



Samuel Colt.
Portrait by Charles Loring, 1865.
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum
of Art. Bequest of Elizabeth Hart
Jarvis Colt. 1905.8.

Chapter 2

Resources and Historical Overview

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of resources and a summary overview of the history of Coltsville and the Samuel Colt family involved in the manufacturing enterprise he established in Hartford, Connecticut. Information for this chapter is primarily drawn from the nomination which resulted in the recent designation of the district as an NHL.

Firearms inventor Samuel Colt was born in Hartford in 1814, the son of a textiles manufacturer, and died there in 1862. He obtained a patent for a revolver in England in 1835 and one in America in 1836. In 1836 he established the Patent Arms Manufacturing Company in Paterson, New Jersey. After producing approximately 5,000 guns, Colt was unable to attract government contracts for his revolver and he closed his Paterson operation in 1842. Colt returned to Hartford and was able to obtain government contracts during the Mexican American War.

He temporarily established operations at Eli Whitney's factory and then established Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company. The company is still in operation today, although it has moved from the historic armory to West Hartford, Connecticut. The Colt revolver was a revolutionary weapon that changed military tactics by enabling the shooter to fire up to six shots without reloading. Colt firearms manufactured at the Hartford plant were used in every major American conflict from the Mexican War through the Vietnam War.

Samuel Colt's salesmanship was legendary, and the company grew due to his marketing skills. The name "Colt" became synonymous with the revolver. Harold Evans, in *They Made America* (2004), wrote that Samuel Colt "basically invented modern branding." At the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, Colt displayed his revolvers and demonstrated their interchangeable parts to highlight the "American System of Manufacturing."

In 1855, Samuel Colt built a model factory in Hartford that employed the most advanced manufacturing technology. He also created an industrial community surrounding the factory that included housing, a beer garden, social hall and library, and a church. The Colt armory's distinctive blue onion dome is still a Hartford landmark, visible from Interstate-91. The original factory burned in 1864, but was rebuilt soon after. Many of the most important Coltsville structures are still extant. The Colt story is also the story of Elizabeth Colt, who owned the factory for 39 years after her husband's death in 1862. Mrs. Colt built many of the structures in Coltsville and was the leading philanthropist and art patron in Hartford before she died in 1905.

The history of Coltsville complements the Springfield Armory National Historic Site, a unit of the National Park System in Springfield, Massachusetts, 25 miles north of Hartford. Springfield Armory, a federal installation, produced shoulder arms while Colt made handguns. Many of the technological innovations developed in the early 19th century at the Springfield Armory were adopted by the Colt factory and elaborated in the private sector. Techniques developed in arms-making were adapted to manufacture other metal products, such as sewing machines, typewriters,

bicycles, and automobiles. For its concentration of metal-working industries, the corridor between New Haven, Connecticut, and Windsor, Vermont, became known as the “Precision Valley.”

Resources

Coltsville is a historic district that includes manufacturing facilities, worker housing, community buildings, and landscape features built by the Colt Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company, largely under the direction of Samuel Colt and his widow Elizabeth Colt. The development of Coltsville started in 1855 following Samuel Colt’s construction of a dike to protect Hartford’s South Meadows from periodic flooding by the Connecticut and Little Rivers. Parts of the Colt dike still exist, with Warwarme and Van Dyke Avenues running atop the historic dike. In the early 1940s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a new dike closer to the riverfront as part of an extensive flood-control project.

The core of Coltsville is the manufacturing complex of the Colt Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company (Colt Fire Arms Company) constructed between 1855 and 1942. The factory complex evolved over the years, reflecting changing types of factory design and construction technologies. Ten buildings still stand at the Colt factory complex: the Foundry and Forge Shop from the original 1855 factory; the signature East Armory (with blue onion dome, which has become the premier symbol of Hartford’s industrial heritage), rebuilt in 1867; the South and North Armories, Machine Shop, Warehouse, Power Plant, and Garage built in 1916 for World War I armament effort; and the World War II Office Building (1942). The West Armory (1861) and infill buildings located between the East and West Armories were demolished in the mid-1930s and 1947.

The surviving factory buildings enable the visitor to understand the evolution of the Colt Fire Arms factory as a major American small arms manufacturer from its establishment in 1855 until its decline following World War II. The building exteriors appear much as they did during the company’s heyday. The interiors have not housed substantial gun manufacturing operations since the 1950s (a limited amount of firearms design and testing occurred in the Machine Shop until 1993). The historic manufacturing machinery of the Colt Fire Arms Company no longer exists in the factory complex. It was removed and sold off over the years, mainly after World War II.

