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## Merrow, Connecticut

Downtown Merrow pictured in 1910



Travel down Route 32 from Willimantic towards Willington and you will pass through Merrow. Where? Gilbert O. Southwick, writing in 1868, answered that question. Southwick explained that Mansfield consisted of numerous, thriving manufacturing villages, but few had heard of Merrow, "about equi-distant from Stafford to the north and Willimantic to the south."

Southwick's interviews with local residents revealed that no one could recall a village there prior to 1810. In that year two brothers, Joseph and William Perry from East Hartford built a mill to manufacture gun powder. It began production in 1811, and business grew with the outbreak of the 1812 war. A small unnamed community developed around the powder mill. The Perrys sold it to Joseph M. Merrow of East Hartford, and the village became known as Merrow. In the fall of 1826, an explosion partly destroyed the mill, killing a workman called Peter White. Merrow rebuilt and expanded, but another explosion on September 26, 1830 killed a worker called Allen Herrick, and Merrow decided to close the business.

Merrow left for East Hartford, but returned several years later and rebuilt the mill to manufacture knitted stockings. The company of J. M. Merrow and Son commenced in 1838. This is considered to be the first attempt to manufacture knitted stockings in America. Joseph M. Merrow died in 1843, but his son Joseph B. Merrow went into partnership with John Pitkin. Merrow & Pitkin became famous for the high quality of their woolen ladies undershirts and drawers.

During 1848 and 1849, the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad was constructed, and went through the center of the small community. No longer did Merrow and Pitkin have to haul their goods 10 miles to Bolton depot with teams of horses to meet the steam trains. A railroad depot and post office was built, and Merrow was on the map. In 1857, the Merrow Manufacturing Company was formed, and a new industry arrived in the village. The Keeney brothers manufactured gas for illumination, and a gasometer fed the mill and the homes in the village. In 1861, the *Willimantic Journal* reported a fire in the Merrow stockinet factory which caused \$20,000 worth of damages. "The fire took from an open lamp which was being used to light the gas in the establishment."

In 1862, an employee of the knitting company, Leander Otis, invented a new machine to knit undershirts. Otis went on to Hartford where he made a fortune from his invention.

In 1863, the Merrow Manufacturing Company became Merrow and Millard, and extensions were made to the mill, making it into, "a spacious and commodious building, 114 X 42." The company then built a small grist mill, and reduced their overheads. Up until that time, the company had been purchasing grain in New York, and shipping at great expense to the village. A schoolhouse was also built, along with a saw mill which made a great profit supplying lumber to the railroad company. In 1867, Merrow and Millard had manufactured 27,000 pairs of knitted stocks in 1867, and more than a dozen trains passed daily through the village.

Southwick's account ends in 1868. A fire destroyed the stockinet factory in June, 1887. The *Willimantic Chronicle* reported that this was the third fire at Merrow since knitted goods were introduced. The insurance was insufficient, and J. B. Merrow & Sons decided not to rebuild. The company auctioned off all the household goods from the boarding house the following October, and relocated to Norwich, leaving M. Millard's lumber business as the sole operating company in the village.