

M-2

Inventory of the Records of the Waterbury Button Company 1849-1935

Finding aid created by Stephanie Crawford in April 2020

Descriptive Summary

Creator: Waterbury Button Company

Title: Waterbury Button Company Records

Dates: 1849-1935

Collection Number: M-2

Quantity: 36 linear feet (61 manuscript boxes, and 34 oversized ledgers; approximately 55,000 items)

Abstract: The Records of the Waterbury Button Company is largely composed of business documents including correspondence, bills, receipts, accounts, patents, and ledgers. The collection also contains a small amount of personal papers of J. R. Smith, President; most related to Waterbury Country Club, of which he was founder.

Language:

Repository: The Max R. Traurig Library, Mattatuck Museum. Advance notice required.

Rights: Contact the archivist in regards to rights.

Historical Note

In 1849, the Benedict & Burnham Manufacturing Co. established its button making division as a separate company, capitalized at thirty thousand dollars. The stock in the newly formed Waterbury Button Company was distributed to Benedict and Burnham's stockholders as a dividend,

* the original officers were J.S, Mitchell, Benjamin DeForest, G. W. Burnham, J. C. Booth, and

Henry H. Hayden, who was also the company's agent. The product line included almost every conceivable kind of button (metal, vegetable ivory, cloth-covered, composition), and later some toys and novelty items as well.

The Waterbury Button Co. followed a familiar pattern of industrial expansion in the last half of the nineteenth century. In the 1850's the letters show a heavy reliance on local orders and individual freelance agents; the employee contracts reflect a scarcity of skilled labor. The new company's influence quickly expanded. The directorships overlapped that of the already-established Holmes, Booth & Haydens Co., the Buttons Co. did a small foreign business through New York agents such as Thomas Prosser & Son.

By 1910, the Waterbury Button Co. had come to resemble a modern corporation. It increasingly abandoned freelance jobbers and relied on its own corporate agents and branch offices. In 1909, it sought to bypass vegetable ivory importers by making direct contact with suppliers in the Amazon. Its European business had grown, and a 1907 item suggests that the Australians, too, were interested in buying Waterbury buttons. Benedict & Burnham was apparently very careful not over-extend itself. Waterbury Button Co. was only one of several major firms that originated as branches of Benedict and Burnham.

The U.S. government had become an important customer, and probably helped to accelerate the formation of a button cartel. During the Spanish-American War, the Waterbury Button Co. colluded with other Waterbury firms to distribute lucrative military contracts and prevent underbidding. That spirit of industrial cooperation continued, resulting in the formation of the National Button Manufacturers' Association (N.B.M.A.) in 1907. That organization attempted to eliminate "destructive competition" among button firms; it established price-fixing and other profit-ensuring practices on the national level. The Association also added a new dimension to the manufactures' fight a high button tariff, a struggle which date back at least to 1893 (See box 50, Folders H and S). With organizations of NBMA, petition and letter-writing efforts by individual firms gave way to a more modern, industry-wide lobbying campaign.

With expansion and modernization came a whole host of modern problems. For instance, twentieth-century organized labor emerged to complicate the lives of nineteenth-century businessmen: the absence of unions was a strong selling point for semi-rural towns wishing to attract industry (See for instance box 57, Folder R). Old problems, too, continued to haunt the

company. The N.B.M.A. correspondence implies that companies stole valued employees from one another, suggesting a continued scarcity of skilled labor.

Company president J. R. Smith's personal papers, while unrelated to the button business, highlight an important social side-effect of Waterbury's industrialization. By 1906, industry had created a substantial class of wealthy manufacturers, one of whom was Smith. The miscellaneous papers in box 60 give some insight into his personal lifestyle and outside financial interests. The papers relation to the construction of Waterbury's first country club (box 60) both identify those Waterburians whom Smith consider his social peers, and illustrate their material aspirations.

Scope and Content Note:

The collection consists of three series: Administrative Files, the papers of J.R. Smith, and Ledgers spanning the time period of 1849 through 1935. The collection is largely Administrative Files which document the company's development and modernization.

Administrative Files (1849-1935) is housed in boxes 1-59 and consists of bills, correspondence, orders, patents, advertising, and legal files. Some items from the years 1879, 1886, 1892-95, 1897, and 1899-1912 are marked: From the J. R. Smith File. Smith was the president of the Waterbury Button Co. He apparently took a special interest in these particular papers. However, it seemed best to file these papers with the rest of the collection, as they strictly with the business of the Waterbury Button Co. researchers interested in Smith can easily pick out the red listings. The company's use of agents leads to further complications. These agents (often companies themselves) both bought buttons from and sold them to the Waterbury Button Co. It is often difficult to ascertain the direction of the transactions through the records.

Of special interest are the records of the agent was Holmes, Booth and Haydens (Boston and New York), who also supplied brass and scrap metal. When possible, the Holmes, Booth and Haydens papers were separated from the rest for easy removal. The same applies to papers from the Button Company's New York Store.

