THIRTY-NINTH

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OFFICERS

OF THE

CITY OF MONTPELIER

FOR THE

YEAR ENDING JANUARY 31,

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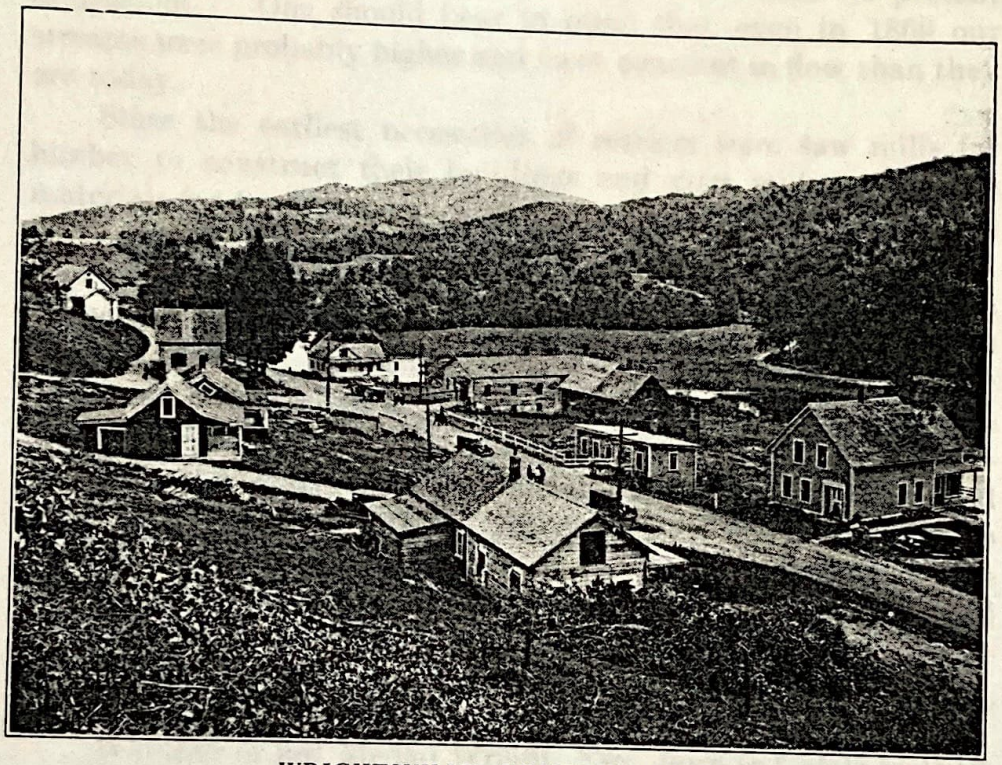
WRIGHTSVILLE

A great part of Wrightsville, that little village "up the Branch", is no more, and it seems fitting to memorialize it by writing into our records a brief and necessarily imperfect sketch of its past.



WRIGHTSVILLE—LOOKING NORTH

For some reason, not now very apparent, the stream on which West Montpelier (later Wright's Mills) was located was formerly known as the Little North Branch. In recent years the more generally used name of Worcester Branch has been applied to it. In D. P. Thompson's *History of the Town of Montpelier*, published in 1860, we find the following and, in view of the purpose for which the greater part of the village has been destroyed, the quotation should prove of interest: "The valley of the North Branch, which lies in the form of a trough, is now being largely cleared of its forests, and when it shall be wholly cleared up, except the usual reserves of woodlots, he must be a bold philosopher who would

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guarantee our village [Montpelier] against disasters from floods coming down on us in that direction. And the village will never be effectually guarded against such disasters, till they have built high, strong walls along each bank of this stream, and extended the width of the channel at least one-third more than its present dimensions." One should bear in mind that even in 1860 our streams were probably higher and more constant in flow than they are today.

Since the earliest necessities of settlers were saw mills for lumber to construct their buildings and grist mills to prepare materials for food, they showed wisdom in locating near streams with natural falls close at hand. Of one such locality D. P. Thompson, in the history before quoted, writes as follows: "At a place now known as Wright's Mills, on the falls of the North Branch, three miles above Montpelier village, which furnishes the most safe and efficient water-power in the county, another little village has latterly been springing into existence. These remarkable falls have thus far been improved by the Machine Shop and Mills of Medad Wright, Esq. But the capital is only wanting to make this a place of great business; for a supply of water might here be taken from the millpond in a flume or canal and safely extended along the bank of the Branch, sufficient, in the greater part of the year, to accommodate a line of factories a quarter of a mile long, and drive ten times ten thousand spindles."

