

South Manchester News

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SOUTH MANCHESTER, CONN., FRIDAY, JUNE 10, 1910

THREE CENTS

From Out of the Ashes

Main Street South Manchester 1897-1920



Written By: Dick Jenkins. Niceville, Florida

April 24, 2016

In the year 1880, Manchester's population was nearly 6,500. There were several centers of population at that time - Manchester Green, Buckland, Hilliardville, the Depot Square area of Manchester, and South Manchester, a rapidly growing location due mainly to the Cheney Silk Mills. Between 1880 and 1920 the number of employees at the mills grew from 1165 to 4670 workers. The center of commerce in South Manchester was in the vicinity of the joining of Main and South Main Streets where the W.H. Cheney store stood. The store was reputed to be one of the finest general stores in all of New England.

In those times, most of the structures were constructed of wood and no taller than two stories. The land that bordered the west side of Main Street from the South Terminus to St. James Street was owned by the Cheney family, as was the land from Myrtle Street to Center Street, which contains Center Park.

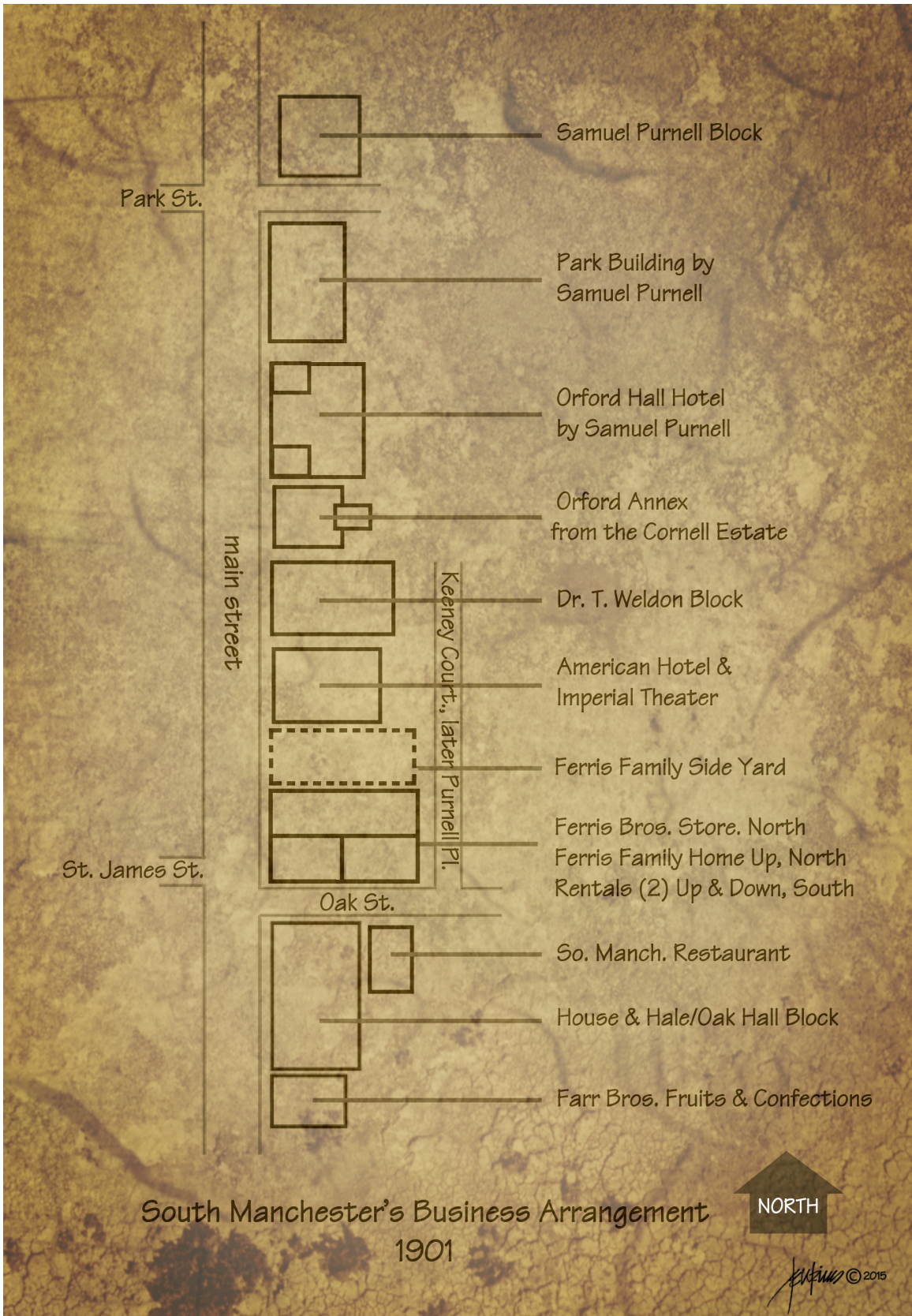
Businesses, for the most part, were situated along Main Street's east side with the greatest concentration located between Purnell Place, then called Keeney Court, and Oak Street. It is these businesses whose history I'd like to address since the majority of them were either affected or destroyed by fires during the period 1897 to 1919.

The major fires that consumed businesses and homes during this period were the Ninth District School fire where miraculously 900 children and faculty walked out of the 32-room school complex without injury. The House & Hale block blaze that reduced the store to ashes and caused numerous businesses to have minor fires 300 yards to the north. The W.H. Cheney Store fire brought about major problems since its businesses served the majority of those living in South Manchester. In spite of these intense fires, many destroying homes in the dead of night, Manchester somehow escaped without a loss of life. Let me begin with this tabulation of dates, businesses and losses as a result of fire. Read the details of each incident as reported at the time in the South Manchester News and Hartford Courant newspapers.

South Manchester's Major Fires
Occurring along Lower Main Street
1897 - 1919

Date	Property Affected	Result of Fire	Details see page no.
1897 March 22	American Hotel	Total loss	4
	Weldon Block	Total loss	4,7
	Orford Hall Annex (see foot note)	Partial damage	4-9
1898 November 29	W.H. Cheney Store	Heavy damage	10-12
1899 February 8	Orford Hall Annex Fire No. 2		8
1908 December 29	American Hotel restored bldg.	Total loss	8
1909 April 13	House & Hale Block	Total loss	12
	Farr Brothers	Must relocate	12, 13
	Orford Hotel	Minor	12
	Weldon Block	Minor	12
	Waranoke Inn	Minor	12
1913 October 23	Ninth District School	Total loss	15
	South Manch. Library	Total loss	15, 16
	Hose House No. 4	Total loss	16
	Rogers two-story home	Total loss	16
	McCormick dwelling 1-1/2 story-School St.		16
	Benson Boarding house 3-story		16
	Campbell House 2-story-School St.		16
	Carrier 4-story School St.	Damaged	16
	Chas. Bissell home-School St.	Damaged	16
	Watkins Bros bldg. Main St.	Damaged	16
	Magnell Bros. bldg. Main St.	Damaged	16
Numerous homes on Eldridge St.	Damaged	16	
1917 March 26	Ferris Brothers Block	Damaged	17-18
1919 April 10	Ferris Brothers Block	Damaged	18-21
	Harry M. Burke property		27
	E.J. Hall		28
	Dr. Thomas Weldon		29
	Comments of the author, Dick Jenkins		30-32

The Orford Hotel is referred to by several names, Orford Hall and Orford Hotel. The Annex is sometimes called Orford Hall Annex or Orford Hotel Annex, and on rare occasions the Cornell Estate or simply annex. It was located south of the Orford Hotel, which in later years was called the Marlow block.



The American Hotel Fire

Hartford Courant - March 22, 1897

“The American House and Dr. Weldon’s Property, With Stores, Destroyed by an Incendiary Fire - Narrow Escapes – The Loss \$25,000 – Need of a Fire Company.”

“The most dangerous fire that has visited South Manchester for many years broke out in the American Hotel building early this morning and before its progress was stayed the American Hotel building, with barns and sheds in the rear, and the Weldon’s block, with stables in the rear, had been burned to the ground, and the Orford Hall annex to the north of Weldon’s was badly damaged. The buildings are in the business center of the place and for a time it looked as if the whole line of business blocks would go.

