

Union Chair Co, The

The following research was done many years ago by Henry Hart Vining, once a prolific and accurate compiler of local history. Most of his writings now reside within the library of the Colebrook Historical Society, and many can be seen in the old copies of the "*Lure of the Litchfield Hills*". This text was entitled "The Story of the Union Chair Factory"; I believe that it was written at least 60 years ago (from 2010).

"A family by the name of Roberts conducted a wood turning shop at the site of what was later known as the Union Chair Factory. Samuel Roberts, a native of Colebrook, came from a family of wood-workers. He and his father made fine wood bottom chairs many years before Lambert Hitchcock came to Hitchcockville (Riverton) in 1818 and manufactured the famous Hitchcock chairs."

"Samuel Roberts inherited the shop from his father and operated it from about 1800 to 1838, when he formed a partnership with Rufus Holmes of Colebrook. [Rufus Holmes first appears on the Colebrook tax list in May, 1830.] In about two years, or in 1840, they sold out their business to their competitors, Hitchcock and Alvord, of Riverton.

On January 7th 1849, the wood-turning factory was deeded to Moses and Caleb J. Camp, of Winsted. Business was started about 1850 under the name of Union Chair Factory, by three men who had been employed by the Lambert Hitchcock chair shop in Riverton. As the concern was in bankruptcy, they took over the lathes and patterns, and taking advantage of the valuable water power afforded by Still River, started the manufacture of chairs. Besides wooden and cane seat chairs and rockers they turned out bedsteads. Twenty to thirty operatives were employed.

At first glance the Union chairs closely resembled the Hitchcock product. Closer examination disclosed certain important differences. The most striking difference occurred in the front legs. The Union chairs had radically different turnings and tapers to the foot, which terminated in a ball. The seats of the two chairs were almost identical and the backs were similar, though the broad panel of the Hitchcock is almost straight, while the Union chair shows a pronounced arch. There is also a distinct difference in the turnings and proportions of the top rail."

"William H. Raidart was superintendent of the shop for around thirty years. His son, George H. Raidart, who was employed by the shop for about ten years, told of a tramp from New York who worked there for a time and was an expert at carving roses on the chair backs, many of which are in existence today. Mr. Raidart's father-in-law, Philemon Woodward, sold a great many thousand feet of lumber to the mill. This gave work to many men in the woods.

Some of the men became very expert in turning out spindles and bed posts from large pieces of wood with only their eyes to guide them. Many women were employed at stenciling the chair backs."

"The chair shop was sold about 1885 to A. L. Rapp's sons, Frank and Augustus, who had been engaged in the wood veneer business in New York. They also made card tables, conducting the factory until 1893. Mr. Rapp lived in the former Clark Roberts residence while operating the chair factory. [Today, 1 Old Forge Road.]

A set of canary yellow chairs, which were sold by the Camps for \$1.00 each, recently sold for over \$100.00. [And you can be sure that the same set would fetch probably ten times that in today's market.]

The chairs were piled into huge wagons built high with racks and sold from door to door throughout the country, some of the drivers going as far as Rhode Island and often into New York State.”

“One of the drivers on these trips was Peter DeMars, father of the late Frank DeMars, of Winsted. About the last driver of these outfits was James A. Williams, father of Jesse J. Williams, now living on the Winsted-New Hartford Road.

This Union Chair Factory was destroyed by fire many years ago and nothing remains to mark the spot but some of the stone foundations.

The location of this shop is as follows: Going from Winsted, turn to the right at the Hemlock Cemetery, [the Colebrook-Winchester town line] follow the dirt road [it was paved in the 1940s after WWII] until you come to the former residence of H. Parks Holcomb, then turn to the right across the bridge over Still River. The shop was located just across the bridge at the left on the bank of the river.”

Here ends the narrative of Henry Hart Vining. I purposely left his directions at the end to highlight the rapidity of change throughout our entire area. No sooner does one generation pass on then the following one applies new names to old landmarks. Where Vining tells you to turn down Parks Holcomb's road, a modern would say that the road leads to Putnams. What really helps today, and at least for the foreseeable future is the fact that all roads are named and have signs, and all houses are now assigned numbers. It makes direction-giving much easier.

Just as a point of interest, here are a couple of entries from the Colebrook tax records: “Tax documents from the Union Chair Co. to the Town of Colebrook, for the year 1851 – document dated Jan. 30 1852. Assets: real estate, \$5,500, personal estate, \$8,012. Liabilities: capital stock laid in, \$4,000, Indebtedness by note & account, \$8,667.29.

“West Winsted, Conn., Jan. 27, 1860 - to the Town Clerk, of Colebrook. The standing of the Union Chair Co. is substantially as follows: Assets: real estate, \$7,450, personal estate, \$12,379.31. Liabilities: capital stock \$6,000, Indebtedness, \$11,549.11.”