



# YANKEES CAN DO ANYTHING

JOSIAH HAYDEN,  
EARLY STEEL PEN PIONEER

BY ANDREW MIDKIFF

In an earlier series of articles in the *Pennant*, I highlighted Peregrine Williamson, the first professional steel pen maker in the United States. Williamson was actively making pens between 1806 and around 1820. By the mid-1820s, imported British pens were beginning to take over the small, but growing, U.S. market. By the 1830s, once the Birmingham makers had perfected their industrial-scale manufacturing of steel pens, American makers just could not compete in price nor in quality.

In the 1830s, a few Americans tried to make their own pens, including the Boston stationer David Felt and the inventor Charles Atwood (Fig. 1). In 1834, Atwood's pens were awarded a Diploma at the

American Institute's fair in New York City.<sup>1</sup> This was also the fair at which Goodyear first displayed samples of his newly patented India rubber. Atwood's pens were displayed under the category of Cutlery, Edge Tools, and Hardware as there was no category at the time for steel pens.

Neither maker prospered with his pens, and Felt rather quickly stopped manufacturing his own, but instead began importing British ones with his imprint on them. By 1840, Atwood had lost interest and went on to other inventions and industries. Not long after that, a few others began to try their hand at making domestic steel pens to compete in this new and growing market.

One of the early pioneers was Josiah Hayden. Josiah H. Hayden was born August 15, 1802, son of Josiah Hayden Jr. (1768–1847) and Esther Hayden (1769–1862). He was born in upstate New York where his

1. Niles' Weekly Register, "Fair of the American Institute," October 25, 1834.

2. Most of the general history comes from two sources. The first is the History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts, Vol. 1, History of Hampshire County (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1879). The second is the vast knowledge of the generous historians at the Williamsburg Historical Society. Mr. Ralmon Black was of tremendous help when I first inquired about Josiah Hayden in 2017. Sadly, he passed away in 2018, taking with him a multi-generational dedication to Williamsburg's history. His successor as secretary of the society, Eric Weber, has also been a font of great information, especially about the Thayer brothers. Without the generous help of local historians, much of our nation's history would be lost.

***Yankees can do anything.—Josiah Hayden & Co., at Haydenville, Ms., manufacture as good steel pens as ever were imported. Thomas Groom & Co., State street, are their agents.***

*Boston Post, Boston, Massachusetts, May 12, 1841, p. 2.*

father, originally from Williamsburg, Massachusetts, was “busy harvesting potash and preaching to the local [Native American] tribes.”<sup>2</sup> When Josiah was still young, they moved back to Williamsburg where Josiah and his older brother Joel became industrialists and entrepreneurs in the typical mold of the early industrial revolution in America: ambitious, hard-working, innovative, dedicated to their community and causes, and finding success by moving with the times and adapting to new markets and new technologies.

The site of their greatest success was the small town of Williamsburg, Massachusetts, in Hampshire County in the western part of the state. The town is built along the Mill River, which served as a source of power for several industrial operations over the years.


In 1809, Josiah’s uncles, Daniel and David Hayden, opened up the first cotton mill in western Massachusetts on the site. The mill was profitable through the War of 1812 but was later abandoned when cheaper and better-quality British imports resumed. The mill sat empty from 1818 until 1822, when Joel Hayden and his brother-in-law James Congdon purchased the property, rebuilt the dam, dug a canal, and started making power-loom for weaving broadcloth. In 1827, Congdon withdrew from the business and Joel was joined by Josiah. They eventually dropped the loom parts, as new manufacturing machinery made them obsolete. Instead, they began making small metal parts and hardware, such as door locks and harness trimmings.

In 1831, Joel and Josiah began moving away from these small parts and into a newly profitable industry: button making. They made japanned buttons, tin buttons, button-molds, and metal-shanked lasting buttons (cloth-covered button with built-in metal loop on the back). Buttons were a big item at a time when shoes, dresses, suits, pants, and pretty much everything else were held together with buttons. Unfortunately, in November of 1832, the factory building was completely destroyed by fire.

