

Introduction

The following information is intended to supplement the inventory form previously submitted for the Penacook Mill. On October 23, 2002 the Penacook Mill was determined eligible for the New Hampshire State and National Registers of Historic Places for both its historical associations with the textile industry in New Hampshire and for its architectural and engineering significance. Left unresolved at that time was the issue of whether the property also has significance for its use as a tannery. The assembled information provides a context for the Brezner Tannery within the area of early to mid 20th century leather processing in New Hampshire, specifically the practice of chrome tannage as distinct from the practice of vegetable or bark tanning which was developed earlier.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

In addition to its previously stated historical associations with the textile industry in New Hampshire and its architectural and engineering significance, the Penacook Mill (Brezner-Allied Tannery) is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of industry for its associations with the Brezner Tanning Corporation, a major producer of upper shoe leather from cattle hides. The Brezner Tannery was an important local industry and the Penacook Mill/Brezner Tannery is significant as one of only three surviving historic industrial complexes in Concord, known for its industrial diversity in the 19th and early 20th century (Hengen 2002). In addition, the Brezner Tannery was the state's largest and most successful tannery from its establishment in 1942 until 1987 when production ended at the facility. Established to insure a supply of quality leather for a Boston wholesaler, the company initially retrofitted the former NH Spinning Mills building and utilized that building from 1942 until 1951 when the older building was supplemented by a state-of-the-art addition featuring the latest developments in tannery structure, equipment and machinery. In 1951 (prior to the completion of the addition), the Brezner Tannery tanned 3.5% of the upper leather made in the United States; undoubtedly this figure was even higher after the benefits of the new addition were fully realized. The period of significance under this category is 1942-1954; the earlier date reflects the initial use of the complex as a tannery and the latter date reflects the National Register's fifty-year cut-off. The Brezner Tannery is of interest as one of the few tannery complexes to survive in the state. Despite its somewhat deteriorated condition, the property is still able to illustrate the history of the company and the important role it played in the village of Penacook and in the tanning industry.

History and Evolution of Tanning after the Introduction of the Chrome Process

Tanning is the process of making leather from skins and hides, usually with an acidic compound (tannin) that prevents normal decomposition and often imparts color. The practice of chrome tannage, utilizing chromium salts, was originally developed by the American chemist Augustus Schultz in 1884. Prior to the development of this process barks, wood, nuts and leaves were the source of the tannins for processing leather and new tanneries were generally established near the sources of these materials to avoid paying heavy transportation charges. By the end of the 19th century, more than 75 percent of all upper leather manufactured in the United States was manufactured by the chrome tanning process (US Dept of Commerce 1939: 6). Upper leather made from cattle hides is called "side upper" leather because the whole hides are cut into two halves or sides before or during the tanning process. When the sides are split two layers of leather are produced. The grain side (top or hair side) is used to make the finest cattlehide upper leather, such as was produced by the Penacook Tannery. The split is sometimes used for other grades and may be finished into leather for gloves, innersoles, shoe tongues or medium quality luggage leather (*Romance of Leather*: 26).

The major benefit of chrome tanning is that the process occurs more rapidly than when utilizing vegetable tannins. In addition, chrome tanning shrinks the stock and produces longer-wearing leather that stretches more with more heat resistance. The advantages of vegetable tanning are that it produces firmer leather with more water resistance. In the mid 20th century most shoe soles, harnesses, industrial beltings, luggage and upholstery were made from vegetable-tanned heavy hides while most shoe uppers, gloves, and garments were made from chrome-tanned light hides and skins although any hide or skin could be tanned by either process and used for virtually any purpose. In order to make machine belting, rough leather is treated with quantities of grease (curried). Other lesser-utilized tanning methods involved alum (pure white leather and furs) and oil (chamois leather) (Hague 1949: 2).

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In the 20th century certain regions of specialization developed within the U.S. leather industry. These included the production of kidskins in the Philadelphia-Wilmington, Delaware area; reptile and fancy leathers in the Newark, New Jersey area; glove leathers in the Gloversville, New York area; and garment leathers of sheepskin suedes and cape leathers in New England. Originally sole leather tanneries were established in close proximity to supplies of natural vegetable tannin materials, such as chestnut trees. As a result, the sole leather industry remained concentrated in Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania for many years. The availability of cattle hides in the Chicago-Milwaukee area naturally resulted in the establishment of shoe upper leather tanneries in that locale. Large quantities of shoe upper leather were also produced in New England (Thorstensen: 66).

