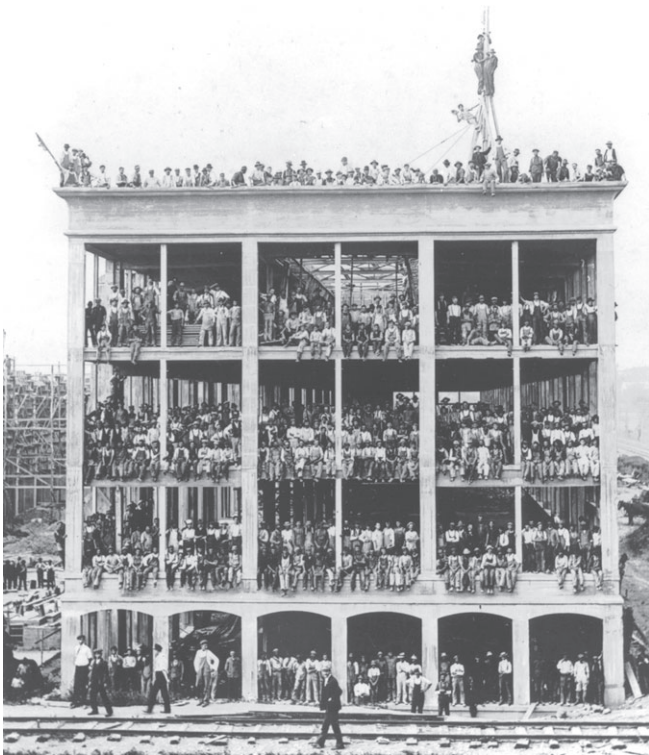


A Brief History of “The Shoe”

In her 1997 feature article for the Wall Street Journal, Pulitzer prize winning architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable hailed the building as “...the single most important, and generally unrecognized, concrete landmark in this country...” Fortune Magazine, 64 years earlier, had pronounced the company that built it “...the bluest of blue chip investments...”

Take a stroll through today’s Cummings Center to relive the history of the United Shoe Machinery Corporation (USM), one of the true titans of twentieth century industrial capitalism. In the process, visit the mammoth engineering marvel that was, at its birth in 1905, the largest factory in the world.



The construction of “The Shoe” had a profound effect on Beverly. Immigrant laborers arrived by the thousands. Neighborhoods like Ryal Side, Gloucester Crossing and Shingleville were built, and populated by USM workers. Schools were built, and even the landscape was harnessed as the tidal areas of the Bass River were shaped into the upper and lower Shoe ponds.

Engineer Ernest Ransome’s patented system of “armored concrete” – commonly known today as reinforced concrete – leapfrogged previous building technology, easily accommodating the weight of the heavy machinery on the upper floors while its curtain wall design opened up an astonishing 90% of exterior wall surfaces for windows.

Such early attention to ergonomics was no accident. Like their pioneering architect, the equally prescient founders of USM envisioned a much kinder, gentler workplace than that which was common at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to the acres of windows flooding the factory floor with daylight, “The Shoe” boasted mechanical ventilation systems, large clean restrooms, an in-house hospital, and later on, a rooftop dining room, country club, marina, even employee vegetable gardens. An innovative collaboration with the Beverly Public School system produced an on-site vocational school to help train the thousands of workers needed to staff the factory.

Rewarding employees with good wages and benevolent working conditions, USM’s founders reasoned, would pay steady dividends in worker productivity and loyalty. A clean, airy factory would reduce accidents, mistakes, and downtime. A well-paid and well-treated workforce would see no need to unionize and disrupt manufacturing with restrictive rules and periodic work stoppages.

Best of all, USM could easily afford to pursue its policy of shared largess. Its creation through the merger of three industry leaders at the dawn of the mechanization of shoemaking instantly bequeathed it a monopoly. For decades afterward, USM sold and serviced up to 95% of the machinery used by shoe manufacturers worldwide.

USM’s research division (second in size only to General Motors) reportedly registered over 9,000 U.S. patents, while the factory churned out the machines that made the world’s footwear. Like the nation’s other industrial giants, “The Shoe” turned its machining expertise to war materiel during WWI and WWII, producing precision-made artillery barrels and aerial torpedoes.

Ironically, the company’s worldwide industry dominance ultimately proved to be its downfall. A federal anti-trust action initiated in 1911 was finally settled 60 years later with the breakup of USM. By the late 1980’s, USM had relocated to Wilmington, Massachusetts and the Beverly factory belonged to Black & Decker Corporation whose halfhearted attempt to convert the property to a multi-tenant industrial park ended with a 90% vacancy rate and severe operating losses.

At the suggestion of then newly-elected Beverly Mayor William Scanlon, Cummings Properties of Woburn negotiated to purchase the 80-acre site and immediately began the first complete modernization of the complex in May 1996.

Today, Cummings Center is home to more than 500 separate organizations ranging from cutting edge research firms to a church. Once again, the site is bustling with activity, a vibrant economic engine of Boston’s north shore, providing good jobs for thousands of its neighbors. And as today’s software developers and biotech researchers walk its halls on the way to their offices and labs, they are inspired by the proud history left by their predecessors, right here in Beverly at “The Shoe.”



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