

Chronological outline of M. M. Rhodes Sons Co., Inc., Taunton, Massachusetts

Revised 4-18-14 by George W. Rhodes / Edited by Marc N. Belanger for SNEC-SIA tour on 6-21-14.

The **M.M. Rhodes & Sons Co.** building located just west of downtown Taunton at 12 Porter Street, is the last surviving manufacturing establishment in what was once an important industrial area that developed after the arrival of the Taunton Branch Railroad in 1835. The neighborhood included notable companies such as the Mason Machine Works (textile machinery, locomotives, rifles) and the Taunton Locomotive Manufacturing Company, along with the central passenger and freight depots. M.M. Rhodes & Sons is also an important part of the city's long history of metal-working establishments (iron, silver and copper).

Marcus Morton Rhodes ("M.M."), was born in Foxborough, Mass. on Jan. 22, 1822 to Stephen Rhodes, Jr. (born 1795). They were the decedents of Henry Rhodes (born 1608 in Lancashire, England) – who later settled in Lynn during the 1640s as "*an iron monger on the east bank of the Saugus River.*" Marcus was educated at local schools in Franklin, Foxboro and Taunton and attended high school and Bristol Academy in Taunton after the family relocated in 1835. After leaving school he entered the factory of his father and learned the trade of making tacks and nails. At the age of twenty one he was taken into partnership becoming a member of the firm of **S. Rhodes & Son** and he continued with this business until 1857. Marcus established **M.M. Rhodes Co.** in 1861, after working in the tack business with his father for several years. During his career, he received several patents related to the shoe button industry. He also served on the board that installed the first public water system in Taunton. (*Beers, 1912*)

1825 - **Stephen Holbrook Rhodes** (brother of Marcus), born on November 7 in Foxborough. He became the second mayor of Taunton in 1867 and served until 1869. He went on to become a state senator and president of John Hancock Insurance Company, and the state's insurance commissioner. (*Hanna, 2007*)

1831- **John Corey Rhodes** (brother of Marcus), born on October 10. He would join his father's tack business in 1848. He also later worked for his brother Marcus until about 1863 when he moved to East Bridgewater to establish and eyelet business with William H. Dunbar. He was a lover of the sea and sailing which is why he moved to Mattapoisett and New Bedford. He would sail his boat, *Indolent*, to Florida for the winter. Upon the death of Dunbar in 1890, the business moved to New Bedford and was renamed J.C. Rhodes & Co.

1848- George Holbrook Rhodes, (son of M.M. Rhodes) is born in Taunton, Mass. on Aug. 11. He works in the company all his life. He becomes president of Taunton's Common Council and is a 33rd degree Mason. He dies in South Portland Maine, where he moved to regain his health, at the age of 68 from a bleeding intestine and a duodenal ulcer.

1854- Stephen Rhodes & Son (M.M. Rhodes) own a mill on Union Street and are made agents to manufacture and sell products for Albert Field (a prominent local Tack maker). (*Agreement dated Feb. 15, 1854 is in the company's possession*)

Circa mid-1850s- Stephen and son Marcus sell out to Taunton Tack Company. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1857- M.M. goes into business for himself. (*Beers, 1912*)

1860s- M.M. brings sons Charles and George into business with him.

1861- M.M. Rhodes manufactures hoopskirt trimmings and lining nails in rented buildings on Porter Street. This information comes from a 1941 story in the Taunton Daily Gazette. The exact date is not available. *Note: Grandson (M.A. Rhodes, 1928) said M.M. Rhodes "hired the old wood building that is now part of our plant" and made coffin tacks, upholstery nails and buttons.*

1865- (A brush with history) April, 10, 1865, M.M. Rhodes and his sons were in Washington, D.C. and staying at Willard's Hotel. M.M. Rhodes notes in his diary "news of the surrender of Lee and his army." He also refers to visits to Lee's home in Arlington, Va. and visits by his sons to Ford's Theater.

