

University of Iowa

From the Selected Works of Sidney F. Huttner

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**John Bidwell. American Paper Mills, 1609-1832.
(2013).**

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/shuttner/44/>

John Bidwell. *American Paper Mills 1609-1832, A Directory of the Paper Trade with Notes on Products, Watermarks, Distribution, Methods, and Manufacturing Techniques*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, in association with the American Antiquarian Society, 2013. Lxxxvi, 340 p. 105 ill. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-58465-964-8: \$150; Ebook ISBN 978-11-61168-316-5: \$149.99.

Paper is so ubiquitous that we rarely attend to the individual ways it crosses our lives: rough paper for wrapping fish and cladding corrugated board, newsprint for newspapers, magazines, and ephemera, fine writing, drawing, and printing papers, elaborately engineered papers for our currency, the distinctive odors of old books in bookshops and libraries ... the textures, finishing, smells of paper, all are endless, and frequently surprising.

SHARPists, however, must have reasons, at least from time to time, to query a paper in front of them, whether that of a letter, a broadside, a pamphlet, or a book – or mere mention of paper in a publication. Unless they never sully themselves with materials pre-1850, they consequently will have firm reason to become familiar with the magisterial 60-page introduction of John Bidwell's definitive study of American paper manufacture prior to 1832 (with informative overlapping more deeply into the 19th century).

The first mill was established in 1690 by William Rittenhouse (an immigrant with experience in Dutch mills) and three partners (a cloth merchant, an ironmonger, and a printer) on a stream near Philadelphia; with numerous changes in the partnership, it was extinguished by flood in 1700. This brief outline is characteristic of most of the 509 mills Bidwell describes: the capital required could rarely be provided by the papermaker alone, so partnerships were typical, particularly when partners brought self-interest or relevant skills as well as funds. Hence a dealer in cloth might help initiate a continuous feed of waste rag, a metalworker could assist the design, construction, and maintenance of machinery, and printers and stationers were key customers. Land requirements were modest (the Rittenhouse partners leased for 990 years) but location on a creek or river with a reliably constant flow sufficient to provide water and energy to drive beaters was essential.

Since these many variables had to be orchestrated simultaneously for a mill to operate successfully, it is small wonder that nearly all struggled constantly and most were short-lived. Still, by 1832 mills producing hand-made sheets had been established in 21 states as far south as Georgia and as far west as Indiana.

Bidwell's introduction discusses concisely but fluently all aspects of the papermaking business. The considerable information he has recovered about the mills is arranged in 300 pages of entries organized by state and then chronologically by date of founding. These are tied together with indexes of papermakers, watermarks (both words and figures), and subjects, and the whole supplemented generously with illustrations.

Bidwell is keenly aware that directories are, for good reasons, etherizing; but he finds unbearably discordant the thought of presenting his decades of research as, for example, a web site. Readers can explore the ebook version on the publisher's web site, however. They will find, I think, as I did, that the book is so admirably organized and carefully compiled that the electronic version offers no significant advantage: the indexes get one to wanted information as quickly as a key-word search. Individuals must

likely spend the extra penny for paper in any case, since the ebook is available through packagers that generally work only with libraries.

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