

William T. Merrifield (1807-1895)

Merrifield was born on a farm in north Worcester in 1807, and as a boy learned the building trade, while also attending school on a winters-only basis, as was common in the outer areas of the town, and doing farm chores. He made a name for himself at a young age as a builder. Having a strong interest in tools and mechanical processes, he was an early proponent of the value of steam power as the motive force of heavy industry.

About 1848 he constructed in Worcester on Union Street a pair of buildings, each 1200 feet long and 40 feet wide, in which a 500 horsepower steam engine was employed to turn a shaft running overhead length-wise throughout the buildings, to which machines could be attached by means of belts. The purpose was to rent space with access to the power system to small firms getting started, many of which went on to achieve great growth and prosperity, usually relocating to larger facilities of their own when they were ready.

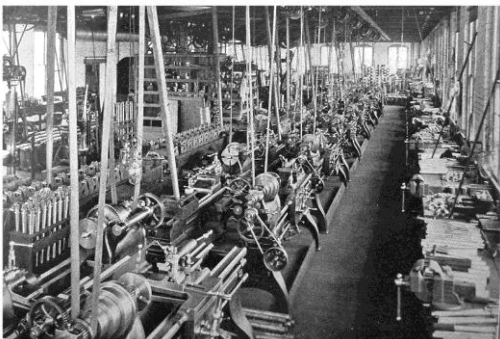
The basic principles of the shaft-and-belt scheme is illustrated below, from an exceptionally well-illustrated book by David Weitzman, *Locomotive: Building an Eight-Wheeler*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1999. (Highly recommended for fans of this kind of subject matter.)

Right: The operator has his hand on the clutch which allows him to attach his machine to the turning shaft or to disengage, such that the shaft does not transmit power to the machine.

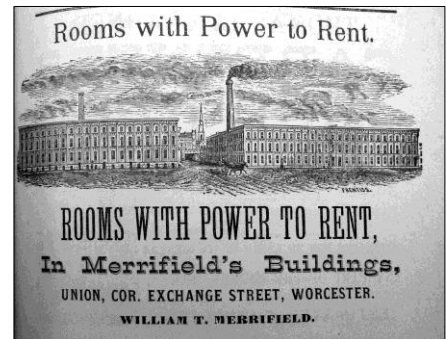
The shaft at the top is always turning, driven by the steam engine located elsewhere in the building, or in a separate, connected building. The wheel on the left is attached and turns with it, while the adjacent wheel, onto which the belt can be shifted, is a dummy, through which the shaft turns while the belt on the dummy wheel is idle. The same is true of the two wheels on the lower, local, shaft, which turns to drive the machine itself, but only when the belt is on the attached wheels. When the belt is not turning, the worker can adjust the location of the machine belt to obtain greater or lesser turning speed.

This system allowed numerous machines to be attached to the shaft for power, limited only by space and the total power generated by the steam engine. This simple but extremely significant technology made it possible

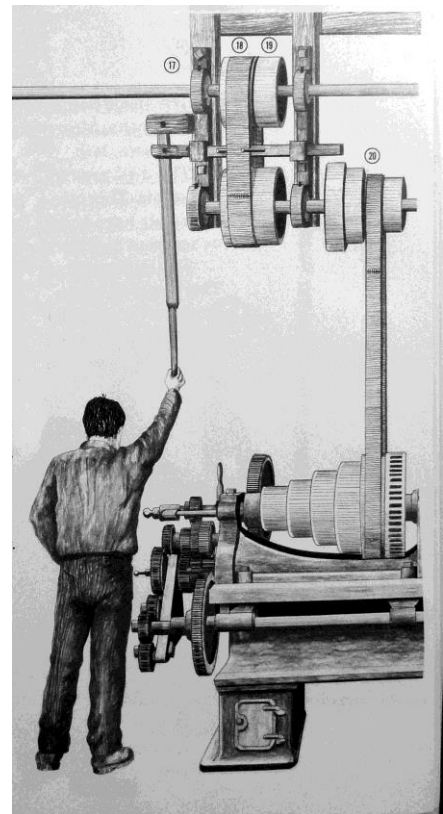
to launch and provide the foundation for the industrial revolution by making it possible to develop and use drills, saws, routers and shapers, planers, lathes, and other machines needed for working with metals and wood.



