

National Blank Book Company Collection, 1880 - 2008

13 Document Cases, 4 Oversized Scrapbooks (6.5 linear feet)

Collection Number: HPLA2005.274

Abstract:

The National Blank Book Company, originally founded in 1843 by J.G. Shaw, moved from New York City to Holyoke, Massachusetts in 1881. It manufactured quality stationary products for businesses and retailers. In 1888, Frank B. Towne became the Treasurer, and Edward S. Towne, future President, became employed at the company. The locally established Towne family successfully maintained the operations for nearly one hundred years. National Blank Book operations spanned the United States in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Mississippi and around the world in Canada, England, and Central America. The National Blank Book Collection consists of product catalogs, artifacts, photographs, scrapbooks, and over 75 years of company newsletters.

Historical Note:

Dotted along the scores of rivers that intersect a map of New England are the locations of towns and small cities by the hundreds. Collectively, they gave birth to its prosperity and opportunity beginning in the early 19th Century. By taking advantage of its inland natural resources, the energy of its water power, and its human ambition, New England's river towns became centers for a burgeoning collection of industries of many kinds, the manufacturing of goods perhaps the most significant. Manufacturing industry allowed New England, for generations, to become America's tool room. The Connecticut River community of Holyoke is a perfect example of this phenomenon, and the success of the National Blank Book Company is a result of this advantageous Massachusetts location.

The National Blank Book Company originally began as a small New York City outfit in 1843 known as the J.G Shaw Company, named for its founder. The company manufactured quality blank book products on a small scale. As a consequence of the 1873 Wall Street panic, Shaw became indebted to Massachusetts papermakers William Whiting of Holyoke and Levi L. Brown of Adams. In 1875 Shaw's company reorganized in New York, with Whiting and Brown as partners. Shaw withdrew from the firm by 1877, but remained a part of the industry for many years. In 1880 Whiting and Brown officially changed the company's name to National Blank Book. A year later the factory moved to Cabot Street in Holyoke MA. It was not until 1892 that the main offices also moved to Holyoke.

Prior to the move of the main office, in 1888, William Whiting began a partnership with James W. Towne, who was the New York City agent of Blake, Robbins and Company, a San Francisco based paper and printing wholesaler

which reorganized the same year as Blake, Moffitt, and Towne. James Towne originally hailed from Amherst, New Hampshire and migrated to California where he established himself as a notable printer. Towne and Whiting immediately appointed James' son, Frank B. Towne, to be Treasurer of National Blank Book. The same year also saw the hiring of Edward S. Towne, James' other son, as Vice President. The Towne family successfully maintained the operations of the company for nearly one hundred years. From 1885 to 1890 blank book sales doubled, and doubled again by 1906. The success in part can be attributed to the company's catalogs, which were among the first to have colored illustrations in 1898. A majority of the prosperity, however, was due to mechanical and technological progress, improved work conditions for employees, and the transfer of full management responsibility to the Towne family after the retirement of William Whiting in 1897. In 1898 the company moved from the old Cabot Street mill to a new facility near Riverside at Water Street.

In 1904 the company first published its newsletter and magazine, *The National*. For over sixty years it aimed at promoting brand loyalty among its retail stationary store customers, while it showcased the company as a friend with a strong interest in their dealers' success. *The National* doled out three or four times a year, with some exceptions during the World Wars, advice on retailing, tips on selling new products, and news of employees at work in the factories or offices. The publication was especially unique within the industry for its use of contemporary graphics, color printing, and photography. Its writers and editors received awards from their peers in the New England publishing trade. Along with the National Blank Book catalogs, *The National* newsletter and magazine was an important reason why the company possessed a distinguished reputation and sales record.

In 1912, Joseph M. Towne, youngest son of James W. Towne and Frank's younger brother, became a Vice President of National Blank Book, in charge of the loose-leaf division. Joseph Towne expanded product lines and introduced several new items, and, in 1931, he became the company's President.

