

# Steep Brook Was Important

Steep Brook today is one of the most picturesque areas of the city and the place where most of the city's oldest houses are located.

Historically, as those old houses attest, Steep Brook (the section from Baldwin Steet north to

Miller's Cove, from the shore as far east as what is now Highland Avenue) was an important early settlement.

In 1934 Mrs. Rodolphus N. Allen offered a welcome glimpse into Steep Brook's past and its role in shaping what was to

become Fall River in a paper entitled "Stories of Steep Brook."

Allen, who read her paper at a well-attended meeting of the Fall River Historical Society, explained how Mother's Brook got its name and described some early

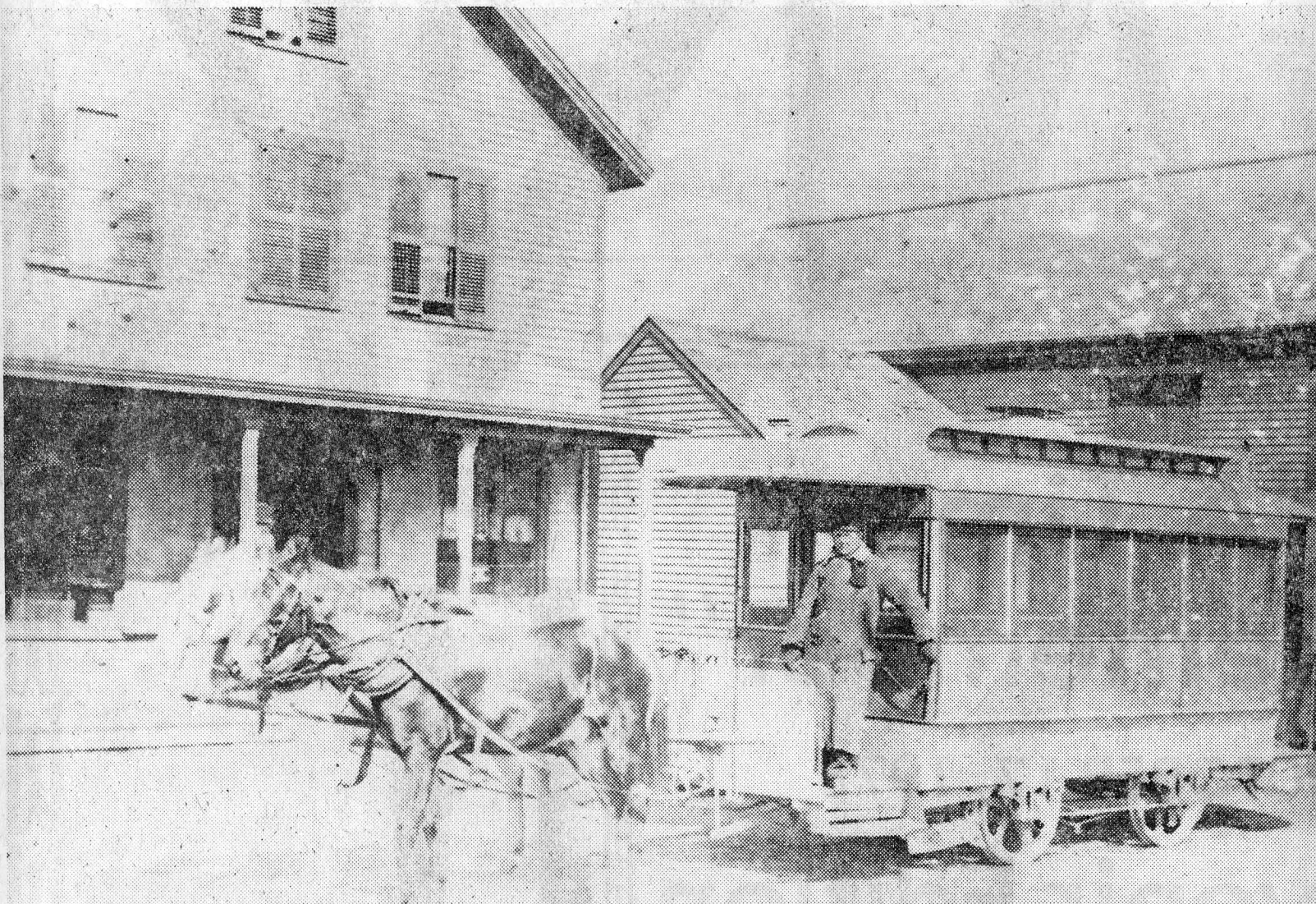
Steep Brook houses, people and industries.

The past 44 years have brought changes to Steep Brook, but that makes it all the more interesting to recall the past.

