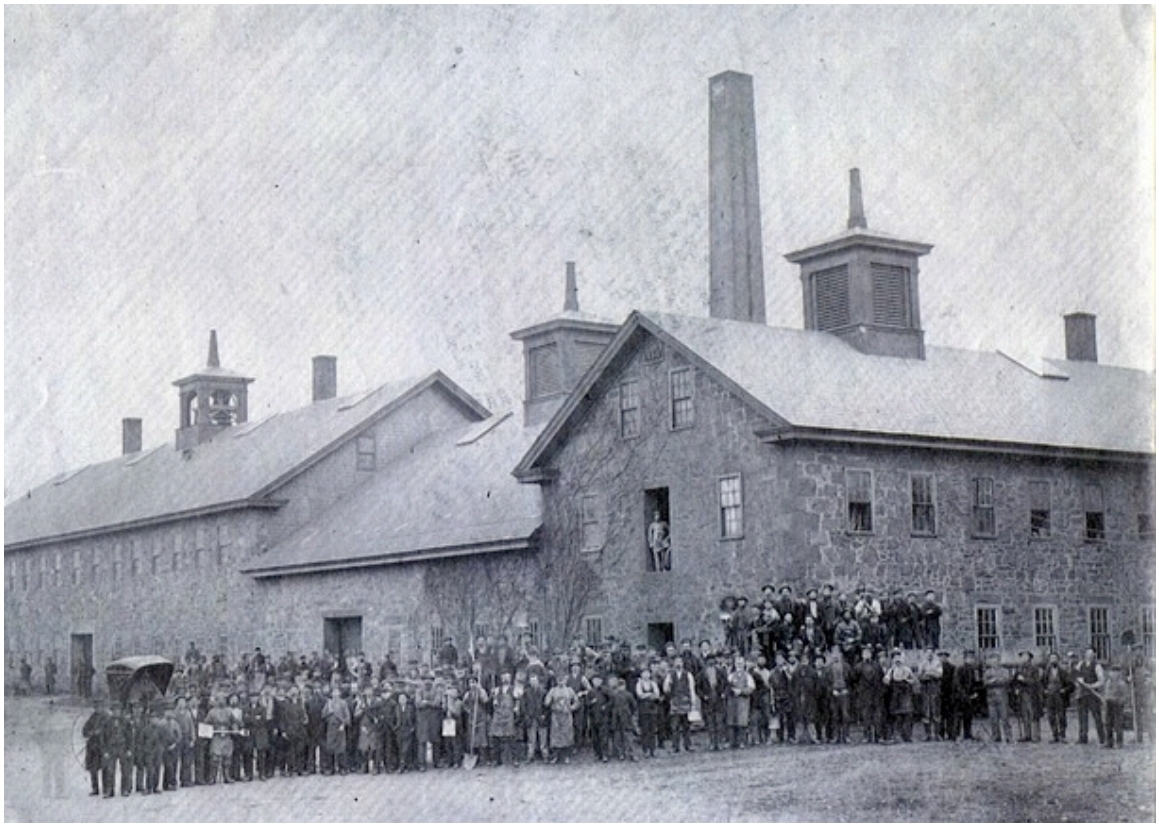
Ames Shovel Works



"It is worth noting that there is an American company, founded in 1774, which is still operating and the history of which parallels and reflects in many ways the history of our nation."
-National Park Service website

Captain John Ames started his shovel company in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts in 1774. After a series of moves and mergers, that company, now called Ames True Temper, still exists today, making it one of the oldest continuous business operations in the United States. For most of the company's history, it occupied the Ames Shovel Works in Easton, Massachusetts, where it rose to national prominence and eventually controlled 60% the US shovel market. Along the way it pioneered the concept of mass production, helped build virtually every major public works project in America, became one of the first companies to operate on a global scale, and brought the Ames family to national prominence. Now the site, generally regarded to be one of the country's best remaining connections to the history of American industrialization, is being threatened with demolition.

In recognition of both its great national importance and its precarious future, the Shovel Works have been listed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2009 list of America's most endangered historic places. The Trust has been publishing its list for 22 years, and named a total of 211 endangered sites. All but six of those sites have been saved. Demolition of the Shovel Works would not only be a rare loss for the Trust, it would also mark the first time that Chapter 40B has been used to demolish a building on the state registry of historic places.

As stated above, the history of the Ames Shovel Works "parallels and reflects the history of our nation." As such, the Ames company, and its site in North Easton, are historically significant on three major fronts: What the buildings themselves tell us about the industrial history of the town of Easton, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the United States; the significant role that the shovels produced at the Shovel Works had in world history; and finally, the role that they played in the Ames family's rise to national prominence.

The Buildings:

The magic of the Shovel Works complex is that it was built over a period of 75 years, evolving with the industrial technology of the time. Every building from that period is still standing, creating a museum of 75 years of industrial history in one place. There is no greater example of this industrial evolution in Massachusetts.

The granite industrial architecture of the early buildings on the site was once extremely common in Southeastern Massachusetts, but most other examples have been lost. The region was once the iron making capital of the United States, and with so little of that history still standing, it is vitally important to protect such a well-preserved example of that architecture, and how it evolved.

The first building in the complex, the Long Shop, was built in 1852, and additional buildings were constructed as needed until 1928. The various buildings and their

different uses capture the major advances in industry in the 19th and 20th centuries, showing how shifting technologies called for new types of buildings. For example, when the factory moved from water to steam power in 1853, the company built the Engine House to house the steam engines, and when it converted to electricity in 1907 the Power House was built. The buildings are the "physical manifestation of the innovative techniques of specialization and mass production that made the Ames firm a leader in America's Industrial Revolution"(Utile report).

