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“Paterson, O’Paterson-How Glorious Was Thy Past!”

A Historical Sketch on the Life and Times of Robert Hamil
(1818–1880), one of Paterson’s former great silk industrialists.

by *Vincent D. Waraske*



This scene of the northwest corner of Broadway and Summer Street (c.1881) looking north shows the stately residence of Robert Hamil, one of Paterson’s famous silk pioneers of the past. The name of Hamil and likewise that of his business partner, James Booth, have left their stamp in the annals of Paterson’s great industrial history.

The photograph depicts the spirit, dignity and tranquillity of old Broadway, then a noble thoroughfare lined with tall shade trees and encompassing during those latter decades of the nineteenth century the industrial nobility and prominent citizenry of “Silk City”.

Robert Hamil, born near Belfast, Ireland, St. Patrick's Day 1818, emigrated to the United States about 1840. Working for a short time at the Belleville Paint Works he soon removed himself to that then rising "Industrial City" of promise — namely Paterson, N. J. In those pre-Civil War days silk was yet in its infancy with no foreshadowing of the golden age of preeminence and distinction that was in store for "Queen Silk". Silk and Paterson were to become synonymous and names of the proud Paterson silk establishments were to become household words, known and respected across the nation.

Hamil soon found employment with John Ryle, "Father of the Silk Industry" in that veritable "cradle of industry" the old Gun Mill after a short sojourn at the Franklin Mill on Mill Street for \$1. per day. The world famous Gun Mill which still remains on the lower race gave birth to and sheltered many industrial endeavors beginning with the organization of the Patent Arms Company in 1835–36. It was in this ancient mill that Robert Hamil learned and mastered all aspects of silk operation under that great, venerable patriarch of the silk industry — John Ryle. After eleven years Hamil found himself superintendent of the hard silk department at \$9. weekly. Mr. James Booth at this time, also in the employ of John Ryle, was superintendent of the finishing department at \$6. weekly. The association of the above two gentlemen, coupled with their energy, skill and thrift culminated in the formation of the copartnership of Hamil and Booth in 1855 as a silk throwing plant with but 20 operatives. Little did they realize that in the decades to come they would live to see their joint efforts cause them to become head of one of the most important silk manufacturing establishments in Paterson, which in those days meant among the first nationwide, offering employment to more than 1200 persons.

In 1862, after approximately seven years as tenants of John Ryle in Ryle's "Murray Mill" on Mill Street, Hamil and Booth bought the old "Passaic Mill" on Ward Street, a portion of which remained standing until May 1970 with "1862" inscribed upon its facade — the first year of Hamil and Booth's occupancy. The jaws of progress and the wrecker's machinery at its gates, the building fell victim to the Ward Street widening project and has been razed. The boom period of the post Civil War days caused the erection of numerous additions and various improvements as business expansion necessitated until Hamil and Booth ranked among the first of Paterson's "silk empire". In those days Messers Hamil and Booth lived simply at numbers 26 and 28 Ward Street respectively, within walking distances of their mills, this being common practice for bosses and superintendents during those embryo days of the silk industry.

In 1872, to satisfy an ever-increasing need for more space, the old "Godwin Mill" on the lower race was purchased, which in its pristine form remains to this day at Market and Mill Streets. The Godwin Mill had been built in 1858, its product at that time being cotton goods, for Paterson during the two decades following the War of 1812 had deservedly earned the sobriquet "Cotton Town of the United States" — this being another industrial epoch and story. Amid impressive ceremonies this mill was rechristened the "Hamil Mill". An iron plate bearing witness to this fact is yet visible, being attached to the rear of the mill at the peak formed by the roof. (For the interested historian, across Mill Street from the present Passaic Street site of the Board of Health Offices is an arched stone bridge. Crossing this bridge and gazing upward one can see this ancient marker symbolizing one of Paterson's great former silk giants.)

The raceways today are a sad and depressing view, now in a state of decay. Once Paterson's raceways were a source of true beauty, visitors in that bygone era being greatly impressed with their power, their picturesque spillways, their rapid motion — dash and sparkle — as they pursued the course made by man, close to the mills.

Now, with the increased facilities of another mill, Hamil and Booth during the 1870's ventured into ribbon goods, fringe silks, weaving on Jacquard looms, handkerchiefs, scarfs and one of their famed specialties fancy black dress silks. In 1882 the looms of Hamil and Booth produced a black silk dress with a graceful spray of delicate flowers for Mrs. James A. Garfield during the period of her bereavement. Mrs. Garfield was not the first nor was she the last first lady to adorn herself with products of the Paterson looms. These were great years of growth for silk in Paterson when from countless local mills a stream of beautiful silk velvets, braids, tassels, and flower brocades poured forth in nearly endless profusion.

Into this picture of success and abundant prosperity stepped an event of sadness. On September 11, 1880 occurred the demise of Robert Hamil at his Broadway residence, 247 Broadway. Robert Hamil had been an ex-president of the Paterson Savings Institution (now New Jersey Bank & Trust Co.), an ex-director of the Second National Bank, a long-time trustee of St. John's Catholic Church, former president of the Paterson Silk Industry Association, and an honorary member of the Silk Association of America.

