

The Rittenhouse Paper Mill Circa 1690 ...the Beginning in America

Early printers like Ben Franklin helped drive demand for paper mills in America, and William Rittenhouse in Philadelphia was first to accommodate that demand.

Originally written by Harvey Whitten
for *PaperAge's* 1984 Centennial Issue.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania... Benjamin Franklin is famous for so many firsts we can hardly remember who was on second. Just a few of them: Philadelphia's first paved streets and street cleaning system, its first library, hospital, college and fire company. Ben was also a scientist, politician, kite flyer, lover, diplomat, patriot and author. And, certainly not last or least, he was a printer and good customer of America's first paper mill.

A Colonial printer wasn't at all what we think of as a printer today. Back then he was a jack of all trades. Wrapped up in one person a printer, author, typographer, advertising man, magazine and newspaper publisher, editor, reporter, stationer and book-seller, and you have some idea of what an early

American printer was. He also had to be a canny purchasing agent, and Franklin certainly was that as well as a salesman. His own wealth was a good testimonial to his business skill.

Franklin didn't just sit around waiting for work to come in. He got one of his first fat contracts through sampling and direct mail. In about 1730, the official public printer was generally regarded as incompetent. Franklin set up shop and



Ben Franklin works in his brother's printing shop in Boston, about 1721.

They published the controversial New England Courant during a time of intellectual excitement and political struggle.

circulated some beautifully printed public speeches to all the public officials. Quality talks. As Franklin said, "[competition] printed an address of the House of the Governor in a course, blundering manner. We reprinted it elegantly and correctly, and sent one to every member. They were sensible of the difference...and voted us their printers for the year ensuing." Then, as now, good printers made good profits and Franklin did.

One of his most profitable ventures were the almanacs known as "Poor Richard's Almanacs." Smart promotion and advertising were always a keystone to his success. Franklin didn't invent the almanac but he's most remembered for them. In those days, most newspapers were printed weekly.

Calendars were very rare. Just to know what day it was you needed an almanac. It also contained holidays, tides, the length of days, and guesses at the weather.

Shock value gave Poor Richard's Almanacs sales appeal. Controversy helped boost circulation, as well as pithy advertising copy. Who could resist an almanac containing, in Franklin's words, "Planet Motions and Aspects, Weather, etc.,

besides many pleasant Witty Verses, Jests and Sayings, Author's Motive of Writing, Moon No Cuckhold, Bachelor's Folly, Game for Kisses, Katherine's Love, Conjugal Debate and Breakfast Bed, all 3s6d per dozen."

Of course all this printing required paper, and Philadelphia is also the home of America's first paper mill. This was built by a branch of the Wissahickon Creek in 1690, only two years after England built its first paper mill and forty years before New England got around to building one.

William Rittenhouse was the famous Philadelphian who was a partner in the operation. The mill was washed away in 1701, but put right back the next year. Later, four more mills were built in the same area. The Rittenhouse mill is still on view in Fairmount Park.

The last of the mills in operation was as late as the late 1800's. During this period papermaking went through quite a revolution. Earlier, pulp was made from rags, many of them shipped from Europe. A popular poem of the times is as modern as today with its theme of recycling:

*"So that the flax which first springs from the land,
First Flax, then yarn...*

*To weave the same which they took pains to spin.
Also when on our backs it is well worn,
Some of the same remains ragged and torn;
Then of the Rags the Paper is made,
Which in process of time doth waste and fade;
So what comes from the earth, appeareth plain,
The same in Time, returneth to earth again."*

William Rittenhouse was a familiar Philadelphia character, buying up old rags wherever he could. He was a bright advertising man, too. A contemporary ad noted, "If the necessary stock is denied paper mills, young maids must languish in vain for tender epistles from their respective swains. Bachelors may be reduced to the necessity of personal attendance on the fair." It's paper that makes the world still go round, in many ways.

Little did William Rittenhouse know that all the beautiful trees arching around his first mills would later provide a cheaper material for paper. Nor did he know that the average American family would discard in one day as much paper as his entire mill could produce in one day.

William Rittenhouse died two years before Franklin was born, so obviously they didn't know each other. But Ben was a close friend of astronomer David Rittenhouse, William's grandson. The Rittenhouses and Franklin were all men of good spirits. If William and Franklin had met, an imaginary conversation might have started off like this: "Hi Bill, what's new in the paper industry today?"

"Glad to see you, Ben. Got a new load of fine quality rag bond just made from some linen pants, a few blouses, some shirts and a few cloth bags thrown in for good measure. Stop on out to the mill and I'll make you a special price."

Franklin was a good customer of the mill, even though William wasn't around to handle the account.

Rittenhouse evidently didn't make as much money from paper as Franklin did from printing, but then Rittenhouse didn't have the rich government contracts that Franklin did. But government printing was not all that Franklin did. He also printed many religious works, including those of the Quakers. Franklin believed in freedom of the press long before the Bill of Rights was written. One of his most stirring comments, "Without freedom of thought, there can be no such thing as wisdom," he wrote. "And there can be no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech. This is the right of every man as far as he does not hurt or control the rights of another."

Although Franklin's thoughts are well over 200 years old today, they certainly deserve to be dusted off. Where would printing and the paper industry be if Americans didn't enjoy the right to print and read what they want. ■

Harvey Whitten was Manager, Marketing Communications for E.F. Houghton & Co. in Philadelphia, PA.