

# THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN



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*Frances V. Marshall researched and wrote the featured article on the Hobbs' Tannery over a decade ago while serving on the Historical Commission. I thank John S. Hodges for the edited rendition.*

F.A.C. III



Looking west and slightly north showing west (front) of house and south (front) of outbuilding

## THE HOBBS TANNERY

Turning onto North Avenue from Church Street in Weston during the morning rush hour can be a hard way to start one's day. Most commuters, intent on wedging into the traffic flow, take little note of the large white house directly across the road at 87 North Avenue.

Two centuries ago, the roads were dustier, the traffic was horse-powered, and the house was the heart of the Hobbs tannery, a commercial enterprise which survived for more than 100 years.

### The Leather Business in New England

The tanning of hides was an important industry in the 18th and 19th century. Indeed, the leather trade was a major factor in Boston commerce well into the 20th century.



Leather was the only readily-available strong, tough material for harnesses, saddles, footwear and other products basic to the transportation of man and goods. Tanneries were established early in our country's history, the first being founded in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1630.<sup>(4)</sup>

Ninety-nine years after the establishment of the Lynn tannery, Josiah Hobbs, husbandman, of Boston purchased from John Cheney, Jr., of Weston about 122 acres in Weston and Waltham with Stowells Brook, Stoney Brook and the highway (North Avenue) mentioned in the description of the properties. The purchase included "our Dwelling House and Barn, our Homestead and Lands thereunto adjoining, part of Warren's farm and part of Whitney's farm together with houses, orchards, fences, trees, improvements and water courses". Josiah subsequently bought seventeen more acres, part in Weston, part in Waltham "near the brook".<sup>(12)</sup>

In *The Old Boston Post Road*, Stephen Jenkins wrote that the Hobbs tannery was started in 1730.<sup>(6)</sup> It is likely that Josiah Hobbs already had a tannery or similar enterprise in mind when he made these large purchases of land on Stowells Brook "with all manner of privileges and rights thereunto"<sup>(12)</sup> conveying the right to use water power from the brook.

Indeed, by 1740, Josiah Hobbs had placed a mortgage on twenty-five acres described as "messuage, land and tenements".<sup>(12)</sup> This may well have been to erect or expand the tannery. In any event, it seems to have been a worthwhile investment as the mortgage was paid off in a year.

## The Making of Leather

The process of converting animal hides (primarily cattle, sheep, pigs and goats) into leather began with prolonged washing of the hides followed by soaking in successive vats of lime solution to loosen the hair. (In 1778, Isaac Hobbs, Sr., traded with blacksmith Hezekiah Wyman some "slact lime" in return for "shoen hors").<sup>(8c)</sup> An ample supply of water (Stowells Brook) was essential.

Next the hides were beamed; placed on a sloping wooden beam and scraped with a knife. After another soaking, remaining tissue was removed and the surface smoothed with a whetstone.

The hides were then ready for the actual tanning process which converted them into leather. Pits of water containing ground bark, usually oak or hemlock, produced tannin. The tannin, in turn, slowly penetrated hides placed in the tan-pits and transformed them into leather over a twelve to eighteen month period.

Grinding the bark was typically done in a horse powered bark mill. But by 1749, Ebenezer Hobbs had "liberty to dam up the brook to bring sufficient water through the Saw Bark house"<sup>(12)</sup>, suggesting that he used the resource of Stowells Brook to grind the bark as well as soak the hides.

After removal from the soaking pits, the hides (now leather) were pounded to make them flexible, then dried. Curriers dressed the hides by stretching, kneading in oil, further beating for softness rubbing with pumice to bring out the grain.

## Evolution of Hobbs Tannery

In a deed dated June 16, 1749, Josiah Hobbs sold his son Ebenezer three parcels of land containing seventy acres. This deed includes the property where the “Isaac Hobbs House” (87 North Avenue) still stands and the site of the Tannery on the west side of Stowells Brook (now known as Hobbs Brook). In selling the property to his son, Josiah calls it “Ebenezer’s Dwelling”, “Bark House”, “Saw Bark House” and “Tan Yard”.<sup>(12)</sup> This is the first mention of the tannery in a deed, and it indicates that Ebenezer was living in the house and was largely responsible for the tannery.