A machine shop making extensive use of the system. Prentice Bros. Machine Tools Co. on Cambridge Street.



Advertisement in Worcester City Directory



(David Weitzman)

WILLIAM T. MERRIFIELD.

William Trowbridge Merrifield, manufacturer, contractor and builder, son of the late Deacon Alpheus Merrifield, was born at Worcester, April 10, 1807, and being connected on the maternal side with the Rice brothers, becomes identified with the earliest permanent settlers of his native town. He worked on his father's farm until the age of fifteen, the last two years of which doing his full share of labor on a farm of eighty acres; here he laid the foundation of a rare physical development. During the winter school-days he enjoyed the advantages of the district school. At the age of fifteen he began a six years' service as an apprentice at the carpenter trade. At the age of eighteen he was entrusted with the erection of several buildings, and soon after attaining his majority he erected a block of houses, a store and a mill. In 1830 he began his career as a builder, and soon became a prominent and leading contractor of that day. In 1832 he also included a general lumber business. In 1840, Mr. Merrifield put in operation one of the first, if not the first, steam-engines in Worcester, and added the manufacture of sash, doors, blinds and builders' finish, introducing into Worcester the first power planer. Two years later he erected at Princeton a steam saw-mill, and, so far as is known, this was the first engine set up in the woods for the manufacture of lumber. In 1844, Mr. Merrifield took the contract for building the Lancaster and Coach Lace Mills at Clinton, which, with the eighty dwelling-houses, and other buildings, covered several acres of ground; this being before the days of railroads, he employed fifty teams to transport the necessary building material. The contract price exceeded three hundred thousand dollars, a notable outlay at that day, and from this beginning the industrial development of Clinton dates. In 1848, Mr. Merrifield realized the advantages in making Worcester a leading mechanical centre, and with a large investment laid the corner-stone of her material growth and industrial progress. In those experimental days of industrial transition, the inventors and mechanics needed power and rooms, that they might perfect their various specialties. Mr. Merrifield furnished these at an all important era in the history of Worcester; he erected a series of buildings, exceeding one thousand two hundred feet in length, forty feet in width and four stories high, with over one and a half miles of main shafting, turned by a steam-engine of five hundred horse-power, and suitably dividing the buildings to meet the mechanical needs of Worcester at that day, and rented the same to fifty individuals and firms, many of whom now have world-wide reputations. New industries were immediately developed

in these buildings, and Worcester, mechanically, was greatly expanded. From this point of beginning dates the energizing impetus which gave her the possibilities that have made her what she is. In 1854 these buildings were burned, and immediately re-built, substantially as before, and devoted to the same general purposes. Mr. Merrifield has always retained his natural love for agriculture and horticulture; upon his farm of one hundred and thirty acres he has a herd of high-grade Jerseys, having been a breeder of valuable stock for over fifty years. For twenty-five years or more he has been a prominent exhibitor at the annual fair of Worcester County Agricultural Society; for many years was president of the Worcester County Horticultural Society which made large drafts upon his green-houses at their annual exhibitions; his contributions of rare exotics and specimen plants added much to the society's success. In both of these honored societies he has rendered valuable aid in educating public taste to a higher level of appreciated merit. He has been a member of both branches of the city government of Worcester. In 1856 and '57 he was a member of the Legislature; he held for ten years the office of trustee of the State Lunatic Hospital, and was made a director of the Mechanics' Bank on its organization, which office he held for ten years; he was for some time president of the Worcester Mechanics' Association, also for ten years director in the Worcester Mutual Fire Insurance Company. In 1836 he was one of the first members that organized the Union Church in Worcester, and has ever since been a constant attendant. He has been married twice. On the 27th of April, 1830, he married Margaret, daughter of the late Jabez Brigham, of Worcester. William F. and Henry K. are the surviving children of this marriage. On March 9, 1847, he married Maria C., daughter of the late Captain Charles Brigham, of Brigham Hill, Grafton. One daughter survives, Harriet, wife of Hon. W. T. Forbes, of Westboro'. In common with all marked men, who have been pioneers in shaping the material growth and prosperity of a community, Mr. Merrifield has those sturdy characteristics which clearly define a strong individuality—self-reliance and even temper under the severest exigencies, a uniform courteous bearing, kindness of speech, tenacity of purpose, courageous in action, and unconquerable by discouragements, are some of the more pronounced traits of character on which Mr. Merrifield has built a symmetrical manhood of substantial moral worth—a clear type of a sturdy, self-made, New England character, which took deep root in the early years of the century.

