

# Cook's Dam, Ansonia, Connecticut

## Beaver Brook and Cook's Dam

Beaver Brook is a minor tributary of the Naugatuck River. While small, the brook drains a large area and its flow is reliable throughout most of the year. It also had sufficient fall at this location to satisfy the power requirements of a small manufacturing plant. The location is characteristic of the intensively developed water resources found in many 19th century Naugatuck Valley and New England manufacturing sites. In the early-1800s, Beaver Brook provided power for a saw mill and blacksmith shop at a dam site further upstream from the location of Cook's dam. Beginning in 1867, Beaver Brook provided power and process water to a small but significant 19th century industrial site.

After 1920 the Cook's dam was no longer used for industrial purposes. Abutting landowners partially filled the mill pond, expanding their properties. Its mill pond had become a stagnant repository for old tires and shopping carts. The City decided to remove the dam, replace the adjacent Jewett Street bridge and create a landscaped park in the area. Engineering studies revealed that removal of the bridge would dangerously weaken Cook's Dam on Beaver Brook, abutting it on the upstream side. Ansonia removed Cook's dam during the summer of 2001.

The City of Ansonia retained American Cultural Specialists L.L.C. to conduct the Phase I Reconnaissance Survey. AMCS conducted the survey in the spring and summer of 2001. Work included a surficial inspection of the site and associated areas, a documentary study, subsurface archeological investigations, and monitoring/photo-documentation of the demolition work.

Cook's dam was a 16 foot high, 50 foot wide masonry dam made of roughly squared and rectangular granite blocks of varying sizes, cemented together. The structure dammed Beaver Brook and formed the southern boundary of Cook's mill

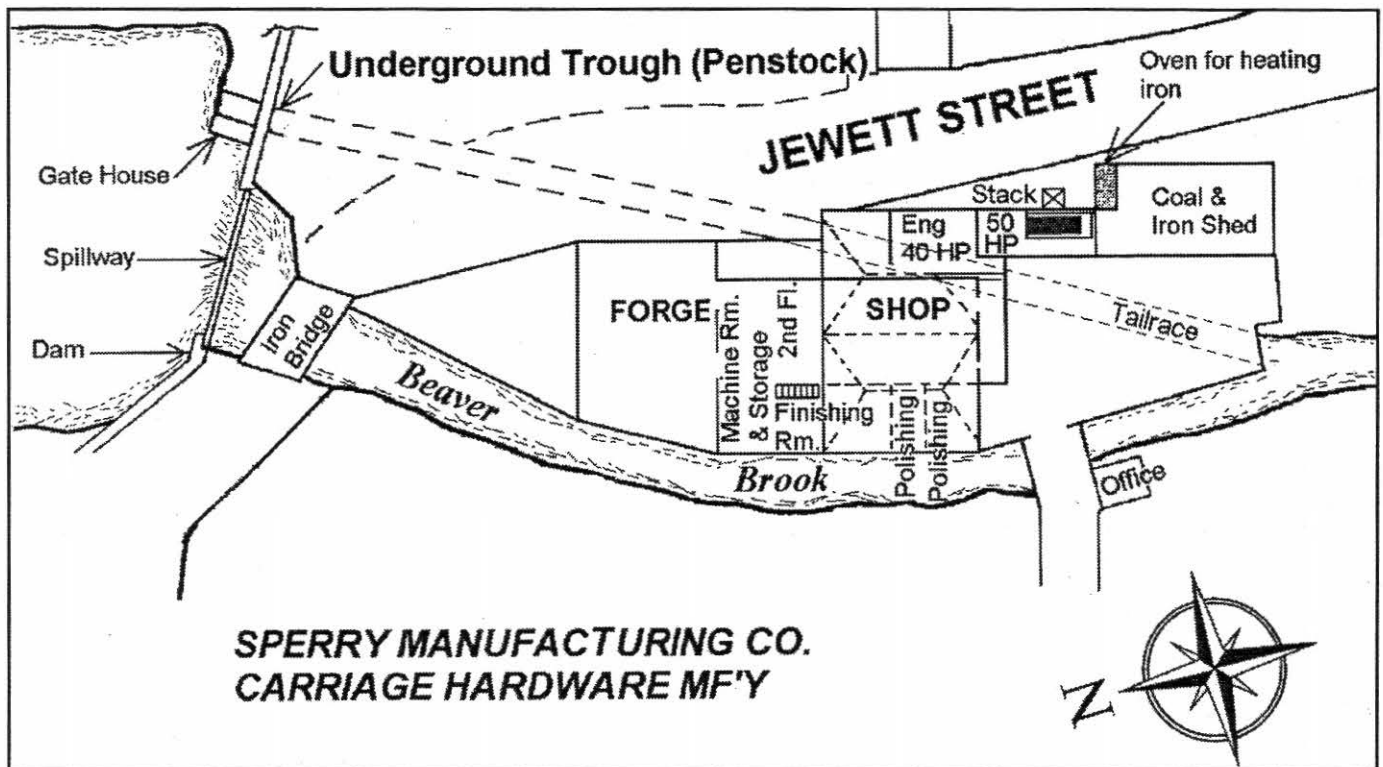
pond. It had a stone masonry spillway about twenty-nine feet wide on its east side. The stone masonry capstones in the spillway were about four feet long, three feet thick and varied from two to three feet in width. The upper six feet of the dam's downstream face was vertical while the lower portion sloped downstream at an approximate angle of 73°. The upstream face of cemented granite block sloped at an angle of 62°. Stone rubble and packed earth formed the internal structure.