1865- M. M. Rhodes buys his first piece of property on Porter Street from Horace Lewis* for \$3,350. This property is believed to be the same property bought by Lewis in 1859, which at one time in the 1850s housed the Taunton Umbrella Co. Lewis' umbrella company deed is recorded in Book 246, Pages 71-73 in Northern Bristol County Registry of Deeds. It's a mortgage deed to Bristol County Savings Bank and is in possession of the company. *According to information at Old Colony Historical Society, Lewis was a "railroad superintendent. "

Circa late 1860s -M.M. built a shoe button machine while his son Charles developed or found the material with which to make the button. At the time, most shoe buttons were imported from France and American shoe companies were "shy" about buying American buttons. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1870 (July 19) - Franco-Prussian war breaks out, cutting off shoe button supply to America which was good for the company. The war in Europe touched off an era of prosperity for M.M. Rhodes & Sons Co.

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1876 - U.S. Patent #174,741 issued on March 14 to Charles M. Rhodes of M.M. Rhodes & Sons Co. for "Improvement in Japanning buttons," March 14, 1876. (*Patent papers in possession of the company*).

1878- Shoe button business so good that M.M. and his sons began planning an addition to their factory. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1879- M.M. Rhodes conveys $\frac{1}{4}$ of Porter Street property to his son George H. Rhodes for \$1,250. The company is in possession of the deed which is dated March 3, 1879 and recorded in Book 379, Pages 387-388 at the Registry of Deeds in Taunton.

1879- M. M. Rhodes, George H. Rhodes and Charles M. Rhodes, doing business as M.M. Rhodes & Sons, buy a Porter Street lot from Mary E. Cook on May 3, 1879 for \$500. Company is in possession of the deed which is recorded in Book 377, Pages 181-182 at the Northern Bristol County Registry of Deeds in Taunton. Cook and her husband are allowed to occupy the home rent free until April 1, 1880, under an agreement dated May 2, 1879 which is in possession of the company.

1880- Company plans to build a three-story brick building on Porter Street are reported in the Taunton Daily Gazette on Feb. 12. Company has a transcription of the story. A photo copy is on file with the Old Colony Historical Society in Taunton.

1880- U.S. Patent #231,359 is issued on August 17 to M.M. Rhodes on Aug. 17 for "Apparatus for Gauging and Assorting Disks of Varying Thicknesses." (*Patent papers are in possession of the company*).

1881- U.S. Patent #244,310 is issued on July 17 to M.M. Rhodes on July 12 for "Machines for Making Shoe Buttons." (*Patent papers are in possession of the company*.)

1881- Marcus Arnold Rhodes (grandson of M.M.) is born in Taunton on July 17. Believed to be the first Rhodes to attend college, he started his professional life as teacher after getting degrees from Amherst College and Harvard University. He became company treasurer, a bank president and served on Taunton's school committee for 14 years. He writes a six-page history of the company in 1928 as part of a letter to a New York lawyer. The reasons for the letter are not evident. The lawyer may have represented the wife of Albert Clinton Rhodes, the third son of Marcus Morton Rhodes and the brother of Charles and George, who moved to Clifton Springs, N.Y. for health reasons, it is believed. A "Mrs. Rhodes" is noted in the letter. His biography is in The Massachusetts Encyclopedia of Biography.

1884- Charles M. Rhodes and George H. Rhodes convey their $\frac{1}{4}$ quarter shares of Porter Street property back to M.M. Rhodes for \$1. The deed is in possession of the company and recorded in Book 418, Pages 318-319 at the Registry of Deeds in Taunton.

1888- Incorporation papers for M.M. Rhodes & Sons Co. were signed on Oct. 23, 1888 by M.M. Rhodes, Charles M. Rhodes, George H. Rhodes and Albert C. Rhodes who each got 75 shares of the company. Each share was valued at \$100. The business was formally incorporated by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on Oct. 31, 1888.

