



innovative by nature

Western Knitting Mills

When Western Knitting Mills came to Rochester in 1891, it would become the area's largest employer, one of the world's largest manufacturers of knitted products, and affect the growth of the community, including the establishment of a Catholic Church.

In 1891, Western Knitting Mills came to Rochester with owners, William Yawkey and Charles Chapman, and William Chapman as the new manager. At Fourth and Water Street, a state of the art building was constructed with two stories, a basement, and room for 400 knitting and tufting machines. The mill itself ran from steam, water, and electricity. In 1896, a fire watchtower was also added to the mill's 111,000 square feet. Requested by the Village of Rochester, the watchtower was patrolled 24 hours a day. As a knitting mill, it employed 500 people, who produced 100,000 dozen gloves, socks, and mittens annually. When more workers were needed in the early 1900s, Reverend William Collycott brought unemployed women back from his hometown of Calumet in the Upper Peninsula. Women were also encouraged to emigrate from Ireland and Belgium for work at the mill, leading to the establishment of St. Andrew Catholic Church in 1912.



After WWI, the Chapman brothers sold their share of the company. From the 1920s to the 1930s, the mill struggled through a number of closings and re-openings. In 1941, McAleer Manufacturing Company purchased the building, after receiving a government contract to produce 50,000 photoflash bombs for the World War II effort. Since 1891, the Western Knitting Mill building has remained a landmark in downtown Rochester and in 2000, it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Today, it is home to the restaurant and brewery, Rochester Mills Beer Co. and several other businesses.



Online Resources

NOTE: If the below links do not take you directly to the photo or document, click on “Open Document File” under the Links section.

- Photograph of crowd in front of Western Knitting Mills:
<http://www.oaklandcountyhistory.org/awweb/awarchive?item=6458>
- Photograph of employees inside Western Knitting Mills:
<http://www.oaklandcountyhistory.org/awweb/awarchive?item=211591>
- Photograph of employee dormitories at Western Knitting Mills:
<http://www.oaklandcountyhistory.org/awweb/awarchive?item=87551>
- Deed of sale on Western Knitting Mills stationary:
<https://rochesterhills.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/E10220C4-4AFA-4AE7-94DC-992713964119>
- March 26, 1897 *Rochester Era* newspaper article about Western Knitting Mills facilities (see first page under “The New Western Knitting Mills”):
<http://www.oaklandcountyhistory.org/awweb/pdfopener?md=1&did=202989>
- December 11, 1891 *Rochester Era* newspaper article about an incident between an employee and a manager at the Western Knitting Mill (see first page in third column from left above “Rochester Schools”):
<http://www.oaklandcountyhistory.org/awweb/pdfopener?md=1&did=202862>
- May 21, 1897 *Rochester Era* newspaper advertisement seeking women to work at Western Knitting Mills (see first page in second column under “Talk of the Town”):
<http://www.oaklandcountyhistory.org/awweb/pdfopener?md=1&did=202996>

A historical newspaper advertisement for Western Knitting Mills. The text is in a bold, serif font and is centered on a dark background. It reads: 'GIRLS WANTED. ONE HUNDRED WANTED at once to learn KNITTING. Steady employment. Apply to THE WESTERN KNITTING MILLS, Rochester, Mich.'