

Manchester Historical Society

www.manchesterhistory.org 860-647-9983

Forest Street Neighborhood Walk

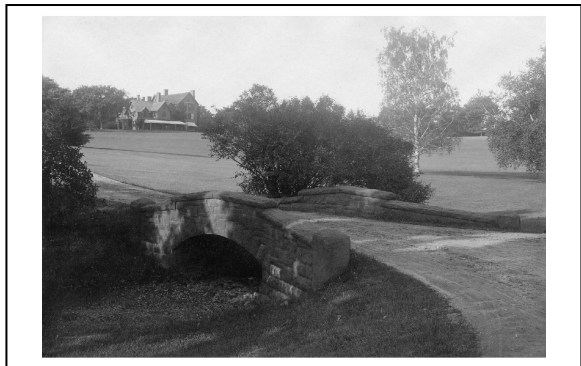
By Susan Barlow, Manchester Historical Society, Notes January 1, 2015

This walking tour traces a large rectangle, and encompasses illustrations of societal and cultural changes. For example, the 1785 Cheney Homestead once housed George and Electa Cheney and their family, whose occupations there were farming and operating a water-powered gristmill. Today, the house overlooks I-384, and farming has nearly disappeared from Manchester.

Five of George and Electa's sons founded the world-famous Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company, a dramatic example of the changes brought about with the Industrial Revolution. Cheney Brothers went on to become Manchester's largest employer. Thousands of immigrants and native-born worked at Cheney's their whole careers. The mills reached their apex in the 1920s, when synthetics and other changes in the textile industry and tariff policy spelled the beginning of the end of the Cheney era in Manchester. Today, only a very rare New England town has mill employees. Manufacturing has moved elsewhere. The huge Cheney mills now house apartments and small businesses.

Some of the area's mansions have been torn down or converted to apartments, group homes, or other enterprises, but many continue to serve as single-family homes. "Mansion Zoning" prohibits multiple-family housing and other building development on the Great Lawn.

On Forest Street, the St. James Apartments, dating from 1942, illustrate another change for Manchester, as it became a residential hub for defense-industry workers in World War II. The silk mills provided space for Pioneer Parachute beginning in the 1930s. At the peak of WWII parachute production, thousands worked on three shifts around the clock.



1903 View of Knight Dexter Cheney House and Sandstone Bridge

Cheney Hall represents a dramatic example of riches to rags to riches. Built in 1866, the Hall hosted theatrical touring companies and prominent speakers of the day: Horace Greeley, Presidents Cleveland and Taft, Susan B. Anthony, Henry Ward Beecher. For silk shows at the Hall, businessmen came in from New York and Boston on special railroad cars. The silk industry declined, the Hall became a fabric salesroom in 1925, and closed its doors in 1976. Pigeons roosted there, the plumbing was a disaster, and logic would have argued for its demolition. But, in 1978, Cheney Hall was added to the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior. In 1991, an extensive restoration was completed. Today, theatrical and musical groups play Cheney Hall, and the town and region benefit from having an accessible cultural center close to home.

The Manchester Historical Society has created a History Center from the former Cheney Brothers machine shop at the corner of Forest and Pine Streets. As our work progresses, we will have another historic treasure of which Manchester and the region can be proud.

Farming to weaving. Silk to synthetics. Boom to bust. Mills to apartments. Change is a constant. But we must be careful that change does not include destroying our historic resources.

Sources of information about local history and events: See maps, photos, and stories about Manchester at www.manchester.org. Our local history videos are available at Manchester's libraries and for sale through the Historical Society. Although out of print, copies of these two books are available at Town libraries, at the Manchester Historical Society, and occasionally in used book stores or online: *History of Manchester, Connecticut*, by Mathias Spiess and Percy W. Bidwell, published 1924, Centennial Committee of the Town of Manchester; *A New England Pattern, the History of Manchester, Connecticut*, by William E. Buckley, published 1973, Pequot Press. The Spiess & Bidwell history is available on our web site www.manchesterhistory.org under Vintage Reprints. Learn more about historic Cheney Hall at <http://cheneyhall.org>