

1997

14 Small Tags, Big Business: The Keystone Tag Company of West Chester 1901-1956

Kelly McVeigh

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest



Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McVeigh, K. (1997). 14 Small Tags, Big Business: The Keystone Tag Company of West Chester 1901-1956. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest/34

This Labor and Business is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of West Chester, Pennsylvania by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.



Small Tags, Big Business: The Keystone Tag Company of West Chester 1901-1956

by Kelly McVeigh, HIS 480 (submitted April 29, 1997)

Web adaptation copyright 2004 by Jim Jones

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this paper is to provide a narrative history of the Keystone Tag Company (1901-1956), and to examine the relationships between the company, the company's employees, and the local West Chester neighborhood. The Keystone Tag Company was a family-owned small business with connections to major national and international industries. During the historical time period in which the Keystone Tag Company existed many social, technological, political, and economic changes took place within America. A central question raised in the research of this paper is how did the company respond to changes in American society. This paper will attempt to address some of the ways that the increase in the number of working women, the adoption of a minimum wage for women, the Great Depression, and World War II affected the Keystone Tag Company.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the Keystone Tag Company begins with the arrival of the Denney Tag Company to West Chester, Pennsylvania. In 1888, Samuel Denney Jr. decided to relocate his tag manufacturing plant from Philadelphia to West Chester.(1) While it is unclear as to why Mr. Denney chose West Chester for the site of his plant, there were several economically attractive features within West Chester. During the 1800s West Chester's population grew from 374 to 8028 residents; from 1850 to 1890 West Chester's population more than doubled in size resulting in a large labor force of men, women and children.(2) Additionally, West Chester's proximity to paper mills, such as those located on the Brandywine River, and its access to rail road transportation, necessary components to tag manufacturing, surely influenced the decision of Mr. Denney to move his plant to this town. In addition to

bringing his plant to West Chester, Mr. Denney also brought with him, a shipping clerk, Samuel O. Barber, who would eventually become the founder and president of the Keystone Tag Company.

During the winter of 1888 the Denney Tag Company occupied the vacated brick school house on E. Barnard Street and began its operations with fifteen employees.(3) By September 1888, the Denney Tag Company had the second largest tag factory in the United States, with a production rate of 500,000 tags per day, and a declared dividend of 8% on capital stock.(4)

In November 1889, Mr. Denney resigned as President and Superintendent of the company and Samuel Barber became the plant's Superintendent.(5) Mr. Barber remained in this capacity for more than a decade becoming one of the largest stock holders in the company.(6) In June 1901, Dr. B.F. Herr of Lancaster, PA offered to sell his pin ticket and strong business tag manufacturing company to the Denney Tag Company.(7) The directors declined Dr. Herr's offer, as they "were satisfied with the present scope and profits of their industry."(8) However, Mr. Barber and three other men arranged to purchase Dr. Herr's business.

In October 1901 Samuel Barber, George McFarland, Benjamin Hains, Dr. Herr and S. LeRoy Barber, who was Samuel Barber's oldest son, incorporated the Keystone Tag Company to manufacture tags, tag hooks, pin tickets, baggage checks, gum labels and adhesive labels in West Chester.(9) It is significant to note that for a period of time Mr. Barber continued to act as superintendent of the Denney Tag Company and owner of the Keystone Tag Company.

TAG PRODUCTION

The Keystone Tag Company began manufacturing its products in the Ralston R. Hoopes warehouse building located on Barnard and Matlack Streets, only four blocks west of the Denney Tag Company.(10) It was managed by C. Harry Barber, another son of Samuel Barber. Originally the company used only a single machine and had only two or three employees.(11) Despite its small beginnings, shortly after opening for business, the company received an order from London for a half million tags.(12) This order appeared impressive in size and it hinted at the scope of international business the Keystone Tag Company would command in the future. However, as noted previously, Denney Tag produced that amount in one day in 1888. Therefore, Keystone's success could not have been due to its production rate, as it was never as large a manufacturer as Denney Tag.

