

The village of Merrow is in the extreme northwestern part of the Town of Mansfield. The area had remained entirely agricultural for over one hundred years since first settled, until 1810. There were some mounds marking Indian settlements which once could be located, but they have long since disappeared.

The long narrow building known in the village as "the boarding house" is not the first building to serve that purpose. William Perry's boarding house no longer stands. We must make a guess, based on the evidence at hand, as to the approximate date of this second building. Judging by its style, with the distinguishing feature of the wide perpendicular corner boards characteristic of the Greek Revival period in architecture, it is safe to say that it does not date much before the 1840s. Then, too, in 1838 when stockings were being knitted on small hand machines, there could not have been many resident employees. But between 1838 and 1857, and especially after 1843, new personnel had been added to the company, a re-organization and expansion program had been initiated, and the name had been changed. The company now began the production of woolen underclothing and ladies' woolen hose. Logically, additional help must have been needed. Girls and women making up the <sup>greater proportion</sup> of the early mill workers, most of them must have been recruited from distances beyond ~~the village~~ the village. Putting these facts together, therefore, a fairly close guess is that the building dates from the middle 1840s.

The south end contained the kitchen and livingroom of the boarding house "family." Upstairs, a hall ran the whole length, with bedrooms on either side just large enough for a bed, bureau and one chair. The building now houses two families and the interior has been suitably rearranged for apartments.

The establishment of a manufactory here was first initiated by two brothers, Joseph and William Perry, then residents of East Hartford. They were no doubt influenced by the natural advantages surrounding the place, water privilege being excellent. Work was begun in the fall of 1810 and by

spring a ditch had been completed, a dam built, and construction had begun on a mill suited to their enterprise -- the making of gunpowder. The complete complex consisted of four mill buildings: the grinding mill, the boiling room for preparation of the composition, the drying room, and the storehouse or magazine. A Mr. Eliakim Jones, local resident, served four years as superintendent. He bought the house on the corner of Route 32 and the (then) Tolland Turnpike in 1813 and lived there for 56 years, finally selling it to Charles W. Tilden. It remained in the Tilden family for 106 years. The original house was still in use in 1919, at which time it formed an ell at right angles to the newer building presently standing. Some time after 1942 the ell, which had fallen into disrepair, was completely demolished.

Since this country was at war with England, gunpowder was in great demand, and the mills were kept running day and night in spite of the difficulty of obtaining salt petre and the high price demanded. For several years the business thrived and powder sold rapidly. Mr. Levi Turner manufactured the powder kegs for the company and William Perry boarded the help in a house built for this purpose, but no longer standing.

On November 7, 1826 an explosion occurred, after which reorganization became necessary. Mr. Joseph M. Merrow of East Hartford, because of business connections, then assumed command and business again became brisk. Another mill was built and in about four years, in September 1830, another explosion occurred which ended the manufacture of gunpowder in this village. The gunpowder was made under U. S. Patent signed by James Monroe, President, and John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State at the time.

Mr. Merrow tried again to set up a manufactory in Hartford, but he was unsuccessful. He returned to the village and took up residence in the "Merrow homestead." This house, now covered with green shingle siding, is located just south of the Merrow post office and store, on a long driveway which leads off the road to Coventry and stands between the Railroad tracks and Route 32.

Mr. Merrow soon conceived the idea of a new business -- knitting stockings on a small hand machine. In 1838 he and his son Joseph B. formed a partnership under the name of J. M. MERROW & SON, thus establishing the first knitting mill in the United States. It continued until the father's death in 1843.

Subsequently, John O. Pitkin, Chauncey and Milton Keeney and Milo Millard, a brother-in-law of the younger Joseph B. Merrow, became members of the firm and the name became PITKIN, MERROW & COMPANY. In 1857 John O. retired and Horace Pitkin filled his place, the company name now becoming MERROW MANUFACTURING COMPANY, and the products were woolen underclothing and ladies' woolen hose.

About this time the Keeney brothers introduced a new innovation -- the manufacture of gas for illuminating purposes. The gas was conveyed to the factory, store and boarding house where it was used until the introduction of kerosene, a cheaper product which soon superseded the gas.

In February 1861 when the company was again doing an enormous business, the mill burned to the ground, the fire originating in the carding room. The mill was rebuilt and received immense orders for soldiers' stockings during the Civil War.

In 1863, J. B. Merrow and Milo Millard purchased the entire property and continued business under the name of MERROW & MILLARD. Previous to this change, a new machine for the manufacture of undershirts had been introduced, knitting eight threads at once. The machine necessitated new buildings, owing to the increase in demand and capacity. The company now began to work up 100,000 pounds of stock annually, manufacturing therefrom upwards of 25,000 pairs of stockings, besides a large quantity of cardigan jackets. Business thus continued until the night of December 2, 1870 when the entire complex with all the machinery was entirely destroyed by fire. The score: two explosions and two fires in less than half a century. Manufacturing activity became dormant here for a few years after these misfortunes.

With admirable persistency, in the face of great financial loss, Milo Millard put up a saw mill, to which the railroad company extended a switch. This proved a decided advantage to the business, which produced mainly ship timber.

In the year 1875 another mill was built, and a new company formed by Joseph B. Merrow and his two sons, Joseph M. and Joseph W. under the name of J. B. MERROW & SONS, and the manufacture of hosiery resumed. These mills -- the stockinette mills -- were burned in 1886. At last the village settled down sadly and reluctantly to contemplate its future.

ANNE M. GAUGER

~~FROM HER OWN RESEARCH~~  
(BASED ON RESEARCH  
DONE BY ALICE BUMPUS)