Cheney Brothers, the New York Connection

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Wadsworth Atheneum

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The Cheney Brothers turned a failed venture in sericulture into a multi-million dollar silk empire only to see it and the American textile industry decline into near oblivion one hundred years later. Because of time and space limitations this paper is limited to Cheney Brothers’ activities in New York City which are, but a fraction, of a much larger story.

Brothers and beginnings

Like many other enterprising Americans in the 1830s, brothers Charles (1803-1874), Ward (1813-1876), Rush (1815-1882), and Frank (1817-1904), Cheney became engaged in the time consuming, difficult business of raising silk worms until they discovered that speculation on the morus morticaulis, the white mulberry tree upon which the worms fed, might be far more profitable. As with all high profit operations the tree business was a high-risk venture, throwing many investors including the Cheney brothers, into bankruptcy.

Failure however, was not part of Cheney vocabulary. In 1838, with a friend from New York, Edwin H. Arnold, they built a water power mill on the Hop Brook in Manchester Connecticut with financing supplied by their successful artist brothers, Seth (1810-1856) and John Cheney (1801-1885). The Mt. Nebo Silk Manufacturing Company hired young women to unravel cocoons to produce silk sewing thread that Ward took to Philadelphia to sell under the name “Fratelli Chinacci,” since all fine sewing thread at that time came from Italy. Uneven and imperfect, their thread was not suitable for the newly invented sewing machine until the family tinker, Frank, perfected a machine for winding and twisting a double-strand of uniform silk in 1847.
In 1854 the brothers incorporated as Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company with $400,000 in capital stock. Congenial Ward became their first president. Charles, discouraged but not defeated, after the failure of his mulberry tree venture and death of his wife and daughters returned to Manchester to become secretary/treasurer. Frank, ever the inventor developed a method to make spun silk from the tangled mass of pierced and unraveled cocoons. Rush, ran the machine shop and Ralph (1806-1897) “who could be difficult,” was relegated to the farm. Once again, John and Seth supplied funds to see the fledgling operation off to a successful start.

Cheney Brothers’ first big profits were generated by their number four spun-silk grosgrain coveted by Civil War widows who needed inexpensive black silk. During the 1870s, high tariffs, skilled labor, better factories, improved machinery, and constant innovation led to an era of tremendous growth. As the Cheney factory grew so did South Manchester, Connecticut. The wave of immigrant textile workers recruited from Northern Europe found a pleasant town with recreational and entertainment facilities in Cheney Hall, tenant houses rented to employees at low rates, decent boarding houses, a fine school and ample opportunity for religious worship. A two-mile long Cheney railroad linked South Manchester to the main line in North Manchester with connections to Hartford and New York City where Cheney Brothers maintained an office/showroom at 477 Broome Street.

In 1908 Cheney Hall was filled with the products from Cheney mills. The management wanted its thousands of employees devoting their labors to specific production, to comprehend the entire scope of the Cheney Brothers operation by an exhibition comprising every kind of fabric manufactured by the plant. There were fine spun silk yarns, trams, and organzines for manufacturer's use, as well as a remarkable range of products for consumers including pongees, florentines, velvets, plushes, ribbons, handkerchiefs, mufflers, and flags. A revolving fountain display featured shower proof foulards, Cheney's revolutionary non-spotting dress silk. An 18th century furnishing fabric made for Marie Antoinette's hideaway "The Petit Trianon" and Cheney Brothers' reproduction of the same textile were displayed side by side.
By this time Cheney Brothers had become Connecticut's largest silk manufacturer with salesrooms in New York, Boston and Chicago. In Dec. 1909 they moved their New York showroom uptown to 4th Avenue and 18th Street. Knight Dexter Cheney Jr., "reserved and taciturn, quaintly humorous with manners and bearing of an aristocrat", was placed in charge of the New York office. When he died the following year at the age of 40 his brother Clifford D. Cheney took his position.

