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The local history of shoemaking: The E.G. & E. Wallace Company



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Courtesy photo/Rochester Historical Society This Maybury Shoe Shop Party photo was taken on Thursday Dec. 22, 1938. The merry Christmas celebrants included Wilda Berube, Antoinette Trembley, Rose Lacroix, Lillian Boucher, Sylvia Randall, Lucille Daggette, Betty ?, Ester Hasting, Orena St. Pierre, Jack Cotz (standing), Irene St. Cyr, Annie Forest, unknown, Bena Roulx, unknown, Laurie Concord, ? Deneaux and Yvonne Veno.

By MARTHA FOWLER
Rochester Historical Society President

Posted May. 14, 2009 at 3:15 AM

ROCHESTER — Ebenezer G. and Edwin Wallace were twin brothers born in Berwick in 1823. At age 17, Ebenezer was apprenticed to learn the trade of a tanner and currier. Edwin worked on the family farm. When Ebenezer's apprenticeship was finished, both attended Exeter Academy for three years. To support themselves they tanned calf skins.

Edwin returned to the farm and taught school in the winter. Ebenezer moved to Rochester where he worked for a local tannery. In 1849 he joined the California gold rush. After three years of what was called "fair success in the mines" he returned to New Hampshire.

In 1854 the two brothers purchased a Rochester tannery and founded the E.G. & E. Wallace Company, commonly called Wallace Shoe. One was in charge of the tannery where they made leather, and the other ran the curry shop where they cleaned it. They had six to eight employees. Gradually they enlarged their tanning business. They made leather to sell to shoemakers.

When the Civil War began many shoemakers joined the army. The shortage of shoemakers led to a steep decline in the demand for leather and a shortage of shoes and boots. To use their leather in 1862 the Wallaces decided to begin making boots for the army. Later they added shoes to their business.

The Wallace Company became the largest business of its kind in New Hampshire. Making their own leather meant lower production costs which gave them a competitive edge. They soon occupied more than five acres on South Main Street in the area where Walgreens is now. They built two brick factories for their shoe business. One was three stories measuring 36 by 179 feet with a 36 by 65 foot wing. The other was four stories measuring 50 by 120 feet.

By 1890 they were producing about 4,000 pairs of shoes a day using the most modern machinery available. It was operated by a 120 horse power steam engine. Later they had a 700 horse power steam engine which supplied all the energy needed to run the machinery and heat and light their buildings. They continued to tan their own leather for their shoes until around 1910.



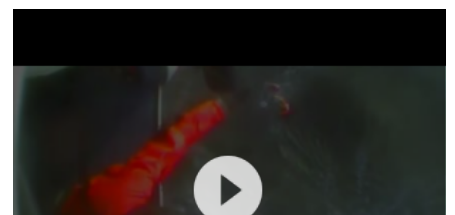
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They had a nationwide reputation for inexpensive, durable work shoes. Many were sold in the southern and western United States, Canada, and South America. They also had their own box shop where they made all the wooden boxes they needed. They had a machine shop to repair their machinery themselves. After two devastating fires they had a commodious, fireproof storehouse.

In 1880 a night watchman saw fire in the engine house where the boilers and steam engine were located. Hundreds of people and two fire engines came to the scene, but heat and intense flames, fueled by the oily substances used in the business, drove everyone back helpless to do anything. Within a couple hours all the buildings, except the brick shoe shop, were in ruins.

Twelve buildings and their contents, including the old and new tanneries, dry house, store house, ice house, two large shops with the latest machinery, 200,000 feet of pine boards, a thousand cases of shoes, and an immense lot of hides and leather, were all destroyed. Insurance covered only a small part of the loss and 672 people were out of work. The Wallaces asked the town to excuse them from paying taxes for 10 years as a condition of rebuilding. Amid controversy, the request was granted.

In January, 1884, one of their three boilers exploded killing four men and seriously injuring seven others. The boiler was found 100 yards away in the leather store house. It passed through a 90 foot chimney that fell burying one worker. The fire that broke out in the engine house was quickly put out by the fire department, but 700 people were out of work until the boilers and engine were repaired.

For half a century Wallace Shoe was Rochester's leading industry employing as many as 750 people. They were a factor in New Hampshire's position as the nation's third largest shoe producer in 1899. They worked year round and experienced very few labor troubles. The Wallaces were well liked by their employees and were among New Hampshire's most well known and influential businessmen. Ebenezer died in 1893 and Edwin in 1894. Ebenezer's sons, Albert and Sumner, then ran the business. Albert died in 1916 and Sumner died in 1920. Shortly before Albert's death they formed a stock holding company to run the business.

In 1926 the Rochester Factory Holding Company bought the buildings. Several different companies rented parts of them. Hubbard Shoe and Dix Heel moved on to their own buildings. Grinnell, Hobby, and Emerson Shoes only lasted a short time. In 1934 Maybury Shoe opened and ran the business for many years.

Although Wallace was Rochester's largest shoe shop there were several others. By 1890 shoe manufacturing employed more people than all other Rochester industries combined. We will look at some of these other shoe shops next time.

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Buyer's Brokers of the Seacoast

**Lamont Gallery Presents: Graphic Advocacy** 9:00 am

Lamont Gallery

**"Gents Bow, Ladies Know How" : Traditional Dance in New Hampshire's Monadnock Region, 1750-2015** 12:00 pm

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