COLTSVILLE NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

# SCHOLARS ROUND TABLE REPORT

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The Coltsville National Historic Park is an extraordinary site capable of helping to interpret broad patterns of United States industrial, labor, economic, and cultural history. The challenge, indeed the responsibility, of stewardship at Coltsville will be to convincingly connect these broad narratives of United States history with the Connecticut River Valley region and with the specific architecture and landscape of the Coltsville site.

In establishing comprehensible connections to the region, National Park Service stewardship needs to directly and convincingly take on why the "Precision Valley," or "Gun Valley" developed along the Connecticut River Valley from New Haven, to Hartford, to Springfield, and north to Windsor. When comparisons are made between the 19th century geographical clustering of gun manufacture and that of computer and software companies in Silicon Valley in the late 20th century, we need to be precise about the skills that were gathered and their relationship, if any, to geography, landscape, and systems of finance and knowledge. What were the skills and crafts gathered together in this regional geographical niche that permitted precision manufacturing and gun production to dominate this particular place? What made all of this possible? Was it a gathering of tool and die makers? Was there particular

knowledge specific to gun manufacture that helped settle manufacture in this particular place? It is possible to see in the Colt operation spin-offs into non-firearm products-- steam engines, printing presses, sewing machines, typesetting machines, dishwashers, electrical equipment, all creating products that required precision, standardized parts; however, this focus needs to be interpreted in terms of the specific skilled labor and knowledge. In economic geography there is a literature on the clustering of particular forms of manufacture. This clustering needs to be made more precise for "Precision Valley" and for Colt. Samuel Colt was born and raised in Hartford. Therefore, it is notable that Colt's first revolver manufacture was undertaken not in Hartford but in Paterson, New Jersey? This suggests that the logic of concentration and clustering of certain manufacturing operations was not as obvious to Colt at the start of his gun production career. Rather than assuming the easy fit between Colt and standardization and interchangeable parts and precision manufacture in the Connecticut River Valley, there is an obvious need to probe more deeply and explain more precisely about the basis in labor, finance, and entrepreneurship that made all of this possible. It would also be useful to understand whether the concentration of the insurance industry in Hartford, with no palpable manufactured product, but with considerable financial reserves needing investment, helped boost the fortunes of local precision manufacture. Beyond skilled labor and specialized knowledge was there also early access to natural resources, to, perhaps iron and lumber or power generation, that encouraged local clustering of gun manufacture? What were the other nodes, out of the Connecticut Valley, that supported gun manufacture? In what ways were these localities similar to, and different from, the Connecticut Valley? If natural advantages helped in the early

development of the industry, over what period of time did these natural advantages persist? These are all questions that invite the stewards of Coltsville to explore and reveal the regional geographical logic that helped Colt's business to survive and thrive in Hartford. There was much more to Colt's success in Hartford than entrepreneurial savvy and creative genius.

The need to explain more clearly the logic, pattern, and success of precision manufacture at the level of the region is even more necessary and compelling at the level of the Coltsville site. Existing documentation of the site is far from satisfactory; it jumps far too easily from the existence of manufacturing buildings to the exciting story of Samuel and Elizabeth Colt's entrepreneurship, and Colt's global success in producing and selling guns on a colossal scale. This dominant Colt narrative does not really need buildings at all. The buildings should provoke us to ask and answer a pretty basic question--how did these particular architectural and landscape spaces function in the manufacture of firearms? In any manufacturing process, specific inputs are modified through labor and machinery, resulting in both products and by-products. At the moment, site interpretation at Coltsville tends to focus on products and the changes in products over time. This focus often glosses over the resource represented by the buildings and spaces of manufacture themselves and the workers' skills and machines involved in the process. Even without visitor access to the entire site, visitors need to learn in precise and compelling terms what industrial work and production happened in the buildings that they see when they visit Coltsville? When visitors encounter a building called a "foundry" they should be able to understand what sort of work was done in that building and how it related to the production of Colt revolvers or other

