Lawrence M. Russo II

New Jersey's Oldest FELT MILL

Hidden in plain sight in Clark Township are reminders of the Garden State's rich industial heritage if you know where to look...

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A few small offices and a warehouse, on the corner of Valley Road (County Road 608) and Walnut Avenue in Clark, NJ, are all that remain of the Essex Felt Mill, the oldest industry of its kind in the entire state of New Jersey.

The property that would become the Bloodgood Felt Mill was occupied by a gristmill, grinding grains into flour and spinning wool into fabric for the Continental Army in the 1770s. Mr. Vreeland owned the gristmill and, at that time, lent his name to the pond nearby and the road, then called Vreeland's Pond Road, now called Valley Road.

A man named Phillip Trussler bought part of the mill in the 1830s and began using it to bleach and print calico cloth. In 1845, a fire consumed and destroyed most of the mill, leaving Trussler penniless. The value of the property began to plummet.

In 1847, when the property became near worthless, William E. Bloodgood, of the New York Bloodgoods, bought the property. He immediately repurposed the factory for the production of felt goods. It became the only factory of its kind in New Jersey, making fine linens and felts, used for hats and gloves. The Bloodgood family became incredibly important in the fledgling township of Clark, formed from the Fifth Ward of Rahway in 1864. William E. Bloodgood served as the second and fourth mayor of Clark.

The Bloodgoods ran a felt distribution and production company out of New York City and had factories in Connecticut and New York, however, New Jersey proved to be greener pastures for manufacturing. It was far cheaper to produce and transport goods between New Jersey and New York City than anywhere else, making this small factory, in a seemingly insignificant, newly formed town, one of the most important in the tristate a rea.

In 1869, on Independence Day, a fire consumed and destroyed the main plant but it was quickly rebuilt. After this, business boomed and William E. Bloodgood brought in a partner, William S. Taylor, and began handing the reins over to his son, William, Jr. The factory took its new name,

What Is FELT?

Felt is a textile produced by matting, condensing, and pressing fibres together. Felt can be made of natural fibres such as wool or synthetic fibres such as acrylic. While some types of felt are very soft, some are tough enough to form construction materials. Felt can vary in terms of fibre content, colour, size, thickness, density and more factors depending on the use of the felt.

Feltmaking is an ancient process. Sumerian legend claims the secret of feltmaking was discovered by Urnamman of Lagash. The story of Saint Clement and Saint Christopher claim that while fleeing from persecution, the men packed their sandals with wool to prevent blisters. At the end of their journey, the movement and sweat had turned the wool into felt socks!

In the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries, felt was a popular material for men's hats.

the Taylor & Bloodgood Felt Mill, from the new management. The two lived in separate houses on what is now Parkway Drive in Clark.

The most information we have about any one point in the mill's history comes from "History of Union and Middlesex Counties, New Jersey," published in 1882. From it, we can catch a small glimpse at what the factory and property were like over 100 years ago. The Essex Felt Mill (its name was changed in 1876) stood on the bank of the Rahway River over several acres. On the high ground, above the owners' and workers' homes, stood the company store, the only store in Clark until 1910. These workers produced at least two million yards of felt a year and took home a combined seventy-five thousand dollars per year, at the very least. In today's money, that's almost two-million dollars.

Management passed from Bloodgood and Taylor to an Englishman named Benjamin King, Sr. In the 1890s, he became one of the most notable superintendents of the factory and served on the Clark Township Committee for 22 years. Then, in 1907, American Felt Co. purchased the factory and, during the Great War, produced uniforms for our doughboys in Europe.

Here the waters of history turn muddy. Sometime between the First World War and the 1960s, Valley Road was widened, resulting in the destruction of many of the old company homes from the days of William S. Bloodgood. In the 1950s, the National Chair Co. purchased the factory and repurposed it for the production of home furniture. The prowess and power of the factory faded as the years wore on and, in 1958, a fire burned it to the ground. It was rebuilt, but the neighboring Hubert Distributing Company burned down in 1959.

Finally, on April 28, 1963, the factory drew its last breath and erupted into flames, causing "$650,000 worth of damage to it and the Electro-Metals Co., Inc." It took five fire departments (Clark, Cranford, Garwood, Westfield, and Winfield) to put out the blaze but by then the damage was done. The property is now occupied by a few private businesses and a warehouse. Only one of the commercial buildings remaining is from the original factory.

The factory and its long history have left their mark on Clark, the Bloodgood Pond and Dam—what used to be Vreeland's Pond—are popular fishing and recreation sites. If you are ever in the area, check it out. Have a picnic, go fishing, and enjoy this little piece of our state's legacy.

SIXTEEN FAMILIES POISONED.—On Friday night an epidemic, resembling colic, excited great alarm among the employees of Taylor, Bloodgood & Co's felt factory, near Rahway, N. J. Several persons who were employed in the factory at night were confined to their beds on Saturday, and work in the mill was partially suspended. The patients were suddenly taken with cramps in the bowels and lower extremities, with very severe vomiting. The symptoms in each case were alike, and the cause of the attack was traced to the cheese sold by Coles & Co., more than twenty families having had portions of it on their supper tables. In all about sixteen families are known to have been poisoned, but up to noon on Saturday none of the cases had terminated fatally. The physicians think that the cheese was pressed in a copper press, and that the action of the acid in the cheese upon the copper poisoned the cheese and produced the serious results. On Saturday a few of the hands were able to go to work.

TOP: The National Chair company fire of 1963 destroyed what had been one of the Taylor & Bloodgood felt mill buildings. It was said to have been Clark Township's first ever four-alarm fire.

Brian P. Toal
Images of America: Clark. Portsmouth: Arcadia, 2003.

LEFT: Taylor, Bloodgood & Co. featured in this odd story about food poisoning from the Wednesday, November 24, 1875 edition of the *Examiner* newspaper from Frederick, Maryland!

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<u>TOP:</u> Two views of a surviving building from the felt mill as it appears today.

<u>LEFT:</u> The general store today.

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TOP: **The main family homestead today.**

LEFT: **The main factory as it looks today.**

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