Lots 9-15 of Freeman's Purchase were located between the little stream

called Steep Brook (just south of Wilson Road) and Mother's Brook, which was the boundary established between Fall River and Assonet.

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A once familiar sight at Steep Brook, the last horse car on the North Main Street line was photographed for posterity on the last morning it

made the run in the late 19th century. The clapboard building in the background was the Steep Brook Post Office.



# Important Early Settlement

called Steep Brook (just south of Wilson Road) and Mother's Brook, which was the boundary line established between Fall River and Assonet.

The area around Mother's Brook was "an inviting spot for colonists," with its high land above

the river, abundant fish, game and lumber and land to be cleared. There was "plenty to do, and the new settlers were not afraid of work."

The early settlers came from places such as Plymouth, Taunton, Newbury, Portsmouth, Weymouth, Rehoboth and Lakeville. The new settlement grew rapidly and by 1680 there were a number of houses between Mother's Brook and the former site of St. Vincent's Home on North Main Street.

Some of the names of the early settlers were Winslow, Barnaby, Valentine, Hathaway, Read, Thurston, Ashley, Thurston, Durfee, Davis, Wilson, Canedy, Miller, Collins, Terry and Elsbree.

The first houses were built on or near the old Post road from Boston to Newport, over which in 1659 William Dyre was allowed to take his wife, Mary, the Quaker who was sentenced to die for religious belief. Mary Dyre was allowed to go to Roger Williams' Colony on the condition that she speak to no one on the way.

At first, saddle horses and river craft were the only means of transportation. Later there were crude carts, but the roads, originally Indian trails were "far from straight and very rough."

Like Plymouth Colony, Allen noted, the little village of Steep Brook had its "undesirables." In 1690 stocks for the punishment of evil-doers were erected two miles north of Steep Brook Corners. Paid for by special assessment of taxpayers, perhaps their presence was enough to deter law-breakers.

According to the author, the stocks were seldom used and were discontinued in 1740.

In explaining how Mother's Brook got its name, Allen related that when Samuel Valentine married Abigail Durfee of Stone Bridge, he built a home not far from the brook. Since Mrs. Valentine was very lonesome in her new home, "as Stone Bridge had been a very lively place," she spent many hours at the brook and the children started to refer to it as "Mother's Brook."

According to Allen, the old house known as the Valentine House on North Main Street was built by William Valentine. Samuel

to the patriots' stand and "voted to send delegates to ask that no action be taken to oppose the king because of the 'debt and dire misery' that might result. Later the townspeople decided to send a committee to find out what would be for the best interest of the colony."

In keeping with an order of Plymouth Colony that each township of more than 50 householders should be provided with some religious education, in 1710 the town voted to build a 36 by 26-foot house. The site, selected by a committee of three ministers from Taunton, Bristol and Little Compton, was a 2½-acre lot on the east side of the road, south of Mother's Brook.

Deeded to selectmen of the town, the lot was given not only for a church or meeting house, but also for a school, training ground and burial place.

Allen wrote that the question of allegiance to the king eventually brought about the closing of the church. "Party opinion ran high and split the congregation," she related.

In nearby Swansea, Rev. John Myles was going from house to house teaching and the women of Steep Brook wanted schooling for their children, too. "So a school teacher who would preach Sundays was secured, but wasn't satisfactory as some wanted a regular minister."

In 1747, the town entered into an agreement with Rev. Silas Brett, who bound himself in writing not to accept any salary, but to receive only free will gifts. He was given use of a house and 53 acres on what became known as the ministerial lot. Two centuries later the lot was purchased by Temple Beth El for a cemetery.

Around 1740 Assonet was the "metropolis" of Freetown, but Steep Brook, which had six grocery stores, was a close rival. "The Blossom road was laid out in 1773, meeting Wilson Road to connect New Bedford with Swansea and Providence by means of a ferry south of Wilson's wharf."

Although the town's first post office was established in 1811 near what is now the center of Fall River, in 1813 it was moved to Steep Brook, since that area was "a

After 1826 the first town hall was used as a school house and then a store before it burned down.

In 1808 a Boston paper advertised a stage coach to run from Boston to Newport, leaving about 5 a.m. and reaching Newport at 6 p.m., if not delayed. Later another coach was added, so that there was a daily trip each way.

People from Dighton, Somerset and other places west of the river came across by Chase's ferry to take the stage to Newport.

"Travel at this time was very dangerous because of poor roads, and crossing rivers in small open boats. Mud in spring and ice in winter sometimes overturned the coach or upset the ferry boats. It is reported that two drivers were frozen on this stage line."

