

The Colonie Historical Oracle

Quarterly Newsletter of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie & Town Historian's Office

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“From Sheep to Shipping”

A Short History of the Albany Felt Company of Menands and the Production of Paper-Making Felts, 1895-2010

Submitted by Kevin Franklin, Historian, Town of Colonie



Albany Felt Company, Menands, Town of Colonie

Several publications have been attributed to the history of Albany Felt and later Albany International Company. To tell the entire story of Albany Felt Company would take several newsletters, even in condensed form. In 1995, Lorna Skaaren (Member of the Historical Society of the Town of Colonie and currently on the Board of Directors of the Historic Pruyn House of Colonie) authored a book called: “*Albany International, The First One Hundred Years.*” The publication consists of slightly more

than 100 pages of text and graphics. In 2009, Mr. J. Spencer Standish, Chairman of the Board of Albany International, along with *Times Union* columnist Paul Grondahl, compiled a book about Mr. Stan-

Welcome New Member!

The Historical Society of the Town of Colonie would like to welcome our newest member: Elinor Obuchowski. Welcome, Elinor!

dish's family history and their association with the early and continuing history of the Albany Felt Company. The book is titled: *"From Myles to Spencer, An Informal Standish Family Memoir."* The book consists of slightly more than 200 pages of text and graphics. This newsletter will attempt to squeeze the wealth of information written about the early beginnings of the Albany Felt Company into one newsletter.

On June 30th last year I received an email by Susan Lawson, a historic preservation architect employed with Johnson-Schmidt & Associates, Architects of Corning, N.Y., asking if she could review any material I had about the Albany International Building on Broadway in Menands. Susan visited my office and advised me that the Felt Company complex had been purchased by Harmony Prima Lofts, LLC, (The same group responsible for converting the old Harmony Mill Complex in Cohoes into upscale apartments). Susan advised me that the new owner was exploring the possibility of placing the Albany International Company complex on the National Register of Historic Places and wanted to know if I had any record of who the initial architect was for the original building, as this was an important fact to know in the nomination process. My first thoughts went to Albany's architects Marcus T. Reynolds, or even Walter VanGuysling, but most of their building designs had already been well documented. Who then designed the original mill of the Albany Felt Company? No-one seemed to know.

The Albany Felt Company Headquarters (later called the Albany International Headquarters) in Menands had been up for sale for many months. Initially, it had been reported that FEDEX Corp. had an interest in the property with the thought of tearing the building down and using the Felt Company lands along with a plot of adjoining land to the north to build a new distribution facility. (On this northern plot once stood an architecturally important commercial structure [Crane Co. circa 1911] designed by architect Walter VanGuysling in the very early 20th Century. Sadly, this wonderful viable building was torn down only a couple years ago.) FEDEX eventually opted not to purchase the properties.

I reached out to my friend Mr. Steve Sassaman, who

had worked for Albany Felt & Albany International Corp. for many years before the plant began downsizing in the late 1990's and into the 2000's. I also reached out to Mr. Ernie Quinto, who ran the laboratory at the company for many years. Steve advised me to contact Susan Siegel or Mr. J. Spencer Standish, Chairman of the Board of Albany International Corp. I contacted all three of these individuals.

I called Mr. Standish, and both he and his daughter, Christine, Mr. Ernie Qunito, Susan Lawson and I began looking into the old photos and files in the archive room of Albany International Company in an attempt to identify the name of the architectural firm that designed the original mill, before all of these files were transferred to their new corporate headquarters in New Hampshire. We discovered hundreds of old photos and negatives related to the construction of the additions to the original Felt Company building. Many photographs were borrowed and dozens of photographs were electronically scanned by this author including a very remarkable set of about sixty or more early glass projection slides which documented the entire felt making process from photos of sheep in the field through the many steps in the manufacturing process, ending with the finished product waiting to be shipped. The photographer for these glass projection slides was initially unknown, but discovered to be Mr. John A. Glenn, who resided on Villa Road in Menands for many years. Mr. Glenn ran a professional photography company in Albany during the first half of the 20th Century. The photos and slides were wonderful and important images to have, but they still didn't reveal who the architect or contractor was for the original 1902 Albany Felt Building and the research continued.

Felt Company's Early Background

One of the Felt Company's early founders was Francis C. Huyck. Huyck was born in Rensselaerville, Albany County, in the year 1838. As a young man Francis worked in his father's general store in Rensselaerville. By about 1870, he joined a local woolen mill run by Mr. Henry Waterbury. Mr. Waterbury suggested to Francis that they join together to explore manufacturing paper makers felts, as the use of paper and paper products was rapidly expanding throughout the country.