Whether or not Medad Wright, Esq., born in Calais in 1812, would have agreed entirely with Mr. Thompson's opinion long afterward expressed, it is certain that in the year 1833, after attaining his majority, he purchased his first tract of land in West Montpelier, which included a part of the falls. At the time Mr. Wright took possession "the timber had been felled and the ground burned over, but the surrounding country was a primitive forest with but few exceptions. His first work [1834] was to construct a dam and blast a channel through the rocks to the wheels of a contemplated grist mill," which he erected and had in operation by September, 1835. During the next few years he enlarged his mill until he was grinding corn, wheat and other grains and hulling and grinding oats dried in his own kiln. The need for this mill is

apparent since it was the only one of its kind in the section, and Mr. Wright had an immense patronage.

In 1837 he completed his first dwelling, which was erected on the knoll opposite the mill site, was later sold and used as a boarding house for those employed in mills, machine shop and factory and is today standing and known as the Davis house. From then on Mr. Wright pursued his remarkable career. A glance at his various activities in inventive and industrial lines will give an understanding of the reasons for the growth and prosperity of Wright's Mills.

In 1840, after purchasing an addition to his water-power, Mr. Wright started an old style "up and down" saw mill, building a machine shop the following year in which he manufactured "woolen machinery". This was in demand throughout New England and eastern New York. Soon he added to his saw mill a circular saw of his own designing, the first in successful operation in the state, which was found by lumbermen so superior to the old style mill that he was immediately engaged in building others, while his lumber mill, grist mill and machine shop were all in active operation. He constructed planing and matching machines and continued in this industry, turning out over 500 such machines, until 1860. In 1860-61 he erected on the site of the old machine shop, which had been damaged by the high water of '58, a woolen mill, 40 x 100 feet and four stories high. This he never operated but in 1862 sold to William Moorcroft, who successfully operated it for some eight years, when it was destroyed by fire.

Meanwhile in 1865 Mr. Wright had moved off the old saw mill and erected a three-story building on its site. The first floor was for woodworking, the second for iron machinery. He built an iron foundry in 1874, from which time he made his own castings. Among other articles manufactured by him were stoves and cider mills. His last invention, patented in '78, was a polishing machine for all kinds of stone, which has acquired a wide reputation.

With so much building and so many successful industries in operation, employing a number of men and women, there is small reason to doubt that even before the recollection of any now living (which takes us back to about 1855) Wright's Mills had become a

thriving and prosperous little village. And the highway running through the village was a much traveled one. Years ago one might often stand by the mill and see the road above filled with a line of wagons loaded with lumber being drawn from the mills farther up the Branch and, looking down the road, see it filled with wagons loaded with lumber and articles manufactured in Wrightsville, all on their way to Montpelier.

