

Lowell Notes

Kirk Boott

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Lowell National Historical Park



“When an enterprise of some extent and importance has been dearly conceived, heartily undertaken and steadfastly pursued to a degree of success, especially when the enterprise is itself an original—nothing of the like having been known before—the single mind which imaged its conception, which moulded it in its plastic state and directed its early course, will leave an impress on the enterprise itself which a long series of years may not efface.”

The Reverend Dr. Theodore Edson
on Kirk Boott, 1875

With the dawning of the Industrial Revolution in America, new opportunities abounded for all. From Yankee farm girls to merchant traders and capitalists, life would never again be the same. With education not as widespread as it is today, many successful men and women made their fortunes by hard work, determination, and natural abilities. One such man, Kirk Boott, took the chance to prove himself and made his mark by becoming the guiding hand that would transform a small farming village in New England into one of America’s first industrial cities. Both praised as a commanding leader and condemned as an autocrat, Kirk Boott wielded considerable power and influence over early Lowell. Although he was well respected by his peers, he was often misunderstood and criticized by others.

DERBYSHIRE HERO

Born in Boston, October 20, 1790, Kirk Boott was educated predominantly in England where he would presumably receive a better education and fulfill his father’s wish that he should become a future “Derbyshire Hero.” He studied at a number of schools, most notably, Rugby Academy. Upon his return to Boston at the age of sixteen, Boott entered Harvard College in the class of 1809 and “sowed an abundance of wild oats but never graduated.” Lacking the enthusiasm and self-discipline that were needed, Kirk Boott gave up his intention of studying law and went to work as a bookkeeper in his father’s store, but he grew restless. In a letter to his aunt in 1808, he stated that he had been happier in England, fondly recalling his time spent there.

Being militarily inclined, Kirk Boott was sent to England in 1811 where a commission was procured for him by his father. Boott served as an officer in the English Army for five years. Anxious and uncertain as to whether he should be ordered to join an expedition against his native land, Boott secured a detail to a military academy for more instruction. Soon after his father’s death in 1817, he returned to Boston and became an active partner in his father’s mercantile business, joining his brother John. He expected to make a good living from it but was disappointed. In 1818, he briefly returned to England to marry Ann Haden of Derby, the daughter of a highly respected English family.

SUPERINTENDENT OF A VAST MULTIPLICITY OF AFFAIRS

In 1821, while spending a day with Patrick Tracy Jackson, the superintendent of the Boston Manufacturing Company, Kirk told him that he was interested in managing a manufacturing company. He was hired as Agent and Treasurer of the newly incorporated Merrimack Manufacturing Company. By 1822, he was also appointed as Agent, Treasurer, and Clerk of the Proprietors of Locks and Canals on the Merrimack River. The position of Treasurer was similar to that of a modern-day CEO. The Agent was the “vice-president in charge of production.” Kirk Boott, holding both positions for two companies at the age of thirty-two, acted with a tremendous

amount of independence and power. Imagine how he must have felt given such free rein in an untried and unique experiment in America’s early industrial days.

Under Kirk Boott’s supervision, the Pawtucket Canal was enlarged and modified, the dam on the Merrimack was completed and the Merrimack Canal was dug to bring power to the Merrimack Manufacturing Company. He also founded the Lowell Machine Shop where textile machinery and the first American locomotives were made. Boott designed, laid out and supervised the construction of mills, boardinghouses,



St. Anne's Episcopal Church, c. 1841

streets, and the first church for millworkers of Lowell, St. Anne's Episcopal Church. To attract and keep English and Scottish weavers and printers, he installed a malt brewery. He also built for himself a mansion, situated on the spot where the Boott Mills now stand.

Dr. John O. Green, Boott's physician, characterized him in this way: "He spoke in an undertone, always in few words, directly and to the point. Either naturally, or acquired by his military education, he had a commanding manner which never seemed to me misplaced, but appropri-

ate to the position of superintendent of a vast multiplicity of affairs and a large number of men."

Boott's duties must have proven burdensome at times. In fact, in a letter to a friend, Boott wrote: "I am almost worried out. Committee after committee keep coming up in relation to the increase of the Appleton works, or a new concern, for all of which many calculations are required, taking all my time and, . . . I get neither rest nor sleep."

GREAT POTENTATE

The Reverend Theodore Edson, of St. Anne's, said Kirk Boott "had a quick and ready discrimination of character, and . . . his keen distinctions and his open, out-spoken way of expression might have been mis-apprehended, and perhaps offensive to some."