1888- M.M. Rhodes, Charles M. Rhodes, George H. Rhodes and Albert C. Rhodes, co-partners of M. M. Rhodes & Sons Co., transfer Porter Street real estate to M.M. Rhodes & Sons Co. Inc. for \$30,000 on Nov. 1, 1888. The deed is in company possession and is recorded in Book 465, Pages 315-317 at the Registry of Deeds in Taunton.

1890- Date approximate. A two-story brick building is constructed in the southwest corner of the company property. This information comes from a building map drawn by Marcus A. Rhodes, Jr. who was the son of Marcus Arnold Rhodes. Map drawn Dec. 21, 1888.

1892- Shoe button business falls off because of competition from at least six other companies. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1896-1900- Business bad, no dividends. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1896 and 1898- Stockholders are assessed 40 percent. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1897-M.M. Rhodes begins shoe hook finishing business, known as Rodite Hooks, they were placed on "popular priced" shoes of time. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1897- M.M. designed an upholstery nail.

1899 – M.M. Rhodes and Morley Button Manufacturing Co. sign a contract. Rhodes is to supply buttons to Morley along with other companies and is to get a cut of the profits (15 percent) in proportion to the percentage of buttons supplied. The papers thought to have been drawn by Louis Brandeis. (*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*)

1900- A one story brick building housing a coal fired boiler is constructed.

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1900- A trademark is issued to M.M. Rhode & Sons for a “plastic composition” used in its production of shoe buttons and other items. The material is trademarked “Rodite.” Trademark document is in possession of the company.

1906-1913- shoe button business is again “very profitable” thanks to the arrangement with Morley. *(M.A. Rhodes, 1928)*

1906- Marcus A. Rhodes, who was a teacher at Deerfield Academy (where he met his wife Ruth) and in New Jersey for a while, applies for a job in the family business, but is rejected because there are no jobs with three members of the family already in the business.

1907- Marcus A. Rhodes, the son of George H. Rhodes comes into the business, because M.M. “realized he was becoming an old man” and Charles M. Rhodes wanted to retire and Albert Clinton Rhodes wasn’t too interested in the business. *(M.A. Rhodes, 1928)*

1911- Stephen H. Rhodes, son of Marcus A. Rhodes, born in Taunton on Feb. 25. He serves in Navy CBs during WWII, become president of the company and to serve the community on the electric light board and school board. Member of Rotary Club and active in his church.

1913- A mechanic who formerly worked for M.M.’s brother, J.C. Rhodes of New Bedford, is hired for M.M. Rhodes to work on button machines.

1915- The new mechanic develops a new machine for tufting nails which was successful, but the business wasn’t. *(M.A. Rhodes, 1928)*

1916- By this time shoe hook finishing business had fallen off partly due to a “vogue for oxfords,” the blind eyelet and cheaper products from Germany. *(M.A. Rhodes, 1928)*

1916- Marcus Morton Rhodes dies at his 43 Cedar Street home in Taunton on March 23, at the age of 94.

1916- George H. Rhodes dies in South Portland, Maine Oct. 19, age 68 intestinal hemorrhage/ duodenal ulcer. He had lived in Maine for five weeks.

1917- Marcus Arnold Rhodes Jr. born in Taunton, Mass. March 20.

1918- Company began production of shoe laces, “Liberty Laces,” in November, which failed because WW I ended the same month.

1921- U.S. Trademark issued to M.M. Rhodes & Sons Co. for Liberty Laces, April 26, 1921. *(The Company is in possession of trademark papers. There is one known pair remaining in possession of the company).*

1922- Began selling inside wiring nails for telephone companies, eventually had to design and make better machines. This began more than 90 years of supplying the telephone and other companies with fasteners. The Bell companies, AT&T, ITT, General Electric are among them. Products shipped all over American and many parts of the world.

1927- Telephone company business falls off because of “retrenchment” and competition with Atlas Tack which had 60 percent of the business compared to M.M. Rhodes’ 40 percent, lost money, 1917 through 1926, Marcus Arnold Rhodes’ salary “materially reduced.” *(M.A. Rhodes, 1928)*

1929 – U.S. Patent #1,305,144 is issued on June 7 to Charles W. Tobey for an “Insulated Staple”.