Workers at the Keystone Tag Company designed and built a machine to mechanize the job of stringing tags to replace the work which had been done through child labor.(13) In the summer of 1902, Keystone Tag reported operating three machines in the manufacturing of its tags. One machine cut tags of various sizes from paperboard, perforated the tags, and punched each tag with a small round patch at the eyelet; another machine was used in the production of pin tags, and a third machine was used to string the tags and tie each string with a knot.(14) The tag stringing machine was delivered to the factory earlier that year. According to a newspaper account, the patent was issued to a member of the Keystone Tag Company and the machine was built from plans designed by a West Chester firm.(15) The machine was "expected to revolutionize the work of stringing tags and eventually take the place of dozens of persons about town who have been doing work by hand ever since the tag factories located in West Chester."(16)

Both the Denney Tag Company and Keystone engaged in a system of putting-out work among local residents in the form of stringing tags. For example, in 1901 the local newspaper stated that for several years tags had been "put out" to West Chester residents in their homes to be strung by children or others "whose time was of moderate value."(17) The going wage was about ten cents per thousand tags.(18) While a person could not get rich stringing tags at home, this system enabled persons, including children and the disabled, unable to work in factories an opportunity to earn an income. According to a local resident,

"There were a lot of people who made money off of Keystone who didn't actually work at Keystone by taking the tags home and stringing them. Johnny Shields was a blind man who... used to walk back and forth to the Tag Company. He had a sort of rope that went up across his shoulder and he had it set up so he could carry several boxes of tags. And then he would sit on his front porch and string tags, and walk back and forth to the factory to get more tags."(19)

The putting-out system was industrial work done in the home for wages. Such work was attractive to women who needed an income but wanted to continue homemaking and caring for their children.(20) West Chester's tag companies may have serviced the local community by providing a "social security" income for persons who would otherwise have been unable to support themselves. This system appears to have existed from 1888 until at least the 1940's despite the use of tag stringing machines.

THE GROWTH OF THE KEYSTONE TAG COMPANY

Many published accounts of Samuel O. Barber describe him as a genial, energetic, prosperous resident of West Chester and a pioneer in the tag business. Barber was respected for producing quality goods at fair prices. Shortly after starting the Keystone Tag Company, Barber made his first attempt to expand the size of his factory. He requested a portion of the lot at the borough's stone crusher on South Matlack be transferred to him for free.(21) Members of West Chester's Borough Council considered this land to be expendable and wanted to sell it for a nominal price to the company.(22) They believed that a factory would benefit the borough through increased tax revenues and employment opportunities for town residents.(23) During the turn of the century many West Chester's residents viewed factories as benefits to the community's growth and economy. In 1892 a newspaper article stated that the establishment of a factory would offer hundreds of young girls a "respectable and light employment" and that there would be more applicants than they had positions to fill.(24) Several years later a local businessman stated "We need factories as it increases our population and helps businesses...We can afford to be liberal with all new manufacturing companies."(25) Although a favorable atmosphere for the construction of a new manufacturing industry prevailed in West Chester, Samuel Barber's land deal fell through and the tag company remained in the Hoopes warehouse until 1908.

Although the company's physical growth did not expand past the walls of the Hoopes warehouse, from 1905-1907 Keystone Tag reported substantial increases in its business.(26) For example, in January 1906 the company reported an export of 2.5 million tags.(27) By 1907 the company experienced difficulty obtaining the materials needed for tag manufacturing. Mr. Barber reported that paper mills throughout the country are "full of orders" and that "all lines of business" are more prosperous now than they had ever been.(28)

After a second failed attempt to acquire land in order to build a tag factory, Barber purchased a plot of land from David J. Scott on Mechanic Street in December 1907.(29) Within four months the two story brick building containing about 10,000 square feet of space was completed.(30) The new Keystone Tag Company plant was described as a modern factory, well lit, ventilated and heated to accommodate the comfort, convenience and efficiency of its workers.(31) A year later the company built an addition onto the factory increasing the size of the factory to 20,000 sq. feet.(32)

