

Now featured in the corridor near the Schoolfield Gallery

## Tobacco Trade That Built Hearth & Home Danville Tobacconists and Their Houses

The “house that tobacco built,” describes the Sutherlin Mansion, home to the Danville Museum for nearly half-a-century now—nearly as long as the Sutherlin family occupied their late-antebellum suburban Italian Villa. Actually, that succinct monicker, the “house that tobacco built,” fits scores of dwellings built postwar, in Danville’s own Gilded Age—of the Golden Leaf.

When William T. Sutherlin completed his sumptuous residence just before the Civil War, he also operated the second largest tobacco factory in Virginia. His early prosperity, borne of Bright Leaf tobacco, foreshadowed even greater economic exuberance after the war, which had left Danville and the surrounding Old Belt counties relatively unscathed.

Danville became a “come-to” place, attracting entrepreneurs who continued to pour into town after Reconstruction ended in 1877. Some focused on tobacco marketing, building and operating auction warehouses. Others erected lofty tobacco prizeries and a host of factories for processing tobacco or turning out consumer goods like the renowned “Danville lugs.” Newcomers included former tobacco growers straight off nearby farms, as well as tobacco speculators from smaller markets not too distant from Danville. Folks like the Dibrell brothers, Richard Louis and Alfonso, came too, all the way from Richmond, sent by their father in 1873 to establish in Danville a leaf order business. Such was Danville’s heady reputation through the eager Eighteen Eighties and the non-stop Nineties.

Getting rich quick proved to be a family affair. The Penns, eight brothers from Penns’ Store on the Patrick/Henry County, Virginia line, transformed Danville with powerhouse firms like Pemberton & Penn on Bridge Street, and an array of lavish houses along Main Street’s 800 block (Penns Bottom) and elsewhere in the Old West End. Also on Bridge Street, the F.X. Burton Plug & Twist Factory still stands as testimony to late-19th-century alliances of tobacco wealth in the marriage of Alice Shelton to Franklin Xavier Burton. Late in the 19th century they changed this community’s landscape with at least three other landmarks, sadly no longer standing. The Hotel Burton graced Main Street at North Union and their dazzling Victorian mansion stood at 723 Main Street. The third, hugging the banks of the Dan River, embodied in industrial brick-and-mortar, the direct link between tobacco wealth and the genesis of Danville’s textile industry. Morotock

Cotton Mills, built 1882-83, became Burton's and his partners' only foray in cotton textiles, but also their most lucrative venture ever when they "cashed in" by selling Morotock to Riverside Mills in 1890, the year Danville became a city. Riverside, born within sight of Morotock downriver, and at the same time (1882), grew to become the colossus Dan River Inc.,

"Tobacco Trade That Built Hearth & Home" profiles not only Sutherlin, the brothers Dibrell and Penn, and the marriage of F.X. Burton to Alice Shelton, whose union also forged a singular tobacco alliance, but it recounts as well the sometimes complicated sagas of seven other tobacco titans—along with pictures of their some of their houses—in the alcove just outside the Museum's lower (Schoolfield) gallery. Walls nearby are lined with other artifacts and memorabilia echoing Danville's unique role in marketing and processing tobacco. The installation includes an 1899 Sanborn (Fire Insurance) Map, covering much of a large wall, keyed to identify local tobacco trades flourishing some 120 years ago. These included prizeries, auction warehouses, factories, companies, stemmeries, storage facilities, and box factories then in the city—a total of seventy-seven (77)!