



American Phoenix: The Remarkable Story of William Skinner, A Man Who Turned Disaster Into Destiny

Sarah S. Kilborne

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The incredible story of nineteenth-century millionaire William Skinner, a leading founder of the American silk industry, who lost everything in a devastating flood—and his improbable, inspiring comeback to the pinnacle of the business world.

In 1845 a young, penniless William Skinner sailed in steerage class on a boat that took him from the slums of London to the United States. Endowed with rare knowledge in the art of dyeing and an uncanny business sense, he acquired work in a fledgling silk mill in Massachusetts, quickly rising to prominence in the nation's new luxury industry. Soon he opened his own factory and began turning out one of the bestselling silk brands in the country. Skinner was lauded as a pioneer in the textile industry and a manufacturer who knew no such word as fail. His business grew to sustain a bustling community filled with men, women, and children, living and working in the mill village of "Skinner-ville," producing the country's most glamorous, fashionable thread.

Then, in 1874, disaster struck. Hundreds of millions of gallons of water burst through a nearby dam, destroying everything in its path, including Skinnerville. Within fifteen minutes, Skinner's entire life's work was swept away, and he found himself one of the central figures in the worst industrial disaster the nation had yet known.

In this gripping narrative history, Skinner's great-great-granddaughter, Sarah S. Kilborne, tells an inspiring, unforgettable American story—of a town devastated by unimaginable catastrophe; an industry that had no reason to succeed except for the perseverance of a few intrepid entrepreneurs; and a man who had nothing—and everything—to lose as he struggled—and succeeded—to rebuild his life for a second time. *American Phoenix* offers a new twist on the American dream, reminding us that just when we thought the dream was over, it may have only just begun.

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