

The History of Jewelry Manufacturing in the US

When we think of “Vintage” Jewelry, it must bring to mind Providence Rhode Island and Attleboro, Mass, the home of the American Jewelry Industry.

Just why the silver smiths’ settled in Providence is probably a matter of convenience to the seas and boats which brought them raw materials and buyers as well.

Famous Immigrants: After immigrating to Providence in 1784, the Dodge brothers pioneered the manufacturing of jewelry. They are credited with inventing a less expensive process to apply a gilt of gold over a less a base metal, such as copper plate. Using silver solder he hammered and rolled it becoming the first manufacturing jeweler. This was also known as “soft solder”.

Famous Apprentice: The Dodge brothers’ most famous apprentice was Jabez Gorham, the founder of the **Gorham** company beginning with a small shop on Main Street, a now an internationally known company for its silver wear.

Rolled Gold: Thomas Lowe arrived in Providence in 1844 and brought with him the technique of forming rolled gold plate, which was first developed in Sheffield, England, a fusion of silver and copper, known as Sheffield Plate. Lowe used used the same technique with gold to create less expensive gold jewelry.

Costume – Fashion Jewelry: In the 1850s with the development of electroplating, Providence and nearby Attleboro had an hold on the technology for the production of “costume” jewelry and many of these factories still carry on this work. By 1890, Providence reportedly had more than 200 jewelry manufacturers employing a large population from Rhode Island and supplying the markets of New York and beyond.

The Luther Brothers (factory pictured on right) introduced the stud-wire machine and electroplating process for novelty items and shirt studs, buttons, badges, and numerous articles for the “findings” industry, components of earrings, backings for brooches , clasps for bracelets and necklaces..

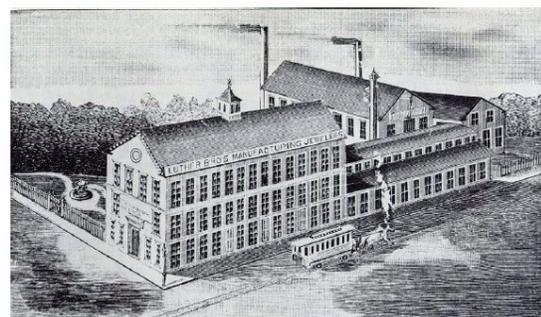
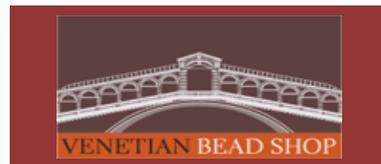


Fig. 24. Luther Brothers Factory (1866 and later), Oxford Street, engraving, 1897. This company was an innovative leader in production equipment and jewelry boxes. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society. RIS 52 2046.

Levi Burdon established the seamless-filled-wire production . They brought all the items we use today into production and at prices the average person could afford. No longer was jewelry limited to the ultra rich.

Famous Designers: Among the early designers whose names we all recall or still see in the jewelry cases of stores, Alfred Philippe, Marcel Boucher, Balfour (famous for class rings).



The behind the scenes producers of the individual components “findings”, the jump ring, the ear wire, lobster claw still manufacturer their components used by all of us in jewelry, like Guyot and Sons who filed patents on many elements we still use, like the snap clutches and the production of filigree. The chain manufacturers were also busy producing equipment, goods and patents.

Ups and Downs: The industry suffered in all the economic downturns and wars with a major blow to the industry when the American stock market crashed in 1929 drying up the demand for jewelry in the more expensive carat segment. The market rebounded in the 30’s for even more inexpensive jewelry.

Jewelry Makers to War Supplies: During WWII, the need for the metals again crippled the industry as these materials were diverted to national defense.. Many firms survived only by converting their tooling to producing items needed for the war. As many of their workers were women, they had a ready trained work force. After the war, they returned to producing intricate pieces for jewelry.

Providence Museum: The Providence Jewelry District was placed on the National Registry of Historic Place in 1985. The Providence Jewelry Museum is the work of Peter Discristofaro, who has spent 3 decades trying to preserve the tools and history of this American industry.

For more on this, watch Hugo Kohl and Peter’s youtube videos

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rISSQ9Jr_6I

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFb00Q-pVMxo>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI7p_IH_3Tw

or here’s the complete list of Hugo’s videos: <http://www.youtube.com/user/hugokohljewelry/videos>

Online Resources:

- [American Costume Jewelry](#) by Juliet Friedman
- [History of the Guyot Brothers](#)
- [Chicago Silversmith](#)
- [History of Providence](#)

Other Resources:

Becker, Vivienne *Fabulous Costume Jewelry: History of Fantasy and Fashion in Jewels*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 1997

Cera, Deanna Farneti, ed. *Jewels of Fantasy: Costume Jewelry of the 20th Century*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishing, 1992

- Fishel, Carlton *Oral history project of the fashion industries ; v. 35, pt.1-2: Carlton Fishel, Louis Krussman, Trifari, Inc. New York: Fashion Institute of Technology, 1982*

Weisberg, Alfred *Why Providence?: how did it become the jewelry center of the*



U.S?: an introduction to the first 100 years. Providence, R.I.: Technic, Inc., 1988

- *Weisberg Naida D., ed. Diamonds are Forever, but Rhinestones are for Everyone! An oral history of the costume jewelry industry of Rhode Island. Providence, R.I.: The Providence Jewelers Museum, 1999*
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