

JOSHUA H. MARVIL AND HIS FACTORY
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Joshua Hopkins Marvil was born in Little Creek Hundred, on Sept. 3, 1825, the son of Joseph and Sallie Ann (Hopkins) Marvil. His father, a farmer, died in 1834, and increased demands in helping to run the farm limited Joshua's schooling. When he reached the age of 20 he hired a man to replace him on the farm and joined the crew of a ship for a year. Then he worked as a shipwright for seven years. Next he began the manufacture of agricultural machinery, from about 1853 to 1865. The next five years were spent in carpentry and cabinet work, and during the latter period occurred some inventive experimenting. His previous experience in farming and in working with wood helped him to design an improved fruit basket, which he patented in 1871. In the same year he launched the container manufacturing business which would bring him fame and fortune.

Early published histories say that he invented the machine to make his first basket design. Patent office records show that only the basket itself was patented. The directions of his inventiveness and therefore his business, took can be seen in the illustrations showing his 17 patents secured in a period of 18 years.

His first manufacturing site was at the curve where Market and West Streets meet. Land records are not clear as to when this property was purchased. The factory was started in a building formerly used as a cabinetmaker's shop. A small house across West St. from it was the company's business office.

In the first year of business the output was 600,000 baskets of the first patent type. Business quickly grew, and he acquired land nearby on the river to serve as a wharf area, permitting his wares to be shipped by water as well as by rail. This land included the "landing lot" shown in early maps. The factory was enlarged through the 1870's, and new machinery added, but they became inadequate for the burgeoning business.

The Delawarean, Dover, Jan., 1880 said, "J. H. Marvil expects to run his crate and basket factory with a full force of hands in order to meet orders he could not fill last season." The same paper one month later noted, "J. H. Marvil has put up a machine in his basket factory which will cut 240 mortices and tenons per minute." The latter refers to the machine designed to make his patented basket whose bottom was held in by mortices and tenons (see patent 273,864).

The Industrial Census of Delaware in 1880 gave the following data about this factory: \$20,000 invested; maximum number of hands employed at any one time, 60; males above age 16, 30; females above 15, 5; children and youths, 3; number of hours in ordinary day of

labor, November to May, 10; day's wages for a skilled mechanic, \$1.50; average day's wages for an ordinary laborer, 75¢; total amount paid in wages during the previous year, \$7,000. Ten months in full time operation in past year; idle two months. Value of materials used, \$10,000; value of product, \$40,000. One steam boiler; one steam engine of 40 h. p.

Nature dealt him and the local farmers a heavy blow in the severely cold winter of 1880-81. Temperatures reached a record low of -18° , and the fruit trees, buds, and berry bushes were killed to a degree that made the next year's crop a record low. His basket orders declined sharply because of it. Due to his dependence on the farmers, he was given to predicting the next season's crops, especially of peaches. The Morning News, Wilmington, in March, 1881 said, "J. H. Marvil, Laurel's enterprising citizen, is the proprietor of a peach and berry basket factory. He predicts that it will not be a good year for peaches, and believes only one-fourth of a crop of raspberries and blackberries will be produced." Concerning the degree to which peach buds had been killed by the severe cold, the same paper later in that month reported, "For his own satisfaction and benefit, J. H. Marvil has recently completed a test for the prospect of the peach crop for the present year in this latitude. He secured a limb from the Troth Early variety, containing about 500 buds, placed it in a room with the end in water, where the temperature was kept at about sixty degrees from the first of February to March 19th. At this time the leaves were a half inch long, and but two buds bloomed out."

Although the year started on a pessimistic note, he decided to proceed with the erection of a new factory. He had anticipated the need by buying land from Ann Hooper in 1878 at the corner of West and Townsend Sts. At that site the building began to rise. The Morning News in Aug., 1881 announced, "The new factory of J. H. Marvil has opened, and is 50 x 130. It is believed that he will also engage in other types of manufacturing. He already employs 100 hands in his busy season, and may double the number."

The Encyclopedia of Delaware (1882) told of his business growth up until that time:

From the first year, in which 600 thousand strawberry baskets were made, the manufacture of two million baskets, boxes, and crates annually are turned out, as the result of both skilled labor and improved machinery. So perfect is the skill employed that two berry baskets are made in a minute, and one peach basket in two minutes, and the capacity of the works is equal to the making of 35,000 berry baskets per day. For the safe transportation of fruits and vegetables Mr. Marvil has obtained six patents, the improved parts of which are made at the factory in Laurel. He also has invented and patented two "Improved Watchman's Time Detectors" for the protection of his works. The different kinds and sizes of baskets, boxes, and crates number about forty, and range from the capacity of pints to bushels. The baskets are made with

and without lids and handles, so as to meet any want in the business. The demand for these wares of Mr. Marvil is such as to give employment to 40 agents besides sub-agents and contractors, who dispose of them in the several States of the Union, from Massachusetts to Texas. To accommodate the trade, numerous warehouses are already established in the chief centres of the country, and a healthy growth in the trade is everywhere manifest. These wares are all cheap and comparatively inexpensive, hence their rapid sale and the constantly growing demand.

