Volume 22, Number 3 Fall 2008



Loom and Spindle

THE MILL MUSEUM OF CONNECTICUT/
WINDHAM TEXTILE AND HISTORY MUSEUM

COMING EVENTS:

- ***Exhibit: Sewing Revolution: the Machine that Changed the World.*** Sept. 26 through Dec. 28.
- ***Festival of Trees & Gift Shop Sale.*** Dec. 1, 5-8 PM. Festival of Trees open to public. 10% or more off most items in the museum gift shop. Free gift wrapping. Free refreshments.
- ***Victorian Holiday Tea.*** Dec. 5, 5-7 PM. Enjoy an assortment of teas, sandwiches, scones, and pastry amidst a Christmas Tree Fairyland. $15 per person.
- ***Celebration of Gingerbread.*** Dec.6, 1-3 PM.
- ***Festival of Trees Christmas Tree Auction.*** Dec. 11, 7-8:30 PM. Wine and cheese and holiday desserts. Bid on the beautifully decorated Christmas trees that have been donated by area businesses. $10 per person admission.
- ***Holiday Gift Wrapping.*** Dec. 6-7, 13-14, 20-24. East Brook Mall.

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Sewing Revolution: The Machine that Changed the World

A new exhibit has opened at the Textile Museum that explores the history and development of sewing machines. Featuring more than 60 antique machines, the exhibit recounts how sewing machines transformed both the textile and industry and the lives of millions of women around the world. The exhibit will be open through December, 2008. The exhibit is funded from a grant from Schiller's Sewing Circle in Willimantic, CT.

The core of the exhibit is the Museum's stunning William E. Wright Collection, 47 rare antique sewing machines donated to the Textile Museum in 1994 by the now defunct Wright Museum of Ware, MA . At the time of the donation, the collection was valued at $225,000. During the past twelve years, the Textile Museum has augmented the collection with about 20 other sewing machines donated by individuals in eastern Connecticut. The exhibit also features six industrial sewing machines on loan from Charles Merrow and the Merrow Sewing Machine Company, formerly of Mansfield, Hartford, and Newington, CT, but now located in Wareham, MA.

"We've wanted to do an exhibit of the Museum's sewing machines for a long time," said volunteer collections curator Jamie Eves, who is also a history professor at the University of Connecticut. "The collection is large and features a number of rare and antique machines. But we wanted to do it in a way that emphasized the historical significance of the sewing machine — how it fundamentally transformed American industry and the everyday lives of millions of people, especially women."

To make sure that the impact of the sewing machine on women was included, the Museum tapped the expertise of Carol Buch, who teaches women's studies at the University of Connecticut. Buch and Eves designed two social history vignettes that are key parts of the exhibit: a reproduction of a c. 1900 sweatshop featuring several industrial sewing machines, and a reproduction of a Victorian middle-class sewing room.

"An exhibit like this required the help of many people," said Eves. "Michele Palmer, as chair of the Museum's Exhibits Committee, did most of the designing, as well as the research on the industrial trade cards, which form a visually stunning part of the exhibit. Carol Buch brought in many great elements that tie into women's history, including the sweatshop, the Victorian sewing room, and the home economics classroom. Michael Palmer spent untold hours cataloging the machines. Bev York, the Museum's Educator, contributed a display on the inventors Howe and Singer. Schiller's Sewing Circle cleaned and restored one of the old treadle-powered machines to working order. The Merrow Company loaned us several of their rare antique machines. It's just a terrific exhibit."



A worker toils over an antique treadle-powered industrial sewing machine in an exhibit on sewing machines at the Textile Museum. A second industrial machine — its exact purpose unknown — stands behind her, in front of rolls of fabric waiting to be sewn into garments. Can any of our readers tell us what the second machine was used for?

News & Notes

The Textile Museum thanks everyone who donated money for purchasing new folding chairs. We have 30 new chairs.

The Textile Museum is also an events center. In September, we hosted a large wedding. Anyone interested in renting the Museum for an event should contact Brooke Shannon at the Museum.

The Yale Art Museum donated four large, climate-controlled display cases to the Textile Museum. Willimantic realtor Brian McCarthy loaned a truck to a group of Textile Museum volunteers, who picked up the cases.

The Museum's gift shop, the Linen Company Store, has numerous items on sale for the winter holidays, including prints of six different Mary Baum paintings. Baum, a Willimantic-Windham area artist who paints in the folk art style, donated the numbered prints. A signing event is in the planning stages. The Linen Company Store carries a number of other art items, locally produced crafts, a variety of knitted goods, and books, among other items.

