

Howland Mill Village, 1888-1889

The Howland Mill Village in New Bedford's south end was one of the most innovative and visionary corporate housing developments of the nineteenth century. It was designed for the singular purpose of providing a quality and aesthetically pleasing environment for textile mill workers. The demise of this noble experiment is part of one of the compelling, tragic chapters in the city's eventful history.

The origins of this development have deep roots in the Quaker tradition of social consciousness, egalitarianism and sense of Christian responsibility. William D. Howland, the man behind the village that bears his name was the son of Matthew (1814-1884) and Rachel Howland (1816-1902). Born on March 27, 1853 he was raised in a household of considerable wealth earned through efforts of his grandfather, George Howland (1781-1852) and his father and uncle, George Howland, Jr.

(1806-1892) in the whaling industry. William's mother was an extraordinary woman. Rachel Smith Howland had a life-long career as a committed and tireless social activist. Her life is one of the important untold stories of New Bedford's history. She was a figure of local, regional and even national significance. Always dressed in traditional Quaker clothing, she was acquainted (or perhaps they acquainted with her) with most of the prominent feminists and social visionaries of her day. In addition to founding and or leading such institutions as the Ladies City Mission Society, Incorporated in 1868, Association for the Relief of Aged Women, organized in 1866, Children's Aid Society, and the Instructive Nurses Association, 1891, she was a minister and speaker for the Society of Friends for over 50 years. She was primarily responsible for mediating and ending the Wamsutta Mill textile strike of 1867. She and her husband sponsored and built in 1870 the Howland Mission Chapel, a nondenominational house of worship for textile workers on Purchase Street near the Wamsutta Mill. At the end of her life she was still active at the national level in the peace movement. She addressed sessions of national congresses and is credited with coining the term "outlaw war" which for a time was a rallying cry for the movement.

Small wonder that William Howland would not only have the ambition of his father but also the compassion of his mother. After graduation from Brown University in 1874, it is also clear that he followed his own path. As with many in his generation, he did not attend the Monthly Meetings of the Society of Friends. He became a member and vestryman of Grace Episcopal Church. He married Caroline Child on September 22, 1875 and had two sons, Edward Morris and Llewellyn. It appears that he traveled extensively. He was also an avid sailor with a sizable yacht and maintained an active membership in the New Bedford Yacht Club.

William chose the burgeoning New Bedford textile industry in which to make his mark. After serving a stint as a clerk at the Wamsutta Mill (1876-1880) and a year researching the textile industry outside of New Bedford, he successfully organized his own textile mill in 1882, the New Bedford Manufacturing Co. He did so without the financial help of his parents.

As wealthy and successful as George, Jr. and Matthew Howland were in the whaling industry, their "greasy luck" ran out in the 1870s. The catastrophic losses of the Arctic whaling fleets in 1871 and again in 1876 ruined the firm and the finances of the Howland family. Matthew and Rachel owned considerable property in New Bedford



including their residential estate on Hawthorn Street (now 81 Hawthorn Street), a wharf and a block-sized parcel on the waterfront at the foot of North Street, the north half of the acreage that is now Hazelwood Park among perhaps other holdings. Before Matthew died in 1884, he sold the North Street property, formerly the site of his counting house, to his son for the New Bedford Manufacturing Co. The house on Hawthorn Street was sold to William W. Crapo (1830-1926) upon Matthew's death. Rachel still had access to a summer home at the Hazelwood property but her permanent residence was 21 South Sixth Street for many years after her husband's death. (The Howlands owned the Gothic Revival building in Hazelwood Park that stands north of the more familiar stone house. This building was formerly a barn and was converted to a summer home sometime after 1865.)