The coach made a stop in Berkley at the French Tavern and another on the northwest corner of Main Street and Wilson Road. Passengers used to rest in the Green Dragon Inn, a tavern run by Orin Eddy on the southwest corner of Main Street and Wilson Road.

When the town "went temperance," a celebration was held. Benches were set up on the hill above the river, liquor was collected and there were speeches and songs. As the climax, a torch was applied to the rum, but the liquor wouldn't burn. "After a little delay some gunpowder was obtained and the rum blown up."

Allen related that clay was discovered in Steep Brook by Barnabas Clark, who came to Steep Brook from Lakeville about 1840 to work as a blacksmith.

Clark noticed a peculiar substance in the brook. He took a sample of this substance to Taunton and learned that it was the best kind of fire clay for lining furnaces and stoves.

"He bought land along the brook from Main Road to Highland Road and began to take out the clay. The layer of clay was 15 to 20 feet thick, and under it in some places were strata of slate with prints of ferns and birds' feet."

Clark bought Wilson's



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According to Allen, the old house known as the Valentine House on North Main Street was built by William Valentine, Samuel's brother. Although others have dated it 1769, she believed it was built in 1767.

East of the Valentine House was the Wigwam lot, where an Indian lived when and after the Valentines arrived. Years later a descendant of the Valentine family found what he thought was the site of the wigwam and some Indian artifacts.

One of the Steep Brook lots was purchased by Edward Thurston in 1702 and his son, Thomas, lived there until 1730. There was a cooper's shop by the river where barrels were made and then sent in Thurston's vessels to the West Indies for sugar. Chase's ferry and Winslow's tannery were in the same area.

It was said that treasure was buried on the Durfee land, located on an old road running north from Wilson Road. The Wilsons, whose ancestor Roger Wilson in London helped fit out the Mayflower, owned land on both sides of Wilson Road. "Capt Wilson after building a wharf and vessel sent to Newport wood split to make hoops for barrels, also shipped firewood in winter."

North of Mother's Brook was the James Barnaby farmhouse. Barnaby's son, Ambrose, was one of the town's richest men and largest land owners.

He was also one of the 10 "fearless patriots" who "risked their heads and property as early as 1768 by voting to send a delegate to Boston to protest against the treatment of the colony by England."

However, Allen reported, a majority of the townsmen were opposed

established in 1811 near what is now the center of Fall River, in 1813 it was moved to Steep Brook, since that area was "a strong rival in business prospects." The post office was returned to its original location in 1816 when it "became apparent that the advantages of Quequechan River as a mill stream were attracting business two or three miles south of the originally intended center of Steep Brook. . ."

The earliest landing place for ships at Steep Brook was Durfee's Wharf in the cove near Gage's Hill.

Robert Miller and his son, Robert 2nd, were shipwrights who owned considerable acreage in the area. The son also kept a tavern on the old Post road.

Many vessels were built at Steep Brook shipyards by the Millers and by Capt. Luther Winslow. Built in 1828, the "George Washington" sailed to Charleston, Savannah and Cuba to trade in rice and cotton. "In 1849 Capt. Miller fitted her out to go around Cape Horn to California gold fields. On arrival she was beached and abandoned by the crew who were mostly local men."

In 1803, the first town meeting was held a little south of Steep Brook Corners in the old Elsbree House, occupied then by Louisa Borden.

The first "town house" (town hall) was built by Isaac Winslow at the northeast corner of Wilson Road and Main Street for \$415. When the original location was judged unsatisfactory, in 1925 another town hall was built nearer the present center of the city.

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Clark bought Wilson's Wharf and enlarged it so vessels could carry the clay to the Presbrey Stove Lining Co. in Taunton and other places.

Barnabas Clark, from whom Clark Street is named, also built a dam, a saw mill, grist mill and ice house on Mill Pond.

Clay mining at Steep Brook was continued by Clark's great-grandson, B. Clary Shaw, until after World War II. Shaw dug the clay with steam and diesel powered shovels and sent it to Taunton by truck.

When the Route 24 connector was constructed, it removed all traces of the house, the stone mill and the stone ice house built by Barnabas Clark, as well as the Mill Pond. In 1972 Clark's stone blacksmith shop west of Main Street was torn down and all traces of Clark's buildings were gone.

Writing in 1971, B. Clark Shaw described some of the changes that the 20th century brought to the village of Steep Brook and pointed out that the Taunton River had become so polluted that bathing was no longer allowed at Bliffin's Beach.

Shaw wrote: "A brook still runs from the swamps of Watuppa Pond to the Taunton River, unnoticed and unworthy of a name. The street cars once had a sign reading 'Steep Brook.' Present buses have a sign reading 'North Main.' The community near the brook, at the fork in the highway, has even lost its name except in the memory of the old timers."