

Whittier Mill

Significance and Founding of the Mill

Located on Stackpole Street, near the Concord River's confluence with the Merrimack, the Whittier Mill dates from 1878, with a major addition in 1888. The family-run company that operated this mill has the distinction of being one of the few manufacturing concerns in late 19th century America headed by a woman, the founder's daughter.

Moses Whittier, the founder of the company, was born in Canaan, New Hampshire, and grew up on his family farm. At the age of 18, he moved to Hallowell, Maine, and learned the trades of machinist and jeweler, while living with a brother. Although troubled by poor health Whittier gravitated into the field of mechanics and in 1825 he accepted the position of superintendent of a cotton mill in Winthrop, Maine.



Moses Whittier founded the mills that bore his name in 1867.



The Whittier Mill was erected on Stackpole Street in 1879 soon after the demolition of a group of boardinghouses, (shown here in this 1879 atlas of Lowell) which were owned by the nearby Massachusetts Cotton Mills.

Whittier superintended the mill in Winthrop for only four years before moving to Lowell and, under the direction of Merrimack Mills agent Warren Colburn at Merrimack Mills, he started up one of company's cloth-dressing rooms. Whittier gained a reputation as an able mechanic and manager, and when the Boott Cotton Mills began in 1835 he took a position there as overseer, initiating that company's cloth-dressing production. He remained with the Boott Mills for a number of years, including the period, beginning in 1852, when he started his own manufacturing of loom harnesses and twine. Around 1865 he resigned from the Boott to concentrate solely on his company.¹

¹ Whittier established this enterprise in 1852. He initiated the firm Moses Whittier & Son in 1870 and five years later Moses retired, leaving his son, Henry F. Whittier, as sole proprietor. See Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1889), p. 320; Hurd, *History of Middlesex County*, pp. 87-88.



The Whittier Cotton Mill Company's factory on Stackpole Street was originally constructed in 1879 and relied on steam to power its carding and spinning machinery.

Moses Whittier's only son, Henry F., born in Lowell in 1833, educated in the city's public schools, and a graduate of Lowell High School, returned to the Spindle City in 1867, after working for 17 years in Boston for an insurance firm, and joined his father's business. For a number of years they ran the firm as Moses Whittier & Son. In 1875 the elder Whittier retired, leaving his son as sole proprietor. Henry Whittier oversaw the construction of the new mill on Stackpole Street in 1879. The Whittier Company manufactured cotton yarns, twines, banding, and rope in this three-story, steam-powered mill.

Helen Whittier Assumes Control

The only daughter of Moses and Lucinda Whittier to survive into adulthood, Helen Augusta Whittier, was born in Lowell in 1846 and likely received an education in a private academy. At the age of 23 she and several other Lowell women founded a literary society originally named the Dickens club, since Charles Dickens had visited Lowell in 1842. This organization later changed its name to the XV Club.² In addition to her duties as a Whittier company official, beginning in 1888, Helen Whittier also helped found the Middlesex Women's Club and for many years was a nationally recognized figure in the women's club movement. She was active in local educational, arts, and cultural organizations and was a talented amateur photographer.³

² "Unique XV Club of Lowell," *Boston Globe*, March 25, 1906.

³ For an early biographical sketch highlighting the path-breaking role of Helen Whittier in the textile industry see Frances E. Willard, *Occupations for Women*, (New York: The Success Company, 1907), pp. 356-357. For an example of her role in the nation's women's clubs see Helen A. Whittier, "Report of the Committee on Arts and Crafts," *The Federated Bulletin*, .v. 2, (October 1904), pp. 5-6.



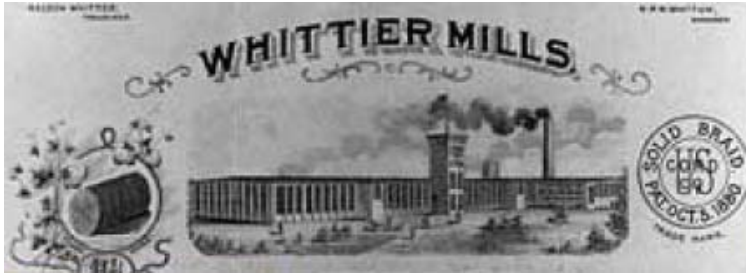
This portrait of Lowell-born Helen Whittier dates from the 1890s. Whittier was among the few women who ran a manufacturing company in late-19th century America.

Helen Whittier became involved in the family business in 1888 when her brother, who was seriously ailing with Bright's disease, died in September of that year. With no other male heir to take over the firm, Helen then assumed control with assistance from her cousin Nelson Whittier, who moved from Chicopee, Massachusetts, to Lowell to superintend the mill.⁴ Over the next 15 years Helen Whittier served as president and treasurer of the company. She presided over the operation of the Lowell mill in the 1890s, the construction of a new mill in Chattahoochee, Georgia, in 1895-96, and the closing of the Lowell mill in 1901,⁵ after which the company was sold to Paul Butler, the son of Benjamin Butler, and Charles B. Stevens.⁶

⁴ The early years of the Whittier Cotton Company is highlighted in D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts: With Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men*, v. 2, (Philadelphia: J.W. Lewis & Co., 1890), pp. 87-88. Also see "Lowell Manufacturing Improvements," *Lowell Morning Times*, September 29, 1879; "Enlarging Their Works," *Saturday Vox Populi*, July 28, 1888; and "Miss Whittier on Southern and Asiatic Competition," *Lowell Mail*, July 19, 1897.

⁵ In the summer of 1895, the Whittier Cotton Company incorporated in Georgia with a capital of \$75,000 to build a mill in Chattahoochee, an unincorporated town outside of Atlanta, and completed it the following year. See *Fibre & Fabric*, v. 21, (July 6, 1895), p. 234; "10,000 Spindles Whirring Here," *Atlanta Journal*, July 18, 1896.

⁶ Ames Stevens, "Hither and Yon with Spindle and Loom," unpublished manuscript, 1976, copies available at the American Textile History Museum. See pp. 5-6 for the takeover of the Whittier Mills by Paul Butler and Charles B. Stevens. Other members of the Whittier family remained involved in the Georgia mill, including Helen's nephew Nelson Whittier, as well as Nelson's son, Walter R. B. Whittier, and two grandsons, Paul and Sidney Whittier. An account of the Whittier family's operation of the Georgia mill is in Stevens, "Hither and Yon with Spindle and Loom," pp. 30-33.



This letterhead from 1901 from the Whittier Mills includes an engraving of the factory near Atlanta.

By 1920 Helen Whittier was living in Boston and was still active in the Massachusetts State Federation of Women's Clubs. Upon her death in 1925 the federation established a scholarship in her name, which continues today.⁷

⁷ "Women's Clubs in Autumn Session," *Boston Globe*, November 14, 1925.