

Lost West Concord: Transformations over Time

For your consideration: Buildings, businesses, and a mode of transportation that no longer exist, or are greatly altered, that once were an integral part of the fabric of West Concord life.



A brief history

Powered by the fast-flowing Assabet River, West Concord had an industrial foundation from the start. It began with the establishment of several mills, including George Hayward's saw mill, Lot Conant's fulling mill and culminated, early in the nineteenth century, with the Damon family's mill, which began producing textiles in the 1830s and continued with various changes in ownership into the twentieth century. At about the same time Pratt's Powder Mills on the Concord-Acton town line opened for business.

Shortly after Hayward established his mill in about 1664, Simon Willard sold 1600 acres in West Concord and surrounding towns to the proprietors of the Saugus Iron Works when bog iron was discovered in the wetlands. Here they established the Concord Iron Works. This was later joined by a related business, the Loring Lead Works, established around 1700.

Over time, these early enterprises gave way to more modern manufactories such as Warner's Pail Factory, the Boston Harness Shop, the Allen Chair Factory and the Bluine Factory, producing products that were in demand from the mid-nineteenth into the early twentieth century.

In addition to mills and manufactories, West Concord also had a number of thriving farms, including the Derby Farm as well as that of Abiel Chase, known as the "Strawberry King" because of his ability to achieve phenomenal production of the fruit. And all this production, of products and produce, was made possible by the four train lines that traversed West Concord, bringing in raw materials and shipping out finished merchandise.

West Concord neighborhoods began springing up in the 1870s when Benjamin Derby subdivided a portion of his farmland into 109 house lots, a neighborhood known as the Derby Addition. At about the same time, Ralph Warner built more than twenty-five houses on Commonwealth Avenue to house Reformatory employees and their families. The late nineteenth century saw increased construction all over West Concord and by 1900 its residents made up one third of Concord's population.

Top Shelf

Boston Harness Shop

The Boston Harness Shop once stood in the vicinity of 1150 Main Street, near the Assabet River. In 1890, Harvey Wheeler constructed the buildings and brought his leather business from Lynn to Concord, his hometown. He employed 120 workers, providing housing for them on Cottage and Crest Streets and on Old Bridge Road.

In spite of the growing popularity of the automobile, the business was a success, particularly in supplying the military during World War I. It continued successfully beyond that time and in spite of changing modes of transportation, finally closing its doors in the early 1940s.

Concord Jet Station, West Concord

The early decades of the twentieth century were the heyday of streetcar travel. Various lines ran through Concord between 1901 and 1923. During that time they were heavily used, allowing people to more easily spend time away from their own locales and expand their horizons. Women especially benefitted from this new ability to travel away from home on their own. By the 1920s streetcars were being eclipsed by the popularity of the automobile, until now only the occasional suggestion of tracks remaining beneath the pavement is all that remains.

Second Shelf

Bluine Factory

The building still stands at 20 Beharrell Street (it currently houses Minute-Man Printing), but it was originally built for George Conant's Bluine Factory in 1895. Founded in the space above the West Concord drugstore in 1893, its burgeoning popularity quickly necessitated a larger space. The product was so popular that a special chute was installed between the Bluine Factory and the post office. The amount of product mailed each day elevated the West Concord P.O. to first class status, above that of Concord's milldam P.O.

Bluine had one main use: it whitened laundry. Conant was innovative in two ways: first, he developed a method for adhering the bluing to paper, thereby eliminating the need for glass bottles; then, he was a master of marketing, selling his product through mail order, recruiting school children across the country as salespeople, offering toys and other prizes to encourage and reward Bluine sales.

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the space was used by Dovre Ski Binding, founded by Leif Nashe and Odd Overgaard and a reflection of their Norwegian heritage.

Reformatory Station

Reformatory Station (called Prison Station prior to 1888) was at the end of the Boston & Maine's Lexington Branch, located directly across Route 2 from the Reformatory. There the line continued west, but there was also a spur line that took the train directly into the Reformatory itself, dropping off prisoners, as well as coal

and other provisions. This part of the Boston & Maine's Lexington line, including Reformatory Station, was abandoned in 1927.

West Concord Grammar School

Opening in 1887, the West Concord Grammar School was located next to the current Harvey Wheeler Center. Built as a replacement for one of Concord's small district schoolhouses, which were inefficient and no longer able to accommodate the town's students, its construction also reflected West Concord's rapidly growing population. An addition was constructed in 1900, bringing the size of the school to nine rooms. To accommodate the ever-growing number of students, the Harvey Wheeler School was built next door in 1918, and the grades reconfigured between the two buildings. By 1950, however, plans were being made to abandon the West Concord School—by then considered old, dark, and unsanitary—and build a new one, a wise move and a necessity with the wave of baby boomers just beginning to appear on the horizon.

Third Shelf

Hosmer-Sheehan-Comeau Farm

Now part of the Concord Greene Condominium Complex, the house was originally the Joseph and Lydia Hosmer homestead. It was purchased in the 1870s by Jeremiah Sheehan, who planted apple orchards, and later owned by the Comeau family, who were contractors as well as farmers. The Comeau's were the last family to call the house *home*, as well as being the developers of Concord Greene.

Fourth Shelf (left)

This one's just for fun . . . (date unknown)

Fourth Shelf (right) and below

Derby Farm & the Derby Addition

In 1874 Benjamin Derby subdivided 35 acres of his farmland for what would become the first housing development in West Concord. Divided into 109 lots, building was slow and sporadic at first, finally taking off between the 1890s and 1910, a time of increased real estate speculation in West Concord.

The Derby Addition includes lots on Main Street, Derby Street, Central Street, Riverside Street, Pine Street, West Street, Prairie Street, Frances, Chase and Shirley Streets.

The Derby farmhouse remained on Main Street until the 1960s. It is now the site of the West Concord Shopping Plaza.