Like many other textile manufacturers Cheney Brothers purchased designs directly from Europe, Paris in particular. They sampled freely from and eventually purchased the "Holzach Collection", a group of over two hundred 18th century fabric samples made on European handlooms. In addition Mise en carte and gauche patterns from Ch. Paillard, Ateliers Ruepp & de Rose, and Paul Dupont Dessins were bought and are today preserved in the American Silk Mills Corp., Cheney Brothers Archive. In 1914, while lobbying for design registration Horace Cheney asserted: "We bring out every year in the neighborhood of 500 designs. These cost us roughly $20,000 a year buying the designs; $30,000 for engraving and $6,000-7,000 to procure the cards for weaving which is only the initial expense of preparing a design so it can be shown."
Conflict and collaboration

American silk products had reached the 250 million-dollar mark when WWI interrupted the flow of European design. M.D.C Crawford, of Fairchild Publications, had good reason to worry that the aesthetic and artistic sides of the textile industry had not kept pace with technical and mechanical progress. He encouraged American designers to use American museum collections for inspiration and Cheney Brothers readily embraced. Extant furnishing fabrics prove that they used the historic textile collections of Cooper Union and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Numerous photographs in the American Silk Journal document their involvement in exhibitions staged by the industrial arts division of the latter. In 1926 the collaboration of Cheney Brothers and the Metropolitan produced a book, The Romance of Design with an introduction by Richard F. Bach of the industrial arts division of the Metropolitan, and co-authored by Garnet Warren and Horace B. Cheney. Although the book pretended to be a text on textile history, it was actually an attractive and informative advertising vehicle for Cheney Brothers furnishing fabrics.

After the war France fought to regain the silk markets lost to enterprising Americans. The American silk industry retaliated with gigantic International Silk Exhibitions held in Grand Central Palace, New York City in 1921 and 1923. The American Silk Journal wrote it up as "The Cheney Brothers portion of the exhibit extended the entire Lexington Avenue front of Grand Central Palace. At the 1923 silk expo Horace Cheney awarded a scholarship to Hazel Burnham Slaughter. It was, according to a Cheney Brothers press release to "take her to Egypt to study Egyptian art for American fashions and silk designs. It is the belief of Mr. Cheney that the Egyptian excavations (at the newly discovered tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen) will give inspiration to American styles and decorations." Happily, Miss Slaughter apparently made a wrong turn and produced a batik design The Cafe de Paris at Midnight, because the textile industry was left with a glut of Egyptian prints on hand, when sales were dampened by the death of Lord Carnarvon. For the silk industry it was truly the "curse of the Pharaohs".
Even before the war was over Cheney Brothers re-established their French connection in the person of Henri Creange, a naturalized American citizen hired to take charge of Cheney Brothers art policies in the spring of 1918. Instituting an aggressive advertising blitz to replace Cheney Brothers ultra conservative style he succeeded in making "Cheney silk" a household name. To combat the ever-growing mass-market clothing trade Cheney Brothers advertisements in fashion journals enticed readers with new Cheney silks and paper patterns to construct the garments featured. From 215 Fourth Avenue, The Cheney Style Service circulated a newsletter describing the latest Paris fashions and the perfect Cheney silk for making them up. Croquis de la Mode Nouvelle, arrived twice a year from Paris containing a series of 12 hand colored drawings of original French dress designs made up in Cheney silk. The Fabric Guides, issued to coincide with the Spring/Fall lines contained silk swatches and two corresponding high-fashion croquis.
Bulls and Bears

In June 1924, The American Silk Journal announced "The Boundary line of the wholesale silk district will shortly be extended to 34th and Madison, the old brownstones on the southeast corner will be torn down and a large office building erected on the site. The new structure will cost around 6 million." The entrance for the Madison Belmont building was (and still is) on 34th Street with Cheney Brothers around the corner at 181 Madison Avenue. There they would occupy four floors on which they had a lease covering a term of 21 year at an aggregate rental of $2,500,000. To finance this new expansive, and expensive, mode in the spring of 1925 Cheney Brothers increased their capitalization to 25 million dollars with an issue of 5% serial gold bonds that sold out in one day.

