The Button Factory, Portsmouth, N.H.
Rick Ashton

In the spring of 2021, my daughter brought me to a restaurant in Portsmouth, N.H. The food was great, by the way, but what really caught my attention was an old factory building in the back of the parking lot. The door at the end of the building was open so in I went. It turns out the building is now a studio for artists. I was told the building was once a button factory that produced buttons for women's shoes around the turn of the twentieth century. I also learned they have an open house every December. I made a note of that and on the first weekend in December, my friends and I were there. This is what I learned that day:

The story of Morley. (Circa 1946) [Ed. note: the following appears to be a quoted text, the source of which is not clear]

"Evolution is not a force but a process: not a cause but a law." Viscount John Morley

About the time that the late Viscount Morley wrote on evolution in an essay concerning compromise, another Morley in Portsmouth, N.H., was starting an enterprise which in a little over 50 years of evolution has become the Morley Company, famous for buttons.

From a small maker of machines for the swing of buttons on shoes, the evolution since 1890 took the firm to the forefront in the production of fiber and molded plastic buttons for apparel. This evolution, constantly going on, is bringing newer horizons to this progressive manufacturer.

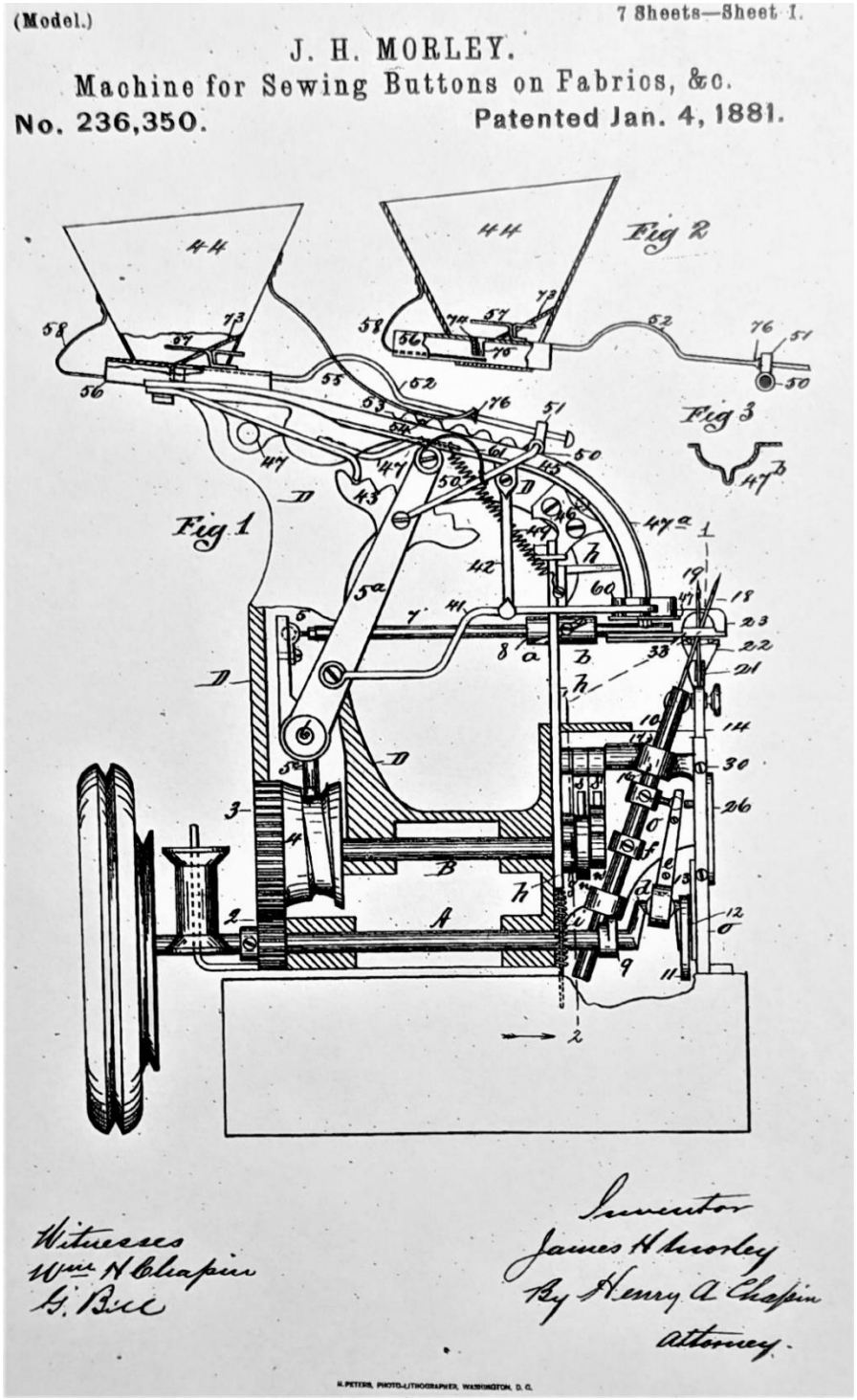
Actually, the idea that started the company on its way in 1890 occurred 10 years before when James Morley invented a shoe button sewing machine. There was need for such a machine in those days; button shoes were in fashion. After tinkering around for a decade trying to obtain buttons that would fit both shoes and his machine, Morley became convinced that to operate his automatic feeding unit successfully it was imperative to have buttons of uniform size and shape.

