



Business History

William Underwood Factory at McKinley

Canning

Address - 5 Granville Road

City - Tremont

State - Maine

Map and Lot - Map 12 - Lots 39+

Map - CS 1887 - UNDERWOOD - McKINLEY

Built - 1904 (present brick building)

Original Site Owner: P.W. Richardson & Son

Underwood - Henry Oliver Underwood (1858-1921)

Underwood - William Lyman Underwood (1864-1929)

William Underwood (1787-1864) was a food manufacturer, born in London, England. He apprenticed at Crosse & Blackwell's factory. He came to America on the bark "Alfred," moved to Boston, in 1819 and founded William Underwood & Co. in 1822, the first canning factory in New England.

William expanded his canned fruit line to include pickles, milk, sauces (1828) and canned tomatoes (1835). In 1839 he began substituting tin cans for glass jars, and found them less expensive and more adaptable. He opened a lobster-canning business in Harpswell, Maine (1844) and an oyster-canning plant in Boston (1850), and as competition increased, he focused on specialty foods such as devilled ham, clams, and sardines. In 1860 he purchased the rights to advanced sterilization methods, and during the Civil War he canned roast beef for Union soldiers.

The Underwood Canning Factory began its branch on Mt. Desert in the early 1850s at Steamboat Wharf in Southwest Harbor and then moved to what is now Bass Harbor in 1889. - See: Steamboat Wharf - SWH

"The Catching And Canning Of Lobsters - The principal boat-fishing is for lobsters, and eighty-two men were employed in this work from April to August of the present year. Each man tends about ninety pots. The lobster fisheries of the island are among the oldest on this portion of the coast. As early as 1853, a lobster cannery was built by Boston parties at Southwest Harbor. It has continued in operation to the present day, still doing a large business. In addition to lobsters, clams and mackerel are canned in considerable quantities. The first shell lobsters canned in North America were put up at this place in 1879. This

brand is the outgrowth of a demand by wealthy British customers for whole lobsters for garnishing purposes. Finding it difficult to get lobsters as commonly prepared for the trade sufficiently fresh for this purpose, the London agent for one of our leading packing establishments suggested the idea of meeting this demand, and, after a certain amount of experimenting, methods were hit upon by which satisfactory results were obtained. The "shell lobsters," as they are called are selected of uniform size and perfect condition from the general stock, and are placed, without being removed from the shell, in long cylindrical cans, made expressly for the purpose. The method of boiling is similar to that for ordinary canned lobsters, the only difference being that they are boiled a little longer that the heat may penetrate the shell and thoroughly preserve the meat. During the height of the season this cannery furnishes employment to fifty hands." - The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States by George Brown Goode, Washington Government Printing Office. Section II, p. 33-34 – 1887.

“A lobster factory stood close to the wharf [in Southwest Harbor], built in the early [eighteen] fifties by William Underwood and Co. of Boston, and lobsters were canned there for many years. The factory was built with the idea of canning beef, and cattle were driven down to Southwest Harbor from a wide area where they were slaughtered and the meat canned. The supply of cattle soon failed and attention was turned to the canning of lobsters, which at that time were abundant, even to be picked up along the beaches. Employment was furnished for many people in the town and the industry flourished. Several men came from Boston when the factory was first built, to instruct the local men in the art of making the tin cans and canning the product. About 1883 when the summer tourists began to come to Mount Desert in great numbers and every boat in the early summer brought crowds of passengers for Southwest and Bar Harbors, objections began to be made to the factory and its odor. Discussion waxed hot on both sides; one pointing out the amount of money brought into the place by the employment furnished by the factory and the other side clamoring that the future of Mount Desert was a summer resort and that the odoriferous factory, placed directly on the steamboat wharf, which was the only way of arrival at Southwest Harbor, was a deterrent to the growth and development of the town. Letters from both sides were published in the Mount Desert Herald and it was a fruitful discussion at any place of gathering by both permanent and summer residents. Finally the Underwood Company wished to enlarge their plant and Deacon H.H. Clark, who owned the adjoining land and who also owned and conducted the principal summer hotel of that time, refused to sell. So the Underwood Company bought land at McKinley, built a new and modern factory and moved to that place.” - Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine by Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, p. 172-3 - 1938.

William Underwood (1787-1864) and his wife, Betsy Hale (1797-1865), had nine children.

His eldest son, William James Underwood (1829-1897) - Continued the canning company.

William James Underwood (1829-1897) and his wife, Esther Crofts Mead (1831-) had three sons:

Henry Oliver Underwood (1858-1921) - President and Treasurer of William Underwood Canning Co.

William Lyman Underwood (1864-1929) – Bacteriologist and Photographer - associated in the Underwood Canning business.

Loring Grant Underwood (1874-1930) – Landscape architect and photographer

“After Mr. William Underwood’s death in 1864, the management of the business devolved on his son, Mr. William J. Underwood, and in due time he took into partnership at 67 Broad St., Boston, his two older sons, Henry Oliver and William Lyman Underwood. This proved to be a good combination for the Company and for the canning industry. Henry was the salesman and financial manager. Lyman was of a scientific turn of mind....It was he who discovered how to prevent the souring which frequently ruined entire seasons’ packs of peas and asparagus....who finally exploded the old theory, arising from a distorted understanding of Appert’s discovery, that a vacuum inside the can rather than perfect sterilization at proper temperature was the essential for proper preservation of the contents.

“It was during this period that the canning of fish and shellfish in Maine became an important part of the Underwood business. In 1880 they built what for those days was a large modern plant in West Jonesport where they began the canning of sardines, and continued the canning of clams, lobsters and other fishery products. At about the same time, finding the demand for canned lobster increasing, a small cannery was started at South West (sic) Harbor on Mt. Desert.

“...[In 1895] the business was incorporated under the name of William Underwood Company with Henry O. Underwood as its President and Treasurer.

“ “H.O.” as he was affectionately known, graduated from Harvard in 1879....Brought up ...in the atmosphere of the Underwood business, ...he loved his trips to his fish canning plants in Maine. The seasons made little difference. Many a time he drove by horse and sleigh from Jonesport to Bangor, a distance of some 60 miles, in a blinding snowstorm, and he looked back on those experiences as great larks.

“Under his administration the business prospered. The records show that in the first ten years after incorporation, the sales doubled, and in the year of Mr. Underwood’s death...at his summer home on Nantucket Island, August 22, 1921, he had the satisfaction of knowing that they would be treble the original amount.” - "The Second Century," written by Alden Winthrop, published for private distribution by William Underwood Company, 52 Fulton St., Boston c.1927, Chapter II.