

# The Mechanic Street Mill Boiler Explosion, by Algernon H. Hill

This is copied from a typewritten essay from the Library's Pamphlet File. Algernon H. Hill died in 1941 at the age of 95 years.

The reason for taking this for my text is to put on record a few items as I remember them because there are only three men now known to be living who were workmen in the mill at the time, Mr. Henry Reason of N.Y City, Mr. Robert Munsell of Keene and myself.

In 1850 Lanmon Nims, who was a contractor, miller and wheelright, bought the small mills then in operation on Mechanic Street, enlarged them, and established the sash, door and blind business, taking in Daniel Buss, and later Cyrus Woodward as partners.

The plant was again enlarged. In 1856 the sash door and blind machinery which had been operated in West Swanzey by Wilder and Baker was bought and removed to the Mechanic Street Mills and several of the help came at the same time. Joseph Hill and Robert Munsell among the rest.

In 1859 Mr.Nims sold to Daniel Buss and Cyrus Woodward. Mr. Nims went to White River Junction and engaged in the manufacture of shoe pegs, was burned out,returned to Keene and went into business of manufacture of shoe pegs at Chase and Fairbank's Mill on Ralston Street. After a short time he sold out and in 1863 he returned to the Mechanic Street Mills and with Samuel B.Crossfield, as Nims and Crossfield, leased power and continued his former business there.

On June 22, 1861, Henry Pond became the assignee of Daniel Buss and Cyrus Woodward to Harrison D.Roberstson of Warren N.H. In 1861 the property came into possession of S.D.Osborne and S.W. Hale. They built another mill west an the other mills and went into the chair business. In 1863 they leased power and the old Mills of Nims and Crossfield to manufacture sash, door and blinds.

Messers Wilder and Baker soon quit. Baker went [to] Winchester and Mr.Wilder went to Holyoke to work and while he and some others were repairing the dam their boat got away and they were drowned. Joseph Hill and Joseph Doolittle from Winchester took their places in the Mechanic street Mills making blinds until Mr.Doolittle enlisted in the 14th. Regt. of Volunteers, Mr. Doolittle's place being taken by Mr.Munsell. The Handy Brothers, John and Henry, were making doors and the Briggs brothers the sash.

The boiler explosion occured on the morning of March 25,1864.The following account of the catastrophe is from the New Hampshire Sentinel of March 31,1864:

**A SAD EVENT IN KEENE: BOILER EXPLOSION AND LOSS OF LIFE!**

Our community was startled at about 8 o'clock on Friday Morning last by an explosion of a boiler at the steam mill of Osborne and Hale on Mechanic Street, by which some dozen persons were more or less injured, two of whom have since died and two or three others are at this time in a critical condition.

The steam power was owned by Osborne and Hale, chair manufacturers, and it was also used by Nims and Crossfield, manufacturers of doors, sash and blinds, both establishments employing some seventy-five hands.

The report caused by the explosion resembled that made by the blasting of rocks and was heard at points several miles distant, the concussion being so great as to cause buildings in the neighborhood to shake.

The fire-box with its accompaniments, weighing some two tons, was detached from the boiler, thrown into the air 75-100 feet, and deposited in a yard in front of a dwelling on the opposite side of the street, some ten or fifteen rods from the place of the explosion, while the boiler, weighing perhaps eight to ten tons was thrown back its whole length, over thirty feet, plowing up the solid frozen earth.

The engine building, 20x40 feet on the ground and two stories high, was blown to fragments and the larger building with which it was connected was a good deal shattered.

Roger S. Derby was the only person in the engine building at the time of the explosion, and was blown entirely out of it, being found some 40 or 50 feet from where he is supposed to have been standing. He was slightly scalded in the face and badly bruised about the chest.

The engineer Elisha Plaisted, had left the engine room but a minute before the explosion, and thus fortunately escaped. The other persons injured were mostly in the main building, north and east of the one in which the accident occurred.

Among these William Lang and Salmon G. Metcalf both of whom died before night, living perhaps eight hours. Mr. Lang was 20 years old and had served a year in the Navy. He was terribly scalded, and somewhat bruised, his skin peeling off like dry, dead bark from wood.

Mr. Metcalf was both scalded and bruised badly. He enlisted in the 6th. N.H. Regt. at the time of its organization, and after enduring hard service was discharged on account of ill health. His age was 32 years. Both of these young men were highly esteemed and leave many sincere friends to mourn their untimely departure.

Their funeral services took place in the Congregational Church last Sunday morning, Rev. William O. White and John A. Hamilton jointly officiating.

The large audience room was densely crowded, both in the body of the house and in the galleries, while many were unable to gain admission.

The three most severely injured, who survive are Roger S. Derby before mentioned, George W. Briggs, and Henry Reason. Mr. Briggs is a young man 22-25 years old and was severely scalded on the arms and back and bruised about the head. Mr. Reason, some 15 years old, was badly scalded about the face and neck and bruised on the arms.

Much anxiety has been felt about these Young men, but they were all doing well as late as Sunday evening, when it was thought by the attending physician Dr. Twitchell, that they would recover.

Samuel H. Woods, 50 or more years old was considerably burned in the face. At the time of the explosion he was at work grooving doors, and the grooving machine was blown away from him. Charles H. Briggs, younger brother of George W. Briggs before named, received some slight injuries.

A young man named John E. Jones employed in the chair shop received a severe contusion on the head from a piece of iron, it is supposed, but is now doing well.

One whose name we do not learn is reported to have been blown up through the sky-light and to have come down through the roof in some way not explained to us, very little hurt.

