

The Stories An Old Saw Can Tell

By Bob Garay

I enjoy the history that our old tools uncover. I recently obtained a Henry Disston & Son No.12 hand saw in fine condition. Now just finding a saw of this vintage and quality is a delight in itself, but there was another treat in store for me. It had an owner's name, "Wm R. Leeds", engraved artistically to the right of the Disston etch. I often see owners names marked on the saw plate or handle but not with the fine artistic excellence of this

miah Leeds served as a lieutenant in the Gloucester County Militia during the Revolutionary War, and married Judith Steelman, a member of another prominent Southern New Jersey family and the granddaughter of one of the first people to own land on Absecon Island, where the modern-day Atlantic City now stands. Jeremiah Leeds owned more than 1,000 acres of land here known as Leeds Plantation. Chalkley S. Leeds served as Atlantic



one. The owner that I purchased

Disston & Son 1865-71 No. 12 handsaw with owners engraving "Wm. R Leeds".

City's first mayor. Henry Disston

it from informed me the owners mark was of a man that was a distant cousin of Hamilton Disston and a prominent politician in Philadelphia. Thus it really intrigued me to purchase this saw and research its history further.

This is a Disston & Son saw with a vintage of 1865 to 1871. It is the singular "Son" when Henry Disston's son Hamilton Disston, officially joined his father in the operation of the business. Hamilton joined his father at age 15 in 1859 as an apprentice to learn all the different facets of the business. He was restless under his father's eyes and joined the local volunteer fire company. He often would leave his work at the saw factory to fight fires. It is during this time that Hamilton became friends with his distant cousin William R. Leeds, who like many other future politicians of this time were using the many local fire departments as political training grounds. Hamilton twice joined the Union Army only to have Henry purchase his release. But Hamilton organized a Company of saw factory employees during the Gettysburg Campaign in 1863. Henry finally agreed to support the "Disston Volunteers" financially. In 1865 after the Civil War, Hamilton returned to work in his father's factory as an executive. During this time he also became active in local Philadelphia politics.

William R. Leeds ancestors came to America from England in the 1670s. Leeds is one of the most omnipresent names in southern New Jersey history, due to the family's early settlement of the area. Jere-

married Mary Steelman in 1843 whose grandmother was Margaret (Leeds) Steelman

These family ties were so strong that Henry Disston erected a large sawmill in Atlantic City in 1872, which spurred the building of homes, hotels, and business houses and started Atlantic City on its way to becoming one of America's most popular playgrounds. He built for himself a large home there, which was for many years one of the show places of the Jersey shore, and which did much to maintain the character of the vicinity.

During these times Hamilton Disston became involved in local Philadelphia politics. Although never elected to public office, Hamilton Disston served for a time as the City's Fire Commissioner and became the City's first Fairmount Park Commissioner in the 1870's. Hamilton's social venue became one of Republican politics. Besides using politics as a fruitful social outlet, the firm was staunchly in favor of the protective tariff on imported goods, and Hamilton was sure to make his Republican allies aware of this. In 1875, he was the Ward Leader of the City's 29th Ward. It became clear that Hamilton Disston virtually controlled Republican nomi-

nations in the City during the 1870's and 1880's. Early alliances with the City Gas Works "Czar" James McManes as well as William Leeds, and David Lane - who were known as the "Big Four", controlled Republican nominations and appointments to city positions, which reaped bountiful political rewards.



To right of DISSTON & SON etch is high quality engraving of owners mark - Wm. R. Leeds.

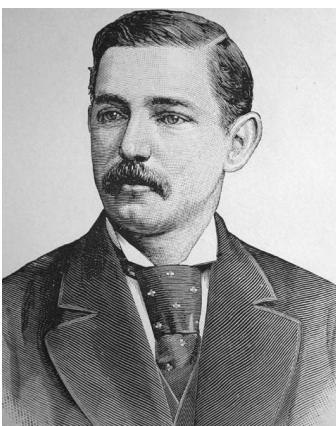
Hamilton was also Vice President of the powerful Philadelphia Union Republican Club, with William R. Leeds being President. Thus Leeds was not only his distant cousin but also his friend and partner in Philadelphia politics during this time. William R. Leeds was such a prominent Republican politician during this time that a Wm. R. Leeds Association was formed for promoting Republican agendas.

