

# THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM



**Newsletter**

**June 2018**

## **Soapstone Issue**

**SOAPSTONE** - aka "FREESTONE" as it can be cut freely with ordinary tools. The Francetown deposit of soapstone was considered the best in the world as it lacked flaws, hard spots and rusty markings. It was prized for its ease of cutting and shaping and also for its heat retention. Soapstone was quarried here in Francetown and soapstone products were manufactured here as well. So in demand was Francetown soapstone that in the early 1800's in Boston it was selling for \$36/ton while the next best available soapstone was sold for only \$20/ton.

The uses of soapstone were many and included stoves, hearths, floors, sinks, mantels and many other useful and essential items. It proved to be resistant to acids and found use in commercial and industrial products such as the sizing rollers in cotton mills. When ground into fine powder it was found to be a good lubricant for machinery.

The Francetown quarry satisfied the need for all these items and the Francetown mill made the much sought after stoves which were found not only in our ancestors' homes, but around the world. One can be seen in **The Francetown Heritage Museum** and on the masthead of this newsletter.



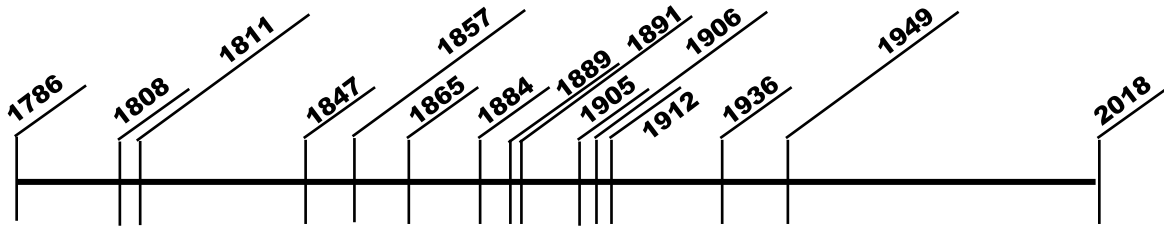
**THE SOAPSTONE MILL**



**THE SOAPSTONE QUARRY**

The Newsletter soapstone story will be done in two parts: This June issue will outline the industry in Francetown as a whole and the next issue will detail the actual operations of the quarry and the mill. Both will include ties to the Francetown Heritage Museum and its exhibits.

## SIGNIFICANT DATES IN FRANCESTOWN SOAPSTONE HISTORY



**1786** Daniel Fuller and Joseph Guild bought 300 acres of land near what is now known as Bible Hill Road. A short time later Guild wanted to marry and gave Fuller \$100 for sole ownership of one half of the land. Fuller continued to farm his 150 remaining acres.

**1808** By now, Fuller had fallen on hard times and had accumulated a good deal of debt. One day while out mending fences he was thinking of selling his land. Not concentrating on his fence work, he accidentally dropped his freshly honed ax on an outcropping of ledge. When he retrieved his axe he was surprised to find that it had not been dulled even though it had cleanly cut a piece off the ledge. Fuller then began to work this find and quarry the stone.

**1811** Lest the importance and value of this find be underestimated, within just three years of his discovery, Fuller had become a rich man. The stone was sold in Boston to a shop on Milk Street and taken from the quarry to Boston by ox team. The trip to Boston and back took six days and there were teams constantly on the journey.

**1847** Fuller died and his son (Daniel Fuller, Jr.) took over the business continuing to quarry soapstone.

**1857** Daniel Fuller, Jr. died and the quarry now sat idle for some time.

**1865** "The Francestown Soapstone Company" was formed and took over the quarry. Production was greatly increased with the introduction of a 12hp steam engine derrick for lifting stone from the quarry and loading it. By 1869 the quarry was 80' deep and 30 workers were employed. The annual output was some 4000 tons per year (approximately 20 tons/day). They began to expand the size of the product and started providing stone for a newly invented bakery oven that was 9' in diameter. There was a factory in Nashua for manufacture of soapstone products and the quarried stone was taken by six-team horse-drawn wagons to the railroad station in Greenfield for rail transport to Nashua.