An essential component of Coltsville is the Samuel Colt Home (Armsmear) National Historic Landmark. Armsmear was home to firearms manufacturer Samuel Colt and his wife Elizabeth, who oversaw the firearms company after his death in 1862 through 1901.

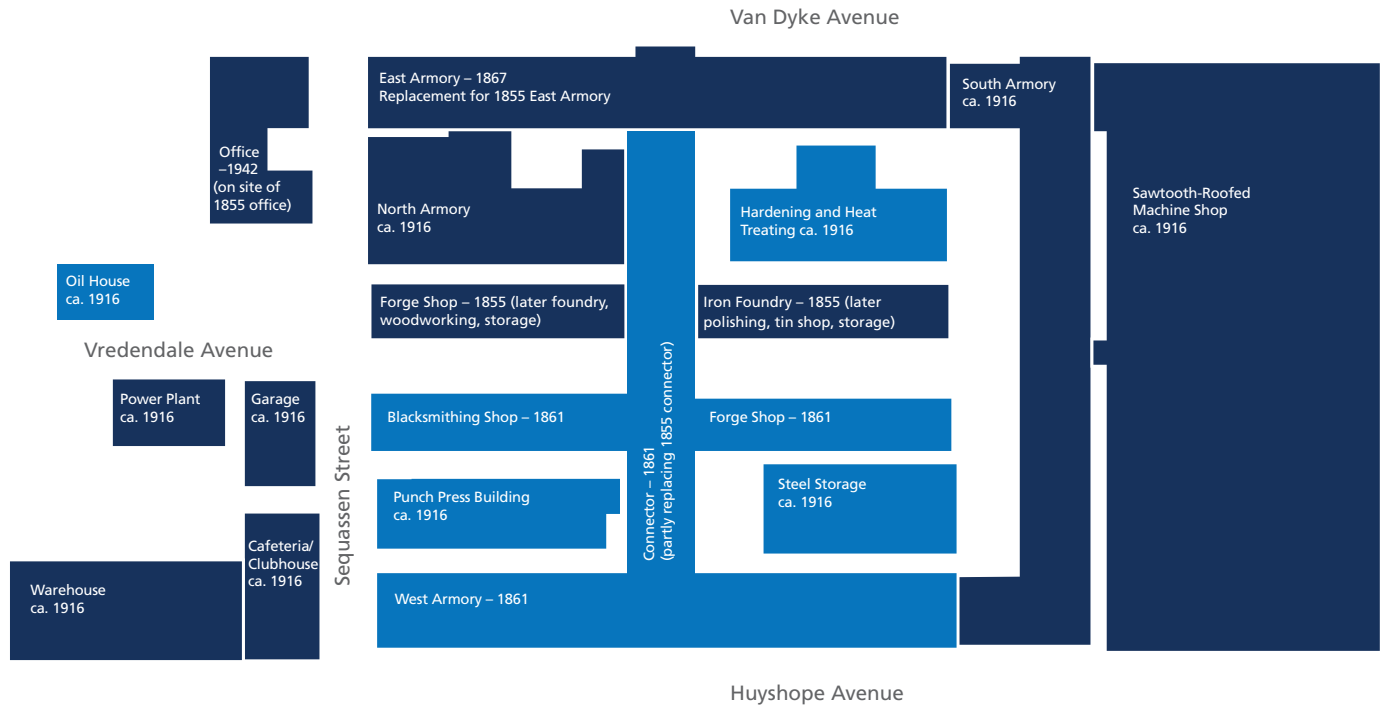
Coltsville also includes 19 extant dwellings that were built for workers in the arms factory and related Colt enterprises, including 10 vernacular five- or six-family tenements (1856) and nine two-family “Potsdam cottages” (1859). Other structures contributing to the district include three Colt-owned manager houses on Wethersfield Avenue; the Victorian Gothic Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd (1869) and its Caldwell Colt Memorial Parish House (1896); Colt Park, which was the original grounds of the Colt estate and was donated to the City of Hartford for public park purposes at the time of Elizabeth Colt’s death in 1905; and the Samuel Colt’s dike (1855).