Cheney Brothers impressive new quarters were described in November 1925 Journal: "The lobby is in Pompeian design executed in bronze and marbles...The height of the ground floor is 19 ft. A window display of unusual character is made possible by cutting out the floors at the windows on the second and third floors, permitting one to hang unbroken lengths of material clear from the third floor down, thus permitting a glorious massing of color and material." At the formal opening of their showroom Charles Cheney, II (1866-1942) said: "here are no street noises, no external movement, no sound of any kind, no cross lighting, nothing to carry your minds away from the thought that we want you to buy our goods."

The massive exterior iron doors, interior railings, fixtures, partitions, and decorations were designed by Edgar Brandt. Creange said, "I saw his work in Paris three years ago... when we thought of adopting his designs (for fabric) we made many attempts over a period of three years. Finally the stiffness of the iron was softened into patterns for silks." Creange made arrangements to have "Prints Ferroniere", (Brandt’s ironwork patterns executed on Cheney silks), exhibited in the Pavillon Marsan section of the Louvre, the Museum of Decorative Arts. Brandt’s work also inspired some serious questions about its cost. "Unfortunately" wrote Horace Bushnell Learned, Cheney relative and plant foreman, "Creange subsequently fell into disfavor when it was discovered that some $75,000 worth of ironwork was sublet at exorbitant prices to one of his in laws." In November 1925 Creange formed International Industries, withdrew from active Cheney Brothers management and moved his consulting business to Paris.
Cheney Brothers found a way to amortize their "exorbitant ironwork" by borrowing design motifs from the building's exterior doorways, interior fixtures, and fabric stands. They created a stunning collection of rayon and cotton lampas in "Art Moderne" style, breaking their habit of looking to the past for design inspiration. The textiles captured designer and public imagination in all areas of the decorative arts and were featured in advertisements for the Reo Flying Cloud, the Master, a special edition Oldsmobile offered to the luxury car market in the spring of 1929. When the stock market crashed in October, only four hundred of these premium priced cars with Cheney Brothers upholstery were available across the country.

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126 Textile Society of America 1998 Proceedings
As the economy soured, manufacturers consolidated and merged in order to save money and insure survival. But Cheney Brothers remained gigantic family owned and run organization incorporating every aspect of silk manufacture from importation of raw material to distribution of textiles. In the first six months of 1932 Cheney Brothers sustained an operating loss of one half million dollars but Ward Cheney, President, said "to close until business improves is to close forever." The board of directors of Cheney Brothers filed a New York reorganization plan to refinance the financial obligations incurred in 1925 and secure release from the property at 181 Madison Avenue.

The firm moved their New York offices to 1412 Broadway in 1935 lingering in various guises through WWII. In 1953 they again reorganized, closing out their Decorative Sales Division at 509 Madison Avenue and purchasing the Greef Fabrics Division of Burlington Mills in an effort to create fabric and pattern lines suitable to the popular market. It was not successful. On February 24, 1955 Ward Cheney wrote to the stockholders: "The Board of Directors has received from J. P. Stevens & Co., Inc. one the leading concerns in the textile industry an offer to purchase all of the outstanding stock of Cheney Brothers." And so as Ward Cheney (1813-1876) had become the first President of Cheney Brothers in 1854, his great-great-grand nephew, Ward Cheney (1899-1963) became its last Cheney president 101 years later.
References

The American Silk Journal was published from 1882-1938. It recorded the views and interests of The Silk Association of America organized in 1872 by forty-three pioneer silk firms to promote the common interest of all branches of the trade. Three generations of Cheney men served as officers in the association and had a great deal of influence over what was published in the Journal.

The American Silks Mills is a subsidiary of Gerli & Co., Inc. After Cheney Brothers was sold to J.P. Stevens in 1955, Geri purchased the pile and jacquard divisions as well as the Cheney name. They have designated The American Silk Mills, Cheney Brothers Archives as the official repository for their vast holdings of textile samples and design documents.


Geer's, Hartford City Directories. Hartford: 1854-1890.


