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Businesses put pinch on each other

By PAUL HELLER For the Times Argus
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1 of 3

The New York Times once called Vermont the Silicon Valley of the clothespin. All of the important early clothespin patents were claimed by Vermonters, and in Montpelier, a city better known for bureaucrats and insurance companies, two great manufacturers dominated clothespin manufacturing for parts of three centuries. In some ways it was a quintessential Vermont industry, utilizing waste from sawmills and employing specialized milling and fabricating equipment engineered in the heart of the Connecticut River Valley s machine-tool industry, Springfield. Alas, lamented the Times a few years ago, Montpelier s last manufacturer of clothespins was calling it quits. Early start First there was the U.S. Clothespin Company, incorporated by a former Civil War hero, Stephen Thomas. It was joined and succeeded by the National Clothespin Company, which maintained a presence on Granite Street in the Capital City until a few years ago. According to the National Register of Historic Places, the clothespin industry in the United States was historically comprised of small, family-run factories, located primarily in the Northeast. With annual sales of about $500,000, the clothespin industry in Montpelier was, by most measures, a marginal enterprise. But as a family business, it provided a livelihood for a handful of enterprising Vermonters into the first years of 21st century. Sales encompassed a surprisingly large share of the national market. Finally, cheap foreign imports and the popularity of electric dryers rendered Montpelier s tiny industry obsolete. Thomas helped raise the 8th Vermont Regiment in 1861, the first year of the Civil War. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for gallantry in hand-to-hand combat at Cedar Creek, a bloody battle in the Shenandoah Valley in 1864. After the war he became involved in lumber and building-supplies and, in 1887, as president of the U.S. Clothespin Company. He soon saw it evolve into a corporation with a national market, employing 15 to 20, as needed. Industries and Wealth of the Principal Points in Vermont (1891) noted, These clothespins are a great invention and one that every housekeeper will appreciate, and after once seeing these in use will have no other, and wonder how they have done without them so long. The will hold the clothes on a rope or wire line in a hard wind or blizzard, and when put on properly will not be lost by falling off. They can be put on or taken off the line without tearing the most delicate fabric, as the rough sawed, split pin will do by being crowded on, wearing holes in handkerchiefs and all fine linen. They will not break, split or rust the clothes, being made of the best galvanized wire and select hard wood. They cannot freeze and lock on the line as they will open at the top and let the snow and ice out. Innovations Clearly, the improved design employed the U.S. Clothespin Company was inspired by the harsh climate of the Green Mountains specifically in central Vermont. The entry in Industries and Wealth also proclaimed a large facility for the company a factory 40 feet by 100 feet, fitted up with all the latest improved machinery and appliances. It was apparently large enough in 1891 to produce more than 20,000 units a day. Their first factory had originally been built to house Lester Greene s Syrup of Tar production facility and located at the corner of Berlin and River streets at the present-day location of Parker s Quick Stop. Greene s popular cough medicine contained

alcohol, heroin, and chloroform. Eventually, Greene s product was the target of an investigation by the Food and Drug Administration and the plant became available for the U.S. Clothespin Company. Quickly outgrowing the Lester Greene building, the plant moved to its last location near the dam which supplied the power to turn its specialized machinery. Ralph Nading Hill s book The Winooski remarked that: The water wheel under the clothespin factory turned machinery that fashioned clothespins when they first appeared in the United States. Montpelier is still the clothespin capital, having diversified its line to meet changing conditions. New England prefers the slotted type, presumably because the spring pin is liable to freeze to the line, while the people of the South will have nothing but the spring type, which ensures laundry against windstorms. After generations of making the traditional white-birch or beech pin, Montpelier has added plastic numbers in bright colors. Noted design The building was notable for one additional feature the giant clothespin that adorned its roof. A machinist, Charles Ellicott, who is credited with designing the machining for the first spring-operated clothespins, fashioned the iconic rooftop sign that was proclaimed The World s Largest Working Clothespin. Ellicott worked for the U.S. Clothespin Company from about 1920 to 1941, when he moved to Maine to work for a clothespin company there. His daughter, Lucie Bridges, recalls that her father also made the world s tiniest working clothespin. The ¼-inch device was made of gold and used in promotional visits by the company s salesmen. She also says that for the rest of her life, her mother never had to buy any clothespins, and neither did she. The site of the former plant is presently occupied by Champlain Farms on Memorial Drive near the intersection of Main Street. Their innovative design was patented in 1887 by Solon Moore of Swanton, a tireless inventor with several improvements of existing devices to his credit. In fact his coiled fulcrum clothespin was an advance over that of David Smith of Windsor, who, in 1853, invented the spring-clamp for clotheslines. Moore s coiled fulcrum design very closely resembles the device we think of today when picturing a spring clothespin. Thomas closest associate in the enterprise was his son-in-law, S.T. Newcomb, who served as vice president. The factory employed the dam on the Winooski River that powered the machinery for the U.S. Clothespin factory, and the Clothes Pin Dam is still visible near Shaw s Supermarket in Montpelier. The original timber-crib dam was rebuilt by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early 1930s to enhance flood control in the Winooski River watershed. More clothespins The small factories primarily used birch, maple and beech. The first decades of the 20th century saw the heyday of clothespin making in the Northeast with expanding markets and 15 factories in production in New England. In Montpelier, the U.S. Clothespin Company soon found it had a rival. Allen Moore, an employee of Thomas, saw a way to improve the design of the metal clothespin spring, and started a new company in 1909 with an investment from Fred Blanchard, a respected hardware merchant and Montpelier entrepreneur. Moore, it is said, found he could reduce the number of coils in the metal spring, thereby reducing production costs. He originally called his new enterprise the National Spring

