

Chapter VI

"...a cozy place for chance visitors..."

In the history of every town there are certain critical periods which leave their mark for later generations. Present-day Avon can count two of these periods, coming about 140 years apart. The first was the development of the boot and shoe industry in East Stoughton in the forty years before the Civil War. Fully three generations of villagers became involved in this trade, and there are still some among us who can recall working in shoe factories that had their beginnings in the halcyon days of the nineteenth century.

The first mention of shoemaking in America goes back to the Plymouth Colony. It was recorded in 1627 that one Thomas Beard, with "hides, both upper and bottom, was shipped out" on the Mayflower for America. Governor William Bradford was asked "to give him lodging and diet." Fifty acres of land were also allotted to him.¹

The first American shoemakers were itinerant craftsmen who moved about the countryside fashioning custom-made shoes for their clients. Later, as the eighteenth century approached, they conducted their businesses from small kitchen shops in their homes, usually with the help of family members and perhaps a few apprentices. During the American Revolution most of the shoes worn by the Continental Army were made in Massachusetts, and by 1778 men's shoes were being produced in small shops in Reading and Braintree, as well as in several other Old Colony towns. These were manufactured wholesale and sold to dealers in Boston, Philadelphia, Savannah and Charleston. Others were exported to Cuba and the West Indies.

The shoe industry witnessed a revolution about 1811, when woodenshoe-pegs were invented. By 1815 they were in general use

and with them came the crude beginning of the factory system. The industry was seen as profitable and extra capital was attracted to it. This brought about more competition for orders and a tendency towards specialization. The old-timers lamented the fact that standards were being lowered as less skilled at, or was brought in to do cheaper work on some types of shoes.²

Until the Civil War much of the shoe-making was done in so-called "ten-footers," small shops in which craftsmen supervised apprentices and laborers. In nearby Weymouth, just as in East Stoughton, there were many of these tiny shops. A local historian describes a typical ten-footer: It proved to be a cosy [sic] place for chance visitors from the neighborhood, who happened in to discuss current events at a time when newspapers were not so plenty as nowadays. There was commonly a box to sit upon (for the caller) and a cast-iron cylinder stove fed with

leather chips to furnish heat in cool weather. The work-bench was characteristic - posturing on four short wooden legs, with a hallowed out seat at one end provided with a leather bottom. On the right of the sitting workman there w'd be some square compartments checkered off for the reception of pegs, nails, or tools, while an upright cabinet of drawers at the extreme end held many needful things.³

These shoemakers in their small shops were in the employ of capitalists who, although knowing little about the trade itself, were astute businessmen. They continued the process of centralizing the shoe industry; throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Soon the necessary materials were collected at a factory and the uppers sent out to women and children to be stitched together and bound. When returned to the central shop their work was inspected and then sent out again, this time to the master shoemakers scattered throughout the town in their ten-footers. These craftsmen supervised a team of laborers who took the fitted uppers and bottomed the shoes or boots with roughly cut soles and thread which had been sent from the factory. One worker did

the lasting, another the pegging, another the trimming, and still another the edge setting. All this work was done by hand in the small shop, and then it was returned to the factory where the shoes were finished, packed and sent to market.⁴

The manufacture of shoes began in Stoughton as early as 1816 when John Linfield opened shop. Five years later he was joined by Isaac Beals, who in turn was followed by Simeon Drake. The industry grew so quickly in Stoughton that by 1860 the value of the boots and shoes produced there was about \$1,300,000. Further, the boot and shoe business employed about; 1,200 men and women.⁵

Although we cannot say for sure who the first East Stoughton shoemaker was, we are able to identify several of the earliest. Samuel Tolman, for example, was in business by 1830. He ran a successful manufactory in a small shop situated on present-day North Main Street, where St. Michael's Church now stands. Also among the earliest was Laban Simmons, who I owned a small shop on West Main Street opposite the schoolhouse. Simmons operated on the "putting-out" system and thereby distributed about sixty cases per day. His chief markets were in Boston and New York.⁵

Not only does Simmons deserve mention as an early shoemaker, he also merits a word because of the house he lived in for much of his life. The building stood at the junction of Page and West High Streets. An ancient-structure, it became known as "Pa Simmons' place," being located along the most direct route to New Bedford, so it was a familiar landmark to those carrying the overland mail southward. Its past was so distinguished. that at least one Boston newspaper took note of its demolition in 1900. ⁶

Another early shoemaking firm belonged to Isaac and Henry Blanchard, whose business was located first in present-day Goeres Square. Later the Blanchards moved the shop to the old Hobbs Estate,

at the corner of High and Main Streets.

