



John J. Allen: Amesbury Carriage and Auto Body Building History

by

Mike Harrold
Industrial Survey Volunteer

Amesbury Carriage Museum
Amesbury, MA

July 1, 2019

John Jewell Allen

John Jewell Allen (1868-1960) is remembered today for his extensive *History of Carriage Making and Automobile Body Building*, describing makers of carriages and automobile bodies in Amesbury and Merrimac (West Amesbury until 1876). This is an amazingly complete compilation of sketches and biographies for several hundred companies and individuals who participated in these industries from 1850 to 1955. Because of his personal placement in these events, he had deep knowledge of such matters and people, and how the business functioned.

John Allen was from an old Amesbury business family, eventually owning his own retail store in town. Two previous generations had operated Allen & Co. since mid-19th century, a grocery and hardware establishment for domestic and trades supplies, from their iconic Greek Revival building on the north side of Market Square. Until 1886, when the towns of Amesbury and Salisbury merged, Salisbury town offices were on the second floor, and the hardware store at ground level. With the office space thereafter available, their hardware business was extensively expanded.



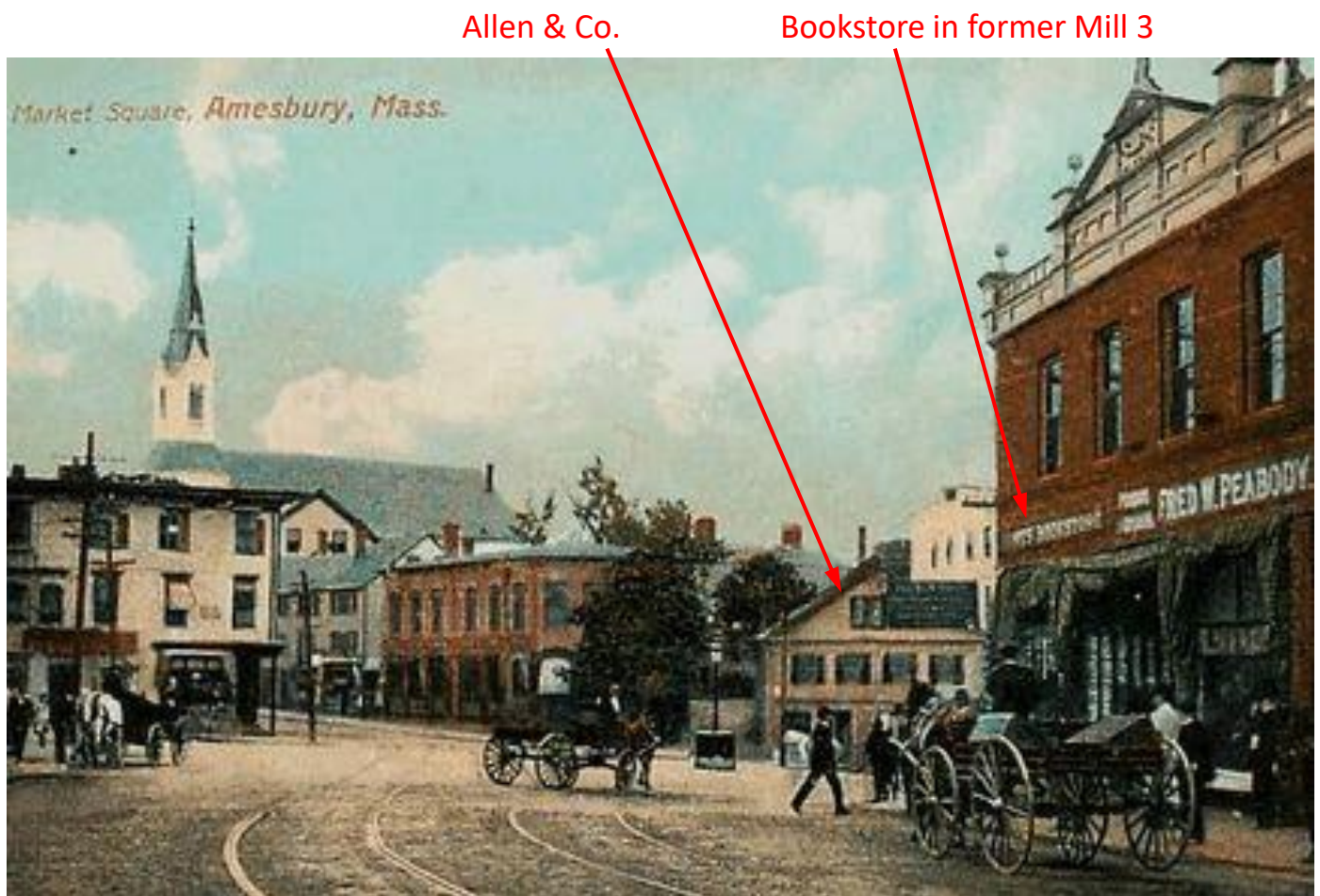
Center, Greek Revival storefront of Allen & Co. in Market Square, with Powow Bank on the left, at the corner of Market Street. Postcard, ca. 1910.

