

American Hard Rubber Company

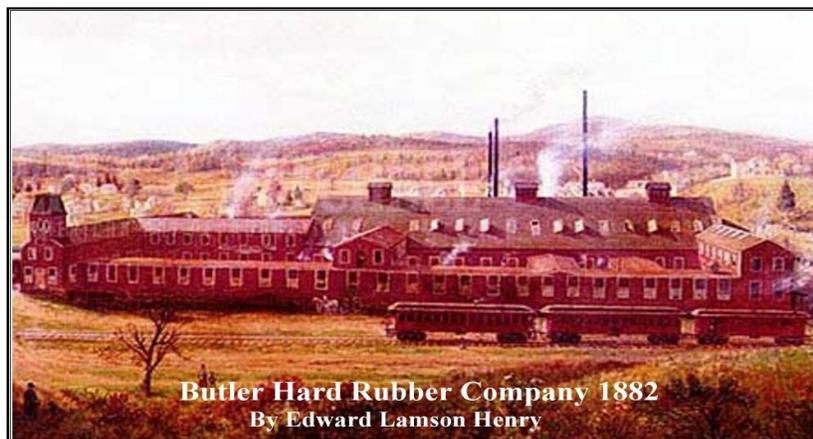
Butler, NJ

Butler's rubber industry was born in 1869 when Dr. Newbrough, a New York City dentist, and Horace Day started the Day Rubber Company. For a short time, the company manufactured dental gum. Dr. Newbrough bought out Mr. Day and renamed the company the Newbrough Hard Rubber Company. Plans were made to expand the factory and enlarge the raceway that provided power to the plant, but after a short period of time, the company was absorbed by the Union Vulcanite Company. This company, in turn, was taken over by the Rubber Comb and Jewelry Company in 1876, owned by S.S. Sonneborn and Meyer Dittenhoefer. These enterprising young men imported William Kiel, a German engineer, and perhaps the most respected man in the rubber industry at that time, to run their factory. Kiel would later become Butler's first mayor.

In 1879, Dittenhoefer left the firm and purchased an interest in a company making colored rubber and Sonneborn took on a new partner, Richard Butler. Mr. Butler became the president and general manager of Rubber Comb & Jewelry, with an office at 33 Mercer Street in New York City. Butler handled the merchandising of products and Mr. Sonneborn, the treasurer of the company, was the factory manager at the Butler plant.

At the time, West Bloomingdale boasted perhaps a dozen modest homes and farms. The town's growth paralleled the growth of the rubber company. By 1879, there had been a considerable influx of people into the area seeking employment at the factory. Housing was at a minimum, so the company started purchasing property surrounding the plant. They built homes on both sides of Gifford Street and made them available for purchase by workers on an installment plan for \$350. Five hundred dollars would buy a larger corner house.

In 1882, Rubber Comb & Jewelry was renamed the Butler Hard Rubber Company and Richard Butler remained the president of the new company. In 1883, when William Kiel became superintendent, many new methods of manufacturing as well as products were introduced, greatly increasing business. His notable inventions in the art of rubber compounding and improvements to machinery greatly increased productivity and profitability.



When the first rubber plant opened in Butler, 150,000,000 gallons of water flowed down the Pequannock River per day. After the construction of the Oak Ridge Reservoir, 100,000,000 gallons per day were siphoned off to supply the city of Newark. The result was that all the mills downstream that depended on the river for power lost their main source of water. Fortunately, by that time, an alternate source of power was available. Companies compensated by installing steam engines. In 1885, a new 500 H.P. Watts and Campbell engine was installed at the Butler plant and a 175 ft. brick chimney was constructed. By 1890 most of the company's old wooden factory had been replaced by modern brick buildings.

In 1898, the Butler Hard Rubber Company, the India Rubber Comb Company, and the Goodyear Hard Rubber, once arch rivals, merged to form a new corporation called the American Hard Rubber Company. First chosen as vice president, Richard Butler later assumed the office of president. Before his death in 1902, Mr. Butler gave permission for his name to be used when the new Borough of Butler was carved out of Pequannock Township. (Biographies of Richard Butler and William Kiel can be found in *Stories About Butler.*)

At that time, the factory was making a variety of products including pocket combs, magneto and distributor parts, telephone receivers, and parts for electric storage batteries. Hard rubber's insulation and chemical resistance qualities were in great demand by other industries. The plant was enlarged and modernized during World War I and, for some time afterward, production of all types greatly increased. New items were constantly being added to the product line. Cutlery handles, smoking pipe tips, cigarette holders, fountain pen parts, steering wheels, storage battery containers, and many other items made by the company were all in high demand.

The effect that the company had on the Borough of Butler is indicated by the change in the number of employees. In 1888 there were about 675 workers on the payroll. From 1900 up to the outbreak of World War I, the number jumped to about 900. From the outbreak of war in 1914 to Armistice Day in 1918, war orders necessitated an increase to approximately 1,600 employees. The number dropped off to about 900 after the war. Similar changes in the number of personnel took place during World War II. In 1950 there were 950 people working at the Butler plant.

During World War II, the factory was busy making submarine battery containers, microporous separators and other battery parts, rubber lined tanks and pipes, pistol grips, rifle stock plates, and dozens more war materials. Business was booming and local merchants prospered along with the company.



A major area employer in the 1950's, the American Hard Rubber Company went through many changes after 1953. In 1955 the production of Ace Combs, which had been made at the Butler plant since the 1800's, was moved to a new factory in Booneville, Arkansas. In 1957, a merger took place with the Wardell Corporation and the Bachmann Uxbridge Corporation and the name of the parent company was changed to the Amerace Corporation. The American Hard Rubber Company became a division within the new company along with six other divisions. Corporation sales increased from \$15 million in 1953 to \$50 million in 1962. Also in 1957, a new office and laboratory complex was built on Ace Road in the borough.

