Selections from *Before the Power Loom* by Z. E. Stone in *Contributions of the Old Residents' Historical Association*, Volume 6

There must have been a misapprehension of the facts in the minds of those who have written concerning the early days of East Chelmsford — its population and industries. It was more of a place than represented to have been. Rev. H. A. Miles's work, “Lowell as it was and as it is,” published in 1845, says that “East Chelmsford in 1820 had two hundred population.” “A few scattered farm-houses, the store, the tavern, the humble wooden factory, the few small buildings for the powder-works, the two grist-mills — this was nearly all the place possessed.” Nathan Appleton, in the “Origin of Lowell,” issued in 1858, says that the first visit to the spot of Patrick T. Jackson, Kirk Boott, Warren Dutton, Paul Moody, John W. Boott and himself, was “made in the month of November, 1821, and a slight snow covered the ground. . . . . We perambulated the grounds and scanned the capabilities of the place, and the remark was made that some of us might live to see the place contain twenty thousand inhabitants. At that time there were, I think, less than a dozen houses on what now constitutes the city of Lowell or rather the thickly settled parts of it — that of Nathan Tyler, near the corner of Merrimack and Bridge Streets; that of Josiah Fletcher, near the Boott Mills; the house of Phineas Whiting, near Pawtucket Bridge; the house of Mrs. Warren, near what is now Warren Street; the house of Judge Livermore, east of Concord River, then called Belvidere, and a few others.”

More than twenty years ago a gentleman “to the manner born” — Joseph W. Mansur—wrote us and made the following enumeration concerning East Chelmsford: “In 1820 there were fifty-one houses, all occupied, in the original Lowell — three in Belvidere and eleven in Centralville. . . . . There were, besides the dwelling-houses, four coopers’ shops, a machine-shop, a blacksmith’s shop, a fulling, dressing and carding-mill, woolen-mill, iron-works (Ames & Fisher’s, on Concord River, between Andover and Rogers Streets), powder-mills, two grist-mills, three stores, two hotels, a cabinetmaker’s shop, two school houses,” and others. In all there must have been four hundred people in the place before a purchase had been made or a blow struck by the Boston capitalists in pursuit of a site for a great manufacturing centre. The estimate of our correspondent did not include the three
houses in Belvidere and the eleven in Centralville, for they were not on territory included when East Chelmsford became the town of Lowell, in 1826. We have other reasons for believing the calculation to be correct. As early as 1803, beginning at a dwelling-house which stood on the site of one of the Gage ice-houses, on Pawtucket Street, and including those on a direct line on the right, south, and north and east to the Merrimack and Concord rivers, there were thirty dwelling-houses, each of which was mentioned and location described in a paper which appeared in the first volume of Old Residents' Contributions.

Thus have we attempted to enumerate and locate the manufactories that gradually struggled into existence in this vicinity previous to the advent of the power-loom. And including them all — that on Beaver Brook in Dracut, those on River Meadow Brook and Concord River in East Chelmsford — they were of great importance to this section of Massachusetts. It will be noticed that up to this time there had been no attempt made to harness the voluminous waters of the Merrimack — only its tributaries had been made the servants of the manufacturers. Saw-mills and grist-mills may have been built at different periods above and below the great falls. The smaller streams, which were more easily and cheaply controlled, furnished sufficient power for all who came to East Chelmsford up to 1821.