WINCHESTER'S SHOE STORY

By Ellen Knight[1]

In Winchester, named for a man who never set foot in the town, there are other places bearing the names of people not connected personally with the town. One of these is the oft traveled street, McKay Avenue, which leads today to the Transfer Station.

The street was actually named for the McKay Metallic Fastener Company factory which formerly occupied the site of the Transfer Station. The company was named for its founder, Gordon McKay. While he possibly may have visited Winchester at some point, by the time the factory was built, McKay had retired and moved to Newport and even opposed the new building.

Just as the Winchester factory belongs to a concluding chapter in the McKay story, so also it is at the end of the story of shoemaking in Winchester, a story not only of a changing craft but also the changing local economy.

SHOE SHOPS LIT UP THE NIGHT IN SOUTH WOBURN

Early Woburn, including the village of South Woburn (incorporated into Winchester in 1850), was a shoe-making town. Shoemaking was an important part of the economy and was an integral part of the culture and family life.

In the earliest years of colonization, shoemakers or cordwainers were recruited for the Colonies and would follow a method known as "whipping the cat," traveling from house to house, staying at each long enough to make new shoes to measure or repair old ones.

As the population grew and the job required keeping a larger stock of materials on hand to suit the various customers and fashions, shoemakers eventually gave up traveling and worked in their own homes. By the time shoemaking in South Woburn came to be described in written records (after the Revolutionary War), it had become the custom to build a small shop in the yard, about ten to twelve feet square.

During the era of hand-made shoes, Massachusetts led the nation in shoe production. Woburn and South Woburn were among many towns busily engaged in the trade. Woburn also made the materials for shoes and was already known in the eighteenth century as something of a leather town.

According to Parker L. Converse, shoes made in Woburn were not only for local customers but also the Boston market. "The earliest shoemakers … carried a few dozen pairs of shoes to Boston, in a hand-cart, or on a sled in winter, to the public open air market, held in Faneuil Hall Square, and there stood and sold them, returning on foot after the market was over."[2]

South Woburn native Nathaniel Richardson recalled Horatio Symmes (whose home stood near the McCall School site) doing this prior to 1830. “Horatio made shoes, taking them to Boston himself–almost weekly–hiring his brother Zachariah’s horse and wagon for 5 cents a trip.”[3]

South Woburn was a small village. In 1798, about 35 homes stood within Winchester’s boundaries (mostly in Woburn). In 1850, 201 dwellings were listed in the federal census. Between these dates, Richardson recalled, “a third of all the houses had a small shoe-shop attached” and was able to list 35 of them. The first train depot was, in fact, a shoemaker’s shop and the first depot master was a shoemaker.

403 Main St., the Sharon House, whose rear section is believed to have been a shoe shop

Richardson described shoemaking in South Woburn as “the principal industry of the town.” The Converse mill had gone to decay, the Cutter mill was only grinding corn for local convenience, and there was only one blacksmith shop and one wheelwright shop. Otherwise there was farming.

Farmers and shoemakers were often one and the same. Farmers and their families could do piece work for shoemakers or produce entire shoes themselves to supplement their incomes, especially during the winter months. Shoemaking was thus part of the agricultural economy

“Seventy years ago, shoes were made wholly by hand, no machinery used–soles and uppers cut out by hand, put together by men upon wooden lasts, and the price was from 10 to 50 cents per pair,” Richardson wrote. “Women did the stitching and binding of the uppers for from 3 to 7 cents per pair. Shoemakers had a low (sometimes high) seat, made of plank, on one end of which he sat with his tools on the right hand side, consisting of a lapstone and hammer to pound the soles hard and smooth; his ‘kit’ was a knife, an awl a long stick, to polish the bottoms by friction, a shoulder-stick, to smooth the heels and the sides of the soles, paste, gum, flax thread and wooden pegs to hold the shoes together.

“A day’s work was from morning until ten at night, making from four to eight pair of shoes with the average wages of one dollar a day. The shops were about twelve feet square; at night work, a single tin or glass lamp, filled with shale oil, hung from overhead and swayed in front of the workmen.”

