

Merrimack Mill History

This history is paraphrased and rewritten from a document originally authored by Mrs. Sarah Huff Fist, Merrimack Mill Company accountant for 47 years. Other sources for this history include photographs, interviews with mill employees, copies of "The Merrimacker" company newsletter, The Bradleyean school yearbook, and other documents in the Huntsville Public Library Archives.

1898

About two miles beyond Huntsville, along a winding dirt road leading west by way of the one bridge which spanned Pinhook Creek, lay the small suburban community of West Huntsville. Triana Pike passed south through this community and wound toward the town of Triana, some ten miles away on the Tennessee River. The West Huntsville area was home to a furniture factory that operated periodically and the West Huntsville Cotton Mill and Warehouses. Mr. Tracy W. Pratt, owner of the West Huntsville Cotton Mill was a man of vision and enterprise. He saw Huntsville as the ideal location for industrial investment – especially investments in textile enterprises – and he knew men in the east who had capital to invest. He had the creative imagination to visualize Huntsville – quiet little center of a cotton-raising area – as a thriving textile city, manufacturing the cotton into cloth. Mr. Pratt also had the courage and the wisdom to set about making his dream for Huntsville come true.

Mr. Pratt enjoyed traveling around Huntsville and its suburbs, looking for possible industrial sites. He knew that a textile mill would require a large tract of level land with plenty of access to water for powering the industrial plant. Within one mile of his own plant, he found two large plantations, a half-mile from Brahan Springs that he thought would be ideal locations for a cotton mill. In early 1898, Mr. Pratt heard that the Merrimack Manufacturing Company of Lowell, Massachusetts, was interested in locating a plant in the south. Mr. Pratt knew Merrimack Manufacturing to be one of the oldest and most well-established textile companies in the country and he wasted no time in writing to them

to describe the benefits of the West Huntsville/Brahan Springs tracts he had located. Merrimack officials immediately expressed interest in Huntsville and asked Mr. Pratt to secure a quote on a sales price from the owners of the two pieces of adjacent land. Once Mr. Pratt secured the sales deal with the two plantation owners, Merrimack Mills notified him that representatives would be arriving in Huntsville to inspect their prospective plant site promptly.

As luck would have it, the night before the Merrimack officials' arrival, the city suffered one of the worst rainstorms and flooding in its history. Mr. Pratt escorted the guests through the flooded streets of Huntsville to a plantation home where they could have the best view of the Brahan Springs land. The officials were said to have asked Mr. Pratt, "Did you think we wanted to locate our plant in the middle of a lake?" The entire Brahan Springs area was completely underwater and appeared to be a useless swamp. In spite of Mr. Pratt's assurances that a flood like this one had never happened in Huntsville before, the Merrimack officials left town in disgust, thinking their trip south had been a waste of their time.

Mr. Pratt refused to be deterred and set out on a campaign to convince the Merrimack Mills to take a second look at Huntsville. He secured letters from the city mayor, an Episcopal priest and a local judge, certifying that the recent extreme flooding in Huntsville had never occurred before in any of their lifetimes. Mr. Pratt took the train to Boston, where he presented himself at the Merrimack headquarters and begged for another visit. He was able to convince them to return, and on their second trip they found the acreage, the spring and the adjoining plantations to be just what Mr. Pratt had described.

On February 22, 1899, "The Huntsville Weekly Democrat" reported that "there will soon be erected by the Merrimack Manufacturing Company of Lowell, Massachusetts, on the Fennell place, an immense cotton factory." The Huntsville factory would make "gray cloth", or cloth that is not dyed. The cloth manufactured in Huntsville would be subsequently shipped by train to Rock Island, South Carolina, where Merrimack Mills' dye plant was located. The final land sale included tracts of land from several owners totally 1,385 acres.

July 4, 1899, was an exciting day for Huntsville. The ground breaking for Merrimack Mills was held in West Huntsville at the same time that ground was being broken around the square for a streetcar line. The streetcar lines, which were to operate in town and serve the three manufacturing plants in the suburbs, promised to be a great convenience to Huntsville's citizens. Huntsville was on the cusp of a period of tremendous expansion and growth.