In 1878 when his father Henry Disston died Hamilton took over the company as the controlling family member. A little over a month later on April 26th President Rutherford B. Hayes visited the Disston plant and was so impressed that he expressed a desire to return for a private tour of the establishment. During his visit a rough piece of steel was offered to him for inspection, and Hamilton Disston told him a saw would be made from it and presented to him before his departure. Forty-two minutes later, he received the finished handsaw with his name etched on the blade. It seems possible that Hamilton also presented this top of the line No. 12 saw to his distant cousin and political friend, William R. Leeds, years earlier.

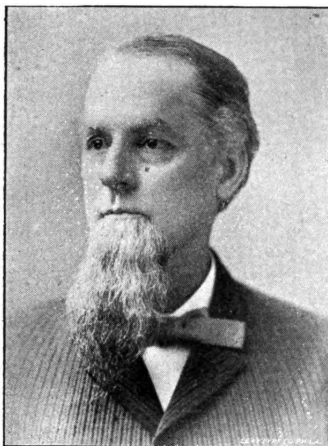
Lastly the friendship and ancestral relationship between the Leeds and Disston's were so strong, that the Leeds name carried on in the Disston family. In fact the last Disston to apprentice in every department of the saw works and act as President of Disston Saw Works was William Leeds Disston during the 1940's thru early 1950's.

In the publication – **Portraits of the Heads of State Departments & Legislature of Pennsylvania 1893-94** is this Profile of William R. Leeds.

“WILLIAM R. LEEDS, one of the Representatives of the Tenth district (Sixth and Tenth wards), of Philadelphia, has, for a generation, been one of the principal leaders of the Republican organization in that city, where he was born on January 31, 1837. His father was a tailor. When eleven years old the boy's public school training ended, and he became employed in the wholesale grocery business, in which he remained until appointed a letter carrier by Postmaster Walborn in 1861. A year later he was made superintendent of the letter carriers at the Dock Street post office. In 1864 he was appointed a deputy sheriff by Sheriff Henry C. Howell, and was given charge of the personal estate sales. President Grant appointed him collector of internal revenue for the Second Congressional district in 1869, and in 1870 he was elected sheriff of Philadelphia by a 6,889 majority. His chief deputy, Enoch Taylor, was subsequently chosen sheriff by 29,000 majority. Mr. Leeds



Hamilton Disston



William R. Leeds

was a trustee of the Philadelphia Gas Works continuously from 1866 until the amended city charter took effect, in 1887. He was chosen, in 1864, chairman of the Republican City Campaign Committee, and re-elected every year until 1869, when he resigned during his candidacy for sheriff. In 1877 he was again elected to the Republican City Committee, and in 1880 again made the chairman, which position he held until 1887, when he was once more the Republican nominee for sheriff, with A. J. Maloney as the Republican candidate for city controller. The Republican ticket was defeated, Charles H. Krumbhaar being elected sheriff and Colonel Robert P. Dechert re-elected controller. Mr. Leeds was a member of the House of Representatives in 1887 and 1891, but, in the latter term, resigned to accept the United States marshalship for the Eastern district of Pennsylvania, to which he was appointed by President Harrison. He resigned the marshalship shortly before being re-elected to the present House of Representatives. He has been a member of the Union League for twenty-five years, a member of the Union Republican club since its organization in 1869, and was president of the club for ten years after 1882. He was a delegate to several Republican National Conventions, being with the one in Cincinnati, 1876, when he voted first for Hartranft and then for Hayes, for President. Governor James A. Beaver wrote, in 1887: "There is no man in office, or that has held office, elected on the Republican ticket, within a quarter of a century, but that owes to Mr. Leeds a debt of gratitude. There is not a Republican voter interested in the success of Republican principles and Republican candidates and party supremacy in state and nation but is under obligation to the skillful, tireless, courageous and faithful labors of William R. Leeds." For his famous work, lasting over a year, in managing the successful contests which ousted Democratic officials who claimed to have won in the elections of 1868, Mr. Leeds, who declined pecuniary compensation, was the subject of eulogistic resolutions adopted by the Union League.”

Sometimes it is amazing the story an antique tool can tell with a little research.

