

The View from The Crow's Nest



Newsletter of the Mattapoisett Historical Society

Spring 2012 / Issue XVII

Fifty-four years of preserving the past for the benefit of the future.

The Mendell Manufacturing Company and Charles Stetson Mendell

By Seth Mendell

One of Mattapoisett's forgotten industries is the Mendell Manufacturing Company whose factory building stood on Railroad Avenue across from Mattapoisett's railroad station and around the corner from Depot Street. Built when electricity was in its infancy, the company made marble and slate switchboards of all sizes. These switchboards were needed to bring electricity into a building and were marketed throughout New England to theaters, municipal buildings, factories and military installations. Charles Stetson Mendell (the author's grandfather) was the owner and CEO of the company which operated from 1914 until 1930.

Charles Stetson Mendell was a native son of Mattapoisett, born November 28, 1861 in the family home on the banks of the Mattapoisett River near the corner of Neck Road and Route 6. The house still stands today and was built by his grandfather,



Charles Stetson Mendell circa 1920

Captain Seth Mendell (the author's namesake) who served in the Mattapoisett Militia during the War of 1812 when the British attempted to land and burn the shipyards that ringed the harbor. Charles Stetson Mendell's parents, John and Abby Mendell, owned a large farm whose



Farmhouse at corner of Neck Road and Route 6

fields and pasturelands ran along both sides of the Mattapoisett River. John Mendell's apple orchards extended up into part of what today is Reservation Golf Course. Across the Neck Road from the farm was a granite quarry which had been in operation for over a century. Granite from the quarry had been used to build the wharves along the harbor front for the shipyards in the late 1700's and early 1800's and later for Ned's Point light and Pilgrim's Tower in Provincetown.

When grandfather was born his parents gave him the family name of their close friends, the Stetsons. Consequently, grandfather became Charles Stetson Mendell. The original Charles Stetson had established Mattapoisett's first major shipyard a century earlier. With the arrival of grandfather in 1861, John and Abby now had four children: Clara, John, Jr, Charles and a daughter, Lucy, from John's first marriage to Sarah Barstow who died at the age of 31 in 1857. John had remarried quickly to Abby Bowles. She was a young bride of 17 and bore him three children as mentioned.

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Mendell Manufacturing Company (continued from cover)

Tragedy struck early in Charles' life when his father died of pneumonia in 1865. He had gone out in a cold wet rain to trim the broken branches in his apple orchard after a northeast gale. He had a chest cold and two days later he was dead. John Mendell was laid to rest in Hammond Town Cemetery. One of grandfather's first memories was of his mother's concern about whether there would be enough carriages to carry the people attending the funeral in the house on Neck Road to the cemetery at the end of River Road.

So suddenly Abby Mendell, at the age of 24, was all alone with four children, a farm to run, and pregnant with Ellis Lincoln Mendell who was born April 9th, just five days before Lincoln was shot. The only thing she could do was to remarry as quickly as possible, which she did to Edmond Hammond. Grandfather always referred to his stepfather as, Uncle Ed, never as father. There was a reason. We go back a generation to Captain Seth Mendell. Seth had married Jane Bullen of Farmington, Maine. They had six children and the first son was named John: grandfather's father. Seth died in the 1830's leaving Jane with six children. She quickly married Thomas Penn Hammond who lived on Neck Road (where the Craig Collyers now live) and she bore him five sons, one of which was Edmond, half brother to John Mendell and uncle to grandfather.

Ed Hammond was a lucky man when he married Abby Mendell, as he got the whole farm. It was a typical New England farm of the 19th century with a barn in back of the house along with numerous sheds and fenced in areas. Grandfather's day started at 5 AM with the feeding of the animals, milking the cows and splitting the kindling for his mother's cook stove. As an old man he remembered clearly the early morning smells and sounds from the barn and barnyard. Then there was the plowing, planting, cultivating and harvesting, all with horses, oxen and wagons. There was hay to get in, fences to mend and cord wood to cut for the winter fires.