Francis borrowed \$10,000.00 from his father and joined Mr. Waterbury in their new venture of creating felts used in the production of paper. By about 1880, Mr. Waterbury and Francis Huyck separated with Waterbury moving his operation to Oriskany, N.Y. Francis decided to stay in the Albany area and purchased a knitting mill in the Kenwood area just outside the southern part of Albany. Now on his own, Francis needed additional funding to keep his mill in operation. He was joined in partnership by Chauncey Argersinger, who provided the additional funding needed to continue operation of the mill. The venue became known as Huyck & Argersinger Co.

At about the same time that Huyck & Argersinger formed their new company, another individual named Andrew Fuller joined Huyck and Argersinger as Superintendent of the Kenwood Mill. Andrew took his son Duncan into the company at about the same time. The mill became very prosperous and was recognized as one of the largest manufacturers of press felts for the making of paper in America. After about ten years of working at the Kenwood Mill, Duncan Fuller had become an expert in the manufacture of press felts. He also designed and patented a new method of weaving endless felts. By about 1892 Duncan succeeded his father as the Superintendent of the Huyck & Argersinger Mill at Kenwood.

In 1894 a disastrous fire leveled the Kenwood mill and the company began reorganization. Mr. Argersinger was then about sixty years of age and retired from the company. Francis Huyck brought his two sons into the company which then abruptly fired Duncan Fuller. Mr. Fuller knew he had the knowledge to compete with the new Huyck mill then being built in the City of Rensselaer, but needed financial backing to do so.

It was about this same time that he made contact with one of Albany's most influential families and presented his ideas of creating a new company and mill to Erastus Corning Jr., son of, and executor to the estate of Erastus Corning Sr., a multi-millionaire who had built his fortune in the industries of iron, railroads, banking, and more, to name a few. Apparently Duncan Fuller had so impressed Mr. Corning with his idea of forming a new company to compete with other felt making companies that Erastus convinced his son Parker to join forces with Fuller. Erastus Parker Corn-

ing was just graduating from Yale College and had yet to make any decisions about what he would do in life. Parker took his father's advice and teamed up with Mr. Fuller.

Duncan Fuller and Parker Corning were joined by two other investors. The first being Mr. James Cox, manager of the Corning family farm just South of Albany, and the other, a Mr. Selden Marvin, business manager of Corning's farm. The four men were able to pool together \$40,000 dollars, and on March 8, 1895, formed their new company called: "*The Albany Felt Company.*"

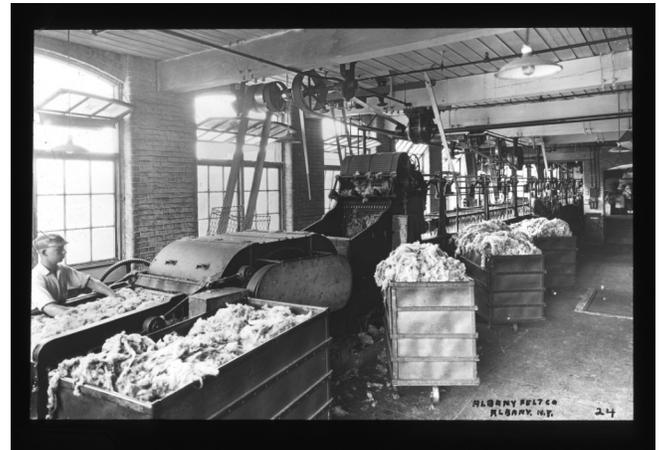
The new company first operated out of a building on Thacher St. in North Albany before finally acquiring undeveloped land along Broadway (also called the Watervliet Turnpike) in the new Town of Colonie. Much of the land in the southern area of present day Menands, Loudonville and Newtonville areas was all part of a 2,500 acre plot still within the lands of the original 1630 Manor of Rensselaerswyck. When the last Patroon, Stephen Van Rensselaer III, passed away in 1839, his sons Stephen IV and William P. Van Rensselaer inherited their father's vast estate. Stephen IV received the land on the west side of the Hudson River and William land on the east side. When Stephen IV passed away in 1868, his land on the west side of Hudson's river reverted to his brother William P. Van Rensselaer. When William P. Van Rensselaer died in 1872, his land, including what was left of the 2,500 acres mentioned above, became part of his estate and was eventually sold off, including land to build the new Albany Felt Co. in 1901.

