

— HISTORY —

Holland silk mills spun their way into local history

During the Civil War, two Mansfield-based silk manufacturers, Goodrich and James Holland, relocated to nearby Willimantic and organized the Holland Manufacturing Co. The brothers spun high quality silk thread, which won several prizes at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia. The Holland silk mills stood on the junction of Valley and Church streets, and the company continued manufacturing silk thread in the city until 1933, when it relocated to Pennsylvania. The historic mills were demolished in 1940, and shortly afterwards the A&P supermarket chain built a store on the site of the company's east mill.

The Holland silk mills are mostly forgotten today, but in May 1928 America's most renowned automobile manufacturer came incognito to Willimantic in order to examine some historic machinery, which he intended to buy for his industrial museum at Dearborn, Mich.

One of the criticisms aimed at 19th century New England manu-

facturers was that they failed to invest in new technology, which in the long term, it is argued, was one reason why the textile industry relocated to the South. Indeed, ancient machinery could be found across Willimantic during the 1920s.

In 1928 the Holland Manufacturing Co. was still operating a 55 year-old steam engine. The Willimantic-based silk company had purchased this historic C. H. Brown, four-valve, single cylinder engine, replete with a 12-foot flywheel, in 1877 to power its new Edison electric lights.

Thomas Edison had used the Brown steam engine, manufactured at Fitchburg, Mass., in experiments to drive his dynamos at his machine shop at Schenectady, N. Y. He had sold the engine, generator and lights as a package to the enterprising



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Holland silk company, and Edison's old friend, Henry Ford was delighted that he found the historic machine, which was believed lost.

The Holland Manufacturing Co.'s manager, Edward Kenney, gave Ford and his party of four a tour of the two mills flanking Church Street, and the veteran automobile manufacturer was surprised to see that the Willimantic company was also still using an Edison electric generator, manufactured in 1888, in its east mill. When installed, this generator had lit 150 Edison lights, each of 16-candle power. Ford put in a bid for it, and the silk company accepted the offer.

Henry Ford announced that the Brown steam engine, the earliest example of a steam engine driving an electric generator, would go on exhibit, but the historic generator he'd surprisingly found would be used to provide lighting in one of the Dearborn museum buildings. This generator had been one of the earliest of its type manufactured by Edison, and was identi-

fied by Ford from a number engraved onto the machine.

The Edison generator was located in the east mill, and was easily removed, but the Willimantic silk thread manufacturers had to demolish a wall in their west mill to remove the Brown steam engine — but the company replaced it with a state-of-the-art steam engine, an Ames 320-horse power, four cylinder vertical engine.

Whilst touring the Church Street mills, Henry Ford was introduced to the silk company's engineer, Charles Weldon, and discovered in conversation that Weldon owned a 100 year-old

sewing machine, named "The America," but he refused to sell it to the famous automobile maker. Nevertheless, Ford was not to be discouraged, and before leaving Willimantic he visited the Stearns Harness Co. at 636 Main Street, to inquire about an ancient machine shop planer being used by the company, but on arrival the company's proprietor, Mary L. Stearns told Ford that she had recently broken it up, and burned it.

Despite these disappointments during his Willimantic visit, Ford had acquired two important artifacts from America's early industrial revolution.



The Holland Manufacturing Co.'s silk mills, 1876.

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