

# The Other “Villes”: Early Mill Villages in Vernon

By Jean Luddy

During the era of industrial expansion in New England at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many individual mills were established alongside rivers or streams in existing rural towns. When workers’ housing, mercantile buildings, and churches were constructed, a mill village was born. These industrial communities were given names by local residents to distinguish them as a location within an existing town. Some names were inspired by one of the company’s founders or by a prominent citizen. The trend in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was to combine a factory settlement’s name with the ending “ville.” One researcher counted 203 “villes” within existing Connecticut towns. Some of these “villes” grew in population and prosperity as the success of the factory system spread, while others remained as sections of a town or faded away.

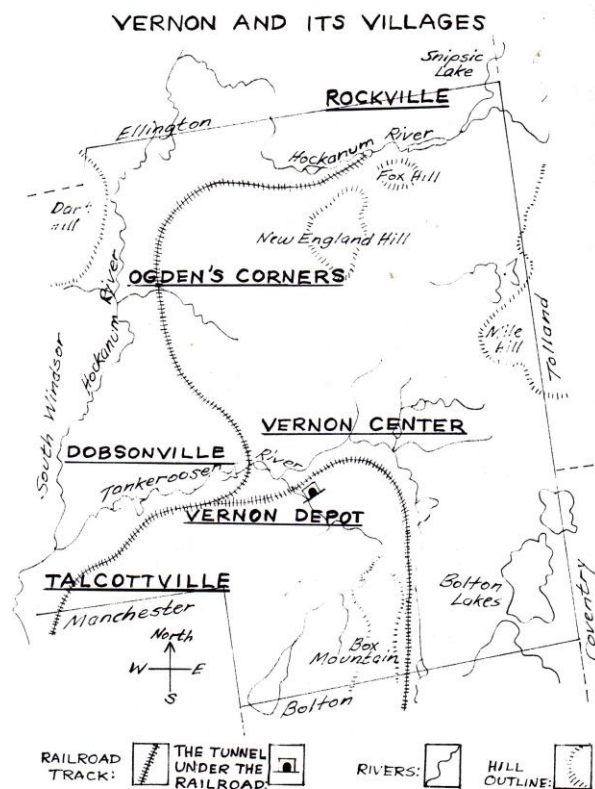
Founded as a mill village in the 1820s, Rockville expanded rapidly, becoming the industrial center of the area. In 1888, it became incorporated as a city within the larger town of Vernon, a distinction it retained until the consolidation of city and town services within the Town of Vernon in 1965.

Rockville’s fortunate location on swiftly flowing Hockanum River created conditions for industrial expansion during 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before the first mills were built along the Hockanum industrialists tapped the Tankerhoosen River, a tributary of the Hockanum, for its water power in the early 1800s. The Kelloggville and Dobsonville settlements were founded when these early factories were built. Kelloggville was later renamed Talcottville. These settlements grew to a lesser degree than Rockville. A factory run by the Talcott family existed the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the Dobson factory fell on hard times. Dobsonville never became an established community. The story of these two mill villages provides instructive comparison to the success of Rockville.

Waterpower fueled the early factories. Vernon’s first factories were built along the Tankerhoosen River. The earliest European settlers to this area had been attracted by the land’s suitability for farming. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the area near the river was settled with farms. It made sense to construct a mill near a source of labor and also near a potential market for mill products. The access to additional markets and ease of importing supplies increased with construction of the Hartford and Tolland Turnpike (Route 30) in 1806.

Industrial activity along the Hockanum River consisted of several mill sites along the lower branch. These were mostly small operations with few that lasted. The river started at Snipsic Lake in the northeastern section of town, but the land there was considered too steep and forested for mill sites at that time.

Vernon’s first industrialist, John Warburton, had established a cotton yarn mill by 1802 when Vernon was still called North Bolton. Within a few years, he had installed a wool carding machine. Most customers were local people who used his cotton yarn or carded wool to make their own fabrics.



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Warburton's mill soon was not the only one along the Tankerhoosen. By 1811 Peter Dobson, with the backing of several Vernon farmers, had built the Ravine Mill, a cotton yarn mill upstream from Warburton's mill on a site previously occupied by a saw mill.

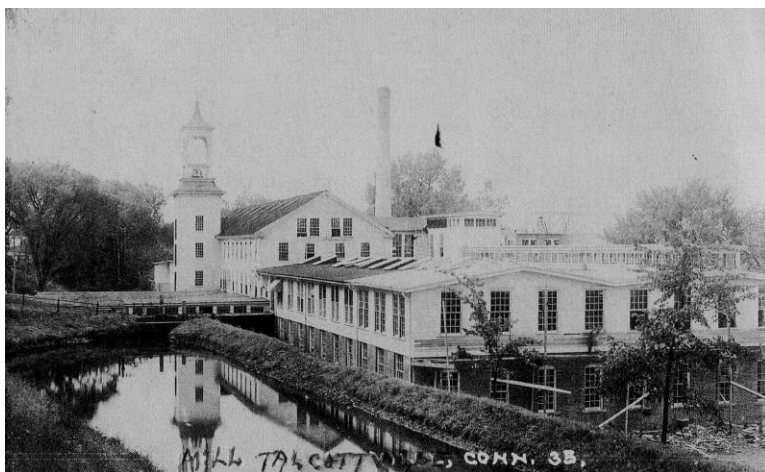
These early mills produced cotton-based products in the early years. The addition of wool to textile production occurred when a local farmer, Delano Abbott, bought an unusual fabric. He took this fabric, called satinnet, to Peter Dobson. They took the fabric apart and realized that satinnet combined a cotton warp with a woolen weft. Abbott asked Peter Dobson, an English immigrant with a background in textile production, to develop machinery to produce this fabric. Dobson visited other factories and applied his own knowledge to acquire or adapt the necessary machinery to create the woolen weft that was combined with the cotton warp thread already produced at the Dobson factory. The successful production of satinnet inspired other local investors to consider building factories in Vernon and led to the development of sites along the upper Hockanum River.



