

“‘There Once was a Man from Pawtucket’ and other saucy limericks”
a sermon by Rev. David Carl Olson
preached to the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore (Universalist & Unitarian)
on September 6, 2009

*There was an Old Man of Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket
His daughter, named Nan,
Ran away with a man--
And, as for the bucket, Nantucket.*

*Pa followed the pair to Pawtucket
(The man and the girl with the bucket)
And he said to the man,
“You’re welcome to Nan,”
But as for the bucket, Pawtucket.*

Pawtucket is the fourth largest city in Rhode Island, with a population just short of 75,000, a figure that has remained relatively constant for several decades. I was born in Pawtucket in 1954, and during my childhood and youth Pawtucket—just north of the capital city of Providence—ran neck-and-neck with Cranston—just south of Providence—in being Rhode Island’s second city. It arrived at its current fourth place position as land-rich Warwick—just south of Cranston—transformed itself from being a farm town to becoming both a populous suburb of Providence and an expanding city in its own right.

Despite its lessening importance as a population center, Pawtucket has great historical significance. The Algonkian-language name “Pawtucket” means little waterfall, and the town of Pawtucket was founded in 1671 at the site of the final waterfalls of what the English named the Blackstone River, where it finally flattens out to join the Seekonk and then the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket to create the Providence River. Pawtucket is home to a Triple-A Red Sox farm team, the Pawtucket Red Sox. You might know that “the diner,” a dining car not connected to a train, originated in Providence in 1872. The Modern Diner on East Avenue in Pawtucket was the first diner to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is a customized, factory-built diner of the Modernist line from the 1930s. But Pawtucket’s greater significance in history is as an early location of international industrial espionage.

We call Pawtucket the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution because it was here that a disaffected manager from England was wooed to set up the first successful mechanized spinning frames in the United States. Samuel Slater was born in 1768 in the county of Derbyshire, England. His father, William Slater, was a moderately well-to-do land owner and real estate speculator.

When Samuel was a youth, Jedediah Strutt contacted his father to buy land and water rights to build a new textile mill featuring the latest versions of Richard Arkwright’s machinery. Arkwright’s invention could comb and clean cotton fibers, a process called carding, and then pull out and spin cotton into thread in a continuous flow. Arkwright’s design, you may know, was causing panic in the English countryside, where the traditional cottage craft in spinning thread was being threatened by the removal of the craft and its cash income from the farmhouse to the factory and with the mechanization of the process driving down the value of all thread. As Arkwright’s machines began to be replicated and teamed up with Edmund Cartwright’s power looms—and even James Watts’s steam-driven engines—the creation of textiles—carding,

drawing out, spinning, and even weaving – was to be transformed forever – and England would have a monopoly on the technology.

As part of the land deal with William Slater, Strutt offered an apprenticeship in textile management for one of Slater's sons, expecting one of the older boys. Samuel was eventually chosen in spite of his age – 14 – because of his competence in arithmetic and his organized mind. He went on to receive the highest levels of management training, becoming one of Strutt's right hand men and, as was the custom, living at Strutt's house during his apprenticeship. During his seven years spent with Strutt, Samuel's primary duties were bookkeeping, mathematical calculations and administrative tasks – but he also learned about the mechanics of cotton manufacturing.

Samuel's father was killed in an agricultural accident, and Samuel received an early inheritance; but he did not need to touch his nest egg while living with Strutt. At the end of his apprenticeship, however, he recognized that the textile industry in England was overextended, but he thought that he might make his fortune in textiles in America. America – politically independent from England, but entirely dependent on England for its finished textiles – lacked the modern techniques of English manufacture. But New England certainly did have skilled workers of metal and wood who worked in shipbuilding, farming and fishing.

You can imagine that England did not want to share her machinery or her skilled mechanics with former colonies who could become competitors. To protect the textile industry, the English government placed restrictions on who and what could leave the country. Samuel Slater, now 21 years old, disguised himself as a farm hand when he boarded the ship and told no one of his plans. He was careful, though, to bring the papers authenticating his apprenticeship and his release from indenture.

Slater landed in New York in November of 1789 and found work in a small textile mill there. It was then that he heard about experiments with an Arkwright-type machine in Rhode Island by one of the foremost merchants in America, Moses Brown.

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*Then the pair followed Pa to Manhasset
Where he still held the cash as an asset
And Nan and the man
Stole the money and ran.
And as for the bucket, Manhasset.*

*Nan had it sent to Alaska,
It's farther, she thought, than Nebraska.
Did she and her man,
Fool her Pa with this plan?
Well, the next time I see her, Alaska.*

Moses Brown had purchased all of the available textile machines in Rhode Island and moved them to a mill at the great falls on the Blackstone River in Pawtucket. His son-in-law William Almy, nephew Samuel Brown and great-nephew Obadiah Brown operated the mill and tried to perfect the mechanics of each machine. Almy and Brown Company attempted to make cloth spun on mechanized spinning frames, but the machines were too cumbersome to be hand-cranked and when spun by water power created an irregular thread that was too imperfect for manufacture or market.

They consulted every mechanic, every inventor, every self-professed expert they could find to fix the problem, until they were pointed to New York, to this English immigrant, no longer disguised as a farm laborer, Samuel Slater.