James Morley

Thus, when the business was organized as the Morley Button Sewing Machine Company by Morley, Charles A. Sinclair and Walter E. Bennet, who later became superintendent, not only did the firm make the machine but also fiber machine buttons. Operations began on the ground floor of a three-story building, and for a short time a button manufacturing factory in a small, shingled building in Beverly, Mass. also was conducted.

Before long, buttons were a more important part of the Morley business than the machines and the production of machines was abandoned. The growing company expanded its operations from fiber shoe buttons to fiber-headed upholstery nails and buttons. Fiber-headed nails for electric wiring then were added.

In 1895, the company needed to expand and moved from Beverly to the present location at the "cricket field" in Portsmouth. Within four months the original three-story building was erected, and the business was so successful that Morley became the largest manufacturer of shoe buttons in the world.

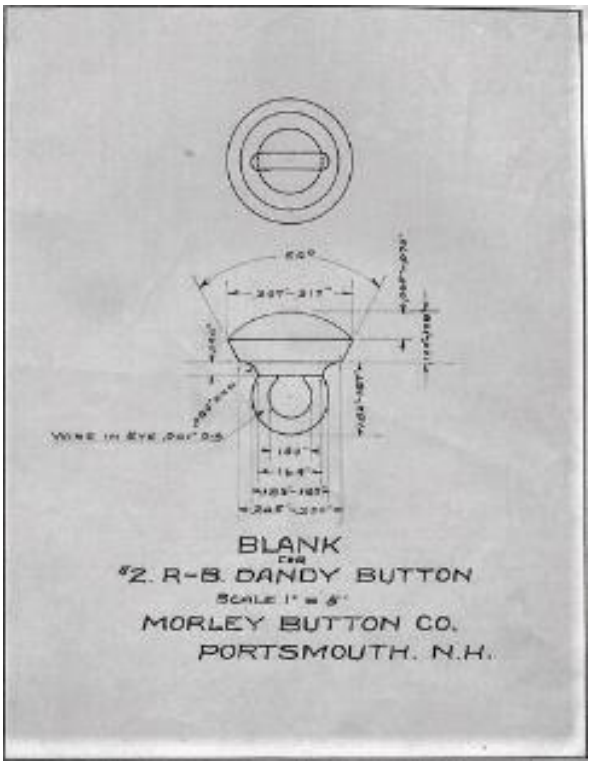


The machine that started it all, the shoe button sewing machine.