Within New England, Massachusetts in particular was home to many tanneries in the early to mid 20th century. The City of Peabody featured one of the world's most impressive concentrations of leather tanning facilities. In 1950 Peabody had a population of 22,645 of which just under 80% of the total work force was employed by more than 60 tanning establishments. A total of 3,737 workers were employed in the city's 64 tanneries in 1952 (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, Nov. 27, 1954). Nearby Salem hosted an additional 29 tanning concerns (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, Oct. 2, 1954). About a hundred major tanning firms had their principal offices in the Boston area; many of these were located in Boston's "leather district", an area roughly bordered by Atlantic Avenue, South Street, Lincoln and Kneeland Streets (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, Dec. 25, 1954). By 1969, an industry observer noted that the development of the shoe upper leather industry in New England had spread more towards Maine and New Hampshire in search of low labor costs (Thorstensen: 66).

Both tanning and shoe manufacturing were important 19th and 20th century industries in New Hampshire. In the late 19th century many New Hampshire cities including Manchester, Nashua, Rochester, and Dover had developed major shoe factories. In the late 1930s, the leather industries overtook textiles as the dominant manufacturing sector in the state and into the mid 1950s continued to lead the manufacturing factor in terms of number of employees (Jager: 115). In 1954 New Hampshire's civilian labor force totaled 218,500 of whom 78,700 were employed in manufacturing. Of these 78,700, 21,200 were employed in the manufacture of leather and leather products. The gross majority of these worked in shoe factories although this number also includes the lesser numbers employed in the state's tanneries.

In 1953 there were nearly 600 principal tanning concerns in the U.S. and approximately fourteen tanneries operating in the state of New Hampshire (*Made in NH, Shoe & Leather Reporter Annual*, 1953). Of these fourteen, the Brezner Tannery was the largest, employing 270 persons. Four of the tanneries were engaged in tanning something other than cattle hides. The Saranac Glove Company in Littleton tanned deerskin leather for its own use. The Tilton Leather Co. and the Pittsfield Leather Co. dealt in sheepskins. The A.C. Lawrence Leather Co. in Winchester, a subsidiary of a Peabody, Mass. firm, also tanned shearlings (sheepskins with the wool left on). This was the second largest tannery in the state at that time, employing 240. The Page Belting Company in Concord produced transmission leather and leather belting but after its tannery burned in 1894, the company purchased already tanned leather (cowhides) from elsewhere (Hengen 1998). The remaining nine tanneries which existed in the state in 1953 all tanned upper leather for shoes. The next largest cowhide tannery appears to have been the United Tanners, Inc. in Dover which employed 150 in 1953 and produced sides, splits and elk for its own use as well as contracts. The International Shoe Co. operated tanneries at Manchester and Merrimack to produce the leather used in its own shoe factories. The remaining tanneries operating in 1953 for which employment figures are available are the Granite Tanning Company in Nashua (104 employees); Pittsfield Leather Company (100); E. Cummings Tannery in Lebanon (100); Tilton Leather Co. (85); Merrimack Leather Co. (75); and Seal Tanning in Manchester (69) (*Made in New Hampshire*, 1953). Based on directory listings, it appears that many of these tanneries were established in the late 1930s or early 1940s. The E. Cummings Tannery was related to a Woburn, Mass. firm. Undoubtedly, a number of the others were also linked to larger corporations in Boston or the surrounding area. By 1955 employment at Brezner (now a subsidiary of Allied Kid) had grown to 497, while the employment levels at the other tanneries remained nearly the same as their 1953 levels (*Made in NH*, 1955).

Production of Chrome-Tanned Side Leather

The process of converting cattle hides to leather involves three stages – firstly, the preparation for tanning, secondly – the actual tanning and other chemical treatment, and lastly, applying finishing to the surface. The following description provides a generalized view of the transformation of hides to side leather. The raw material – typically cattle hide from the Western steer beef - were received at the tannery prefleshed and brine cured (green salted). The hides are trimmed, sided (cut in half) and placed to soak to remove the salt. The sides are next soaked in a lime solution and agitated by revolving paddles to remove the hair. After the unhairing it is necessary to remove the flesh and muscle tissue adhering to the inner surface of the hide. Next the leather is sent through the splitting machine– separating the sides (top grain side) from the splits which are used for athletic shoes, combat boots and work shoes. In some cases side leather tanners work the splits to completion, in other cases the tanners were sold to other tanners who specialized specifically in the field. The raw hides are then placed in large revolving wooden tanning drums. This chemical reaction took approximately 24 hours. When removed from the drums and piled on platforms the skins are blue in color due to the chrome used in the tanning process. After tanning, the material is wrung and shaved to a uniform thickness. The skins are then impregnated with oil and dyed in coloring drums. The stock is then wrung and dried by one of four methods – hang drying, pasting onto glass plates, toggling or vacuum drying. The leather is typically lightly sandpapered to remove grain imperfections, and sometimes buffed. The final finishing operations include coating the leather and pressing it to make the surface more smooth or imprint a pattern (Thorstensen: 73-75).

