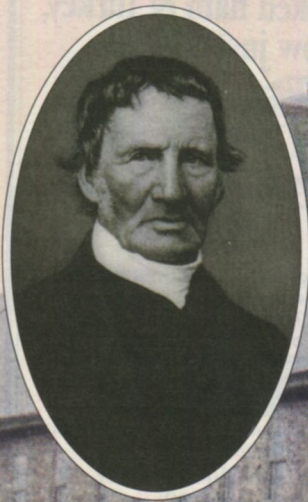


THIS NEW ENGLAND

North Easton

WHEN THE AUTHOR WENT IN SEARCH OF
HIS OTHER FAMILY, HE FOUND A REMARKABLE
CAST OF HISTORIC CHARACTERS WHO LEFT A
LEGACY OF MAGNIFICENT ARCHITECTURE AND
POLITICAL SCANDAL. *by* JOHN SEDGWICK

- courtesy Easton Historical Society



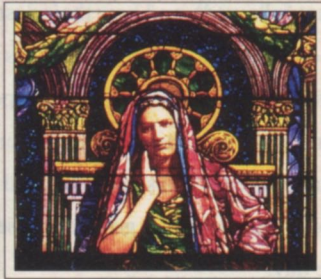
*Workers pose outside
the O. Ames and Sons
shovel works around
1889. Inset: Oliver
Ames, the founder.*



- photographs by SUSAN LAPIDES

Massachusetts

MY MOTHER IS TOO THRIFTY to display much brand loyalty, but she has always bought Ames shovels for her garden, and when I was young, she used to point out the label to me with some pride. "This is our Ames," she would say,



This window at Unity Church was designed by John La Farge.

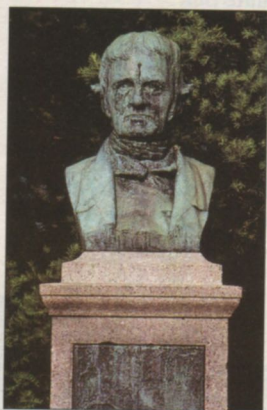
giving the handle an affectionate pat.

Seeing me stand there silently before her, obviously unsure whom she meant by "our Ames," she would then patiently tell me one more time about her mother's side of



***i* GREW UP WITH NORTH EASTON LYING OFF
SOMEWHERE — I NEVER KNEW EXACTLY WHERE.**

the family — about how Grandmother’s great-grandfather, Oliver Ames, had made a fortune in the shovel trade, how his sons had built the first transcontinental railroad (she always left out the part about the huge scandal that followed), and how their descendants erected a kind of family town for themselves in North Easton, Massachusetts. She had given this speech many times before, and it must have bothered her to sense how little it registered. Then she would wind up by saying that perhaps we should all go out and see North Easton some day.



This bust of “Shovelin’ Ollie” catches his fierce, Dickensian character.

But the years passed, and we never went.

I suspect my father had something to do with our not going. He took us on regular pilgrimages to Stockbridge, his family’s ancestral home in the Berkshires, to gather with living relatives in the house built by his great-great-grandfather, Judge Theodore Sedgwick, and to commune with the dead ones, after a fashion, at the nearby family graveyard, the so-called Sedgwick Pie. Still, he never responded with much enthusiasm to my mother’s suggestions that we all drive out to North Easton. He probably wanted his children to think of themselves the way he thought of himself — as a Sedgwick to the core. And so I grew up with North Easton lying off somewhere — I never knew exactly where — like some great undiscovered continent.

Out of loyalty to my father, who died in 1976, I remained resolutely Sedgwick through my twenties. Then, in 1988, my mother received an invitation to bring her family to an Ames reunion, and I was startled to discover that North Easton stood just 15 miles south of my childhood home.

Of course I had to go. And as I drove with my wife and child down Route 138 toward North Easton, past miles of strip malls, used-car



F. Lothrop Ames kept a cemetery for his guernseys.

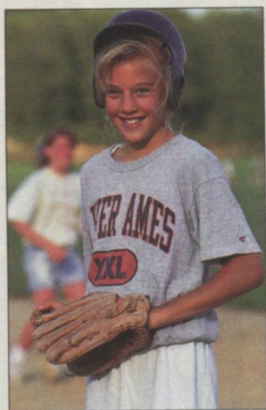


F. Lothrop Ames's mansion, Stone House Hill, built in 1904, is the administration building of Stonehill College.

i GLIMPSED ROLLING ESTATES, TURRETED MANSIONS, AND IMPERIOUS TOWN BUILDINGS.

lots, and other detritus of the ex-urban sprawl that marks south-central Massachusetts, I feared that modern times might have turned the glorious North Easton of yore into some grim Hoboken of today.