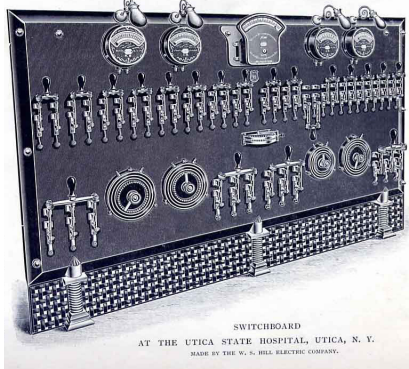
Uncle Ed also had both a gravel contract with the town and a slaughtering business. When a cellar hole was dug, grandfather would take the gravel from the hole, and using a tipcart, would spread the

gravel on the town roads. And when a pig needed to be slaughtered it was grandfather who was sent to fetch the animal from the neighboring farm. One such time, the pig was a large one and got away from the eleven year old boy armed only with a willow switch, running through the backyards of the houses in the village before an embarrassed and exhausted boy could corral it.

Charles and his sister, Clara, attended first grade at the one room schoolhouse at Swift's Creek (near the present town landing at the head of the harbor) with the children from Brant Island. The following year, 1867, they walked the length of River Road to the Hammondtown School at Jenny's Corner. For the sixth and seventh grades grandfather walked either the railroad tracks across Goodspeeds Island or County Road to the Olive Branch School at the corner of Church and Pearl Streets in the village. Next, he attended the Intermediate School at the corner of Church and Barstow Streets and finally the Barstow School at Main and County (Grange Hall) for a few years of high school before dropping out to support the family. It was interesting to note that the years grandfather walked back and forth to school, the shipyards were building on the waterfront and he would have seen the launching of the Wanderer in 1878.

Just when grandfather left Mattapoissett to seek employment elsewhere is not recorded. He captained a tourist steamer on Lake Winnepesaukee for several seasons and worked for the Fairbanks Scale Works in St. Johnsbury, VT. At some point he became interested in electricity, and in the late 1880's at the age of 28, he took a job with the Economic Electric Manufacturing Company in Brockton, MA and in a few years' time became superintendent.

Thomas Edison had invented the light bulb in 1879 and the first hydroelectric power station at Niagara Falls began producing



W.S.Hill switchboard at the Utica State Hospital



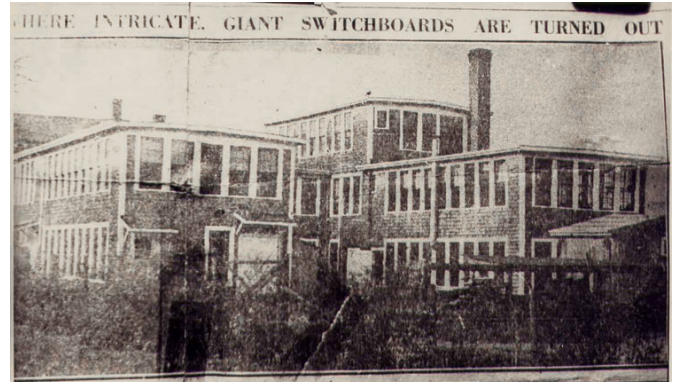
electricity in 1882. Cities and towns were starting to electrify.

During the 1890's he was employed by the New Bedford Union Street Railroad Company as superintendent. He ran the first electric trolley to Lincoln Park on the New Bedford/Fall River Road. The electric rail (trolley) came through Mattapoisett in 1900, and in the same year Charles Mendell accepted a position with the W.S. Hill Company, which had moved from Boston to New Bedford in 1896. The company made electric switchboards and switches and was located on the corner of Elm and Water Streets. Grandfather went up the ladder from Treasurer to General Manager to Chief Executive Officer. There was a tremendous market for electrical products nationwide. Locally, boards and switches were made for such companies as Edison Electric Light, Pairpoint Glass, Morse Twist Drill, The Merchant Bank Buildings and the Harvard Medical School.

In 1908 he negotiated the sale of the Hill Company to the Taunton/New Bedford Copper Company. The U.S. was in the midst of a recession and markets were down. Such a move allowed the electrical department under new ownership to continue to exist with grandfather as General Manager. In a few years, prosperity returned and the electrical department of the Taunton Copper Company increased three fold under his direction. Seventy skilled workers followed the move from New Bedford to Taunton.

