

## Before There Was a Can Factory

Generations of Perinton residents have a direct connection to the old factory building that crowds the sidewalk along the south side of Parce Avenue. These families know that millions of cans were produced in the factory, and that history was made in a company known as American Can, and before that, the Sanitary Can Company. But before the first can, the old factory walls were witness to different tasks of an earlier generation. The dreams, successes, and failures of business leaders and laborers alike are found within these walls.

Before there was a can factory, there was the Forster Pulley Works. Before the pulley factory, the Alta Implement Company manufactured hay baling presses, said to be the best you could buy. And before that, the big brick building was used for the cold storage of cabbage, reportedly “kept to a certain temperature, the secret process of which was known only to Mr. J. M. Green,” the owner of the business. And before cabbage, there was a shoe factory. But not just any shoe factory. The P. Cox Shoe Company manufacturing plant on Parce Avenue was at one time the second largest shoe factory in New York State.



Patrick Cox was a success in the shoe business long before he built his Fairport factory in 1884. He was lured to our community by the guarantee of a \$16,000 bonus. His part of the deal was to keep the factory open at least five years and utilize local workers. Local citizens helped to fund the bonus as an investment, and were given preferential opportunities for hiring.

The building was designed by Andrew Jackson Warner, who also designed some of Rochester's most celebrated buildings. These include the Powers Building (1869), Rochester City Hall (1873), the Wilder Building (1887), and Saint Bernard's Seminary (1891), among others. Many buildings designed by Warner are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The factory we see today was built in stages over many years. The initial building was two stories high, 128 x 48 feet with a flat tin roof, and was built in less than two months. The general contractor was Benjamin Long of Avon. He was highly regarded in Fairport for his previous work two years earlier on the new Catholic Church on East Avenue, then known as Sanford Street.

The walls of the factory were built of brick, with rows of large windows, as the building initially had no electricity and relied on natural light. The upper floor was said to be built with extra strength in order to withstand the weight of heavy machinery. A description of the new building in the local newspaper indicated that it contained “ample water closets” and also had a 2,500 barrel cistern to supply water, and “a most perfect sewer.” Total expenditure for the initial building was \$10,000, not including the cost of the land. Proximity to the railroad provided for the efficient delivery of raw materials and shipment of the finished product.

The manufacture of shoes began in January of 1885, under the direction of Elisha Hanshew, Superintendent. Within one month, seventy employees, almost all women, were making several hundred pairs of shoes per day. After only three months, plans were underway to triple the size of the building, and newspapers soon confirmed the truth in persistent rumors regarding the consolidation of the Cox factory in Rochester to Fairport. The new addition was described in newspapers as having three stories of brick and stone and a mansard roof. Combined with the initial building, there was a total of 52,000 square feet of flooring in all.

The shoe industry in Fairport was short-lived. In an era of conflict between business owners and fledgling unions, the P. Cox Shoe Company had its share of turmoil. Patrick Cox likely opened his factory in Fairport to avoid organized labor in Rochester, in order to make shoes at lower cost. Ironically, labor issues drove Cox to shut down the Fairport operations in 1893, when he relocated all the machines and equipment back to the city.

Fairport’s early factory on Parce Avenue has grown substantially over the past 125 years, and remains a useful part of the community. Today, several businesses continue to make their home in what began as the P. Cox Shoe factory.

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