

# HISTORY

Northampton's silk industry was born in the mulberry tree craze of the 1830's and died, at the age of 100, in the throes of the Great Depression. The official cause of death, labor unrest, was emblematic of the problems that had plagued the American silk industry from its start in the colonial era. No amount of optimism and ingenuity could alter the fundamental fact that silkworms are finicky and silk production is highly complex and labor-intensive.

The history of the Northampton silk industry can be divided into four eras:

1. The sericulture era, 1832-1846. Northampton's silk manufacturing history begins with the Boston-born New York businessman, Samuel Whitmarsh, who moved to Northampton to raise silk and manufacture it, too. He embarked on a complex and delicate process: sericulture (raising and feeding silk worms on mulberry leaves), reeling (unwinding their cocoons into long silk filaments to make "raw silk"), twisting several filaments together to make sturdy thread, dyeing the threads and finally, weaving them into cloth or ribbons. Whitmarsh purchased an old oil mill, with water privileges, on the Mill River in what is now Florence, several miles from Northampton, and land for an orchard of Asian mulberry trees. He also stoked feverish speculation in the *Morus multicaulis* variety of mulberry tree through sales of seeds and seedlings.

When his Northampton Silk Company collapsed, its trustees sold the property, in 1841, to the small group of men who, the next year, joined with others to found the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. This "utopian" community of Garrisonian abolitionists included Sojourner Truth and many other renowned reformers. The Association saw silk manufacture as an alternative to cotton and the slavery system that supported its growth. Some member's homes were, it is believed, stations on the Underground Railroad. Rejecting the prevailing industrial model, the Association sought a business that they could own and operate communally. Its products were sewing and saddler's thread.

2. By 1846, after only four years, the debt-ridden Association dissolved. One of its members, Samuel Hill, paid off the debts and restarted the silk thread business, eventually incorporating as the Nonotuck Silk Company. Like other American silk manufacturers in this era, Hill imported all his raw silk.



The invention of "machine twist", a thread smooth enough and strong enough to use on the newly invented home sewing machines, was the turning point: checks signed in 1852 by Isaac M. Singer for thousands of dollars put Hill's company on its feet. Soon the factory village was renamed Florence in recognition of its growing silk industry (a motion to rename the Mill River the "Arno" did not pass.)

Between 1852 and 1874, the silk industry grew into a mainstay of the local economy and became Northampton's largest employer. In 1874, the mill owners' dam on the upper Mill River broke, taking many lives and destroying many mills. The catastrophe forced the surviving companies to switch to steam power.

3. From 1875 and 1912, the silk thread industry grew in size and sophistication, gradually losing its local character. With the rise of steam power and the growth of the rail systems, new factory buildings were built close to rails lines, not rivers. Local industries opened branches elsewhere and a branch of the Connecticut-based Belding Brothers Company opened a factory here. The Corticelli brand of embroidery and sewing silk, made by the Nonotuck Silk Company, was world renowned, even entertaining New Yorkers with a huge electric signboard in Times Square in New York. Everyone recognized the company's trade symbol: a kitten playing with a tangled skein of silk thread. By this time, some of the company's mills made specialty items such as silk hosiery.

4. From 1912 to 1932, Northampton's silk industry continued to be a major player on the local and national scene. The Nonotuck Silk Company's merger with the other local silk companies increased the range of their products to include silk cloth fit for fashion, but labor unrest increased. The development of rayon or "artificial silk" in the 20's also cut into the demand for silk, as did the fad for short skirts. The Great Depression dealt silk its death blow. Northampton's last silk mills were gone by the 1940's.



The original stockholders of the Nonotuck Silk Company:  
Front row: A.T. Lilly, Samuel L. Hill, S.L. Hinckley, Ira Dimock  
Back row: E.W. Eaton, J.D. Atkins, Lucius Dimock



## THE PROJECT

This map of the Northampton Silk Route is one of several projects undertaken by the Northampton Silk Project, a multi-faceted exploration of the role that silk has played in the development of this community. Led by members of the Smith College community, local historians and artists, the project has engaged students of all ages, teachers, scholars, museum staff, former silk industry workers, history buffs, scientists and craftspeople to reconstruct the history of a vanished industry and recognize the physical and cultural marks it has left behind.

Illustrations on the map come from a silk quilt designed and handpainted silk by Sally Dillon, and handquilting by Janet Hale, 2002. The map is designed by Amy Holich and Holly Bowyer.

For more information on the Northampton Silk Project, please visit the website: <http://www.smith.edu/hsc/silk>.

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# THE Northampton Silk Route



**1** **SKINNERVILLE** - On Route 9 between Haydenville and Williamsburg  
In 1848, William Skinner opened a silk mill up the Mill River from Leeds. He ran it successfully for twenty five years until, in 1874, a poorly constructed dam up river collapsed, causing a disastrous flood through this whole mill area. Over 140 died in this catastrophe. Skinner's mill and others downstream were destroyed. He moved his grand house to Holyoke and rebuilt his business there. The Skinner Company became known for its silk satin lining fabrics. His mansion, known as Wistariahurst, is now a museum.



