

# This Week in Saratoga County History

## The Unknown “King” of Ballston’s Mills

Submitted by Timothy Starr January 3, 2024

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*Hovey Mansion – Ballston Spa Brookside Museum*

Jonas Hovey had only about a decade to make his mark as a manufacturing powerhouse in Ballston Spa before he died, but he was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the Paper Bag King, George West.

Hovey was born September 16, 1809, in Sutton, Massachusetts. Early in life he became one of the wealthiest cotton manufacturers in the city. Seeking an area for greater expansion possibilities, he relocated to Ballston Spa with his wife in 1858.

For several years, Hovey was busy acquiring property around the Blue Mill Dam that once existed across Kayaderosseras Creek. In 1861 he purchased all of the mill properties on the northeast side of town between Milton Avenue and Mechanic Street, which included three cotton mills.

He also purchased land from an investment group headed by Jonathan Beach and Harvey Chapman, which included the future Bag Factory and the Union Mill buildings. This purchase included land and water power west of Milton Avenue, north of Gordon Creek, and west of the Kayaderosseras.

By 1864 Hovey’s enterprises were in full swing. He was erecting a new tower on one of the cotton mills which would contain a clock and bell, and the factory was being enlarged with the addition of another story.

He was also in the process of building his 6,500 square foot mansion on the corner of Milton Avenue and Prospect Street at a reported cost of \$70,000 (about \$1.6 million in today's money). The *Troy Times* wrote in 1865 that the new residence "is nearing completion and will be unsurpassed by any similar structure in the county of Saratoga. It will be a model of architectural taste and elegance." This stately residence would later be the home of George West and Frederick Bischoff., owner of the Bischoff Chocolate Factory, before being demolished in 1955.

In 1868 the newly-formed J. A. Hovey Hook and Ladder No. 1 fire department on Bath Street was named after him. Years later the name was changed to the Matt Lee Hook and Ladder Company, which still serves Ballston Spa today. Hovey erected some 40 tenement houses for his workers to live in at reduced rates from what they were paying at the local hotels and boarding houses.

By the time he completed his expansion projects around the village, Hovey owned three cotton factories, two woolen factories, the tenement houses, the mansion, and one of the largest tracts of land in Ballston. In fact, he owned every factory in the village with the exception of the oil-cloth factory on Bath Street. Because cotton factories were labor-intensive, Hovey employed more people than any other business owner in Ballston's history until the Haight tannery and George West surpassed his workforce size in the late 1880s.

Hovey's manufacturing empire was to be short lived. His business affairs forced him to travel a great deal, especially to New York City. His health began to suffer as the stress from traveling and mounting legal troubles took their toll. He entered an infirmary in Canandaigua and died there in 1875. His obituary stated, "poor health and an overworked mind and body combined to dethrone his reason," His wife Fidelia inherited the home and his several mills. With no children, she moved back to Massachusetts where she is buried alongside her husband.

For over a year the Hovey Mills sat idle. No one was willing to take the risk of assuming control of several cotton factories when similar mills were closing around the country. However, the availability of this property came at an opportune time for George West. West owned several factories in villages surrounding Ballston Spa and his paper products were in high demand. At the nominal price of \$75,000 he purchased the entire Hovey estate, one-third of the stated value of his property just five years earlier. West acquired four mills, the Hovey residence and 30 tenement houses in the transaction.

Although Jonas Hovey does not receive as much credit as other businessmen in Ballston's history, he left his mark during his short time in Ballston Spa by gathering a substantial number of mills under his ownership, paving the way for George West to purchase the entire property and expand into the largest industry in Saratoga County.