The first floor of the factory contained the machine shop, the shipping and receiving department and storage space for the enormous rolls of paper, ink for the presses, glue for the adhesive, completed tags and other supplies. The second floor contained presses, several tag machines which cut out the tags, and punched holes, if needed. Also on the second floor were the machines which made the boxes to store the completed tags and administrative offices. The division of the factory into two stories enabled the company to separate its various departments as well as its workers.(33)

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN FACTORY LABOR

During most of the 19th and 20th centuries industries "sex-typed" work and blue-collar work of industrial production was no exception. The men employed by the Keystone Tag Company worked as salesmen, machinists, shipping clerks, truck drivers and laborers. Pressmen were responsible for overseeing the maintenance of the machines. These men set the type, cleaned the wells when they became full of ink, and changed the paper rolls.(34)

Women ran the tag and box machines, and did most of the hand stringing. This was classified as unskilled work, because a new employee could be trained by a more experienced worker within a week. However, many women machine operators, although not trained to do so, acquired more advanced skills such as the ability to clean their own machines when they became full of ink. Learning to maintain their own machines meant that these women did not have to wait for a pressman to attend to their machines.(35)

In addition to sex-typing job duties, the factory also paid its workers unequally, and during the first half of this century women were paid significantly less than men. For example, in 1909 the Keystone Tag Company offered its employees gifts on Christmas Eve. Men were given a ton of coal and a turkey, women were given kid gloves.(36) The most likely rationale for this inequality is that many women working in gainful occupations in the early 1900s were unmarried and lived with their parents. Conversely men were still considered to be the primary breadwinners and therefore required higher wages.

Another example of sex-typing was observed after a fire damaged the factory. Early in the morning of February 12, 1914 as Harry Barber arrived at work to find a smoke filled office and "a lively blaze leaping along the ceiling of the operating room".(37) Barber attempted to extinguish the fire using a hose from a 50 gallon Chemical tank.(38) Unfortunately this failed and Barber called the fire department who responded by pumping water from hydrants into the factory.(39) Ironically, the fire caused minor damage to the building but much

of the equipment and stock were destroyed by the water from the hydrants. The estimated total loss of property was between \$6,000 and \$7,000. The building suffered \$1,200 in damage and several machines were damaged.(40) The "girls" who worked at the factory were sent home while the men were employed in cleaning up the debris and removing damaged stock. Fortunately for the women workers, the tag machines escaped serious damage and they were able to return to work within a few days.(41)

The Keystone Tag Company resumed business shortly after the fire and in May of that year reported exporting tags throughout the U.S., Cuba, Mexico, Australia, India, South Africa, and the Philippines.(42) The factory continued to operate as a family owned business for several more decades.

THE FACTORY CHANGES HANDS

In 1923, Samuel Barber retired from active management. His son Harry, who had been operating the plant with his father for twenty-four years, succeeded him as president of the company.(43) Upon the his father's death in 1925, Harry Barber became the company president. As a result of provisions in his father's will, Harry also became the major stockholder of the company.(44) Fourteen years later, Harry died and the company was turned over to his brother, Dr. S. LeRoy Barber.(45) Unlike Harry, LeRoy had little experience operating a factory. Instead, Dr. Barber received a medical degree from Hahnman University Hospital and practiced medicine from his home on Church Street. As a consequence, Dr. Barber's brother-in-law George McFarland (one of the original founders of the company) became the active director of the company.(46)

However, three years later, in February 1941 the Barber family sold its interests in the Keystone Tag Company to Edward F. Beatty of Dilworthtown.(47) This marked the end of forty years of a family owned and operated tag manufacturing company.

MODERNIZATION

The 1940's were a time of modernization at the Keystone Tag Company. Improvements were made to the factory and modern equipment was installed.(48) Another form of modernization was a more equal treatment of female workers. Most outstanding was the promotion of Ms. Henrietta K. Feters to an executive position. Ms. Feters had worked as a private executive secretary for the company since 1923 and after the company was sold to Mr. Beatty she was appointed as Secretary Treasurer of the company.

