

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).

1. Name of Property

historic name McKee Button Company

other names/site number McKee and Bliven Button Company

Name of Multiple Property Listing N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

street & number 1000 Hershey Avenue not for publication

city or town Muscatine vicinity

state Iowa county Muscatine zip code 52761

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this x nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance: x national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: x A B C D

Signature of certifying official>Title: Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Date

State Historical Society of Iowa

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register

 determined eligible for the National Register

 determined not eligible for the National Register

 removed from the National Register

 other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

McKee Button Company

Name of Property

Muscatine County, Iowa

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Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph (Briefly describe the current, general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

The McKee Button Company is located along the railroad tracks and Mississippi River approximately seven blocks to the southwest of downtown Muscatine in Muscatine County, Iowa (Figure 1). The building sits between Hershey Avenue to the north and the railroad tracks, levee, and Mississippi River to the south/southeast (Figure 2). The site was chosen for this location, with railroad side tracks specifically built to the factory to ship in shells and ship out finished buttons. The three-story brick button factory constructed in 1907 reflects the Romanesque Revival style, including its arch openings, pilasters, symmetrical design, parapet treatment, and overall massing. The design is more refined than most factory/industrial buildings of this period. Several additions were built towards the railroad tracks within five years of the original construction, serving primarily as storage and shipping spaces (Figures 3-4). These additions have been remodeled to various degrees, and one newer addition was constructed in 1993. The property was utilized by McKee Button Company from 1907 to 2019 for the manufacture of buttons. The building is currently in the process of being vacated, as the factory operations shut down in late 2019. The property has been maintained over its years of operation, and it is in good condition. Overall, the McKee Button Company retains overall good integrity, as further discussed at the end of this section.

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable.)

(Iowa SHPO Additional Instructions: After the main **Narrative Description**, discuss any physical alterations since the period of significance under the subheading **Alterations**, and the seven aspects of integrity as it applies to the resource in a **Statement of Integrity** with each aspect discussed in its own paragraph.)

The McKee Button Company is located on the south side of Hershey Ave, sited at an angle so that the building is parallel to the railroad tracks that run parallel to the Mississippi River. The site is located to the southwest of downtown Muscatine on the former land of Hershey Lumber Company. The property historically has had industrial uses to its west and residential uses to its north, with commercial buildings and residences then mixed along Hershey Ave / W. Mississippi Drive to the east/northeast as the corridor approaches downtown Muscatine. The railroad tracks, levee, and Mississippi River are found to the south/southeast. For the purposes of the description, the side facing Hershey Ave is described as the "north" side (faces north-northwest) and the side facing the railroad tracks is described as the "south" side (faces south-southeast). Thus, the "east" end (east-northeast) faces towards downtown Muscatine. This Romanesque brick building was built in 1907 into a slight hill, with entry from ground level on the north side between the first two stories. While the lower/first story is partially underground on the north side, it is ground level on the south side. Thus, the lower level is noted as the first story (historically by the company and within this form), the main level is noted as the second story, and the upper level is noted as the third story. The levels of the additions/sections to the south then align with these descriptions of the main brick factory building. The main factory building and its additions occupy the majority of the property associated with the building complex, with a parking lot between the building and Hershey Ave to the north. Several historic additions/sections are found to the south of the main building, constructed along the railroad tracks (Figures 3-4). These additions primarily date to construction within the first five years of the factory construction in 1907, as noted on Figure 4 and within the description below. The overall footprint of the building complex is similar to the footprint in 1912/1913, as depicted on historic maps and drawings of the property (Figures 5, 27, 29-30). While the additions occupy a large footprint, they are primarily one story in height, and the main three-story brick factory building is the dominant feature of the property, particularly when traveling along Hershey Avenue (Figure 6).

McKee Button Company

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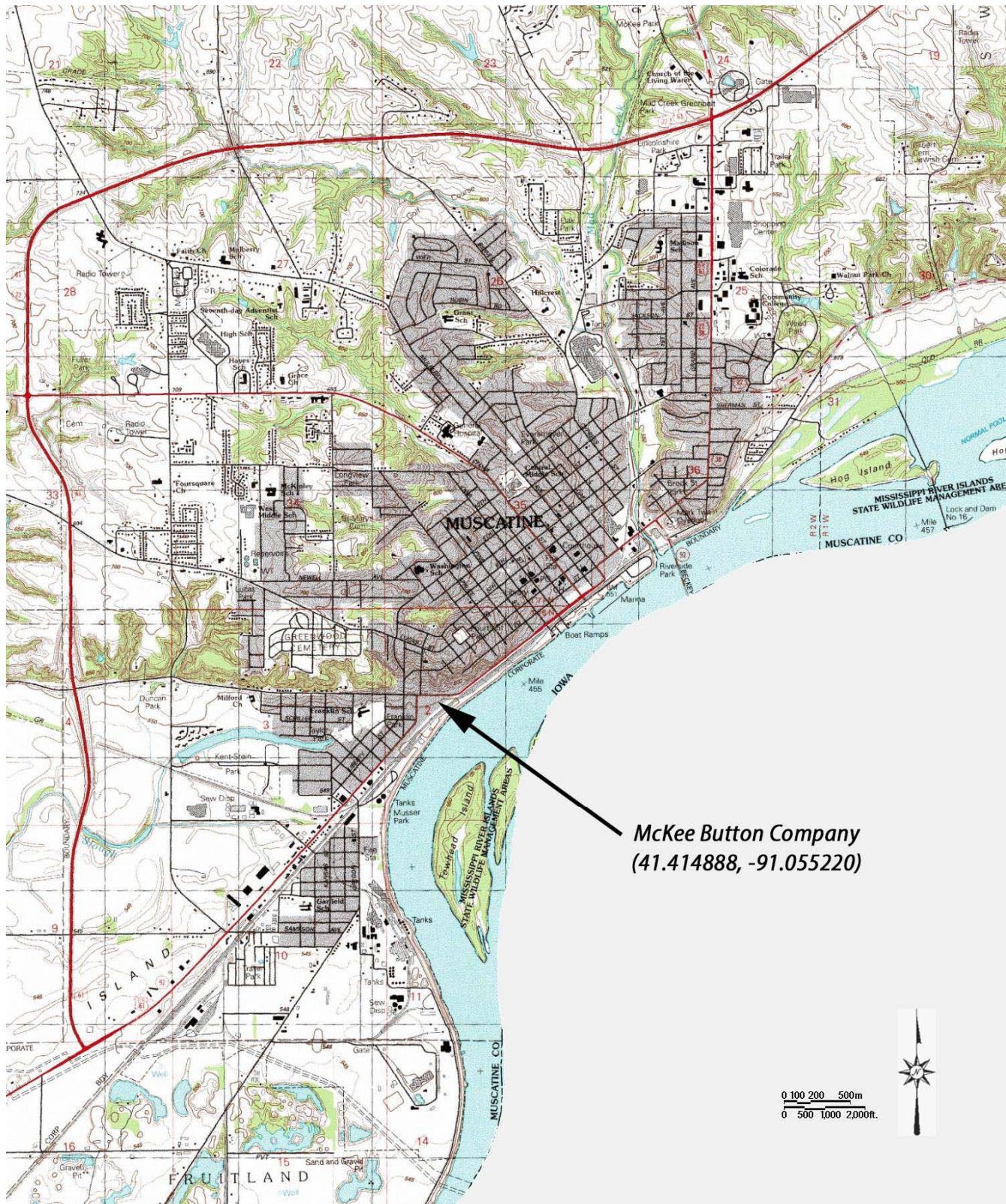


Figure 1. Location map showing McKee Button Company in southwest Muscatine.
(base map: Muscatine, USGS topographic quadrangle map)

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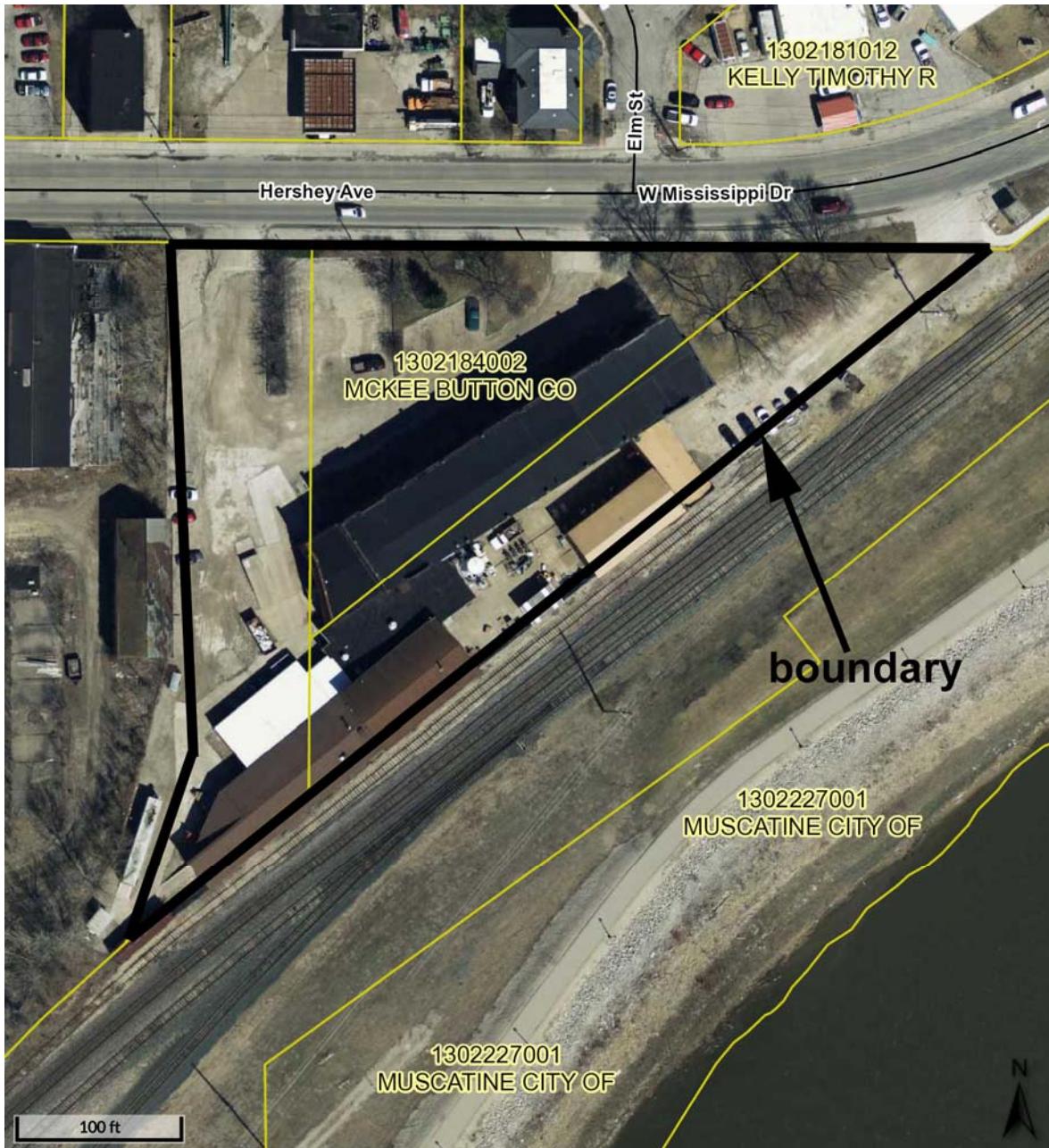
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Figure 2. Location map showing McKee Button Company in southwest Muscatine.
(2014 base aerial photography, Muscatine Area Geographic Information Consortium)

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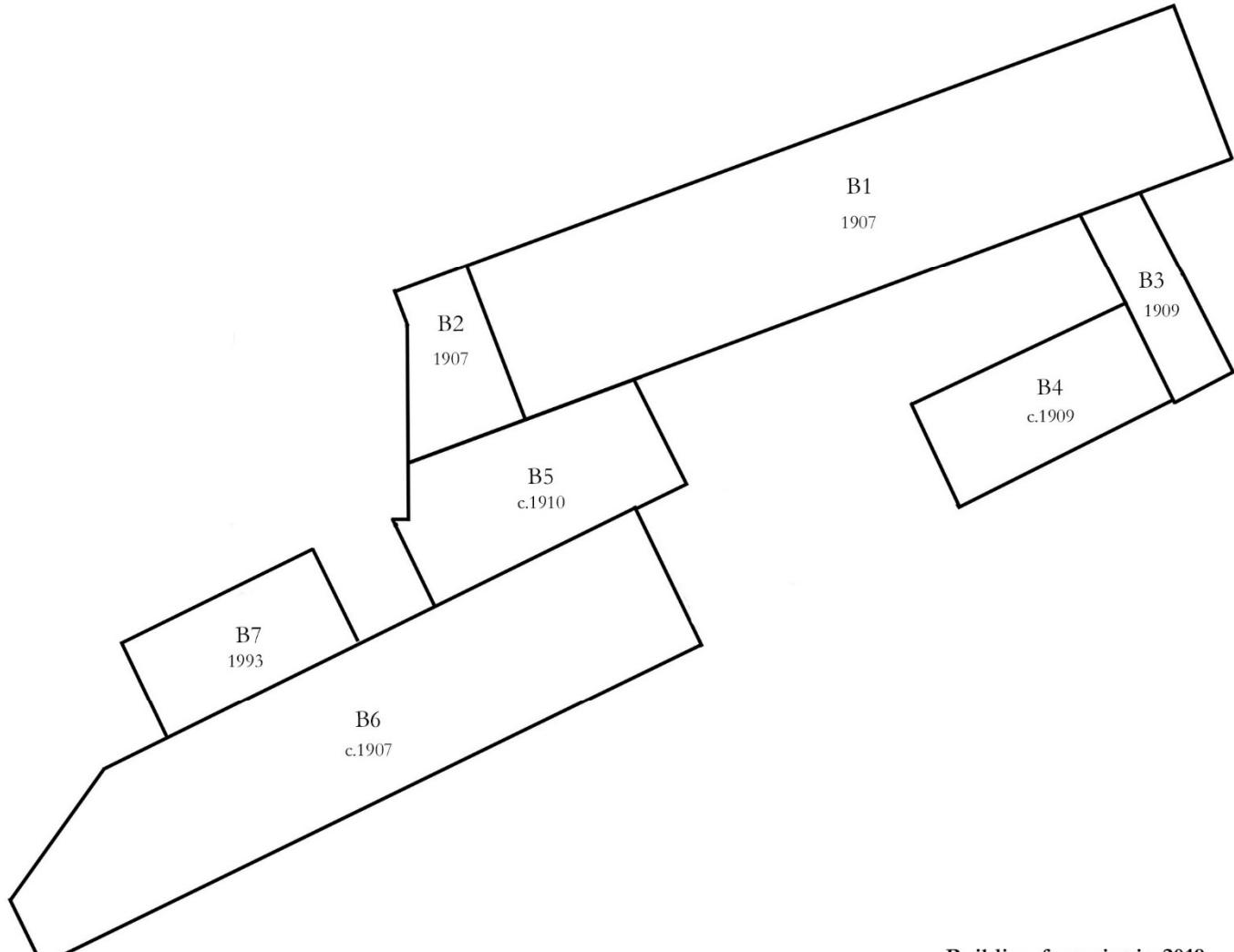
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**Figure 3. Site plan for McKee Button Company, with National Register boundary (McCarley 2019).
(2014 base aerial photography, Muscatine Area Geographic Information Consortium)**

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Building footprint in 2019
McKee Button Company
Muscatine, Muscatine Co, IA
R.L. McCarley, SPARK Consulting
October 2019 / February 2020
Scale: roughly 1" = 50'

Figure 4. Building footprint of McKee Button Company in 2019 including main factory (B1) and various additions, with labels added to key to narrative description (McCarley 2019).

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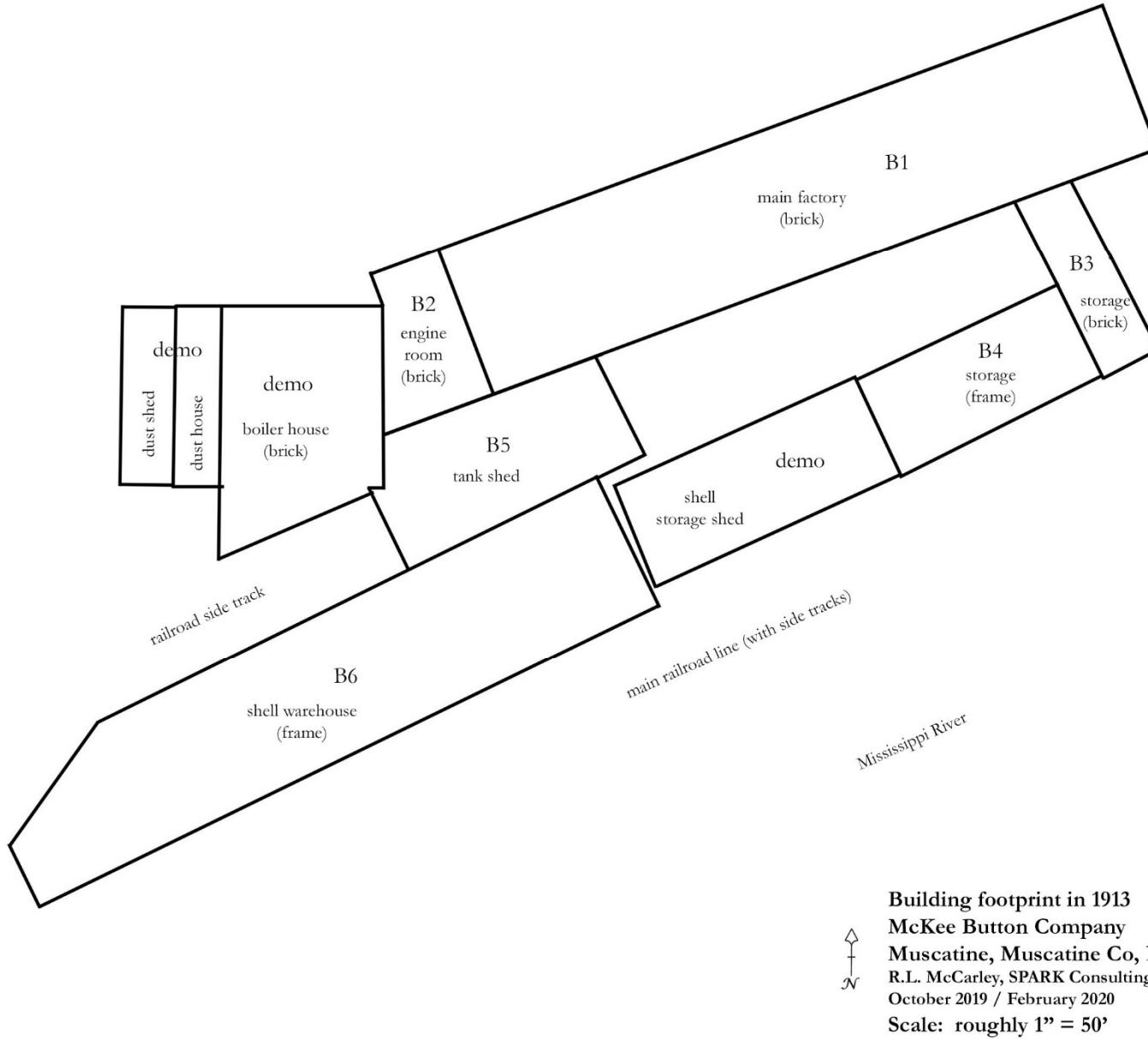


Figure 5. Building footprint of McKee Button Company in 1913 including main factory (B1) and various additions, with labels added to key to narrative description (McCarley 2019).

drawn from sprinkler system installation drawings, General Fire Extinguishing Company, Chicago, IL (McKee collection)
see also Figures 29-30 in Section 8

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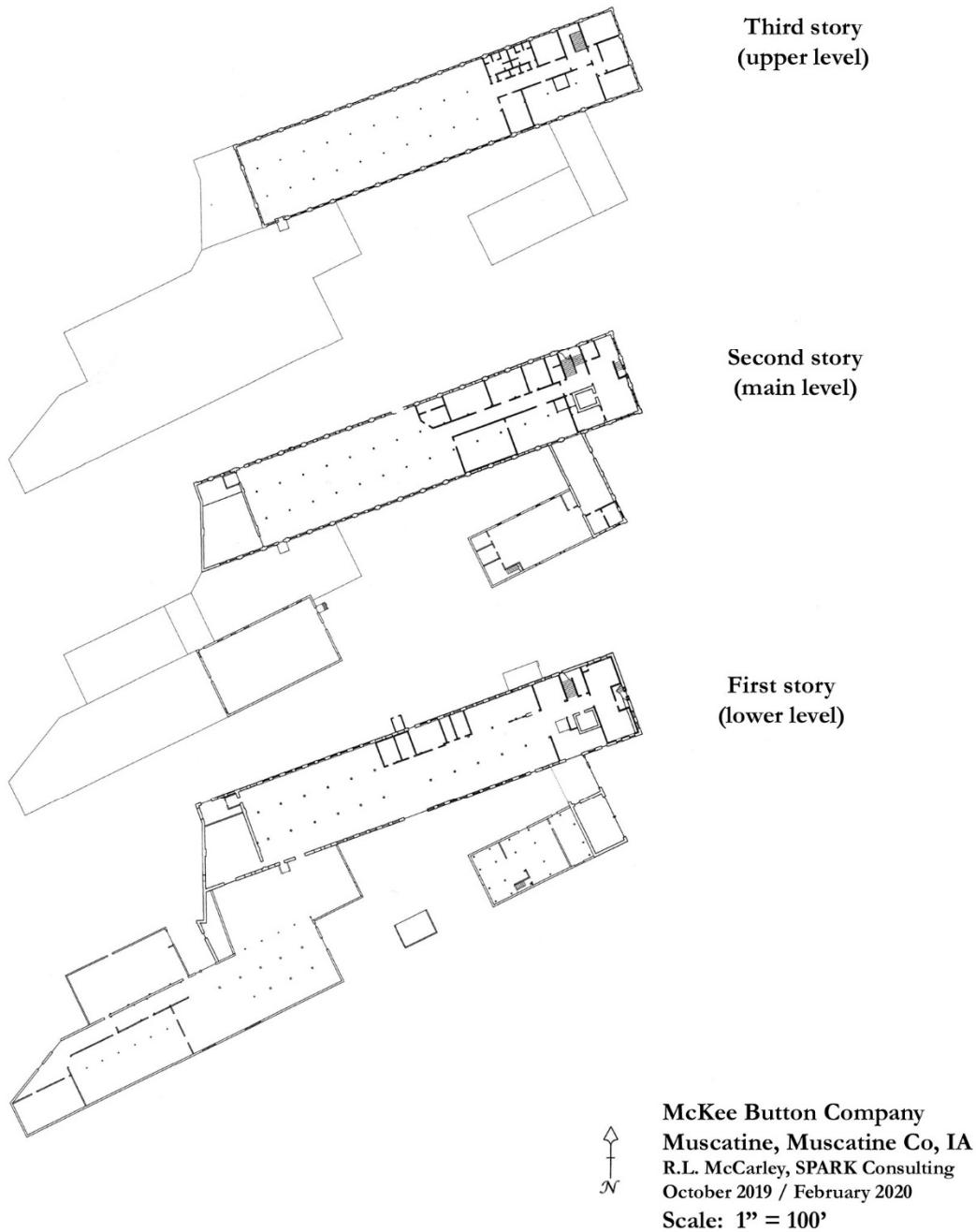


Figure 6. Overview of floor plans for McKee Button Company in 2019 (McCarley 2019).

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Main factory building (B1)

The main three-story brick Romanesque Revival building (B1) was constructed in 1907 as the largest pearl button factory in Muscatine, as well as reportedly the largest freshwater pearl button factory in the world.¹ The entry and office area are located at the east end of the building, with factory space then stretching to the west. The building measures approximately 225 by 48 feet, thus encompassing 32,400 square feet of space over the three stories for main factory and office operations alone. The east end of the building (B1) is the main "face" towards downtown Muscatine with the main office entry historically, and the main factory entry is along the north side. The east elevation is divided into three sections/bays by pilasters and the taller decorative parapet on the center section that reflects the Romanesque Revival style. The center bay has a tall arch entry, which has a wood door, sidelights, and covered upper section currently. This entry is not currently used, with the north entry serving as the main entry. Two arch windows with replacement single-light arch windows are located above the entry. The bays to either side of the center section of the east end have large arch window openings on the first story, with a wider single-over-single-light double-hung center window and narrower single-over-single-light double-hung side windows. The tops of the windows are curved to follow the arch opening. The windows have been replaced, but they match the original wood windows. The third story (upper level) has two windows with segmental arch brick lintels that have replacement single-light windows on each of the side bays. Historic photographs show six-over-six-light double-hung wood windows on the third story.

The north side of the main factory building (B1), facing Hershey Ave, is divided into 16 sections/bays by brick pilasters, and each section/bay generally has two windows. The east bay has a large arch window opening on the second story (main level), which is covered by wood panels. A smaller rectangular window has been inserted for the interior office. The third story (upper level) of this east bay has two replacement single-light windows, which match the windows on the east end. The main factory entry is located in the second bay, which has a taller Romanesque Revival parapet to distinguish this bay. The second bay from the west end also has a decorative taller parapet, providing symmetry with the east end. Brick "chimneys" with decorative tops are located generally every other bay on this elevation stretching to the west. While the entry doors have been replaced, the entry retains its large arch opening, transom window, and wide opening with framing for two sets of double doors. The entry enters the building at the ground level, with stairs up to the second story (main level) and down to the first story (lower level). The third story (upper level) above the main entry has two arch windows with replacement single-light arch windows. A wood deck was added in 1988 to the west of the entry on this elevation to provide a break area. The windows throughout this north side in the 14 bays extending to the west generally have translucent panels that cover the openings, installed between 1987 and 1990 (depending on story/opening). The windows retain their brick window hoods and brick sills. The original wood sashes appear to remain in place behind these panels on the majority of the windows, with portions visible for light on the interior and others covered on the interior as well. Historic photographs show six-over-six-light double-hung wood windows on the first story (with six-light windows in the smaller openings at the east end), nine-over-nine-light double-hung wood windows on the second story, and six-over-six-light double-hung wood windows on the third story. On the first story level, there is a door in the ninth bay, with a small addition that covers stairs to a sprinkler room under the first story level. A metal fire escape then extends up to the west to the second and third story levels. The first story windows in the bays to the west have louvers inserted on the lower half in most of the window openings. The last (16th) bay at the west end has a vent

¹ This statement is noted throughout the articles on the original construction in 1907, as well as articles on the company from the 1910s to 1940s, as cited throughout the history outlined in Section 8. Additionally, while exhaustive research has not been completed on every freshwater pearl button company ever to exist, the claim appears valid through research completed for this nomination on other extant buildings related to the freshwater pearl button industry and other major pearl button companies. The freshwater pearl button industry was nationally focused on Muscatine in 1907, and it was noted in 1919 as a uniquely American industry. This building was the largest in Muscatine and Iowa devoted to the production of freshwater pearl buttons, and it appears to have been likewise the largest in the country built for the freshwater pearl button industry.

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hood inserted. The windows in the third and fourth bays were slightly shortened on the second story level, associated with interior bathroom spaces. The last (16th) bay at the west end has a door that has been replaced, with a set of metal stairs leading down to the west. The third story level has a door in the 12th bay, leading out to the top of the fire escape. The two-story boiler/engine room (B2) then continues to the west.

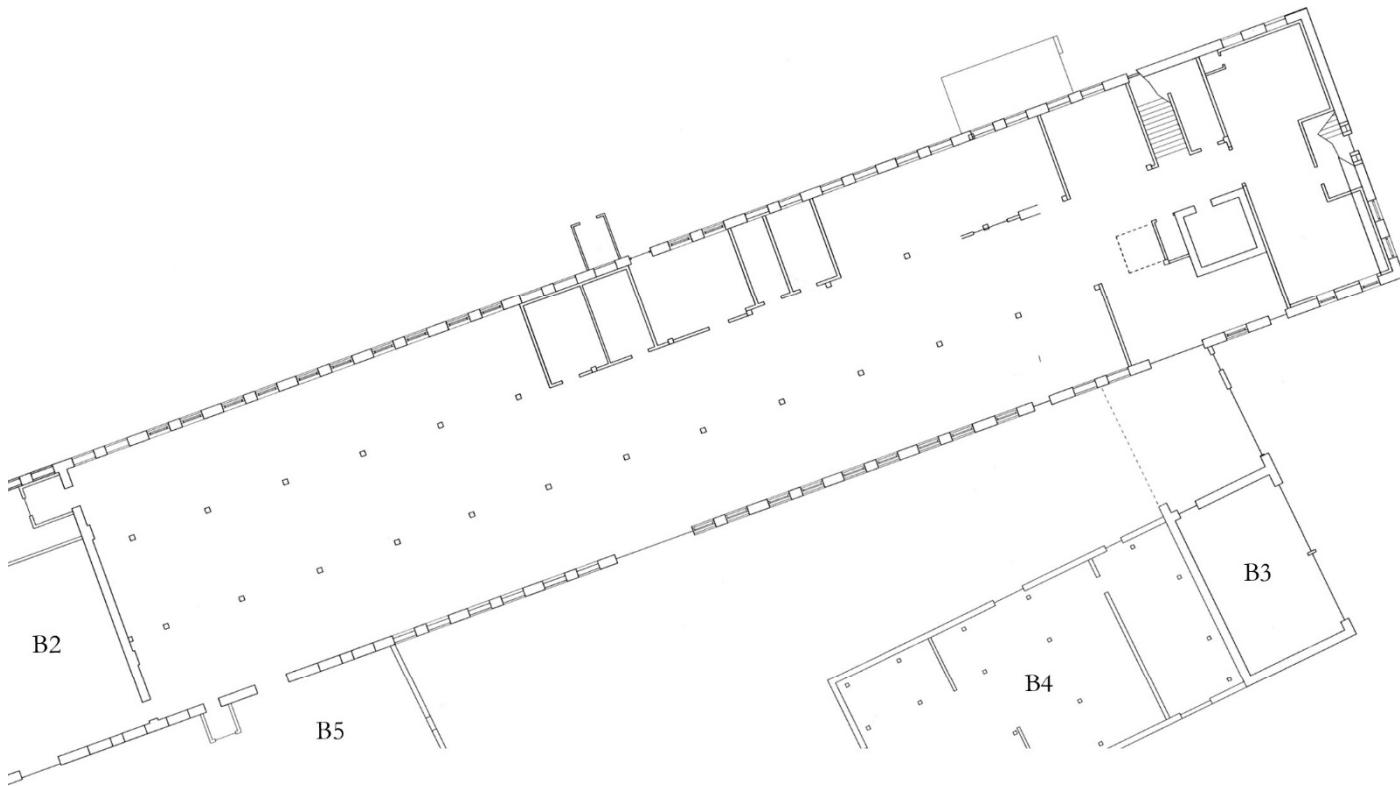
The south side of the main factory building (B1) faces the courtyard created by the south additions/sections of the building complex, as well as having views of the Mississippi River over the levee on the upper two levels. The overall design of the south side of the main portion of the building appears identical to the north side. The south elevation is likewise divided into 16 bays/sections by pilasters, with two windows generally in each bay. The second bay from either end has a taller decorative Romanesque Revival parapet, and brick "chimneys" located between every other bay. The east two bays of the building, associated with the office end of the second story on the interior, are visible on the east side of the original brick section that extended south to the tracks. In numbering the bays from east to west to align with the north elevation, the first bay from the east end has two replacement one-over-one-light double-hung aluminum windows on the first story (lower level). A large arch window identical to the ones on the east end is located on the second story (main level), with a wider center double-hung window and small side double-hung windows. This window was also replaced, but it also matches the original window. The third story (upper level) has replacement single-light windows. The second bay has an entry and a window covered by a translucent panel (six-over-six-light wood window visible on interior) on the first story level. The second story level has two tall segmental arch window openings, with wood paneling also covering these openings. A smaller rectangular window has been inserted in the left/south one, associated with the interior office. The second bay of the third story has a single-light window on the right/north and a replacement one-over-one-light double-hung window on the left/south. The third bay then has the two-story brick section (B3) that extends to the south, which was originally open on the first story and connected on the second story. The first story of the main building has a large opening under the "bridge," and the second story has a door into the bridge section. This entry was originally a large arch opening, visible from the interior of this section. The third story of the main factory building is then visible above this section, again with a single-light window on the right/north and a replacement one-over-one-light double-hung window on the left/south, a pattern repeated again in the fourth bay. The remainder of the building (bays 4-16) are then visible from the interior courtyard creating by the various additions. The window openings retain their brick window hoods and brick sills throughout this elevation as well. The next (5th) bay on the first story level has door, and the next three bays (6-8) have a translucent panel on the upper half and boxed lower half. The ninth bay has small windows inserted into the lower half, and the 10th bay has a double-door entry with replacement doors into the courtyard area. The remaining bays to the west on the first story level generally have the dust collection system on the upper half and boxed lower half. The second story level has translucent panels covering the windows in the first four bays (bays 4-7). The remaining bays to the west (bays 8-15) generally have replacement aluminum windows, with an upper fixed half and lower one-over-one-light double-hung window. The last (16th) bay at the west end has a freight elevator with interior door and a similar replacement window. The third story level on the south side has translucent panels covering the windows in the 5th bay. The remaining bays to the west (bays 6-15) generally have replacement one-over-one-light double-hung aluminum windows. The last (16th) bay at the west end has a freight elevator with interior door and covered window on the third story as well.

The west end of the main factory building (B1) is covered on the first two levels by the engine/furnace room (B2, see description after B1). The third story is visible above the boiler room section. It has a brick parapet with the higher center section, but it lacks the Romanesque detailing of the east end. There are no pilasters on this side either. The center section has two widely spaced windows, which are covered with wood panels. The bays to either side also have two windows each, which are covered with wood panel. The windows retain their brick window hoods and brick sills. This west end of the building is not easily visible from the west end of the building from ground level to the south of the additions to this end, and it is mostly visible from the sidewalk on the top of the levee to the south.

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The interior of the main brick building (B1) generally retains its historic layout, with the building primarily open space utilized for factory operations (Figures 6-9). Offices were historically and are currently located on the east end of the second story (main level). Two rows of support columns extend through the building, with the columns incorporated or adjacent to walls at the east end and open on the remainder of the building. The columns support large beams that run the length of the building, with joists then running across the width of the building. The square wood columns are larger on the first story (roughly 10 by 10 inches), smaller on the second story (roughly 8 by 8 inches), and yet smaller on the third story (roughly 6 by 6 inches). The rows of columns on each story were also utilized for mounting surfaces for belts for the machinery. The columns remain intact and visible on each story. Pilasters are also found on the exterior brick walls throughout the second and third story levels, supporting the roof structure.



First story (lower level)
McKee Button Company
Muscatine, Muscatine Co, IA
R.L. McCarley, SPARK Consulting
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Scale: 1" = 32'

Figure 7. First story (lower level) of main factory section of McKee Button Company.

