

JERSEY CITY AND THE BEGINNING OF BIG TOBACCO

By John A. Trosky

P. Lorillard & Company, one of the most iconic names in the tobacco industry in America, had its beginnings in the New York City area in the mid 17th century. The company was founded by Pierre Abraham Lorillard, a French Huguenot, in the year 1760. Its small beginnings were from a rented home on Chatham Street, now Park Row, in lower Manhattan. The company began as a snuff grinding factory. Lorillard is recognized as the first man to make snuff in America. He single handedly made New York a destination for world class tobacco products. One of his first business secrets was to sell his tobacco in dried animal bladders to maintain freshness, a bit repulsive today. His trademark of an Indian standing next to a hogshead of tobacco soon became one of the most recognized trademarks around the globe. Still in business today, they are the oldest continuously operated tobacco company in the world. They recently celebrated their 250th anniversary in 2010 making them the oldest publicly traded company in the United States. With success, the fledgling company moved to newer quarters in what is now the Bronx, along the Bronx River. It is here where a snuff mill was constructed on land purchased by Pierre Lorillard and what today, is now, the grounds of the New York Botanical Garden.



Fig. 1: An illustrated example of the original Pierre Lorillard logo used for tobacco products shipped by the company throughout the world.¹

Although some may recognize the name Lorillard, few may realize that the purveyor of such well known brands as Kent, Old Gold, Newport and Beech Nut, among their 160 brands, had a distinct connection to New Jersey and Jersey City in particular. Pierre Lorillard maintained a successful tobacco business in New York City until 1776 when he was killed by Hessian mercenaries of the British during their occupation of New York. Upon the death of Pierre, his sons, George and Peter (Pierre II) took over the business and continued to grow it. The popularity of tobacco in 18th and 19th century America insured that profits would soar and the company would see continued growth.

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In the early 1870s, having outgrown their facility in the Bronx, the Lorillard family chose to move their manufacturing to a new location on the other side of the Hudson River in Jersey City, New Jersey. It was on the site of 111 First Street in Jersey City that they took over a plant that was constructed by one of the nation's first conglomerates, the American Screw Company. It was a Greek revival red brick building that fronted on Washington Street that they would use to manufacture tobacco products and snuff. This factory became a part of a fast growing manufacturing area along the downtown Jersey City waterfront. The location provided easy access to rail and water transportation to ship products worldwide.

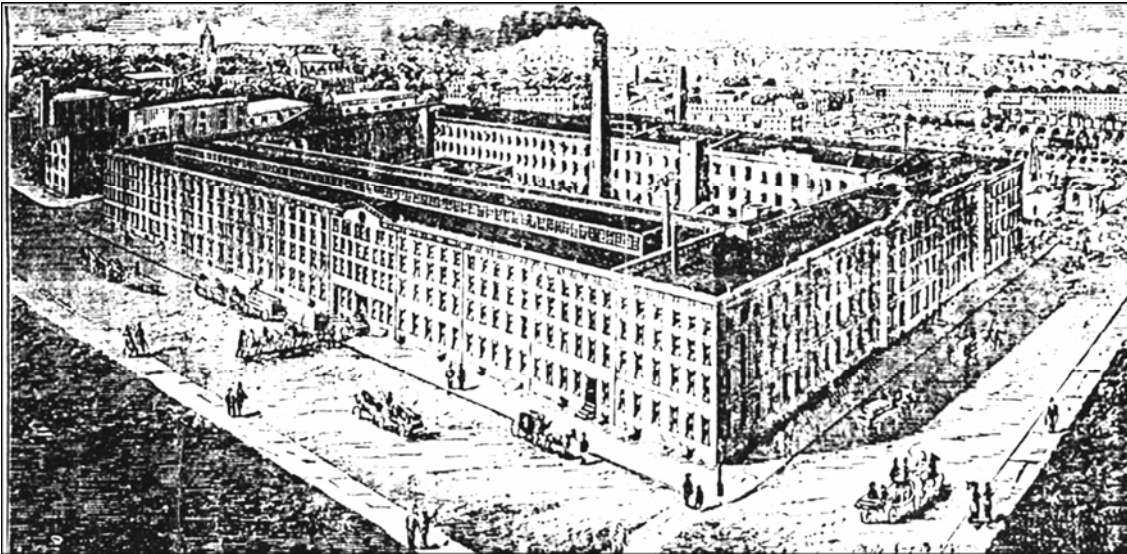


Fig. 2: Illustrated view of the original P. Lorillard plant in downtown Jersey City, formerly the American Screw Company manufacturing plant.²

