

The Henry Francis Hills House
38 Gray Street (formerly 58 / 390 Main Street)

In 1859 L.M.Hills and Son moved their straw hat business to the railroad terminus and depot area just south of Main Street, built two buildings and bought the land under them from the railroad. On the street a three story hood shop was erected; to the south and west, the beginnings of a hat factory. The Hillses went on to develop Amherst's largest industry around the railroad and the First National Bank of Amherst on Main Street.

To oversee their new domain they bought four and a half acres on the north side of the street and erected their two mansions. Henry Francis Hills commenced in 1862 and had his house ready for his bride, Adelaide Spencer, in September 1863. By then his father had started the house next door (now the Amherst Womens Club). Both buildings were designed by Northampton architect William Fenno Pratt. In 1869 H.F.Hills collaborated with his neighbor, farmer Joseph Proctor Gray, to open a street beside his house, now Gray Street. Hills also maintained a home in New York, where the hats made in Amherst were sold; nevertheless, the 1880 U.S.Census lists Henry F. Hills 47, wife Mary A. (Addie) 41, son Leonard M. 13, daughters Mary P. 11, Emily A. 9, Caroline C. 4, with Mary A. Adams, servant 23 & Kate Evans, cook, 35. H.F.Hills died in 1896; the 1900 census lists his widow, Adelaide S. Hills, 59, son L.M. 31, Caroline C. 24 & Susan C. 18, with two servants. Leonard M. Hills succeeded his father as president of the Hills Company, the hat factory incorporated in 1877 just east of the railroad. Upon his death in 1924 his successor (and neighbor) Fred Hawley executed sale of the man-sion to the youngest sister, Susan C. Hills Skillings, who moved in and remained at home until her death in 1968. Her son Hills Skillings and his wife Ruth lived there briefly in 1948 but moved into Hawley's house just to the north; the rest of the family had also moved on, so the mansion was sold in Dec. 1969 to the H.P.Cummings Construction Co. It was intended to be taken down, but instead Dan Chevalier was installed (as caretaker?) through 1973; then the house was left vacant. In April 1976 The Amherst Boys Club bought the property, the town having taken their old building for a parking lot. Richard A. Britt became the resident caretaker, living in the house and attempting upkeep from 1977 through 2003, but left after serious health problems. By the new century the (renamed) Boys and Girls Club served few children – the mansion had never fit the club's needs as well as had the old location – so the club officers sold the place to Barry Roberts in June 2007, with the intent that the property

should be divided and developed, possibly into condominiums. The present owners acquired it together with the transplanted Chapin-Ward house in January 2008 and have put old houses on two of the previously subdivided lots. The mansion has been assigned a new address on Gray Street.

Research by Ed Wilfert, Nov. 2008