

## **A Brief History of West Concord Industry**

*(prepared by the West Concord Junction Cultural District Committee  
for the Industry Project)*

West Concord industries and the people whose entrepreneurship, innovation, labor, persistence, and resilience built them have profoundly shaped our village's economy, population, and culture throughout its history.

### **Native American Manufacturing**

The Concord area has been inhabited for more than 10,000 years by Native American people who established the village of Musketaquid here, according to the Concord Free Public Library's *Brief History of Concord*. Throughout this time they produced a wide variety of objects. For these millennia, Native people would "collect fresh-water clams, make tools, cut with axes, hunt game with spears, grind food with stone pestles, and cook with soapstone pots" as well as "make weirs to catch fish in brooks" and "make dug-out canoes."

### **Beginnings of European Settlement in the 17th and 18th Centuries**

West Concord began to be settled in the mid-17th century as part of the Second Division of land. Almost immediately, landowners began to build mills using the brooks and river. George Hayward built a sawmill in 1644 on Hayward's Pond that was later followed by a corn mill. Near the site of the Damon Mill, the Concord Ironworks was incorporated in 1658 by a group of investors. It dug and forged peat bog iron ore. Later a grist and fulling mill was operated on the same site run by Lot Conant and his descendants. Another fulling and saw mill was established by Ed Wright before 1700 along the Nashoba Brook.

### **West Concord Industry in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries**

West Concord really began to develop in the early 19th century as three villages grew up around mills and factories. Westvale (also known as Factory Village and Damondale) at the Damon Mill site was the first in the first half of the 19th century. In the mid-nineteenth century, Warnerville (also known as Concord Junction) grew up around the Warner Pail and Tub Factory and the junction of the railroads. Finally, Prison Village (also known as Reformatory), developed around

housing for those employed in the Reformatory in the later 19th century. These three neighborhoods later merged to become West Concord.

West Concord's first railroad was the Fitchburg Railroad which had a station near the Damon Mill. The coming of the Framingham & Lowell, Middlesex Central, and the Acton, Nashua, and Boston branch of the Concord, New Haven and Montreal lines in the 1870s significantly contributed to the growth of industry due to the ability to move freight easily in and out of the village. At the height of railroad traffic, 120 trains came through Concord Junction each day.

### *Mills and Factories*

The first of the 19th century mills was a multi-story wooden cotton mill, one of the earliest in America, established in 1808 on the Damon Mill site by Ephraim Hartwell and John Brown. After changing hands a number of times, the mill was purchased by Calvin Damon in 1834. His son, Edward Damon, assumed control of the mill in 1854 and it was one of West Concord's major employers for many years. The Damon Mill was known for a cloth known as "dommet" or "domet," which, according to Renee Garrelick in *Clothier of the Assabet*, got its name when Calvin Damon took it to show a Boston merchant who said "Dom it, that is good cloth; it will sell" (p.14). The wooden mill building burned in 1862 and was replaced by the current red brick Italianate mill building.

According to Robert Gross in *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, "The mill operated on a scale unmatched by any other enterprise in town" (pg. 95). The mill workers carded and spun the raw cotton, then, after it was dyed elsewhere, wove it into cloth on power looms. In the beginning, the mill workers were children, teenagers, and young adults, including both boys and girls. Later, most of the employees were girls and women between the ages of 10 and 25. They lived in a large boardinghouse run by the mill. By the 1830s, 30 teenaged and young women and some children, both boys and girls, tended the spindles, while nine men worked as carpenters and in other trades to ensure the machinery ran smoothly. During that time the mill had 1100 spindles and 20 looms and worked about 50,000 pounds of cotton made into 188,000 yards of cloth annually.

The Robbins House, in their *Concord's African American History Map*, notes that the Damon Mill used cotton grown "on plantations in South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama... In 1855 it consumed some 40,000 pounds of cotton from Southern plantations."

The mill finally closed in 1898, “victim to the general decline of the textile industry in New England,”(p. 92) according to Renee Garrellick in *Clothier of the Assabet*.

Other industries soon grew up, taking advantage of both the water power of the river and brooks and the railroad. In the 19th century, these included:

The Loring Lead Works was established in 1819 by David Loring on Nashoba Brook near Warner’s Pond. It first made lead pipe, but then turned to making sheet lead. In the 1830s, it used 300,000 pounds of lead annually.

