

## **BALLSTON SPA'S INNOVATIVE PAPERMAKERS**

If you are in Saratoga this summer and want a break from the main attraction, you might find an entertaining bet visiting the undiscovered mill town of Ballston Spa. That's where George West was once known as the Paper Bag King. If you go, stop at the intersection of Prospect and Thompson streets next to the Kayaderosseras Creek and look into the gables of the turreted brick factory buildings in front of you. West's name is etched in granite next to the date—1878—when he acquired the former textile mill and repurposed it as the crown jewel of his growing empire of paper mills and paper bag factories

The mill complex is on the National Register of Historic Places, marking Ballston Spa as a supplier of paper products to the world.

West was a former British subject who settled in the area in 1861. He became Ballston Spa's main employer when he used machinery to apply the necessary bead of glue to sheets of paper that he manufactured and folded into square-bottomed bags. The resulting innovation served the needs of grocers and other merchants who previously relied on bags that were made from cotton and, without a flat bottom, resembled envelopes.

West's bags earned him a fortune estimated at \$75 million if measured in today's dollars.

He owned some ten mills along Kayaderosseras in and near Ballston Spa. His operations and others at places like Factory Village, West Milton and Rock City Falls were connected by a light rail trolley. It transported workers up and downstream and carried finished products to connections with the main line of the Delaware and Hudson railroad.

West served several terms in the State Assembly and the U.S. Congress. He had a mansion in town and a summer home near his upriver paper mill in Rock City Falls, across the road from where the Kayaderosseras Creek still tumbles from an elevation of about 500 feet above sea level, producing the power once needed for manufacturing and providing the water for

papermaking. The Creek courses through Ballston Spa at an elevation of about 300 feet and then begins another descent to Saratoga Lake.

West's raw materials included cotton rags, which originated in the south. Historian Tim Starr, who has written extensively about West and has walked the Kayaderosseras to pinpoint the locations of long-gone mills and dams, says that while West was an innovator, he also had good timing. When the Civil War planted the seeds of economic change, paper manufacturers switched to various sources of the fiber needed for making paper. One material used at mills near Ballston Spa was rye straw. But West chose a plant called manila hemp. It was grown in the Phillipines and, although commonly referred to as hemp, is actually was a species of banana plant. Manila hemp was a good choice. Eventually, the Ballston Spa area was producing much of the manila paper in the world and making paper bags.

History says that West could have used the hemp that is now recognized as a member of the cannabis family to make his paper. It has what is necessary to produce the fiber for making paper but was more expensive than imports. Real hemp also got a bad rap as a member of the cannabis family and was caught up in the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937. As a result, hemp was effectively banned in the United States.

Before his death in 1901, West continued to demonstrate his business acumen. He sold his assets to the Union Bag and Paper Company just before the widespread electrification of villages and cities prompted manufacturers to consolidate in populated areas and leave small rural mills behind. The electric railroad line that served West's mills was independently owned and fell into disrepair.

But not before West established Ballston Spa as a center for manila paper bag manufacturing. And not before his philanthropy helped support community projects such as construction of the United Methodist Church and the War Memorial at the Village Park on Front Street. His legacy helped anchor papermaking as an economic engine in Saratoga County and the North Country. And he left behind the elements for new successes by entrepreneurs such as the Cottrell family which picked up pieces of West's enterprises at Rock City Falls in 1926. They paid \$1,500 for West's extensive property along

the Kayaderosseras Creek. Four generations of Cottrells have turned it into a growing, modern company of expert papermakers.

Today the Cottrell company supplies specialty paper products such as electrical insulation to other manufacturers, including the auto industry. Makers of shotgun shells use Cottrell's high-strength paper for the casings that contain the pellets. The company has built a clientele of more than 100 partner businesses across the country that thrive on the Cottrell reputation for quality and dedication in meeting the needs of customers.

But history is also repeating itself. The Cottrell team of Jack, Josh, and Jim Cottrell, backed up by long-timers Tom Harrington and Darren Costanzo, manage some of the same issues that George West once faced.

The company's mainstay product is paper insulation that meets strict safety standards set by independent quality control groups and government regulators. At the same time, laws passed in 2018 recognized a variety of the hemp plant called industrial hemp. It is biologically different from the hemp that is used to produce other cannabis products and can be used as a source of fiber for making paper, creating opportunities to develop new products.

Josh Cottrell, a professional pulp and paper engineer, isn't sure why George West chose to import manila hemp from the Philippines. But he is sure that the industrial hemp available today from farmers in the United States produces a clean and sustainable raw material, and he wants to use it. The Cottrell Company, he says, has developed a proprietary process for fabricating industrial hemp into a stronger, more pliable paper that can be recycled many more times than paper made from other fibers. And hemp isn't difficult for farmers to grow quickly to a mature height of 16 feet without the need for pesticides.

"It's an entirely sustainable raw material that saves trees and reduces our carbon footprint on the environment," he says.

And the result is a higher quality paper than was produced by George West, with one thing in common. Among the Cottrell company's 100 percent hemp products is a new line of paper bags. Product samples are imprinted with the words Mill 26, recalling the day in the early 1900s when the family purchased

the West properties and began growing a twenty-first century business that employs 40 workers and aims to add more. A sign outside the factory invites qualified workers to apply.

Josh tells visitors that he discounts his academic training in favor of the valuable papermaking lessons taught by his father Jack, who sits next to him at the adjoining computer in the company's large conference area. Outside, the Kayaderosseras rumbles eastward, much as it did when George West was a neighbor. A prominent notice warns walkers on Rock City Road that the Creek may rise rapidly. A \$3 million gas line that was constructed to serve the factory about a decade ago helps send a second message: manila hemp put Ballston Spa and the Kayaderosseras Valley on the papermaking map. But the twenty-first century product is an engineering innovation.

"We are already developing a food-quality drinking straw," Josh says.

The Cottrell management team wants more farmers to produce industrial hemp, especially in New York. Transportation costs can be high, so the closer the better. Plastic carryout bags were prohibited four years ago in New York. If all goes as planned in Rock City Falls, there might soon be a new Paper Bag King.