

Carroll Yesteryears
30 January 2022
Shoes Offer Reminder of Long-lost Tanneries
By Samuel M. Riley

Look at your shoes. Chances are they are *not* made of leather, nor made anywhere locally—not even in this country. Our ancestors just a few generations back would be amazed.

Shoes today are largely manufactured using synthetics like plastics. Historically, shoes were hand-crafted using natural materials—typically leather. In the early 1800s, even the soles of most shoes were leather, made from the thickest part of a cow hide.

Shoes, and the leather from which they were made, were locally sourced. As James Switzer reflected in reminiscences published in the *Union Bridge Pilot* of life in the early 1800s, “Ready-made shoes from Massachusetts were not in vogue then. You went to the shop, got your foot measured and got your shoes or boots made to order.”

Shoemakers bought their leather from nearby tanneries, part of a local economy unfamiliar to us today. Switzer continued, “you butchered and cured your own meat. You sold your hides to the home tanner, who purchased the oak bark from you to tan the hides; or you could trade your hides at the tannery for leather, deliver it to [the shoemaker], get your foot measured, and in 2 weeks go and get a pair of shoes....”

Leather was not just used for shoes, but also for harnesses, saddles, fire buckets and many other practical applications. It was essential to everyday life and a key product in the 19th-century economy. In the colonial era, leather products could even be used as currency, with major purchases—including real estate—capable of being transacted in shoes.

Leather-making was a craft essentially unchanged for thousands of years. Animal hides were “tanned” and turned into leather using natural tannins found in tree bark. A lengthy process, tanning required soaking hides in a brackish solution made from bark naturally high in tannic acids. The solution was an infusion of ground bark, much like tea.

According to the 1820 U.S. census, ten tanneries operated just in the area around Westminster processing over 7,000 skins and hides into leather. One of these local tanning operations was at Union Mills. Andrew Shriver, co-founder of Union Mills, ran a tannery that by 1820 included 26 vats and one iron bark mill worked by a single horse. The mill ground the bark for the tanning solutions. According to the 1820 census, Shriver made his leather products from ox and cow hides, some horse hides, as well as sheep and calf skins.

And what were vats for? Vats, typically sunk in the ground and lined with wood, were where the bulk of the processing occurred. If the tanning solution was a tea, then the vats were the teacups. Tanners treated hides in these vats, called layaway vats, for up to a year in successive tanning solutions.

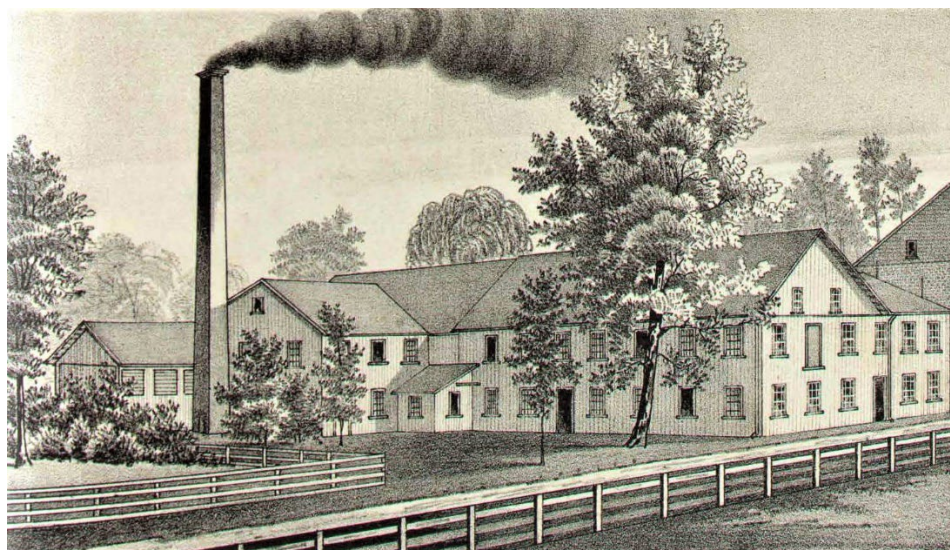
Over time, as leather tanning became more industrialized, small rural tanneries became obsolete. Large Philadelphia or Baltimore companies bought at least three local tanning businesses. In 1894, Louis Shriver (Andrew Shriver's grandson) recorded in his diary that "owing to the dullness of trade and the small profits in leather...[t]his is the first time in probably forty or fifty years that there has been no leather in the vats." After a storm in 1902 blew over the smokestack at the Shriver Tannery, it officially closed shop and never tanned leather again. Carroll County's last remaining tannery shut down in 1919. Today, few tanneries remain in North America due to increased imports and availability of synthetic substitutes for leather.

The same market forces that decimated local tanneries also caused the eventual decline of shoe manufacturing in the U.S. Amazingly, despite the importance of leather historically, and the large number of 19th-century tanneries in the area, today there is little understanding of this key industry. There are no industrial tanneries in Maryland anymore and few museums that address the topic.