Then I turned onto North Easton's Main Street, and I might have heard a snatch of a Purcell trumpet air, my head so quickly brimmed with thoughts of plump English aristocrats. Out the car window I glimpsed rolling estates, turreted mansions, and some imperious Ames-built town buildings. I understood in an instant why my father never wanted us to go. The Ameses made the Sedgwicks look shabby.



Even on a softball field, there are reminders of the family philanthropy.

We checked in for the reunion at what was once Stone House Hill, a mansion built by one F. Lothrop Ames in 1904 at age 28, and is now the administration building of Stonehill College. It is a vast brick building that, with its many columns and its hilltop location, looks a bit like Mount Vernon, only it

is a good deal larger. Even my four-year-old quieted as we stepped inside the cool marble hallway and headed toward the main hall, with its parquet floor, lofty ceiling, and ornate stone fireplace.

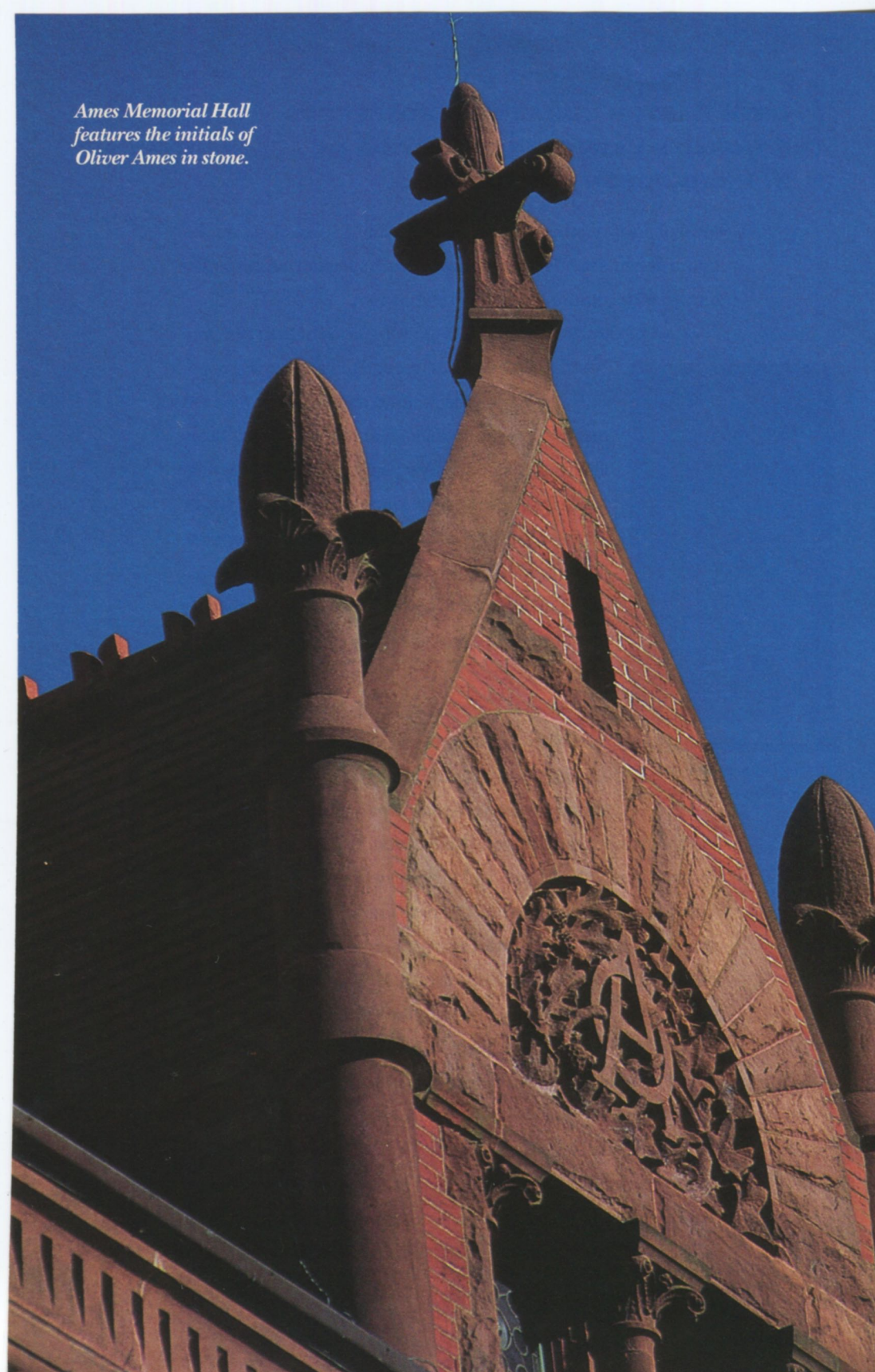
Lothrop was one of the first Americans to import guernsey cattle from England, and in keeping with his image of himself as a cattleman, he had outfitted his bar as a Western-style saloon, complete with spittoons and swinging doors, items that unfortunately were deleted when the Catholic college fathers moved in. A man of some sentiment, Lothrop also maintained a graveyard on the property for the remains of his favorite guernseys, such as the celebrated Queen of the East, with markers made of bronze.

