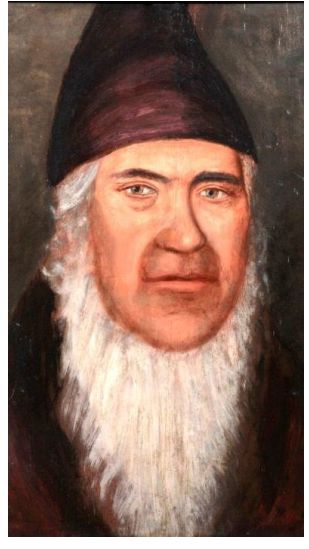




## Old Economy Village: A Brief Textile History

The Harmony Society raised sheep and silkworms, and produced wool, cotton, linen, and silk. Thread and yarn were produced onsite, used by members for fabric, and sold as well. The Harmonists became nationally and internationally known for textile production. The following is a brief history of textiles produced at Old Economy Village, Ambridge, Pennsylvania.



George Rapp, a linen weaver, founded the Harmony Society. He and his followers produced wool in Harmony, Pennsylvania, wool and cotton in the state of Indiana, and wool, cotton, linen, and silk in Economy, Pennsylvania. George Rapp died in 1847.

**1824:** The Harmonist Society purchased 3,000 acres of Beaver County farmland that became the site of Economy. They built homes, a community that included shops for linen weavers, blacksmiths, tanners, hatters, cabinet makers, and other artisans. They also founded and managed several railroads and banks. At its height, The Harmony Society had 800 to 900 members.

Their factories were large industrial buildings, with commercial equipment powered in part by Pittsburgh-made steam engines. These buildings housed spinning and weaving operations, with 70 horsepower steam operating pressure. A 50-foot well pumped water for steam.

The Harmonists created and used the latest textile manufacturing technologies, providing them with a competitive edge within the growing early American economy, with production of thread, yarn, wool, cotton, and linen. Later, they perfected the silk manufacturing process, from worm to fabric. Silk was worn for special occasions; cotton and wool clothing was intended for everyday wear.



The cotton mill employed about 100 workers, and contained a picker, spreader, carding machines, spindles, reels, thrussels, lapping, spreading, and spinning machines. Harmonist cotton fabric was plain rather than printed, as printing equipment was cost-prohibitive. The cotton mill was located on 15<sup>th</sup> Street and Ohio River Boulevard.



Wool production began with merino and Saxon sheep raised onsite; fleece was also purchased locally. Wool was separated, dyed, combed, coarsely spun, fine-spun, then woven and fulling. Woolen factory equipment included pickers, spinning jennies, spruling, warping, dressing, fulling stocks, washing machines, and dye kettles. The woolen mill was located on 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Ohio River Boulevard.

**1827:** Gertrude Rapp, age 19 and granddaughter of George Rapp, directed silk manufacturing at Economy. See below for special recognition of Gertrude Rapp.

**1830s/Early 1840s:** The Harmonists were widely known for their steam-powered silk reeling operations. Silk apparel was popular in the United States, and Economy produced high quality silk jacquard. Silkworms fed on mulberry leaves from trees on Economy property. The Harmonists processed cocoons in two onsite silkworm cocooneries, reeled and dyed thread, then wove silk fabric using complex patterns.



Silk production included velvets and ribbons; shawls were trimmed with the five-inch-wide *Harmonist Rose* ribbon pattern. Harmonists won gold medals twice for silk cloth production. By 1842, 237 pounds of raw silk were produced yearly. The Economy silk cocooneries were located at 14<sup>th</sup> and Merchant Streets.

**1850:** Silk production ended, due to an aging population, no younger members, and lack of protectionist legislation from foreign competition. Other manufacturing dwindled as well during the following years but farming continued.

**1905:** Lack of younger members plus an earlier split of many members due to philosophical differences brought the Harmony Society's population to two, and the Society was dissolved.

**1965:** Old Economy Village was made a National Historic Landmark. The six-acre museum complex contains the remaining key buildings of the Harmony Society. Many examples of the Harmonists' fine textiles including fabric swatches, wool, cotton, silk, and velvet apparel, as well as tools of the trade are housed and exhibited at the Old Economy Village Visitor Center.

**1986:** The Historic District became a National Historic Landmark District.

Above, top to bottom: cotton and woolen mills, silk cocoonery



Above: Harmonist Rose ribbon



### Gertrude Rapp, 1808-1889

Gertrude Rapp was part of the Economy community. Economy had already established itself in wool and cotton cloth manufacturing, and in 1827, Gertrude was tasked at age 19 with creating silk production at Economy, hardly the typical pursuit of a 19th century young woman. She studied sericulture to learn the most effective means of silk production. Under Gertrude's supervision, the Harmony Society became the top U.S. silk producer, providing top-quality silk cloth. Silk production ended in 1852, due to foreign competition, changes in technology, and an aging Harmonist workforce. Gertrude lived to age 81, and died several years before the Harmony Society's dissolution.

*This Old Economy Village textile history was compiled by Three Rivers Fiber Focus. All information and photographs courtesy of Old Economy Village. Special thanks to Sarah Buffington, Curator, Old Economy Village.*