

## Horace J. Wickham Manchester Inventor

By Dave Smith

*First of a series of occasional articles on Manchester men who had great inventive talent and whose genius had both local and national impact.*

Horace John Wickham was born in Glastonbury in 1836 and moved to Manchester at the age of 14. As a boy he had an innate mechanical ingenuity. He was happiest when using his mechanical abilities, including making miniature water wheels and testing them in the brook on his father's farm. At the age of 17 he became an apprentice machinist in the making of clocks in Bristol. He was a quick study and mastered the trade of machinist by the age of twenty. He then went to New Haven and was employed at the Whitney Gun factory, where he remained for most of the Civil War. In 1864 he joined the United States Arsenal in Springfield as master machinist. After the war, the need for rifles declined and Wickham returned to Manchester.

Wickham's inventive genius became evident with his first patent issued in 1868. It was for a jack for knitting needles. His next patent was issued in May 1869 for a match box, a very simple device for storing matches. In 1871 he received a patent for an improvement in pencil holders, an early mechanical pencil.

In 1869 Wickham joined the Plimpton Manufacturing Co. in Hartford, maker of paper products, most notably envelopes. His next series of patents was for manufacturing envelopes with greater efficiency. In 1874 Plimpton won the United States government contract for making stamped envelopes, which were previously made in New York. His success at Plimpton was due in large part to his mechanical abilities. He devised many improvements in the making of envelopes including the design of machines that would combine several operations in one (they cut, stamped, printed, gummed, folded, counted and boxed envelopes). His improvements resulted in the ability to manufacture 50,000 envelopes each day which was an astounding gain

in production for the time. One girl operator could handle the work formerly done by twenty operators. And it was found that one adjuster could care for twenty of these machines. These economies of scale were evidenced by the reduced cost for manufacture of envelopes. Previously it cost about 50 cents per thousand envelopes and with the Wickham machines the cost was reduced to 3 ½ cents per thousand! Nearly a billion stamped envelopes were being made annually for the government. For 25 years all the stamped envelopes used by the government were made by Wickham machines.

Plimpton also made stamped newspaper wrappers and Wickham's improvements in these machines was comparable to the envelope machines. Wickham retired from the Plimpton company in 1898 having secured nearly 40 patents.

He had many other interests and together with his son Clarence, organized the Hartford Manilla Company in 1881 with a large plant in the Burnside area of East Hartford. He was also general

manager of the Hartford, Manchester & Rockville Tramway Company, which ran the trolley system between Manchester, Rockville and Hartford. In his later years he developed an interest in using peat as a fuel. He designed and patented machines for forming peat into blocks, for carbonizing peat and for producing fuel and gas from peat for use in a cooking oven he also designed.

Wickham was a lover of and a good judge of horses and fine cattle. He built his estate known as "The Pines" on the border of Manchester and East Hartford (now known as Wickham Park) in 1896. He had married Fylura Sanders of Halifax, Vermont in 1857. They had one son, Clarence H. Wickham. Horace died May 22, 1914 at the age of 78.