Thanks to insurance, the brothers were able to begin rebuilding the following spring. The new building was three stories and measured 64 feet by 32 feet. Later, the Haydens added two wings of two stories each, for a total span of 104 feet. Upon reopening, though, the two brothers split their business into two different operations.

Joel began experimenting with improvements on the metal-shanked lasting button and eventually came up with a design for the first flexible-shanked lasting button made in the United States. Just down the road, in Easthampton, was a successful manufacturer of wooden buttons, Samuel Williston. Williston knew button-making technology and is credited with designing the machines to make covered wooden buttons. Williston joined with Joel Hayden and together they created

### **Premium Steel Pens.**

 **TWOOD’S American Patent.** The distinguished feature of the American Pen is, that it combines the two best English Pens, (Perrian and Gillott’s patents,) in one, and is capable of accomodating itself to all the various degrees of pressure used in different handwritings, and produces with perfect ease any strength of character at the will of the writer.

These Pens are unequalled by any pen imported; and the extraordinary flexibility and delicacy they possess renders them a desirable acquisition to every writer

For sale by the groce, dozen, or single, by  
**A. HEGEMAN, No. 57 Fulton-st.**  
**Brooklyn, Oct. 23, 1834 – 3w**

*Fig. 1: Long-Island Star, Brooklyn, New York, Oct. 23, 1834, p. 5*



FIG. 2

**STEEL PENS**—from the manufactory of Josiah Hayden & Co., Haydensville, Mass., comprising imitations of, and an excellent substitute for the various patterns of English Perryan Pens, at greatly reduced prices from the imported.  
For sale at Stationers' Hall, 82 State street, by **THOMAS GROOM & CO.**, Agents for the manufacturers.  
m12 3w

FIG. 4



Fig 2: *Boston Post*, May 17, 1841, p. 4

Fig. 3: *New York Tribune*, Dec. 8, 1842, p. 4.

Fig. 4: The original Thayer factory sometime before it burned down for the first time in 1907.

It could well date to when William Thayer was still running it. It has been rebuilt twice, both times along the same lines as the original. The building as shown in the photo dates from

the 1870s and houses a blacksmith shop.

Fig. 5: The Thayer Brothers' store is still standing and is currently a private home on the east end of Buttonshop Road in Williamsburg.

FIG. 5



**HAYDEN'S Premium Pens.**—A Silver Medal was awarded J. Hayden for his "very superior Pens" by the American Institute at its last Fair. The Government have given them the Preference, and the best accountants and many of the public institutions will use no other Pens. They have justly obtained the highest reputation, and are not surpassed if equaled by any in the country. The trade are supplied at the Manufacturer's prices by the agents **J. & P. HAYDEN, 5 Platt-street.**  
Agents also for Silliman's School and Counting-house Ink Stands.  
my9 tf

FIG. 3



a new company making these new lasting buttons, and eventually employed about 200 people, mostly women.<sup>3</sup> In 1848, Williston bought out Joel, moved the button making back to Easthampton, and proceeded to make the largest fortune at the time in western Massachusetts. Joel moved on to other things, eventually running a large cotton mill with 400 spindles, making door locks in another foundry, and becoming quite successful and rich by making brass plumbing fittings in his half of the original factory.<sup>4</sup>

After the original factory was rebuilt in 1832, Josiah had continued making japanned buttons and button-molds. Metal button making at the time required similar equipment to what was used in making steel pens: button makers had to prepare the metal, often with furnaces and rollers, and they used presses to impress designs and shape the sheet metal. Other equipment was required to polish and finish the items, box them, and ship them.

While continuing the button business, Josiah saw an opportunity and decided to branch out into making these new, hot items—steel pens. In 1839, he brought in as his

foreman Andrew Adams, an experienced mechanic of Middletown, Connecticut, and began to make steel pens in a part of the button factory.

