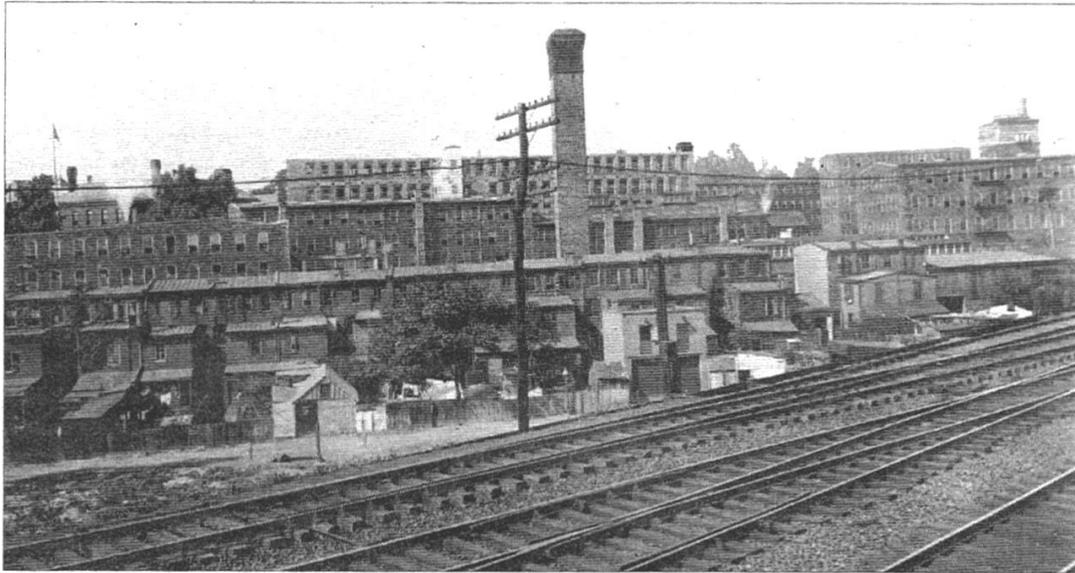


## East Falls Past--Dobson Mills

*The Fallser*, November 2008, by Wendy Moody



## East Falls Past



*Dobson Mills is seen over the roofs of houses on Ridge Avenue in this vintage photograph, no date provided. The Breck School, with its flag hoisted, rises above the mills in the upper left corner.*

Photo/THE FALLSER: Courtesy of East Falls Historical Society

In 1981 a series of oral histories took place at the Falls Library with gerontologist Cherie Snyder. Following are memories of Dobson's Mills from this group of local seniors - some had worked at the mill, some had parents who had. These vivid, though undocumented, responses are from various participants:

### **Did anyone here work at Dobson's Mills?**

One woman remembered: "The girls who didn't finish school went into the mill. For the first year, I worked in the factory in the velvet finishing room. After that, I worked in their office from 1916 - 1937 as a bookkeeper since I had gone to business college. I liked it very much. The Dobsons were very nice to me. I knew them personally and they had me up to their house."

### **Does anyone have memories of John or James Dobson?**

- There was a story about John Dobson. Someone went bankrupt and owed him \$50,000. They didn't have it, so he took their old rickety wicker chair and put it in his office. No one would sit in it because it was the \$50,000 chair!

- James Dobson used to stop at my parent's store to shake hands as he walked to work. He was a handsome looking man who always had something pleasant to say. He lived in the Buena Vista mansion way up in the fields, where Abbottsford is now. He

walked up the hill from the mill every day to catch the 12:30 train. He was a delightful man but his brother John was a crank. I remember my father telling me that when John saw a man sleeping on the job in the plant he said "Sleep as long as you want. Because while you sleep you have a job, but as soon as you wake up you're fired!" James wouldn't have said that.

- John lived on Allegheny Avenue. They had cows and would sell the milk at 4:00 p.m. right from the cow. But if you picked up anything from the lawn – a piece of fruit or something – John was after you.

- After the civil war, Dobson Mills were originally water –powered and then changed to steam. They built new buildings and went into weaving in a big way. They recruited the best weavers from Great Britain, including my grandfather. Then he had his thumb and finger cut off when he reached into a loom. He couldn't weave anymore, but still maintained good relations with the Dobson's, although they didn't pay any compensation.

- It was a dual personality with them. The Dobsons were hard taskmasters but had a benevolent and pleasant attitude. Whatever people said about them, they liked them.

James had carpet end of the business; John did the velvet and blankets.

- If you got in an argument and punched one of the foremen, you got fired as well as all your relatives. A week later you could come back but you lost a week's wages.

#### **Were there any safety measures?**

Yes, they told the workers not to bleed on the cloth!

"My father worked there. His arm was caught in a machine and taken off partway. There were no safety devices. After WWI a gas tank exploded there and burned a lot of people. It was a good thing they still had the mill race running right through the building - they were dropping people into it. No one recovered 5 cents in damages.

**Were there woman weavers?** Not many. They made plushes, not carpets.

**What were the hours?** People in the mill worked 65 hours a week.

**Was the mill unionized?** Yes, the carpet weavers were because my brother went there in 1916 and there was a union.

#### **Were there strikes?**

Yes, there were strikes. In fact I went on a two week vacation and when I came back I had 3 raises because there had been three strikes!

#### **What were the salaries?**

You were paid piecework. The weavers paid by the yard. I made \$20 a week – it was considered high. The overseer got \$25. It was a good wage then but some made a lot less. It was better than I did in the depression when I made \$17.50.

#### **Were the workers from the Falls?**

Yes they were local. Children would start at age 14, after grade school, if they didn't go to high school. You didn't need papers.