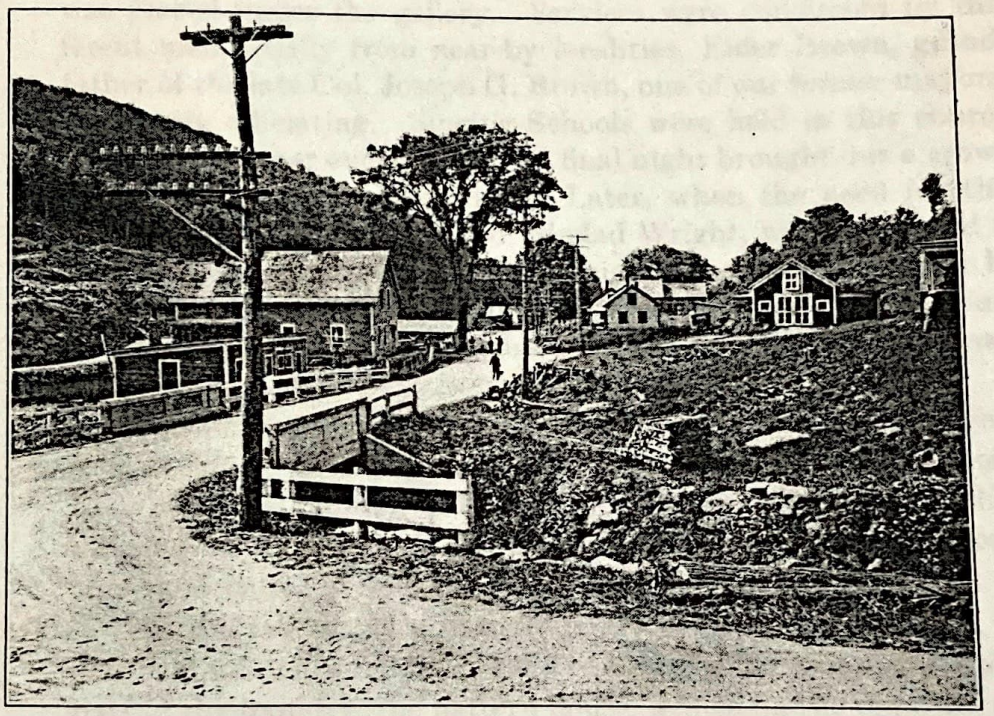
It is impossible, at this distance in time, to set down accurately the appearance of the village as it was. What is written here has been largely gained from conversations with the older residents and with those who remember hearing these things described. To Mr. and Mrs. Edgar A. Francis, Mrs. H. O. Nelson, Michael Pembroke and Edward W. Dillon, among others, credit is due for information contained in this article.

Most of the houses recently purchased by the city of Montpelier were standing as far back as 1855 at least, and some were far older than that, the exceptions being the Stoddard and Gregory houses. The Lynn Nelson garage is of comparatively recent date as it was built by E. A. Francis about 1915. In this connection it is interesting to note that of the buildings recently moved or torn down Mr. Francis erected eleven.

The Stoddard house was a "packed" house, built about 1880 for Albert A. Green on the site of Mr. Green's former dwelling, which had burned two years before in a fire that also destroyed the Ezra D. Rawlins house and barn, standing next toward the north. This latter house was never rebuilt. The Gregory house across the Branch on Gould's Road was erected by Gustavus Gould about 1872. This was originally the Daniel R. Culver house, standing on the Culver farm in Middlesex, and was by no means new when Mr. Gould bought it in '71, took it down and rebuilt it in Wrightsville.

In such a busy little village with so much teaming up and down the road, it is natural that we should find there were, in the old days, stores, liveries and blacksmiths' shops, a post office, a meeting house, a hotel of sorts and even a slaughter house. This latter was located across the Branch back of the ledges on Gould's Road.

The "hotel", which was George Spencer's residence, stood about where Lewis Gould's second-hand shop was later built and was not a hotel in the present accepted sense. It was a long building with an ell and barn attached, all lengthwise to the road, both the main part and ell having verandahs. In the ell was a general



SITE OF SPENCER HOUSE

store which did a good business, especially when teaming from Worcester was heavy. At one time a meat market was opened in the basement. The top floor of the ell was a dance hall which extended into the main building, making a very narrow but long room some 20 x 60 feet. Here, as late as the 70's, dances were held, our own Timothy R. Merrill playing there at times and Mr. and Mrs. George Elmore often furnishing the music. As many as seventy-five couples attended some of these dances, at which Mr. Spencer served a hearty supper, later furnishing lodging to people who had come from a distance.