### Hayden Premium Pens

From the beginning, Hayden was not out to innovate with his steel pens, but to imitate. He took as his model the very successful British pens from James Perry. They were even labeled as "American Perryan Pens [FIG. 2]."

While they may have been unoriginal in shape and finish, they did appear to be quality pens. As proof, Josiah entered the pens into the annual fair of manufactured goods held by the American Institute in New York City.

In his first year, 1841, Hayden received a silver medal and his steel pen seems to have been the only one to be awarded a prize.<sup>5</sup> Starting in 1842, a new rival, C. C. Wright of New York City, began entering his pens, and after that, poor Josiah Hayden was fated to come in second every other year he participated, in 1842, 1843, and 1844.

Josiah also opened up an agency at 5 Platt St. in New York City with his younger brother, Philanthropus "Peter"



Hayden, to sell and distribute his new pens (Fig. 3). Josiah stayed in Haydenville, as that part of outer Williamsburg had become known, while Peter lived in New York and oversaw sales.

Josiah Hayden was personally connected with the business until 1845, when he sold the steel pen business to the local brothers Willisson, William, and Ezra Thayer, who moved the manufacturing down the road to Williamsburg Village and sold the pens out of their general store at one end of Buttonshop Rd. The store still stands as a private residence (Figs. 4 & 5).

The Thayer brothers manufactured more than pens in their factory at the other end of Buttonshop Road, including steel tools and other household goods. It is still not clear how long they made

the pens. I've found one reference saying that the Thayers continued making pens until at least 1856.<sup>6</sup> In the *Massachusetts Register* for 1852, the Thayers are listed under Hardware, as there was still no category for steel pens.<sup>7</sup>

Ezra moved to New York in 1852 and may have left the pen business at that time. Willisson died in 1859 in an accident when he fell from his wagon while on a selling trip to Chicopee, Massachusetts, and the wagon ran over him. By this time, they may not have still been making pens, as they were quite busy making wooden clock cases for clockmakers like Seth Thomas, and their tool business was also running well. William, the youngest, continued to run the store and factory until he sold the business shortly before his death. The company continued under the W. E. Thayer & Co. name, manufacturing a variety of household and tradesmen's tools and hardware for more than a decade after William's death in 1893.

The original factory has burned down twice but was rebuilt in the same style. The current building is a good indication of what the original looked like and is still being used as a blacksmith shop.

3. Ronald R. Switzer, *The Steamboat Bertrand and Missouri River Commerce* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), footnote 99.

4. National Register of Historic Places, *Haydenville Historic District Official NRHP file*. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/63795459>

5. Documents of the Senate of the State of New York, Vol. 4 (Albany: Thurlow Weed, 1842), p. 100.

6. William Frederick Adams, *Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of the State of Massachusetts, Vol. 3* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1910.) p. 1,431.

7. The *Massachusetts Register and United States Calendar for the Year of our Lord 1852* (Richardson, Lord & Holbrook, and James Loring, 1852), p. 125



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## Leaders of Industry

The Hayden brothers were significant in their community, not just as rich industrial powers but also as dynamic and contributing members of their society. Josiah Hayden was a lay preacher in the local Methodist community, and he and Joel were instrumental in building the Methodist church. Joel and Josiah were especially active in the abolitionist movement, and Josiah is recorded on a petition to the U.S. House of Representatives as "Josiah Hayden and 35 other citizens of Williamsburg, Massachusetts,"<sup>8</sup> objecting to the admittance of Texas into the Union as a slave state.

In 1838, the community of Haydenville was formed and got its first post office. Josiah Hayden was its first postmaster. Joel and Josiah also donated the land for the Haydenville Cemetery, and the first person buried there was their father, Josiah Hayden Jr. The brothers also built fine Greek Revival houses next to each other, across from the factory. These are still there and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places [Fig. 6].