History of Brezner Tanning Corporation and Allied Kid Company

The original Brezner organization, N. Brezner & Co., was founded by Nathan Brezner (1889-1981) who was born in Russia and came to the United States at the age of 17, settling in Haverhill, Mass. (*Boston Globe*, Oct. 21, 1981). He established N.Brezner & Co. in Boston in 1912. The company was a wholesaler of finished upper leather made of cattle hides for shoes. It maintained offices in Boston, initially at 121 Beach Street and later at 145 South Street. In January 1942 Brezner acquired the old NH Spinning Mill in Penacook and converted it to a modern tannery in order to assure his customers of controlled fine quality leather. A subsidiary of N. Brezner & Co., the Brezner Tanning Corporation was engaged in finishing leather for shoe manufacturing. Production began in Penacook on April 13, 1942. The local newspaper described the facility as “New Hampshire’s newest war industry”. Among those present at the dedication were representatives from the War Production Board and Governor Robert O. Blood who threw an Australian hide into the soaking pits to start production (*Concord Monitor*, April 13, 1942).

When the plant opened company officials promised that ultimately 200 men and women would be employed. Initially, production stood at approximately 1,000 sides of upper leather daily (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, May 14, 1949). This represented 1.5 percent of the upper leather made in the United States. Approximately 60% of the initial capacity was devoted to filling defense orders. The plant operated three shifts around the clock throughout World War II and within two years more than a million pairs of Brezner-tanned shoes had been produced (*Monitor*, April 13, 1951).

By 1949 the tannery was producing 3,000 sides of leather daily or an average of one million feet of leather each month. Expansion efforts in 1949 were geared to increasing output to 1,500,000 per month by 1950 (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, May 14, 1949). Brezner Tanning were tanners of uppers, sides, dress, work shoe, splits and elk. Elk leathers were made from cowhides but split to a heavier weight than for dress shoe upper leathers. The elk leathers were most often used for work shoes and sport shoes. Within the leather trade N.Brezner & Co. was well known for its “Cobble-White” sides in elk and smooth. The company also produced a wide range of “Cobble-Tints” in various colors.

On July 23, 1950 construction began on a modern 80' x 200' structural steel and reinforced concrete addition to the plant to the south of the old stone mill according to plans prepared by the firm of Clifford Broker Associates. Considerable blasting with dynamite had to be done in the foundation of the original building and a whole new foundation was placed under the south wall. The new \$250,000 addition was formally dedicated on April 13, 1951 and the *Concord Monitor*

published a special ten-page supplement in honor of the event. As described in an industry publication, "the new building of modern design...embodies the latest developments in tannery structure, equipment and machinery" including conveyor systems, individual motor drives, power lift trucks, and automatic ventilating monitor type windows (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, April 21, 1951). The addition featured a state-of-the-art leather-drying unit manufactured by Industrial Air Company of Hyde Park, Mass. which featured 250 glass plates, each as large as the average show window. The wet leather was applied to both sides of the large sheets of glass with paste and then moved automatically along overhead conveyors to the drying unit. It took four to six hours for a plate to move through the 90-foot long dryer. In 24 hours the unit could process as many as 2,400 sides of leather (1,200 cattle hides). The new drying unit offered substantial benefits over earlier toggling dryers as it eliminated the marks left by the clamps around the edges of the sides of the leather (which had to be discarded as wastage) and offered humidity control, resulting in a better quality leather of a more uniform type. The 1951 addition marked the last major technological improvement to the physical plant. All other additions and improvements which followed were generally to accommodate additional production space or storage. In 1951 the Brezner tannery tanned 3.5 percent of the upper leather made in the United States (*Monitor*, April 13, 1951). By 1952 the Brezner tannery employed 325 persons (*Monitor*, Nov. 28, 1952).