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The main entry on the north side of the main factory building (B1) originally had two doors, with the east door leading to the upper two levels (office space, finishing/sorting departments (largely women)) and the west door leading to the lower level (blank cutting (men)). A historic five-panel wood door with transom divides the east half and the west half of the main entry space on the interior. The west half of the main entry continues to lead to stairs down to the first story (lower level), which was factory space historically (Figure 7). The wide wood stairs remain intact, along with simple metal handrails. The wall opposite the base of the stairs on the first story level retains the time card slots in the center, with a five-panel wood door at the left into the area under the vault (which has thick brick walls with arched ceiling) and a pair of narrow wood paneled doors at the right into a storage space. The freight elevator extends down immediately to the west, with storage space and a wide loading door to the south. The east end of the first story was remodeled for an employee break room in 1998, with walls furred out, windows covered or replaced, kitchen cabinets installed, and a utility closet space under the east stairs. Storage space also remains under the main stairs on the north side. A small room is subdivided to the west of the stairs, noted as the "churning" space on the 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps, likely for cleaning blanks. The remainder of the first story (lower level) was noted as "cutting blanks" on the Sanborn maps, as well as the east end. This section was later converted for the manufacture of plastic buttons. This lower level had a concrete floor, noted to be more "sanitary" than wood floors at the time of construction in 1907. The concrete floor was replaced in 1994 and 1997 with the current concrete floor. The brick walls have no baseboard, and the window openings are simple rounded openings. The interior brick is clad in plaster. Near the center of the north side, there is a large room (with six-over-six-light double-hung windows visible on the interior) with an exterior door, with two restrooms to the west. This section has tall historic baseboard on the plaster walls, indicating earlier construction. The doors to the rooms have been replaced and restrooms appear to have been remodeled in the 1950s or 1960s. Two smaller rooms appear added later at the east end, with shorter baseboard and modern doors. The remainder of the first story space remains open, with manufacturing of surfaces produced for McKee Surfaces primarily occupying the west half of this story in the 2010s.

The east half of the main entry into the main factory building (B1) on the north side leads up to the second story (main level) space (Figure 8). The wide wood stairs are retained, along with the simple metal handrail. The wood stairs are open leading to the third story, with a square newel post. Double paneled wood doors with a window and a transom window are found on the left/east of the main hall, leading into the main office space. The office space was remodeled for McKee Fashions in 1981, and then it was remodeled back to office space in 1984. An open office area spans the depth of the east end of the building, with a small office built into the northwest corner and enclosed with wood panels. Enclosed stairs from the east entry lead up on the center of the east wall, and it has a paneled wood door with a window. This configuration is noted on the 1913 plans for the sprinkler system. Window and door trim throughout this main office span is simple wood trim with a lintel detail, typical of the 1907 construction. The ceiling has pressed tin panels, and the floor is carpeted. A vault is found in the center of the west wall, with a large metal door (The Mosler Safe Co, Hamilton, OH). A metal safe is built into the vault on the south side (also from Mosler Safe Co). An entry to a private office is then found to the left/south of the vault. The single-door entry has sidelights that have been covered and transom windows that are painted. The private office has been remodeled, with a dropped ceiling. A paneled wood door leads to a small closet space that connects into a small bathroom (to the west of the vault) with a paneled wood door with a painted window and a transom window above it. This bathroom also has a shorter paneled wood door that leads into it from the main hall, opposite the stairs. A large panel is located above this door. The door is opposite a paneled wood door with a window and with a transom window above it that leads into a women's restroom. This space extends further to the west, creating a larger restroom space and cleaning closet. Paneled double wood doors with windows with narrow sidelights and a large four-light transom window are found at the west side of the main hall, leading into the hall to the main factory space on the second story. The hall side of the door has simple flat historic wood trim. The hall has tall wood wainscoting (about six feet) with plaster walls above it, tall ceiling with exposed floor joists, and a wood floor covered in square linoleum tiles. Two large rooms are found on the south side of the hall and a

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series of four spaces are found on the north side of the hall. The 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps list grinding and soaking in this portion of the building, noted on the map on the north side of the building. The first room on the south is a large shipping/storage space, including the freight elevator in the northeast corner. It has a wide double door opening from the main hall, and a door on the south wall that leads to the south brick extension (B3). The second room has a dropped ceiling and furred out walls to create a sanitary environment for the production of adult diapers with buttons for Proctor Gamble in this space. It connects with the shipping room and the main factory space, but not directly to the main hall. The first room on the north side is a larger women's restroom. It has a paneled wood door with a window with a transom window above it and simple flat historic wood trim. The second room is a larger conference room, which has a shorter door into the east end and then the main double-door entry with sidelights and a transom window (the original door into the main space, which may have been enclosed to include the space previously accessed by the smaller door). Two three-light hinged wood windows are found in the exterior window openings, behind the exterior translucent panels. The third room has a set of double doors with three windows that is currently used for

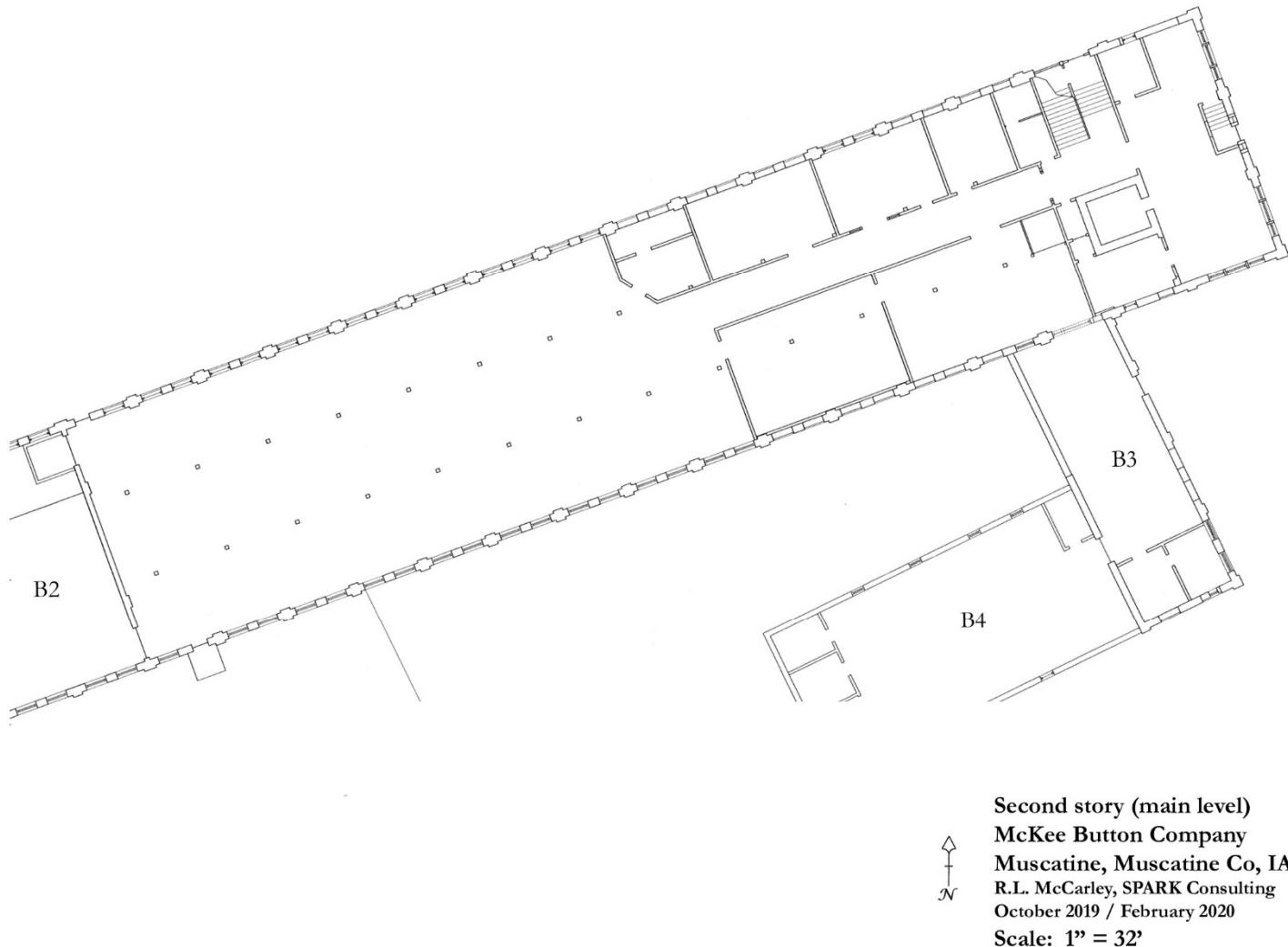


Figure 8. Second story (main level) of main factory section of McKee Button Company.

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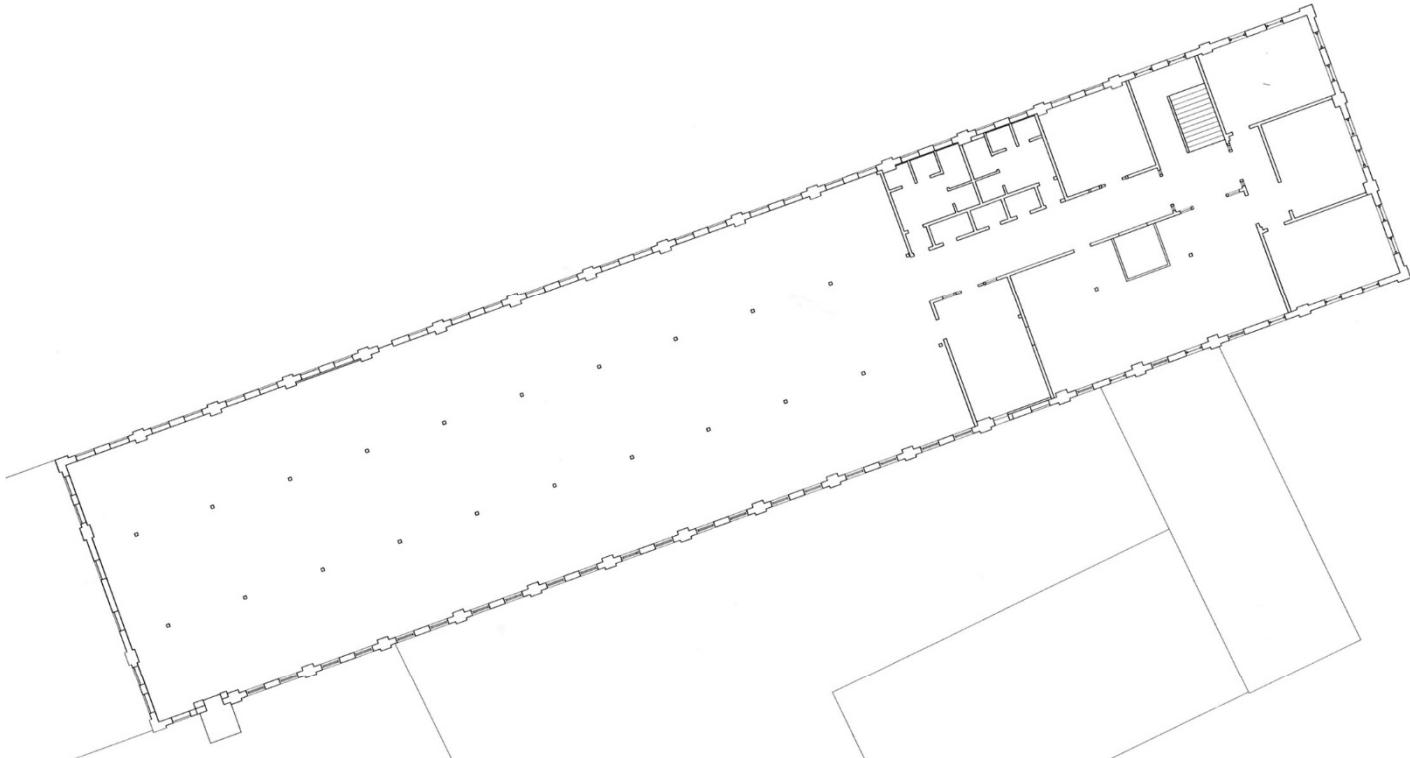
storage. Additional storage space is found at the west end with a room with an angled corner entry. The wood wainscoting of the hall continues around this corner, and the wood paneled door with window has a painted transom window as well. The remaining west half of the second story is open factory space, with two rows of columns. The 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps list automatic machines throughout this part of the second story, the process to finish buttons by facing them and drilling holes. The wood floor is laid diagonally at a 45-degree angle to the walls, and the ceiling is exposed floor joists. The brick walls are plaster with no baseboard and simple rounded window openings without any wood trim. The windows on the south side are generally replacement aluminum windows, and the windows on the north side are covered with wood with a hinged glass panel at the bottom for light. The lower three lights of the historic wood sash can be seen behind this panel on the majority of windows. A door at the west end of the south side leading into a small freight elevator on the exterior of the building. Double metal doors at the south part of the west end lead into the engine/furnace room (B2), and double metal doors on the north part of the west end lead into a freight elevator to a loading dock. A pedestrian door is also found at the west end of the north elevation, leading to exterior metal stairs.

The third story (upper level) of the main factory building (B1) is accessed by the main set of stairs at the east end of the building (Figure 9). The wood stairs continue to a landing with the windows of the north main entry arch transom and continue to the third story. The stairs are open with a historic wood railing and newel posts. The stairs retain a simple metal handrail on the wall. The stairs hall on the third story has diagonally laid wood flooring, plaster walls, and plaster ceilings. The hall has a set of double doors with transoms and sidelights on the east, south, and west sides of this space. The east set is paneled wood doors with a window, narrow sidelights with transoms, and a wide four-light transom window above the door. It leads into a space that spanned the depth of the building at the east end, which was remodeled for office space in 1981 when McKee Fashions moved into the second story space. The spaces retain exterior plaster walls and plaster ceiling, and carpet has been installed on the wood floor. The windows were replaced throughout this end, with interior boxed wood trim. The doors to the office have paneled wood doors with windows, with the middle office having a set of double doors. A wider opening connects the south end of the hall to the offices to the larger space across the south side. This space is accessed directly from the main/stairs hall through a set of paneled wood doors with windows, wide sidelights with two-light transoms, and a wide four-light transom window. This room has the freight elevator along the north wall, protruding into the space. The room has tall wood baseboard, plaster walls, arched plaster ceiling, and carpet on the wood floor. The windows have likewise been replaced and have boxed wood trim. A door to the west of the freight elevator leads to the factory hall. The west end of the main/stairs hall has double paneled wood doors with windows, narrow sidelights with transoms, and a wide four-light transom that leads to the hall to the third story factory space. The hall has plaster walls, plaster arched ceiling, and carpet over the wood floors. The hall has the previously mentioned large room and a smaller room on the south side, and it has a historic room and two sets of added locker rooms and closets on the south side. The 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps show sorting and storage in the east room and throughout this east half with rooms, with polishing throughout the remainder of the third story (the last two steps in producing a button). The room on the south side to the west of the large sorting room has a double door opening with a single door and paneling installed, wide sidelights with a painted transom, and a wide painted transom window. The room has been finished off into a break room with kitchen cabinets, sink, and refrigerator. The first room on the south side has a simple door and trim, and it has a furnace within the space. It appears to have been used as a mechanical / storage room. The restrooms / locker rooms were added in 1989, when the third story was no longer used for manufacturing buttons and converted for use as a gym / exercise space for employees to provide showers and changing space. The main factory space then occupies the remainder of the third story to the west. It has plaster walls, arched ceiling, and carpet on the wood floor. The ceiling is finished with plaster throughout most of the space, with exposed roof joists at the west end. The arch of the ceiling throughout the third story is related to structural support for the roof. There is no baseboard, and the windows are simple rounded brick openings. The windows on the south side are replacement aluminum windows, and the windows on the north side are

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covered with wood panels on the interior. The south side has a door into the small exterior freight elevator at the west end.



Third story (upper level)
McKee Button Company
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R.L. McCarley, SPARK Consulting
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Scale: 1" = 32"

Figure 9. Third story (upper level) of main factory section of McKee Button Company.

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Engine / furnace room, 1907 (B2)

The engine / furnace room (B2) is the two-story section of the building at the west end (Figures 10-11). This section was built in 1907 at the same time as the factory building, providing the needed power for the factory. The north side, facing Hershey Ave, has a concrete loading dock on the first story, accessed by metal stairs at the west. A second set of metal stairs then continue up to the second story entry on the main factory section. The first story has two window openings that have been covered. The loading dock leads to a set of modern metal double doors. The second story has three window openings with brick hoods similar to the windows on the main factory section, and they have also been covered with translucent panels. The west end of this two-story brick section has an angled wall that was previously covered by the shell crushing room that was added within a few years after the original construction. There is a side entry on the front corner of the first story that was built within a larger opening with a brick arch (visible on the interior), which is filled with concrete block, and a second side entry towards the rear of the west side. The first story on the south side is covered by the brick section to the south (B5), but the second story is visible. It is divided into two sections by brick pilasters, with two double-hung windows in each section. A small third section is also defined by pilasters to the west, a brick wall with no openings created with the angle of the west side wall. The 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps show this section (B2) as an engine room with a concrete floor. The railroad siding to deliver coal was built to the west of the southwest corner of this two-story section. A floor was installed in this section to create two separate levels when the engine room was no longer needed, with a mid-level north section for the freight elevator and access to the exterior on the north side. The first story has a concrete floor, finished walls, and exposed metal beams and wood floor joists on the ceiling. It is used for manufacturing space. There is a single door entry into the factory section (B1) on the east wall, and there are two covered window openings and a double-door entry on the south wall that lead into the south addition (B5) on this end. The second story has a tall ceiling height with exposed wood joists of the gable roof. The brick walls are generally unfinished, and there are four windows along the south wall. It is used for storage space and a furnace. The north part of this section (B2) is partitioned off, though not the full height to the ceiling when viewed from the main portion of the second story. Thus, there is an unfinished drywall wall with a ceiling, which could provide additional storage space. This north mid-level space is accessed from the stairs / loading dock on the north side. It has a concrete floor with brick walls with some concrete block patching and the unfinished drywall partition. There is an elevator on the east wall, providing access to the main levels of the factory section (B1).

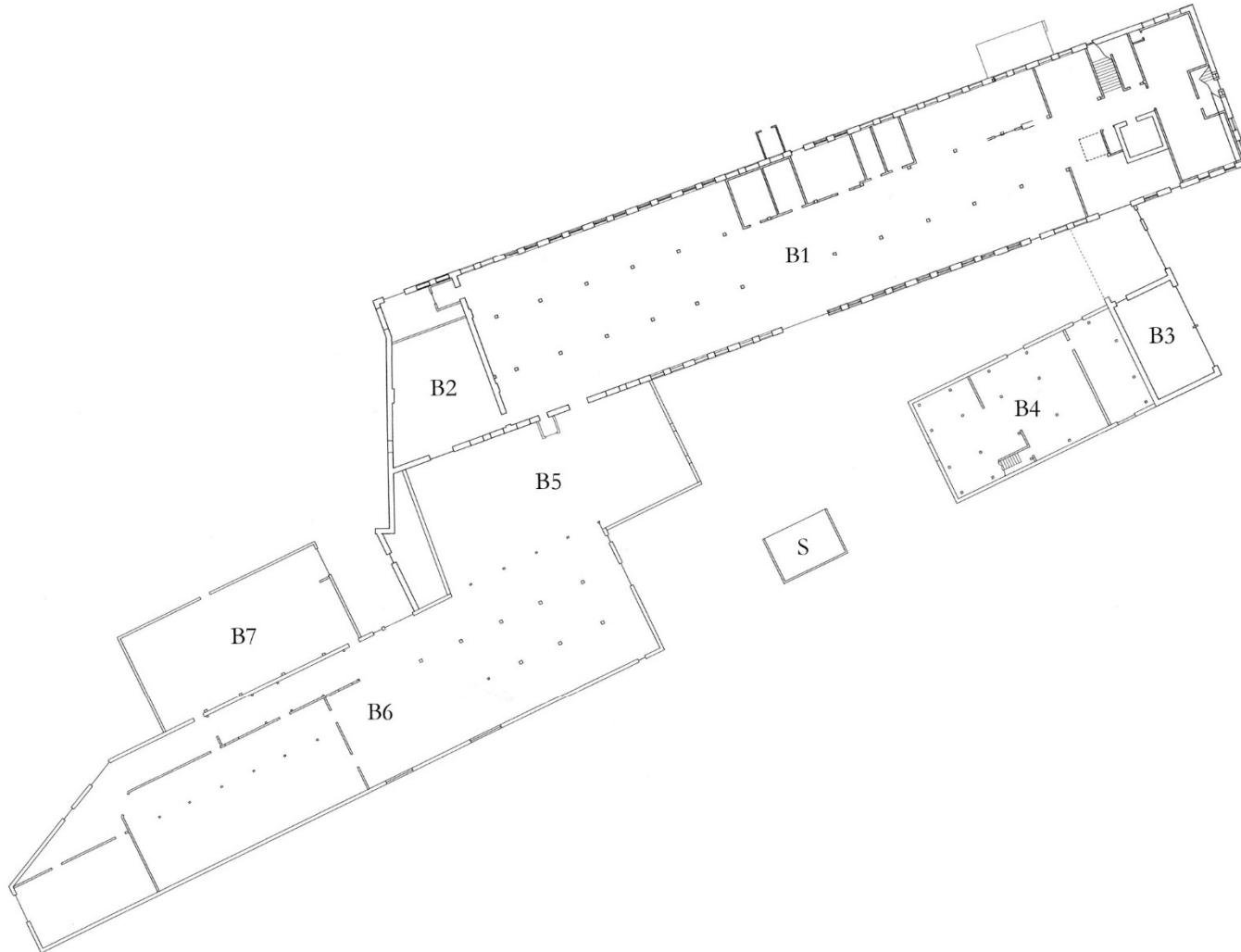
Brick storage addition, 1909 (B3)

The two-story brick addition (B3) on the south side towards the east end of the main building is roughly 20 by 50 feet (Figures 10-11). In July 1909, newspaper noted that they started construction on a two-story brick addition on the south side of the factory. The addition was constructed for additional space for the finishing department and for storage of blanks, and it was completed in September.² The building is noted as a button blank warehouse on the 1912 map. The section adjacent to the main factory section of the building (B1) is open on the first story, connected on the second story. The section adjacent to the railroad tracks is the full two stories. The brick is visible on the east and south sides of the building, and it has been clad with metal siding on the west side. The pilaster, brick detailing, and window hoods are reflective of the design of the main factory section of the building. The east side has several larger vehicular entries on the first story. The "bridge" section adjacent to the building has been enclosed on the first story with a pedestrian entry and larger overhead garage door, though it remains open on the west/courtyard side. The first story of the south section has two garage doors, which are modern doors, but the addition of garage doors here appears to date to the

² "Erect Two-Story Brick Addition," *Muscatine Journal*, July 14, 1909, 7; "Record of Building Improvements for Past Year," *Muscatine Journal*, December 16, 1909, 33; "Complete Addition," *Muscatine Journal*, September 11, 1909, 6

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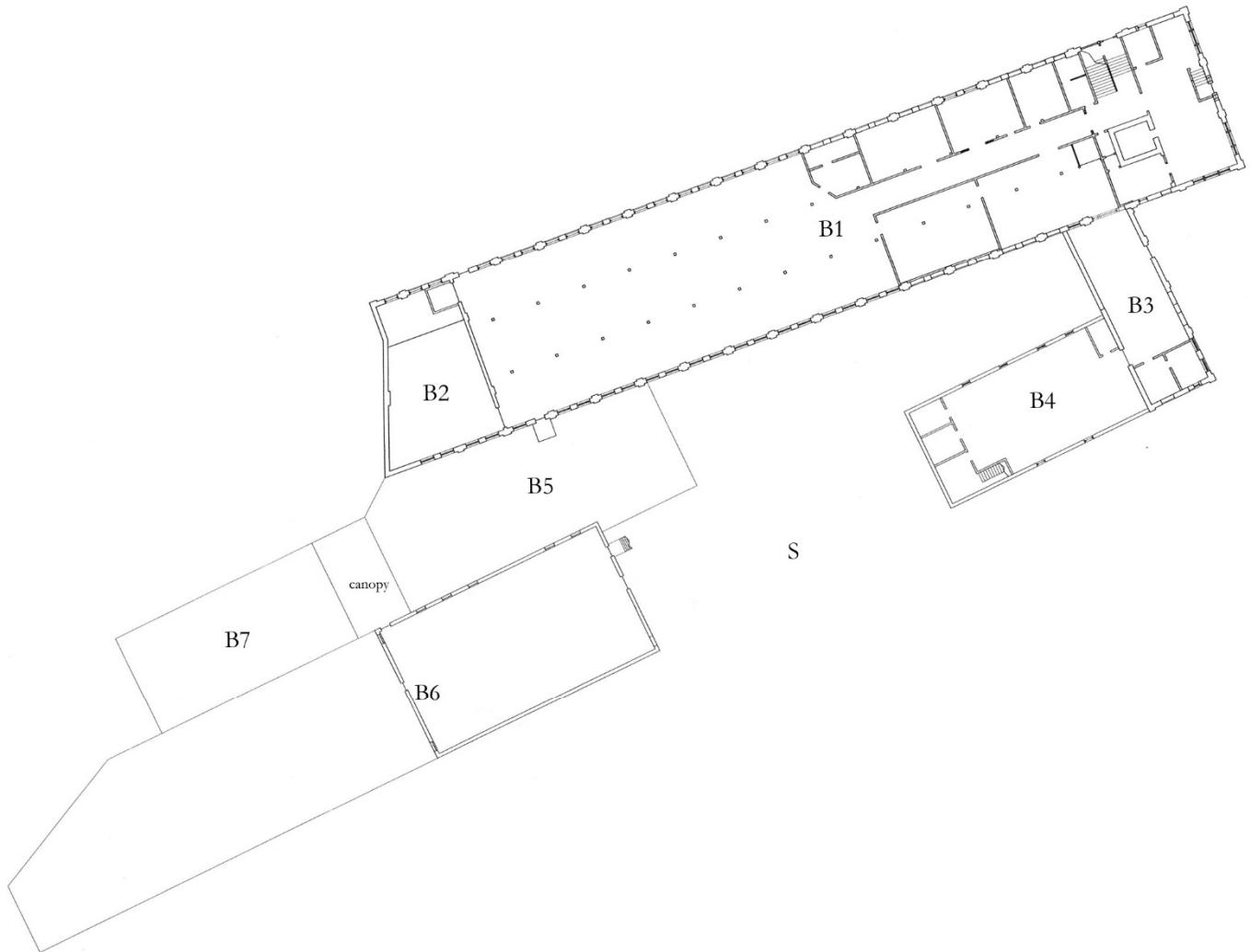


First story (lower level)
McKee Button Company
Muscatine, Muscatine Co, IA
R.L. McCarley, SPARK Consulting
October 2019 / February 2020
Scale: 1" = 50'

Figure 10. First story (lower level) of McKee Button Company.

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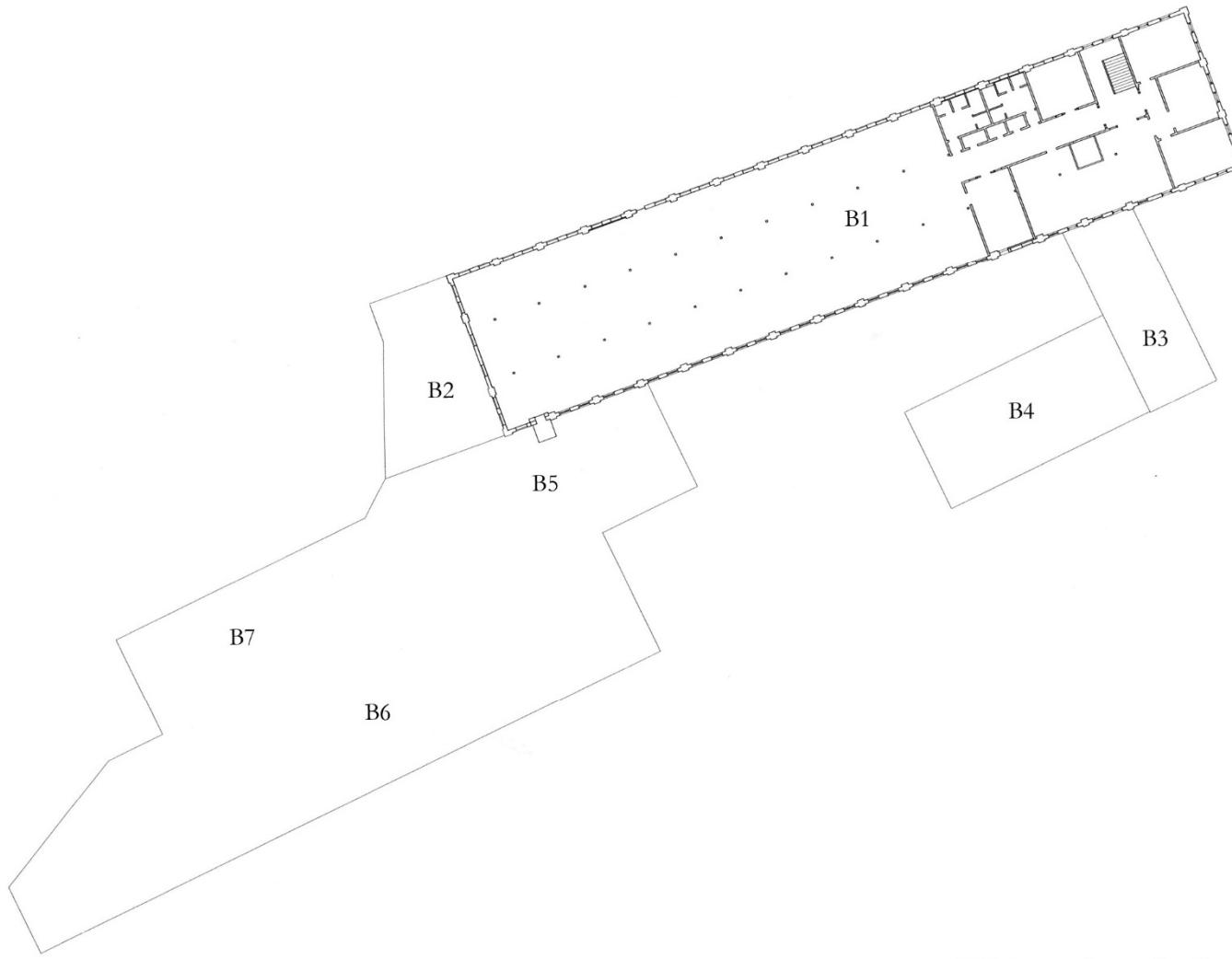


Second story (main level)
McKee Button Company
Muscatine, Muscatine Co, IA
R.L. McCarley, SPARK Consulting
October 2019 / February 2020
Scale: 1" = 50'

Figure 11. Second story (main level) of McKee Button Company.

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Third story (upper level)
McKee Button Company
Muscatine, Muscatine Co, IA
R.L. McCarley, SPARK Consulting
October 2019 / February 2020
Scale: 1" = 50'

Figure 12. Third story (upper level) of McKee Button Company.

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1920s with this section noted as an “auto garage” on the 1928 Sanborn map. The second story had five window openings on the east side, with the center two filled in with brick and the other three covered (two south ones retain double-hung wood sash on interior). The north one has a door added to extend it to floor level, likely used for loading below. The south end has two window openings on the second story, both of which are covered with wood panels. A small window has been inserted in the east one. The interior of the south half of the first story is garage / storage space, and it has a concrete floor, exposed brick walls, and a finished ceiling. There is a door at the north end into the open space under the “bridge” of the north half. The interior of the second story spans the full depth of the addition. It has exposed brick walls and exposed wood ceiling joists. The wood floor is diagonally laid, similar to the main factory building (B1). The north side connects with the main factory building, and a large arch entry and a double-hung window opening are visible in the connecting wall on this side. The east wall has the tall opening (which has a door with window above on the interior), two window openings with concrete block, and two windows with double-hung wood sashes remaining intact on the interior. There is a double-door opening in the west wall into the two-story storage building to the west (B4). A partition wall has been added to create two small work rooms at the south end, under a wood loft space.

Storage addition, c.1909 (B4)

A two-story gable-roof frame storage addition (B4) extends to the west of the earlier brick south addition (B3). This building/section (B4) is roughly 32 by 63 feet, extending parallel to the railroad tracks to the south (Figures 10-11). The 1912 Sanborn map shows a building here with the same footprint, utilized as a shell warehouse. A connected shell warehouse to the west of this building shown on the map has been demolished (a small storage building (B8) and fence constructed here around 1993). A large frame building with a concrete floor was constructed for a shell storage shed to the south of the factory in summer 1909, measuring 88 by 33 feet with a capacity to hold over 1,600 tons of shells. A second shed was then built as well.³ The first appears to be the demolished building, and this remaining building appears to be the second. This two-story building (B4) has been clad with metal siding. Two small windows are found on the upper/second story level on the south side (facing the railroad tracks), and four larger double-hung windows remain on this level on the north side facing the main building. These north windows retain older six-over-six-light double-hung wood sashes. A single-door entry and a double-door entry are found on the first story level on the north side, and another double-door entry is found on the west side of the building. These entries all have modern doors. Other historic openings are obscured by the metal siding. The first story has a smaller room at the east end, which has brick walls and large wood support columns/beams. The south wall has a large entry that is covered on the exterior, which faces the railroad tracks. The west wall has a door into the larger room. The remainder of the first story is a large room, with stairs along the south wall near the west end. The wood stairs are enclosed, with a paneled wood door with a window. This first story space has a concrete floor, finished walls, and exposed wood floor joists on the ceiling. There are two rows of large square columns supporting large wood beams through the middle of the length of the building, with a third and fourth row near the north wall and south wall for additional support of the second story. It appears that the second story level was added on the interior, with floor for the second story then supported by these square wood columns seen on the first story. The columns are not integral for the truss structure of the gable roof of the building. This storage building was later converted for a machine shop, with the development and manufacture of the Buttonmatic and Spacematic. The interior of the second story is largely open space, with two rows of wood columns. The walls are finished, and the floor is composite wood panels. Large wood beams and wood ceiling joists are exposed and visible. Three small office or storage rooms are located at the west end of the second story, with the stairs on the south wall accessed from the south room. The walls are

³ “Large Shell House Now Being Erected,” *Muscatine Journal*, June 23, 1909, 6; “New Shell Shed Being Completed,” *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 6, 1909, 5

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clad in wood paneling (1970s). The center room has a simple modern door, but the other two rooms have older paneled wood doors with windows.

Tank room / intermediary addition, c.1910 (B5)

On the south side of the west end of the main building (B1) and boiler / engine room (B2), there is a one-story brick building (B5) that is irregularly shaped to fit the space between this building and the large storage shed to the south along the railroad tracks (B6) (Figure 10). This one-story brick section is shown on the 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps as the soaking room (for shells before cutting blanks) and on the 1928 Sanborn map as a polishing room (after buttons are finished). The 1913 plans label it as the tank room (likely for soaking shells). The north side of this section (B5) connects to the factory and engine room section. The brick wall on the west side is visible on the exterior, and it is a continuation of the angled wall of the engine room (B2). This wall was also the east wall of the demolished boiler room to west of the engine room (B2), and the section that continues south along the west part of B5 is thus this wall. There are two small covered windows on this wall. The wall jogs (currently and historically) at the former corner of the boiler room, and there is a side entry on the south part. The east side and visible part of the south side of the building (within the courtyard area) have been clad in older metal siding. The east side has two double-hung windows. The remainder of the south side connects to the large storage shed (B6), with a beam and columns on the interior creating connected space rather than a wall between these building sections. It appears that these columns define the original edge of the large shell warehouse (B6) to the south, with the wall removed to connect these sections after this intermediary addition (B5) was added. The interior of the building has a bowed wood ceiling and a concrete floor. The arched ceiling of the structure of the roof on this building is visible on the interior, running perpendicular to the main factory building. The small freight elevator is found on the north wall along the main factory building, exiting through the roof and extending along the exterior of the factory building above.

