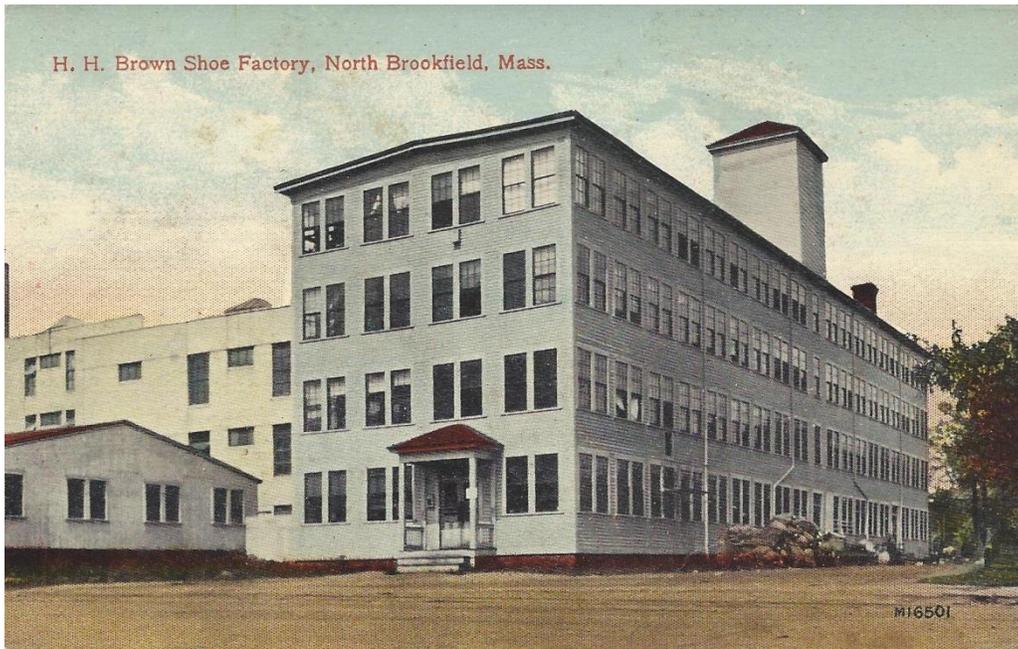


The H.H. Brown Story – Part I

(Linda Grace – October 6, 2012)

Compiled from Articles of The North Brookfield Journal, Feb-Jul 1890



From Excavation to Operational in 107 Days!

In 1883, Henry H. Brown opened his first shoe factory in Natick, MA

During the last week of February 1890, representatives of H.H. Brown & Co. of Natick had been in town “looking over the ground with a view of changing their location of their present Natick factory, having been very much pleased with the town and its advantages,” and on February 28, a special town committee from the Board of Trade met in Boston with the hope that every honorable effort would be put forth to secure the firm’s removal to North Brookfield. At the time, the factory in Natick employed 175 hands, and the company hoped to increase that number.

At the Board of Trade meeting on Monday, March 3, 1890, Secretary Burrill read the letter from H.H. Brown & Co., of Natick, providing an outline of what they desired “our people do for them in case they come here to do business. They wish that a 4-story factory building 35 x 150 feet be erected on the easterly side of the Grove School-house lot and furnished with engine and fixed machinery, ready for use.” The estimate for

this was expected to be \$12,000-\$15,000, in addition to the assurance that a good supply of water was available. The agreement would be for a five-year term with the privilege of renewal, and the H.H. Brown terms for a loan to purchase new machinery were considered very acceptable. After a "full and lively discussion" it was voted without dissent that a town meeting be called within 10 days to see if the town would sell or lease to the Board of Trade Committee, a part or whole of the Grove School-house lot, with the school building thereon. The property would be held in trust until a stock company was organized to use it for manufacturing purposes. There was every prospect of "something being done" to build up the town, and add to its manufacturing industry. It was stated that, "one of our enterprising manufacturers, now sadly cramped for room, stands ready to occupy the Grove School-house (which has been condemned as unfit for school purposes) and thus form a nucleus of a manufacturing district what is now a rocky park. The opportunity was considered favorable "to secure just what we all want and must have."