Nathan Brezner retired in 1952 and the entire Brezner holdings in Boston and Penacook were sold to the Allied Kid Company of Boston. At the time, Allied Kid was regarded as one of the most foremost tanning concerns in the country. The firm was incorporated in 1929, consolidating the Standard Kid Company of Massachusetts, the Standard Kid Company of Delaware, the McNeely Company and the Quaker City Morocco Company. The history of the McNeely Company dated back to 1809 when its tannery was established in Philadelphia. In 1929 Allied developed the first commercially successful process for tanning suede kid. In 1952, Allied was principally involved in importing goatskins and tanning them in three plants at Wilmington, Delaware and another in Camden, New Jersey. Together, these plants were capable of processing about 50,000 skins/day. The firm also manufactured horsehides, calfskins and cowhides for patent leather. Prior to acquiring the Brezner Tannery, Allied acquired the New Castle Leather Company in 1933, the Sterling Patent Kid Company processes and trademarks in 1935, and the Waterboro Company of Maine in 1947 (*Monitor*, Nov. 28, 1952).

By acquiring the Brezner Tannery, Allied Kid was able to enlarge its product line to include quality upper leather sides from cow hides. In order to further expand production at the same time it was merging with Brezner, Allied also acquired the former Harris Emery Woolen Mill properties and the Stratton Flour Company buildings on Commercial Street in Boscawen in order to develop a plant for processing split leathers. The processing of split leathers took place in the former woolen mill while the adjacent Stratton property acted as the hide receiving station. The Penacook facility was used to process the grain side leathers. Under Allied's leadership, the Brezner Division developed various new lines of shoe leather including "Shag", a textured leather; "Oso-Soft" and "Butter-Soft" (*Shoe & Leather Reporter*, Feb. 28, 1953). In 1955 a transformer room and parts warehouse (Building C) was constructed and an addition was constructed to the boiler room (Building H).

In the late 1950s the Brezner Tannery continued to be the largest tannery in the state of New Hampshire. A NH Water Pollution Commission Report dated Feb. 1957 indicates that each day approximately 96,600 lbs. of green salted hides were put into production at the side division plant in Penacook, ultimately producing approximately 82,800 square feet of leather. In 1957 employment at the Brezner Tannery stood at 530; the next largest competitor – International Shoe in Manchester – employed 375 (*Made in NH*).

In 1963 there were fourteen leather tanning and finishing establishments in the state and the Brezner Tannery remained the largest. In the 1960s employment at the tannery fluctuated between 450 and 530 jobs. Several additions were made to the Penacook tannery in the 1960s including a two-story concrete block office (shipping/delivery) addition in 1960 (Building E). In 1966 a two-story concrete and steel frame addition (Building F) was constructed at the rear of the old mill building for storage and production space. Another purpose of the addition was to help bolster the stone building at this location (Jurta 2004). An extension to the boiler room (Building I) was constructed in 1968 featuring three smoke stacks. A three-story concrete block section was added on the south façade, next to the central tower, in 1968 providing additional production space in the basement, an employee lounge, offices and paint rooms. One of the last additions

made to the building occurred about 1973 in the form of a 50' x 100' single-story addition sheathed in T1-11 on the east end of the rear elevation (Jurta & John, 2004). It was originally production and storage space and later housed a small metal fabrication company. The concrete reinforcing piers on the façade of the old mill building were added in the late 1960s or 1970s.

In 1972 Allied Kid Co. and the Brezner Tanning Corporation merged into Allied Kid Company. Later in the 1970s the company became part of the General Hose Co. in New York. By 1975 employment was approximately 300. Several of the state's older tanneries closed their doors in the late 1970s including Tilton Tanning Corp., Seal Tanning in Manchester the Merrimack Leather Co. and United Tanners in Dover. In 1978 Lowengart Corp., a subsidiary of Feuer Leather of New York, bought Allied Leather. The company also owned six other tanneries, mostly in Pennsylvania and upstate New York (Monitor, Feb. 1, 1984). It was apparently at this time that a single-story office building (Building K) was constructed to the west of the old mill building.

Well into the 1980s employment remained steady at about 300 (*Made in NH*). In 1984, Allied was using cleaned cowhides from a plant in Gloversville, New York and could dye, thin or strengthen about 25,000 sheets of leather in a week. The company continued to produce both side and split leather. Of varying textures and colors, the leather was used mostly for shoes but also for gloves, jackets and other clothes. Allied shipped its leather to manufacturers all over the world (*Monitor*, Feb. 1, 1984).

