

The Mills of Bennington



This view of a row of identical two-story housing for workers at the Holden-Leonard “big mill” was taken in May 1909 by Lewis W. Hine, famed for his photographs that exposed abusive child labor conditions. Rents ranged from \$6 to \$8 a month. Several of these houses still exist along Benmont Avenue.

What Bennington Made -- Made Bennington The Mills of Bennington

Bill Morgan

Bennington is typical of small nineteenth-century New England industrial towns, though it was fortunate to not have the tremendous boom-and-bust experienced by larger mill towns like Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts. It was also spared some of the labor unrest and mass unemployment that came to larger cities when their economic base vanished. The potential growth of Bennington industries was limited by four factors: the extent of waterpower available, the difficulty of transporting goods to larger markets, a small population, and a lack of monetary capital.

The problems Bennington faced a century years ago when mills closed and jobs went to other states were not so different than today’s situation on a national level where jobs and manufacturing have gone to other parts of the globe.

Bennington’s first settlers came from southern



Made when Bennington was “an underwear town,” this long ladies underwear shirt, or chemise, bears the label “Cooper’s Spring Needle Knit Gauzeribs, Bennington, Vt.”

*All images from the Bennington Museum collection
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5. Valentine home



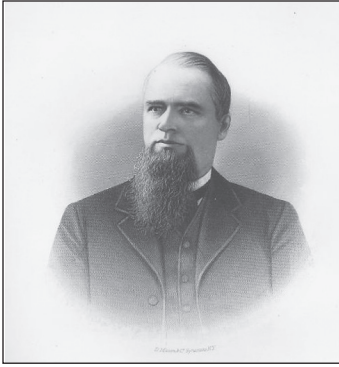
6. Valentine Knitting Co.



Twin images of the Joel Valentine home and his Valentine mills, both located on Bennington's Pleasant Street. Several Valentine mill buildings once employed several hundred workers.

New England in the early 1760s, searching for a place where they could have freedom to practice their own religion without interference. They selected Bennington because the land was available, cheap, and plentiful. At first the settlers relied on farming for a livelihood and made use of natural resources for their survival. They arrived in time to take part in the greatest transition in American social history, for it was during the early 1800s that America's economy shifted from rural to urban. In a rural economy, the lives of most people are measured by the four seasons. As people moved into towns and cities their lives came to be governed by the time clock and the factory whistle. Their work became routine and was the same day after day the whole year round. There was also a shift in labor demographics as more and more women and children became part of the workforce. An ad in the *Vermont Gazette* from 1821 read:

"Wanted. At the Bennington Cotton Factory. Several Families that can furnish a number of children each. To such constant employ will be given, and wages paid according to the ability of the children, by Benjamin Peck."



Olin Scott 1832-1913

Another change came later in the nineteenth century when American industries shifted from waterpower to more dependable steam engines. That shift had a dramatic effect on Bennington's mills, too.

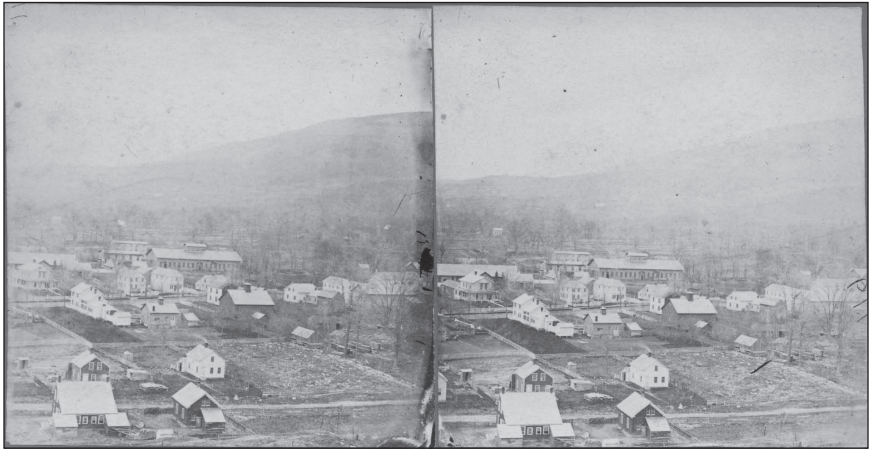
It was because of the change in elevation of the Walloomsac River that Bennington was able to become an important industrial center. Without the natural drop in the river there would have been no industry in Bennington. The early mills were never established at altitudes higher than 740 feet above

sea level, which gave them sufficient water pressure to drive powerful waterwheels. This is also why there were no mills in Old Bennington, whose altitude is nearly 200 feet higher. Due to the river's fluctuations caused by summer droughts and spring floods, the mill owners soon realized that they needed to control the flow of water year-round to assure a sufficient supply of power.

