# SAMUEL SLATER: EMPLOYER, ENTREPRENEUR, CITIZEN AND CHURCHMAN

by FRANK A. PEAKE

There have been a number of accounts of the life and work of Samuel Slater. The earlier ones, in the tradition of much Victorian biography, have been fulsome and eulogistic. The more recent ones, usually undertaken in an academic setting and with access to more complete source materials, have been less effusive and more carefully critical and analytical.

What manner of man was Samuel Slater? His name and achievements have become part of American folklore to an extent as great if not greater than those of his masters, Strutt and Arkwright, in England. The popular legend is that Slater arrived in the New World with nothing but his native abilities and a mental image of Arkwright's water frame. By a prodigious feat of memory he reproduced the spinning machine, *ex nihilo* as it were, introduced cotton spinning into the U.S.A. and in time became the 'father of the American textile industry'.

The facts are rather less romantic although remarkable enough. Samuel Slater was born on 9 June 1768,[1] the fifth son of William Slater, a yeoman farmer, of Holly House, Belper. Following the death of his father in the summer of 1782, Samuel went to live with the family of Jedediah Strutt[2] to whom he was apprenticed on 8 January 1783. It is believed that Strutt would have preferred one of the older sons but William Slater, before his death, had pressed Samuel upon him observing that 'he wrote well, and was good at figures'. The apprenticeship was for six-and-a-half years and provided for Samuel to be taught his trade as a cotton spinner. It seems to have been assumed on both sides that the boy was to be what today would be called a 'management trainee' but this did not prevent him from becoming 'an excellent machinist'.

The late eighteenth century in England was a period of industrial growth and expansion, not least for the cotton spinning industry. For Samuel Slater the future seemed bright. His career with Strutt was assured and his prospects unbounded. Why then did he decide to emigrate? He might have felt that the industry was over-extended with little room for future growth. Such fears would assail him in the New World years later. It seems more likely, however, that the inspiration came from quite a different direction.

Among the ironfounders with whom Jedediah Strutt dealt was the firm of Walker at Rotherham, Yorkshire.[3] To the Walkers in 1789 came Thomas Paine, the well-known radical, fresh from the U.S.A., seeking support for a new bridge design. Paine was quite possibly introduced to Strutt by the Walkers and visited him at Belper. At all events, Paine wrote to his friends in America:[4]

> I have been to see the Cotton Mills, — the Potteries — the Steel furnaces — Tin plate manufacture — White lead manufacture. *All those things might be easily carried on in America.* [Italics added]

What more likely that he met Strutt's protegé, Samuel Slater, and caught the young man's imagination. Paine had been to Providence, Rhode Island, a few months previously and may even have described it to him, comparing the Blackstone river with the Derwent as a source of power. Intrigued, but saying nothing to anyone, the young man pondered the prospect and then made his decision.

Saying nothing to his family until he was safely on board, Slater took ship for New York. Following an ocean voyage of nine weeks he arrived there and found employment which he considered neither rewarding nor congenial. It would, however, give him time and opportunity to survey the situation. Through the captain of a coastal trading vessel he learned that attempts, as yet unsuccessful, were being made to spin cotton by machine at Pawtucket, Rhode Island. With all the assurance of youth he wrote to Moses Brown to offer his services, intimating that what he did not know about cotton spinning was not worth knowing. He wrote:[5]

> New York, December 2nd, 1789 Sir,
> A few days ago I was informed that you wanted a manager of *cotton spinning*, &c. in which business I flatter myself that I can give the greatest satisfaction, in making machinery, making good yarn either for *stockings* or *twist*, as any that is made in England; as I have had opportunity, and an oversight of Sir Richard Arkwright's works, and in Mr. Strutt's mill upwards of eight years. If you are not provided for, should be glad to serve you. . .

To Brown the letter seemed providential. The New England cotton industry at the time was almost negligible. Following the revolution it became apparent that although the U.S.A. had gained political independence it was still economically dependent upon Great Britain. Raw cotton was exported to Britain and the American market was flooded with British manufactured goods. There was some domestic industry but virtually no manufacturing on a large scale.

