By 1867, the Oneida Community was well embarked on the road to industrialization. The Perfectionists had constructed a factory (1864), the largest trap manufacturing facility of its day, and staffed it with outside wage earners. Immediately after, they bought the nearby Wilson foundry where, with employee help, they turned out plows and other agricultural implements (1865). Meanwhile, on the second floor of the trap shop, they started up another factory industry, one devoted to the making of thread for sewing machines (1866). It, also, was dependent on hired help. Suddenly, the Oneida Community had become one of the region’s largest employers.

But if employees now played a major role in Community life, that fact was hard to digest. “Stop hiring, and carry on your business by taking your workmen into your family,” John H. Noyes had thundered at the hireling masters of the world. “Let the employer, whatever his line of business, live with his men, and make them interested partners instead of holding them by mere bond of wages” (Circular, 6/20/1854). Paid laborers, they thought, were “crushed down beneath the weight of drudging toil—toil which is a master, stern and relentless.” Only nominally better than slavery, “the old vicious hireling system” required “a kind of driving, quite distasteful to Community people” (Circular, 12/1/1859; Daily Journal, 10/26/1867). Wage labor was antithetical to the communal and socialist values of Oneida.

As people who led deeply self-examined lives, the moral dilemma bothered them. They wanted to believe that work in Community factories could benefit the laboring class: “We hope to avoid in some degree at least, the spirit of the hireling system, and that these working men may have no reason to regret their service of the community” (Circular, 6/25/1863). They also wanted to believe they were better employers than non-Perfectionist bosses: “We want a spirit of liberality toward our workmen and not the spirit of the world which grinds them down and seeks to get all it can from them for the least money” (Daily Journal, 11/1/1867).

It was an issue they never resolved. “While the Community employs many persons for wages,” they admitted to visitors in tight-lipped fashion, “it does not wholly approve of the hireling system, regarding it as one of the temporary institutions which will in time be displaced by the associative principle” (OC Hand-Book, 1875, 18).

Though logical resolution eluded them, the Oneida Community nevertheless explored practical ways to reconcile communism with capitalism. In 1867, the Community started up two communal ventures to investigate different aspects of labor-management relations. Both were regarded, like Wallingford, as separate...
The first was established near the trap-thread works in present Sherrill. This, the Willow Place Commune (abbreviated to “WP”), was a group of Perfectionists sent to that location with the express purpose of supervising factory operations (Daily Journal, 3/25/1867). It consisted of about thirty Community members who initially occupied a house next to the trap-thread shop. From 1872 to 1876, they lived in a larger residence called the “Villa.”

The second experiment in labor relations, the “Boarding House Commune,” called for Bible communists to run a boarding house of workers and to participate in its inner life. The Community owned at least two boarding establishments near the trap-thread shop, both managed by outsiders under contract to the Perfectionists. Now, however, the Community imagined itself supervising such a place and rubbing elbows with its residents. Doing so would provide the laborers with an example of proper living. Oneida’s employees, it was supposed, would want to imitate their Perfectionist betters and, thereby, be morally improved (Daily Journal, 1/23 and 3/9/1867).

Community members long debated the idea in their evening meetings at the Mansion House (Daily Journal, 1/23 and 3/9/1867). In September, Noyes proposed that the Community “start another branch Commune at our boarding-house building over the Creek, whose business will be to provide accommodations for a limited number of guests or boarders, for certain prices; and as soon as the way opens, invite those who have and who are almost daily applying for the privilege of working for the O. C. We are doing almost the same thing now in providing meals for daily visitors. We cook for them, we entertain them, invite them into our noon meetings, &c., &c. only, we do not lodge them. It is virtually pushing Communism to the front again on a different line. Christ is to subdue all principalities and powers, that is to say, bring them into his service or dash them in pieces. Hotels are a principality. Christ is bound to take charge of them” (Daily Journal, 9/7/1867).