*Peter Dobson, one of Vernon's early industrialists and builder of the factory in Dobsonville*

Meanwhile the Warburton property went up for sale after John Warburton died. In 1816 George Kellogg, a member of a prominent Vernon family, purchased the wool carding shop and set up a satinnet mill in the Warburton plant. He turned daily operations of the mill over to his brother Nathaniel O. Kellogg. In 1832, the Kellogg brothers purchased the Warburton cotton mill. Over the next 20 years, Nathaniel Kellogg brought enough land around the settlement to encompass one square mile. He built six dwelling houses and a new three-story mill building. He named the expanded village Kelloggville.

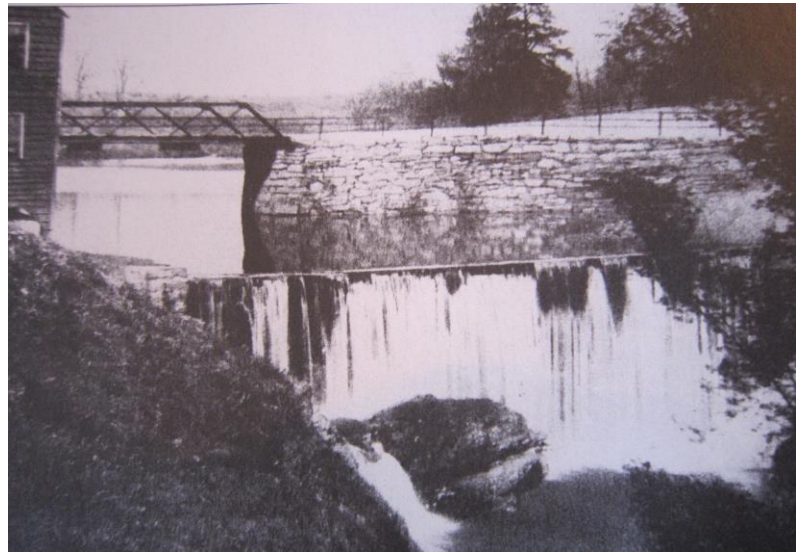
After Kellogg's death in 1854, the factory complex was purchased by Horace W. Talcott and Charles D. Talcott. The Talcott brothers were also from a prominent Vernon family and were related to the Kelloggs. With the arrival of the new owners, the company was called Talcott Brothers and the village was renamed Talcottville.



As the business prospered, the Talcott brothers purchased additional land to build more housing for their workers. They funded construction of a church, school, library and community building for the benefit of the village.

*The Talcott Brothers factory complex in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century*

Dobsonville never expanded into a fully complete village. Dobson's cotton spinning mill was managed by his son John after Dobson's death. Later the mill had a series of owners who produced a variety of products. Cloth for covering shade tobacco plants was produced when the factory was named the Ackerley Mill. Another mill building constructed near the original Dobson factory was owned by the Vernon Woolen Company when it burned completely in 1909. The mill's foundation and the stonework for the mill race that



channeled the water are still visible to those who hike through the Talcottville gorge. The falls at the Dobson mill site can also be seen from the Dobson Road bridge.

The Dobsonville name served as an informal designation for the area around the mill. This location lacked the planned development seen in Talcottville and Rockville. With the establishment of the railroad in the 1860s, the area became known as Vernon Depot. The local schoolhouse carried the Dobsonville name because Peter Dobson's widow gave the land for the building which was located along Hartford Turnpike (Route 30) where the New Alliance Bank stands today. The building was used as a schoolhouse into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later it served as a fire station.

Talcottville exists today as a residential neighborhood in Vernon. The Talcott Brothers ceased operations and sold the mill complex in 1950 to the Aldon Mills, a company that specialized in the production of fine yarns and specialty fabrics. The Aldon Mill company was in business for a number of years before closing when synthetic fabrics began to replace woolen ones.

Talcottville still resembles an early 19<sup>th</sup> century mill village due to several fortunate decisions by the state transportation officials. In the 1930s, the Hartford Turnpike (Route 30) was relocated away from Main Street. When Interstate 84 was expanded in 1979-80, the redesigned exit ramp closed off Main Street. These decisions helped to preserve the early industrial character of the village.

New England's manufacturing history is exemplified in the mix of industrial development located in Vernon. The foundations of colonial era saw and grist mills lie along the Hockanum and Tankerhoosen River, visible to those who know where to look. The Dobsonville mill foundations remind us that not all innovative companies last beyond the inventiveness of the founder. The well-preserved mill village of Talcottville and the former textile manufacturing center of Rockville span the range of industrial expansion, product development and technological change that characterized the industrial era in Connecticut and New England. This assortment of industrial activity within our town reminds us that during this era farmers, businessmen, engineers, and craftsmen successfully worked together to experiment, innovate, and adapt to a new kind of technology and business model.

Note: The information presented in this article was gathered from *Building the Loom City: Rockville, Connecticut, 1821-1908* by Municipal Historian, Dr. S. Ardis Abbott. For those who want to learn more about the industrial era in Vernon and Rockville, the book can be purchased from the Vernon Historical Society or borrowed from the Rockville Public Library.