John's mother, Clara Jewell, was from South Hampton and "Jewell-town", just across the state line above Amesbury. It appears that John had only one sibling, older brother Arthur L. Allen (1866-1881), who, reminiscent of the "good" old days, died young of tuberculosis. John cut short his high school studies in town to complete his

education at Bryant & Stratton's Commercial School, whereupon he entered the family business, likely helping to keep the books, among other duties. (Founded in Cleveland, Ohio in 1854, Bryant & Stratton had, by 1864, 50 branch locations charging \$40 for the complete business course. It is unknown just where John Allen studied. This school still exists, as Bryant & Stratton College, stating that two of its graduates from this period were Henry Ford and John Rockefeller.)

On October 28 1890, 22 year old John Allen married Isabel Drummond, who had come to Amesbury from Scotland in 1870 with her father, Robert Drummond Sr. and his entire family. Robert was first employed at the textile mills, and then tried work at the Merrimac Hat Company for several years. He then had the opportunity to work for another Scotsman, James Hume, at about the time (1875) that Hume purchased the Chestnut Street factory complex that had been built up by Jacob R. Huntington to be the largest carriage making concern in town.

As an aside, Amesbury carriage making had a group of Scottish company owners in George W. Ellis, James Hume and his two brothers, Robert Drummond and his three sons, and John Leitch. The last three were all from the "village" of Galashiels (as

