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Before we were known for our quality of life, we actually *made* things. We're not making a point here, we're just saying...

The Things We Carried

"Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into are awake through years with transferred touch, and go on glowing for long years.

And for this reason, some old things are lovely warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them."

—D.H. Lawrence

BY HERBERT C. ADAMS

When did we start selling sizzle and stop selling steak? Just weeks ago, Portland's sharpest city planners looked into the Forest City's future and recorded what they saw on paper. The result: the *Economic Development Vision & Plan*. It's hopeful and well-written, yet it privileges the service and tourism sectors, only making a vague appeal to *nicheful*-thinking markets like nanotechnology and biochemicals. Whatever happened to products we can sink our teeth into? Our city once had a dazzling catalog of tangible products for the waiting world.

HEARTH TO HEARTH

Once, Americans across the continent heated homes, fed families, sailed ships, rolled trains, and lived life with the practical things produced by the Portland Stove Foundry: skillets, pots, pulleys, gears, radiators, stoves for parlors and kitchens, and

Portland Stove Foundry made this Duchess in the 1920s, smallest of their Atlantic line. The Hearth Doctor in Gray recently sold it for \$1,100.

more. Founded in 1877, the **Portland Stove Foundry** moved to 25-67 Kennebec Street in 1882, where for 100 years its rambling red, wooden factory filled the block between Kennebec, Somerset, and Fox streets. Here hundreds of Danish and Italian families found their first jobs; here everything useful, needful, and ornamental was cast in iron. Here, wrote the *Portland Eastern Argus*, by forge-light were seen “Statues of sweating men amid a nursery of sparks, and rivulets of red-running iron.” The Foundry’s most famous product, shipped nationwide, was the grand Atlantic Range, the nickel-trimmed, square-sided, ebony-black kitchen stove with clanging lids. For generations, it kept the home fires burning, heating homes with both coal and wood and cooking countless meals for the bustling country.

In World War II, Foundry workers turned out millions of casters, pivots, and pulleys here for the U.S. Navy in around-the-clock shifts. For years, the forge fires never went out.

Changing tastes ended Portland’s Iron Age. The 1970s Oil Embargo & Energy Crisis brought a sales boom to Portland Stove’s airtight parlor stoves, but cheap foreign imports doomed the factory at last. Portland Stove Foundry closed its doors in 1984, and in the 1990s, a spectacular night fire demolished its picturesque buildings. Today, the site is an empty brownfield by tracks where trains will never run again. In spite of this, Portland Stove Foundry’s legacy lingers on in humble stoves across the country, still quietly keeping kitchens warm and toes toasty, warm as a happy memory once made in Maine’s Iron Age, as they have for a hundred years.

SQUARE CADENZA

In the 1830s, pianos were rare and for the rich here. One day, in 1832, young cabinetmaker **William G. Twombly** was uncrating a Boston-made piano for a Free Street family, and he was struck by its fine craftsmanship and musical mystery. Tantalized, he embarked upon a Boston apprenticeship, returning around 1835 to work with Gorham pipe organ maker **Calvin S. Edwards** at Portland’s first piano factory. A Twombly-made piano swept the prizes at the city Mechanic’s Fair that year, besting even a Chickering import, and the Forest City’s love affair with pianos was on. A square grand, or

box grand piano (the strings run right and left), was a cabinetmaker’s wonder, each case hand-carved from rosewood and mahogany by master woodworkers like **John Griffin** (1806-1871), father of sculptor Edward Griffin and grandfather of American Impressionist painter Walter Griffin (1876-1937).

