

East Falls Past-- Simpson Mills

The Fallser, April 2009, by Wendy Moody

Recently, a former Falls resident emailed requesting information on Simpson Mills, a unique textile mill in “West Falls.” One product of this mill was hand-printed silk handkerchiefs – very fine ones.

Here, abbreviated, is an article on the mill that appeared in a 1917 *Evening Ledger*, (courtesy of Joseph P. Kelley):

One of our largest department stores recently advertised - “We’ve just opened a case of English silk handkerchiefs. For richness of color and novel and beautiful effects they surpass anything of the kind we’ve had for some time.”

How many readers know that the first silk handkerchiefs in this country were printed at the Falls of Schuylkill? William Simpson came to the village from Scotland about 1832, bought an old coach factory on the west side of the river and started printing handkerchiefs on silk imported from China.

He started in a small way and the business increased until it had taken up all the property between the Reading Railway tracks and the river, from the Falls bridge to Wakin’s ferry road, with several large buildings west of the railroad.

The silk was received in cases and sterilized. Then it was stretched on long tables and printed with hand blocks on the face of which the pattern had been formed from designs, each color being printed separately. A large square handkerchief was printed on square tables, of which there were 13, with small railroad tracks between, on which little cars bearing colors in tubs were run. The color was spread on felt by a boy or girl and the printer pressed the block in the color on this felt and then on the silk, and pounded it on with a leaden hammer called a maul, each printer printing only one color.

After the handkerchiefs had been printed, they were subjected to several chemical processes to fasten the color. The silk was then cut into several handkerchief lengths, neatly folded in the original cases and shipped to the market, leaving the hemming to be done by the purchaser.

One of the hand-printed handkerchiefs is in the possession of a former Falls resident and the colors are as bright as when they were first printed.

The silk handkerchief industry was abandoned during the Civil War, and when the property, including the Simpson summer home near Chamounix, the farm and dams were purchased by Fairmount Park during the early 1870’s, the mills were used exclusively for printing mourning goods. Plans had been made by William Simpson, Jr. and his sons for the erection of an immense plant west of the railroad when the property was condemned for park purposes. Consequently the entire business was taken to Eddystone, in Delaware County.

When the ten-hour-a-day law went into effect, Simpson was the first to comply with its provisions. In fact, Simpson not only accepted the order, but improved upon it by telling his employees they should work but eight hours on Saturday without reducing their pay, so as to have time to prepare for the Sabbath.