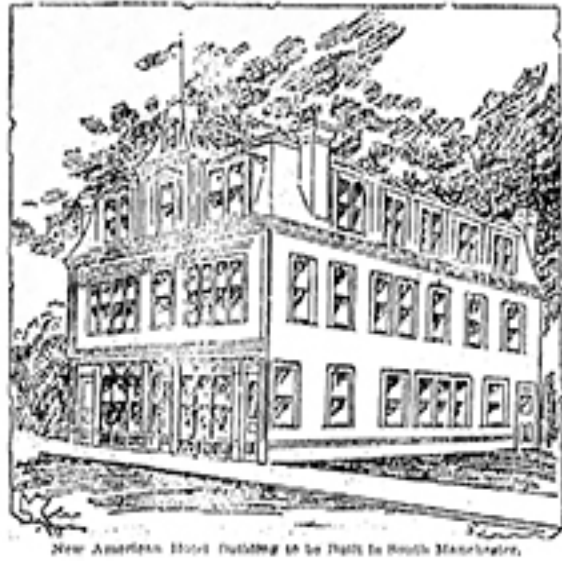
It was about 2 o’clock when the fire was discovered by Mrs. Maria Ingalls who lives with her mother, Mrs William Ferris, in the building/next south of the American Hotel. The flames were just bursting through the front of the poolroom which occupies the whole of the ground floor. The occupants of the tenement over the poolroom had hardly time to seize scant clothing and escape by a rear stairway, as the front stairway was in flames.

“The American Hotel was in ruins and the Weldon’s building was blazing furiously. A line of hose was connected with the hydrant at the corner of Oak Street and the stream turned on Ferris Brothers buildings, which were smoking. The Ferrises meanwhile had kept a garden hose at work and probably saved their buildings from catching fire. A second line of hose soon arrived and connected with the Park Street hydrant. This stream was turned on the Purnell building (Orford Annex) which stood just across the narrow driveway from Weldon’s block. Fire had broken out in this building and the firemen had a stubborn fight to keep it under control. It was only after a long, hard fight that the building was saved.

The occupants of the burned buildings had a very narrow escape. David Backus and his family, who keep a boarding house in the American Hotel, barely escaped with their children. Weldon’s block was occupied by T. Weldon & Co.’s drugstore, Robert Weldon’s shoe store, and Dr. Weldon’s office on the first floor, and on the second floor by Dr. Weldon’s residence. The Weldon family had barely time to dress their two small children and themselves and escape.

The Orford Hall/Hotel Annex was occupied by four stores and two families. William E. Gleason lives in the south tenement nearest the Weldon building and his wife is sick. He had to hurry off for a hack to remove her and was barely able to get her safely out. Felix Farr occupies the other tenement. He has four small children and his wife has been sick for some time. Everything they had was destroyed. Mr. Farr’s fruit and confectionery store was a wreck. The two Chinese laundrymen lost nearly everything. Undertaker Scott’s stock was saved.

It is probable that the fire was incendiary. Mrs. Ingalls saw three men prowling about the American House (Hotel) poolroom and saw them inside the building with a light. Soon after they came out she saw the fire, and she thinks it was they who gave the first alarm.”



New American Hotel to replace that, which was destroyed by fire in March of 1897

What became of the American Hotel

Hartford Courant, August 7, 1897

“Patrick R. Hayes began work preparatory to the erection of a new hotel building on the site of the burned out American Hotel. The new building would be 41 X 68 feet and three-stories in height. It will contain two stores on the ground floor and two upper stories will be specially arranged for a comfortable hotel of about twenty-five rooms.”

Less than eleven years later, on December 29, 1908 this hotel would again be reduced to ruins.

Events leading up to the American Hotel fire No. 2

Hartford Courant, March 10, 1905 “W.L. Wheeler, who came here from Hartford about a year and a half ago and took charge of the American Hotel after its remodeling, disposed of his interest in the place last night to Solomon Anderson. The new lessee is without hotel experience but has been engaged in the saloon business in town.”

Hartford Courant, September 12, 1905 “The American Hotel was today sold to Fredrick Russell, who will take possession at once. Mr. Russell has been employed in the hotel for the last five months and intends to make several changes. He has secured a lease for five years with a privilege of renewing it for five more at its expiration. The business was sold to settle the estate of Solomon Anderson.”

Hartford Courant, February 24, 1906 “Within the last fifteen months there have been two licenses granted the place and three transfers while another is being asked for. Fredrick Russell has asked for a renewal of the license, which was granted, and he has continued to run the bar part and has sublet the hotel part. William Miller of Hartford took control and he will ask for a transfer of the license to his name.”

Hartford Courant, March 26, 1906 “...the hotel part has been conducted by Christian Christian and Fred Russell conducted the bar until a short time ago, when he disposed of it

to James Miller. After April 1, Mr. Miller will also take over the hotel part and will conduct both branches of business.”

Hartford Courant, November 19, 1906 “James P. Miller, who recently sold out his interest in the American Hotel at South Manchester, filed a petition in bankruptcy in the district court of the United States Saturday.”

Hartford Courant, December 10, 1907 “The American Hotel which has been conducted by William Edgar for one and one half years will change hands tomorrow. The place is owned by Henry Case and the rent has been so high that it has been found impossible to make it pay without a liquor license. New proprietor, James Ryan from Hartford will keep the hotel open but will use the space devoted to a saloon as a place for showing moving pictures and small vaudeville house.”

Hartford Courant, February 07, 1908 “William Edgar, who has conducted the American Hotel for the past twenty months, vacated the place yesterday and unless another tenant is secured the American Hotel, as far as hotel accommodations are concerned, will become a thing of the past.”

Hartford Courant, November 10, 1908 “Patrick Calhoun of Oak Street has practically closed with Henry Case, owner of the American Hotel for its sale to Calhoun. The deal will not be settled until such time as Calhoun is able to learn whether he can secure a liquor license in the place or not.”

The American Hotel Fire No. 2

Hartford Courant, December 29, 1908 “The American Hotel and Imperial Theater are tonight in ruins. That no other building was destroyed is remarkable as three feet separated the burning building from the Weldon block. The building was a three-story facing 40 feet on Main Street and running back about one hundred feet. The upper floors were used as a hotel, while the north half of the ground floor was a moving picture house called the Imperial Theater. The south half was occupied by a saloon until a year ago, since which time it has been vacant. Fire began in the moving picture house whose proprietor was James Ryan. The Weldon building is protected on the south side, the side next to the American Hotel, by iron shutters, the building itself being of brick with a slate roof. The hotel owned by Henry Case was a mass of ruins.”

The fire started in the moving picture house, James Ryan, the proprietor, also conducts a moving picture show in Rockville and the Imperial was in charge of George Anderson, a boy about 18 years old. There were forty-two people at the show, mostly children. According to the story told the Courant, George Anderson, was about to replace a film when it fell across the flame and in a second all was afire. Those inside made their escape through the windows, while several went through a back door which led to the second floor of the hotel and then down the front stairs to the street.”

What became of the Weldon Block

Hartford Courant, August 30, 1897 "Work on the Dr. T. H. Weldon's new block to replace the one burned out last spring was begun on Friday. The building will be brick, three-stories in height. It will be arranged on the ground floor very much like the building that was burned. The two stores will be occupied by T. Weldon & Co. as a drug store and by Robert Weldon as a shoe store. Dr. Weldon will also have an office on the south of the stores. In the second story will be a tenement to be occupied by Dr. Weldon. The third story will contain sleeping rooms and a clubroom. The front of the building will be of an attractive design and the building will be a great addition to that portion of Main Street. The new block also featured a metal roof and a wall of metal louvers that shielded his property from the American Hotel."

The Orford Hall Annex



The original Orford Hall the morning after being set ablaze by the American Hotel fire.

Close examination of this photo from 1897 shows the Orford Hotel/Hall on the far right with its distinctive parapet wall, the rear of the Orford Annex which continued to be hosed down the morning after the fire, the ruins of the Weldon block in the lower left, and the northeast corner of St. James church across Main Street.

What became of the Orford Hall Annex

Hartford Courant, March 25, 1897 "The insurance on the Orford Hall Annex, which was damaged by Monday morning's fire has been adjusted and the building will be at once repaired. The two laundrymen have reoccupied their old store, Undertaker Scott will move his stock back into his store as soon as it is made tenantable and Felix Farr will also take his old store."