On the piano family tree, square grands are descended not from harpsichords (the strings are plucked) but clavichords (the strings are struck). After a move to Middle Street), The Edwards factory kept ten craftsmen busy. Sadly, Edwards’s sudden death and the Great Fire of 1866 destroyed the industry. No pianos were mass manufactured in Portland afterward. With their beautiful cases and

elaborate legs, square grands symbolized the solid Victorian age. Twombly became a popular dealer in pianos at his famous showroom at 154 Exchange Street, but the old days never returned. Antiquarians know that Portlanders E.B. Robinson and William Andrews also made a few pianos

prior to the Civil War. But to square-grand purists, there was only one William Twombly. Beloved by newsmen for his eccentric ways (and the fact he resembled Horace Greeley) the papers mourned his passing in 1894. “He has solved the

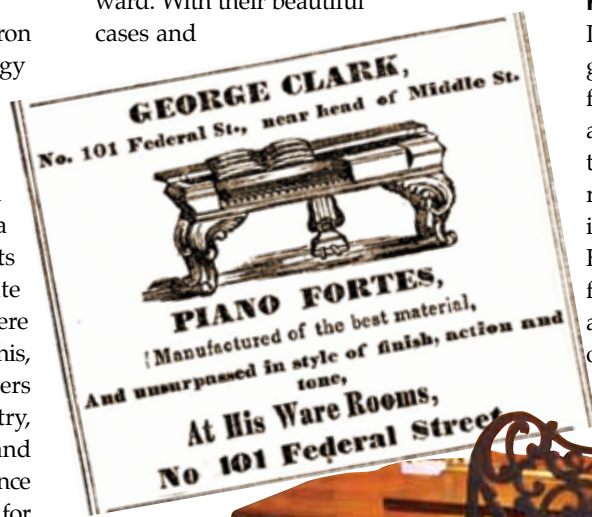
great mystery,” said the *Argus*, “and gone to the greater music.”

I just took two to the dump! We had them stored downstairs for the better part of 12 years, with no one asking about them. I mean, they were beautiful. The cabinets were unbelievable.

—Jill Starbird Clarke, *Starbird Piano, on Portland’s forgotten square grands*

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Portland’s heyday as a producer of fine glassware (1864-1873) was brief but beautiful. **The Portland Glass Factory** was among the first city enterprises to gain national fame, was among the first to fail, and remains among the few whose fragile work is still avidly sought by collectors today. From its long-gone West Commercial Street factory, Portland Glass was spun, blown, and shaped by artisans applying the secrets of the Scottish and Italian masters. Prized for their beauty, artistry,



The design of the square grand piano stems from the clavichord, with shape and size contributing to its popularity.

and clarity, its multi-hued bowls, goblets, and table settings still flash with the frozen light of long ago. Its many unique designs—"Shell and Tassel," "Loop and Dart," and "Tree of Life"—appealed to sentimental Victorians. (And practical ones, too: In 1867, despite state Prohibition, Portland Glass produced over 100,000 ale and whiskey glasses.) Legend says around 1863 Mary Lincoln ordered over \$40,000 of Portland Glassware for the White House—an \$800,000 order in today's dollars. Lucky collectors pay thousands for a single pattern today. Fortunate Portlanders can still see Portland Glass for free at the Glass Gallery of the Portland Museum of Art—fragile as dreams, still bright as sun, and still clear as ice.

WRITTEN IN STONE

Wyatt Earp's gunslinging city of Tombstone, Arizona, had a downtown cousin in Portland. From 1860 to 1890, just one block

The Forest City's love affair with the square grand piano was doomed by a culture shift. Suddenly, everybody had to own a baby grand.

off Monument Square and beside one of today's busiest intersections in the city, stood **Enoch M. Thompson's Monument Works**, sculptor extraordinaires of markers for one's very last address. Thompson's one-story wooden emporium stood at Cumberland Avenue and Preble Street, where a

(Continued on page 76)



FROM LEFT: ANTIQUE PIANO SHOP.COM; DAVID SHANKBONE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS




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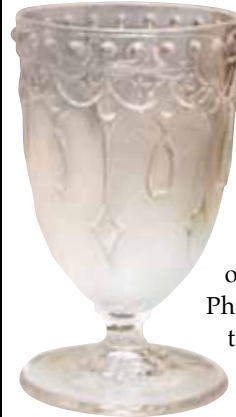
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DOLLARS & SENSE