Isaac, the oldest son of Ebenezer Hobbs, was married on June 15, 1758. As a wedding gift, his father gave him “for love” one-half of the same land that his father, Josiah, had given him in 1749 “together with one third part of the Dwelling House and one half of the Bark House and Tan-pits and one half of the Shop all lying undivided”. The following condition was included in the deed that “Isaac Hobbs nor any of his Heirs shall ever have Liberty to sell said Premises or any part thereof Excepting it be to his Father or Brother. Furthermore if the said Isaac Hobbs should decease and leave a wife and children, then they to enjoy it as long as she shall remain his widow”.<sup>(12)</sup> Most of the Hobbs property stayed in the family until the end of the 19th century.

## A Thriving Commercial Activity

The tannery became an important industry serving Weston and neighboring towns. D. Hamilton Hurd in *The History of Middlesex County* says, “This tannery was known throughout the county, and it was a custom in early days to locate houses and people in Weston by the distance from the tannery. As late as 1795, vessels from Maine loaded with bark for these works came to Watertown to unload.”<sup>(5)</sup>

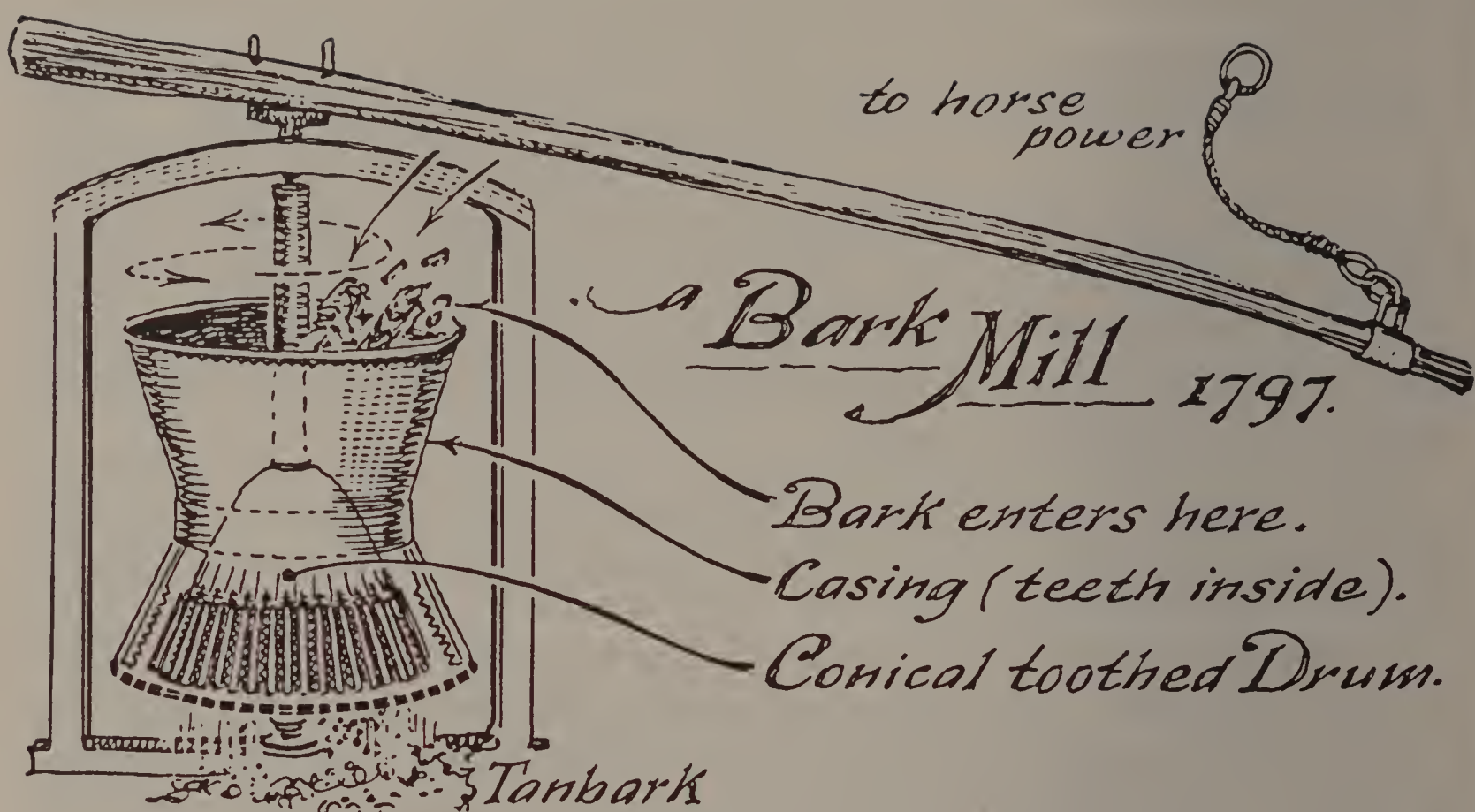
Further, “Bark for tanning was brought from Vermont and New Hampshire by ox-teams over Lancaster Road” (North Avenue).<sup>(13)</sup> The pace of the ox teams probably compared favorably with today’s rush hour traffic on that same road.

