

FORM B - BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
80 BOYLSTON STREET  
BOSTON, MA 02116

AREA	FORM NO.
	2095

Newton, Mass. MRA

Town NEWTON (Nonantum)

Address 1-3 Bridge Street

Historic Name Bemis Mill

Photo (3"x3" or 3"x5", black and white) Indicate address of property on back of photo. Staple to left side of form.

Use: Present offices

Original logwood grinding mill

**DESCRIPTION**

Date early-mid 19th century

Source Newton histories

Style Industrial vernacular

Architect unknown

Exterior Wall Fabric brick

Outbuildings none

Sketch Map: Draw map showing property's location in relation to nearest cross streets and/or geographical features. Indicate all buildings between inventoried property and nearest intersection(s).  
Indicate north

Major Alterations (with dates) roofline altered (late 19th c.); concrete-block addition (1920s).

Condition Good; 1981 rehab for offices

(SEE ATTACHED MAP)

Moved no Date ---

Acreage 41,215 sq. ft. (less than 1 acre)

Setting Adjacent to Bemis Dam at Charles River, opposite Watertown's Aetna Mills.

UTM REFERENCE 19.318390.4692470

USGS QUADRANGLE NEWTON, MA

SCALE 1:25,000

Recorded by Kathlyn Hatch; Peter Stott

Organization Newton Historical Comm.

Date February 1977; April 1986

## NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA STATEMENT (if applicable)

As one of the oldest mill complexes in Newton and for its associations with the industrial growth of Newton, the Bemis Mill meets criteria A and C of the National Register of Historic Places.

### ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE Describe important architectural features and evaluate in terms of other buildings within the community.

The three-story brick mill complex is typical of modest industrial construction built in the second and third quarters of the 19th century built along eastern Massachusetts rivers. Utilizing the heavy mortised frame of slow-burning mill construction throughout, the building also displays the low-pitched gable-roof favored by insurers by mid century as a deterrent to fire. Unique to the building is evidence of the control mechanism which operated the rolling dam and the rope drive which powered the mill across the river (see below). Like its neighbor across the river and many industrial buildings in the Boston area, the mill has recently been rehabilitated for professional office space.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE Explain the role owners played in local or state history and how the building relates to the development of the community.

Industry played a major role in the development of Nonantum. This factory complex at Bridge Street contains the earliest buildings remaining from the area's growth as an important manufacturing center. For virtually all of its history, the site has been closely linked to mills on the opposite (Watertown) side of the river, to which the mill was linked by a bridge in 1795.

The earliest dam at this location is thought to have been built by David Bemis in 1778 (Pettee: 105; Jackson reports 1760), with a paper mill constructed the following year, probably on the site of the existing mill. (On the Watertown side, in 1778, Bemis built grist and snuff mills, which eventually became the successful cotton mills of the Bemis Manufacturing Company.) A disastrous fire in the winter of 1792-3 destroyed the mill; of such importance was the nascent paper industry to the Commonwealth that upon petition by the Bemis brothers, Luke and Isaac, the Commonwealth made a loan of one thousand pounds toward the rebuilding of the mills "of at least equal size and extent of the mills lately destroyed by fire" (quoted in Pettee: 105). Luke Bemis and his brother-in-law, Caleb Eddy, operated the mills evidently with some success until after the War of 1812, equipped with three vats, three beating engines, and a glazing and rolling machine.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES

Newton Journal 10/6/1866.

Otis Pettee, "Industries and Manufactures," in D.H. Hurd, History of Middlesex County (3 vols., Phila., 1890) 3:105.

Solon F. Whitney, "[History of] Watertown," in D.H. Hurd, History of Middlesex County (3 vols., Phila., 1890) 3:403-404.

Francis Jackson, A History of the Early Settlement of Newton (Boston, 1854).

U.S. Census of Manufacturers, 1820 Manuscript returns.

Barlow & Bancroft Insurance Survey No. 3273, "Aetna Mills," May 1874, Museum of American Textile History.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
Office of the Secretary, Boston

1 of 2

Community: Newton, Mass. MRA	Form No: 2095
Property Name: Bemis Mill	

Indicate each item on inventory form which is being continued below.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE, cont.

The three-story mill is L-shaped in plan, with the base of the ell built along the Charles River. Handmade brick is laid in a common-bond pattern with segmental window heads. A parapeted firewall separates the original building from a similar three-story addition, apparently built prior to 1875. Both upper-level loft doors on the Bridge Street side, now the mill's main entrance, and a ground-story opening feature granite lintels. The river elevation, fronting directly on the Charles, has a foundation of large granite blocks; two arched openings at the base of the narrow east wall are all that remain from the water-power system that ran under this section of the building. Part of the 1822 granite-faced rolling dam remains on the Newton side of the river, but the millrace has disappeared. Single-story concrete-block additions were added about 1920.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, cont.