Visualized, then, as a Bible Communist hotel, the plan was that Community members would live with employees in order to elevate them to a higher spiritual level. Perfectionists in residence would cook for and serve the workers with an example of proper living. They would clean up after the laborers. They would provide transportation for girls working in the silk factory. They would offer educational opportunities and encourage their wage earners to develop higher religious consciousness. In return, employees in residence would not gamble, play cards, smoke tobacco, or keep late hours. They were not to have visitors that “tax attention and burden the housekeepers with...”
what belongs not to them.” They were not to have company objectionable for “pleasure purposes” (Daily Journal, 3/11-12, 11/18, 11/25, and 12/19, all 1867).

The “boarding-house building over the Creek” was an existing establishment on the Hitchcock farm north of the Mansion House. Just southwest of what we know today as the CAC, it overlooked Oneida Creek on the high north bank. The Oneida Community came into possession of the building when it acquired the Hitchcock property in March 1865 (Daily Journal, 1/17/1868). The career of the Boarding House Commune (abbreviated to “BH”) lasted from Sept. 14, 1867 to late March 1868. It was supervised by a committee at the Mansion House of which George E. Cragin was the chair as well as the main Community presence on site (Daily Journal, 9/13/1867). The commune consisted of Community members, employee boarders, and a hired superintendent named Mr. Stone.

“Our family, all told,” Cragin explained, “numbers thirty-one souls, six of whom are Communists, one a probationist, one a hired helper and twenty-three are boarders. Of the latter, sixteen are women and girls, and the remaining seven are men. Two evenings since, Mr. Bradley opened a school from seven to eight for the sterner sex. In the course of the week Mrs. Thayer will do the same for the young women, or as many of them as choose to attend” (Daily Journal, 12/19/1867). Several weeks later, he elaborated: “We have only sixteen boarders at present, twelve women and four men. Seven of the former are employed in the Silk-factory. They are taken over in the morning and brought home at night by the WP team. They take their dinners with them. The washing department employs three more, and the tailoring business has the services of the two remaining. Of the men, two are teaming under Mr. Conant, one is in the Shoe-shop, and one is in the Bag department” (Daily Journal, 1/11/1867).

One of the only problems reported was ethnic tension. Several German men who were bag-makers “complained of the way the Yankee boarders treated them,” calling them names such as “Dutchmen,” “sauerkraut, etc.” (Daily Journal, 11/1/1867). On the whole, however, things seemed to be going well. When Cragin offered the commune as a topic for criticism in the evening meeting at the Mansion House, “all concurred in the opinion that the experiment of introducing a Community family there had proved a perfect success” (Daily Journal, 2/17/1868).

Suddenly, however, the venture was discontinued. A possible clue to what happened comes from this description of boarder behavior occurring just before the end:

“Our Boarding-house life, outwardly, is quite a monotonous one. The boarders make short work of the ordinance of eating, then disappear till the ringing of the next bell. But Sunday is an exceptional day. Some leave us on Sunday to visit their friends and return Monday. Those who remain, however, (mostly girls), do not usually lack for company of the other sex from abroad. On our return last Sunday evening, from mother O. C., we stumbled upon cozy couples in various quarters. In the men’s sitting-room there were not less than three couples each occupying a corner, having willed our steady Mr. Stone into the wash-room somewhat against his sense of propriety and of equal rights. On hearing the facts we felt a little disturbed by it and thought some of calling a meeting of the feminine boarders and kindly suggest to them that if they must be sparked on Sundays that they learn to do it up in a Christian-like manner, i.e., discreetly and in order, or in such ways as the world to which they belong, approves, so as not to bring scandal upon our BH home” (Daily Journal, 3/4/1868).
In an apparent post-mortem by Cragin, it sounds as though the Perfectionists were tired of living with their employees, weary of putting up with the ways of the world’s people:

“The BH has been run six months by a Community family. The four members of the family entered upon their new calling with some trepidation as to their ability and fitness to make the experiment a successful one. The boarders too, at the commencement, were not, by any means, such as we should have selected for an experimental expedition to the frontier. At first, we experienced a little heart-sinking, occasioned by the roughness of our new situation. When under such temptations we remembered him who placed us here as one who had been guilty of no mistakes in his matured plans, so we took in fresh courage to press on and came out of our momentary temptation to run up a signal of distress.