The Orford Hall Annex Fire No. 2

Hartford Courant, February 8, 1899 "Patrolman Thompson discovered the fire in Charlie Sing's laundry at 2am this morning, which did so much damage to Purnell's block (Orford Hall Annex) as described in today's Courant. The laundry was in a small building adjoining the Purnell building (Orford Hall Annex) and two Chinamen slept there. It was thought the fire started from an overheated stove. Over the stores in the Annex were the families of Joseph Desire and Felix Farr. The Farr family, including five children, were cared for by the Rev. W. J. McGurk nearby. The stores on the first floor were Farr's confectionery store, Howell, Silcox & Co's furnishings store and P.J. O'Leary's lunchrooms. The laundrymen and a shoemaker, named Louis Selvitz, who had a shop in the laundry, lose everything, practically, their place having been completely burned out. Horton's drug store and Blish hardware store in the Orford Hotel/Hall were damaged by water. Farr was burned out about a year and a half ago, in the Weldon fire." (Assume the American Hotel fire).

This photograph, taken about 1936, captures the restored Orford Hotel Annex in close



The rebuilt Orford Annex after the American Hotel fire.
From the Sylvia Oflara collection, possibly a Fallot photo, circa 1936

proximity to the Orford Hotel/Hall. I remember this building as a child. The businesses directly south of the Orford Hotel/Hall can be identified by their overhead signs, and listed in the order they appear, Silbros Clothing Co., S.P. Karambelas Tea Room restaurant, Green & Gold Pastry Shop, L.S. Jaffee Jewelry and Mary Carney Millinery. At the time of this photo Dr. Barney Wichman, chiropodist and Dr. Fancher, dentist had their offices on the second level of the Orford Annex.

The Final Chapter for the Orford Hotel Annex

Hartford Courant, May 13, 1952 "Police and firemen joined to alert tenants and restrict a dangerous fire in the Main street business area Monday morning.

Policeman Thomas Graham saw smoke billowing from the Silbros clothing store at 881 Main St. in a small, one-story building owned by the Rosewell Corp. He notified Policeman Newton Taggart who sounded the box alarm at Park and Main streets. The pair, with Policeman Joseph Sardella, then went to the small wooden, two-story building to the south (Orford Hotel Annex) where there were several apartments on the second floor. They warned residents of the fire hazard and found at least two still asleep and unaware of the smoke which was filling the two buildings.

Investigators said that the fire apparently started in the basement of the Silbros clothing store or the restaurant, which adjoins it on the south. The adjoining two-story wooden building (Orford Hotel Annex) is owned by Jules E. Filiere of Griswold Ct. It is occupied by the Federal Bakery, Heating Engineering Co., Crockett insurance and real estate office, Gaudet's jewelry store and Janet's millinery store on the first floor."

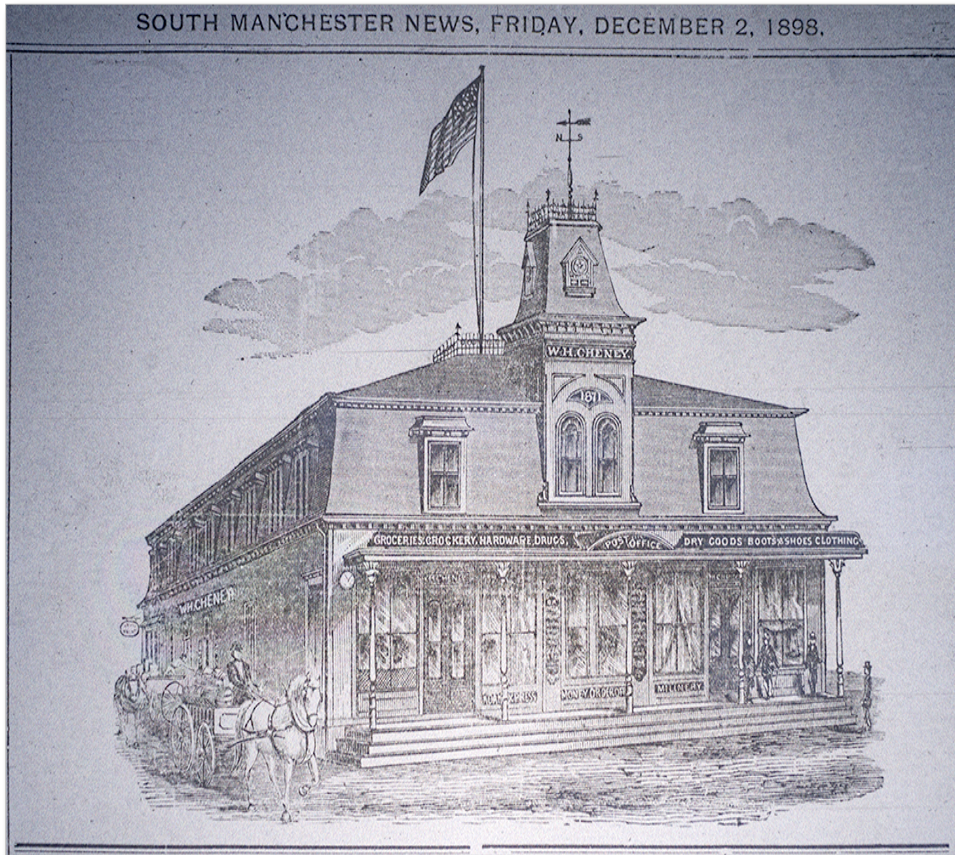


Not much has changed since 1900 along this stretch of Main Street, the Park building, far left, followed by Orford Hall/Hotel, the Orford Annex is replaced by the two-story Bank of America followed by the Weldon block.

Dick Jenkins photo

W.H. Cheney Store Fire

Hartford Courant, November 29, 1898 "The Cheney store block built in 1871 was destroyed by fire early Tuesday morning. The fire started in the barbershop over the post office gradually making its way through the main building until the whole building was practically destroyed. The contents of the post office, of W.B. Cheney's drug store and of C.D. Strickland & Son's grocery store were destroyed. It (the store) was reputed to be one of the finest general stores in New England. Streams of water had to be kept on the fire all of Tuesday night and part of Wednesday and Thursday nights. There is some fire still in the grain, flour feed, etc of the grocery department."



Illustrated drawing of the original W.H. Cheney Store that appeared in the full-page article reporting the great fire of November 29, 1898 in the local South Manchester News.

Many folks born in the 30s and 40s are of the opinion that they remember the W.H. Cheney store but that certainly can't be, since it was badly burned in 1898. The confusion lies in the similarity of the structure that replaced Mr. Cheney's store. Much of the foundation and lower portions of the structure were retained, but the ornate roof details were not repeated in the reconstructed version. I'm excited over the beautiful illustration included in the South Manchester News newspaper a few days after the fire. It appears above in all its glory. The rebuilt structure appeared as below until the I-384 by-pass caused several structures in the Hop Brook valley to be removed. "The portion of the old building now standing (at Main & Charter Oak) will be utilized and another story will be added. The new

building will be about seventy-five feet in length and of about the same present depth. The main floor will be occupied by two stores and the upper store will probably be made into flats."

What became of the W.H. Cheney store



The rebuilt version of the Cheney Store, circa 1960

Ken Burkamp photo

Hartford Courant, February 27, 1899 "Mrs. Sarah G Cheney has practically decided on rebuilding Cheney's store. The plans now are for two blocks, one on the site of the old building and one farther uptown. The burned building has been for many years a center of business, but within five or ten years the center of population has gradually gone northward and with this growth business blocks have been erected so that there is almost a solid row of stores from Maple Street

north to Park Street, where ten years ago there was only an occasional dwelling house. Because of the northward tendency the owners of the old building have bought from Cheney Brothers the lot adjoining Rolston & Brooks's store on the south and will erect a three-story building containing stores on the ground floor to accommodate the post office, W.H. Cheney's drug store, Martin's dry goods store, Smith's boot and shoe store and Tiffany's jewelry store." In actuality the new Cheney block would be two-stories tall.