The New Bedford Manufacturing Co. was a cotton yarn facility. It did not make cloth but supplied yarn to the other mills in New Bedford and elsewhere. William D. Howland was Treasurer, a Director and de facto head of the operation. Other directors included Charles W. Clifford, also the first President, Charles W. Plummer and Edward T. Pierce. As with all of the mills throughout their history in New Bedford, the practice of interlocking directorates was the norm with the Howland mills. Pierce was the son of Andrew G. Pierce, Sr. and the brother of Andrew G. Pierce, Jr. The elder Pierce was arguably the most powerful man in the textile industry in New Bedford during this time. The Pierces were Presidents of both the Wamsutta and Potomska Mills as well as leading the New Bedford Manufacturer's Association, the collection of mill owners that often attempted to set city-wide policies on wages, production and other economic factors of the city textile mills.

It appears that much of the financing for the mill came from the Rotch family through the National Bank of Commerce. William J. Rotch (1819-1893) scion of the renowned New Bedford whaling dynasty was one of the wealthiest men in New Bedford at the time. His commercial interests in New Bedford spanned the entire spectrum of business activity. He was President of the New Bedford Cordage Co. and the Mount Washington Glass Works and a director on many other boards including the Potomska Mills and the National Bank of Commerce. He would become the first President of both the Howland Mills Corporation and the Rotch Spinning Co. His son Morgan Rotch (1848-1910), like his father, a mayor of the city, later became President of the New Bedford Manufacturing Co. The success of the New Bedford Manufacturing Co. led Howland to embark on an ambitious project to incorporate all of his knowledge on the textile industry as well as his abiding interest in the welfare of his workforce. The Howland Mills Corporation was conceived in 1886. With his investors from the previous project, 150 acres of woods and former nursery land in the south end of the city was painstakingly acquired.

Among the parcels purchased were the remnants of "Fairview" the former nursery of Henry H. Crapo (1804-1869) who had left New Bedford many years earlier and eventually became the Governor of Michigan. A large lot was purchased from the estate of Cornelius Howland, a distant relative as well as a number of other parcels. (This land is currently bound, approximately by the following streets: Rivet to Juniper, Juniper in a line to Dunbar, Dunbar to Dartmouth, Dartmouth to Rockdale, Rockdale to Hemlock, Hemlock to Cove, Cove to Orchard, Orchard to Rivet.) With the land acquired and surveyed, the Howland Mills Corporation was incorporated in May of 1888 as a producer of fine cotton yarns. William J. Rotch was named President, William D. Howland, Treasurer and the directors nearly identical to those at New Bedford Manufacturing. Work was begun immediately on the mill and the residential village. Construction on both projects proceeded rapidly. Mill No. 1, that complex which still stands south of the more familiar Howland Place (Mill No. 2), was completed in the late summer of 1888. The mason contractors were Brownell (Alfred M.) and Murkland (James H.) of New Bedford. The designer of the mill is not known. It is possible that William had a hand in its design. He was hired by the Potomska Mills around 1880 to redesign space at that complex to accommodate new machinery. The mill opened with 150 workers and was equipped with over 30,000 spindles. Twenty-five of the cottages were constructed by the end of 1888 and another twenty-five in 1889. Although much more residential development was planned for the site, it was never undertaken.

The two scholars who have done the ground-breaking work on the Howland Mill Village, Thomas McMullin and Kingston Heath, both used the term “utopia” in describing William Howland’s vision for this development. It’s hard to describe it otherwise. Clearly, he believed that he could create on a large scale a modern manufacturing environment that would not only be profitable for the shareholders but pleasant for the plant workers. Utopian communities were not uncommon during this period of American history. Men of wealth or influence were always developing schemes to create the “perfect world.” Usually there was a hidden agenda of religion, sex or some other exploitive obsession that eventually foiled the dream. Factory-owned worker housing was commonplace in New Bedford and elsewhere at this time where labor-intensive mills required many hundreds of hands. Usually these tenements were constructed in a “monotonous regularity” with few amenities, often being poorly maintained.

