

IT'S THE UNIONS

THE BRASS CITY OF THE WORLD

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This is a story about the city that is known as the Brass City of the World or sometimes just the Brass City. For those who live there, it is more commonly known as Waterbury, Connecticut. I was born and grew up in Waterbury.

The city is 77 miles from Manhattan, 32 miles southwest of Hartford, about 25 miles north of Long Island Sound, and a part of New Haven County. Its population is about 110,000. It is a city of many hills, big hills. It is on the Naugatuck River; I often joke about the river and say that it has about an inch of water in it. But that is an exaggeration. It is probably more than one inch but it is not navigable. I have recently heard that someone drowned in the river. How do you drown in an inch of water? Perhaps there is a little more water in the river due to more rain in recent years.

Waterbury is a city of many neighborhoods. In my research, I found a number of 100. I have doubts about that. The neighborhoods often had a church, stores, and possibly a small movie theater. Most had a distinctive name such as Brooklyn or Town Plot. In the past, most people living in a particular neighborhood would have belonged to the same ethnic group. There were Italian, Irish, African American, French (Canadians from the Hudson Bay area), Polish, Jewish, Puerto Rican, and many other ethnicities. I have recently heard of Albanian neighborhoods. I had thought that Albanians must have arrived after I left, only to discover recently that they had come to Waterbury during World War I. Waterbury has a long history of immigrants coming to find work in the factories.

Waterbury was founded as a town in 1686 and became a city in 1853. Its name prior to 1686 was Mattatuck which is an anglicized Indian name, which I cannot pronounce or spell. I suspect that the Naugatuck River is also a name from Indian times.

Although I went to elementary school and high school in Waterbury and college in nearby New Haven, I have no memory of learning of or ever hearing of anything about the indigenous people who were living in the area when the colonists arrived. I recently learned that some of those Indians were sold into slavery in the Caribbean. This is confirmed by materials from the Mattatuck Museum and the Silas Bronson Library, both in Waterbury.

When I was a child, there were three large factories in Waterbury. They were Scovill Manufacturing Company, Chase Brass and Copper Company, and the American Brass Company. What is brass? It is an alloy of copper and zinc. It has endured because of its hardness and workability. My father, grandfather, great grandfather, and possibly my great, great grandfather worked at Scovill's.

During World War I and World War II, Scovill's made fuses, munitions for artillery, and other war materials. During peaceful times, they made a variety of consumer goods. Some of the items produced were brass buttons (think police and fire department uniforms), brass lamps, screws, tools, needles, pins, motor vehicle parts, navigation equipment, snap fasteners (Scovill's was a world leader in snap fasteners), lawn sprinklers. Oh. I have the patent for the original lawn sprinkler. The patent is dated 1932 and was granted to Joseph F. Moran, my grandfather. I also have the patent for the tool we used to use to open a can of oil and then pour it with the same tool. I have three U.S. patents related to the flash mechanism on the flashlight and one patent for the flash from Denmark. What we now generically call the flashlight had been known as the torch prior to my grandfather's invention. It is still referred to as the torch in other parts of the world.

The foregoing are just a few of my grandfather's patents. There are several patents for various storage boxes, card holders, etc. My father had divided up the patents and given them to my brother, my sister, and me.

Scovill's made their own brass. The copper and zinc were fused, then rolled into sheets in the rolling mill. The brass could then be used in manufacturing.

Scovill's provided housing for some employees. There were two streets of attached brick houses (similar to Pullman in Chicago) for those employees. My grandparents lived in one (my father grew up in a Scovill house). When I was about four years old, I lived in one of those homes with my parents for about a year. We left when my parents bought a home.

Our new home was at the North edge of the city and was built during World War II when there was a housing shortage caused by the large number of people who moved to Waterbury to work in the factories. It was not an ethnic neighborhood. Those days seemed to be ending. The days when I lived there seem to be ending also. I am told that the neighborhood has been going downhill and is not a place where you would want to live today.

Scovill's also built a dam on the Mad River outside of the city. The dam made a small lake or a big pond, for swimming. They also made a beach. This was for the use of employees and their families for recreation. It could easily be reached by car or by a city bus.

Scovill's was on East Main Street. As a child, I thought that it was about a mile long as it stretched as far as one could see to the East and to the South. I also recall as a child riding by Scovill's in a car. In the summer, there would be windows open with

great heat, steam, and noise coming through the open windows. No doubt, this was the rolling mill.