We purposed at the beginning to make a loving, unitary home for ourselves, and if successful, depend on our family contagion for securing a quiet, parental, home-feeling for the comfort of our boarders. We purposed also, to treat all with due respect and show partiality to none. How well we have succeeded in the execution of our purposes and aspirations, it does not belong to us to say” (Daily Journal, 3/18/1868).

The Boarding House Commune disappeared from the written record after that. While the Oneida Community continued to own boarding establishments, it never again concerned itself directly in their operations. Instead, the Perfectionists focused on building tenant houses—living situations which favored married employees desirous of living home lives free of management’s presence.

West end of the old Boarding House Commune, photographed by LaVerne Cross, about 1923.

East end of the former commune, late 1920s. A member of the Historical Committee (Hope Allen?) has written: “The Old Boarding House on bank of creek near Clubhouse, said by Mr. Len Morrison (b. 1829) of Morrison’s Landing, Sherrill in 1915, to have been bought by an Oneida Indian chief Moses Schuyler. Mr. Morrison remembered that he had seen it in 1845, before the Oneida, as a tribe, left for Green Bay, Wisconsin (they went in groups from 1825-1845). Those who remained lost the tribal organization and owned their land as individuals.”
Boston artist Samuel Chamberlain (1895-1975) was a distinguished printmaker and noted writer. One of his books, *Clémentine in the Kitchen* (1943), introduced America to French cuisine and gourmet dining. He also enjoyed a fair reputation as a photographer of landscape and architecture. Commissioned by Oneida Ltd. to photograph Sherrill, Chamberlain depicted the place as a small New England town filled with trees and shadows—but no people. Many of Chamberlain’s photos appeared in Oneida Ltd.’s book, *The First Hundred Years*, by Walter Edmonds (1948). Others taken during that long-ago summer were never published. Copies of all are in the Mansion House’s photo archive.

This pictorial sequence compares five of Chamberlain’s landscapes to what can be seen from approximately the same vantage points today. The 1947 places were identified by Pody Vanderwall assisted by Don Talbot and Lauren Hollander. The contemporary vistas were photographed by Wonderley in early May 2016.

Chamberlain was attracted to plain, old-looking buildings along East Seneca Street just east of Oneida Ltd.’s factory complex. On Willow Place, he paused to gaze across Sherrill Pond to the American Legion building, originally the farm house on property purchased by the Oneida Community in the early 1860s for their new trap factory. This structure was also the home of the Willow Place Commune, 1867-1872.
Chamberlain photographed this old house a little further east on East Seneca. Pat and Bruce Wayland-Smith have lived here since 1965. They were told this was the second or third home to be built in the old settlement of Turkey Street. Milford Newhouse once lived in it.

Continuing east along Seneca, Chamberlain turned left on Filly Road to record this farm house across Sconondoa Creek. Frightened off by "No trespassing" signs, your fearless photographer reports that the house Chamberlain documented is gone.
This photo was published in The First Hundred Years with the caption: “Cradled within the rolling hills that fringe New York State’s historic Mohawk Valley spread the pleasant communities of Sherrill and Kenwood.” Chamberlain took it from Betsinger Road looking west toward the West or Stockbridge Hill. Since then, the view (this is Ransom Avenue at Betsinger) has been obscured by suburban development.

This was taken from the same vantage as the previous one. Here, however, the present photographer moved beyond Betsinger to the Marble Hill Inn to obtain a roughly comparable view.
Stay warm and remember the Mansion House this winter
(postcard, perhaps early 1900s; gift of Nini Hatcher.)