

Tannery on Bath Street was a major village employer for half a century

By Maurice "Christopher" Morley
As told to Ann Hauprich
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Students walking to and from school during the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s didn't need a weathervane or a meteorologist to let them know which way the wind was blowing.

"If the air on our way to school was filled with the aroma of chocolate, the wind was coming from Bischoff's Factory on Prospect Street; if it smelled like rotten meat, it was coming from the tannery over on Bath Street because the cow hides still had flesh on them when they arrived on the premises," according to Village History Consultant "Maurice" Christopher Morley.

The former Ballston Spa tannery's origins date back to 1878 when Troy-born Samuel Haight, who had married Helen Vassar of the famous family that founded Vassar College, acquired the Rugg tannery along the banks of the Kayaderosseras Creek in Milton Center. After that tannery was destroyed by fire in 1881, Haight decided the prospects for future expansion would be better in Ballston Spa. With this in mind, he purchased the former Wait oil cloth factory along the village's Gordon Creek.

According to Timothy Starr, author of *Invented in Saratoga County*, "The plant in Ballston Spa was largely completed within a month of the fire in Milton. The tanning room in Ballston Spa measured 480 feet long by 45 feet wide. The dressing and finishing department occupied a four-story building measuring 200 feet by 50 feet. The bark mill was on level with the nearby Delaware & Hudson mainline and a railroad switch delivered bark directly to it. The bark was then run down a 35-foot long chute.

The new tannery officially opened on Bath Street in 1882 and before long, Haight – assisted by sons H. Vassar and Theodore and brother-in-law Matthew Vassar – succeeded in making the tannery one of the largest and most prosperous in the nation. Over the next half century, the enterprise would employ hundreds of workers.

Among those who earned his daily bread at the tannery soon after World War Two was Morley. He left after three and a half years to learn the welding trade, but will never forget the unpleasant odor — which slowly, but surely, vanished from the air shortly after the tannery closed its doors a half a century ago.

Records show the tannery went through several ownership changes during its long life. Originally operated by the firm Haight & Company, it later became known as Hall, Haight & Company. Then, in 1899, the American Hide & Leather Company was formed to consolidate several large tanneries. When American Hide & Leather went bankrupt in 1956, the Howes Leather Company purchased the plant and renamed it the Ballston Tanning Corporation.

A decline in the demand for soft leather uppers of shoes prompted by the introduction of plastic and other synthetic products in the footwear manufacturing industry ultimately led to 1960 closure of the tannery – and the loss of about 100 jobs.

The sprawling complex was subsequently used as a storage depot for storm windows and doors, but got a more glamorous new life when Angelica opened there around the turn-of-the-millennium. Across the street stands a residential housing complex known as Tannery Row. And now we know why!

Hundreds toiled at tannery



Chris Morley shared these images of tannery workers of a bygone era that were taken before he labored there for three and a half years starting in the mid-1940s.



A GROUP of tannery workers, Bath Street.