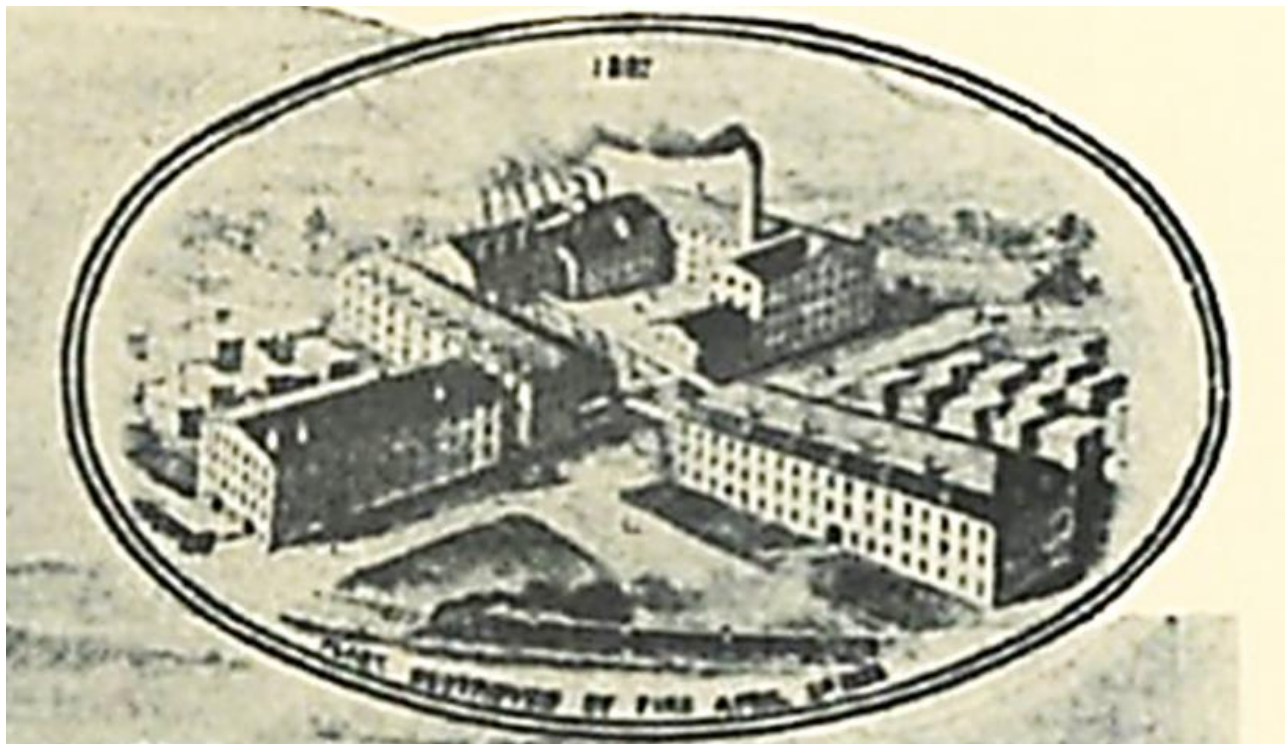


The Greek Revival storefront of Allen & Co. in Market Square, with (far right) shops in the former Mill #3 on Main Street, where John J. Allen had his store. Postcard ca. 1890

described by John Allen), Hume and Drummond being within a year of the same age. Circumstances suggest that news from America may have prompted the others to follow James Hume to Amesbury, and it may have been that that Hume and Drummond knew, or at least knew of, each other before coming to America.

Robert Drummond Sr. proved a productive and prosperous asset to the Hume business, such that he owned a share of the company when it was sold in 1885 to Frank Babcock and Robert Drummond Jr.. At that point, Drummond Sr. retired for several years, while his older sons built careers in the carriage business.

Meanwhile, Colin Cameron and another gentleman had started in 1881 a business in the Friend Street factory complex of Felix D. Parry, in which they contracted iron work, trimming, and some woodwork for various carriage makers. Cameron's partner withdrew the following year, replaced by Charles Goss and Robert Drummond's son, James, to become Goss, Drummond & Co.. That organization moved almost immediately to the four-story Colchester Mill building at 85 Elm Street, where they expanded to manufacturing carriage gears and bodies, fully ironed and "in the white", to be finished by other makers. Having a new upcoming opportunity, James Drummond sold his interest in that firm to John Currier in 1887, which then became Currier, Cameron & Company, later well known for making Stanley steamer bodies in that same factory.



A rare depiction of the 1887 factory complex at the intersection of Chestnut and Oakland Streets that belonged to Frank Babcock and Robert Drummond Jr.. Having purchasing a smaller adjacent facility in 1884, they expanded it with new brick buildings and added steam power before it was completely destroyed in the Carriage Hill fire of April of 1888.

James Drummond's upcoming opportunity was to join David J. Folger in a new company, and in a new factory. Folger had been making carriages in the brick factory at 12 Oakland Street (Barewolf Brewery), where his name can still be read on the building. He and James Drummond built, during 1887, a new factory down along the north side of the tracks on Railroad Avenue, roughly between the current senior center and Nichols scrap yard. The firm was called Folger & Drummond, with their factory powered by electricity from the newly completed electric power plant (built by Scotsman, William G. Ellis) that was south of the tracks at the bottom of Oak Street.