On April 15, 1895, as Ira May was about to celebrate his eighty-eight birthday, he recalled the day seventy-six years earlier that he had gone in the Blanchards' shop as a 12 year-old apprentice. Born on West Main Street in East Stoughton in 1807, his mother and father had moved away leaving the boy in the care of his grandparents, who lived just over the line in Randolph. Ira's grandfather was a shoemaker and at 8 or 9 years of age the boy was put to work in the family's ten-footer. He remembered that he never had more than a year or two of schooling, although after entering the shoe shop he was occasionally given permission to leave his bench long enough to recite lessons with some of the members of his class.

Shortly before the youngster's twelfth birthday his grandfather was taken seriously ill. Among the many callers at the house was Isaac Blanchard, who offered to take the boy into his own shop as an apprentice. He joined a number of other lads, all under contract to the Blanchards.

Ira's job was bottoming shoes, and he was expected to keep at it. The shoes made by the boys were sold to Zephaniah French, a grocer on the road to Brockton. Five pairs per day were expected from each boy, and each was obliged to take his turn by weeks and cut firewood

It was the firewood that got young Ira into trouble. One day when it came his turn to cut it, he found that he could not handle the ax, so as substitute he went into the woods and gathered brush. This was unsatisfactory and Ira was taken to the barn and given a severe thrashing. At the first opportunity he ran away to his parents, who had returned to the area and were then living in Stoughton. When his father learned of his escape he returned the boy at once to the Blanchards

Isaac Blanchard wasn't a vindictive man, and he gave young Ira his

release. The boy stayed with his parents for two years before returning to East Stoughton to live with his sister. Not long after, he again entered the employ of Mr. Blanchard, this time making shoes by the piece, and here he remained until his marriage in 1828.

Ira May became a successful man in his own right. After leaving Blanchard for the second time, he opened his own shop and began making boots. He employed a few men to help him, and among them they manufacture five or six cases per week. May continued in the boot business for several years before turning his attention to harness making. In this he became eminently successful, and assumed his place among the citizens of East Stoughton⁸.

By far the most prosperous of the early East Stoughton shoemakers were the Littlefield brothers: Buryess, James and Lysander. Theirs was amongst the largest operations in the country in the 1830's. With leather supplied by Gushing Mitchell and others, they built a thriving trade with the West Indies and Cuba. They were so successful that they opened an office in New Orleans, managed by another brother, Isaac. They were so extensively engaged in the Cuban market that Spanish businessmen went personally to their southern office to place orders."⁹

Profits were substantial enough to allow the Littlefields to look beyond the shoe trade for areas in which to invest their money. In the years before 1836 they invested over \$80,000 in land in Aroostook County, Maine, and their business in New Orleans trade amounted to \$100,000 a year between 1827 and 1838.¹⁰

The big money days ended with the Panic of 1837, in part because the boot and shoe industry was existing on a system of extended credit which was most susceptible to collapse. From the 1830's on, jobbing-houses were established as distribution points in many of the major cities in the West and South. They bought the boots and shoes of Eastern manufacturers on six, eight, or ten months' credit, and they in

turn sold them to farmers on credit payable when the crops came in. The Eastern shoemaker seldom received any hard cash, only notes that he accepted and depended upon banks to discount, and therefore provide him with enough money to carry on his own business. This occurred in spite of the fact that the manufacturer himself bought his leather on credit and contracted with his help for six months at a time. This system was a veritable "house of cards," just waiting to crumble.
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Littlefield Brothers managed to escape the worst of the Panic of 1837, yet even they felt its effects. They pulled out of the land speculation business because they needed money for their New Orleans trade. Even so, by the early 1840s, a combination of mismanagement and the aftershocks of the depression combined to plague them with numerous insolvent clients, and the firm finally had to accept payment in the form of lands in Mississippi and Texas. The East Stoughtonites could content themselves with the sorry knowledge that during the panic years of 1837-1838 at least 90% of the nation's shoe merchants had failed.¹²

After the economic crisis of the late 1830's had subsided, the shoe industry entered a period of rapid recuperation. Shoemakers with a reputation for a "specialty" were in great demand as employers sought out only the best craftsmen. One of these lived in nearby Randolph. It was said that spectators from all of the surrounding towns used to gather to watch Samuel White, a "champion rapid-pegger" who worked in a ten-footer on Union Street. His speed was gained by using both hands at once running the dink, using the awl, and hammering in the pegs, which he held in his mouth.

