



Museum and Headquarters
LAMBERT CASTLE
Garret Mountain Reservation
Paterson, N. J.

PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume 1971 - Number 2

“A SCENE from PATERSON’S GOLDEN ERA”

by Vincent Waraske

It was 92 years ago – the year 1879. Rutherford B. Hayes was President of the nation, the Honorable Joseph R. Graham was Mayor of Paterson, Nathan Barnert was 6th Ward Alderman, and John W. Griggs, future New Jersey Governor and U. S. Attorney-General, was City Counsel.

John P. Holland, a Paterson school teacher, had conducted successful experiments and trials on his first submarine only the year before.

One hundred and twelve first class locomotives were to be built that year by Paterson erectors and 120 individual silk firms were turning out voluminous bolts of that lustrous material for which the city was famous. All this activity, despite the business depression that followed the Panic of 1873.

In August of 1879 Patersonians witnessed a death defying feat when Harry Leslie, the “Daredevil of Niagara”, performed his acrobatics on a tight rope stretched across the ravine of The Great Passaic Falls.

A new brick building for School No. 5 had been recently completed.

The year 1879 also held tragedy for “Silk City”. On February 13 a great fire broke out at the Rogers Locomotive Works, destroying the immense millright shop on Spruce Street along with its many valuable patterns.

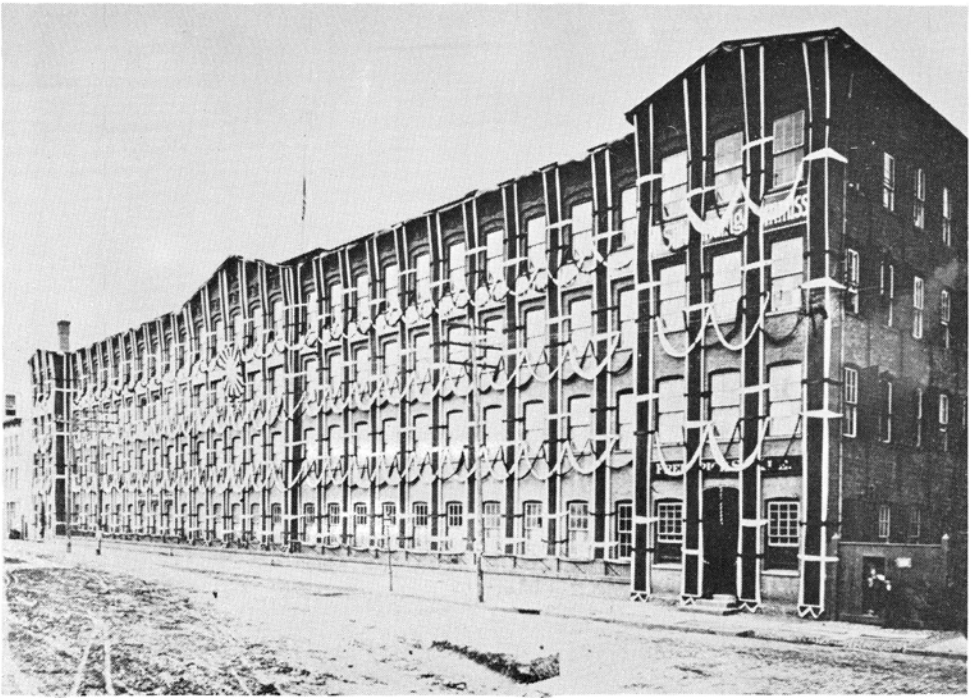
In the summer of that year, Paterson also lost two of its most famous silk pioneers – Benjamin B. Tilt, former head of the old Phoenix Silk Works and Thomas N. Dale, President of the former Dale Manufacturing Company.

It can truly be said that the latter gentleman was “a prince among men”.

When he came to Paterson, Dale brought not only his inherent intelligence and energy, but abundant capital as well – combining these assets to augment the city’s importance as a great industrial center. He labored zealously toward this end despite financial reverses and numerous other setbacks which prevented the complete realization of his dream of an industrial utopia.

