The Story of a Trade Card

By Jamie Eves • April 18, 2023

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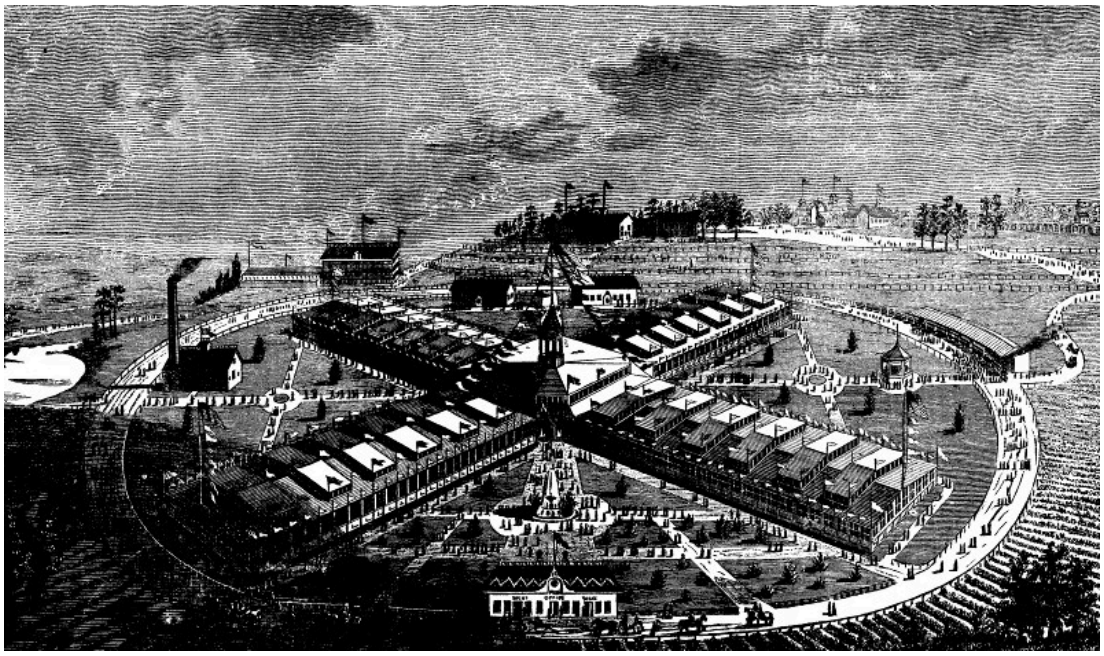
Artifacts tell stories, which is a major reason why museums collect and preserve them. Recently, another museum in another town donated to the Mill Museum twelve c. 1880s/1890s trade cards that had found in its collection. The cards did not really fit the other museum's mission to preserve and interpret the history of seafaring in Connecticut, but because all 12 cards had originally come from Willimantic businesses, The Mill Museum was deemed an appropriate home for them. Our staff has just finished researching and cataloging the cards, so we thought we would post about the stories one of them has to tell.

Trade cards were a common form of advertisement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. About the size of baseball cards (a typical trade card measured approximately 7 mm x 11 mm), they usually had an image (sometime accompanied by a short catch phrase) on the front and advertising text on the back. The image was designed to grab people's attention, while the text provided more information about the product and where to purchase it, sometimes including the names and addresses of the local stores that carried it. The card below was one of dozens of different trade cards published by the Willimantic Linen Company, which manufactured thread in Willimantic, CT, from 1854 until 1898, when it was acquired by the American Thread Company. The image on the front shows a top-hatted cherub flying around the Earth, wrapping the planet in a "girdle" of WLC thread. The Company manufactured enough thread in its massive Willimantic plant to circle the globe every forty minutes. That's a lot of thread. Indeed, by 1890 the WLC produced about 90% of the cotton sewing machine thread manufactured in the United States.

