

Chatham Factories

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

Although the idea of factories in Chatham may seem odd and inconsistent with our view of the town, there have been factories of different sorts throughout the town's history. Not surprisingly, the first known factory was one that produced goods for the many vessels that plied our waters. In 1828 Joseph Young established a block factory at the water mill he had created in 1819. Of course the blocks he manufactured were the kind used for pulleys on ships.

In 1856 Isaac B. Young established a shoe manufacturing business in a shed behind his house near the present-day rotary. His 30 employees made and sold the shoes throughout the country until the factory was discontinued in 1863. During World War II in North Chatham the Crescent Novelty Manufacturing Company in a simple tar paper shack that was formerly a boathouse on the shore of Pleasant Bay made wheel pullers for amphibious boats. The boss was Herbert F. "Cap" Baker, who in peace time owned a boat in which he took out fishing parties. The foreman of the shop was Charlie Chase, who supervised two women employees, one of whom was his granddaughter. It is reported that the resident dog wagged his tail up and down like a pump handle rather than the side-to-side motion of most dogs. Although the smallest "war plant" in the state, it was visited by the chief of the Boston Ordnance District, who proclaimed it unsurpassed by any plant of its size in the country.

A much larger and more impressive factory was that of the Weld Manufacturing Company that was founded by Gould Weld, a member of one of Boston's most prominent families that ultimately produced a governor. He found his way to Chatham because his family spent their summers at the former Tomlinson Estate on Old Harbor Road. In the garage on the property he rebuilt and remodeled cars, where Edwin Eldredge and George Goodspeed assisted him. It was not long before he needed more space than provided by the garage, so he built a building on the corner of Depot Road and Crowell Road, next to what was then the Nickerson Lumber Company and is now Oyster Heights condominiums.

Mr. Weld and his assistants rebuilt cars here until World War I, when it was given a government contract to make artillery shells. Because of the highly sensitive nature of the work, the building was guarded at all times by uniformed guards and guard dogs. It was surrounded by an electrified fence and was one of the first buildings in Chatham to have electric lights. More than 140 men and women worked in the factory in two shifts, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 7a.m.

Car loads of steel came to the factory by train in stacks one foot high covered with protective tar, which had to be removed with kerosene. The steel was used to make one- pound glazed shells that were washed with soda and lacquered before being packed in boxes of 500 artillery nose parts to each one to be shipped to Maryland for assembly.

At the end of the war all of the machinery was removed and the factory was closed.

A less dramatic factory or shop was that of Spaulding Dunbar that made wooden boats and was located at the end of Eliphamet's Lane on the edge of the Little Mill Pond. When he outgrew that building, Dunbar moved his factory to the sail loft building on Bridge Street and added a wing at the rear where the final construction of catabouts and whistlers was completed in a room with double doors wide enough for the finished boats to be

moved outside for launching.

When Dunbar closed his boatbuilding shop around 1942, it was replaced by the Old Harbor Candle Factory that was owned by John Emery, the proprietor of the Swinging Basket. At that time large and fanciful candles were very much in demand. The basic shape was about five inches in diameter at the base and ranged in height from six inches to 12 or 14 inches. The candles would burn down a few inches so that the flame showed through the top section. Emery produced candles in every imaginable shape, from apples to Cape Cod cottages complete with hollyhocks growing at their sides. To prevent fires the floor was covered with tin, and after a few years of candle production, the walls were covered with wax. John Emery did not produce any candles himself but left the work to his employees while he sat in a quiet corner trading tales with his good friend Joseph Lincoln.

Other than the Pease Brothers Boatworks and some small shops in Commerce Park, there no longer are any true factories in Chatham, for the town now is largely residential.