Richardson’s contemporary, Oliver Clark, recalling the houses on Richardson Row (Washington Street), wrote, “Most of these were farmhouses and their owners gained their livelihood by farming, yet to most of them was attached a small shoemaker’s shop, in which the farmers and their sons, during the winter months, manufactured shoes. Many of the leading manufacturers of shoes in Woburn and surrounding towns had their first training in these small shops.

"It was customary to work until 9 p.m. from October 1 to April 1. The old blacksmith's shop being in full blast and the old mill and the shoeshops brightly lighted till that hour."[4]

MECHANIZATION BEGINS

The Richardson shoe shop in 1860 by which time it was put to other use

Clark himself was apprenticed to Samuel S. Richardson (1806-1869), one of Woburn's leading shoe manufacturers. Richardson rebuilt the old Converse mill and built a new building for a shoe shop near the railroad gates. It was at the Richardson mill that the first shoe-making machinery was first introduced, though not very successfully.

The mechanization of shoe production proceeded slowly. The first known patent for any sort of mechanical shoemaking equipment was awarded in London in 1790. In the United States, from 1812 to 1833, eleven patents taken out for attaching soles by means of pegs. But getting a patent and getting people to use the machine were two different things. In 1835, Amos Whittemore (1814-1882) of Cambridgeport patented a pegging machine which met resistance when he introduced it at the Richardson mill.

When interviewed in 1870, "he said…it was argued that the making of shoes by machinery would throw the shoemakers working by hand out of employment, and it was threatened to burn him out even, if he continued using his machine. Through the influence of his brother-in-law, Dr. Benjamin Cutter of Woburn, women were induced to bind his shoes, but only at double prices, and this only for a short time."[5] Whittemore tried again in Danvers, but workers there threatened to burn down the whole factory to destroy the machine which they feared was sure to steal their jobs.

Mechanized shoe production did not ever take hold in Winchester. In the 1850 Census of Industry, only four shoemakers were listed, with the number of employees ranging from three to eight. In 1880 only three were listed, plus one individual who produced boot and shoe cut stock, with the "greatest number of hands employed" being one and the kind of power being "hand."

Such shops survived through the latter part of the 19th century because for decades hand-made shoes continued to be finer than those made on machines. But that changed as new inventions followed one another and machine-made shoes improved. Among the leaders in this field were Gordon McKay and Winchester's Louis Goddu.

CHANGE COMES WITH THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

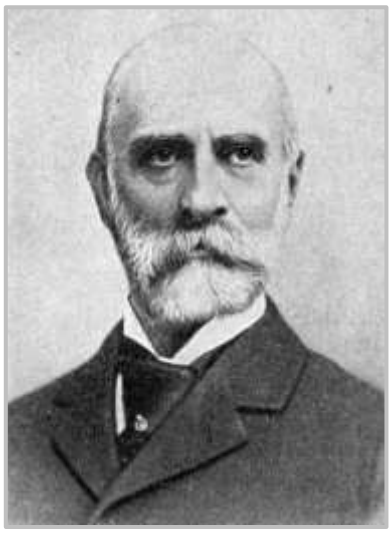
Over the course of the eighteenth century, the character of New England towns with their family-owned farms and a few small mills began to change, preparing it for the industrial revolution of

the next century. Changes in production from the old craftsman model to piece work and division of labor had commenced. A working class was growing, due to farmers increasingly accepting paid employment to supplement their incomes, to the younger generation leaving the hard toil of the land for new occupations, and to new waves of immigration.

It was a time when businessmen were seeking new opportunities for wealth through manufacturing and when more markets were being opened up through improved transportation by water, land, and rail.

One of these opportunities opened up through the mechanization of shoe-making. Success in this field depended not only on inventors but also on entrepreneurs with the capital to go into production and with an inventiveness for selling the machines. One of the most successful entrepreneurs was Gordon McKay (whose name is memorialized at the road leading to the Transfer Station), a man who found the right invention at the right time.