A start in this direction had been made by William Almy and Moses Brown — an old Quaker mercantile house of Providence — who in 1789 had ventured into the spinning business. Although it was known that spinning by water power was being undertaken in England no detailed knowledge of the process was available. The British government had imposed strict limitations on the emigration of spinners and the export of technical information. Experiments had been made in the U.S.A. but on the whole without success.[6] The constructors of one such set of machinery, the Barr brothers, were granted a subsidy by the Massachusetts Legislature : their machines were dubbed the 'State's Models' and put on exhibition, but none of the frames copied from these models worked. The frames which Almy and Brown bought were copied from these models.

In the circumstances Almy & Brown were overjoyed to obtain Slater's services and were willing to pay him almost anything he asked. Without waiting to demand references Brown eagerly sought to enlist Slater's services. He wrote to him:[7]

> . . . We are destitute of a person acquainted with water-frame spinning . . . we hardly know what to say to thee, but if thou thought thou couldst perfect and conduct (the frames we have) to profit, if thou wilt come and do it, thou shalt have all the profits made of them over and above the interest of what they cost, and the wear and tear of them . . .

It was a surprisingly generous offer and Slater made his way to Pawtucket with all speed. Quite probably the owners of the mill thought, or at least hoped, that it required only the touch of an expert to make them work. Slater seems to have started with the assumption that the machinery would be virtually useless. No doubt his motives were mixed. He could not imagine that successful spinning frames could have been developed in this wilderness. It was also to his advantage to deprecate what had already been done so that his own success might seem the greater. Said Moses Brown,[8]

> when Samuel saw the old machines, he felt down-hearted with disappointment — and shook his head, and said 'these will not do; they are good for nothing in their present condition, nor can they be made to answer.'

The careful Brown, having made his offer, did not immediately enter into a contract with Slater. He was naturally anxious to see if performance lived up to promise. Slater spent his first ten weeks rebuilding one of the frames or using some of the parts to build a machine which would work.

The Pawtucket to which Slater came was a few miles north of Providence, Rhode Island. Providence itself had been established by Roger Williams in 1636 following his expulsion by the Puritans of Massachusetts. The village of Pawtucket grew up on the

banks of the Blackstone river, the Reverend William Blackstone having been the first settler. Iron ore was discovered in the vicinity in 1650 and a blacksmith's shop was established near the falls a few years later. Although it was destroyed by the Indians in 1675 the village was rebuilt with the addition of a sawmill and carpenter's shop. During the eighteenth century Pawtucket became a centre for farm implements for the region and for the keel plates, anchors and bells for the ships. During the American Revolution the iron industry was devoted to the manufacture of muskets and ammunition. More recently, in the summer of 1789, Moses Brown had started on his cotton-spinning venture in the village.

In terms of technology Slater built upon what he knew, reproducing and improving the frames he had seen and worked with at home in Belper. Yet it was not a single-handed operation. As one writer has said,[9]

> Pawtucket ingenuity carried Slater through when his memory faltered: the contributions of David Wilkinson, Sylvanus and James Brown, Asa and Jeremiah Arnold, and others in the machine industry reflected the endemic inventiveness of the people. Thus the mechanics of Pawtucket, and the capitalist merchants of Providence [together, it must be added, with the technical skill and business acumen of Samuel Slater] created an industry that in the end defied state boundaries and town parochialism.

Within a few months high quality yarn was being produced and the new industry had begun. But the infant undertaking was not without its problems. The converted tailor's shop in which it had been established proved to be quite unsuitalbe. As an earlier writer has commented:[10]

> For nearly two years the work was carried on in the old clothier's shop next to the bridge. Here the water wheel was so exposed to the weather that it froze every night during the winter and each morning it was so covered with ice that it would not turn. Samuel Slater could get no one to break the ice in the early morning when it was time to start up the mill, or even to help him to do it. Some mornings he was two or three hours before breakfast breaking the ice until he was thoroughly chilled with the wet and cold.

For this reason, among others, a new mill was built about twenty rods upstream on land owned by Moses Brown. Initially, there were some difficulties about water rights. It was complained that the new dam interfered with the passage of fish up the river and therefore with the food supply of people further upstream. In the new mill Slater was careful to place the water wheel beneath the building and to provide an adequate sluice-way.