Scovill's no longer exists. What happened? Before I come to what happened, I want to mention the other two large brass companies. First, the Chase Brass and Copper Company was on the Northwest edge of the city on Thomaston Road in a neighborhood known as Waterville.

As a kid, I would walk down the hill I lived on with other kids, cross a major street, careful to dodge the traffic (there was no light or crosswalk), walk into the woods, down a trail, and finally climb a rock hill to the top (from which there was a steep rock decline), where I could enjoy a wonderful view of the Chase Brass and Copper Company. Its beautiful blue roof appeared to stretch for miles. I also remember the snakes hiding in the rocks on the way up the hill. I don't believe our parents knew that we went up that rock hill.

There were also a number of smaller buildings. Chase also made brass and had a rolling mill in Waterbury and a copper mine in Montana. Their rod mill made brass products for plumbing, brass buttons for federal uniforms, and belt buckles, among other items. Chase had its main office downtown across from City Hall. They owned the building which they had designed by a well-known architect, Cass Gilbert.

In 1938, Chase began to make Art Deco household items. Today, these items are sought after as collectible items.

Chase is on the Naugatuck River and I'm sure their waste went directly into the river. But the river turned on them just as the use of brass began to decline. In 1955, a major storm came up the East coast. It had been a hurricane, but since it came over land, it had lost the wind and it just rained, nineteen inches of rain. The one-inch

Naugatuck River became the mighty Naugatuck for a few days. It took out the railroad tracks to Manhattan. It tore up cemeteries, took down eight-story buildings, and severely damaged Chase Brass and Copper's building with the beautiful blue roof.

The pipes that carried city water to the West side were all severely damaged causing the failure of the entire city water system. My sister, brother, and I were fortunate to be able to stay temporarily with my grandmother at her summer cottage on Long Island Sound. We were able to sit on the beach and watch large trees float by on their way to the ocean.

The storm was the beginning of the end for Chase Waterbury. The damage was so overwhelming that it opened a small plant in Ohio. Today Chase no longer exists in Waterbury. More later on the final end of brass in Waterbury.

American Brass is more difficult to define. Most of its life is involved with other companies such as Anaconda. American Brass had a large factory on North Main Street in Waterbury. There was an Anaconda plant in Ansonia on the Southern end of the Naugatuck Valley and an Anaconda plant in Torrington at the North end of the Naugatuck Valley. The Waterbury plants were the hub of the brass industry.

Between Ansonia, Waterbury, and Torrington, the brass industry employed about 50,000 people. Today, brass is gone from the Naugatuck Valley. What happened?

When I was a child, I heard the adults saying over and over again, "It's the unions; it's the unions". I did not know what that meant. I also knew that Scovill's opened a plant in India and in one of the Carolina's. They also bought Hamilton Beach in Racine, Wisconsin.

As an adult, I can see that they were desperately trying to survive and they were blaming the unions which probably kept them from understanding what was happening

and probably kept them from finding a solution. It would have been better if they acknowledged the truth. If they had known the truth, they might have been saying, "It's the plastic; it's the plastic". Plastic was cheaper to make and plastic items were cheaper for consumers to buy and 50,000 jobs were lost in the Naugatuck Valley.

All three large brass factories in Waterbury folded. Well almost. Scovill's has a small plant in a small town in Georgia. They are still known for making snap fasteners. The Chase Brass and Copper Company facilities in the Naugatuck Valley have been demolished but Chase has several small plants in Ohio.

American Brass is gone in Waterbury. The last time I drove by the factory on North Main Street, the buildings looked like the old steel mills on the south side of Chicago. It appeared that every window in the building had been broken. But it survives to some extent with Anaconda.

What has happened since the closings? Most of Scovill's was torn down, leaving a large vacant space and empty buildings in the middle of the city. After some time, the Brass Mill Shopping Center was built in the vacant space. Other shopping centers have been built nearby. When I was in Connecticut in recent years, I would hear people saying that they were going shopping in Waterbury. The New York Times praised the city for arranging for these centers to be built. But does a shopping center really take the place of huge factories? I say, "No". Further, a shopping center may not last very long today, as people buy more on line.

Brass is still made today. It is made in Germany, France, and a few other places. Today, the large companies from Waterbury no longer manufacture the brass but still make small brass items in lesser amounts in smaller towns across the country.

Was there anything else in the city that kept the city from helping to save the industry? I was surprised by what I found in my research for this paper. Waterbury is known as the Cook County of the East coast.