By 1919, an entirely separate loose-leaf division opened. Two years prior the company internationally expanded into St. Jean, Quebec in Canada with a branch named Dominion Blank Book Company, and into London, England where it was known as National Loose Leaf Ltd. The decade of the 1920s showed marked improvements and increased popularity in National's loose-leaf product line, the successful production of new items with unique features, and the standardization of product sizes and systems. The Great Depression significantly slowed this progress, however, but the management of a new Towne family generation guided the company through the harsh times. Frank Towne's son, Richard P. Towne, became Assistant Treasurer in 1927, and E.E. Cornwell directed the sales and advertising operations. Under their management, National Blank Book began to sell products to retailers exclusively, a novel and successful sales strategy. In the years leading up to World War II, management primed factories for mass

production. Every year following the decline of the Depression in 1933 National Blank Book experienced growth and financial prosperity. Many National employees served in the war, and the company's metals division converted to manufacture gun parts to contribute to Allied victory.

In 1946, Joseph M. Towne retired from his 35-year career at National Blank Book. His 15-year presidency proved invaluable to the company as it weathered the impact of Depression and war. Joseph M. Towne received the William G. Dwight Award for Distinguished Service to Holyoke in 1947. He also opened the company's financial records to the employees in an exercise of good faith. 1956 marked the highest sales in the company's history, with Richard P. Towne as Joseph's successor to the Presidency. An expansion to Chicago and increased profits continued through the latter part of the decade and into the 1960s.

Holyoke attorney Louis F. Oldershaw became the company's Secretary Clerk in the 1950s, and became its Treasurer shortly thereafter. When Richard Towne relinquished his role as President to serve as Chairman of the Board, and his immediate successor Paul Buckwalter retired, Oldershaw became National Blank Book's Chief Executive Officer. The 1960s saw the rise of a fourth generation of Towne family management, when Richard P. Towne, Jr. began as International Operations Manager. Towne, Jr. thereafter managed the development of new business and marketing strategies, and finished his career in the 1980s as the company's Human Resources Manager.

By 1966 National Blank Book's marketing, manufacturing, and progressive organizational systems made it the largest industrial operation in Holyoke. The next year it merged with Dennison Manufacturing Company of Framingham, MA to become Dennison-National. Richard Towne, Sr. and Louis Oldershaw utilized shared Directorships on the Boards in Framingham and Holyoke to orchestrate a successful combination of firms for several years following the merger. In the late 1960s, Dennison appointed Louis Oldershaw to head their Stationary Products Group, and he continued to serve on the Dennison's Board of Directors. Richard P. Towne, Jr. joined Oldershaw on the Board in 1970 after his father's retirement. That same year the National Blank Book built a new plant in Los Angeles, securing the company's influence from coast to coast, while Dennison continued to expand its stationary product portfolio.

During the 1970s, National Blank Book's operations spanned the United States in Massachusetts, Ohio, Mississippi, and California, and also reached internationally into Canada and Central America. The company's diverse workforce consisted of Irish, French, Polish, and Hispanic people, both immigrants and native-born Americans. In 1976 company's sales reached \$60 million nationwide, and reached over \$100 million by the 1980s. In 1981 Dennison-National celebrated its 100th year anniversary of being a Holyoke industry, by breaking ground for an administrative building on Whiting Farms Road. The 1980s saw rising and falling profits, intense collective bargaining with workers, and significant changes in

factories, production, and management organization. Continued growth in sales led Dennison-National to seek new manufacturing facilities, resulting in its decision to leave Holyoke after over a century. In 1991 it relocated to the Westover Industrial Park in Chicopee, MA. Avery International Corporation of Pasadena, CA, the leading manufacturer of self adhesive products in the United States, purchased the Dennison Manufacturing Company in 1990.

Scope and Contents:

This collection comprises the records of the National Blank Book Company and Dennison-National. The first three boxes include the National Blank Book newsletter, "The National," and select newsletters from Dennison-National. The following three boxes in the collection include master and product catalogs from both companies and early price lists from NBB.

Box 7 houses copies of *Through 100 Years 1843-1943*, a corporate history of NBB and the Towne family, and Box 8 preserves NBB artifacts including early 20th century loose leaf binder products and date books. Box 9 and 10 house annual and company reports regarding organizational development, manufacturing strategies, and the 1967 merger between Dennison and National Blank Book.

