

## BOURNE SPOONER

“While I am wandering about the North part of the town, let me speak of Bourne Spooner, who having been dead thirty-five years, cannot be remembered by any of my readers who are much less than fifty years of age. Few are aware to whom the town was indebted, for the establishment of the Plymouth Cordage Co., a corporation filling so large a place among the industries of the town, and which with its growing proportions promises to stand many years as a conspicuous and deserved monument to his memory. He was a son of Nathaniel and Mary (Holmes) Spooner, and was born in Plymouth, February 2, 1790. After receiving the education which our public schools could furnish, he went to New Orleans, where he spent ten years engaged in rope making, but in what capacity I have no means of knowing. It is probable that the material used in the manufacture was Kentucky hemp, as its transportation from the hemp fields by the Mississippi river was easy and cheap. It is doubtful whether sisal from Mexico was much used in those days and Russia hemp and Manilla could be obtained in Boston more expeditiously and cheaper than in New Orleans. The unprofitableness of slave labor employed in that city appealed to his Yankee spirit of thrift, and he conceived the idea of establishing if possible a cordage factory in his native town. Returning home he kept for a time a store opposite the Green, and later conferred with a number of gentlemen in Boston, who looked favorably on the scheme of a Plymouth factory, and on the 12th of July, 1824, an act of incorporation was granted by the Massachusetts legislature to Bourne Spooner, William Lovering, Jr., John Dodd and John Russell, and their associates, as the Plymouth Cordage Company, “with power to hold real estate not exceeding twenty thousand dollars. The location decided upon for the factory was in the north part of Plymouth, on a stream supplied by two brooks, one of which was called Nathans brook, after Nathan Holmes, the grandfather of Gideon F. Holmes, the present treasurer of the company, the capacity of which was twenty horse power. Thus it seems evident that any very considerable growth of the establishment was not anticipated. The part of Plymouth selected for the factory was called in Pilgrim days, “Plain Dealing,” but in my boyhood, Bungtown, and a little later, North Town. When the Old Colony Railroad established a station there they unwittingly adopted practically the old Pilgrim “Seaside,” as “Plain Dealing” meant a plain by the sea. The growth of business set in at a very early day, and

up to 1883, when the capital stock of the company was increased to half a million of dollars, only forty-four thousand dollars had been paid in, and all the remainder of the half million had been furnished by the profits of the company. In 1894 the capital was still further increased to a million, all of the “million, all of the increase being furnished by the stockholders. To meet the growth of the factory business the original water power was supplemented by steam engines in 1837, 1839, 1850, 1868, 1888, and 1900. The last two of these are of 1500 and 1600 horse power. In 1827 the sales of cordage amounted to 601,023 pounds, and in 1899 to 19,597,644 pounds. In addition to the above, while the first lot of binding twine sold in 1882 amounted to 384,820 pounds, the sales of the same in 1899 amounted to 27,905,981 pounds, and the entire product of the factory is estimated to be about one-seventh of the product of all the Cordage companies in the United States. Of the large cables made by the Company I have personal knowledge of one of fifteen or fifteen and a half inches. About the year 1865, an English steamer, named, I think, “Concordia,” was wrecked on Cape Cod and “bought by Boston parties. The cable, to which I refer, was ordered for the purpose of hauling her off shore. I was told by Osborne Howes, one of the purchasers that within forty-eight hours after it was coiled on the beach the junk men cut it up and carried it off. The steamer was got off and towed to Boston, where she was lengthened and refitted for service.

I have said thus much concerning the Cordage Company for the purpose of illustrating the sagacity, energy, good judgment and integrity of Mr. Spooner, who was until his death, during the career of the company, its agent, and after 1837, its treasurer. He did his business so unostentatiously, that I think few of his fellow citizens realized the great work he was doing in building up “an industry which has done so much in promoting the growth and welfare of Plymouth. Next to his interest in the affairs of the company intrusted to his care, was his interest in the anti-slavery cause. How, and exactly when he enlisted in the cause, I never knew. His life in New Orleans probably opened his eyes to the evils of the institution of slavery, but I do not think that he entered the anti-slavery ranks until after the visit of George Thompson to Massachusetts, and the Garrison mob in Boston in 1835. Among the earliest in Plymouth to engage in the movement, according to my best recollections were, Lemuel Stephens, William Stephens, Ichabod Morton, Edwin Morton, Ephraim Harlow, Kendall Holmes, George Adams and Deacon Wm.