When Slater arrived, he was disappointed with the quality of the machines that he found. Brown was disappointed to hear Slater's assessment because he had bought all the machines that then existed, and was not prepared to scrap them. The merchant and the industrial spy reached a compromise: Slater would work without a contract for ten weeks while he rebuilt a spinning frame and proved himself. Brown agreed then to remove the useless machines and would pay to construct two new spinning frames at Slater's direction.

For two years, Slater and his staff of nine – all children between the ages of 7 and 12 – successfully demonstrated the profitability of mechanically spinning yarn. At the end of 1792, Almy and Brown was deemed so successful that Almy and Brown, now Slater's partners, prepared to construct a new mill, one built expressly for the purpose of textile manufacture – the factory of Almy, Brown and Slater – or what we know today as Slater Mill.

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*Let's be clear on Miss Nan and her mate,
That bucket of cash sealed her fate,
Though her motives were pure,
And the good life seemed sure,
'Twas a community property state.*

*So the girl went back home to Nantucket
Walked the beach with her man and the bucket.
Oops, a seagull flew low!
He had nowhere to go,
But Nan, she was able to duck it.*

Propriety, of course, prevents me from sharing any of the racier versions of "The Man from Nantucket." You probably know the classics, if you've spent any time in a barroom or a frat house. But I've brought you to my birthplace – Pawtucket, that is – to think not about dirty limericks, nor even about illegal immigration or child labor or industrial espionage.

I want to think, just for a moment, today, the day before Labor Day, about Samuel Slater arriving in Rhode Island, and this Rhode Islander coming to Baltimore prepared to get some work done.

First, it is important to see what Slater brought. He had done his apprenticeship of seven years, not unlike the four years of undergraduate education and three years of graduate study and an internship of about a year which are the requirements for entering the professional ministry. Slater came with a particular set of experiences that prepared him for his career in analyzing, tinkering, planning, and, of course, espionage.

Slater also made his move because he saw that what he had to offer to the industry in England was not needed. The ideas and inventions were all coming together for the Arkwrights and the Cartwrights and the Wattses. Country people were setting fire to their factories as a threat to traditional ways of life. And the market was saturated!

No, Slater needed greater opportunity to apply what he had learned. He left the old ways of his life because he knew he could make a better life for himself, could transplant the new industry, could purchase land and make a family. These experiences and desires were what Samuel Slater brought.

Second, let's think about what he found. He came to a place where others believed there was an opportunity for something new. Others were experimenting, were learning what was working in other places and trying to apply innovation in their own towns. He came to the place where the Browns and the Almays and others saw the possibility of combining efforts, of working together in new ways, of making a profit and making a living, making a life.

He also found a mill full of machines – the best that could be crafted in Rhode Island – and was surprised when he saw they weren't workable. Too unwieldy to be driven by hand, too imprecise to use water power. (Don't read too much into this!) And when sharing his thoughts with the people who had assembled the great combinations of machines, he listened to their disappointment in his assessment.

Third, what did Samuel Slater do? He compromised with his backers. He accepted a challenge to prove himself. He accepted their willingness to run with him a while. And he proved that he could direct a system that would work, that would turn a profit, that would establish in New England a technically advanced, highly organized industry that would lead to the establishment of the United States as an industrial power.

Which would later lead to another war with England, of course; but I think that's *your* story.

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It's been a not-too-quiet week, this first full-week of mine in Baltimore. Meetings with Board President and Vice-President, getting to know Yvette, our Church Administrator, planning music with Jim and beginning to talk about Lifespan Faith Development with Becky, and learning the alarm system with Jeffrey. A photo of the new staff. A first pastoral call. First staff meeting. Stewardship Committee meeting. Calls to clergy colleagues in the area to learn about support systems for me and for the congregation. Meeting with leaders of our Social Action Clearinghouse. Learning about their magnificent plans for an awards banquet in October (I hope you'll all be there!). Finding information about what Unitarian Universalists will be doing at the National March for Equality in Washington. Imagining how we can be part of the celebration and the demand. Getting a telephone call about the accidental death of a UU in Baltimore who is not a part of any church. Missing a newsletter deadline.

I'm pleased that I demanded of myself that I take my day off on Friday. This would not always be a way I would operate, and it takes some intentionality on my part to make sure it happens. But it is important, Labor Day reminds me, that I separate the time for work from the time to rest and re-create. It's important that we do that as a community, too.

What a work there is to do in this place! I've driven through many neighborhoods in these past weeks seeing challenges in all of them, and imagining that we will find a way to choose just a few places to concentrate our energy, to make a real difference in the lives of people, to be transformed together as we reflect on what we've accomplished and what we are called, yet, to do. What a glorious opportunity I sense here.

I hope that the contributions I am able to make to this place help us, each and all, live up to the potential of this congregation, its magnificent history and the promise of our faith. The principles we say we stand for are principles worth dedicating a life to, and even emigrating for – even if not quite a spy; from Boston to Michigan to Balmer, hon. Believe.

I ask for your understanding; I ask for your allowances as I try to understand you. And I seek your generous expectation that in the leadership I will provide and the conclusions and compromises we will together establish, that there is a promising and even profitable future for all of us, together, here.

I'm ready, even now, to get to work, and as Quaker Douglas Steere says, "There is nothing that prepares for corporate contemplation more effectively than a community of common work." Let's work in common, and contemplate in common, and be transformed, body and soul, in the process.

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*When that man who was born in Pawtucket
Came to Maryland, he was in luck. It
was just such a ball
to accept First U's call.
(Bet if he had a lyre, that he'd pluck it.)*