

# GERMANTOWN *CRIER*



The Society's  
90th Year



*The Society's first major public event — the "Loan Exhibition of Colonial Relics" — took place in the Alumni Building of Germantown Academy, in June 1902. See page 8.*

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# Shoe Manufacturing in Germantown in 1850:

## The End of the “Gentle Craft”

by Lisabeth M. Holloway

### Shoes and Stockings

Nobody, we think, if asked to name Germantown's leading industry in 1850, would answer “Shoemaking.” Nevertheless, in the *U. S. Census of Manufactures, 1850*, 21 manufacturers of shoes are named,\* with hosiery makers running a close second at 19. (This fortunate coincidence might have been exploited — “Germantown for All Your Footwear Needs,” or “The Well-Fitted Foot Finds Its Footwear in Germantown” — but, of course, advertising slogans and the Chamber of Commerce were still many decades down the road.) We should also hasten to say here that the town's two largest and wealthiest industrial establishments were not in the footwear business: the McCallum carpet mills (employing 160 persons and producing Brussels carpet to the value of \$130,000 per year) and the Thorp calico works (employing 30 and producing goods valued at \$135,000).

Stocking-weaving had been Germantown's best-known industry in the earliest days, and had been revived in the early 19th century. The Germantown stocking was celebrated for decades, whereas the Germantown shoe never achieved recognition. If Germantown shoemakers ever labelled their products with the place of manufacture, no examples have survived to us. In 1850, a few hosiery makers were using water-powered machines, and would proceed toward further mechanization, whereas Germantown shoemaking, in contrast, remained entirely an industry of hand-workers. (1)

Cordwainers, or shoe manufacturers, employed 175 male and 40 female hands; 19 hosiery makers employed 243 males and 373 females, together accounting for 45.4% of male and 82.4% of Germantown's female manufacturing workers. They produced 102,220 pairs of shoes, and 1,009,800 pairs of stockings.

### The Gentle Craft

In a sense 1850 can be seen as the end of the era of handmade shoes (except as luxury goods) — that is, the era when all shoes were essentially handmade. The craft antedates its written record. Egyptian shoemakers are shown at their benches in wall-carvings at Thebes, about 1495 B.C.(2) Greek vase-paintings show shoemakers, with their tools, not differing greatly from the tools of early New England cordwainers. (3) Roman shoemakers were

\*Joseph Scheetz; Daniel Bowman; Samuel Keyser; Bowman and Goodfellow; Joseph C. Handsbury; George Shingle; John Harmer; David Harmer; Alfred C. Harmer; Lemuel G. Harmer (twice); John W. Harmer; William Thomas; William Benner; Daniel Bullard; Thomas Marple; Gideon Keyser; Ashton Tourison; John Wager; Jesse Millman; and William Millman.

organized into a guild, and their sub-specialties designated (“sutor” for the shoemaker, “solearius” for the sandal or bootmaker, and “sutor cerdo” for the cobbler). (4) In 1272, the Cordwainers' and Cobblers' Company of London was granted royal recognition and power to supervise workers in other leather trades as well. Allen quotes an English play, dated 1500:

Marry, because you have drank with the King,  
And the King hath so graciously pledged you,  
You shall no more be called shoemakers;  
But you and yours, to the world's end,  
Shall be called the trade of the gentle craft. (5)

According to Quimby, the first American footwear guild, the “Shoemakers of Boston,” was incorporated in 1648. (6) Pennsylvania attempted to regulate the leather industries in 1721 by requiring persons “occupying or using the mystery of shoemaker” to make “boots, shoes, or slippers . . . of good leather well and sufficiently sewed with good thread, well twisted and made and well waxed. Nor shall [such persons] put into any boots, shoes, or slippers for sale any leather made of sheepskins, bull's hide, or horse's hide.”