Shell warehouse / storage building, c.1907 (B6)

The largest building/section after the main factory building is the shell warehouse (B6) that extends along the railroad tracks. This shell storage building appears to be the original shell warehouse built in 1907 for the factory, and it was connected to the main factory building prior to 1912 by the intermediary addition (B5) described above. This building/section (B6) is roughly 200 by 40 feet, extending parallel to the railroad tracks to the south (Figures 10-11). The gable-roof building has been clad in metal siding. The east end is taller with a gable roof, and the west end is shorter with a gable roof (B6). The interior shows that the roofline on the east end was extended to its current two-story height, with the earlier gable ends and historic double-hung windows added visible within the interior of the second story of the east end on the north side. There appears to have been a smaller second story / attic storage space previously. The entire building/section (B6) is clad in metal siding dating to around 1984. The east end of the building (B6) has double-wide vehicular entry with a small covered door/window above it on the second story. There is an entry to the north/right on the first story and stairs to a single door entry on the second story above it. The south side facing the railroad tracks has an older door at the east end with a row of three small windows further to the west on the east half of the building (B6). The west half of the building has a row of four small windows towards the east end on the south side. The metal siding obscures any other historic openings on the south side. The west side has a concrete ramp up to a large entry. The west end has an angled wall on the north side with concrete loading dock with a large entry and a pedestrian entry to its right. The north side originally would have faced the railroad spur that entered the property from the west end. The north side is partially obscured by later shipping addition (B7), which is connected to this building/section (B6) by two interior doors. The interior of the first story of this large building/section (B6) has two rows of large square wood columns supporting large ceiling/floor beams, exposed wood ceiling/floor joists, and concrete floor. There is no dividing wall on the

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interior of the east half and west half of the building as defined by the second story addition. However, there is a room on the west half of the first story that has a single row of columns supporting truss roof structure. This room has most recently been used for drums utilized to create sheets of plastic from resin for buttons and storage of resin. There is a hall that wraps around the north side of this room to the west end of this section of the building (B6). A smaller room is found at the west end, utilized for receiving shipments. The raised second story section is open space with a wood floor, unfinished walls, two rows of columns supporting the roof structure, and exposed wood roof joists. It connects to attic space on the west above the remainder of the building. When the main building was constructed in 1907, a large shell warehouse was also built along the railroad tracks to the south. While it was originally planned to be 280 by 20 feet, it appears that this 200 by 40-foot building was constructed instead. The 1912 Sanborn map shows a large storage building in this location, with the same footprint and angled section on the west end. The building is noted at a taller two-story height throughout the full length of the building. This same footprint is found on the 1913 plans, with the building noted as a shell warehouse. There was a small space at the east end between this building and the demolished storage building to the east, which was adjacent to the extant storage building further east (B4), creating the interior courtyard area (Figures 4-5). The first story was used for shell storage and the second story was used for general storage per the 1912 and 1919 Sanborn maps. It is simply generally noted as shell storage on the 1928 and 1946 maps.

Shipping addition, 1993 (B7)

One addition has been constructed to the building footprint over the last 60 years (Figure 4). This addition/building (B7) was constructed in 1993 (November 1992 building permit) as a shipping room on the north side of the shell warehouse (B6). Sanborn maps show the railroad side track for the engine room in this location, and the tracks have been removed (Figure 5). This one-story shed-roof metal building measures 60 by 30. The north side (facing the parking/loading area and Hershey Ave) has a single-door entry near the center (Figure 10). The south side abuts the earlier storage shed (B6), and wood columns line this wall on the interior supporting the edge of the roof. The open area to the east of this building has been covered with a canopy/roof, providing covered outdoor shipping space (Figures 10-11). The loading dock on the north side was remodeled in 1997, per building permit records. The interior is open space with a concrete floor and finished walls and ceiling.

Demolished building components

The Sanborn maps and 1913 plans for the sprinkler installation show an additional shell storage shed between the extant storage buildings (B4, B6) along the railroad tracks that has been demolished (Figures 4-5). The maps/plans also show the boiler house to the west of the engine room and the dust house with the dust shed to its west, both of which have been demolished. These demolitions are believed to have occurred in the 1960s, after the transition to plastic buttons was completed. Any potential for archeological sites on these areas or other portions of the property have not been evaluated to date, but these sites could be identified in the future and potentially contribute to the property.

Metal shed, c. 1993 (S)

There is a small shed (S) towards the rear of the courtyard space that was built around 1994. The shed-roof building is clad in metal siding on three side, and it is open on the north side. It is tabulated as a non-contributing building on the property.

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Integrity

The McKee Button Company retains good historic integrity overall. The building remains on its original site and setting within Muscatine. The overall integrity of design, workmanship, and materials is good on the exterior and interior. The building clearly retains its association to the button industry of Muscatine and the United States, and it retains the overall feeling of a historic factory building. Specific aspects of the integrity of the property include:

Location: McKee Button Company remains on its original site between Hershey Avenue and the Mississippi River in southwest Muscatine, so its integrity of location is excellent.

Setting: The setting of McKee Button Company remains a site to the southwest of downtown Muscatine, with commercial buildings dotting W. Mississippi Drive and Hershey Avenue as the road extends into the core of the area historically known as Musserville or South Muscatine. Residences are located at higher elevations on the bluff that extends to the north of Hershey Avenue. Two sets of industrial buildings to the west have been demolished with planned street improvements at the intersection of Hershey Avenue and Green Street. The railroad tracks, levee, and Mississippi River remain to the south of the building. The integrity of setting is good.

Design: The overall design of McKee Button Company remains intact, clearly reflecting an early 20th century factory building. The building retains its overall Romanesque Revival design, with arch openings, brick pilasters, brick window hoods, and brick parapet detail. Brick detailing defines the design features of the building, and the brick work remains intact throughout the exterior. The arch office entry opening on the east side and arch factory entry opening on the north side remain intact and distinguish the main entry areas of the building. While the windows have been replaced or covered, the window openings with brick arches or brick shoulders remain intact to convey the overall design concept. The original wood sashes remain in place on many of these windows, just not visible with translucent or wood panels. On the interior, the building retains its historic layout with stairs and the main hall separating the office and support spaces on the east end from the factory space spanning the majority of the building to the west. The interior retains several historic design features, such as wood doors, transoms and sidelights, wood trim, and rows of wood columns. The building historically had a number of appendages / additions. The majority of these additions date to the first few years after the construction of the main factory, with one later addition at the west end. The overall layout of the property as a main brick factory building with various appendages remains intact. Overall, the integrity of design is good.

Materials: McKee Button Company retains good integrity of historic materials. The exterior material is primarily brick, with the brick walls with brick detailing, brick pilaster, brick arches, and brick parapet wall intact. The historic wood windows have been lost with the replaced windows, though still intact behind most of the translucent and other panels. On the interior, the wood stairs, wood floors, plaster walls and ceilings, exposed wood joist ceilings, and wood columns remain generally intact, with the concrete floor remaining on the lower level. Several historic wood doors and wood trim remains intact, along with the wood baseboard in more finished spaces. Carpet has been installed in some areas, and new partitions are drywall with modern doors/trim.

Workmanship: The historic workmanship of the building continues to be reflected in the overall historic design elements and materials. The workmanship of the brick walls and brick details on the exterior of the building remains clearly intact. The workmanship is reflected on the interior in the wood doors, transoms/sidelights, wood trim, wood columns, and wood floors. Overall, the integrity of the historic workmanship of the building is good.

Feeling: The overall feeling of McKee Button Company remains that of a large factory constructed in the early 20th century, with its exterior design and interior layout clearly reflecting this purpose. The integrity of feeling is excellent.

Association: The McKee Button Company retains strong association with the industrial history of Muscatine, specifically the button industry in Muscatine and throughout the United States. The building remained utilized by McKee Button Company through 2019. The integrity of association is excellent.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Industry

Commerce

Period of Significance

1907-1959

Significant Dates

1907

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation (if applicable)

Architect/Builder

Zeidler, Henry William

Zeidler, William

Nyenhuis, Joseph (general contractor)

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Statement of Significance

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations).

The McKee Button Company is significant under Criterion A for its prominence in the button industry of the United States. The company exemplifies all aspects of the freshwater pearl button industry from its inception to its demise, and this factory is the resource that best represents the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States. The property is thus nominated at a national level of significance for its prominent role within the freshwater pearl button industry. This type of button dominated the button industry throughout the first four decades of the 20th century, and Muscatine was the national center of the industry. The McKee Button Company was a leader within the freshwater pearl button industry nationally from the early 1900s through the 1950s, operating several branch factories, maintaining a sales office and distribution center in New York City, and actively advocating for the broader button industry. This factory in Muscatine was built as a modern factory for the company for the production of freshwater pearl buttons in 1907, and it was noted as the largest individual freshwater pearl button factory in the country consistently over the next four decades. This building remained as the headquarters and primary button factory for McKee Button Company from 1907 through 2019. The period of significance for the McKee Button Company property spans from the construction of this factory in 1907 to end of production of freshwater pearl buttons in 1959.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance.)

(Iowa SHPO Additional Instructions: For properties not nominated under Criterion D, include a statement about whether any archaeological remains within or beyond the footprint of the property were assessed as part of this nomination under the subheading **Archaeological Assessment**.)

The McKee Button Company is individually eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its historic significance within the button industry of the United States. The freshwater pearl button industry began in Muscatine in the 1890s, outpacing all other types of buttons by 1905. Muscatine grew as the heart of the freshwater pearl button industry in the country, and this company originated as one of the first freshwater pearl button companies that operated in the United States. Operations of the Peerless Pearl Button Company under the leadership of James S. McKee grew significantly in the first decades of the 1900s as the freshwater pearl button industry flourished, and they reorganized as the McKee and Bliven Button Company in 1904. In 1907, they constructed the largest button factory in Muscatine, which was noted as the largest and most complete freshwater pearl button factory in the United States.⁴ This three-story brick building was further expanded with additions over the next few years to support their operations. A sales office was maintained in New York City, as the company primarily supplied buttons wholesale to the garment industry. By 1914, McKee and Bliven Button Company operated their primary button factory in Muscatine and supported branch cutting factories in seven other cities across the Midwest. The company incorporated as McKee Button Company in 1926. At the time of James S. McKee's death in 1927, he was noted as the largest individual button manufacturer in the world. His sons and grandsons continued to produce freshwater pearl buttons through the 1950s. Competition from Japan in the button industry through the 1920s affected many button companies, and several of the remaining companies then closed during the Depression of the 1930s. McKee Button Company stands out as one of the most significant button companies in the country throughout this period, not only continuing operations but expanding with additional cutting factories. Newspaper articles through the 1930s and 1940s note that McKee Button Company was the largest individual freshwater pearl button factory in the United States. The main office and plant operated from this 1907 brick building in Muscatine, with a number of branch factories, warehouses, and sales offices throughout the country. By the early 1940s, types of plastic buttons became the dominant type of button produced in the United States, further growing in popularity through the early 1950s. These cheaper buttons impacted the

⁴ "Will Build Big Button Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, February 2, 1907, 4; "World's Biggest Button Factory," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, June 3, 1907, 7; "Lack of Material is Cause of Delay," *Muscatine Journal*, July 16, 1907, 7; "Many Employed at New Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, September 13, 1907, 5; see also footnote 1 on page 10.

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market for pearl buttons, resulting in many companies closing or switching product lines. The McKee Button Company stands out for its continued prominence in the production of freshwater pearl buttons throughout the 1950s. The company experimented with adding molded plastic buttons to its line of products in the 1940s and then synthetic buttons in the 1950s. In 1959, they ceased production of freshwater pearl buttons, one of the last remaining companies to produce this type of button in the United States. Thus, the company is significant as one of the first and one of the last companies to produce freshwater pearl buttons, serving as a leader within the pearl button industry throughout six decades. The company continued to operate with the production of synthetic / polyester buttons and remained as dealers in freshwater pearl buttons for several years. McKee Button Company would continue to manufacture buttons in Muscatine for the garment industry through 2019, one of the last companies in the United States to manufacture buttons. The continued operations of McKee Button Company should be further evaluated in the future to determine its significance within this later portion of the button industry. The McKee Button Company stands out historically as a leader in the freshwater pearl button industry and as the largest freshwater pearl button factory in Muscatine, which was the birthplace and heart of this national industry. It remains locally recognized for its prominence as a landmark building in the community, both from a historical and architectural presence. Additionally, with other later industrial development in Muscatine, this factory also remains standing as one of only a few extant buildings in Muscatine associated with the freshwater pearl button industry. This three-story brick building of the McKee Button Company was associated with the button industry for more than 110 years – decades longer than most button companies throughout Muscatine and the United States remained in existence.

Developmental history/additional historic context information

The national significance of the McKee Button Company is demonstrated through the following three sections that include a historic context of the button industry, developmental history of the company, and assessment of other button companies and their extant resources:

- *The Button Industry in Iowa and the United States*
- *The McKee Button Company in the Button Industry of Iowa and the United States*
- *The McKee Button Company in comparison to other button companies and extant resources*

Through a review of the National Register of Historic Places files, it was determined that there was no existing historic context on the freshwater pearl button industry or on the button industry of the United States in general to provide necessary background information to understand the full significance of the McKee Button Company. Thus, a significant portion of the research for this project has included the development of a historic context related to the button industry. The historic context entitled *The Button Industry in Iowa and the United States* is subdivided into five sections that outline the development and evolution of the industry, particularly as it pertains to freshwater pearl buttons: The Button Industry in America and the Development of the Freshwater Pearl Button Industry, 1890-1899; The Strength of the Freshwater Pearl Button Business as an American Industry, 1900-1915; Competition from Foreign Countries and Strengthening of Domestic Button Manufacturers, 1915-1930; Freshwater Pearl Button Industry in the United States through the Depression and World War II, 1930-1945; and Development of Plastic Buttons and Evolution of Pearl Button Companies, 1945-1970. The McKee Button Company stands out for its significance within the button industry of Iowa and the United States within each phase of the historic context as outlined. The second section of this nomination then goes into further detail on the historic development and significance of the McKee Button Company. This section further demonstrates the national significance of this factory within the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States, spanning from the construction of this building as a large button factory for this company in 1907 through the end of the production of freshwater pearl buttons in 1959. The last section provides information on comparable button companies and remaining resources, further demonstrating that the McKee Button Company stands out as the most significant extant resource associated with the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States.

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The Button Industry in Iowa and the United States

The Button Industry in America and Development of the Freshwater Pearl Button Industry, 1890-1899

In 1924 in England, W. Unite Jones wrote *The Button Industry*, a book that he identified as the first attempt to write a history of the button trade. In this international book on the production of buttons, Jones wrote: "A special note is obligatory in regard to the manufacture of pearl buttons in the United States."⁵ Among the lines of buttons in the world, the freshwater pearl button industry was noted as particular to the United States. The button industry was slow to develop in the United States, with the importation of buttons from England and Europe throughout the 18th century and into the 19th century. Craftsmen immigrated to the United States, particularly from Germany and Eastern Europe, bringing knowledge of button making with them. Factories were opened in some larger Eastern cities, with few factories in the newer cities of the West (now Midwest) by the 1880s. J.F. Boepple immigrated from Germany to Illinois in the 1880s, bringing his knowledge of button making from ocean shells and a determination to find freshwater shells in rivers suitable as a raw material for buttons in the United States. He found a supply of shells in the Mississippi River near Muscatine, Iowa, and he opened his first shop in 1891. The business was slow to start, but it was assisted by tariffs driving up the price of imported buttons. Interest eventually grew in freshwater pearl buttons, attracting the interest of and orders from garment manufacturers in Chicago and the East. By 1897, three freshwater pearl button companies operated in Muscatine. The boom of the freshwater pearl buttons industry then followed in 1897 to 1899, with dozens of additional button companies and button "blank" cutting shops opening in Muscatine and along the Mississippi River near mussel beds. By 1900, the manufacture of freshwater pearl buttons, non-existent in 1890, had risen to the second largest segment of the button industry in the United States.

The button industry in the United States into the 1890s

With the changes in fashions involving both the ornamentation and utility of the button, demand for buttons and button production had increased through the 19th century. The button industry in England was centered in London and Birmingham, with metal buttons, cloth covered buttons, horn buttons (made from hoof of cattle), vegetable ivory buttons (made from the Corozo nut from South America), and pearl buttons (made from ocean shells from the East and Middle East) produced. The ocean pearl button industry thrived in Birmingham, employing about 3,000 in the button industry at its peak in England in the middle of the 19th century.⁶ The button industry in Europe then increased, particularly in Paris (France), Vienna (Austria), Prague (Bohemia/Austria), and several cities in Germany. While each place produced a variety of types of buttons, Paris was known for a specialty in expensive fancy buttons, Vienna was known for pearl buttons, Prague was known for glass buttons, and Germany was known for cheaper types of fancy and pearl buttons. Germany thus produced the largest quantity of buttons, with the exports exceeding the combined exports of England and France.⁷ In 1880, England had 319 button factories (London, Birmingham), France had between 200 and 300 factories (Paris, Lyons), Austria had 86 factories (Vienna, Prague), and Germany had 73 factories (Barmen, Ludenschied, Elberfeld, Hamburg, and others), while the United States had 55 button factories (mostly in New York and Philadelphia, near the garment industry).⁸ The American factories met some of the demand for buttons in the United States, while the remainder of buttons were imported.

As the country developed, button production followed immigrants to the United States. The earliest buttons made in the United States were brass and wood buttons. Metal buttons were made by 1800 at the first button

⁵ Jones, W. Unite Jones, *The Button Industry*. London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd, 1924, 103.

⁶ Jones 1924: 25-36

⁷ Jones 1924: 67-76

⁸ Jones 1924: 82

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factory in the United States in Waterbury, Connecticut, which remained a center of the metal button industry in the United States into the 20th century. In the 1820s, production of covered buttons and horn buttons started in Massachusetts and Connecticut. In 1859, A.W. Critchlow from England started producing the first vegetable ivory buttons in the United States, also in Massachusetts. Fancy buttons and pearl buttons continued to be largely imported from Europe. The first composition buttons were produced in the 1870s, with advances in technology in 1882 increasing their production. However, natural materials remained the most common source of raw materials for buttons.⁹ Button making was a skilled profession, with an apprenticeship program until the advent of mechanization. Thus, most of the button makers in the United States were of German or Eastern European descent. Ocean shell (pearl) buttons started being made on a small scale around 1855. Button companies in New York City; Amsterdam, NY; Newark, NJ; and Philadelphia, PA, produced ocean pearl buttons through the 1880s. The eastern companies opened branch factories in some western cities, including Cincinnati, Detroit, and St. Paul.¹⁰ D.A. Willis later noted that he had started a small ocean pearl button factory in Newark for B. Blumenthal & Company of New York, but the factory only operated for a year or two before closing due to competition with cheaper imported buttons and lack of appropriate machinery.¹¹ In December 1887, the Consul-General of United States reported: "The manufacture of pearl buttons is not an industry of the United States and probably never will be. The reason for this is quite obvious: pearl buttons cannot be manufactured by machinery; owing to the brittle state of the raw material these must be made by hand. As this hand labor is remunerated at the low rate... the competition of the American laborer is out of the question."¹²

With an eye towards foreign competition, the passage of the McKinley tariff in 1890 paved the way for the development of the button industry in the United States. The 106 button factories noted in the country in 1890 benefited by increased tariff rates on buttons, making their buttons more competitive with and/or cheaper than imports. The value of pearl buttons imported from Austria to the United States fell from \$1,681,747 in 1886 to \$100,001 in 1891, greatly impacting the button industry in Vienna.¹³ A large number of buttons were imported prior to the tariff going into effect, creating a stockpile of buttons for the first few years. However, button companies had incentive and a growing market to experiment with new machinery and techniques. A hand machine was patented by a Frenchman, Jules Cleret, which improved the process of making buttons. An automatic machine for ocean pearl buttons was developed in Chicago in 1892, with B. Blumenthal & Company from New York noted as obtaining three of them for a fee plus annual royalty. Adaptations were then made to the machine to improve its operations. The Automatic Pearl Button Company of Providence, Rhode Island, then also made several advances in the development of automatic machinery for producing ocean pearl buttons in 1893-94, protecting their inventions with patents as well.¹⁴

The origination of the freshwater pearl button industry, 1891-1896

With development of the button industry, the stage was set for the development of a new type of button to be produced in the United States – the freshwater pearl button. While there were earlier experimentations with crafting button from freshwater shells, the material was generally considered too fragile to be practical for

⁹ Jones 1924: 96-101; Robert E. Coker, *Fresh-Water Mussels and Mussel Industries of the United States*. Bulletin of the Bureau of Fisheries, Volume XXXVI, Document No. 865, October 25, 1919, 64

¹⁰ Coker 1919: 64;

¹¹ D.A. Willis, "Story of Button Industry in Pre-Muscatine Era and Early Days Here Written by Willis," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p9 (19)

¹² Jones 1924: 94; Claassen, Cheryl. *Washboards, Pigtoes, and Muckets: Historic Musseling in the Mississippi Watershed. Historical Archaeology*, Journal of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Volume 28, Number 2, 1994, 4-5

¹³ Jones 1924: 93, 96

¹⁴ D.A. Willis, "Story of Button Industry in Pre-Muscatine Era and Early Days Here Written by Willis," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p9 (19)

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button production.¹⁵ As a result, no freshwater pearl buttons were produced in the United States in 1890. John F. Boepple is then credited with the start of the freshwater pearl button industry in the United States. Boepple apprenticed as a button worker in Wurtenberg, Germany, and he then worked in the button industry in Hamburg, Germany, and then opened his own shop in nearby Ottensen. Boepple later noted that he saw a box of shells in the 1880s that had been shipped to the father of a friend several years previous from some river about 200 miles southwest of Chicago in Illinois. He experimented with them and found that the mussel shells would be good for making buttons. With the sudden death of his wife and declining button industry in Vienna, he closed his shop and immigrated to the United States in March 1887 to look for the river with the shells. He traveled to the home of his sister in Petersburg, Illinois, working on farms and for the railroad. He explored local rivers, finding a variety of mussels with thicker shells in the Mississippi River near Muscatine, Iowa, which also had a large German immigrant population. However, he lacked the capital to begin making buttons, and he was still largely unfamiliar with the language. Boepple found work on a farm near Columbus Junction to the southwest in Louisa County, which was located along the Iowa River. He worked in the evenings and during the winter on making shell novelties and buttons from freshwater shells found in the Iowa River. He was able to sell these novelties and buttons to a store keeper in Muscatine.¹⁶

With the passage of the McKinley tariff in 1890, John F. Boepple heard that the price of imported pearl buttons was increasing, and he decided to move back to Muscatine to work on opening a button shop. He found a willing partner in William A. Molis, superintendent of the waterworks, who introduced him to machinist I.A. Kerr. The three men formed a partnership, with J.F. Boepple opening a shop in the basement of the Davis cooper shop on Cedar Street in January 26, 1891. The opening of this shop in 1891 is attributed as the start of the freshwater pearl button industry. The pearl buttons produced were crude but half the wholesale price of Eastern buttons or imported buttons. The shop soon moved to larger quarters over Nester's blacksmith shop. Molis traveled east with samples to show firms in New York and to explore machinery for making ocean pearl buttons, attracting some interest of Eastern button companies and bringing a Cleret machine back to Muscatine. Boepple tried to modify the machine for softer shells, and Kerr tried to utilize its design to create a more appropriate machinery. Disagreements led to the partnership dissolving by the end of 1891. Boepple then started a second company on his own in 1892 in a shop at the rear at his home at 6th and Linn streets. Boepple worked with three foot-powered lathes to create freshwater pearl buttons that he then took to Chicago. With the increasing price of imported ocean pearl buttons, the sample buttons landed him orders for additional buttons. Boepple then returned to Muscatine to produce freshwater pearl buttons.¹⁷

The first button companies in Muscatine were then listed in the 1890s city directories. In the 1893-94 directory, J.F. Boepple was listed as a pearl button manufacturer at the corner of 6th and Linn Street (home at 608 Linn St), and the Muscatine Button Company was listed on the second story of 601-617 E. 2nd St, with William Molis, secretary, and Charles Page, president and treasurer. Over a dozen residents were listed as working for the button factory or "B's button factory," including Louis Tillig listed as foreman for the button

¹⁵ Freshwater shells along the Ohio River near Cincinnati had been utilized for carving cuff buttons in the early 19th century. In 1872, William Salter in Peoria, Illinois, on the Illinois River, collected some shells and shipped them to Germany to see if they might be utilized in the button industry. Some freshwater shells had been shipped from Beardstown, also in central Illinois on the Illinois River, to a button factory in the East around 1876, but the material was considered too fragile to be practical for button production. Around 1883 or 1884, a commercial button factory was started in Knoxville, Tennessee, attempting to utilize freshwater shells from the Tennessee River. However, the factory was soon closed, likely due to foreign competition and lack of suitable machinery. (Coker 1919: 64; D.A. Willis, "Story of Button Industry in Pre-Muscatine Era and Early Days Here Written by Willis," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p9 (19); "Story of Mr. Boepple," *Muscatine Journal*. October 4, 1900)

¹⁶ Coker 1919: 64, 66; Jones 1924: 103-104; J.F. Boepple, "Story of Mr. Boepple," *Muscatine Journal*. October 4, 1900; Wooley, E. M. "Buttons: A Romance of American Industry," *McClure's Magazine*, February 1914. Vol. 42, p 113-115; Mike O'Hara. "Mr. Boepple and His Buttons," *Iowan* 30, fall 1981, 46-47; Claassen 1994: 6

¹⁷ J.F. Boepple, "Story of Mr. Boepple," *Muscatine Journal*. October 4, 1900; E. M. Wooley. "Buttons: A Romance of American Industry," *McClure's Magazine*, February 1914. Vol. 42, p 116-17; Claassen 1994: 6-7; Mike O'Hara. "Mr. Boepple and His Buttons," *Iowan* 30, fall 1981, 48-19

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factory.¹⁸ The passage of the Wilson-Gorman Tariff Act of 1894, reducing tariffs from the 1890 McKinley act, does not appear to have significantly impacted the growth of the new industry in Muscatine. An article in 1895 notes that Boepple's button factory "has grown to be a great factor in the employment of cheap labor in Muscatine," employing 12 to 15 men and 70 women in the building next to his house.¹⁹ With success, J.F. Boepple secured a group of new investors in 1895 for his company.²⁰ The 1895 city directory for Muscatine then only lists one button company: Boepple Button Company at 6th and Linn Streets, with J.F. Boepple as president and D.S. McDermid as secretary.²¹ A study of the freshwater pearl button industry in 1898 notes that two other plants existed elsewhere along the river in Iowa in 1895 as well.²² With his new investors, Boepple constructed a two-story building at 3rd and Oak streets in 1896, dedicated in October with a banquet and dance.²³ This was the first building in Muscatine specifically built for a button factory, and it remains extant on the east side of Muscatine, though significantly remodeled. As Boepple Button Company grew, additional residents in Muscatine learned the craft of making pearl buttons from shells from the Mississippi River and additional shops were started. While many shops lasted only a short time, a handful survived their first year to continue to operate through the 1890s. The 1897 city directory for Muscatine then lists three button factories: Boepple Button Company at 3rd and Oak streets (extant, on HON/HNI property), Muscatine Pearl Button Company at 311 Mulberry (building of blacksmith J.T. Nester; demolished), and the Peerless Button Company at 401 W. Front Street (Mississippi Dr) (demolished).²⁴ While the first two companies would close over the next decades, the Peerless Button Company would continue to expand and evolve into the McKee Button Company, which was one of the largest freshwater pearl button companies in the United States and one of the most prominent button companies in Muscatine throughout the 20th century.



Figure 13. Boepple Button Company at 3rd and Oak St around 1900 (extant, remodeled) (Grossheim collection, image 302a).

¹⁸ Chas A. Barker's 1893-94 City Directory for Muscatine, Iowa. In collection of Musser Public Library, Muscatine, IA.

¹⁹ Claassen 1994: 87

²⁰ These men were C.K. Nebling, D.S. McDermid, Harry W. Hutting, and William Huttig (the latter three from Huttig Manufacturing Co).

²¹ Claassen 1994: 83, 87; Chas A. Barker's Muscatine City Directory for 1895-96. In collection of Musser Public Library, Muscatine, IA

²² Claassen 1994: 83

²³ Muscatine News Tribune, October 18, 1896, 4; Claassen 1994: 7

²⁴ Chas A. Barker's Muscatine City Directory, 1897-98. In collection of Musser Public Library, Muscatine, IA

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The boom of the freshwater pearl button industry, 1897-1899

With less favorable tariffs impacting the ocean pearl button industry in the United States after the passage of the Wilson-Gorman tariff in 1894, the button companies in the East began to pay more attention to the young freshwater pearl button industry in Muscatine, Iowa. D.A. Willis, who worked in the button industry in the East at the time, later attributed the subsequent growth of the freshwater pearl button industry in Muscatine and other Mississippi River towns to the wounded ocean pearl button industry. Button companies saw freshwater pearl buttons as a chance for survival, and they sent representatives to Muscatine to investigate the industry.²⁵ Additionally, the button industry was helped by the Dingley Act of 1897 that again increased tariffs on several imported items, including buttons.²⁶ This tariff would remain in place until 1913. As a result, Eastern button companies were further attracted to Muscatine, bringing capital and knowledge of mass production. Further, the “ready-to-wear” clothing industry also exploded in the 1890s, centered on Manhattan’s lower east side. The “new woman” in the 1890s wore simpler garments, with buttons required for new styles of dresses, blouses, and skirts for easy dressing. Men’s dress shirts also evolved in this period from a pull-over shirt with a top button to a shirt with buttons down the front.²⁷ The freshwater pearl button entered the market in mass quantities at this time, and it quickly proved to be well-suited for this clothing.

Significant expansion of the freshwater pearl button industry started in Muscatine in 1897, and it quickly spread to other cities along the Mississippi River, with Muscatine remaining as the center of the industry. Local machinists, including the Barry brothers and I.A. Kerr, worked to create machinery for the process of button making, testing out designs and making more efficient machinery to assist with the steps of cutting, grinding, facing, and drilling the button. The sale of this machinery quickly helped advance the local pearl button industry in this period. The production of a freshwater pearl button required several steps and different machines. First, clams and dozens of varieties of mussels were caught in the Mississippi River by using lines with hooks, which the clams or mussels then clamped on by instinct when touched. They were boiled to open the shells, with the meat removed. Shells were then sold to a shop where “blanks” were formed from the shell. Button blanks were simple round disc, without any facing or holes. Shells were first soaked to soften them, with circular discs then cut from the shells and the rough outside and edges then removed by grinding. The production required some skill, but not as much as the creation of the actual buttons. Thus, with some simple machinery, a shop could be started to produce blanks. As these shops opened, a “clam rush” was felt in Muscatine and along the Mississippi River in 1897-1899, similar to a gold rush, with numerous men flocking to the city. Once the button blank was formed, more skilled labor was required to carve out the center (“facing”) and drill the button holes. Thus, while some button companies produced a button from shell to finished product, many shops only produced blanks while other button companies focused only the production of the final button for sale, buying blanks from other shops. As demand increased, even full-fledged button factories started buying blanks to supplement their own stock to meet the demand for buttons. The production of freshwater pearl buttons continued to employ both men and women in a variety of types of jobs.

The three button companies in Muscatine at the start of 1897 (Boepple Button, Muscatine Button, and Peerless Button) grew to nine companies by the end of the year, plus additional shops making only blanks. The *News Tribune* noted that “factory number 4” was a local company,²⁸ while “Factory number 5” was then the first of the Eastern button companies to open a branch factory in Muscatine for the production of buttons,

²⁵ Claassen 1994: 110; “Story of Button Industry in Pre-Muscatine Era and Early Days Here Written by Willis,” *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p9 (19)

²⁶ J.F. Boepple traveled to Washington, D.C. to testify on the importance of the inclusion of buttons on that list to aid the growth of the industry, and the provision was included. (O’Hara 1981: 50; Claassen 1994: 67, 111)

²⁷ Claassen 1994: 66-67

²⁸ Factory No. 4 was newly organized button company of Kleinfelder, Nester & Co, who had leased the second story of the Nester building adjoining the Barry plant, the location of first plant operated by Boepple and Molis (“Still Another One,” *Muscatine News-Tribune*, January 10, 1897, 1; “To Start Week After Next,” *Muscatine News Tribune*, January 15, 1897, 1; *Weekly News-Tribune* – January 22, 1897, 3)

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opened by D.A. Willis of B. Blumenthal & Company of New York City.²⁹ The local company was initially known as the New York Button Company, later incorporated as the Vienna Pearl Button Company. The Royal Button Factory then started operations in June,³⁰ with John Weber, an Austrian butter cutter, leaving Boepple Button Company to serve as its foreman.³¹ A Philadelphia firm started a local button factory in May, equipped with Barry's machines. The manufacturers noted that the machinery developed by the local Barry firm was the finest they had seen in America.³² The ninth button company in Muscatine was then one opened by the Excelsior Pearl Button Company of New York in November 1897, having leased the second story of the Kerr building on Orange Street and contracted with Kerr for 12 button saws for their factory. A visitor to their firm from a button company from Newark, NJ, noted that they were superior to any seen in 20 years in business. Kerr was also noted to have contracts to supply new button factories in Cedar Rapids, West Liberty, and Port Byron.³³ Thus, Muscatine was not only the center of the freshwater pearl button industry in 1897, but it was rapidly becoming known of the supplier of button machinery for the industry.

The vast expansion of the freshwater pearl button industry within this short period of time is later noted in various documents. By the end of 1897, there were reportedly 13 button or blank factories in four cities on the Mississippi River (including the nine in Muscatine). In July 1898, Hugh Smith of the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fishery studied the button industry as it related to mussels, and he found that there were 49 button factories operating in 13 towns on the Mississippi River in Iowa and Illinois, with at least 12 button factories on other rivers that were tributaries. Thus, 36 button or button blanks factories had been established in the first six months of 1898. The center was noted to remain at Muscatine, which had five complete button factories and 28 cutting factories (only blanks) at the time (or 33 of the 49 identified operating factories. Other towns included Fort Madison, Sabula, Clinton, Davenport, and Buffalo in Iowa, and Keithsburg, Cordova, Albany, Andalusia, New Boston, Oquawka, and Port Byron in Illinois. New plants were added in Iowa in Oskaloosa, Cedar Rapids, Vinton, Charles City, Coralville, West Liberty, What Cheer, Keokuk, and in Aledo, Illinois, by the end of 1898.³⁴ The number of blanks manufactured increased from 673,200 gross³⁵ (nearly 97 million buttons) in 1897 to 761,113 gross (over 109 million buttons) in 1898, produced in blank factories and shops along the Mississippi River from Keokuk, Iowa to Janesville, Wisconsin.³⁶ Smith reported in July 1898 that there were 1,000 musselers working the 170 miles along the Mississippi River between Fort Madison, Iowa, and Sabula, Illinois, with the principal fishing ground between Davenport and Clinton.³⁷ Additionally, a number of these factories in other Iowa towns had Muscatine connections. For example, the plant in Cordova was opened in 1898 by the Boepple Button Company as a cutting plant. The Monarch Button factory, managed by Hans Einhausen of Muscatine, opened in Keithsburg, Illinois in spring 1897.³⁸ The opening of button blank factories and button factories in other cities along the Mississippi River would later provide trained workers and readily available buildings for larger companies in Muscatine to open branch companies in these locations as the small firms closed and larger companies grew in the early 20th century.