In the early years of the nineteenth century they began to build a complex system of canals or flumes, with dams to hold and channel the water around the village. Giles Olin Jr. was the first to build a series of these channels when he connected the Roaring Branch with the Walloomsac River east of town. The waterways changed the early landscape and dictated where mills would be built, and hence where people working in those mills would live. In the beginning, the mill owners closed the sluiceways at night to build up enough water pressure for the next day's work. Eventually, when proper lighting came along, the mills began to run 24 hours a day, which put increased demands on the town's limited water supply.

A survivor of the earliest industrial era is this Greek Revival mill at 169 North Street, built as the Brown & Gage Foundry about 1842 to process pig iron mined along the Walloomsac River. Today it houses the Council on Aging.





A stereoscopic view of a sparsely populated Bennington neighborhood focuses on Olin Scott's foundry in the center. The photographer was Calvin Dart, circa 1870.

First Stage: 1762-1852

Stage one of Bennington's industrial period began shortly after the founding of the town and lasted nearly a century, until 1852. During this period, local entrepreneurs built mills for local use. Two early settlers, Joseph Safford and Samuel Robinson, joined to build the first grist mill and saw mill in Bennington in 1762, only a year after the earliest settlers arrived. Their mills were located on east Main Street near today's intersection with Beech Street. Because Bennington was originally a farming community and boasted excellent soil for grains and grasses, the farmers needed a grist mill to convert their crops to flour. And because the town was growing, there was a need for a saw mill to cut timbers into boards. These were basic but important businesses for the local economy. Area entrepreneurs worked with the resources they had. They did not import materials and they did not export their finished products, which were for local consumption only.

Following the lumber and grist mills, a few other small mills provided goods for the local population. In 1784 a fulling mill was established in North Bennington to make pleated garments for local merchants. In 1792 a second fulling mill was set up in Bennington itself, then in 1795 a tannery and a shoe-making mill were established. Other early mills carded wool, made paper, and produced cast iron. In 1793 John Norton, a farmer living south of town, began to make redware jugs and crocks for local farmers' products. During the next century Norton's business moved downtown to Pleasant Street and grew into Bennington's famous pottery industry. By 1810 the first cotton mill had been set up to produce cloth and was called the Bennington Cotton and Woolen Manufacturing Company. These mills

were followed by other small mills that grew up along the banks of the Walloomsac River and Paran Creek, but by the time of the Panic of 1837 when monetary capital dried up they were mostly gone. During this early period the population of Bennington grew to about 4,000, with nearly three quarters of them still dependent upon agriculture for their livelihoods.

As the early network of roads improved, Bennington became a commercial center. Major roads led north to Rutland and Burlington, and extended east to west from Brattleboro to Troy. With better roads the mill owners were able to ship their products to markets farther and farther away, and as natural resources were depleted locally, they also began to bring in raw materials.

Second Stage: 1852-1890

Finally, in 1852 railroads arrived in Bennington, and this was to herald the beginning of the second stage of economic development. The area mills grew to their peak of production and continued to expand well into the 1890s. This was the period when men named Bradford, Cooper, Tiffany, Holden, and others came to Bennington to open mills. Typically they brought money with them to invest and were able to establish larger mills than those set up by the original settlers. Many times, these out-of-towners continued a formula of success that they had practiced in other parts of New England. Many settled in Bennington, oversaw their factories in person, and became part of the local community, often becoming active in political and civic organizations. The arrival of the railroad actually caused a decline in the agricultural importance of Bennington because fresh food could be shipped to town cheaply, making the region less dependent on local crops. Farmers could switch to the production of wool for the local mills and abandon food crops.

In 1854 Henry Bradford arrived from Massachusetts and converted an existing woolen mill to the manufacture of knit cotton underwear and hosiery. For several decades afterwards the manufacture of underwear became the major industry in town. By the 1880s, industrialists had built several relatively large knitting facto-



An advertisement for Cushman Colonial furniture included this smoker's stand that featured a drawer offering a choice of cigarette brands for the discriminating smoker.

ries and Bennington's mills were able to enjoy a nationwide market for their goods. With farming on the wane, industry began to dominate the town's economy and politics, and a majority of the population became dependent upon manufacturing.

