PREFACE

This book describes the evolution of a small mill town in New England. The writer has sought to eschew the strictly antiquarian, to place the local developments in the larger context of the American experience, to portray the details of economic, political, social, and cultural history in a balanced and integrated fashion, and in the process to convey something of the quality of life in this community. The scholarly need for this type of town history seems self evident. The current popularity of urban history is understandable, but historians, among others, would do well to heed the words of Page Smith who, in his recent, distinguished study of the role of the town in American history, has pointed out that "if we except the family and the church, the basic form of social organization experienced by the vast majority of Americans up to the early decades of the twentieth century was the small town."

Harrisville's history includes in miniature many developments important in the history of the nation. Here one finds, successively, a frontier community of self-sufficient farmers, the utilization of waterpower to run small mills, the erection of a factory village, the rise and fall of a paternalistic authority, the color and conflict brought by mass immigration, the railroad mania, clashes between farmers and mill population, a separatist movement, the transformation of an economy punctuated by booms and busts, and the slow growth of a sense of community.

Central, however, to the town's experience, as to the nation's, has been the process of industrialization. The original settlement antedated the Revolution, but it was early in the nineteenth century that a controllable and reliable fall of water gave rise to an industrial village along the common boundary of the agricultural towns of Dublin and Nelson. The decline of these towns was accompanied by the growth of this awkward and demanding stepchild soon to be known as Harrisville. By 1850, two rival concerns were engaged there in woolen manufacturing. The next two decades saw the mill village's most vigorous growth. The parting of the ways for Harrisville and Dublin and Nelson came over the question of the railroad; in 1870, Harrisville was

incorporated as a separate town. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, business panics, a fire, and the disruption of agriculture dealt heavy blows to the town's growth. Nonetheless, a century after the town's incorporation the woolen manufacture survives, and along with the virtual disappearance of agriculture there has been the compensating development of a summer tourist industry.

This process of economic growth and change acted upon, and was reflected in, every aspect of the community's life. The Harrises' patriarchal control was challenged by the Colony family in the 1850s. There were many points of friction between the mill village and the surrounding rural area; the immigrant population was troublesome, elections were turbulent, and the moral tone of the community sagged. Much of this pattern of life persisted after Harrisville became a separate town, although there were efforts at reform. By some indices life in Harrisville reached "low ebb" about the turn of the century. Since then a sharp population decline has leveled off, certain quickening influences, such as improved education, transportation, and communication, have improved the quality of life, and the hard times of the twenties and thirties served to bring about a new sense of community. In the last quarter century Harrisville has continued to experience change, but it has been change within a familiar framework.

Although it contains much of the American, and more of the New England, experience, the history of this mill town has in some respects been atypical, and therein may lie the town's real significance. It never became an industrial slum, a ghost town, or the fief of some outside industrial overlord. With an economy resting upon the numerous summer residents and upon the up-to-date woolen mill owned and operated by the same family that founded it in 1850, the town today is neat, harmonious, and business-like. The village itself looks very much as it did a century ago. In the faded brick of its buildings one is aware of that indefinable sense of continuity; the town has adapted to change without destroying its past. Through a process of time, adversity, and what might be called permissive paternalism, Harrisville has made terms with the industrial revolution that favor both the dignity of the individual and the strength of the community.

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Such merit as the book contains is due to the help of many people. Its shortcomings remain the exclusive possession of the writer.

J.B.A.

FACTORY UNDER THE ELMS: A HISTORY OF HARRISVILLE, NEW HAMPSHIRE, 1774–1969