In general, however, early American footwear production was highly individualistic and comparatively unregulated. Quimby recognizes four stages to 1850: 1) 1629-1650, the itinerant era when shoemakers went from house to house carrying their tools and boarding with the family long enough to outfit the household; 2) 1651-1750, the “kitchen



“An Old-Fashioned Shoemaker,” frontispiece to Wm. H. Dooley, *A Manual of Shoemaking*, 1912.

era," when shoemakers worked in their own homes, with assistance of their families; 3) 1751-1800, the "home shop era," distinguished by small shops (the New England "ten-footers," for example, small separate buildings exactly ten feet square) in which the master cordwainer worked with his apprentices and journeymen; and 4) 1801-1850, the small factory period, in which the manufacturing units were enlarged, and distribution was made to wholesalers, rather than directly to the purchaser.

The industrial revolution came late to footwear. Before 1850 the four essential "operations of shoemaking: cutting, fitting, lasting and bottoming" (7) were performed by hand, the individual shoemaker working at his bench, although operations within the shops were often specialized. Rudimentary attempts at mechanization in the first half of the 19th century, such as peg-cutting and pegging machines to attach the upper to the sole, had limited effect. In the late 1850's, however, the McKay sewing machine, followed by the Goodyear Sewing Machine about 1874, an edge-trimmer about 1877, and a lasting machine in the 1890's, gradually mechanized the industry, enlarging factories, increasing production, shortening hours, and effectively wiping out the "gentle craftsman." "Upon the introduction of shoemaking machinery, the Germantown shops went out of existence." (8)

#### The Census of Manufactures, 1850, for Germantown.

This manuscript document (9) shows the industry at its heyday and in considerable detail. **Capital investment** — "Real and Personal Estate in the Business" — ranged between \$100 (three manufacturers) and \$2,000 (two); the second most profitable business (\$2,803; that of Alfred C. Harmer, which included, according to the 1854 city directory, a shoe store) showed an investment of only \$400. Besides the workshop itself, the owner's capital investment would consist of tools for his apprentices, and wooden lasts in graduated sizes, which were rather costly.

**Raw materials**, consisting of goatskins, "kips" or cow skins, and sole leather, ranged from William Millman's cost of \$318 — Millman barely broke even with a product of 900 pair of ladies' shoes, valued at \$900, yielding a year's profit of \$6 — to a high of \$6,542 for Lemuel G. Harmer's main shop, producing 15,000 pair of boots and shoes, at an annual profit of only \$1,546. From the information at our disposal, it is impossible to distinguish gradations in quality, but our presumption is that the Germantown manufacturers were producing shoes for the lower end of the market.

Annual **payroll costs** ranged between John Harmer's \$300 (2 male employees) — he nevertheless managed a profit of \$140 on 1,800 pair of coarse brogans — and L.G. Harmer's \$7,140 (35 men and 5 women) for his main shop. (10)

By "profit" we should explain, is meant "operating profit," the sum left after subtracting total cost of raw material and total cost of labor from the value of the product for each manufacturer. (Whether the manufacturer actually sold all his product, we are not informed, nor is the term "profit" used in the census.) The most profitable establishment was

that of Bowman and Goodfellow, at \$3,336 (capital investment \$1,000; raw material costs \$3,000; payroll of \$5,664 for 22 men and 8 women; output 15,000 boots and shoes). Three establishments showed a loss for the year — George Shingle (-\$186) with three hands making children's shoes; Samuel Keyser, (-\$140) with ten hands (two women) making 6000 pairs of shoes and David Harmer (-\$120) with two hands making 1,500 pairs of shoes. David Harmer, however, would soon take over the formerly very profitable business of his cousin Lemuel.

Monthly **wages** for male hands ranged between an average of \$4.38 for David Bowman's four apprentices (profit \$880), and a high of \$32 for William Benner's five (profit \$976). In comparison, among stocking weavers, low pay, \$18.46/month, went to the 65 male hands of A. & T. Jones, whose profit stood at \$11,200, and high pay, \$36/month, went to the single employee of G. Thomas — who may possibly have been himself.