Charles Mendell married Carol Dennis of Mattapoisett in 1888. The couple had three children: Anne, John and Abby. Unfortunately, Carol died of breast cancer in 1906 leaving him with three teenage children. The family lived near the corner of Church and Mechanic Streets.

The 50th Anniversary Celebration of Mattapoisett's separation from Rochester in 1857 took place in the summer of 1907. Grandfather stepped forward to chair the Anniversary Committee and set up twelve sub committees to plan events for the weeklong celebration. One committee wrote the town's first history, "Mattapoisett and Old Rochester," and another, the Music Committee, which he



Mendell Manufacturing Company corner of Depot Street and Railroad Avenue. (View from Main Street, note roof of railroad station top left.)

must have had a personal interest in, featured a violinist by the name of Florence Purrington. In the spring of 1910, Charles and Florence were married. He was 49 and she was 39. Charles Jr. (the author's father) was born within the year and the family lived in Taunton for, as mentioned, grandfather had sold the Hill Company to Taunton Copper.

Four years later in 1914, he brought the Electrical Division from the Taunton Copper Company and moved it to Mattapoisett under the name Mendell Manufacturing Company. The catalyst for this move had been the failing health of Florence's parents, George and Olivia Purrington. With the company now in Mattapoisett, young Charles Jr. and his parents moved in with the elderly Purringtons at 36 Main Street.

The Mendell Manufacturing Company occupied a large frame building built in the shape of a U on Railroad Avenue across from the railroad station. The bottom of the U, or the front of the building facing the street, was two stories with the two arms stretching toward Main Street. The U shape design afforded more windows and natural light. The New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad operated two sidings on the west side of the train station. The large slabs of slate and marble came by rail and

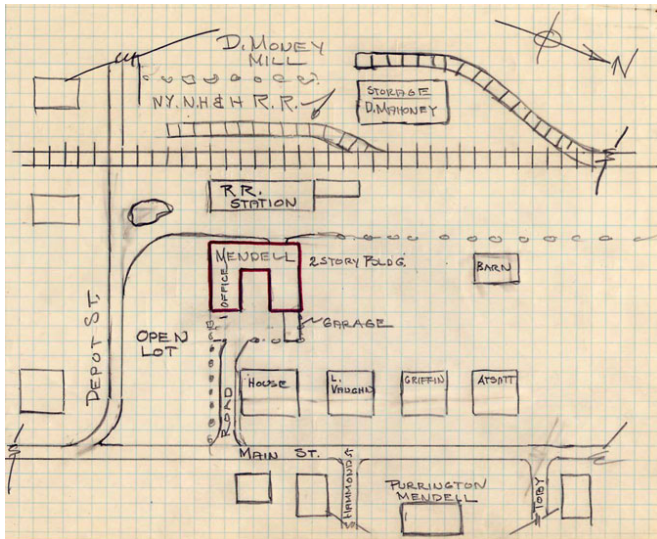


Charles Stetson Mendell weds Florence Purrington, 1910

(continued on next page)



Mendell Manufacturing Company (continued from page 3)



Sketch showing location of Mendell Manufacturing and railroad station

were stored in the vacant lot on Depot Street next to the factory.

Electrical insulation as we know it today was non-existent and slate and marble were used to insulate the copper switches. The large slabs were cut to size, holes drilled and the knife switches attached. The finished boards, some coated and others polished, with terminals ready for wiring were shipped by rail to waiting customers.

The foundry was located in the lower section of the south wing near Depot Street. Frances Rowland, Mattapoisett's historian for many years before his death, and contemporary of Charles Jr., remembered the smell of the hot metal as old "Jimmy" with a handle-bar mustache poured the molten copper from the furnace into the clay molds to make the copper switches. He also remembered how it was always "Charley" who had to go up and see his father, Mr. Mendell, when their baseball went through a factory window.

