

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 28, 2005

The Building of the Insulite Mill, 1900–1901: What was the “Insulite” mill? The Marshall Brothers paper mills at Yorklyn and at Marshall’s Bridge were very profitable in the 1890s, largely because they specialized in making only “fibre paper,” sold to the several fibre companies around Wilmington and Newark. A large fibre company, probably owned by the Taylors, the Ruperts (Delaware Hard Fibre Company at Marshallton), or the Wrights (Continental Diamond Fibre Company at Newark), was buying all its paper from the Marshalls, and this amounted to perhaps 80% of the Marshalls’ business. When this prosperous fibre company bought its own paper mill, it no longer had a need for the Marshalls’ paper. So about 1900, Israel and Elwood put their heads together and decided to enter the fibre-making business in order to have an outlet for their paper.

On the Auburn Heights side of Benge Road were four large houses with about 11 family dwelling units, plus a fairly new brick office building. The paper mill was (and still is) directly across the road. There was also a single dwelling in the triangle between Benge Road and Route 82. The large frame house closest to the lawn of Auburn Heights was razed, and a new mill, about three times the area of the razed house, was erected on the site to house the first fibre machine in Yorklyn. Completed in 1901, this building was called the Insulite Mill.

Within a very short time the fibre business flourished, and the capacity of the Insulite Mill was severely taxed. A large farm was bought by the Marshall Brothers on both sides of the railroad in Yorklyn, some of it flood plain and some a high hill to the southeast. The plan was to expand both the paper and fibre business in this new location. No. 1 Fibre Mill was the first building on this new site, but a freak storm blew the stone walls down before the roof was on. The debris was soon cleaned up, the new building completed, and the machinery was in operation by the end of 1904. Before all the machines were installed, however, a community dance was held in a large, open room on the second floor.

The National Fibre and Insulation Company came into being with 23-year-old J. Warren Marshall, eldest son of Israel and Lizzie, as its first president. In the early 1920s, the name was changed to National Vulcanized Fibre Company, which was abbreviated to NVF in 1965. Warren Marshall was president until the end of his life in 1953.

Except for the active continuation of paper-making at the old Marshall Brothers mill, almost all activity shifted to the new location, and the paper and fibre plant there was greatly expanded in 1911–12. By 1912, the fibre machines had been removed from the Insulite mill, and it became a heated storage area for the next 89 years. Steam pipes through the building continued under the lawn to Auburn Heights to heat the house, garage, and later the museum. The lower level along Benge Road was a truck garage and repair shop, and a small blacksmith shop on the Route 82 end was converted for welding and vehicle maintenance. Barn swallows loved the tall brick chimney, and Clarence Marshall stored some antique tires and old Stanley boilers in the building right after World War II. The blacksmith shop collapsed first, then in 2001 one end of the main roof fell in. The company immediately tore everything down; the Insulite Mill had lasted exactly 100 years!