

Union Mills leather takes center stage at 1876 Centennial Exhibition – January 14, 2024

Union Mills is widely known for its large grist mill that still stands today at the historic site north of Westminster, open seasonally for the public to tour. As reflected in its name, the enterprise, founded in 1797 by Andrew and David Shriver Jr., featured a union of two mills: a grist mill and saw mill. These two mills stood at the center of the Shriver brothers' early industrial complex.

Another important part of the enterprise, however, was a tannery where animal hides were “tanned” and turned into leather. Although the tannery at Union Mills often is overshadowed by the grist mill, in 1876 the tannery's leather products stole the spotlight with an appearance at the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. Lasting from May 10 to Nov. 10, 1876, the exhibition – the first official World's Fair in the U.S. – attracted almost 10 million people and featured participants from around the world.

As set out in the enacting legislation passed by Congress, the Centennial Exhibition was officially named the “International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine.” Sponsored by the United States Centennial Commission to celebrate the country's first 100 years, major inventions introduced at the exhibition in recognition of American progress and innovation included Alexander Graham Bell's telephone and mass-produced typewriters.

Organizers constructed a special building for manufacturers of shoes and leather to display their products and information about leather making. A dedicated Shoe and Leather Building reflected the respected status of the leather trades in Philadelphia where shoemaking was among the city's top industries. A souvenir portfolio from the Centennial Exhibition recorded that the Shoe and Leather Building, designed by architect Alexander B. Bary of Philadelphia, measured 314 feet long and 160 feet wide, and cost \$31,000.

To raise money to cover the costs of the exhibition, the Centennial Board of Finance sold stock certificates at \$10 per share. Louis “Lou” Shriver of Union Mills and his two brothers, grandsons of founder Andrew Shriver, each received handsome certificates for shares that the Centennial Board of Finance issued to them. Today, Lou's stock certificate is displayed in his sitting room at the Union Mills Homestead; his older brother Wirt's certificate hangs in the site's historic post office.

The Shriver family engaged in tanning in the area as early as the 1730s when Andreas Schreiber, a recent German immigrant, established a tannery just east of present-day Littlestown, Pennsylvania. In 1760, Andreas' son, David Shriver Sr., settled west of Westminster with his wife, Rebecca Ferree, building a grist mill and tannery. After two of David and Rebecca's sons founded Union Mills in 1797, the family continued in the leather trades. Shrivvers engaged in tanning included Andrew's nephew, Francis Shriver, who worked at Union Mills before operating his own tannery in Westminster into the 1850s. Francis won awards for his leather in the 1840s at fairs in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Baltimore. By 1876, descendants of Andrew Shriver were still tanning leather at their A.K. Shriver & Sons Tannery in Union Mills and did not want to miss the opportunity to showcase their firm's leather products at the Centennial Exhibition.

The Shrivvers used vegetable tanning to make hides into leather. This process— still used by specialized tanners today — involves extracting tannin from the bark of oak trees, which is then infused into hides during an extended soaking process in vats at a tannery. While animal hides are laid away in the vats, tannin in the tanning “liquor” bonds with proteins in the hides, preserving and waterproofing them to create leather.

Official reports of the U.S. Centennial Commission document that the A.K. Shriver & Sons Tannery was one of 104 U.S. tanneries represented at the Centennial Exhibition, along with other leather producers from around the world. Eight Maryland tanners participated, all from Baltimore except for A.K. Shriver & Sons. Oak-tanned sole leather predominated at the exhibition although tanneries from the Northeast (primarily New York) displayed leather made using a hemlock tanning process.

During the spring of 1876, the Shrivvers prepared the leather they sent to the Centennial Exhibition. Lou Shriver recorded in a diary entry, dated April 15, 1876, that they “worked out 10 sides of prime sole leather for the Centennial and today boxed it up and sent it to West[minster] to be shipped.” Lou’s brother, Austin “Aust” Shriver, penned his observations the same day. Aust noted, “Lou went to West[minster] this PM with the ‘Centennial leather.’ There were 10 sides put in a long flat box with white printing paper between each side.” Aust continued, “Each side had a label pasted on it giving weight, time of tanning, and percentage of leather made from each side. Wirt attended the whole arrangement.”

According to Aust, “The leather was made from Texas wet salted hides tanned in from 6 to 8 months.” Despite all their efforts, Aust appears not to have been overly impressed with the product sent to Philadelphia, saying that the leather “was very firm and solid, but the color was not better than average.” Lou echoed Aust’s concerns, noting upon his return from Philadelphia, “I don’t think our leather is much better than some others there, if as good.”

Nevertheless, the judges at the exhibition viewed the leather from Union Mills favorably. The official report commended the oak sole leather from Union Mills “for high skill and workmanship and thoroughness in manufacture, and noticeable for fine finish and close trim.” A framed certificate of award from the Centennial Exhibition is still proudly displayed at the Union Mills Homestead in its 1820s dining room. The tannery also received a bronze medal for its leather.

By the turn of the 20th century, however, more modern methods of tanning, increasing industrialization, and Union Mills’ rural location put the Shriver Tannery at a competitive disadvantage. Diary entries in the 1890s reflect unfavorable market conditions. During a violent storm on July 3, 1902, the tannery smokestack blew down and operations permanently ceased. Thus ended the Shriver family’s five generations of producing leather products in the area.

On Jan. 18, the Union Mills Homestead and the Carroll County Public Library will co-host “Tales from the Tannery: Milestones of Leather Making,” a presentation by English tanning expert Barry Knight. The program can be viewed live on the co-hosts’ social media including Carroll County Public Library’s YouTube channel. Local tanneries may be gone, but they are not forgotten. Join us Jan. 18 to learn more about this important historic industry.

Guest columnist Samuel M. Riley, a local attorney and retired National Guard officer, serves as president of the Union Mills Homestead Foundation and researches local history. He can be reached at info@unionmills.org.

Image 1: Source: Library of Congress

Caption: A print showing an exterior view of the Shoe & Leather Building at the Centennial Exhibition held in Fairmont Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1876.

Image 2: Source: 1877 Illustrated Atlas of Carroll County, Maryland

Caption: 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.

Image 3: Source: Submitted photograph

Caption: Photograph of a 2-inch souvenir item of Shriver leather from the 1876 Centennial Exhibition. The item was a sample of leather products sold by leather commission merchant Massey & Janney of Philadelphia.