

Talk for Board of Directors, Slater Mill Historic Site
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Jeanne asked me to speak on the role of an industrial history museum in a post-industrial era. This, it seems to me, is a fundamental question—both for Slater Mill and for industrial museums more generally. What can looking at the history of a world apparently so different from our own tell us about the world today? How can museums be not only more than interesting, but also more useful?—and I think that to gain support, museums must be not only interesting but also useful. They must make a difference.

Slater Mill represents the beginning of an industrial era in American history, an era that has, for the most part, ended. When Samuel Slater died in 1835, about 10 percent of Americans worked at industrial jobs. In 1920, at the peak of America's industrial employment, about one-quarter of jobs were industrial. Today, in Rhode Island, we're back to about ten percent of the state's workers work at industrial jobs. The industrial era has come full cycle.

So on the one hand, we're back to where we were in Slater's day, with manufacturing a significant but small segment of the economy. On the other hand—everything has changed. Slater started in a pre-industrial economy and helped to make it into an industrial one. We've seen an industrial economy become a post-industrial one. The machines that were high-tech when installed at Slater Mill are now antiques. The details of Slater's innovative accounting systems are long since of only antiquarian interest. Times have changed.

One thing that businesses do, when times change, is to change the way they think about their expertise—to redefine themselves. They put themselves in a broader perspective. So, for example, railroads decided they weren't in the railroad business, but the transportation business. UPS decided it wasn't in the package delivery business; it was in the logistics business. IBM wasn't in the computer business, but the information processing business. Thinking about your business in a broader perspective can help to suggest where to put energies in the future.

What I want to suggest today is that we need to change the way we think about Old Slater Mill—to see it not as a moment in history, but rather, to put it into a broader perspective. Yes, it is an industrial museum—and a very good one—but it is not *only* an industrial museum. Like UPS or IBM, Slater Mill might gain from thinking of itself in a broader context. I'd like to suggest three:

- Slater Mill is a museum of global capitalism
- Slater Mill is a museum about environment and energy.
- Slater Mill is a museum of innovation

Industry and industrial history happens to be an important subset of all those stories. But while industry seems like something of the distant past, something fading away, and no longer important to us in a postindustrial era, the stories of global capitalism, and energy and the environment, and innovation are more important than ever. Doing what it does today, or a just a bit more, the stories Slater Mill tells can be of vital importance to us today.

Let me start with the story of global capitalism. Samuel Slater and Moses Brown produced products that required technologies and skills from Europe, North America, and Africa. By 1860, 72 percent of the employees in Slater's mills were immigrants. They came from agricultural lands hard hit by global trade. They moved to America to take low-paying, difficult jobs in the hopes of a better life. (Sound familia?) Slater and his business associates depended on capital from trade on four continents, a labor force from three continents, and intellectual property management on two continents. Slater's cloth competed with cloth made around the world, and he and other American textile manufacturers put considerable energy into promoting tariffs that would protect him and his workers.

But Slater was a traditionalist in many ways—he believed in traditional notions of family, authority and responsibility, and personal control. Upstart competitors in Lowell, and Slater's sons, more eager than Slater to move into the world of unrestricted capitalism, would leave behind tradition and more wholeheartedly embrace global capitalism. His moral and ethical concerns about the rush to a workplace and marketplace based solely on money, and the moral concerns of his workforce for protecting their traditional values and family relationships – resonates today.

How about Slater Mill as a museum that tells a story of energy and the environment? The water wheel is a superb symbol of the interconnections of energy and the environment--more obvious, because more local, than, say, the coal fired electric power plant. Early mill owners reworked the environment to provide water power for mill operations. As soon as mills began to expand they met an early version of an energy crisis. More water power meant building more dams, flooding more fields, and investing in innovative technology. Switching to steam power meant yet more technology, as well as building mines and new systems of transportation.

All this had a dramatic impact on the environment. Fish disappeared from streams as dams were built and dyeing and other chemical processes polluted the waters Farmers lost their fields as dams flooded them. The courts reverberated with suits over environmental change for decades as farmers fought back to preserve their rights, and their traditional uses. It was a key political issue. We look at mill villages as an almost quaint Yankee tradition; in their day, they produced dramatic changes in the environment. The intersection of energy, environment and politics is certainly one that we relate to today.

And finally, Slater Mill as a museum of innovation. Innovation was key to the success of Slater's mills, and those that followed. Technological inventions of the sort protected by the patent system were important. But perhaps more important was a different kind of technological skill—the skills of an interdependent group of inventors, machine builders, machine operators and fixers. Invention is the flashy side of innovation: the learning-by-doing that yields steady technological advance in a community of workers is just as important, and something that Slater and his employees excelled. It's also key to American innovation today.

But there's more to innovation than just technological innovation. Just as important, today, are innovations in marketing and business practice. Slater practiced coordinated and innovative marketing—he was an early proponent of trademarks—and vertical integration into machinery building, purchasing and sales.

But again, Slater was ambivalent—and not always successful—in these innovations. His innovations were conservative, in many ways, attempts to keep control locally while the world beyond him was changing in ways in which he did not approve. Like so many of us he was ambivalent about the new world of constant change.

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The issues of global capitalism, energy and the environment, and innovation—the issues that surrounded Slater Mill in its heyday—have a strong resemblance to the issues that we're dealing with today. If we think of Slater Mill not as a museum of early 19th century industry—not as history—but as a place where people wrestled with issues that still concern us today, it doesn't seem so quaint, so pre-industrial in a post-industrial world. Slater and his workers struggled with how to reconcile tradition and innovation, local and global connections, commitments family and community, and to economic success.

Slater Mill addresses issues that visitors—and potential visitors—care about. It can do more of that, by thinking about the big picture, by connecting past and present and drawing attention to the similarities and differences. That will allow Slater Mill to build on its strengths, to tell a historical story of contemporary importance. Slater Mill is important as history, and maybe even more important as a place to think about the future.

Thank you.