

U. S. Bunting

Early Manufacture of Bunting

Prior to the Civil War, American flag makers imported primarily English bunting for the manufacture of the nation's flags. In March 1865, General Benjamin F. Butler incorporated the United States Bunting Company and began producing flag bunting in a factory within the works of the newly established Wamesit Power Company.¹ U. S. Bunting quickly became the most successful manufacturer of bunting cloth in the United States.² Butler exploited his ties with members of Congress and military officials to garner government contracts with his company. In 1866 his agent, De Witt C. Farrington, presented the Senate with a large American flag (21 by 12 feet), produced by the bunting company, to fly over the U.S. Capitol. It was reportedly the first flag of American-manufactured bunting to be hoisted over the capitol building.³



This flag made at the United States Bunting Company around 1865 was auctioned at Sotheby's and its estimated value was between \$50,000 and \$70,000.

Benjamin Butler and His Managers

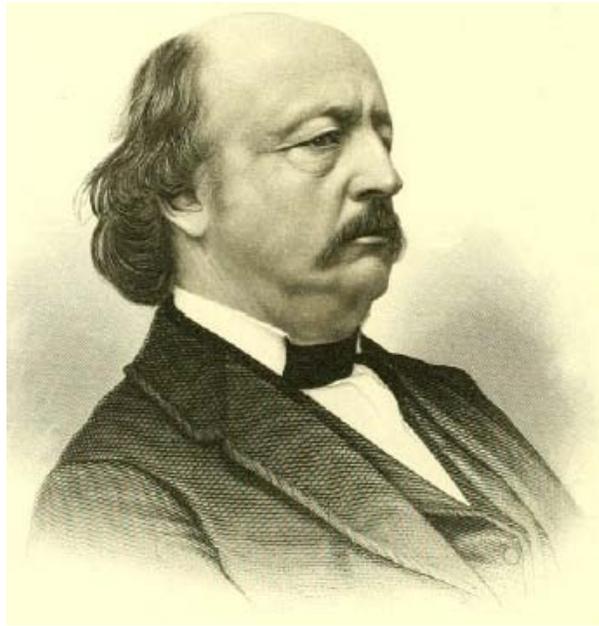
At U.S. Bunting and the several other manufacturing concerns in which he held a controlling interest, Benjamin Butler demonstrated a remarkable skill for hiring and

¹ Benjamin F. Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War*, v. 5, (Norwood, MA; Plimpton Press, 1917), p. 681. The bunting company and the Wamesit Power Company were chartered at about the same time. Butler maintained interests in both concerns. The Wamesit company was modeled somewhat after the Proprietors of Locks & Canals insofar as its main purpose was to supply mills along its canal system with waterpower. It controlled the water rights of Concord River at the location of its dam at Wamesit Falls, using the old Whipple Canal to channel river water to its associated mills. In addition, the Wamesit Power Company owned a number of mill properties connected to its canal system and leased space in these mills to a range of manufacturing companies.

² Grace Rogers Cooper, *Thirteen Star Flags: Keys to Identification*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), p. 23.

³ An article on Farrington's presentation of the U.S. flag to the Senate appeared in the *Philadelphia Press*, February 23, 1866, as noted in George H. Preble, *Origin and History of the American Flag*, v. 1, (Philadelphia: Nicholas L. Brown, 1917), p. 348.

retaining highly capable, fiercely loyal agents and superintendents. For many years the key official at the bunting company was Walter H. McDaniels. Born in Dennis, Massachusetts, in 1844, McDaniels was the son of an English gunsmith and Scottish mother whose large family settled in Lowell not long after his birth. McDaniels likely attended Lowell's public schools and by age 17 was working as a bookkeeper.⁴ He probably served in the Civil War after which he returned to Lowell and was hired as an overseer at the newly formed U.S. Bunting Company. By 1870 McDaniels was appointed superintendent of the bunting factory where he oversaw its daily operation.



Soon after Benjamin Butler founded the United States Bunting Company he was elected to Congress from Massachusetts and quickly gained renown as a leading Radical Republican.

During the 1870s the company emerged as the second largest woolen mill in Lowell and expanded its production to include worsted dress goods. By the mid 1880s U.S. Bunting employed 450 women and men, and operated with five sets of cards, 5,000 spindles, and 220 looms, and used 3,000 pounds of wool per day.⁵ Farrington had continued to serve as treasurer of the company, but following Benjamin Butler's death in 1893 he sought to retire from active involvement in the firm. McDaniels knew of two brothers, Charles B. and George Stevens, with whom he had done business in the worsted industry, and offered each a position at U.S. Bunting.

⁴ Federal census for Lowell, 1850 & 1860. In the latter census McDaniels is listed as a bookkeeper. His father's birthplace was variously listed as Ireland and England. A number of the McDaniels family members became educators in Lowell's public schools. Joseph H. McDaniels, two years older than Walter, graduated from Harvard in 1861 and then taught at Lowell High School before receiving a graduate degree at Harvard. From 1868 to 1911, he was faculty member at Hobart College in Geneva, New York, teaching Greek language and literature. A sister, Elizabeth, taught many years at Lowell High School. See Lowell city directories, 1866, 1868 & 1874.

⁵ This data is noted in *The Bivouac*, (Lowell: 1886), p. 54.



The oldest surviving buildings of the U.S. Bunting Company date from the 1880s and extend along the west side of Hale's Brook. The waterway seen in this photograph is part of the power canal system that was formerly used in conjunction with the mills.

The Stevens Brothers Take Control

The Stevens brothers borrowed money from their wealthy mother, Harriet Brooks Stevens, and acquired Farrington's interest in the company. Within a few years Charles Brooks Stevens married into the Butler family and subsequently played a leading role at U.S. Bunting.⁶ Although, as with other branches of the textile industry, worsted and bunting manufacturers experienced booms and busts, U.S. Bunting remained relatively prosperous and undertook a series of improvements to its factory on Crosby Street, within the Wamesit Power Company's waterpower system. A fire in 1907, which destroyed a dye house, carpenter shop, and wool storage building, prompted the bunting company to build a new dye house.⁷ That same year the company had a five-story brick factory constructed along Newhall Street, replacing a number of outdated manufacturing buildings on this site.⁸ As one of the Stevens family members observed, from the 1890s through the First World War, "the Bunting Company's profits were the principal source of income that permitted [Butler family members] to live in the style to which General Butler had accustomed them."⁹

Following McDaniels death in 1915, the Stevens family continued to operate U.S. Bunting, which also maintained an interest in the Stevens' Ames Worsted Company. These two firms were operated independently until 1947 when the Stevens family decided to shut down U.S. Bunting. Ames Worsted occupied a number of buildings within the former bunting and cartridge company facilities, leasing space from the new

⁶ Ames Stevens, "Hither and Yon with Spindle and Loom," unpublished manuscript, 1976, copies available at the American Textile History Museum. See pp. 2-3.

⁷ "Fire in U.S. Bunting Works at Lowell," *Boston Globe*, May 25, 1907.

⁸ The new addition to the plant is noted in *Textile World*, v. 34, (October 1907-March 1908), p. 161.

⁹ Stevens, "Spindle and Loom," p. 4.

owners of the Wamesit Power Company (the Stevens family had also owned the Wamesit Company, before selling it in 1947). By the mid 1950s, however, they closed Ames Worsted, thus ending over 90 years of woolen textile production at this location.¹⁰



This recent aerial view of Hale's Brook in the vicinity of the former U.S. Bunting Company's works is looking north. The large concrete building in the lower right is on the site of the former Lowell Bleachery.

¹⁰ Stevens, "Spindle and Loom," chapters 5 & 11.