The Museum is holding a Christmas tree silent auction fundraiser this year. Willimantic-Windham area businesses and organizations will be donating small, tabletop-size pre-decorated trees, ideal for window displays. The trees will be available in the Museum on Dec. 1, from 5-8 PM, for a sneak preview. The silent auction will be held at the Museum on Dec. 11, from 7-8:30 PM.



"Let It Snow" — one of six different Mary Baum art prints for sale in the Museum's gift shop, the Linen Company Store.

Pat Miller and Barbara Wright donated a new, state-of-the-art DVD player to the Museum.

The Museum will hold its annual meeting on Thursday, Nov. 13, at 7:00 PM. All Museum members are invited. The purpose of the annual meeting is to elect officer sand a Board of Directors for the upcoming year.

Wachovia Bank has donated a spinning wheel and a weaving machine to the Museum.

Special thanks to Jose and the AIC for helping the Museum move heavy display cases and other items from the Bev York Room, the Museum's main exhibit hall, into storage, and for helping with several other tasks.

Power Point Presentations at the Museum

Recently, two of the Museum's staff — Educational Consultant Beverly York and volunteer Collections Curator Jamie Eves — presented power point slide shows at the Museum.

York presented a fascinating examination of the impact of the 1938 Hurricane on eastern Connecticut. She incorporated numerous photographs showing the devastation — steeples tumbled, trees uprooted, bridges washed out — and the high water levels and surging rivers. She also described the hurricane's impact on people's social lives.

Eves used photographs and other images from the Museum's collection to present a synopsis of the rise of the textile industry in eastern Connecticut, covering the period 1820 to 1920.



Hurricane of 1938. Bridge Street in Willimantic, CT.

From the Archives: Sewing Machine Revolution

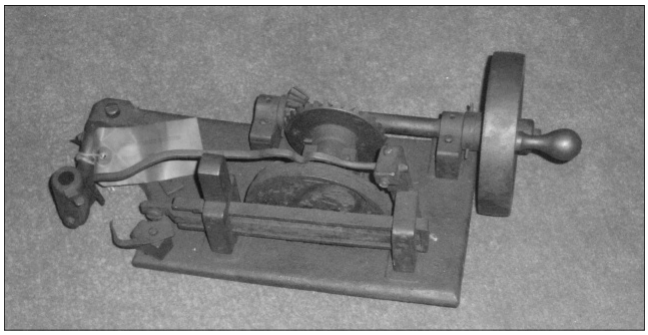
By Jamie Eves, Collections Curator

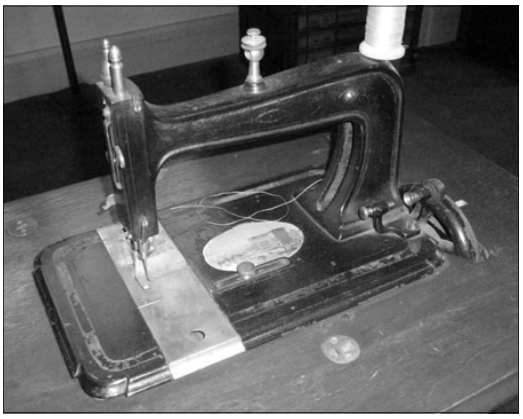
The invention of the sewing machine by Connecticut native Elias Howe in 1846 touched off a technological, industrial, and social revolution. By making possible the manufacture of inexpensive clothing, it greatly speeded up the pace of industrialization, begun only a few decades earlier with the inventions of the spinning jenny, power loom, and cotton gin, and led to the construction of newer, larger, and more modern textile mills. By changing the way that clothing was manufactured, it led to the decline of cottage industry and the old putting out system and ushered in the age of the sweatshop. By appealing to middle-class homemakers, it facilitated the Cult of Domesticity and provided middle-class women with the opportunity to prove they could master complex machinery. Widely available a half century before typewriters or automobiles, more than any other machine it came to symbolize women's work in the modern era.

