

FROM EAGLE TANNERY TO WINCHESTER COMMUNITY PARK

By Ellen Knight¹

For centuries industry lined the banks of the Aberjona and other Winchester waterways and created many fine and varied goods, jobs, prosperity for the owners, and, unfortunately, enduring industrial waste problems.

Tanneries were a leading industry. Like Woburn, which was once known as “the home of the tanyard”² and “The Tanning Center of Middlesex County,”³ Winchester hosted tanneries. One such site was that now known as 134 Cross Street, most familiarly associated with the former Whitten gelatin factory.



A bird's-eye map from 1898 showing (l-r) the Maxwell (later Whitten), McKay, and Beggs & Cobb industries

Before the gelatin company, however, the site had at least two other owners. John Maxwell purchased the factory in 1870 from a Major MacDonald, about whom nothing more is presently known but who may have been the owner of the tannery marked at the site on the map of Winchester made in 1854.

Maxwell (1828-1908), born in Nova Scotia, learned the leather business in Philadelphia. He and his wife came to Woburn about 1853 and lived there until about 1880 when he built a home on Cross Street, east of the river.

Maxwell first worked in a shop at Cummingsville, Woburn, for John Cummings, grandson of one of Woburn's first tanners. In 1865, Maxwell opened his first tannery in Woburn. In Winchester, having bought a tannery from Major McDonald,⁴ he ran the Eagle Tannery, located off Cross Street, from 1870 until his retirement in 1890. Early called Maxwell & Sons, this enterprise was better known as the John Maxwell Co.

THREATENED BY STRIKE & FIRE

“Mr. Maxwell was kind hearted and generous,” his obituary said, yet he could also be tough and uncompromising. When his workers went on strike, led by the Knights of Labor, at the beginning of November 1886, Maxwell stood firm against them. Maxwell responded by hiring all new employees—even constructing a special boarding house for them—and refusing to rehire strikers or any member of the Knights of Labor. “The Knights of Labor, he says, have not used him right, and have done their best to ruin his business.”⁵

The *Boston Traveller* reported, “Mr. Maxwell is a quiet and unassuming man, pays strict attention to his large business, believes in paying a man according to his worth, but will not be dictated to by labor organizations, claiming that he is capable of running his own business.”⁶

The strike was “one of the most stubbornly fought labor contests that ever took place, either here or in Woburn.”⁷ Not surprisingly, next year when the factory burned to the ground rumors—ultimately unproved—of arson spread.

“At the conclusion of the session of our annual town meeting last March,” George S. Littlefield wrote in 1887, “after a heated debate had been indulged in, as those present descended the steps of Lyceum Hall, a weird sight met their gaze. The sky was overcast and a glare spread from the northern horizon to the zenith. It proved to be due to the burning of John Maxwell & Co.’s currying shop on Cross St.

“Not only from the intense heat and light was this a remarkable fire, but as an extended labor fight between Mr. Maxwell and his former employees had just terminated and the engine hose was during the progress of the fire cut in numerous places, many believed it was directly a sequence of the strike which had just ended.”⁸

CHANGING USES

Though he rebuilt the tannery, since the tanning industry had declined, Maxwell retired a few years later. The establishment was sold about 1902 for a gelatin manufactory known for about ten years as the Winchester Manufacturing Company, then the J. O. Whitten Co.

Since 1970, the property changed hands a few more times but remained a gelatin factory until 1979. A spectacular fire destroyed the factory in 1981. That blaze and the rezoning of the parcel in 1987 from a light industrial to a multi-family residential district ended the site’s industrial history.

Remnants of that history remained underground, however, prolonging the old conflict between the town’s accommodation of industry and its character as a pleasant residential community. Once economic assets producing jobs and revenue, Winchester’s industries also produced industrial waste some of which went into the river, some into the sewers, and some into on-site settling basins.

For all the best intentions of industrialists like Maxwell, they left a mixed legacy to the town. Maxwell knew his business and meant to run it well. At one time he was one of the largest tanners in the state. But he also had to address the complaints of “the nuisances of foul odor and river pollution.” In 1885 his company’s response to problems with waste disposal was to clean out its old catch basin and create a new waste site⁹ in what was apparently a conscientious effort to incorporate the best methods then available. “The owners of the tannery seem determined to make it [the new system] so thorough that no complaint of nuisance in the future will be possible.” Such did not happen.

At the turn of the 20th century, reformers sought to move industry out of the town center and transform former industrial sites to park land. Though much of their motivation was aesthetic, they also they knew that health hazards accompanied local industry. The Maxwell/Whitten site, in fact, became unbuildable.

FROM WASTE LAND TO PLAY FIELDS

Although gone, the old tannery and gelatin works left their mark on the land. A variety of reports over the years have documented the presence of waste on the tannery/gelatin site. After the DEP was notified of hazardous waste at the 7.5 acre site (at least by 1986), the property became subject to the state’s cleanup law, Chapter 21E. Subsequently, several investigations of the site have been conducted.

In 1985, a 72-unit condominium development called Winchester Woods was proposed for the site. The parcel was rezoned, but at that time toxic waste issues were unresolved, and Town Meeting eventually rescinded a covenant and agreement permitting the development.

In 2005, a proposed 40B, 116-unit condominium development called Riverview Village was put forward. The Board of Selectmen solicited comments from relevant boards and committees, and on the selectmen’s behalf land counsel Mark Bobrowski submitted a letter to MassHousing, which listed 13 issues with the plan, including density, height, flooding potential, traffic, and sewer capacity, among others. Although the developer scaled back the development, the Town could not support it. MassHousing also had issues and concluded that the site should not be developed for affordable housing. That project died in 2006.

Then the Winchester Soccer Club came along with a proposal to turn the vacant brownfield into playing fields. However objectionable the site was for housing, many of the issues formerly raised disappear with a proposal for a remediated and capped recreational site. The Club purchased two connected properties to enlarge the site to 8.7 acres.

Once approved, Phase I of Winchester Community Park began in June 2015 including the construction of two regulation synthetic turf fields, and one natural grass field.



WDG | Waterfield Design Group

¹This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 19, 1997 and Feb. 23, 2005. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² *The News* 1898.

³ Orra L. Stone, *History of Massachusetts Industries*, Boston: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1930.

⁴ Maj. McDonald is named in Maxwell's obituary, but nothing further is known about him.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 20, 1886.

⁶ Reprinted in *The Winchester Star*, Dec 24, 1886.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, Aug 14, 1908.

⁸ From a manuscript historian's report for the Historical and Genealogical Society in the Town Archival Center.

⁹ Detailed in *The Winchester Star*, October 9, 1885