ENTREPRENEUR MCKAY TEAMS UP WITH INVENTORS



Son of a Pittsfield cotton manufacturer, McKay (1820-1903) trained as an engineer and worked on a railroad and on the Erie Canal before he acquired a machine shop and relocated to Lawrence in 1852. The company advertised locomotives for sale, along with stationery steam engines, machinist's tools, lathes, and planing machines.

A couple years later, he watched intently as a cobbler operated a machine for sewing shoe soles to uppers in a little room on Tremont Row, Boston. The inventor was Lyman Blake, credited as the first to adapt the sewing machine to leather. The moment an option some Lynn shoe manufacturers held to purchase that machine expired, McKay handed Blake $8,000 plus a promise of $62,000 from the earnings of the machine.

The time was right for McKay to prosper with this invention since the American Civil War was right around the corner. The war created an enormous need for boots and shoes. In 1862, McKay filled an army order for 25,000 pairs. Faced with the same demand and losing their workers to the army, other shoe manufacturers began to buy shoe machinery, including McKay's. By the end of the Civil War, more than half of all shoes needed by the northern army had reportedly been made by Massachusetts manufacturers, using McKay machines.

McKay eventually made a fortune, not by making shoes but by his business strategy–leasing his machines. Picking up the idea from a doctor in Boston who charged a royalty on the manufacture of a health shoe he invented, McKay decided that rather than sell his machines he would lease them for royalties, a few cents on every shoe made (a system later adopted by the United Shoe Machinery Company). Each manufacturer purchased small "royalty stamps" which were then

affixed to each pair of shoes made with the machines. By the late 1870s, McKay's machines produced half the nation's shoes, yielding $500,000 a year.

Another element in McKay's success was diversification. Shoe-making has a multitude of components–heeling, lasting, turn-sewing, metallic fastening, and more. McKay developed and bought patents for machines to do everything. By the end of the century, he had built six companies to supply shoe machinery to the industry

McKay employed a number of inventors, who assigned a multitude of patents to him. One of the most notable of these was Louis Goddu (1837-1919).

LOUIS GODDU

Goddu was a prolific inventor who came to be called the "300-invention man." He invented cars, including one powered by denatured alcohol, (and had one of the first auto accidents reported in Winchester when he ran his car into a tree in his own yard in 1903) and patented turrets such as are used on battleships and improvements in street cars. One of his machines for producing wire nails used in building was awarded a gold medal at a Chicago exposition.

The *Christian Science Monitor* commented on his most widely used invention, stating that "Whenever you pick up a current number of some wire-bound magazine and note how easily and comfortably it lies open in your hand, you may like to recall that you are indebted to Mr. Goddu for the invention of the newer way of binding books and pamphlets by wire staples, so that the pages open flat, without breaking apart."

Most of Goddu's inventions were for making shoes, and they reportedly revolutionized the industry. After running away from his family's farm in Quebec at age 16 and following the railroad tracks south, Goddu found work in Massachusetts making shoes both by hand and by machinery. Eventually, he became an operator of a Blake shoe-sewing machine and began making improvements in the machine's construction. As a young man, while employed in a large Montreal shoe factory, he acquired skills as a machinist and an on-the-job education in mechanical principles and practices.

Returning to Massachusetts to exploit some new inventions made in Canada, he had very little success selling or introducing them until meeting Gordon McKay while living in Lowell. Recognizing Goddu's inventive genius, McKay hired him and purchased his more promising patents. Over time, Goddu invented machines to cover nearly every operation in the manufacture of shoes.

13 Madison Avenue, the Goddu home

In the early 1870s, Goddu moved from Lowell to Winchester. He set up a regular machine shop on the second story of his garage where, with his sons, he continued to invent machines and gadgets. By the time the McKay factory came to Winchester, Goddu had transferred over 100 patents to the McKay company.