²⁹ B. Blumenthal & Company was manufacturer and importer of pearl buttons for several decades, and they equipped the factory with the latest machinery to start in the manufacture of pearl buttons from shells from Mississippi River. They leased the Nyenhuis building formerly occupied by Taylor Novelty Works (3rd St and Orange St) and started operations with 75-100 workers ("Make More Buttons," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, February 18, 1897, 1; "Another Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, February 19, 1897, 4)

³⁰ The Royal Button Factory shared space with the Royal Canning Co in South Muscatine, starting with 24 machines in June. (*Muscatine Journal*, March 26, 1897, 2; *Muscatine Journal*, June 29, 1897, 2)

³¹ "Weber Button Company Signals Most Prosperous Year by Expansion," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 56; Claassen 1994: 84-85

³² Ashton & Butler opened in the mill property at Mulberry and 2nd St, starting with 25 workers and anticipating a capacity of 500 gross buttons per week (*Muscatine Journal*, April 3, 1897, 4; "Seven Factories," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, May 8, 1897, 1)

³³ "Muscatine Getting in the Swim," *Muscatine Journal*, August 4, 1897, 4; *Muscatine Journal*, October 28, 1897, 4; "Muscatine Gets It," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, November 18, 1897, 1

³⁴ Coker 1919: 65; USTC 1918: 20; Smith 1898: 304-305, cited in Claassen 1994: 83

³⁵ Gross = group of 144 items; typical term used for counting buttons and other items produced in large quantity

³⁶ Claassen 1994: 67

³⁷ In 1899, a total of 23,824 tons of shells were gathered from the Mississippi River in four states – 10,200 tons from Iowa, 8,150 tons from Wisconsin, 4,450 tons from Illinois, and 1,050 tons from Missouri (Claassen 1994: 11, 29)

³⁸ *Muscatine Weekly News-Tribune*, December 28, 1897, 4; *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 29, 1897, 5

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Development of the freshwater pearl button industry in Muscatine continued through 1899. Muscatine remained the largest button manufacturing community in Iowa, with overwhelmingly the largest number of companies and production. The early companies in Muscatine continued to expand with the increased demand and market for freshwater pearl buttons. J.F. Boepple continued to run the largest factory not only in Muscatine but reportedly in the world in February 1898, and W.E. Bliven and J.S. McKee operated the second largest factory in Muscatine, the Peerless Button Company.³⁹ The New York Button Company (run by/for B. Blumenthal & Co of New York) then moved to larger quarters in November 1898, operating 150 saws with a capacity of 20,000 gross per week by August 1899 and claiming the title as the largest factory on the Mississippi.⁴⁰ The 14 button companies listed in the 1899 city directory (compiled in 1898) included a mix of local companies and Eastern firms with local branches or subsidiaries in Muscatine. Eight of the companies appear to have operated as full-fledged button factories, with the other six as blank factories.⁴¹ The Barry Manufacturing Company, run by Nicholas Barry and his sons Nicholas Jr., Thomas, and Pat J., also continued to work on several inventions related to button machinery that were patented and sold to various firms to improve efficiency of the process. In 1898, Henry Umlandt and John Weber started the Automatic Pearl Works (later incorporated as Automatic Button Company in 1902), incorporating innovative Barry designs for their company.⁴² A new building was constructed for the Philadelphia firm of Ashton and Butler in Muscatine in 1899, but they soon decided to close this branch location. The building was then sold to Leo H. Hirsch & Company of New York City, who opened a blank cutting plant in this location to supply their eastern factory.⁴³ With machines sitting idle in Muscatine for lack of available workers, J.F. Boepple negotiated with Davenport to open a new factory location there, leaving factory in Muscatine under the management of D.S. McDermid, a decision that would later lead to a rift and split within the company.⁴⁴ William E. Bliven and James S. McKee bought full interest in the Peerless Button Company in 1899, with James S. McKee taking over active management in the company. James S. McKee would then guide the further development of the company over the next seven years, leading up to the construction of the largest button factory in Muscatine in 1907.⁴⁵

A special "Pearls and Prosperity" edition of the *Muscatine Evening Journal* was printed on December 9, 1899. According to the figures presented in this paper, there were 25 button factories employing 1,200 people who produced 98,000 buttons each week in Muscatine. Wages totaled \$8,000, and the average wage ranged from \$7.50 to \$16 per week depending on the type of button produced and speed of the worker. Around 175 tons of shells were used each week. Blank cutting machines were relatively cheap, and many people could afford to buy one to cut shells that they collected. Blanks were sold to local button producers as well as eastern button companies that previously relied on imported shells. Vacuum systems were key to all

³⁹ "The 'Bend-Pearl Button City,'" *Muscatine Journal*, February 15, 1898, 11

⁴⁰ The New York Button Company (run by/for B. Blumenthal & Co of New York) moved to the old Bitzer property at Third and Mulberry. They planned an expansion of 50 saws in August 1899, which would make their plant the largest on the Mississippi with a capacity of 20,000 gross per week. (*Muscatine News-Tribune*, November 22, 1898, 4; "A Pleasant Day's Outing," *Muscatine Weekly News-Tribune*, June 9, 1899, 1; *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 13, 1899, 1)

⁴¹ A&B Pearl Button Co (303-09 Mulberry), Boepple Button Co (3rd and Oak), Excelsior Pearl Button Co (northwest corner of 3rd and Mulberry), Muscatine Pearl Button Company (311 Mulberry), New York Button Company (Oak bet 2nd and 3rd St), Royal Pearl Button Company (opposite passenger depot on Front), Peerless Button Factory (401 W. Front), and Standard Button Works (608 E. 11th St). The six button factories that only produced blanks included Becker Button Co (Oak between Front and 2nd St), Boston Button Factory (1113 2nd St), L.H. Concannon (710 Maple), Mittman's Button Factory (between front and 2nd near Reed), Schmalz Bros (Bleeker St), and Teichmiller Button Factory (416 Hanover).

⁴² They rented space in the Barry building and had a close relationship with the family. (Claassen 1994: 85-86; "Weber Button Company Signals Most Prosperous Year by Expansion," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 56)

⁴³ "Early Morning Blaze Completely Destroys Hirsch Button Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, June 22, 1940, 1

⁴⁴ "New Button Factory," *Daily Times*, Davenport, Iowa, March 18, 1899, 7

⁴⁵ "Musserville," *Muscatine Journal*, September 9, 1899, 4; *Dubuque Daily Times*, August 1, 1899, 2; "Button Factory for Lyons," *Adams County Free Press*, Corning, IA, September 14, 1899, 1; *Muscatine Journal*, February 13, 1900, 5; "James M'Kee is Dead," *Muscatine Journal*, January 22, 1927, 1, 10; "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6; "William E. Bliven Dies at New York City Home," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1915, 2; Claassen 1994: 94

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companies to remove the associated dust of the production, reducing health problems. The Boepple Button Company was noted as the first company and the largest in Muscatine, with their main factory in the building constructed for the company at 3rd and Orange, second factory in Davenport, and sales office run by W.C. Wadsworth in New York City.⁴⁶ The second oldest company was the Peerless Button Company, operated by James McKee and William Bliven in the former Electric Light and Power Company building. Less than half of the other companies highlighted in this special edition would survive through the next decade. Several button sawing companies operated in South Muscatine. Eastern interests were also represented in Muscatine with the New York Button Company and Leo H. Hirsch Company.⁴⁷ As these button companies formed and attracted new workers to Muscatine, the population had grown from 11,454 in 1890 to 14,073 in 1900.⁴⁸

The Strength of the Freshwater Pearl Button Business as an American Industry, 1900-1914

With the development of new automatic machinery in the first few years of the 20th century, the freshwater pearl button industry quickly rose from second within the button industry of the United States in 1900 to the leading type of buttons produced in the country by 1905. The installation of this machinery required an investment that larger button companies quickly made, significantly increasing their efficiency and production. As a result, smaller companies struggled to compete and closed, and larger companies further expanded through the next decade. The industry was further formalized with the creation of the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers, with leading firms of Muscatine represented on the board of directors. The freshwater pearl button industry led all other branches of the button industry through the 1910s. Thus, the freshwater pearl button industry defined the overall button industry of the United States, and the button industry was defined by the freshwater pearl button industry. Muscatine retained its position as a leading producer of freshwater pearl buttons, with a number of companies rising to prominence nationally. The use of freshwater shells prevalent in the United States, and the domestic invention and manufacture of machinery to produce buttons from these shells, retained the freshwater pearl buttons as a uniquely American product through the middle of the 1910s. Thus, prominence in the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States translated to prominence in the freshwater pearl button industry of the world.

Rise to prominence as the leading button industry in the United States, 1900-1905

In 1900, button manufacturing was first included for the federal census of the United States as an industry with statistics compiled. The United States continued to manufacture a variety of buttons, with five main categories. Brass buttons were primarily made in Connecticut and New York; vegetable ivory buttons were primarily produced in New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey; composition buttons were primarily manufactured in Pennsylvania and New York; ocean pearl buttons were primarily made in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania; and freshwater pearl buttons were produced in Iowa, New York, and Pennsylvania. New York remained the largest producer of buttons overall, with ocean pearl buttons, vegetable ivory buttons, and freshwater pearl buttons as their primary types of buttons and numerous local garment companies as their primary customer. Iowa represents the lone mention of a non-Eastern state among the primary button manufacturers, with the industry firmly centered on freshwater pearl buttons. A history of the button industry in New York from 1904 notes that J.F. Boepple started manufacturing freshwater pearl buttons in Muscatine in the early 1890s utilizing methods from Austria and Germany. A number of factories along the Mississippi River were affiliated with Eastern companies, making blanks and shipping them to the East to be finished into

⁴⁶ Boepple Button Company included J.F. Boepple as the president, William Huttig as vice president, C.K. Nebling as secretary, and D.S. McDermid as treasurer. ("Pearls and Prosperity" edition, *Muscatine Journal*, December 9, 1899; McCarley 2008: E46-47)

⁴⁷ "Pearls and Prosperity" edition, *Muscatine Journal*, December 9, 1899; McCarley 2008: E46-47

⁴⁸ The number of dwellings in town also grew from 2,366 dwellings in 1890 to 3,054 per the 1900 census, with a large number built and rented for button workers (McCarley 2008: E103)

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Table 1. History of button industry from 1880-1905.⁴⁹

	1880	1890	1900	1905
Button factories	124	106	238	275
Capital	\$2,013,350	\$3,089,265	\$4,212,568	\$7,783,900
Average number wage earners				
- men	5,825	3,831	8,685	10,567
- women	2,128	1,544	4,086	5,188
- under age 16	3,052	2,176	4,131	5,024
- 645	111	468	355	
Cost of materials	\$1,792,891	\$1,551,603	\$2,803,246	\$4,144,446
Value of products	\$4,449,542	\$4,216,795	\$7,695,910	\$11,133,769

Table 2. Number of button factories and workers from 1890-1905.⁵⁰

	1890 factories	1900 factories	Salaried Persons	Wage earners	1905 factories	Salaried persons	Wage earners
Arkansas	0	1	n/a	n/a	3	n/a	n/a
California	0	5	1	6	2	n/a	n/a
Connecticut	14	11	24	800	11	69	1,044
Illinois	4	14	14	272	22	20	280
Indiana	0	0	0	0	4	4	140
Iowa	0	53	42	1,402	51	116	1,936
Massachusetts	16	13	19	772	12	30	816
Missouri	0	11	4	83	10	16	200
New Jersey	17	34	53	1,169	46	82	1,369
New York	34	49	105	2,647	61	333	3,237
Ohio	0	4	7	72	4	6	73
Pennsylvania	14	21	58	1,009	21	42	1,140
Rhode Island	4	3	4	28	0	0	0
Wisconsin	0	9	4	106	18	11	189
Other states	3	10	20	188	10	23	274
Total	106	238	339	8,685	275	768	10,567

Table 3. Freshwater pearl button factories in 1900 and 1905.⁵¹

	1900 factories	Salaried Persons	Wage earners	Value of products	1905 factories	Salaried persons	Wage earners	Value of products
Illinois	10 of 14	11	237	\$181,704	13 of 22	16	259	\$209,500
Indiana	0	0	0	\$0	3 of 4	4	139	\$69,068
Iowa	50 of 53 41%	38 32%	1,335 37%	\$822,478 30%	51 of 51 34%	116 30%	1,936 38%	\$1,500,945 30%
Massachusetts	3 of 13	10	388	\$304,400	0 of 12	0	0	\$0
Missouri	8 of 11	1	64	\$34,529	8 of 10	16	180	\$136,994
New Jersey	11 of 34	9	193	\$310,954	11 of 46	22	330	\$480,765
New York	15 of 49	28	906	\$771,482	27 of 61	163	1,461	\$1,844,432
Ohio	3 of 4	6	66	\$56,008	3 of 4	5	66	\$50,216
Pennsylvania	6 of 21	4	223	\$193,823	8 of 21	25	397	\$333,732
Wisconsin	9 of 9	4	96	\$63,125	17 of 18	11	187	\$164,229
Other states	7	6	66	\$27,550	9	7	130	\$136,577
Total	122	117	3,574	\$2,766,053	150	385	5,085	\$4,926,458

⁴⁹ Bureau of the Census. *Manufacturers, Part III. Special Reports on Selected Industries, 1905*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908, 205.

⁵⁰ Bureau of the Census 1908: 206

⁵¹ Bureau of the Census 1908: 206

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a button.⁵² The census data shows the direct growth of the button industry of the United States through the 1890s and early 1900s due to the development of the freshwater pearl button industry, as well as the prevalence of the freshwater pearl button industry in Iowa (Tables 1-3). While Iowa had no button factories in 1890, the 1900 census reported 53 button factories in Iowa (including both blank and button factories),⁵³ compared to 49 factories in New York, 34 in New Jersey, and 21 in Pennsylvania (Table 2). Further, the button industry of Iowa was clearly defined by the freshwater pearl button industry to a greater degree than any other state (Table 3). Not only had the freshwater pearl button industry begun, it had risen to the second largest type of buttons produced in the United States per value of product in less than a decade.⁵⁴

The subsequent rise to leading type of button produced by 1905 was not a foregone conclusion of the growth of the freshwater pearl button industry starting in the 1890s but rather a focused effort tied to advances in machinery and the development of large button companies in Muscatine. In July 1900, the *Democrat* in Davenport, Iowa, reported that the boom of the freshwater pearl button industry was over. Of the 30 companies operating in early 1900, only four or five were reported as operating in July, with overproduction of blanks flooding the market. Shells were largely depleted in the Mississippi River from Keokuk to Clinton, with fishing shifting further north along the Mississippi and south to Arkansas where new mussel beds had been discovered.⁵⁵ The cost of shipping shells increased the cost of button production and closed many smaller cutting shops. In August 1900, only 15 of the 42 button factories in Muscatine were running, with 27 suspending operations due to overproduction. The closed shops were primarily smaller factories, with the larger factories continued to produce buttons.⁵⁶ Muscatine remained as the center of the freshwater pearl button industry, with the local factories composed of local firms and Eastern companies with local branches. The largest button factories operating in December 1900 in Muscatine were the Boepple Button Co, Peerless Button factory, Royal Button Co, New York Button factory, Automatic Button factory, Keystone Button Co, Leo H. Hirsch Co, Co-operative Button Co, and A & B Button Co, furnishing employment for 1,200 male and female workers who were paid by the gross according to the type of blank or button.⁵⁷

While the freshwater button industry had developed well, the *Davenport Democrat* wrote in July 1900 that it would need advances in machinery to continue to compete with Eastern competitors.⁵⁸ Advancement in automatic button machinery over the next few years not only kept the industry alive, but it advanced it quicker than thought possible. The Barry Manufacturing Company of Muscatine had continued to work on automatic button machinery, trying to further automate the process, both reducing labor costs and increasing production. In 1901, they patented and sold an automatic facing machine (to carve the face of the button) and an automatic drilling machine (that lined up buttons to drill holes). These "single automatic" machines were bought by some local and national companies and installed in their factories. In 1903, the Barry Manufacturing Company then patented and began to sell the combination facing and drilling machine, combining these two functions into one machine. This "double automatic" machine greatly improved efficiency and production, producing four to five times the number of buttons compared to foot-power lathes previously used. The machine initially sold for \$1,200, and it included a mechanism for continuous

⁵² New York State – Department of Labor (NYDL). *Report on the Growth of Industry in New York*. Submitted in February 1903. Albany: The Argus Company, 1904, 295-296.

⁵³ The numbers for each state included both factories finishing buttons as well as those producing button blanks as it was not practicable to separate the two types, as many factories did both steps.

⁵⁴ Bureau of the Census 1908: 205-206

⁵⁵ "Button Industry," *The Democrat*, Davenport, IA, July 17, 1900, 5; Claassen 1994: 30, 84

⁵⁶ Boepple Button Company was still running in both Muscatine and Davenport (500 workers); James S. McKee was making blanks only (60 workers), New York Button Company was running with reduced workers (70 workers); the Keystone Pearl Button Company of Erie, PA was running with a full force (40 workers), and Royal Button Company and Automatic Button Company were also operating. A number of large blank factories continued to operate, including the shop of John Teichmiller (66 workers). The blank factory of Leo E. Hirsch of New York was closed, with 85 out of work ("News Budget from Muscatine," *Daily Times*, August 2, 1900, 6; "Fifteen Running," *Muscatine Weekly News-Tribune*, August 3, 1900, 3)

⁵⁷ "Pearl Button Industry," *Muscatine Journal*, December 15, 1900, 20

⁵⁸ "Button Industry," *The Democrat*, Davenport, IA, July 17, 1900, 5

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adjustment and sharpening of facing and drilling tools. While modified and altered by various companies to improve efficiency, the Barry double automatic remained at the core of button machinery in factories from the 1900s through the 1940s.⁵⁹ As R.E. Coker wrote in 1919: "The automatic machine has revolutionized the industry of button manufacture from fresh-water shells. It makes possible not only a far greater yield, but a better uniformity of product than was ever possible with handwork."⁶⁰

The installation of the single automatic machinery, and then the double automatic machinery, quickly separated the old button companies from the modern button companies. Seven cutting machines were required to keep pace with the increased efficiency brought by one double automatic machine.⁶¹ Henry Umlandt and John Weber of the Automatic Button Company had already adopted earlier Barry machinery for other processes, and they quickly added the new machinery. James S. McKee and William E. Bliven were also quick to add the automatic machinery to the Peerless Pearl Button Company.⁶² The debate over the installation of automatic machinery led to the dissolution of the partnership of J.F. Boepple and Harry W. Huttig in the Boepple Button Company. Boepple opposed automating the hand craft of the process, while Huttig went ahead and installed machinery in the Muscatine plant while Boepple was busy with the Davenport plant.⁶³ Leo Hirsch & Company expanded their factory in Muscatine to support automatic machinery.⁶⁴ D.A. Willis of New York, representing the New York Button Company and various other affiliated Blumenthal companies, decided in 1901 to construct a new larger finishing plant in Muscatine adjacent to their earlier factory with new machinery. The company was then incorporated as the Vienna Pearl Button Company, and the new three-story building in Muscatine supplemented Blumenthal's affiliated factories in New York City, Brooklyn, Paris, France, and Vienna, Austria – the largest conglomeration of button companies in the world.⁶⁵ Thus, Muscatine was reinforced as the center of the freshwater pearl button industry, even for the companies based in New York and producing some of their freshwater pearl buttons in New York.

With the addition of new machinery, larger button companies that could afford to modernize quickly outpaced smaller button companies, who were already struggling with the earlier overflooded market. The result was the move toward larger button companies over the next few years. The model of using branch factories to expand capacity, particularly through the establishment of blank factories, was one advanced by the Eastern button companies when opening factories in Muscatine, and it was then adopted by local button companies as well. While the Boepple Button Company had opened a second factory in Davenport, the separation of the two companies resulted in separate businesses. Thus, the first Muscatine button company to open a branch location that was maintained as a branch was the Peerless Button Company. James S. McKee of the Peerless Button Company opened the company's first branch factory in May 1902 in Columbus Junction (Louisa County), Iowa. This branch location would be operated by the Muscatine company through 1927. The establishment of branch factories allowed the Muscatine button companies to expand their production, and the model would be adopted by other newer button companies in Muscatine over the next decade.

⁵⁹ By 1911, the Barry Manufacturing was among the largest businesses in Muscatine, and one of the largest of its kind in the country. They employed over 100 people in their three building plant. The firm name changed to the Barry Company in 1915 (Coker 1919: 65; Claassen 1994: 59; Richman 1911, Vol. 1: 303; Richman 1911, Vol. 2: 50; McCarley 2008: E47)

⁶⁰ Coker 1919: 77

⁶¹ Alexander 2007: 8

⁶² Wooley, E. M. "Buttons: A Romance of American Industry," *McClure's Magazine*, February 1914. Vol. 42, p 113-115; "Tell Story of Umlandt's Start," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p10 (20)

⁶³ Interest in the Muscatine factory was then transferred to Huttig, while the interest in the Davenport factory went to Boepple, who continued to run it (Claassen 1994: 7; "J.F. Boepple Withdraws," *Muscatine Journal*, April 19, 1901, 8; "Boepple Co. Incorporates," *Davenport Morning Star*, April 18, 1901, 7; "Buys Boepple Factory," *Davenport Weekly Republican*, Davenport, IA, May 10, 1901, 1)

⁶⁴ "Improvements in City in 1901," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, December 15, 1901, 2

⁶⁵ The model new factory for Vienna Pearl Button opened in May 1902 on E. 3rd Street between Orange and Oak (demolished). It was the second large factory designed specifically for a button company in Muscatine, predicted to have a capacity of 40,000-60,000 gross (5.5-8.5 million) buttons per week with Barry machines were installed. The company included three New York men: Gustav Blumenthal, president; Alfred Blumenthal, vice president; and D.A. Willis, secretary and treasurer. (*Muscatine Journal*, June 20, 1901, 8; "Finishing Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, September 25, 1901, 5; "Fine Button Plant," *Muscatine News Tribune*, May 13, 1902)

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The impact of the freshwater pearl button industry of Muscatine was felt throughout towns along rivers with shell sources in the Midwest. Increased production of freshwater pearl buttons in Muscatine led to an increased demand for shells as the raw material. In December 1902, the *Journal* reported shells were shipped from the north and south along the Mississippi River and from Arkansas.⁶⁶ The cost of shipping shells to the button factories had thus become a large part of the cost of producing buttons, further weeding out smaller manufacturers. In 1902, Elmer Becker moved from Muscatine to Clarendon, Arkansas, on the Black River to open a button and shell business. The Valley Button Company was established in Newport on the White River in Arkansas in 1904 to sell shells to button companies in Muscatine, including the Peerless Button Company (McKee & Bliven). Other cutting plants close to the source of the shells were then opened in Arkansas as well.⁶⁷ As the cost of shipping increased, experimentations were made with establishing cutting plants in other locations, which had issues with the quality of blanks. Muscatine men determined that they needed to provide some oversight of these plants, and some saw a new opportunity. For example, Frank Koeckeritz from Muscatine moved to Vincennes, Indiana, and interested investors on the lower Wabash River to start the Vincennes Pearl Button Company. They operated a large blank factory by 1905.⁶⁸

The button manufacturing companies in Muscatine that formed with the introduction of new automatic machinery are the nucleus of those factories that thrived and continued to exist in Muscatine as manufacturers of freshwater pearl buttons into the 1950s. A December 13, 1902 article in the *Muscatine Journal* noted: "Muscatine has already become the button center of the world. The makers of blanks all over the Mississippi valley send them here to market. The buyers for eastern finishing plants come here to get them. And right here in Muscatine more buttons are finished, besides being cut, than in New York City, which is itself a great button making center." A total of 3,500,000 gross (504 million) blanks were cut with 2,750,000 gross (396 million) finished buttons produced in Muscatine in 1902. The 18 factories in Muscatine were divided into three types: cutting and finishing plants, blank manufacturers, and feeders for eastern finishing plants. The six full-fledged button companies (cutting and finishing) were the Automatic Button Company, Boepple Pearl Button Company, Leo H. Hirsch & Company, Peerless Pearl Button Company, Royal Pearl Button Company, and Vienna Pearl Button Manufacturing Company.⁶⁹ Eight "button manufacturers" were then listed in the 1904 city directory for Muscatine.⁷⁰ The factories employed on average 100 men, women, and girls, with pay rolls from \$800 to \$2,200 per week totaling between \$10,000 and \$12,000 in wages for the eight factories per week.⁷¹ Nineteen button blank manufacturers are also included in the 1904 business listings, including only six listed in the 1900-1901 business listings in the city directory. They were further scattered around the city, employing from 12 to 200 people. Six companies were listed under "Button Machinery" in the 1904 business listings of the city directory.⁷²

The prominence of the pearl button industry in Muscatine is also highlighted across the state in 1904 and 1905. After noting other industries in Muscatine, the article in the 1904 *Atlas of the State of Iowa* continues: "The most important of all is perhaps the pearl button business, Muscatine being the pioneer in a business

⁶⁶ "Button Industry Claims First Place," *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 33

⁶⁷ Claassen 1994: 37-38; 83-84

⁶⁸ Claassen 1994: 83-84

⁶⁹ The 10 blank manufacturers included Bishop & Hagermann (two plants), Boston Button Works, H.F. Boston Co, Co-operative Button Company, Giesler & Block Button Company, W.H. Franklin Company, Holzhauer & Bauerbach, Schmalz Brothers, and Schreurs Button Company. Teichmiller Brothers and Empire City Pearl Button Company specifically supplied Eastern finishing plants with button blanks ("Muscatine is Button Center of World," *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 24; "Button Industry Claims First Place," *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 33)

⁷⁰ 1904 listing: Automatic Button Company (309 Mulberry, demolished), Boepple Button Company (701 E. 3rd Street, extant), Giesler-Stewart Pearl Button Company (116 Walnut, demolished), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (125 E. Front, demolished), Leo H. Hirsch & Company (809 E. 4th Street, demolished), Peerless Pearl Button Company (315 W. Front, extant), Royal Pearl Button Company (Main & Grandview, South Muscatine, demolished), and Vienna Pearl Button Company (604 E. 3rd Street, demolished).

⁷¹ "One of Iowa's Best Cities," House-Warming Edition, *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1904, 9

⁷² Companies manufacturing button machinery included Barry Manufacturing, J.C. Brumwell, Hess Machine Works, J.T. Nester, Thormann Manufacturing, and Thormann, Ward, & Company.

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that has grown to great proportions. Pearl buttons are made from clam shells gathered from the Mississippi River, and Muscatine leads all other cities in the number of its factories and laborers employed in this industry.⁷³ The *Journal* noted in November 1904: "As a city, Muscatine is distinguished as much for its great button and lumber industries as Grand Rapids for its furniture factory, Pittsburg for its steel mills, Kansas City for its packing houses, and Minneapolis for its flour mills."⁷⁴ The freshwater pearl button industry was impacted by the depression impacting the garment industry in 1904,⁷⁵ with the *Des Moines Register* reporting better conditions in the pearl button industry by March 1905. Blanks were again in production from shells that had been bought and stored. The newspaper noted: "Iowa will continue to hold the name of being one of the principal pearl button manufacturing states during the coming year. From Mississippi river towns, especially from Muscatine, regarded as the center of the fresh water pearl button business of the world, comes the word that shops are working overtime, and that prospects are very bright for a busy season."⁷⁶

The 1905 census of manufacturers included the button industry, and it reflects both a renewal in production and the prominence of Iowa among button manufacturers (Tables 1-4). By the 1905 census, pearl buttons ranked number one in type of button produced, exceeding the combined value of the next two highest sources of buttons, ocean shells and vegetable ivory.⁷⁷ Of the 275 button factories in the United States, 150 factories (55%) were making freshwater pearl buttons (Table 3). Of these factories, 51 of them were located in Iowa, representing 100% of the button factories in Iowa and 34% of the freshwater pearl button factories in the country. The factories in Wisconsin, Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio each represented more than 75% of the total button factories in these states. By comparison, the freshwater pearl button factories in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania each represented around 30-40% of the total button factories in each of those states. The 1905 census noted that the majority of pearl buttons were made in New York, Iowa, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, with blanks made principally in Iowa. Blanks also were produced from freshwater shells in factories in Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, New York, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.⁷⁸ With the significant amount of investment and increased production related to automatic machinery, the freshwater pearl button industry was firmly implanted as a defining and significant aspect of the button industry in the United States.

Table 4. Button production in the United States in 1905.⁷⁹

Type	Quantity (gross)	Percent overall	Value	Percent overall
Pearl buttons	13,143,553	44.0%	\$4,870,274	53.9%
- freshwater pearl buttons	11,405,723	38.2%	\$3,359,167	37.2%
- <i>ocean pearl buttons</i>	1,737,830	5.8%	\$1,511,107	16.7%
Metal buttons	6,815,962	22.8%	\$1,312,741	14.5%
Vegetable ivory buttons	2,470,409	8.3%	\$1,305,766	14.4%
Cloth (covered) buttons	2,990,750	10.0%	\$766,091	8.5%
Bone buttons	956,412	3.2%	\$124,454	1.4%
All other buttons	3,482,206	11.7%	\$660,703	7.3%
Total	29,859,292	100%	\$9,040,029	100%
Button blanks, made for sale	6,991,738		\$916,003	

⁷³ Huebinger 1904: 307

⁷⁴ "One of Iowa's Best Cities," House-Warming Edition, *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1904, 9

⁷⁵ "One of Iowa's Best Cities," House-Warming Edition, *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1904, 9; "Bad for Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, May 5, 1904, 7

⁷⁶ "Iowa to Make Many Buttons This Year," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, March 9, 1905, 3

⁷⁷ Coker 1919: 67

⁷⁸ Bureau of the Census 1908: 208

⁷⁹ Bureau of the Census 1908: 207

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Expansion of freshwater pearl button companies and national prominence of Muscatine, 1906-1911

Over a period of less than 15 years, the freshwater pearl button industry had progressed from non-existent to the leading type of button manufactured in the United States. The button industry was thriving in 1905 and 1906, with smaller companies sold off to larger companies who had capital to expand production by adding facilities and additional automatic machines. Shell sources also began to move to locations along the Ohio River in this period.⁸⁰ Machinists continued to tweak the automatic button machinery, with the Barry Manufacturing Company of Muscatine continuing to lead sales in button machinery. Larger button companies employed their own machinists in this period, working to improve production by tweaking machinery to gain an edge over their competition. Investment in new machinery was continual in this period, and the rapidly changing equipment further meant smaller companies could not keep pace.⁸¹ By 1906, general improvements to the Barry machinery had reduced the cost of a gross of buttons from 4 cents to 1 cent and eliminated three workers from the process.⁸²

The *Muscatine Journal* reported in November 1906: "That Muscatine is the greatest pearl button center in the United States has been generally conceded for some time by all authorities in the pearl button industry, and the city has claimed, with good authority, that there is no place in the world that can equal our own city in this industry. This reputation will be maintained and increased in the future by the local manufacturers, who are continually increasing the output of their plants, improving their factories and facilities for the manufacture of pearl and shell buttons." The construction of a new modern factory for McKee and Bliven was an important step in that direction.⁸³ The McKee and Bliven Button Company consolidated operations from three other locations in Muscatine into the "largest and most complete button factory in the United States" in 1907 on the former site of the Hershey Lumber Company.⁸⁴ Thus, all operations in the production of pearl button from cutting blanks to shipping pearl buttons was contained under the roof of this massive factory in Muscatine. Sufficient machinery was planned to be installed to employ 250-300 men and nearly as many women. This number would make it one of the largest, if not the largest, factory in the city in terms of number employed – as well as truly the "World's Biggest Button Factory."⁸⁵ The *Muscatine Journal* again noted as the factory was nearing completion in July 1907 that it would be "the largest of its kind in existence," with plans to produce two varieties of buttons and manufacture more buttons per day than any other plant in the country.⁸⁶ The transition from their other Muscatine locations into this plant successfully occurred in September 1907, and McKee Button Company would continue to operate here through 2019. Their buttons were also sold through a sales office in New York City, located in proximity to their customer base in the garment industry.

As the freshwater pearl button industry was noted as the "most important branch of the button industry today in the United States" by the *Boston Transcript* in July 1908, they compiled an article outlining the history of the pearl button industry. This Boston newspaper noted and recognized that Muscatine was the center of the industry. Rapid improvements in machinery at the start of the 20th century had spurred further development of the industry, with smaller factories closing and large factories expanding. Freshwater pearl buttons could be produced much more cheaply than ocean pearl buttons, utilizing shells of the Union that were much cheaper than imported ocean shells. The mussel shells were taken to factories, sorted by size, and stored until ready for production. The shells were soaked in barrels of water for three to six days to make them less brittle when cut, and then blanks were cut using tubular saws of various diameters depending on the size of the button to be produced. The grinder then removed the "bark" (rough back) from the shell and made an even surface by being held against an emery wheel. The blank was then transferred to the finishing department, where

⁸⁰ Claassen 1994: 57, 66, 68

⁸¹ Claassen 1994: 57, 59

⁸² Claassen 1994: 59 – per Longstreth 1906: 77

⁸³ "Will Build Big Modern Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1906, 5

⁸⁴ "Will Build Big Button Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, February 2, 1907, 4

⁸⁵ "World's Biggest Button Factory," *Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, June 3, 1907, 7

⁸⁶ "Lack of Material is Cause of Delay," *Muscatine Journal*, July 16, 1907, 7

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automatic machinery put the depression on the front of the button and drilled the correct number of holes. The button was then polished by being put in a barrel with tumblers to restore the natural luster of the shell lost in the grinding process. The buttons were then transferred to the sorting department to be graded into quality categories. Buttons were then either packaged and shipped to garment manufacturers or sewed on cards to be sold. Many button factories of the West (Midwest) were noted to only produce blanks, which were then shipped to Eastern factories for finishing. The newspaper also noted the issue with the depletion of mussel beds, with the need to do something to protect the mussel to retain the raw material.⁸⁷

The local newspaper noted at the same time that "Muscatine is the pearl center of America, as a large part of the entire output of the country comes from here." The large number of button companies in town employed an "army of men" and also hundreds of women in sorting, finishing, and other departments. Additional women worked at home sewing buttons on cards.⁸⁸ The 1908 city directory listed 12 button manufacturers operating in Muscatine, in addition to 10 blank manufacturers. The larger local button companies with histories in town included the McKee and Bliven Button Company (Hershey Ave and 315 W. Front), Automatic Button Company (303-311 Mulberry), and Hawkeye Button Company (209 Orange). The Boepple Button Company had evolved into the Huttig-McDermid Pearl Button Co (701 E. 3rd St) in 1906, which was then transitioned to the Pioneer Pearl Button Company (701 E. 3rd St) in 1908, with listings for both companies in this directory.⁸⁹ Leo H. Hirsch & Co (809 E. 4th Street), and Vienna Pearl Button Manufacturing Company (604 E. 3rd St) continued to operate their local factories while being headquartered in New York. Likewise, the Empire City Pearl Button Works (702 E. 4th St) continued to operate as the local blank factory for the New York company. Six smaller button manufacturers were listed, as well as a number of blank manufacturers.⁹⁰

As the freshwater pearl button industry thrived in Muscatine, there was growing concern with the mussel population in the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers worked for various interests of the industry, including monitoring freight rates and tariff legislation. At their annual meeting in April 1907, discussion focused on requesting the government to investigate a plan to protect the freshwater mussel, as its extinction would bring the industry to a halt.⁹¹ A site slightly upriver from Muscatine at Fairport in Muscatine County was selected in 1908 by the Bureau of Fisheries as the best location for a hatchery, known for its ideal conditions for mussel beds on the river and benefitting from the support of the local button industry.⁹² The National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers met in August 1909, with 50 leaders of button companies in Iowa, New York, Wisconsin, and Missouri in attendance. Officers elected included H.W. Huttig of Muscatine as president and W.E. Bliven of Muscatine as vice president, two of the earliest men in the freshwater pearl button industry. The association organized the Fairview Land and Improvement Company to support the experiment station and hatchery at Fairport, making it available for the government to purchase when more land was needed for the station.⁹³ On December 15, 1909, the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries officially established the Fairport Biological Station to study the habits and needs of the mussel, working towards artificial propagation. Dr. R.E. Coker of Washington, D.C., was appointed as the director of the facility, and J.F. Boepple was hired as an engineer and "shell expert." Boepple traveled around the Midwest to assess the quality of shells in various rivers until his death on January 30, 1912, caused by an infection acquired after cutting his foot on a shell in a river in Indiana.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ "Muscatine Frequently Mentioned in Leading Boston Newspaper," *Muscatine Journal*, July 8, 1908, 3

⁸⁸ Muscatine: A Busy Town... and a City of Homes as well," *Muscatine Journal*, July 3, 1908, 15

⁸⁹ Claassen 1994: 88; Muscatine city directories

⁹⁰ Smaller button companies included the Muscatine Pearl Company (123-127 Front St, a new company incorporated in 1907 by the Clark family), John Weber (Park Lane), Richards-Smith Button Co (415 Hanover), Robert Rankin (214 Mulberry), Abraham Mills (1201 Orange), and Peter Dove (1002 E. 5th St). McKee and Bliven was also listed under button blank manufacturers in 1908, the only crossover among listings. Other longer running blank manufacturers included Bishop & Hagermann (125 E. Front and 416 Bismarck), Block Button Co (114 Iowa, factory 309 Benham), and Schmalz Brothers (318 Bleeker).

