

Early History of the Davis Sewing Machine Company

“About ten years ago (1861) at Great Bend, Penn., Job A. Davis invented and manufactured on a small scale, a sewing machine known as “The Davis”. After six years of manufacturing and selling these machines by Mr. Davis at Great Bend, the demand became so great for them that it was impossible to proceed under the embarrassing circumstances. “

“ Davis came to Watertown in 1866, and exhibited his model. After careful examination, Mr. John Sheldon was induced to organize a company that would make the needed investment to secure a plant for its manufacture. It so happened that the Hon. Joseph Sheldon, brother of John, was an intimate friend at New Haven, Conn., of that Elias Howe, who invented the first machine and was then highly interested in the manufacture of sewing machines. He examined, at Mr. Joseph Sheldon’s request, the Davis machine, before any investment had been made for it’s manufacture at Watertown and pronounced the device novel and valuable. This was the opinion and which Mr. John Sheldon and the company organized by him based their willingness to put money into manufacturing the Davis machine.”

“A private company for the manufacture of the Davis Vertical Feed was first started in 1868 and made the machine on a small scale in an old stone building on Beebe’s Island. The “combination” so called, composed of Singer, Wheeler & Wilson and Grover and Baker companies, who shared royalties in common with certain patents, claimed the Davis was an infringement, and the disputed question was finally settled by the Davis company paying to them 40 cents on each Davis machine manufactured. This was less than other companies paid, and was a violation of contract. The Florence heard of it and refused to pay more than the Davis was paying. Here was trouble. So the representatives of the “combination” came to Watertown and tried to buy up the Davis. In this they failed, but succeeded in making a contract with the company whereas they were to build for them 30000 machines at a fixed price per machine in about 3 years, and as many more as might be wanted.”

“Singer and Wheeler & Wilson sent on their men and the work commenced. The machines were miserably constructed, Davis’ reputation began to suffer and it became pretty evident that the one object of the contract was to ruin in the market the new and formidable competitor of the “combination” machines. If this was the intention it was partially successful as imperfect machines were returned in large number and sales fell off. At last in 1872, the “combination” stepped out of the shops and the company stepped in and the recovery of good name began in earnest. “

“When the new management took charge it was found necessary to call in all these thousands of machines which had been paid for and scattered all over the country and to rebuild them and furnish perfect machines in there places. This put the company in debt some \$300000 with heavy interest and they have never been able to get out from under it. Because of this the stockholders have never received any dividends and the board of directors guaranteed bonds which would ruin them individually if they had to pay them.”

Though Davis prospered in Watertown for the next 27 years, the old debt with interest hung over the Board and the stockholders earned no dividends on their Davis stock investment. In 1889, the Dayton syndicate offered \$50000 cash, new facilities, debt relief , and 60 cents on the dollar for Davis Stock which was almost unanimously accepted. Remarkably, Davis remained productive turning out sewing machines until the end of 1889. In January of 1890, the manpower and facilities were in place for work at the new Dayton factory.