



*"Knowing our past, guides our future."*

## **JAMES KILLAM, THE PLANE MAKER**

by Edward C. Swift

*Note: Mr. Swift, a professional engineer, enjoys woodworking and collecting antiques. These interests led him to study the Killam family, particularly James Killam, who was a successful Glastonbury maker of wooden planes during the early days of the Republic.*

### **Wooden Planes**

The first European settlers in New England brought axes and saws to use in constructing their earliest buildings. They also brought with them an appreciation for artistic elements, and some knew how to create ornamental woodwork. With an ample supply of wood in New England, it was not long before decorative elements were being incorporated into locally-made houses, furniture, ships, and tools.

Wooden planes were a key tool used in finishing woodwork. A wooden plane can be thought of as a specialized metal knife mounted in an exact position in a block or body. Today these bodies are made of metal, but until the mid-nineteenth century, they were usually made of wood.

With a plane that holds a straight metal blade, a craftsman can create a smooth finish by passing the tool over a rough wooden surface with the blade set to shave off thin strips of the surface (wood shavings). This leaves a surface that is smoother and more regular than a wood finish created with a saw, broadax, adz, or handheld knife.

A specially shaped plane with a shaped blade (called a molding plane) can be used to create a particular shape for banisters, moldings, or other decorated surfaces. Different shaped planes create different shaped moldings and other ornamental elements.

### **Migration**

Our story starts in Dennington, Suffolk, England in 1637, when Austin Killam, his wife Alice, and their children sailed from Yarmouth, England and to Salem, Massachusetts. They were part of a migration during the 1630s organized by the Massachusetts Bay Company. It moved over 20,000 Englishmen and women to New England on the first of a great series of convoys, this one utilizing about 200 ships. The leading settlers were outstanding Puritans, like John Winthrop. Although many were seeking economic opportunities and not focused only on religion, this was considered the Puritan migration.

The newly arrived Killam family settled in Wenham, Massachusetts. In time, their three sons left Wenham seeking their own land and opportunities. One of the sons, John Killam, and his wife Hannah Pickford settled in Preston, Connecticut. Their son, Samuel, married Elizabeth Rose of Preston and in time acquired the Rose family farm land. Samuel, while operating his farm, also did some part-time carpentry which may have included making wooden planes, a trade that his descendants are known to have engaged in. Samuel had a son and a grandson, each named Samuel. The son and grandson made wooden planes and sold them to furniture makers and others in and around New London County.

According to New London County Furniture published by the Lyman Allyn Museum, there were at least 50 cabinetmakers in New London, 40 in Norwich, and 12 in Preston, at the time of the American Revolution. Many of the

customers for furniture made by these craftsmen probably lived outside the immediate New London area because, according to a 1774 census, New London, the region's primary city, had only 5,888 residents.

The American Revolution was hard on New London. In the summer of 1781 the *Minerva*, an American privateer out of New London, captured the British ship, *Hanna*, with its rich cargo, including personal supplies for the British officers stationed in New York City. In retaliation, at sunrise on September 6, 1781, a British force of about 800, led by Benedict Arnold, a native of Norwich, Connecticut, attacked and laid ruin to New London. Not only were large stockpiles of goods and naval stores destroyed, but 143 buildings were burned, as were many ships and all of the city's wharfs.

It took years before New London recovered as a thriving commercial center. In the meantime, the many cabinetmakers and carpenters located along the Thames River, who had depended on New London as their commercial hub, had to rely on their farms for a living or relocate. These included the 12 cabinetmakers in Preston, Connecticut.

It was the original Samuel Killam's great grandson, Lyman, who came with his sons, James and Samuel, to South Glastonbury. Early records not only make it possible to trace the family in both England and colonial America, but they also provide some insights into the life of the family. For instance, the will dated November 14, 1754 of Captain Samuel Killam, the second of the Samuel Killams discussed here, provides in part as follows:

“To wife Elizabeth Killam, one third of the moveables and use of all the real estate till grandson Samuel Killam shall arrive to the age of 21 years and the use on one half of the real estate during her lifetime.

“To son Samuel Killam, my wearing apparel, my gun, one half of my farming and carpentering tools, to be delivered to him when my grandson Samuel Killam is 21, which with what I have already given, is his portion.

“To beloved grandson Samuel Killam, my freehold estate on which I now dwell it being a tract of land given to me and my wife Elizabeth by our honored father Mr. Thomas Rose late of Preston, deceased, and one half of the farming and carpentering tools when 21.”

In making this will, Captain Samuel Killam could not foresee that, because of a revolution, his beloved grandsons would find it necessary to leave the property in Preston to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

### **Life in Glastonbury**

By 1816, James Killam, who had come to South Glastonbury with his father, Lyman, and brother, Samuel, was prosperous enough to purchase from Luther Goodrich the home at what today is 202 Ferry Lane. It is known now as the Goodrich-Killam House. This house, which dates from about 1760, came with 1¾ acres of land on what was then called the Rocky Hill Ferry Highway. From 1826 to 1835, James Killam made nine additional purchases of adjacent land. As a result, his home stood on a contiguous 42-acre tract.

