

BLOOMSBURG BRICK COMPANY

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For several decades in the early twentieth century, the Bloomsburg Brick Company was an important employer in the town. The firm began in 1910, constructing a large brickyard on East Fifth Street, where Dillon's greenhouses stand now. In busy times the yard employed upwards of sixty workers. The firm made bricks for building as well as larger paving bricks and construction blocks. There was a large market for its products: as early as 1868 the local newspaper noted that at least three million bricks would be needed in town that summer for construction projects, and when Main Street was paved in 1906 more than 70 carloads of bricks were imported to cover the road from Market Square to Iron Street.

The brickmaking firm was organized in early 1910 by a group of Bloomsburg business leaders: bank president George Low, physician and head of Bloomsburg Hospital Dr. J. E. Shuman, coal merchant William R. Kocher, and bank officer H. Reber Mears; these four became officers in the new company, respectively president, vice-president, treasurer and secretary. To design, build and manage the brickyard they recruited W. W. Swengel, a Bellefonte insurance agent who mastered the craft of brickmaking. He supervised the construction of a large brickyard with the very latest equipment.



The brickyard in about 1915.

For raw material for the bricks, the firm acquired rights to a bank of red shale which ran up the hill from Fifth Street to Light Street Road. This shale lay in what geologists call the Bloomsburg Formation, a layer of rock so named because it was first identified in the town. This rock layer or stratum has outcrops through six states from New York to West Virginia. It was formed from marine sediments more than 400 million years ago and contains plentiful fossils, both plant and animal. This rock grinds to a fine red powder which when properly fired makes sturdy and long-lasting bricks.



The company office, with the rock-crushing tower in the background.

The brickyard had the newest grinding and brick-making machinery, all run by electricity. The yard eventually had nine large round kilns, each about thirty feet across, as well as brick structures to hold grinding and molding machinery and storage sheds. Since the rock quarry was across Fifth Street, the company received permission from Town Council to dig a tunnel under the road so that quarried rock could run on a conveyor belt from the quarry directly into the stone crusher. Excavation went on rapidly, eventually leaving a large gully now known as Dillon's Hollow. The work was on a large scale: on June 14, 1927 an explosive charge brought down 20,000 tons of rock, enough to supply the kilns for six months; people on Main Street thought there had been an earthquake!

Work at the brickyard and its adjacent quarry was sometimes dangerous. In December, 1912 three men were buried under tons of rock when a ledge gave way; two died instantly and the third was seriously injured. Again in 1915 a worker—still in his first week—was killed in the shale bin next to the grinding house, and in 1922 another quarry worker was buried under a fall. The firm tried in one way to make the workers safer: in 1915 the firm said it would dismiss any employees who used intoxicating liquors, and in the next month fired four men who came late to work after an evening at the tavern.

The firm shipped bricks throughout the region by rail and truck. In 1912 Northumberland school board changed a contract to buy bricks from Bloomsburg instead of from Watsontown because the price was 9% lower. By 1924 the firm expanded capacity to turn out 1,000,000 bricks a month.

The firm suffered from the ever-present brickyard peril: fire. In 1914 a fire destroyed the machine shop and part of the grinding shop; town fire companies were powerless because the town water lines did not reach the plant. The damaged buildings and equipment were quickly replaced. Then, just before World War II, a more disastrous fire leveled most of the premises, and this time the firm did not rebuild.



The main structure after a fire.

Curiously, there were at least two earlier brick-making firms with similar names. Bloomsburg farmer and bricklayer William B. Ferguson began making bricks in 1888 from a clay bed beside the river at the foot of Market Street. His firm prospered and in busy times he employed thirty men and produced 30,000 bricks daily. His firm was later named Bloomsburg Brick Company. When the usable clay gave out, there remained a large deep pit, which became for a time the town dump. When filled with refuse, the dump was compacted and covered with soil and now is a part of the Bloomsburg Town Park.

In 1909 Mr. Ferguson and four other Bloomsburg men received a charter for a new company named Bloomsburg Brick and Construction Company. They found a workable bed of clay on riverlands north of Espy and set up their brickyard there. However, they were thinly capitalized at just \$5,000, and when the rival company of George Low and other business leaders started up the next year, the older firm could not compete and did not last long. The new company brazenly appropriated the name of Bloomsburg Brick Company and, with stronger capital and better management, survived and prospered until World War II.