The Colt factory complex includes the East Armory, South Armory, and North Armory, each of which is physically connected, although they were built at different times. When the Colt Fire Arms Company started downsizing its operations at the historic factory after World War II, much of the industrial space became vacant. Some of it was subdivided for use by small businesses, artist studios, and a limited number of apartments. In 2003, a private developer Colt Gateway LLC (Homes for America Holdings, Inc.) acquired the historic industrial buildings and has been redeveloping them for commercial, residential, and office tenants. Colt Gateway rehabilitated some of the factory



Elizabeth and Caldwell Colt.
Portrait by Charles Loring, 1865.
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum
of Art. Bequest of Elizabeth Hart
Jarvis Colt. 1905.9.

buildings, in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards regarding character-defining features such as windows, roofs, and facades. In 2009, the developer Urban Smart Growth took controlling interest of the Colt Fire Arms factory complex. The former developer, Colt Gateway, built some market-rate apartments in the South Armory, and Urban Smart Growth plans to complete this housing construction in the South Armory as well as the East and North Armories.



Schematic plan of Colt industrial buildings. Dark blue buildings are still standing; light blue buildings have been demolished. Some minor buildings are not shown. *Bruce Clouette, based on 1939 Factory Mutual Insurance Survey.*

East Armory (1867), 55 Van Dyke Avenue—A 5-story gable-roofed building, this structure is perhaps the most visible and best-known part of the Colt factory complex. It was built on the foundations of the original 1855 brownstone East Armory after that building was destroyed by fire in 1864. The East Armory was always the main building for manufacturing Colt firearms.

Rising above the center of the East Armory is the complex's signature onion-shaped dome, painted blue with gold stars (the original 1855 East Armory had a similar dome). On top of the dome is a gilded ball, above which is a gilded fiberglass replica of the original gilded wood Rampant Colt, a symbol of the company since Samuel Colt's time. The original is on display at the Museum of Connecticut History.

The interior framing of the East Armory has the original Phoenix-column posts supporting I-beams. In the center of the armory, the internal framing is supported by the vertical cast-iron beds and piston-rod guides of four Porter-Allen high speed steam engines that once drove the armory's machine tools. The East Armory, which is currently vacant, was most recently used for commercial and light industrial space.

South Armory (1916), 75 Van Dyke Avenue and 140 Huyshope Avenue—A six storied structure, the South Armory is constructed of reinforced-concrete and is joined to the East Armory. This building was constructed by Aberthaw Construction Company and was originally used to manufacture machine guns. After being vacated by the Colt Fire Arms Company, it was used for commercial, light-industrial, artist studios, and residential purposes. Recently, the building was undergoing redevelopment, with some apartments being opened on the upper floors.

North Armory (1916), 7 Sequassen Street—Constructed of reinforced-concrete, this structure has five stories with a sawtooth-monitor roof. It was constructed during World War I, before the United States officially entered the hostilities. This building was also constructed by Aberthaw Construction Company, a leading firm in the construction of reinforced-concrete industrial

buildings. The North Armory was originally used for the production of gun barrels. After being vacated by the Colt Fire Arms Company, it was leased for commercial and light-industrial purposes, including storage. Currently, the building is vacant and is awaiting redevelopment.

Forge Shop (1855), on the interior of the block bounded by Sequassen Street and Van Dyke and Huyshope Avenues—This original structure is a one-story gable-roofed building of random-ashlar brownstone. The entire interior is open and unobstructed. Later uses of the building included woodworking and general storage. Now vacant, the Forge Shop was used mainly for storage after World War II.

Foundry (1855), on the interior of the block bounded by Sequassen Street and Van Dyke and Huyshope Avenues—The building's interior is open and unobstructed. Originally equipped with cupola furnace for melting iron, it was later used for polishing operations and sheet-metal work. Like the Forge Shop, the Foundry, which was used mainly for storage after World War II, is vacant.

Machine Shop (1916), 170 Huyshope Avenue—This one-story structure is almost completely open, as it was when used for manufacturing. The sawtooth roof allows the interior of the building to be bathed in natural light. It originally housed machine gun production as well as a drafting room and offices. Between World War I and World War II, it was used for the production of Colt electrical equipment. Colt Fire Arms manufactured M-16s were produced here during the Vietnam War, after which the building was used for storage. In 2004, the Machine Shop was rehabilitated to become office space for an information technology company. It was rehabilitated in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Office Building (1942), 17 Van Dyke Avenue—This brick-and-glass building is noteworthy for its streamlined Moderne style. It replaced the original Italianate Colt Fire Arms Company offices. It is currently vacant and awaiting redevelopment.

Warehouse (1916), 36-80 Huyshope Avenue, 34 Sequassen Street—This two-story building originally accommodated storage, shipping, and receiving and contained a clubhouse and cafeteria. It has been rehabilitated to house the Capital Region Education Council's (CREC) River Street Autism School and offices of community organizations, including the Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon/Charter Oak Neighborhood, Inc.

