

Industries

Mills

The town of Falmouth was established in 1728 on the falls of the Rappahannock River. In the 18th century moving goods overland was extremely difficult due to the lack of roads and the extremely poor condition of those that existed; it was far easier to move goods and people by water. Consequently, early 18th century towns were often established as far upstream as a boat could navigate, thus enabling inland planters to more easily carry their products to ships and markets.

The centerpiece of Falmouth was its wharf. Although not visible today, its massive stone bulk remains beneath the sand just downstream from the Moncure Conway house on River Road. The wharf was constructed perpendicular to the shoreline and was intentionally made low enough to allow water from the frequent floods to pass over it.

While the initial purpose of Falmouth was as a shipping point, men quickly recognized the economic potential from the ceaseless supply of water power there. While Francis Thornton had built a grist (flour) mill on the opposite side in the early 1700s, James Hunter was the first to harness the river's power on the Stafford side. His iron works and manufacturing facility made an enormous range of domestic goods and military supplies. Most of Falmouth's mills were built after the Revolution and utilized water from Falls Run rather than from the flood-prone Rappahannock.

After the Revolution, Virginia suffered from a serious economic depression; however, Europe's Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815) had destroyed that area's ability to feed itself and European countries looked to America for a source of flour. Recognizing the promising market, industrialists began building very large mills for grinding wheat into flour. Called merchant mills, these facilities purchased wheat by the ton and ground it for export and international sale. Within a very short time, American flour was recognized as the finest in the world. Mill owners couldn't build mills fast enough to meet the ever-growing demand for their product. A canal was built in Falmouth for the purpose of powering these massive flour mills. Some of the industrialists involved with this venture included John Richards (1734-1785), William Richards (1765-after 1815) who was John Richards' son, Robert Dunbar (c.1745-1831), Joseph B. Ficklen (1800-1874), Montgomery Slaughter (1818-1897), James Vass (c.1769-1837), William Brooke, Jr., and William C. Beale (1791-1850). These men assumed enormous debts to finance the construction of their mills; at one point, there were five merchant mills in Falmouth. Falmouth was not alone in this building surge; merchant mills were being constructed anywhere there was enough water power to run them.

In the midst of this building frenzy, American-English relations deteriorated. English warships began firing on and boarding American ships. Angered by these actions, President Thomas Jefferson convinced Congress to implement an embargo halting all shipping of goods from America to Europe. For the industrialists who hadn't yet had

time to pay off their mortgaged mills, this was an economic disaster. The embargo was enacted in 1807. Almost immediately, it resulted in bankruptcies, not only for the mill owners, but for ship owners, as well. Finally recognizing the magnitude of the disaster, Congress repealed the embargo in 1809. Unfortunately, it was too late for many of the mill owners who, by then, had lost their properties.

The flour industry never recovered its pre-embargo vitality, but the buildings remained and another group of industrialists arrived in Falmouth to take advantage of new technology and a new market—textiles. The Industrial Revolution had originated in the northern states but, once again, Falmouth's water power enabled men to utilize that technology here. The old flour mills were converted to textile production, primarily the manufacturing of various types of cotton cloth. The primary men involved with this venture were Duff Green (1792-1854), Walker P. Conway (1805-1884), and Joseph B. Ficklen (1800-1874).

The peak years for textile production in Falmouth were 1821 through 1853. By far, Duff Green was the greatest local player in this industry. Green came to Falmouth from Culpeper County. He was involved in a number of industrial ventures including canals and railroads in western Virginia, and steamships on the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay. He established the Falmouth Manufacturing Company, Stafford's first company controlled by stock holders. Green purchased cotton from all states in which it was grown and sold his products up and down the eastern seaboard and as far west as California. As the railroads spread across America, so did Green's textiles.

Because of the unpredictable nature of water power, Green embraced steam technology and built the Elm Factory. Located near the base of the present Falmouth Bridge, Elm provided employment for many local men and women. Duff also owned a store and hotel in Falmouth. After his death in 1854, his son, Duff Green, Jr. (c.1833-c.1885), continued to operate the factory. When the Civil War erupted, Green began making fabric for the Confederate service. Not until Union forces moved into Falmouth in 1862 did his manufacturing cease. After the war, Elm Factory was leased to a northern industrialist who promised to restore and reopen it. It operated sporadically for a couple of years but was then closed and abandoned.

Silting in the river, which had always been a problem for a town built so far upstream, became insurmountable. Boats could no longer pick up or deliver goods to the Falmouth wharf and the little town quietly faded into little more than a residential community.

Sources:

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Virginia Legislative Petitions:

"Duff Green," Jan. 7, 1836, Reel 236, Box 298, Folder 92, Library of Virginia.

“Duff Green,” Jan. 17, 1848, Reel 188, Box 239, Folder 66, Library of Virginia.
“Falmouth Merchants,” Dec. 8, 1835, Reel 188, Box 239, Folder 47, Library of Virginia.
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This picture of Tackett’s Mill was taken in 1940. It used to be standing in western Stafford. It was removed from this site and placed in Prince William County in Lake Ridge, Virginia. A shopping development is built around it. .