In 1762, Ebenezer Hobbs died and willed to his son Isaac “all my stock leather or hides and all my bark for tanning” and to his son Matthew “all my tan house and yard”.<sup>(11)</sup>

The invoice required by the Town of Weston in 1768 lists “Trading Stock” 200 for Isaac Hobbs and 80 Matthew Hobbs. By 1796, the invoice includes the Hobbs family, Deacon Isaac, Captain Matthew, Ebenezer and Isaac, Jr., with a total of 265 “Trading Stock”. Three other men in Weston are listed with a total of 140 and Isaac Lamson, the store keeper, with 150 “Stock in Trade”.<sup>(16)</sup>

The Elisha Jones Ledger shows that Ebenezer Hobbs, in 1754 through 1759, bought 204 pounds of cow and ox hides and deer skins.<sup>(8a)</sup> Entries in Isaac Lamson’s Ledger indicate a moderate but steady growth in the tannery. Ebenezer Hobbs II obtained credit for “six leather stocks” in 1789. From 1790





to 1792, Matthew was credited with 198 pounds of sole leather. Lamson's Ledger from 1790 to 1793 indicates that Isaac Hobbs, Sr., bought 919¼ pounds of skins and sold back 317 pounds of sole leather and 3 sides of upper leather. Isaac Hobbs, Junior received credit for 74½ pounds of sole leather in 1794.<sup>(8b)</sup> When Isaac Hobbs, Jr., died in 1834, the appraisal of the property reveals that the tannery had become into a substantial operation. It included "a tanyard containing about 60 vats, bark houses, currying shop and all the necessary buildings for doing an extensive business with sufficient water power for grinding the bark, pulling hides and rolling leather with mills for same." Several thousand skins and hides, on hand or being processed in the tanyard and currying shop were appraised for \$10,506.00.<sup>(11)</sup>

On May 20, 1837, the entire estate was sold to Nathan Hagar, Junior, Isaac's son-in-law, and one-half of the estate was in turn sold by him to Samuel Hobbs, Isaac's son.

### Businesses Emerging from the Tannery

A number of businesses related to the tannery were carried on by the Hobbs family. Henry Hobbs was both a harness-maker and carriage maker. The harness-making operation occupied a building at the south-east corner of the double house (88 North Avenue). He produced carriages in sheds which stood on the south-west end of the Hager House barn. This barn stood on the property across Church Street from the Hager House at 87 North Avenue. The heavy fieldstone foundation of the barn still exists.

Henry specialized in chaises and obtained a license to use them "which cost him three dollars and reads: a two-wheeled carriage called by him a chaise to be drawn by one horse and to carry two people".<sup>(7)</sup>

While Henry may have been the first in Weston to make a chaise, he was not the first of the Hobbs family to own one. In 1762, twenty-two years before Henry was born, Ebenezer Hobbs directed the administrator of his will, with regard to his wife Eunice, "to find her a suitable horse and chair for her to ride in at all times when needful while she remains my widow."<sup>(11)</sup>

The Hobbs family also made whips. Isaac Lamson's ledger between 1789 and 1794 credits Ebenezer Hobbs II and Matthew Hobbs with more than fourteen dozen whips. Ebenezer II traded in leather cartridge boxes and welts as well.