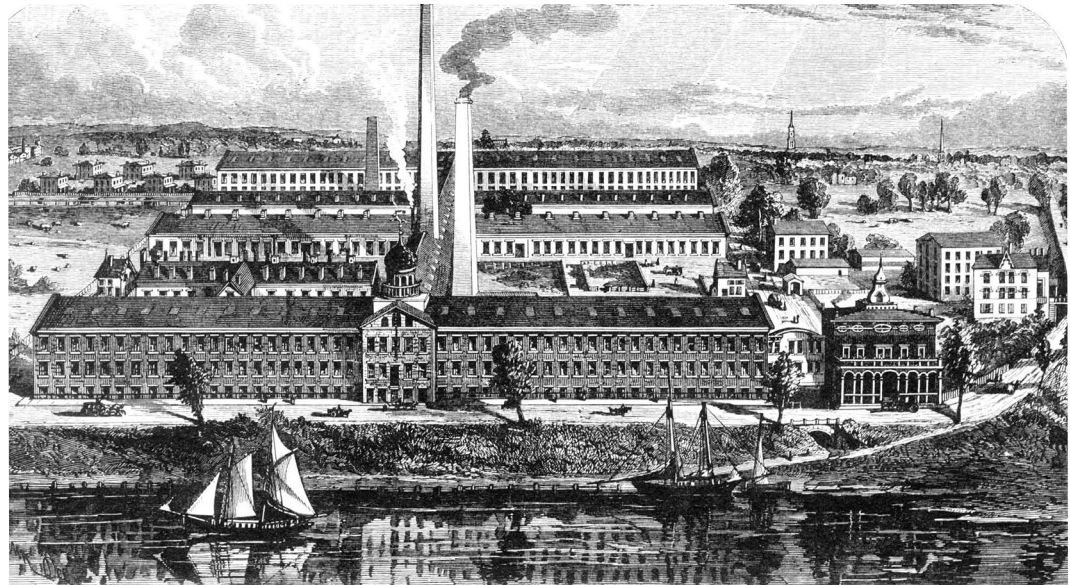
Garage (1916), 53 Vredendale Avenue—The former garage is a one-story brick building currently used as school gymnasium space.

Power Plant (1916), 49 Vredendale Avenue—This single story structure continues to supply steam for heating the complex. The northeast corner features a tall circular brick smokestack with "COLT" spelled out vertically in black brick letters.

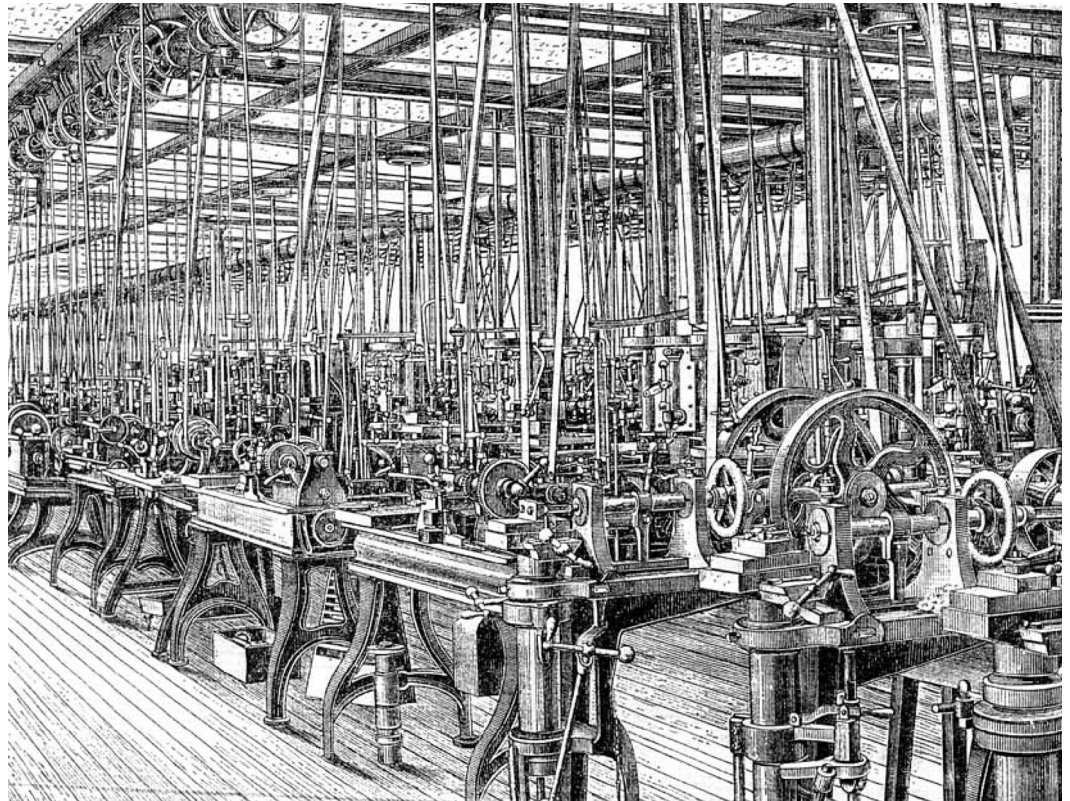
Away from the factory complex at 80 Wethersfield Avenue is Armsmear, the Colt family home from its construction in 1857 until Elizabeth's death in 1905. It has been a home for elderly women, originally widows of Episcopal ministers, since then. Armsmear was designated an NHL in 1966. The house has been altered and added to in order to meet its residential functions, although several rooms including the library retain decorative details dating to the occupancy of the Colt family. Armsmear is not open to the public, although occasional tours have been arranged. Armsmear is endowed by the Colt Bequest, Inc., which was established by Elizabeth Jarvis Colt. The Colt Bequest also owns and funds the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd and the Caldwell Colt Memorial House.