Born amid poor surroundings in Springfield, Massachusetts, during 1812, he rose from the impoverished environment of his youth to become a merchant prince – heading the nation’s largest tailors’ trimming house in New York.

As an ambitious young man, Dale found Springfield too confining. He took to the sea at an early age and set out on a whaling voyage hoping to find his fortune and make his mark on the world. He returned home after an absence of three years and with scarcely a cent of capital began to trade in buttons. Shortly thereafter, with a total reserve of \$50 cash, he and a Mr. Maxwell entered into a partnership as dealers in tailors’ trimmings.



The renowned Dale Mill fronting on 36 to 58 Railroad Avenue. One of the city's most imposing manufacturing structures, it was a landmark for passengers as they entered Paterson via the Erie Railroad.

Dale's strong will and determination did not allow this partnership to exist for long however. Severing relationships with Mr. Maxwell, he founded the New York importing house of Thomas N. Dale & Co. Stimulated by his energetic enthusiasm and business acumen, the firm rapidly rose to the top of the tailors' trimming trade in America. The business was carried on in New York City, with branches in every direction, both domestic and foreign, and soon was yielding an intake of several millions a year.

In pursuing his importing business, Dale was obliged to spend a great deal of time abroad. For many years he maintained an elegant mansion in Paris, where he dispensed princely hospitality amid regal surroundings to thousands of American and foreign guests. He also maintained a magnificent house in New York, where he found it necessary to keep a retinue of some 13 servants to adequately entertain his visitors.

In addition to the Paris mansion and the New York domicile, Dale also had a villa at Newport, where the family spent its summers while in the United States.

Eventually, upon moving to Paterson, he maintained a magnificent residence at No. 63 Prince Street. At the time this particular block of Prince Street between Ward and Grand Streets was a splendid thoroughfare lined with shade trees and beautiful residential buildings that faced the western extremity of Colt's Hill.

By 1855 Dale already had amassed a vast fortune. However, the restless and adventurous spirit that drove him to seek out new horizons led him to venture into the realm of the silk business. Feeling that silk manufacturing in America had a bright and prosperous future, he began manufacturing braids, binding and other items for tailors' use at Newark, New Jersey. At the same time he continued operations at his vast importing house in New York.

In the years that followed this shrewd businessman perceived that Paterson, the rising silk metropolis of the Americas, would be the ideal center to continue his own operations. Moving to the city in 1862, Dale leased a part of the old Grant Locomotive buildings. The works was located on lower Market Street and Grant was one of the five world famous locomotive manufacturers of old Paterson.

While a tenant of Mr. Oliver Grant, a misunderstanding arose between the two men over the water power used and, as this dispute reached bitter proportions, Dale resolved to erect a mill for himself. With the brilliant future of Paterson silk manufacturing only arching the horizon, Dale launched into a mammoth project, which even for 1862 was of stupendous proportions. Unfortunately, the burden that this man of vision so proudly assumed, eventually was to prove a crushing undertaking.

In the meantime however, Col. Andrew Derrom, a famous architect and builder of old Paterson, was placed in full charge of creating the new works. Originally the Dale Mill proper stood with a 375 foot frontage on Railroad Avenue, encompassing Numbers 36 to 58. One and a half million bricks were used in its construction and the engines for power and the boilers alone cost \$60,000.

Let us reflect on the fact that these prices represent the American economy of over a century ago when \$1 a day was the anticipated workingman's wages for a ten, twelve or even fourteen hour day. It was Dale's intention to spend \$75,000 on his mill project. The outlay eventually was in excess of \$185,000.

It is most appropriate to pause here for a moment to mention one of the unique features of this most extraordinary silk establishment. One of the most remarkable aspects of the interior arrangements as they existed during the lifetime of Dale, was a portion of one floor finished with special sound-proof walls which served as a library.

