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Lyman Higgins Account Book

1851-1886

1 volume

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A resident of South Worthington, Massachusetts, Lyman Higgins appears in the Federal Census and in town histories as also pursuing a variety of other callings: mechanic, farmer, blacksmith, sawmill proprietor, and manufacturer. Higgins eventually devoted his work life to basket making, supplying textile mills and paper companies as far away as New York City with large batches of assorted baskets tailored to their needs.

Higgins' account book includes records of jobs performed, payment (in goods and services as well as in cash), employees and their wages, and the local companies to which he sold his custom-made basket product

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Background on Lyman Higgins

Lyman Higgins of South Worthington, Massachusetts appears in the Federal Census and in town histories as having a variety of callings: mechanic, farmer, blacksmith, sawmill proprietor, basket maker, and manufacturer. His account book 1851-1886, shows him to have been all of these, becoming eventually chiefly a basket maker who supplied textile mills and paper companies in locations as far away as New York City with large batches of assorted baskets tailored to their needs.

When first listed in the federal census in 1850, Higgins was a 27 year old mechanic, yet his accounts show that he also repaired washing machines, wagon wheels, and bog hooks. He sharpened drills and file saws, and fixed hoops, sleds, and chairs. He also sold provender, made ironware, and did the sawing and basketmaking on which he later focused. He took goods and services as well as cash in payment. He was paid, for example, in onions, squash, and potatoes; glue, sandpaper, and stove pipe; work on a dam and a horse to go to Huntington.

By 1880, Higgins had invested \$1000 in his basket business and employed six hands at peak times, although only one was a male above 16. Whether this means he employed women or younger apprentices is unclear. He paid only \$1.00 a day for skilled labor and \$0.50 a day to the average worker. In all, he paid \$50 in wages for the year, although a workday was 10 hours.

He sold steam baskets in oak with extra finish to the Harris Woollen Mill; the Sugar River Paper Co. bought copper finished bushel baskets; Stark Mills ordered doffer, filling, waste, and twister baskets; Lawrence Duck Co. wanted doffin baskets with square corners.

At the same time, Higgins was running a sawmill where he did custom work making batches of handles (usually pack, saw, or pointer), shingles, planks, or sled runners, among other things. He cut butternut, bass, cherry, hemlock, beech, poplar, and other woods. Higgins has another \$700 invested in the two-saw sawmill, which employed three people during the 2 months a year that it was in production full-time.

During the years depicted in this account book, Worthington had numerous small manufacturers and mills as well as many farms. Nearly everyone who lived in the town worked there as well, since fast transportation was not available to other towns until later, although the only post office between Northampton and Pittsfield was there for many years and the town was an important one on the Boston to Albany Turnpike. Efforts to bring a railroad to Worthington failed; raw and finished goods had to be hauled by team to Williamsburg or Huntington.

Higgins and his wife Mary had four children Theron, Jane, Alice, and Hiram. Mary died in her 40s and Lyman married Elizabeth. By 1870 his real estate was valued at \$3000 and his personal estate at \$450. That year, Theron was working in the basket shop and living with his wife Lottie's parents-Willis Burke, a farm laborer. Hiram became a basket maker, too, and married Fidelia, living for a while next to Lyman.

Scope of collection

The Higgins Account Book contains business and personal accounts of Lyman Higgins, documenting the evolution of his work in manufacturing baskets, primarily for the textile industry. Beginning in 1851, the accounts provide a perspective on the young Higgins' efforts to establish himself as a mechanic, and after 1880, they reveal his growing prosperity and increasing success in basketry, as well as his investments in a sawmill and real estate.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from dealer.

Processing Information

Processed by Linda Seidman.

Language:

English

Acknowledgments

Encoding funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Cite as: Lyman Higgins Account Book (MS 118). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

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Harris Woollen Mill--History--Sources.
Higgins, Lyman--Finance, Personal.
Higgins, Lyman.
Lawrence Duck Co.--History--Sources.
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Stark Mills--History--Sources.
Sugar River Paper Co.--History--Sources.
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Contributors

Higgins, Lyman [main entry]

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