

James Croft

1774 - 1837

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- Samuel Crowther,
A Basis for Stability

James Croft was born Jan. 28, 1774, in Little Witley, Worcestershire, England. At a young age, he was introduced to the brass industry in the industrial city of Birmingham. He became a seasoned, skilled worker and at the age of 43 came overseas to Philadelphia in 1817.

His association with Waterbury began in 1820, when he was discovered by Charles Kingsbury, a sales agent for Leavenworth, Hayden & Scovill. Kingsbury recognized Croft's talents and convinced him to come to work in Waterbury. Virtually from the moment he arrived, Croft made an impact on the fledgling brass industry here.

According to historian Joseph Anderson, "the quality of (Leavenworth, Hayden & Scovill's) product was considerably improved and the economy of production increased by the employment of James Croft, an Englishman, who had been thoroughly trained in the business and was able to add other skilled workmen."

Croft was the first person in Waterbury who had been trained in the art of making gilt buttons. His ability and generosity in sharing his skills were invaluable to the city's growth.

"He at once supplied the needed stimulus to improvement in the enterprise and is really an unsung pioneer of the Brass Mill Industry," wrote Clark S. Judd in *Sidelights on Brass Mill History*.

"Even his year or two at work with (L, H & S) brought about a noticeable change and improvement in casting and rolling techniques," according to *Brass Roots*.

Samuel Crowther noted in *A Basis for Stability*: "For some years, the Grilleys and other manufacturers turned out small quantities of buttons which were mostly sold by peddlers, for in the open market they did not seem to compete with the English brass makers. In 1820, one James Croft, an English brass maker, came to Waterbury, entered the service of (L, H & S), and introduced English machinery and processes. Within ten years, Waterbury was beginning to hold its own against imported rolled brass."

After several years at Scovill, Croft was induced by Aaron Benedict to move over to the Benedict, Burnham Mfg. Co., "which almost immediately commenced to forge to the front both in equipment and output until it became for many years foremost in the (button) industry". (Judd)

While Croft and Alfred Platt were both at Benedict, the former taught the latter all he could about various manufacturing techniques, including "finish-rolling metal to a smooth surface; making dies and machines to impart figured patterns to metalbutton fronts; the recipes for the mercury and gold mixture used in gilding; heating methods, etc., etc.," according to *Platt Bros. & Co.* For all his work in the plants, perhaps Croft's greatest contribution was in recruiting other skilled workers to come from England to Waterbury. He made his first trip in 1823 and, according to Judd, brought back a caster, a roller and the



largest rolling mill ever seen in Waterbury. The new workers, chosen carefully by Croft, were immediately helpful. According to Anderson, Croft made seven trips in all to England. Anderson called Croft "an industrious, reliable, frugal man and much respected in the community".

Croft was married July 4, 1829, to Polly Carter, and with her had two children, a son, Edward, and daughter, Margaret. Croft died June 10, 1837. He was buried in Waterbury's burial ground and later removed to Riverside Cemetery.

In a country that has long admired the latest technology, James Croft was among the 19th century's first high-tech handymen. With his able eyes and hands, competitive nature and real desire to pass on all he knew, he was instrumental in building Waterbury's industrial empire. Although he passed through the city for a relatively brief time (17 years), he touched down at key times and in key places, and he helped transform the place. The city fathers, his bosses, possessed the will and the where withal, but they needed the technique. Croft taught them to speak the language of brass.