The Cheney Block as it appears in 2010

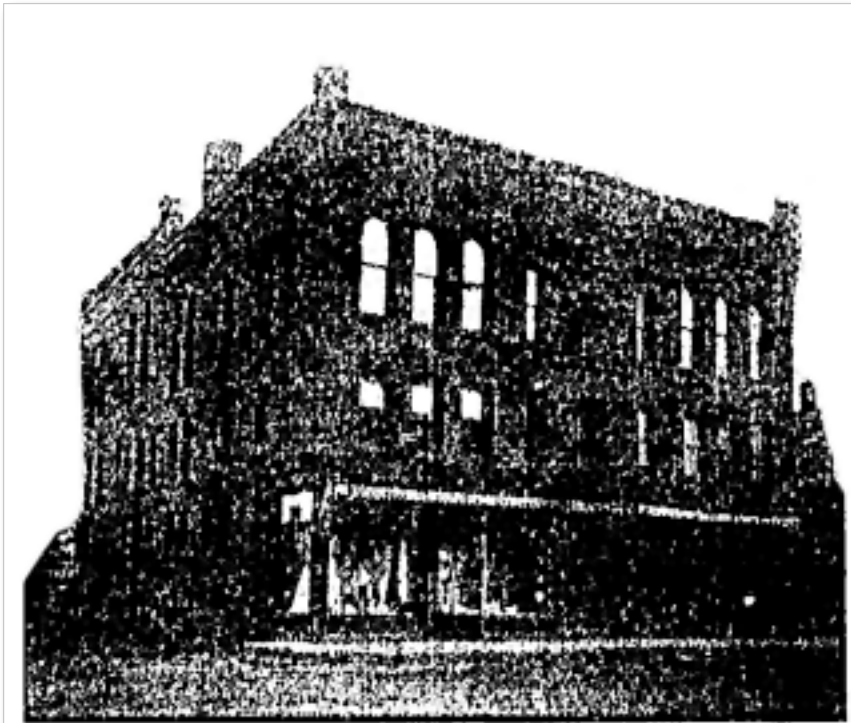
Dick Jenkins photo

House & Hale Block Fire-April 13, 1909

Hartford Courant, April 12, 1909 "The most destructive fire that has ever visited South Manchester destroyed this afternoon the House & Hale block, one of the largest business blocks on Main Street, and for a time threatened to spread to all of the other business blocks north of it. In fact, at one time there were as many as seven different fires burning. The fire was, however, mainly confined to the House & Hale block, and that building is now a mass of ruins.

Street in Flames

About that time it was remembered that there was a lot of gasoline in a little tin building between the Ferris block and the American Hotel building an effort was made to get it out



The original House & Hale Store.

Hartford Courant photo

of the way. A local cart driver was passing by and the gasoline cans were put into his cart. He had just turned into Main Street, going north, when leaking gasoline caught from embers in the street and a streak of fire shot up. The fire spread along the street and there was a merry time for a while, the cart and driver had gone about fifty yards before he knew the cart was on fire. Willing hands helped to cut the horse

away from the wagon, the gasoline was turned into the street, barrels and all, and for a time there was a large blaze from that.

Sparks from the main fire lighting in the awnings of the Orford Hotel building had five different fires in that building at one time. The Weldon block was also on fire at that time, but the contents of a hand extinguisher and a little garden hose extinguished that fire. The Waranoke Inn, which is located fully 300 yards from the main fire also caught fire, but the awnings were torn off and the trouble removed.

The fire could be seen in Hartford and Rockville and large numbers from both places were in town to view the ruins."

Farr Brothers Confectioners

The fire that completely destroyed the House & Hale block had an effect on the business of *Felix and Rocco Farr* since they occupied a portion of the building directly south of the



**Circle Theater abuts the House & Hale block.
Circa 1949**

Sylvian Oflara photo

House & Hale block. The new House & Hale block would become larger than the original business and would grow to occupy that space in which Farr Brothers conducted business. Within a few days of the House & Hale fire Farr Brothers would purchase the site and ruins of the American Hotel directly south of the Weldon block.

The wooden structure in which the Farr Brothers had their shop would be picked up, lock, stock and barrel and moved to face on Oak Street and abut to the new House & Hale block being constructed.

Hartford Courant, April 20, 1909 "An important real estate deal was closed yesterday morning when Farr Brothers, proprietors of the store on Main Street which is soon to be moved to Oak Street, bought through the agency of A.H. Skinner, from Henry F. Case, the site and ruins of the American Hotel, the property on Main Street opposite St. James Church. The announcement of the sale will be received with much pleasure in Manchester as it means the clearing up of the ruins of the property

and by so doing remove an eye-sore from the main street of Manchester."

Hartford Courant, March 15, 1910 "Manchester is to have another theater. The building which was used by C.E. House & Sons and J.W. Hale, while their new stores were being built as a temporary store, was yesterday leased by P.R. Brannick and Joseph Cushing, who intend to remodel the place at once and to open it as a theater. A stage is to be built and the sidewalls made to present an attractive appearance. It is the purpose of the new owners to conduct a show house along the lines of the Scenic of Hartford. It is also proposed to have, besides moving pictures, a number of vaudeville acts. Work will be started at once on making the necessary changes and it is hoped to get the place open and in operation early next month."



Circle Theater, circa 1916. The marquee displays *The Romance of Elaine*, a silent picture serial. Children would flock to the theater on Saturday afternoon to see the ongoing sagas of moving pictures such as this, *Flash Gordon*, *Red Rider*, *Superman* and others. From the John Knoll Collection

We know from articles written in the *Hartford Courant* shortly after the House & Hale fire that a wood-framed structure immediately south of the original House & Hale building, sometimes called Oak Hall, was moved to Oak Street to allow for the new and bigger House & Hale store. I believe the wooden structure above was that store. It has the appearance of a temporary structure with a shingled front.

The *Courant* reports in their September 24, 1924 newspaper, "The new theater is being built by Gorman & Hayes, Mr. Gorman has the brick and plastering contract and was about to finish his work."

Hartford Courant, November 2, 1952 "The Circle Theater which has a seating capacity of about 719 persons was erected more than a quarter century ago by the late John F. Sullivan. He disposed of it to Lockwood and Geld who subsequently sold it to Hoffman Brothers. Warner Bros. acquired it in 1926. The brick building was extensively renovated several years ago and stands on a plot of land having a 62 front footage on Oak Street and a depth of 107 feet. (see photo on page 13)

Ninth District School Fire-October 23, 1913



Ninth District School Fire - October 23, 1913

John Knoll Collection

Hartford Courant, October 23, 1913 "The school building was the largest wooden building in town measuring 300 ft long and contained 32 classrooms. The complex was huge, covering an entire city block that took in Main, School, Vine and Wells Streets. Howell Cheney said there were about 900 students in attendance the day of the fire since about 1/8 of the students are typically absent.

After a young student discovered the fire, janitor Jim Gleason attempted to extinguish the fire using a standpipe and hose nearby but was unsuccessful in his attempt. His hands and face were burned and his hair singed. Miss Mary Sullivan, the gym instructor led 20 pupils out of the school along smoke-filled halls and stairways knowing that other routes of egress were impassable.

Nine hundred children ranging in age from 5 to 11 years were attending school when at approx. 2pm papers were discovered burning in the 2nd floor library. The building was constructed entirely of southern pinewood including the walls and ceilings. The children were evacuated in about one minute in an orderly manner thinking it was yet another fire-drill.

The upper floor of the South Manchester Library that shared the school grounds at the southwest corner also served as a dwelling for the librarian and her sister and Miss Conklin, a stenographer employed by Cheney Bros. Mrs. Charles Gustafson who lived in the east end of the 2nd floor, and the other tenants lost everything.

Captain of Police William F. Madden, seeing the library building was sure to burn, and noticing a crowd around the place, called upon volunteers to remove the books. A line was soon formed and they worked in an endless chain. Books were taken from the shelves and carried out across the street to the lawn where they were deposited. Captain Madden remained in charge and kept the line working free, not allowing any congestion on the stairs or doors and before the flames had broken through to the library not a book was left on the shelves. They were loaded on automobile trucks and removed to Cheney Brothers warehouse, where they were stored.

Hose House No. 4 caught fire as flames jumped School Street. The building materials were similar to the schools. It was reduced to ashes. Homes, businesses and a boarding house on Eldridge Street were damaged but not destroyed.