firearms. The production of tools and dies for the drop forges needs to be explained. The incredible amount of lathe work and filing in the production of precision parts must be engaged. The National Park Service site at Lowell has the benefit of having looms that run and help to demonstrate the work that was done in textile production. The Coltsville site, with no existing production machinery, and without access to many of the site's historic buildings, will not be able to as easily demonstrate the historic pattern of production on the site. However, the site, the buildings, and landscape provide powerful provocation for interpreting the combination of labor, skill, ingenuity, and technology in the production of firearms. What was the experience and culture of the workers who labored in this process? What did various workers do? As production became more standardized how did the circumstances and experience of labor change? How did materials flow through the process? Did the advent of assembly-line production processes in other industries change the nature of the industrial process and architecture at Coltsville? What aspects of the production required highly skilled labor? What work did unskilled laborers perform? How did the balance between skilled and unskilled labor change across time? What was the difference in pay between the most skilled and the least skilled labor at Coltsville? How did the hierarchy of work and pay change across time with different technological developments? Despite the overarching frame of paternalism at Colt, workers did organize and did strike at Colt. This labor history needs to be understood and presented. Coltsville is, after all, a site of production. Fairly precise production figures are very likely available in Colt records. It is important that visitors to the site come to understand how the buildings and spaces at

Coltsville were precisely structured by labor and machinery to make that production possible.

The source of power at Coltsville shaped the industrial spaces and the nature of production. The change from steam power, with belt drives to electric motors and electric power at Coltsville influenced the changes in industrial architecture. The careful consideration of energy determinations of production has the potential to have visitors think about the ways in which their own consumption of energy influences the shape of the world they occupy today.

Coltsville enjoys the legibility and typological clarity of a classic proprietary capitalistic company town. The factory occupies the low ground. The brick and wood frame workers' residences stand adjacent to the factory. The proprietor's home stands at a distance, on the high ground, adjacent to landscapes and buildings that signal the cultivation and philanthropic and paternalistic intentions of the proprietor--the expansive garden landscape of Armsmear, the architecturally ambitious Colt Memorial Parish House, the impressive Episcopal Church of the Good Shepard. The overall landscape is extraordinary. However, the Coltsville site, adjacent to downtown Hartford, the Connecticut state capital, complicates the company town typology. Coltsville's buildings and landscapes and its workers blend seamlessly into the public and private urban landscapes of Hartford. The permeable boundaries between Coltsville and Hartford needs to be explored and interpreted as part of the Coltsville narrative. It is clear that for much of its existence Coltsville did not house the vast majority of its workers. Colt workers lived in, worshipped in, shopped in, and spent leisure time and money outside of Coltsville, throughout the greater Hartford area. Colt employment records,

manuscript census records, city directories, property deeds, real estate atlases, Sanborn Maps, building permits, and other local history sources could all be drawn upon to capture the extramural world of Coltsville workers. This research would then throw into higher profile the possibilities and limitations of Coltsville for the people who worked at Colt. Coltsville has great examples of 19th century brick multiple-unit workers' housing on Huyshope Avenue, Van Block Avenue and 19th century two-family frame cottages on Curcombe Street. These houses need to be carefully scrutinized so the accommodations they provided can be contrasted with the form, layout, and standards that prevailed in the broader community. Likewise, the religious and civic buildings constructed in Coltsville should be contrasted with the religious and civic buildings that Colt workers used outside of Coltsville. It seems likely that Colt's paternalistic provision of housing, religious, and civic buildings gave way in the face of competing buildings that might have been more modest but offered Colt employees a larger measure of free choice, with less direct surveillance by the company that controlled their workplace. The complex transition away from the forms and landscapes of corporate philanthropy and paternalism needs to be part of the interpretative frame for considering Coltsville's examples of workers housing. The demolition of some early workers housing units along Huyshope and Van Block and their replacement by employee parking lots, presumably for the cars that carried them to quite distinct residences and communities, merit close attention in the interpretation of the residential aspects of Coltsville. Similarly, the architecture and consumption of space at Armsmear and in manager housing on Wethersfield Avenue and elsewhere should be contrasted with the forms and residential spaces that accommodated different levels of

Colt workers. When was indoor plumbing provided for the workers' housing? When did Armsmear receive indoor plumbing? Was human waste from this site piped to the Connecticut River? Where was drinking water obtained from on the site? Again, thinking about these basic necessities and infrastructure would provide the basis for visitors to think about their own relationship to such systems today.