It was reportedly at Goddu's instigation that the factory of the McKay Metallic Fastener Company (formed in 1877) was moved from Lawrence to Winchester in 1893. According to United Shoe Machinery (USM) historian Gaynor O'Gorman, James W. Brooks, McKay's successor as company president, stated that "there has never been anyone else in the world who could compare with Louis Goddu in the fecundity and originality of his inventions in the metallic-fastening field."[6] However, according to Brooks, he was of an excitable and irritable disposition.

According to O'Gorman, "Goddu had invented the once famous Standard Screw Machine which made the strongest shoe ever produced. In 1877 he sold it to the McKay interests and had been under contract to them for assignment of all his inventions ever since. He was renowned for the genius that he was and though rewarded by the McKay group to the tune of more than $250,000, plus the employment of his brother and his own five sons, they never seem to have made him happy for long at a time."

When the McKay factory moved to Winchester, McKay himself was no longer leading the companies he founded. He had retired to Newport with a fortune (the greater part of which he left to Harvard University to promote applied science–$4 million, left to increase to about $25 million).

According to O'Gorman, McKay did not approve of the move to Winchester. In fact, the business only stayed in town about a dozen years. Nevertheless it was a good addition. No longer was mechanization feared as threatening employment. It created jobs. It benefited the local economy. However, arriving at a time when not everyone welcomed new industry, its coming and going was not without some controversy.

THE MCKAY FACTORY

In 1893, a large plant for manufacturing machinery to make metallic fasteners for shoes and boots was built on 15 acres in Winchester near the Aberjona River between Swanton and Cross streets

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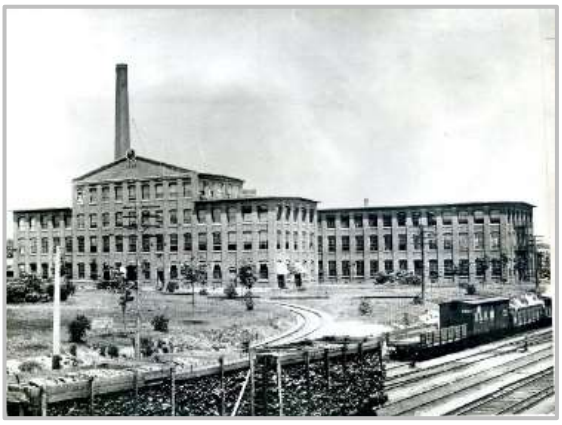
By this time, the small shoe shops that had dotted the area were gone and the town no longer feared that machinery would take away jobs. Many industries had come to Winchester since Amos Whittemore unsuccessfully introduced his mechanical shoe-pegging machine in the 1830s.

Winchester had tanneries and factories making a variety of products from piano cases to felt, furniture, watch hands, tannery machinery, and more. They provided hundreds of jobs.



The new machinery factory was constructed during an era when competing attitudes toward industry in town were developing among townspeople. One set preferred a residential village with open spaces and quiet. It promoted cleaning up the river and replacing industrial sites with parks and was in the process of doing just that at the industrial site below Main Street when the McKay factory came to town.

Others welcomed the new factory as an economic boon, not only offering employment to hundreds but also creating opportunities to develop real estate (then in ample supply) to house the workers and their families.

Aaron C. Bell, a Winchester resident interested in locating the factory in Winchester, first offered Louis Goddu about one and a half acres, but Goddu informed him that would be about one-tenth of what they would need for the plant. Bell said he would see they had enough land and helped engineer a gift of free land acquired by Sylvanus Small, which the newspaper claimed "will be worth thousands of dollars to Winchester and bring into the village a large number of skilled workingmen of an exceptionally high order."

The plant was meant to absorb the shops in Lawrence and a pattern shop already in Winchester, as well as a lot of contract work done elsewhere in New England. The factory was located between Swanton and Cross streets next to the river. Low land adjoining river had to be filled in. Trees were set out and a park made on its banks.

The plant was composed of three buildings laid out like the letter H. The main building, measuring 300 x 50 feet, had three stories. Parallel to it was a second building, 150 x 40 feet, with four stories. These two were connected by a third building 60 x 70 feet. They were constructed of brick, brownstone, iron, and Georgia pine and had more than 500 windows.