Pratt’s Powder Mills, founded by Nathan Pratt in 1835, manufactured gunpowder on both sides of the Assabet River near the Damon Mill and in Acton and Sudbury, with some of the land later becoming part of Maynard. It was responsible for improving the network of roads west of Concord. It was later incorporated in 1842 as the American Powder Company, then sold to the Massachusetts Powder Works in 1864, then to American Powder Mills in 1883. It was taken over in 1929 by the American Cyanamid and Chemical Company. At its height, 120 workers labored in 40 buildings on both sides of the river scattered over 400 acres to minimize damage during the many explosions that injured and killed workers. Henry David Thoreau described bodies blown apart strewn around the site after an explosion in 1853. One explosion in 1889 could be heard 50 miles away. Three final explosions in 1940 caused the mill to finally cease gunpowder production.

Pencil making was an industry that bridged Concord Center and West Concord. The first pencil manufacturing was done by William Munroe, a cabinetmaker, in his shop on the milldam in the center of Concord in 1812. Later he moved his operation to his farm on Barrett’s Mill Road and was selling pencils as far west as Kentucky. John Thoreau became Concord’s second pencil manufacturer, and soon his product became celebrated for their quality. Both Munroe and Thoreau got their graphite locally, from a graphite grinding mill in Acton. Later, in the 1850s, the Thoreau pencil factory got its graphite from Sylvester Hayward’s graphite grinding mill in West Concord.

Warner’s Pail and Tub Factory, owned and operated by Ralph Warner’s R Warner and Company, was established and took over the site of the Lead Works in 1854. It manufactured wooden pails and tubs and employed about 35 workers. According to the *1892 Concord Directory and Guide*, “about seven hundred cords of pine timber are yearly made into pails and tubs, which find a ready market in this country and in England.” The factory burned down in 1894.

The Boston Harness Company factory opened on Main Street near what is now Baker Avenue in 1890 and by 1899 employed 175 workers, according to the *Concord Enterprise*. By 1892 they were making 20,000 harnesses a year, saddles, holsters, and belts. Many of the workers were from Canada, Ireland, France, and Scandinavia.

The Bluine Factory, founded by George Conant, originally operated in Acton making a laundry product to whiten clothes. It came to West Concord in 1893, eventually moving to 20 Beharrell Street. The Bluine Factory was known for its innovative marketing, sending their product to children all over the country, who sold it, sent back the money, and received a child's watch or other prize in return. Bluine was also sold in retail stores. This strategy dreamed up by Mr. Conant enabled Bluine to become a household product across the country.

The Whitney Coal and Grain Company was established in 1896.

The Concord Rubber Company began operation in 1899 at the site of the Damon Mill. It made supplies for pharmacists, mackintoshes, and rubber footwear.

In the early 20th century other industries were established:

The Strathmore Mills, making woolen cloth, took over the Damon Mill site in 1904 and operated through the 1930s.

The Allen Chair Factory was built on Bradford Street in 1906. The *Concord Enterprise* noted the following about the Allen Chair Company when it was sold to the Finley Manufacturing Corporation in 1956: "The Allen Chair Company has been making chairs in Concord for 50 years. It has been owned and operated by three generations of Allens and has manufactured over \$13,000,000 worth of furniture. It has made from time to time mission furniture, high chairs, windsor chairs, cots, dining chairs, upholstered maple chairs, and recently has concentrated on office chairs and school furniture. It has pioneered in improving the construction and strength of wooden furniture and has earned a reputation for making the highest quality it in its field." The Finley Manufacturing Corporation was a maker of household furniture.

The Conant Machine and Steel Company was founded by Wallace Conant and operated by the Conant and Hatch families between 1915 and 1960 developing and manufacturing loading machines for coal, gravel, sand, and broken stone. One machine, consisting of a motorized

conveyer belt with twenty buckets, was able to handle 30 tons of loose coal per hour in 1918. The company was eventually moved to Lancaster, Massachusetts. According to his relative, Carolyn Flood, Mr. Conant also edited the local newspaper about 1900, was on Town committees overseeing the water and sewer system and the Municipal Light Plant, was involved with Florida lumber, visited Russia about 1930, and worked to get a phonetic alphabet adopted in the US (personal communication, April, 2022).