The business flourished and expanded and Slater's future seemed assured although, like Arkwright, he experienced pressures from competitors. Arkwright had sought to protect his interests by legal action against those who infringed his patents.[11] Quite apart from the fact that such a course was closed to Slater he seems to have preferred to take his chance in open competition or to withdraw from the scene to an area where the competition was less intense. As early as 1810 he considered moving from Pawtucket to the southern United States.[12] Instead he and one of his foremen, Bela Tiffany, embarked upon a new manufacturing venture at Oxford (later Webster), Massachusetts. In 1821 he wrote to George Benson Strutt concerning claims which were being made in the U.S.A.,[13]

> . . . a certain cotton manufacturing company in this country, who have been in the cotton business a few years only. . . have pretended to be the inventors of almost everything, and have taken out patents accordingly; but as it is also known, that, before they commenced business, one of their brightest partners was in England for some time (cloaked as a merchant,) obtaining information and workmen, . . . the public here, [is inclined] to believe that they claim that which belongs to the public.

## I

From this rather lengthy introduction we may turn to a consideration of Samuel Slater as employer. Here there are certain difficulties because while he was a partner in the firm of Almy, Brown & Slater, his function was principally that of superintendent of the

mill at Pawtucket. The real business of the concern, the purchase of raw materials and other supplies, the recruiting and payment of workers and the sale of finished products was carried out by Almy & Brown at Providence. This, inevitably, led to friction and there were times when Slater felt that they neither knew nor cared for anything beyond the profits which were supposed to accrue. On one occasion he wrote to them with rare, wry humour:[14]

> Yesterday I wrote for a round file. You sent a half round. I wish you would send up the other half today. Probably I can cement two halves together to make a round. . .

The most serious difficulty, however, lay with the shortage of currency, a problem which plagued the whole of early industrial society, and resulted in the 'long pays' so difficult and irritating for the workers. On one occasion, although by no means the only one, Slater wrote in exasperation to Almy & Brown:[15]

> Please send some fleece cotton . . . & a little money. If not I must unavoidably stop the Mill after this week. It is now going on four weeks since I rec'd $15 20c. Can you imagine that upwards of 30 people can be supplied with necessary articles that cannot be gotten short of cash with that sum. Or, do you not imagine anything about it. This is the 3rd & last time I mean to write until a new supply is arrived, if this avails nothing I must stop the mill or sell a part of the stock or mach'y to carry on the rem«ainin]g part . . . You can't say you have not rec'd the letters respect'g money, I think, because other things have been sent which were written for in the same letters. If you say the Business will not admit of anything better, I say in answer to that do less or stop. For I cannot bear to have people come round me daily & sometimes hourly saying, I have no Wood nor Corn, nor have had any for several days: can you expect my Children to work [if] they have nothing to Eat. I must take them out if they can't have verry high wages. You know or feel but little about it.

Whether the situation arose from the callousness or carelessness of Almy & Brown or whether there was genuine difficulty in obtaining currency is difficult to determine but the end-results were equally distressing.

In his relationships with the workers Slater was confronted with the problems of every employer at that time — working conditions, wages or their equivalent and living accommodation. Most of the workers, at least in the early years, were children between the ages of seven and thirteen. Some were apprentices in a genuine sense. Others were what in England would be called 'parish apprentices' and who, like their counterparts, ran away from time to time. Most were placed in the mill by their parents to supplement the family income.

There is evidence that Slater was worried by the dangers of moving machinery and the resulting injuries suffered by the children. He was also frustrated by the occasional failure to adapt to the discipline of time. In one instance he complained that on a certain summer's day, instead of working in the mill, the children were out picking whortleberries. On the other hand, in 1828, a clock was installed in the tower of the Congregational church overlooking the mill by public subscription because, it was said, the populace felt that they could not trust the time announced by the factory bell.