The property had frontage on the railroad tracks of about 1,500 feet. Railroad tracks passed lengthwise through both buildings for the loading of products from the shops into the cars. No dwelling houses were erected on company land, but the factory stimulated a building boom in the area of Swanton, Harvard, and Irving streets.

Just six years after the factory was built, the McKay company merged with the Goodyear Machinery Company and Consolidated Hand Lasting Machine Company to form the United Shoe Machinery Company. The Winchester factory became known as the McKay division of USM.

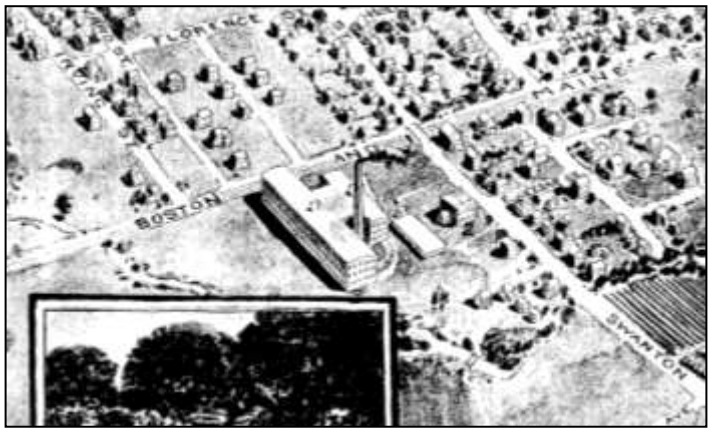
Its hundreds of employees became part of the Winchester's culture. Like other large businesses, McKay had sports teams, such as baseball and bowling, which played other local or neighboring teams. In 1900 (and probably other occasions) the employees gave a successful entertainment in Town Hall. They developed a Mutual Relief Association (and possibly gave ideas to USM's directors for the munificent employee benefits offered after they consolidated their factories).

When the company eventually relocated, the newspaper commented, "The only thing that can he hoped for is, that when the McKay Company leaves town that the buildings will be occupied by as intelligent, public spirited, and as good citizens as the men now employed there and known as friends, neighbors, and workers in the church and social life of Winchester."

Once the companies were united (in 1899), the question arose–and rumors flew–about whether the factories would be united, too. Goodyear had a new factory in Boston employing 400 to 500 men. Consolidated in Beverly had a leased building where 300 to 400 were employed. The largest group was in Winchester where over 700 men worked for the McKay Division. Each had its own special line of manufacture.

In 1900, USM stilled some of those rumors temporarily when it enlarged the Winchester factory. It was not the managers' intent to locate the entire concern there, but, it was reported, "There are several smaller branches of the concern scattered about in a number of towns, particularly foundries where castings are made, and it is these that will come to Winchester."

The addition was devoted principally to the manufacture of drop forgings, which the local newspaper envisioned would be a wondrous sight. "No doubt it would be an interesting sight for many of our unsophisticated citizens to visit this new plant when in operation and witness the process of 'drop forging' by the means of powerful machinery, with its attendant grim-faced but skilled operators, its flowing forges and myriads of sparks. Again a sight of the wonderful product of the heavy drop hammers formed from the dies so skillfully designed by expert hands would mystify them, the art is so surprising."[7]



The McKay factory as depicted in an 1898 bird's-eye map

Hard on the heels of this enlargement, early in 1901, a circular to USM shareholders indicated that the directors wanted to build a modern manufacturing plant to do the work conducted in its separate plants and enable the company to increase the output of its leased machines both in the US and abroad. But where would it go?

Some delay in announcing any decision may have been due to strikes. In 1900, the McKay workers walked out on strike. A year later, the Goodyear men struck. At

issue each time was bringing the work week into conformity with the union standard, a 54-hour week at 60-hour pay.

