

AN INTRODUCTION TO I. W. HARTMAN'S ACCOUNT OF BLOOMSBURG'S FIRST SILK MILL AND OPERA HOUSE

I. W. Hartman wrote many letters of a historical nature for the newspapers in the late 1800s and early 1900s concerning Bloomsburg. He was a well-known businessman who took an active interest in the town's civil affairs. He died at the age of ninety-seven on January 16, 1922. In his obituary, the *Morning Press* wrote: "His wonderful memory went to make him the court of last resort in matters pertaining to Bloomsburg of early days." What follows are excerpts from one of his letters that appeared in the *Democratic Sentinel* on October 25, 1895, in which he commented on the first silk mill and opera house in Bloomsburg.

BLOOMSBURG'S FIRST SILK MILL AND OPERA HOUSE

By I. W. Harman

Editor Sentinel: -- This letter was suggested and thought up by me at the instance of a friend and by the visit of Ebenezer Painter, of Harrisburg, who was a young man and an associate of mine from 1843 to 1845 at which time he left Bloomsburg and removed to Harrisburg, from that time until the present has only made two visits in a business way. Some time ago during the Veterans parade he came here to associate with his old comrades and take in his old home and the whole town "as he said." He engaged a team and invited me to accompany him, which I accepted. Showing him first the "Snyder Hill" with the Normal School buildings and all the surroundings, we returned to East street, "he only knew it as Smoketown," down to Fifth street, out to Oak Grove, down Park street to Seventh, out to Ice Plant, down Catharine to Tube Works, Novelty Works and Elevator Works on Ninth street, then down to Susquehanna Ave. on the river bank with a view of the new bridge over the river, up Market, out Sixth to Silk Mill, Woolen Mill, Keystone Works, up West to Fifth, Down to Carpet Mills and through the lower part of the town, "he remembered it only as Barton's fields," drove over to Fernville, returned to Main street, up to Iron, up to First street to the Wirt mansion and returned, and last he desired to drive out First street to the Schoch mansion where he resided last with his father and sisters, also desired to look upon the old Cocoonery building, we halted in front of Chrisman's ally, I asked him if he recognized the location, he hesitated a moment and said "I am lost to the Cocoonery, by reason of its surroundings, I remember it only as a lonely building high upon the "rock" and used as a silk worm factory." Remember reader this was his first view of it since 1845. We then drove to the point of rocks, as we once called it when it was grown up with scrub pines, now the handsome dwelling of James Magee occupies the location. Before we closed our trip he opened his mind to me and gave expression in these words, "I have traveled considerably over the State for the last few years and have not seen a town as "clear cut" in its improvements, both in opening streets (through fields he and I traveled in our boyhood days) and in the erection of handsome buildings both in private residences and public buildings, factories, &c.," and that he looked upon Bloomsburg in the near future as a city.

I now desire to go back and resurrect or unearth lost and buried history. About the year 1838 W. G. Hurley and Robert Cathcart, both of whom I gave in my letter of personals as being good and enterprising citizens, purchased all the land north of First street from Chrisman ally – now a street – to where the Robison house was, nearly opposite the Cyrus Fry house and back to the rocks. Mrs. Robert Cathcart has kindly put in my hands a small account book, in which her husband kept an itemized account from the time of purchase in 1838 and during the fencing of the tract and its cultivation with wheat, corn, oats &c., until it was in such a state of richness that the mulberry tree (or the Latin term *morus multicaulis*) would grow and produce leaves for food for the silk worm. I find among its items charges for three hundred mulberry plants, and to Andrew Kuhn and Lewis Roat for planting the same during the build of the Cocoonery (which still stands on the hill overlooking Fishing creek) and after its completion in 1841 I find also a charge for 1/8 oz silk worms eggs five dollars and postage seventy-five cents on August 3, 1841, is a charge of \$12.50 paid Catharine and Sarah Weaver for feeding silk worms; Sept. 6 a charge paid Catharine Weaver for flossing. Prof. Walker gives me this as a definition: "The process of reeling the silk from the cocoon." There are many other interesting charges in the book in connection with the working of the silk mill (as I call it) a charge for a silk reel of fifteen dollars with freight by boat from Philadelphia at another place paid Josiah Furman freight on silk shipped by boat to the city, and again seventeen dollars paid Catharine, Sarah and Eliza Weaver for feeding worms. I remember visiting the building several times to see how rapidly the worms would devour the leaves of the mulberry when given then and also to see the process of reeling the silk. For some reason the enterprise was not a profitable one, and about 1847 they sold the building to Thomas Bomboy and began selling the land in lots. John Egan bought the lot and built the house now owned by D. A. Creasy, John Ludwig the corner and built the brick house now Prof. Walker's, Benjamin Hagenbuch the house now Mrs. Brittain's and so on until now you can see at least room for one dozen families. Thomas Bomboy made some changes in the building and arranged it for concerts with a few long benches, &c. The original Buell family gave a musical concert in it. Many of the older persons carried their own chairs. Jacob Eyer and I well remember carried a chair from his room; us young clerks and others had good standing room. The house was well filled and the music grand. The next was a Negro Minstrel show and was enjoyable to the young bloods, after that slight of hand performance and ventriloquist entertainment, then a boxing school was enjoyed by many. These were continued until the Court House was erected and many of the better entertainments were allowed to give concerts, &c., there. The young people can contrast the change from going to an exhibition up a narrow alley and opening bars to the Opera House in 1847, or walking wide paved streets lighted by electricity to the present Opera House with a capacity of nine hundred and not more than half large enough at that for the town.

Yours, &c.,

I. W. Hartman