Back in East Stoughton, Adam Goldthwaite began a prosperous shoe business in the 1840's. When the firm dissolved in 1854, one of its members, Loring Goldthwaite, joined with Ebenezer Tucker and together they built a factory. They were very successful, and when

their factory burned they replaced it with another on High Street. Soon after, Ebenezer Tucker took his son, H.H. Tucker, into the business, which became known as E. Tucker & Son. They manufactured boots for several years and did a very substantial business in East Stoughton. After the Goldthwaite Company dissolved, its building was purchased by E.W. Littlefield, who added to the factory and did business there until 1878,¹³

Andrew McCabe was another well known East Stoughton shoemaker. Born in Ireland in 1834, he crossed the Atlantic as a 15 year-old boy, accompanied by his five brothers. Arriving in Boston in 1849, Adfrew decided to stay in America while his brothers continued on to Canada, where his mother and other family members already lived.

Attracted by the possibility of earning money as a shoemaker, young McCabe went to North Bridgewater and quickly learned the craft. He moved to East Stoughton, set up a small shop, and found that there was a ready market for the few pairs of shoes that he produced each day.

About 1851 the young Irishman set out to make his fortune in California as a gold prospector, but stayed there only about a year before returning to the East. He also made at least a half a dozen trips to Canada to visit his mother.

Back in East Stoughton, Andrew resumed his career as a shoemaker while also becoming one of the foremost citizens of the village. He was active in the Catholic Church, and indeed was one of the eventual founders of St. Michael's Parish. It was his money that purchased the land for St. Michael's Cemetery; and even after the parish reimbursed him, he continued in his unofficial capacity as its caretaker. When he died in 1924, at 90 years. of age, he left this life as one of Avon's most respected citizens.¹⁴

Another early local manufacturer was John H. Simmons, a son of

Laban "Pa" Simmons previously mentioned. The boy was raised in the family homestead on High Street and educated at the old West Main Street schoolhouse. He finished his very brief schooling and set out for Lafayette, Indiana, where he learned the bootmaking trade. He returned home after just a few years in the West, married and became a prosperous East Stoughton bootmaker. 15

The importance of the shoe industry to the economic life of East Stoughton in the years before the Civil War is best illustrated by statistics. The earliest reliable information we have comes from the U.S. Census taken in 1850, when the town of Stoughton listed twenty-four shoe factories. These employed a total of 1,566 people - 953 men and 613 women - who manufactured 304,506 pairs of boots and 46,600 pairs of shoes. The total value of this merchandise was \$805,700.¹⁶

Although not identified as such, six of the town's twenty-four shoe factories were in East Stoughton, and their production figures are listed below:

Firm	Men	Women	Boots	Shoes	Value
Jon. & F. Blanchard	10	5	3,500	-	8,000
Chas. Littlefield	15	8	5,000	3,000	14,500
Darius Littlefield	40	20	10,296	15,600	35,000
I. & H. Blanchard	80	70	20,000	15,000	62,000
E. Tucker & Co.	120	80	44,000	100,000	
Loring Goldwaite	70	36	26,160	60,000	
Totals	335	219	108,956	33,600	\$279,500

These figures show that 35% of the boots and 72% of the shoes manufactured in Stoughton were actually made in East Stoughton factories, and these accounted for 34% of the market value of Stoughton products. The same figures hold true for labor, showing that

35% of Stoughton's shoe corks were employed by the six East Stoughton firms.¹⁷

Until 1850 all shoes were made by hand. Throughout the following decade, however, machines were introduced which would all but end the days of the master craftsman working in his small ten-footer. It was the decade before the Civil War which introduced the shoe factory as we know it (or rather remember it) to southeastern Massachusetts.

The process began with a number of inventions designed to prepare the leather for the shoemaker, and all were worked by a crank turned either by hand or foot. First came a rolling machine, in which a man could do in a minute what before had taken him half an hour of hard work with a lapstone and hammer. In 1855 came the splitting machine, and two years later the racing machine, which cut leather into strips quickly and more efficiently. The sewing machine, invented by Elias Howe in 1845, came into general use by 1854, as did the pegging machine by 1859. Most revolutionary of all, perhaps, was the introduction of steam power to larger factories by 1860. The days of the simple "putting-out" system were over.¹⁸

This new era of the centralized, steam-powered shoe factory was given added impetus by the discovery of gold in California and Australia. Immense orders were received from those who had gone West in search of wealth. Jonathan Wales, for example, left Randolph, Massachusetts in time to establish a San Francisco store by 1851. At first, loyalty to his hometown caused him to place orders for shoes only with Randolph firms. His business was so profitable, however, that he was soon handling the merchandise of twenty factories in Randolph, Stoughton and North Bridgewater.

