

The Portsmouth Shoe Industry

Once known as “The Shoe Capital of the World”, Portsmouth has its place in the history of shoe manufacturing. Robert Bell came to Portsmouth July 1, 1850 and opened the first shoe factory in August of that year. Bell is considered the pioneer of shoe and boot making in Portsmouth.

All the shoes were made by hand until the business purchased a machine in March of 1869. In that year, the factory employed 25 men and 15 women and was reported to have made 200 shoes per day. During this time, Frederick Drew, Irving Drew’s father, worked as a foreman for Mr. Bell. Bell went into the wholesale shoe business with partners W.H. Ware and Joseph Vincent, but by 1874 had left the profession to go into the insurance business. In 1873, Bell’s son-in-law, along with 2 others, formed the Portsmouth Shoe Manufacturing Company. The factory was located on Front Street, and among those mentioned as the stockholders were; Fred Drew, Irving Drew, George Paden, and Henry Paden.

In January of 1877, the Irving Drew & Company was formed. It was reorganized in 1879 under Drew, Selby and Company with partners Irving Drew and George Selby. The first location of their factory was on the third floor of a building on Second Street between Court and Market Streets. In 1881, the plant moved to a leased building at the Northwest corner of Third and Gay Streets. Shoes that were previously made by hand (and foot power) could now be made in this new powered plant.

In 1891, Drew, Selby and Company acquired property at Findlay and John Streets (a city block), and built their factory at this location. In 1906, Drew was bought out, and the corporate name was changed to Selby Shoe. In 1927, Selby had become the eighth largest maker of shoes in the world with orders being shipped to

other countries including: Australia, Canada, Great Britain and New Zealand. In the 1930s, over 2,000 workers were employed at Selby's.

Over the years, there have been many shoe factories in Portsmouth. In the 1894 city directory, the following is listed:

- Drew, Selby & Co., John, 7th and Findlay (streets)
- Excelsior Shoe Manufacturing Co., 3rd and Gay
- Heer & Kleinknecht, 106-110 Court
- Paden Brothers & Co., 107-111 West Front
- Russell, Vincent & Williams, 6th and Offnere
- Star Shoe Co., 39 West Front

In 1901, the manufacturers listed:

- Drew, Selby & Co., John, Findlay and Gallia (streets)
- Excelsior Shoe Manufacturing Co., Findlay and Gallia
- Heer Shoe, 350 East 10th
- Portsmouth Shoe Co., 107-109 West Front
- Tremper Shoe Co., East 6th and Offnere

In 1920, Williams Manufacturing Company was founded and became one of the leading shoe manufacturers of ladies shoes in America. The shoes were priced affordably, especially during the early years prior to the Depression.

The years have brought many shoe factories to Portsmouth (many not mentioned here). Those who may have genealogical ties to Scioto County will probably find an ancestor who worked at one of the many shoe companies.