

# West Cape May rich in gold-leaf manufacturing history

By **JEFFREY REEVES HILGERT**  
Special to the Star and Wave

WEST CAPE MAY — Thousands of years ago, ancient craftsmen developed the skill of beating gold into extremely sheer leaf to decorate their temples, statues and other art objects. This delicate craft, passed down through the ages, found its way to the New World and ultimately became a source of employment for many Cape May County residents. Even today, gold leaf is used to title fine books, gild page edges, decorate items such as picture frames and to adorn the domes of important buildings to add that lasting gold luster.

Gold beating as a trade arrived in Cape May in a very happenstance fashion. In the early 1860s, two Cape May brothers — Andrew and David Reeves — decided to seek their fortunes in the big city. They both found employment at the same Philadelphia establishment, Hastings & Co., the country's largest gold leaf-manufacturing firm. By the mid-1870s, Andrew Reeves was running a gold leaf factory in Cincinnati and David Reeves managed a similar facility in Chicago. About that time, their younger brother, George H. Reeves, decided to join his brother in Chicago. It was there that he learned the trade.

The Chicago business was burned out in the great Chicago fire in 1871 and George Reeves relocated to Camden. Missing the gold beating business, he returned to a re-established business in Chicago where he remained until 1877. In that year, George Reeves' health failed and his doctor suggested he return to his family in Cape May "to die." George Reeves and his family moved in with his brother, John W. Reeves, on a farm in West Cape May. The long hours of outside work seemed to agree with George Reeves and his health slowly returned.

On a spring day in 1879, George Reeves was engaged in hauling sand to a sailing vessel on Delaware Bay. He noticed a man who seemed to be watching the operation with interest. After a while, the man approached and said, "Mr. Reeves, how would you like to organize and run a gold leaf plant in Cape May?" George Reeves was somewhat bewildered until the stranger introduced himself as Robert Hastings, one of the owners

of Hastings & Co., the firm that had employed two of his brothers and in fact himself several years earlier.

George Reeves accepted the offer and started a gold leaf business with two employees in a small building on Cape Island Turnpike, which is now called Sunset Boulevard. The beater was William H. Smith and the cutter/filler was George Reeves' sister Lida Reeves. Before long, it was necessary to move to a larger facility to accommodate the six men and eight women now in the business. This larger plant was on Second Avenue in a building that later was used as a barn by Joshua Hoffman.

In 1884, Hastings & Co. erected a 60-foot by 60-foot, two-story building at the rear of the Reuben Reeves residence at 210 Broadway. The alley that ran by the building became known as Goldbeater's Alley, a name it retains today though slightly modified to Goldbeaten Alley. This new facility housed about 30 gold beaters on the first floor and 45 cutters and fillers on the second.

In 1913, George Reeves died and his son, Theodore W. Reeves assumed responsibility for the Cape May plant. Under his guidance, many residents of Cape May and the surrounding area learned the goldbeater's trade. Gold beating had truly become an important part of West Cape May's economy and remained so for another 20 years.

During the Roosevelt Administration, the price of raw gold at the mint was raised from \$21 an ounce to \$35 an ounce. This increase made it impractical for Hastings & Co. to continue operation of the Cape May plant. In May 1934, the business was closed and the building was demolished in 1941.

As the economy gained strength after the Depression and gold became important to the war effort, the economics shifted to favor gold leaf. Once again there was a need for cutters and fillers to divide the molds and package finished leaf for Hastings. Knowing that there was an experienced pool of talent in Cape May, Hastings requested that Mary Hughes Reeves, Theodore's wife, re-open a small cutting and filling operation. Having managed that part of the business in the past, she had a thorough knowledge of the process and knew most of the talent in Cape



CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

Tools of the gold-leaf manufacturing trade included 99.9 percent pure gold, a cutch, a shoder, tweezers and the rear foot of a Belgian hare.

May. In 1943, she rented the rear portion of the R. Clifton Ware store at Broadway and York Avenue and quickly employed Alice Ewing, Ran Hoffman and three additional women. Cape May was back in the gold leaf business, albeit on a lesser scale.

The business remained in the Ware store until the death of Mary Reeves in 1953. Management of the business was transferred to Mae Cliver and Mrs. James Glace, who supervised cutting operations. The business made its final move from the Ware store to the former dry goods store of Hand roughly across Broadway from Goldbeater's Alley, the site of the earlier factory. The decline in popularity of pure gold leaf and the rise of adequate mechanical means of manufacture it collapsed the demand for hand made product. Gold beating made its final departure from Cape May when Hastings & Co. withdrew all operations in 1956.

Folks could easily tell when they neared a gold beater's shop. The air resounded from morning until night with the rhythmic thud-thud-thud of the workers' hammers as they methodically pounded the precious metal on massive granite blocks.

Except for clothing, the gold beaters could easily have been plying their trade for the Egyptian Pharaohs — the craft has truly changed that little.