The personal papers of J.R. Smith are contained in boxes 60 and 60a, and reflect the upper class development of Waterbury. Lastly, Ledgers are organized as items #61-96, consists of bound ledgers detailing business transactions.

Related Collections:

[The Mattatuck Museum has a collection of over 20,000 buttons.](#) The collection was originally assembled by Warren F. Kaynor for the Waterbury Button Company.

Administrative Note:

Processing Note: The collection was arranged somewhat miscellaneous upon receipt. Three series were obvious from the original order: Administrative, the person papers, and the Ledgers. The largest series by far is the Administrative files. Therefore, the archivist arranged the Administrative Files chronologically. The archivist also tried to group similar types of files together: correspondence, bills, etc.

Preferred Citation: Records of the Waterbury Button Company. M-2. The Max R. Traurig Library, Mattatuck Museum.

Container List: This section provides descriptions of the materials found within each series. Each series description is followed by a container list, which gives the titles of the folders and their locations in the numbered boxes that comprise this collection.

Series: Administrative Files, 1849-1935

Arrangement: Arranged chronologically. Please see Processing Note for more information.

Box Folders

- | | | |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | A-W | Letters, Balance-Account Sheets, Orders, Employee Contracts, Agreements, Patent Specifications, and Bills, 1849-1851 |
| 2 | A-R | Agreements, Specifications, Contracts, Insurance, Letters, Orders, Balance-Account Sheets, Checks, Bills, and Price Lists, 1852 |
| 3 | A-O | Original Labels, Insurance, Letters, Price Lists, Orders, Balance-Account Sheets, and Power of Attorney, 1853-1854 |

Box	Folders	
4	A-Q	Bills, Original Labels, Writs of Attachment, Patents, Power of Attorney, and Letters, 1853-1854
5	A-P	Price List, Balance-Account Sheets, Checks, Bills, and Letters, 1854-1855
6	A-O	Letters, Accounts of Sales, Checks, Bills, Promissory Note, Letters, and Bills, 1855-1856
7	A-M	Letters, Balances & Accounts, Checks, Promissory Notes, and Bills, 1857
8	A-N	Bills, Letters, Balance & Accounts, Checks, Promissory Notes, Bills. 1857-1858
9	A-N	Letters, Checks, Promissory Notes, and Bills, 1858-1859
10	A-K	Letters and Patents, 1859-1860
11	A-L	Letters, Checks, Agents, Accounts, Consignments of Stock, and Bills, 1860-1861
12	A-M	Letters, Ticker-tape Messages, Agents Accounts, Checks, and Promissory Notes, 1861
13	A-S	Patents, Letters, Agents Accounts, Promissory Notes, Bills, Holmes, and Booth & Haydens, 1862
14	A-L	Letters, Agent Accounts, and Bills, 1863
15	A-O	Stock Statement, Accounts, and Bills, 1864-1865
16	A-M	Bills and Accounts, 1865-1866

Box Folders

17	A-N	Bills and Letters, 1866-1867
18	A-N	Accounts and Bills, 1867
19	A-P	Political Button (Grant), Letters, Accounts, and Bills, 1868
20	A-R	Bills, Accounts, Sight Drafts. Writs for Unpaid Bills, and Insurance, 1868-1870
21	A-N	Bills, 1870
22	A-Q	Bills, Patents, Accounts, and Sight Drafts, 1870-1871
23	A-U	Bills, Patents, Insurance, Inventory, and Letters, 1871-1874
24	A-M	Bills, 1874
25	A-P	Bills, Patents, and Letters, 1874-1875
26	A-K	Letters and Bills, 1875
27	A-M	Bills, 1870-1871
28	A-M	Bills, Patents, and Letters, 1875-1876
29	A-N	Letters and Bills, 1876
30	A-O	Bills, 1876
31	A-Q	Bills, Patents, and Letters, 1876-1877

Box Folders

32	A-L	Bills, 1877
33	A-Q	Bills, 1877
34	A-N	Bills, 1877-1878
35	A-M	Bills, 1878
36	A-N	Bills, Patents, Insurance, and Ivory Nuts, 1878-1879
37	A-O	Bills, 1879
38	A-Q	Bills, 1879
39	A-L	Bills and Letters, 1879-1880
40	A-P	Bills and Letters, 1880
41	A-Q	Bills, and Letters, 1880-1881
42	A-P	Bills, 1881
43	A-N	Letters, 1882
44	A-M	Letters, Drafts, and Bills, 1882
45	A-M	Bills, 1882
46	A-M	Bills, 1882

