

# This Week in Saratoga County History

## The Death of George West

Submitted by Timothy Starr September 24, 2020

*Tim was born in Connecticut but moved with his family to Hebron, (Washington County) New York where he graduated from Granville High School. During his senior year he wrote his first book, a novel called "The Meatloaf Incident and Other Adventures" that is based on his experiences growing up in a small town. After earning an MBA he went to work in the nonprofit field, holding positions in accounting and senior management.*

*In 1997 he moved to the Town of Milton and from 2003 to 2013 served as the Treasurer of the Saratoga County Historical Society (Brookside) Board of Trustees, but in 2014 reluctantly moved to Glenville to be closer to work. He has written 18 books, some self-published and others published by Arcadia Press, which include histories of local industries, railroads, and inventions. He has also published a biography of George West with help from one of West's descendants, Douglass "Tim" Mabee of Saratoga Springs.*



*West family photograph including (seated) Louisa, Florence, and George; (standing) Walter, George Jr. and his wife Emily. The identity of the baby is not known.*

Perhaps the most famous and successful citizen in the history of Ballston Spa passed away 119 years ago this week. Here on this anniversary of the death of George West, we look back at his life and the legacy he left behind.

West was born in the English village of Kentisbeare on March 2, 1822. He was the sixth of nine children born to George Sr. and his wife Jane. As soon as he was old enough, West followed in his father's footsteps and began working at a local paper mill.

After marrying his life-long partner Louisa and learning much about the paper making trade, West moved his young family to America in 1849 to seek a better life. He spent time in New Jersey and Massachusetts managing several paper mills before moving to the town of Milton in 1861. There he obtained a management position at the Pioneer Paper Mill in West Milton. His employer Coe Buchanan was also a partner in an idle mill in nearby Rock City Falls called the Empire. When Buchanan's partner Harlow Kilmer was killed in a tragic machinery accident, Buchanan offered West the chance to purchase the mill. After some consideration, West took possession of it the following year.

At the time, cotton shortages stemming from the Civil War made producing paper from cotton rags expensive. Paper mill owners and inventors were scrambling to find alternate methods of manufacturing paper. West's neighbor Chauncey Kilmer perfected a method which used rye straw that could be used for newsprint paper. However, West decided to use manila hemp imported from the Philippines to produce manila paper.

West also decided that rather than limit his product line to various grades of manila paper, he would use some of it to create paper bags. Grocers' and millers' bags were in short supply due to the ongoing cotton shortage. If a paper bag could be produced from his manila paper, West reasoned, he would be able to sell them at a much lower price than any other bag manufacturer in the country.

At first West's bags were made by hand at the Union Store in Ballston Spa, but demand soon far outpaced his ability to supply them. He therefore erected a bag factory next door to the Empire Mill and in 1866 built a second paper mill next door, which he named the Excelsior.

By 1875 West's mills were manufacturing five and a half tons of manila paper per day. Half of this output was sent to his bag factory, while the other half was sent in equal parts to Chicago and St. Louis for his business partners to use in manufacturing their own bags. Eight teams of horses were kept busy delivering raw materials to the mills and finished paper from Rock City Falls to the railroad freight station in Ballston Spa five miles away. Total sales approached \$65,000 per month, equivalent to \$1.2 million today.

For about ten years, Rock City Falls could lay claim to the largest manila paper bag operation in the world. West added to his paper empire by purchasing two mills in Middle Grove, Pioneer Mill in West Milton, and Eagle Mill near Factory Village. In 1875 he completed his largest acquisition: the former Jonas Hovey estate in Ballston Spa, consisting of several mills, a mansion, tenement houses, and a large tract of land.

A year later West refitted one of the former Hovey mills into a modern bag factory and moved all bag-making operations out of Rock City Falls. His Ballston Spa mills, consisting

of the Union, Glen, and Island mills, became the center of his operations, although six other paper mills along the Kayaderosseras Creek continued to churn out tons of manila paper as well.

West became ill in 1898, just as paper bag factories around the country were being consolidated into giant corporations. Unable to run his huge operation single-handedly like he did for so many years, he sold his mills to the Union Bag and Paper Company.

In January 1901 his wife of 56 years passed away. Already ill from Bright's disease, West passed away just months later on September 28, leaving behind a fortune that would be valued at \$75 million in today's dollars.

Today large portions of the Empire Mill still stand in Rock City Falls, along with the stone foundations of the Excelsior Mill and his 23 room mansion that now serves as a bed and breakfast. His Union mill and bag factory building complex on Prospect Street in Ballston Spa survives as mixed-use buildings, with the "Geo. West" name still etched in the stonework for all to see.