

HAMBURG HISTORY

A special section contributed by Mr. Daniel Barr on behalf of the Hamburg Historical Society

The Paper Mill

When I was in 5th grade at Hamburg School, our teacher, Mrs. Clair Lewis, gave us an assignment. It was a combination English and History assignment. We were given one old spot in town and we had to write its history. Because I walked to school everyday and passed the big smokestack in the woods, I asked for the paper mill. This was the start of my fascination with the history of Hamburg. I hope these columns have the same effect on some of you.

In the late 19th century, Hamburg was a great industrial force in Sussex County, and the neighboring counties in New York and Pennsylvania. This is due largely to the Wallkill River. The largest employer at that time was the Union Waxed & Parchment Paper Co., otherwise simply known as the Paper Mill.

Built in 1873 by A.B. Peloubet & Sons, it started out as a saw mill and steam bending works. In 1874, Peloubet & Brown started a brick yard. This was all built on the site of an old blast furnace, which had been erected along the river in the 1830's, and closed in 1850. When the furnace was built, they built a dam across the Wallkill to create power. This caused the formation of a pond, known as Furnace Pond. When the mill was constructed 23 years after the closing of the furnace, the dam was raised 8ft... Soon after, in February of 1874, the dam started springing leaks. It took gangs of men working hard to keep the dam from bursting. Finally in the spring on 1874 the mill was complete.

Importing wood pulp from Canada, the mill started making paper. There was a printing facility in the mill. They started making bread, candy, and fruit wrappers and were shipped all over the country. The mill soon expanded to make newspaper, wrapping paper, and brown paper bags. Not only was the mill a large employer of full time workers, local farmers were able to make money over the winter by selling straw to the mill.

After changing hands a couple of times, it was purchased by the Sparks Brothers in 1895. The Sparks Manufacturing Co. increased its printing operation and built a new retaining wall in front of the dam to strengthen it. By 1900, the mill had become the Union Waxed & Parchment Paper Co. At one time there were seven smokestacks at the mill. They were eventually taken down and replaced by one large stack that still stands along the river today. On the stack are the letters U W & P P Co. that can still be read today.

The old Furnace Pond became known as the Paper Mill Pond, and still retains that name today. It was the site of recreation boating and fishing for many years in the early 20th century. There was even a club called "The Bass Rock Fish Club" who built 2 boat houses along the pond. During this time there were two people who had drowned in the pond, including a six year old boy who was playing on the dam.

Although the mill had survived multiple fires and a couple of dam breaks, it could not survive the Great Depression. Business started to slow down around 1930, and was closed in 1933 by its current owner, Berst-Forster-Dixfield Co. of Plattsburg, NY. Many of the employees moved to Plattsburg to work in the main facility. But many stayed and found new work and continued to raise their families in the Hamburg area, some of which still remain.

Back in the 1960's and 70's, I, along with many other kids, spent many hours hiking, fishing, and trapping along the pond. I still take frequent hikes along the river and pond. In February of 2008, the pond made news again. Lifelong Hamburg Resident, Ransler Hall, went into the icy pond to save a man from drowning. He held the man's head above water until Chief Wright of the Hamburg Police, the Hamburg Fire Dept. and EMS could arrive. We pulled the man out, carried him through the woods, and put him on a helicopter to the hospital. The quick reaction of Mr. Hall, and the great response of the Hamburg Emergency Services, saved the man's life. Mr. Hall received a bravery award from the Borough of Hamburg and the Human Spirit award from Sussex County for his effort.

The paper mill & pond area along the Wallkill River is a beautiful and interesting area which has unfortunately been vandalized with graffiti on some of the old remaining walls and garbage and other debris being left in the woods. It is also a very dangerous place. If anyone decides to hike along the river, please never go alone. Always take an adult with you and make sure you have a cell phone in case of an emergency.