In addition to their industrial pursuits, the Hayden brothers invested in many other side businesses in the area. In 1838, Joel and Josiah opened a general store, mainly catering to their workmen. They operated this for five years, doing a business of \$25,000 a year. Josiah came back to it in later years, running the store for a couple of years with his partner, Sereno Kingsley, after a later owner had died. And in 1846, Josiah joined with two other wealthy gentlemen to found a bank in nearby Northampton.<sup>9</sup>

8. Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, Vol. 29, issue 1 (Washington: Ritchie & Heiss, 1845) p. 229

9. "An Act to establish the Holyoke Bank," Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts Chapter 188, 1846, pp. 705-706

10. History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts, Vol. 1, History of Hampshire County (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1879), p. 408.



FIG. 7

**GOLD PENS.**  
**GOLD PEN DEPOT,**  
**123 BANK STREET.**  
 MABIE, TODD & CO'S.,  
 FAIRCHILD'S,  
 MORTON'S,  
 NEWTON'S,  
 J. B. BEERS',  
 DAWSON, WARREN & HYDES'  
**GOLD PENS.**  
 REPOINTING.  
 BESTOR'S GOLDEN PEN.  
 J. E. HOPKINS.

FIG. 8

**GOLD diamond-pointed Pens.**—The subscriber has been appointed agent by Levi Brown, of Brooklyn, New York, and Josiah Hayden, of Massachusetts, for the sale of their gold diamond pointed pens, with or without cases, a large assortment of which has just been received. Also, constantly on hand Bagley's pens. These are the original and best makers of the articles in this country; therefore, gentlemen may rely upon being suited with the genuine pen at Stationers' Hall.  
**WM. FISCHER.**  
 March 8—3taw8w

FIG. 6



Fig. 6: Josiah Hayden House in Williamsburg, Massachusetts: Historic American Buildings Survey, Creator, Josiah Hayden House, 127 Main Street, Williamsburg, Hampshire County, MA. Documentation Compiled After Photograph Retrieved

from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/ma1373/](http://www.loc.gov/item/ma1373/)

Fig. 7: Published in the *Cleveland Daily Leader*, May 5, 1863, p. 4

Fig. 8: Published in the *Washington Union* (Washington, D.C.), March 13, 1848, p. 1

Joel was also active as a director on the board of a local railroad, and his influence was seen as an important factor in the town being connected to, and given a stop, on that railroad. Joel became active in local politics and was elected as lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, serving 1863–66, during the whole of the Civil War.

### Josiah's Golden Pens

Readers may be interested in another pen-related phase of Josiah Hayden's amazing life. After Josiah sold off his steel pen business to the Thayer brothers, he started a gold pen business that was briefly known as Hayden, Wells & Co., a partnership with Samuel Wells, a selectman in the town and co-partner with Hayden in Haydenville's dry goods store. Josiah worked at this until 1848. In 1851, Wells left for Boston, at which time a former employee and later partner, Rollin L. Dawson, reorganized the company with two other locals, Warren and Ellsworth Hyde, who had worked with Hayden and Dawson in various enterprises. The company during this phase was known as Dawson, Warren & Hyde

[Figs. 7 & 8].<sup>10</sup>

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FIG. 9



Dawson, Warren & Hyde became a very successful manufacturer of gold pens and eventually pen and pencil cases, pen holders, and fine jewelry from 1848 until at least 1860 [FIGS. 9, 10 & 11]. Dawson died in 1857, only 32 years old, and Hyde in 1861, only 39. It is not clear how long the pens were made nor whether Warren carried on or sold the firm, but we do have an advertisement in 1866 for Dawson, Warren & Hyde's Tip Top gold pens.<sup>11</sup>

To give you an idea of the scale of their works, in 1855, Massachusetts took inventory of the various industries

