

Born of Supply and Demand

Rittenhouse Mill marks the beginning of papermaking in America.

Throughout the later half of the 1600s commerce within America's colonies was growing and the demand for paper heightened. But obtaining paper was a major problem for colonial printers due to the fact that all paper was imported from England—until 1691. In that year, William Rittenhouse and his son, Nicholas, produced the first paper in the American colonies.

William Rittenhouse was born in Germany, near the Dutch border. His name was then Wilhelm Rittenhausen, later changed in America. He apprenticed in a paper mill in the German city of Mulheim-Ruhr-Broich. Later he moved to Holland to stay with his older brother where he learned the Dutch methods of fine paper making.

In 1688, William Rittenhouse left Holland and settled in Philadelphia near the print shop of William Bradford. Within two years, Rittenhouse established the first paper mill in America near Germantown, Pennsylvania.

William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, was very proud of the Rittenhouse Mill because such facilities were new even in England. The Rittenhouse Mill was a center of papermaking in America for over one hundred years. A flood destroyed the mill in 1701, but a stronger mill was built in its place with Penn's assistance.

Early papermaking was a laborious process. First, clean cotton and linen rags had to be collected. Men called "ragpickers" went from house to house, asking for rags, which they then sold to the mills. Newspapers also ran ads requesting that people bring in their old rags, which the newspaper sold to the mills, who in turn granted a discount to the newspaper publisher for his next purchase of paper.

Three men working very hard were fortunate to produce a thousand sheets a day. Pulp was beaten using a huge trip hammer, known as a stam-

per beater, which was lifted by the mill's water wheel. Sometimes flax was used, but mostly linen rags were recycled for printing and writing paper.

Of the three major jobs in the mill, including the Coucher and the Layer, the Vatman was the real artisan. He dipped a rectangular wire screen, called a "mould," into the liquid pulp or "stuff" and lifted out a layer of fibers that would become a sheet of paper. The layer of fibers was laid between felts and then placed on a press. After the water was squeezed out, the paper was hung over ropes to dry.

The establishment of paper mills in America created political tensions with Great Britain. While the colonists wanted to manufacture their own paper and cloth, English merchants who exported these commodities saw a lucrative market about to dry up. To protect its merchants, England continued to limit these industries in America, which irritated the colonists. Some of the Stamp Acts, which further angered the colonists and helped lead to the Revolutionary War, involved a special tax on imported paper. When the Revolutionary War broke out, imports of paper and cloth were banned. ■



This house is from 1707. It is a National Landmark and the birthplace of David Rittenhouse (Historic Rittenhouse Town). It has an addition from 1713. The first papermill in America was at this site.