All I can remember from my childhood days was that my uncle John, who ran Scovill's Chicago office, would visit Waterbury in the summer and take me and his wife's niece to dinner in the Elton Hotel (a beautiful old building designed by a famous architect). While we were eating, he pointed to an old man, Frank Hayes, eating dinner by himself. Uncle John told us that he used to be the mayor before he went to jail. He was accused of defrauding the city, convicted in 1940, and wound up serving six years in prison. After he was released, he lived at the hotel and ate there every night.

Numerous people besides the mayor were arrested and convicted. One person escaped. I remember when I was a teenager seeing in the newspaper that Waterbury residents visiting in Chicago saw the escapee on the street and quickly got a police officer. He was arrested and extradited to Waterbury. He was charged with defrauding the city. He had been running a religious store in Chicago. The corruption was mostly in the 1930's and the jail sentences were handed out in the 1940's.

In recent years, Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman has said that when he died, he wanted to be buried in Waterbury because then he would be able to continue his political career. That does sound familiar. Did corruption continue? I don't think so but the people who took over might just have been inexperienced. Would a good government have made a difference in the city?

The three large companies were always able to change to wartime production and back to peacetime production when the wars ended. Might they have been able to change when times changed with some help from the city?

I don't know if they could have survived. I do know that the city went downhill fast. When 300 cities in the country were rated for their livability, Waterbury was tied with Rockford for number 300. In 2014, the poverty rate was about 25%.

It is not the city that I knew. The city I knew had a huge wonderful library, live theater, a symphony orchestra nearby, several large movie theaters downtown, and wonderful parades with fife and drum corps much as they had been in revolutionary times. There was a fast train into New York's Grand Central and wonderful local transportation into any part of the city, as all buses went to Exchange Place where you could take a bus to any place else in the city. There were large beautiful parks, some with natural ponds used for ice skating and hockey. The city had two hospitals and easy access to special medical treatment in nearby New Haven. There were two newspapers, one morning, one evening, as well as New York City newspapers. Television stations from New York were available by way of rooftop antennas. Beautiful views of the hills and rock formations outside of the city could be seen from where I lived.

One of my concerns while working on this paper was that Waterbury was relying on one industry. If they had some diversity, would it have been less disastrous? To my surprise, they did not rely on just brass.

There was the Waterbury Clock Company. It was founded in 1857. The clocks were made with wood and brass. They were large. Some were made for walls; some were for mantles. They also made watches and clock movements. Many of these items were sold through Sears and Roebuck. They began to struggle during the Depression and the company was sold in 1942 to a Norwegian group who renamed the company U.S. Time Corp., which eventually became Timex. Timex is a global watch

company located in Middlebury, Connecticut, a suburb of Waterbury. Today, clocks made by the Waterbury Clock Company are regularly seen on PBS Antiques Road Show as highly-collectible items. Timepiece manufacturing did not, however, come close to replacing the brass industry.

What was Waterbury like as the world of brass ended? Xhenet Aliu, a native of Waterbury whose father was Albanian and whose mother was a Lithuanian-American, has written a novel, *Brass*. It is a story partly about her relationships with her mother and partly a story of her escape from Waterbury.

This is how she described the downtown as she drove to a doctor's appointment. "The cheapest doctors, the clinics that advertised on billboards on the sides of buildings that were one lead brick away from being condemned were mostly downtown in walking distance from the most busted up, hope defying neighborhoods in the city."

She describes rolling down East Main Street past what used to be Scovill Brass Works except that it hadn't worked in years and was being demolished to make way for a mall that she was guessing wouldn't work any better. There are still some stores in downtown Waterbury but the large department store, Howland-Hughes closed a number of years ago.

Some good things do remain in Waterbury. The old railroad station, a beautiful building with a bell tower, is still there though no longer a railroad station. The bell tower that rises from the old station is also still there. The tower is a replica of a tower in Italy. The building today is occupied by the remaining local newspaper, the Waterbury American.

The green in the center of downtown is still beautiful. The Catholic church, known as the Immaculate Conception Church, is a beautiful building right across from

the green. On the other end of the green is St. John's Episcopal Church, also an attractive building. The previously mentioned Elton Hotel, now an assisted-living facility, is also across from the green and next to the Immaculate Conception Church.

I don't know what will become of Waterbury. I do know that brass was known in the ancient world but its time may be nearing its end. It may survive in navigation for a time because of its rust resistance, but I'm not sure what else it will be used for in the future.