The firm, however, was unable to withstand the flood of imported paper, making it necessary by December 1820 to run at only one third capacity. In 1821, the paper business was given up, and the mill was sold to Luke's brother, Seth Bemis (1775-1851), who then operated the cotton mills on the Watertown side of the river.

At that time, the dam created a millpond that extended as far upstream as the Boston Manufacturing Company's mills in Waltham, much to the latter's consternation. To relieve this, the company offered Bemis \$1000 for every inch that he would lower the dam. To his later regret, Bemis accepted the offer, lowering the water level twelve inches. The present "rolling dam," constructed in 1822, was probably the result of this arrangement. (Its operation has long been a topic of conjecture. It is believed that the term refers to the means by which the height of the water flowing over the dam could be regulated -- either by means of a sill or flashboards rolling along a track on the top of the dam; or by large rollers which could move up or down the sloping downstream face of the dam. Wooden pulleys set into the mill wall above the southern end of the dam are thought to relate to its operation. It is also possible that the name refers to the curved downstream face, then an unusual feature in dams. [The reverse curve spillway was not introduced until Jervis's use of it in 1838 on New York's Old Croton Dam.] Another rolling dam was constructed in 1835 on the Merrimack Canal in Lowell, but its operation is no better understood.)

It is unclear whether the old paper mill was rebuilt at this time; in any case, Seth Bemis converted it to the manufacture of dyewoods and drugs, and particularly to grinding logwood, a Central American tree whose ground pulp produced a favorite dye for woolen goods; its blue shades ranged from light lavender to a dense blue-black, depending on the number of immersions. The Boston firm of William F. Freeman & Company was a major importer of the material, organized by William Freeman (1790-1870) and his

Staple to Inventory form at bottom

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HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, cont.

son, William F. Freeman (1817-1888). In 1847, William Freeman purchased Bemis's logwood mill; in 1860, his son bought control of the mills on the Watertown side as well. Freeman was probably instrumental in the organization in 1863 of the Aetna Mills, of which he was Treasurer. The Newton mill, however, continued to be used for grinding dyewoods until the early 1870s. In 1870, the mill employed fifteen men and produced 1500 tons of logwood dye annually.

The closing of the Logwood mill left the Newton mill with excess water-power capacity which the Aetna company chose to utilize by installing heavy gearing on the second floor and a belt drive across the river to Aetna's Mill No. 1. A vertical slot in the logwood mill's river facade identifies the location of this power transmission belt. Sorting of raw wool before it was processed on the Watertown side, was also carried out here. For the remainder of Aetna's corporate history, the Newton mill remained a subsidiary operation. After Aetna moved to Fitchburg in the 1920s, an auto fabric manufacturer moved into the vacant Newton mill, constructing at that time the existing single-story concrete-block additions on the south and west. In 1981 the building was rehabilitated for the offices of an electronics firm.

Staple to Inventory form at bottom

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only  
received 7/23/86  
date entered

Continuation sheet Item number Page

Multiple Resource Area  
Thematic Group

Name Newton MRA  
State Middlesex County, MA

Nomination/Type of Review

Date/Signature

21. West Newton Hill  
Historic District

Qualitative Review

Keeper Kathie Andrus 9/4/86

Attest Beth L. Savage 9/4/86

22. Adams, Amos, House

Qualitative Review

Keeper Kathie Andrus 9/4/86

Attest Beth L. Savage 9/4/86

23. Adams, Seth, House

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

24. Auburndale Congregational  
Church

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

25. Bartlett--Hawkes Farm

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

26. Bayley House

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

27. Bemis Mill

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

28. Bigelow, Henry, House

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

29. Blodgett, William,  
House

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

30. Brackett House

Entered in the  
National Register

Keeper Selma Byers 9/4/86

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

8600 1773

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

Bemis Mill (Newton MRA)  
Middlesex County  
MASSACHUSETTS

Working No. \_\_\_\_\_  
Fed. Reg. Date: JUL 23 1986 2/3/87  
Date Due: 8/24/86 - 9/6/86  
Action:  ACCEPT 9-4-86  
 RETURN  
 REJECT  
Federal Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Entered in the  
National Register

- resubmission
- nomination by person or local government
- owner objection
- appeal

Substantive Review:  sample  request  appeal  NR decision

Reviewer's comments:

Recom./Criteria \_\_\_\_\_  
Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_  
Discipline \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ see continuation sheet

Nomination returned for: \_\_\_\_\_ technical corrections cited below  
\_\_\_\_\_ substantive reasons discussed below