“Attention of the firefighters had to be divided, as Watkins Brothers’ building, the largest frame mercantile building in town, also caught fire and glass began to break on account of the heat” (Watkins Bros. then stood on the corner of Main and School streets)

Sparks reached as far north as the Park Building some 500 yards away, set awnings afire on businesses along Main Street and reached the roof of the Circle Theater before being extinguished. It would be safe to say that all the homes on Vine Street were destroyed or severely damaged according to reports.

Not only was the entire school complex destroyed, but these other neighboring buildings, some of which were two and three-story, also burned:

Public Library Wells Street

Hose House No. 4 School St.

Rogers two-story frame bldg., School Street

William McCormick dwelling, one and one half-story, School Street

Benson boarding house, three-stories, School Street

Campbell house, two-stories, School Street

Alexander Trotter house, School and Vine Streets

Those damaged were:

Carrier four-story house, School and Vine Streets

Mrs. Charles Bissell house, Wells and Vine Streets

Watkins Bros. building, Main and School Streets

Magnell Bros. building, Main Street

Ferris Brothers Block

This from the book, "Old Manchester...The Storytellers", page 111

"In 1880, Ferris Brothers opened a hardware and stove store in a new wooden building on the northeast corner of Main and Oak Streets. It was a two-storied, flat roofed building. The store took up the north part of the first floor and the senior William Ferris had an apartment above the store. The south part was two "rents" up and down stairs and facing with their porches on the Oak Street side and an apple tree and grape arbor beyond the building on Oak Street.

The senior Mrs. Ferris had a door yard a little below the sidewalk level and occupying all the space where the Savings Bank of Manchester now stands (north of the now Watkins Block).

A driveway from Oak Street led to the tin and plumbing shop in the rear of the store; also to a two-story warehouse, a barn, a pigpen with two pigs, and a row of woodsheds. There was also a small shed in which were barrels of oil and gasoline, all to be drawn through spigots and measured with hand cans (see House & Hale Block fire). There were no filling stations in Manchester then because there were no cars to patronize one."

The following article appeared in the Hartford Courant dated October 6, 1900 on the occasion of the Ferris' 50th anniversary.

Hartford Courant, October 06, 1900 "Mr. and Mrs. Ferris were married in 1850 in Lebanon Springs, N.Y. They came to South Manchester thirty-one years ago (1869). They have four children, William S., George W., Edwin, and Mrs. M.R. Ingalls. (see American Hotel fire)

William M. Ferris was born in London, England in 1826. He learned the trade of wool carding and spinning and followed it in England until he was 23 years old, when he came to this country and settled in New York. In 1869 they came to South Manchester. Mr. Ferris took the position of boss carder in the Charter Oak Woolen Company's mill. The company did business there in a frame building on Charter Oak Street under the name of E.E. Hilliard & Co. Several years ago Cheney Brothers bought up the mill and turned it into a warehouse.

In 1880 the firm of Ferris Brothers was established with William M. Ferris as senior partner. The other members of the firm were his three sons. The senior partner continued in the carding department until his sons persuaded him to give up work and remain home to attend the store. When Mr. Ferris began business his neighbors rebuked him, telling him he had located his business in an isolated spot; now his store is in the center of the business section on Main Street. Since that time a pasture lot east of Main Street and extending a mile north of Cheney's store has been built up with brick business blocks and dwellings and is now the principal street in town."

Hartford Courant, March 6, 1901 "Work on the Ferris Block began 3/5/1901 with the removal of a huge 100 year old elm. The block will be built adjoining the Ferris Bldg. and will occupy the

corner of Main and Oak Streets. It will be three-stories high, and the ground floor will contain a store 30X37 ft., the second floor offices, and the third floor a hall and lodge room 23X40. The present Ferris Block will be built out to the sidewalk, adding three floors 15X20 to the present floor space.”



Three-story Ferris Brothers brick building sits on its original location, the corner of Oak and Main Streets. It would be moved east to the corner of Purnell Place and Oak Streets and turned 90 degrees to face Oak when purchased by the Watkins Brothers where it would be joined to their new store. John Knoll photo

Hartford Courant, March 26, 1917 “A fire was discovered in the basement of the Ferris building on Oak Street. The upper part of the building where the fire was discovered was occupied by Noah Ingalls and family in one apartment and Miss Albiston in the other. The smoke got into the Ferris Brothers store and did much damage there.”

Note: The Ferris Brothers business is sometimes a bit difficult to explain. Let me begin here. Their original wood-framed store stood on this very corner but at some point in 1901 was moved east, down Oak Street to make room for the three-story building you see above. Family members occupied the upper floor of this building as a residence.

Hartford Courant, April 10, 1919 “The fire started in the one-story frame building on Oak street, owned by Ferris Brothers, spread to their Main street three-story brick building, and before it was out had done damage to the extent of from \$30,000 to \$35,000. Later

developments seemed to indicate that it started on the storeroom of the Ferris Brothers store. The large plate glass in the Main street store of *Ferris Brothers* was blown into the street and the windows were blown into the street and the windows in the lower part of the building were also blown out. An examination of the building after the fire showed that the rear part of the Main street store was badly gutted. Their storeroom in the rear, which contained many farming tools and other hardware was about all destroyed and the east end of the building was also badly gutted.

The heat from the fire, soon after it started was such that all of the windows in the South Manchester restaurant across the road were cracked. All of the windows on the north side of the J.W. Hale Company's store were also cracked, as were several of the windows in the upper part of the building used for offices. The home owned by Harry M. Burke, located just to the east of the building in which the fire started was also on fire."



The former Ferris Brothers Block with its distinct beveled corners appears in its new location facing Oak Street along with the superimposed Main Street location.

John Knoll/Dick Jenkins photo

Hartford Courant, May 9, 1919 "A real estate transaction involving valuable Main Street property and the first step towards the erection of business blocks in South Manchester that will mean an expenditure close to \$250,000, without taking into consideration the buildings now upon this property, located on the corner of Main and Oak Streets, was sold. The three-story building in front is occupied by J.H. Quinn, druggist; Ferris Brothers, hardware; the South Manchester office of the "Manchester Herald" and the war bureau of Manchester, with the Knights of Columbus rooms, the dental office of Dr. J. Renehan, and two apartments on the second floor, a hall and rooming apartments on the third floor, together with the ruins of the frame building owned by Ferris Brothers on Oak Street, their vacant lot to the north of their property on Main Street, their storehouses and barns in the rear, and also the two-story, two-family frame house owned by Harry M. Burke.

Watkins Brothers became the owners of the Ferris building on Main Street and also the ruins of the frame building on Oak Street. The land and building purchased from Mr. Harry Burke is for the J.W. Hale Company, and the vacant lot on Main Street is bought by the Manchester Trust Company. The occupants of the Ferris buildings are to vacate, but up to a late hour tonight they had not been officially notified of this. Their leases were broken by the fire last month.

J.W. Hale Company to Build. To make room for their expansion the land owned by Mr. Burke was bought by J.W. Hale Company. The building in which their store is located is the House & Hale block, located just across the street from the Ferris building. To the east end of their block is a two-story frame building used as a restaurant. The land which was bought from Mr. Burke will be occupied by the restaurant building which will be moved across the street and the space that is in this way secured will make possible the extension of their store to the east to the building now occupied by the Circle Theater. They will also be able to build to the south and rear of the building, giving them extra space.

THE MANCHESTER TRUST CO.
SOUTH MANCHESTER
CONNECTICUT
MEMBER FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM



The vacant lot on Main Street which was owned by the Ferris Brothers and which was included in the sale this evening is to become the property of the Manchester Trust Company. The site which is selected brings them right into the business section and a new building will be erected on the vacant lot."

Hartford Courant, April 20, 1909, "An important real estate deal yesterday morning when *Farr Brothers*, proprietors of the store on Main Street which is soon to be moved to Oak Street, bought through the agency of A.H. Skinner, from Henry F. Case, the site and ruins of the American Hotel, the property on Main Street opposite St. James Church property, and just south of T.H. Weldon's property."