1933- Stephen H. Rhodes, son of Marcus A. Rhodes joins the company.

Circa 1930s- Sold inside wiring nails to the International Telephone and Telegraph Co. which shipped them to South and Central America, South Africa and China. *(Memories of Stephen H. Rhodes in a Taunton Daily Gazette news story from 1976)*

1943- (Another brush with history) Nov. 25, 1942 through Jan. 10, 1943 Capt. Clark V. Poling, an army chaplain, along with his wife and young son Corky lives with Marcus Arnold Rhodes and his wife Ruth at 43 Cedar St. before embarking on U.S. A. T. Dorchester which was sunk by a Nazi submarine on Feb. 3. Poling and three other chaplains gave up their life jackets to soldiers and sailors as he ship sank and were later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. They became known as “The Four Chaplains” and their heroism was widely celebrated.

1946- Marcus A. Rhodes Jr., son of Marcus A. Rhodes and brother of Stephen H. Rhodes, joins the company after serving overseas during WW II. He was a lieutenant in a black construction company in the Philippines.

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Circa 1940s- began production of cable clamps for Western Electric. (*Taunton Daily Gazette news story, memories of Stephen H. Rhodes and Marcus A. Rhodes Jr. April 21, 1999.*)

1954- George W. Rhodes, son of Marcus Arnold Rhodes Jr. is born in Providence, R.I. May 15, future president, treasurer, clerk of M.M. Rhodes & Sons.

1955- Timothy L. Rhodes, son of Marcus Arnold Rhodes Jr. is born in Providence, R.I. Oct. 30, future manager and president of M.M. Rhodes & Sons.

1955- The Company began making tack strips for the furniture business.

1957- Marcus A. Rhodes dies at his home at 43 Cedar Street, Feb. 8.

1957- Wooden structures on southern end of company property are torn down and replaced with a cement block building.

1959- Marcus H. Rhodes, son of Marcus Arnold Rhodes Jr. is born in Taunton, Mass. Nov. 10, future clerk of M. M. Rhodes.

1960- (January) A 40' X 60' metal "Pruden" metal warehouse is built for the company by Charles A. Eldridge Inc. for \$7,688.43. Construction contract is in possession of the company.

1960- A 1-1/2 story barn is torn down by Wilbur & Ewald Building Razing for \$100. Razing contract and razing permit are in possession of the company.

1962- Consideration is given to selling the company to PCI Co. from a letter written by Marcus Arnold Rhodes Jr. on Feb. 17, 1962.

1972- M.M. Rhodes buys insulated staple business from a Worcester concern, which becomes valuable source of income for the business.

1976- Major customer is Western Electric. (*Taunton Daily Gazette news story, information from Stephen H. Rhodes*)

1997- Timothy L. Rhodes begins working full time for the company.

2005- Marcus Arnold Rhodes Jr. dies in Taunton, Mass. May 8, at the age of 88.

2007- Stephen Holbrook Rhodes dies in Taunton, Mass. Nov. 20, at the age of 96.

2008- Stock market crash begins a five- year slide for the company. In 2011 sales reached only \$92,000. The crash precipitated by the mortgage crisis caused construction to all but stop across the nation. The company relied on the construction for its sales. Also contributing is the increase of wireless communications.

By 2014 the company had spent \$50,000 in savings and more than \$150,000 in loans to stay afloat. With business on track for only \$72,000 in sales after the first quarter in 2014 a decision was made to close effective on May 31.

References:

(*Beers, 1912*) - *Representative Men and Old Families of Southeastern Massachusetts, J.H. Beers, Co.*

(*Hanna, 2007*) - *A History of Taunton, William F. Hanna.*

(*M.A. Rhodes, 1928*) – *1928 Six-page written history by Marcus Arnold Rhodes.*