Despite the investment of millions of dollars to increase production and modernize methods, tanning operations at Penacook ceased in 1987 when Allied Leather Company closed its Penacook plant to merge with its other plants in New York and Pennsylvania. At the time, Allied Leather was Penacook's second largest employer with about 300 jobs. According to company officials, problems with a tight labor market and the state's environmental regulations forced the closure (*Monitor*, July 17, 1987). The same year, another of the state's larger tanneries – A.C. Lawrence in Winchester – also closed (Preservation Company 2000). The state's last tannery, Suncook Leather in Pittsfield, closed in February 2004 leaving about forty workers out of jobs (*Monitor*, Feb. 27, 2004).

In 1994 Allied Leather's parent company, Feuer Leather Corp., filed for bankruptcy (*Monitor*, Aug. 26, 1994). In 1997, Dana Willis, a resident of Boscawen and abutter to the property, formed Hannah Dustin Holdings LLC and acquired all of the assets of the Allied Leather Company including the Penacook Mill from the Bankruptcy Court for \$25,000. The original mill property was subdivided into four separate lots in 1999. The former picker house at the northeast end of the main mill building was demolished in 2001. The property was acquired by the City of Concord in 2003.

Penacook Facility

The locations of the various tanning operations which took place at Penacook have been documented through oral interviews with two long-time employees – Sam Jurta (1951-1985) and Wesley John (1965-1987), both of whom worked in the maintenance department, as well as through news coverage of the opening of the addition to the tannery in 1951. Prior to the construction of the 1951 addition, hides were stored on site in a long, single-story hide house building fronting East Street, to the east of the brick office building as well as in the first floor of the east end of the old stone mill building (the former picker house) and another building in the rear yard. The hide house building was apparently removed when the 1951 addition was constructed although the east end of the building continued to store hides. Hides were also received at the former Stratton Flour Company buildings in Boscawen. The hides were transported by truck from the railroad siding, handled by conveyors from the truck to the pallets with power lift trucks carrying the pallets to the storage areas.

In the basement of the tannery addition (and to a lesser degree in the old mill building) were approximately forty paddles for soaking and washing the hides in order to remove hair. Made of pine, the paddles were largely made on site. After dehairing, the hides were then transported up to the next floor by wheelbarrow and elevator to fleshing machines. After splitting the hides were fed directly into wooden tanning drums on the lower level through openings in the floor above. At one time there were approximately twenty or thirty of these wooden drums, about eight feet in diameter on the lower level. Shaving machines, located on the second floor of the mill building, were the next stop for the hides before they were sent down to the coloring drums. The hides were then sent to the second or street floor level of the new addition to

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the setting out machines where they were smoothed out and wrinkles were removed. On the same level was the conveying, pasting, drying and washing equipment and machinery introduced in 1951. From here the leather was transported to various finishing machines on the third and fourth floors of the old stone mill building depending on the desired end result.

At the rear of the building, near the west end were the machine/carpenters shop and maintenance shop (Building C) where many equipment parts were manufactured. An adjacent underground tank stored the chromium salts used in the tanning process. An additional above-ground tank was located adjacent to Building E.

Despite its deteriorated condition, the Brezner Tannery remains the best preserved of the state's mid 20th century tanneries. The building retains some remnants of machinery although not sufficient quantity or arrangement to demonstrate the entire tanning process. A number of wooden tanning drums are still visible in the basement and additional equipment remains on the second floor. Scattered throughout the building are leather swatches and wooden horses used for moving the hides from station to station. Elsewhere in the state there are few remnants of the state's leather processing industries. In 1966 American Velcro built on the site of the former International Tannery off Brown Avenue in Manchester (*NH Indus. Dev. News*, Oct. 7, 1966). The Merrimack Leather Company burned in 1966 (*Ibid*, Aug. 11, 1966). The E.E. Cummings Tannery in Lebanon, the Granite State Tanning Co. in Nashua, United Tanners in Dover and Seal Tanning Co. are no longer standing. The A.C. Lawrence Tannery in Winchester was determined eligible for the National Register in 2000 although the complex was rapidly deteriorating at that time. The former Stratton Flour Company buildings and the former Harris-Emery Mill buildings in Boscawen, acquired by Allied Leather in 1952 and utilized for the processing of split leathers are still standing on Commercial Street in Boscawen in a deteriorated state. Approximately a third of the complex has been lost to fire and demolition (Jurta & John, 2004).

The Penacook Mill/Brezner Tannery is also one of only three surviving historic industrial complexes in Concord. The others include the former Boston & Maine Railyard in the southern part of the city and the Page Belting Company Mills constructed between 1892 and 1906. The latter, including the belt shop and curry shop, was developed in recent years into affordable elderly housing (Hengen 2002).

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