Not surprisingly Matthew Hobbs had a slaughter house near the tannery. Hekezia Wyman's Ledger in 1790 credits Matthew with "123½ pounds of beef and hart"<sup>(8c)</sup>

Local shoe manufacturing was another direct result of the tannery. Many were made by small producers at home. The Elisha Jones Ledgers for 1754 to 1756 show that Mr. Thoms Russell received credit for "making and mending shoes".<sup>(8a)</sup> In 1779, the Town of Weston saw fit to place a ceiling price of five pounds on a pair of shoes.<sup>(18)</sup>

Between 1790 and 1795, I. Lamson's Ledger lists seven people who received credit for a total of 132 pairs of shoes. Thomas Warren, who lived just east of the Hobbs on the corner of Lexington Street, was one of the most productive. He submitted 67 pairs of shoes for credit for his "sundries", never more than three pair at a time. They sold for five shillings a pair (well under the Town's price ceiling. Out of twenty-two entries in Lamson's ledger, Warren paid his account once in "cash" and once in "flour". The rest were paid in "pair of shoes".<sup>(8b)</sup>

The inventory of the estate of Isaac Hobbs, Jr., at the time of his death in 1834, shows that he conducted on a large business in shoemaking; 2,368 finished boots, bootees, shoes, slippers, pumps and brogans were listed in "E. Hobbs Storeroom" and "S. Hobbs Chamber". Great quantities of supplies for making shoes, such as leather, hides, skins, parts of shoes, lasts, findings and shop furniture were listed in the "Shoe Shop" located at the southeast corner of Isaac Hobbs House (87 North Avenue). A small lot valued at \$2,966.80 was in the "old brick front of Shop". In the Barn Buildings, Currying Shop, and Tanyard were "more hides and skins in the process of being finished".<sup>(11)</sup>

Nathan Hagar, Jr., also established a partnership with his father-in-law Isaac Hobbs, Jr., for the manufacture of shoes.

In 1837, 5,606 pair of boots and 17,182 pair of shoes were manufactured in Weston in 1837.<sup>(1)</sup> This may have been near the peak of the leather industry in Weston. The shoe factory was closed down around 1850, and the schedule of the estate of Samuel Hobbs in 1859 refers to the "late" firm of Hobbs and Hagar.<sup>(11)</sup>

Two centuries ago, the intersection of North Avenue and Church Street was a thriving center of commerce. Today, the two Hobbs homesteads stand silent watch as ever-increasing traffic flows past to new centers of new industries.



# GENEOLOGY

## Descendants of Josiah Hobbs

### Concerning #87, 88 and 121

#### North Avenue

Name	B	D	Age
Josiah Hobbs	1684	1775	91
m. Esther*	1709	1777	68
Ebenezer Hobbs I	1709	1762	53
m. 1735 Eunice Garfield			
Isaac Hobbs Sr.	1735	1813	78
m. 1758 Mary Sanderson			
Abigail Hobbs	1759	1790	31
m. 1778 Isaac Jones Jr.		1780	
Ebenezer Hobbs II	1762	1848	86
m. Eunice Spring	1762	1848	86
Sarah (Sukey) Hobbs	1782		
m. 1802 Isaac Fiske	1778		
Sophronia Hobbs	1796		
m. 1832 Isaac Fiske	1778		
Isaac Hobbs, Jr.	1765	1834	69
m. 1790 Mary Baldwin			
Samuel Hobbs	1795	1857	62
m. 1834 Abigail W. Kendall	1791	1883	92
Mary Ann Hobbs	1805		
m. 1832 Nathan Hagar, Jr.	1807	1860	53
Matthew Hobbs (Son of Ebenezer I)	1745	1816	71
m. 1768 Lydia Wesson			
m. 1783 Lucy Holmes			
Henry Hobbs	1784		
Samuel Hobbs**			
m. 1773 Lucy Monroe			

\*On tax list in 1775. Next three years as Mrs. Josiah Hobbs<sup>16</sup>  
 \*\*In Bond, listed separately, not as son of Ebenezer Hobbs I.<sup>2</sup>  
     In Hurd, listed as eighth son of Ebenezer Hobbs I.<sup>5</sup>

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Featured in the following edition of *The Bulletin* will be an article on the Fiske Law Office by fellow board member Wendell E. Ryerson.

Ms. Fiske  
431-9759  
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For several years, Lee C. Marsh served as Editor of THE BULLETIN. The members of the Board of Directors of the Weston Historical Society thank her for those years of service.



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