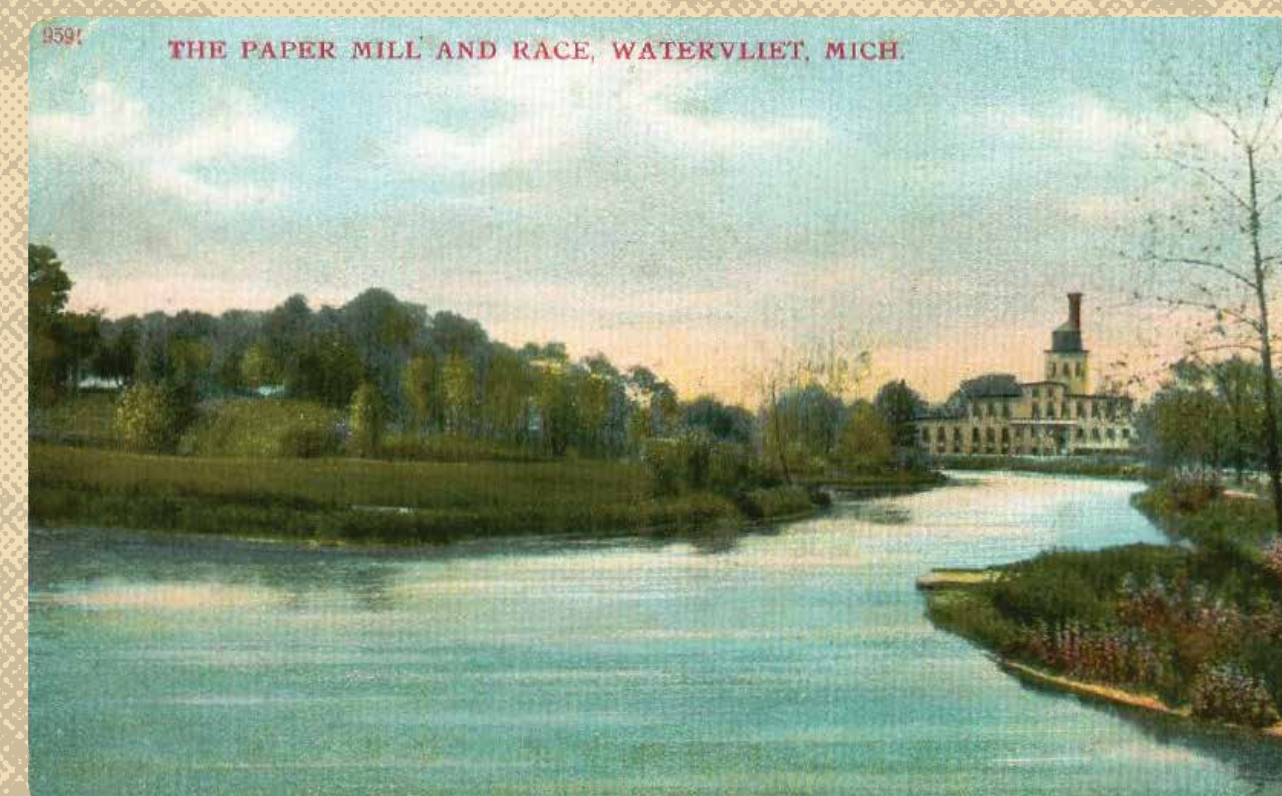


# The Story of the Watervliet Paper Mill

The flow of the Paw Paw River powered the earliest lumber mills near this site with the help of dams by the late 1830s and local timber was depleted after a few decades. A brick paper mill was built on the former site of a saw mill and first began operating in 1894, but was closed by 1905. The Watervliet Paper Company was formed in 1910, primarily by Kalamazoo investors. The paper mill here was considered “one of the best constructed plants ever erected” in Michigan, so it was re-opened with renovations and new state-of-the-art machinery. In 1912, the Watervliet Paper Company (WPC) began making fine glossy or “coated” paper products. A rail spur connected the paper mill to the railroad in town, allowing the WPC to easily bring in pulp sources and ship out its finished products.



A placid scene: Early hand-colored postcard view of the Paper Mill and Mill Race in Watervliet

WPC quickly gained a reputation for quality and consistency. Paper made in Watervliet was used around the nation as catalog covers, including Sears, Roebuck, & Co., as well as labels and wrappers in goods such as Wrigley's Gum, Campbell's Soup and Kodak Film. The mill also produced U.S. postage stamps and large amounts of playing cards. Hundreds of workers drove the success of WPC—in 1960 the payroll included 470 employees. It was not only the area's largest employer, its significant contributions to local taxes helped fund the fire and police services, schools and the hospital in Watervliet. WPC sponsored leisure activities like baseball and bowling teams, musical groups, an employee newsletter, annual parties and social events. The paper mill shaped everyday life for local residents and generations of workers.