The Lambretta Garnett Mill took over the pail factory site in 1916 and worked recycled wool fiber. It was founded by Daniel Hayes.

The Moore and Burgess narrow-webbing factory was established in 1917.

The Concord Foundry was established in 1921 as a Division of Scott and Williams, a maker of knitting equipment. It made iron, brass, and aluminum castings for use in Scott and Williams New Hampshire factories.

The Concord Waring Hat Factory was founded in 1931. It buffed and trimmed ladies hats.

The Concord Woodworking Concord at 10 Beharrell Street opened in the 1930s and was led by President John Damon. They manufactured garden products such as trellises and snow fences.

Leif Nashe and Odd Overgaard opened the Dovre Ski Binding Company in 1935 at the site of the Bluine factory. The Company made “releasable” bindings that helped make skiing safer and contributed to its increased popularity across the country. By 1960, their ski bindings were considered to be the best in the world. The company was determined to, in Nashe’s words from an interview reprinted on the *VintageWinter* website, take “the solemn ponderosity out of business” with a satirical coat of arms they created themselves and a description of the corporate culture as being like “a sandlot baseball team.”

### *The Reformatory*

The State Prison opened in Concord in 1878. In 1884, when the general prison population was relocated to Charlestown, the Massachusetts Reformatory for Men took its place. It was a major influence on West Concord industry, providing well-paid employment, labor for West Concord businesses meant to give the young Reformatory residents trade skills, and opportunities for West Concord’s residents to attend church services and lectures and use the grounds for

recreation. In addition, in a personal communication (September, 2022), the Rev. Hannah C. Brown of the West Concord Union Church noted that "The West Concord Union Church (WCUC) was founded almost exclusively by folks employed by or related to employees of the Reformatory. The group was led by the Reformatory chaplain at the time, Rev. William Batt."

According to an oral history done by the Concord Oral History Program with Jean Bell and Diana Clymer of the Concord Prison Outreach Program, "When the Commonwealth decided to close Charlestown prison because of its poor condition, the Massachusetts legislature in 1873 voted one million dollars for a new prison. 1873 was a difficult economic time and Concord land was less expensive than that of Boston. The Cooke farm was acquired and 300 men hired to construct the new prison. Charlestown wanted their prison back because of the employment and in 1884 all but 100 of the 650 inmates were returned. Concord became the men's reformatory and a showcase for visitors. Eventually more than 1000 inmates were confined there, with the focus on learning a trade to reenter society from many vocational offerings and industries operated within the prison. The Waring Hat factory in West Concord employed women to decorate hats made at the prison. The reformatory provided local employment and contributed to the growth of the town."

The State Prison inmates manufactured furniture, clothing, hats, and harnesses through contracts with local employers. Later, the Reformatory offered inmates training in a wide variety of trades, including, according to Laurence Eaton Richardson's history of West Concord titled *Westvale, Warnerville, and Prison Village*, "tinsmithing, blacksmithing, wood turning, carpentry, wood carving, engraving, printing, mechanical drawing, bricklaying, shoemaking, chairmaking, painting, machinist's work, ornamentation, cooking, office work, gardening, farming, concreting, and gas making" (p. 9). Instructors taught classes to the inmates in academic subjects in the evenings. West Concord residents attended lectures and church services held at the Reformatory. Picnicking on the grounds of the Reformatory was another popular pastime. By 1900, only a quarter of those who had been at the Reformatory returned.

Winifred Carter remembered in an oral history of the Concord Library, "We lived near the Reformatory and the prisoners were very good to us. If I was washing windows on the outside and dropped my cloth and they were walking by to the farm, they would pick it up and bring it up to me. We didn't fear them at all. If I had wash on the line and it would blow away, they would pick it up."

### *Numbers of Mill and Factory Workers in West Concord*

The Damon Mill eventually employed about 100 people. The Harness Factory had about 175 workers in 1899. In 1943, the Allen Chair Factory employed 65 workers. In 1930, the Gunpowder mill employed about 120 workers. An article about Concord Junction manufacturing published in the *Concord Enterprise* on July 14, 1926 noted that there were about 300 people employed in manufacturing and about 60 in retail.

