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MeadWestvaco Corporation

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Introduction

The story of MeadWestvaco Corporation is, at its heart, a tale of American enterprise, resilience, and innovation. Born from the union of two venerable companies—The Mead Corporation and Westvaco Corporation—MeadWestvaco’s lineage stretches back over a century and a half, reflecting the ebbs and flows of the American economy, the development of industry, and the enduring spirit of adaptation. With roots deep in the forests and towns of Ohio and West Virginia, and branches extending to markets and communities worldwide, MeadWestvaco’s journey embodies the dynamic challenges and opportunities faced by American manufacturing giants.

From humble beginnings as a small paper mill in Dayton, Ohio, and a pioneering pulp company in Piedmont, West Virginia, both Mead and Westvaco emerged as major players in the U.S. paper industry. Their histories are intertwined with the nation’s economic development: supplying paper for books and newspapers during the explosive growth of mass media, innovating during the packaging revolution of the twentieth century, and forging new ground in specialty chemicals and information systems. Along the way, they weathered storms—economic downturns, antitrust scrutiny, and evolving consumer demands—that required deft management, strategic acquisitions, and bold technological innovation.

The 2002 merger that created MeadWestvaco was emblematic of a changing industrial landscape, where scale and specialization became key to survival and success. The new company harnessed the strengths and traditions of its predecessors, positioning itself as a global leader in packaging solutions—a sector increasingly central to commerce, consumer goods, and logistics. With operations spanning continents and a product portfolio serving a vast array of industries, MeadWestvaco adapted to the complexities of globalization even as it stayed rooted in sustainable business practices.

MeadWestvaco’s history is not solely defined by products and profits; it is also a story of people, places, and values. The company made significant investments in the communities where it operated, supported by employee commitment and charitable giving through its foundation. It strove to be a good steward of the environment, achieving recognition for sustainability while confronting the challenges posed by large-scale industrial operations.

In the closing chapters of its independent existence, MeadWestvaco initiated decisive changes—spinning off business lines, divesting assets, and ultimately merging with RockTenn in 2015 to form WestRock, continuing its legacy into the present era. Today, the story of MeadWestvaco offers insight into the transformation of American industry,

the importance of innovation in maintaining competitiveness, and the enduring impact of a company on the lives of its employees, customers, and communities.

This book invites readers to explore the full sweep of MeadWestvaco's rich history, tracing the roots, challenges, triumphs, and transformations that shaped it. Through this chronicle, we gain not only an understanding of one remarkable company, but also of the broader forces that have shaped—and continue to shape—the industrial and economic fabric of the United States.

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CHAPTER ONE: The American Paper Industry: Historical Roots

The origins of paper trace back over two millennia to ancient China, where early innovators crafted sheets from mulberry bark, hemp, and rags, creating a medium for writing and drawing that would eventually revolutionize communication worldwide. For centuries, the secrets of papermaking remained closely guarded within China, but by the 8th century, the craft began to spread to the Middle East, and by the 11th century, it reached Europe. In Europe, papermaking largely replaced animal-skin-based parchment, with early mills in Spain utilizing water mills and trip hammers to refine the process. The boom in papermaking accelerated with the rise of literacy and the invention of movable type in the 15th century, driving a demand for a more affordable and abundant writing surface.

When papermaking finally arrived in the American colonies in 1690, it brought with it a centuries-old tradition rooted in European methods. The first paper mill in British America was established near Germantown, Pennsylvania, by William Rittenhouse, a German papermaker who had honed his skills in the Netherlands. This pioneering mill, located near William Bradford's print shop, remained the sole paper producer in the colonies for two decades. Early American paper mills, much like their European counterparts, were strategically situated near populated areas to ensure a steady supply of rags—the primary raw material for paper at the time—and access to fresh water, essential for both washing fibers and powering machinery. Cotton and linen rags, often imported from Europe, were the backbone of paper production for centuries.

As the colonies grew and demand for printed materials increased, so too did the number of paper mills. By 1710, William DeWees, Rittenhouse's brother-in-law, established a second mill, and by 1726, William Bradford himself started a mill in New Jersey to supply paper for his *New York Gazette*. The Stamp Act of 1765, enacted by Great Britain to tax colonial papers, inadvertently highlighted the growing reliance on domestically produced paper, as restrictions on colonial papermaking were not rigorously enforced due to paper shortages. The Revolutionary War further underscored the importance of local paper production, with skilled artisans like Nathan Sellers of Pennsylvania being discharged from the army to focus on manufacturing paper molds crucial for military orders and powder wrappers. By 1810, the newly formed United States boasted approximately 185 paper mills.

The early 19th century saw significant advancements in American papermaking, moving from largely hand-based production to mechanized processes. In 1816,

Thomas Gilpin patented the nation's first papermaking machine, based on English models, and put it into operation at his family's Brandywine Paper Mill in Delaware. Other inventors, like Coleman Sellers, son of Nathan, also contributed to the mechanization of the industry, patenting various papermaking devices in the 1820s and a complete machine in 1832. By the 1830s, machine-based production had largely supplanted traditional hand papermaking, drastically improving efficiency and lowering costs.

Despite these mechanization efforts, a persistent challenge remained: the scarcity and expense of rags, the traditional raw material. Papermakers constantly sought more plentiful and cost-effective alternatives. Experiments with various plant fibers, including tree bark, sugarcane waste, straw, and cornstalks, were conducted as early as the 1790s. The true game-changer, however, arrived in the mid-19th century with the advent of wood pulp.

The concept of using wood for paper gained traction in Europe in the 1840s, with Friedrich Gottlob Keller inventing a wood grinding machine in Germany in 1844. This innovation slowly made its way across the Atlantic, and by 1863, the *Boston Weekly Journal* became the first U.S. newspaper to be printed on paper made from ground wood pulp. The commercial production of wood pulp truly took off in the 1860s with the development of chemical processes like the sulfite and sulfate methods, which effectively "cooked down" wood in acid solutions to extract fibers. The first groundwood pulp mill in the United States was established in Massachusetts in 1867.

The shift from rags to wood pulp was nothing short of revolutionary. Wood was a far more abundant and cheaper resource, making paper significantly less expensive to produce. This dramatic reduction in cost had profound implications for the publishing and news industries. Newsprint prices plummeted, and books, newspapers, and magazines became affordable for a much wider audience, fostering an explosion in literacy and access to information. The per capita production of paper in the U.S. surged from less than 5 kilograms in 1850 (when rag paper was still the norm) to over 30 kilograms by 1900. This massive increase in paper availability fueled the growth of modern corporations, which relied heavily on vast supplies of paper to function.

The late 19th century also saw a geographical shift in the American paper industry. While Philadelphia had long been a preeminent center for papermaking, the industry's growth increasingly moved to regions with better access to water power and abundant wood pulp, such as New York and New England. Holyoke, Massachusetts, for example, earned the moniker "The Paper City" due to its burgeoning paper production. This period marked a critical transition, as companies invested in larger mills and more sophisticated machinery to meet the ever-growing demand for paper, setting the stage for the industrial giants that would emerge in the 20th century.

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