As factories grew larger they became less flexible and produced more and more specialized products. The manufacture of the carpenter's square is a good example. Bennington area inventors secured patents to produce steel squares that were a marked improvement over the wooden ones used earlier by the building trades. An entire industry grew up in North Bennington and Shaftsbury. Indeed, the old Eagle Square buildings in Shaftsbury were used to manufacture squares and other tools for more than a hundred years.

Specialized products and larger mills became the formula for success throughout the later decades of the nineteenth century and the smaller mills vanished one by one. At their peak, Bennington's knitting mills were the largest producers in Vermont and the fourth largest in the nation.

Third Stage: 1890s-1938

After a period of economic prosperity the mills reached their peak of production and by the turn of the century the local economy began to slow. The average lifespan of mills that opened in the late nineteenth century was only nine years, and no new mills were established between 1899 and 1914. Throughout this period knit goods remained the dominant product but specialty items continued to be manufactured. When mills went out of business it became more and more difficult to find new tenants for aging buildings. As early as 1890 the town began to offer tax exemptions and other incentives to bring new industries to town.

Several factors, mostly beyond the control of factory owners, contributed to Bennington's industrial decline. A major reason was simply that fashions changed and demand for knit woolen ware fell off. Competition grew, both domestic and foreign, and Bennington's aging mills couldn't compete. The monetary crisis of 1896-97 made it difficult to raise capital, which didn't help at a time when the mills needed money to modernize to survive. Bennington also suffered because of the declining quality of affordable transportation. Modern roads were not yet constructed and railroads suffered some major setbacks. Railroad shipments became more expensive and unreliable due to local disputes with connecting railroad lines, so goods could not get to other markets easily.

Another long-term problem was that the mills that still managed to stay in business grew even larger. Although that might not sound like a problem, it meant that when one of those mills went out of business, a larger percentage of the population became unemployed. In the early days, the

town's economy suffered if one grist mill closed, putting a few people out of work, but it was able to weather that downturn. In the early twentieth century, when Cooper Manufacturing went out of business, seven hundred people lost their jobs, and these closures put a tremendous strain on a small town.

Still another factor that affected Bennington's industries in the late nineteenth century was inadequate waterpower. The quantity of power that could be harnessed from the Walloomsac and Paran Creeks was finite and unreliable, prompting most companies to switch to steam engines. But that was expensive, requiring coal and the means of transportation to bring coal to the mills. In 1910 only two factories accounted for 1,100 of the town's 1,450 workers, the Cooper plant and the E-Z Waist Co. As these old mills and equipment began to age and break down, new capital was constantly needed for repairs and to upgrade machinery to stay competitive.

Bennington's decline after the 1890s was also due to the trend for more industries to become part of larger corporations without local management or owners. As a result these new corporations had little loyalty to the community and when times got tough they moved elsewhere. Following the Great Depression, which began in 1929, things never returned to normal. The few remaining factories either failed or moved away and unused buildings fell into disrepair. In the end some factories burned, some were torn down, and a few were converted for other uses. Only the Holden-Leonard Big Mill, Cushman, and E-Z Waist Company buildings remained in use into the second half of the twentieth century.

The Survivors

Haviland's Privilege. Fortunately, several mills still remain in Bennington as reminders of the earlier economic history. Although no mills remain completely intact from the eighteenth century, some fragments can still be found. As mentioned, Safford and Robinson built the first grist and lumber mills near the intersection of Main and Beech streets in 1762, and no trace of those two mills remains. But in the 1770s an English Loyalist named Joseph Haviland secured the water rights to a portion of Paran Creek in the center of North Bennington. There he constructed a stone grist mill. He abandoned the property to his son-in-law, Moses Sage, who took over the mill during the American Revolution. It is said that Sage, very much on the colonists' side during the war, ground cornmeal at this mill for the troops at the Battle of Bennington.

Although the building that is now called Haviland's Privilege was not constructed until 1833 by Edward Welling, it rests on the stone foundation of Haviland's original grist mill. In an effort to save some money

Welling cut the millstones from the grist mill in half and used them as lintels over some of the windows of his new building. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the building was used as a saw mill, grist mill, and starch mill. Then in 1852 it was converted into a paper mill owned by the Stark Paper Company. It functioned in that capacity until 1925 and has now been converted into residential apartments.

While looking at the early mills in North Bennington, the houses along Sage Street should be noted. Most were built for the town's mill workers in 1811 and a few more were added to the row during the 1850s. They stand as the oldest complex of mill housing in Vermont. Until the 1950s they remained under common corporate ownership at which time they were sold to individual buyers.

