

— HISTORY —

Pipe organ firm provided a unique industry

Erastus McCollum, the great-grandson of a Scottish immigrant, was born in Manchester, and removed to Rockville 1835, where he would establish a manufactory to build church organs. He was trained as a carpenter, and was employed in the local mills as a millwright.

Shortly afterwards he began to manufacture parts for church organs in his workshop with his brothers Julius and Henry. The McCollums were later subcontracted by the famous Hook and Hastings organ building company of Boston, and built organs for churches across the state, including one for the Rockville Congregational Church in 1848.

In 1868 the McCollum brothers left the employ of Hook and Hastings, and were hired by an organ building company at Westfield, Mass. When that company's factory burned down in 1871, Julius and Henry left and worked for Hook and Hastings at Boston, and Erastus and his son Fenelon McCollum organized a workshop at Merrow in 1873.

Fenelon was born in Rockville in 1841, and shortly after graduating from Rockville High School, he became Rockville's assistant postmaster, a position he held through the Civil War. He then went into the furniture business, before joining his father and uncles in the organ works at Westfield, where he was hired as a cabinetmaker.

In 1874, Fenelon and his brother Henry began to manufacture wooden organ pipes, pedals and actions in the Merrow workshop. Two years later they moved to a section of the Brigham paper mill at Mansfield Depot, and organized the company known as the Mansfield Organ Pipe Works.

Fenelon McCollum's organ parts were of the highest quality, and were in demand by organ builders across the county. In



Tom
Beardsley

1881 he took over all the space in the old paper mill, and installed new machinery. McCollum rented the entire mill from the owners of the Eagleville cotton mill, and in 1889 purchased the site along with the water privileges and the worker tenements. Three years later Fenelon McCollum demolished the old mill, and built a four-story factory. However, this burned down in 1896, but was quickly rebuilt, and then was considered to be the best-equipped shop in the nation for manufacturing organ pipes.

McCollum purchased about 400,000 feet annually of the best Michigan pinewood to manufacture his organ pipes, pedals and actions. A 1900 promotional pamphlet explained that the company was located close to the railroad, with a factory driven by a never-ending source of waterpower from the Willimantic River. The entire plant consisted of the factory, a sawmill, storehouses and tenements, with low rents. They carried 10,000 pipes in stock, which were dressed in orange shellac. "Being the largest manufacturers

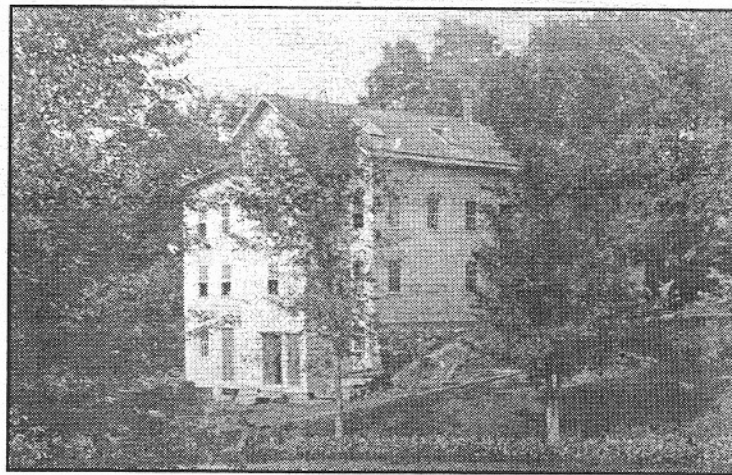
of wood pipes, we are enabled to supply the best of work at a lower price than any organ builder can make them."

Fenelon McCollum was also an inventor and patentee and made special machinery for some of the work. Among his inventions was a pipe foot for organs, which is still widely used on Estey organs.

The skills needed to repair cotton machinery were transferred to

organ building and in the long term, provided Mansfield with a unique industry, one that like the region's cotton mills also prospered because of the waterpower of the Willimantic River, and the proximity of the railroad.

The company was eventually taken over by the Organ Supply Co. of Erie, Pa., in 1979, but its location on the Willimantic River can still be detected.



The Mansfield Organ Pipe Factory pictured, circa 1910. Picture courtesy of Francois J. Gamache.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.