

# A "GREAT IDEA" THAT ACTUALLY SUCKED

By Nina & Jake Elsas, The Patch Works Art And History Center



*Ah, the 1950s. So wholesome. So innocent.* Nothing but Mad Men, McCarthyism, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Good times!

More relevant to Cabbagetown history, however, it was also a decade of changes in American consumerism, as households across the nation had better

access to all sorts of sh... stuff. With the success of that pioneer-of-gluttony, *Piggly Wiggly*, and its early-20th century copycats – *Safeway*, *Kroeger* (yes, with an additional "E"), etc. – shoppers could purchase groceries just about anywhere. Dapper store employees would then simply plop everything in a bag (bless their hearts), and everyone went home happy happy happy. By the 1950s, markets had become "super" and their offerings were inexpensive; American mouths frothed excitedly at the idea of bringing home piles of *Twinkies* and frozen TV dinners (courtesy of *Howdy Doody*). Hell, even the Queen o' jolly ol' England had to get in on the action during a trip to her Lost Colony. In 1957, she checked out a supermarket in Maryland and was... amuuuuused.

And who could blame her??? Supermarkets had gone viral. Foreigners watched the United States with ever-growing envy, as we zealously ate ourselves into junk-food-coma oblivion.

But look, this isn't an article about health and nutrition. Far from it. Cabbagetown Steak is scrumpdillyicious! Y'all, eat as many Twinkies as y'all want... we ain't judgy. Instead, what we wanna discuss is how this phenomenon impacted our beloved Mill and its operations. Remember: our Mill produced cotton bags that schlepped BULK quantities of sh... stuff.

*So, as mighty as the cotton sack once was, the 1950s tore a sizable hole in its woven armor.* Some might speculate that 'twas the sinister rise of plastics that usurped cotton's crown, but nay, knave, 'twas indeed a more-tempestuous hurly-burly. Sure, plastics played something of a role, but more so did America's blossoming love for expediency, affordability, and pre-fab foodstuffs. Also, consumers and stores began to prefer multi-walled paper bags.

*In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the key selling points for a cotton sack wasn't always the product it held.* Often, it was that rural Americans liked to reuse the cotton itself, making Little Bobby his sturdy summer shorts or a durable downy pillow for Grandma's ancient noggin. Opportunistic mills like ours took advantage of this trend and added all sorts of colorful patterns to the bags, knowing full well that the dried beans were really an afterthought: what people truly wanted were new curtains! By mid-century, with the slow but steady creep of urbanization, American households cared less and less about repurposing sacks into Little Bobby's shorts or Grandma's noodle rest. That was the stuff of them country folk, not us big city dwellers. No longer prized for

its longevity, the cotton bag had become a liability. Who the heck wanted those damn sacks lying around the house, just taking up space??? [Insert joke about lazy husbands.]

*Paper, on the other hand, had grown STRONG.* What was previously a material with a relatively limited Schleppepage Factor (a term all physicists undoubtedly use), Big Paper could now hold its own, especially in the context of bagging groceries. And it made for a fantastic fire-starter! (Much like this article!) Indeed, cotton textile mills felt this wind change and knew the halcyon days of cotton sack production were going to get blown away.

That being said, in the early 1950s, an exuberant and financially robust *Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills* continued to confidently expand, not just by adding new, sparkling buildings in Atlanta, but also by establishing more plants in other cities. Just a couple of years later, however, by the mid-1950s, leadership suddenly woke the hell up and dropped a painful brick. Ginormous industrial compounds like Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills looked around at their infrastructure and plotted.

*We at The Patch Works like to envision the Elsas ownership running frantically around with arms flailing high above their heads and screaming, "Whadda we do??? Whadda we do???" Nyuck, nyuck, nyuck!"* All this machinery, tools, employee training... even the train tracks... everything had been designed primarily for cotton sack production. That's not to say that FBCM didn't have other products. Of course, it did. It was also dabbling in multi-walled paper bags. But the factory was just so darn massive and would eventually need a significant and very expensive Linda Evangelista-sized facelift. So, the Elsas owners did what all wise businessmen do: they punted.

*In 1956, in a move that could be seen as a mix between a hostile takeover and an escape hatch, the Elsas family sold controlling shares of Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills to a group of investors from various mills in North Carolina.* The agreement also allowed most of the executives (i.e.: the Elsasseseses) to get reelected to leadership positions, so... awesome! Some other schmuck has to foot the bill, but the Elsas fam still gets to run the show! Yessiree-dee-dee, wise businessmen indeed.

*Or so they thought.*

Businesses are fickle things. And owners and leadership don't always see eye to eye, especially when the property gets sold again. And again.

The 1956 sale most certainly did not future-proof The Mill, but instead set off an unintentional cascade of events that doomed what was once one of the most successful enterprises in the country. What seemed like a great idea at the time, actually kinda sucked.

*Next Chapter: We tell you how much it sucked...*