Segment Summaries

Rivalry

On an early canoe expedition, future Territorial Governor James Doty visited an island, with the Fox River flowing around it in two channels. When the U.S. government opened the land for settlement, Doty returned as a land speculator. A clash of ambitions between other town-builders led to the establishment of the rival settlements of Neenah and Menasha — one along each river channel.

Wood and Wheat

Dams captured the constant flow of the Fox River, which powered the growth of early industries. Mills processed wood into woodenware products, and the wheat from pioneer farms into flour. Ironically, the canal system that was the focus of settlement quickly became obsolete with the coming of the railroads. With direct access to Chicago via rail, both communities grew rapidly.

Paper

The Wisconsin Central Railroad provided an abundant supply of wood to the growing Menasha Woodenware Company. But the flour industry faced declining wheat yields and steep competition from Minneapolis. Entrepreneurs found that the Fox River could provide the power and clean water needed for papermaking. The industry expanded outward, and impacted the entire region.

Building Communities

Manufacturing industries in Neenah and Menasha created unprecedented wealth. To solve pressing problems of the day, wealthy industrialists and their families gave back and created new local institutions.

Better Than Cotton

New leadership, and a new emphasis on science, research and development fueled the Kimberly-Clark Corporation in the 20th century. Development of a cotton substitute made from wood aided the war effort during World War I. After the war, the product revolutionized women’s hygiene and led to the development of Kleenex, one of the best-known products in American history.

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Makers

In addition to papermaking, local industries produced a wide variety of products, including books, printed packaging, and manhole covers. The often family-owned and operated companies provided thousands of jobs and a strong sense of community.

Retooling

In recent years, local industries faced stiff competition and great pressure to get big or sell out. Many closed or lost their local ties, and some transformed to meet the new demands. While the cities turned down an opportunity to consolidate, they have merged their fire departments. A series of public/private partnerships led to a new industrial park, and revitalized downtown areas.