Three boxes contain company and employee photographs, slides of displays and conferences, and a glass negative of the National Blank Book logo. The final series in this collection consists of four scrapbooks which chronicle the publicity of National Blank Book in newspaper articles and advertisements.

The collection is organized into seven series:

- Series 1: Newsletters
- Series 2: Catalogs and Price Lists
- Series 3: Books
- Series 4: Artifacts
- Series 5: Reports
- Series 6: Photographs
- Series 7: Scrapbooks

Information on Use

Terms of Access and Use

Restrictions on Access:

The collection is open for research

Preferred Citation

Cite as: The National Blank Book Collection (HPLA2005.274).
Holyoke Public Library History Room & Archive.

Custodial History

The National Blank Book Company Collection was donated by Richard P. Towne, Jr.

Processing Information

Processed by Jim Massery and Richard P. Towne, Jr.

Additional Information:

Repository Information

Holyoke Public Library
History Room & Archives
250 Chestnut Street
Holyoke, MA 01040

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Series Descriptions:

Series 1: Newsletters (3 Boxes) 1906-1988

Series includes company newsletters, published quarterly by National Blank Book and Dennison National, which contain information regarding products, services, and the workforce.

Box 1: "The National," 1919-1924

Box 2: "The National," 1924-1962

Box 3: "The National," 1906-1960

Dennison-National, "The Pip Speaks," 1985-1987

Dennison-National, "Quality Circles," 1985-1987

Dennison-National, "Update," 1988

Series 2: Catalogs and Price Lists (3 Boxes) 1880-1987

Series includes bound volumes, created for customers and company employees, which organize, catalog, and explain product types, features, and prices.

Box 4: National Blank Book, 1880-1910 (Fragile)

Box 5: National Blank Book, 1890-1939 (Fragile)

Box 6: National Blank Book, 1897-1982

Dennison-National 1981-1986

Series 3: History Books (1 Box)

1843-1943

Series includes multiple copies of a commemorative book published by National Blank Book for their 100th anniversary celebration. It chronicles the history of the first 100 years of the company.

Box 7: *Through 100 Years 1843-1943* (Multiple Copies)

Series 4: Artifacts (1 Box)

1900-1992

Series includes featured products created by National Blank Book and Dennison National.

Box 8: Loose Leaf Binder, circa 1900; National Diary, 1927; Dennison Date Book, 1992

Series 5: Reports (2 Boxes)

1927-2008

Series includes annual reports for National Blank Book and Dennison-National. Also comprises consultation reports and the National Blank Book Company's analyses of operational and manufacturing productivity. Series also contains reports and documentation pertaining to the merger of National Blank Book and Dennison, as well as an oral history interview of former CEO Louis Oldershaw conducted by Richard P. Towne, Jr.

Box 9: Annual Reports: National Blank Book, 1958-1960; Dennison 1966; Dennison-National 1972, 1986-1987; American Pad and Paper Company, 1976; National Blank Book Patent for Loose Leaf Binder, 1938
Open Letter from Frank Towne, 1938

Box 10: National Blank Book Operational and Organizational Development, Business and Manufacturing Strategies,

1927- 1954; Oral History Interview with CEO Louis Oldershaw conducted by Richard P. Towne, Jr.; Report on Merger of Dennison and National Blank Book, 1967; Dennison-National Consultation Reports, 1977- 1990

Series 6: Photographs (2 Boxes) 1940-1990

Series includes photographs and negatives of the National Blank Company's products, services, and workforce

Box 11: Displays, Conferences, Departments, Mechanical Processes, and Glass Negative of National Blank Book Company Logo

Box 12: Employees and Departments

Box 13: Employees and Departments

Series 7: Scrapbooks (4 Newspaper Scrapbooks) 1946-1982

Series includes newspaper scrapbooks which contain newspaper clippings of advertisements, and newspaper articles about National Blank Book's progress.

Scrapbook 1: 1946-1961

Scrapbook 2: 1966-1971

Scrapbook 3: 1971-1978

Scrapbook 4: 1978-1982