The Howland Mill Village was a stunning departure from the norm. 50 single family homes were built in an arrangement that allowed for small gardens and a modicum of privacy. The cottages were placed on winding roads at slightly differing angles. Paths wound around and through the village to enhance the feel of a pastoral setting. Fifteen five room cottages and thirty-five seven room cottages were built. A tenement for single male employees was also part of the development. Each residence had indoor plumbing connected to the public sewer system, flush toilet, tub, hot and cold running water and a full, concrete basement among other amenities. Rents were \$8.50 per month for the small cottage and \$10 per month for the larger cottage. Families from all socioeconomic levels lived in the village with incomes ranging from \$5 to \$19 per week as documented in a government report issued in 1895. In short, there were no hidden agendas. While recruitment of the most skilled workers may have been a goal, there were as many unskilled workers living in the village as skilled. It was meant to be the first phase in an ever-increasing development of mills, housing and other buildings such as men’s and women’s clubhouses, a library and a building to house a gymnasium and evening school.

The houses in the village were designed by the Boston architectural partnership of Edmund M. Wheelwright (1845-1912) and Parkman B. Haven (1858-1943). At the time, Wheelwright and Haven was a relatively young firm although they had other commissions in the area. Wheelwright would later become the city architect for Boston and design a number of notable structures including the Longfellow Bridge. They designed four distinct cottages for the development displaying elements of the prevailing styles of the day, Queen Anne, Shingle and Colonial Revival. The four distinct designs are the gable-end, jerkin head end, gambrel (Dutch colonial) roof and gambrel-end. There were slight differences from building to building in each style. An example of this variation is seen in the gambrel roof style. Some of the dormers on these homes have jerkin head ends and some have traditional gables. The tenement was built as a double gambrel-end structure, an oversized version of the cottages. The total cost of the land and the buildings was \$107,000. Infrastructure cost such as roads, water and sewer connections and landscaping was \$38,000.

The Howland Mill Village became the model of corporate funded worker housing. The national press took notice as well as government sponsored reports. All reviewers highly praised the innovative designs and the attractive environment of the development. The contrast between the new village and other mill-built housing was duly noted by critics.

Rev. William J. Potter (1829-1893) of the Unitarian Church, New Bedford’s most influential clergyman, referred to the Wamsutta housing in 1892 as a “pestiferous excrescence.” In 1894, at the Potomska housing the New Bedford Morning Mercury reported that “signs of squalor were manifest.” As late as 1913, the village was still considered model housing while other mill housing was consistently described as “old and gloomy” or “old and in bad repair, with no attempt by builder, owner or tenant to make them attractive.”

Howland appeared determined to maintain a good relationship with his employees. He wanted to avoid the constant labor/management conflicts that were a routine part of the industrial and manufacturing landscape. In addition to maintaining prevailing wages during poor economic times and providing exceptional housing,

he also treated his employees to an annual steamboat cruise to Martha's Vineyard. This remarkably generous gesture included scheduled events such as a baseball game with an island team, a bicycle race with cash prizes, a band concert from musicians that also performed on the voyage and a fine noon-time dinner followed by dancing and song in the afternoon.

In 1892, the investors, flush with success, established another yarn mill, the Rotch Spinning Co. It differed in name only from the management and directorship of the other Howland mills. It was built on the north end of the Orchard and Bolton Streets site (later, the Goodyear plant). The benevolent empire that William D. Howland had envisioned mushroomed to three manufacturing facilities with over one thousand employees operating in excess of 100,000 spindles and millions of dollars invested.

The heady times were short-lived. The American economy experienced one of its many cyclical depressions with one called the Panic of 1893. The suffering economy came to New Bedford. With the demand for goods low, wages at the textile mills were cut, strikes were called and by the summer of 1894, the city's economy was in great distress. But not at the Howland mills. For the most part, wages and hours remained at pre-Panic levels at all three mills. Pressure from the New Bedford Manufacturer's Association on Howland, who was out of town when the vote to adopt the wage cuts was taken, was ignored. Workers at the Howland mills continued to work their full schedule of hours and receive their normal wages. Dividends continued to be paid to shareholders. "I look for better times in the near future" was his answer to the press.