In 1865 Wales Terrell acquired the Beaver Brook water rights and by 1868 had an earth dam, smaller than the masonry dam that existed until 2001, at the site. This dam was associated with a blacksmith and file manufacturing plant at the site. Terrell built a home overlooking the mill pond in 1875. Currently, his house is used as the Spinelli-Malerba Funeral Home.

The industrial development of Beaver Brook was part of the great commercial and industrial expansion of Ansonia. With all the manufacturing activity in the borough, a market for local suppliers of tools, dies, files, drills and a variety of industrial hardware existed. Excepting railroads and water-borne transport, 19th century movement of goods and people required horse drawn carriages and wagons. Wheeled vehicle builders needed a variety of special fasteners, springs, wheels, steps and unique hardware for their products. The Naugatuck Valley, with its skilled workers and experience in the metal trades, was especially able to supply these goods. Manufacture of carriage hardware and specialized tooling did not require the power needed to run massive rolling mills or a large factory. These activities could be powered by a smaller stream having a dependable flow.

## The Sperry Manufacturing Company

The end of the 19th century marked a peak of horse-drawn road transportation. Railroads had



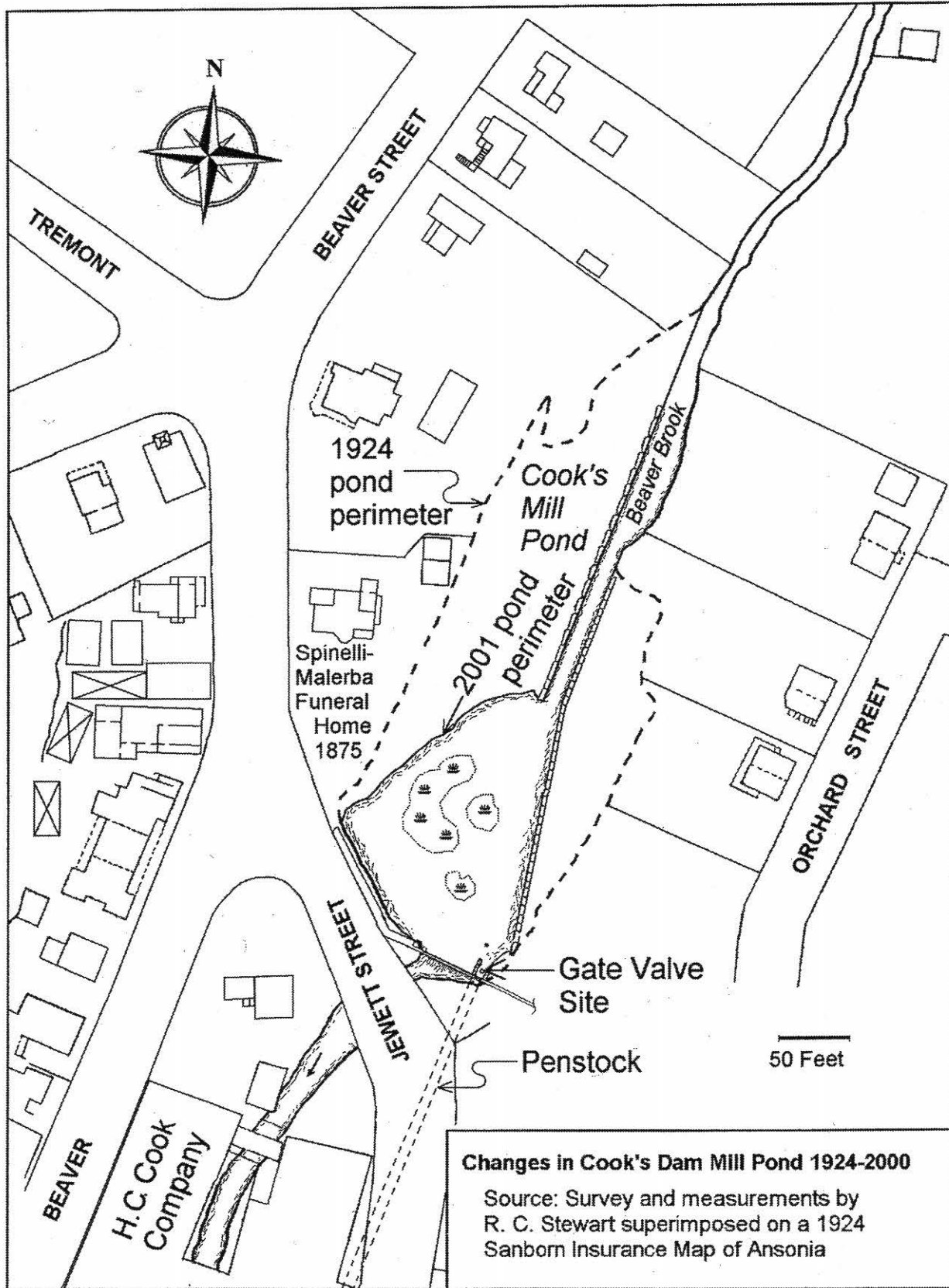
reduced the need for long distance over-the-road transport but horse drawn wagons provided local transport. In 1882 Terrell's file business was succeeded by the Sperry Manufacturing Company, a major manufacturer of carriage hardware. Sperry manufactured saddle and clip springs, slat irons, joint ends, platform circles and steps. They were the largest manufacturers of fifth wheels in America. A fifth wheel on a carriage served as the pivot point for its front axle and had to carry the weight of the front of the carriage. The fifth wheel had to turn freely and, as it was usually below the springs, take the full impact of road shock.

In the last decade of the 19th century, Sperry and other suppliers of carriage hardware were at full manufacturing capacity. Sperry employed twenty-five skilled workers and had a reputation for quality backed up by a meticulous program of inspection for finished goods.

Sperry's factory occupied a two-acre site and consisted of several joined buildings. Most of the first floor factory space was occupied by a forge shop. The second floor over the forge shop housed a machine shop. Other first floor rooms housed polishing, plating and finishing shops. The plant was heated with coal stoves. Coal heated the forges. Kerosene lamps, provided light that was rarely needed as windows supplied ample light.