Female employees of shoemakers were fewer, some shops having none at all, and they came much cheaper. Their wages ranged from a low of \$4/month (Bowman & Goodfellow) to a high of \$12/month (William Benner and Daniel Bullard). Their function in the shops — or outside, since they may well have been home-workers — is suggested by a verse cited by Allen:

Poor lone Hannah,  
Sitting at the window binding shoes!  
Faded, wrinkled,  
Sitting, stitching, in a mournful muse!  
Brighte-eyed beauty once was she,  
When the bloom was on the tree.  
Spring and winter  
Hannah's at the window, binding shoes. (11)

#### Customs of the Craft

By tradition, shoemakers had long been regarded as a thoughtful, philosophical class of men, reading or being read aloud to at their work, and earning the reputation among their fellow artisans of being "an uncommonly clever class of men." Some achieved distinction as poets: Hans Sachs, the hero of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, who wrote both verse and music for his 4,000-odd songs; and John Greenleaf Whittier, who combined farm-work with shoemaking as a youth, and addressed one of his *Songs of Labor* "To Shoemakers." Some were philosophers and mystics, like Jacob Boehme, whose published works influenced Sir Isaac Newton and William Blake; or George Fox, founder of the Quaker movement. Others became politicians or men of action, like Roger Sherman, signer of the Declaration of Independence, who supported his widowed mother and her younger children at the trade in his early manhood; or Sir Cloudesley Shovel, who ran away to sea from the shoemaker's bench, and rose to Admiral of the Fleet. One of the most interesting shoemaker-thinkers was John Pounds of Portsmouth, England (1766-1839), a mere cobbler, never advancing to the status of cordwainer, who gathered around him in his one-room shop "street-children," taught them to read and write, and is called the founder of England's "ragged" schools, predecessors of the British system of compulsory public education. (12)



*A set of leather-worker's tools, some from the mid-19th century, in the collections of the Center for the History of Foot Care and Footwear, Pennsylvania College of Podiatric Medicine.*

Some of these characteristics are reflected in Germantown. Robert Thomas, shoemaker, who was to found a five-generation business in Germantown (see below), saw to the education of his apprentices, according to the receipt-book described in *Germantown*, the Site & Relic Society's little journal, No. 12, May 15, 1920. In 1812 he paid for the schooling of Henry McDowell — and in 1816 for McDowell's "walnut coffin." His widow Elizabeth, who ran the business till her son-in-law David Bowman came into partnership, never neglected the education of her apprentices, who often went to evening school.

Like the hatmakers, another trade not to survive the introduction of machinery, local shoemakers employed "readers" from among their own number. "When the paper arrived in the morning, the reader ceased work," says our 1911 clipping, "and proceeded to read aloud not only all the news but all the advertisements in the paper as well. Those who listened contributed enough to pay the reader for what he lost in wages during the time he read. . . . The newspaper articles on politics, the abolition movement and other pressing questions of the day were closely followed and furnished food for much discussion, not only in the workshops during the day but in the taverns at night."

Apropos of politics, it might be noted that several local cordwainers are mentioned as active in the Native American movement, which protested against importation of foreign labor, limiting membership to men born in the U.S. A considerable number of apprentice or journeymen shoemakers are listed among persons proposed for membership in the local Junior Order of American Mechanics in the late 1840's, according to the roll of members in our archives. Alfred Crout Harmer (see below), who served two terms in Congress, was Germantown's contribution to the politician-shoemaker tradition.

The close association of shoemaking with Methodism is often remarked upon in the reminiscences of pre-Civil War Germantown. Possibly the phenomenon can be explained on a family basis: the Harmers (see insert), leatherworkers by tradition, and Methodists from the early days of the little Haines Street church, would account for a substantial proportion of both. Even the Keyzers, long identified with the Dunkards, were not immune to Methodism. Samuel Keyser, 1783-1868, owned a shop near the Mennonite church which is mentioned as the scene

of religious services held by itinerant Methodist preachers. He employed 8 male and 2 female hands, in the 1850 census, and apparently lost money (\$140) that year; his son Gideon with 5 male employees and one female, turned a good profit (\$2,366).