For the next few hours, my wife and child and I ambled around North Easton with guidebooks in hand — bug-eyed tourists in the



Stanford White helped give North Easton its tone.

*Ames Memorial Hall
features the initials of
Oliver Ames in stone.*



NORTH EASTON CURRENTLY POSSESSES THE WORLD'S LARGEST COLLECTION OF H. H. RICHARDSON BUILDINGS . . .

town of my forefathers. I felt an overwhelming sense of disconnection, a puzzling numbness in the face of such splendor, and my mind buzzed with questions about my relation to it.

In Stockbridge the Sedgwicks are very proud of their old clapboard-sided Federal house and private burial ground. In North Easton the Amesese built no fewer than ten mansions, many of them great towering affairs bearing names like Langwater, Spring Hill, and Wayside, which make the Sedgwick house look like the help's cottage. And instead of setting up one peculiar family burial plot, the Amesese hired, legend has it, Frederick Law Olmsted to lay out a cemetery for the whole town, reserving a prominent mound called Ames Hill for themselves.




Meaghan Burke studies in front of another Ames gift to North Easton.

All of this was certainly impressive. What I personally found disturbing was that the Amesese also displayed taste, a taste that in many instances outshone the old colonial gentility that the Sedgwicks displayed. Ames scion Frederick Lothrop Ames had gone to Harvard with H. H. Richardson's business partner, Charles Gambrill. The connection led to tiny North Easton's currently possessing the world's largest collection of H. H. Richardson buildings — five altogether, including the railroad station and the library, which the architect Robert Stern cited on PBS's "Pride of Place" as one of the finest public buildings in America. They give the town its medieval sense of grace and solidity. And Richardson, in turn, had introduced the Amesese to a kind of '28 Yankees infield of distinguished artisans like Olmsted, who laid out many of the Amesese's private landscapes; John La Farge, who conceived the church's stained-glass windows; Au-



H. H. Richardson arrived thanks to a Harvard friend.



Oakes Plimpton in the library at Borderland, once his grandparents' home, now a state park.

WITHOUT THE AMESSES
TO FILL IT UP, THE TOWN
SEEMS SOMEHOW OVER-
INFLATED, OUT OF SCALE.