**2** **THE NONOTUCK SILK MILLS FACTORY**  
Located on the corner of Mulberry and Main streets in Leeds, this large brick factory building reflects the prosperity of the largest silk company in the area. It replaced a smaller building washed out in 1874. Some of the frame houses on either side of the river had been built for the factory workers.

**3** **DIMOCK HOUSE**  
Across the railroad track and up the hill stands the imposing mansion of Lucius Dimock, who ran the Leeds factory when it was built in 1880. Note how the design of the central tower of the factory matches the tower of the mansion.

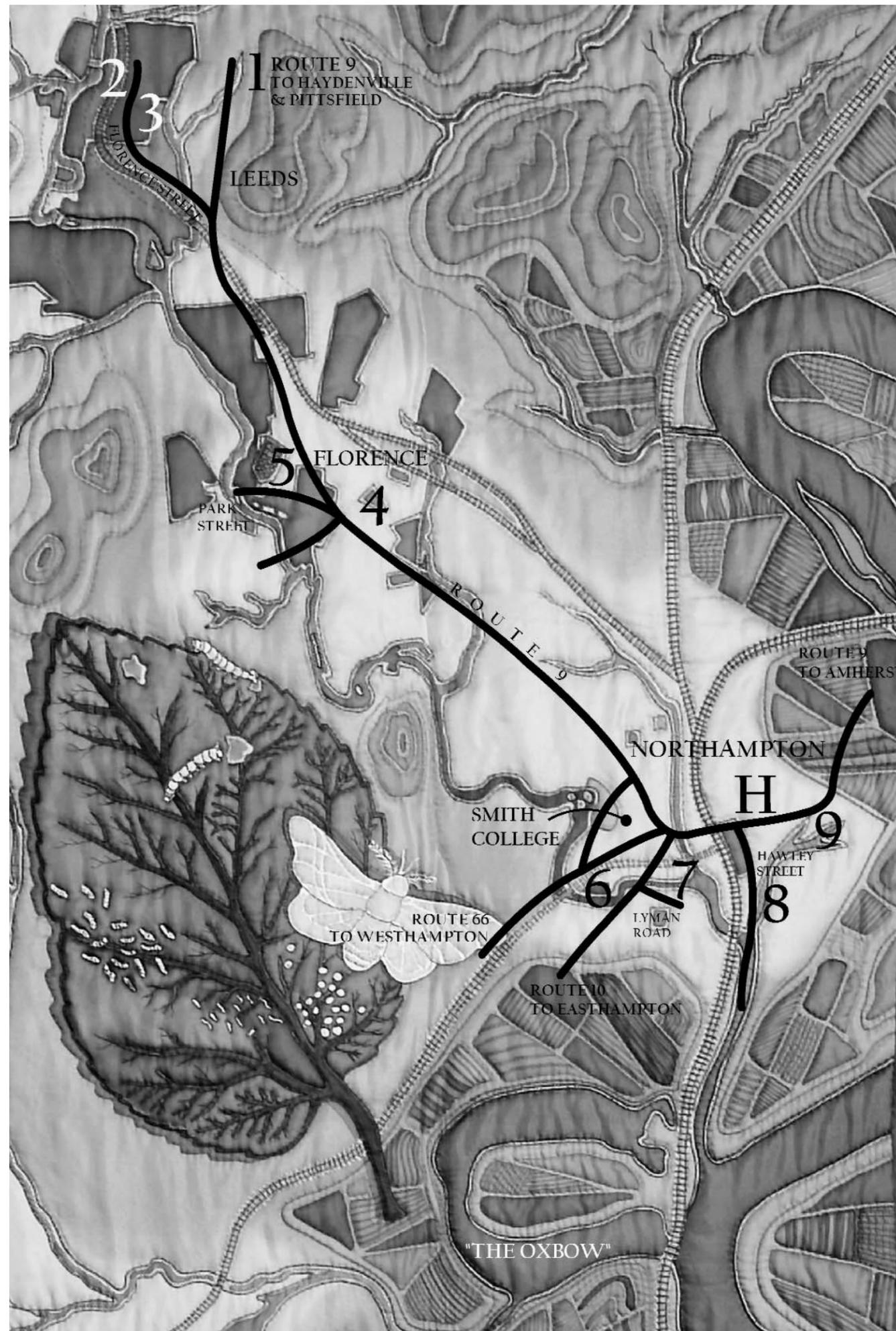
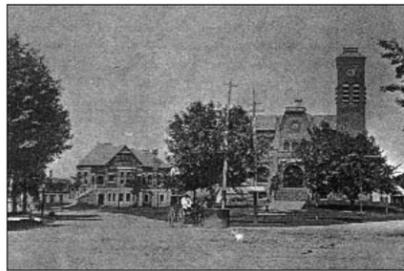


The town of Leeds had been named after the English city in recognition of the woolen mills located here, before the silk mills developed.