Business lineup between Orford Hotel and Ferris Brothers left to right shows Orford Annex, Weldon Block, Farr Brothers and the Ferris Brothers Block. Manchester Trust/Savings Bank of Manchester would soon fill the void in 1919. John Knoll photo

of the American Hotel, the property on Main Street opposite St. James Church property, and just south of T.H. Weldon's property."

South Manchester News, June 25, 1909 "Farr Brothers have received the plans for their new business block which is to occupy the site of the old American Hotel on Main Street. The building will be located about five feet further south than the old building bringing the south wall nearly to the Ferris Brothers northern boundary.

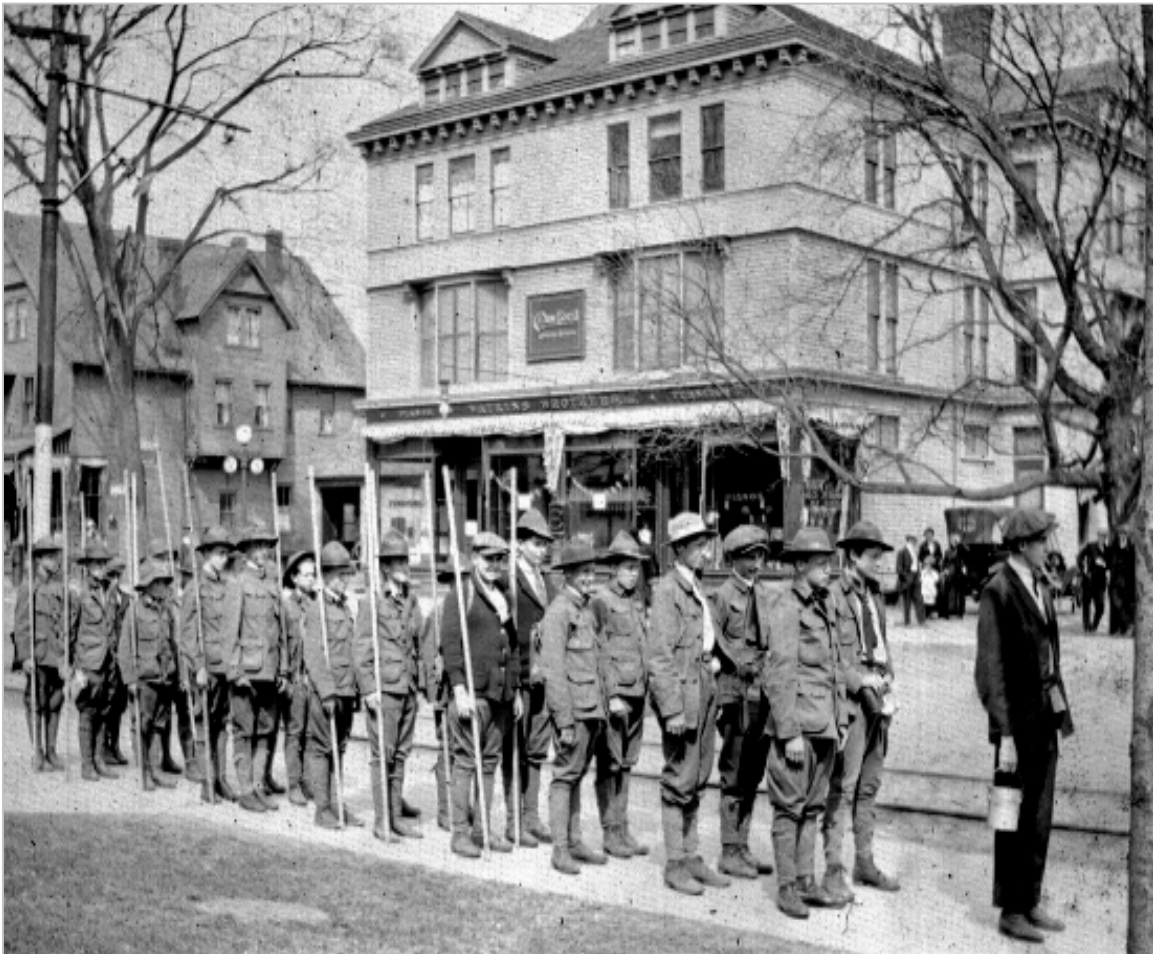
It is proposed to leave an eight-foot driveway between the new building and the property of Dr. Weldon on the north. This will make it pleasant for the occupants of the Farr Block (see photo above) as well as for Dr. Weldon and family inasmuch as it will admit sunshine and fresh air to all concerned. The proposed new block is to be of brick, two stories high fronting forty-five feet on Main Street and extending east a distance of seventy-two feet. The lower floor will be occupied by two stores, the upper floor will be given up to offices in the front with two flats in the rear. The front will be light colored pressed brick making an ornate appearance and adding to the beauty and serviceability of the business structures on Main Street.

Watkins Brothers

Excerpts from the Hartford Courant beginning in November of 1920 at their present store opening.

It might come as a surprise to most that “Watkins Brothers is the oldest retail business in Manchester. Established in 1874 by Clarence and F. Ernest Watkins, the first branch engaged in undertaking. For a few brief months, the young men sold candy and cigars but in less than two years from the time they first opened their doors, they were launched in the furniture business by buying out the furniture department of the William H. Cheney general store.”

“New quarters became imperative and in 1890 a large wooden structure was built at Main and School Streets. The business was continued there until the construction on the present huge building at Main and Oak Streets.” This building still remains today.

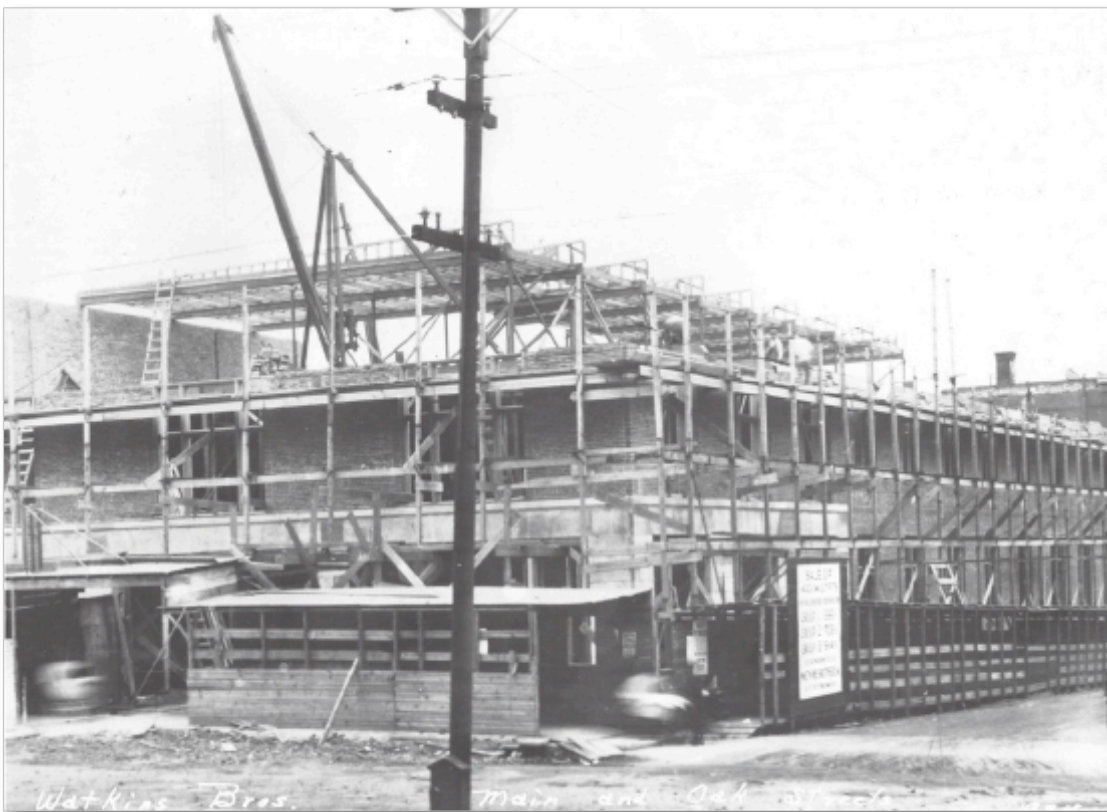


Had the direction of the wind been from **the southeast** rather than from **the south** the Watkins Brothers Store would have been destroyed by the Ninth District School Fire of 1913. Both Watkins store and Magnell Brothers Drug Store were damaged, but saved. The buildings east of Watkins Bros. to a point beyond Vine Street were destroyed.