Box Folders

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| 47 | A-N | Bills, Patents, Letters, and Drafts, 1882-1883 |
| 48 | A-N | Bills, 1883 |
| 49 | A-N | Bills and Patents, 1883-1884 |
| 50 | A-AA | Bills, Patents, and Letters, 1884-1894 |
| 51 | A-R | Bills and Patents, 1894-1895 |
| 52 | A-P | Bills, Patents, and Price Lists, 1895-1898 |
| 53 | A-W | Bills, Patents, Letters, Annual Statements, Military Buttons, Vinton Pearl Button Company, and Sales, 1898-1902 |
| 54 | A-V | Patents, Stock Report, Vinton Pearl Button Company, Letters, Sales, Patents, Checks, and Switchboard, 1903-1904 |
| 55 | A-S | Checks, Patents, Advertising, and Sales, 1904 |
| 56 | A-N | Checks, 1905 |
| 57 | A-FF | Checks, Patents, National Button Manufacturers' Association, Business Cards, Buttons for Australia, Price Lists, Sales, Tariffs, and Custom Buckles, 1905-1909 |
| 58 | A-BB | Petty Cash, Patents, Capital Stock Report, Expenses, Sales, Price Lists, National Button Manufacturers' Association, and Checks, 1909-1917 |
| 59 | A-Q | Petty Cash, Patents, Checks, and Time Tickets, 1917-1935 |

Series: J Smith Personal Papers, 1881-1912

Arrangement: Arranged loosely chronologically, following original order. Please see Processing Note for more information.

Box Folders

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|-----|-----|--|
| 60 | A-T | Bank Books, Correspondence, Clippings, Automotive, and Family, 1881-1912 |
| 60a | B-X | Building of Country Club Trolley Stop and Membership Lists, 1906-1909 |

Series: Ledgers, 1881-1912

Arrangement: Arranged chronologically by type of ledger, following original order. Please see Processing Note for more information. Box 61 holds loose ledgers. Items 61-97 are oversized individual ledgers.

Box Folder

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|----|---|---|
| 61 | A | Metal Order Book, April 1859-April 1860 |
| | B | Bank Book (Waterbury Bank), Feb. 1850-June 1852 |
| | C | Bank Book, July 1854-Feb. 1860 |
| | D | Bank Book, June 1861-June 1864 |
| | E | Cash Memo Book, Dec. 1856-March 1858 |
| | F | Labor Memo Book (Overtime etc.), 1861 |

Letterbooks:

Item

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|----|---|
| 62 | Letter book (from Holmes, Booth & Haydens), Jan.-April 1864 |
| 63 | Letter book (from Holmes, Booth & Haydens), April 1866-May 1867 |
| 64 | Letter book (from Holmes, Booth & Haydens), Aug. 1873-Feb. 1871 |
| 65 | Letter book (Waterbury Button Co NY Office), Oct. 1872-May 1873 |
| 66 | Blotter Book (outgoing letters), 1876-1879 |
| 67 | Blotter Book (outgoing letters), Feb. 1881-Feb. 1882 |

- 68 Blotter Book (outgoing letters), Oct. 1885-March 1886
- 69 Blotter Book (outgoing letters), Dec. 1886-Feb. 1887
- 70 Blotter Book (outgoing letters), June-October 1887
- 71 Blotter Book (outgoing letters), March-June 1888

Cash Receipts (orders and sales)

Item

- 72 Order Book (Holmes, Booth & Haydens), March 1865-June 1868
- 73 Order (Day) Book plus fragment, Dec. 1877-Feb. 1880
- 74 Order (Day) Book, May 1889-Feb. 1890
- 75 Order (Day) Book (Joe Dougherty), May 1889-May 1890
- 76 Order (Day) Book, Aug. 1889-May 1890
- 77 Order (Day) Book, April-December 1891
- 78 Order (Day) Book, March 1892-March 1893
- 79 Order (Day) Book, March 1897-March, 1898

Receipts and expenditures

- 80 Balance book fragment (profit & loss), Jan. 1871-Jan. 1875
- 81 Cash balance, October-January 1885
- 82 Cash balance, October-January 1888
- 83 Cash balance, Jan. 1891-May 1890
- 84 Cash balance, September-January, 1891
- 85 Cash balance, March 1899-Jan. 1898

Expenditures

- 86 Cash book (record of outlays), Nov. 1849-Aug. 1854
- 87 Account book of expenses (including bills, 1852-1855 payable & receivable, stock, machinery, tools, cash on hand, income from interest, labor and freight costs)

- 88 Daybook of expenses, Aug. 1852-Dec. 1860
- 89 Daybook of expenses, 1860-1855
- 90 Account book of expenses, 1861-1878
- 91 Check book-partially used, with stubs, June 1856-March 1862
- 92 Check book completely used, 1869-1874
- Item
- 93 Check book completely used, Nov. 1878-July 1879
- 94 Payroll book, Sept. 1855-April 1863
- 95 Payroll book, April 1863-Dec. 1870
- 96 Time book (labor record), July 1866-March 1874
- 97 ADDENDUM: Price list of Operations #1, 1898
(Price List of Manufacturing Processes, and cost of each)