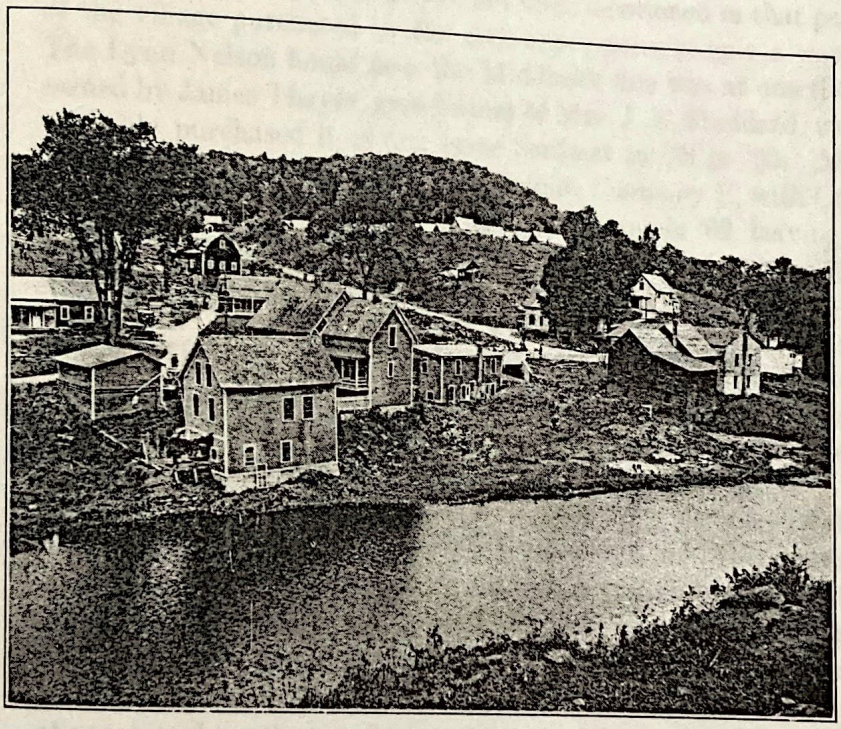
The Union Church was a project of families from the Horn of the Moon, the Middlesex hills near the village and Wright's Mills, and was built before 1855. It stood between what have lately been known as the Medad Wright and the Guyette houses, a white building some 30 x 45 feet with a spire, painted white in the interior, with red birch pews in three rows. Facing the pulpit was a gallery for singers, reached by stairs at either end, and a stove was placed under the gallery. Services were conducted by different men usually from near-by localities, Elder Brown, grandfather of the late Col. Joseph G. Brown, one of our former mayors, frequently officiating. Singing Schools were held in this church on many a winter evening and the final night brought out a crowd which filled the standing room. Later, when the need for this church had greatly diminished, Medad Wright, who then lived in his third house on the adjoining premises, bought the pews, one by one, and finally sold the building. It was taken down and rebuilt (minus the spire) about a mile below Wrightsville and used as a workshop.

The post office was established in the late 70's in Mr. Wright's second house, then standing on the ledge near the mill. Some time after the foundry was built, this house was moved a short distance up the road as the sparks from the foundry proved a continual source of danger.

In the fall of '89 a disastrous fire destroyed this house, the original building standing on the site of the Community Club house, part of the foundry, the pattern house, a barn on the opposite side of the Branch and the uncovered bridge spanning the stream. This was the bridge which E. A. Francis had built for the sum of $60.00. Some years after another building was erected for Mr. Wright north of the road leading across the bridge by Michael Pembroke, for many years manager of the Wright Mills. This was first used as a blacksmith's shop. Later it became the scroll shop and was finally rented by the Community Club, formed August 7, 1925. On the night of November 3, 1927 or in the early morning of the 4th, the Community Club house, part of the foundry, some small buildings and the covered bridge were swept away

by the flood which did an immense amount of damage in the village and up and down the valley.

The recent flood was by no means the only high water to injure Wrightsville, but of these other disasters this article will mention only the cloudburst of 1902. About dusk on a June evening the so-called Culver Brook, which rises to the northwest in the Middlesex hills, after a previous leisurely rain, suddenly rose to an unprecedented height, swept over its banks, struck the front of the Owen house, broke the windows, took out the south cellar wall and exerted so much pressure that it smashed the front



VIEW OF GOULD'S ROAD

of the house and tipped the main part into the cellar, breaking off the studs. The rain, as it then fell, sounded like stones dropping on the houses and the noise of the boulders smashing and grinding together as they were moved by the tremendous force of the waters of Culver Brook was deafening. So heavy was the fall of rain that

rocks in a pasture, which if squared would have measured six or seven feet by four and four, slid out of their beds. As the water struck the house, Mrs. Owen, who was frail and blind, was carried out by Edward W. Dillon, the other occupants of the house holding to Mr. Dillon, one on each side, as they waded out through the water then nearly breast high. All this was over in thirty minutes, the rain had become a gentle downpour and the brook had receded, but it left hillside, pastures and roads torn and the bridge over the brook and the main part of the Owen house ruined.