This is one of the earliest known pictures of the paper mill, dating to about 1897. The road in front of the mill (labeled "So. Haven road, North") is known today as M-140. The tower in front of the smokestack was 100 feet high and held a 30,000 gallon water tank to supply sprinklers in case of fire. Beneath that tank was another 30,000 gallon water tank, which held the mill's supply of river water for paper making.



This image is from a postcard of the paper mill prior to 1910. In the foreground is a dam on the Paw Paw River. The original builders of the paper mill were attracted to Watervliet because of its proximity to Chicago and the promise of water power on the Paw Paw River. The river's power ultimately was not sufficient to run the mill and water power was supplemented with steam engines and electricity.



This aerial view of the Watervliet Paper Company was taken on February 25, 1959. A railroad car can be seen in the middle of the complex on the spur that connected to Watervliet's main railroad tracks. This photograph appeared in a WPC tour booklet that was produced for the mill's customers and business partners.

## WATERVLIET PAPER MILL

1833: The first saw mill near this site begins operating, using power from the Paw Paw River to saw locally-harvested timber.

1837: Michigan becomes a state.

1849: The State of Michigan grants first permit for a dam on the Paw Paw River near this site.

1858: The saw and grist mills here are nearly destroyed when heavy rains broke the dam on the Paw Paw River and cover the surrounding area with flood waters.

1862: A re-built lumber mill at Watervliet is one of the largest in Berrien County, producing up to 30,000 feet of lumber a day with 40-50 employees. The lumber is formed into large rafts and floated down the Paw Paw River to St. Joseph for sale.

1871: The railroad is completed connecting Watervliet to Grand Rapids and Chicago.

1872: The dam at a Watervliet saw mill washes away, leaving "considerable damage."

1891: The village of Watervliet is incorporated.

1894: The paper mill begins operating after two years of construction. The builders and original owners were William Syns and George Dudley who came from the paper industry in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

1899: Syns & Dudley sell the paper mill to American Writing Paper Company, a large "paper trust" which reportedly mismanages the mill.

1905: American Writing Paper closes down the mill and abandons the dam. Unusual seasonal fluctuations in Paw Paw Lake water levels result in a lawsuit over handling of the dam.

1910: Watervliet Paper Company is founded after Kalamazoo businessmen purchase the mill. The mill is updated with a new power plant and a new Fourdrinier paper machine. Power supply comes from two generators: one powered by water wheels and the other by steam engines.

1912: Coating Mill is built; Paper mill begins making glossy or "coated" papers.

1915: Watervliet Paper Company shows a profit for the first time. Contracts are undertaken to make packages for Camel cigarettes and wrappers for Wrigley's chewing gum.

1922: WPC employs 170 workers.

1925: Watervliet becomes a city.

1928: A second Fourdrinier paper machine is installed as well as a new power plant.

1931: Production at the WPC is more than 75 tons per day.

1934: The first attempt is made to organize a labor union among paper mill workers.

1946: Plant modernization program begins: new air blade coaters replace old brush type coaters and paper machines are rebuilt. A Memorial to workers who lost their lives in World War Two is installed using a massive granite press roll retired from a paper machine.

1950: At Christmas, a new program is introduced: Employees Profit-Sharing and Retirement Fund of the Watervliet Paper Company.

1956: WPC becomes a part of Hammermill Paper Company. Watervliet is Hammermill's first factory to produce coated paper.

1963: Paper pulp production at the mill is ended "for environmental and economic reasons". The primary source of pulp becomes baled pulp shipped in from long distances.

1967: Employees of the Watervliet Paper Company organize their first official union — United Papermakers and Paper Workers Union Local #985 AFL-CIO.

1970: Taxes paid by the WPC total \$209,000, which was 40% of the property taxes paid in Watervliet City that year.

1973: WPC makes \$1 million upgrade to a natural-cycle water use and recycling system, eliminating its impact on the Paw Paw River and reducing its water use from 1.8 million gallons to 1 million gallons per day.

1974: The paper mill is sold to Parsons & Whittimore, an international paper company, and the first prolonged strike of union employees occurs.

1976: A fish ladder is installed to allow salmon and steelhead to move upstream past the dams, a cooperative project of the WPC, the DNR (Department of Natural Resources) and the Michigan Steelheaders.

