

Taking a Walk in the Shoes of Marlborough

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Marlborough was once a well-known shoe manufacturing center. Shoe manufacturing was such a huge industry, that when Marlborough became a city, shoemaking was incorporated into the official seal. Samuel Boyd is considered the “father of the city,” and he and his brother Joseph started the first shoe company in 1836.

In 1836, the community [of Marlborough] changed forever when Samuel Boyd, the father of the city, and his brother opened the first shoe manufacturer business. By 1890, Marlborough had become a major shoe-manufacturing center, supplying both soldiers and civilians. In fact, this was such a major part of this community that when they incorporated as a city in 1890, the official seal was a factory, a shoebox, and a pair of boots.

The Rockport Company was founded in 1971 by the father-son team of Saul and Bruce Katz. They wanted to make shoes out of lightweight materials for comfort that had subtle styling. They were known for creating comfortable dress and casual shoes. In 1984, Reebok bought Rockport, and in 1987 started selling Rockport shoes internationally. Today both companies are under the control of Adidas. The Rockport Company is based in Canton, Massachusetts, but still has an outlet store in Marlborough.

Frye Boot & Shoe Company was famous for their boots. Well-known for clunky heels and the variety of colors and styles, the boots were manufactured in Marlborough. Frye Boots was founded in 1863 by John Frye, an immigrant from England. During the Civil War, soldiers on both sides wore Frye boots. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, the boots were very popular, and the Smithsonian later picked a pair to represent America in the ‘60s. The Frye Company is now owned by Jimlar Corporation, and the headquarters are in Great Neck, New York.

The S. H. Howe Shoe Company was started by the first mayor of Marlborough, Simon Herbert Howe, and his brother Lewis Howe. They started making shoes in their father’s old copper shop. When Simon became mayor in 1891, he made sure that the city seal used a picture of his shoe factory for the background. By 1894 the S. H. Howe Company had four major factories running in Marlborough’s West Village.

John O’Connell, the third mayor of Marlborough, had his own shoe manufacturing business. He and Richard Mansfield started out on Howe Street, but the partnership didn’t last. John O’Connell bought another building on Howe Street and started again for himself. His shoe company was built in 1869 and located on the spur of the railroad. The company became known as John O’Connell & Sons. When he was mayor, John O’Connell promised discounts to citizens who paid their taxes early. Before John O’Connell died, he discontinued his company and leased the factory to Rice & Hutchins.

Rice & Hutchins Shoe Company opened in 1866 and closed in 1928. Its first business location was on 30 Hanover Street, selling shoes from Felton & Chipman. Partners

William B. Rice and Horatio H. Hutchins were cautious, and moved surely and soundly with each step higher. In 1875 they settled in to their new factory on Cotting Avenue, taking over Felton & Chipman, the same company whose goods they had sold for commission only ten years prior.

With the closing of the Rice & Hutchins Company, Charles Curtis, who had been with the company for 44 years, started his own operation. He took over the factory on Cotting Avenue from Rice & Hutchins. He started his own shoe company, Curtis Shoe Company, with his four sons. The Curtis Shoe Company specialized in men's dress shoes and later had to close down due to foreign competition.

John Chipman was the first of many shoe manufactures to go into business. He started producing shoes in 1836, and in 1842 his brother Samuel joined him. John and Samuel remained in partnership for many years. John retired from the shoe business to go into carpentry with his other brother, George. Meanwhile, Samuel stayed in the shoe business and went into partnership with Charles Whitney and Lewis Felton in 1862. In 1866 Charles Whitney withdrew from the partnership and the company was continued by Felton and Chipman until 1876, when it switched ownership to the Rice & Hutchins Company.

In 1990, celebrating its one hundredth year as a city, Marlborough had a festival. There were a number of festivities, including the construction of a park that recognizes shoe manufacturers with statues from the sculptor David Kapenteopolous.

Shoe manufacturing was a big part of Marlborough's success in becoming a city. This is the history of shoe manufacturers in Marlborough, and with so many successful shoe companies contributing to the growth of Marlborough, you can see why the city chose to adopt the shoe-related seal.