The Things we carried (continued from page 51)



squad of six artisans chiseled tombstones—formally, “funerary monuments”—for our busy city, even then topping 40,000 people above ground and another 10,000 beneath. Photos show tall, urn-topped marble shafts rising in Thompson’s tiny front yard like a

The Portland Museum of Art houses many fine examples of glassware, including this Portland Glass Co. loop-and-dart pattern.

thicket of birches. Here, hundreds of stones were cut for the city’s tragic Civil War dead and still stand in greater Portland’s Eastern, Western, Calvary, and Evergreen cemeteries. Thompson’s was torn down in 1890, and the current three-story brick building was erected on the spot. In the 1980s it housed mega-developer Michael Liberty’s first corporate offices. In the 1990s construction work here came to a crashing halt when road crews uncovered broken tombstones deep underground. A forgotten cemetery? No; just old discards from Thompson’s—symbols of an industry long departed, and reminders from the past about the future one day awaiting us all.

FIGURES ON THE WATER

In the Grand Age of Maine Wooden Shipbuilding (ca. 1850-1900) about 35 ship carvers labored along the coast, from whose skilled tools flew the rampant eagles, lively ladies, grand shields, and flags for figureheads of the Maine-built ships cutting the seas. Some six worked in Portland, and the greatest—and last—of these was **Edward Souther Griffin** (1834-1928). His art and medium were so tightly married that today, like the great ships themselves, little more than a memory exist to remind us of the craftsmanship that once sailed from Casco Bay. Griffin’s work spanned the eras of wood to steel and sails to rails. The son of Portland cabinetmaker John Griffin, who specialized in piano case carving (see “Square Cadenza,” above), Edward apprenticed in his father’s India Street shop, where the smell of the sea entered his work. Young Griffin carved both bow ornaments and stern boards, and “No self-respecting ship would have left [port] without a figurehead

in those days," he remembered. "They were ornamental and inexpensive, too." A pine image, carved and painted, cost \$100-\$300 and was the eyes and image of any staunch new ship.

At 17 he set out on his own, carving hundreds of boards and figureheads in his shops on Commercial and later Fore Streets, each unique. And today, very rare. Griffin proudly decorated the many vessels of Portlander Jacob S. Winslow, builder and owner of the largest and last fleet of wooden ships on the East Coast of the United States. Many went down far away with the ships they adorned; many, alas, rotted away with their vessels at anchor when the age of ironclads overtook the wooden ship and Winslow himself passed away in the new century.

In the 1860s, Mary Lincoln ordered over \$40,000 of Portland Glassware for the White House.

Today not one full Griffin figurehead is known to survive. A small eagle-wings spread with fierce wooden eyes-remains in the Portland Fire Museum, and one 1930s photo exists of a Griffin figurehead: a woman proud in a flowing dress and blonde tresses, one foot poised to step forward in the bounding seas. Today, Griffin's greatest remaining works are granite-the Victorian fireman (1898) in front of Portland's Central Fire Station on Congress Street and the sturdy statue of J.S. Winslow himself (1904) atop his funeral monument in Evergreen Cemetery. The irony was not lost on the master woodcarver. "The eye for the artistic in shipbuilding seems to have been blinded in later days," he sighed in an interview when nearing ninety. "I suppose if I had my life to live over, I'd be a sculptor." Griffin died at age 94 in 1928, the last in a line of craftsmen from the final era of wonders made of wood. But his talent and his craft can still be glimpsed in the granite monuments he left for Portland, still in sight of the sea's salty air.