At about the same time as the construction of the mill began, work was begun by the Merrimack Mill Company on houses for its employees. Merrimack Mills planned to recruit most of their employees from other towns and out-laying areas and knew that housing would entice a large work force. Most of these first houses were two-story, two-family dwellings, with five or six rooms to the side. Houses were set on lots large enough to allow space for outbuildings for the stabling of cows or horses, and the Mill also provided a pasture (located where Milton Frank Stadium now stands) for employees' cattle to graze on. Near the pasture was a pigpen, for those employees who could afford to have a hog. Rent for the village houses was \$.50 - \$.75 per week, depending on the size of the house, and was deducted directly from the worker's pay. Toilet paper was delivered once a week by the mill to each village house's outhouse. The Mill provided a communal garden area as well, so that employees could grow their own produce.

On January 6, 1900, "The Republican" carried the following enthusiastic and far-sighted editorial:

"As the Merrimack Mills nears completion, the attention of the public is attracted to West Huntsville, and it appears that there will soon be a lively little town out that way. Last week, we made notice of the fact that a gentleman had begun the erection of a building to locate a steam bakery. There is also good prospects of locating a bank, meat market, grocery, and a general store. All of this shows that our recent prediction that West Huntsville was going to be one of the best suburbs to our city is getting more prominent every day. We would advise investors to keep their eye on West Huntsville."

When the mill began operations on July 9, 1900, there were approximately 60 houses completed and occupied by some of the 750 initial mill employees. The mill was operated by steam, and required a four man boiler crew to feed coal into the boiler at all times. A typical shift was from 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. and until World War I, wages were paid in gold coins. Prior to the mandatory school law passage, children were allowed to work in the mill as spinners or sweepers. Children were given their own wooden boxes to stand on so that they could reach the spinning machines. Initial regulations on mandatory school only required children to attend class six weeks a year. Until the Child Labor Law was placed into effect, children were allowed to work in the mill year round, reporting for their shift at the end of their school day during their required six weeks of class time. The many windows in the mill were designed to allow as much light as possible into the building. The only additional lighting was provided by dim, oil burning lamps. Cotton was delivered to the plant by drays pulled by two mules.

Almost immediately after opening their first mill, Merrimack Mills began preparations for the construction of a second mill. While the first announcement of a second mill appeared in "The Republican" on August 25, 1900, it was not until February 25, 1903, that construction actually

began. During this three year period, Huntsville's growth continued, with more than 500 new homes built in the area and the population increasing to an estimated 8,000. Mr. Pratt's dream of Huntsville becoming the center of the textile industry in the south had been realized.

According to an article in a 1901 edition of "The Republican"...

"This city has won such fame in handling the new cotton mills that the eastern capitalists who desire such investments first inquire if they can be accommodated with a site here before maturing their plans for organization. Several more mill enterprises are seeking sites in and around Huntsville and it is likely they can get what they are looking for without going further".

From 1900 until 1913, there were several businesses established in the Merrimack Mill Village. The first company store was opened in 1902 in an existing wood frame building, and in 1913 the company acquired the frame building for their store that would later become Merrimack Hall. The downstairs of this building was home to the company store and the upstairs was used as a classroom for the mill employees' children to attend their mandatory six weeks of school per year. There was also a bicycle shop, a photographic studio and two barbershops located in the village during this time.

On June 24, 1905, Joe Bradley became the agent for Merrimack Mills and began several initiatives that improved the quality of life for the mill workers and the amenities of the mill village. One of his first projects was the construction of a small hospital with a resident physician and two nurses. According to the 1923, edition of the Bradleyean (Joe Bradley School's yearbook), "The Merrimack Hospital was established by Mr. Joe J. Bradley for the benefit of the employees of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company. No one but those who are employed by the company is admitted into the hospital. The hospital is equipped and maintained by the company. A minimum charge is made for the use of the operating room and for board, but all dressings are done free of charge. An up-to-date operating room was built in 1921 and a high class electric sterilizer was installed with other necessary fixtures and conveniences. There are accommodations for four patients. Two nurses are employed by the company, who have charge of the hospital and who visit the mill employees and their families to advise and help them in any way they can. The nurses not only look after employees, but also the welfare of the school children."

Mr. Bradley also established a landscaping and beautification program for the mill grounds and for the community proper and in 1914, began construction of the school named in his honor, Joe Bradley School. During 1920, Merrimack Mills made the change from steam power to electricity and started a 30,000 square foot expansion of mill #1. That year the mill also constructed sidewalks, curbs, gutters and a sanitary sewer system throughout the village. In 1922, all the mill village houses were wired for electricity and by 1925 there were 279 homes in the Merrimack Mill Village.

