

1902 Niagara Street Buffalo, NY 14207



**Black Rock**  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Black Rock  
Riverside  
Grant Amherst  
West Hertel**

Second Quarter Issue:  
April-June 2017

#### IN THIS ISSUE

*The Buffalo Weaving & Belting Co.*

*Pages 1-4*

*Louise Bethune Architecture in Black Rock & Riverside*

*Recent Acquisitions*

*Breaking the Ice Fundraiser*

*Page 4*



### The Buffalo Weaving & Belting Company by Warren Glover

The Black Rock Historical Society has recently acquired an important piece of Black Rock History. In 1906 Buffalo Weaving & Belting published a booklet that includes its early history of the office and factory's expansive manufacturing plant that was located at 196-252 Chandler Street. Now in our collection, it also includes photos, a price list, and cipher codes for ordering (coding for freight, sizes, use and thickness).

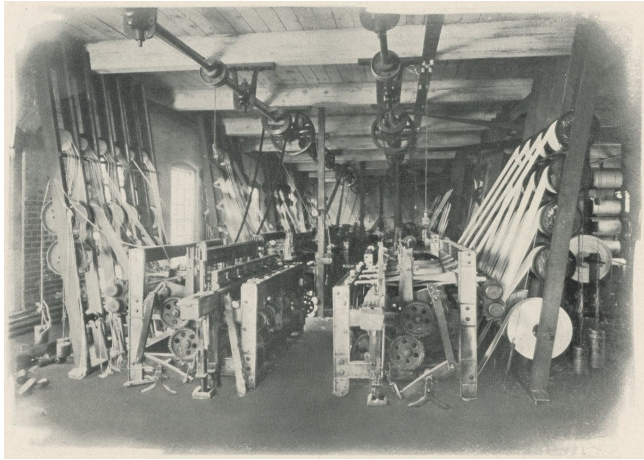
The 15,000 square foot plant was designed by Louise Blanchard Bethune (1856 to 1913), considered America's first professional female architect. She planned many large commercial structures in Erie County and a few houses, in the 1870's to the 1910's, including the Lafayette Hotel.

In 1891, the company was founded as Chase and Mathewson, taking on the name Buffalo Weaving and Belting in 1903, making assembly line and machine belting and webbing of woven cotton. At this time, it wove cotton harnesses for horse drawn transportation. The capital stock was worth

\$200,000 and was fully paid up. George L. Mathewson, one of the original partners was President of the company from 1923 to 1943, when he died at the age of 64.

Over the years, it supplied civilian and military products, including woven items during peacetime and industrial rubber belting during wartime. The factory complex expanded from its founding over a 25 year period from 1891 to 1916. It was laid out at a location alongside the trunk Belt Line railroad tracks, expanding out in all shipping directions, enabling it to import raw rubber and chemicals and export finished product by rail. It occupied a continuous quarter mile long sequence of contiguous buildings, in the form of a single story horizontal workshed construction, unique in a time of multi-story factory buildings. This design proved more efficient as product components moved along the assembly line much

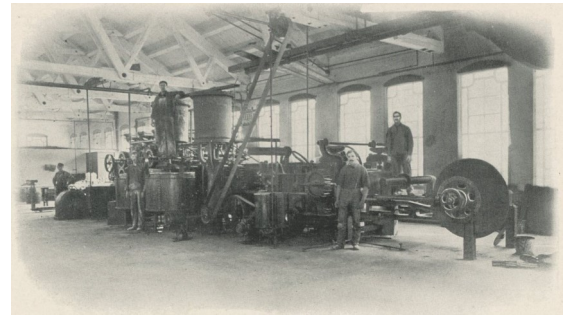
quicker by avoiding the time needed for hoisting cranes lifting goods over multi levels and the use of overhead platform mounted receiving doors.<sup>1</sup> Actually, its main doors opened by a weighted pulley sys-



tem and brick lined archways connected the eight buildings in the complex. The plant eventually became a 240,000 square foot facility on 12 acres of land in 2003. They made the sled harnesses used by Admiral Richard Byrd in his first south polar expedition exploring the Antarctic region in 1928. In 1916, the company applied for a permit to build two more factory buildings at a cost of \$17,000. In the 1920's, the company made transmission belt linings for the Ford Motor Company's Model T. In the 1930's the company made the first seat belts for aircraft out of woven cotton webbing. At this time the company employed about 200 workers.