On March 14, 1890, Mr. H.H. Brown was in town for a meeting with the Board of Trade. He asked nothing unreasonable, and if the desired land can be secured and the money raised, indicating that there was no reason why the wheels of the new factory could not be running by the first of June or July. The Committee had decided not to ask for any more of the land on the Grove School house property than necessary. Mr. Brown was satisfied that this arrangement would satisfy his preference, and still leave "ample" room for a \$35,000 library if such would ever be given to the town by the death of someone who might wish thus to remember us.

A Special Town Meeting was called on March 21, 1890, to see if the town would sell or lease a portion of the Grove School-house lot or the school house thereon. More time was requested by the Board of Trade to present a more formal motion for the land transfer, there being a technical point necessary to investigate. However, an informal vote was requested to ascertain the town's willingness to sell a portion of the Grove School-house lot at a nominal price. The vote was carried 510 to 5. "It seemed to be the feeling that this lot must be secured in order to insure the coming of Messrs. Brown, and the citizens did not feel warranted in losing a present surety of business by keeping the land for a possible library."

On Thursday, March 27, 1890, the intense interest of the all-important subject of new business was evinced by the fact it would have been difficult to have obtained even

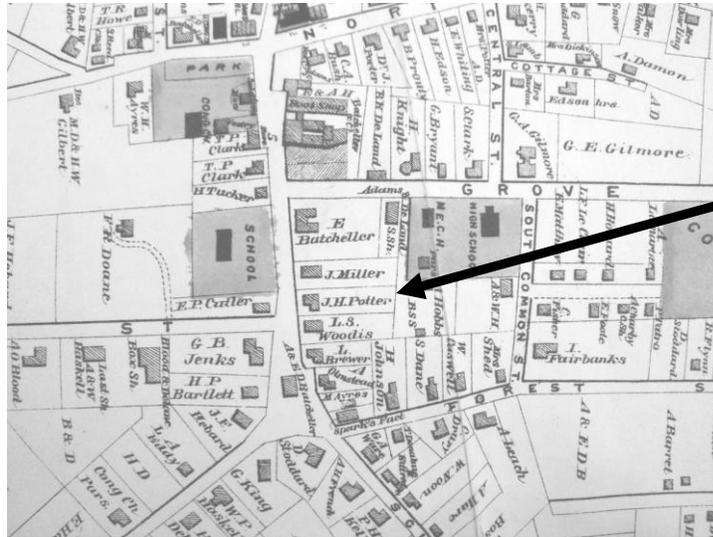
standing room in the hall, while the gallery was packed with ladies, many of whom stood during the whole evening.

Dea. James Miller made a motion that the town sell and convey to Mr. Sumner Holmes, the land on the east side of the Grove-School house lot. The temper of the meeting was very evidently in favor of this motion and, had it been put to vote then, it would have been carried with great unanimity.

However, Mr. H.P. Bartlett arose to oppose the motion on the ground of sentiment principally, believing there was a will in existence providing for a large benefaction to the town for a public library to be placed on the ground where it was proposed to erect the factory, and if the land was taken for the purpose, it would result in the loss of the bequest as the donor would not accept any other location. Dr. Bartlett thought the ground should be kept for school and library purposes. H.W. King, Esq. followed in the same strain, replying to the insinuation which he said had been thrown out by some that there was no such will in existence. Mr. King stated that he received permission from the party who made it to bring the document there and read such portions relating to the library gift. This he did. In short, some \$30,000 for a library building and of a fund for books, was conditional upon putting the building on the lot where the present Grove school house now stood, and the building of a new school house, if needed, on the east side of the lot.