World War I was a prosperous time for the Mendell Manufacturing Company as was much of the decade of the 1920's. Cities and towns were electrifying, and hundreds of establishments needed electrical equipment. Forty people worked in the factory. John Mendell, grandfather's son from his first marriage, was plant manager. A number of workmen and families had followed the move from Taunton and were employed. One such family was the Bradley Family. However, times changed and

companies like General Electric and Westinghouse developed new materials and small compact switching units by the late 1920's. The Depression years were not good for business and Charles Mendell, nearly 70 years old, sold the company to Clark Holcomb, owner of the New Bedford Plumber Supply. The name, Mendell Electric, continued to exist, and was eventually sold for a second time to a firm in Dartmouth who ran an electrical retail outlet until the 1990's. The factory building in Mattapoisett sat vacant for several years and then burned to the ground one night sometime in the early 1930's. A crowd gathered to watch the flames. Later, grandfather had the land cleaned up and divided into house lots.

Charles Mendell was a gardener at heart. Having grown up on a farm, he possessed a green thumb and for forty years the "Purrington House" on Main Street was known as the "Mendell House", and Charles turned the extensive grounds into a Garden of Eden. There were walkways and garden paths, avenues of trees and clipped hedge rows and everywhere flowering shrubs and plants. The green lawn was carefully manicured around the garden beds. A flag pole stood on the north side of the house and on the south was a gazebo beneath a large spreading elm. Also on the south side was a formal rose garden and beyond the gazebo was a croquet court where Florence played croquet with her Purrington cousins on a summer's afternoon.

Following the sale of Mendell Electric, in the late 1920's, grandfather turned his attention to real estate and rental properties. He already owned several houses on Main Street he had purchased for



Purrington/Mendell House, Main Street

(continued on page 7)

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If, in our listing, we have missed anyone, please accept our sincere apologies and please contact us.

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2012 Upcoming Programs

Open House - June 28, 5:30 pm

Museum Opens - July 5

Ice Cream Social - July 11, 6:00 pm

Harbor Days - July 21 and 22

War of 1812 Lecture by Seth Mendell - August 2
at *Mattapoisett Library*

Heritage Days - August 3 - 5

Additional programs for children will be added this summer. The exact dates have yet to be determined. Please watch the website and Wanderer for location of programs and other events.

WELCOME, ELIZABETH!

By Jennifer N. McIntire

The Mattapoisett Historical Society is pleased to announce the appointment of our new curator Elizabeth Hutchison.

Elizabeth joins the Historical Society after spending thirteen years teaching and working in education at historical museums. For six years, Elizabeth taught history to seventh graders at the Wheeler School in Providence, RI. Prior to teaching in the classroom, Elizabeth was an education coordinator for the Fairfield Historical Society. She has experience developing, supervising, teaching, and evaluating educational programs for children as well as adults. At the South Street Seaport Museum, Elizabeth was the Elderhostel Coordinator, specializing in programs for senior citizens. She held internships at the Mystic Seaport Museum and Old Sturbridge Village.

Elizabeth began her new duties with the Historical Society in February of this year. She has been busy getting to know the collection as well as the membership. As she focuses on what we have, she is full of ideas for exhibitions for this year and beyond. Forging strong connections with the library, the Council on Aging and local schools, Elizabeth is eager to share Mattapoisett history with learners of all ages.



Photograph by Erix Fox

CURATOR'S CORNER

By Elizabeth Hutchison

My what an educational and busy first months I have had at the museum! Grants have been written, plans have been made for the summer, and projects have begun!

This summer's exhibit will feature a section on the War of 1812 as 2012 marks its 200th anniversary, and here in Mattapoisett, we have some interesting stories about this war involving night raids and seaweed forts. A second section of the summer exhibit will feature often overlooked treasures from the museum's storage areas-interesting, fun and scandalous objects will definitely keep the interest of male and female, old and young!

Having heard of all of the wonderful work of the Mattapoisett Museum and Carriage House volunteers, I am looking to expand our volunteer program to operate all year long. The idea is to match a volunteer's talents and interests with the needs of the Museum and Historical Society. More information will be forthcoming as plans evolve. **Also, since the summer is fast approaching, we will be working on the Summer Volunteer schedule in the next several weeks-if you would like to volunteer for one or more days, please let us know.**

On another note, we have had several new interesting items donated to the museum since January:

- A Bible from 1791 owned by Rev. Lemuel LeBaron, and other family papers.
- A blubber pot donated in "Shep" Shepley's honor.
- Ship timber's found by the Mattapoisett Highway department while digging in the Town Beach parking lot.
- Class photos from Center School (1912), and Mattapoisett Junior High School (1941).
- Oriental items from Dunseith's store.