⁹¹ "Button Men Confer," *Indianapolis Star*, Indianapolis, IN, April 3, 1907, 5

⁹² "Muscatine Ideal Site for Hatchery," *Muscatine Journal*, August 29, 1908, 5

⁹³ "Muscatine Men Officers of National Pearl Button Men," *Muscatine News Tribune*, August 3, 1909, 8

⁹⁴ Richman 1911, Vol. 1: 271, 305; Claassen 1994: 7

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By 1910, all of the large freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine operated a home factory, branch cutting plants, and a New York sales office. The New York and other eastern companies continued to dominate the market in the East, but the Iowa and other Midwest companies had established their sales territory as from the middle of Pennsylvania through the Midwest and further to the West.⁹⁵ The companies competed with each other but also had their own specialties. For example, the Hawkeye Button Company, organized in 1903, catered to the manufacturing and jobbing trade, with a specialty of large buttons.⁹⁶ At the same time, McKee and Bliven Button Company catered to the manufacturing and jobbing trade, working directly with the garment industry.⁹⁷ Officers elected for the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers also continued to draw on the local companies, as they dominated the freshwater pearl button industry. In April 1910, officers elected included H.W. Huttig (Pioneer Pearl Button Co, Muscatine) – president; W.E. Bliven (McKee & Bliven, Muscatine) – vice president, Henry Umlandt (Automatic Button Co, Muscatine) – treasurer, and David W. MacWillie (Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, WI) – secretary. These four leaders within the button industry were then re-elected in April 1911. The association continued their work in conjunction with the biological station in Fairport. The committee on propagation and protection included Edward Cooper (Hampshire Pearl Button Co (Chalmers company), Amsterdam, NY) – chairman, D.A. Willis (Vienna Pearl Button Co, Muscatine), and Leo H. Hirsch (Leo H. Hirsch & Co, New York), while W.F. Bishop (Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, Muscatine) served as chairman for the committee on freight rates.⁹⁸ These leaders among the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers represent the leading companies in the United States of the pearl button industry in the early 1910s.

The population of Muscatine grew from 14,073 in 1900 to 16,178 in 1910 with the growth of the pearl button industry, then slowing through the 1910s as the button industry leveled off. According to the 1910 federal census, over half of the Muscatine's 3,500 wage earners worked in the button industry. Estimates in 1911 asserted that over 2,000 men and 800 women were employed in the pearl button industry.⁹⁹ The button industry also ranked fourth among the state's industries employing women.¹⁰⁰ The *History of Muscatine County* published in 1911 reported that at least 4,000 men women and children were employed in the button industry in Muscatine. Annual payroll among the 15 most prominent button and blank companies was over \$1 million. While the industry was found in other cities, Muscatine was recognized as the freshwater pearl button center of the world, with many of the other locations connected to companies in Muscatine.¹⁰¹ The three largest local button manufacturers in this period were McKee and Bliven Button Company (extant, 1000 Hershey Ave), Automatic Button Company (demolished, 303-311 Mulberry), and Hawkeye Button Company (demolished, 209 Orange).¹⁰² Muscatine continued to draw new button factories to town in this period as well, with new machinery for a branch of the Amsterdam Button Co of Amsterdam, New York, installed in the old McKee & Bliven building in spring 1911. However, they then closed and sold it to Hawkeye Button Company in 1912.¹⁰³

⁹⁵ Claassen 1994: 66

⁹⁶ They expanded their plant in 1910 in Muscatine on Orange Street with a large addition towards 2nd Street, under the leadership of W.F. Bishop. In addition to their headquarters in Muscatine, they had sales offices and stock rooms in New York and St. Louis, as well as cutting plants in Keokuk, Iowa, and Canton, Missouri, where more labor was available ("Hawkeye Company Enlarges Plant to Meet New Business Needs," *Muscatine Journal*, December 19, 1909, 41)

⁹⁷ They operated from their main office and factory at 1000 Hershey Ave in Muscatine, as well as a sales office in New York and branch factories in Columbus Junction, Iowa, Keithsburg, Illinois, and Chicago, Illinois. Some of the branches operated a full button factory, while other factories operated simply as blank factories. Several additional blank factories would be opened by the company throughout the Midwest over the next few years

⁹⁸ "Huttig at Head of Manufacturers," *Journal*, April 7, 1911, 5

⁹⁹ O'Hara 1982: 247; Richman 1911, Vol. 1: 270, 304; McCarley 2008: E52

¹⁰⁰ O'Hara 1982: 249-250; Carlson 1984: 84; McCarley 2008: E53

¹⁰¹ Richman 1911, Vol 1: 304

¹⁰² Richman 1911, Vol 2: 118, 621-622, 625

¹⁰³ "New Button Plant Nearly Completed," *Muscatine Journal*, February 7, 1911, 2; Claassen 1994: 101

McKee Button Company
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Concerns within the button industry in Muscatine and further prominence of local companies, 1911-1914

With the economic force of the button industry, unions were discouraged in Muscatine by both the button companies and the city. Initial attempts at unionizing occurred in 1897 and 1903 but neither were successful. In November 1910, the Muscatine Button Workers Protective Union formed, and membership grew to over 1,000 by January. Soon it reached 2,500 members with all but a few hundred workers in the union. On February 25, 1911, tensions reached a new peak when the button manufacturers closed their doors on their workers, citing overproduction due to a series of garment worker strikes in the East. The 2,500 laid-off workers saw the "lockout" as a reaction to their newly formed union, pointing to branch locations that continued to operate. On April 18, 1911, many button factories were reopened with a partial workforce, but many union workers then refused to return to work at the companies unless all workers were rehired. They continued to seek recognition of the union, honest weights/counts/wages, sanitary working conditions, prompt pay, prompt arbitration of grievances, pay for all marketable buttons, and overall raises. Governor B.F. Carroll then visited Muscatine to try to mediate between button workers and management. The leaders of the companies involved included H.W. Huttig, Pioneer Pearl Button Co; James S. McKee, McKee & Bliven Button Co; Henry Umlandt, Automatic Button Co; W.F. Bishop, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co; D.A. Willis, Vienna Pearl Button Manufacturing Co; John Butler, Leo H. Hirsch & Co; A.C. Adams, U.S. Button Co; Charles R. Gardiner, Amsterdam Button Co; and C.C. Smith, Richards-Smith Button Company. They offered to take back workers without discrimination of their affiliation with the Button Workers' Union at the same wages with the same methods of weights and counts as utilized previously. A settlement was reached in May, with button factories then back in operations. However, tensions between the firms and the union continued through the summer and into the fall. By August, button workers were again on strike, protesting their list of grievances.¹⁰⁴ The tensions between the Button Workers' Protective Union in Muscatine and the button companies did not cease until early in 1912. The strike was finally ended by the union, with few gains for the workers. As a result, there was little interest in the continuation of the union by local residents.¹⁰⁵

Through this period in 1911 and 1912, the prominence of the Muscatine freshwater pearl button companies rose further within the button industry of the United States. The number of freshwater pearl buttons produced continue to outpace any other type of button. As part of his work at the Fairport Biological Station, Dr. R.E. Coker surveyed the freshwater pearl button industry in 1912. A number of freshwater pearl button companies had closed throughout the country, with the remaining factories concentrated in the Mississippi River valley near Muscatine. At the same time, a large number of factories had opened simply devoted to cutting button blanks, scattered along several rivers. In 1912, he recorded 196 plants in the United States that used mussel shells in button production among 20 states. Of these plants, 153 plants, or 78%, were devoted to cutting only, producing button blanks, and 36 plants focused on finishing and/or grading buttons. Of these latter button factories, 20 also had cutting departments, thus completing all aspects of button production in house. An additional 6 businesses focused on pearl novelties.¹⁰⁶ The statistics completed for the freshwater pearl button industry in 1912 was also reported in the annual report of the Commissioner of Fisheries in 1914. The numbers were presented slightly differently than Coker's summary, though appear to reflect the same data. The report estimated that 890 automatic finishing machines were utilized in the freshwater pearl button industry in 1912, producing 26.2 million gross buttons valued at over \$6.1 million. Of the 21 freshwater pearl button factories in the United States in 1912, nine of them were located in Iowa, more than the combined total of seven in the leading states of the overall button industry of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and

¹⁰⁴ Claassen 1994: 106-109; "Manufacturers Issues a Statement Late Today," *Muscatine Journal*, April 20, 1911, 6; Rousmaniere 1982: 243-244, 250-254, 257-262; Churches of Christ of America 1912: 1-6; McCarley 2008: E53

¹⁰⁵ Claassen 1994: 107-109; "Condemn Carroll in Resolutions," *Muscatine Journal*, September 1, 1911, 7; Rousmaniere 1982: 243-244, 250-254, 257-262; Churches of Christ of America 1912: 1-6; McCarley 2008: E53

¹⁰⁶ Coker 1919: 88-89

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New Jersey.¹⁰⁷ The majority of these Iowa companies operating in 1912 were located in Muscatine. Thus, Muscatine retained its position of national prominence with the pearl button industry.

Table 5. Freshwater pearl button factories and workers in the United States in 1912.¹⁰⁸

	Workers	Male	Female	Button factories	Cutting only	Other*
Alabama and Kentucky	131	130	1	0	4	1
Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma	374	368	8	0	7	2
Illinois	725	663	62	0	36	4
Indiana	356	300	56	1	11	3
Iowa	3,649	2,447	1,202	9	60	22
Maryland and Pennsylvania	223	142	81	1	0	2
Michigan and Minnesota	176	175	1	1	6	2
Missouri	416	307	109	2	8	0
New Jersey	208	183	25	3	0	0
New York and Massachusetts	1,356	503	853	3	0	10
Ohio and West Virginia	226	224	2	0	4	2
Tennessee	69	69	0	0	3	0
Wisconsin	465	244	221	1	14	4
Total	8,376	5,755	2,621	21	153	56*

* other includes related businesses (affiliated or not affiliated with other factories)
 such as finishing, finishing and grading, grading, shell crushing, and novelty works

Table 6. Freshwater pearl button industry in the United States in 1912.¹⁰⁹

	Cutting only	Cutting machines	Button factories	Single automatic	Double automatic	Values of blanks	Value of buttons	Value of other
Alabama and Kentucky	4	132	0	0	0	\$67,454	\$0	\$1,840
Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma	7	404	0	0	0	\$267,495	\$0	\$9,888
Illinois	36	605	0	0	0	\$472,937	\$0	\$2,840
Indiana	11	298	1	0	10	\$150,089	\$0	\$9,216
Iowa	60	2,141	9	11	339	\$1,065,619	\$2,846,691	\$127,326
Maryland and Pennsylvania	0	52	1	53	15	57,600	\$86,547	\$1,488
Michigan and Minnesota	6	147	1	0	10	35,068	\$0	\$1,569
Missouri	8	303	2	0	31	\$108,999	\$0	\$9,286
New Jersey	0	65	3	0	15	\$0	\$198,455	\$200
New York and Massachusetts	0	116	3	52	329	\$1,257	\$2,678,459	\$18,500
Ohio and West Virginia	4	250	0	0	0	\$171,378	\$0	\$3,160
Tennessee	3	61	0	0	0	\$35,323	\$0	\$310
Wisconsin	14	182	1	0	25	\$77,998	\$363,334	\$12,145
Total	153	4,756	21	116	774	\$2,511,217	\$6,173,486	\$197,768

¹⁰⁷ USTC 1918: 20

¹⁰⁸ USTC 1918: 20

¹⁰⁹ USTC 1918: 21

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In addition to dominating the freshwater pearl button industry in the number of factories producing buttons, Iowa also led the country in the value of blanks, value of buttons, and value of other products. The nine button factories had 350 of the 774 automatic finishing machines in the country, with 339 double automatics with its increased capacity for production. Iowa produced over \$1 million worth of blanks, with a number of the blanks produced in branch factories in other states also shipped to the main factory in Muscatine. Other states, including Iowa, supplied blanks for New York factories as well. The value of freshwater pearl buttons produced in Iowa exceeded \$2.8 million and represented 46% of the buttons produced in the country. New York and Massachusetts fell in second with over \$2.6 million in buttons and 43% of the buttons produced, leaving only 11% of the buttons produced among the other three states with button factories.¹¹⁰ Muscatine easily claimed the title as the "Pearl Button Capital of the World" through this period.

In addition to working to protect the industry through tariffs, the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers also continued to work on other issues to protect the future of the industry. William E. Bliven continued to serve as vice president of the organization, with other officers also re-elected at their annual meeting in Chicago in April 1914 including W.F. Bishop (Hawkeye Button Co, Muscatine) as president, Henry Umlandt (Automatic Button Co, Muscatine) as treasurer, and David W. MacWillie (Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, WI) as secretary. The four officers composed the board of directors along with Edward Cooper of Amsterdam, New York (Hampshire Pearl Button Co / Chalmers), D.A. Willis of Muscatine (and New York), and Leo H. Hirsch of New York City. Thus, Muscatine men dominated the leadership roles on the board of the national association. When the newly elected President Woodrow Wilson and other Democrats sought to reduce tariffs in 1913, the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers spearheaded a movement to circulate petitions among various communities and states connected to the industry to oppose the proposed reduction of the pearl button tariff.¹¹¹ The association continued to work with Dr. R.E. Coker of the biological station at Fairport on a plan to close portions of rivers for a period of years and prohibit the removal of small sizes mussels to protect the shelling industry and permit the national propagation of the mussel. They pledged to cooperate with the Bureau of Fisheries to secure favorable legislation in various states to implement the plan. Additionally, they supported appropriations for the further development of biological station at Fairport to develop the facilities and work towards practical field propagation.¹¹²

The freshwater pearl button industry continued to be reported as the most important branch of the button industry in the United States in 1914 per a report by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. Over 21 million gross freshwater pearl buttons were produced in the United States in 1914 (Table 7). Freshwater pearl buttons composed 43.2% of total quantity and 45.4% of total value of button produced in the United States. The report noted: "Muscatine, Iowa, is still a center of the industry, and Iowa leads in the production and buttons and blanks; New York State takes second place in the output of the finished product." There was considerable expense in equipping a modern button factory, and many factories in the Midwest had shifted to only production of blanks that were shipped to the larger plants for the finishing process. Thus, the smaller number of button companies were producing larger quantities of buttons with expansion of facilities, addition of machinery, and opening of branch factories. While there had been an abundance of shells near the button-making centers of Iowa and Illinois in the early days, principal mussel fisheries were found on the Ohio River in Illinois and Indiana, rivers in Arkansas, and rivers in Minnesota and Wisconsin in 1914. Thus, a number of blank factories had opened in proximity to those sources. These blank factories accounted for the large number of states with some type of factory, which included New York, Iowa, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Kansas, Arkansas, Ohio, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Massachusetts.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ USTC 1918: 21

¹¹¹ "Expect Other Cities to Send Petitions," *Journal*, April 11, 1913, 7

¹¹² "Meeting of Pearl Button Association," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, November 5, 1913, 9; "Manufacturers to Draft New Statutes," *Journal*, March 25, 1914, 12; "Re-Elected Bishop Association Head," *Muscatine Journal*, April 1, 1914, 10

¹¹³ USTC 1918: 21-22

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Table 7. Button industry in the United States in 1914.¹¹⁴

	1904 quantity (gross)	1904 value	1914 quantity (gross)	1914 value
Freshwater pearl buttons	11,405,723	\$3,359,167	21,664,436	\$4,879,844
Ocean pearl buttons	1,737,830	\$1,511,107	4,516,969	\$2,489,364
Metal buttons	6,815,962	\$1,312,741	1,660,018	\$807,437
Vegetable ivory buttons	2,470,409	\$1,305,766	5,128,005	\$2,885,503
Cloth buttons	2,990,750	\$766,091	3,017,436	\$1,600,178
Bone buttons	956,412	\$124,454	2,198,946	\$329,934
Other buttons	3,482,206	\$600,703	22,413,549	\$3,240,938
Button blanks, made for sale	3,482,206	\$916,063	14,304,148	\$2,349,406
Snap fasteners	n/a	n/a	1,159,046	\$411,385

The Record Printing Company produced a publication around 1914 entitled *Muscatine, Iowa, The Pearl City*, with the subtitle of *The Pearl Button Center of the World*, including images of the prominent button companies in town. The title indicates the significance of the pearl button industry in the community. The purpose of the publication was to showcase the community, including its three railroad lines, interurban, good schools and churches, modern water and sewer system, electric street car lines, sound banks, strong businesses, and large number of factories. Muscatine led the state in terms of industry per the amount paid annually for laborers for manufacturers per capita. The 35 button factories of the town made Muscatine known as the "Pearl Button City of the United States," where clam shells were made into button blanks and blanks are made into all kinds of buttons. The local annual output was valued at over \$3 million per year. Additionally, Muscatine had the largest button machinery manufactory in the United States, shipping machines around the world. The nearby biological station at Fairport also worked on mussel propagation. In addition to the button companies, Muscatine boasted two of the largest sash and door plants in the world, iron foundries, boiler works, a clay pipe factory, concrete works, two artificial ice plants, wagon and carriage factories, box factories, candy and ice cream factories, and canning and preserving factories.¹¹⁵

Four of the prominent button companies in Muscatine were selected for inclusion in the images of this publication among other factories, businesses, and prominent residences in the community. The image of the McKee and Bliven Button Company shows the large three-story factory built along Hershey Avenue in 1907, with engine room on the far end as well as various additions, shell sheds, and supporting spaces on the property (Figure 14). The unique Romanesque Revival architecture of the building is clearly conveyed through this image, as well as its distinction for its size and design among the other button factories in the community. The Hawkeye Pearl Button Company is also shown in the publication as a sketch of a large complex, including the three-story building facing 2nd Street built in 1910 and the earlier two-story building and additions stretching along Orange Street (Figure 15). The photograph of the Automatic Button Company shows the three-story factory extending north along Mulberry Street from 3rd Street, with the two-story section at the north end near the alley (Figure 16). In 1913, the U.S. Button Company moved into the original Boepple Button Company (later Pioneer Button Co) building on 3rd Street at Oak Street, with the original building at the corner and addition to the east (Figure 17). Among these factories, the McKee and Bliven Button Company stands out for its design as a comprehensive factory building for button production. As the freshwater pearl button industry would decline over the next decades, these images represent the largest buildings in Muscatine associated with the industry during the height of its production, and these companies would remain in these buildings throughout the subsequent decades until their closures. The 1913 city directory lists these four companies in Muscatine, along with Pioneer Pearl Button Company at 116 Chestnut and Bishop & Hagerman at 416 Bismarck (affiliated with Hawkeye in personnel, typically blanks), and the local

¹¹⁴ USTC 1918: 93

¹¹⁵ RPC 1914: 2-4

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companies affiliated with Eastern button companies: Empire Button Company (327 Oak St, demolished), Leo H. Hirsch & Co (800-900 E. 4th St, demolished), and Vienna Pearl Button Company (3rd and Orange, demolished). Only the McKee and Bliven Button Company and the former Boepple Button Company (then U.S. Button Company) remain as extant factory buildings in Muscatine.

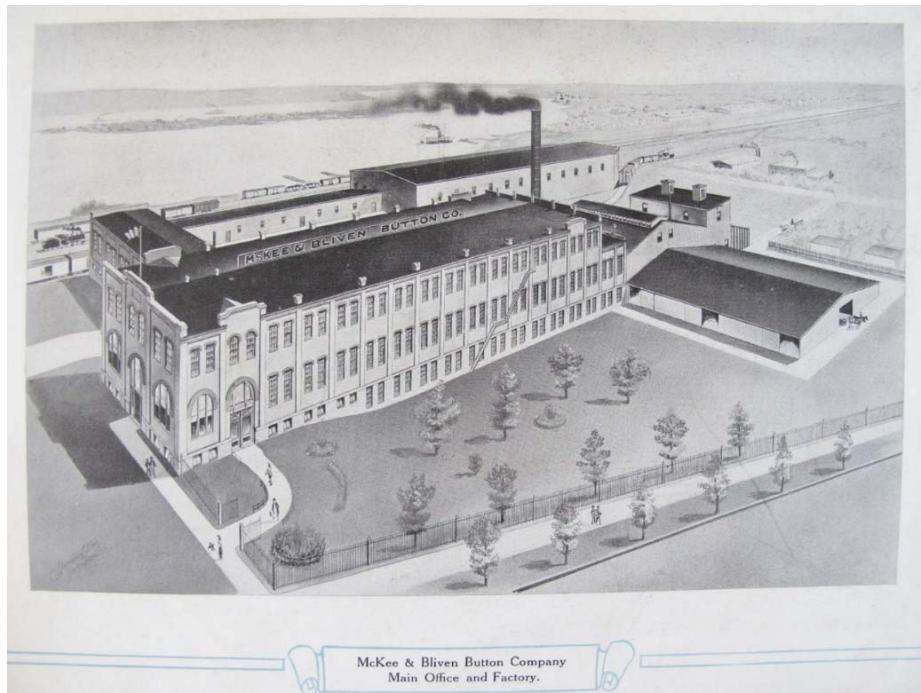


Figure 14. McKee and Bliven Button Company at 1000 Hershey Avenue (extant) in 1914, looking southwest from Hershey Ave (RPC 1914).

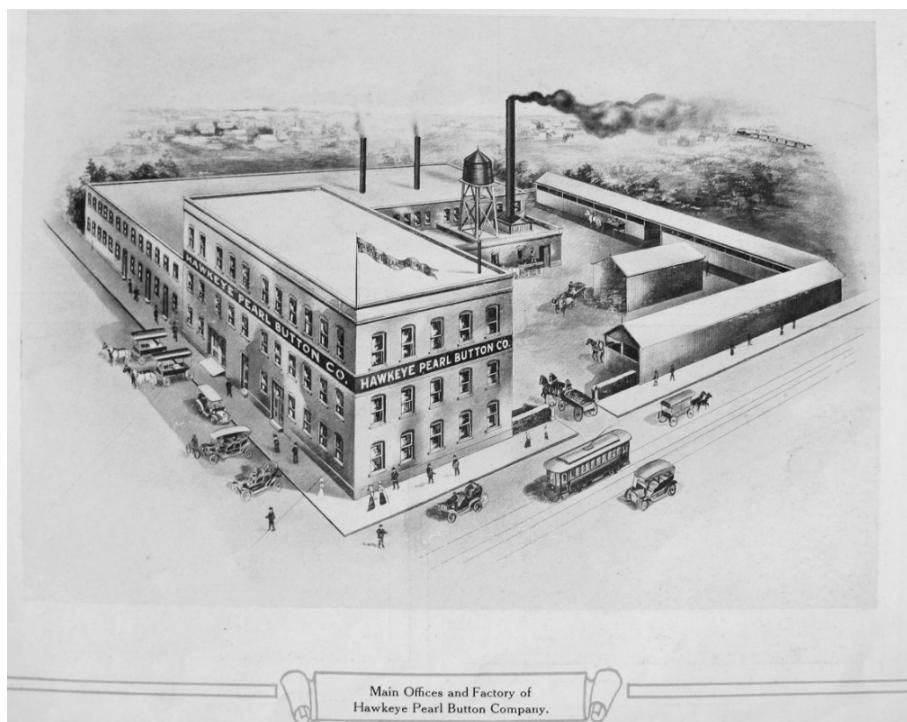


Figure 15. Hawkeye Pearl Button Company at 210-215 Orange St (demolished) in 1914 (RPC 1914).

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Figure 16. Automatic Button Company at 301 Mulberry St (demolished) in 1914 (RPC 1914).



Figure 17. U.S. Button Company at 701 E. 3rd Street (extant) in 1914 (former Boepple factory) (RPC 1914).

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Competition from Foreign Countries and Strengthening of Domestic Button Companies, 1914-1930

While the freshwater pearl button industry had blossomed under favorable tariff conditions over the previous two decades, the removal of a specific duty on buttons in 1913 ushered in a decade where the domestic freshwater pearl button struggled to compete with imported buttons. The pearl button industry in Japan had been developing in the early 20th century while the domestic companies prospered in the United States, and the removal of the tariff opened up a vast new market in America to the Japanese industry. At the same time, the button companies of Europe began a renewal with the improved export conditions. With the onset of World War I in Europe in 1914, the European companies once again closed, but the Japanese companies grew at a pace alarming to the United States button industry. Freshwater pearl buttons imported from Japan flooded the American markets, with domestic button manufacturers struggling to compete with the lower priced product. The increased markets during World War I enabled the button companies to continue production, but the end of the war brought the creation of the National Association of Button Manufacturers to lobby in Washington with the Muscatine and other pearl button manufacturers for a new specific duty on freshwater pearl buttons to ensure the continuity of the domestic industry. A new tariff on pearl buttons was enacted in early 1920, and the industry breathed a sigh of relief. However, recovery was slow through the early 1920s, favoring the larger button manufacturers and closing doors of smaller factories.

The impact of World War I on the freshwater pearl button industry, 1914-1917

As the “McKinley tariff” of 1890 created business conditions conducive to the development of the button industry in the United States, the “Underwood tariff” of 1913 – or lack thereof – created business conditions that threatened to destroy the domestic button industry. The implementation of this legislation in October 1913 signaled the first time that there was not a specific duty on buttons since the passage of the McKinley tariff in 1890, which had spurred the development of a domestic button industry, specifically the freshwater pearl button industry. Without this protection for the domestic button industry, the buttons began to be imported again in larger numbers from Austria, Saxony (Germany), and France in 1914. Ocean pearl buttons from these locations competed with domestic freshwater pearl buttons, generally noted to be of superior quality than those buttons made from freshwater shells. Additionally, the freshwater pearl button industry had started in the early 20th century in Japan, and they became a new source of cheap imported pearl buttons in the United States after the removal of the tariff. American laborers were paid higher wages than European and Japanese competitors, and the pearl button industry felt the impact of revisions to the tariff within the first few months.¹¹⁶ The impact on the freshwater pearl button industry was immediate. While larger companies were better equipped to compete with the imported buttons, smaller companies were severely impacted. The competition was felt even among the largest of the pearl button manufacturers in Muscatine, though varied by the company. Fred C. Vetter would later testify that the tariff law nearly caused the failure of the Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, which went from producing 50,000 gross buttons per week in 1913 to running at half capacity by spring 1914.¹¹⁷

However, the third peak in the freshwater pearl button industry then occurred from 1915 to 1917, with the war occurring in Europe and prior to the United States involvement. The start of World War I in July 1914 in Europe provided a lifeline for the button industry in the United States. The renewed button industry in eastern Europe quickly saw a reversal of its promising conditions as the war stopped the importation of European buttons to the United States. The removal of these imported buttons from the domestic market meant lower supply and thus increased demand for domestic buttons again. Additionally, buttons imported from Europe to other countries was also halted, creating new markets for other button companies. While Japanese buttons

¹¹⁶ “The Tariff and How It Affects Pearl Buttons,” *Muscatine Journal*, September 16, 1916, 7; *Pearl Buttons* (2) 1919: 5; Claassen 1994: 111-112

¹¹⁷ *Pearl Buttons* (1) 1919: 42-43; Claassen 1994: 90-91

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continued to be imported to the United States during World War I, the increased demand for buttons during wartime and additional markets for buttons sustained the button industry in 1915 and increased it in 1916. The price of shells initially dropped with reduced exportations, permitting some companies to acquire a stockpile of shells at low rates. With blanks produced cheaper in Japan and the lack of duty, some companies started to import blanks from Japan, finishing them in the United States.¹¹⁸ The report on the button industry by the United States Tariff Commission printed in 1918 notes that the button industry showed steady growth in the United States from 1914 to 1917. The elimination of European competition due to the war encouraged manufacturers to enlarge existing plants and expand into other types of buttons that were formerly imported. Glass and agate buttons were added to domestic production, and there was an increase in production of fancy buttons previously imported from France. The pearl button industry was noted as rapidly growing through this period, with pearl buttons imported from Japan. However, exports of buttons had risen from \$650,000 in 1914 to \$1,171,232 in 1915 to nearly \$2,000,000 in 1917. One-third of all buttons exported were noted to be pearl buttons, serving markets previously served by European countries such as Latin America, Canada, and Australia.¹¹⁹ Over 40 million gross of freshwater pearl buttons were produced in 1916, with a value of \$12.5 million.¹²⁰ There were 822 automatic machines in existence in the United States in 1916, with 375 noted to be in operation. Muscatine accounted for 375 of the total machines (46%) and 195 machines (71%) that were producing buttons that year.¹²¹ At the same time, the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers continued to monitor the overall prognosis carefully. As early as their meeting in September 1916, the association was discussing the increasing competition from Japan and its potential long term impacts under the reduced tariff.¹²²

The renewed button industry trickled through the freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine in 1915, including both Muscatine-based companies and New York companies with Muscatine branches. Leo H. Hirsch & Co of New York were noted to have resumed operations at their cutting plant in Muscatine with 50 men on June 1, 1915, after sitting idle for a year and half.¹²³ The Vienna Pearl Button Co, with Gustav Blumenthal of New York as president, continued to produce freshwater pearl buttons in Muscatine.¹²⁴ Hawkeye Button Co expanded its cutting operations by remodeling the Mississippi Box factory in May 1915, employing around 150 workers.¹²⁵ The McKee & Bliven Button Company shut down in August 1915 to make several improvements to their plant in Muscatine, including the installation of a dust collector. The new dust collector worked well, and the cutting department was re-opened with a full force in late September.¹²⁶ The U.S Button Company moved from its location on E. 6th Street into the larger facilities of the former Boepple Button Company (and then Pioneer Button Co) at 701 Oak St in 1913, with their building on E. 6th Street then leased to the Weber Button Co in 1915. The Weber Button Company, a smaller company run by former Vienna button maker John Weber, specialized in fancy buttons, and the increased demand for domestic fancy buttons with the closing of the Paris factories greatly increased their business. By December 1915, they were noted as being the largest factory in the world devoted to the manufacture of fancy pearl buttons, employing from 100 to 200 workers.¹²⁷ With the demand for machinery, the Barry Manufacturing Company built a large new factory in 1914 that was expanded

¹¹⁸ Claassen 1994: 91, 112

¹¹⁹ United States Tariff Commission (USTC). *The Button Industry*. Tariff Information Series, No. 4. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918, 15-18

¹²⁰ Claassen 1994: 69

¹²¹ "Button Factories are Muscatine's Greatest Commercial Asset," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p8, 10 (18, 20)

¹²² "The Tariff and How It Affects Pearl Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, September 16, 1916, 7

¹²³ *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 78; "Almost Million Expended in Improvements," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 58

¹²⁴ *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 54

¹²⁵ *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 78; "Almost Million Expended in Improvements," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 58

¹²⁶ "Dust Collector to be Tested Sept. 13," *Muscatine Journal*, August 27, 1915, 4; "Button Factory is Opened after Long Period of Idleness," *Muscatine Journal*, September 27, 1915, 4

¹²⁷ *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 79; "Weber Button Company Signals Most Prosperous Year by Expansion," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 56

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with a second building on E. 4th St completed in 1916.¹²⁸ The health of the pearl button industry is then reflected in the listings in the 1916 city directory of Muscatine. Ten companies were listed under button manufacturers, and a record number of button blank manufacturers – 43 – were also listed in the 1916 directory.¹²⁹ The improved conditions spurred the organization of the Iowa Pearl Button Company, with William F. Bishop as president (who had retired from Hawkeye), O.A. Hammer as vice president, and J. Bishop as secretary-treasurer. The company purchased the former McKee & Bliven factory at 315 W. Front Street from Hawkeye Button Co, and they opened there with 10 Barry automatic machines driven by electricity instead of steam, an innovation that then spread to other factories.¹³⁰

While the freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine were not the only ones to benefit from the economic conditions brought by the start of World War I, the sheer number of companies in Muscatine greatly outpaced any other community in Iowa or the United States and thus the impact of the shift in the industry was greatest for Muscatine. Other pearl button companies continued to operate in Iowa in Davenport, Burlington, Washington, Guttenberg, and Lansing, with additional cutting plants located in other communities as well. The Davenport Pearl Button Company, organized in 1896, operated from the old Eagle Brewery at 5th and Taylor in Davenport, with J.E. Krouse as president.¹³¹ The Tri-City Button Company was the evolution of the J.F. Boepple Company reorganized in Davenport in 1901, with D.S. McDermid of Muscatine becoming president around 1908.¹³² Both companies continued to operate in 1916, though only the former would survive into the 1920s. Another early company that survived to this date was started by Jeremiah M. Turner as button cutting factory in Lansing in 1897, which was expanded to finishing buttons as the Lansing Button Works in 1904 with the addition of new automatic machinery. They focused on the jobbing trade and carding buttons.¹³³ The American Pearl Button Company of Washington also continued to operate in 1916, a company that had begun in Muscatine as the Giesler-Stewart button company in 1902, renamed in 1906, and moved to Washington in 1908.¹³⁴ The Mississippi Pearl Button Company of Burlington, incorporated in 1901, operated in a former hotel property that was later demolished. The Mississippi Pearl Button Company operated cutting plants in Fort Madison, IA; Oquawka, IL; and Warsaw, IL by 1919.¹³⁵ They were affiliated with the large Harvey Chalmers & Sons button company of New York, which produced a variety of types of buttons including freshwater pearl buttons (as the Hampshire Pearl Button Company). The larger Eastern button companies also operated branch plants in other cities besides Muscatine. By 1900, Harvey Chalmers & Sons of Amsterdam, New York, was operating cutting plants at Keithsburg, IL, and Guttenberg, IA, and the Iroquois Pearl Button Company in Dubuque opened in 1901 as an additional blank cutting plant for Harvey Chalmers & Sons. These blank factories continued to operate in 1916, and buttons were then finished in New York.¹³⁶ Likewise, the Empire Button Works in Guttenberg opened in an older stone building in 1909 as a cutting factory for Empire City Pearl Button Works of New York, and it continued to operate in this period.¹³⁷ Overall, Muscatine had a larger number of button companies and a larger number of blank factories than the other cities in Iowa combined.

¹²⁸ "Barry Plant Extension Year's Best Improvement," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 50

¹²⁹ The 10 button companies included Automatic Button Company (301 Mulberry), Hanover Pearl Button Company (415-417 Hanover), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (210-215 Orange), Leo H. Hirsch & Company (800-900 E. 4th Street), McKee & Bliven (1000 Hershey), Pioneer Pearl Button Company (116 Chestnut), Schreurs Button Company (327 Oak Street), U.S. Button Company (701 E. 3rd St), Vienna Pearl Button Company (3rd and Orange St), and Weber & Sons (1008-1010 E. 6th St).