A map titled: "*Sketch Showing Lands Along Broadway & the Watervliet Turnpike Sold By (the) Estate of Wm. P. VanRensselaer*" records that the Albany Felt Company made its initial purchase of 5.066 acres of land on the east side of Broadway adjoining the Albany City line on May 13, 1901. Another small parcel on the west side of Broadway in the vicinity of where an unnamed creek flows from the hills in the southern part of Menands was purchased on Oct. 9, 1907 (probably to obtain control of the small creek there). The last 1.308 acres of land

(Continued on Page 6)



Albany Felt Co. purchased raw wool from all over the world, including wool from the Royal Farms in Sandringham, England.



Picked wool was sent to a scouring machine where dirt and unwanted oils (lanolin) were removed from the wool.



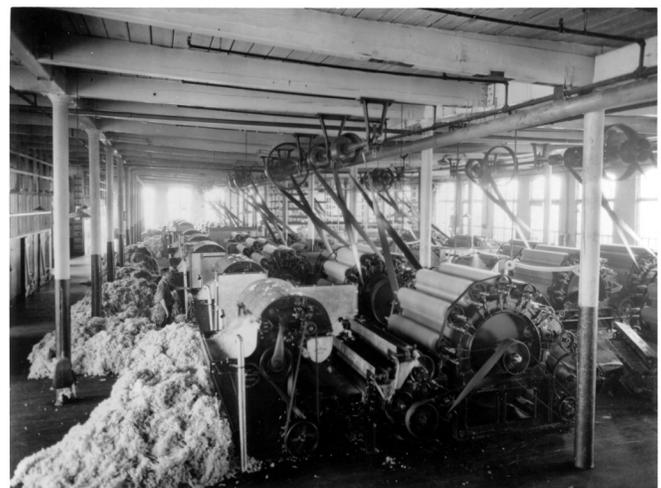
Raw wool was shipped and delivered in heavy burlap bundles. A single sheep's fleece contained different grades of wool.



Scoured wool was sent to a blending (mixing) room where each grade of wool was weighed and blended before being sent to the carding room.



Raw wool was transferred to 'pickers' on the 3rd floor. Wool pickers separated different grades of wool from a single fleece. An apprenticeship of 3 years was required to qualify as an expert wool picker.



Feed ends of a series of large carding machines which processed the picked wool into separate threads. The opposite end of the carding machine collected individual threads and wound them onto large spools to be sent to the "mule" spinning machines.



Large cylinders of 'carded' wool were sent to the Mule Spinning Machines which took up an entire wing of the building. Mule spinning gathered wool yarn and transferred it to smaller bobbins.



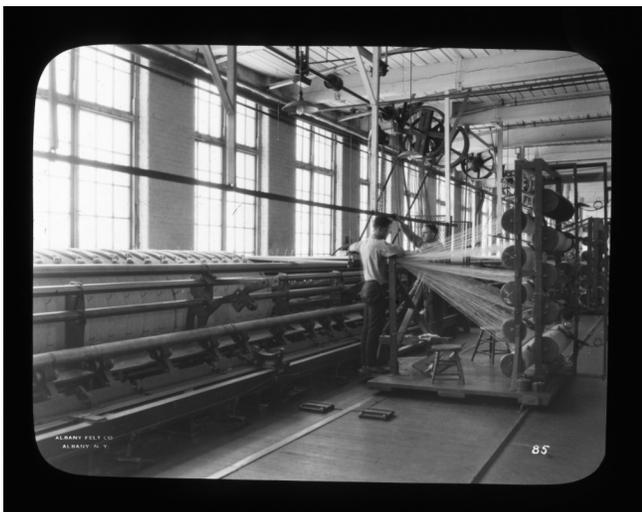
An example of a long beam with the completed warp ends within the harness nettle to be sent to a large loom for weaving.



Yarn from spinning bobbins was reversed and tightened to a second bobbin and then wound onto larger 'Warp Spools.'



The final napping process used a machine with a large drum of green plant thistles secured to the drum which would lightly brush the surface of the felt. Each felt was inspected and repaired if necessary prior to shipping.



Yarn on Warp Spools was then unwound from a 'dressing frame' onto the cylindrical beam of a dressing machine. Yarn would then be gathered & sewn together by women to create the warp ends in a nettle harness, which was sent to the loom.



Finished felts of various sizes ready to be shipped. Domestic felts were wrapped in heavy paper and cloth bags. Wooden crates were used for exports.