The Union Mills Homestead is working to change that. An archaeological project this past year confirmed that extensive remnants of the Shriver Tannery remain buried underground at the site. During a dig in October 2021, archaeologists uncovered the walls of one of the tanning vats and even recovered a hairy plug of a buried animal hide. Additional research is now underway to determine whether more excavation should occur and how best to interpret Union Mills' tanning operations and the implications of this near-forgotten industry.

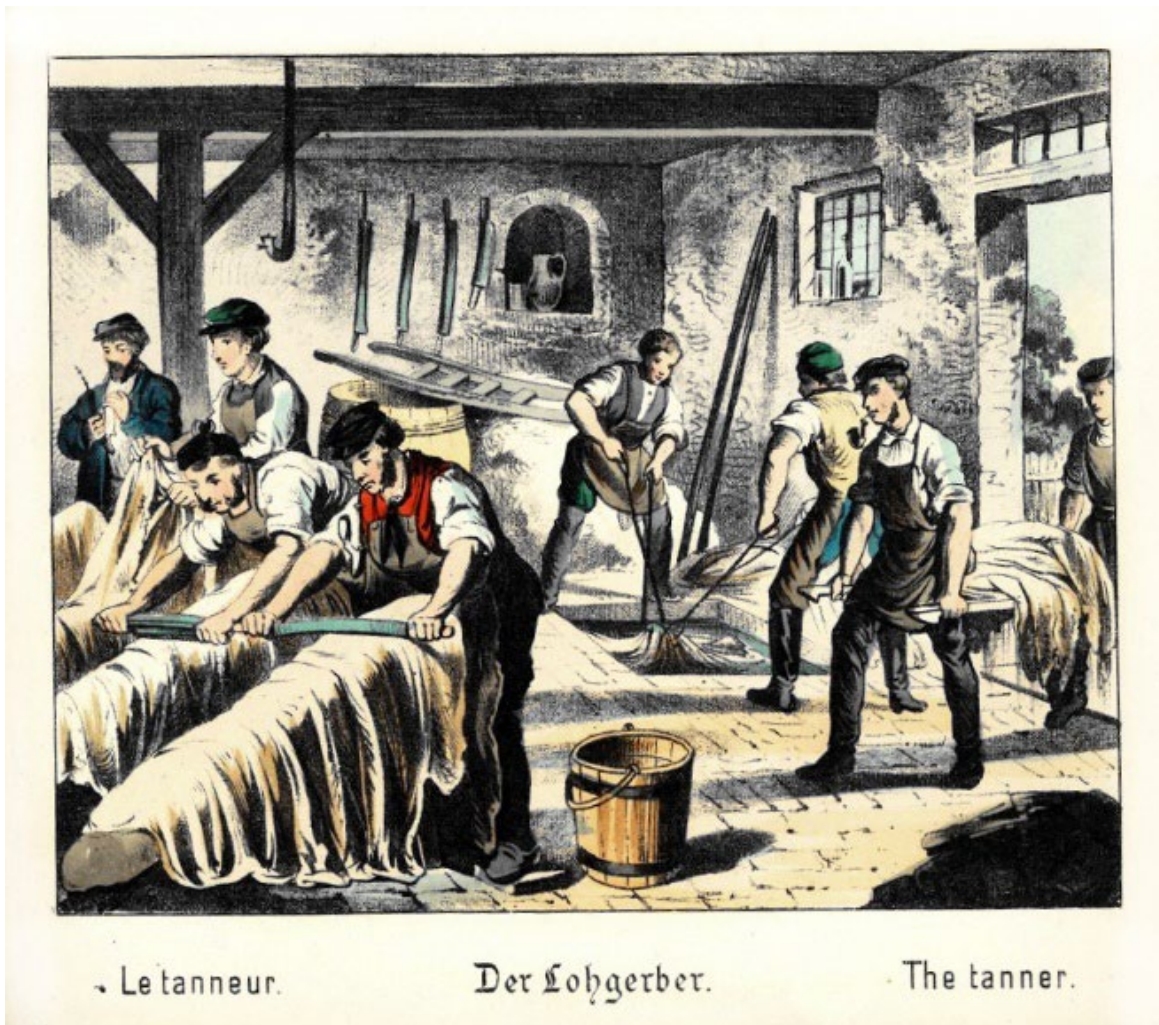
Our economy continues to evolve in a digital world. As we work to better understand economic growth and development, long-gone local industries such as the tanning of leather serve as great examples for study.

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Caption for Image #1: An 1877 view of the A.K. Shriver & Sons Tannery at Union Mills. By the outset of the Civil War, the Shriver family had adopted steam power for their tanning operations and their tannery featured a large smokestack. (1877 *Illustrated Atlas of Carroll County, Maryland*)

Caption for Image #4: An advertisement for boots and shoes in the May 25, 1872 edition of the *Democratic Advocate*, indicating that locally-made shoes were still available in the 1870s. (Library of Congress/University of Maryland image)



*Caption for Image #3: An 1880 image depicting the preparation of animal hides in a tannery “beam house,” where tanners would remove hair and flesh on a beam. (Unknown artist, from *Was willst du Werden? Bilder aus dem Handwerkerleben*. Berlin: Winckelmann [c. 1880], distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)*