

Shoe & Comb Factories

For about a half of the 19th century, West Newbury was primarily an industrial town, with [twice as many employed in manufacturing as farming](#). Glimpses of the longest lasting factories can still be seen: the J.H. Durgin Shoe Factory at 282 Main Street (now West Newbury Pizza) and the S.C. Noyes Comb Factory at 320 Main Street (now the Comb Factory offices).

In the 1840s, small home-based shoe and comb making shops began to give way to factories clustered on or near Main Street. These used new systems and steam-powered machinery to boost output and profits. Prominent among these, in addition to the Durgin and Noyes factories, were the T.S. Ruddock Shoe Factory at 324 Main Street, built by Ruddock's brother-in-law Benjamin Edwards, Jr., c.1858 and [burned on February 11, 1884](#), and the [Chase Comb Factory](#) at 10 Harrison Avenue, built c.1842 and closed in 1895.

James H. Durgin's factory, first Durgin Brothers, then Durgin & Son, was, according to our [Historic Sites Survey](#), opened in 1843. [Deed records](#) indicate that Samuel Durgin, the Durgin brother with James in the business, bought the Main Street property in 1841. In time the Durgin factory expanded, notably in [1865](#) and [1883](#). According to the Town's [1978 Annual Report](#), the Durgin factory comprised two connected buildings, the one still at 282 Main Street serving as the shoe shop, with another adjacent to the east serving, on its upper floor and basement, as a packing area.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) [report on West Newbury](#) said that by 1855, “[s]hoe production increased by 450% to 275,000 pairs, with more than three times the number of workers compared to 1832.” At this time, Massachusetts shoe manufacturers would have used [marketing wholesalers in Boston](#) who sold “throughout New England, to the Middle Atlantic, and to the South (particularly, to slave plantations).” According to the MHC report, during the Civil War, the Town’s “jobs in shoe production fell by 31% as the industry turned from the slave market to production for the north’s soldiers.”

[In 1889](#), the Durgin enterprise—the last major shoe-making factory in Town—moved to Haverhill. Unlike West Newbury, [Haverhill boasted](#) a modern fire department, an electric plant, a virtually limitless water supply, and transportation infrastructure including

railways. Until 1951, the former Durgin factory building served as the Bailey’s grocery—and post office and telephone exchange. Earl Lewis, who bought the property in 1959, built the ells, used the upper floor as family apartments, and continued the grocery, with additional hardware and liquor sales. [In 1978](#), the West Newbury Pizza Company moved in.

Our other factory vestige, [Somerby C. Noyes’](#) Comb Factory at 320 Main Street, was built as a 2½-story structure in 1850. It was the largest and last of the Town’s comb manufacturing locations, begun in 1759 by [Enoch Noyes](#). Adjacent to the east at 322 Main Street was the company’s box making and packing building. The MHC report describes industrialization in comb making as creating both enormous efficiencies and diminishing returns. By 1855, “[n]ew technology meant that 48% fewer workers than in 1832 were able to produce 720% more combs. ... Despite the incredible boom in comb production, the value of combs produced in 1865 was less than in 1832.”

Marking “THE LAST OF AN INDUSTRY,” the [Newburyport Daily News](#) reported that the S.C. Noyes Comb Factory’s whistle blew for the last time at noon on October 15, 1904. In 1906 the Grange bought the building, using it for suppers, fairs, dances, and more. The second floor contained an auditorium with a stage spanning the width of the structure. As late as 1915, it was [reported that](#) “[o]n warm nights the odor of horn and oil is still exceedingly strong....” According to our [Historic Sites Survey](#), a furniture dealer purchased the structure in the mid-40s. After a fire, only one floor and basement remained through the 1950s-60s. Subsequent remodeling added floors and created an office building. Little of the factory building is left but for the name on the sign; the [packing building remains](#) next door at 322 Main Street, now also used as offices.

Today only a few repurposed buildings serve as reminders of West Newbury’s brief boom time as a manufacturing town of [factory whistles](#), [industrial stench](#), and [labor disputes](#)—along with remarkable wealth, growth, and civic improvement. In 1915, the [Boston Globe](#) described West Newbury, “‘beautiful for its situation’ on the banks of the Merrimac,” as having again “‘become a farming community entirely, with the exception of its being used as a ‘bedroom’ for many of the workers of Haverhill.”

Shoe & Comb Factories

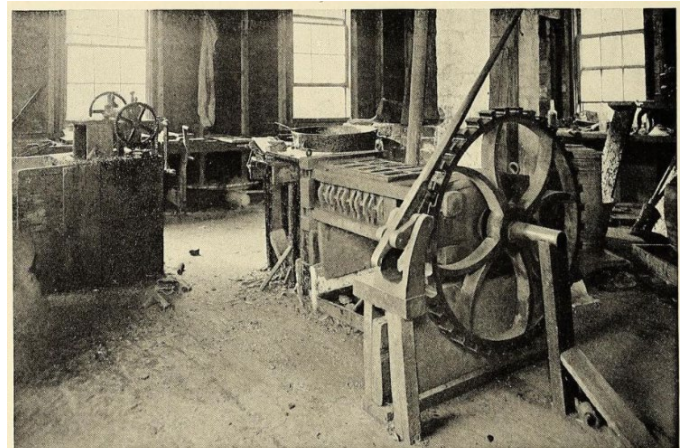
Durgin Shoe Factory c. 1875 Likely James Henry Durgin, Sr., at center
Source: [Harvard University Baker Library](#)



COMB FACTORY OF S. C. NOYES AND COMPANY, WEST NEWBURY
Showing old comb shop in the background and storehouse in the foreground

Source: [Comb Making in America](#)

Cutting Room, Haverhill Durgin Shoe Factory c. 1912
Source: [Harvard University Baker Library](#)



COGWHEEL SCREW PRESS
In the horn-dressing room of the Robert A. Spill Comb Shop, Leominster

Source: [Comb Making in America](#)

Shoe factory now Pizza Company 2021



Comb factory & box/packing buildings now offices 2021