

— HISTORY —

The Hanks Hill mill: 'A busy little place . . . of taste'

Part one of two

On Dec. 24 1882 George Philo and John S. Hanks were devastated by the loss of their silk mill by fire. The 28-by-60-foot white-painted, two storied building with wing was located at Hanks Hill in Mansfield, and was described as "one of the prettiest mills, inside and out, often seen." It was built in 1854 by George S. Hanks, and had only recently been repaired and refitted.

The Hanks mill was insured for \$5,000, but the property destroyed was worth over \$10,000. Fortunately the first mill in the country in which silk thread was manufactured by machinery, which the Hanks used for storage, was unharmed in the fire.

The Hanks brothers cleared away the debris of the old mill, which had stood at the end of the street, and commenced the construction of a new silk manufactory. It would be the same height, but in order to locate a steam engine and boiler as a back up for dry times, it was several feet longer. Furthermore, the new

structure would face the village thoroughfare rather than straddling it, thus making more room for access down the street.

Work commenced in March 1883, and the stone from the old foundation was utilized in the construction. In April 1883, Mansfield's *Willimantic Chronicle* correspondent visited the village, "located in the eastern part of town on a small plateau, gradually rising towards Spring Hill on the west, and gently sloping to Fenton River on the east."

This descriptive essay not only captured this historic location in time, but also recalled the Hanks family's early history in Mansfield. For example in 1785 Col. Benjamin Hanks (1755-1824) established the first bell and cannon foundry in America, and had cast the nation's first ever



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bell at Mansfield.

Shortly afterwards, Horace Hanks invented the "double geared wheel head" for the spinning wheel. The correspondent noted that older readers would remember the busy whirr and whiz of the old wheels, "which can be found in many an old-garret at the present day."

She subsequently described the process of early silk production:

"In those days silk and twist were sold by the skein and formed an important medium of exchange, amounting almost to a standard currency. The raw article was of home product and a source of revenue. The mulberry flourished spontaneously and the business furnished employment for young and old of both sexes. The younger part usually picked the leaves from the trees, in which occupation the boys and young men were compelled either from their superior agility, or motives of modesty to gather from the top-most branches, while the gentler sex gathered from the lower."

"The leaves were gathered in a

strong cloth wallet suspended in front by shoulder straps with a string to tie it about the waist to keep it from flopping about. A hundred pounds a day in ordinary picking was considered a fair day's work. The silk worms developed rapidly in growth, shed their skin three times and then crawled into the bushes conveniently placed for that special purpose and wound its silk into a cocoon completely enveloping itself in a hard fibrous shroud. It was during this intermediate state that the silk was reeled from the cocoon."

In 1810, Rodney Hanks (1782-

1846) and his nephew Horatio Hanks had made the first successful attempt to manufacture water-powered silk thread in a 12-foot-by-14-foot building at Hanks Hill. In the 1840s blight destroyed home-produced mulberry bushes, and raw silk was imported from China and Japan. Nevertheless, Hanks Hill profited greatly from the import industry, and when visited in 1883 it was described as "a busy little place," that bore evidence of "taste and refinement."

Continued next week



The mill where silk was first mechanically produced in 1810 is pictured above at its original location at Hanks Hill in Mansfield.

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