Charles Nutt, *History of Worcester and Its People*, vo. 4, pp.774-775

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE MERRIFIELD, Contractor and builder, owner of the Merrifield buildings in which many of the industries of the city were established, was born in Worcester, April 10, 1807, died December 26, 1895. He had a common school education. At the age of fifteen he began to learn the carpenter's trade and served seven years in the employ of his father. When he came of age he started in business as a contractor and builder, and from the beginning was uniformly successful. He was the contractor for many of the important structures erected here in his day, including the Worcester Academy, the Lancaster Mills, and many of the mansion houses. In 1839 he bought land on Union and Exchange streets and erected brick buildings four stories high covering two acres, renting them according to the needs of his tenants for manufacturing purposes and furnishing steam power to such as wished to hire it. Deacon Ichabod Washburn laid the foundation of the wire industry here. The biographies of Worcester manufacturers in this book give scores of cases where the business began in the Merrifield building. In 1854 the first buildings were burned, causing a serious setback to the industrial growth of the city. But Mr. Merrifield erected new buildings and to the present time he and his descendants have maintained successfully his original idea in supplying quarters for the smaller industries of the city. How important this idea was in determining the industrial growth of the city cannot be estimated, but it was certainly of great value. He was a member of the first Common Council of the city in 1848, and for several years was a representative to the General Court. He was for ten years a trustee of the State Lunatic Hospital, and for several years president of the Worcester County Mechanics' Association.

Mr. Merrifield married (first), April 27, 1830, Margaret Brigham, daughter of Jabez and Nancy (Kingsbury) Brigham. They had four children, two daughters and two sons; the sons were: William Frederick, born in Worcester, August 30, 1837, lives in Brookline, Massachusetts; and Henry Kingsbury, born July 21, 1840, resides in this city. Mr. Merrifield married (second), March 9, 1847, Maria Caroline Brigham, daughter of Charles and Susannah (Baylies) Brigham, of Grafton. Their daughter Harriette married Hon. William T. Forbes (see biography).

The Merrifield line of ancestry is: William T. (4), Alpheus (3), Timothy (2), Thomas (1). Thomas Merrifield was not the immigrant; the first settler doubtless came with the Puritans, from England. Timothy (2) Merrifield and his brother Asaph came from Sherborn to Holden, in the section now in West Boylston, in 1784. Their old house is still standing. It was built about 1739, when the land was purchased of Benjamin Flagg, Jr., by Joseph Woolley. In 1786 Timothy Merrifield sold his share of this place and bought the farm on Mountain street, where he lived the remainder of his days, and where his son, William T., was born. He died in 1806. He served as a private in the Revolution. He married (first) Lydia Cheney, and (second) Mercy Perry, daughter of John and Mercy (Nelson) Perry. Besides Alpheus, Timothy Merrifield had two daughters, Caroline and Chloe. Alpheus Merrifield held various town offices in Worcester; was selectman five years; deacon of the First Unitarian Church. He was a contractor and builder here and also had a business in South Carolina and Georgia. He married, November 12, 1804, Mary Trowbridge, daughter of William and Sarah (Rice) Trowbridge. Her father, William Trowbridge, was a soldier in the Revolution. (See Trowbridge in Early Settlers).

William T. Merrifield

Evening Gazette, Dec-27-1895

FULL OF YEARS AND HONOR

Death of the Venerable William T. Merrifield.

ILL BUT TWELVE HOURS.

A Life of Great Activity and Use-
fulness Closes.

William Trowbridge Merrifield, the Nestor of Worcester's industrial and manufacturing interests, died at his home, Highland Place, at 12:10 o'clock this morning at the ripe old age of almost 89 years. The news of his death, as it was passed along the street this morning, caused saddest and great surprise, for none had even heard of his illness, which was of but 12 hours duration.