The adequacy of wages paid is uncertain. Probably, to say the least, they were no worse than those for comparable work. I am inclined to believe that early factory masters, whether in England or New England, did not deliberately victimize or exploit their workers. Obviously there were exceptions. They were, however, firmly convinced of two things: first, that they could not afford to pay higher wages and second, that unduly high wages would be demoralizing. Far more damaging than inadequate wages was the system of 'long pays' already referred to. Under this system wages were paid only when there was ready cash available. In the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth there was a shortage of currency although this has been disputed. Parents whose children's wages were not paid simply removed them from the mill thus disrupting the manufacturing process. These 'long pays' made it necessary for the worker to run an account with a local store managed either by an independent merchant or by the employer. In either case it was open to deception and exploitation on the one side and to distrust and dissatisfaction on the other. Even in the most ideal

circumstances the worker was never sure of his financial position. In periods of short time and unemployment he was completely at the mercy of the employer. None the less the arrangement was unavoidable. In the earlier days Almy, Brown & Slater allowed their employees to buy from local merchants on credit. Later, the system was discontinued and Almy & Brown opened a store of their own at Pawtucket. It was supervised by Slater but was an extension of their establishment at Providence. In the later industrial colonies, in the more remote areas, the 'company store' was part of the community from the beginning.

It also fell to Slater to find accommodation for some of his young charges. This he did by persuading some of the villagers to take them as boarders. Within a few years houses were also being built in Pawtucket for the accommodation of some of the mill families. This part of the undertaking was financed by Moses Brown and it does not seem that Slater had much connection with it.

My general impression is that Slater was gruff, fair and on the whole responsible. He was the child of his generation, certainly. One observer remembered how Slater had caned the childworkers in the mill when they displeased him. Even there, however, it was an old man's recollection of his youth. Slater may have been strict and perhaps impatient but that did not mean that he was without concern for the well being of his employees. This, however, was not the view of the *Pawtucket Chronicle* as evidenced by the following editorial:[16]

> VILLAGE ARISTOCRACY
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> Every village, as well as every monarchy, has its tyrant. Wealth or talents constitute someone to domineer over the multitude, and to keep down the poor and indigent. We have seen more of this in manufacturing communities than any other — we have seen it in our own village — where one man occasionally rules those in his immediate power, as if the Almighty had created him better, or different materials from his neighbours. . . . Need we look twice, in the circle around us, for distress and poverty among those who have lorded it, with a high hand over their poorer neighbours.
>
> There are individuals, in manufacturing communities, who from the habit of ruling the children in their mills with a rod of iron; and from dealing out to them, at the end of each week, barely enough to cover their nakedness and support their nature, have acquired the belief that they may step out into the community with the same air, and browbeat those who come in their way, as if they too were dependent upon them for subsistence. They will bind to the ear of their religion or their politics all who are dependent upon them for their subsistence, and make these two principles subservient to interest. What is this but tyranny, and that too over the body and the mind. Nothing to which the human mind is subjected is so degrading as this — it converts man, independent man, into a tool, to be used for the very worst of purposes. It makes his conscience and his neck, a stepping stone, whereby the ambitious may ascend to the temple of human grandeur.
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> When they find one in the crowd who does not see fit to acknowledge their supremacy, and who will not compromise his conscience for the sake of gain; but who publicly and privately asserts his own rights, every effort which malignity can invent, is bestowed upon him; and every act which wealth can conjure up, is made use of to blast his prospects in life, for ever. Notwithstanding all these denunciations, however, there are men who will not bow and fawn, like a sycophantic courtier.

It need hardly be pointed out that the editor of the *Pawtucket Chronicle* was no friend or admirer of Slater. For this two reasons may be suggested. First, his paper was running in competition with the *Farmers' and Manufacturers' Journal* instigated and supported by Slater among others. Secondly, the *Pawtucket Chronicle* was typical of the egalitarianism of many North American newspapers at the time which could bear no hint of an hierarchical or class-structured society.

## II

Slater was treated fairly and perhaps even generously by Almy & Brown, but he had gone to the U.S.A. to become something more than a mill superintendent. That he could have been and almost certainly would have been had he remained at home with Jedediah Strutt. His aspirations were towards mill ownership and the wealth and satisfaction which he believed would accrue from such a position.

