Three Stories Told by an 1890s Trade Card

By Jamie Eves • May 14, 2023

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Recently, the Mill Museum received a donation of the trade card pictured below. Trade cards were commonplace 19th-century marketing gimmicks: advertisements printed on cards about the size of baseball cards that could be handed out to potential customers. Typically, they had an eye-catching illustration on one side and information about the product (including which local retailers carried it) on the other side. This particular trade card, probably printed between 1890 and 1892, advertised rubbers — the kind of small overshoes that people used to slip over their regular shoes when it was raining — manufactured by the Colchester Rubber Company and sold in Willimantic, CT, at the Union Shoe Store, Julius Pinney, proprietor, and C. F. Risedorf, manager. Like many artifacts, this one has a good story to tell — three stories, actually: the story of Julius Pinney and the Union Shoe Store, the story of a factory in Colchester, CT, that manufactured rubber products (once an important Connecticut industry), and the story of the very first basketball sneakers.

First, the Union Shoe Store, which — it turns out — was initially located in the very same building the Mill Museum now occupies! In 1877 William E. Barrows, the Superintendent of the Willimantic Linen Company, and a strong temperance advocate, got tired of looking out his Main Street office window and watching his off-duty workers strolling into the saloon across the street, at the corner of Union and Main. So, he talked the Company's Board of Directors into buying the saloon, tearing it down, and replacing it with a new, grand, three-story, Queen Anne edifice that would be the Linen Company's company store, and also contain a library for the education and improvement of the Company's workers. The building still stands today as the home of the Windham Textile and History Museum, the Mill Museum. Unfortunately, the Company store lost money; workers generally preferred to shop downtown, where prices were lower, credit was more generous, and they could buy items not carried in the Company store, such as alcoholic beverages. So, in the mid-1880s, after less than ten years of operation, the Company store shut down. The Linen Company then leased the first two floors of the building (everything but the library) to Julius Pinney, who in 1885 sold "groceries, meat, boots, shoes, and dry goods" as the "successor to [the] Linen Co.'s store." It appears that Pinney began to refer to the store as the Union Store, because of its location on the corner of Union and Main. 1887 found Pinney still operating the former Linen Company store, with Charles F. Risedorf as his clerk. But, alas, Pinney was no more successful at operating a large department store than the Linen Company had been, and by 1890 he had moved out of the building, which would remain vacant for a few years and then be remodeled into the Linen Company's main office building. 1890 saw Pinney at a new location, 154 Main St., operating the Union Shoe Store. (This was just before Willimantic renamed several of its streets and renumbered all of the addresses on Main Street. In 1890, 154 Main Street was downtown. The 1896 Willimantic Street Directory, published after the renumbering, lists the Union Shoe Store as being at 701 Main Street, possibly the same address [or at least nearby nearby] 1890's 154 Main.) By 1896, Pinney had sold the store to J. M. Travers, who lived in Worcester, MA, but it was still managed by Risedorf.

Pinney was now employed as a traveling salesman. The trade card helped us fill in some of the history of the Mill Museum's main building!

But the trade card had two more stories to tell — the story of Connecticut's once-thriving rubber industry, and a story connected to the invention of basketball! The Colchester Rubber Company, which printed the card, was located in Colchester, CT, not far from Willimantic. Before 1839, natural rubber (as distinct from the synthetic rubber in today's automobile tires) had only limited commercial value. Made from the latex-laden sap of South American rubber trees and African rubber vines, it tended to become brittle and fragment if it got too cold, and gooey and sticky if it got too warm. In the 1830s a number of inventors tried to come up with chemical processes that would keep rubber both solid and pliable at most temperatures. Two of those inventors were from Connecticut: Charles Goodyear and Nathaniel Hayward. Hayward came up with a process where he combined latex with sulfur, which helped. Goodyear purchased Hayward's patent and made improvement (including super-heating the latex-sulfer mixture) and in 1839 patented vulcanization. Hayward and Goodyear argued about who the real inventor was, and others claimed that, since many different inventors had actually contributed over the years to the invention of vulcanization, all existing patents should be considered void. In the legal battle that ensued, Goodyear prevailed, in part because he had the good sense to hire Daniel Webster as his lawyer — and, as every schoolchild of a certain age knows, Webster could out-argue the Devil. Hayward then founded the Hayward Rubber Company in Colchester, CT, which from 1847-1885 manufactured items made of vulcanized rubber, mostly footwear. Located at the intersection of Lebanon Avenue and Mill Street, it was a large and prosperous factory. (We understand that the question of the invention of vulcanization is still a sore point among some in Colchester, who feel that Hayward was somehow cheated. We are going to stay out of that argument, but you can read all about it at https://connecticuthistory.org/rubber-vulcanization-and…/.) In 1888, George Watkinson, who had previously managed a different rubber factory elsewhere in Connecticut, bought the Hayward Rubber Company and changed the name to the Colchester Rubber Company, which continued to specialize in making rubber footwear, including what it called "tennis shoes." It also made rubbers

— then sometimes called “gums” — like those advertised on the trade card. In 1892, the much larger United States Rubber Company, headquartered in western Connecticut, bought the Colchester Rubber Company with the idea of creating a monopoly of rubber production in the United States. The 1893 depression, however, cast a pall over the industry, and U. S. Rubber decided to cut its losses and shut down the Colchester factory and discontinue its trademarks. Later, U. S. Rubber would change its name to Uniroyal. It continued to manufacture rubber footwear, though, and in 1916 trademarked the brand name Keds, which it still makes. Thus, the trade card tells the story of how Connecticut was once a center for rubber manufacturing in the United States.

All of this helps us date the trade card. The Colchester Rubber Company operated for only a few years, from 1888 until 1892. And Pinney operated at 154 Main Street (as opposed to “the junction of Main and Union” and “701 Main”) from c. 1890 until c. 1895, so the card probably was printed sometime between 1890 and 1892.

But there is a third story. One day, George Watkinson received a visitor at the Colchester Rubber Company, Dr. James Naismith, who in 1891 invented the game of basketball in Springfield, MA. Realizing that basketball required a different kind of shoe than tennis shoes, Naismith asked the Colchester Company to help him create one based on his design. Thus, the Colchester Rubber Company manufactured the first pair of basketball shoes — exactly one pair, in Naismith's size — shortly before being bought out and closed down by United States Rubber. Only years later, after Naismith died, were the shoes discovered. They are, however, the prototype of all modern basketball shoes. The original pair — made in Connecticut — are today exhibited in the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield. And Keds has decided to revive the old Colchester Rubber Company trademark and is manufacturing basketball shoes in Naismith's original design under the Colchester brand name. How's that for a story!


Compliments of
UNION SHOE STORE.
Main St
Pinney. Proprietor
Risedorf Manager
Conn
The Colchester Rubber Co's.
Adhesive Counter Overshoe
Never slip at the heel.