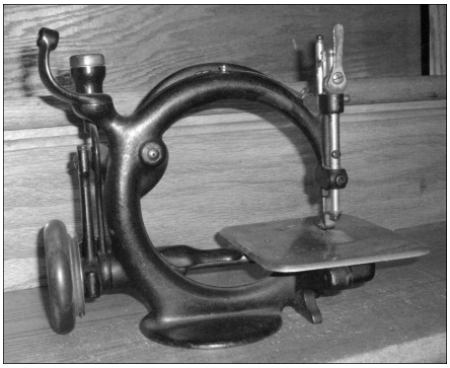
In the 1800s, Connecticut was a major center for the manufacture of sewing machines. Wheeler and Wilson — the chief rival to Singer until Singer bought it out in 1908 — had its factory in Bridgeport. Weed manufactured its sewing machines in Hartford. The Merrow Company, which made primarily industrial rather than home sewing machines, got its start in Mansfield, but moved to Hartford in 1892. In addition, sewing machines were manufactured in Berlin, Danbury, Norwich, Bristol, Meriden, and Middletown. Five companies operated out of Bridgeport alone.

Clockwise from right: 1876 Johnson & Clark one-foot treadle lockstitch, Orange, MA; 1880 Wilcox & Gibbs chainstitch, New York; 1871 Finkle & Lyon lockstitch, Middletown, CT; and pre-1890 Merrow overlock industrial sewing machine, made in Mansfield, CT, on loan from Merrow Company.









Museum Membership Renewal Fall 2008

If you have already renewed your membership, thank you!

Student/Senior, $10 _____ Sustaining, $50 _____

Individual, $15 _____ Patron, $100 _____

Family/Household, $25 _____ Sponsor, $250 _____

Benefactor, above $250 _____ Additional Donation _____

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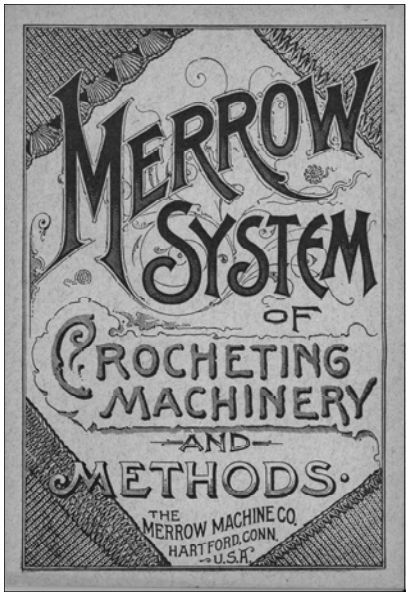
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The Merrow Sewing Machine Company

When the Windham Textile and History Museum began putting together its new exhibit on the history of sewing machines, "Sewing Revolution: The Machine That Changed the World," we never thought that we would discover that a sewing machine manufacturer once operated in our own backyard in eastern Connecticut. We knew that 19th-century sewing machines had been manufactured in Hartford at the Weed Company , and that Bridgeport had been a major center for making sewing machines, with several manufacturers, including the 19th-century giant Wheeler and Wilcox. But the conventional wisdom was that, while the textile industry had predominated in eastern Connecticut, most of the metals industry had been in the western part of the state. The Museum even has several sewing machines manufactured in western Connecticut — in Bridgeport, Hartford, and Middletown — in its collection.



But then Museum staff and volunteers found a reference to 19th-century sewing machines made by the Merrow Machine Company. We knew that the there was a village called Merrow in the town of Mansfield, Connecticut., only about a dozen miles from the Museum Was there a connection between Merrow sewing machines and Merrow, CT?

As it turned out, there was.

The Merrow Sewing Machine Company, as it has been called since 2004, traces its origins to the Merrow Company in Merrow, CT. Joseph Makens Merrow founded the company in the 1830s to manufacture gunpowder. When an explosion destroyed his mill in 1837, Merrow built a knitting mill on the same site, using waterpower from the adjacent Willimantic River. The company bought local wool, which it sorted, scoured, dyed, picked, carded, spun, and knitted into hosiery. Over the 1840s the business expanded, marketing its wares through merchants in New York City. Like many 19th-century manufacturers, the Merrow Company added a machine shop to tool replacement parts for its machines.

In the 1840s J. M. Merrow invented a crochet machine to finish the tops of men's stockings. The company continued to make the machines even after Merrow's death in 1847, selling them to other manufacturers. Several additional industrial crochet and sewing machines were patented.

In 1887 the mill in Merrow burned, and the company relocated to Hartford, CT, where it concentrated on manufacturing overlock sewing machines to overedge fabric and add decorative trim. The company was renamed the Merrow Machine Company in 1893. More than 100 patents have been issued in the Merrow name. In 1982 the company relocated to Newington, CT, and in 2004 it changed its name to the Merrow Sewing Machine Company and moved to Wareham, MA.