For the first few years Slater continued to work with Almy & Brown although, as we have seen, the relationship was not without its frustrations. In 1798, he entered into partnership with Oziel Wilkinson, his father-in-law, and Timothy Green and William Wilkinson, his brothers-in-law. The new firm which functioned under the style of S. Slater & Co.,[17] proceeded to build a mill of its own, known as the 'New Mill', on the opposite side of the river, an undertaking which can scarcely have pleased Almy & Brown. However, Slater continued to manage both mills.[18]

John Slater arrived in Pawtucket in 1803, presumably in response to the suggestion of his elder brother, although the circumstances are not clear. He entered the employ of Almy, Brown & Slater but soon opportunities were being sought for further expansion. According to one writer,[19]

> to ascertain where a favourable site could be found, John Slater made several journeys on horse-back, in one of these journeys he went to the northern part of the town[ship] of Smithfield, R.I., then almost a wilderness, and discovered a stream, the Monhegan, now the Branch River, which had at one point a fall of some forty feet, with ponds above it forming natural reservoirs and promising an ample supply of water at all seasons of the year. This was the site of the future Slatersville. Three purchases of land were made, comprising in all more than one hundred and fifty acres, controlling the stream, and providing sites for mills, Tenements, etc. A partnership was formed by William Almy, Obadiah Brown, Samuel Slater and John Slater, under the style of Almy, Brown & Slaters, and the erection of the first mill was commenced, the mill being completed late in 1806 and going into operation early in 1807.

By 1810 Samuel Slater was beginning to feel that the cotton industry in New England was growing overcrowded and uncomfortably competitive. There is evidence that he considered the possibility of moving to the 'southern world', presumably the southern U.S.A. Instead he sold his interest in S. Slater & Co., Pawtucket, to his in-laws and, in partnership with Bela Tiffany, one of his mill overseers, set up a small cotton spinning mill at Oxford, Massachusetts. This was followed by the acquisition of several other mills in the area, both cotton and wool.

The financial collapse which Slater had feared took place in 1829, due in part to the over-expansion of the textile industry. Slater survived but shortly afterwards sold his interest in Almy, Brown & Slater, Pawtucket,[20] and went to live at Webster, Massachusetts. In 1832, however, he and his brother bought out Almy and Brown and the firm became S. and J. Slater. The development of Slatersville belongs to the story of John Slater.

## III

Slater's business interests went beyond the establishment and ownership of a chain of mills. His name appeared frequently in prospectuses for the formation of turnpike and canal companies, newspapers, banks and insurance companies. These, or course, were all geared to the improvement of the area as an industrial and commercial centre.

In addition to these undertakings he was identified with a number of societies for the moral and cultural improvement of the community. For example, he seems to have been responsible for the establishment of the first Sunday School in Pawtucket. This school, like the one which had been established by Jedediah Strutt in Belper in 1784,[19] was intended for the education of mill children.[20]

> The school was first taught by Mr. David Arnold, at whose house, on Main Street, it was accustomed to meet. Other early teachers were Mr. Amaziah Marsh and Mr. Benjamin Allen. These men were given a stated salary by Mr. Slater. A record of 1797 is as follows:
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> 'Fifth month. Cash paid Benj. Allen for teaching
> a school first days, 2 pounds 14 shillings.'

Slater was also instrumental in the formation of the Pawtucket Bible Society 'to encourage a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures' and was a supporter of the Pawtucket Moral Society. Both these ventures would suggest that he took an interest in the affairs of his day and was aware of affairs beyond the limits of his parish. The extent to which he kept in touch with family and friends in England seems uncertain.

Samuel Slater was a member of the Church of England or the Episcopal Church as it was known in the U.S.A. But the area to which he had come was predominantly Quaker or Baptist although the Quaker cause was declining. At the time of his arrival there was no place of worship of any kind in Pawtucket but in 1792 steps were taken to establish one by a curiously named Catholic Baptist Society of which Slater was a director. Still more curiously, funds were raised by a lottery and work on the erection of a meeting house was begun.