The soon-to-be Mayor of Jersey City, Charles Seidler, would eventually become a partner in this venture with the Lorillards. Some even say that it was Seidler, himself, who convinced the Lorillards to move their business to Jersey City in the first place. The potential benefits of the location were Harsimus Yards and the nearby Pennsylvania Railroad for product distribution, a large newly arrived immigrant population for cheap labor, close proximity to a port for the shipping of product and the importation of spices for flavoring different brands of tobacco, and a readily available municipal waste system. Since their chief product was of a highly combustible nature, Lorillard was very concerned about fire safety. They were one of the first firms to install a rudimentary automatic sprinkler system through their building and they also maintained a detail of firefighters.

The three brick factory buildings occupied sixty-six city lots. They also had an additional eighteen city lots for making wooden cases for packing and transporting goods. There were upwards of 3500 people working in the factory at any given time, drawing a payroll of \$35,000 per week. By 1884 the number of employees had risen to over 4000, with many of those workers under-aged boys and girls. With no child labor laws in existence in the 19th century and Jersey City unwilling or unable to provide free night school, it was the P. Lorillard Company that took it upon itself in 1884 to comply with New Jersey's compulsory school laws by forming its own evening school for workers under the age of sixteen. The school was situated near the factory on Newark Avenue in Booraem Hall.

John Trosky~ JERSEY CITY AND THE BEGINNING OF BIG TOBACCO

A local physician, Dr. Leonard Gordon, was Lorillard's chief chemist who also managed a free library for all adult employees at the plant. Dr. Gordon would go on to become a director of the Jersey City Free Public Library. Lorillard also provided a dispensary to all employees as well as sewing classes.

The company continued to grow in the late 19th century and a new annex was built between 1st and 2nd Streets in Jersey City. Although all manufacturing was done in Jersey City, the company maintained a corporate presence in New York City at 114 Water Street.



Fig. 3: P. Lorillard Company full color advertising cover featuring Climax Plus (chewing tobacco), hand cancelled with a duplex cancel and franked with a Scott #265 at station 4 in Jersey City on February 3, 1895.

Great success also brought great wealth to the Lorillard family. They used much of that wealth to construct lavish homes. The family owned country property in downstate New York which would become Tuxedo Park in the 1880s. It was here that Pierre Lorillard IV would arrive at a formal ball at the Tuxedo Club in 1886 in a new style of formal wear that he had designed himself. He named his new creation in honor of the town and thus, the tuxedo was born.

With the dawn of the 20th century things began to change for the Lorillard empire. James Buchanan Duke, founder of the American Tobacco Company, soon absorbed the Lorillard firm in 1910. Duke had the license for a cigarette rolling machine that changed the dynamics of the industry. Although a part of the American Tobacco company conglomerate, Lorillard was allowed to keep its name intact. A new factory was constructed in Jersey City on the old Thompson estate in the Marion section of the city on 170 city lots and employing 5000 workers. The factory was of brick and steel construction and was located close to the Pennsylvania, the Lackawanna, the Erie and the Susquehanna railroads.