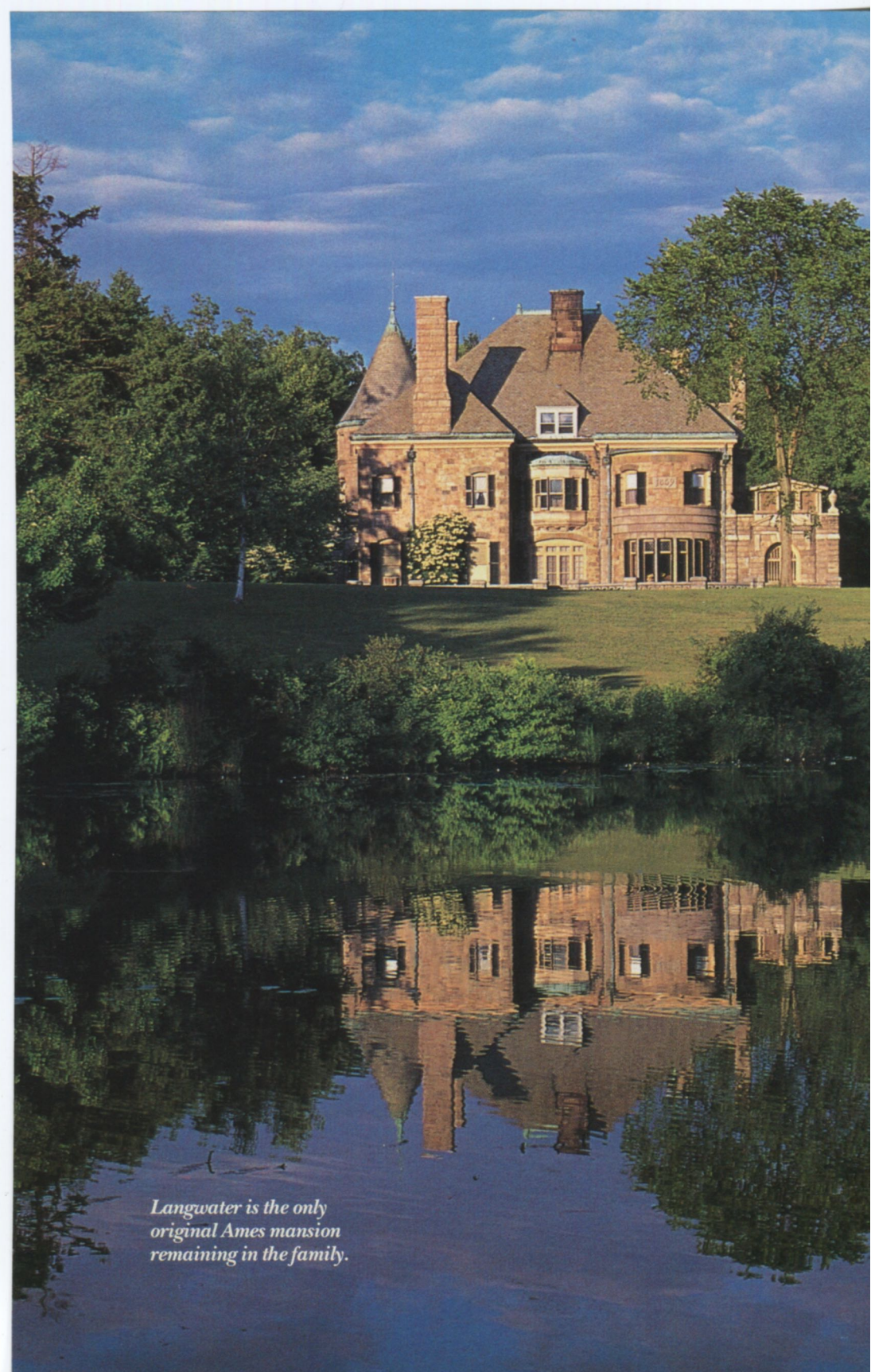
gustus St.-Gaudens, who did much of the Ameses' sculpture; and Stanford White, who designed much of the ornamentation for the Ames buildings.

For hours we wandered dazedly from one three-star attraction to the next, ending up at Borderland, now a vast state park, for lunch. The mansion is a sweeping Moorish structure, cloaked in ivy and topped by an unexpected bell taken from a Cuban mission that was used to summon the children for dinner. The house was built for Oakes and Blanche Ames in 1910. He was a Harvard botanist and an early director of the Arnold Arboretum; she, a painter and suffragette. Blanche designed the property herself after the couple sensed the architect they had hired was trying to bilk them with too-lavish plans.

That Saturday afternoon their grandson, Oakes Plimpton, gave visitors a tour of the house, and it was all quite charming: the arched doorways; the library snug as a ship's cabin; the near-perfect, full-scale reproductions of old masters that Blanche had done by a "color-chart" system of her own devising.