The opening of new markets in the West, combined with the fact that the traditional southern and southwestern markets held firm, made the factory system prevalent by the Civil War. Practically the whole

laboring population of a shoe town was employed in its shops or factories.¹⁹

By 1859, according to a trade publication, there were twenty-five boot and shoe manufacturers in Stoughton, and of these eleven were located in East Stoughton. The reliability of this information is questioned, however, as the U.S. Census taken in 1860 lists only eighteen Stoughton manufacturers, including six which are identifiable as East Stoughton firms. The discrepancy probably lies in the fact that the trade journal's information was gathered some time before, and did not take into account the failure of a number of small firms which could not keep pace with the large scale industrialization. The census figures for the East Stoughton firms are revealing.²⁶

Firm	Men	Women	Output*	Value
D. Littlefield	25	-	18,000 pairs	49,000
Chas. Littlefield	11	2	6,240 pairs	17,680
H. Littlefield	16	6	10,800 pairs	28,500
J.B. Blanchard	100	1	24,960 pairs	85,360
D.H. Blanchard	30	2	19,920 pairs	66,400
E. Tucker	135	5	48,000 pairs	108,000
Totals	317	16	127,920	\$354,940

*Denotes boots only

These figures are interesting, for while they show a net loss of 221; shoemakers over a ten year period, there were only eighteen fewer men working in East Stoughton shops than there had been a decade earlier. During the same period, however, 203 women left the shoe trade. The! impending crisis, looming ahead in the 1860s, would make their absence temporary.

Just as the 1850's brought change to the little village, the decade ahead would bring tragedy. Civil war was brewing - the "irrespressible

conflict," someone called it - and when it was finished some of the men and, boys who labored in the shoe factories would be dead or maimed for life. ' Radicalism was chewing at the edges of American society. Foolish threats were being made and carried out. The crisis came slowly at first, and then - like so many of the conflicts of our own day - burst on the scene with sudden and irrevocable fury.

NOTES

1. William B. Rice, "The Boot and Shoe Trade." in 1795-1895: One Hundred Years of American Commerce, ed. Chauncey M. Depew (New York: D.O. Haynes & Co., 1895), p. 566.
2. Rice, pp. 566-67; Blanche E. Hazard. "The Organization of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Massachusetts Before 1875," abstract published from The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 27 (1913), p. 14.
3. Torrey Bates, The Shoe Industry of Weymouth (Weymouth Mass.: The Weymouth Historical Society, 1933). p. 13.
4. Rice, p. 567; Hazard, p. 14.
5. Orra L. Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries (Boston: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1930). II, 1123.
6. "Avon: History of the Shoe Industry," newspaper clipping dated October 3, 1945, Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical Society: hereinafter cited as Avon Shoe Industry.
7. Boston Globe, July 28, 1900.
8. This information comes from an unidentified newspaper clipping, dated April 15. 1895, in the Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical

Society.

9. Seth Bryant, *Shoe and Leather Trade of the Last Hundred Years*. Boston: Seth Bryant, publisher, 1891), p. 50;

10. Hazard, p. 16.

11. Hazard, p. 17.

12. Hazard, p. 17.

13. Hazard, p. 17.

14. Avon Shoe Industry."

15. Early Shoe Manufacturer and Pioneer Resident," undated newspaper clipping [Aug. 21. 10211 Goeres Family Scrapbooks, courtesy of Joseph Zablocki.

16. Their 51st Milestone: Anniversary Observed by Mr. and Mrs. John H. Simmons of Avon .," newspaper clipping in the Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical Society.

17. United States. Census. Nonpopulation Schedules for Massachusetts. Manufacturing, 1850. Microfilm Roll 406: Nantucket-Worcester Counties. Massachusetts State Library, Boston, Mass.: hereinafter cited as U.S. Census, 1850. 17. U.S. Census. 1850.

18. Rice, p. 567.

19. Hazard, pp. 22-25.

20. United States. Census. Nonpopulation Schedules for Massachusetts. Manufacturing, 1860. Microfilm Roll 415: Barnstable-Worcester Counties. Massachusetts State Library, Boston, Mass.; hereinafter cited as U.S. Census, 1860. The original census document

lists the production only in dozens of pairs. I have converted these figures to total pairs manufactured.