¹³⁰ Claassen 1994: 93

¹³¹ "Button Company Buys Property," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, November 14, 1907, 8; "Button Works is Running Again," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, August 14, 1908, 10; "Men Volunteer Aid in Crisis," *Daily Times*, Davenport, IA, October 15, 1918, 7

¹³² "Another Factory to Visit Friday," *Daily Times*, Davenport, IA, June 23, 1910, 14; "Men Volunteer Aid in Crisis," *Daily Times*, Davenport, IA, October 15, 1918, 7

¹³³ Claassen 1994: 94; "Keeping clothes on is firm's business," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, IA, March 31, 1996, 35 (360)

¹³⁴ Claassen 1994: 86

¹³⁵ "New Factory," *Burlington Gazette*, February 7, 1901, 5; "The City," *Burlington Evening Gazette*, March 16, 1901, 8; "Bought Hotel," *Burlington Evening Gazette*, March 29, 1901, 5; *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 23, 1910, 4; Claassen 1994: 96

¹³⁶ "Fifteen Running," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 2, 1900, 1; "Local News," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, May 25, 1902, 4

¹³⁷ Diane Langton, "The Pearl Button Industry," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, May 4, 2014

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Concern of the future of the pearl button industry, 1917-1920

The largest button manufacturers, including McKee and Bliven Button Company, quickly had to find new strategies to compete with the entry of the United States into World War I in April 1917. While England had been a chief importer, they had placed a strict embargo on pearl buttons, removing the market there completely. At the same time, Japan was on the brink of flooding the American market with large quantities of pearl buttons at lower prices. An emergency meeting was held by the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers in New York in May 1917, with James S. McKee (McKee & Bliven Button Co), Henry Umlandt (Automatic Button Co), Fred C. Vetter (Hawkeye Button Co), Archie C. Adams (U.S. Button Co), and W.F. Bishop (Iowa Pearl Button Co) attending from Muscatine.¹³⁸ The companies were keenly aware of the need to reduce their costs to be able to compete, with utilization of the Japanese industry as perhaps the best solution. In June 1917, Albert S. McKee was sent from McKee & Bliven to Osaka, Japan, to establish a branch office there to purchase button blanks and ship them to Muscatine for finishing. Thus, the cost of producing the blanks, a costly part of the button manufacturing process, would be reduced.¹³⁹ By July, the importation of blanks from Japan was common among a number of other American companies as well. Overall, the shells obtained from rivers in China created a blank of a superior quality to those manufactured domestically, and the blanks were produced at a much lower cost due to lower labor rates. The predicted future was the elimination of the shelling business in the United States, if this trend continued. With World War I impacting markets, the Japanese button industry exploded in 1917, with 40,000 pounds of shells utilized from China in 1916 increasing to over 6 million pounds in 1917. Following the structure of American companies, they started opening blank factories in China, then shipping blanks to finish in Japan. At the same time, the Japanese started exporting "Dobu" shirt buttons to the United States, selling for as low as 5 cents per gross, carded and duty paid. This cost was cheaper than cost of simply producing a blank in the United States.¹⁴⁰

With increased competition from Japanese buttons, button companies in the United States began to close. Those companies closely associated with the ocean pearl button industry were the hardest hit, with the high quality Japanese pearl buttons grossly underselling this more expensive domestic product.¹⁴¹ The cheaper domestic freshwater pearl button also continued to struggle to compete, with the peak numbers of 1916 reduced significantly by 1918. The number of automatic machines operating fell to around 500 by 1918, only producing 25 million gross buttons compared to 40 million gross in 1916. At the same time, the value only decreased from \$12.5 million to \$10 million, indicating the rising sales price of buttons with the wartime conditions. However, the materials costs, machinery costs, and labor costs also rose during the war, with labor shortages an increasing problem as the war continued on. Increasing labor costs also further drove up the price of freshwater shells from American rivers. By 1919, it was estimated that only half of the automatic machines operated to produce freshwater pearl buttons as had in 1916, and the industry average had button companies running at 44% capacity.¹⁴² The shifting sentiment regarding Eastern European countries during World War I also had an impact on a local Muscatine company. On June 1, 1918, the Vienna Pearl Button Company, incorporated in New York by the Blumenthal interests, became the Pennant Pearl Button Company, also incorporated in New York but operating in Muscatine. The executive office and Eastern sales room remained in New York, with the factory and sales room based in Muscatine.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ "Button Men Go to Big Meeting," *Muscatine Journal*, May 7, 1917, 10

¹³⁹ "Will Open Branch House in Orient," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, June 25, 1917, 5; "Thirty Years Ago," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, June 24, 1947, 6

¹⁴⁰ USTC 1918: 24-25

¹⁴¹ Some of the largest companies with a large segment of the ocean pearl button market that closed in this period included Ocean Pearl Button Works of New Jersey in January 1917, Pearl Button and Novelty Engraving Co of New Jersey in January 1918, and the Empire Button Company of New York in November 1919 (and thus its associated plants in Iowa) (Claassen 1994: 112).

¹⁴² Claassen 1994: 70; "Button Production of Past Years is Shown by Figures," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, 18

¹⁴³ "Factory Name to be Changed," *Muscatine Journal*, May 17, 1918, 10; *Muscatine Journal*, June 7, 1918, 6

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Despite the competition, the freshwater pearl button industry continued to lead the button industry in 1919 in the production of buttons in the United States. The census information of manufacturers collected in 1914 and 1919 for the 1915 and 1920 censuses respectively reported data on either side of the spike in the freshwater pearl button industry in 1916, showing overall gains with the wartime conditions in comparison to the year immediately following the revisions to the tariff law (Table 8). The numbers show the overall increases in the value of buttons produced in this period, as well as growth in certain types of buttons. The 557 button factories (including blank factories for pearl buttons) included 243 factories in New York, followed by 77 factories in Iowa, 70 factories in New Jersey, 33 in Illinois, and 24 in Pennsylvania. Overall, the 77 button and blank factories in Iowa remained directly connected to the freshwater pearl button industry. The United States Tariff Commission from 1918 noted that the 21.6 million gross in freshwater pearl buttons were produced by a decreasing number of overall button companies. Overall, the machinery for freshwater pearl buttons was from American invention and manufacturers, and companies were well equipped to meet all American demand for freshwater pearl buttons. The National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers was composed of 21 companies producing freshwater pearl buttons, representing 90% of the total industry and operating factories in 17 states.¹⁴⁴ Dr. R.E. Coker of the Fairport biological station published *Fresh-Water Mussels and Mussel Industries of the United States* as part of the Bulletin of the Bureau of Fisheries on October 25, 1919. He outlined the history of the freshwater pearl button industry, noting: "The industry is peculiarly American. The material has until recently been obtained in no other country, and the machinery and methods are largely of American design and development." Both single and double automatic machinery invented in Muscatine in the early 20th century remained at the core of the industry, with improvements to the designs by various changes and additions. These machines produced four to five times the number of buttons as a foot-powered lathe and created a greater uniformity of finish. A new invention in the last few years had created a machine for attaching buttons to cards with small wires. This sewing machine had already changed the way that carding was being completed, with women operating machines that could card 150 gross buttons per day.¹⁴⁵

Table 8. Button industry in the United States from 1919 census of manufacturers.¹⁴⁶

	1914 gross	1914 value	1919 Gross	1919 value
Fresh water pearl	21,664,436	\$4,879,844	23,969,125	\$8,199,639
Ocean pearl	4,516,969	\$2,489,354	5,892,344	\$6,564,105
Vegetable ivory	3,221,163	\$1,842,760	7,835,296	\$7,676,455
Covered (cloth)	3,017,436	\$1,600,178	2,871,986	\$1,769,162
Bone	2,198,946	\$329,934	2,170,800	\$509,165
Metal	872,563	\$455,485	771,367	\$616,981
Celluloid, plastic	623,169	\$724,354	2,210,181	\$3,323,148
Glass	217,224	\$100,201	570,949	\$260,948
Horn	537,096	\$299,487	2,574,822	\$1,110,957
Shoe	15,520,037	\$610,796	5,295,169	\$632,217
Trouser (inc. metal)	6,694,795	\$2,337,059	8,113,327	\$2,811,991
Collar and cuff	1,771,053	\$56,251	974,140	\$80,114
Others	1,463,937	\$396,160	5,732,317	\$1,001,915
Total	62,318,824	\$16,121,973	68,981,823	\$34,556,797

The need for restored protection for the button industry led to the creation of the National Association of Button Manufacturers in May 1919, and they successfully lobbied for restoration of the tariff on pearl buttons. The National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers met in New York with other button manufacturers,

¹⁴⁴ State with freshwater pearl button or blank factories included New York, Iowa, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Kansas, Arkansas, Ohio, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Massachusetts (USTC 1918: 109)

¹⁴⁵ Coker 1919: 65, 79, 88

¹⁴⁶ Bureau of Census 1922: 940

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calling for a broader organization to band together with a uniform voice to call on Congress to re-establish a duty on buttons. A total of 40 button manufacturers, including the freshwater pearl button companies, joined the new association as charter members. All types of buttons were represented in the new organization for the industry - pearl, vegetable ivory, metal, bone, horn, celluloid, cloth covered, etc. It was estimated that the button industry employed around 100,000 in the United States. W.P. Fickett of New York was elected as secretary for the organization, serving as the spokesmen over the next few years.¹⁴⁷ The first order of business for the new National Association of Button Manufacturers was speaking with Congress about the need for a protective tariff for the button industry. In June 1919, pearl button manufacturers appeared before a subcommittee of Ways and Means in the House to testify on the conditions within the button industry since the passage of the Underwood bill in 1913 and ask for emergency legislation to restore the duty on imported buttons.¹⁴⁸ Without the wartime conditions, they believed that the pearl button industry would have already collapsed. Frank M. Swacker testified that "Unless a change is made in the present tariff law, the importations will greatly increase at the end of the war and will result in the elimination of the entire American industry." Already, American companies were working with Japanese companies for blanks and considering moving operations to Japan completely.¹⁴⁹ Japan had shipped 5 million gross buttons to the United States in the last year, which represented about 20% of the domestic pearl button production.¹⁵⁰

The National Association of Button Manufacturers succeeded in their quest in Washington, D.C. to restore the tariff on buttons to protect the domestic pearl button industry. The House passed H.R. 7705 to "amend section 339 of the Tariff Act of October 3, 1913 in respect to the tariff on buttons of shell and pearl," and it was referred to the Senate for their consideration. The Committee on Finance of United States Senate then held hearings on the proposed legislation on December 15-16, 1919. The testimony included much of the same information presented before the House in June – a review of the button industry, conditions since the tariff bill of 1913, impact of World War I, competition from Japan, blanks from Japan, and the resulting slump in the domestic button industry. D.A. Willis noted that recently automatic machinery had been purchased and sent to Japan, a new improvement in their industry that would have further impacts on the American button industry.¹⁵¹ Those men who testified reflect the national leaders within the button industry and the nine leading companies of the pearl button industry: James S. McKee, McKee & Bliven Button Co, Muscatine, IA; Fred C. Vetter, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, Muscatine, IA; Henry Umlandt, Automatic Button Co, Muscatine, IA; D.A. Willis, Pennant Pearl Button Co, Muscatine, IA; Ralph Willis, Pennant Pearl Button Co., Muscatine, IA; A.C. Adams, United States Button Co., Muscatine, Iowa; J.E. Krouse. Davenport Pearl Button Co, Davenport, IA; Leon Lemaire, Mississippi Pearl Button Co, Burlington, IA; James Moir, Mississippi Pearl Button Co, Burlington, Iowa; D.W. MacWillie, Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, WI; Edward Cooper, Harvey Chalmers & Son, Amsterdam, NY; and W. P. Fickett, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, New York City. Action on the Payne-Aldrich tariff bill to restore duty on pearl buttons was delayed until after the holiday break, with the legislation passed in January 1920 and tariff restored for this significant segment of the button industry.¹⁵² Thus, the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States survived into the 1920s.

¹⁴⁷ The initial executive committee included L.R. Carley of the Patten Button Co of Westbury, CT, Arthur Chalmers of Harvey Chalmers & Son of Amsterdam, NY, T.G. Robinson of J.T. Robinson & Son of New York, and M.B. Whittemore of Morley Button Co of Boston. ("Button Men Vote for Tariff Wall," *New York Herald*, New York, NY, March 6, 1919, 11; "Button Makers Organized for Industry's Good," *New York Tribune*, New York, March 6, 1919, 14)

¹⁴⁸ The members who traveled to Washington to testify on June 23-24 included James S. McKee, D.A. Willis, Fred C. Vetter, and Henry Umlandt of Muscatine, James Moir and Leon LeMaire of Burlington, David McWillie of La Crosse, WI, and F.M. Swacker and W.P. Fickett of New York, as counsel and secretary of the National Association of Button Manufacturers ("Japanese Competition Worries Button Makers," *New York Tribune*, May 23, 1919, 18; "Ask for Tariff; Japs Get Trade," *Daily Times*, Davenport, Iowa, June 24, 1919, 2)

¹⁴⁹ *Pearl Buttons* (1) 1919: 12-15

¹⁵⁰ *Pearl Buttons* (1) 1919: 59

¹⁵¹ *Pearl Buttons* (2) 1919: 11

¹⁵² ("Senate to Act on New Tariff," *Muscatine Journal*, December 27, 1919, 7; Claassen 1994: 70, 117

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Recovery and stabilization of the pearl button industry, 1920-1925

Restoration of the tariff on imported pearl buttons in 1920 assured the pearl button industry of its survival, but it did not quickly restore the manufacturers to their former level of production. Recovery spanned the early years of the 1920s, as stockpiles of imported Japanese buttons were utilized by companies that had acquired them under the lower duty rate. American factories continued to operate around 40% capacity in 1921, increasing to 50% by the end of 1922. Japanese buttons continued to be exported to the United States, sold at higher rates than without the tariff and more competitive with domestic pearl buttons.¹⁵³ A special meeting of the National Association of Button Manufacturers was held in Muscatine in October 1920, in conjunction with the dedication of a new building at Fairport biological station. In addition to discussing the ongoing Japanese competition, the association continued to support the propagation work of mussels at Fairport, understanding that preservation of mussels in local rivers was necessary for the survival of the pearl button industry. The attendees from out of town included men from 10 button manufacturers in Iowa, Wisconsin, Missouri, and New York, representing the primary manufacturers of freshwater pearl buttons in the United States outside of Muscatine in this period.¹⁵⁴ Thus, the eleven button manufacturers in Muscatine listed in the 1921 city directory represented roughly half of the companies in the pearl button industry of the United States.¹⁵⁵ The McKee & Bliven factory in Muscatine was again noted in 1923 as the "largest factory for the manufacture of fresh water pearl buttons in the world."¹⁵⁶ Optimism was felt within the pearl button industry by summer of 1922 with growing demand for domestic pearl buttons and increased orders from garment manufacturers. The surplus of Japanese pearl buttons was nearly exhausted, and the industry estimated full production to resume by October 1923.¹⁵⁷

According to local statistics, Muscatine reportedly produced 15 million gross buttons in 1922, employing 3,000 people across 40 businesses related to the button industry. Amsterdam, New York, home of the Harvey Chalmers & Sons company, was noted as the town that was the second largest manufacturer of buttons, producing about 40% of the amount of buttons produced in Muscatine.¹⁵⁸ Recovery was slower than anticipated in 1923. Statistics noted that 277 automatic machines were in operation in 1923, producing 14 million gross buttons valued at \$5.6 million.¹⁵⁹ As noted, W. Unite Jones of London wrote *The Button Industry* in 1924, the first history looking at the broad spectrum of the history of button production on an international level. In terms of the United States production, he wrote: "A special note is obligatory in regard to the manufacture of pearl buttons in the United States."¹⁶⁰ Overall, "quite a remarkable trade sprang into existence in the United States since 1890," with freshwater pearl buttons developed as uniquely American industry.¹⁶¹ Additionally, the United States led the world in development of button machinery related to the production of

¹⁵³ Claassen 1994: 70, 117

¹⁵⁴ These companies included the Mississippi Pearl Button Company of Burlington, IA; Davenport Pearl Button Co of Davenport, IA; Tri-City Pearl Button Co of Davenport, IA; American Pearl Button Company of Washington, IA; Wisconsin Pearl Button Co of La Crosse, WI; La Grange Pearl Button Co of La Grange, MO, Leo H. Hirsch & Co of New York, Pioneer Button Co of Poughkeepsie, NY, and Harvey Chalmers & Son of Amsterdam, NY ("Button Men of U.S. Meet Here," *Muscatine Journal*, October 8, 1920, 10).

¹⁵⁵ The companies with histories dating to the 1890s included McKee & Bliven Button Company (1000 Hershey), Pioneer Pearl Button Company (115 Chestnut), and Automatic Button Company (301 Mulberry) and two companies with New York connections, Leo H. Hirsch & Company (801-827 E. 4th Street) and Pennant Pearl Button Company (600 E. 3rd Street). Companies that started in the early 20th century included Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601-605 E 2nd St), Hanover Pearl Button Company (415-421 Bond), Schreurs Button Company (327 Oak St), U.S. Button Company (701 E. 3rd St), and Weber & Sons (1008-1014 E. 6th St). The most recent addition, Iowa Pearl Button Company (315 W. Front St), had ties to the early button industry of Muscatine as well. The number of button blank manufacturers totaled 36 in 1921, including those focused on fishing. Two wholesale button dealers were also listed in 1921 (Batterson-Wessels Company and Schner-Block Company), and Muscatine Pearl Works (218 W. 2nd St) continued to manufacture pearl novelties. The Barry Manufacturing Company continued to be the only listing under "Button Machinery."

¹⁵⁶ "Muscatine Factory Expands," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, June 10, 1923, 39

¹⁵⁷ Claassen 1994: 70

¹⁵⁸ Claassen 1994: 70

¹⁵⁹ "Button Production of Past Years is Shown by Figures," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, 18

¹⁶⁰ Jones 1924: 103

¹⁶¹ Jones 1924: 93

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freshwater pearl buttons.¹⁶² The ocean pearl button industry continued to thrive in England, but they continued to face competition from the American freshwater pearl buttons: "Unlimited capital is being put into these American businesses, and they make a point of cutting export prices to the lowest."¹⁶³

By 1924, it was becoming apparent that the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States had peaked and would not return to the levels of production prior to the implementation of the Underwood tariff in 1913, despite the revisions in 1920. The competition from Japanese buttons continued to impact the American market, and changes in fashions were removing the numerous buttons found on clothing in previous decades. Women's fashion shifted to more clothing designed to be simply slipped over the head, and men's long underwear with 10 buttons was replaced by short underwear. Production of freshwater shoe buttons would decline from over 2 million gross in 1923 to 558,158 gross by 1929. While production of freshwater pearl buttons increased from 277 machines producing 14 million gross in 1923 to 375 machines producing 18 million gross in 1925, the level was far below the levels of the early 1910s. Production remained steady in 1926 at 18 million gross. However, the value of the buttons produced decreased from \$7 million in 1925 to \$6.75 million in 1926, a decline attributed to competition from Japanese buttons.¹⁶⁴

The evolution and prominence of freshwater pearl button companies, 1926-1929

The changing market conditions for freshwater pearl buttons once again favored the expansion of larger companies and the closure of small companies. Several of the prominent Muscatine companies had prospered sufficiently to outlast their founders, and new leadership was put in place. The McKee and Bliven Button Company was incorporated as simply McKee Button Company in 1926, and the board of directors included the McKee family members – James S. McKee, Albert S. McKee, and J. Harold McKee.¹⁶⁵ When James S. McKee then died in 1927, his sons then continued operations of McKee Button Company. Henry Umlandt, founder of the Automatic Button Company, died in 1926, with his brother William Umlandt then becoming president and his sons Arthur and Harold continuing in leadership positions.¹⁶⁶ John Weber continued as head of the Weber & Sons Button Company, with his son Charles as vice president, son John Jr. as secretary, and son Louis H. Weber as treasurer. Gustav Blumenthal, president of the Pennant Pearl Button Company of New York and Muscatine, died in February 1927.¹⁶⁷ The company was then listed with D.A. Willis as president and treasurer and R.S. Willis as vice president and secretary. Fred C. Vetter continued as head of the Hawkeye Pearl Button company, with Charles C. Hagermann as vice president. The U.S. Pearl Button Company was run by Paul Steinmetz, Archie C. Adams, and Edward Hagerman. W.F. Bishop remained at the head of the Iowa Pearl Button Company, with O.A. Hammer as vice president and J.C. Bishop as secretary and treasurer. Interestingly, the American Pearl Button Company of Washington continued its Muscatine connections with E.B. Hammer and Carl J. Jungbluth as managers of the factory.¹⁶⁸

At a time when other freshwater pearl button companies had closed throughout the country, Muscatine retained these core companies, supplying a large segment of the freshwater pearl button industry and the overall button industry. The eight pearl button manufacturers in Muscatine per the 1927 city directory included the Automatic Button Company (301 Mulberry, demolished), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601-605 E. 2nd St, demolished/remodel for HON), Iowa Pearl Button Company (315 W. Front, extant, also 407 W. Front), Leo H. Hirsch & Company (801-827 E. 4th St, demolished), McKee Button Company (1000 Hershey

¹⁶² Jones 1924: 102

¹⁶³ Jones 1924: 81

¹⁶⁴ "Button Production of Past Years is Shown by Figures," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, 18; Claassen 1994: 71

¹⁶⁵ "McKee & Bliven Becomes McKee Button Company," *Muscatine Journal*, June 26, 1926, 7; "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6

¹⁶⁶ Claassen 1994: 86

¹⁶⁷ "State News," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, IA, February 9, 1927, 2

¹⁶⁸ "American Pearl Button Co," 25th anniversary edition, *Evening Journal*, Washington, Iowa, April 3, 1926, 49

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Ave, extant), Pennant Pearl Button Company (600 E. 3rd St, demolished/remodeled for HON), U.S. Button Company (701 E. 3rd St, extant), and Weber & Sons Button Company (1008-1014 E. 6th St, extant). Only four of these companies have extant buildings with integrity to this period. The McKee Button Company complex at 1000 Hershey Avenue stands out among these companies as the largest factory for button production in Muscatine, with Iowa Pearl Button Company at 315 W. Front associated with their small building for their operations also prior the 1907. The U.S. Button Company at 701 E. 3rd St likewise operated in a building associated with an earlier button factory, the extant building associated with the Boepple Button Company. The two-story extant building of the Weber & Sons Button Company at 1008-1014 E. 6th Street was a much smaller factory, sufficient space for their specialty in fancy buttons. The 1927 city directory also continued to list 32 blank manufacturers in Muscatine as well, including McKee, Hawkeye, and Iowa Pearl Button.

Additionally, these button companies in Muscatine represent the core of the freshwater button industry throughout the United States. When James S. McKee died in 1927, representatives were sent from the other prominent pearl button companies in the United States, both personal friends and competitors with respect for this leader within the industry. These men representing other large freshwater pearl button companies in the United States in 1927 included Leon LeMaire, Alexander Moir, and James Moir of the Mississippi Pearl Button Company in Burlington, IA; J.E. Krause of the Davenport Pearl Button Co of Davenport, IA; E.M. Denniston and E.G. Girard of the Harvey Chalmers and Sons of Amsterdam, NY; D.W. MacWillie of Wisconsin Pearl Button Company of La Crosse, WI; E.A. Hammer and Carl Jungbluth of the American Pearl Button Co of Washington, IA; and Mr. Nord of the Nord-Buffum Pearl Button Company of Louisiana, MO.¹⁶⁹ The first four companies were the other four companies with representatives testifying in Washington D.C. in 1919, which were previously noted to have no identified extant resources. The latter two companies include other earlier firms that survived within the industry for over two decades, with the American Pearl Button Company starting in Muscatine in 1902 and moving to Washington in 1908 and the Nord-Buffum Pearl Button Company starting in Louisiana, Missouri, in 1902. Neither factory of these latter two companies remain extant.

In December 1928, the *Journal* noted: "Muscatine can have no rival in claiming to be the center of the button industry. This city alone produces more than half of all the fresh water pearl buttons manufactured in the United States. When the shops operated by local factories in other cities is considered, the percentage of the output dominated by Muscatine is still larger." The pearl button industry was profiled in the year end edition of the *Muscatine Journal* on December 31, 1928, as well as a number of local companies. The article noted that the industry was noted as accounted for \$2.5 million in wages in Muscatine, plus salaries of executives and salesmen. While the industry had declined in the late 1910s and early 1920s, slow but steady gains had been made again since 1924. Pearl buttons were again more popular, and new manufacturing methods enabled factories to be more versatile in their products.¹⁷⁰ The National Association of Button Manufacturers gathered leading companies in the freshwater pearl button industry in Muscatine in August 1929 for a dinner at the Hotel Muscatine featuring a presentation by Dr. M.N. Ellis of the University of Missouri on his work on propagating mussels by artificial means at the Fairport biological station. The attendees represent the leading companies in production of freshwater pearl buttons and blanks at the end of the 1920s. Muscatine companies represented included McKee Button Co, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, Automatic Button Co, Pennant Pearl Button Co, Iowa Pearl Button Co, U.S. Button Co, and Weber Button Co. Companies from out of town with representatives attending included the Mississippi Pearl Button Co, Burlington, IA; Davenport Pearl Button Co, Davenport, IA; American Pearl Button Co, Washington, IA; Harvey Chalmers & Son, Amsterdam, NY; Lansing Pearl Button Co, Lansing, IA; and the Wisconsin Button Co, La Crosse, WI.¹⁷¹ The number of freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine continued to outnumber the total of the remaining freshwater pearl button companies that operated in other towns and states.

¹⁶⁹ "Vittum Speaker at M'Kee Rites," *Muscatine Journal*, January 25, 1927, 6

¹⁷⁰ "Button Factories are Muscatine's Greatest Commercial Asset," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p8, 10 (18, 20)

¹⁷¹ "Artificial Propagation of Mussels Now Practical," *Muscatine Journal*, August 27, 1929, 1, 7

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The Freshwater Pearl Button Industry in the United States through the Depression and World War II, 1930-1945

Freshwater pearl buttons continued as a leading component of the button industry of the United States through the 1930s and into the early 1940s. The number of freshwater pearl buttons produced, however, were being manufactured by a decreasing number of companies through this period. Muscatine remained the center of the production of freshwater pearl buttons through this period, with the majority of the prominent freshwater pearl button companies and factories in the United States located in the town. The decade of the 1930s was marked by a series of programs designed to address the poor economic conditions of the Depression. The programs impacted the freshwater pearl button industry in several ways from increased tariffs to protect American industry, standardization of industry codes in relations to labor and working conditions, blossoming of unions for workers within the button industry, and resulting increased labor costs for domestic button production. The continued increase and acceptance of plastic buttons through this period began to make inroads on the dominant pearl button industry, and the remaining button companies banded together to promote the qualities of pearl buttons over the newer composition or plastic buttons. The start of World War II brought prosperity to some button companies with war contracts and the end to other button companies that struggled to compete with increasing labor costs and a decreasing market for pearl buttons. Only the strongest of the freshwater pearl button companies emerged after the war in a position to continue to produce buttons, further focusing the industry among the companies located in Muscatine, Iowa.

Freshwater pearl button industry during the early years of the Depression, 1930-1933

Overall economic conditions for business and industry worsened at the start of the 1930s, despite the efforts to protect American products with high tariffs. The question of tariffs had remained a governmental policy issue through the 1920s, particularly with the continued challenges within the agricultural industry in this period. Herbert Hoover ran for president in 1928 on a platform that pledged to help the American farmer by, among other things, raising tariff levels on agricultural products. He initiated a move towards legislation to achieve this goal upon taking office, and the proposed legislation quickly expanded to include requests for increased tariff protection for a wide spectrum of industries operating in the United States. With a broad discussion on tariff rates, representatives from the National Association of Button Manufacturers testified on the need for the existing as well as an increased tariff for the pearl button industry in February 1929, as well as tariffs on other types of buttons.¹⁷² The Tariff Act of 1930, known as the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, was passed the following year, and it included the highest tariffs across a wide spectrum of products in 100 years. The enactment in June 1930 led to further losses on Wall Street, and it exacerbated the Depression over the next few years. The act raised U.S. tariffs on over 20,000 imported goods by margins on average of 40% to 48%. The increased tariffs on agricultural products, intended to help farmers, increased food prices for the consumer. Imported goods became a luxury only for the wealthy. Other countries around the world retaliated by raised tariffs on U.S. exports. The act would prompt the end of high tariffs for American trade policy. Beginning with the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934, the United States would generally seek trade liberalization through bilateral or multilateral tariff reductions.

The freshwater pearl button industry had developed as an American product, spanning from the collection of shells in rivers to the finished button. Arkansas was the leading mussel producer for the button industry in the 1930s, supplying up to one-third of the needed shells in a given year with the peak in 1936. The Ohio River, Tennessee River, and the Wabash River in Indiana also continued to provide a large number of shells for the

¹⁷² "Iowa Button Men Assured Change to Talk Tariff," *Waterloo Courier*, Waterloo, IA, January 24, 1929, 20; "Low Tariff on Foreign Made Buttons Constitutes Danger to Industry," *Muscatine Journal*, February 27, 1929, 7; "Middle West Industries Ask Higher Tariff," *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, IL, March 19, 1929, 6

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industry.¹⁷³ Pearl buttons continued to dominate American button production in 1932, followed by vegetable ivory, metal, pyroxylin (cellulose nitrate - plastic), galalith (casein - plastic), composition, and horn.¹⁷⁴ There were 16 companies remaining in the United States producing freshwater pearl buttons from mussel shells in 1932, according to a study by the Bureau of Fisheries. Ten button factories were located in Iowa (including seven in Muscatine), three in New York, and one each in New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Missouri. The report noted: "Blank cutting plants are frequently operated near the mussel producing centers, while the finishing plants are concentrated principally at Muscatine, Iowa, with scattered factories elsewhere."¹⁷⁵ In addition to having the majority of the pearl button factories, Iowa also produced nearly 70% of all the freshwater pearl buttons in the United States in 1932 (Table 9). The overall number of freshwater buttons produced declined by nearly 25%, from over 20 million in 1929 to 15.1 million in 1932. By-products of the shells were utilized in 15 plants, including eight plants in Iowa. Overall, 97% of the 93,014 tons of crushed shell for poultry feed (97%) was produced in Iowa and 91% of the 1,185 tons of agricultural lime. Additionally, two plants in Iowa manufactured shell novelties.¹⁷⁶ Ocean pearl buttons continued to be produced in 39 plants across the United States, with shells obtained from fishing around the coast of the United States and imported from other countries, such as Australia.¹⁷⁷ In 1932, the button companies relied chiefly on the domestic market of garment manufacturers and wholesale dry goods firms located in and near larger cities, with some pearl buttons also exported. Pearl buttons were also produced in other countries such as Japan, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Italy, France, Austria, and England.¹⁷⁸

Table 9. Pearl buttons produced in the United States from 1929 to 1932.¹⁷⁹

	1929 amount (by gross)	1929 value	1930 amount (by gross)	1930 value	1931 amount (by gross)	1931 value	1932 amount (by gross)	1932 value
Freshwater pearl buttons								
- Iowa	13,559,994 67%	\$4,129,158	11,299,215 73%	\$3,340,933	11,088,981 66%	\$3,356,426	10,501,702 69%	\$2,325,071
- Other	6,645,079 33%	\$1,666,705	4,134,729 27%	\$1,444,945	5,599,515 34%	\$1,384,388	4,682,770 31%	\$1,053,852
Total	20,205,073	\$5,795,863	15,433,944	\$4,785,881	16,688,496	\$4,740,814	15,184,472	\$3,378,923
Ocean pearl buttons			4,484,393	\$3,699,313	4,479,463	\$2,883,664	3,839,293	\$2,504,303
Exports of pearl buttons	242,399	\$82,915	216,794	\$55,970	95,683	\$27,306	140,953	\$19,219

While competing, the freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine also each has their own particular markets. The overall button manufacturing process remained the same, with blanks cut in a cutting branch or cutting department, sent to the main factory, ground to the correct thickness, soaked to soften, finished on an automatic machine to carve out the center and drill holes, polished by tumbling, and sorted by quality. McKee Button Company with its main plant in Muscatine and multiple branch locations catered primarily to garment manufacturers, selling buttons wholesale. The Iowa Pearl Button Company focused more on buttons sold on cards, with this segment of the industry thriving in the early 1930s as more families chose to make their own clothes.¹⁸⁰ They also purchased the pearl novelty company, Muscatine Pearl Works, in 1929, and they ran it

¹⁷³ Claassen 1994: 36

¹⁷⁴ Johnson 1934: 14

¹⁷⁵ Johnson, F.F. *Aquatic Shell Industries*. Bureau of Fisheries, U.S. Dept of Commerce, Fishery Circular No. 15, April 1934, 7-8

¹⁷⁶ Johnson 1934: 7-8, 9-12

¹⁷⁷ Johnson 1934: 3, 5, 12

¹⁷⁸ Johnson 1934: 15, 17

¹⁷⁹ Johnson 1934: 12, 17

¹⁸⁰ Aluminum was obtained from Alcoa Aluminum Co in Riverdale to sew buttons on cards, sold to the Kresge chain. They had branch plants at Mt Carmel, IL; Wapello, IA; and Columbus Junction, IA in 1931, with a business office in New York (Claassen 1994: 92)

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as a separate company through 1936. They expanded to produce a specialty large button.¹⁸¹ C.H. Perkins incorporated as the Perkins Freshwater Pearl Products in 1932, producing fancy buttons, pearl belt buckles, and utilitarian buttons.¹⁸² The Muscatine manufacturers continued to outlast companies in other locations in this period as well. In 1933, the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company of La Crosse, Wisconsin closed its doors permanently, after briefly shutting down in 1931 and reopening in 1932. Its branch plants in Corning, AR, Lake City, MN, and Guttenberg, IA, were also closed in this period. Their stock and equipment were then sold to the Hawkeye Pearl Button Company of Muscatine in September 1933.¹⁸³ Thus, the number of non-Iowa companies was reduced by one more company.

The future of the pearl button industry in this period remained focused on the demand for pearl buttons and the propagation of the mussel. The Associated Press (AP) ran an article published by several newspapers across the country in February 1932 on the new fashions for spring including more pearl buttons, a throwback to older styles. Pearl buttons were ornamenting the back of dresses, used as trimming on sleeves and skirts, included as double rows on blouses, and used for buttons on jackets. W.P. Fickett of New York, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, noted: "Muscatine, Iowa, is rated the manufacturing center of the pearl button industry." The industry was supported by the increased propagation of clams along the Mississippi River due to the experiments by the Bureau of Fisheries at Fairport. Clams were then turned into pearl buttons, and buttons were sewed onto cards for retail sale at stores.¹⁸⁴

Standardization and changes within the button industry, 1933-1938

While workers had coordinated strikes for better wages and organized into unions for negotiating power in earlier decades, the button industry remained largely a loose network of workers in individual plants. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 was a labor and consumer law that was enacted to authorize the President to regulate industry for fair wages and prices to stimulate economic recovery. Title I was devoted to industrial recovery, authorizing the creation of industrial codes of fair competition, guaranteeing trade union rights, permitting the regulation of working standards, and regulating the price of certain refined petroleum products and their transportation. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was created to implement new policy within various industries. The act also established the Public Works Administration (PWA). Over the next two years, the NRA staff worked within various industries to standardize wages and terms of employment to provide fair competition among businesses to improve the overall economy. A challenge to the National Industrial Recovery Act resulted in a ruling in 1935 by the Supreme Court that the act, particularly Title 1, was unconstitutional. However, the seeds for further union organization to advocate for wages and conditions of employment were planted, leading to more union and labor unrest over the subsequent years.

