

Penick & Ford

Pete Chagnon · May 25 2018



Vermont Maid historyFrank L. Austin, of Burlington, was the architect of this unique brick factory located on 7 Marble Avenue, today 400 Pine Street, in 1917 for the Welch Brothers Maple Company. Brothers Llewellyn and Charles Welch and Harry Miller, first came to Vermont in the year of 1890 to start a business in the packaging of maple sugar and syrup; they were one of a few early businesses that aimed to industrialize one of Vermont's premier and beloved delicacies: the syrup and sugar made from the sap of maple trees.¹ Initially, they established a business and factory on Church Street, and placed ads in newspapers across Vermont requesting large quantities upwards of 10,000 gallons of maple syrup from farmers.

In the early 1890s, they built a factory on the corner of Battery and Cherry Street, where they maintained a lucrative and growing business with a capital of \$25,000 by 1896, in preparing maple syrup for distribution locally and beyond. By the early 1900s, business was booming, and capital for the company had doubled to \$50,000. After the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, Welch Bros. began experimenting with diluting maple syrup with sugar-producing products such as the "Mayflower" breakfast maple and sugar syrup, and the famous "Vermont Maid" cane sugar and maple syrup blend. With the increased liberties from the act, however, there were also tighter testing regulations, and interestingly, there are numerous reports of the syrups not passing tests for having the amount of maple syrup they claimed to have bottled.

The new syrups were so successful that by the late 1910s, Welch Bros. was ready to expand past its factory on Battery Street, and met with Frank Austin in the summer of 1917 to discuss plans. The project commenced immediately to build a three-story brick factory with a boiler house and storehouses attached to it. The factory, specifically constructed for the packing and shipping of maple syrup and sugar, had a unique special sliding platform built on a southern ell of the building where railroad tracks ran to expedite shipping .

The main block of the building, which was distinctly characterized by a stepped parapet wall on the northern elevation, had an office and storage and packing on the southern elevation; the secondary ells of the building were also designated for storage and distribution. In the 1920s, twenty people were employed by the company-here, they received sap in fifty-five gallon barrels from around the state, which would then be boiled down to syrup or sugar. Finally, it was later made into cakes of maple sugar or bottled in syrup containers and packed for shipping across the country. By 1926, Welch Bros. added an additional brick storage ell to the southeastern elevation of the building and a small wooden room with windows on the third floor still extant today. The Welch Brothers' office and factory remained at 7 Marble Ave until 1927, when the newly-formed Vermont Maple Sugar Company assumed ownership of the building. They were only in the building for two years when Penick & Ford, Ltd. bought the building in 1928.

Penick & Ford was a large company that originated in Louisiana in 1919 to sell syrup and molasses, and they established their Vermont Maid Division at 7 Marble Ave in 1928. Here, the manufacturing of Vermont Maid Syrup commenced with vigor. The factory was rearranged to now both manufacture and bottle the syrup: the primary block of the building was for canning and bottling, and two additional ells were added to the southern elevation as finished product warehouses between 1940 and 1960. Louis McAllister, a local photographer, photographed the interior of the factory at the height of its operations in the 1940s, offering a rare glimpse of the equipment and the production line of the syrups. The factory and its machinery were powered by a strong Cooper Bessemer engine located in the boiler room of the building. In McAllister's photos, the process of how the syrup was labeled, bottled, boxed, and ultimately shipped from the factory is viewable (Fig. 3, 4). The company used a combination of conveyor belts and bottling and labeling machines, and employees boxed goods and monitored the machinery. Production was high at the company, and the Rutland Railroad Company in 1955 estimated they were shipping out 1,000 carloads of syrup a year. Reportedly by 1931, Penick & Ford was the third largest producer of corn products in the country. Harry Miller, one of the original founders, was the manager of the factory until 1950.¹⁹ Penick & Ford's Division of Vermont Maid operated here smoothly until 1968.

Penick & Ford in its entirety was bought out by R.J. Reynolds, a national tobacco company that wanted to expand into the food industry, and in 1968 the company's name changed to R.J. Reynolds, Inc. It appears that they continued to produce Vermont Maid syrup at this factory until 1976, when Pepsi Cola took over the building and used it for storage purposes. On a side-note, Reynolds was bought out by Nabisco, who later sold their rights to Vermont Maid to B&G. B&G still produce Vermont Maid today, which is now primarily made of corn syrup.

By the early 1980s, the Howard Space Partnership, L.L.P. owned the building. The partnership aimed to revitalize the old factory into a rentable space for small businesses. A laundry-mat was in the main building for some years until 2003 when the Great Harvest Bread Company moved in. In 1996, the Burlington Furniture Store moved into the southern ells; interestingly, they still use the side of the building where the trains used to stop by for syrup for trucks to deliver furniture. Today, Battery Street Jeans, a thrift store, is in the first floor of the main building, with its entrance on Marble Ave. The old maple factory's façade remains unchanged since its construction.



The young folks loved to invade the sugar camp and enjoy fresh-made maple sugar cooked on the stove.

Real maple sugar flavor you've longed for!

Vermont Maid Syrup, our skilled blenders select maple sugar usually full-flavored; then blend it with cane sugar, and gives you, at moderate cost, real maple sugar flavor gloriously rich and delicious.

Get Vermont Maid Syrup today. Your grocer now has it in glass jugs, ready for your table.

Ford, Ltd., Inc., Burlington, Vermont.



John McLean

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