On September 18, 1920, the company began construction of Merrimack Hall, incorporating the existing wood frame building housing the company store into its construction. When it opened, Merrimack Hall's 25,000 square feet housed a gymnasium, two community rooms, the company store, the company drug store, a café and a barbershop. The company store was run for many years by a man named Searcey McClure and many residents of the village referred to the store as Searcey's. The company store also included a meat market, where meat was cut to the buyer's specifications. On Fridays, when pay was distributed to the workers, their first stop was Searcey's, where they could pay their bill for the week. Merrimack Hall became the central hub of the village, providing a place for socialization and recreation to all of the village's residents.

The 1922 edition of the Bradleyean reported, "Merrimack Hall is a beautiful work of architecture that has filled a long felt need in Merrimack. On the first floor are to be found two mercantile stores, a barber shop, a meat market and a modern café. The second story contains places of recreation including a gymnasium, library, scout meeting room, lodge room and auditorium. The spacious gymnasium, modern in every respect, is in constant use."

The gymnasium was used during the day for the physical education classes for the students at Joe Bradley School, and many recreational basketball leagues played in the gym in the evenings. There were many organizations who called Merrimack Hall their home, such as the Woodmen of the World, The Boys Scouts, The Girl Scouts, the Home Demonstration Club, the Allied Youth Club and others.

Originally, Merrimack Hall's gymnasium housed a black box stage, where many productions and programs were held. In 1928, Joe Bradley School was expanded to include a large auditorium, and sometime after that the stage was removed from Merrimack Hall to enlarge the gymnasium. Two productions at Merrimack Hall are documented in photographs and reviews in the Bradleyean – 1921's production of "Cinderella in Fairyland" and 1923's production of "The Gypsy Rover". Both of these productions included large casts, elaborate costumes and sets and musical numbers.

If the 1920's were years of growth, expansion and improvement in Merrimack Village, the 1930's were years of challenge, difficulty and sacrifice. As the Great Depression took hold of the country, workers at the mill struggled to live on an average wage of \$3.00 a week. There were at least half a dozen strikes by the workers and the mill was closed by a strike from late 1937 throughout the entire year of 1938. Families helped each other by sharing what little resources they had with their neighbors. When the mill was working, conditions for the workers were difficult and dangerous. The plant was insufferably hot in the spring and summer, visibility was limited by great clouds of lint in the air, and the work itself was grinding manual labor.

Village residents found relief from the constant demands of their hard life in the social and community activities offered by Merrimack Hall. Basketball games were held at Merrimack Hall at least three nights a week, with both boys and girls playing, and movies were shown in one of the meeting rooms twice a week. The meeting room on the north side of Merrimack Hall was designated for men over the age of 16, and was outfitted with pool tables, dominoes and other types of activities. The south meeting room was used for Scout troop activities, lectures and other meetings. There were many community fairs held in Merrimack Hall's gymnasium, where village residents brought their home-made items to sell or share. Dances were held in the gymnasium regularly, with different themes adding variety and excitement to the evenings. Many village residents recall that when the whistle blew, ending your Friday shift, they collected their pay and went directly to Merrimack Hall, to pay their bill for the week. Then they went home to have supper and clean up so they could head back to Merrimack Hall for the evening's activities.

As early as 1903, the mill sponsored a baseball team, and attending these games was a must for village residents. The baseball field, located across the street from Merrimack Hall, was home to games for the mill's team, as well as the Joe Bradley School team and youth teams. Joe Bradley School's football team, organized in 1921, was closely followed by mill residents as well. One of the most recounted sports events at Joe Bradley School was its defeat over cross-town rival Huntsville High School in 1947, in front of a crowd of 6,000 spectators at Goldsmith-Schiffman Field. This was the only time in the school's history that it defeated Huntsville High School.

By 1942, the mills were operating at top output, producing cloth that was used to make garments for the military. Some time before 1945, rumors began to circulate that the Merrimack Mill Company would either sell or liquidate its Huntsville plant. During the War, most of the mill's production had gone to supplying textiles for the armed forces. Peace-time production dropped to record low numbers, the age of the mill was starting to show, and the machinery was in need of many repairs which would require an immense amount of capital investment to bring the mill back to a competitive position. It was no surprise when, on November 25, 1945, it was announced that M. Lowenstein and Company of New York City had purchased the Merrimack Mill Company's plants. The equipment at the plant at the time included 110,000 spinning spindles and 2,500 Draper automatic looms. The mills had a normal production capacity of 50,000,000 yards of print cloth per year. At the time of the sale, Merrimack Mills employed "800-odd" employees, and M. Lowenstein and Company announced its plans to increase the workforce to about 1,100.