The initiative for the establishment of an episcopal church in Pawtucket seems to have come from James L. Braid of Cambridge, Mass., and William Holmes of Dublin both of whom had moved to Pawtucket in the early part of the nineteenth century. The first Sunday school in which religious instruction was given was founded informally by James Braid. It was his custom to invite his neighbours' children to join with his own as he taught them the Church Catechism. Braid and Holmes had been in the habit of attending St. John's, Providence, now the cathedral church of the diocese of Rhode Island. At their suggestion the rector, the Reverend Nathan B. Crocker, began to hold services in Pawtucket. The response was mixed but enough interest was roused to secure the appointment, in 1815, of the Reverend John L. Blake as priest-in-charge of the area which was constituted as a separate parish. A building fund was started and prominent among the subscribers was Samuel Slater who became the first senior (rector's) warden and 'one of the two principal patrons'. The new church of St. Paul was consecrated by the Bishop (A. V. Griswold) of the Eastern Diocese as it was called on 15 October 1817.

## IV

In conclusion, we return to our initial question, what manner of man was Samuel Slater? It should be unnecessary to point out that he was the child of his generation, influenced by the values and aspirations of his day. We do him — and ourselves — an injustice if we attempt to judge him by the standards of the late twentieth century. He had never encountered the dictum that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' and would have been very surpirsed if he had. On the other hand, he probably knew Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* and may indeed have met the author.

Success, for Samuel Slater, was a matter of ability and determination and he knew that he had a generous measure of both. Without question he was a man of driving personal ambition intent on material success for its own sake. In this respect he was probably more like his master, Jedediah Strutt, than the more flamboyant Sir Richard Arkwright of Willersley Castle.

He also possessed a measure of social conscience. There is no evidence, despite a few assertions to the contrary, that Slater made 'the consciences and necks of his workers stepping stones to wealth and grandeur'. Undoubtedly, he accepted the prevailing realities of social and economic disparity. He would probably have agreed with the view expressed by J. B. Sumner, Bishop of Chester, in a sermon:

> If any one . . . comparing his own abundance with the scanty fare of those around him, were to double by an indiscriminate donation the current wages of the labourers in his neighbourhood, he would soon find that he had not really bettered their condition. (For two reasons. The regular employers of labour would reduce their payments and fresh labourers would crowd into the district.) Labour and the average return for labour, is a part of the machinery by which a community is carried on and cannot be safely meddled with. Whilst we attempt to regulate one wheel, we set others in motion of which we had not known the power and the result is confusion.

At the same time there is reason to believe that he treated his workers fairly, if at times roughly; that he paid the going wages and was concerned for their physical, mental, religious and moral wellbeing. It does not seem likely that his welfare schemes were designed to drug his workpeople into submission.

## REFERENCES


1 The biographical details in the early part of this paper have been taken from George S. White, *Memoir of Samuel Slater* (Philadelphia 1836).

2 See R. S. Fitton and A. P. Wadsworth, *The Strutts and The Arkwrights* (Manchester 1958) and Stanley D. Chapman, *The Early Factory Masters* (Newton Abbot 1967).

3 Fitton and Wadsworth, *op.cit.,* 199-200.

4 M. D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (New York 1892), i, 265.

5 White, *op.cit.,* 72.

6 Caroline F. Ware, *The New England Cotton Manufacture* (New York 1931), 21.

7 White, *op.cit.,* 73.

8 *Ibid.,* 74.

9 G. F. Gilbane, 'A Social History of Samuel Slater's Pawtucket, 1790-1830', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Boston, 1969, 71.

10 F. L. Newton, 'Samuel Slater, Father of Cotton Manufactures in the United States', unpublished manuscript in the possession of the Slater Museum, Pawtucket, 35.

11 White, *op.cit.,* 243.

12 Lewton, *op.cit.,* 73.

13 White, *op.cit.*

14 Almy and Brown papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, 27 May 1794, no.135.

15 Almy and Brown papers, 19 February 1796, no.318.

16 29 April 1831. Quoted by G. F. Gilbane, *op.cit.*

17 White, *op.cit.,* 106.

18 *Ibid.,* 189.

19 William R. Bagnall, *Samuel Slater and the Early Development of the Cotton Manufacture in the United States,* 64.

20 S. M. Boucher, *The History of Pawtucket,* 1635-1976, 68.