The Damon's mill workers were about half men and half women. Other industries also employed women workers, either working on the mill and factory floors or in administrative or clerical functions. Children regularly worked in the mills and factories, though their hours were limited by state law and they were required to attend school. In fact, entire families sometimes worked in the mills.

### *The Growth of West Concord's Immigrant Community and Industry*

Before the coming of the mills and factories, most of West Concord's residents were from Concord's "Yankee" families. However, by the latter part of the 19th century, West Concord's mills, factories, and farms had attracted workers from Ireland, Canada, France, Italy, and Scandinavia. These immigrants brought not only their skills and labor, but their culture and sense of community. Our Lady Help of Christians Catholic Church and the West Concord Union Churches were both founded with the help of West Concord's immigrant communities.

### *Hours and Pay, Strikes and Unions, Time Off, and Poverty*

The workday began at 6:15 in the Damon Mill and was limited to 10 hours for women and children beginning in 1874 due to a new labor law. Men were allowed to work longer hours. Edward Damon noted in his diary, quoted by Renee Garrelick in *Clothier of the Assabet*, that employers met to protest against the bill, but he did not attend. In the 1830s, women earned about 38 cents a day while the men made 90 cents per day. Edward Damon's diary also noted some of the wages he paid in the 1870s. Adult workers earned between about \$1.75 and \$2.50 per day and children and teens received about \$1 a day. To give some perspective, in 1871, the *Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor* found that across the state, butter cost 30 to 50 cents/lb., a dozen eggs were 32 to 50 cents, a cord of wood for heating was \$6.50 to \$14, and a quart of milk was 7 to 10 cents. When there were not enough orders, mill workers pay

was cut or the mills and factories were closed for a number of days. In addition, workers were docked pay if their work was not acceptable.

While there were no strikes at the Damon mill, workers did sometimes come in groups to protest pay cuts or pay hikes. However, a one day strike at the Strathmore Mill in 1918 was resolved peacefully and the workers received a 15% increase. A 1941 strike at the Allen Chair Company resulted in a chapter of the United Furniture Workers of America of the CIO being established there. In 1947, workers at the Concord Foundries of the Scott and Williams, Inc, voted to join the American Federation of Labor.

Workers did receive vacations. Besides occasional days off for special occasions, the *Concord Enterprise* mentions workers from various employers taking vacations and one week in the summer when the Bluine Factory closed for vacation. Some employers, like the Boston Harness Company and the Allen Chair Factory, would regularly close at noon on Saturdays in the summer.

Some West Concord families faced poverty. Charlie Comeau, who lived in Concord in the early 20th century, recalled to Renee Garrelick in *Concord in the Days of Strawberries and Streetcars*, “There were a great many poor people, really poor. I recall people picking up the trimmings and bark from the Allen Chair Company to heat their homes. Often boys would go up and down the railroad tracks to pick up lumps of coal that had fallen down. Most of the boys worked at that time and it was a common thing at eleven or twelve years of age” (pg. 25).

### *Housing*

Edward Damon, Ralph Warner, and the Reformatory all built housing for workers. In the 1870s, the Damon Mill built a number of “knee-wall cottages” for workers and also owned and operated 20 “tenement” (multi-unit dwellings) units and a boarding house. Edward Damon charged one worker \$6/month rent for a cottage. At about the same time, Ralph Warner built more than 25 houses on Commonwealth Ave occupied by Reformatory staff. Some private homes also took in one or two boarders.

However, some workers were able to afford homes and raise families in West Concord. In 1889 Harvey Wheeler established “Harness Shop Hill” on Old Bridge Road, Cottage, and Crest Streets and Old Marlborough Road, building 51 homes that workers were able to buy on time. Other workers were able to buy homes elsewhere in Concord Junction. One Main Street home built in



1871 was owned by workers in the Damon Mill, the Reformatory, and the Boston Harness Company at various times. It cost \$1600 in 1904, about three years' salary of an average factory worker of the time.

