

FROM WINN WATCH HANDS to WINCHESTER HOSPITAL

By Ellen Knight¹

When colonists from Charlestown moved out to the Winchester area the primary reason was water. The water proved good not only for drinking and agriculture, it provided power for the first mills, not only in the center where Mill Pond has become a lasting reminder of the town's mill history, but in other locations as well, including 620 Washington St.

In the late 18th century, the Richardson family built two mills by the Aberjona River above Forest Street. The first was a grist mill and the second a saw mill. In the 19th century, it was known as the site of a mahogany mill. However, today the site is not associated as much with those mills as it is with the watch hand industry which operated there for over a century and whose buildings still stand.

WINN GOES INTO BUSINESS



Original Winn brick building

The business began in a barn in Waltham, where Bardwell A. Goodell and James H. Winn built some machines and started to manufacture watch hands. Goodell had been foreman at the Waltham Watch Co. and Winn was the husband of Goodell's sister-in-law. In 1872, needing a better source of water power than they found in Waltham or Woburn, the partners chose the site of the old Richardson mills. Goodell and Winn tore down the mahogany mill and built a small two-story factory in 1876.

At that time, the watch manufacturing industry itself was just taking off in America. Because watch hands had previously been made by hand and American watch manufacturers were highly dependent upon imported watch hands, Goodell and Winn's machinery, which made mass production possible, put them in a position to succeed with a domestic product.

The business did succeed. In 1896, Frank W. Winn, second son of James, bought out Goodell's interest in the company and the company name changed to J. H. Winn and Son. Growth in the business necessitated growth in the building. In 1900 a brick building replaced the wooden one. Due to pollution in the river, water power was abandoned in favor of a gasoline powered dynamo and later electricity. The building was enlarged several times, from 1910 through 1969.



Frank, Harry, and Arthur Winn, 1934

James H. Winn died in 1913. In 1914, James' two other sons, Arthur L. and Harry T., joined the business and the company became J. H. Winn's Sons & Company. Frank W. Winn died in 1933; Harry T. Winn died in July 1945. The firm was purchased by three Winn in-laws and incorporated in 1953 under the name of J. H. Winn, Inc.



Winn building with a 1957 addition

Originally a watch-hand manufactory, over the years the company diversified. It produced pointers for speedometers, gauges, compasses, and other machines. In addition to pointers, it manufactured diverse stampings, screw machine products, and industrial finishing work. During wartime, it manufactured components for clocks, gauges, aircraft, radar, ammunition, ordnance equipment, and guided missiles. In 1976, it was reported that the firm made 40,000 different types of pointers. At that time, the company produced about 70,000 pointers a year.

In 1968, the Winn company became a division of the McCord Corporation, a Detroit-based supplier of the auto industry. It diversified further, becoming a major supplier to the automotive industry and expanding its operations into the field of decorative metals for the appliance industry. At its peak it employed about 350 people.

PINE GROVE AND SITE DEDICATION

On October 1, 1988, an employee team and the managers of McCord Winn dedicated the site “to 200 years of continuous manufacturing” through the unveiling of a plaque with the following inscription:

“This grove commemorates the 200th year of continuous manufacturing at this site
Jeduthan Richard Mill 1787
Harrison Parker Mahogany Mill 1840
James H. Winn & Son 1872
McCord Winn Textron 1987.”

The dedication booklet stated that through its continued beautifications efforts the company had “shown that manufacturing can co-exist successfully with the surrounding community.”

The plaque was sited at a pine grove, created in the 1930s by transplanting some young pine trees from Winn-owned land in Wilmington (where employees sometimes had the opportunity to work in cranberry bogs during slack periods in the Depression) to the grounds of the Winchester plant.

Apparently the pine grove was damaged during later storms and at some point after 1988 the plaque was removed. When the building changed hands in the early 21st century, it was gone.



McCord Winn continued in business in Winchester for a couple more decades, became a subsidiary of Textron Inc., but eventually closed. In 1994 the Winn-McCord-Textron building was purchased by the International Family Church which sold the 11-acre site in 2005 to Winchester Hospital.

CENTER FOR CANCER CARE

To allow the Hospital to develop the site for its Center for Cancer Care, Town Meeting twice rezoned the parcel, the second time to a new Health Services Overlay District specially written under the guidance of a Winchester Planning Board/Hospital working committee to allow development that would be beneficial both to the Town and the Hospital. A three-phase development plan was outlined. The first phase was the conversion and expansion of the existing factory building into an oncology facility, which opened in 2007. This conversion involved the demolition of all but part of the original building. New construction, designed by Steffian Bradley Associates, was added in 2011, allowing all oncology services and staff to come together to offer integrated care.



NATIONAL REGISTER

Determining that the Winn building was eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Winchester Historical Commission recommended its nomination to the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

The local commission stated that the building is “a well-preserved and excellent representative example of its type” and identifies the historically significant sections are those constructed in 1900, 1921, and 1931. These “were constructed in a manner consistent with conventional mill design developed throughout the second half of the 19th century.”

Copies of the letter and description were given to various local boards and to Winchester Hospital, which announced that it would save the historic building and make it a focal point of

the proposed adjacent greenway.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on April 13, 2007. This revision supersedes all previous articles.