Putnam Ripley, and I think Johnson Davie and their families. Nearly all of these, except the Ripleys, lived on "tother side," as it was called, like "l'autre cote" of Paris the other side of the Seine, as "our "tother side" is the other side of Town Brook. The merchants, professional men, including ministers, and the politicians in both the whig and democratic parties, were either too timid to join the anti-slavery ranks, or were decidedly hostile to the anti-slavery movement. An anti-slavery meeting was held on the evening of July 4, 1835, in the Robinson church, which was disturbed by an incipient mob which contented itself with breaking a few windows, and afterwards smearing with tar the dry goods sign of Deacon Ripley. Though the Old Colony Memorial contained a paid advertisement of the meeting, its columns were silent concerning its doings and the disturbance. It is of little consequence how or when Mr. Spooner became interested in the movement. He became one of the most prominent men in the state, supporting it, and undoubtedly furnished to it material aid not exceeded in amount by the contributions of any other in its ranks. He was a constant friend and supporter of Garrison, "Phillips, Quincy and Douglas, all of whom frequently enjoyed the hospitalities of his home.

Mr. Spooner was widely known, especially by fellow travellers on the railroad, as an expert and entertaining story teller, and skilful in the art. He knew how to tell a story, omitting details, careful never to say that he had a capital story, being willing to leave its quality to the judgment of his listeners, never laughing until he had finished, and then when his companions began to laugh he would join with them as heartily as if he had never told the story before. He told many stories about his great uncle, Deacon Ephraim Spooner, which seemed to amuse some persons, the humor of which I never could see.

But he had a nearer kinsman, his own uncle, Thomas Spooner, who was a man of both wit and humor, from whom he must have acquired his own delicate sense of these qualities. Thomas Spooner was at one time town treasurer, and many years a constable. One evening he was called upon to serve a precept, and while making his way in the dark through a private yard he encountered a clothes line, and then a second one which knocked off his hat. "By George," said he, "I never knew before what the Bible meant by 'precept upon precept; line upon line.'" He was an ardent whig, and when returning home one day after an absence of a couple of days, he found posted on the town tree a notice

for a democratic meeting. "By thunder," said he, "can't I leave town twenty-four hours without there being the devil to pay?" and he pulled the notice down.

Mr. Bourne Spooner, not only as occasion offered, repeated stories which his tenacious memory had treasured up, but he found satire and humor in the incidents of every day life, which he often used to point a moral, as for instance, the case of the old lady who had a husband somewhat addicted to profanity, and who when rebuked by a sister of the church then attending revival meetings because she bestowed so much care on her husband, who she said was a bad man, replied, "I know sister, my husband is a very bad man, and has little to expect in the next world, so I feel it my duty to do what I can for his comfort and happiness in this.

Mr. Spooner was a tender hearted man, especially towards his workmen and their families. An instance of his tender feelings once came under my own observation. The Cordage Company did their banking business in Boston, discounting once a month at the Old Colony Bank a note to obtain bills for the monthly pay roll. During one of the financial panics when money was almost impossible to obtain, he came one day into the Plymouth Bank in despair. He said that he could not get a dollar in the Old Colony Bank, and Mr. Dodd, his Boston director, could not obtain a dollar in Boston. He had put off the settlement of his payroll two or three times, and he was afraid to go home and meet the disappointed looks of his men, whose families were in absolute need of their wages. As he said this, I noticed the tears trickling down his cheeks. It so happened, either by good luck or good lookout, we had for some time been confining our discounts to short paper, and our maturities were keeping us well supplied with funds. We gave him the money, charging him only 7 per cent, while as the following incident will show, money was worth more than double that rate. A day or two afterwards I met on Water street, Boston, the President and Treasurer of a large manufacturing concern in Taunton, who asked me if I would let him have ten thousand dollars. I told him that I would, and should charge him for it on a four months' note, fifteen per cent. He turned on his heel and left me. An hour after I met him in the National Bank of Redemption, and he asked me if my offer held good. I told him it did, and the loan was made then and there.

**Mr. Spooner married in 1813, Hannah, daughter of Amasa and Sarah (Taylor) Bartlett, and died July 21, 1870.**

***Excerpt From: William T. Davis. "Plymouth memories of an octogenarian." Apple Books.***