Brown and Gage Foundry. Another survivor from the first stage of Bennington's industrial era is the stone Greek Revival mill at 169 North Street. It was built as the Brown and Gage Foundry around 1842 by Samuel H. Brown and his brother-in-law Gay Sanford to process the pig iron that was being mined along the Walloomsac River. Within a decade it had been converted into a grist mill for grinding wheat, corn, and buckwheat, and operated in that capacity until 1938. Later the building was used as an automobile repair shop and now holds offices. It is typical of early mill construction with large open work areas, an interior stairway, and large exterior doors on all floors for moving supplies and finished products.

Eagle Iron Works. Another group of factory buildings stands directly across the street west of the Brown and Gage Foundry at 190 North Street. These were built around 1845, just a few years after the stone foundry, and were known as the Eagle Iron Works. The property stretches from North Street to Depot Street with several brick mills and a gabled office dotting the lot. Here, Lemuel Grover manufactured stoves, plows, and a variety of water wheels and was joined in partnership by his foreman, Olin Scott, in 1858. In 1865 Scott bought out Grover and began producing heavy machinery to manufacture gunpowder. By 1867, Scott had moved to Pleasant Street, and Henry W. Putnam, one of Bennington's most prominent industrialists, took over the mill buildings to produce waterwheel governors, bottle stoppers, clothes wringers, and various light hardware and wire goods such as barbed wire. During the twentieth century these buildings housed the Bennington Brush Company before being converted to retail space.

Bennington Machine Works. When Olin Scott took over the Eagle Iron Works in 1865 he changed its name to the Bennington Machine Works. Immediately he relocated to new quarters he built at 330 Pleasant Street.

Several of those buildings remain today including the brick factory with a roof monitor used for ventilation purposes. Scott was a good example of a local man who made his fortune in Bennington through hard work and inventiveness. He fabricated heavy equipment and at one time could boast that all the machinery used in the United States to make gunpowder came from his factory. The machine works also built derricks, water turbines, and steam engines.

Olin Scott was also typical of local industrialists who built their homes close to their factories. It was a practical matter because they could oversee the day-to-day operations. Scott's house at 324 Pleasant Street was an elaborate Italianate stick-style residence he built in 1887 with all the conveniences then available. More recently it has been divided into apartments. Scott also was philanthropic, and profits from his industrial complex funded many local community projects.

Valentine Mills. On the same street as Scott's machine works once stood the Valentine Mills. It is hard to believe that behind the white house at 300 Pleasant Street once stood one of the largest factory complexes in town. This was the site of Joel Valentine's mills, which he established in 1824. He took over an existing woolen mill to manufacture cloth; the mill burned in 1836 and he rebuilt it. In 1865 his son, Major Alonzo B. Valentine, returned from the Civil War and took over the mills after his father died the following year. Major Valentine and his wife lived in the house, which had been a wedding gift to the bride and groom upon their marriage in 1863. At that time the *Bennington Banner* wrote that the house was "one of the pleasantest residences in our village, the site itself being a beautiful one." At their peak the Valentine Mills employed hundreds of workers in several large three-story structures that even sported a tall clock tower and a bell that struck the hours. In the early days of the twentieth century Coy-Babcock took over these buildings and manufactured waxed paper here, but eventually the factory closed and the buildings were all torn down. Only the house remains.

The Big Mill. The best example of the second stage of industrial development in Bennington is the Holden-Leonard Mill, known locally as "the Big Mill." It was built of brick in 1865 by Seth Hunt and the Tillinghast Company. Originally it was meant to produce paisley shawls, all the rage during the Civil War, but that was merely a fad and within a few years Hunt sold the business to new owners to manufacture other products. In 1889 John Holden and Charles Leonard bought the mill for a million dollars and started the Bennington Woolen Mills, which operated until 1938. The structure is 113 feet long and four stories high. It is a good example of a modern mill because it incorporated safety features intended to prevent

the fires that destroyed so many of the early mills. A prime example is the exterior tower built to house the stairway. Before this development, stairs were located inside the mills themselves and if a fire broke out the stairway would act as a flue that carried the fire from floor to floor. Placing stairs in a separate structure provided a little more time to fight any fire that might break out.

At one time the big mill boasted 144 looms and produced a half million yards of material per year. The looms were powered by both steam and water, providing a steady source of energy. The Holden-Leonard mill was one of the first to employ traveling salesmen to sell their merchandise instead of going through a commission house. When the mill closed in 1938 it put 800 people out of work, one fourth of the town's workers. Other firms tried to revitalize the factory and they continued to make woolen goods there until 1949. In 1990 the Big Mill was rehabilitated for use by a dozen different businesses, which continue to use it today.

