



# History of MANCHESTER

THE AREA NOW KNOWN AS MANCHESTER began its recorded history as the camping grounds of a small band of peaceful Indians — the Podunk tribe. English settlement began about 1673, some 40 years after Thomas Hooker led a group of Puritans from Massachusetts Bay Colony to found Hartford. "Manchester" was part of Hartford in what was called "Five Mile Tract". Later our area came to be called Orford Parish, and was part of East Hartford.

BY 1790 ORFORD PARISH had about 1000 residents, clustered in small settlements such as Buckland, "the Center" and "the Green" — the last two located near Middle Turnpike. There was a Congregational Church and a Methodist Church, 5 schools, 4 taverns, 5 saw and grist mills, an unsuccessful copper mine, a woolen factory, and 3 paper mills. Some 70 men of Orford Parish had fought in the Revolution. Captain Richard Pitkin and his sons had produced gun powder for supply to the Continental Army. As a reward for this vital service, the new state of Connecticut in 1783 granted the Pitkins a 25 year monopoly for the manufacture of glass. The Pitkin Glass Works manufactured bottles, flasks, and inkwells until about 1830. Residents of Orford Parish began agitating for incorporation as a separate town as early as 1812. Their petitions were not successful until 1823, when Orford Parish was incorporated as the town of Manchester.

THE HOCKANUM RIVER and 6 brooks ran through Manchester in the early 1800s — providing a ready source of water power for manufacturing. Woolen mills were in operation on Hilliard Street from 1780 until the mid 20th century. When it closed in the 1940s, the Hilliard Company was the oldest family-owned continuously operated factory in the U.S. The first successful cotton mill in Connecticut (1794) was taken over by the Union Manufacturing Company in 1819. By 1850 cotton gingham were made at the Union Company mills in North Manchester by nearly 200 women and men, including many Irish immigrants. The first Catholic Church in town, St. Bridget's, was built in 1858 to serve this new population. A railroad line linking Manchester to Hartford was completed in 1849 — making Depot Square a hub of commercial activity.

CHENEY BROTHERS, founded in South Manchester in 1838, gradually became world famous for premium quality silk thread and fabrics — as well as for the invention of innovative silk processing techniques. It was as an employee of Cheney Brothers that young Christopher Spencer (*inventor of the Spencer repeating rifle*) won early fame as a mechanical genius by inventing a silk spooling machine. Cheney Brothers were renowned as well for their generosity and public spiritedness — building over the course of 50 years a "model community" of workers' housing and contributing assets such as schools, Cheney Hall, a public library, the Hall of Records, public utilities, and land for churches.

MOST CHILDREN ATTENDED one or two room schools in town but left formal schooling after learning how to read and write in order to marry, work on family farms, in factories, or at a trade. In the mid 1800s, Manchester had 2 short-lived private academies for older children whose parents could afford to pay tuition. There was no public high school.

THE CIVIL WAR disrupted many lives, taking 268 young men from Manchester; 48 never returned. After the war, a time Mark Twain called "The Gilded Age", people in town launched many

new commercial enterprises such as the stores of Watkins Bros., J.W. Hale Co. and C.E. House & Son Inc. (*later House and Hale*). Manchester had been called "Silktown" because of the immense influence that the Cheney Bros. Silk Manufacturing Co. had on South Manchester. In the 19th century the town could just as well have had the nickname "Papertown", since there were five successful paper mills in operation: the Rogers Co. in South Manchester; Case Bros. Inc. at Highland Park; Adams Paper Mill in Buckland; Lydall and Foulds at "Lydallville"; and Oakland Paper Co. near the border of South Windsor. Everything from specialty carts and plow moldboards to melodeons was made in town.

MANCHESTER WAS A "BOOMTOWN" by 1900. Cheney Bros. employed about 25 per cent of the residents — still actively recruited new European immigrants to work in the mills — and continued its corporate generosity to include the cost of construction of "Educational Square" (*now a part of Bennett Junior High School*). The first public high school was built in 1904. Many former farms were sold and turned into housing tracts. Manchester's first banks were incorporated. Utilities such as electricity, telephones, piped water, sewer lines; and services such as extensive trolley tracks, volunteer fire departments, and 2 town newspapers improved life for all residents. Citizens enjoyed music and other entertainments at Apel's Opera House and Cheney Hall; there were a dozen social and fraternal clubs for men and a half-dozen for women; and sports such as baseball and harness racing. Until 1907 the town was governed in the old New England tradition of "town meeting". In that year the town adopted a new charter — creating a more efficient method of governing, with a Board of Selectmen charged with the responsibility of running the town.

MANCHESTER CELEBRATED ITS CENTENNIAL in 1923 with a huge parade and weeks of special activities. The town could pride itself on a century of progress in education and public benefit, and could applaud such commercial advances as the innovative Hale's Store — one of the first self-serve groceries in the United States. "Made in Manchester" was one of the mottos of the Centennial; products in that category ranged from precision industrial gauges through fine silk fabrics to Bon Ami cleansing soap — a familiar household name, worldwide, for many years.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION of the 1930s hit Manchester hard, especially with the decline and eventual failure of Cheney Bros. There was a modest upswing in housebuilding as workers in Hartford moved to Manchester to live. An offshoot of Cheney Bros., Pioneer Parachute, helped in the defense efforts in World War II. The post WWII era was a time of housebuilding again, as many people commuted to work at places like Pratt & Whitney Aircraft. Manchester adopted a new charter providing for the council-manager type of government. The period from 1950 through the 1970s saw commercial growth in town, improvements to the highways for the commuting public, the construction of the first Jewish synagogue, and new industrial parks. The Manchester Historical Society was founded in 1965 by a group of retired teachers to preserve the town's rich historical legacy for future generations.

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