Clip Company, and leased space on Main Street in Montpelier (in the footprint of Sarducci s Restaurant), almost in the shadow of his former employer. Within a decade, however, he moved the enterprise to 1 Granite St., the address it would claim for almost a century. The move was made possible by the proliferation of electric lines emanating from power plants upstream on the Winooski River. It was well equipped with specialized machinery fabricated in Springfield, much like its competitor, the U.S. Clothespin Company. The National Register also points out that the Lane Shops on Mechanic Street in Montpelier were able to fashion replacement parts. Moore s company quickly outgrew its rival, and at the height of production consumed 500,000 board feet of Vermont lumber annually. By 1921 there already were attempts to protect the industry from foreign competition. B.R. Demeritt, who had a competing factory in Waterbury, offered testimony to a congressional committee: In Montpelier and Waterbury there are now about 125 persons employed in the manufacture of spring clothespins and the industry has grown from the manufacture of a few hundred gross annually to nearly a half million gross, the output during 1920. Amazingly, the yearly production amounted to 72 million clothespins just in central Vermont. Demeritt indicated that not all were used in drying clothes. He mentioned that many were used by photographers, some as paper clips, and in automobiles for hanging up hats, etc. He noted that the production costs per gross for Vermont clothespins in 1920 amounted to slightly more than 58 cents. Demeritt complained that Sweden was flooding the American market with imports they were selling for 48 cents per gross. Transitions The years of the first World War were good for the American industry because imports came to a halt. With the war over, cheap foreign goods created difficulties for the Vermont manufacturers. A tariff of 20 cents per gross is all the Vermont makers wanted a refrain that was to be repeated regularly until the last Vermont clothespin factory closed its doors. The years after World War II were not kind to the clothespin industry. A flourishing post-war economy and ensuing baby boom increased demand for more efficient housekeeping appliances. Electric dryers soon made clotheslines things of the past and the U.S. Clothespin Company closed its doors in the 1940s. The giant clothespin sign, however, remained on the roof for several more years. A large contract with the department store chain F.W. Woolworth allowed the National Clothespin Company to stay in business, and the company was purchased in 1967 by Jack Crowell, a Montpelier businessman, who was able to produce 38 million pins a year. Rebounding from a nearly disastrous fire in 1978, Crowell allied himself with other American clothespin manufacturers to fight cheaply produced Chinese imports. They remained unsuccessful in their appeal for a tariff to protect the industry. Crowell eventually turned his company over to his daughter, Janet, and son-in-law Peter Merrill. They continued to run National Clothespin for almost three decades. In the face of cheap imports, they discontinued manufacturing clothespins in Montpelier in 2009. Before Crowell passed away in 1996, he contracted with the Northeast Granite Company of Montpelier to build the monument that marks his grave in Middlesex Center Cemetery a giant granite clothespin almost

five feet in length. I ve been working 38 years making clothespins, he told Elaine Harrington in 1986, so I figured why not have one on my grave. His design was executed with one exception.

I asked for a metal spring so that kids could go up to the cemetery and teeter, he recalled, but the stoneworkers at Northeast Granite objected, anticipating problems with a moveable structure. From the marker over Jack s grave, one may infer the great satisfaction he took in the National Clothespin Company, as well as the intrepid spirit of the independent businessman. I don t think there is another one like it in the world, he said with pride. Paul Heller is a writer and historian from Barre.