This was exceptional, as very few women ever crossed the threshold from clerical to executive or managerial positions. According to Matthaei's book, "Managerial jobs were intrinsically masculine, developing and giving expression to masculine competition for self-advancement. Clerical positions were permanently subordinated, dead-end positions which allowed women to keep their femininity..."(49)

Additionally, in 1943, the Keystone Tag Company began recognizing its employees for 25 years of loyal service -- both men and women received war bonds in appreciation of their continuous service.(50) This is a stark contrast to the days of women receiving kid gloves and men getting a ton of coal. Awarding long-term company employees with war bonds served to strengthen the employee-employer relationship, as well as the patriotic atmosphere of this era. To further illustrate the patriotism of the company, in 1945 the factory hosted its 4th annual picnic, touted as "A Victory Outing."(51) It should be noted that company picnics and service awards began after the transfer of the company from the Barber family to Mr. Beatty.

Another change in the factory that took place after 1941 was its transition from employing girls to employing married women. While there is no direct evidence that Keystone's female employees were young, unmarried girls, this hypothesis is supported by numerous references to female workers as girls and that in 1920 only 23% of American women over the age of sixteen engaged in gainful occupations were married.(52) Ironically, after the Depression the number of married women workers increased at a rate of 30.0 despite legislative attempts to restrict the employment of married women.(53) Therefore it is not surprising that during the 1940's and 1950's married women were employed at the factory.(54) Working at the tag plant enabled these women to supplement their husband's salaries. It is not known what a full-time female worker earned at the factory, however due to the Fair Labor Standards Act women working in businesses conducting interstate commerce were to receive a minimum wage of \$.40 per hour. If the Keystone Tag Company was paying at least minimum wage, a full-time female worker earned \$16.00/week or \$832.00/year. Even for the 1940's this was not a substantial wage. Therefore in addition to working full-time at the factory some women supplemented their income by doing ironing and laundry in their homes.(55)

In 1950 the Keystone Tag Company reported a business volume of \$.5 million which was the largest in the company's 50 year history.(56) The company was producing tags for large American firms such as Ford and duPont.(57) Despite the apparent success of the company, in 1955 Ed Beatty entered into negotiations with Denney Tag Company. In 1956 The Keystone Tag Company

was formally absorbed by Denney.(58) The company's 54 employees were assured placement at Denney, including Ms. Fetters who was offered the position of Sales Promotional Manager.(59)

CONCLUSION

West Chester has a rich labor history which deserves further study. The end of the Keystone Tag Company is indicative of several declines in the economy and changes in the demographics of the borough after World War II. With the closing of the Keystone Tag Company, West Chester and its residents lost an employer, an international business attraction and an icon of America's industrial age.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The Chester County Historical Society's clippings file and news paper microfilms provided most of the secondary sources for the research of this paper. Primary sources for this paper came from interviews with a former Keystone employee and West Chester residents. Further study of the Keystone Tag Company will depend upon locating additional secondary and primary sources. A starting point for future study would likely be Census Bureau documents in order to identify how many West Chester residents listed their occupations in the tag making industry, what their incomes were, their ages, marital status, race, nativity, as well as information about their families.

Other useful sources may be found among reports which focus on women and working conditions during the first half of this century, including those published by the Census Bureau and the "Federal Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage- Earners," by the 61st Congress, second session, Senate Document number 645. "Women in Gainful Occupations 1870 to 1920" provides information about general trends, but includes no specific information about industries in West Chester, Pennsylvania due to the relatively small population of this town. Another path of research which may provide information about West Chester's tag industries are union documents published by the International Brotherhood of Bulk, Sulphite and Paper Mill workers, A.F. of L., CIO. It is not known if such documents exist, however, unionization attempts were made during the 1950's.

WORKS CITED

"Adjusted Insurance at the Keystone Tag Company" in *Daily Local News* (February 19, 1914).

Daily Local News articles listed under "Denney Tag Company" in Chester County Historical Society clippings file.

Gincely, Anne. Interview by Kelly McVeigh (West Chester, PA, April 12, 1997).

Hill, Joseph A. *WOMEN IN GAINFUL OCCUPATIONS 1870 TO 1920* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972).