Still, the *Concord Enterprise* notes on November 2, 1899 that when the Harness Factory increased its workforce to 175 workers, there was concern that some would not be able to find lodging in Concord and so have to rent housing out of town.

### *Community Life*

Mill and factory owners tried to create a sense of community among their workers. In 1877, Ralph Warner built Warner Hall, a community gathering place. In 1893, residents formed an association and built another building, known as Association Hall. It had three stories and included the Post Office, stores, and spaces for community residents to meet and enjoy performances, recreational activities and more. In 1902, for example, among the events were social dances held by organizations, a community play titled "Imogene, or the Witches Secret" (according to the *Concord Enterprise*, "the company were perfect in their lines. The services of the prompter not being called into requisition even once"), a recital of students of a local music teacher, a fundraiser for the Catholic Church including a concert and speeches, a Christmas festival, and a traveling vaudeville show. The building burned in 1903 and was rebuilt. By the 1920s, Association Hall was also the movie theater, showing in 1922 such films as "'Rodolph' Valentino in Blood and Sand" and "For Love of Service with an All Star cast."

Edward Damon's efforts to create a sense of community and improve the lives of his workers included evening prayer meetings at the mill, a 100-book cooperative lending library (also open to those who did not work at the mill), and civic and social gatherings. He once gave workers the day off to attend the annual Cattle Show in 1875. Millworkers from the Damon Mill were among the first members of the Westvale Village Improvement Association, taking on such projects as planting elm trees on Main Street. They also were involved in their churches and in other capacities.

Workers would also sometimes enjoy evenings out as a group. The Blaine Factory workers went for a sleighride in 1897 after dining on oysters at the Hudson House. The *Concord Enterprise* noted that one young woman sat too close to her male companion, which was evidenced by the "beautiful blue tinge" on her gown. Even the children enjoyed some fun. The Strathmore Mill

took 65 children for an all day picnic at Walden Pond and “Whalom Park” in 1920 and frequently used their truck to transport children for other outings.

Workers also enjoyed sporting activities. The Strathmore Mills, the Harness Shop and the Allen Chair Company all fielded baseball teams, for example. The games were played at Rideout Playground. In 1908, the *Concord Enterprise* noted that “Hopkins of C.H.S. pitched a dandy game for the Harness Shop boys.” A bicycle club held races and “moonlight rides” to neighboring towns.

Music was home-grown in Concord Junction, with the Concord Junction Brass Band performing at social events in town as well as on a Boston Harbor Cruise. They practiced weekly at Warner Hall and played waltzes, marches, and other popular tunes.

By 1880, Warner’s Pond was a popular site for recreation including ice skating, fishing, sledding, and boating. The “Maude Blake” steam launch steamed around the Pond. Summer camps operated on the island.

The growing population of employees also created a burgeoning business community. The *Town Concord Directory* of 1921 lists, among many others, the following businesses on Commonwealth Ave.: a drug store, bakery, automotive supplies, barber, blacksmith, bookstore, boarding house, department store, dentist, various grocers, hotel, laundry, lunch room, furniture store, bookstore, shoe repair, and stables. Other businesses in Concord Junction included an auto dealer, auto repair shop, another barber, cattle dealer, embalmer and undertaker, florist, florist, and fish dealer.

### *Social Concerns*

Alcoholism and violence were part of life in the mills and factories, as indeed in many sectors of Victorian society. Edward Damon in his diary noted drunkenness and brawling as well as sometimes domestic violence among his workers, which he personally addressed.

### *Dangers of Working in the Mills and Factories*

Some West Concord workers were injured or even killed in explosions and accidents. The gunpowder mill was the site of a number of explosions throughout its history that cost both management and workers their lives. During one explosion the sound could be heard a mile away

at the Damon Mill and knocked bricks out of the chimney of the Brown house and broke dishes at the Damon house. A *New York Times* article from 1895 noted that five workers had been killed in a single explosion.

Edward Damon, in his diary, notes a number of accidental injuries at the Damon Mill. In one case, he gave a worker who had to have his arm amputated \$75, a considerable compensation even though there were no worker's compensation laws at the time. The *Concord Enterprise* also noted injuries, sometimes severe, to workers in other mills and factories.

