

From Autos – to Apparel – to Art: The Secret Life of a Building

By Roy Perkinson

If buildings could only speak – what stories they might tell. A case in point: the massive concrete structure at 59 Fountain Street Framingham, now called “The Bancroft Building.” The Framingham Historical Society’s archives provided insight into the life of this impressive building.

This building would never be mistaken for an H. H. Richardson marvel of architectural elegance. Solidly built and unapologetically functional, it is simply what it is, a factory building. But climbing its wide, worn staircase you hear echoes not only of your own footsteps but also those of countless men and women who for nearly a century have spent their days plying their trades, employing their craft, making things that were both practical and pleasing to the eye.



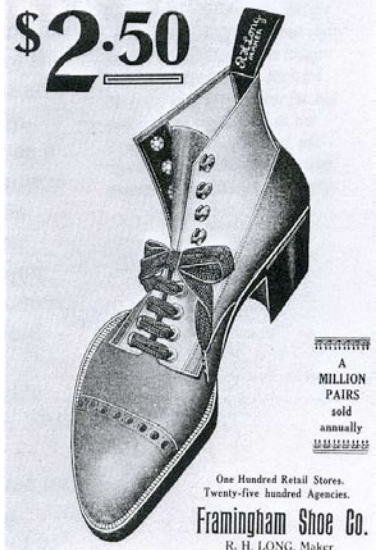
How appropriate, then, that the building is nestled between the picturesque and the practical, with Framingham’s lovely Farm Pond on one side and railroad tracks on the other. Richard H. Long was the energetic, ambitious mastermind behind its creation. He had already become an important businessman in the Framingham area by the turn of the last century and owned a large shoe factory near Route 135, a huge wooden building and a local landmark until it was razed a few decades ago. Feeling the need to further expand production, in 1908 he began construction of a new factory on Fountain Street, not far from the other one. It was to be a massive structure of reinforced concrete, with five floors that comprise nearly four acres of workspace.

With a remarkably long, rectangular shape and an east-west orientation, a vast number of large windows flooded the interior with plentiful natural light on both the southern and northern sides. Long saw to it that the factory had its own power plant (the huge smoke stack still stands beside it) to guard against interruptions in operations, and placed it adjacent to railroad tracks for easy transportation of raw materials and his manufactured goods. Amtrak and the Worcester/Boston commuter trains still rumble by within yards of the building every day.

The edifice was so significant a structure that it was formally dedicated on January 12, 1910, almost one hundred years ago. As heralded by the local newspapers, the celebration – which was billed as a special “Ladies Night” – included tours of the factory, a reception and brief addresses, and dancing until midnight. Reports do not

The Waldorf Shoe

\$2.50



indicate whether the ladies danced in one of the products of the new enterprise: the high-topped “Waldorf Shoe.” If so, there must have been a lot of tired feet the next day.

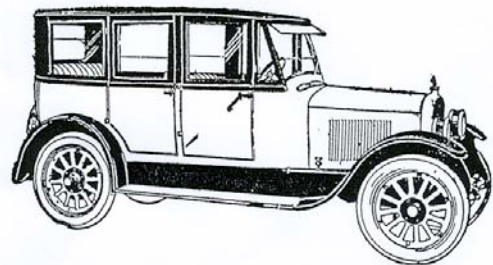
In time, R. H. Long decided to redefine his business and began producing not footwear but an elegant conveyance that would save your shoe leather. A deep believer in the proud tradition of Yankee craftsmanship, and with a practical awareness of the availability of craftsmen who could produce fine coachwork and gleaming fittings that would catch the discerning eye, he introduced the “Bay State Automobile” in 1922.

An article in Automobile Quarterly says that “the Bay State was introduced on the mezzanine of the Hotel Commodore [in New York City],” and that the price range was \$1,800 - \$2,500 (a Ford Model T, by comparison, cost only a few hundred dollars). Eventually the line of offerings included the standard touring, roadster, coupe, sedan, brougham (when was the last time such a name was applied to a car!), sport sedan, sport touring, and “a commodious seven-passenger sedan.” No hybrids were offered.



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Finding that the capital to sustain auto production outstripped his means, Long opted to share his huge plant with the Luxor Cab Manufacturing Company – the name of which reflected the King Tut mania that swept the country in the 1920s and helped inspire the quintessential style of the Art Deco movement. Unfortunately, although by 1926 between 2,000 to 3,500 automobiles had been made and sold, Long’s venture proved financially unviable, so in 1927 he joined General Motors as a franchised dealer of Cadillacs, Pontiacs and GMC trucks, and the dealership he founded continues in operation to this day.

Eventually the Bancroft Cap Company revived operations at the Bancroft Building and for years had a thriving business fabricating everything from children's snowsuits to caps of all kinds. Sadly, like many manufacturing enterprises in the United States, economic forces caused Bancroft to close its Framingham operations in 1983 and move them to Arkansas, where it was able to carry on for another decade and a half before closing its doors.

Nimbly, the former President of Bancroft, Richard Goldman, has managed to keep the old factory building afloat by renting portions of the copious spaces to an amazing variety of small businesses, including a few printing companies, furniture and cabinet makers, a supplier of used office furnishings, decorators, photographers and especially a large community of artists. Indeed, there are currently over sixty artists working in building. It seems fitting that the tradition of fine craftsmanship and dedication to Yankee ingenuity and high standards would be carried on in this manner.

Today, as it nears the century mark, the building shows signs of having supported a tremendous amount of work, the ebb and flow of commerce, and vigorous efforts to redefine its purpose. Like a well-aged bleu cheese, perhaps it's a bit spotted and crumbly around the edges. Or maybe a better analogy is that with age and extensive life experiences, it has acquired character. Who wouldn't settle for that!

If you would like a glimpse inside the building, one enjoyable way to do this would be to visit the studios of some of the many artists who work there, making paintings, photographs, sculpture and pottery. Check out their communal website at www.FountainStreetStudios.com. Each spring for many years, they've thrown open their doors for a building-wide Open Studios. Also, some of the studios are open during the evening on the second Friday of each month. Come visit – you'll enjoy the experience, and who knows, you may bring home a beautiful addition to your home or office, or perhaps a lovely gift!