According to Killam family records, when James Killam bought the house, he, his brother, Samuel, and father, Lyman, brought their wives and all their worldly belongings by boat from Preston, Connecticut to settle in South Glastonbury. Like most other rural New England residents at that time, James Killam farmed and engaged in other businesses. In his case the business was making wooden planes and woodworking.

In 1866, his son James L. Killam posted a \$1,000 performance bond with the towns of Glastonbury and Rocky Hill obligating him to construct and operate a steam ferry for a ten-year period. This was on the famous Glastonbury-Rocky Hill ferry run, which is still in operation today and recognized as the longest continually running ferry service in the nation.

When the elder James Killam died in 1878, records show that in addition to his farm and other real estate holdings, his estate included a feldspar mine and a shop with a wood turning lathe. That lathe is said to have been used to turn spokes for wagon wheels. While there is no known record that James Killam ran a tavern, the Goodrich-Killam House apparently once served that purpose.

By engaging simultaneously in a number of enterprises, James Killam was a typical New Englander. Inhabited by such industrious people, it is no wonder that New England, during this period, became known for the outstanding enterprise of its inhabitants.

The peak period for the manufacture of Killam wooden planes in South Glastonbury was from about 1800 to 1825. Beginning in 1840, plane manufacturing companies began to replace family plane making shops. The elder James Killam passed away on May 24, 1878. The shop where the family made molding planes was destroyed by the 1936 flood. However, much of his property still exists in South Glastonbury, including the Hollister House, which the older James Killam had purchased for use by his relatives. It is the oldest house still standing in Glastonbury.

### **Killam Planes**

Although the Killams who made Killam planes and those who used them are long gone, many of the planes still exist. Glastonbury's Historical Society has several on display on the top floor of the Eastbury Barn at the Welles-SHIPMAN-WARD property, 972 Main Street, South Glastonbury. There is also an extensive collection on display at the Manchester Historical Society Museum in Manchester, Connecticut.

The standard text for identifying the trademarks of early plane makers is Pollak's A Guide to the Makers of American Wooden Planes. It lists the trademarks of James Killam and other 19th century plane makers.

To estimate when a particular plane was made, it is important to know that the name "Glastonbury," which sometimes appears on these planes, was officially changed from "Glastenbury" by a town vote in 1870. Trademarks also incorporated the Masi Treaty Shield of 1825. Its use was discontinued in 1871.

The planes on exhibit at the Manchester Historical Society Museum are marked "S. Killum" and were made by James Killam's brother, Samuel, in about 1840. We know this because these planes match the wedge profile and length (nine and ½ inches) of James Killam planes. From a Killam family history, we know that the name "S. Killum" for Samuel Killam was used on the planes made by the early Killams in Preston. It was 1/8 of an inch high by 13/32 of an inch long. Later the Killams used the "J. Killam" mark which was 5/32 of an inch high by 13/32 of an inch long. Although these planes have the older "S. Killam" mark, we know by their size and design that they were made later by James' brother, Samuel, using an embossed mark passed down from family members who had lived in Preston.

Additional information about the Killam trademarks and business, along with an example of one of their trademarks, is nearby.

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Typical of early 19th century craftsmen, James Killam and his family operated a plane making shop, creating planes required by shipbuilders and housewrights in the Glastonbury area. The shop produced at least 21 plane types in various sizes. For good reasons, the plane size was always stamped on the plane body's rear, while the maker's trademark was always embossed on the plane's front toe.

Carpenter tool chests of the period were traditionally organized with each molding plane standing on its toe, exposing its back so that the carpenter could see the plane size and its cutting configuration. Once the correct plane was located, it could be lifted out of the chest without disturbing the 50 or so other planes all being stored there in an organized way.

The fanciest of the Killam's five trademarks is shown below. These marks served to identify and advertise their products.

Planes made in the prolific Killam shop included hollows and rounds, complex molding planes, tongue and groove planes, and beading planes. To gain an appreciation for the capabilities of wooden planes, visit the Welles-SHIPMAN-WARD House to observe its architectural decorations that were shaped by hand using wooden planes. While there, you also can see some of the planes themselves and wood shaped using those planes, all in an exhibit on the top floor of the Eastbury Barn.

The Killam plane business grew rapidly with Glastonbury shipbuilding and peaked during the War of 1812. A few decades later, it began to suffer from competition associated with the industrial revolution. In about 1840, plane making moved from small shops to factories. By about 1855, metal planes were being patented by men like Leonard Bailey whose company was later acquired by the Stanley Company.