Please feel free to email (mattapoisett.museum@verizon.net) or call me with any questions or suggestions. I look forward to getting to know all of you in the coming months.

Mendell Manufacturing Company (continued from page 4)

factory employees and now he built three cottages at the Cedars between Pico and Crescent Beaches.

He also owned several houses in Marion and a cottage on Snow Pond in Rochester. To service his properties, he turned his 1925 Buick Roadster into a pickup truck by removing the rumble seat and replacing it with a truck bed. A number of men who had been laid off following the sale of the factory continued to work for "Mr. Mendell." With so many houses, there were always repairs to be done along with gardening, cleaning and furniture to move.

Grandfather also involved himself in town affairs. He served as Water Commissioner, a Trustee of the Congregational Church and of Shipyard Park. As a member of the Town Improvement Association, he oversaw the passing of the Purrington property on Water Street to the Town and Shipyard Park. He was also a member of the Machacam Club and other Civic Organizations.

Florence died in 1949 and was buried in the Purrington plot in Cushing Cemetery. Grandfather continued to live in the "big house" in Mattapoissett with a housekeeper for a few years before going to

Mrs. George's nursing home on Mary's Pond in

Rochester. He passed away January 3, 1954 at the age of 93.

Several remembrances stand out in my mind about grandfather. When I was a little boy, I complained of a tooth ache. Grandfather took me into the kitchen and gave me a small glass of brown liquid telling me to hold it on my tooth. Of course, the raw whiskey burned my mouth and I gagged, choked and screamed bringing my grandmother and parents. Poor grandfather was in the "dog house."

Grandfather liked to buy me shoes, probably because as a boy shoes were hard to come by. I remember going to a shoe store on Purchase Street in New Bedford on several occasions and getting stiff brown leather shoes. In the summer I used to ride in the back of his old Buick "pickup" when he made the rounds of his rental houses. He liked to visit and always included me.

The last time I saw Grandfather before leaving for my sophomore year at college, he was seated behind a card table like he liked to do. On the table there was always a bottle of whiskey, a pack of cigarettes and a deck of cards. He loved to play gin rummy. Grandfather had a saying he often repeated as he held up his glass at cocktail time: "Here's to us! Who's like us? Damn few!"

Sea Chanteys Raise the Roof

By Maureen McCarthy

On Sunday, April 30, the Mattapoissett Historical Society hosted the New Bedford Sea Chantey Chorus and a rousing good time was had by all. An enthusiastic audience of more than 60 filled the church pews and even overflowed into the balconies. Heads were bobbing, toes were tapping in time to the music and folks were singing along with the chorus. The music covered a range of styles from the traditional work songs, chanteys, to river songs like the "Old Fall River Line" and "Who Built the Ark?". We even had a few pirates show up with "15 Men on a Dead Man's Chest". The song "Barque Gay Head" was particularly noted as it tells of the ship that was built and captained by Mattapoissett residents. A poignant moment came when the old pump organ lent its voice to a wonderful old hymn named "Calm is the Sea".

There are several Mattapoissett residents in the Sea Chantey chorus and they were delighted to sing before such a welcoming home audience. All of the singers were appreciative of their reception and hoped that they would have the opportunity to sing here again. The Clifford Ashley mural stunned them in its breadth of coastline and illustrations, and they were fairly amazed at all the museum had to offer. Many of them were heard to say "I'll be back!"



Photo by Robert Chiarito



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WORD SEARCH

By Lisa Hill

Summer People

Late 1900's - Early 20th Century

Dickerman	Wells	Hinsdale
Browne	Ingersoll	Field
Brower	Blake	Nickerson
Thomas	Tyler	Barklie
Chapman	DeKoven	Nash
Dalton	Wheelwright	Peters
Tiffany	Windeler	Stoddard
Maury	Dupalet	
King	Dumaresq	
Stewart	Means	

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