John Knoll photo

Meanwhile the firm had been branching out in other directions. At the time of the opening of the first new building a piano department was installed, which was destined to become an important feature of the business. In 1905 the business of the old firm of Woods and McCann on Asylum Street, Hartford was bought and later the business of William Wander & Son, Steinway agents, and still later, the talking machine department of Ludlow, Barker & Co. all of Hartford.”

“Recently the Grand Rapids “Furniture Record” called for a straw vote by the traveling men and retail furniture stores throughout the United States as to which was the finest retail store in the country in a town of less than 20,000. The result was that Watkins Brothers received 90% of the votes.”



Watkins Brothers under construction, perhaps from 1919. Since the block is two-stories high at this point you can see the upper level of the former Ferris Brothers block in the distant background with its distinctive chimney. Watkins had the Ferris block relocated to the corner of Purnell Place and Oak Streets to allow for his new business fronting on Main Street. The buildings would be joined at completion.

Knofla family album of Manchester Construction Company



Watkins Brothers block while under construction, circa 1920. The grand opening would occur on November 12, 1920.

Knofla family album of Manchester Construction Company

Who had the vision?

Samuel Purnell

In the months I've spent back in time to the turn of the 20th century, the name that is foremost in my mind is that of *Samuel Purnell*. Little is known of Samuel, but I hope to learn more. This much I do know - Samuel Purnell was born in England in the year 1848. At some point prior to 1870 I find him living with his parents, Jacob and Mariam, in Rockville, Connecticut. His father, Jacob, was the proprietor of a meat market. . Samuel's occupation was listed as a "Traveling Agent". He was then twenty-one years old. In the 1880 U.S. Census his vocation is "Commercial Traveler" and he has taken a wife, Ellen, born 1853.

I first learned of Purnell's accomplishments when he was instrumental in the building of the Orford Hotel. The obvious question - where does a "traveling agent" get the money to erect the first brick three-story business, the second and largest hotel in all of Manchester? To accommodate the hotel, Purnell bought the Keeney Farm. A portion of that four acres was utilized for the Orford Hall. The majority of the remaining land fronted on Main Street.

The Keeney Farm extended eastward from Main Street to the rear of the property lines of the home situated along Cottage Street's west side and south to Oak Street. There were some small parcels of land excluded that will be explained later. The Orford Hotel would be opened for business in July of 1893.

Samuel Purnell passed away unexpectedly on March 12, 1897 at the young age of 48. His obituary from the South Manchester News follows:

"Samuel Purnell was laid at rest in Rockville last Sunday afternoon, a large number of friends, neighbors and acquaintances, business and social, attending the funeral service at his late residence in the Park building. Rev. Thomas Simms officiated. The bearers were: F.W. Mills, George W. Finlay, J.W. Hale, F.T. Blish and F.B. Horton of this place and W.H. King of Hartford.

Mr. Purnell has done more to build up South Manchester, than any individual in town, outside of members of the Cheney families. He had wonderful nerve and pluck in business matters, had undying faith in the business development of this town and threw his whole energies of late into real estate ventures in this place, building the Park building, the other lesser buildings adjoining on Main Street, the handsome brick building known as the Orford Hotel, the long row of tenements back of his Main Street buildings, and lately the large and well equipped livery stable on Keeney Court. The hotel property should perpetuate his name here for many a year to come, as it is a large and substantial edifice and the most imposing business structure in town. He is cut down in the prime of his life and the plans,

over which he dwelt so fondly, can never be realized. His wife and family have the deep sympathy of a large circle of kind friends in this sad bereavement.”

Being that the South Manchester News was published on Friday of each week the paper printed a very brief notice on the day of his death, it read as such:

“Readers of The News will be greatly surprised to learn that Samuel Purnell entered into rest at 8 o’clock this Friday morning, after a violent attack of pneumonia coupled with heart failure. His families are overwhelmed with grief at this cruel, sudden and unexpected stroke of fate. He leaves a wife and six children, three of whom are fully-grown and were by his first wife, and there are three little ones by his present wife who was known before marriage as Elizabeth Finlay, sister of George W. Finlay of this place and of James and William Finlay of Hartford.”

I’ve since found this published in the Hartford Courant: “Samuel Purnell, who died in South Manchester yesterday from pneumonia, was one of the best known men in that section. He was for a time in the wholesale tea business in Hartford, living on Farmington Avenue. During the last four years he lived in South Manchester and was interested in real estate, building the Orford Hotel. Mr. Purnell was married twice and leaves a wife and six children, three by his first wife, They are Harry S. Purnell and Mrs. L.N. Charter, living in Manchester, and Elsie, Maude Helen and Dorothen, who live at home.”

If one spends enough time examining South Manchester’s history back to the late 1800s they form a picture of the area along Main Street beginning at the south terminus, that is the junction of Main, South Main, Charter Oak and Hartford Road. In those times Charter Oak Fields was populated by small manufacturing mills powered by the flow of water from Hop Brook. Cheney had a few buildings scattered between Wells Street and School Streets. The W.H. Cheney Store sat at the beginning of South Main Street and Watkins Brothers, the furniture and undertaking business sat on the northeast corner of School Street. The Magnell Brothers conducted their drugstore next north of Watkins. Between Eldridge Street and Maple Street there existed the farm of Russell Eldridge, later son, Daniel Eldridge. Their home was grand, a three-story Victorian style mansion centered on the block. Their farm ran deep to the north and east being bounded by a dry-creek that plagued Manchester for years.

Little was going on along the block from Maple to Oak Street. House and Hale had their first store on the corner of Main and Oak. Captain Keeney had a farm that occupied most all of the next block north, Oak to Park Street. Clues to its existence was the former name of Purnell Place, Keeney Court.

Harry M Burke

Purnell's holdings, the Purnell Estate would remain as they were until a Manchester man, *Harry M. Burke*, living on Park Street and having his law practice on Main Street, Hartford, became the owner of the principal business section of Manchester known as the Purnell Estate and with it the distinction of becoming Manchester's largest taxpayer. Harry Burke would say this about Purnell: "All was built under the direction of Samuel Purnell, who saw ahead in Manchester's future and bought the property before any one thought that it would ever be possible to transfer the business section to where it is now. The hotel property was the first that he built and as the town grew he invested further and at his death the estate was considered Manchester's most valuable property."



Harry M. Burke was born and raised in Manchester, became a lawyer and was active in town government as well.

It appears that Burke, too, was a visionary since less than a year later he sold the Purnell Estate to E.J. Holl, prominent realtor and developer. Holl paid a reported \$150,000. The Courant article reads as such:

"Manchester has seen more real estate changes in a week than has been the case in the town in ninety-five years. Harry M. Burke sold to E.J. Holl the remaining property owned by him of what is known as the Purnell estate. This consists of three buildings having a total frontage of 290 feet on Main Street with nine houses, each two-family tenements, three storehouses and several small buildings. The property sold consists of the Orford Hotel building, the Purnell Block, a two-story brick and limestone building being the last on Main Street built by the Purnell Estate and situated on the northeast corner of Purnell Place and Main Street and the Park Building. It is estimated that as a result of the transactions

that have taken place Mr. Burke has made over \$60,000 on his investment."

E.J. Holl

October 20, 1929 "E.J. Holl Announces Plans to Convert Famous Street Into Modern Business SectionThirty years ago when the contracting firm of Joseph Hawley and



E.J. Holl
Real estate developer and builder

George M. Barber built nine houses on the old Keeney farm, Manchester was a small town and their contract was regarded as a big real estate development. Eventually they erected the present Purnell building, Orford building and other well-known Main Street premises on the same tract, which comprises four acres.

The Keeney farm had been purchased by Samuel Purnell, an itinerant tea salesman, described by Mr. Holl as a man of large vision. The houses which are two-story and debauched with plenty of garden space were built at a cost of \$850 each, Mr. Barber said today. Its position however, 200 feet in the rear of the main business section is assurance that its future cannot be neglected, although it has become a byword among respectability. When Holl became its owner he moved the old Keeney homestead to the rear of the court widened from 24 to 40 feet and to have it converted into a north and south artery of

traffic from Maple Street to Birch Street as well as have its northern arm made a widened continuation of Park Street to Cottage Street."