Nearby on Benmont Avenue, formerly called Mill Street, are several wooden houses built by the Holden-Leonard Mill to provide affordable housing for the workers. The company owned them and charged rent, increasing their profits. Several have been restored recently to their original appearance. A company store was located in the brick building at the corner of Benmont and River streets, where employees could buy items they needed on credit, which also increased company profits.

Brick Row. Another distinctive example of housing built for mill workers is that of the brick houses, known as Brick Row, located in North Bennington on Greenwich Street. In 1868 the North Bennington Boot and Shoe Company built nine double houses for their workers, five of which are still standing. The Boot and Shoe Company itself had a short and unfortunate history. The president of the company was Charles Hall, one of Governor Hiland Hall's six sons. In 1867 he built a factory where the present John G. McCullough Library now stands, the year before he built Brick Row. Hall decided to market shoes directly to the public in Chicago and opened a large wholesale store in that city. On November 8, 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed his store and all its inventory, causing a severe financial setback. Then in 1884 the factory in North Bennington burned to the ground, putting the company out of business for good. Only the mill houses remain.

Bradford Mill. Henry E. Bradford is another of Bennington's industrial giants who came to town with enough capital to set up his business. He built his mansion directly across the street from his mill at 751 Main Street. In 1857 Bradford established the Green Mountain Mills, but the original

structure burned in 1865 and he rebuilt it the same year. Although the mill is currently underutilized, the family's house has been brought back to life.

At one time Bradford's knitting mills employed hundreds of workers and made 18,000 dozen pairs of underwear a year. On January 17, 1874, one of the worst accidents in Bennington's history occurred at the Bradford mill. A tank of gasoline that was used for generating gas lighting sprang a leak. When an employee inadvertently struck a match, a terrific explosion blew part of the building to pieces. Nine people were killed, four of them teen-age girls. Many more were injured. The injured and dead were taken into the Bradford mansion and treated until they could be transported elsewhere. (A detailed article on H. E. Bradford & Company appeared in the *Walloomsack Review*, Vol. 12, autumn 2013.)



H. C. White Company workers sort stereoscopic photographs in the North Bennington factory. These views of famous sites all over the world, which provide a kind of three-dimensional image, were popular before moving pictures came along.

H.C. White Company. The H.C. White Company mill was built around

A modern view of the Holden-Leonard "Big Mill," which has been adapted for many contemporary purposes.



1881 on Water Street in North Bennington. It rests on the foundation of the earlier washing works of the Burden Iron Company after a fire destroyed that building. White became one of the leading manufacturers of stereoscopes, an entertaining form of 3-D photography popular in the late nineteenth century. The new factory was equipped with automatic fire sprinklers and a large pump to suppress fires quickly.

When stereoscopes went out of fashion White branched out into other products including the wooden Kiddie Kar, which was invented here in 1915 for one of his children. These proved to be immensely popular and became a source of income for the next decade. By 1919 more than one and a quarter million Kiddie Kars were being manufactured here each year.

H.T. Cushman Company. The stone buildings originally known as the Estes Mill were erected along Water Street, North Bennington, in the early 1840s. Estes manufactured cotton goods like so many of Bennington's mills at the middle of the nineteenth century. Then in 1892 it was taken over by the H.T. Cushman Company for the manufacture of furniture and wooden novelties. The mill owner's house across the street predates the current mill, it being built in 1838. After the death of Henry Cushman in 1922 the house was remodeled and used as the display room for the line of Cushman Colonial furniture. It is now a private residence. □

Suggestions for further reading

Rush Welter, *Bennington, Vermont, An Industrial History*, School of Library Science, Columbia University, 1959, also available at www.questria.com.

Bennington Souvenirs of 1904 and 1914, annotated and indexed copies available at the Bennington Museum library.

Yankeetown: A Study of Community Decision-Making Processes, by Harry M. Scoble, Yale University Ph.D thesis, 1957. "Yankeetown" was a pseudonym for Bennington.

Tyler Resch, ed., *The Shires of Bennington: A pictorial history of a Vermont county*, Bennington Museum, 1975, contains a chapter on industry and commerce by Joseph Parks.

"H.E. Bradford & Company: A century of knitting-mill heritage," by Ruth Burt Ekstrom, in *Walloomsack Review* Vol. 12, Autumn 2013.