

[https://www.independentri.com/view\\_from\\_swamptown/article\\_c0fbd880-cbe4-11ec-97f6-23385f8ac6b4.html](https://www.independentri.com/view_from_swamptown/article_c0fbd880-cbe4-11ec-97f6-23385f8ac6b4.html)

FEATURED

## The View From Swamptown: South County's White Mulberry Trees born from a dream

By G.T. Cranston Special to the Independent  
May 8, 2022



This building, now utilized by the Wickford Baptist Church, was once home to Henry Congdon's Washington Hotel. Congdon was one of four local businessmen who, in the mid 19th century, attempted to create an American silk industry by importing Chinese White Mulberry trees into New England.

Photo: Michael Derr

As odd as it sounds, I think it's fair to say that the 15-foot-tall Chinese White Mulberry tree that has successfully established itself in my front yard's natural garden area informs me each morning as I leave my home in western North Kingstown to head down to Wickford village. The song birds I am

trying to attract with this planned “natural” area just love this Mulberry sapling and I’ve got to say this tree, one of the earliest documented “invasive species” in New England, pleases me as well. Sure, it’s a bit messy with its multitude of sweet sticky berries each summer, but this tree, like every other Chinese Mulberry in South County tells a tale of early 19th century entrepreneurial enterprise, if one only knows how to listen. And since North Kingstown just last week celebrated its designation as an Arbor Day Community, I thought we ought to contemplate trees for a bit.

As its name, and the label “invasive species” implies, the Chinese White Mulberry just does not belong here in South County. But despite that, it, as a species, has been here for about 190 years or so and has done quite well for itself; wisely establishing its kind in numbers substantial enough to insure its continuation in perpetuity, but not in numbers that raise it to the nuisance level attained by its oriental cousin the Japanese bittersweet vine. The interesting historical fact about the Chinese White Mulberry Tree, found to some degree up and down the eastern seaboard, with areas like South County possessing a localized higher concentration, is that they were originally imported here from the exotic Far East as a part of a brave and bold, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, entrepreneurial venture that began in 1832 or so, modeled after earlier successful ventures in Massachusetts and Connecticut, when two gentleman farmers and amateur 19th century botanists from Wickford, Reverend Lemuel Burge the priest at the Old Narragansett Church, and his friend Henry Congdon, an innkeeper who ran the Washington Hotel on Main Street, joined this growing group of daring businessmen in New England, New Jersey and various states in the southeast, in attempting to establish an American silk industry. Here in Rhode Island, only four men, Wickford Village’s Burge and Congdon, North Providence farmer Samuel W. Greene and Foster based botanist Solomon Drowne decided to give this potentially profitable industry a try. Congdon and Burge, as partners, planted an astonishing 15,000 Chinese Mulberry Seedlings in various orchard plots in the Wickford area beginning back in 1832 and, after the trees took root, then imported silkworm caterpillars by the thousands and established them on the Mulberry trees, the only food source that true silkworm caterpillars would accept. Indeed, the accepted wisdom of that timeframe was that one acre of young mulberry trees possessed the potential to support 540,000 silkworms. Solomon Drowne, the famed Revolutionary War doctor/surgeon and Gaspee co-conspirator, who was now established as Brown University’s very first Professor of Botany, reported on the progress of the Wickford based venture, as well as his own and Samuel W. Greene’s North Providence based undertaking, in the professional journal “The New England Farmer & Horticulturalist” throughout most of the 1830’s. This daring business was, by many measures, a success; all four men reported that both the Mulberry trees and the silkworm caterpillars/moths did well in this southern New England environment, producing viable quantities of truly American-made silk thread each year. Burge actually won an award from the organization in 1835 for producing 4,900 skeins of sewing silk in a single season. Unfortunately, ultimately the quantities produced were never

enough to reach a necessary “critical mass” required for a truly financially sustainable industry and one by one the four men, along with like minded groups in the Connecticut River Valley, nearby Massachusetts, and the New Jersey farmlands, gave up the dream of being our nation’s first silk tycoons.

The Chinese White Mulberry trees however, never did give up and never went away. Even though Henry Congdon and Lemuel Burge eventually returned their numerous orchard lots to more traditional fruit production, the Mulberry’s, whose durable tiny little seed spreads itself dependably in bird droppings, established themselves for eternity it seems, along the forest edges and in the unused farm fields all around South County. That’s right, they are, like true invasives, here to stay and benignly inform all of us who care to listen, about an age when daring businessmen who called South County home, imported their ancestors in tightly bound expensive bundles of seedlings sent all the way from exotic China, to do something so very American — Take a risk on a bold dream!

---

The author is the North Kingstown town historian. The views expressed here are his own.