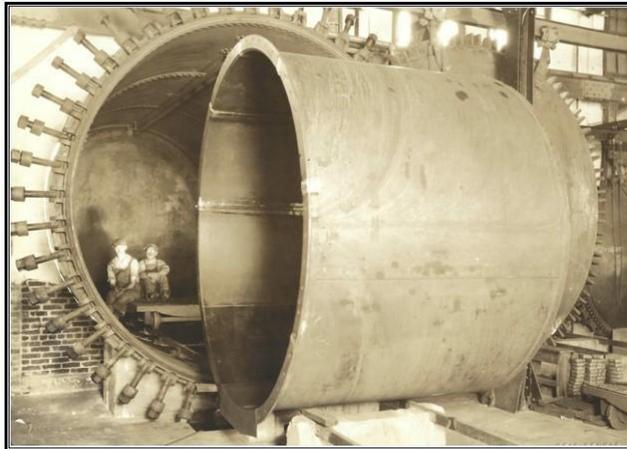
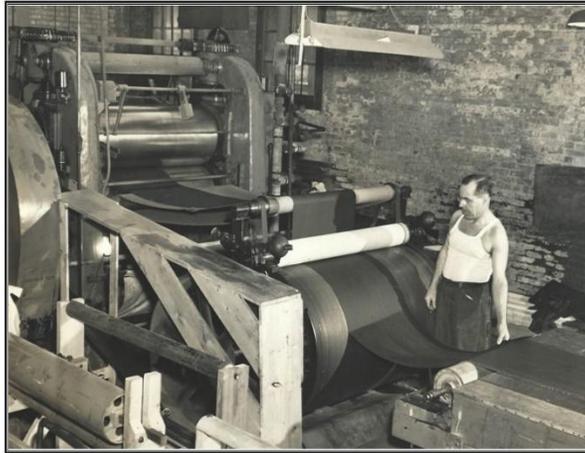
On February 26, 1957, Butler's second largest employer, the Pequanoc Rubber Company, was destroyed by fire. It was the largest industrial fire in the nation that year and a major blow to the community with a loss of over 400 jobs. Pequanoc Rubber supplied steam not only for their own factory, but also for American Hard. Its steam plant was damaged in the fire, but not destroyed. Operations at American Hard were halted until the power was restored about a month later. (See more information about the Pequanoc Rubber Company in *Stories About Butler*.)

In 1966, the name American Hard Rubber was dropped as a division of Amerace. It was replaced by the name Molded Products Division to avoid the term "hard rubber," a material that was rapidly being replaced by plastics and polymers. In 1969, Amerace's 36 manufacturing plants and half dozen subsidiaries employed more than 7,400 workers, about 500 of them at the Butler plant. In 1973 the Johnson City, Tennessee factory took over the manufacture of Ace-Sil separators, a major product of the Butler Plant. Bowling ball production had previously been relocated to the Booneville, Arkansas facility.



The writing was on the wall for the Butler factory. It had been losing money for five years, and in early 1974, the decision was made to close the plant. It became a victim of increased competition, growing environmental protection regulations, deteriorating facilities, and rising modernization costs. On September 1, 1974, after over 100 years of the production of rubber products in Butler, the mill was closed. By that time, the employee count was down to about 400, many of whom had worked for the company for multiple decades and were near retirement.

For years, Butler had served as a business and financial center for area towns that sent their citizens to work in its mills. Factories paid more than 30% of the town's taxes, keeping property taxes low. Butler was a good place to live and work. The loss of both rubber mills had a disastrous effect on the town's economy. Empty storefronts began to appear on what had once been a bustling Main Street and taxes went up because of the loss of ratables. It took years for the town to adjust and recover.





The Ace Road complex, which had been expanded in 1971, was kept open after the plant closed and was used as administrative offices and research and development for the Molded Products Division. That too was closed in 1984.

The Borough of Butler had outgrown its old Town Hall and, for a price of approximately \$500,000, they purchased the Ace Road property. The site now houses the Borough Municipal Building, the Library, the Council Chambers, and the Health Department. A Senior Citizen Apartment Building and a playground were also built on the property.



The site of the former factory on Main Street is now known as Butler Center and houses over fifty small businesses and light industries.



RUBBER COMPANY REUNION — An American Hard Rubber Co. alumni reunion party was held at the home of Cornelius Hubner of Kinnelon. The 28 former employees of the Butler company who attended the party were Hubner, Eugene Smith, Chris Hirth, Art Larson, Patsy Squitieri, Ed Rodda, Arnold Card, Larry Johnson, Al Starets, Asa Davenport, Earldon Maxfield, Leon Parker, Ward

Kimble, Cam Vechiotti, Leonard Tintle, Ernest Tintle, Harry Vreeland, Anthony Rizzo, E. Annesley Wade, Harry Cato, James Smith, Harold Jones, Chester Kimble, Raymond Struble, William Van Houten, Herman Squitieri, Robert A. Poole, and John A. Van Luvender.

Suburban Trends Sept. 18, 1988

Sources: *Butler In Story and Pictures, 1951-2001*, *Suburban Trends June 15, 1969*, *Suburban Trends June 18, 1978*, *Suburban Trends April 29, 1979*, *Paterson Morning Call July 14, 1949*, *The Hard Rubber Industry at Butler NJ by George J. Fritz 1940*, *Suburban Trends Aug. 7, 1974*, *Suburban Trends Sept. 1, 1974*, *Suburban Trends Sept. 18, 1988*

