

\$10,000,000 BUYS A COTTON MILL. UGH!

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



After reading-ish our history articles, y'all might assume that The Patch Works abhors Change and that we who run it are insufferably stuck in the Past. Not true! We simply like the Past because... it's already happened. But that doesn't mean we don't appreciate the benefits of Change. It's just that Future-o-meters have yet to be invented, so we can't foresee how Change works out in the (sometimes-bitter) end.

Nonetheless, Change can often be totes needed and super welcome. Usually, awesome-possum Change is for the benefit of humankind, like... say... giving freedom to oppressed and marginalized peoples. That's good! And yay!

Then again, some Change is not-so-awesome-possum, having dire and perhaps unintended consequences (which *could* have been avoided if those darn Future-o-meters were invented). An example might be... say... making a decision that has the potential for wiping out an entire community. That's bad! And boooooooo.

So, with hyperbole firmly in place, we finally get to tell a tale of not-so-awesome-possum Change.

In June 1956, for \$10,000,000, Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills handed over its cotton-picking reins to a bunch of North Carolina dudes, whose Big Kahuna was Julius W. Abernathy, owner of Carolina Mills, part owner of Alabama Mills, and director of the Dan River Cotton Mills of Virginia. This guy clearly liked mills. Well, The Abernathy Gang didn't last very long, flipping soon thereafter the factory to another group of investors. (Yeesh, flipping a ginormous factory definitely makes flipping a small, Cabbagetown house far less impressive.)

The New-New Owners went right to work, restructuring and rebranding the entire enterprise. First... name change! *"Who the hell cares if the old name has been known throughout the universe since 1889???* Let's henceforth call our company *Fulton Cotton Mills, a division of Fulton Industries, Inc.* [breath]. And let's stop making those *silly sacks!*" Yuh, they opted to kill off the very thing that made the company so successful: the cotton bag.

In 1958, the last cotton bag rolled off the line, marking the official end of an era. Now, to be fair, as we discussed in our last article (turn your Past-o-meters to two months ago), the demand for cotton bags was diminishing. And sure, American cotton-bag production would eventually go Full Dodo. Mayhap it would've been wiser, however, to provide clients with a bit more warning and sloooooowly transition away from that product, as opposed to doing such a hatchet job. *"So long, suckers! Y'all just gotta look elsewhere for a sack! Maybe find a company that produces multi-walled PAPER bags, which, sure, we think are kinda groovy, but... c'mon, who's gonna really wanna invest in that much paper???"*

Bag-free, Fulton Cotton Mills focused on churning out fabrics for use in other industries: fabrics for the automotive field, canvas, mattress and pillow ticking, upholstery, toweling, and materials for such items as labels and books. **Yet, here's the rub, y'all: Fulton Cotton Spinning Company/Fulton Bag & Cotton Mills was a LEADER in U.S. cotton-bag production; the New-New Owners' decision to concentrate on non-bag stuff just placed Fulton Cotton Mills in the same line with run-of-the-mill mills (hahaha).** Oh, and the New-New Owners also sold off all the other FBCM factories around the country. Ka-BOOM. Buh-bye.

So, now that this once-industry-leading factory was well underway to becoming excitingly mundane, the New-New Owners took the next step: changes under the Hood! Just like those pesky FBCM plants around the country, company-run amenities (e.g.: housing and social services) were just weighing things downwwwwwwn, man... harshing the New-New Owners' mellowwwwww. Zap! Begone!

[We interrupt this article to be a Devil's Advocate: would The Mill Village have fared any better had the New-New Owners kept these amenities, especially the housing? It's not as if the company-run stuff was primo. Y'all... buy some coffee and talk amongst yerselves.]

By 1961, the company-owned housing was sold off, with First Right of Refusal going to the mill workers (uh huh), and then to anyone with more than a dollar to their name. Okay fine, this glib comment (of which we make many) may or may not have merit. To be sure, the era's industry-friendly newspapers enthusiastically proclaimed that a good amount of the housing indeed went to mill workers. Yet, knowing the economic status of the workers, we find this particular Unicorns-and-Rainbows Pill a bit hard to swallow. And when chatting with Originals today, we've learned that, from this moment on, the never-ending specter of the Where-In-the-Hell-Are-You Absentee Landlord rose up to haunt us forever. Although the company-run housing wasn't exactly Tuxedo Road, the state of The Mill Village homes went into an even steeper decline.

Well. It's now 1961. We have only twenty years left to the final End of Mill Days!

For now, we shall finish this article with a clichéd bookend. Knowing the Past may offer insight into how Change might affect the Future, but nothing's guaranteed. One benefit of living in our historic neighborhood is that it allows us the luxury of 20/20 Hindsight Reflecto-Vision. Many communities don't have the foggiest clue about the Past and simply bound forward, like tongue-lolling puppies, into the Future, blissfully unaware that some supposedly "new" Change might actually just be recycled Past Change that was abandoned by their forebears due to its not-so-awesome-possumness. Would we, the residents of today's Cabbagetown, prefer such ignorance? After all, it would save us from these endless debates about our neighborhood's Future and allow us to embrace all Change (come what may).

We at The Patch Works would like to answer this question – and with the utmost respect to anyone who disagrees – HELL. NO.