

THE SOUTH MANCHESTER NEWS

Friday, April 2, 1897

RALPH CHENEY PASSES AWAY

Ralph Cheney, the last but one of the famous Cheney Brothers, entered into rest at the home of his son, Richard O. Cheney, last Friday afternoon, after a long and faithful stewardship. He had been failing through the infirmities of old age for several months, but the end came unexpectedly. He had a rush of blood to the head Tuesday but rallied quickly. Friday, soon after dinner, there came a repetition of the attack and from this he did not rally. Up to a little over a year ago Mr. Cheney had been vigorous and in the full possession of his faculties, but for a year or more he has required constant attention. He had reached the ripe old age of 91 years 2 months and 13 days.

Ralph Cheney was the fourth son of George Cheney and was born in Manchester January 13, 1806. His other brothers were George Wells, John, Charles, Seth Wells, Ward, Rush and Frank. He had one sister, Electa, widow of the Hon. Richard Goodman of Lenox, Mass. Of these only Frank and Mrs. Goodman survive.

Mr. Cheney's death removes a man who has been identified with Manchester's life and growth more closely than almost any other man of his generation. His grandfather, Timothy Cheney, removed from the Center to the house now known of the "Cheney homestead" in the last century. He died in 1795 and George Cheney, father of the famous Cheney Brothers, became the owner of this property.

Ralph Cheney was the first of the Cheney Brothers to engage in the manufacture of silk, and he and his brothers became interested in experimental silk culture, and in March 1836, they built a small mill on the site of what is now known as the "old mill" and began the manufacture of sewing silk in a small way, it being Ralph's custom to go by stage to Boston with each case of silk as soon as made and dispose of it.

When the craze known as the morus multicaulis speculation came over the country, four of the brothers, Ward, Frank, Charles and Rush, became interested in it and with many others sank a good deal of money. Charles carried on his experiments on his farm near Cincinnati, and the other three went to Burlington, N.J. In 1841 the collapse came and the brothers came back and reopened the Mt. Nebo mill, which they had deserted. They made sewing silk from imported raw cocoons and meantime devoted ten years of hard labor experimenting, studying both at home and abroad, and acquiring a full knowledge of the business. In 1854 the corporation of Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company was formed with a capital of \$1,000,000. At the same time they were obliged to build the Hartford mill to take advantage of the larger labor market. The next year they began the work devised by themselves of making spun silk from pierced cocoons and other materials which had been heretofore considered waste.

The growth of the industry has been steady and great. From the little Mt. Nebo mill, employing about half a dozen hands, the plant has come to include the "old mill", which grew up around the



Ralph Cheney's obit in the *South Manchester News*.

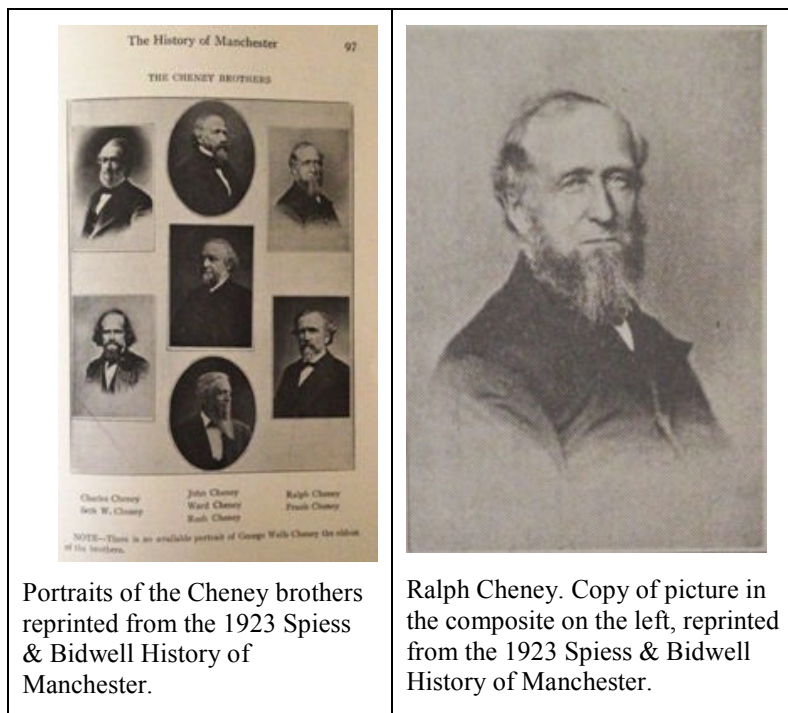
site of the original; the “new mill” built in 1871, and the group of three mills seven times larger than their predecessors, just north of the “new mill,” and there are nearly 3,000 hands employed in these mills.

Ralph Cheney lived in a cottage near the present site of Frank Cheney’s house, and carried on a small farm. He went West in 1855 and engaged in the real estate business, where he remained until 1858, when he closed it out, returning to South Manchester and again became a member of the firm of Cheney Brothers, those three years being the only period that he had been out of the silk business. He remained one of the directors of the corporation until about five years ago and devoted most of his attention to managing the outside work of the company. He resigned his position as director, to his son, Richard O. Cheney, about five years ago, and at the same time resigned as a director in the Mercantile National Bank and in the Plimpton Manufacturing Company, both of Hartford.

In early life he married Jerusha Goodwin. She has been dead about twenty eight years. Richard O. Cheney is his only son.

Mr. Cheney was the oldest member of the Manchester Lodge, F. and A. M., and was one of the oldest Masons in the state. He had held many positions of trust in town. He served as town clerk for several years soon after the incorporation of the town and was the first judge of probate for this district, being succeeded by Judge David S. Calhoun. He was democratic senator for this district in 1852.

The funeral was held at the home of his son, Sunday afternoon at 3 o’clock, Rev. Thomas Simms, pastor of the Center Congregational church, officiating. Burial was in the East cemetery. Although the funeral was bereft of display, or pomp, or ceremony, still it was not by any means private, nor was it intended so to be, notices to the contrary notwithstanding.



Portraits of the Cheney brothers reprinted from the 1923 Spiess & Bidwell History of Manchester.

Ralph Cheney. Copy of picture in the composite on the left, reprinted from the 1923 Spiess & Bidwell History of Manchester.