Other Visionaries

William M. Ferris

Certainly William M. Ferris saw into the future coming here from New York in 1869 at the age of 43. Perhaps he saw the Charter Oak Woolen Mills as his opportunity for a respectable job when he accepted the position of boss carder. When Cheney's bought up the mill turning it into a warehouse 10 years later he then established the business of Ferris Brothers. He secured land at the corner of Main and Oak Streets, then a pasture lot that was part of the Captain Keeney Farm. Folks told him he'd made a poor choice of location. His business prospered until 1920 when the family chose to pursue other interests.

Doctor Thomas Weldon (1861-1939)

Doctor Thomas Weldon endured many adversities while having his successful practice and drugstore next door to the American Hotel. I'm sure he and his family had many sleepless nights over the three fires that finally consumed the hotel. Perhaps it was the unfortunate choice by the hotel owner to locate some sixty feet from the St. James Church and expect to operate a saloon and pool hall on the premises. There are numerous accounts reported over the life of the hotel where a liquor license was applied for and refused. After the first fire, possibly incendiary in nature, destroyed the hotel and Dr. Weldon's block, Weldon wisely rebuilt using brick walls and slate roof. Additionally, he added a steel fence having louvers between him and the hotel, a sound decision that saved his block when yet another fire occurred at the hotel approximately eleven years later.



Dr. Thomas Weldon and family as they appear from left to right: Ethel and Edith (twins), Ann E. Mints, Dr. Thomas Weldon, infant Margaret, wife, Anne May, Mary, Thomas and Elizabeth. Circa 1906

Susan Weldon Lyons photo from the Thomas Weldon Family Collection

Reflections by the Author

I was born in Hartford in the summer of 1937 and, due to my parents divorce soon moved to Manchester. It was during the early stages of WWII that we lived in the Sheridan Apartments at the corner of Main and Pearl Streets, a brick structure partially destroyed by fire in later years. It is for that reason I can say that I am one of a very few children who grew up along Main Street. My playground was Center Park, and my world was contained between "the Center", Charter Oak Street, Main and Spruce Streets. My dear grandmother lived at Spruce and Wells Streets and Mom and I wore a path between our apartment and my grandmothers, often pushing a vacuum cleaner.

My dad was off to war and mom worked in the Cravat Department of the Cheney Silk Mills. Through an agreement with the Silk Town Diner that once stood immediately south of the Princess Restaurant, I was given breakfast each school day since mom was long gone to the mills.

Dick Farr, younger brother of Jimmy Farr, was my friend and neighbor since he lived on the second floor of the Farr block where his father, James, the son of Felix Farr, practiced dentistry.

Since I had no grandfather here in America, I adopted a very dear man named Samuel Yules, a Romanian immigrant who conducted a shoemaker business in the Johnson block. He was all that one wants in a grandfather, always asking about life, school, and growing up. Even as an adult and having children of my own I would stop by his cobbler shop, then on Oak Street and share that which had transpired. His son was Herman Yules, who became a prominent Manchester attorney having his practice in the Farr block.

Between those two points was the Park Theater, a wood-framed business that had long since served it usefulness. It was never operated in my lifetime. Next to it was the Triple-X store where I got my first tricycle and could pedal my way to grandmother's house.

I remember the Salvation Army band and their "open air concerts" along Main Street. They had several spots where they would play their brass instruments and offer guideposts for living.

During the war I had family tasks to perform that have long since been forgotten by most. We were expected to recycle light bulbs and Manchester Electric had a store just south of the State Theater where I'd turn in burned out bulbs and get refurbished ones. Then, just up the street a bit was the A&P Store where armed with O.P.A. ration coupons I'd stand in line for our allotment of sugar. I also had the job of kneading the oleomargarine until it resembled the color of butter rather than lard.

Another of my favorite haunts was the House & Hale Store where I was always amused by placing my feet into their x-ray machine, the latest state of the arts device for determining if your new shoes were to fit properly. I did that so often that I'm surprised I couldn't see my feet glow under the bed sheets.

A very special treat while in that block came when mom would take me to the Sandwich Nook, that tiny little shop next to the Nassiff Arms store. Adrian Groot operated the business. Besides having hot dogs and chili dogs to die for, he sold tropical drinks in various flavors that made my mouth water just to think about them.

Once you crossed over Maple Street heading south, the Eldridge Mansion stood, but not in my time. Even today as I walk Manchester's Main Street I can see, but only in my mind's eye, the stately Victorian mansion that occupied that spot. I know I never laid eyes on it since the mansion was razed before I was born. The Eldridge family, much like the Captain Keeney family operated farms that reached from Eldridge Street to Birch Street, hence Eldridge and Keeney Court are names of streets from our history.

Mary's Soda Shop was difficult to pass by as a kid. Mary sold all those things that kids yearned for. I can still see her today behind the soda fountain counter.

"The East Side Rec" I never realized how privileged I was living in Manchester until I joined the military and exchanged stories about our hometowns. When I spoke of the features of the East Side Recreational facility, having an indoor track and swimming pool, and tunnels that connected to the neighboring school buildings, guys would look at me in disbelief. The Cheney's were generous people, and it's important that we not lose sight of how generous they were.

During the summer months and school vacations, I lived with my grandmother on Spruce Street. I had a whole new territory to call mine. There was no air conditioning in those days, so the windows were thrown open at night. In the dark stillness of the morning, at 5 a.m. you could hear the rag picker and his horse and wagon traveling down Wells Street, his lantern swaying in the wind. The iceman delivered block ice from a horse drawn cart to grandmother's icebox, carrying it on his shoulder protected by a rubber apron. It was a special treat to gather the ice-chips from his wagon on a warm summer's day.

Much of my day was spent at Charter Oak fields, playing baseball with my eastside gang. We'd take a break occasionally and visit Lewis's Store where young Francis and his dad sold groceries and auto parts. A very special treat offered there was a Frisbee Pie, about the diameter of a softball, and a soft drink. We'd then walk across Charter Oak Street and dangle our legs off the five foot tall stone wall that shored up Charter Oak Street.

Next door west of Lewis' Store was Kilpatrick's Blacksmith shop. Curiosity drew me in on occasion for a closer look at the goings-on there. On an earth floor there was a forge and bellows that occupied the central spot in the shop and you'd sometimes see the blacksmith heating metal to cherry-red and pounding it into various shapes on his anvil.

If you ventured into Little & McKinney's store, the spot formerly occupied by the W.H. Cheney Store, you'd step back fifty years to a potbellied stove, the smell of grain and seed and white haired men visiting over the topics of that day.

In those days the old Armory still stood on Wells Street. I can only recall it being used as a Hudson automobile dealership, McClure Auto Company, and a roller skating rink.

My great uncle, Tom Tedford, born in Ireland in 1882, was conductor on the Connecticut Company trolley and later drove bus for them. In all he spent 39 years in their employ. I was even curious over history back then and would ask him to tell me again and again how the trolley lines were routed down Main Street. They were never visible in my time. Then one summer, perhaps in the early 1990s Main Street took on a major change and the entire stretch from the center terminus to the south terminus was excavated. I just happened to be visiting home and you might have thought I'd walked onto the playing field in "The House that Ruth built". I dug in the earth with my bare hands and unearthed several rail spikes that I have to this day.

When I decided to write this article I never dreamed that I would be taken on such a journey back in time as I have. Learning how South Manchester along Main Street began, how they sprouted out of the earth from farmland to wood framed structures to what we have today. If you reach back through the generations of development it is not at all difficult to view the structures that still stand today and know their origin. I'm so impressed with young Samuel Purnell, a tea salesman who possessed the gift to foresee the future. His mark is everywhere. Harry M. Burke, a local boy who became an attorney, also saw the heart of South Manchester taking shape between Purnell Place and Oak Streets, invested a fortune and made a fortune. William Ferris knew before the turn of the century that he wanted to be a business owner in that same location as did Dr. Thomas Weldon. I feel that if I were to run into any of these folks while back in time they'd nod their head at me as if to say, hi, I believe I know you from somewhere. Yes, they do indeed.