The product of the gold beater's skill is still familiar to many but few know either the details of its manufacture or how it came to be a part of the fabric of South Jersey's history.

While the process has been automated today, for thousands of years the leaf started with the manual beating of a simple 1/4-inch square of the highest grade gold — 23+ karat, 99.9 percent pure. It was about the thickness of a piece of writing paper at the start, but that was only the beginning. Two hundred and ninety of these squares were interleaved with special 4/4-inch parchment squares and bound together into a bundle termed a "cutch." Wrapped in bands of additional parchment, the cutch was beaten with a 16-pound hammer until the gold reached the edges of the parchment. This beating was carried out on a massive 3-foot-thick slab of granite mounted on a great wooden pillar sunk deep into the Earth.

Each piece of gold was then quartered and re-assembled into a new bundle known as a "shoder" contain-

ing 1,160 leaves. Shoders were quite different from cutches. They employed a special "gold beater's skin" as the interleaving material. This skin was prepared from the tough but delicate lining of an ox's stomach by a secret German process. Shoders were beaten with a 9-pound hammer until the gold was once again expanded to the edge of the 4/4-inch packet.

As before, each leaf of gold was quartered and assembled into four "moulds." Each mould contained 1,160 squares of gold between 4/4-inch squares of the best gold beater's skin. Preparation of this last step had a quaint, almost superstitious nature about it, but over the years had proved to be absolutely necessary to the production of good leaf. "Brime," a special antifriction material made from finely ground burnt gypsum, was applied to both sides of every sheet of gold beater's skin. This special lubricant was always applied using the hind foot of a special breed of Belgian hare.

Finally, this third and most exacting beating began. It was here that the skill and thoughtful care of the gold beater was truly tested. The final leaf had to be of uniform weight and thickness and free from pinholes or other imperfections. Although critical, this final beating took only 15 to 20 minutes with a 6-pound hammer. That humble 1/4-inch square of gold had now, through thinning and quartering, become 4,640 4/4-inch squares so thin a newspaper could be read through one. A single ounce of gold had been expanded to the point that it would cover nearly 200 square feet of area. The beater had to use extreme skill and patience to keep these gossamer gold leaves intact. Movement of the leaves was accomplished using a gentle puff of human breath and special boxwood tweezers.

Individual leaves were virtually floated through the air to a specially prepared calfskin "cutting cushion," where they were cut into uniform 3/8-inch squares using a "wagon." This tool actually more closely resembled a sled, having two parallel cutting runners made of very fine reed bark. Twenty five trimmed gold leaf squares were finally placed ("filled") between the rouge-coated tissue paper pages of a book. These books were the commercial packages so familiar to the professional gilder.

## West Cape May school intersection needs safety improvements

By **JACK FICHTER**  
Cape May Star and Wave

WEST CAPE MAY — Borough engineer Ray Roberts is recommending a number

of changes to the intersection in front of West Cape May Elementary School to make it safer for arriving and departing students.

Initially the school ap-

proached Borough Commission seeking a "no parking" zone at a dumpster area in front of the school building. Upon inspection, Roberts said he noticed a number of other

items. "The situation in that intersection warrants more than just that 'no parking' zone," he said. "It requires additional 'no parking' zones. It requires some stop signs and stop bars and improvement of a sight triangle."

Roberts, of Remington, Vernick, Walberg, described an

"elbow turn" from Moore Street to Columbia Avenue with no stop signs outside the front of the school. He said he had concerns about students walking into the street from between parked cars.

"There's an accident there waiting to happen," Roberts said.

He said students should be better protected by dedicating "no parking" areas along the sides of the intersection to eliminate parking from the Columbia Avenue approach to the school. Roberts said

cars are parked right up to the intersection of Columbia Avenue and Moore Street, an issue further complicated by a row of hedges that reduces visibility.

Roberts said drivers should be forced to come to a full stop, look down the street and then make the elbow turn past the school. He said when approaching the school from Moore Street, cars do not stop.

His recommendations included "no parking zones" at the intersection of Moore

Street and Columbia Avenue, installing stop signs and stop bars and additional signs denoting a school zone with a reduced speed limit ahead. Roberts said he saw no difficulties by creating a "no parking" zone in front of the school's dumpster area.

Mayor Pamela Kaithern said a home that would be affected by a new "no parking" area had residents that needed the parking space due to health issues. Roberts asked if the homeowners had room for a driveway.

## Food trucks

Continued from Page A1

as does Cape May and North Wildwood.

Burke said there was probably not enough traffic in West Cape May for a food truck to operate other than during a festival. He asked if food-vending trucks could be restricted from operating near a festival. Corrado said he believed that type of regulation was feasible.

"What I don't think you can do is say 'On days of the festival, the vendor has to be 2 miles up the road,'" he said. Kaithern questioned why the borough had to allow

food-vending trucks to operate in the borough. She said ordinances from other towns kept food-vending trucks from congested areas, out of commercial districts and allowed them on residential streets.

