

— HISTORY —

The Hanks brothers rebuild their silk mill

Part two of two

On Christmas Eve 1882, the Hanks brothers' silk mill in Mansfield was destroyed by fire. Despite the heavy losses incurred, the family went ahead and rebuilt the mill. This structure was completed and in operation by September 1883.

Many local residents will recall that it was the home and studio of the recently deceased sculptor, Raymond Hitchcock. Hitchcock had gracefully allowed me on many occasions to conduct educational tours through this historic silk mill.

As the new mill was being built in 1883, a correspondent toured the Hanks Hill mill village and provided *Willimantic Chronicle* readers with a history and description of the location. She proudly pointed out that it was here that Rodney and Horatio Hanks had first mechanically manufactured silk thread in 1810.

Rodney's son George R. Hanks, was still living in the village, and was assisting his sons John S. and George Philo Hanks to manufac-

ture silk until the recent fire had halted production.

George R. Hanks and his father Rodney had manufactured silk cannon swabs for the U. S. government, and at this period the developing

mechanical processes were kept as secret as possible. During the 1830s George R. Hanks was the superintendent of a small mill at nearby Gurleyville.

An uninvited stranger entered the premises and Hanks immediately ordered him out. It was later discovered that the stranger was governor of New York William L. Marcy (1786-1857).

Later the secretary of state in President Franklin Pierce's cabinet, Marcy was interested in instigating the silk industry in New York state. The Hanks family also had other famous connections. During the 1840s they hired



Tom
Beardsley

Augustus Storrs, who donated the land for the Connecticut Agricultural College, as the New York City agent for their silk thread.

The old Hanks silk mill's water-power came from a small stream on which there were two reservoirs. The one across from where the new silk mill was being built had a grassy walk, which "added to the beauty of the surrounding scenery." The other was located farther up stream, and was used as a baptistry by the church on Spring Hill. The frame for the new mill was raised in May 1883. The building was completed and fitted with machinery by the following August when it was described as a "neat looking structure" 84 feet in length, and one story high, surmounted by a cupola. Production commenced in this new mill in late September 1883.

The Hanks Hill mill village differed from most industrial communities in the 1880s in that its owners were devout Democrats. Indicating their local popularity,

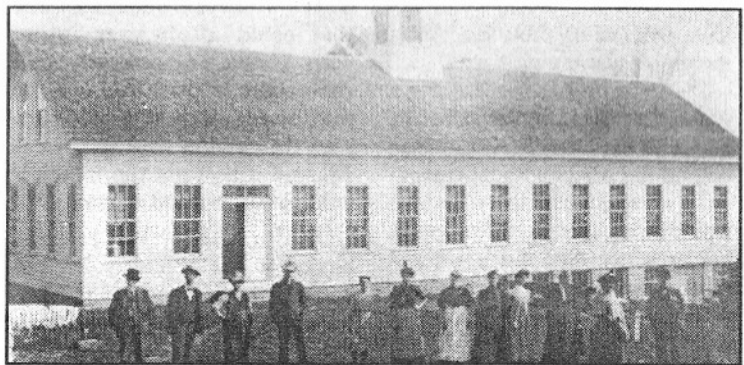
George R. Hanks and one of his sons John S. Hanks both represented Mansfield in the state legislature despite the town's Republican majority.

The Mansfield correspondent noted in February 1884 that the town had 10 leading manufacturing industries, and five of them were silk mills operated by O. S. Chaffee, W.E. Williams, the Hanks Brothers, E.B. Smith, H. E. Conant and James MacFarlane.

The other industries in town

were the J. B. Merrow stockinet mill, the J. L. Ross cotton mill at Eagleville, the National Thread Company cotton mill at Mansfield Hollow, and the L. H. Hooker, ax helve and spoke factory.

Silk thread continued to be manufactured in Raymond Hitchcock's late residence until 1928. Next time you're in the area take a detour to Hanks Hill and take a trip back in time.



The late Raymond Hitchcock's home and studio, the Hanks brothers silk mill built in 1883, is depicted here circa 1910.

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