

Industrial Hubris: A Revisionist History of the Papermaking Machine

ABSTRACT

Between 1801 and 1810, the London stationers Henry and Sealy Fourdrinier organized and financed the development of the first viable papermaking machines on the basis of a crude prototype patented by Nicolas Louis Robert in 1798. Although the Fourdriniers did not invent the machine, they deserve the credit for introducing it in the English market at prices papermakers could afford. Historians of technology admire their achievements but never question their motives or methods, which were irregular at best, if not plainly fraudulent at times when they were running low on funds. Like many early industrialists, they tried to accomplish too much too soon, yet they did manage to remain solvent and discourage competition long enough to be singled out for recognition by the public and by the British government. Most papermaking machines are called Fourdriniers in their honor. This revisionist history reveals their less honorable business practices and shows how their schemes influenced the diffusion of machine technology both in Britain and America.

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