In 1882 production methods were further improved by the addition of a 20hp steam boiler to power larger derricks and allow the companies to dig even further down into this seemingly endless deposit of soapstone.

**1884** In this year a second company, “The New England Soapstone Company”, owned by Daniel Clark, started quarrying soapstone in the Southwest corner of Fuller’s old quarry. Soon after, Clark sold this business to “The Union Soapstone Company”. In this same year, Union Soapstone also took over the quarry in the Northeast sector of Fuller’s old quarry. This left only “The Francestown Soapstone Company” and “The Union Soapstone Company” as the operators of the soapstone quarries. Union was a large company that already had a quarry and mill in Chester, VT. It is interesting to note that while all these various companies were being formed and sold, many of the same individuals were found to be on the boards of directors of all these companies.

It was also noted that the Union Soapstone Company also had a factory in Greenfield for cutting and fabricating of soapstone.

In spite of quarrying being a relatively dangerous occupation these companies’ operations were comparatively free of accidents. Only two recorded incidents were found:

- Frank Dumas lost a foot in 1884
- Daniel Henderson lost both hands in 1886

**1889** The Mill Village mill site was originally a grist and sawmill built in 1785 along with a broad stone dam forming the mill pond. These were destroyed by a flood in 1796 and were replaced by George Dean who then sold the mill to Charles Williams who in 1889 converted this mill for sawing soapstone.

**1891** By 1890 both Francestown Soapstone and Union Soapstone remained the only viable operations and each employed some 50 workers. The quarries were now some 134’ deep and it was becoming problematic as this was well below the water table and there was a constant struggle to remove water from the quarries. Also about this time the demand for soapstone products was decreasing and the price being paid for the stone was also decreasing. In 1891 the quarrying of soapstone in Francestown came to an end. However, there was a good deal of previously cut soapstone available and the mill in Mill Village continued in operation.

**1905** As demand continued to wane ever since the quarrying ceased and prices continued to fall, The Francestown Soapstone Company declared bankruptcy. This forced the closing of the Mill Village mill. So rapidly did this take place that a stone slab was left on the saw table cut half-way through and completed stoves were left in the mill awaiting shipment.



COMPLETED STOVES AWAITING SHIPMENT  
ABANDONED WHEN THE MILL CLOSED



UP AND DOWN SAW IN MILL AS IT WAS WHEN MILL CLOSED  
WITH A PARTIALLY CUT STONE STILL ON THE SAW TABLE



**1906** The bankruptcy courts sold the Francestown Soap Stone Properties to Clarence Dodge of New Boston. This entity known as “The New Boston Soapstone Company” reopened and operated the quarry seasonally until 1912 but did not reopen the mill.

**1912** In May 1912, while dynamiting for a new vein of soapstone, a fire broke out and destroyed all the buildings of the company as well as a number of homes in the area, bringing about once again the end of soapstone quarrying in Francestown.

**1936** In this year a flood washed away the dam which formed the mill pond at the Mill Village mill and also the water wheel. The interior of the mill and its mechanical equipment, which was already in partial ruin after sitting idle for 40 years, was also further damaged.

**1949** The flooded quarry and flood-damaged mill were sold to Gerald Newell of Warren, VT who planned to reopen the quarry and make necessary repairs to get the mill back into production. The quarry was partially restored but did not again become a successful operation. Some more modern machinery/equipment was installed in the mill. Since the flood had destroyed the dam and water wheel a gasoline engine was installed to power the mill. Some 8-10 tons of old soapstone that had been left lying on the site when the mill last closed was sawed. Once that existing supply of soapstone was gone the project was abandoned as was the mill once again.



**ACTIVITY IN THE REOPENED QUARRY**



**THE REMAINS OF THE GASOLINE ENGINE BROUGHT INTO THE MILL TO REPLACE THE FORMER WATER WHEEL**

**2018** The quarry and mill in 2018. The final page in the history of Francestown Soapstone.



**THE QUARRY**



**THE MILL**