The National Recovery Administration (NRA) worked with the button industry in 1933 to 1934 to attempt to bring standardization among not only the branches within the industry but within the industry as a whole, as the goal of the recovery act was to get competitive branches of industry together to eliminate unfair competition, including long hours and low wages. There were six codes among the nine branches of the button industry in August 1933, and the initial goal was to bring them together into one code. The National Association of Button Manufacturers submitted the proposed code for the freshwater button industry (the largest branch), including a 44 hour work week and minimum wage of 30 cents per hour (or about \$13 per week). The standards would apply to all employees from button cutting to finishing and shipping buttons, with home carders exempted. Other branches of the button industry also submitted their proposed standards.¹⁸⁵ By October 1933, it was apparent that the button industry would not be able to agree upon a basic code

¹⁸¹ Claassen 1994: 92, 97

¹⁸² Claassen 1994: 98

¹⁸³ Claassen 1994: 100

¹⁸⁴ "Vogue for Buttons Follows Increase in River Shells," *Wausau Daily Herald*, Wausau, WI, February 27, 1932, 7

¹⁸⁵ "Button Code Meeting Will Be Held Soon," *Muscatine Journal*, August 26, 1933, 1

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among the nine branches of the industry. There were proposals to regulate the “natural material” buttons – pearl, bone, horn, and vegetable ivory – under one code, which then left out casein, metal, covered, and celluloid buttons. The freshwater pearl button industry was composed of 16 plants that produced 37.8% of gross button production and 30.6% of gross value of buttons, the largest branch of the industry by production. About half of the 8,105 button workers in the 1931 manufacturing census were employed in the production of freshwater pearl buttons, with the number employed in the freshwater pearl button industry increased to 4,752 in June 1933. Other branches included 52 factories for ocean pearl buttons, nine for vegetable ivory buttons, four for bone buttons, seven for work clothing buttons of metal or fiber, 39 for celluloid buttons, 18 for casein buttons, 112 for covered buttons, and unknown number for molded buttons. J. Harold McKee of Muscatine, J.C. Bishop of Muscatine, and W.P. Fickett of New York, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, spoke on behalf of the pearl button industry and their proposed code in October 1933, answering questions on current wages and other working conditions.¹⁸⁶

Without agreement on a basic code for the button industry, efforts at standardization then reverted to codes within the various branches of the button industry in early 1934. The Fresh Water Pearl Button Manufacturing Industry code went into effect on March 12, 1934. The code set a minimum weekly wage of \$13 and maximum hours of 40 hours per week, with eight hour days for all the freshwater pearl button factories, including blank factories. The code authority to regulate the companies included Albert S. McKee of McKee Button Company of Muscatine, Fred C. Vetter of Hawkeye Button Co of Muscatine, J.C. Bishop of Iowa Pearl Button Co of Muscatine, W.P. Fickett of New York City (National Association of Button Manufacturers), Edward Cooper of Hampshire Pearl Button Co (Chalmers) of Amsterdam, NY, and Leo Hirsch of Leo H. Hirsch and Co of New York City. The code impacted about 2,500 factory workers and nearly 500 home carders in Muscatine.¹⁸⁷ Additional amendments were proposed and considered over the next year.¹⁸⁸

The industry code brought standardization to the various freshwater pearl button manufacturers. There were 37 companies listed under “button manufacturers” in the 1936-37 city directory for Muscatine, including the blank cutting shops in town. The button factories operating in town at this time included Automatic Button Company (301-15 Mulberry), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601 E. 2nd St), Iowa Pearl Button Company (315-319 W. Front), McKee Button Company (1000 Hershey), Pennant Pearl Button Company (600-04 E. 3rd St), U.S. Button Company (701 E. 3rd St), and Weber & Sons Button Company (1008-14 E. 6th St). Leo Hirsch & Company (821-827 E. 4th St) also continued to operate in town, but it is unknown if they only cut blanks or also finished buttons in Muscatine in this period.¹⁸⁹ Two companies continued to be listed under “Buttons – Wholesale and Jobbers,” the Batterson-Wessels Company at 212-14 W 2nd Street and Muscatine Pearl Works at 227-229 E. 2nd Street. In September 1935, O.A. Hammer resigned from Iowa Pearl Button Company to focus on the Muscatine Pearl Novelty Works, expanding production to pearl buttons as well as pearl novelties.¹⁹⁰ Freshwater pearl buttons also continued to be produced in four other factories in Iowa. The Mississippi Pearl Button Co in Burlington and the Davenport Pearl Button Company in Davenport continued to

¹⁸⁶ “Hearings Fail to Produce Agreements,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 13, 1933, 1

¹⁸⁷ “Sanction Given to Button Code,” *Muscatine Journal*, February 27, 1934, 1, 11; “Approval Given Code Authority,” *Muscatine Journal*, March 15, 1934, 1

¹⁸⁸ “Button Hearing Strs Hot Fight,” *Muscatine Journal*, April 10, 1934, 1; “Factories Ask Wage Reduction,” *Muscatine Journal*, November 21, 1934, 2; “Fight Seen in Proposed Button Code,” *Muscatine Journal*, January 14, 1935, 1; “Wage Scales Unsettled as Hearing Ends,” *Muscatine Journal*, January 16, 1935, 1, 2

¹⁸⁹ Other listings that produced blanks included Wm Boldt – rear 913 Newell, Christopherson Button Company – ns Angle near Pine, Frank Cozzens – 1000 E. Front, Tandy R. Davis – 500 Jackson, Dollman Button Shop – Jefferson and Lincoln, Harry P Gabel – 203 Fillmore, Ivan Goddard – 531 Adams, Jules Gosset – 1108 Hershey, Fred Grau – 1031 Climer, Fred Guder – 1006 E. 7th, Otto Herron – ns Smith 1 w Howard, Edward Hoffman – 1220 Smalley rear, Fred Humpleby – rear 114 Sherman, Emil Lick – 306 Clinton, Earl Lipplegoes – 430 Jackson, Ross Mickey - Scott sw cor Isett, John F. Moore – 503 Adams, Resnick Button Factory – 900 Park Lane, Royster Button Company – 910 E. 7th , J. Arthur Schildberg – 608 Maple, Claus Schmarje Button Works – ss Sterneman blvd near League, Robert A. Schmitt – 500 Adams, Schwalm Cutting Plant – rear 705 E. 4th St, Albert Shepard – 414 Lee St, Wm I Symmonds – 203 Bridgman, Teichmiller Button Company – 413 Bond , Peter Umlandt – 1011 Grandview Ave (blanks), Whittaker Button Company – rear 613 E. 6th St, and Louis Yarek Button Company – 416 Liberty St.

¹⁹⁰ “50 years ago,” *Muscatine Journal*, September 18, 1985, 4

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operate. The American Pearl Button Company in Washington operated 42 automatic machines and 132 cutting machines, employing 230 factory workers plus an additional 100 families for carding.¹⁹¹ The Lansing Button Company in Lansing, traditionally smaller in scale than the other companies, continued to make pearl buttons, but they had also branched out to be a jobber for buttons. They sold their own buttons as well as porcelain and glass buttons from Czechoslovakia, filigree buttons from France, and celluloid, metal, bone, and bakelite buttons from American companies. Their button production would be phased out over the next few years, with the business focusing on selling buttons.¹⁹² In 1937, there were 17.1 million gross of freshwater pearl buttons finished in the United States, valued at over \$4.7 million.¹⁹³

In December 1938, the *Muscatine Journal* reported that the "button industry represents the backbone of the community's industrial life." However, difficulties were facing the industry with the increasing manufacture of composite (plastic) buttons and the general economic downturn. Through the 1930s, there was also an increasing use of zippers and metal clasps, reducing the demand for buttons in general. Overall, sales of freshwater pearl buttons had dropped. In an effort to counter this trend, eight companies formed Pearl Button Industries, Inc., including seven local Muscatine companies (Automatic Pearl Button Company, Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, Iowa Pearl Button Company, McKee Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, U.S. Button Company, and Weber & Sons Button Company) and one Washington, Iowa company (American Pearl Button Company). Plans were underway for a nationwide marketing campaign on the benefits of pearl buttons. These companies had recently passed laundering tests, and their buttons were awarded the seal of approval by the American Institute of Laundering.¹⁹⁴

Profiles of button companies in December 1938 show that the transition from pearl buttons to composite buttons was underway even in Muscatine. McKee Button Company, still known as the largest freshwater pearl button factory in the United States, continued to only manufacture freshwater pearl buttons. The company had its main office and plant in Muscatine, with a number of branch factories, warehouses, and sales offices throughout the country. Buttons were made in a wide variety of patterns and sizes for underwear, shirts, pajamas, and other wash garment factories, and their products were sold throughout the world. Albert S. McKee, son of James S. McKee, remained at the head of the company.¹⁹⁵ The Automatic Button Company, another large local company with branches across the country, continued to produce a large number of pearl buttons, but "in recent years it has expanded its line to include the manufacture of composition buttons, trimmings, and other dress ornaments out of a catalin material." William Umlandt, brother of founder Henry Umlandt, continued to run the company, with had branch offices in New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Utica, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, Kansas City, Dallas, and San Francisco.¹⁹⁶ Charles C. Hagermann had taken over as president of Hawkeye Pearl Button Company after the death of Fred C. Vetter, with his son-in-law J.J. Rogers as vice president and Fred W. Hermann as secretary-treasurer. The company had diversified to including some catalin composition buttons as well. They continued to operate branch cutting plants in Keokuk, IA and Canton, MO, and they had branch offices in New York and Los Angeles.¹⁹⁷ Among these three large companies in Muscatine in the late 1930s, only the McKee Button Company has an extant factory building associated with the company.

¹⁹¹ "American Pearl Button Co," *Evening Journal* – Washington County Centennial Celebration, July 1936, 85

¹⁹² "Thriving Button Industry Puts Life into One 'Dead River Town' of Iowa," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, IA, November 10, 1935, sec 4, p 2 (30)

¹⁹³ Claassen 1994: 71

¹⁹⁴ "Manufacturers Join in Promotional Drive," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938, 2; Claassen 1994: 72

¹⁹⁵ "McKee Button Factory is Largest in Nation," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938, 4

¹⁹⁶ "Automatic Button Company, One of Pioneers in Field, is Observing its 40th Anniversary this Year," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938

¹⁹⁷ Claassen 1994: 91

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Freshwater pearl button industry and labor conditions, 1939-1941

The cost of labor continued to be a significant factor in the overall cost of producing a freshwater pearl button, and wages continued to be a key concern for factory workers at the end of the 1930s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act in June 1938, which then went into effect on January 1, 1939. This “wage-hour” law banned oppressive child labor, set the minimum hourly wage at 25 cents, and the maximum work week at 44 hours.¹⁹⁸ In October 1938, the button workers at McKee Button Company and Iowa Pearl Button Company voted to join a union, choosing the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America as their sole bargaining agent. The workers at Pennant Pearl Button Company soon followed suit.¹⁹⁹ The union then entered a one-year contract with McKee Button Company to outline the terms of employment for its members.²⁰⁰ The pearl button industry contended in fall 1938 that they did not have to comply with the wage-hour law, on the basis that they were a product of the fishing industry, which was exempt from the law. However, the inspector of federal wage and hour division in Iowa, G.W. Sauthoff, ruled in May 1939 that pearl button companies across country must comply with wage-hour act, with all workers required to be paid at the 25 cents per hour minimum wage.²⁰¹ As workers sought to make companies meet the law and other more favorable conditions, several strikes were held among the button workers in Muscatine in fall 1939. By October, agreements were reached between the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Local No. 289, and the McKee Button Co, Iowa Pearl Button Co, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, Weber & Sons Pearl Button Co, and Pennant Pearl Button Company for a 40-hour work week, increased wages, set hours, and general working conditions.²⁰² The one-year contract for McKee Button Company was noted to be the standard preferential agreement, and it was signed with a friendly relationship between the union and the company.²⁰³

Table 10. Buttons produced in the United States in 1937 and 1939.²⁰⁴

	1937 gross	1937 value	1939 gross	1939 value
<i>Freshwater pearl</i>	17,184,120	\$4,784,306	11,238,191	\$3,046,109
Ocean pearl	7,836,541	\$5,306,625	9,131,443	\$5,396,625
Vegetable ivory	3,141,302	\$1,605,022	2,702,440	\$1,535,030
Bone and horn	4,939,119	\$715,896	not included	not included
Wood	783,597	\$371,504	728,399	\$323,611
Cloth covered	4,771,613	\$2,123,771	2,464,213	\$1,934,050
Metal	6,000,146	\$2,616,190	6,966,149	\$3,241,329
Cellulose compounds	327,427	\$716,657	824,884	\$1,156,859
Galalith (casein)	12,340,485	\$3,383,679	13,827,501	\$3,066,495
Synthetic resin	9,407,563	\$4,341,742	15,438,819	\$4,080,941
Total buttons	72,033,685	\$27,270,721	72,960,329	\$25,547,674

The declining freshwater pearl button industry and decreased production of freshwater pearl buttons through the end of the 1930s is reflected in the manufacturing census numbers (Table 10). The overall production of 17.1 million gross of freshwater pearl buttons in 1937 continued to outpace all other branches of the button industry, with 12.3 million gross casein buttons, 9.4 million gross synthetic resin buttons, and 7.8 million gross of ocean pearl buttons. Thus, the combined number of pearl buttons continued to exceed the combined number of composition/plastic buttons produced. However, by 1939, freshwater pearl buttons lost their edge

¹⁹⁸ *Postville Herald*, Postville, IA, December 29, 1938, 2

¹⁹⁹ “Pennant Company Joins Others in Selecting Agent,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 26, 1938, 14

²⁰⁰ “McKee Company and Union Sign New Agreement,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 26, 1939, 11

²⁰¹ “Apply Act to Button Plants,” *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, May 4, 1939, 8

²⁰² “Pennant Button Company, Union Sign Agreement,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 7, 1939, 3

²⁰³ “McKee Company and Union Sign New Agreement,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 26, 1939, 11

²⁰⁴ Bureau of the Census. *Manufactures 1939*. Volume II, Part 2, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Washington, DC.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942, 606.

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on the industry. The number of freshwater pearl buttons manufactured fell to 11.2 million gross, with 9.1 million gross ocean pearl buttons. The number of casein buttons rose to 13.8 million gross, and the number of synthetic resin buttons rose to 15.4 million. Thus, types of plastic buttons outpaced types of pearl buttons in 1939 by 29.2 million gross to 20.3 million gross. The overall number of buttons manufactured in the United States remained around 72 million gross in both years. As a result, the percent of freshwater pearl buttons in relationship to total production fell from 24% in 1937 to 15% by 1939.²⁰⁵

The “Centennial Edition” of the *Muscatine Journal* in May 1940 noted: “For more than half a century now, the button industry has formed the backbone of the city’s industrial life, focusing nation-wide attention on its lustrous title as ‘The Pearl City’ and giving widespread prominence to its well-grounded claim as the center of the freshwater pearl button industry.” While thousands of people had been employed in the industry, economic conditions and cheaper composition products had reduced the demand in recent years. The article went on to note that steps were being taken to revitalize the industry, positively looking to the future.²⁰⁶ However, the pearl button industry had peaked by the late 1930s in Muscatine and throughout the United States, with companies reducing production of pearl buttons over the next two decades. The McKee Button Company was again noted as the “largest manufacturers of fresh water pearl buttons in the world,” as well as the oldest pearl button company in Muscatine with its history dating to 1895. They operated their main office and factory in Muscatine, with several branch locations and sales offices in New York and St. Louis.²⁰⁷

The Pearl Button Industries of Iowa sponsored a display of pearl buttons and pearl novelties at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines in August 1940 to promote the utilization of the pearl button. The association consisted of the leading manufacturers in the freshwater pearl button industry in Iowa, which included seven firms from Muscatine and one from Washington: McKee Button Company, Automatic Button Company, Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, Iowa Pearl Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, U.S. Button Company, Weber & Sons Pearl Button Company, and American Pearl Button Co (Washington). The association promoted the industry through research and education, working to educate the public on style and utility of pearl buttons. Their display showed the advantages of pearl buttons over composition buttons, as well as cutting edge designs in pearl buttons that utilized new techniques in styling and coloring. It also included clams, a cutting machine, and an automatic machine to show the process of making a pearl button to fair attendees. They emphasized that pearl buttons were made by American labor out of American shells from American rivers.²⁰⁸

Negotiations between the button companies and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Local No. 289, became yearly occurrences moving into the 1940s. Renewal of the contract between the union and McKee Button Company did not proceed smoothly in October 1940, with discussions stretching well into 1941 and about 175 workers from the Local No. 289 then on strike for nine weeks. The settlement announced on July 12 included a 10% wage increase, 40 hour week, eight hour day, and clause that all new employees would become members of the union within 30 days. They also agreed that local cutting production would remain in operation if other cutting plants owned or controlled by the company were in operation or when blanks are being purchased from outside sources. A similar contract was announced as signed with Hawkeye Pearl Button Company at the same time. The end of the strike in Muscatine was covered by newspapers throughout the Midwest.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Bureau of the Census. *Manufactures 1939*. Volume II, Part 2, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Washington, DC.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942, 606

²⁰⁶ “Button Industry Centers in Muscatine,” Centennial Edition, *Muscatine Journal*, May 31, 1940, sec , p 20 (179)

²⁰⁷ “McKee Button Company,” *Muscatine Journal*, Centennial Edition, May 31, 1940, sec 6, p 8 (139)

²⁰⁸ “Attractive, Instructive Displays Arranged by Button Firms at Fair,” *Muscatine Journal*, August 21, 1940, 7

²⁰⁹ “McKee Button Plant is Closed by Strike,” *Muscatine Journal*, May 8, 1941, 2; “McKee Strike in Second Week; No Agreement Seen,” *Muscatine Journal*, May 15, 1941, 12; “Agreement Reached in Strike at McKee Button Co; Hawkeye Signs with Union,” *Muscatine Journal*, July 12, 1941, 11; “Button Plant Strike Ended at Muscatine,” *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, July 12, 1941, 1; “Main Operations at McKee Plant Resume Monday,” *Muscatine Journal*, July 19, 1941, 2; “Iowa Button Strike is Reported Settled,” *Argus-Leader*, Sioux Falls, SD, July 13, 1941, 13

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The pearl button industry also continued to face issues with compliance with the fair labor standards act, particularly in relation to the cutting plants. The wage and hour division of U.S. Department of Labor filed injunctions against 27 companies in July 1941 in federal court in Iowa, Illinois, Arkansas, and Indiana for violations in order to bring the benefits of the act to employees in the freshwater pearl button industry. Consent decrees were entered with the majority of the companies over the next month, with the companies agreeing to follow federal minimum wage and time restrictions. The purpose of the drive was to eliminate the "privy" shop system, with cutting shops designated as independent contractors who then did not have to follow the federal standards. The filing and the decrees thus provide insight into the scope and operations of the freshwater pearl button industry in the early 1940s. The 27 filings actually covered more than 27 companies as groups of affiliated firms were included within one filing.²¹⁰ The 27 filings included 12 companies in Iowa (nine in Muscatine, one in Davenport, one in Washington, one in Burlington), as well as cutting shops in seven Illinois towns (Dallas City, Meredosia, Warsaw, Andalusia, Moline, Oquawka, Grayville), three Arkansas towns (Parkin, Brinkley, Newport), and one Indiana town (Loogootee). The companies were noted to be practically all of the employers in the production of buttons from freshwater shells. The ruling granted a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour, with time and half pay for working over 40 hours per week. The case had started with a ruling in June 1940 against Hawkeye Pearl Button Company that covered their plants in Muscatine, IA, Keokuk, IA, and Canton, MO.²¹¹

Freshwater pearl button industry during World War II, 1941-1945

Thus, the freshwater pearl button industry proceeded into the wartime conditions of World War II with a strong backing for labor that increased their manufacturing costs and a decreasing market for their product, with various impacts on the companies within the industry. McKee Button Company continued to produce pearl buttons in their plant in Muscatine, operating their branch blank factories as needed to meet demand and closing some branches no longer needed. Gradually decreasing operations of branch locations occurred within the other pearl button companies in Muscatine as well. The Wapello branch of Iowa Pearl Button Co was closed in May 1941 with machinery and supplies transferred to the main plant in Muscatine.²¹² At the same time, the Hawkeye Button Company offered a complete line of freshwater pearl and casein composition buttons and associated products by December 1941, adding a cutting shop in Dover, KY to the shops operating in Canton, MO, and Keokuk, IA.²¹³ Leo H. Hirsch & Co of New York continued to operate their branch factory in Muscatine, noted as reduced to only nine employees (from 214 cutting machines at one point) when fire destroyed their building in June 1940.²¹⁴ They reopened in the former Block Button Co building at 407 Benham, maintaining a small cutting shop in Muscatine. Two of the three Iowa companies outside of Muscatine would then close their doors within the next few years. The Mississippi Pearl Button Company of Burlington had its assets liquidated in February 1942, with the company then formally dissolved in October 1942.²¹⁵ The Davenport Pearl Button Company then closed down in 1944.²¹⁶

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Local No. 289, continued to negotiate for better conditions for button workers in Muscatine in this period. In August 1942, a new agreement with McKee Button Co, Iowa Pearl Button Co, Pennant Button Co, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, and Weber and Sons Button Co was

²¹⁰ While McKee Button Co, Iowa Pearl Button Co, and John Weber & Sons were listed individually, the Muscatine Pearl Works included the C. Schmarje Button Works and Clifford Paul, the Pennant Pearl Button Co included the Schmitt Button Shop (Robert A. Schmitt) and William F. Boldt, and the Automatic Button Co included the William Solonen Blank Cutting Shop and Fred Thompson.

²¹¹ "U.S. Department of Labor Cracks Down on Midwest Button Cutting Companies," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, July 3, 1941, 1; "Court Signs Decrees to Bring Pearl Button Plants Under Fair Labor Laws," *Quad-City Times*, August 1, 1941, 2

²¹² "Close Factory in Wapello," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, March 4, 1941, 5

²¹³ "Past Year Active One for Hawkeye Button Company," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1941, 19

²¹⁴ "Early Morning Blaze Completely Destroys Hirsch Button Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, June 22, 1940, 1

²¹⁵ "Notice of Dissolution," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, October 28, 1942, 12

²¹⁶ Claassen 1994: 89

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announced that granted paid vacation for all employees who had worked for six months for the company. There was also an equalization of the cutting rates, with the same wage paid for cutting shells in all plants.²¹⁷ Wartime condition reduced the amount of available labor, further positioning the union for better negotiation position. As the union represented all of the button workers, it also had the ability to negotiate the same benefits within multiple companies. The union successfully got a 7½ percent wage increase for finishing departments of the six primary button factories in Muscatine in July 1943: the McKee Button Co, Automatic Button Co, Iowa Pearl Button Co, Pennant Button Co, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, and Weber and Sons.²¹⁸

Overall, World War II proved to be a period of expansion for larger pearl button companies, a start of evolution for some pearl button companies, and the end of the road for other pearl button companies. At the end of the war, six pearl button companies continued to operate in Muscatine, with only one other company in Iowa continuing to manufacture pearl buttons. The companies operating in Muscatine included the Automatic Button Company – 301-15 Mulberry (demolished), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company – 601-13 E. 2nd St (demolished/remodeled), Iowa Pearl Button Company – 315 W. Front (extant), McKee Button Company – 1000 Hershey (extant), Muscatine Pearl Works – 227 W. 2nd St (fire/demolished), and Weber & Sons Button Company – 1008-14 E. 6th St (extant). Hawkeye Button Company had bought the remaining equipment and stock of La Crosse Pearl Button Company of WI, and they likewise did the same with the closure of the New York based Pennant Pearl Button Company in Muscatine, expanding into their adjacent buildings as well. Hawkeye Button Company and McKee Button Company then absorbed the interests and equipment of U.S. Button Company in Muscatine as well.²¹⁹ In addition to these factories, at least 21 cutting plants remained in operation in Muscatine in 1946; the Batterson-Wessels Co (212-14 W 2nd S, extant) continued to operate as a button wholesale and jobbers; and the Barry Company, Inc (901-903 E. 4th St, demolished) continued to manufacture automatic button equipment. The pearl button companies in Davenport and Burlington had closed during the war as noted, and the Lansing Button Company had ceased production of pearl buttons though continued to serve as jobbers for buttons, sewing and selling carded buttons. Thus, the only other remaining pearl button company in Iowa at the end of World War II was the American Pearl Button Company in Washington, the company that had been started in Muscatine and then moved to Washington in 1908.

The main factory building for McKee Button Company was noticeably larger than any other single building used as a button company in Muscatine in 1946, and thus it remained as the largest individual factory for pearl button manufacture in the United States. The 1946 Sanborn fire insurance map shows the factory of McKee Button Company in Muscatine, as well as the other five operating factories in Muscatine at the end of World War II (Figure 18) The McKee Button Company had a similar footprint as in 1928, with the main factory building, engine room at west end, shell crusher to the west, polishing room to the south, and shell sheds along the railroad tracks. An addition had been built to the north of the shell crushing operations at the west end, noted as used as a garage and for shell storage. With its expansion into the former buildings of Pennant Pearl Button Company, Hawkeye Button Company also occupied a larger overall footprint by 1946, composed of smaller individual buildings for the overall factory complex. This complex has been demolished/remodeled for the expansion of The HON Company / HNI Corporation in this section of Muscatine. Automatic Button Company remained in their set of buildings along Mulberry St, which were later demolished, and the site is currently parking for The HON Company. The Iowa Pearl Button Company had a smaller physical plant in Muscatine, operating in the former McKee & Bliven Button Company factory at 315 W. Front (extant). Weber & Sons Button Company remained in their two-story building at 1006 E. 6th St (extant), sufficient for their operations that remained focused on production of "fancy" and specialty pearl buttons. Muscatine Pearl Works operated in several buildings in downtown Muscatine in 1946, starting out as a pearl novelty company on the second story of 218 W. 2nd Street. With the expansion into button production, upper story spaces in

²¹⁷ "Button Workers Given Vacation; Cutting Rates to be Equalized Here," *Muscatine Journal*, August 13, 1942, 2

²¹⁸ "Union Reports Negotiations for Pay Increases," *Muscatine Journal*, June 14, 1943, 3; "Wage Increases Granted Local Button Workers," *Muscatine Journal*, September 4, 1943, 8

²¹⁹ "Clam Shells from the Bed of Mississippi Feed Muscatine's Most Important Industry," *Muscatine Journal*, March 18, 1948, 17

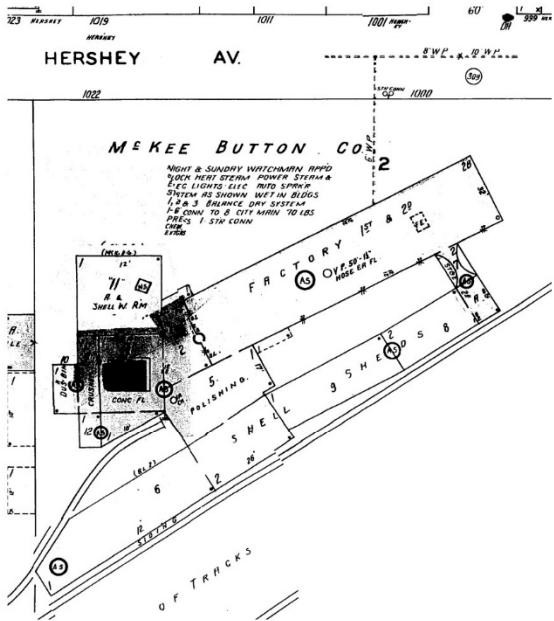
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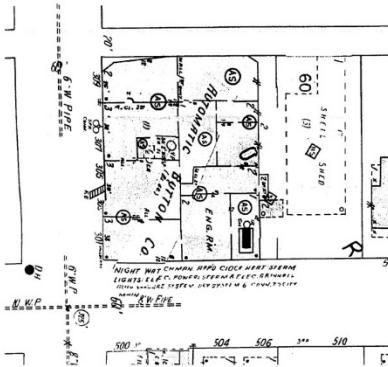
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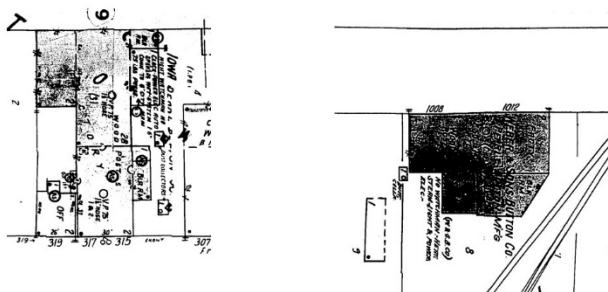
adjacent buildings were utilized and then the building was acquired at 227-229 W. 2nd Street (demolished by fire in 1961) for button production. The former building for U.S. Button Company, built as the Boepple factory, is noted as vacant on the 1946 Sanborn map.



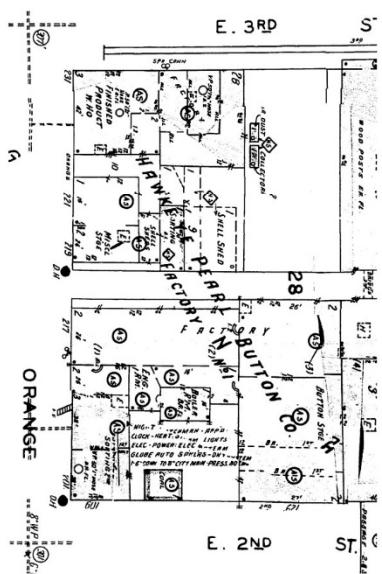
McKee Button Co, 1000 Hershey, extant



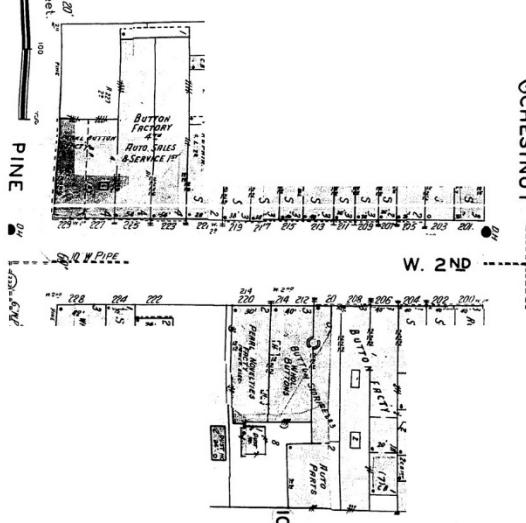
Automatic Button Co - 301-305 Mulberry, demo



Weber & Sons Button Co
 1008-14 E. 6th St, extant



Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, 601 E. 2nd St, demo
 (expanded into former Pennant Pearl Button Co
 at 600-604 E. 3rd to north, demo)



Muscatine Pearl Works - office - 218 W. 2nd, extant
 pearl novelties - 206-208-210-212-214 W. 2nd, extant
 pearl novelties/buttons - 227-229 W. 2nd, demolished

Figure 18. Pearl button companies operating in Muscatine in 1946
 (McCarley 2019; compilation of clips from Sanborn Map Company 1946).

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Development of Plastic Buttons and Evolution of Pearl Button Companies, 1945-1970

While it is frequently written that the pearl button industry died after World War II with the rise of more durable plastic buttons, the actual evolution of the button industry spanned several decades and the decline of the pearl button industry did not consistently lead to the death of the button companies in Muscatine. As noted, plastic button production outpaced pearl button production by 1939, and the plastic button industry continued to develop new products and methods of production through the 1940s. The button companies in Muscatine began to experiment with early types of plastic buttons in this period, though their focus largely remained on freshwater pearl buttons. However, advancement in detergents and laundry machines were rough on pearl buttons and stiff competition of cheaper pearl buttons, as well as now plastic buttons, from Japan again by the middle of the 1950s were also key factors that led to the demise of the pearl button industry. While other pearl button companies closed throughout the United States in the 1940s, the pearl button companies in Muscatine continued into the 1950s, gaining a larger share of the albeit shrinking pearl button market. While the pearl button companies survived in the face of the rising number of plastic buttons, new types of plastic buttons in the early 1950s and the reduced tariff on Japanese buttons in 1955 resulted in a decision over the next five years of many companies to stop producing pearl buttons and focus only on plastic buttons. The handful of remaining pearl button companies in the United States either closed or began their transition to fully producing plastic buttons by the end of the 1950s. The last pearl button company closed in Muscatine in 1966. At the same time, the plastic button industry in Muscatine then grew through the 1950s and 1960s, striving to compete with cheaper foreign plastic buttons.

The pearl button industry after World War II, 1946-1949

While the closure of freshwater pearl button companies decreased the number of companies operating in the face of the overall declining pearl button production, the remaining button companies continued to expand as needed to fill the remaining demand for pearl buttons. Thus, companies such as McKee Button Company, Automatic Button Company, and Hawkeye Button Company in Muscatine continued to prosper through the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s, supplying the pearl button market as well as expanding into other types of buttons. In 1946, it was estimated that nearly 2,000 men and women were employed in the pearl button industry in Muscatine, with annual sales between \$5 million and \$6 million. About 65% of the pearl button production in the United States was reportedly located in Muscatine, with another 25% located in other plants in Iowa and along the Mississippi River.²²⁰ Thus, 90% of the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States operated in Muscatine, Washington (Iowa), and their associated plants in other Iowa and Illinois communities. At this time, the freshwater pearl button industry had existed for fifty years in Muscatine and throughout the United States.

Depletion of mussel shells to produce buttons and cheaper buttons from Japan continued to be concerns for the freshwater pearl button industry. However, it was the continued growth of the plastic button industry that shifted customers from the pearl button industry. Mechanized washing machines and detergents were rough on the pearl buttons. Some detergents also turned pearl buttons yellow, and heat in automatic washers and dryers exfoliated the shell product. After World War II, a new family of plastic buttons was developed that were cheaper and tougher than earlier buttons. In order to keep their businesses running, more of the pearl button manufacturers began to transition from pearl buttons to plastic buttons.²²¹ The census of manufactures in 1947 shows the continued decline in the number of pearl buttons manufactured and the continued growth in the various types of plastic buttons (Table 11). Significant reductions were also seen in the number of ocean pearl buttons and vegetable ivory buttons. However, casein and other plastic buttons skyrocketed to a combined 47.8 million gross manufactured in 1947.

²²⁰ "Button Industry Notes Half Century of Operations Here," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1946, section 3, page 7

²²¹ Claassen 1994: 7-73

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Table 11. Buttons produced in the United States in 1939, 1947, and 1954.²²²

	1939 gross	1939 value	1947 gross	1947 value	1954 gross	1954 value
Freshwater pearl	11,238,000	\$3,000,000	8,254,000	\$8,166,000	6,444,000	\$6,027,000
Ocean pearl	9,131,000	\$5,300,000	5,087,000	\$7,902,000	7,320,000	\$9,640,000
Vegetable ivory	2,702,000	\$1,500,000	778,000	\$800,000	n/a	n/a
Metal	6,966,000	\$3,200,000	8,083,000	\$6,688,000	n/a	\$5,068,000
Casein and casein compound	13,828,000	\$3,100,000	7,124,000	\$5,217,000	6,694,000+	\$4,698,000
Other plastics	23,072,000	\$6,900,000	40,780,000	\$10,824,000	46,488,000+	\$17,892,000

+ = additional quantity not reported in total gross but included in total value

While other companies were scaling down operations, a new freshwater pearl button company formed in Muscatine in 1946 as a direct result of the local development of new equipment for the industry. The Ronda Button Company was incorporated in January 1946 by Clarence F. Schmarje with his father Claus Schmarje as plant manager.²²³ Clarence started making carbide tipped tools for the pearl button industry in Pennsylvania in 1938 and moved back to Muscatine in January 1941. Schmarje Tool Engineering Company moved to larger quarters at 109 Pine St (extant) in May 1943. The Tungsten-Carbide facing of his tools was second only in hardness to diamond, and it was utilized for specialty tools and other products during World War II. The carbide tip not only had a much longer life than steel, but it also had greatest accuracy and thus more precision.²²⁴ With the end of World War II, Ronda Button Company was formed to test out new button machinery that was being developed by Clarence Schmarje through Schmarje Tool and Engineering Company. The company, across the street in the former oatmeal company building at 100 Pine Street, marketed itself as the "Button Factory of Tomorrow," operating with revolutionary styles of new button machinery that improved speed and production. The machinery utilized a different technique for cutting blanks from clam shells, with saw functions on vertical not horizontal plane to allow the worker to be seated. The cemented tungsten carbide saws were superior to steel so that they retained their cutting edge longer, had improved accuracy, reduced shell flaking, and gave a higher yield of perfect blanks. Ronda Button Company operated initially solely as a cutting plant, selling its high quality blanks to other companies to finish.²²⁵ With the new machinery, button blank production could be increased at a lower cost, reducing the overall cost of pearl button production to better compete with plastic buttons.