However, the business conditions that Howland anticipated and hoped for to do not occur. By the spring of 1897, the finances of the three mills were in serious arrears. While Howland had not stolen from the mills he had hidden from the investors the dire nature of the debt the mills had accumulated. Rumors of financial problems at the Howland mills were circulating. If William D. Howland had any hope of buying more time, it was swept away by the events at another mill in April, 1897.

At the same time that William D. Howland was fighting for the future of his mills, the Bennett Manufacturing Co. and the Columbia Spinning Co. (later Fairhaven Mills) were apparently being looted by its principals. These two mills were owned and operated in a fashion similar to the Howland mills with Frank R. Hadley in charge. (Ironically, Hadley was the only mill owner to vote against the wage cuts that precipitated the strike of 1894) The discovery of an alleged embezzlement by Hadley and others was reported in mid April, 1897. Hadley was placed under virtual house arrest at his palatial County Street mansion (now 689 County St.) With the spectacular bankruptcy of the Bennett Mills on everyone's mind, William Howland sought a loan of \$200,000 to pay mill debts. On April 23, he requested the loan from the National Bank of Commerce, which his father had helped found and at which he was a director. Not only was the loan denied but a demand was made that he allow auditors to examine his books. It was later determined that the mills were over \$500,000 in debt.

A distraught Howland left the bank with his accountant. Financial failure of the Howland mills was imminent. He knew that the truths that he had hidden from the investors would become known. These investors, many of whom were close associates and family friends dating back generations, were about to suffer a great financial loss. After assuring his accountant that he would do nothing extreme, they parted ways. Shortly thereafter, at about 10:00am, William D. Howland walked to the family dock at the foot of North Street and jumped into the harbor, taking his own life. On the same day, Frank Hadley died at his home.

Howland's body was not found for nearly two weeks after his suicide. His corpse had somehow floated underneath the dock. The time on his watch was stopped at 10:15. Before the discovery of his body, speculation about his disappearance and sightings of him at various places had been rampant and imaginative. He left behind his wife and two sons. At the time of his death, he was residing at 52 Ash Street, on land that was formerly part of his father's estate. He owned a summer house on family land on Point Road, now Brock Avenue. This building, built in 1890 and very similar in design to the cottages at the Howland Mill Village still stands in altered but excellent condition in Hazelwood Park.

The Howland mills operated in receivership until 1899 under the leadership of Andrew G. Pierce, Jr. Working conditions and wages at the mills reverted to those at the other mills. A corporation called the New England Cotton Yarn Co. purchased the three Howland mills as well as the failed Bennett mills. The Howland Mills and the Rotch Spinning facilities were subsequently purchased by a new firm and renamed the Gosnold Mills. This corporation ran as a successful manufacturer of cotton textiles for many years, even surviving the Great Depression.

The Village cottages were sold off individually after the demise of the Howland mills. The land around the Village was eventually claimed by real estate developers. The privately financed three-decker tenement became the dominant form of mill housing in the city. The ideals of the Howland Mill Village quickly became a fond memory. It was the last corporate owned worker housing built in New Bedford.

Approximately 45 of the original 50 cottages of the village are still standing. I believe the tenement that was formerly on the east side of Bolton Street was moved to Hemlock Street and raised one level between 1913 and 1924. It exists in dramatically altered form. The three houses that were also on the east side of Bolton Street were removed, probably demolished between 1913 and 1924. A house may have been demolished to make way for the tenement move to Hemlock Street. A more detailed study of the changes of the villages is needed to confirm the suppositions. There was also a large gable-end house for the superintendent of the mill (demolished.) This house was located near the corner of Cove and Orchard Streets. It was probably on the site when the mill was built although it may have been moved there. It is clearly visible in a construction photograph of the mill taken in 1888. The house was a large 2 1/2 story gable-end Greek Revival to which was later added a Victorian wrap-around porch.

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