DISCRETE CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE
Walter Corey may be the Mainer who invented the comfy living room. Corey (1809-1889), at the magic moment, perfected the mass production of quality furniture for 19th century America's up-and-coming middle

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DOLLARS & SENSE

class. Born in Ashburnham, Massachusetts (the seat of Bay State chair making in the late 1830s), he came to Portland's Exchange Street and opened a one-horsepower chair factory (literally; later the horse treadmill gave way to steam), turning out 300 chairs a week. In 1842, he bought water rights on the Presumpscot River for sawing and shaping prefabricated parts with fine finishing and seat caning done on Exchange Street. There, Corey combined clever labor-saving inventions created by partner Jonathan Bancroft with skilled decorations by master brushman George Lord (1833-1928), whose grain painting turned pine into rosewood and maple into mahogany. Stencils added class and color to chairbacks. Corey matched a great American tipping point: New railroads meant easy transport and expanding markets, for which he turned out twice the chairs at half the price. With a sharp eye for quality (and sure sidelines like selling feathers for bedding), he soon turned out 20,000 chairs a year; in 1860, he sold a stunning \$75,000 worth of furniture.

But Corey's habit of storing wood on site at 50-54 Exchange Street (in 1865, he had 100,000 feet of rosewood and mahogany stacked out back) spelled disaster in Portland's Great Fire of 1866, which wiped out Corey and all his neighbors. After 1870 he stopped making furniture and became an outlet for others.

Walter Corey died in 1889; his namesake company closed in 1941. But from 1840-1870 he defined the Maine brand: quality, beauty, and affordability. Today, Brunswick's Skolfield-Whittier House Museum, an 1860 Victorian frozen in time and furnished by Corey, preserves a grand glimpse of his good works. Here's to Walter Corey: a Mainer who wanted no one left standing.

FULL METAL DYNAMO

The Portland Company (1842-1982) on 58 Fore Street, whose brick headquarters play host to special events such as weddings and conferences, Portland Yacht Services, and Maine Narrow Gauge Railroad today in the form of the Portland Company Complex, symbolized the zeal and zenith of Yankee metal engineering, creating everything from locomotives to cannons, telescopes to artillery shells, and—from the mighty to the sublime—nuclear reactor casements to the Big Mac box. Founded in 1842 by railroad magnate John Alfred Poor to build locomotives for his Atlantic & St. Lawrence Railroad, the Portland Co. roared on long after

the Age of the Iron Horse. Separate Portland Co. shops worked iron, tin, bronze, and brass—any metal which could be shaped, stamped, bent, coiled, and cast was used. Portland Co. visionaries built the *Colon* (1865), the first steam engine of the Panama Canal RR Company; it built the steam pumpers that fought Portland's Great Fire of 1866. In the Civil War, the Portland Co. cast cannons for the U.S. Army and went one better for the Navy: In 1863, it equipped the mighty Civil War ironclads *Agawam* and *Pontoosuc*, giant steam-powered, 200-foot double-ended gunboats (they could sail either way without turning around) sent by the U.S. Navy into blockade duty on southern rivers like the James. Sequoia-sized boilers followed for the booming paper mills of Millinocket, Rumford, and Westbrook. At the turn of the 20th century, Portland Co. sold Knox air-cooled autos, touring cars, and runabouts—the Pine Tree State's challenge to Henry Ford.

During World War I, Portland Co. turned out thousands of yard-long brass, 108mm artillery shells for the U.S. Army, each packed by a work force of women. ("Because they are more careful.")

Maine's first skyscraper, downtown Portland's Fidelity Building (1910), and the new Portland City Hall (1912) were fitted with Portland Co. hydraulic elevators (now electrified), some of the oldest in the state still in daily use. But Portland Co.'s grand steam locomotives remain its signature and symbol—elegant, elaborate, shining brass and barrel smokestacks, big, bossy, loud—the very image of the Iron Age. Portland Co. built about 630 locomotives, sending them out to all the world. Their locomotives steamed across the Great American West, across the wheat fields of Canada, chugged through early John Ford western films, went "Round the Horn" to the west coast in wooden ships, and crossed the Atlantic to the Allies in WWII, chained to the decks of Maine-made Liberty Ships. In the 1970s, the Portland Co. built the containment vessel for the Yankee Rowe Nuclear Power Plant in Rowe, Massachusetts, and pioneered plastic foam extrusion machines for egg cartons and burger boxes. The list is almost endless, but foreign competition silenced the Portland Company forges at last in 1982. ■

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