January 13, 1946, was the last day of operation in Huntsville by the Merrimack Mill Company. On January 14, 1946, employees entered the plant gates under a banner bearing the words "Welcome To The Huntsville Manufacturing Company." M. Lowenstein and Company immediately set out on a \$1,700,000 renovation of the mills, with a long range plan for the investment of many millions more to renovate and expand the operations. By the end of 1946, Huntsville Manufacturing Company had increased the operation of the mill from one and one-half shifts to three full shifts a day, with approximately 1500 employees. In September 1947, M. Lowenstein and Company was judged by the Financial World Annual Report Survey as "Best in the Textile Industry" and received the "Oscar of Industry" trophy.

In 1947, Merrimack Hall was "redecorated, with new lights and additional seats added to the gymnasium", according to the Bradleean. Also in 1947, a program called "Teen Canteen" was started in the south meeting room at Merrimack Hall which included weekly dances and refreshments for teenagers. Sometime in the 1940's, the showing of movies moved to the school auditorium, followed by dances at Merrimack Hall. In 1940, Joe Bradley School began publishing "The Merrimacker", a school newsletter that was provided to all village residents and included information about all the activities in the community as well as the "happenings" at Merrimack Hall. The name of the newsletter was changed to "The Huntsville Parker" in 1946. Some time in the 1940's, four bowling lanes were added to the "men's only" room at Merrimack Hall and a removable boxing ring was added to the gymnasium, increasing the variety of activities at Merrimack Hall.

In 1949, Huntsville Manufacturing Company began selling 269 of the village houses to its employees. Prices for the houses ranged from \$1,725.00 for a three room house, to \$4,900.00 for a 12 room house. Terms of the sales included a 10% down payment, monthly payments, and payment of all closing costs by the mill.

Many renovations and expansions continued into the 1950's, including the construction of a three-story, air-conditioned building connecting mill #1 and mill #2, that was used to house one of the finest yarn preparation departments existing at the time in any modern mill. The basement of mill #1 was excavated, air-conditioned, and fitted 420 new Draper looms. By 1955, both mills had been completely modernized, air-conditioned and renovated, and at its height of production, Huntsville Manufacturing Company employed 1,600 workers who worked three shifts, six days a week, manning 3,437 looms, making it the largest textile mill in the southeast. The operation refined 43,000 bales of cotton per year, and produced 95,000,000 yards of cloth annually.

As the mill expanded and modernized, so did the mill village and Merrimack Hall. From 1949 until 1955, more than half of the village houses, now owned by mill employees, had been

renovated and remodeled. The gym at Merrimack Hall was outfitted with a new scoreboard, the floors were refinished, and the bleachers, which had been installed in 1946, were rebuilt in 1950. Basketball continued to be played at Merrimack Hall about four nights a week, and the Teen Canteen continued to be the central gathering spot for the neighborhood young people. Various businesses occupied the lower floor of Merrimack Hall over the years, all of which were patronized by the residents of the mill village. Halloween parties, Spring Flings, community fairs and other social events were held in Merrimack Hall's gym and meeting spaces throughout the 1950's.

In 1951, the streets in the mill village were paved for the first time in its history. The county had graded and graveled the streets many times, but had never before paved them. In 1950, Huntsville Manufacturing Company deeded its water and sewage distribution systems to the city of Huntsville. On Friday, November 30, 1951, Huntsville Manufacturing Company deeded Joe Bradley School and all of its facilities and assets to the Madison County School System. Beginning in 1952, high school students in the mill village were zoned to Butler High School, with Joe Bradley School housing grades 1-8. Joe Bradley School continued to operate until the late 1970's when the school was torn down.

By the early 1980's, the textile industry began to dwindle in parts of the United States, with industry officials blaming the downturn on less expensive foreign imports. Governmental regulations and restrictions placed on textile industries in the late 1970's and early 1980's accounted for huge capital improvements and expenditures, which put companies in the red for many years.

In 1988, M. Lowenstein and Company sold Huntsville Manufacturing Company to Springs Industries. In 1989, Springs Industries announced the closing of the Huntsville plant. After nearly 100 years of operation, the Merrimack Mills were demolished in 1992. Today, the mill village houses and Merrimack Hall are all that remain of this important part of Huntsville's history.