The company grew under many local owners and in 1943, it was bought by an investment company headquartered in Philadelphia and then made parachute harnesses for the Army Air Force. In the 1960's and 70's, it made the sheet rubber tread mats used during the Apollo moon walks. Lawrence O'Neil, owner of the Victor Belata Belting Company in Easton, PA. acquired Buffalo Weaving in 1983 and sold it to John Pharr and his wife Robyn under the name Phargo LLC in 1995 for their assumption of the company's debts of over \$500,000. The company became famous for its switchboard mats, used as shock absorbers in high voltage factory areas and in a unique rubber conveyor belt in high capacity mining

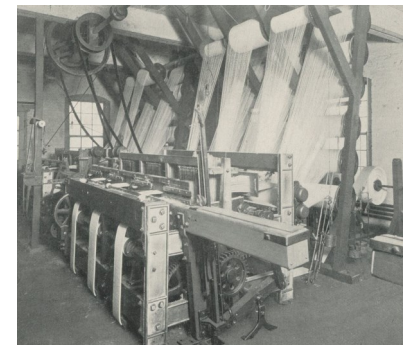
operations, able to turn right or left as needed. The machines to



make these were sold in 2002 to a South Carolina manufacturer, to help pay down Buffalo Weaving's growing debt.<sup>2</sup> To increase sales, they invented new uses for the rubber and textile products made at a subplant at 36 Chandler Street.

Adding a dozen new product lines, the company added 15 more employees. By the mid 1980's, the company employed 235 people. Pharr utilized two-thirds of the available space to avoid maintenance

needing overhead. In the production area, mammoth rubber presses sat in pits to absorb operational vibration. The machinery layout in this location enhanced



the integrative assembly process.

Their belting was made of solid, woven, upland cotton that will not creep or shift under the stress of rough or heavy load materials. The cotton was woven on company made looms, using polyester threads with maximum strength and minimum stretch, either having no plies or ones being inseparable. After being woven, the raw belt undergoes a strict inspection, then is infused with rubber fill and covering to stabilize it.<sup>3</sup>

Some employees were third generation workers and were scheduled to work in one shift or more in overtime; Pharr said one quarter of his business was developed after he bought the company. Some of the former products became obsolete or were made offshore by low wage laborers in Mexico and China at prices he could not match.



However, he was able to develop new markets for those goods that were able to be made competitively in America.

By 2000, the U.S. Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps were regular customers, buying products as woven nylon arrestor tape used to stop Navy aircraft landing on short runways found on aircraft carriers or on land. The biggest market is in mining, using custom-made conveyor belts found in underground mining excavations, where minerals must be moved to the surface expeditiously. They also made gaskets for washing machines and as automotive engine mounts and lubricant sealing parts.

Under Pharr, the company created a special rubber product used in bridge and highway construction as a binder and joint sealer. Also new, was a product meeting specifications for a high temperature rubber, under a contract worth about one million dollars.<sup>4</sup> The company made slewing ring bearings, plastic and latex molding using dip molding and coating specialties to support other prototype production. The company designed and installed custom material handling solutions for use in niche based companies.

In 1977, the company filed a patent for synthetic organic polymeric plastic sling, protected by vulcanized or cured elastomeric laminated at total load contacting areas. In 1984, another patent was filed for longer lasting woven polyaramide belting for high temperature applications. These patents, understood mainly by those in the industry, are cited to show the company tried to stay ahead of the ever evolving technical curve and dispel imitators. They were registered under a 30 year protection period in most other industrialized nations to cover their unique product length, width and ply configurations. The demise of the company was largely due to carrying a larger load of debt that it could not pay off.

Buffalo Weaving in 2000 owed \$600,000 to GE Capital. Unable to pay, the company sought an emergency loan from the City of Buffalo's Economic Development Agency the same year, giving the company \$250,000 in working funds, backed by all its real property holdings as collateral. Repayments stopped shortly after in May of 2000, leaving most of the loan unpaid.