Oakes's more famous brother, author George Plimpton, evoked the place's personality for me later with a family story from his introduction to a collection of his grandfather's papers, *Jottings of a Harvard Botanist*. It concerns his Plimpton grandparents' first meeting with (continued on page 100)





*Langwater is the only
original Ames mansion
remaining in the family.*

THIS NEW ENGLAND: NORTH EASTON, MASSACHUSETTS

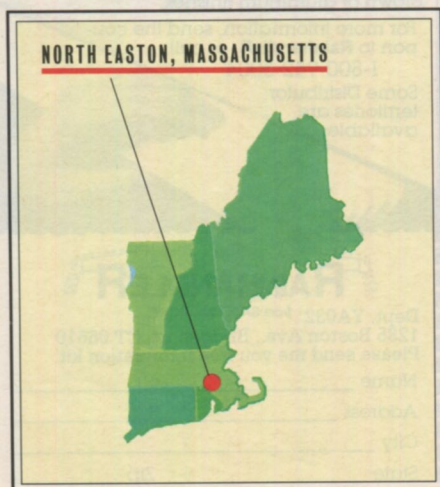
(continued from page 56)

the celebrated Ameses over dinner at Borderland. The Plimptons arrived in evening dress for the occasion and were promptly seated in the dining room, where they were surprised to be presented with a dinner menu that began with orange juice, continued with an entrée of scrambled eggs, and concluded with a dessert of toast and coffee. The Plimptons politely accepted the peculiar evening meal without comment. It wasn't until after dinner that Blanche Ames revealed that anything was amiss. She explained that the regular cook had suffered a "fit" and had to be removed from the house, leaving dinner in the hands of the kitchen maid whose daily duty was to prepare breakfast for the household staff. "Faced with providing a dinner that evening," Plimpton wrote, "she refused to try anything she was not sure of, and so she stuck (as my mother would say) to her 'strong suit' . . . namely, breakfast."

Borderland was quite a place, but I felt some of the Plimptons' initial discomfort. I kept looking at my fellow reunioners and wondering: Who were all these Ames people, and where on earth did they come from?

* * *

MY GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER,
Oliver Ames, the founder of the famous



shovel company, was the first Ames to appear in North Easton, arriving in 1803 at the age of 24. Among the Ameses, he is called "Old Oliver" or, less reverently, "Shovelin' Ollie," to distinguish him from the many other Oliver Ameses among his descendants.

Old Oliver came to North Easton for its waterpower, which he needed for his shovel works. He had married Susanna Angier, a distant Ames cousin, that year, and following custom, he had immediately set out to start his own business. The Ameses had been iron-workers — blacksmiths, really — ever since they arrived in America in 1638 to settle in Braintree. Oliver's father, Captain John Ames, shifted the family business over to shovel making, possibly to take advantage of an embargo on English goods in 1773, shortly before the outbreak of the Revolution. Shovels became young Oliver's line as well.

Oliver Ames assumed that if he produced a quality shovel, the world would eventually take note. That is what happened, but it did take a while. Initially buyers were scarce for a product that seemed suspiciously lighter than the English ones they were used to. In the early days Old Oliver would load a few dozen shovels on his cart to market them in Boston, sell only a few, and end up giving away the rest to roadside farmers on the way home, telling them that if they liked them, they might note the "O. Ames" brand.

North Easton had been a quiet farming village when Oliver arrived, but as more farmers asked for the "O. Ames" brand, the shovel works gradually transformed the community into a booming company town, with rows of factories, a company store, company dormitories for single workers, and company-built clapboard duplexes for married employees.

The shovel works changed the country almost as markedly, for shovels shaped the early macadam roads, scooped out the canals, excavated the mines, built the railroads, and dug the trenches and graves of war. And O. Ames shovels eventually became recognized as the premier brand. They were so valuable to the forty-niners that they served as currency in gold-rush

California. And their fame spread across the seas. At the height of production in 1879, the company manufactured three out of every five shovels sold around the world.

However providential Oliver Ames's appearance in North Easton was to be, the citizens labeled him "the worst young man in town" shortly after his arrival. There is a bust of him in a little park at the center of town, and it shows a harsh Dickensian character with unruly hair and fierce eyes burning deep in their sockets. While other industrialists of the era had some humanitarian principles to smooth over the rough edges of their capitalism, Oliver Ames believed only in the redemption of hard work. He was a big man, over six feet with broad powerful shoulders, and many of the stories that survive about him attest to his brutal physicality: Old Oliver thrashing his employees for shoddy workmanship; Old Oliver chasing village boys who had snatched pears from his orchard and, as family historian Winthrop Ames puts it, "shaking them till their teeth chattered"; Old Oliver knocking out a horse that had annoyed him with a single blow to the head. He was the town wrestling champion until well into his seventies, when, according to a family story, he was challenged by his son Horatio, who had grown even taller and thicker than his father. The two went into the woods to fight on the condition that neither reveal the results. And neither ever did.