So effective was the deadening that neither the whirr of the noisiest machine, nor any other clamor could penetrate the solitude of Dale's study. Here this scholarly manufacturer, whose character reflected a rare breeding of the asthetic and the practical, would retire and engage in those favorite studies that made him so eminent among his contemporaries. This library also housed paintings, skillful works done by his wife, son and other family members, as well as a mineral and rock collection of great value.

(It should be mentioned here that Thomas N. Dale, Jr., Dale's eldest son, was Professor of Geology and Mineralogy at Chicago University and his research writings were known abroad as well as in this country.)

By the time of the Dale Mills completion the proprietor had been forced to abandon his importing interests and center his attention entirely on manufacturing. Dale never was able to utilize even a quarter of this grand mill for his own business and his pride was a great obstacle to his leasing the unused portions. It was his earnest and heartfelt ambition to dominate the entire building with his business alone.

During the heyday of silk manufacturing, national expositions were held. Here manufactured items of every variety were displayed and Paterson artisans were awarded many laurels and honors in competitions with their nationwide contemporaries. One of these memorable occasions took place in 1869 when the American Institute awarded best medal and diploma to the Dale Manufacturing Company of Paterson, New Jersey, for its silk serges, scarves and braids.

Five other Paterson silk firms also were presented with awards that year, much to the admiration and envy of the other manufacturers that made up the silk industry nobility of the nation.

The days of that golden era were numbered however. Enter the panic of 1873 and the energetic and impetuous career of Thomas N. Dale came to its conclusion. Moving with paralyzing force, the general financial ruin of the nation's businesses in the mid 1870's, had disastrous consequences for Dale.

Originally, it had been his intention to divert foreign manufacturing to his silk mill. Unfortunately, by the time this grandiose structure was completed, he had lost the vital outlet for his product due to the failure of his importing house.

One of the prime causes of his New York failure was the excessive importation of foreign goods by a junior partner against positive instructions given by Dale. As a result, capital so desperately needed by the latter for his enterprise in Paterson and for the closing of his outlets, was locked up. The failure of the New York importing house, coupled with the temporary collapse of business and the pressure of staggering mortgages, inevitably crushed Dale.

When the ownership of the mill passed from his hands he went abroad for a period of time and his younger son, Frederick S. Dale, occupied a portion of the mill as a tenant for slightly more than a decade.

Upon Dale's return to Paterson he lived quietly with his eldest son, Thomas N., Jr. in the old Bailey House on Broadway just beyond the Erie Railroad track. The residence is no longer standing, but it was here that he was stricken suddenly and died on July 17, 1879.

In his day, Thomas N. Dale was one of the most widely known of the prominent silk manufacturers of the nation. An enthusiast in all matters relating to the fascinating silk industry of old, he never wearied of discoursing on the subject so nearest to his heart. Also being a student of political economy and world affairs in general, he wrote, spoke on and printed his lucid, yet ardent theses on our Republican institutions and the doctrine of protection for industry.

During his residency in Paterson, Dale was sincerely anxious to promote the welfare and improvement of his adopted city. Toward that end, he devoted much time and effort to the Paterson Board of Free Trade. In addition, Dale served first as Vice-President of the Silk Association of America from 1876 until the time of his death and it was with great pride and delight that he assumed membership in the United States Centennial Commission of 1876.

The Dale Mill proper soon became the property of Nathan Barnert, former mayor and humanitarian. During this period numerous other tenants occupied portions of the mill. It was here also that the Whitney Sewing Machine Company manufactured its world famous machines for many years.

Space does not permit listing all the tenants on this site during its history. However, before the Dale Mill was razed in 1938, its last well known occupants were the Thomas Henshall Silk Finishing Company, Henry, Abram, and Morris Biber, silkmen, and Frank & Dugan, Inc., ribbon manufacturers.

This is only a part of the story of Paterson during its golden age as the undisputed "Silk City of The Americas". It was an age of gratification for Patersonians when its proud citizens could point with pride to its huge locomotive shops, vast iron works and its countless silk, cotton, flax and paper mills. It was an age that contributed much to American history.



(Mr. Waraske is on the faculty of School No. 18 in Paterson and has been a frequent contributor of historic articles.)