At the 74th anniversary banquet of the Wesleyan Beneficial Society, Charles McCarthur, himself of a shoemaking family, recalled the early days of that Society:

At this time our borough was noted for its many shoemaker shops, and most of the "basses," [bosses?] as the proprietors were called, were members of [the] Society. They employed a number of young men as apprentices, and in the long winter evenings, amid the ringing of the poverty bells [this term is unexplained], the drawing of the pegs, and the swash of the waxed end by the brilliant light of the penny-dips, they worked away, confident that what ever else might be accomplished by the invention of machinery, their labor would never be disturbed.

These shops were attractive to many young men of the town that had no desire to spend their evenings at the wayside inn or the corner grocery, and the merry banter and joke went round the company. The shops became the recruiting stations for this society, which in its early history gathered in most of the worthy young men of our quaint old town. . . .

But the march of time has brought many changes. . . . Machinery has supplanted the old cordwainer, and he has been compelled to adopt other methods. The [poverty?] bell has gone to the crusher. No more does the merry crowd gather around the "cannon" stove as it belches forth its volumes of smoke, scented with the fumes of leather chips, much to the annoyance of our aristocratic neighbors. (13)

### **Decline of the Craft**

Certainly the inhabitants of such congenial workplaces would be reluctant to adapt to the noisy and demanding machinery of the new age. The old order vanished swiftly. The 1860 *Census of Manufactures* showed only 6 shoe manufacturers in Germantown as against 21 in 1850, and of these only two, Jesse Millman and Ashton Tourison (who was to die in the Civil War), had been listed in 1850. Total production of these six firms was under 8,000 pair, less than 8% of production in 1850.

The Harmers (thanks to Dr. Binswanger's detailed research) provide some insight into the effect of this occupational displacement on the proprietors (see inset). The hands are more difficult to follow; however, we note a number of shoemakers in the Civil War lists.

Longest to survive of the old-time cordwainers was the Thomas-Bowman-Cherry family business, beginning in 1809 and closing its doors on July 30, 1960. It was called the oldest store in Germantown. Its longevity may be attributed to adaptability: from its account-books, in the Society's possession, it combined retail and "custom" orders, shoe-repair and a sideline of drygoods, which in time came to replace the manufacturing side. The Cherry Stores, occupying the original building, were 20th-century Germantown's last, almost-forgotten link with the lost traditions of "the gentle craft."

(1) Germantown hosiery manufacture is discussed in considerable detail by Philip Scranton in *Proprietary Capitalism: the Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800-1885*, New York, 1983.

(2) Harold R. Quimby, *Pacemakers of Progress, the Story of Shoes and the Shoe Industry*, Chicago, 1946, p. 4.

**The Harmer Family.** Of the 21 Germantown shoemaking shops in 1850, six were owned by five members of the Harmer family. From the family record compiled by Raymond A. Binswanger, as well as from the newspaper clippings previously cited, the Germantown Harmers emerge as a family of Methodists and of shoemakers, at least till the advent of machinery. Samuel Harmer, 1777/78-1854, harness-maker of Milestown (born Quaker) and Margaret Young Harmer, 1777-1865 (born Presbyterian), may have turned to Methodism, suggests Binswanger, when the Hicksite controversy divided Quakerism. Two of their sons entered the Methodist ministry: the Rev. James Harmer, 1808-1850, and the Reverend Samuel Young Harmer, 1809-1884, formerly owner of a large shoe factory in Germantown. Two others, John Wesley Harmer, 1813-1889, and Lemuel G. Harmer, 1816/17-1900, "prominent Methodist," appear as shoe manufacturers in the 1850 census, with Lemuel operating two shops, the smaller and more profitable being perhaps his own, and the larger one managed by him for his brother S. Y. Harmer, by then a full-time Methodist minister. Two other sons of Samuel, Gideon D., 1816/17-1900, and Charles Wesley, 1814?-1888, both worked as shoemakers, probably for one of the others. David Harmer, one of the two shoe manufacturers operating at a loss in 1850, was a brother of Samuel; in the 1850 population census he is listed with one apprentice/journeyman. David's son, David Jr., is said to have succeeded Lemuel. John Harmer, maker of coarse brogans in the 1850 census, is difficult to identify among many of that name.

