Title: "Danbury Crowned Them All: The Rise and Fall of the Hatting Industry in Danbury, Connecticut."

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Proposal:
The familiar story of the textile industry in New England begins with the establishment of small mills adjacent to the rivers of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire in the early 19th century; emphasizes the dominance of huge, technologically advanced, immigrant-staffed work places in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and concludes with the flight of the textile companies for the more congenial tax and labor climate of the South in the 1920's. Rusting mills are the symbols of the economic and social stagnation left in the wake of the departing industry.

This paper will present a somewhat different case history of a New England textile town, of interest in itself, but also valuable as a point of comparison for other regional community studies. Utilizing the methodologies of history and anthropology the authors will analyze the growth and decline of the hatting industry in Danbury and the effect of this process on the social fabric of the city. The investigation will focus on the impact of geography, energy sources and technology, demographic patterns, class relations, and the distribution of power. Both authors will deliver a portion of the paper at the conference.

The chronology of hatting in Danbury corresponds to the traditional New England pattern. The first hat shops appeared in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but were scattered throughout the rural areas as well as in the center of town for initially water was not a major factor in determining the location of the shops. By the
early 1800's more than fifty shops produced hats that were marketed by merchant entrepreneurs in major East coast cities and throughout the South. However hatting was but one of several fledgling industries, including comb making and the production of saddles and shoes, that were competing in the region. The paper will explore reasons for the eventual domination of hat making.

The coming of the railroad and with it a cheap supply of coal escalated the pace and scale of hat production in the 1850's. Larger factories required a plentiful supply of water so that the industry began to locate exclusively in the center of the town along the Still River. The post Civil War decades were boom years for hatting. By 1890 five million hats were manufactured annually, some in factories employing between 500 and 900 workers. Between 1890 and 1930 such factors as an efficient national marketing network, rigid tariff protection, more sophisticated mechanization, and specialization evident in the large scale production of rough hat bodies to be finished elsewhere, brought prosperity to the city. However because of its dependance on fashion, the hatting industry was vulnerable to depression, war, and shifts in taste. Successive blows from reduced purchasing power in the 1930's, re-allocation of resources during World War II, and a more informal post-war lifestyle sent hatting into a permanent eclipse by 1950. Today there is not a single hat factory in Danbury.

The cycle of artisan beginnings, emergence of mass production, and decline starting in 1930, is not unusual. However many aspects of the Danbury hatting experience are unique, and they will be examined in the paper. While Danbury was a hatting town it was not controlled
by a few mammoth firms; rather 50 to 75 hat factories operated in the city from the 1850's on. Even the largest firms employed less than 2,000 people. Diffusion of power was also fostered by the existence of other types of influential companies, such as those engaged in fur processing and the fabrication of hat boxes and hat bands, that serviced the hatting industry. For many decades the social distance between management and workers was not great. It was possible to move from the workbench to ownership of a factory, a route taken by such men as Frank Lee and Harry McLachlan. The city was not ghettoized by class as owners and workers, many of whom owned their own homes, lived in the same modest neighborhoods. The hatting industry was mechanized to only a moderate degree and workmen retained their craft skills and orientation well into the 20th century. The resulting independance of the worker along with the seasonal nature of production which encouraged mobility, were obstacles to control of the industry by both management and union.

Probably the sharpest divergence from the New England model was the continued health of Danbury after the demise of hatting. Serious efforts to diversify local industry, begun in World War I, paid dividends during World War II and the immediate postwar years when high tech industries came to Danbury to capitalize on its pool of skilled workers. The construction of the interstate highway system, and the subsequent migration of corporations into Westchester and Fairfield counties, blended Danbury into the suburban fabric of the Tri-state region. Some attention in the paper will be given to these recent developments.