1980s: Profits have been unstable in previous ten years. Equipment and machinery have become inefficient and outdated, making it difficult for products to compete.

1994: The Paper Mill and property are purchased by Berrien County Economic Development Corporation. A Clean Michigan Initiative Grant of \$2 million is awarded to remove hazardous substances remaining at the site.

2000: The Paper Mill and property are purchased by Berrien County Economic Development Corporation. A Clean Michigan Initiative Grant of \$2 million is awarded to remove hazardous substances remaining at the site.

2002: Demolition of the Watervliet Paper Mill takes approximately five months and is completed in April 2002.

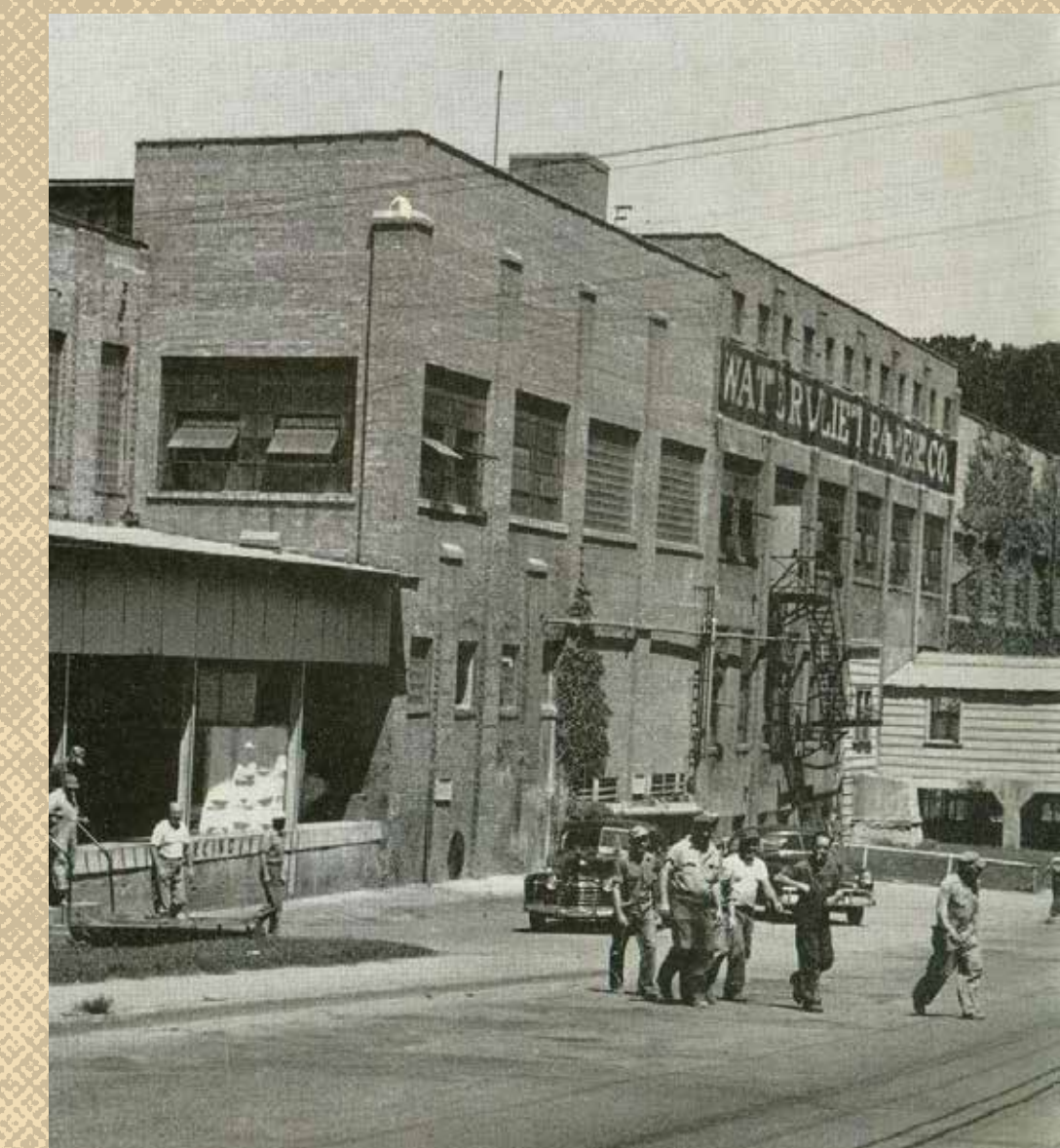
2011: The old diversion and spillway dams of the Watervliet Paper Company are removed, restoring the free flow of the Paw Paw River here for the first time in over 150 years.



