Posing for a photo before the Oct. 27 talk on Oliver Ward are two members of the North Brookfield High School Class of 1939 — John Leamard, left, and Francis Rooney Jr. — who worked in the shoe business.

The pioneer spirit

Program tells the story of North Brookfield's shoe industry

BY DAVID DORE
NEW LEADER STAFF WRITER

NORTH BROOKFIELD — It was a decision that would shape a community for the next two centuries.

In the fall of 1809, Oliver Ward moved to what would become North Brookfield with his wife, Elizabeth, and son Joseph. On the 5 acres and 25 rods they owned to the west of Forget-Me-Not Brook in Spunky Hollow, now known as 75 Ward St., an industry was born. Ward took over the tanning business run by previous owner Charles Bruce. But it didn’t take long for the enterprising Ward to set up a factory to make shoes that were sold throughout the United States, including to slaves on southern plantations.

Many of the big names that dominated the shoe industry in North Brookfield in the latter half of the 19th century — such as Batcheller Shoe, Dewing & Edmands and Edmund Smith —

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can trace their success back to Ward. He trained the owners of all three factories in his shop.

As occasionally happens, the innovator was eclipsed in the history books by his prodigies. For example, the Batcheller Shoe factory in North Brookfield became the largest in the United States, if not the world.

Ward's story went untold until now, thanks to local resident and researcher James Buzzell and Linda Grace, director and museum curator at the North Brookfield Historical Society and a member of the North Brookfield 200th Anniversary Committee.

Buzzell presented his research Saturday, Oct. 27 in the North Brookfield Elementary School auditorium to close this year's celebration of the town's 200th birthday.

In June, following publication of a book on the history of North Brookfield since its 1812 founding, Buzzell sent an email to Grace about Ward and his contributions to the town. Buzzell and Grace worked with roughly 30 people from near and far to piece together Ward's story.

It started on Dec. 3, 1783, when Oliver Ward was born to Nathaniel and Hannah Ward of Grafton. His parents died within nine days of each other in 1793. He and his three siblings would be taken in by Hannah Ward's brother, Mark Batcheller, a wheelwright in Sutton. It was while in Sutton that Oliver began his lifelong close association with cousins Tyler and Ezra Batcheller, whose names became synonymous with shoe making in North Brookfield.

Tyler and Ezra, along with their father, Ezra Batcheller Sr., moved from Sutton to North Brookfield in 1802. Six years later, in 1808, Tyler would return to Grafton to learn the shoe trade. Buzzell theorized Tyler Batcheller could have told Ward about life in North Brookfield during that time.
In the fall of 1809, Ward spent $1,000 to buy land in North Brookfield owned by a former tanner. A year later, a three-story shoe factory was constructed.

Ward used farmers in Brookfield, Spencer, Sturbridge, New Braintree, Brimfield, Charlton, Barre, Warren and Wales to sew the upper parts of shoes together and attach the soles and heels. The rest of the work was done in the factory.

When Tyler Batcheller returned to North Brookfield from his apprenticeship in Grafton, he worked for his cousin Oliver for several years until he finished his commitment and raised enough money to strike out on his own.

Tyler’s younger brother Ezra worked and lived with the Wards for six years, joining Tyler as a partner in 1825.

Ward would train more than 40 young men at his factory in Spunk Hollow, some of who would start their own shoe making companies.

In 1832, according to Buzzell, Ward’s factory produced 65,000 pairs of shoes. Four years later, all of the factories in North Brookfield would produce nearly 600,000 pairs of boots and shoes.

The town’s population grew from 1,096 in 1820 to 1,509 in 1837; it would continue to head upward through the 19th century as more people worked in the shoe factories.

With Grace’s help, he moved ahead with the rest of his research, such as locating probate and registry records in Worcester, going through old newspaper articles, using online ancestry records and information from gravestones, and searching 75 Ward St. for artifacts.

Buzzell’s uncle, Russell, created sketches of the Ward home and factory that appear on a historical marker installed last week at 75 Ward St.

Before Buzzell presented Ward’s life, a “virtual museum” was set up in the elementary school hallway featuring items from the North Brookfield Historical Society’s collection.

“This is a visual representation of our Oliver Ward research project,” Grace said. “Because Oliver Ward’s never been really represented in North Brookfield or through our museum, we recreated his life story in pictures, photographs and events that reflect his influence on the town of North Brookfield.”

Among the items on display were a couple of really big shoes made by the Batcheller Shoe Company.

“In 1899,” Grace explained, “there was a thing called the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. They were celebrating 400 years of Columbus’ discovery of America. The Batcheller Company put together three big, large exhibits plus the No. 40 shoes, and they went on exhibit at the exhibition in Chicago.”

Last Saturday’s program attracted four special guests: Francis Rooney Jr., a 1959 graduate of North Brookfield High School and chairman of H.H. Brown Shoe Company, a subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway; classmate John Learnard, who worked in the shoe industry and founded the Brockton Shoe Museum; Herbert Varnum, former president and chairman of Quabaug Corporation; and Kevin Donahue, chairman, chief executive officer and owner of Quabaug Corporation.

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The Historical Marker constructed by Randy Beaudoin of North Country Signs for the North Brookfield Historical Society in recognition of the North Brookfield’s 200th Anniversary - 2012.

In 1809, Oliver Ward purchased the property here on the north side of the road which now bears his name. In this section of town which was then known as Spunky Hollow. In 1810, he built a three-story shoe-making factory, the first of its kind in Massachusetts west of Grafton, making “sale or extra” shoes for New England provision stores, and later exporting them to southern and midwestern states.

Oliver Ward was considered the father of shoe-making manufacturers to which the prosperity of North Brookfield must be mainly attributed. His talent and industry were the catalysts that led to North Brookfield’s evolution into a shoe-making empire during the 1800’s. He apprenticed virtually all of North Brookfield’s early shoemakers. His influence thus spread throughout the village, both during his lifetime and for generations to follow. He operated his modest factory here until the late 1830’s. This factory, which sat just to the East of Ward’s home, was torn down in approximately the late 1890’s.

Oliver Ward was laid to rest in the Maple Street Cemetery on February 26, 1839. “The community have by his death lost a useful citizen, and his family a most faithful and affectionate friend – but, he has left behind him the assurance that, what to them is loss, is to him unspeakable gain.”