1. Name

2. Location

3. Classification

Category	Ownership Public Acquisition	Status Accessible	Present Use
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4. Owner of Property

5. Location of Legal Description

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

7. Description

Condition	Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed	
	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	
	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

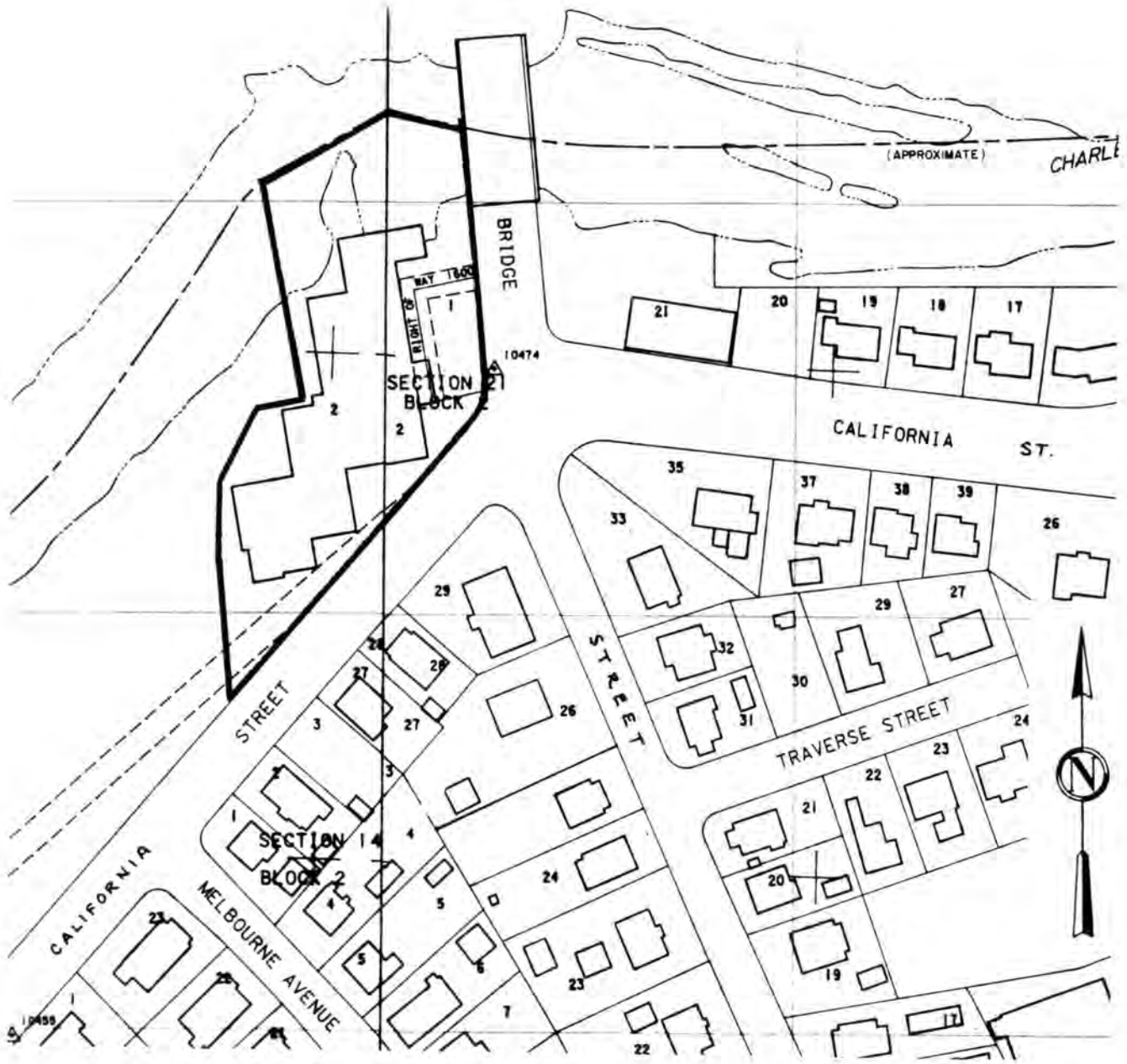
- summary paragraph
- completeness
- clarity
- alterations/integrity
- dates
- boundary selection





Newton, Mass. MRA  
1-3 Bridge St., Nonantum  
(Bemis Mill)  
Inv. #2095

NEWTON MASS MRA



City of Newton Assessor's Maps. Sheets 8 & 9  
 Metric Series. 1979  
 Scale: UTM grid line interval = 100 meters (328 feet)

Newton, Mass. MRA  
 1-3 Bridge St., Nonantum  
 (Bemis Mill)  
 21-2-2