Corrado said the borough had a basis to prohibit a food-vending truck from "taking a free ride at a festival." He said he did not think the borough could adopt an ordinance prohibiting food-vending trucks, peddling or hawking in West Cape May except on festival days.

Kaithern asked whether food-vending trucks belonged

on wider commercial streets or in a residential zone. The borough currently does not offer vending licenses but does issue mercantile permits.

Corrado said a vendor was an itinerant peddler, not a merchant. He said state statutes entitle veterans and retired firefighters to vend in any municipality in New Jersey without buying a local license.

Vendors must register and obtain a license in the municipality where applicable, Corrado said. He suggested a limited ordinance that regulates vendors in connection with borough events or festivals.

# OYSTER BAY

RESTAURANT & BAR

GREAT STEAKS and SEAFOOD

Dinner From 5pm  
Friday & Saturday

BAR OPEN  
WEDNESDAY – SATURDAY

615 Lafayette Street • Cape May, NJ • 609-884-2111

## Cape May Star & Wave

CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE (ISSN 519-020)  
Volume 161 Number 8

Published weekly by Sample Media, Inc., 801 Asbury Ave., #310,  
Ocean City, N.J. 08226

Published Weekly (52 times a year)

**SUBSCRIPTION PRICE:** By mail for \$39 a year; \$70 for two years; \$20 for six months. Periodical Postage at Cape May Court House, N.J. and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to the Cape May Star and Wave, 600 Park Blvd. #28, West Cape May, N.J. 08204.

160 Years Old • 1854-2014

**AART's**  
Cape May Taxi  
www.capemaytaxi.com

We're on your side

CALL 898-RIDE

(898-7433)

- safe and reliable
- all local communities
- clean, comfortable
- airports
- local and distance
- child safety seats

**FRANK THEATRES**

FEB. 20<sup>th</sup> THRU FEB. 26<sup>th</sup>

RIO STADIUM 12

3801 Rt. 9 South #1 • Rio Grande, NJ 08242

Additional Pricing for 3D Features

24 Hour Movie Hotline 609-889-4799

\* Hot Tub Time Machine 2 PG 11:50, 2:10, 4:50, 7:40, 9:55

\* The Duff PG-13 11:30, 2:00, 4:40, 7:30, 9:50

\* MacFarland USA PG 11:40, 3:00, 6:50, 9:40

\* Fifty Shades of Grey R 11:00, 1:50, 4:30, 7:15, 10:00

\* Kingsman: The Secret Service R 12:10, 3:10, 6:10, 9:45

3D Spongebob Movie: Sponge out of Water PG 11:10, 9:25

Spongebob Movie: Sponge out of Water PG 1:30, 4:10, 7:10

American Sniper R 12:00, 3:20 // 6:40, 9:35 (Fri-Wed)

\* Focus (Thurs Premier) R 7:00, 9:30

Jupiter Ascending (PG-13) 4:20 // 9:55 (Fri-Wed)

Initiation Game PG-13 1:40 // 7:20 (Fri-Wed)

Paddington PG 11:20

\* The Lazarus Effect (Thurs Premier) PG-13 8:00, 10:00

\*\* No Passes • [ ] Fri-Wed • ( ) Thurs

# LUCKY BONES

## BACKWATER GRILLE

LUNCH & DINNER DAILY FROM 11:30AM

Coldest Beer  
in Cape May!  
14 ON TAP

Dogfish Head Craft Brews  
Cape May Brewery Honey Porter  
Leinenkugel Summer Shanty  
Sierra Nevada Limited Selections  
Stella Artois

Featuring All Natural  
ORGANIC BEEF & CHICKEN

PLUS! Healthy Kids Menu

BEST GLUTEN FREE  
MENU AT THE SHORE

## THIN CRUST BRICK OVEN PIZZA

Lucky 13

\$13 ALL DAY • UNTIL 5:00PM

SUNDAY: Oven-Roasted Turkey, Stuffing, Mashed Potatoes, Rich Gravy

MONDAY: Grilled Local Fish Tacos, Pico de gallo,  
Baha Sauce & Fresh Crema

TUESDAY: Low-Country Shrimp & Grits

WEDNESDAY: Local Artisan Bucatini Pasta

pan-tossed rustic Marinara two 1/2lb house-rolled Meatballs

THURSDAY: Sautéed Fresh Calves' Liver, Onions & Bacon

FRIDAY: Beer Battered Fried Fisherman Platter

Local Hand-Shucked Clams, Gulf Shrimp,  
Local Catch, Hand-cut Fries & Slaw

1200 RT. 109 SOUTH CAPE MAY, NJ • 609-884-BONE (2663) • WWW.LUCKYBONESGRILLE.COM



ALEX AND ANI  
(+) ENERGY

MADE IN AMERICA WITH LOVE

**HENRY'S**  
Since 1972

407 WASHINGTON ST | CAPE MAY, NJ  
609.884.0334

POSITIVELY AUTHORIZED RETAILER