"Keystone Tag Plant Suffers," in *Daily Local News* (February 12, 1914).

Matthaei, Julie A. *AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF WOMEN IN AMERICA* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

Morely, Thomas "Pat". Interview by Jim Jones (West Chester, February, 1997).

SESQUI-CENTENNIAL 1799-1949 WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA (West Chester, PA, 1949).

West Chester Star articles listed under "Keystone Tag Company" in Chester County Historical Society clippings file.

Wandersee, Winifred D. *WOMEN'S WORK & FAMILY VALUES, 1920-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Transcribed copy of the "Last Will and Testament of Samuel O. Barber" in CCHS.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. *Daily Local News* (February 21, 1888), "Denney Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.

2. SESQUI-CENTENNIAL 1799-1949 WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA (West Chester, PA, 1949), 12.

3. *Daily Local News* (August 17, 1962), "Denney Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.

4. *Daily Local News* (September 6, 1888), "Denney Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
5. *Daily Local News* (August 24, 1948), "Denney Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
6. *Daily Local News* (June 19, 1901), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *Daily Local News* (October 14, 1901), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
10. *Daily Local News* (June 19, 1901), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
11. *Daily Local News* (May 30, 1914), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
12. *Daily Local News* (October 12, 1901), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
13. *Daily Local News* (September 1, 1906), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
14. *Daily Local News* (July 7, 1902), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
15. *Daily Local News* (January 18, 1902), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
16. Ibid.
17. *Daily Local News* (January 12, 1901), "Denney Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
18. Ibid.
19. Thomas "Pat" Morely, interview by Jim Jones (West Chester, February, 1997).

20. Julie A. Matthaei, AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF WOMEN IN AMERICA, 210-211.
21. *Daily Local News* (March 1, 1902), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
22. *Daily Local News* (March 10, 1902), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
23. *Daily Local News* (March 1, 1902), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
24. "West Chester Pays Her Working Girls Low Wages, but Has Many Out Positions" in *Daily Local News* (March 1, 1902).
25. *Daily Local News* (March 1, 1902), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
26. *Daily Local News* (January 9, 1906), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
27. *Daily Local News* (September 1, 1906), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
28. *Daily Local News* (April 4, 1907), file "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
29. *Daily Local News* (December 11, 1907) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
30. *Daily Local News* (February 29, 1908) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
31. West Chester Star (May 30, 1914) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
32. Ibid.
33. Anne Gincely, interview by Kelly McVeigh (April 12, 1997).
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.

36. *Daily Local News* (December 28, 1909), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
37. "Keystone Tag Plant Suffers" in *Daily Local News* (February 12, 1914), 1.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. "Adjusted Insurance at the Keystone Tag Company" in *Daily Local News* (February 19, 1914), 1.
41. "Keystone Tag Plant Suffers" in *Daily Local News* (February 12, 1914), 1.
42. *West Chester Star* (May 30, 1914) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
43. SESQUI-CENTENNIAL 1799-1949 WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA (West Chester, PA, 1949), 77.
44. Transcribed copy of the "Last Will and Testament of Samuel O. Barber" in CCHS.
45. SESQUI-CENTENNIAL 1799-1949 WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA (West Chester, PA, 1949), 77.
46. Ibid.
47. *Daily Local News* (July 07, 1951) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file .
48. SESQUI-CENTENNIAL 1799-1949 WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA (West Chester, PA, 1949), 77.
49. Matthaei, AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF WOMEN IN AMERICA, 223.
50. *Daily Local News* (January 9, 1945), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.
51. *Daily Local News* (September 10, 1945), "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.

52. Hill, WOMEN IN GAINFUL OCCUPATIONS 1870 TO 1920, Table 119, 230-231.

53. Wandersee, WOMEN'S WORK & FAMILY VALUES, 1920-1940, 91-99.

54. Anne Gincely, interview by Kelly McVeigh (April 12, 1997).

55. Ibid.

56. *Daily Local News* (July 7, 1951) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.

57. Ibid.

58. *Daily Local News* (January 20, 1956) "Keystone Tag Company" in CCHS clippings file.

59. Ibid.