Tuesday was passed by Mr. Merrifield at his long-established office on Exchange Street, the place indeed which had been his business home for more than two generations of years. Wednesday, Christmas Day, he passed at his home. Thursday he was up and about the house until about noon when he took to his bed and failed rapidly until the end came as stated. He remained conscious up to within a half hour of his death and the closing minutes of his long and active years were as one falling asleep after a work had been performed.

A NATIVE OF WORCESTER.

Mr. Merrifield was a native and life-long resident of Worcester. He was the son of Deacon Alpheus Merrifield, and the second in a family of seven children. He was born on the farm at the Summit Station, now owned by Charles H. Ellsworth, April 10, 1807. As a mere child he was strong and rugged, and when only eight years helped in the daily task of milking his father's cows and in doing other routine work of the farm. As a boy of 15 years he possessed a fine physical development, was manly, self-reliant and fertile in resource. Like other boys of his time, about his only school days were those of the long winter months, but he made the most of them and the learning he gained was of a thoroughly practical nature. Manifesting a marked taste and predilection for the industrial trades, he became when 15 years old a carpenter's apprentice, his apprenticeship papers requiring the old time service of seven years. He went to work

at his trade with that tremendous and tireless energy which in time made him the most successful and conspicuous master builder and manufacturer in all Worcester County. He made the most of every opportunity and was so successful an apprentice that when only 19, and while still in his apprenticeship, he was given the contract for the erection of a large and important building in Worcester. This work he finished to the entire satisfaction of all concerned, as he did all subsequent contracts and undertakings entrusted to him. By intuition, as it were, he early foresaw and believed in the power of machinery, and the great part it was to take in the material development of the country.

BUSINESS ENTERPRISES.

When he became a master workman he enlarged his undertakings as a contractor by operating in lumber and other building materials, and in machinery. He bought extensive areas of wood land in various sections of Worcester County, but more particularly in Princeton. It was on one of his wood lots in this town that he used the first steam saw-mill set up in Worcester County, if not in all Massachusetts. It was also while engaged in lumbering at Princeton that he drove from Worcester to Clinton on a terribly cold afternoon and in a raging and drifting snow storm, and in less than one hour after his arrival in that town closed a contract for the building of the great Lancaster mills, which at the time of their completion represented the largest industrial plant in Massachusetts. The drive to Clinton on that, to him, memorable day was one that few men would have dared to make. The snow had drifted so deeply in places that Mr. Merrifield had to shovel a path for himself and trusted horse. The Directors of the then proposed Lancaster Mills Corporation had no expectation of seeing Mr. Merrifield that afternoon and their surprise was almost unmeasured when he stepped into the office. The fact that he braved the obstacles of the day showed the Directors the kind of man he was, and with little delay the contract was given Mr. Merrifield. This great task Mr. Merrifield completed ahead of specified time. While the work was in progress it was his wont to drive to and from Clinton daily. It was while on one of these drives at nightfall that Mr. Merrifield was attacked by a man who demanded his money or his life. The would-be highwayman received neither, for a well-directed blow from Mr. Merrifield sent the man into the gutter, and when he arose Mr. Merrifield and his horse were far along on the road. On more than one other occasion Mr. Merrifield had encounters on the highway, but he was always the best man in such affairs.

MERRIFIELD BUILDINGS.

After the completion of the Lancaster Mills contract Mr. Merrifield inaugurated his grand enterprise, the construction of the now famous Merrifield Buildings on Union and Exchange Streets. The primary purpose of these buildings was to furnish room and power for any and such persons or enterprises as might desire to rent them for mechanical purposes. The advantage which these plants have been to Worcester is simply incalculable. The material benefits which have accrued represent untold millions, and they have been the starting place of many an enterprise later destined to attain great proportions.

The conception and carrying to completion of these buildings was one of the greatest enterprises which had then been undertaken in the

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ried to completion great enterprises before he was 40 years old tells in a few words how great and versatile were his abilities.

The Merrifield buildings as first completed were about 1200 feet in length, 40 in width and four stories. There was a 500 horse power engine and a mile and a half of main shafting. Almost in the month of their completion in 1854 the buildings were burned and the fire is known to this day as the "Merrifield fire." The conflagration was the all-absorbing theme of conversation in all the country about for months after its occurrence.

