

OVERLAND COTTON MILL: VICTORIAN SYMBOL OF ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN THE 19th and 21st CENTURIES

Do you think the design of an industrial building makes a difference for the people who work inside it?

The Overland Cotton Mill was built in 1890-91 at the height of Denver's economic boom. Cotton grown in Texas was shipped by rail north to Denver for processing. During the 13 years it was operating, the mill produced between three and twelve million yards of cloth annually. Most of the production was heavy-duty cotton yardage suitable for making work clothes (Denver Public Library).

Structure

The Overland Cotton Mill is a collection of red brick industrial buildings arranged in a rough T-shape. The buildings sit about one-quarter mile west of the Platte River and 150 feet south of Evans Avenue. The structures are surrounded by asphalt on three sides. A rail spur runs on the west side of the mill building and was originally used to ship materials into and out of the plant (Overland Cotton Mill National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form).

The two-story mill building is the largest structure in the group. It stands 102 feet by 408 feet, and the building has regular repetitive bays of large windows separated by massive brick piers. Keeping the windows as large as possible reduced the necessity for additional lighting inside the mill. The tall, narrow windows are made up of 24 individual panes of glass set in metal casement frames with red sandstone sills. Each window is capped with a low segmental brick arch (Colorado Historical Society Historic Building Inventory).

An innovative and unusual ventilation system was incorporated into the building. Large concrete ducts ran under the floor and up inside the thick masonry piers. These ducts were used to add humidity to the air, and fans forced air over pools of water and into the ducts. The moisture-laden air-cooled the building on hot days much like an evaporative cooler. The additional humidity also minimized the likelihood of a fire being sparked by static electricity. Since the air in the mill was filled with highly flammable cotton dust motes, this was important. A tall (approximately 150 feet) square brick smoke stack rises south of the west wing. The stack terminates with decorative corbeled brick cap. Large white letters spell out "COBUSCO" on all four sides of the chimney. This lettering was added when Colorado Builders' Supply owned the building.

Architect

The building's architect, Charles R. Makepeace, was born in Fayetteville, NC in 1860. He attended Duke University (then known as Trinity College) but left before graduating. He then made his way to Rhode Island, where he established his architectural firm in 1886. The firm specialized in the design and construction of industrial buildings, particularly cotton mills. Over its history, the Makepeace firm designed more than 250 industrial facilities in twenty-four states as well as plants in Canada, Mexico, South America and Australia.

People

Many of the workers in the plant lived in housing supplied by the mill. Workers also bought their food and other supplies from the company store on credit. Wages were low, and rents and fees for materials purchased at the company store were all deducted from the workers' paychecks. Many workers found they had little or no money in their paycheck. Wages at the mill were one-third to one-half of wages paid at other industrial facilities. The inability to save any money left workers perpetually tied to the mill with no chance to move on to better employment opportunities.

As bad as conditions were for adults at the mill, children suffered even greater deprivations. There were hundreds of children in the work force and they were paid 30-50 cents for working a 12-hour day. Although the South Denver School Board established a school in the area, few children attended. If a child stayed off the job to attend school, the mill boss could fire all other members of the family and keep them out of work until the child returned to the mill. Stories in *The Denver Post* about the working conditions at the mill caught the eye of Judge Benjamin Lindsey who took up the cause of labor violations. All of this became a moot point when a crippling coal strike in 1903 closed the mill.

Uses

The Ku Klux Klan became a prominent force on the Denver political scene during the 1920s, and the group rented the office wing of the mill for their headquarters. It is possible that the Klan chose this location because it was close to Ruby Hill in Overland Park where the Klan rallied to burn crosses.

The plant was used to manufacture shell casings from 1941 to 1945. In December of 1942, a heat-treating furnace for shells jammed which led to a disastrous fire. Luckily, the factory did not handle explosive materials or the damage might have been worse. The fire destroyed the interior and the roof of the main building. The plant was deemed to be so important to the war effort that the building was quickly rebuilt and put back into production.

The Pittsburgh Radium Company processed vanadium ore from 1920 to 1923, Merrion & Wilkins used the building to auction wool from 1935 to 1939, Colorado Builders' Supply owned and operated the space in 1939, the building was used to manufacture munitions for WWII from 1941 to 1945, the Mentor Corporation occupied the site in 1976, and the Car Corporation used the space in 1988. Currently, Hercules Industries manufactures heating and AC equipment here.

Neighborhood

The Overland Cotton Mill was built near the center of the unincorporated community of Manchester Heights. Manchester was bordered by present day Mississippi Avenue on the north, Yale Avenue on the south and the South Platte River on the east. The community derived its name from Manchester, England in hopes that it might one day establish a textile industry rivaling its namesake. Manchester was annexed by the City of Denver in 1901. In the 1950s, the area was developed as a residential neighborhood for working class people. Modest houses are intermixed with light manufacturing and industry.

References

Denver Public Library. <https://history.denverlibrary.org/>.

Overland Cotton Mill National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form.

Colorado Historical Society Historic Building Inventory.