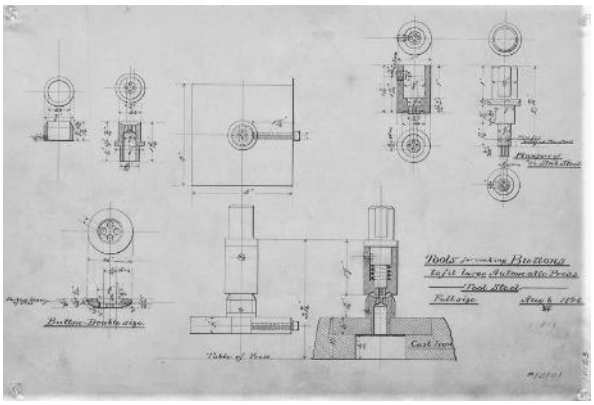
In 1899 Morley combined with five other companies making shoe buttons. These factories were then closed, giving Morley a monopoly. Frank Jones, (of brewing fame) became president of Morley in this period and erected a power generating plant (at the rear of Gallagher's place) which also served his brewery and his hotels, the Rockingham and the Wentworth.

At the turn of the century, Morley developed fiber buttons for the clothing trade. Gradually these gained top position in the firms' distribution.

The United States Investor Journal of November 1899, in a response to a question about the company's financial stability, offered these facts: "Morley Button Company. The above company was organized October 17, 1890 with an authorized capital of $250,000, divided into 2,500 shares of a par value of $100. The company is an offshoot of the Morley Button Sewing Machine company. The capital of the Morley Button Manufacturing company was furnished from the profits of the Morley Button Sewing Machine company, and stock of the Morley Button Manufacturing company was given in lieu of dividends. This company has never paid any dividends and we have heard of no offerings or sales of the stock. The company manufactures about 20 varieties of buttons and thumbnails, and is said to doing fair business. The enterprise is not bonded and the company is quite a close corporation. The concern, we are informed, pays its bills promptly and is enlarging its business, and its future is considered to be a promising one."