(Continued from Page 3)

directly north of and adjoining the 1901 purchase was obtained by the Felt Company on April 9, 1909. The earliest photographs of Albany Felt Company proclaim the original plant was completed by 1902. The initial building construction consisted of heavy timber framing with brick exterior. Two extensions to the northern wing of the plant were added in following years with the framework now consisting of steel beams and supports and the exterior enclosed in brick, keeping with the architectural look of the original structure. In later years offices were added to the west side of the tower.

The Spencer and Standish Family Lines

Spencer Standish's grandfather, John K. Spencer was born in England in 1860. By the young age of 12 he began working in textile mills in England as an apprentice. John K. was a skilled felt maker by the time he arrived in America in 1893 and eventually took a position with the Huyck Mill in Kenwood and played an important part in constructing the new Huyck Mill at Rensselaer immediately after fire leveled the Kenwood mill in 1894.

Spencer Standish's father, John Standish, was hired by John K. Spencer in 1912 to work at the Huyck Mill in Rensselaer. John Standish was a graduate of the Lowell Textile Institute of Lowell Mass. The Institute was originally founded in 1895 as the Lowell Textile School. John Standish was assigned by Mr. Spencer to establish the first laboratory ever dedicated to the study and improvement of the making of paper machine felts.

John Spencer ended up marrying John Standish's daughter Florence. John Spencer left the Huyck mill in 1921 to begin employment with the Albany Felt Company. His son J. Spencer Standish had graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and entered an apprenticeship with the Forstmann Woolen Company of Passaic, N.J. J. Spencer Standish joined his father at the Albany Felt Company in 1952 and remained with the Albany Felt Company and its business expansions to become the Albany International Corporation, with its corporate headquarters being the Albany Felt Building, with the exception of several

years when Albany International purchased the old Henry Manning Sage Estate in Menands and transformed the Sage Mansion into offices for their corporate headquarters by adding a two story addition onto the north end of the Mansion before finally returning their offices back into the original Felt Company building on Broadway a few years later.

The Early Years of Felt Production

The collection of glass projection slides made by John A. Glenn of Menands show the many steps necessary to take raw wool and turn it into felts or "clothing" for various size paper making machines of the early 20th Century. I've chosen some of the most interesting photographs from the nearly seventy slides to portray this early process. The arrangement of these un-named slides into a sensible numerical order according to their spot in the production process, would not have been possible without the vast knowledge of Mr. J. Spencer Standish, who retired in 1998 after having served nearly a half century with the company and his last fourteen years as Chairman of the Board of Albany International Corp.

Architect of Original Albany Felt Discovered

After several weeks of researching early records of the Albany International (Albany Felt) Company archives and conversations with many of the long time employees of the company, the name of the architect or architectural firm or builder of the original structure still evaded myself and Susan Lawson. All of the very early employees of the original Albany Felt Company had long since passed away and even Mr. Spencer Standish, despite his vast knowledge of the company history, didn't know who the architect or company name was that constructed the original Albany Felt Company building. On Tuesday, July 30th Susan Lawson sent an email out advising that she had found who the original architect and builder was of Albany Felt. Exactly one month had passed.

Susan's research indicated that the New England based firm of Lockwood, Green & Co. of Providence, R.I., was the firm responsible for designing and building not only the original construction of

Albany Felt Company, but its 2 other expansions in later years. This documentation was listed in the book: *"Fourscore Years, A Record of Lockwood, Greene & Co.'s Contribution to Industrial Engineering."* printed in 1912 by Lockwood, Green & Co., Architects and Engineers for Industrial Plants. The firm was based in Boston and had offices in Chicago and Atlanta, GA. The company primarily designed hundreds of textile mills throughout the world, but also designed schools, automobile plants, tobacco processing plants, and more.