The buildings were at once rebuilt, but with a lessened story, and for years have been a beehive of industry. On a little tinued board, hanging by the side of an Exchange Street door, has been for many years the sign: "Wm. T. Merrifield—Office." This was up one flight, and like the man himself was practical and unostentatious. But in this office has been done a vast amount of business and man and room will long be remembered by the business interests of Worcester and memory will treasure the traditions of busy and eventful years.

INTEREST IN RURAL AFFAIRS.

But Mr. Merrifield was hardly less distinguished as an agriculturalist than as a business man. The word "agriculturalist" is used advisedly for he was an adept in many of its widely different branches. Horticulture, floriculture and arboriculture he knew intimately and well. Yet it is, perhaps, as a farmer and cattle breeder that he is best known in his relations to rural economy. He never for the moment, as it were, forsook farming. No matter how great were his other business undertakings he never let his interest in agriculture lag.

He early engaged in the breeding of pure bred neat stock. He bred successfully Short Horn, Ayshire, Devon and Jersey cattle. It was as an introducer and breeder of the last named breed that he became best known. He began the importation of Jerseys at a date when the merits of the breed were but little known in America. The cattle he imported and bred became the foundation of many famous herds of the breed in this country. The cows in his own herd from time to time were often noted the country over for their great milk and Lutter records. He retained his active interest in Jersey cattle up to within five years, when his advancing years compelled him to hold a dispersion sale, and on its occurrence most of Mr. Merrifield's Jerseys went to the Deerfoot farm in Southborough.

In horticulture and floriculture Mr. Merrifield became widely known for his success in growing fruits and flowers. At one time he owned one of the largest and rarest collections of costly exotics, palms and like plants in the state. He had quite extensive greenhouses and in these he passed many an hour in plant study and investigation.

"HIGHLAND PLACE."

The home of Mr. Merrifield with its sloping stretches of lawn fronting on Highland Street, he early named "Highland Place," and it is now, as it has been for years, one of the finest estates in either city or county. The first work in the development of the estate was done when he was past 50 years of age. The tall pines hemlocks and spruces which dot the landscape and form a belt to the north of the house were planted by Mr. Merrifield when he was 54 years old, an age when most men would regard tree planting as futile so far as any probable advantage to themselves was concerned. Yet for years these trees have been a source of comfort to him who planted them. Scattered about the grounds are great beeches, lindens, black walnuts and long rows of evergreen trees, all of which he planted and lived to see grow year by year. The house at Highland Place was built in 1857. Its site overlooks the city and long stretches of country to the south and west.

DOMESTIC LIFE.

Mr. Merrifield was twice married. His first wife was Miss Margaret Brigham, whom he married in 1830, daughter of Jabez Brigham of Worcester and who in his day was a leading citizen of the then town. His second wife was Maria C., daughter of Capt. Chas. Brigham of Brigham Hill, Grafton. She died five years ago. In all nine children were born to these

William T. Merrifield

Evening Gazette, Dec-27-1895

Part 2 of 2

UNION. Three children survive. William F., and Henry K., sons by the first marriage, live respectively in Boston and Worcester, and a daughter, Harriet, by the second marriage, is the wife of Hon. William T. Forbes of Westborough, Judge of Probate of Worcester County.

A long and earnest religious career is the record of Mr. Merrifield's life. He was one of the founders of the Union Congregational Church, and it is thought that only two of the founders of this church survive, one of whom is the venerable Albert Curtis.

PUBLIC LIFE.

Mr. Merrifield had, like most men of his nature, an aversion to public life. He was, however, induced to serve as a member of the Common Council in one of the first Worcester city governments, and later served in the Board of Aldermen. In 1856 and again in 1857 he was elected a member of the Massachusetts Legislature. For ten years he was a Trustee of the State Lunatic Asylum on Summer Street, this city, and had been an honored President of the Worcester County Mechanics' Association. On the organization of the Mechanics Savings Bank he was made a Director, and was for ten years a Director of the Worcester Mutual Fire Insurance Company. For years he was closely identified with the Worcester Agricultural Society and the Worcester County Horticultural Society. Of the second named he had been its President, and had frequently been an officer of the first named society.

THE FUNERAL.

The funeral will be from the house at 2 P. M., Monday. The interment will be in Rural cemetery.