

Sterling Manufacturing, Inc: The Rise and Fall of Hebron's Brightest Star

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Don Robinson of Hebron recently donated a valuable artifact to the Hebron Historical Society. It is a simple car horn; it is also the last known existing part of an Ams-Sterling automobile, manufactured in Amston in 1917 or early 1918. All other Ams-Sterling Roadsters, and their parts, have met their maker at the junkyard or have simply rusted into oblivion.

Legends abound regarding Charles Ams and his plans to bring Hebron to the forefront of the industrial map in New England. The excitement over this new venture was electrifying. However, Henry and Mary Jones' collection of original documents regarding the company reveal a far different story.

The south end of Hebron was originally called "Turnerville" because of P. W. Turner, his silk mills, and his vast land holdings, including the lake. Turnerville in 1910 was a bustling economic hub, primarily because of the Turnerville Train Depot. Passenger and cargo transport going east to Boston or west to New Haven and New York usually saw Turnerville as a stopover. Ira Turshen's General Store (which modern residents associate with the Antiques Factory, now abandoned) processed much of the grain that came in by rail. Milk from the many Hebron dairy farms was brought south to the Depot for transport. Cottage industries and inns were abundant.

It was the perfect location for a major manufacturing venture. Charles Ams, a Bridgeport resident, decided to relocate his Sterling Manufacturing Company here. Labor was cheaper and transportation was readily available. He bought much of P. W. Turner's lands; hence "Turnerville" became "Amston." He built an impressive "mansion", which still stands today on the north side of Lake Road. The *Automobile Journal*, touted as "the most widely read owners' magazine published in the United States," wrote on September 10, 1916: "Charles M. Ams, president of the Sterling Auto Manufacturing Company, Paterson, N.J., has announced that the concern's business will be removed to Amston, Conn., formerly Turnerville, which was purchased by Mr. Ams several years ago. A new plant is being erected at Amston, where automobiles will be manufactured. It is understood the company will put a roadster, five-passenger car and a light delivery wagon on the market this fall."

Not even 10 days later problems began. Moving furniture from the offices at 1790 Broad Street in New York City resulted in claims of damage and loss. The Adelson Brothers, who remained at the Broad Street offices and were the sole distributors of the Roadsters, had difficulty selling "dealerships." The retail price of the Roadster was pre-determined at \$550; dealers would pay \$467.50 and pocket the difference. Despite the temptation of making a 17.6% profit on the sale of each car, many hesitated. Whether this reluctance was a direct result of growing fears of America entering World War I is not known, but can be assumed. Parts became an increasing problem, and one letter, dated November 10, 1916, noted that Charles Ams was now "personally guaranteeing payment for [a] motor."

Nonetheless, 100,000 shares of stock in Sterling Manufacturing were sold in early 1917. The typewritten list of shareholders was filed with the "Security Transfer and Registrar Company" in New York on April 18, 1917 – twelve days after the United States declared war on Germany. It had 21 pages of names. Most shareholders purchased less than 100 shares; Charles Ams purchased only 3,102 shares. No Hebron resident purchased stock. New York investors bought the vast majority, including one "Rose Einbund", who purchased 46,199 shares – almost half of the company. No address is listed

for the mysterious Rose, which is inconsistent with the rest of the document. Only two addresses are missing, and one is a major shareholder? Interestingly, George Bartlett, who listed his official address as “The Chronicle, Willimantic, Conn.” purchased 75 shares.

Despite a business plan that called for production of up to 300 cars per month, it is estimated that only about 20 to 30 total cars were actually produced. By September 1917, one dealer was already pulling out. By early 1919, it was officially over. In February, Ams wrote grumbling letters to Lewis Phelps, Bankruptcy Referee, stating: “Will you also return to me at your expense the Sterling motor, my property, which you took away. I should like you to remove the rest of the stuff from my premises as soon as possible, as I am needing the room and want to try to find a tenant for my building, which is now impossible as the stuff is all over the place.” Using the word “stuff” was definitely not part of the formal language of letters in 1919. Later that same month, Phelps wrote the following: “I have in my possession [sic] all the goods that were left at Amston, which were appraised for \$1717.50. I am hoping to get more than the appraisal for them but think that it will not be enough to pay the claims, to say nothing of the stockholders.” Formal bankruptcy hearings were held at U.S. District Court in Hartford on November 26, 1919.

As you drive south on Route 85 or walk the “Airline Trail” today, try to imagine all of this history. The Sterling Manufacturing plant, located east of Church Street and north of North Pond Road. The Turnerville Depot, where trains traveling from Amston to Colchester had to go backwards, because there was no turnaround. The bustling economy, the mills and the workers and the visitors. Postcards galore touting the beautiful life of rural Amston. “Miss Amston Lake” promoting sales of lots on the lake for only \$89 and “easy terms.”

So many hopes, so many dreams...on the part of so many. All that appears left today of those 1917 dreams is a simple horn.

Author’s Note: The Hebron Historical Society thanks Donald Robinson for contributing the Ams-Sterling Roadster horn to the Society’s collection of artifacts. We also thank Henry and Mary Jones of Amston, CT for sharing their extensive private collection of original documents and letters on Sterling Manufacturing.