



"A Century of Fine Cloth, 1831-1931" 1102

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Summary Information

Repository:	Manuscripts and Archives
Creator:	Eckman, Jeannette, 1882-1972
Title:	"A Century of Fine Cloth, 1831-1931"
ID:	1102
Date:	1931
Physical Description:	1 item(s)
Language of the Material:	English .
Abstract:	Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company began operation in 1831 as a cotton cloth manufacturer in Rockford, Delaware. After the Civil War, the company concentrated on finishing cotton cloth. "A Century of Fine Cloth, 1831-1931" is a typescript history of the first 100 years of the company, with emphasis on the personal life of the company's founder, Joseph Bancroft (1803-1874), and his immediate successors.

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Historical Note

Joseph Bancroft (1803-1874) began manufacturing cotton cloth at a small mill in Rockford, Delaware, just north of Wilmington, on March 25, 1831. The mill was built to take advantage of the Brandywine River's water power, and Bancroft adopted the traditional British spinning and weaving technology for use in his operation. The firm expanded steadily during the 1830s and 1840s as it began to produce cotton for both the Philadelphia and New York markets. In the late 1840s, Joseph Bancroft brought his two sons, William Bancroft (1825-1928) and Samuel Bancroft (1840-1915), into the business, assuring that the company would remain a family enterprise. During the Civil War, when the American market was largely closed to English imports, the Bancroft firm, like most other U.S. textile companies, prospered. After the war, the company developed a new bleaching process and began to concentrate on finishing cotton cloth. The firm was incorporated as the Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company on October 1, 1889.

The company purchased the Kentmere Mills adjoining their property on the east in 1895 and concentrated manufacturing there, while the old Rockford property was devoted to bleaching, dyeing, and finishing. In 1910, the Bancrofts purchased a third plant at Reading, Pennsylvania, and incorporated the Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company of Pennsylvania on May 28, 1911.

Subsequently, all manufacture was concentrated at Reading, with the Wilmington facilities devoted to bleaching, dyeing, and finishing. In the spring of 1925, the Bancrofts purchased a controlling interest in the Eddystone Manufacturing Company, another cotton manufacturer, and secured 100% control in 1929. The Eddystone Plant was converted entirely to the printing of cotton and linens, and a rayon finishing plant was installed there in 1930.

As new synthetic yarns came into use, Bancroft expanded into those fields. In 1936, it established its Research Department at Wilmington under Dr. Arnold L. Lippert (1910-2004). Its first success was trademarked as "Everglaze," originally the production of a durable finish on glazed chintz, but later used to create permanent-press fabrics. Bancroft began a program of licensing its patents and trademarks in 1938. In 1953, it purchased the rights to a process for crimping yarn from Alexander Smith, Inc. and successfully applied it to nylon to create "Ban-Lon," which became popular for outerwear, swimsuits, sweaters, and hose. "Ban-Lon" and "Everglaze" were the mainstays of the company in its later years.

Around 1947, Bancroft acquired two additional companies, Wm. Simpson, Sons & Co., a converter, and Albert D. Smith & Company, Inc., which had been Bancroft's sales agent for book cloth, window shade cloth, and industrial fabrics, and which they also manufactured on their own account. However, Bancroft remained primarily a finishing company, and as such, found it harder to compete with large, vertically integrated textile companies. It liquidated its manufacturing operations at Reading in 1957.

By 1960, the Research Department, which handled both research and licensing of products and trademarks developed by Bancroft, was the only viable part of the business. The company considered changing the name of the parent firm to Joseph Bancroft & Sons Research Company and spinning off the manufacturing units to a new subsidiary for a tax loss. When this proved too risky, the entire business was sold, and Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Indian Head Mills, Inc., of Massachusetts in September 1961. With continued erosion of the Northeastern textile industry, the plant became increasingly unprofitable. Indian Head Mills, Inc. became a conglomerate called Indian Head Inc. in 1966, and the finishing plant was put up for sale in 1972. It was purchased by the Wilmington Finishing Company, composed mostly of Bancroft department heads, on June 4, 1973. Indian Head Inc. sold the Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company, which by now was reduced to the licensing operation, to Beaunit Corporation in February 1975. Finishing at the Rockford site ended in 1981, and the plant was redeveloped as a condominium complex.

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Biographical Note

Jeannette Eckman (1882-1972) was a historian, author, and lifelong Wilmington, Delaware resident. She was the daughter of Aument and Margaret Eckman. In 1905, Eckman graduated from Wellesley College, after which she taught German at Wilmington High School until World War I. She was active in Delaware political work and became secretary to T. Coleman du Pont (1863-1930) and took up the banner of women's suffrage.

In 1938, Eckman was presented with an honorary award by the Queen of the Netherlands for her part in the 300-year anniversary celebration of the Dutch settlement of New Castle. In 1941, she worked as the director for the Work Projects Administration in Wilmington. During her tenure, the project compiled a book on the Delaware government.

In 1950, she was appointed director and historian of the New Castle Tercentenary Celebration. After twenty years of extensive work and research, Eckman published "Crane Hook on the Delaware, 1667-1669" in 1957. The book marks the years when Crane Hook Church served a "parish" from New Castle to Tincum, Pennsylvania.

Eckman was a charter member of the Delaware Swedish Colonial Society.

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Scope and Contents

"A Century of Fine Cloth, 1831-1931" by Jeannette Eckman (1882-1972) is a 154-page typescript history of the Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company, with emphasis on the personal life of the firm's founder, Joseph Bancroft (1803-1874), and that of his immediate successors. It was prepared as a centennial history but was not published as intended because of the Depression.

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Publication Statement

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Revision Description

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Access Restrictions

No restrictions on access; this collection is open for research.

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Related Materials

Related Materials

Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company records (Accession 736), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company memoranda books (Accession 1400), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

Joseph Bancroft & Sons Company miscellany (Accession 1440), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

Bancroft family and company miscellany (Accession 1115), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

Harvey Bounds reports on Joseph Bancroft & Sons and Eddystone Manufacturing Company (Accession 0494), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Textile industry
- Textile factories
- Women authors, American
- Cotton manufacture
- Joseph Bancroft & Sons Co