

Factory on First

From Potato Digger to Paper Machinery to Copper Foil

Since 1891, a large factory has been located at 80 First Street. It started as the Pruyn Manufacturing Company, which produced potato diggers invented by Henry S. Pruyn. The company produced and sold potato diggers all over the world, but in 1894, the company went bankrupt.

James A Noble from Lawrence, Massachusetts moved to the area in 1894 to manufacture paper making machinery. A. L. Johnston, a successful store-keeper on Church Street, purchased the foundry. After a few years, Johnston teamed up with James Noble to establish Noble and Johnston Machine Shop. The paper machinery produced at this factory was soon known throughout the paper industry. The plant grew into a machine shop, woodworking shop, and a blacksmith and steel shop. By 1899, it employed over 40 people. However, on March 14, 1902 the plant was destroyed by a major fire.

A. L. Johnston declined to invest in the rebuilding of the business and factory. Walter A Wood, Jr. became interested, and the Noble and Wood Machine Company was organized in 1902. A new modern well-equipped plant was built. Within a few years, over 150 men were working in this thriving enterprise. Noble and Wood became a leader in paper making machinery. They began manufacturing piano parts as a side enterprise. These piano parts were cast, machined, plated and polished in the plant and shipped out ready to be assembled.

During World War II, the company employed over 250. During this time about 100 women were employed making artillery shell boosters. Business slowly declined, and in 1969 Simmons Machine and Tool Corporation of Menands purchased 53 percent of the company's stock. The Simmons company went bankrupt in 1973, and the Noble and Wood Machine Company closed in January 1974.

The factory was purchased by Oak Industries in August 1977. The manufacturing of copper foil started here through a joint venture between Oak and Mitsui Mining. The business flourished, and in 1988, plans were drawn up for a new plant on Route 22, but were later cancelled. In July 2001, 100 employees were temporarily laid off due to a weak electronics market.