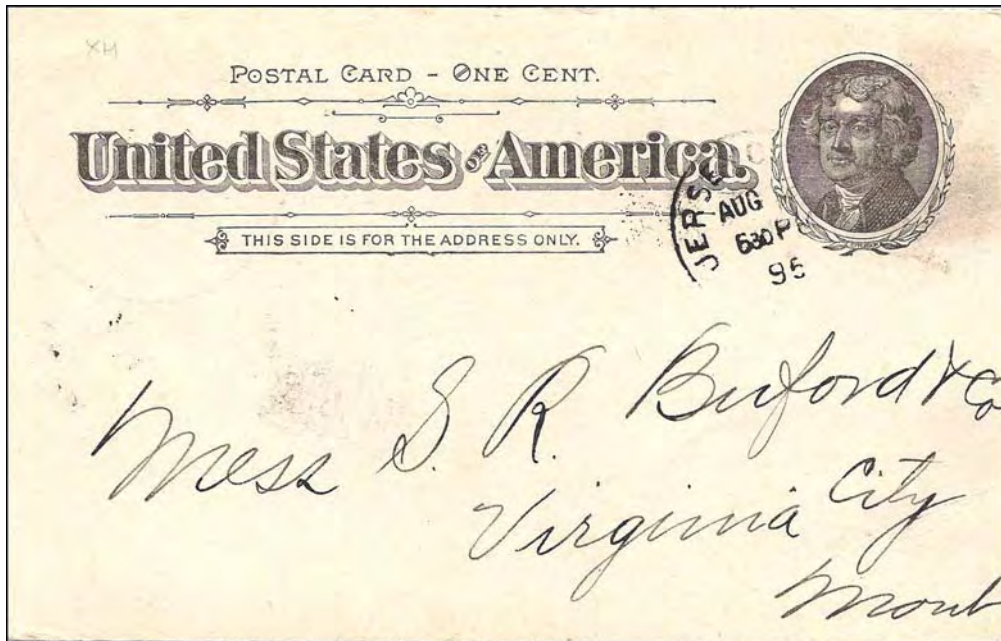


Fig. 4a & b: Hand addressed UX-12 postal card with Jersey City hand cancel dated August 1895, with preprinted reverse with P. Lorillard advertising logo, that acknowledged the receipt of a customer order.

Lorillard was once again an independent company after the US Supreme Court ruled against the American Tobacco Company in an anti-trust action in 1911. The original factory at 111 First Street continued to manufacture “plugs” until 1919 and the cigar factory located at 104 First Street continued in operation until 1928, the latter being destroyed by fire in 1990. Lorillard eventually moved all of its manufacturing operations out of Jersey City in 1956 to Greensboro, NC. The main Lorillard facility was taken over by rival R.J. Reynolds, the manufacturer of “Camel” cigarettes in 1928.

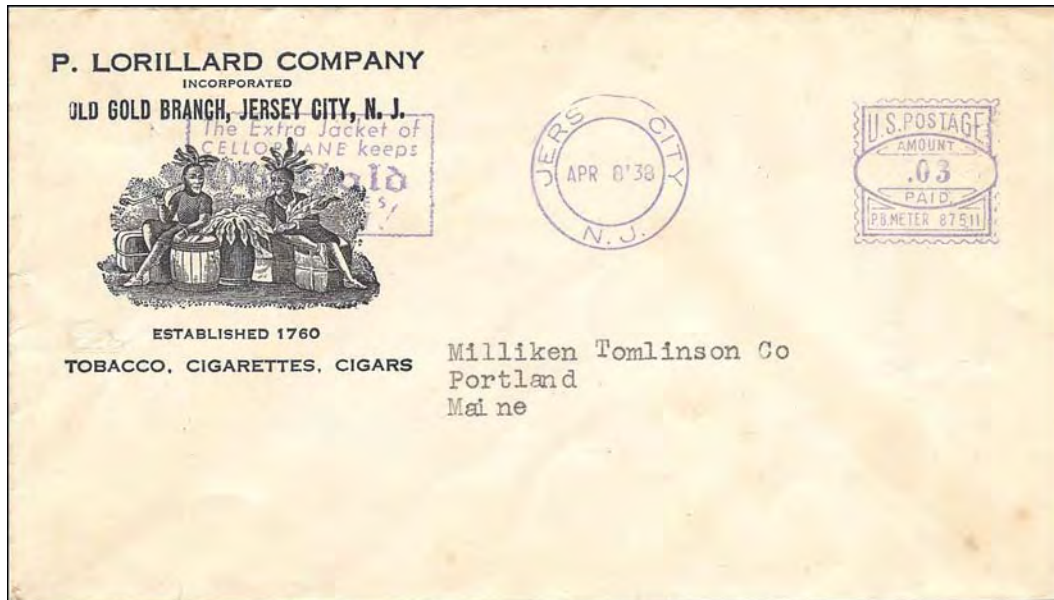


Fig. 5: P. Lorillard Company slogan metered envelope from 1938 with cachet based upon the traditional company logo of the Indian and hogshead of tobacco.

A variety of businesses occupied the 111 First Street site over the years, including light manufacturing, retail and storage companies. The facility showed promise as an arts center offering cheap spaces to artists for studios, galleries and loft space. Unfortunately, with the advance of the real estate boom in the downtown area of Jersey City, and what has become known as “Wall Street West,” this last vestige of the Lorillard empire in Jersey City was razed in 2007 after a long legal battle, to make way for a luxury condo tower. Other Lorillard sites in Jersey City were also razed over the years so that nothing remains of the once mighty presence of this tobacco giant.



Fig. 7: A 2007 view of 111 First Street shortly before demolition to make way for a luxury condo high rise.³

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Wikipedia, PJ Lorillard, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lorillard_hogshead,_1789.jpg.
² Jersey City Past & Present, The P. J. Lorillard Company, at http://www.njcu.edu/programs/jchistory/pages/L_Pages/Lorillard_Tobacco.htm.
³ Ibid.