Buffalo Weaving and Belting closed its doors on January 15, 2003. Mainly known as the weaver of industrial belts, the Buffalo factory



left 30 workers without jobs. Co-owner with the City, John S. Pharr said a power outage caused production to shift to outsource plants using less experienced, cheaper labor receiving no corporate benefits. Buffalo Weaving had a unionized labor force receiving health insurance, a competitive wage structure, and time off credits.



On April 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003, the entire manufacturing complex of six large multi-story buildings was ravaged by a three alarm fire, complicated by the volume of exotic chemicals stored in barrels on the site. The Environmental

Protection Agency and the Buffalo Fire Department's hazardous materials division suspected hazardous waste compounds may have contributed to the intensity of the fire.

Damage was estimated at \$200,000 to the buildings and \$50,000 to the machinery inventory. Thus marked the end for a company existing for 111 years at this location.<sup>5</sup> A shifting market constantly requiring new equipment investment added to extensive outsourcing leaving an uneven field of competition racking up debt and creating the need for loans the company could not repay. This caused the circumstances leading to its demise.



1902 Niagara Street Buffalo  
New York, 14207

**Museum Hours:**

Friday 10:00am-4:00pm

Saturday 11:00am-3:00pm

For any inquiries please contact us  
at

[info@blackrockhistoricalsociety.com](mailto:info@blackrockhistoricalsociety.com)

**Find us online!**

[www.blackrockhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.blackrockhistoricalsociety.com)



**The BRHS**

**Seeks Volunteers**

Your expertise, interest and/or  
love of history are good reasons  
to volunteer.

Students, seniors and  
everyone in-between are  
welcome to volunteer in  
various areas of interest:

office/computer, education, out-  
reach, maintenance, etc.

You can strengthen your  
community, learn about preser-  
vation, and meet new people.

Every volunteer can make a  
difference. To

volunteer, contact us via email  
on our website or  
call 716-510-4007.

**Artifact Donations**

If you think you may have  
items or photos that tell the  
story of our area. you can bring  
them to the museum, or we  
will gladly pick them up  
716-510-4007

**We are now seeking Erie  
Canal related items for 200th  
anniversary displays.**

Today the site is entirely empty save for other company's equipment storage. It once was declared an active superfund area under the Environmental Protection Agency's supervision, because a possible potential risk was posed to human health, safety, and the environment due to contamination of the land. Since then, a thick cap of clay and stone has rendered the area open to restricted usage.

Sources:

1. Book – "The Concrete Atlantis" by Rayner Banham. Pp. 40 41.
2. Article from "The Buffalo News" by Fred O. Williams on February 19, 2003. Pg. B – 4.
- 3 "The Buffalo Weaving & Belting Co." 1906 company advertising booklet.
- 4 Article from "Buffalo Business First" magazine by Tracy Drury on April 17, 2000.
5. Article from "The Buffalo News" by T. J. Pignataro on April 16, 2003. Pg. B – 3.

**Louise Bethune Architecture in Black Rock & Riverside**

In addition to Buffalo Weaving & Belting, she also designed:

Grote Street (near Marion), client-J.A. Oaks, Oaks Factory 1898  
234 Chandler Street - now a vacant lot, was Unit A of Buffalo Weaving Co. 1903

189 Tonawanda Street - now a vacant lot, client-Volker & Felthausen Manufacturing Co.-factory buildings 1888



2280-2286 Niagara Street, client-Cataract Power Transformer House 1898

65-67 Military Road  
client-John H. Schmitz-  
Schmitz Stable 1903



177 Dearborn Street, client-Dr. J.H. Potter-residence 1885

Source: The Buffalo History Museum: Architecture Map Photos by Warren Glover

**Please join us for  
our Spring Fundraiser**

**Recent Acquisitions**



This 4' X 6' roll of  
belting from Buffalo  
Weaving & Belting  
Co. with multiple  
stampings of the  
company name was  
donated by Mark  
Kubiniec.

**Breaking The Ice**  
A FUNDRAISER CELEBRATING THE 2ND ANNIVERSARY OF THE BRHS  
& OPENING OF THE SUMMER BOATING SEASON

**Thursday, May 11  
6 - 8 PM**

Tickets \$25.00 Available at the Door  
or online at [EVENTBRITE](http://EVENTBRITE)  
Includes Draft Beers, Wine, &  
Appetizers

Rohalls Corner  
540 Amherst Street  
Buffalo, NY 14207