The honorary pallbearers on the day of the funeral, September 14, 1880, included John Ryle, long associated with the silk industry; John J. Brown, president of the First National Bank and a former Paterson Mayor; John J. Reynolds, president of the Paterson Savings Institution and other notables. Employer and employee, banker and laborer alike passed through the Hamil house that late summer's day as Patersonians paid final tribute to one of its very first citizens. Paterson lost a noble soul and the silk industry one of its strong pillars.

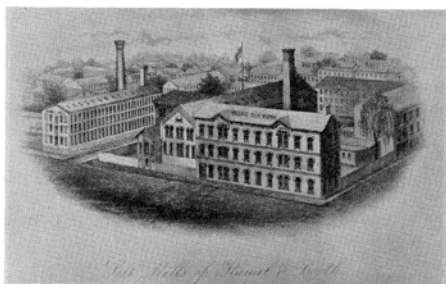
When not laboring in the silk mills Robert Hamil enjoyed his Broadway home and the magnificent gardens surrounding it, the photograph not doing justice to this fact. The choice plants on his grounds became quite famous as many thronged to see the flowering marvels of horticultural art. Robert Hamil's widow, the former Bridget Bannigan, passed from the Broadway scene in the early 1890's as did James Booth, Hamil's long-time partner and neighbor. The Booth mansion, being at 240 Broadway, stood on the southeast corner of Broadway and Auburn Street, where the Danforth Memorial Free Public Library building is today. The wrecker's machinery soon obliterated Hamil's residence, trees, shrubbery, hot houses, exotic plants and fountains and with it all a generous piece of Paterson magnificence and history.



Following the great Paterson Fire of 1902, the Second Presbyterian Church was one among five Paterson churches faced with rebuilding, as their former houses of worship had fallen victim to that disastrous conflagration. The northwest site of Broadway and Summer Street was bought and a new church built. Construction was begun in 1903 and the building dedicated in 1905.

The congregation of Second Presbyterian Church has once more moved and this fine building now houses the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Recreation Center.

This short sketch on the life and times of Robert Hamil is but one of the countless hundreds of success stories of Paterson. In its heyday, proud citizenry of those bygone days of glory fondly referred to their city as "Silk City", the "Lyons of America". Paterson was then the industrial leader in many facets of manufacturing, coveting with justly earned pride a national position of distinction and prominence.



(Mr. Waraske, a member of the faculty of Paterson School No. 18, has written and published other articles on Paterson.)

The Rembrandt Club

'Belle Vista', the beautiful home of Catholina Lambert, was the scene of an unusual gathering on Saturday, April 16, 1898. Mr. Lambert was host to sixty members of the Rembrandt Club of Brooklyn, an organization of art collectors, connoisseurs and patrons which included many leading men of greater New York.

The club members came on the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad in two Pullman cars provided for them by Mr. Lambert, arriving there about one o'clock. The fame of the host as a collector of rare paintings and sculpture was so well known in this metropolis that nearly every member of that representative organization took advantage of his generous invitation and the opportunity - which was the occasion of the gathering - of viewing a number of old Dutch paintings never before placed on exhibition.

Among the members present were Henry T. Chapman, president; Walter K. Paye, vice-president; Charles K. Ovington, secretary; T. J. Blakeslee, importer of many of Mr. Lambert's great collection; Eugene Fischof, American representative of Seidelmeyer & Co. of Paris, the largest art dealers in the world; George A. Hearn, well known New York merchant who had one of the largest and best collections of paintings in America; and many others scarcely less noted in the art world at the time.

As soon as the 'Rembrandts' arrived at the Castle they were served an elaborate luncheon, after which they were given 'carte blanche' to wander through the spacious buildings, the galleries of paintings, and over the grounds. The guests lost no time in placing themselves before the works that had just been hung.

Some of the club members never before having seen Mr. Lambert's collection, their comments were enthusiastic in the extreme. Mr. Chapman, president of the club, remarked to a reporter:

"This has been a great day in the history of the Rembrandt Club. Some of us have pretty creditable collections ourselves, but we were not prepared to see here an array of paintings that in some respects cannot be equalled in the world. Some of these old Dutch paintings of the 17th century are not to be found anywhere else; those of the 18th century English masters are not to be matched in America and many individual pictures are world renowned.

"A surprising and remarkable thing about Mr. Lambert's collection is the catholicity. It doesn't run to any one school but covers them all, and that is one of the grandest features. Every school is represented by some of the best examples existent. Mr. Lambert certainly never had any guests who could better appreciate this great showing than he had today. I regard it nothing short of a marvel that one man in a lifetime has been able to gather together such a collection, embracing as it does all the schools, from the Dutch to the contemporary French and American."

The members of the club returned to New York aboard the special cars furnished by Mr. Lambert, at 6:20 p.m.