



# Town of North Smithfield Historic District Commission

## Slatersville Historic District

**Date Established:** November 15, 2010 (National Register: April 24, 1973)

**Geographic Location:** The Slatersville Local Historic District begins with parcels located along Greene Street and east along School Street, moving southerly toward North Main Street, turning southeasterly onto Railroad Street and into Providence Pike (see Slatersville Historic District Boundary Map).

**General Description:** The Slatersville Historic District, entered in the National Register in 1973, is located on the Branch River in the northwestern part of North Smithfield. The district includes the Slatersville Reservoir, dams and water-power systems, and 19<sup>th</sup> century mills, commercial blocks, mill houses, churches, and other buildings along Main Street, North Main Street, Green Street, School Street, Railroad Street and several side streets.

The recently approved local Historic District for Slatersville includes 18 total parcels encompassing several historically and architecturally significant mill buildings, mill stores and mill housing, as well as a few other compatible late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings.

Today, Slatersville exists as a suburban, residential community with the main businesses and commercial buildings of centuries before being renovated for new business, including Town Hall and the Slatersville Public Library, or rehabilitated mill housing as mostly one, two and three family dwellings. Its most notable features as a classic example of an American factory village can still be evidenced today, with its dense development of mill housing surrounding the main mill complex along the Branch River. A few of the houses are distinct in design and architecture, apparently structures previously of the upper management and owners and their families. Their detail, as seen in their porches, entryways, entablatures, window and door configurations, cornices, and associated trim, combine to create a close-knit community through their axially projected setting around the main mill complex and well-landscaped surroundings along the river.

**Historical Development:** At Slatersville, Samuel Slater moved beyond the limited scale of his Pawtucket mill to a level of operations like that he had known in England. Established by Slater in partnership with his brother John and his Pawtucket employers, Almy & Brown, the new enterprise boasted a textile mill nearly four times the size of the 1793 mill. Slatersville is also notable as one of the first American factory villages, where the mill owners erected worker housing and public buildings, creating a largely a self-contained community centered on the factory. The Slatersville model (which itself was based on English precedents) was widely replicated where manufacturers' reliance on waterpower forced them to develop rural sites.

The village began in 1806-07 with the factory buildings down along the Branch River, and the housing on the higher ground, arranged along a primary east-west road and a secondary north-south road. The manufacturing complex began with the large stone mill, supplemented by a bleach house, a frame weave mill and other support buildings. The operations expanded with the Western Mill in 1821, which was built upstream from the original complex, and Mill #3 in 1843, built behind the Center Mill. These mills were built of stone with clerestory monitors like the

Center Mill. In 1894, the brick Weave Mill was added next to the Center Mill. The Western Mill went out of operation at this point and was demolished early in the twentieth century. The one-and-a-half-story frame building with a trap-door monitor in front of the Center Mill is the only building believed to have survived from the 1806-07 factory complex. Used as an office by 1894, it may have originally been a bobbin mill.

The company built timber-framed, center-chimney houses for the first operatives. These houses' traditional exterior styling contrasted with their internal division into multi-unit tenements. On North Main Street there are examples of the one-and-a-half-story duplexes and some early two-and-a-half-story four tenement houses survive on Green Street in altered form. The house built for John Slater, the resident superintendent, was moved from Green Street to 16 School Street. The company probably acquired some pre-existing houses on Main Street for workers housing as well.

As the workforce expanded to six hundred by 1870, the company continued to build two- and four-tenement houses, as well as larger boardinghouses, on each of the main roads. The larger single-family houses for the supervisory staff or local merchants were built on School and North Main streets, at the outer limits of the village.

A commercial district developed with the company's construction of a brick and stone store block on the west side of the center crossroads in 1850. A second block with the same type of storefronts framed with monolithic granite slabs was added to the west in 1870. These buildings housed the Slatersville National Bank, the post office and a variety of stores on the first floor, tenement rooms on the upper floors and an assembly hall on the top floor of the western building.

Slatersville's most distinctive feature is its green, village commons being a rarity in Rhode Island. The green's origins can be traced back to the community meeting house that John Slater had erected in 1808 on the plateau at the east end of the village. Built with galleries and a three-story tower, it served as a school and the first home of the Congregational Church. When the present Greek Revival Congregational Church (also built by Slater) took its place in 1838, the triangular space in front of the church was reserved as a common, a measure attributed to mill superintendent Amos Lockwood. Lockwood may also have been instrumental in a circa 1850 beautification program in which elms were planted on the common and along the streets and evergreens were planted in the mill yard.

The growth of the French Canadian population led to the establishment of St. John's Roman Catholic Church in 1872, on land donated by William F. Slater (John's son) on the southern edge of the village. An Episcopal chapel was added in 1897; it was adapted for use as a hall ca. 1900 and a grange in 1920.

After passing out of Slater family ownership ca. 1900, Slatersville was acquired by Henry Kendall in 1915. Kendall resumed textile manufacturing and embarked on a general renovation of the village, giving it the appearance of an "old New England village never dominated by industry." Kendall added new housing on Ridge Road and, like his predecessors, freely moved buildings around and adapted them for reuse. Unlike his predecessors he sought to lower village density, transforming the "typical multiple-family bee-hives surrounded by sun-baked hard-packed earth," by providing larger grounds around the houses and reducing the number of tenements. Most notably, on Green Street he converted the early four-family houses into single-family residences for his managers, adding porches and altering doorways to mask their original uniformity.

Slatersville's history as a company town ended in 1954 when the Kendall Company sold off its holdings, with many of the houses being acquired by their residents. Most of the mill housing on

the south side of the village was demolished shortly thereafter; otherwise, most subsequent change has been limited to incremental modifications made by individual property owners.

--The preceding excerpt was revised and condensed, taken from The Early Architecture and Landscapes of the Narragansett Basin, Vol. II, by Claire W. Dempsey, Richard E. Greenwood and Wm. McKenzie Woodward, copyright 2001.