

History of leather tanning in the United States during the first half of the 1800's

The first record is from the Secretary of the Treasury in the year 1791. Mr. Hamilton, in his report on manufactures, mentions: "tanneries are not only carried on as a regular business in numerous parts of the country, but they constitute, in some places, a valuable item of incidental family manufacture." He went on to mention, that encouragement had been asked of the government in two ways, viz.: by prohibiting both in the import of the leather and the export of the bark. It was alleged that the price of bark from \$3 to \$4 ½ per cord. He ascribed the rise, however, rather to the increase of tanneries than to the export, of which, he said, there was no evidence. Glue was a then a large item with the tanners, who used up the refuse portions of the skins in that way. From that time to the present, tanners have increased in all the states, in the proportion nearly of the growth of the population. The importation of the boots and shoes was always insignificant, comprising the high-priced articles from Paris mostly. Thus, the year 1822 was one of the largest import: there were then 14,979 pairs of shoes, mostly kid and morocco, imported, for \$9,192; and 207 pair of boots, for \$793, or nearly \$4 per pair. In 1858 the importation was only 39,826 pairs of leather boots and shoes, at a value of \$87,101; and the export of domestic boots and shoes in this year was 609,988 pairs, or a value of 663,905: showing a large excess of exports over imports.

The manufacture of boots and shoes has, therefore, been in the double ratio of the number of people, and their ability to buy, in the proportions as follows:

| LEATHER MANUFACTURE OF THE UNITED STATES IN 1860. | | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | Establishments. | Capital. | Raw material. | Male. | Female. | Labor. | Product. |
| Boots and shoes..... | 12,486 | \$23,357,627 | \$42,728,174 | 94,512 | 28,514 | \$30,938,080 | \$91,889,298 |
| Gloves..... | 126 | 594,825 | 537,589 | 453 | 976 | 330,419 | 1,176,795 |
| Leather belting..... | 46 | 588,000 | 915,271 | 329 | 25 | 134,952 | 1,481,750 |
| Morocco dressers.... | 136 | 2,331,250 | 3,896,522 | 2,371 | 331 | 924,308 | 6,291,075 |
| Patent leather..... | 12 | 1,039,000 | 1,395,400 | 865 | .. | 317,460 | 2,101,250 |
| Saddles and harness.. | 3,695 | 6,616,034 | 6,726,344 | 12,443 | 337 | 4,333,041 | 14,604,328 |
| Tanners and curriers. | 5,040 | 35,655,370 | 44,520,737 | 22,622 | 57 | 6,933,740 | 67,306,452 |
| Total..... | 21,541 | \$70,182,106 | \$100,720,037 | 133,595 | 30,240 | \$43,912,000 | \$184,850,948 |

The total value was thus raised to \$184,850,948. The value produced by the tanners and curries was \$67,306,452. Of this leather so produced, the harness-makers and shoe-makers used \$49,454,588. The tanneries lie at the foundation of the whole. They use the skin and hides of animals slaughtered in the whole country, and require in addition, an average of some 5,000,000 of foreign hides, imported mostly from Central and South America, and the British East Indies, to make good the demand. The census of 1840 gave the sides of sole leather tanned at 3,463,611, and of upper leather 3,781,868,

The supply of hides in the country originally was derived mostly, if not altogether, from the slaughter of animals for food. Tanneries were started where bark, mostly hemlock, was easily accessible. In the neighborhood of the larger cities, foreign hides became the main resource. Thus, in 1858, the value imported was \$9,719,683, as follows: Boston and Salem, \$3,290,555; New York \$5,629,027; Philadelphia, \$377,635; Baltimore, \$422,466. Importers of hides sell to the tanners for cash or short time, and then tanning takes place in localities best suited to the combination of the materials. Boston is the largest leather market in the states: but there is not tanned in Massachusetts half the leather they use. They tan the upper leather; but sole leather is mostly tanned in New York. The hides imported at Boston and Salem are sold to the New York dealers, by them supplied to the tanners, and then resoled to the boot-makers of Massachusetts. One reason of this is, no doubt, that the newly opened counties of New York supply more and cheaper bark than can be had elsewhere. When the Erie railroad was opened through the southern tier of the counties, tanneries rapidly increased along its line.

The rapid rate at which shoes and boots are made and worn, far exceeds the increase of cattle and hides; and the census returns do not obtain any thing like the quantities that are made in the large cities, where the numbers of very poor foreign shoe-makers are large. The census of 1855 24,804 boot and shoe-makers in the state of New York, while the United States census of 1850 gave but 10,439 in the state. This difference, to some extent, no doubt, grew out of the large migration, there being among the emigrants very many shoe-makers who work very cheap and well.

[For more information on vegetable tanning of the civil War please follow this link](#)

All this information was taken from a book called Eighty Years' Progress of The United States: A Family Record of American Industry, Energy, and Enterprise Published By L. Stebbins, Hartford, Conn. 1867



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Remember that no matter how bad the day is there is always one bright spot and he is Christ

2 Corinthian 12:9&10

And He said unto me, *My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.* Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.