Colt worker houses dating from 1856 are located at 101, 111, 121, 133, and 141 Huyshope Avenue. Each of these five buildings is of the same design. They maintain their historic exterior appearance. Each building originally had six residential units for a total of 30 units. Some of these units were combined to accommodate larger families. Since their renovation into private condominiums in the 1980s, 25 residential units are now found in these five buildings. The gable-roofed main block of the brick building is three stories high. The original room layout, corridors, and exterior access have been maintained.

View of the Colt Fire Arms factory showing the original brownstone East Armory, destroyed by fire in 1864, and the 1861 West Armory at the rear of the complex.
Henry Barnard, *Armsmear*, 1866.



Interior of East Armory upper floor. During the latter 19th century, the Colt factory was using over 1,500 individual machines to manufacture firearms. From *Tenth Census of the United States (1880): Manufactures, Vol. 2, 1883.*



Additional Colt worker houses, also dating from 1856, are located at 60, 64, 68, 72, and 76 Van Block Avenue. Each of these five houses is of the same design. They maintain their historic exterior appearance. Each building originally had eight residential units for a total of 40 units. Some of these units were combined to accommodate larger families during the period of significance. Since their renovation into private condominiums during the 1980s, there have been 30 residential units in these five buildings. These brick buildings are four stories high. The basic room layout, corridors, and exterior access have been maintained.

“Potsdam” Carpenter Gothic worker houses constructed in 1859, are located at 13, 17, 21, 23, 29, 33, 37, 41, and 45 Curcombe Street. These nine cottages were built to house workers at Samuel Colt’s willow ware factory, which abutted these houses before it was demolished. Each cottage is a two-unit dwelling. Some of the Carpenter Gothic decoration has been removed from the “Potsdam” cottages, but their general setting and appearance are still maintained. These houses are under private ownership.

The Church of the Good Shepherd (1869) and Caldwell Colt Memorial Parish House (1896) are located at 155 Wyllys Street, to the north of the factory complex. The Church of the Good Shepherd shares in the collective association with Samuel and Elizabeth Colt and the Colt Company because Elizabeth Colt built it to serve the spiritual needs of residents of the neighborhood and to memorialize Samuel Colt. The parish house was built to serve as a social and educational center for Coltsville as well as to be a memorial to Elizabeth Colt's deceased son Caldwell. The parish house continues to serve the functions of a religious and community center that it was originally designed to meet over a century ago. The land where the parish house is located served as a baseball playing field during the 1870s and 1880s, with the Hartford Dark Blues, a charter member of the National League, playing there in 1876.

Manager Houses are located at 154, 180, and 184 Wethersfield Avenue. Samuel Colt's brother James built an Italianate house (1856) at 154 Wethersfield Avenue, just south of Armsmear. It has been subdivided for apartments, but its exterior retains most of its original Italianate features. The Elizabeth Colt Rental Houses (1885) at 180 and 184 Wethersfield Avenue were built by Mrs. Colt as dwellings for senior managers at the armory and are now used as offices. These two brick Queen Anne-style houses were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Parkside Historic District in 1985.