Of the dwellings which have not been mentioned in that part of the village purchased by the city, space permits only a word. The Lynn Nelson house near the Middlesex line was at one time owned by James Thayer, grandfather of Mrs. J. E. Stoddard, who probably purchased it of one Isaac Scribner in '58 or '60. Mr. Thayer was a sergeant in the 8th Vermont, Company E, with Col. Stephen Thomas and was killed in New Orleans in '62, leaving a widow and children. The Carson house was bought about '69 or '70 by Charles Wilson, father of Mrs. E. A. Francis, probably from John Coffey, but the house was far older than this record shows. The McLoud house, on Gould's Road on the east side of the stream, was built by Joseph Gould before 1855. The dwelling purchased by the city from Mrs. Mary A. Gould was the oldest of the three houses in that group. These houses, situated on a road by themselves, yet almost within speaking distance of the main village, were in a particularly lovely location. The winding road by their doors ran past a fine meadow and finally, at the Bailey house, crossed the East Montpelier line. This meadow and the surrounding land was purchased by the city. The story is told that at one time the bed of the stream was much farther to the east, making the meadow on the west of the river and so a part of the Wright property, but that at some period of high water the stream cut a new channel for itself near the main road, leaving the meadow to the east as it is today and, since the Wright land ran to the river, changing the ownership of this piece of property.

With the part of Wrightsville still remaining this article is not concerned, though the line of houses to the south was, of course, included in the old village. This is where the village school was

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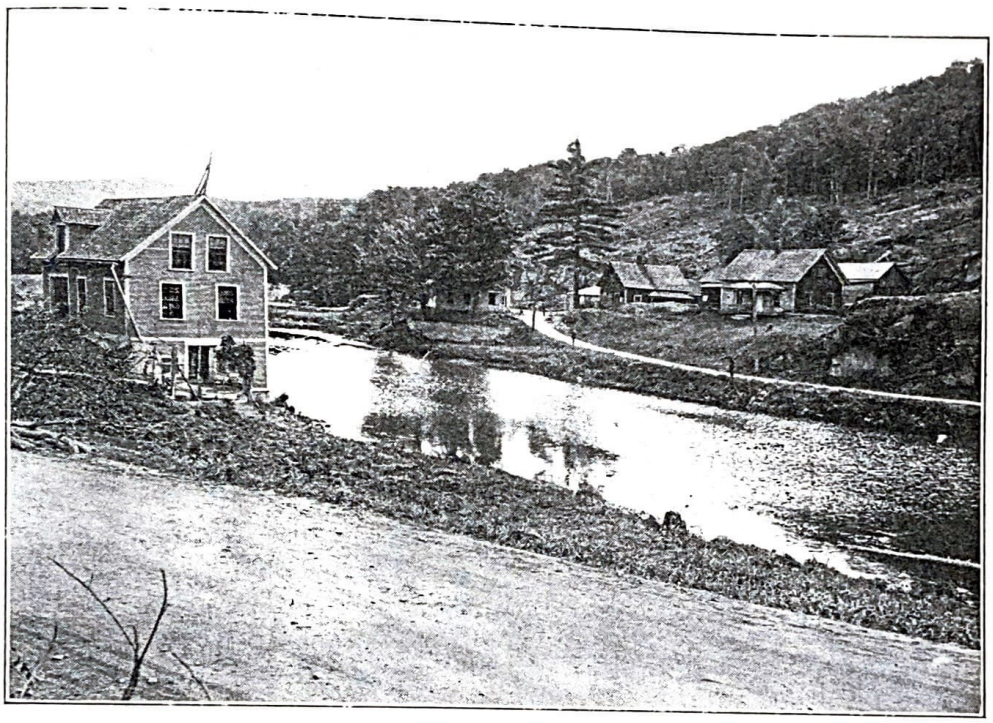
located, which has been turned into a dwelling house and still stands at the west of the road. For many years the children have been transported in barges to the schools in Montpelier.



GOULD'S ROAD

For the properties mentioned, together with land owned by other individuals, the city in 1933, through Mayor W. L. McKee, paid the sum of $50,900, for which amount the Federal government later purchased them. And so little Wrightsville has come and in the main has gone. In a hundred years it has seen a development from almost primal forest to prosperity, has withstood great and trying disasters by fire and by flood and now at the end of its span has been destroyed by the hand of man that other communities lying in the valleys below may be made safe.

ROSE LUCIA