Young Derby, who was so severely injured, was from Dublin, and a member of the 6th. Regt. until his discharge. W.W. Marston, a teamster, was twice knocked down in the street, near the engine building. A number of others were slightly injured, but we have given the main and most important incidents.

Many wild and improbable stories have been current, such as almost invariably attend similar events. One man, a simple-minded creature, ran off towards his home in Swanzev, telling people on the way that already (immediately after the explosion), 12 dead bodies had been taken from the ruins and 20 more to come! We give this as a sample of others.

Many reports some without plausibility, have been current as to the cause of the accident. But as there is to be a coroner's inquest and an investigation by scientific men we very properly omit any comments under this head. The entire loss is estimated by outsiders to be from \$10,000 to \$15,000.

April 7, 1864

Osborne and Hale chair manufacturers, whose works were so seriously interrupted by the recent explosion have bought the real estate formerly owned by J.A. Fay & Co., at South Keene, including the water rights, the large brick factory, boarding house and some dozen dwelling houses, with about 80 acres of land. The purchase was made, we understand, for about \$18,000 dollars which is considered cheap.

They are moving the machinery from the old establishment and will probably get into operation in a few weeks.

When the explosion occurred I remember very well someone sang out "Don't go out until the things get through falling!" The whistle went up and came down through the roof within thirty feet of where it started from, and the same whistle is ready to do duty now.

Mr. Derby worked at a bench right beside the exhaust pipe from the engine on the second floor. He afterwards told me that he had a hammer and chisel in his hands working on door rails. Mr. Lang was only a short distance from him, also the Briggs brothers and Mr. Woods.

Mr. Metcalf worked on the first floor at a bench saw getting out door stock, not over twenty five feet from the end of the boiler. It was thought that one of the fire-doors hit him in the side as it was found beyond him and his side was smashed in.

I heard Mr. Plaisted, the engineer, say that he tried the water in the boiler and when he could find any, started the pump and immediately left the shop and went across the driveway into the Holme's Brothers shop and had just got the door closed and off it went.

The Holmes Brothers were George and Lewis, makers of the iron fences you see in the cemeteries.

The fire box landed on a pile of four foot wood in Mr. Dort's yard. The street and yards of Dort and Kidder looked as though there had been a "twister" through there.

The chimney was blown down and we never found two bricks together, they were completely blown apart. I helped clean them and we were looking for such a pair, as we spoke of earlier in the work. There was a brick found in the Duren house in the pantry that entered through the window. That is the first house south of C. Bridgman's, now the First Church Parsonage.

Another little incident I remember Mr. N. Sawyer telling my father of after the explosion. Mr. Sawyer did the cutting up of the lumber for the sash, doors and blinds, his bench was located next to the street and ran parallel to it. When he was cutting panel boards there used to be some waste that could be sold as heading for pails. These he used to pile in front of his swing saw bench and the side of the mill.

When the explosion took place the impact was so severe that it forced the front of the building plate away from the floor joist and let the floor down on the pile of heading, which held the floor up, otherwise the loss of life might have been greater.

In the garret of this building Mr. Thaddeus Flint had his carding machinery, rag picker etc. In the ell at the east of the main building the Haynes Brothers had a machine shop. Albon Howland's father, Mr. Jean Howe's father, John Draper and Yankee Annan worked there I remember.

When these mills were built there was no water works to pipe to and get water to make steam of. I should have thought that would have been a poser. They laid logs up to Fuller's Swamp to a spring among a clump of trees and brought water to the reservoir, built of plank, at the door. Also every foot of the eaves of those buildings were equipped with wooden eaves troughs and conductors to wooden tanks under the mills, all leading to the main reservoir.

I well remember going to work one morning and on opening the door a very disagreeable odor met me, and we had to leave the chop for the day. One of those very pretty black and white fellows had fallen into the tank of water during the night, and you all know the result.

And i have known them to have to draw water in barrels from Beaver Brook by the way of Beaver Street to get water to make steam so they could run the engine.

On August 12, 1867, one of the most destructive fires in the history of Keene originated in the engine room of Nims, Crossfield & Co. sash, door, and blind shop, a wooden building on Mechanic Street et about 4:30 P.M., and in about one hour and a half reduced to ashes seventeen buildings before it was controlled.

The fire spread with incredible rapidity. The dwelling house of Araba Kidder on the north side of Mechanic Street was burned and the house of George Dort, next westerly, many times on fire and much damaged.

On the east the dwelling of John F. Prindall was burned. That house was once a shop owned by Elias Rugg where he did a variety of odd jobs.

A barn belonging to Charles Bridgan was also burned, his house being saved by tearing down a shed which connected the house and barn.

On the west the fire was checked by tearing down a shop occupied by G. F. A. Brown as a paint shop. About one hundred men were thrown out of employment. Loss \$44,300 insurance \$13,075.

On Sunday, the night before the fire, Mrs. Nims had a dream in which she saw the mills in ruins, which so impressed and troubled her that she told her dream next morning and warned her husband to be extremely careful to avoid accidents during the day.

She was much relieved at noon to learn that all was well at the shop. At four o'clock in the afternoon she said, "I am glad that the day's work at the mill is almost done."

Then the mill whistle was sounded the alarm of fire. Grace Nims was wheeling her sister Mary on Court Street, but ran with the cart and child to the fire by the way of Union and Elm Streets and arrived in time to see the roof of the mills fall in.

The plant was rebuilt of brick constuction by the Keene Steam Poer Company at a cost of about \$40,000.