The back of the card references the 1881 International Cotton Exposition (I.C.E.) in Atlanta, Georgia, a fact that helped us date the publication of the card. The Willimantic Linen Company had begun displaying its products and technology at world's fairs (also called expositions, or expos) just a few years earlier, in 1876, when it had a large display at the much larger Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The earliest world's fairs were held in Europe in the early 1800s. The first really big one was the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851, at the dawn of the Victorian Era, the purpose of which was to show off the country's advanced industrial technology and demonstrate its economic, political, and military dominance. Americans had staged the Centennial Exposition in 1876 both to one-up the British (it was bigger, with more displays) and celebrate the end of the Civil War and the U.S.A.'s 100th birthday. World's fairs remained popular through the 1960s. They are still organized today, they are smaller and draw fewer visitors. In the heyday, world's fairs focused primarily on exhibiting exciting new technologies and promoting national or regional pride, and they attracted huge audiences. At the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the Linen Company demonstrated a new, state-of-the-art spinning machine and winder. When several companies that manufactured sewing machines (including Connecticut's Wheeler and Wilson), who were also displaying their own new technologies at the Exposition, decided to stage an impromptu competition among themselves for best home sewing machine, they used freshly spun Willimantic Linen Company thread. When the WLC thread jammed in only two of the sewing machines out of the dozens of models in the competition, the WLC used that fact to successfully advertise its product as America's best sewing machine thread. (It was also at Philadelphia that WLC executive William Barrows saw how every machine at the Exposition was powered by a single Corliss steam engine, and he resolved to begin installing steam power at his water-powered Willimantic factory.) After its success at Philadelphia, it was a no-brainer for the Linen Company to participate in the Atlanta Exposition in 1881, and in other, subsequent world's fairs.

The significance of the 1881 Atlanta Exposition was that it was the first world's fair held in the U. S. South. It's purpose was to promote the South's cotton-based economy and stir Southern pride by announcing the advent of what was being called "the New South," following the Civil War and Reconstruction. Planners wanted to demonstrate that the cotton planters of the New South, using "free labor" (the 13th Amendment had outlawed slavery, but characterizing a system that utilized convict labor and sharecropping as "free" was stretching the point) had teamed with Northern capital to rebuild the South economy and were producing lots of quality raw cotton for Northern cotton mills. The organizers made it clear that the Exposition was celebratory in nature, and while Southern planters welcomed Northern capital, they did not want to experience any Northern "moralizing" about racism. Focused on expanding their own business opportunities rather than on promoting social justice, Northern mills like the WLC obliged. A vast exhibition hall was constructed on the outskirts of Atlanta adjacent to the Western and Atlantic Railroad tracks, a huge Corliss steam engine was installed, and Northern mills showed off their state-of-the-art textile manufacturing technology. Prizes were awarded, and the WLC apparently won some of them.



What the Willimantic Linen Company, other Northern cotton manufacturers, and even most Georgians did not realize was that the I.C.E. would be an opening move in the shift of the U.S. textile industry from New England to the Piedmont South. As planned, after the I.C.E. closed on Dec. 31, the exhibition hall was converted into a large, steam-powered cotton mill. Southern cotton growers, seeing the new Northern technology close up, realized that they could duplicate it in the South, where wages were about 15% lower than in the rest of the country. The South was close to the Appalachian coal mines that provided the fuel for steam power. The cotton fields were right there. And Southern entrepreneurs knew that Northern capital would help them finance new factories in the foothills of the Appalachians. By 1920, forty years later, the Piedmont had caught up to New England in cotton manufacturing. By 1950, it had surpassed it. And, ironically, the Willimantic Linen Company was present at the beginning of the transition. (Today, of course, textile manufacturing has mostly left the United States — New England and the Piedmont South both — for even cheaper labor in Asia.)

Source: K. Stephen Prince, “A Rebel Yell for Yankee Doodle: Selling the New South at the 1881 Atlanta International Cotton Exposition,” The Georgia Historical Society Quarterly, vol. 92, no. 3 (Fall 2008), pp. 340-371.