The Goodyear strike took a surprising turn when the strikers sought support from the McKay men. When it was learned that 150 Boston strikers intended to take the train to Winchester to persuade the McKay men to join them, the Winchester police assembled 41 policemen from four communities and, before the train arrived, marched them to the factory to preserve order, prevent the strikers from interfering with the local workers, and, if necessary, protect the company's property. However, during what the newspaper called "an invasion" of policemen and strikers there was no display of hostility, the strikers conducted themselves in the most exemplary manner, and the McKay men avoided them, since a year earlier the Goodyear men had not assisted them and they were now satisfied with their pay and hours. Not a single policeman was actually needed.

Rumors continued to spread about the location of a new consolidated factory. On March 21, 1902, the *Winchester Star* announced "on reliable authority" that the new plant would be located at Beverly, home of the company president and several directors. In July, the *Lowell Telegram* reported that USM had "practically decided" to locate in Lowell and went on at length extolling the merits of Lowell over Lynn. The *Star* called this a "fairy tale," and it was right. The choice was Beverly.

Winchester itself was not a contender. Since many of the influential citizens were engaged in promoting Winchester as a residential community, USM never met with encouragement from them. Further, the site chosen in Beverly comprised 90 acres, far beyond what could be assembled around the Winchester plant.

After the Beverly building opened in 1905, the McKay business transferred there. Due to an immediate shortage of space in Beverly, USM used the Winchester building through 1906. It was later sold to the Puffer company for the manufacture of soda fountains.

Many workers moved to Beverly, though reportedly a "factory train" picked up workers near the former McKay plant in Winchester and carried them each day to Beverly via the Boston & Maine's North Station terminal.

Goddu did not go to Beverly, though his brother John, who had worked as a machinist at the Winchester plant, did. Louis was firmly settled in Winchester, having bought a good bit of land near his own home and built homes on it for his married sons. (His name, like McKay's, is also memorialized in a street name, Goddu Avenue.)

Left - Goddu & Sons

Further, according to O'Gorman, Goddu became embittered towards the McKay interests over the operation of their new factory. Though still under contract, he (and his five sons) withdrew to his home workshop. Patents on new machines were taken in the sons' names, but USM believed them to be the father's and hence belonged to the McKay Company. In 1897, the Goddus organized the Goddu Sons Metal Fastening Co. During the next two years a line of metallic-fastening machinery paralleling (and sometimes infringing) the McKay line was invented and built in model form.

The Goddu garage at 632 Main Street which succeeded the home workshop

Patents on new machines were taken in the sons' names, but the McKay Company believed them to be the father's and so belonged to them. The McKay Company sued to compel transfer to themselves of the new inventions under their contracts with Goddu which were still in force and under which he was still being paid for his exclusive services. USM inherited this suit. When Goddu approached them to sell out, the Goddu company had no commercial machines, but it did have control of the company stock and some valuable patents. USM bought these for $150,000 in its own stocks.

Puffer Manufacturing Company

After USM left Winchester, the McKay building was sold to the Puffer Manufacturing Company for the manufacture of soda fountains. During World War I, the company had contracts to make munitions. At the end of the war, it had a quantity of paid-for, unused materials. The company declined and went into receivership in 1929

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The buildings were damaged in the Hurricane of 1938 and a great fire in 1944. Part of one was rebuilt by a trucking company, but another fire in 1979 destroyed the last remnants. The Town bought the site of the main plant in 1944 and created a dump, now a transfer and recycling center where only the name of the street leading to it recalls the existence of a once prosperous industry.

[1] This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Nov. 25, Dec. 1, and Dec. 3, 2014. This article supersedes all previous articles.

[2] Parker L. Converse, *Legends of Woburn*, Second Series, Woburn, 1896.
[3] N.A.R. "Shoemaking: Once a Great Industry in South Woburn (now Winchester), Apr. 24, 1901. Published in *The Winchester Star*, May 3, 1901
[4] Oliver R. Clarke, *Winchester Record*, I:128 (April 1885), p. 129.
[5] W.R. Cutter, "Amos Whittemore," *Winchester Record* I (4) (1885), p. 350.
[6] Typescript history of United Shoe owned by Cummings Properties.
[7] *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 23, 1900