It was originally thought that Messrs. Brown were unwilling to take any other location than the schoolhouse lot, but they indicated they would accept the Potter Place on the north side of the street and the Board of Trade Committee was in favor of the location if an additional \$4,000 could be raised to pay the expenses of purchasing the land. Mr. Mills, in an energetic speech, suggested that the amount for the purchase of the lot be raised right then and there, clinching his argument with his subscription for another share of stock. The town meeting was adjourned for an hour and a citizens meeting substituted. Subscriptions were called for . . . Mr. Bates headed the list with \$500. Mr. H.W. King followed with a similar amount, and then followed a series of subscriptions of \$100 each, followed by subscriptions and gifts ranging from \$25 to \$5. The whole amount raised during the hour equaled \$3,600; about \$147 was subscribed by the ladies. The town meeting was re-adjourned. Dea. Miller withdrew his motion by unanimous consent and the article was passed over. "A most desirable result was reached, the best of harmony seemed to prevail, where there had been serious

indications of a storm, and the money was secured to purchase what all acknowledge to be a most excellent site.” There still remained about \$2,000 to be raised, and the committee planned to visit farmers to receive their subscriptions.



The J.H.
Potter
Property

Beers Atlas Town Map – North Brookfield #55 - 1871

On March 28, 1890, the North Brookfield Journal reported that the Potter Property on School Street was secured for the proposed shop of the company to be incorporated as the North Brookfield Shoe Company, and the contract with Messrs. Brown was now in their hands for signature with the hope that the site is prepared for building to commence in just a few days. The contract for building the North Brookfield Shoe Company factory was awarded to Wm. Fullam & Co, and excavations began on April 3.

On April 28, the formal organization of the North Brookfield Shoe Company occurred with some 50 subscribers present. A board of seven directors was chosen: Theodore C Bates, Sumner Holmes, W.H. Montague, George R. Hamant, Alfred Burrill, B.H. Smith and A.H. Foster.

On June 11, 1890, the first car-load of machinery for the H.H. Brown Shoe Factory arrived. On July 4, 1890, the North Brookfield Journal reported that work at the factory was expected to commence by July 14, indicating the “carpenters and machinists have been driving things in the most lively fashion.

On July 15, 1890, the steam whistle at the new factory shop sounded for the first time at noon. The new factory is ready for business:

- Mr. H.H. Brown is his own superintendent and is putting in hard work at present getting all departments into working order.
- Mr. H.T. Maynard of Natick is in charge of the office and Miss Minnie Stoddard of North Brookfield will assist with clerical work.
- Mr. John Chadbourne of Natick will control the leather sole room
- Mr. L.B. Hayden of Natick is at the head of the cutting Department
- Mr. Ansel A. Edwards of North Brookfield has oversight of the bottoming room
- Mr. Samuel Moulton of Brookfield looks after the stitching room
- Mr. Jones Baldwin of Westboro has the care of the finishing room
- Mr. John Wright of Natick will lead the heeling room.
- Mr. F. H. Putnam of Brookfield is in charge of the treeing department and Charles Graves of the crimping room.

It was expected that the factory will have a capacity of 2,000 pairs daily.

In 1927, Henry H. Brown sold H.H. Brown Shoe Company for \$10,000 to 29-year old businessman Ray Heffernan who would run the company for 62 years until shortly before his death in 1990. The company moved to Worcester in 1932.

In 1990, Mr. Heffernan called upon his son-in-law, Francis C. Rooney, Jr. to take over the reins at H.H. Brown. *Francis C. Rooney (Sr.) served as the President of Quabaug Rubber Company from 1948-1961.* Mr. Rooney (Jr.) had just recently retired after 23 years as CEO of Melville Shoe Corporation. He remains today as only the third chairman in H.H. Brown's 128-year history. In 1991, H.H. Brown was considered a good fit with Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway and became a wholly-owned subsidiary. After 14 years as Chairman and CEO, Mr. Rooney handed over the reins as President and CEO to Jim Issler in 2004, while he dedicates his efforts to his role as Chairman of the company.