The Davisville Mills

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The ruins along the Warner River which you will see today have a long and varied history so I will try to share what we do know or think we know to pique your interest and make your walk more enjoyable. I must confess to being a flatlander but I do have a lengthy connection to Davisville as my parents honeymooned at the Amesbury Cottage in 1939 and our family took mini vacations in the area until we had exhausted the supply of boarding houses.

I have done my share of fishing, swimming, and exploring up and down the river and can remember bits and pieces of the fun I had back as far as the mid forties. My wife and I purchased the property in 2009 which at the time was heavily overgrown and a veritable jungle. As we gradually peeled away years of neglect we discovered far more than we ever expected in the ruins and grew to appreciate the monumental effort the early settlers endured and what they accomplished. And lastly a caveat that our factual knowledge is limited and the site reveals her secrets grudgingly.

We will start at the bridge over Route 127, a covered bridge which met its demise in the devastating flooding of 1936. The Warner Historical Society has a few vintage photos of the structure sagging over the raging waters with spectators on both sides watching her collapsing. From the bridge heading down river are the cellar holes and foundations mainly of businesses dating back to the mid to late 1700s. We do know that the first building was a sawmill built in either 1736 or 1739 which was promptly burnt by the Native Americans in 1740, only to be rebuilt in 1763.
The very first cellar hole is by far the largest and is the only known home; we know this from a few pictures taken looking downriver to the covered bridge and beyond.

There are seven in all until you reach the natural sand beach a favorite swimming hole over the years in Davisville. It is also here that the last and probably the largest, all of four stories, of the commercial enterprises, the Davis strawboard factory, dominated the river until 1909 when it closed.
Further downstream is the dam dating back to the earliest settlers which provided the power necessary to run numerous factories. It is a mix of materials, some stone, concrete and at one time when it crossed the river the core was wood framed.

In the middle of the dam is the slot which creates the mill race which runs some 800’ in a semicircle before rejoining the main stream. The mill run is actually broken into three flows, the main in the middle, one on the right which flows through a brick penstock under two building foundations, and not as apparent but one on the left which has seen better days near the dam but which provided power to a structure on the left at a bend about 300’ downstream.
The mill run in conjunction with the main channel forms an island which in all likelihood had several structures which time has judiciously hidden. The island is worth exploring carefully beginning with a substantial wall running down the river from the dam for some several hundred feet, and the only reason for the wall in my opinion was to protect the factories on the island. Not too far down from the dam where the river becomes ledge rather than rocky the shape of the land reveals a rectangle which was probably a large building, a good guess would be the iron foundry. Only recently I noticed bricks in the root structure of a large pine right there so it tends to confirm my suspicions.

As you walk the island you should notice several foundations generally near either the mill run or the main channel and at the far end of the island is another diversion channeling the water from the mill run to the river where there is evidence of additional buildings at the river’s edge. Throughout your walk keep an eye for artifacts, drive shafts growing out of trees, cables, bricks, glass, and other features that make its history more of a guess than fact. (Please do not move or remove these objects that you find.)
To see the rock walls especially given the size of the boulders and know that
the builders had no heavy equipment as we know it, most likely only oxen
to do the heavy labor, is rather mind boggling. Over the years there have
been dozens of factories which have come and gone, the victims of changing
lifestyles, new technologies, or the moods of the river such as in 1826 which
decimated the mills and bridges.

The Warner Historical Society has many wonderful pictures of Davisville,
the dam, the remnants of the Kearsarge Mills, the river in flood stage, and
others well worth a visit. Also I would suggest logging on to Anglers Guide
which has the current and historical stage and flows of the river taken from
the gauge station at Davisville on an hour to hour basis which can be very
interesting in periods of high water.

If I had a personal genie who could grant me any desire, I would ask him for
a video of the history of this site from beginning to present. But if this is
wishful thinking I can always hope that in some attic there are pictures or
written tidbits of Davisville that are just waiting to be discovered and en-
joyed by devotees such as I.