In 1882 J. H. Marvil's nephew, Harvey F. Marvil, joined him and began a career with the company which would last for over 40 years.

In April, 1883 newspapers announced a new industry in Laurel. J. H. Marvil, with Isaac E. Hearn, John R. Wilson, and Newton E. Ward formed J. R. Wilson & Co. to manufacture tubs and buckets, investing a capital of \$10,000. A factory located east of Marvil's near the railroad tracks was built. The lane which ran from it to the Marvil plant later became Mechanic St. The scarcity of juniper, a wood needed in this operation, forced them to close after about one year. The building remained idle until 1886, when reopened by partners J. H. Marvil, his nephew Lorenzo W. Marvil, and Newton E. Ward, and called N. Ward & Co. Lorenzo Marvil was the superintendent, and it largely duplicated the output of Marvil's own factory, thereby doubling the quantities produced. This plant continued through the 1890's under the same name.

In 1886 Marvil bought his own schooner, drawing only 4 1/2 feet of water, to enable regular trips with larger loads of his goods from his wharf to Baltimore.

In the 1890's he extended his business by becoming a partner in a crate and basket factory in Sharptown, Md. The firm of James & John Robinson, established there in 1872, was reorganized in 1893 by Albert W. Robinson and William H. Knowles of Sharptown, with Marvil as the third partner (A.W. Robinson & Co.).

The Every Evening, Wilmington in March, 1893 announced, "J. H. Marvil on one day shipped 1,000 crates by boat, 1,400 by teams, and 7 railroad cars full, surpassing all previous records."

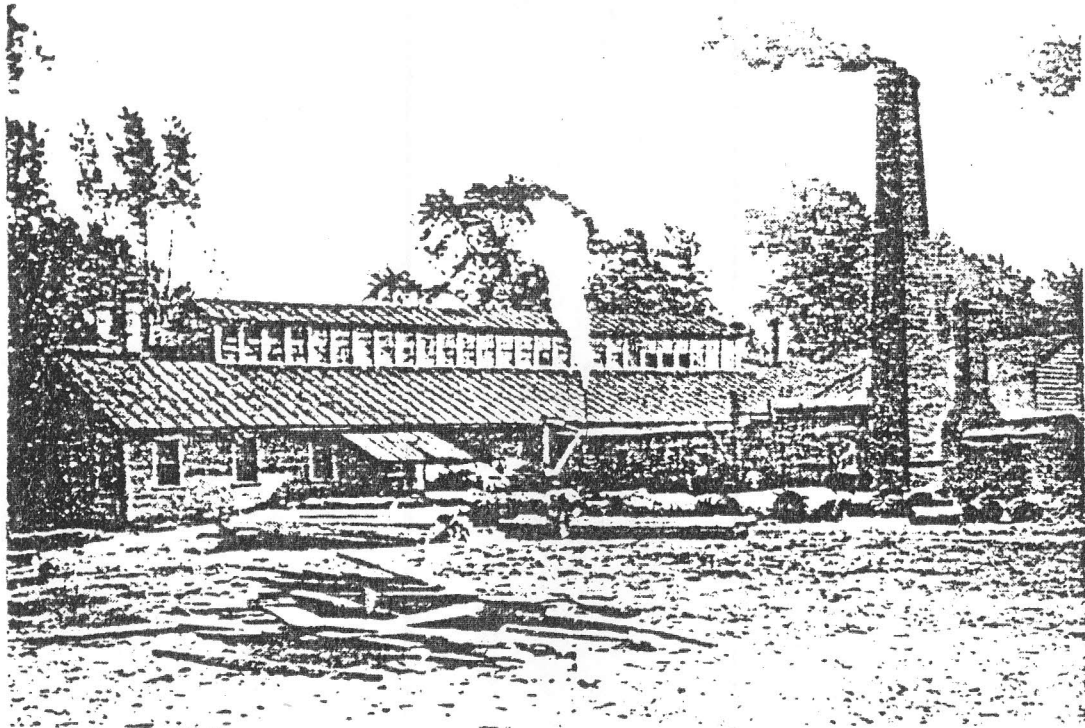
In 1894, Joshua H. Marvil accepted the nomination for Republican candidate for Governor of Delaware. A newspaper, in connection with his restarting his factory after the usual operating season, commented, "J. H. Marvil has again opened his factory, hoping to influence votes." He won the election, but lived only a short time after taking office. On April 8, 1895 he died of heart disease and erysipelas.



Joshua H. Marvil. From Encyclopedia of Delaware, 1882, courtesy of Raymond Dill.



J. Dallas Marvil. From the Sussex Countian & Laurel Gazette, Dec. 5, 1896, courtesy of HSD.



The factory at West and Townsend Sts., seen from the west side. The round objects are tree sections waiting to be placed in the steam box, after which they are turned to make veneer, from which basket parts were cut. From Delaware Pilot Supplement, Lewes, 1902, courtesy of E. D. Bryan, M.D.