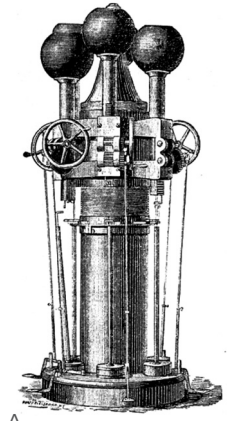
Colt Park at 92 Wethersfield Avenue was originally the grounds of Armsmear. It now serves as a 105-acre municipal park. The Armsmear grounds were laid out in the late 1850s by noted Boston landscape architects Robert Morris Copeland and Horace W.S. Cleveland. Armsmear had extensive formal gardens with statuary, urns, fountains, a summer pavilion, an ornamental pond, special plantings, formal drives, a deer park, cornfields, and grazing pastures. Colt's greenhouses, 2,364 feet in length, were used for growing plants from all over the world, including pineapples, bananas, figs, and 13 varieties of grapes. These gardens served as a physical buffer between Armsmear and the factory village.

The City of Hartford has owned Colt Park since it was bequeathed by Elizabeth Colt's estate in 1905. Theodore Wirth, Hartford's Superintendent of Parks and father of National Park Service Director Conrad Wirth (served 1951-1964), drew up a plan to transform the Armsmear gardens into a recreational park. By 1909, the City had removed some of the decorative gardens and created athletic fields, which are still in place. The reflecting pond and statuary remained until 1952, when both were removed and the area became a lawn.

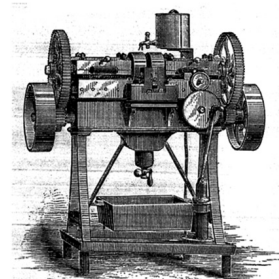
The changes initiated by Theodore Wirth reflected the growing early 20th-century interest in active recreation. Colt Park became part of a Hartford "emerald necklace" that was created in a "rain of parks" around the turn-of-the-century. Inspired by Hartford native and landscape architecture pioneer Frederick Law Olmsted, the Hartford park system included Bushnell Park, Goodwin, Park, Elizabeth Park, Pope Park, Riverside Park, and Keney Park, several of which were designed by John Charles Olmsted and Charles Eliot (designer of Boston's metropolitan park system).

The foremost landmark in Colt Park is the Colt Memorial Statue, sculpted by J. Massey Rhind and dedicated in 1906. The memorial includes two statues: one of Colt as a boy fashioning a revolver and the second as a mature man. Two bas reliefs depict Samuel Colt meeting Russian Czar Nicholas I and demonstrating his interchangeable parts of his revolver before the British House of Commons.

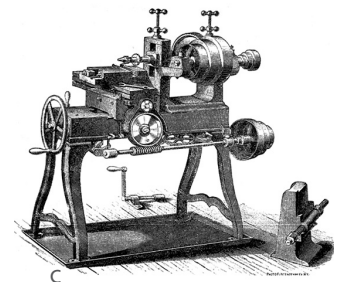
Contemporary recreational facilities include an oval running track, soccer and baseball fields, an outdoor hockey rink, a space-frame-roofed open pavilion intended for outdoors concerts, and a large public pool that dates from the 1930s. The park has four buildings, built between 1937 and 1960, which have been used to support operations. Colt Park includes broad open areas of grass that are not dedicated to specific activities. The area closest to Armsmear, at the Wethersfield Avenue entrance, is lightly wooded. Despite these modern modifications, Colt Park, which still has the original Armsmear Carriage House and Gardner's House (ca. 1860), continues its historic function of providing a large open green space with vistas between the Colt residence and the Colt Fire Arms factory. A private nonprofit organization, Hartford Botanical Garden, is working with the City on plans to develop a botanical garden at the western end of Colt Park. There are no intentions to make it a historic replica of the original Colt gardens.



A



B



C

Three of the innovative firearms manufacturing machines developed for the Colt Armory. A) multiple-spindle vertical barrel boring machine; B) double-head face-milling machine; C) Lincoln miller. *From Tenth Census of the United States (1880): Manufactures, Vol. 2, 1883.*

Map of Coltsville, 1861. Armsmear is on the left, on Wethersfield Avenue, and the Colt factory is on the right, on Van Dyke Avenue. The tree at the bottom is the historic Charter Oak, which fell near Coltsville in 1856. *Henry Barnard, Armsmear, 1866.*