It is tempting to say that the iron-minded Oliver resembled his principal product, but in truth his shovels possessed a beauty that he lacked. A case of them is displayed at Stonehill College, left over from the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia where they won first prize in a tool competition. Plated silver for the occasion, they might, in their simplicity, be Bauhaus sculpture, with their characteristic "Ames turn" where the handle makes a sinuous S-curve into the blade, and their trademark D-shaped handle.

Typically, Old Oliver alludes only once in his diary to his wife's death in 1847: "This was a cold chilly morning, and some cloudy. The[re] is a verry little snow on the ground that feel yesterday. It was fair in the afternoon & the snow all went of. My wife was

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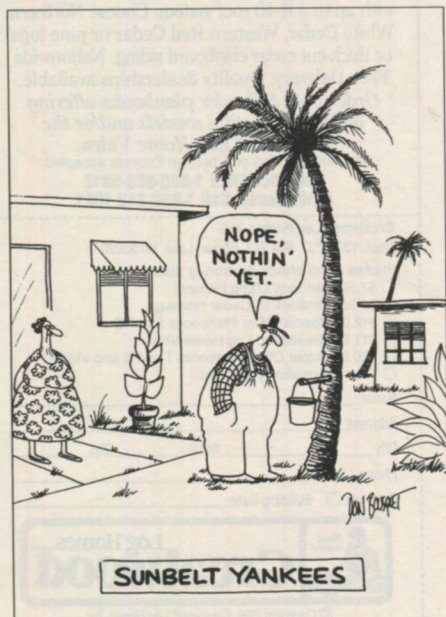
THIS NEW ENGLAND: NORTH EASTON, MASSACHUSETTS

(continued)

buried today.”

He had eight children by her, including six sons. But only two of the sons could bear to stay in North Easton with their father: Oliver Ames Jr. and Oakes Ames, who continued the family shovel works. Another son, William Leonard Ames, went west to St. Paul, Minnesota, to establish himself as a cattleman on 2,000 acres of land his father had purchased for him. He was my great-great-grandfather.

Old Oliver must have been an impossible boss. After he ceded management responsibility to his sons, he regularly accused them of running down the business by producing inferior goods. Finally, in exasperation, Oakes and Oliver polished up some shovels of their father's era and mingled them with some from their own and asked Oliver Sr. to comment on the entire batch. Inevitably, he picked out his own shovels as the worst ones. When his sons pointed out to him the O. Ames brand, he claimed it had been forged. “I never made those,” he asserted.



No one mentioned the incident again.

Old Oliver finally died in 1863 at age 84. Some months before, he'd found himself unable to continue the daily weather log he had maintained for nearly 60 years. His last entry reads: “Since July I have been too unwell to keep up this book as I used to do.” When he died, the family closed the shovel works for three days in his memory.

Old Oliver had served a few terms in the state legislature, although he regarded a day spent politicking in Boston as a day wasted. Oliver Jr. had taken a seat there as well, but he liked politics even less than his father. His brother Oakes, however, took to it, and in 1862 he won election to Congress. His political career would lurch the family in an unexpected direction.

With his prominent fortune and his head for business, Oakes Ames quickly attracted the attention of President Lincoln as the right man to establish a rail line linking the East and West. Oakes later recalled that the president told him, “The road must be built, and you are the man to do it.” He added, “By building the Union Pacific, you will become the remembered man of your generation.” Oakes accepted the challenge, and he enlisted his brother Oliver to the cause of the railroad as well. Together they invested a million dollars cash in the enterprise.

Ultimately, the Union Pacific would run 1,100 miles from Omaha, Nebraska, across the Rockies to a spot called Promontory Point just west of Salt Lake City. There a golden spike would be driven on May 10, 1869, to link it up with the Central Pacific, headed by Leland Stanford and Collis P. Huntington. But it was not an easy crossing. The track had to cover uncharted plains, scorching deserts, and frigid mountain ranges including three passes higher than any yet attempted by rail. The surveyors and workmen faced constant attacks by hostile Indians, virtually turning the engineering enterprise into a military operation. As a business proposition, it was far from sure. The project was plagued by infighting, and more than once the Ames brothers nearly lost their entire shovel fortune in the endeavor. Such an ambition, Oakes later wrote in his diary, “might be re-

garded as the freak of a madman if it did not challenge recognition of a higher motive." He was referring to his promise to Lincoln that he would complete the task.