The National Historic Landmark nomination for Coltsville suggest that the worker housing on Huyshope and Van Block was occupied primarily unskilled workers by the 1880s. This assertion needs to be explored with greater precision across time and across job designations. In 1900 101 Huyshope has three different households led by German immigrants who worked at Colt as a tool maker, a filer, and a driller. Van Block workers' housing units were occupied by drillers, filers, machinists, a press operator, a teamster, a carpenter, a plumber, a box maker, a blacksmith, a drop forger, a shipping clerk, and an Irish immigrant gardener. The census suggests a much more complex world of work and residence in Coltsville. The census also permits us to glimpse the world of worker families, where some children attended school and others worked at other Hartford manufacturers; this was the case of 27-year-old Jesse Bogardus, who worked in a local textile mill, but as the daughter of Adelbart Bogardus, a Colt drop forger, lived with her large family in Colt company housing. This glimpse into the family lives of a few Colt employees raises an important question about gender and Colt employment: it appears that despite having Elizabeth Colt preside over the business after her husband's death, work at Colt was primarily done by men. This might have changed in the 20th century but the gender dimension of employments needs to be

charted and interpreted. What positions were filled by women? How did that pattern change over time?

Coltsville will draw visitors from far flung places. However, site interpretation should also be developed with an eye to local residents and stakeholders. This site should provide a mainstay for public history education in local primary and secondary schools. The strategy outlined above of exploring the specific extramural sites developed by and occupied by Colt workers for residence, worship, and civic and cultural activities can provide a venue for reaching out to the local community is a very specific and compelling way; current residents will see their everyday buildings and landscapes as part of a broader story connected to history and heritage of the Coltsville site. The methods and richness of local history can be framed in particularly vivid and personal way. Such an approach will not only connect residents to broader historical themes but will also demonstrate the rich possibilities of linking people to place through a broadened appreciation of local history and heritage.

The stewards of Coltsville will need to craft a narrative that deals thoughtfully and forthrightly with gun culture, gun violence, and gun carnage. Colt built a business upon the manufacture and broad distribution of an innovative and reliable revolver that could fire five or six shots before being re-loaded. This innovation obviously made firearms more lethal. Colt also contributed to the logic and trajectory towards machine guns, later manufactured in Coltsville, and towards high capacity gun magazines that are now implicated in horrific acts of mass killing and violence. The entire landscape of Coltsville was oriented towards the efficient production of firearms that, at the end of the day, were intended to kill people and have done that to an extraordinary degree both on

battlefields during wartime and in the streets and buildings of civil/uncivil society. "Guns don't kill. People kill." However, the promise and pattern of Colt production sure helped people kill more effectively, more efficiently. In 2018, 39,773 gun deaths occurred in the United States. In Hartford in 2017 29 homicides were committed, mostly using guns.

All the refining of precision manufacturing, all the ingenuity and entrepreneurship, at Colt and among other gun manufacturers, lie behind these numbers. The second amendment of the United States Constitution reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Debates over the meaning of the second amendment and over gun control has certainly roiled the politics of the United States for decades. It is unthinkable that stewardship of Coltsville can be provided without engaging these issues directly. This aspect of the Coltsville narrative is likely the one that most directly connects to the everyday life, experience, and perceptions of future visitors. The site, the wealth created here, the cultural memorialization of Samuel Colt and his family, the innovations in production and marketing, the philanthropy, the religious and civic landscape are all, in the end, tied to a product that, by design, is lethal and almost always aims to kill. Coltsville always thrived most and worked at fullest capacity, during times of war. The place profited from war and death. There is no getting around this fact. There is no ignoring it. It will tax stewards of the site to their fullest; however, they simply cannot avoid confronting on this difficult moral and historiographical conundrum.