Fire was also a constant danger. Buildings that were burnt to the ground or damaged by fire included The Damon Mill in 1862, the Pail Factory in 1894, the Association Hall in 1903, and the Allen Chair Factory in 1951.

### **West Concord Industry Contributions to the Nation's Defense**

West Concord industries contributed to the efforts to win the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. The Damon Mill made cloth for Union Army uniforms and, according to Edward Damon's diary, in an entry from 1862 in Renee Garrelick's *Clothier of the Assabet*, "All my men have been off this afternoon — great excitement about enlistments" (p. 24). Edward Damon would lose his beloved brother, Willie, to fever while serving in the Union Army in 1862. When President Lincoln was assassinated, Edward Damon had the mill's bell toll for an hour. During the Civil War, Pratt's Gunpowder mills produced 1,000 lbs. of gunpowder per day.

An article in the *Concord Enterprise* from 1917 noted that the Allen Chair Company had worked evenings and weekends to fulfill an order from the "militia" for 20,000 cots to support the World War I war effort. Also during World War I, the Boston Harness Company made equipment for the British and Russian cavalries. American Powder Mills sold all the gunpowder they made during the years of World War I to Russia (DuPont already had an exclusive contract with the US government).

West Concord industry also manufactured for the military in World War II. In 1943, the Allen Chair Company was "engaged in defense work," though the *Concord Enterprise* article did not say what they were manufacturing. The Dovre Ski Company also contributed to the nation's defense in World War II, providing ski bindings for the Army.

## **West Concord Industries from the Second Half of the 20th Century to Today**

### *West Concord Industry in Transition: The State of Manufacturing in West Concord in 1926*

The *Concord Enterprise* on July 14, 1926 reported on a meeting of the Board of Trade, which formed to encourage new manufacturing in Concord. It noted that manufacturing brought in about \$1,200,000 per year, with \$350,000 of this attributable to retail. They bemoaned that the town of Concord, which was focused on literary and residential rather than “mercantile” concerns, had not promoted Concord Junction manufacturing. They cautioned that in the past the railroad had brought business to Concord Junction, but that the advent of the automobile had affected the profitability of the railroad and they encouraged Concord Junction residents and businesses to continue to use the railroad to avoid a discontinuation of the railroad lines. They discussed advertising the advantages of Concord Junction to businesses that may have been considering moving. These benefits included its nearness to the railroad junction and the New York market, the efficiency of both the fire and municipal light departments, many other town services that make up for the high residential tax rates, closeness to workers living in Maynard, and Concord Junction’s low house rents. Features still needed in Concord Junction included a sewer, which was planned, a bank, a convenient place to pay utility and tax bills, beautification of the business center, better street lighting, and more worker housing.

### *The Coming of Technology Industries*

Beginning in about the 1950s, as the region’s economy began to turn to high technology, so did West Concord’s industry. GenRad, originally General Radio, moved to West Concord, in the 1950s, with Nuclear Metals coming in 1958 to the site of the former gunpowder mill. Other smaller enterprises also opened in West Concord, like the Electronic Space Structures Corporation which arrived in 1962. Today, a number of technology-driven industries, such as Trashology, Green Labs Recycling, and Plug Power, continue to find West Concord an attractive and beneficial place to bring their operations. Trashology develops innovative technology to help businesses process waste onsite rather than sending it to landfills or traditional recycling. Green Labs recycling provides “locally-based, cost effective plastic recycling solutions to help make science sustainable.” Plug Power “helps businesses achieve greater productivity and sustainability in an electrified world through hydrogen and fuel cells.”

### *More Traditional Industry and Crafts Industries Still Abound*

More traditional industries continued in West Concord. In 1968, Leather Shop was founded by Merrill Weingrod and Phoebe Salten to make beautiful and stylish leather belts at 152 Commonwealth Ave. The belts were sold in department and chain stores throughout the US. They eventually employed a multi-national workforce of 400 people and continued in business for 20 years. Currently, Lawless Upholstery, Potager Soap Company, the JH Klein Wassink and Company cabinet-makers, and many others join West Concord's fascinating manufacturing history.

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*While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this brief narrative, we are happy to  
make any necessary corrections. If you find an error, please contact the West Concord Junction  
Cultural District Committee through the Planning Department so we may correct it.*