As the arduous work progressed, other railroads struggled for federal recognition, and to keep the government's eyes focused on the Union Pacific, Oakes Ames sold several fellow congressmen stock in the enterprise. Neither Ames nor the congressional recipients made any secret of the transaction. But in 1872, when the railroad was complete, the newspapers, already excited by the many embarrassments of the Grant administration, raised a great cry about what they called the Cr dit Mobilier Scandal, named for the construction company that was formed by the Union Pacific to do the work. As the *New York Sun* declared in its bold headline leading the story:

THE KING OF FRAUDS

How the Cr dit Mobilier Bought
Its Way Through Congress
COLOSSAL BRIBERY

Congressmen who Have Robbed the
People, and who now support
the National Robber . . .

Oliver Jr. was never charged with impropriety, but Oakes faced impeachment for improperly influencing several congressmen, including Schuyler Colfax, the former Speaker of the House who had since ascended to the vice presidency. As the evidence came forward, the penalty was reduced to a vote of censure that was carried out in March 1873. Oakes returned sorrowfully to North Easton shortly afterward, and he died there in May. "I think the scandal broke his heart," my cousin David Ames, the longtime family patriarch, told me before his death last November.

Oakes Ames's children erected the Oakes Ames Memorial Hall in 1881 to their father's memory, and with it the family embarked on a spate of building that transformed the town. It was almost as if the public-spiritedness that built the railroad, rebuffed now by the nation, was showered on North Easton. Yet it was received little better there. The Memorial Hall was meant to serve as the town hall, but the plan was scuttled by the rest of the Easton township. For

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THIS NEW ENGLAND: NORTH EASTON, MASSACHUSETTS

(continued)

all its grandeur, the building is now used only as an occasional dance hall. Nevertheless, the Ameses kept on giving. The Ames Free Library was built in 1881, along with an odd Olmsted-designed stone archway called the Rockery that was intended to stand as the public square. In 1882 Oliver Jr.'s son, Frederick Lothrop Ames, gave the Old Colony railroad station — on the condition that it be built on his side of the tracks, which it was. In 1890 Oakes Ames's son Oliver donated the high school. And many of the Ames mansions were built, or significantly expanded, during this period as well.

When I went to North Easton, I somehow expected to find the Ames family still in residence there. But their heyday in the town had been long before, back around the turn of the century, when various Ames siblings and cousins were clustered in their great houses like English royalty: botanist Oakes Ames at Borderland, Minnie Frothingham in her garden-filled Wayside, Winthrop Ames in gothic Queset, Oliver Ames in the vast Sheep Pasture, Lothrop Ames at Stone House Hill, and so on. One by one,

their sons and daughters were lured away by the faster pace and wider opportunities of Boston, Newport, and New York.

In a sense, North Easton now resembles the so-called "Hell on Wheels" towns that sprang up along the route of the Union Pacific, flourished for a few weeks, and then were abandoned as the workers moved on down the line. Without the Ameses to fill it up, the town seems somehow overinflated, out of scale. Maybe this is what kept my mother from pressing harder for a visit. It is hard for anyone — Ames or not — to make a connection with the town anymore. The Ames shovel company has long since been subsumed by a bigger concern called the Ames, Baldwin, Wyoming Company and its headquarters shifted to Parkersburg, West Virginia. The original Ames mansion that remains in the family is Langwater, owned by Frederick Lothrop Ames's grandson, Oliver Ames, a former state representative. The house has been redesigned four times since its construction in 1859, reducing its towering roof a little more each time. Although Langwater is still a grand and lovely place, the Ameses live there only a few weeks out of the year.

When I visited last summer, only one Ames still spent much time in North Easton. That was the patriarch David Ames, who lived in a modest, neo-Federal house built on the site of Governor Oliver Ames's mansion, which had been torn down because its enormous size made it simply unmanageable. He had devoted himself to maintaining the various Ames holdings in the town. "The Project," he called it. "I have a misspent life," he grumbled, "spent in North Easton."

Spring Hill is the only house left in North Easton to which I have any direct link. My grandmother was married there. A wrought-iron fence runs across Spring Hill now, so I could catch only a glimpse of the chateau-style mansion, with its turrets and high chimneys, through the trees from the sidewalk. The granite walls seemed as cold and dark and uninviting to me as old tombstones. I found a lesson in that. Life moves on. I may have Ameses behind me, but I am a Sedgwick now. □□