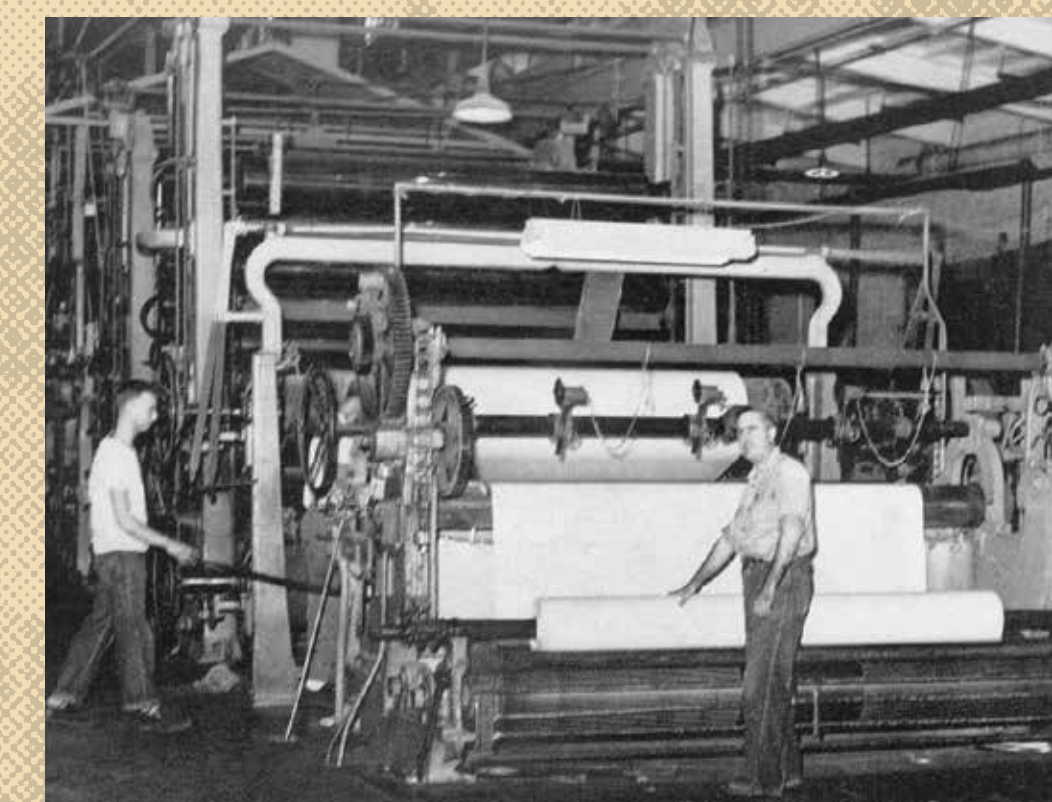
A postcard image produced prior to 1910 showing a view of the paper mill's "upper dam".



To the right of the original paper mill, a three-story brick structure was added in 1917-18, with the large sign "Watervliet Paper Company". Numerous additions and renovations were still to come.



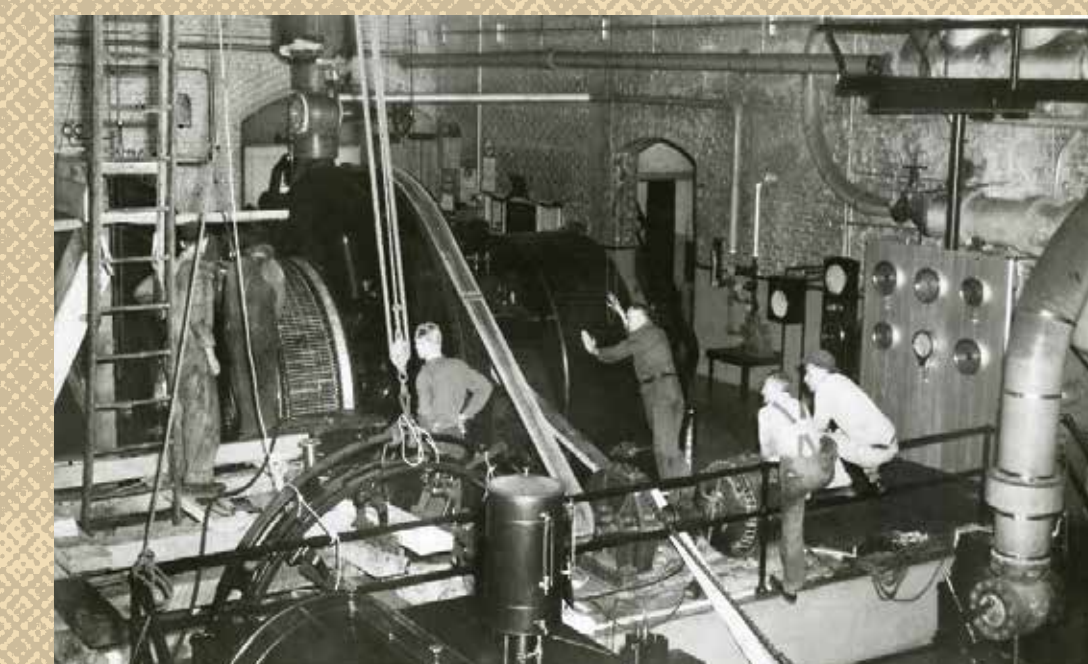
This photograph of workers leaving the paper mill at shift change appeared on the cover of a booklet for a 1960 Open House celebrating 50 years in business.