Harriet Hanson Robinson, a Lowell "mill girl," described Boott as "a great potentate" who "exercised almost absolute power over the

mill-people." She claims he was not popular, and boys were unwilling to go near him for fear that his riding-whip would come down on their backs. Many stories were told of his tyranny, or his "peculiarities," long after his death. One story tells of the outrage caused by his insistence on flying the Union Jack *over* the Stars and Stripes above his house on the Fourth of July. Apparently the "indignant mob" reversed the flags' position for him.

DEAR, DEPARTED FRIEND

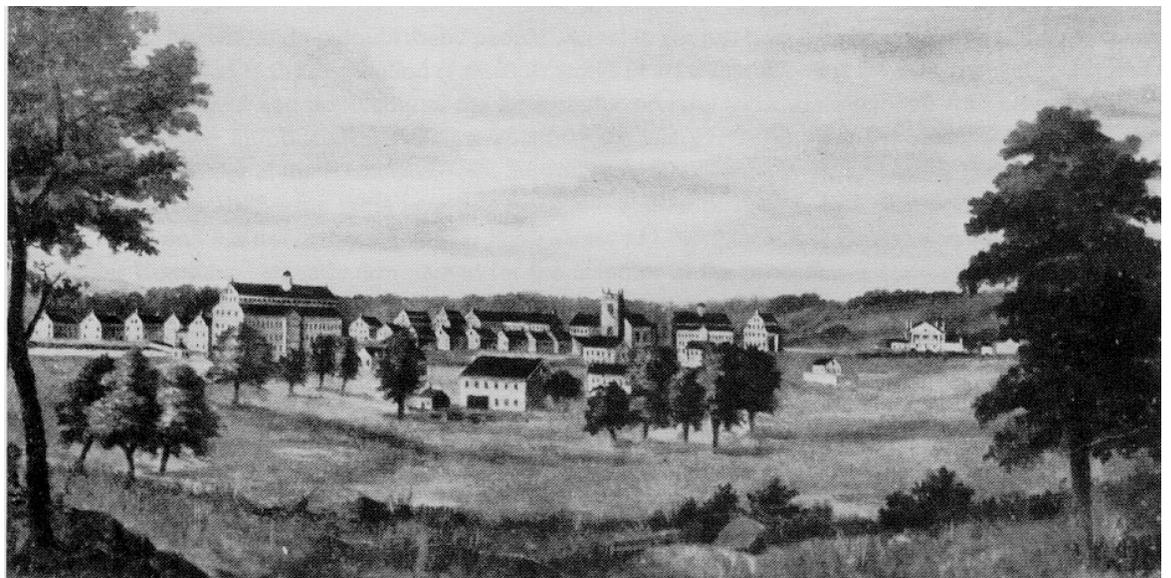
As with any dominant and powerful political figure, myths and legends about Kirk Boott abound, often containing as much truth as fiction. Certainly, Kirk Boott may have appeared overbearing at times and a forbidding figure to some, but to the Irish Catholic community of early Lowell, Kirk Boott represented generosity and friendship. He entertained their bishop from Boston in his home, allowed them to hear Mass in the Merrimack Company's schoolhouse for years, and donated the land on which the first Catholic church, Saint Patrick's, was built. Lowell's earliest historian, Reverend Henry A. Miles, wrote of Boott in 1845, "He gave his whole zeal and strength to promote the prosperity of the new village. He watched its growth with a personal interest, resolving here to live and die."

For years before his death, Dr. Green tells us, Kirk Boott was plagued by symptoms of an "obscure disease of the spine...[and] by the progress of his disease almost deprived of the power of walking."

As a result of this illness, Kirk Boott suffered a stroke and fell dead from his carriage at noon on April 11, 1837, at the Merrimack Street Station. He was 46 years old.

Hugh Cumiskey, the foreman and leader of the original band of thirty Irish laborers hired by Boott to work on the Pawtucket Canal, cultivated a warm and lasting relationship with him and after his death referred to him as one of his "dear, departed friends." Clearly not all Lowellians felt this way. To many citizens of Lowell, even today, Kirk Boott represents the Union Jack and the riding crop. One cannot help but wonder how Kirk Boott might have been remembered had he lived a longer life.

Nathan Appleton, co-founder and major stockholder in the Lowell mills wrote in his 1858 account of the origin of the city that Francis Cabot Lowell "was the informing soul, which gave direction and form to the whole proceeding." If it was in fact Mr. Lowell's vision of a manufacturing town as an ideal community which gave the city its form, then whether one chooses to view Kirk Boott as an autocrat or a commanding leader, we can't help but recognize it was *his* managerial genius that turned that dream into a working reality.



Lowell in 1825, from left to right, Lowell Machine Shop, St. Anne's Church, Merrimack Manufacturing Company and Kirk Boott's mansion. Whistler House Museum of Art Collection.