Folger and his brother Nathaniel were both local carriage builders, originally from Nantucket and almost certainly related to the coffee Folger. David Folger's previous factory, at Oakland and Morrill Streets, then (1887) became home for the new carriage making firm of Drummond & Taylor. Robert Drummond Jr. had stayed with Frank Babcock for several years, but then moved out on his own with another maker named James W. Taylor. Taylor withdrew from the business in mid-1889, whereupon Robert Drummond Sr. re-entered the business under the name of Robert Drummond & Son. They maintained a line of quality carriages until selling out in 1894 to Charles H. Palmer Jr., a maker of high-grade heavy carriages.



"Folger & Drummond" can just be read on the building at center, an "L" shaped factory located adjacent to today's senior center on Railroad avenue. There are clearly numerous factories and a railroad in the area, which is relatively empty today. The white building across the tracks, far left middle, is the factory of Nathaniel H. Folger.

This was the stature of Drummond family enterprises, at the height of Amesbury carriage making, when John Allen married Isabella Drummond in 1890. While he came from an amply respected family, his newly acquired in-laws would have granted him access to some of the parlors of Amesbury's foremost carriage builders, and to hours of discussion regarding the background and nature of the business. This was right at the peak of the local industry, before the crash of 1893, as the Board of Trade was actively promoting Amesbury as the Carriage Capital of America (by 1892 they had declared it the Carriage Capital of the World), and holding Spring carriage "openings" at which wholesale buyers came to acquire new stock.

Whatever he was doing for work at the time he married, he was employed as a clerk and salesman at Folger & Drummond at some point in the 1890s, eventually becoming their office manager. Folger retired from the business at around the turn of the century, which continued under James Drummond until 1911. Meanwhile, John Allen had become Amesbury town auditor in 1903, a position he held until just after leaving Folger & Drummond in 1908. He had then found an opportunity to purchase a long-standing bookstore in Market Square.



Looking across Market Square from near Market Street, ca. late 1930s. The large white lettered sign for John J. Allen News Agency is clearly visible at center, on the side of old Mill 3, where he had his bookstore and newspaper shop. It can be seen how Mill 7 (top left) and Mill 8 (top right) then dominated Main Street.

Mill 3, now housing Ben's Uniforms, is an 1820 textile mill building adjacent to the Powow River on the south side of Main Street. It had gone fallow after 1887, when the mills discontinued processing wool, and was seemingly sold sometime around the crash of 1893. It was reduced to two floors (and subsequently to one story at street level) with a decorative top façade, which became retail shops on the first floor, and office space on the second. Two of the earliest retail tenants were the bookstore of John French Johnson, on the left by 1889, plus the piano and organ store of Fred W. Peabody on the right. Johnson, who had operated bookstores in New York and Boston, gradually added office supplies, and even a watch repair stand, to build a successful place in the local business community. In 1908, John Allen joined with a Mr. Frederick W. Howes to purchase the bookstore. Buying out Howes in 1913, Allen continued to build a thriving business, adding newspaper sales and occasional other features, such as publishing post cards of local scenes.

In 1909, after acquiring the bookstore, John Allen shifted from being town auditor to town treasurer, which he continued until 1917. Thereafter, he served on the town finance committee, until 1930. Around 1940 the bookstore relocated, because of new businesses coming into Market Square, and he finally retired from business in 1947, as he neared age eighty. He was also involved in banking, at some point being president of the Provident Institution for Savings. He may have begun organizing his histories shortly after retirement, but was certainly pursuing them after 1950. By then, very many of the carriage and auto body buildings were gone, and the historical awareness of these industries was fading. From his direct contact and knowledge regarding many principals in these business, he was able to assemble a substantial biographical record of the business entities and their entrepreneurs. In doing so he also drew from several previous histories published by the newspaper under the name "Amesbury Souvenirs".

Perhaps because of advancing age, Jewell was assisted after 1955 in writing his history by Roland Woodwell and Jeremiah Reardon. He died at age 91 on March 15, 1960 and was buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery

John J Allen to Retire, Amesbury Daily News, June 28, 1947, pg. 1 & pg. 4

Death Notice, Amesbury Daily News, March 16, 1960, pg. 3

John J Allen obit., Amesbury Daily News, March 16, 1960, pg. 4

John Jewell Allen, photo
from retirement article