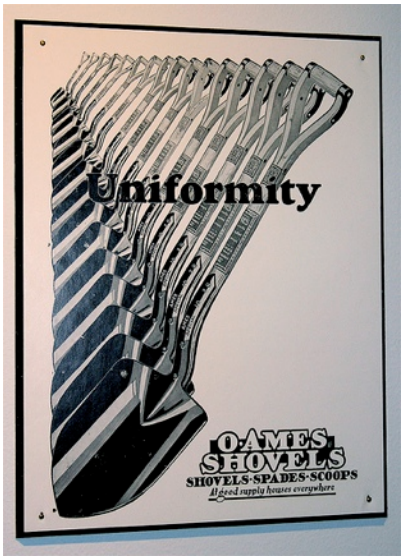
The Long Shop is of particular historical interest. Its length reflects the Shovel Works' position as one of the world's first sites of mass production, with individual workers each performing specialized tasks, rather than the previous system of a single artisan making an entire finished product. The long building allowed the shovels to be moved easily among various workers, all in the same building. According to Frank Meninno of the Easton Historical Society, "The factory used production lines 50 years before Henry Ford did." Any development plan that includes cutting the building in half would cause it to lose its most vital feature.

The complex is also important when viewed in the context of the North Easton Historic District, which includes the Shovel Works and adjacent H.H. Richardson buildings and an F.L. Olmstead park. The Shovel Works are all that remains of the industry that made the town nationally important and provided the Ames family with the money to build the Richardson buildings. The Historic District would not exist without the Shovel Works, and would lose an important part of the cohesiveness for which the District is known if the Shovel Works were lost.

The Role of the Shovels in US/World History:
The story of construction in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries is the story of Ames Shovels. The Ames company was such a dominant force that it would have been nearly impossible to build anything major without using a tool produced at the Shovel Works. At its height, the Ames Shovel Works had 500 workers producing 1.4 million shovels per year, which was 60% of the world shovel market. Those shovels were used all over America and as far away as Australia

Before Ames shovels only wood-blade shovels were made in America, and all iron-blade shovels were imported from England. When Ames entered the market with the first domestic iron-blade shovels, they were immediately recognized for their higher quality. In addition to strength and durability, they were also lighter than English shovels and some accounts credit the Ameses with being the first to make shovels with a pointed blade. Both of these improvements reduced worker fatigue and allowed for greater productivity.

As early as the 1850s, Ames shovels were available and well-regarded in every region of America, making Ames one of the earliest nationally-recognized companies in existence. Soon after, Ames shovels became available around the world, becoming popular tools during the Australian gold rush and in South African diamond mines. The Ameses were also early importers of raw materials from abroad. The relatively large import and export of materials and finished products marks the Ames company as an early global enterprise at a time when slow shipping and communications made operating worldwide extremely difficult.



Ames shovels and hand tools played a significant role in the construction of countless building projects, including the transcontinental railroad, the Panama and Erie canals, the Statue of Liberty, the New York City subway, and Mount Rushmore. At a time when virtually all construction work was done by hand, and Ames dominated the market for hand tools, the Shovel Works in North Easton had a direct connection to the most important projects in America during a time of intense national growth.

By the Civil War, Ames shovels were standard issue for the US military, used primarily to dig trenches in combat. Ames continued to supply shovels for every conflict through Korea, including both world wars. All told, Ames produced about 11 million shovels for the US military.

Ames Family:

The Ames family became one of the most prominent families in Massachusetts business and politics as a direct result of the Shovel Works' success. Oakes Ames served in the US Congress for 10 years, from 1863 to 1873, and his brother Oliver became president of the Union Pacific Railroad. Oakes' son, also named Oliver, later served as Governor of Massachusetts from 1887 to 1890.

The Ameses are best known for their leadership of the construction of the transcontinental railroad. When the family's shovel business reached its peak in the mid to late 1800s, the Ameses looked to other businesses to invest in. Chief among these was a heavy investment in the railroad business, particularly Union Pacific. Eventually, Oliver became the head of Union Pacific, and his tenure overlapped with his brother's time in Congress. The combination of financial resources, political power, and control of the company that provided the necessary tools for construction caused President Lincoln to ask them to manage construction of the railroad that he felt the nation desperately

needed. The railroad was a success and for a time the Ameses were revered national figures. A monument to the two brothers, designed by H.H. Richardson, stands near Laramie, Wyoming, at the highest point along the railroad's original route. The railroad has since been moved.

While their involvement in the transcontinental railroad cemented the Ameses notoriety, it also led to the only great scandal to affect the family. After the railroad was completed, Credit Mobilier, the construction company that handled most of the work for Union Pacific, was discovered to be a shell company, owned and controlled by the Ames brothers and other Union Pacific leadership. When this was discovered, congress launched an investigation and discovered that Credit Mobilier had overcharged Union Pacific for work. Since much of the construction funding came from the federal government, it became a major scandal when it was discovered, considered by many to be the largest financial scandal in US history to that point. Oakes was censured by the congress, returned to Easton, and died a few months later. Although this scandal severely tarnished the Ames name, it clearly did not ruin it, as Oakes' son Oliver was elected Governor after the scandal.

While the Ames' involvement with the transcontinental railroad is what they are most known for, they were also involved in some prominent building in and around Boston. The Ames building, Boston's first skyscraper and still one of the world's tallest masonry structures, was built to house the various Ames business ventures. One of those ventures was the management of filling in the marshes on the Cambridge side of the Charles River. Originally intended as a fashionable residential neighborhood, it eventually became the site of MIT.