

Walter A. Wood

Compiled by Philip Leonard, November 1999

Walter A. Wood was born in Mason, New Hampshire on October 23, 1815. His father was a wagon and plow manufacturer. At age one the family moved to Rensselaerville, New York. During his early years, he worked in his father's shop. At age twenty-one (1836), he moved to Hoosick Falls where he worked as a blacksmith for Parsons & Wilder. He was a blacksmith by trade and became an excellent machinist. After four years he moved to Nashville, Tennessee to work as a carriage maker. (1840)

In 1842, he moved back to Hoosick Falls and married Bessie Parsons, daughter of Seth Parsons. Seth Parsons had been his employer from 1836-1840. He and John White operated a small foundry and machine shop under the name of White and Wood. In 1852, he became interested in a reaper patented by John Manny of Illinois. He purchased shop rights for the New York territory. He divided the purchased territory with Chandler Ball and J. Russell Parsons. Wood represented the western part of the state. The other two represented the eastern part of the state. They both started the manufacturing of the reaper in separate shops. In 1860, the Ball and Parsons Reaper Company burned to the ground. Russell Parsons went to work for Wood.

Walter A. Wood purchased the Tremont Cotton Factory in 1855 to increase the production of the reaper. In 1852, he built two reapers and by 1858-59 he was producing 5,000 per year. In 1860, the plant was destroyed by fire. He immediately constructed a new plant. In July 1857, the Wood Reaper won first prize by the Syracuse Agricultural Society. In 1861, he patented the "chain rake reaper" that was so unique that it caught the attention of farmers all over the world. A mower was added as well as improvements on all the machines manufactured. By 1865, his reapers and mowers were so successful that financial people became interested in the Wood Company. In 1866, the company was organized as a stock company and called the "Walter A. Wood Mowing and Reaper Machine Company." Walter A. Wood was President, William Tibbets, Vice President and Willard Gay, Treasurer.

The second large fire destroyed much of the Wood factory in 1870. They used the Caledonia Mill Building while the factory was being rebuilt. The output of the factory was about 8,000 units during this time. By 1890 the output had increased to approximately 90,000 units. During this time, the reapers and mowers won medals all over the world. (1862: Medal of Merit in England; 1867: Iron and Gold medal in Paris; 1873: medal in Vienna) The factory grew continuously and employment grew as Hoosick Falls prospered with the successful plant.

His wife Bessie died. They had one child, Lynn P. Wood. In 1868, he married Elizabeth Warren Nicholls and had two children. A boy named Walter, Jr and a girl named Julia. -- *The following is provided by David W Babington Aug, 2007: His second wife's name was Elizabeth Warren Nicholls (spelled commonly now as Nichols), daughter of George Huntington Nicholls (1818, Stratford, CT – 1902, Hoosick Falls, NY) and Julia Louisa Phelps (1818, New York, NY – 1892, Hoosick Falls, NY). Elizabeth Warren Nicholls (Wood) was born 24 Apr 1845 in Hartford, NY. The date of the Walter A Wood marriage to Elizabeth Warren*

Nicholls was 2 Sep 1868 at the St. Mark's Church in Hoosick Falls. I am not sure when Elizabeth Warren Nicholls (Wood) died, but she could have died in Hoosick Falls.--

In 1873, they built a large mansion modeled after an English castle. Beautiful gardens were located toward the rear and extended to a large pond. The entrance to the mansion had a large metal fence that surrounded the front, which is now the Woods Park without the fence. They owned more than 1,000 acres that extended into East Hoosick. They operated a large farm.

Walter A. Wood started the First National Bank of Hoosick Falls. He was elected to the House of Representatives in the 46th and 47th Troy district. (1878-1882) He was President of the Board of Education, as well as President of the Village. He was a vestryman at St. Marks Church and was a generous giver to all denominations.

Mr. Wood came down with pneumonia and died in 1892 at the age of 77. The factory was shut down and all works lined the streets as his funeral processional passed toward burial. He is buried in the old Maple Grove Cemetery at the back part of the cemetery.

The prosperity Walter A. Wood brought to Hoosick Falls can be summed up by a quote from the Rensselaer County Standard dated November, 1878:

“Without him, Hoosick Falls would not have been, as it is today, the most prosperous village in the American Continent.”

The following information is from “History of Rensselaer Co., New York,” by Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, published in 1880.

[Walter A. Wood Mowing- and Reaping-Machine Manufactory], was born in Mason, N. H., Oct. 23, 1815, and came to Hoosick Falls in 1836. He was a blacksmith by trade and worked at that business for Seth Parsons, who was engaged in manufacturing. He married a daughter of his employer, a sister of T. Russell Parsons and David B. Parsons, who have been in late years associated with Mr. Wood's manufacturing operations. A few years later, Mr. Wood became interested in the subject of mowing- and reaping-machines, which were then beginning to attract the attention of the country. He made some improvements upon the Manny mower and reaper, which he was manufacturing to a limited extent. He gave to the subject much close thought, and while making machines in accordance with another man's patent, he was all the time reducing his own ideas into practical shape. In 1853 he obtained a patent for the mower that has ever since born his name. In 1854 he commenced in a small way the manufacture of his machines, continuing to increase his works as the demand increased. In 1866 a company was formed, of which Mr. Wood was made president, J. Russell Parsons vice-president, Willard Gay treasurer, and A. C. Gear secretary. The company has ever been on the alert to introduce new improvements, and the steady

and increasing demand for their machines is solid proof of their success. From 1853 to 1879 the number of machines manufactured aggregated to 302,092. This record is unequaled in the history of mowing-machines.

Mr. Wood has been rewarded not only by the great financial success which has resulted from his inventions and his manufacturing establishments, but by prizes, medals, and honors such as have been won by few men. In 1837 he received the grand gold medal of the United States National Agricultural Society; in 1862, the International Exhibition medal, London, England; in 1867, the grand gold medal, first prize at the Paris Exposition (also the Cross of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor); in 1873, the grand diploma of honor, the highest award of the commission, and the only one given for reaping- and mowing-machines at the Vienna Exhibition, supplemented by the Knight's Cross of the Imperial Order of Francis Joseph; in 1874, the first prize, gold medal, at Bremen, Germany, International Exhibition, June 1874; in 1876, four medals and four diplomas, awarded at the Philadelphia International Exhibition, being the highest honor conferred by the Centennial Commission; in 1878, two gold medals and an object of art, awarded at the Paris International Exhibition; also the Cross of Officer of the Legion of Honor, the highest honor that could be conferred.

During the year 1878, in competitive trials, Wood's mower, reaper, and self-binding harvester, in addition to the gold medals and honors from the Paris International Exhibition, before referred to, took first prizes at Rome, Italy, and at fifty-four of the principal cities of England, Wales, Scotland, Belgium, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Australia, Cape of Good Hope, Victoria, New Zealand, New South Wales, etc. From 1873 to 1877, inclusive, in 366 field-trials, these machines gained over 279 first prizes, including 88 gold medals, 64 silver medals, 8 bronze medals, 13 diplomas, 5 silver cups, and over 800 pounds in money. Such are the honors paid to one of Hoosick's manufacturers of world-wide renown.