

W. H. CHENEY'S STORE

MANCHESTER'S FIRST SUPER STORE

Research and Transcription by Douglas Welch

(The following article was published in the Hartford Daily Courant on September 2, 1871 and refers to The W. H. Cheney store which stood for almost 100 years at the corner of Main and Charter Oak Streets.)

"A new building has just been erected by W. H. Cheney, ESQ., the postmaster and merchant of the village. Mr. Cheney has moved the old building which he has occupied for the past ten years, to the rear, and on its site has erected a magnificent new building, fifty feet front by eighty feet deep, which he will occupy almost wholly for his large and increasing business. The post office occupies the central part of the building, and has been fitted up in elegant style, with new boxes, etc...



An artist's drawing of the W. H. Cheney store as it appeared in 1871 along Charter Oak Street. The tall portion on the left end was the original store which was moved and attached to the new store shown on the right.

There are two large and spacious entrances to the front of the building, from a wide piazza fronting the street. The interior of the lower floor is occupied with groceries, crockery, hardware, clothing, hats and caps, boots and shoes, dry goods, millinery, ladies' and gentlemen's furnishing goods, drugs and medicines, etc. New counters and shelving, made of chestnut and black walnut, have been provided for each department, and some dozen or more competent salesmen will be in constant attendance.

The front of the store is well lighted with high and broad windows and large panes of glass, and ten handsome gas chandeliers

will illuminate the main store in the evening. The whole of the second story is devoted to furniture, carpets, paper hangings, oil cloths, etc. A family can here find a complete outfit for housekeeping. The basement has quite a number of finished rooms, to be occupied as a barber shop, a harness store, a tailor's store, a boot and shoemaker, and the remainder will be used for storage. We doubt if there is so commodious and complete a village store in New England. Everything wanted for housekeeping, house furnishing, or as an addition to a ladies' or gentlemen's wardrobe, can be found here. The building is to be heated with one of Blair & Embler's steam-heating apparatus. O. H. Easton drew the plans of the building, which is two and a half stories in height, with French roof and tower. A town clock is to be placed in the tower for the accommodation of the public. There will also be a room provided for an express office and telegraph office.

Mr. Cheney will open his big store to the public on Tuesday or Wednesday evening next. His friends will of course congratulate him on the occasion—and if they do not all say that he has got the pleasantest, best arranged and most complete village store to be found anywhere, then we are mistaken. He has anticipated the wants of the community in which he lives by providing a store which will

accommodate their wants, and we bespeak for him the same liberal patronage in the future that he has had in the past.”



(Another article about the W. H. Cheney store was published in the Hartford Daily Courant five years after the previous one, on January 15, 1876. A few portions of that article which follow describe the interior of the store in detail)

“There can be no doubt but that the model store of the land is that of Mr. W. H. Cheney of South Manchester, and it is because it is a model place, and such a one as even a very shrewd business man might have said never could by any possibility be sustained in a country village, that it deserves to be more widely known. The fact is, Mr. Cheney has established in this village a store which is metropolitan in its management, style of doing business and in the amount of business done, and the word metropolitan is used in its proper sense.”

“The entire left side of the store, with an exception to be noted hereafter, is occupied for the grocery and provision business, and there are to be found as choice an assortment of groceries of all kinds as can be obtained in a large city. A large room in the rear is used for the heavier grocery business, such as molasses, salt meats, etc., and a very convenient and neat arrangement has been placed here for serving kerosene, by pumping from a large tank and drawing by faucet. In this department the hardware business is also carried on, and next adjoining the post office are the clocks, gold pens, and school books counters.

In a prominent position in the passage way leading from the department just described to the other one, is a tasty cashier’s desk. The department on the right is devoted generally to dry and fancy goods and wearing apparel. There is also one space for silver related goods, of which there is a very attractive assortment. There is also a full line of millinery goods with a private room for ladies who desire to inspect such goods more closely, and a large assortment of furs. Of dry goods there is a very large assortment of staple and fancy goods, and one which appears to be as complete as in any city establishment. Toward the

rear are the ready-made clothing, gentlemen's furnishing goods and hat and cap departments, there stocks being large and complete, and there is also a neatly furnished space for the use of ladies and children in buying shoes. Farther back are the tastily furnished book-keeper's and private offices, and here drafts payable in any country and passage tickets to and from Europe may be obtained. In the rear of the grocery department is the drug store, which is very attractively arranged, and which has an entrance on the main street. The drug store is complete in all its appointments, having a prescription desk and a soda fountain, from which hot and cold soda are now drawn."



A prescription bottle from the W. H. Cheney pharmacy department.

"Descending by an elevator, the basement is reached in a moment, and here are to be seen in one apartment a large stock of flour and meal, in another of sugar, while there is a cool fruit room where fruits, eggs, butter, etc., can be cool at all seasons."

"Another feature of Mr. Cheney's business now deserves to be noticed, and will be read with some interest. On the fifteenth of last October he adopted the cash system. It was a venture, many thought a dubious one for a country store especially in a manufacturing village where operatives are paid but once a month, but with the same business shrewdness which enabled him to build up the business he now has, he determined to try it believing that it would be as greatly to the advantage of the customers as to himself and now after three months trial, the system has been found to be a very great success. It is true that the success in a large measure is due to the fact that Mr. Cheney has given the customers the advantage which cash payments make possible in the way of low prices. Some of the prices are lower than people in Hartford would believe to be possible, and the result is that many in a region of ten or twelve miles hearing of the inducements come to his place to buy."

"The country store is one of the most striking of New England peculiarities. It is generally an odd place, where a little of everything is supposed to be obtainable, and where the vicinity farmers exchange their eggs for tea and their potatoes for calico. The idea of a complete metropolitan establishment in a country village would be laughed at, and the person who should attempt to carry on a great business in a business-like manner in a country town, would be regarded either as insane or on the road to bankruptcy, and yet this is precisely what has been done with great success in a neighboring country village already noted as a remarkable example of what possibilities are within the reach of every country place."

Addendum: Historian Dick Jenkins adds this information about the Cheney Store:

I had come upon this newspaper article on January 21, 2011 and was really impressed with what was written about the store and Mr. Cheney's business practices. Like the reports of the South Manchester

High School and its being perhaps the most advanced and impressive in the nation, the same was written about Cheney's Store and its standing in New England.

My memories of the Cheney Store were formed by the articles written about the time it was seriously destroyed by fire in 1899. Over time, shops came and went within the store. The post office occupied space on the north end of the first floor and could be accessed through a door on Charter Oak Street. Tenants included Calvin Tiffany, who had his jewelry and watch making shop there, and the Madden Brothers, and a barber shop. It was another of the Cheneys' good decisions not to rebuild and refurbish the old store but to build anew next to the House & Hale Store because of the growth and development of South Manchester in the early 1900s. Samuel Purnell had already completed his Orford Hotel, and the Ferris Brothers block stood immediately north, across Oak Street from House & Hale. Downtown's future was farther north on Main Street, and not on the south side of Charter Oak Street.

W. H. Cheney had a short life. He was born in 1833, opened his principal store in 1861 at age 28, and died in 1888 at age 54. He died of paralysis of the heart while at home. His sons continued the Charter Oak store until 1904 when it was sold.