In this photo, a roll of paper is being completed on one of the mill's two Fourdrinier paper making machines.



Even in its early days, the Watervliet Paper Company employed many women as well as men.



This photograph of machinery in the mill dates to 1941.



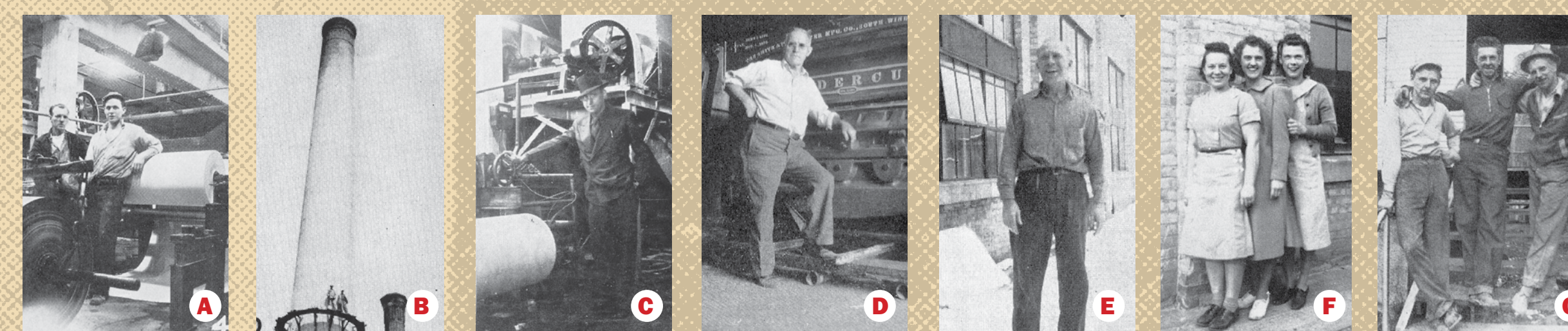
The Watervliet Paper Company used a rail spur to bring in raw materials, shown here along the mill's rear Wood Lot. From 1945 until 1963, an innovative pulp mill allowed WPC to manufacture bleached pulp from hardwoods.



Paper was produced in rolls by the WPC, but it had a wide variety of sizes, colors, coating styles, and other special properties that followed the specifications of customers.



George K. Ferguson, who was President and General Manager of the WPC from 1929 to 1957, speaks during the dedication of a memorial to the paper mill employees killed in World War Two. The massive granite press roll was previously part of a paper machine in the mill.



The WPC produced an employee newsletter called *Friendly Chats* from the 1930s through the 1960s. "Mill Snap Shots" were a beloved feature. These "Mill Snap Shots" appeared in *Friendly Chats* between 1937-40.

(A) Bob Burnsworth and Murray Herron are working with the mill's pastor, a machine involved in the manufacture of playing cards.  
(B) Workers apply decorative paint to the paper mill's smoke stack.  
(C) Louis J. Sheid, who became General Superintendent of the WPC in 1945, poses with machinery.  
(D) Ross Hicks poses with a Trimmer, which he operated as an employee of the mill.  
(E) WPC Employee Clyde Jackson.  
(F) Employees of the mill's sorting department, Martha Zapik, Mary Kolomo, and Caroline Friedrich.  
(G) WPC Employees Paul Peirce, John Ross, and Bob Abel.