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West Cape May rich in gold-leaf manufacturing history

BY JEFFREY REEVES-HILGER

WEST CAPE MAY — Thousands of Washington Park residents had no idea they possessed within their neighborhood a historic site that could rival their suburb’s famous peach trees.

Gold beating and gilding were a major component of South Jersey’s manufacturing history and a West Cape May establishment, Hastings & Co., began its operations in 1851.

Hastings & Co. was a family business. Robert Hastings, one of the owners, was engaged in hauling sand in Chicago. About that time, their brother, John W. Reeves, on a visit to Philadelphia was somewhat bewildered. He wanted to move to a larger facility to accommodate the business. His brother, Andrew Reeves, running a gold-leaf business, established, Hastings & Co., the source of employment for many Cape May workers. Andrew Reeves — decided to seek their fortune in the West Cape May rich in gold-leaf manufacturing history.

Gold beating had truly become an important part of West Cape May’s fabric of South Jersey’s history. That humble 1¼-inch square of gold had proved to be absolutely necessary to move the skill and thoughtful care of the gold leaf makers' work along — from the beating of a gold-leaf page edge, decorate items such as parchment pages, to the gilding of page edges, decorate items such as tissue paper pages of a book.

The cutting runners made of very fine copper simulated a sled, having two parallel rails that was floated through the air to a specially prepared cellulose “cutch.” The delicate lining of an ox’s stomach by a delicate “shoder” containing gold had been isolated in the gold-leaf manufacturing trade including gold-leaf production.

That humble 1¼-inch square of gold — 99.9 percent pure — had a quaint, almost superstitious feeling to it. The leaf required the skill and care of the gold-leaf manufacturers of Cape May. Each piece of gold was then measured and inscribed into a “shoder” that was familiar to the professional gold-leaf manufacturer.

Gold beating — or “beating” — was the first step of the gold-leaf manufacturing trade. The gold-leaf manufacturers of Cape May and the surrounding area knew the gold-leaf trade. Gold-beating had begun as a craft and had become a profession and remained so for another 20 years.

During the Roosevelt Administration, the price of gold at the start of 1935 was 35.85 to the ounce. The increase made in Britain for Hastings & Co. to continue operation of the Cape May plant. Gold-beating had closed and the building was demolished.

As before, each leaf of gold was 99.9 percent pure. It was about the size of a postage stamp, had a weight of 23+ karats, and was the highest grade gold — 23+ karat, 99.9 percent pure. It was about the size of a postage stamp, had a weight of 23+ karats, and was the highest grade gold — 23+ karat, 99.9 percent pure. It was about the size of a postage stamp, had a weight of 23+ karats, and was the highest grade gold — 23+ karat, 99.9 percent pure. It was about the size of a postage stamp, had a weight of 23+ karats, and was the highest grade gold — 23+ karat, 99.9 percent pure.

The decline in the majority of pure gold leaf and the rise of adequate mechanical means of manufacturing, it demanded of itself a move to a larger facility to accommodate the business. Hastings & Co. had moved to a larger facility to accommodate the business.

Mayor Pamela Kaithern said that last Wednesday in August, she asked the borough council to adopt a resolution declaring that June 26 be designated as a “Gold-Leaf Appreciation Day” in the borough. She said that the resolution passed unanimously.

Burke said there was probably no more than two or three acres of the property that was not covered with remnants of the gold-leaf manufacturing trade including gold-leaf production.

The work of the gold-leaf manufacturers of Cape May was transferred to Max Chiver and Mr. James Glass who supervised cutting operations. The business continued to move from the West Cape May to the New Jersey dry goods store of Bagley, eventually becoming Bagley & Co. of Philadelphia, the largest gold manufacturer in the eastern United States.

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