FIG. 10



FIG. 11



doing business in the state.<sup>12</sup> In the big city of Boston at the same time, there were two gold pen manufacturers, and in the previous year, 1854, between the two of them they had made a total of 6,500 pens with a capital investment of \$3,500, and employed six people. Dawson, Warren & Hyde, way out in the wilds of western Massachusetts, that same year made 80,000 of their Tip Top gold pens, using a capital investment of \$25,000 and employing 13 men and 12 women. In addition, Dawson, Warren & Hyde's gold and silver pencil case business manufactured 40,000 items, had a capital of \$12,000, and employed 24 men and 11 women. And the firm's steel penholder business made 6,000 gross of penholders with a smaller capitalization of \$3,000, employing two men and two women.

11. Yale Courant, Vol. 2, Issue 1, (Yale College: 1866) p. 8.

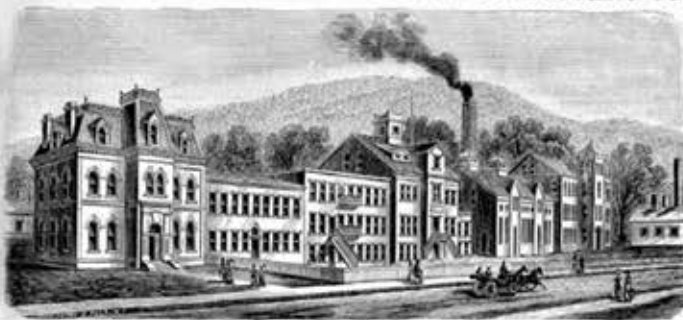
12. Francis DeWitt, Statistical information relating to certain branches of industry in Massachusetts, for the year ending June 1, 1855 (Boston: W. White, 1856) p. 278.





FIG. 12

## WORKS OF THE HAYDENVILLE MANUFACTURING CO.



WORKS AT HAYDENVILLE, MASS. ESTABLISHED 1845.



DESTROYED BY FLOOD, 1874.



REBUILT 1875.

Opposite page:

Fig. 9: Dawson, Warren & Hyde sliding gold pen: Courtesy of the late Mr. Ralmon Black, secretary of the Williamsburg Historical Society.

Fig. 10: Dawson, Warren & Hyde gold pen with original steel pen holder and box: from author's collection.

Fig. 11: Large Dawson, Warren & Hyde gold pen from the author's collection

This page:

Fig. 12: Postcard with three views of the Hayden factory: courtesy of the late Mr. Ralmon Black, secretary of the Williamsburg Historical Society.

Fig. 13: Haydenville Manufacturing Co. postcard, c. 1880s: courtesy of the late Mr. Ralmon Black, the secretary of the Williamsburg Historical Society.

## Epilogue

Josiah Hayden went on to dabble in various businesses in New York and Ohio, while Joel stayed in Haydenville. The Haydenville Manufacturing Co. continued even after Joel's death in 1873 until a devastating flood in 1874 destroyed the original factory and much of the town (Fig. 12).

The factory was rebuilt in 1875 (Fig. 13) and continued in operation as a brass and plumbing works into the 1950s, when it was purchased by the Sterling Faucet Company, which operated it for a few years before closing it. Josiah died in Williamsburg in 1877.

Today, the Haydenville Historic District encompasses the old brass works factory, the Hayden homes, the Congregationalist Church, the old school, and several other buildings in a delightful slice of a 19th-century industrial community. You can find Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, and Italianate styles of architecture in the several buildings. The historic factory has been restored and contains offices and studios; for a short time, it was home to the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School.

Hayden pens never made a major impact on the history of steel pens in America. They were one of the top American pens of their day, so in that respect they helped set a higher standard for American-made pens, but the brand was short-lived and soon forgotten. Hayden pens are never mentioned in any of the very few histories of the early U.S. pen industry written later in the 19th century, but that does not mean their impact was quickly lost.