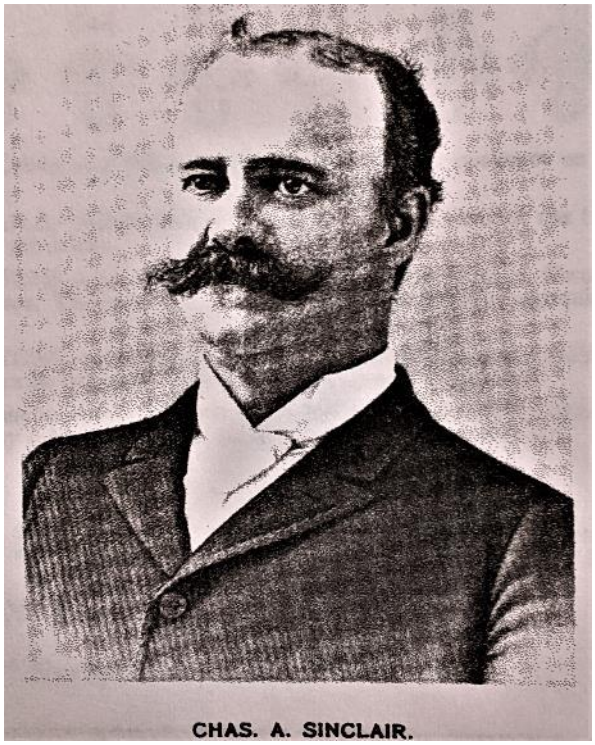


Shoe Button Blank



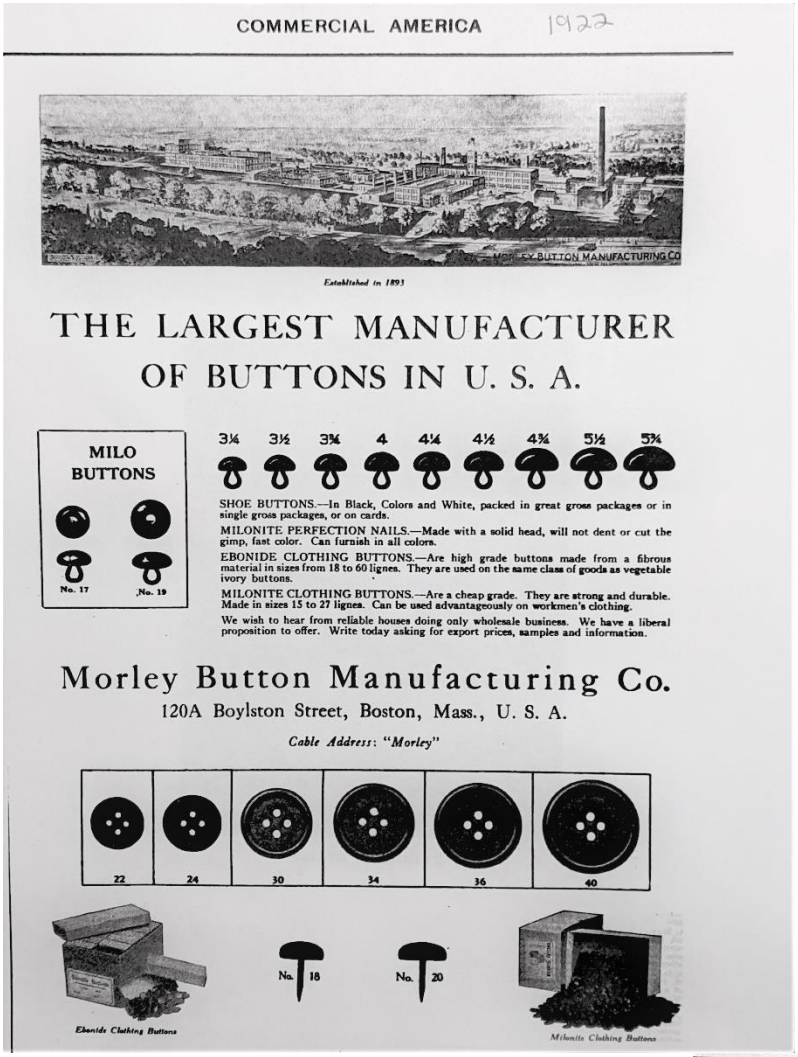
Tools used in press to make buttons

Wider and wider grew its activities. Between 1910 and 1920 Morley was making shoe buttons and upholstered nails, clothing buttons, cloth and metal tab laundry tags, elastic machines and clinch buttons. Its business grew to a point where it had to fabricate its own fiber board.



Charles Sinclair, the largest owner of the Morley Button Company

Walter E. Bennett, who joined the firm in 1891, and by 1895 was in charge of the entire plant



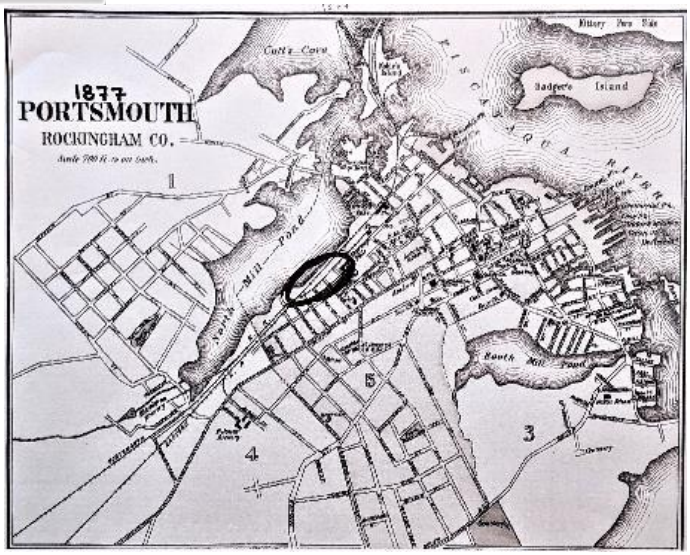
A 1922 trade catalog advertisement

World War I saw the end of shoe buttons as a factor in footwear fashion and shoe buttons dropped to an insignificant portion of the company's activities. Thus, within a generation, Morley's operations had undergone almost a complete change. It is interesting to note, however, that shoe and gaiter buttons have continued to be manufactured since the first years of operation.