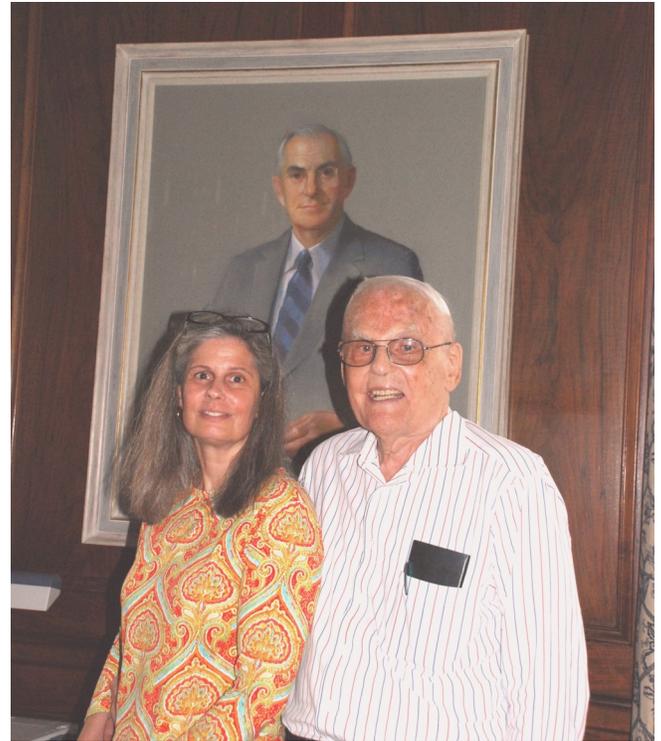
On January 9, 2014, this office received a letter from the New York State Office of Parks and Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) advising that they had reviewed Susan Lawson's application and report nominating the Albany Felt Company Complex at 1373 Broadway, Menands to the National Register of Historic Places.

On February 25, 2014, a second letter was received from OPRHP declaring that the Albany International Complex had been accepted to the National Register of Historic Places. Both letters had been signed by Ruth L. Pierpont, Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation, N.Y.S. OPRHP, at Waterford, N.Y.

The rhythmic chatter and thump thumping sounds of the looms of the Albany Felt Company could be heard throughout the southern parts of Menands and north Albany areas for decades as they combined the warp and weft of yarn into felt fabrics, especially on warm nights when windows were open. The looms have been removed and the swans that once glided gracefully across the beautifully landscaped ponds are no more, but the future of this historic building and its grounds will now hopefully be protected for years to come.

NOTE ABOUT PHOTOS ON PAGES 4 & 5:

No less than a dozen other procedures took place after the yarn was weaved, including: burling and joining (sewing felt ends together to make a continuous belt); fulling (felts were originally woven twice as wide as needed but 'fulled' or shrunk to about half their original size before they were stretched to test the strength of the fulling operation. Felt was then washed again to remove excess soap or oils, then sent through an 'extruding machine' which spun the fabric until it was nearly dry, thence to the drying department, passing over a series of heated rollers. Each felt was continuously inspected during this process with pieces sent to the company laboratory to ensure quality control before being sent to the napping machines and final inspection.



Above: J. Spencer Standish and daughter, Christine Wilk, in front of a portrait of Mr. Standish's father, John Standish, also a long-time employee of Albany Felt Company.

Special thanks to Mr. J. Spencer Standish, his daughter Christine Wilk, Steve Sassaman, Susan Siegel, Ernie Quinto, and Susan Lawson for all their valuable time and assistance.

The Historical Society sends a special Thank You! to Alan Holmes, our newest volunteer to work with our Collections Committee in photographing, scanning, documenting and cataloguing our large collection. Much appreciated, Alan!



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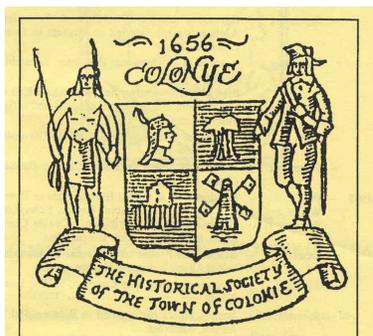
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THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE TOWN OF COLONIE

Kevin Franklin: Town Historian
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Historical Society Founded 1971

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Support the Society’s efforts to stimulate an appreciation of the historical heritage of your community. Join Now!

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Our 2014 Annual Dinner will be held **Tuesday, May 13** at the Shaker Ridge Country Club. During the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Civil War (2011-2015) our speaker’s topics have been the War of the Rebellion. In May our keynote speaker is John McTague, a Licensed Gettysburg Town Guide. The title of John’s talk is: “Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg.” Why was President Lincoln invited to Gettysburg? How did he develop his “few brief remarks” that have become famously known as the Gettysburg Address? And what local dignitaries were in attendance that day? Come and join us—this promises to be a provocative talk. Cost is \$35.00 per person or \$60.00 per couple. Contact Bebe Morehead at 694-8610 if you’re interested in attending.

We’re still looking for interesting photos or other sundry information from our members and/or friends about our Town that we can use for our newsletter. We don’t need you to fill the entire newsletter, but rather we’ll do a “quilt” of a variety of subjects. We need your help! Please call me (459-5147) with anything you think would be of interest. Thank you!

Mark Bodnar, President