

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: The telephone comes to Mansfield

By Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco

Dec 1, 2020

MANSFIELD - In the age of Zoom and FaceTime it's easy to forget how novel the telephone was just a few generations ago. But there was a time when telephone service was new to Mansfield.

Historian Jennie Copeland tells us that by 1883, just seven years after the telephone was invented, Foxborough and Walpole had service. At the time Mansfield had a greater population than either of those towns and was "agitating" for the telephone. But the phone company determined there was not enough interest in Mansfield to warrant a line.

In 1891, a company manager came to Mansfield but was unable to find enough subscribers to bring service. In April 1892, the Taunton Gazette reported that Mansfield and Rehoboth were probably the only two towns in the nation that couldn't be reached by phone. This was clearly an exaggeration. But the business community in Mansfield was "sore" about being unable to reach the outside world. They soon convinced the phone company to make a change.

In October 1892, it was announced that phone service was finally coming to Mansfield.



Doliver Spaulding, above, owned a jewelry factory where the town's first 'pay station' telephone was installed in Mansfield. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

“This town is one of the very few in this state where telephone connections were never made and there has been much annoyance [as a result],” reported the Bristol County Republican.



The Spaulding jewelry factor was where the town's first 'pay station' telephone was installed in Mansfield.
Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society

Later that month the Mansfield News reported that construction of a phone line was underway to connect Mansfield through the exchange in Taunton.

“Many of the business places in town will have telephone put in as soon as the connection with the main office is completed.”

Mansfield’s first “pay station” was installed at the jewelry factory operated by Doliver Spaulding at North Main and Pratt streets. This was soon followed by Cobb’s jewelry factory on Spring Street, Shield’s foundry on Oakland Street, Comey’s straw shop on Park Street and G.E. Hodges’ drug store on the South Common.

The arrival of the telephone helped spread Christmas cheer in 1893 when the congregation of the Methodist Church placed a phone call to Santa Claus.

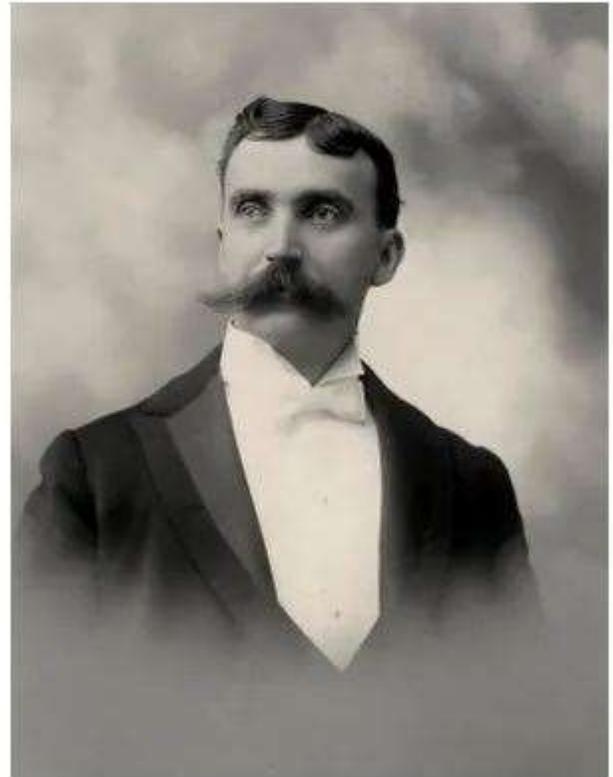
“To the surprise and delight of all, the jolly old fellow responded,” said the Mansfield News.

But Santa still preferred to visit in person.

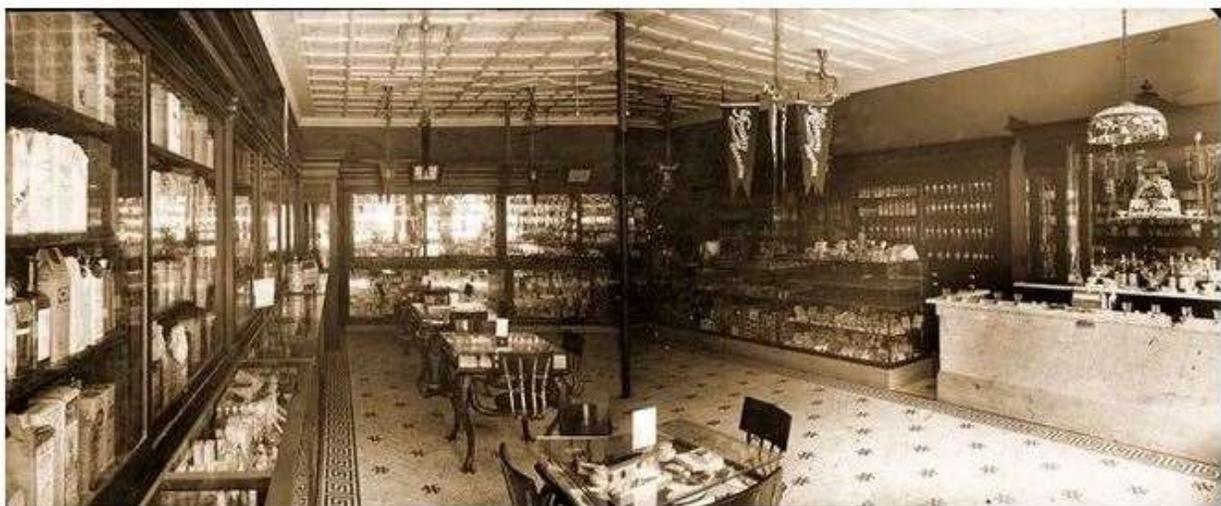
“No sooner had the telephone rung ‘good bye’ than the merry tinkle of the sleigh-bell was heard and the round, rosy patron saint strode majestically to the platform and began the distribution of his goodies.”

The next advancement came in June 1895 when a “twenty line wall switchboard” was installed at Hodges’ drug store. By now Mansfield had 30 telephone subscribers.

The company installed a “central exchange” at the Winter Block (now Jimmy’s Pub) in 1902 to serve Mansfield’s 60 customers. At that point a phone company operator had charge of the switchboard. Two years later a second switchboard was installed to handle rapid growth. Phone lines were extended to East Mansfield and Norton to accommodate “more distant subscribers.” By 1906 there were 212 telephone subscriptions in Mansfield; by 1909 there were 315.



George Hodges's drug store became home to a 20-line telephone switchboard in 1895. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*



Inside Hodges' Apothecary in Mansfield, which became home to a 20-line telephone switchboard in 1895. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*