

For thousands of years silk was produced only in China, and exported by sea and along the “silk road” which crosses Asia and the Middle East into Europe. Eventually the secret leaked to Japan and India, and silkworms were smuggled into the Roman Empire in 522 A.D. The industry grew slowly in Europe; by the 15th century France and Italy were the leading manufacturers of silk on the continent, and in the 18th century England, with its innovations in the textile industry, outstripped its neighbors across the Channel. Although the English sent shipments of silkworms to Jamestown in 1613, attempts at silk production in the colonies were eventually abandoned.

A Get-Rich-Quick Scheme . . .

In an independent America, agricultural journals in the 1820s began to promote silk as a highly lucrative cash crop. The U.S. Congress was concerned about the unfavorable balance of trade with Britain, and the \$8,000,000 Americans spent each year on imports of silk and silk goods. In 1831 Congress passed a resolution authorizing the distribution of J.H. Cobb’s manual on silk culture. Early literature had proposed that silkworms could be raised on leaves of the native mulberry tree, *morus alba*, for which seed could be purchased, or cuttings taken from wild trees. Another species of mulberry, *morus multicaulis*, said to be the same kind grown in China, was introduced in 1825. This type of mulberry grew very rapidly and sprouted enormous leaves, enough to feed two crops of worms per season from just one tree. Since a single moth laid an average of 300 eggs, the basic stock could be multiplied to start a household industry within one season. It was claimed that a family with three adults could make \$300 in six weeks, not counting the time spent on reeling and the labor of the children in the family.

The new interest in silk culture soon led to what was known as the “*morus multicaulis* craze.” Thousands of individuals purchased mulberry plants and planted large areas of valuable land. But the sensitive silkworm exacted an enormous amount of care from its tenders: its environment had to be controlled, it was subject to wilt disease (*flancheria*), its trays had to be cleaned often, and during the last two weeks of its growth it required constant, 24-hour-a-day feeding. The mulberry trees, too, were sensitive: in the severe winter of 1839-40 heavy frosts destroyed plantations of them. Except for a few well-established ventures – some of them in Massachusetts (in Hampshire and Norfolk counties) - silk culture was practically abandoned all through the States in the course of a few years.

The silk industry in Framingham

For locations, please see the map in the front gallery.

Apart from several small family ventures, there were two attempts to establish silk farms in Framingham in the 1830s. Little is known about the first: mulberry cuttings were planted in the early 1830s in the “old Agricultural Grounds” by William Buckminster Esquire. According to Josiah Temple’s History, “the trees flourished; but the worms were not a success.”

A larger-scale venture was launched at the height of the “*morus multicaulis* craze” in 1836, when a group of Framingham investors - Thomas G. Fessenden, George C. Barret and William H. Montague - organized the Massachusetts Silk Company “for the purpose of raising, reeling, throwing and manufacturing silk, in the town of Framingham.” The Company, which had a number of other stockholders, purchased about 160 acres, including the former Col. Nathaniel Fisk farm, west of Winter Street and just south of the Sudbury River. The land was planted with 78,800 of the native white mulberry trees and 7,300 of the Chinese *morus multicaulis*, and a two-acre seed bed in which the *morus multicaulis* could be tripled or quadrupled. The Massachusetts Silk Company appeared on the Town’s tax rolls for two or three years. It is likely that the trees succumbed during the harsh winter of 1839-40, ending the second attempt at silk farming in Framingham.



Mary Kennard’s silk wedding stockings are on exhibit. The wedding party walked on carpets to the Kennard home at 20 Vernon Street.

Wedding of Mary Kennard & George C. Scott, June 1, 1905 from M.S. Evans Collection 2002.124

Silk

Perennial favorite, and fad



The MASSACHUSETTS SILK COMPANY have a capital of \$100,000, and have purchased a large tract of land in Framingham, Mass., 20 miles from Boston, on the Worcester Railroad. They have 100,000 white mulberry trees and from 10,000 to 20,000 *morus multicaulis* trees, which are to be set out. The New England Farmer says, “a plantation of 160 acres of white mulberry trees, at six years of age, will produce 20 or 25,000 pounds of raw silk annually, which, at \$4 per pound, will amount to the enormous sum of \$100,000.”

Article published in the New Bedford Mercury, November 13, 1835 from Early American Newspapers, Series 1, 1690-1876, an Archive of Americana collection
 Courtesy of Readex, a division of Newsbank, in cooperation with the American Antiquarian Society

A Boston paper announces the arrival in that city of a couple of waggons from Connecticut loaded with seventy thousand Mulberry trees, for the Massachusetts Silk Company’s Farm at Framingham.

Article published in the Connecticut Courant, November 23, 1835 from Early American Newspapers, Series 1, 1690-1876, an Archive of Americana collection
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“Representation of the different ages of the Silk worm” from a color plate in a treatise on the rearing of silk-worms, translated from German, 1828. U.S. Congressional Serial Set, 1817-1980.
 Courtesy of Readex, a division of Newsbank