

# Bethlehem Moment: A Remnant of Bethlehem's Silk Industry

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Fun Stuff October 16, 2019

 Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem Moments 

Bethlehem Moment 13

City Council

October 15, 2019

Barbara Diamond

425 Center St.

research by Stasia Brown Pallrand

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## Bethlehem Moment: 1837

Standing just across the street from here is a building with an interesting story to tell about the early industrial history of Bethlehem. This modest, single-story white house at 26 W. Church Street was once a cacoonery<sup>[1]</sup> where silk worms were tended and their mile-long filaments were reeled to produce the precious fabric that was all the rage in the US and Europe.

The silk industry in Bethlehem was established early in our history; there are references to a cacoonery overseen by Rev. Philip Bader in the Brethren's House as early as 1752. Benjamin Franklin was early and influential promoter of the cultivation and production of silk.



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He saw economic opportunity for our young country in response to the wild demand for silk in Europe, the need for the colonies to develop domestic industries, and the favorable conditions he found in colonial America for growing white mulberry trees, the silk worm's essential food. In fact, the trees were so wild and plentiful that the name given by Delaware Indians, Nolamattink, to the area near present day Nazareth means "where the silk worm spins," an apparent reference to the abundant trees and a later cacoonery operated by Bader.

The revolutionary war interrupted the development of the industry and it sputtered along early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century before collapsing in the late 1840s. It was a cottage industry in early America, suited to the "weak hands" of women and girls by the men of the day who believed that it could be done during their leisure time to supplement family income. In fact, the work was intense, laborious, and required a high level of skill. Women were expected to master the complex art of raising silkworms: maintaining the cocoons between 50 and 75 degrees until ready to hatch; feeding them multiple times during the day on a precise variable schedule; unreeling the mile-long filaments; braiding multiple filaments together to form strands for weaving; dying the cloth; fashioning it into garments and cultivating mulberry trees.

This underestimation by Franklin and other promoters of the industry of how much time women of the day had to devote to this enterprise accounts in part for its failure as a cottage industry to produce the quality and quantity of silk they envisioned. Other factors that led to the industry's pre-civil war demise included a nationwide bubble in mulberry trees created by speculators and fraudsters and a mulberry blight. The little house at 26 W. Church Street is of this period, recorded in a 1970 report on historic structures in Bethlehem as having been built in 1826 and operating as a cacoonery in 1837.

The silk industry revived after the Civil War and was centered in Paterson, NJ, where industrial mills were able to produce large quantities of fabric and other silk products (again largely employing women and children as labor). As demand grew, the owners in Paterson searched for areas with a large supply of low-cost labor where they could establish more mills. Bethlehem and surrounding areas fit the bill with its large numbers of immigrants working in the steel and coal industry

whose wives and children could be employed in the factories.

“The first silk mill in the Lehigh Valley opened in 1881; by 1900 there were twenty three silk mills in the Lehigh Valley, and Pennsylvania was second only to New Jersey in silk production. The industry in Pennsylvania and the US peaked in the late 1920s, undone by labor unrest, competition from synthetic fabrics and the Great Depression. In the decades after WWII, international competition from low-wage countries eliminated most of the textile employment in the Lehigh Valley. In 100 years the same economic factor – low-wage labor – that brought the industry to the Lehigh Valley in the 1880s led to its demise.”[2]

*I would like to acknowledge the extensive research conducted by Stasia Brown Pallrand for this Bethlehem Moment.*

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[1] Original spelling.

[2] Historical Markers: Dery Silk Mill. Explore PA History. com