

Finding Aid from the Northborough Historical Society

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10/18/2015

Collection Title: Proctor Button and Comb Mfg.

Date Range: 1876 through 1903

Size and Extent of Collection: 12 boxes; 19-1/2 linear feet; 23,800 documents.

Nine boxes contain file folders of correspondence, bills, orders, employee earnings, product development, etc. Three additional smaller boxes are of Postal Cards containing orders and brief notes; a box of files containing Production Notes, i.e. slips of piece-work notes, hours worked and costs for orders filled, all in a rough stage; and one smaller box of Advertising Cards from a variety of related fields and locations.

Creator: Ellen M. Racine, curator

Abstract: The records of the Proctor accession show complete records of a factory in the late 1800s. from 1876 to 1903. Five years of records are missing, 1881, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887 but the remaining years give a great look into a prosperous business, complete with traveling salesmen.

Repository: Northborough Historical Society's Archive, west wall

Collection Number: 2015.1.01.1

Acquisition Information: These records came to the Society from three descendants of the Proctor family and in several batches in 1964, 1972, 1974 and 2004.

Access: Open to research

Copyright: Northborough Historical Society

History: Yates, Whitaker & Kaighn, manufacturers of tortoise shell jewelry, started up in March of 1876. By March of 1878, the company had evolved into Yates & Co. after both Nathaniel Currier Whitaker and Charles Thenerly Kaighn dissolved the partnerships. Richard R. Yates continued on as Yates & Co. until he sold it in April of 1880 to Nathaniel Whitaker and Josiah Proctor. Whitaker and Proctor closed the Boston office run by M. W. Carr and continued to operate the business successfully for eight years. By September, 1888, however, Whitaker wanted to move the company to Boston but Proctor did not and so he bought him out. Josiah Proctor ran the business until his death on January 24, 1892. His wife Lizzie and daughter Emma Proctor along with operations manager, Frank Gates, continued to run the business under the name of Estate of Josiah Proctor. They eventually closed in 1903 when foreign competition, the invention of celluloid and changes in women's hair fashions changed the industry.

Scope and Content: The collection consists mostly handwritten letters and orders and include correspondence, orders, bills, payroll records, salesmen's correspondence and commission, product designs, production costs and tasks, production notes of piece work; one box of postal cards of brief orders and requests; advertising cards from numerous suppliers 1877 to 1900 and bank check stubs. These file folders are stored in boxes by each of the four companies and their subseries and arranged by date.

Strength of collection: employees piece work, payroll, bills, and letters by traveling salesmen often discussing business practices, the economy, and changing styles.

System of arrangement: four series with five to six subseries

Series 2015.1.01.1 Yates & Co.: Oct.1876 to March,1880

Series 2015.2.01.1 Whitaker & Proctor: April 1880 to August 9, 1888

Series 2015.3.01.1 Josiah Proctor: August10, 1888 to January 24, 1892

Series 2015.4.01.1 Estate of Josiah Proctor: January 25, 1892 to 1903

Subseries .01: Correspondence: letters from owners, others of special interest numbered separately; orders from customers arranged by date in folders.

Subseries .02: Agents: letters from salesmen on the road in NY, Chicago, Cincinnati, Buffalo, etc. with orders, pricing, new designs, lookout of the clothing, button and comb industry, retail, competition, health and weather in folders by date and letters on interest numbered individually.

Subseries .03: Employee records: application letters, time tables, piece work record books by date in folders.

Subseries .04: Product development: letters referring to designs, sketches, memo books listing details of production tasks, hours and costs for various customer's orders, filed by date and type.

Subseries .05: Bills. File folders of N'bro competitors, Milo Hildreth and W. M. Farwell; Northborough vendors, Northborough Town Bills; operating expense bills; product expense bills; shipping bills; banking.

Subseries .06: The final years: closing the business, detailed inventory, sale of machinery, tools, stock and building and land.

Contents Listing:

Box 1 2015.1.01 **Yates & Co.** Letters from 1876 to 1880

.02 Agents Letters

.03 Employee Records

.04 Product designs and development

.05 Business Operation expenses, Northborough vendors and town bills; Product expenses; Banking, Shipping

Box 2 2015.2.01 **Whitaker & Proctor.** Letters from April, 1880 - July, 1883 (30 folders)
Individual folders for N. C. Whitaker, J. Proctor and D. B. Wesson

Box 3 .01 Letters: 8/1883 – 12/1883 (29 folders) (*letters of 1884-1888 are missing*)
Order books: 12/1877 through 1888, (*includes Yates & Co.*)
Log Books: customers, jobbers, retailers, cloaks, button pricing and Boston office

.02 Agent Letters: 1880 – 1883 (*letters of 1884-1888 are missing*)

.03 Employee letters, piece work, help time records, 1880-1883

Box 4 .04 Product designs (24 file folders)

.05 Statement of Accounts, 1880, 1882, 1887-1888; Product Stock Books,

Rentals, Bills/letters from local competitors (Farwell, Hildreth); Northborough vendors and town bills; Operating expenses, Product expenses, Banking and Shipping.

Box 5 2015.3.01 **Josiah Proctor** Letters: 8/1888 – 1/1892 (28 folders)

Box 6 .01 Order and Memo books (31 folders)
.02 Agents' letters 1889-2/1892
.03 Employees application letters, piece work books, Help Time sheets
.04 Product letters, Booklets of inventory, 1889; production records and estimates, 1888-89; Production costs, 1891
.05 Statement of Accounts, 1888-1891; Bills from local competitors (Farwell, Hildreth); Northborough vendors and town bills; Operating Expenses, Product expenses, Banking and Shipping.

Box 7 2015.4.01 **Estate of Josiah Proctor** Letters: 1892-1896 (30 folders)

Box 8 .01 Letters: 6/1896-1902 (22 folders)
Order and Memo books and customer accounts, 1892-1900
.02 Agents' letters, 1892-1900
.03 Employee application letters
.04 Product designs, Button manufacturing data, not dated

Box 9 .05 Collection Agencies; Farwell bills; Northborough vendor bills; (26 folders) Operating expenses, Product expenses; Banking; Shipping
.06 Closing: Detailed inventory and values, real estate, sale of machinery and supplies, Button stock inventory and value

Box 10 Postal cards: 1877-1898, filed by date. Correspondence dealing with orders, deliveries, travel, etc.

Box 11 Production Notes: slips of piece-work; notes, hours worked, orders processed, calculations, etc.

Box 12 Advertising Cards from 1877 to 1900 from MA, CT, NY, RI, PA, Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, California.
Trades: Die sinkers, engravers, jewelers, findings, watchmakers, spectacles, tailors, corsets, trimmings, merchant tailors, cloaks & suits retail, jobbers, dry goods, cloth, gossamer waterproof garments, fancy goods, millinery, buttons, dressing combs, boots, hotels, machinery, typewriters, Jet, rubber, shell, pearl, ivory, carpets, woodwork, paint, oil, leather belting, chemicals, colors, horns, hoofs, fertilizers, etc. Also insurance, publishers, attorneys, lithographers, stationery, collectors and adjusters.

Related Materials: genealogy of Yates, Whittaker, Kaighn, Proctors; two photos of the Blake St. factory with employees outside (c.1877 and c.1883); Boxes of products including raw tortoise shell, processed shell, horn, sea beans, nuts, metal ornaments in various stages of production. These are stored separately and many are displayed in our museum.

Conservation Notes: All letters and notes were folded in three, bundled and tied. They have been unfolded and placed in archival file folders.