

## *Enoch Noyes, Pioneering Combmaker*

In her [Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian](#), Sarah Anna Emery described her distant cousin Enoch Noyes as “a great oddity. He would run half over the parish bareheaded and barefooted. It was no uncommon thing for him to appear at our house, after dinner of a hot summer day, in only a shirt and breeches, having run across the fields two miles, ‘jest to take a nooning.’ A great joker and a capital story-teller, his appearance was the signal for a general frolic. He was fond of telling strangers that his father used to say he had ‘four remarkable children: Molly was remarkably hand-some, Tim was a remarkable sloven, John was remarkably wicked, and Enoch was remarkably cunning.’”

Enoch Noyes, who lived his life in West Newbury, was indeed extraordinarily cunning and energetic. A polymath, his interests and improvements ranged from grafting fruit trees to raising special fish varieties. [In 1759, at the age of 16, he began as a self-taught maker of buttons and crude combs from cow horns](#), which he peddled in the neighborhood.

[Comb Making in America](#) says he cut off the ends of the horn, split it lengthwise, used hot whale oil to soften it, opened it like a book, and then placed it under heavy stones to flatten it as it cooled. [Another source](#) suggests that he “straightened the horns by steaming them over his kitchen fire and pressing them in a cleft log, opening it with wedges . . . .” After the horn was by whatever means flattened, he sawed or cut out the desired shape.

According to [Comb Making in America](#), Enoch Noyes continued in this fashion for some 19 years until one day, “[a]s he sat absorbed in his work . . . he heard a footstep and looking up saw a stranger—evidently a foreigner, to judge from his clothing. He asked Noyes for employment and opened a dusty and grimy knapsack from

which he brought forth the curious tools which he as a comb-maker had used in Germany. Nothing is known about the real name of the man. It has come down through the annals of the comb industry as William Cleland, Cleland evidently being an effort to Anglicize the odd Hessian name which the stranger, who proved to be a soldier from Burgoyne’s army, must have borne. . . . He not only taught Noyes how combs were made in Europe but gave him the tools which he had brought with him from Germany. Together they evolved the first [folding] comb, called a ‘case comb,’ made in this country. So it happened that although a Hessian did not make the first comb in America, he made possible the rapid development of the comb industry.”

The American Revolution brought not only William Cleland but also considerable controversy to Enoch Noyes, who was an outspoken Tory. [Comb Making in America](#) recounts: “It was due to this state of affairs that he built in his house a sort of sub-cellar, the entrance to which was by the chimney. When the town threatened to make it too hot for him after he had freely expressed his opinions, he would hasten home [presumably 127 Main Steet, described in the Town’s 2018 [Historic Sites Survey](#)] and disappearing down the chimney, remain in his [novel hiding place](#) until the agitation had subsided. His presence during his hibernating period was known only by his wife [Sarah L. Emery], who daily lowered food in a basket by means of a rope.”

Enoch Noyes died in 1828 and is [buried along with his redoubtable wife Sarah and other family members in West Newbury’s Merrimack Cemetery](#). His descendants carried on the comb business and other townspeople followed his lead in setting up combmaking enterprises in West Newbury and elsewhere.

## Enoch Noyes, Pioneering Combmaker



### W. H. Noyes and Company Comb Factory

The birthplace of the comb industry in America was at the home of Enoch Noyes in West Newbury. In 1759 Mr. Noyes was manufacturing horn buttons and combs, and by the 1830s there were twenty comb businesses in West Newbury and three shops in Newburyport. Cow horns, tortoise shells, and sometimes antlers were shaped into decorative hair pieces and combs for barbers. In 1832 Enoch Noyes's grandson David arrived in Newburyport, supported by Charles H. Coffin, an ambitious merchant. Mr. Coffin rented several buildings at the foot of Fair Street, in the area of the future shipyards of the Cushing and Bayley families. Here Mr. Noyes fitted up a machine shop, erected a steam engine of about fifteen horsepower, and employed several skilled mechanics and a pattern-maker. In a short time, Mr. Noyes had invented a machine for cutting instead of sawing the teeth of dressing-combs. The device could cut both coarse- and fine-tooth combs! This invention revolutionized the local comb-making industry as this type of comb, the "English dressing-comb," had previously mostly been imported from England. Despite success, fourteen years later Mr. Noyes and his family moved to New Jersey to begin another business.

In 1871 David's brother, William Noyes, along with his son William Herbert Noyes, moved the family comb business from State Street to Water Street and leased a shop on Ferry Wharf. Soon after the family moved their comb business to the foot of Pike Street. In 1879 William H. and his brother Davis F., under the firm name of William H. Noyes & Co., built a large building on Chestnut Street in Joppa, the South End of Newburyport, and continued to produce comb products until the 1930s. The building was razed a few years later. According to Bernard W. Doyle, author of *Comb-Making in America*, the elder William "invented many and mastered the most complicated problems of mechanics. His career and accomplishments in the comb industry have never been equaled by any man since his time."

Of William H. Noyes, Doyle observed in 1925, "To William H. Noyes, who showed most strongly the genius inherited from his father, belongs the credit for practically all the comb machinery invented in the past fifty years. A man of vision and tenacity of purpose, William H. Noyes was one of those who made the comb industry one of the most important, and compelled manufacturers from all over the country to look to the little town of Newburyport in Massachusetts for the latest developments in comb-making machinery and methods."



*W. H. Noyes and Company Comb Factory, 28 Chestnut Street. Courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center.*



*Comb-Makers Davis F., William, and William H. Noyes. Courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center.*

The large Noyes comb factory on Chestnut Street employed fifty hands with a weekly payroll of \$350. The firm produced, 400 dozen combs a day with an annual worth of goods from \$50,000 to \$60,000. Another comb factory located at the corner of Fair and Water Streets, Carr, Brown, & Co., employed forty-five hands producing up to \$50,000 worth of combs annually. The firm worked in the comb industry for more than twenty years. The successful firm of G. W. Richardson produced combs on Dalton Street; the factory was destroyed by fire in 1919.

In Caleb Cushing's *The History and Present State of the Town of Newburyport of 1826*, Mr. Cushing reported there were over 125 persons employed in the comb factories. Records showed that 56,000 dozen of various sizes of shell combs were manufactured at a value of \$140,000. The factories produced over 40,000 horn combs at a value of \$43,000.

*(return to top of page)*

Image source: [http://www.clipperheritagetrail.com/tour\\_waytojoppa.php](http://www.clipperheritagetrail.com/tour_waytojoppa.php)

Marker Location 127 Main Street, West Newbury, MA Latitude: 42.785615 Longitude -71.003239