

The Brass Worker

"Waterbury's working people were at the heart of the City's industrial success."

- Metal, Minds and Machines.

During the 19th and first half of the 20th Century, Waterbury led the world in the production of brass. The American brass industry was concentrated along Connecticut's Naugatuck River and Waterbury was "The Brass Center of the World".

Connecticut entrepreneurs began importing skilled brass workers from Birmingham, England after 1820. Toolmakers, rollers, casters, platers, die sinkers, and burnishers were brought to the Naugatuck Valley. By 1850, American men had come to form a large part of this skilled workforce. They predominated until approximately 1870 when Irish immigrants began to take over. The Irish were followed by other immigrants representing over fifty varieties of foreigners. As brass manufacturing processes became more mechanized and the products more varied, companies found they could employ unskilled and semi-skilled labor.

Each ethnic group experienced harassment and discrimination. They felt isolated from their relatives back home and from their new culture. The language barrier caused many of them to have their names changed by immigration officials and some became disillusioned when they discovered the streets were not "paved with gold."

Brass workers toiled in conditions that were hot (2600 degrees for the furnaces), hazardous, filthy and required intense physical exertion. In 1910, the average work week was 54-60 hours with no paid vacations. Accident rates were extremely high. "Spelter shakes," a disease caused by inhaling metal oxide fumes, especially zinc, was a characteristic malady as was asthma, chronic anemia, tuberculosis and old age at forty. These conditions, combined with no health or safety agencies, no pensions, no social organizations, strikes, layoffs, random wage schedules and favoritism made for a punishing work environment. Conditions improved with the advent of labor unions in the 1930s but there was risk in joining them. The book, *Brass Valley*, states "their lives have been shaped by the necessity to spend most of their waking hours working for others, under conditions they do not control, for purposes they do not determine. They live in a system that treats them as tools."

During and after World War I the flow of immigrants to the United States was largely cut off due to the war and to restrictive legislation. The brass companies looked for new sources of labor and found it in the growing number of Black migrants from the American South.

Young, single women worked as unskilled laborers in the Scovill button factory from its earliest days, and as production machinery increased more women entered the workforce. During World War II countless women went to work



in the factories adding to the total of over 50,000 employees in the brass industry in Waterbury.

The brass workers defined Waterbury. They significantly affected the social, cultural and religious life of Waterbury for over 150 years. Three-family houses within walking distance from the factories changed the landscape and created ethnic neighborhoods that endure to the present. Churches, social clubs and nationalist organizations were established by these tight-knit ethnic groups to help retain their customs and at the same time, assist with assimilation.

From 1880 to 1930 Waterbury's population grew from 20,000 to 100,000. The major factor influencing this increase was brass. As the "Boston Commercial Bulletin" wrote, "Brass is the life of Waterbury, but for it the City would be no city...What is not made of brass would be easier to tell than what is. You hear it, smell it, see it, feel it everywhere." Waterbury's motto is *Quid Aere Perennius*, "What is more lasting than brass?" Due to the solid foundation created by the Brass Worker, Waterbury is more lasting than brass.