Steam produced by a fifty-horsepower boiler provided all power for the two to four months of each year when power provided by Beaver Brook was insufficient. At other times it provided a significant supplement to water power. The steam ran an engine shown on the earliest 1884 Sanborn plan of the plant. The 1890 Sanborn map shows a forty-horsepower engine next to the boiler. Following the history of 19th century power development in New England, the plant increasingly relied on steam power as production expanded.

Water came to the plant through an "underground trough" which was a penstock made of riveted iron plates curved to form a pipe about two feet in diameter. A valve in the gatehouse at the east end of the dam controlled flow into the penstock. Investigators found the remains of this penstock and a piece of valving when the dam was removed in 2001. The penstock originally fed a seven and one-half horsepower Crocker-Wheeler turbine that discharged downward into a tailrace. It is unlikely that the original turbine could provide enough power for forging. It may have been replaced by a larger turbine or used only to provide power for polishing and finishing operations. The forty-horsepower steam engine would have been ample for the light forging operations. Electricity began to play a role at Sperry's probably as early



as 1890. Sperry had an electroplating line powered by a Holtzer-Cabot plating dynamo. Sometime during the 1890s Sperry switched to electric lights powered by a Ferreth Electric Light Dynamo.

### The H. C. Cook Company

Henry C. Cook was a master toolmaker who owned a job shop in downtown Ansonia. The shop manufactured special machinery, presses, clock tools and machinery, punches and dies. Cook also built special machinery and cut gears to order, supplying manufacturers throughout New England with custom machine repair parts and tool making services. Early consumer products were brass and German silver thumbtacks.

In 1896 the H.C. Cook Company received a U.S. Patent for a nail clipper. The company gave the trade name "Gem" to the clipper and successfully marketed it. "Gem" nail clippers received considerable consumer acceptance between 1897 and 1900. The first illustration of the "Gem" clipper appeared in the 1898 Price-Lee Business Directory. Cook needed more manufacturing space for the new product and bought the Sperry Manufacturing Company in 1901. H.C. Cook discontinued production of carriage hardware to concentrate on consumer products. As additional products were added to the Cook line, new brick buildings were built on the west side of Beaver Brook in 1919. The new plant housed a sheet metal stamping department, electroplating equipment and lines for enameling, baking and assembly.

The company continued to diversify its product line and by 1926 produced paper clips, metal index tabs and file signals. Other consumer items included the "Burro" adjustable pistol grip hacksaw frame, the "Openright" can opener and clips for use on ointment and toothpaste tubes. The "Gem" and "Ansonia" nail clippers continued to sell well. As late as 1967 the product line still included the clippers and stationery hardware. Cook also produced custom sheet metal specialties for other manufacturers.

In 1984 H.C. Cook Company sold out to the W.E. Bassett Company of Shelton, Connecticut. Bassett continued to make the nail clippers until August 2000 when they began importing them

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from Korea. The Beaver Street plant currently is an industrial condominium housing the Micron Coatings, Inc. and a local office of Triangle Business Forms. Other tenants include The Handyman Connection, a company that matches contractors with homeowners and social service agency. The following illustration shows some of the changes in Cook's Pond from 1924 to 2000.

### Conclusion

Connecticut's Naugatuck River Valley, with its abundance of water power, has been a center of commerce, manufacturing and industrial production from the colonial period to the present. Its water powered saw and grist mills, which served local customers, were replaced by factories that made profitable products to satisfy worldwide demand. Ansonia was a leader in the hardware and metal working industries. The history of Cook's Dam on Beaver Brook summarizes the transition of an early agricultural and forest product processing mill locale to a water powered industrial site. Further development occurred as energy requirements increased and water power was supplanted by steam and electricity. The factories here also responded to market changes and their product output reflected adaptation to production of more profitable, mass-produced consumer goods.

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