**4** **FLORENCE AND THE SILK INDUSTRY**  
The roots of the silk industry are here by the Mill River on the site now occupied by the Perstorp, Inc. factory. The row of single-story brick office buildings was part of the last silk factories here in the 1930's. Behind them is the river that powered Samuel Whitmarsh's first silk factory in 1834. To increase the power, the Nonotuck Silk Company later built a canal to siphon off the water from the base of the dam (the canal ran parallel to Nonotuck Street through what is now a parking lot and lawn in front of the Perstorp buildings.) On Riverside Drive at the eastern end of this factory, there is a small brick building, called now the 'Braid House', which is thought to have served as a dye house for the early factories. Across the street from this Braid House, on the corner of Maple Street, is a clapboard building that was likely one of the many boarding houses that lined Nonotuck street and the streets above. On the corner of Corticelli and Nonotuck streets stands an old, gnarled mulberry tree, a reminder of the company's sericultural roots.

By the 1850's, many of the more prosperous or renowned members of the early Association had established homes and funded buildings for the community up above this first factory area. Sojourner Truth owned a house across the street from the Park Street Cemetery; it is still a private residence. Samuel Hill, who bought the industry from the Association in 1846 and made it into the prosperous Nonotuck Silk Company, built his house at 31-33 Maple Street in 1845 and later oversaw the first of several remodelings of his residence. Around the corner, at 115 Pine Street, is the home of James D. Atkins who came from Cambridge to join the Association and became their dyer. Down the hill on Pine Street, on the triangle where Pine intersects Nonotuck, was the estate of a director and superintendent of the Nonotuck Silk Company, Alfred Lilly. Unfortunately, it has not survived.

**5** Also lost was one of Lilly's grandest bequests, the **COSMIAN HALL**, built at the head of Main Street in 1873 where the Florence Civic Center now stands. It was a three-story, Italianate 'Temple of Free Speech', home of the Free Congregational Society, the successor to the Association. Behind it in 1890, he built the **LILLY LIBRARY** which faces the Park Street Cemetery. In this cemetery, you can find the graves of many of the founders of the silk industry, including Hill, Lilly and Atkins. Around the corner from his house, on Pine Street stands the Hill Institute, endowed by Mr. Hill to provide a kindergarten for all the residents of the town and technical training for adults. The Hill Institute continues to this day.



**6** **THE MCCALLUM HOSEIERY PLANT**  
126 West Street  
Local industrialist Alexander McCallum built this factory in 1898 as part of his mills that produced silk hosiery worn by the likes of the actress Lillian Russell. By 1930, this building and the Silk Mill on Locust Street employed about 850 workers who dyed the silk threads, ran the knitting machines and sewed up the back seams by hand. The company survived until WWII and the development of nylon. It is now the office of the Physical Plant department of Smith College.

**7** **THE FORT HILL ESTATE**  
Lyman Road off South Street

Samuel Whitmarsh moved to Northampton in 1830 to establish a silk growing and manufacturing business. He purchased the land and built a 'commodious residence' here; later, it was rebuilt into the large white clapboard house now used as a pre-school for the Smith College Campus School. By 1835, Whitmarsh also built a cocoonery for 2,000,000 silk worms. His Northampton Silk Company was of great interest to a range of promoters and businessmen, but failed in the collapse of the mulberry craze. Whitmarsh never gave up: he later tried (and failed) to raise silk in Jamaica.



**8** **THE BELDING MILLS**  
Hawley Street near corner of Hancock Street

At the same time that the Mill River destroyed some of the water-powered wooden silk factories in 1874, the Belding brothers were building a brick factory, run on coal-powered steam. This building (no longer standing) was here along the railroad tracks for the coal supplies and the shipping of goods. Natives of this area, the brothers had built their first silk thread factories in southern Connecticut and now expanded their business to Northampton. This company merged in the late 20's with two other local companies. An image of this mill was incorporated into the Northampton city seal, which also includes four silk moths around the edge. Along Hancock street, you can see a row of houses built for the workers here.



**9** **THE STEBBINS HOUSE** -  
81 Bridge Street

Dr. Daniel Stebbins was one of the first in Northampton to import silkworm eggs directly from China in 1842, which he and his daughters fed with the leaves of the mulberry trees he planted on 12 acres behind this house. Dr. Stebbins brought a silk weaver from Lyon, the French silk capital, to Northampton to weave for the family. Parts of dresses made from this silk for his daughters are in the clothing collection at Historic Northampton.



**H** **HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON MUSEUM AND EDUCATION CENTER**  
46 Bridge Street  
<[www.historic-northampton.org](http://www.historic-northampton.org)>

For more information on this and other facets of the area's history, visit this museum's wide-ranging collection of photographs, documents and period artifacts as well as an important collection of textiles and clothing from Northampton.