What became of the Harmers as shoemaking disappeared in Germantown before the onslaught of machinery? Lemuel G. Harmer operated a grocery and drygoods store in Chestnut Hill 1857-1858; then he returned to shoemaking in Germantown 1859-1866; from 1867-1875 he was listed in Quakertown, where his brother Gideon lived; from

(3) *Hide and Leather and Shoes Encyclopedia of the Shoe and Leather Industry*, Chicago, 1941, pp.328-329.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 330.

(5) Frederick J. Allen, *The Shoe Industry*, Boston, c1916, p. 27.

(6) Quimby, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-33.

(7) *Hide . . . Encyclopedia*, p. 330.

(8) "Old-Time Worthies of Germantown," column from the *Germantown Independent-Gazette*, probably written by Nathan Ployd about 1911.

(9) The copy used was reproduced from the Federal Archives microfilm (the original rather faint) and kindly presented to the Society by our member, Harold Spaulding. The writer worked from her typed transcription. Unless otherwise stated, data comes from this document.

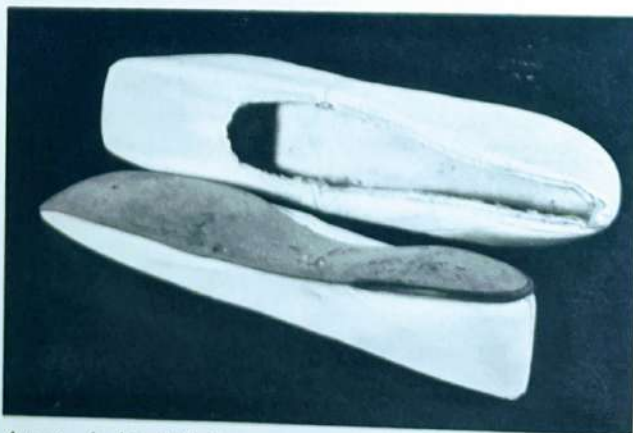
(10) Raymond Adam Binswanger. *Descendants of David Harmer, Revolutionary Soldier, and His Wife Ann*, Slippery Rock, Pa., The Author, 1978; typescript. All Harmer information comes from this document.

(11) Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

(12) William E. Winks, *Lives of Industrious Shoemakers, New York, 1883. Also Lives of Distinguished Shoemakers*, [anonymous], Portland, Me., 1849.

1876-1898, he and two sons, Theodore H. and Alfred G., and a son-in-law, Simeon Davis, are listed as partners in "shoes" (apparently shoemaking) in South Philadelphia. After being wounded in the Civil War, Charles Wesley Harmer, Jr. (1846-1906) seems to have moved from shoemaking to cabinetmaking; his brother Edwin G. (1842-1872), also wounded in the Civil War, had also been a shoemaker. Their cousin Joseph C. Harmer (1838-1902), son of Gideon, also wounded, moved away to Quakertown after the war and died in Atlantic City. Stephen Parsons Harmer, Jr. (1839-1904), formerly a cordwainer, eventually became a motor inspector.

Alfred Crout Harmer, (1825-1900), cousin of John and Lemuel, had served his apprenticeship under his uncle Samuel. He was to become Recorder of Deeds for the City of Philadelphia and twice U. S. Congressman. At the time of the 1850 census he had a profitable shop employing 12 men and 2 women.



A pair of white kid slippers, worn in Germantown, though not made here, about 1850. From the Society's Costume Collection.