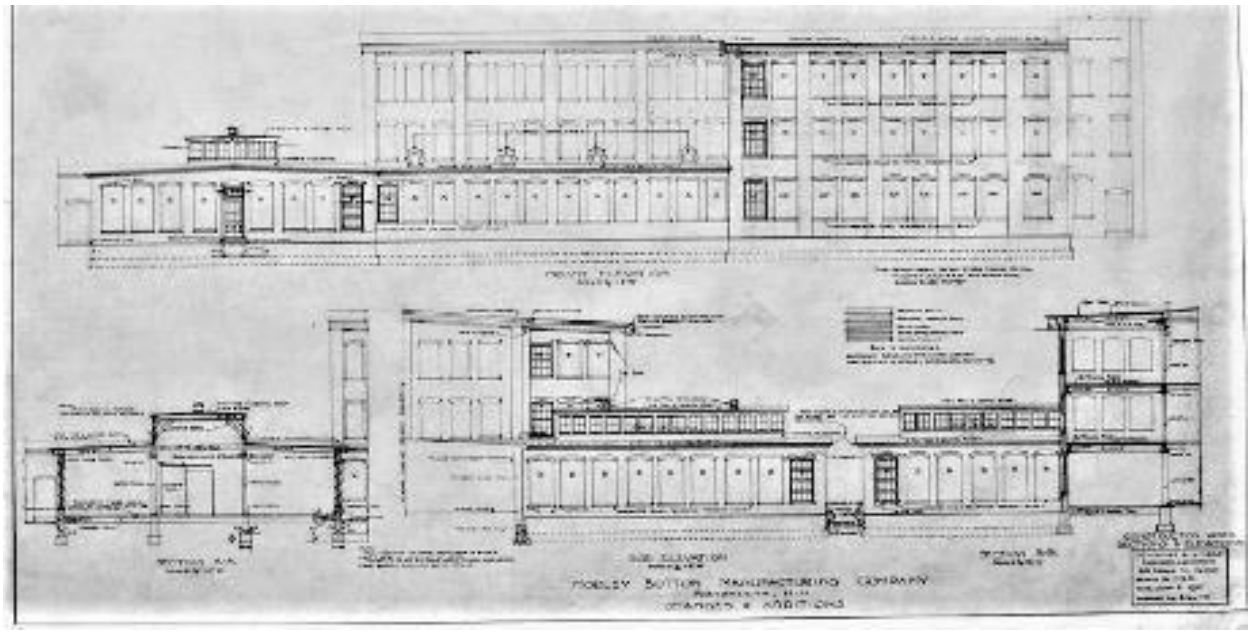
But, as the demand for shoe buttons declined, the other items grew more popular. Another oven room was added to manufacture ebonide buttons for apparel. Still later, a button for tufting mattresses was developed. So successful was this type of button that the company became the largest producer of buttons for the mattress industry. Other products included golf tees, collar buttons, ring travelers, fiber shoe soles and a wide variety of other fiber products.

The firm was the second to develop dry process stereotype mats for newspapers. Its Trutone mats for newspapers and Trumold mats for syndicates have attained national prominence. When plastics first made their appearance commercially the Morley company started to produce compression molded plastic clothing buttons. More recently various novelty packaged button items were introduced.

This constant expansion obviously required more extensive manufacturing facilities. Soon after the enterprise began to function, the second and third floors of the initial plant were added and the entire building was occupied. This was not sufficient. A number of one-story additions had to be erected. Then wings were constructed. Whereas one oven for the making of buttons was used by Morley in the early days, a single wing opened in 1910 had 56 ovens. A fiber mill was constructed to make fiber board. The company also built its own power plant.



Location of the plant from an 1877 map



Plans for one addition to the plant

A photograph of the plant, date unknown

In a 1922 U.S. Senate hearing on the Tariff Act of 1921 (page 4065), interesting details on the Morley Button Mfg. Company were reported by M.B. Whittemore.

1) Morley Co. wanted a 45% tariff on imported buttons from the proposed 38%.

2) Morley manufacturers cost per button was over .42 cents per great gross (1728 pcs). Importers' cost was estimated at .25 cents per great gross.

3) Morley manufactures buttons entirely of papier-mâché and fiber products, which are the cheapest grade of buttons used on cloth and shoes.

4) Morley's percentage of labor cost? 30% Materials, 20% overhead.

10,000 great gross of buttons produced in an 8 hour shift.

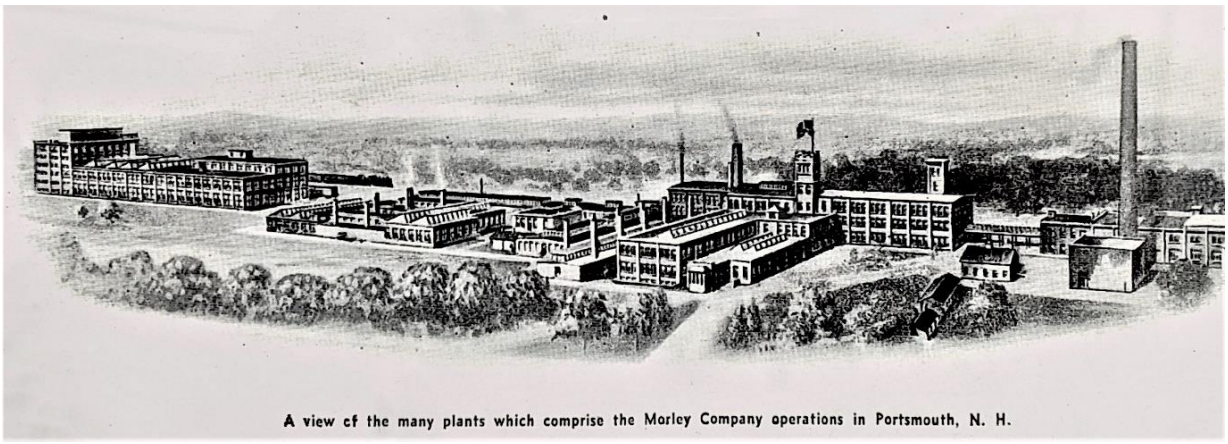
On a peak day, the value of the output is $5,000 a day.

600 to 700 people are working on an 8-hour shift

A normal factory payroll runs between $10,000 to $12,000 for 47½ working hours.

For a long time, the executive offices were located in Boston, but in 1930 were transferred to Portsmouth so that all activities centered in one place.

In 1923 A Pageant of Portsmouth was put on to honor the Tercentenary of the first Portsmouth settlement in 1623. Morley Button Manufacturing donated all the buttons used on the costumes.



Artist's view of the factory complex, no date

During World War II, the company had converted much of its civilian production to war activities. It had been making gas mask face forms and decontamination bags for the army chemical warfare service, fiber and molded plastic buttons for uniforms, tufting buttons for the maritime commission and medical corps, and fiber dimout-shades used by industry and utilities. In addition to fiber and molded plastic buttons for war workers garments, fiber board for lunch boxes and stereotype mats for the newspaper industry were also produced. Recently the company has been working with four consulting firms, two on factory methods and two on industrial chemical research to examine the possibilities of post war products. Buttons, as in 1890, will continue to be an important part of the Morley picture.

[Ed. note: this appears to be the end of the quoted history]

In 1947 parts of the factory were sold to the city of Portsmouth and the N.H. Technical Institute was established. There were no real structural changes to the site after 1957. The site housed a furniture warehouse and other small industries. Industrial use of the property ceased by the end of the 20th century. In late 1999 some of the buildings were converted into condominiums.

The building was purchased in 1986 by Jim Buttrick (a SIA member) and Peter Bowers. They focused on encouraging the use of the building by artists and craftspeople. The Button Factory became more visible to the community with the addition of the annual Open Studios. This event is now been going on for 34 years.

In a future article we'll visit the Sash & Solder Company, a tenant in the Button Factory, which specializes in historic restoration of stained-glass windows.

A big thank you to Jim Buttrick for the use of photographs and the bulk of the Morley story.

Editor's Notes: How to Prepare Articles and Images for Submission to the NEC Newsletter

Robert W. Timmerman

We seem to be getting a few more submissions, and I have already received proposals for articles for the next issue of the newsletter. The more people give us, the more we can print.

I think it is well that we have two articles on preservation or documentation of sites in the newsletter: one on the Elizabeth Mine (there is a detailed article on the mine contained in the author's website, which is referenced in the article), and one on tide mills, which are of interest to me, an energy engineer. The tides are renewable, and unlike wind and solar, are predictable.

One of the proposals for the next newsletter is also a preservation/documentation project. It was also refreshing to hear the presentation at the Northern New England Chapter meeting in March about stabilization and possible (let us hope probable) preservation of the gasholder in Concord.