The two largest pearl button companies operating in Muscatine in this period were the McKee Button Company and the Hawkeye Pearl Button Company. The profile of the McKee Button Company in June 1948 noted that it was the largest freshwater pearl button manufacturing concern in the world with a factory that sprawled "conspicuously at the midpoint of Muscatine's long and extensively industrialized riverfront." Muscatine remained as the headquarters for this national company, with the main sales office in New York and additional sales offices in St. Louis and Los Angeles. Branch cutting plants for the company were operated in Keithsburg, IL, Metropolis, IL, Brookport, IL, and Centerville, IA. Additionally, the branch in Centerville also had a molded plastic button plant. Another branch factory was operated at Macon, MO, to manufacture ocean pearl buttons. The company continued to be operated by the McKee family, with Nellie McKee Barry as the president.²²⁶ The Hawkeye Pearl Button Company operated their main plant in Muscatine, and they had branch blank factories in Keokuk, IA, Toledo, IA, Warsaw, IL, and Canton, MO. One

²²² Bureau of Census 1952: 64, Bureau of Center 1957: 39C-17

²²³ "Incorporated," *Des Moines Tribune*, Des Moines, IA, January 11, 1946, 10; "Notice of Incorporation," *Muscatine Journal*, April 1, 1946, 8; Claassen 1994: 98

²²⁴ "Business that Began as a Hobby Progresses Steadily," *Muscatine Journal*, December 29, 1944, 67

²²⁵ "Ronda Button Company Pioneers Drastically Improved Button Cutting Methods in 'Proving Ground' Plant here," *Muscatine Journal*, August 12, 1948

²²⁶ "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6

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of the early button cutters in Muscatine, C.C. Hagermann, remained as president of the company, with his son-in-law J.J. Rogers as vice president and Fred W. Herman as secretary-treasurer. The company was noted to have absorbed or taken over the interests in four other button companies, and C.C. Hagermann, J.J. Rogers, and C.S. Hagerman bought the Iowa Pearl Button Company in spring 1948.²²⁷ The latter company continued to operate as a separate company in 1949. The other older button manufacturers that continued to operate in Muscatine per the 1949 city directory included the Automatic Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, and Weber & Sons Button Company. A number of blank cutting factories also continued to operate in Muscatine in 1949, including Leo H. Hirsch & Co, Ronda Button Co, John Schmarje Button Works, Teichmiller Button Co, and Whittaker Button Co. According to the 1949 city directory, the primary industries in Muscatine were pearl buttons, plastics, millwork, food products, machinery, burial vaults, sheet metal products, wooden toys, industrial alcohol, centrifugal pumps, grain and feeds, and clothing.

Reduced production of freshwater pearl buttons, 1950-1955

The pearl button industry made Muscatine a nationally known community, as well as one with an international reputation for button production. The development of this large industry positioned the community for significant industrial growth in other industries in the period following World War II. The leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, local banks, and other community organizations had a national presence and focus on the future of Muscatine that led to the development of other large local corporations, such as the Grain Processing Corporation, Stanley Engineering Company, and The HON Company.²²⁸ "The Home-O-Nize Company" was incorporated in 1944 to produce newly designed steel kitchen cabinets during World War II, expanding after the war to manufacture metal storage cabinets that were also adapted for office use by simply painting them olive green. The company moved into the old U.S. Button Company Building at Third and Oak in October 1945. Because "Home-O-Nize" seemed inappropriate for an office cabinet manufacturer, they went by the initials only, evolving into The HON Company.²²⁹ As pearl button manufacturers closed in the industrial area to the east of downtown Muscatine over the following decades, The HON Company would grow into a number of the earlier manufacturing buildings, demolishing or remodeling them to meet their needs, retaining their corporate headquarters and manufacturing plant in this section of Muscatine.

In addition to competition from newer types of plastic buttons, the pearl button industry also continued to struggle due to the diminishing number of clams and mussels from American rivers. Despite efforts at propagation, the clam population dwindled through the early 1950s. In spring 1953, there were no clams from the Mississippi River that were expected to be utilized by button companies in Muscatine – the first time that had happened in the 60+ years of the freshwater pearl button industry. In addition to overfishing, the population of clams had been impacted with the construction of dams along the Mississippi River, reducing the ability of fish to migrate and creating a silt that smothered the clam beds. Clams continued to be imported from the Ohio River and Wabash River in Indiana, but higher freight costs were increasing the cost of shipping. LeRoy Waters of McKee Button Company was quoted in this *Quad Cities Times* article, with the company noted as the largest freshwater button manufacturers in the world.²³⁰

Freshwater pearl button production declined from 8.2 million gross in 1947 to only 6.4 million gross in 1954 (Table 11), roughly one-quarter of the freshwater pearl buttons produced through the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, casein and other plastic button production rose again from 47.8 million in 1947 to 53 million in 1954, exceeding the number of freshwater pearl buttons produced even at the peak of the industry. With the exception of some button companies in the East that maintained lines of freshwater pearl buttons in addition

²²⁷ "Clam Shells from the Bed of Mississippi Feed Muscatine's Most Important Industry," *Muscatine Journal*, March 18, 1948, 17

²²⁸ McCarley 2008: E80-81

²²⁹ McCarley 2008: E80

²³⁰ "Import' Clamshells to Keep Iowa Button Industry Alive," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, March 29, 1953, 15

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to other types of buttons, the remaining freshwater pearl button companies were primarily located in Muscatine. The 1954 city directory for Muscatine lists 12 companies under button manufacturers – also a significant drop from previous decades. Seven companies continued to produce some quantity of freshwater pearl buttons: Automatic Button Company (301-315 Mulberry, demolished), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601 E. 2nd St, demolished/remodeled for HON), Iowa Pearl Button Co (315 W. Front, extant), McKee Button Co (1000 Hershey Ave), Muscatine Pearl Works (227-229 W. 2nd St, demolished by 1961 fire), Ronda Button Co (109 Pine, extant), and Weber & Sons Button Co (1008-1014 E. 6th Street). Additionally, five companies remained that produced blanks in Muscatine. Only two other pearl button companies have been identified as operating in the United States in this period, the American Pearl Button Company in Washington, Iowa, and the Nord-Buffum Pearl Button Company in Louisiana, Missouri. The American Pearl Button Company in Washington, Iowa, also maintained a branch cutting plant in Guttenberg, Iowa. They maintained two staple lines with nearly 50 variations in 1953, with carding done by machinery rather than home sewing.²³¹ The Nord-Buffum Pearl Button Company in Missouri was recognized as a smaller operation overall than the Iowa companies. Both of these pearl button companies would likewise transition to plastic buttons by the end of the 1950s similar to the companies in Muscatine.

The largest freshwater pearl button companies had also begun production of plastic buttons in this period. As noted, the McKee Button Company had begun manufacturing molded plastic buttons at a second plant in Centerville, IA, in 1946, though the company continued to focus primarily on freshwater pearl buttons. The transition to an increased number of plastic buttons occurred throughout the 1950s. While the 1952 city directory listed them as manufacturers of freshwater pearl buttons, the 1954 city directory lists them as manufacturers of pearl and plastic buttons. McKee Button Company continued to operate their main factory in Muscatine, branch cutting factories at Keithsburg, IL, Metropolis, IL, and Centerville, IA, and the molded plastic factory in Centerville, IA. Similarly, Hawkeye Button Company produced freshwater pearl buttons, some ocean pearl buttons, and some plastic buttons in 1953. They retained one cutting plant in Toledo, with the Muscatine factories also supplying their blanks. In January 1955, they were reportedly producing 20,000 to 25,000 gross buttons per week of over 1,000 styles and types.²³² The Automatic Button Company opened a plastic division in New Jersey in 1952, with Arthur Umlandt appointed as manager and William Umlandt remaining as president of the overall company.²³³

Tariffs, which had encouraged the freshwater pearl button industry to develop in the 1890s, also continued to be an issue that impacted the freshwater pearl button industry in this period. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) had been negotiated in the years following World War II, and it was enacted by 23 nations on January 1, 1948. The Memorandum on the Japan Customs System governed exports from Japan in the late 1940s, with external trade under strict control. With changes in occupation policy, however, this control was gradually relaxed, and it was withdrawn completely in January 1950. As the Japanese economy continued to recover, they became a larger player in international trade and business again. Under the authority granted by the Trade Agreements Extension Act of 1954, a trade agreement was negotiated with Japan providing for reciprocal tariff concessions. Additional impetus to external trade was given by Japan's accession to GATT in 1955. William Spieth traveled to Washington, D.C. in July 1954 to testify as the representative for the National Association of Button Manufacturers before the U.S. Tariff Commission. The U.S. Senate finance committee had directed a study of all imports carrying duties of 50 percent or higher, and Spieth specifically requested tariff protection against Japanese importation of buttons. However, changes in tariff agreements resulted in the tariff on imported plastic buttons being cut in half.²³⁴ This change would not only affect the remaining freshwater pearl button industry, but the button industry in the United States in general.

²³¹ "Button Industry Important Factor in Progress," *Washington Evening Journal*, 60th Anniversary Edition, February 27, 1953, 68

²³² Claassen 1994: 91

²³³ Claassen 1994: 86

²³⁴ "Spieth Returns from Conference at Washington," *Muscatine Journal*, July 31, 1954, 5; "Spieth Elected New Head of Button Group," *Muscatine Journal*, December 17, 1954, 1; "Speaker Advocates Policy of 'Buy American to Save American Jobs,'" *Muscatine Journal*, November 30, 1960, 2

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Muscatine was further reinforced as the center for the remaining freshwater pearl button industry, and a key center of button production in the United States, with the move of the offices of the National Association of Button Manufacturers from New York City to Muscatine in January 1955. W.P. Fickett had served as president of the organization since 1919, with the office maintained in New York City. After his death in October 1954, William Spieth was elected as the new president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers in December along with a vote to move the executive office from New York City to Muscatine. Spieth was noted as working with the Vienna Pearl Button Company (of New York and Muscatine) from 1909 to 1918, continuing with the company after it evolved into the Pennant Pearl Button Company until 1943. With the closure of that company, Spieth then started working at McKee Button Company, serving as production manager for the company and remaining an active voice in the association.²³⁵ In January 1955, the permanent offices of the National Association of Button Manufacturers were established in the Laurel Building in Muscatine, where the organization remained until 1970 when Spieth retired as president and the association appears to have disbanded.²³⁶ The National Association of Button Manufacturers continued to work with the Fish and Wild Life Services of the Department of the Interior to discuss a program for the improvement of the supply of mussel shells for the pearl button industry in July 1955. An appropriation was approved by Congress for mussel propagation, with discussion between William Spieth, Wallace Newcomb of the Fairport fish hatchery, and other men related to the study of propagation on how to proceed with funds.²³⁷

Evolution of freshwater pearl button companies, 1955-1960

While Ronda Button Company had been organized in 1946 for the manufacture of pearl buttons with advanced machinery, the transition to plastic buttons is further indicated as the next new button company to form in Muscatine was focused solely on the manufacture of plastic buttons. Carl H. Umlandt took over as president of the Automatic Button Company in 1955 when his father William Umlandt left the company after 57 years to form J&K Button Company with his son-in-law Bernard Hahn. Similar to other local button companies, J&K Button Company was organized as a family business, and it was then incorporated in December 1957. The company made Jewel-Kist buttons from a heat resistant type of plastic resin, particularly for women's blouses, suits, and dresses. The buttons were noted to be durable in home and commercial laundries, and they could be easily dyed to any shade. The company moved into the former home of Iowa Pearl Button Company at 315 W. Front St, the earlier home of McKee & Bliven Button Company. They employed 20 people by December 1956.²³⁸

A number of prominent local industries were profiled in the February 26, 1957 edition of the *Muscatine Journal*, including three remaining button companies. The McKee Button Company was noted to have remained almost exclusively a producer of freshwater pearl buttons. The company had operated for more than 50 years in Muscatine, expanding after the introduction of the first Barry automatic button machines. They sold their buttons wholesale to the garment industry. They maintained six sales offices, located in New York City, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Dallas, Atlanta, and Boston.²³⁹ The Automatic Button Company and J&K Button Company were the only other button companies included in this special edition focusing on local industries. The Automatic Button Company had started by making freshwater pearl buttons, and they had

²³⁵ "Button Official Well Known Here Dies in New York," *Muscatine Journal*, October 30, 1954, 13; "Spieth Elected New Head of Button Group," *Muscatine Journal*, December 17, 1954, 1

²³⁶ "William Spieth Has Office in Laurel Building," *Muscatine Journal*, January 13, 1955, 12; "Retired button executive William Spieth, 77, dies," *Muscatine Journal*, July 22, 1971, 1

²³⁷ "Group Confers on Improving Mussel Shells," *Muscatine Journal*, July 27, 1955, 7

²³⁸ "Carl H. Umlandt Elected President of Reorganized Automatic Button Company," *Muscatine Journal*, April 18, 1955, 5; "J. and K. Button Co. Looks Ahead to Bright Future," *Muscatine Journal*, December 29, 1956, 8 (76); *Muscatine Journal*, December 27, 1957, 8; Raffensperger, "The Passing of an Era in Muscatine," August 7, 1966, 20

²³⁹ "McKee a Major Button Producer," *Muscatine Journal*, February 26, 1957, 14

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also been producing buttons from different plastics since the 1930s. Freshwater pearl buttons were made in Muscatine, with a cutting plant operating in Monticello, Iowa. The new building constructed in 1955 in Muscatine housed the plastic molding plant, the polyester sheeting department, and the blank cutting department. The polyester sheeting was used to make "Polypearl" buttons, sold to the garment industry. The company also had their Blue Bonnett line, pearl and plastic carded buttons sold to chain stores and dry goods jobbers for retail sale. They had eight branch stock rooms and sales offices across country.²⁴⁰ J&K Button Company had recently been formed to manufacture plastic buttons out of a special heat resistant type of plastic resin, marketed nationally primarily to manufacturers of women's blouses, suits, and dresses.²⁴¹ In addition to button manufacturers, the Batterson-Wessels Company was also included, which had carded and sold carded buttons to retail stores and jobbers since 1903. They dealt in domestic freshwater pearl buttons, ocean pearl buttons, and plastic buttons, as well as porcelain and genuine crystal buttons from western Germany, horn buttons from Italy, and pearl buttons from Japan.²⁴² The Lansing Company in Lansing, Iowa, also remained a source of carded buttons for retailers and jobbers in this period.

With the growing plastic button industry in Muscatine, the Muscatine Development Corporation worked with U.S. Plastic Products Corporation of Metuchen, New Jersey, to organize a subsidiary company in Muscatine to maintain a stock of plastic button blanks to sell to local button companies. The U.S. Plastics Corporation manufactured basic chemicals and pearl plastic sheeting utilized for making button blanks of various sizes and thicknesses. The Plastic Corporation of Iowa opened in 1959 with a 4,000 square foot warehouse at 1204 Washington St, with William Spieth hired to manage local operations. He also continued as president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers. With the increased production of plastic buttons in Muscatine, the company had support from local button companies to establish a local warehouse to accelerate and expedite the delivery of finished buttons from local plants to the consumer.²⁴³

Freshwater pearl buttons continued to be manufactured by a decreasing number of companies over the next few years. Weber & Sons Button Company, who had specialized in fancy buttons, stopped the manufacture of pearl buttons in 1957. Their cutting plant in Savannah, Tennessee, was then closed. Five truckloads of pearl buttons were given to Des Moines for uniforms as they worked to reduce their stock. The company shifted fully then to the manufacture of plastic buttons.²⁴⁴ At the same time, the Pearl Products Company was incorporated in Muscatine in August 1958 to produce any and all kinds of pearl and plastic novelties and buttons, including freshwater pearl buttons, ocean pearl buttons, and plastic buttons.²⁴⁵ The 1959 city directory lists eight button manufacturers in Muscatine: Automatic Button Company (301-315 Mulberry), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601 E. 2nd St), Iowa Pearl Button Co (604 E. 3rd St), J&K Button Co (315-319 W. Mississippi Dr), McKee Button Co (1000 Hershey Ave), Muscatine Pearl Works (227-229 W. 2nd St), Ronda Button Co (109 Pine), and Weber & Sons Button Co (1008-1014 E. 6th St). There were no additional listings for button blank firms, further indicating the decline of the pearl button industry in Muscatine. The McKee Button Company continued to be listed as manufacturing plastic and pearl buttons in the 1959 city directory, but they then ceased production of pearl buttons in 1959, retaining their line of plastic buttons. In 1960, Automatic Button Company stopped their manufacture of pearl buttons, retaining only their plastic lines.²⁴⁶ The other remaining pearl button company in Iowa, American Pearl Button Co of Washington, also

²⁴⁰ "Automatic Button Widened Facilities," *Muscatine Journal*, February 26, 1957, 13

²⁴¹ "Plastic Buttons Made at J.&K. Co.," *Muscatine Journal*, February 26, 1957, 15

²⁴² "Wide Range of Buttons Handled," *Muscatine Journal*, February 26, 1957, 15

²⁴³ "New Plastic Corporation of Iowa Organizes; Open Local Warehouse," *Muscatine Journal*, October 28, 1959, 3

²⁴⁴ Claassen 1994: 99

²⁴⁵ "Button Machine innovator Francis Tompkins retires," *Muscatine Journal*, July 27, 1976, 19; "Legal Notice," *Muscatine Journal*, August 20, 1958, 10

²⁴⁶ Claassen 1994: 87

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ceased production of pearl buttons at the end of 1960, closing their blank factory in Guttenberg and focusing on the production of plastic buttons in their main facility in Washington.²⁴⁷

Muscatine continued to be widely known as "The Pearl City" in December 1959, noted as a tribute to its role as the center of freshwater pearl button industry of the nation. The number of pearl button manufacturers was noted to have declined, as the shells became more scarce and other buttons were cheaper to produce. However, the button industry in Muscatine was entering a new phase – plastic buttons. Plastic buttons were made through several different processes. Some buttons were some manufactured through the plastic injection process, in which composition material was heated and forced into dies to be formed into buttons. Other buttons were made by a thermoplastics process, with powder placed in dies, heat applied, and button formed. Another method was to create plastic sheets, which were then cut into blanks by traditional methods utilized in the pearl button industry. Machinery was being developed for all of these methods, with tubular saws designed to cut through multiple thicknesses of sheet plastic. Plastic buttons were then available in a variety of colors, sizes, and types.²⁴⁸ While the button companies evolved and survived the 1950s, the industrial base of Muscatine shifted from dominance by the pearl button industry to a broader base by 1960. The new industries started in town through efforts of community leaders as the pearl button industry began to fade continued to grow and develop in the 1950s, gradually replacing the diminishing pearl button business.²⁴⁹

Development of the plastic button industry in Muscatine, 1960-1970

Freshwater pearl buttons continued to be sold by Muscatine companies into the 1960s, as they transitioned to plastic buttons. The switch from pearl buttons to plastic buttons did not automatically guarantee success for the button companies. If the 1950s were a period of transition and rebuilding, the 1960s were the testing ground for the new business model. Some of the largest and oldest button companies in Muscatine would close during this decade. While plastic buttons dominated the button industry by 1960, plastic buttons faced some of the same issues as pearl button in the past. William Spieth, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, continued to advocate for the button industry, now more plastic than pearl. He noted in November 1960 that the competition from imported buttons since the tariff was cut in half in 1955 was having a devastating impact on the American button industry. The button manufacturers had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to convert their production from pearl to plastic while the import of plastic buttons from only Hong Kong and Japan had increased by 503 percent over the last five years. The sale price of an American made plastic button had fallen from 54 cents per gross in 1955 to 32 cents per gross in 1960, while the Japanese made plastic button sold for 42 cents per gross in 1955 and 30 cents per gross in 1960..²⁵⁰ With a bill proposed in 1962 to limit the amount of imported buttons from other countries as lower duties were again proposed in Congress, the button industry was again noted to be in a fight for survival since 1954 after the changes in tariff policies, with the value of imitation pearl (plastic) button imports rising from \$260,000 in 1955 to \$1,528,000 in 1960.²⁵¹

With the competition from Japanese buttons and the retooling of button manufacturers from pearl buttons to the less labor intensive and cheaper plastic button, the number employed in the button industry in Muscatine continued to decline. The number employed in the button industry in Muscatine dropped from 1,200 in 1955 to 461 in August 1961, while the overall number of factory jobs rose from 3,997 in 1963 to 4,801 in 1964 with the development of other industries in town.²⁵² Thus, button companies employed less than 10% of the work

²⁴⁷ "Button Factory Closes," *Postville Herald*, Postville, IA, November 23, 1960, 1; "Plastics Kill Tri-State Pearl Button Industry," *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, January 8, 1961, 23

²⁴⁸ "Muscatine – The World's Pearl Button Capital," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1959, 79

²⁴⁹ McCarley 2008: E85-E86

²⁵⁰ "Speaker Advocates Policy of 'Buy American to Save American Jobs,'" *Muscatine Journal*, November 30, 1960, 2

²⁵¹ "Muscatine Dreads Low Button Duty," *Muscatine Journal*, April 1, 1962, 6L, 40

²⁵² "Industry Payroll Increased \$4.3 Million," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1964, 48

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force. Eight button manufacturers continued to operate in Muscatine in April 1962.²⁵³ Only Ronda Button Company was noted as still producing freshwater pearl buttons, with the other companies retooled to plastic buttons.²⁵⁴ The button factory of the Muscatine Pearl Works at 227-229 W. 2nd Street was destroyed by fire in 1961. They built a new factory on the south side of Muscatine in 1962, a much larger and more completely automated button factory. They resumed some manufacture of pearl buttons after their move, but then dropped the line within a few years as well to focus only on plastic buttons. With the declining plastic button market, their new building proved too large by 1968 and they moved to smaller quarters.²⁵⁵

Muscatine was noted as the "Garment Button Capital of the World" by the *Des Moines Register* in an article in May 1963. The changing times for button manufacturers was noted when five executives of Muscatine button companies were in Des Moines, and only William Umlandt was wearing a shirt with pearl buttons. The button industry had refused to die in Muscatine, with companies switching from pearl buttons to plastic buttons. Eight button companies continued to operate: Automatic Button Company, Hawkeye Button Company, J&K Button Company, McKee Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, Pearl Products Company, Ronda Button Company, and Weber & Sons Button Company. About 450 people were noted to be employed in the eight button companies in Muscatine, with payrolls of over \$1.7 million. The companies produced 1.5 billion buttons per year that had a market value of \$3 to \$4 million. William Spieth, president of National Association of Button Manufacturers at age 88, noted that many of the Muscatine factories were in the second or third generations of families that had originally started in the button industry. Most factories were noted to continue to produce some pearl buttons, utilizing shells from rivers in the South. However, the focus of production was plastic buttons. The chief cause of concern within the industry remained competition from imported buttons from Japan, who could produce buttons at a lower cost due to lower labor costs.²⁵⁶

The end of the era of pearl button production in Muscatine was marked in 1966, and the total number of button companies was reduced by two more in the next year. Only seven button companies remained in Muscatine at the start of 1966, with only the Ronda Button Company devoted to pearl button production. In July 1966, the Ronda Button Company stopped production, continuing to sell pearl buttons from stock on hand. Clarence Schmarje noted that the cost to manufacture a pearl button was now five times more expensive than the cost of a plastic button, and the business did not warrant continued production. William Umlandt noted that detergents were also big factor in loss of pearl buttons, as plastic buttons were a better product for modern laundering.²⁵⁷ With the death of Fred W. Hermann in March 1996, the Hawkeye Button Company was then dissolved, with machinery and equipment sold from their plant at 2nd Street and Orange in June 1966.²⁵⁸ Their property was then sold to The Home-O-Nize (HON) Company in October 1966, who then demolished it to expand their operations.²⁵⁹ The Automatic Button Company, with its history dating to 1898, was then closed by president Arthur M. Umlandt in fall 1967, with the company placed into receivership. The company had converted from pearl buttons to plastic buttons in 1960, never reaching the same level of business as previously.²⁶⁰ Thus, only McKee Button Company remained among these earlier leaders.

Aside from the threat of cheap imported buttons, the future was promising for the other button manufacturers in Muscatine that were now focused on manufacture of plastic buttons. William Spieth, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, noted "As long as clothing is worn, and as long as the

²⁵³ Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, McKee Button Company, Pearl Products Company, Automatic Button Company, J&K Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, Ronda Button Company, and Weber & Sons Button Company

²⁵⁴ "Muscatine Dreads Low Button Duty," *Muscatine Journal*, April 1, 1962, 6L, 40

²⁵⁵ Claassen 1994: 96-97

²⁵⁶ "Firms Adapt to Plastics for Buttons," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, May 12, 1963, 19

²⁵⁷ Gene Raffensperger, "The Passing of an Era in Muscatine," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, August 7, 1966, 20

²⁵⁸ "Fred W. Hermann," *Muscatine Journal*, March 16, 1966, 8

²⁵⁹ The sale included lots 1-2-3-8-9-10 in block 28 ("Deeds Recorded," *Muscatine Journal*, October 6, 1966, 11). The alley was also vacated, allowing further development of this half block for HON ("Plan and Zoning Commission Continues Study of Rezoning," *Muscatine Journal*, April 13, 1966, 2).

²⁶⁰ "Automatic Button Co. in Court Receivership," *Muscatine Journal*, October 31, 1967, 2

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population continues to expand, the future looks favorable.²⁶¹ However, the number of imported plastic buttons from entering the United States already on clothing from Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, and other countries was over 10.3 million gross in 1966, cutting into both the domestic garment industry and domestic button industry. The United States was estimated to produce about 30 percent of world's buttons due to imports and modernization of industry in other nations in 1967.²⁶² Five companies producing buttons then remained in Muscatine in 1968. The three primary companies producing buttons in this period were McKee Button Company, Weber & Sons Button Company, and J & K Button Company.²⁶³ Muscatine Pearl Works and the more recent Pearl Products Company manufactured some buttons, with the latter focused more on pearl and plastic novelties. Freshwater pearl buttons continued to be sold by McKee Button Company and other Muscatine companies over the next decade, decreasing in sales as the supply of pearl buttons dwindled.

The Decline of the Button Industry of the United States, 1970-2020

While pearl buttons faded from the button market by the 1960s, the button industry of the United States has continued to evolve over the last 50 years to a point when it nearly does not manufacture buttons of any type. With the increased competition from foreign manufacturers of both buttons and clothing, the button industry of the United States continued to show an overall decrease in the number of companies through the 1970s. The button industry was dominated by polyester buttons in this period, with a significant number of other types of plastic buttons also produced. The 19 button companies producing 48.6 million polyester buttons in 1977 dropped to only nine companies producing polyester buttons by 1982.²⁶⁴ The button companies in Muscatine stood out in this period within the button industry of the United States. There were three primary button manufacturers in Muscatine in 1980: McKee Button Company, J&K Button Company, and Weber & Sons Button Company.²⁶⁵ McKee Button Company expanded their production of plastic buttons as well as increasing their production of button feeder machinery for garment companies through the 1970s. Button manufacturing in Muscatine was covered by the Associated Press in an article in July 1982 that was reprinted in several newspapers. Muscatine was noted as having the corner on the pearl button market before the advent of polyester buttons, which now dominated the industry and production of the companies remaining in Muscatine. The Muscatine companies were among nine major button manufacturers for polyester buttons in the United States.²⁶⁶ These companies were noted as employing around 150 people and producing around two billion buttons in Muscatine each year in March 1987. Nearly 95% of the buttons made in Muscatine were sold to U.S. companies. The button manufacturers encouraged everyone to buy American made clothing, as it had American made buttons on it.²⁶⁷ McKee Button Company (1000 Hershey Ave), Weber & Sons Button Company (1008/1009 E. 6th St), and J&K Button Company (315/319 W. Mississippi Dr (formerly Front St))

²⁶¹ Gene Raffensperger, "The Passing of an Era in Muscatine," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, August 7, 1966, 20

²⁶² Helen Weiershauser, "Button, Button – Muscatine Has Plastic Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, October 7, 1967, 1

²⁶³ McKee Button Company, the oldest with history dating to 1895, employed around 50 people, and they produced plastic buttons of various sizes and types. Weber & Sons Button Company was the second oldest, dating its history to 1904, though John Weber had previously worked for other companies in town. The firm continued to be run by the Weber family, also employing around 50 people. They produced over 5 million gross plastic buttons per year. They had recently expanded into a new building on E. 6th Street with space for manufacturing, storage, stock, and shipping facilities on one story. The company maintained large warehouses in New York, Tennessee, California, and Texas. The J&K Button Company was the newest among them, dating its history to 1955 and organized as a company to manufacture buttons from polyester resin, rather than older pearl buttons. William Umlandt retired in 1967, with Bernard Hahn continuing as president. They employed around 45 people, supplying durable polyester resin buttons to garment manufacturers throughout the United States. The company had the distinction of operating in the oldest existing building in Muscatine that has constantly been used for manufacture of buttons by various button companies, with its history associated with the industry dating to 1898 when James S. McKee and William E. Bliven moved the Peerless Button Company into this former electric company building (Helen Weiershauser, "Button, Button – Muscatine Has Plastic Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, October 7, 1967, 1)

²⁶⁴ Bureau of Census and U.S. Department of Commerce. 1982 *Census of Manufactures*, Industry Series, Office Supplies, Costume Jewelry, and Notions. Washington D.C., 1985, 39C-23

²⁶⁵ Dan Piller, "Muscatine's on the button," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, July 6, 1980, 3F (45)

²⁶⁶ Margy McCay, "Button still in Muscatine even though clams gone," *Muscatine Journal*, July 13, 1982, 1, 15

²⁶⁷ "Button industry keeps rolling," *Muscatine Journal*, March 28, 1987, 18C (36)

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were the major button manufacturers in Muscatine. Buildings associated with these three companies remain extant in Muscatine, with the McKee Button Company clearly as the largest button factory building.

With imported products putting a strain on button manufacturers in the United States, there were only five or six companies left manufacturing polyester buttons by the end of 1990, per an article by the Associated Press. This December 1990 article appeared in several newspapers and highlighted the button industry in Muscatine, Iowa. After the closure of the largest U.S. button company, which was a conglomerate, the McKee Button Company and Weber & Sons Button Company were left as two of the largest remaining button companies in the United States, with J & K Button Company as a smaller button manufacturer in Muscatine.²⁶⁸ The three button companies in Muscatine were noted among the dozen button companies remaining in the United States in April 1995 in a very competitive worldwide button industry.²⁶⁹ The shifting clothing market led to a further reduction in the button industry in the United States, as most of the textile and clothing industry had moved to overseas countries by 2000. Many of the small manufacturers closed, and the struggling economy was impacting the remaining clothing industry. The clothing industry was becoming more specialized, with smaller designers working on brands. McKee Button Company remained as one of the largest button factories in the country. They were reduced to 56 employees by March 2001, with further automation requiring fewer employees.²⁷⁰ The large Emsig Manufacturing Corporation closed their Lower Township, New Jersey, button factory in 2001, and then their Hudson, New York, plant in 2002, unable to compete with low wages of foreign manufacturers and impact of clothing manufacturing moving to South America and Asia. Jay McKee of the McKee Button Company reiterated in a New York article at the time that the button industry was suffering as more apparel manufacturers move offshore.²⁷¹

Button production has continued to decline in the 21st century, with increasing material costs, continued competition from imported buttons, and fewer domestic garment companies that continue to operate to purchase buttons. The remaining button companies in Muscatine continued to produce buttons into the 21st century, among the last of the button companies operating in the United States. While this later history falls within the last 50 years, the legacy of the pearl button industry in Muscatine is significant within the button industry of the United States. The continued move of the garment and clothing industry to foreign countries over the last five years has significantly impacted the remaining button manufacturers, including the three in Muscatine. The 2015 city directory listed Weber & Sons Button Company with 25 employees, with Edward Weber Jr. also still operating Iowa Pearl Button Company as a distributor with one employee. With increasing health issues for Edward Weber, Jr. and the fading button market, the Weber family decided to cease manufacturing buttons in April 2019. The company continued to operate through the end of 2019, selling its remaining stock and then selling their buildings. The McKee Button Company then manufactured their last button in November 2019, remaining open into 2020 to sell remaining inventory before closing completely and working towards selling their building. J&K Button Company continued to manufacture polyester buttons through the end of 2019, with three employees working to supply orders as needed. They sold polyester buttons to Emsig Manufacturing Corporation, who then sold the buttons to customers such as the U.S. military.²⁷² In 2019, Emsig Manufacturing / U.S. Button Corporation was noted as the only other major button manufacturer in the United States, and their primary manufactured button was a melamine button, though they also sold a variety of other types of buttons. Thus, the button industry of the United States was nearly non-existent by the start of 2020.

²⁶⁸ Linda Cook, "The Hole Truth: When it comes to buttons, there's no place like Muscatine," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, December 16, 1990, H1 (77); "Button Business Booming in Muscatine," *Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, IA, December 30, 1990, 15A; "Factories in Iowa town roll out the buttons – millions every day," Associated Press article run in several newspapers, including *Argus-Leader*, Sioux Falls, SD, December 30, 1990, 41

²⁶⁹ "Marketing technique hinges on custom orders," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, 1A, 3A

²⁷⁰ "Hole lot of history," *Muscatine Journal*, Muscatine, IA, March 24, 2001, 4D-5D (58-59)

²⁷¹ "Hudson button plant to close; 128 jobs cut," *Poughkeepsie Journal*, Poughkeepsie, NY, December 16, 2001, 1B

²⁷² Ron McGowan, J&K Button Company, November 15, 2019.

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The McKee Button Company in the Button Industry of Iowa and the United States

The history and significance of the McKee Button Company within the context of the button industry in the United States is outlined below within five historic contexts developed for this project: *The Button Industry in America and the Development of the Freshwater Pearl Button Industry, 1890-1899*; *The Strength of the Freshwater Pearl Button Business as an American Industry, 1900-1915*; *Competition from Foreign Countries and Strengthening of Domestic Button Manufacturers, 1915-1930*; *Freshwater Pearl Button Industry in the United States through the Depression and World War II, 1930-1945*; and *Development of Plastic Buttons and Evolution of Pearl Button Companies, 1945-1970*. The McKee Button Company stands out for its national significance within the button industry of United States within each of these historic contexts. The company exemplifies the historic trends in the freshwater pearl button industry throughout each of these periods from its inception in the 1890s to death in the 1950s. It was one of only a handful of companies that spanned this entire period of the life of the freshwater pearl button industry, and it was significant among these companies. Additionally, McKee Button Company is the only company identified with an extant factory building that operated throughout these significant phases of the pearl button industry from the early 1900s to the 1950s.

The Button Industry in America and Development of the Freshwater Pearl Button Industry, 1890-1899

The McKee Button Company traces its history to the start of the freshwater pearl button industry in the United States. The freshwater pearl button industry developed in the United States after the passage of the McKinley tariff in 1890. John F. Boepple is credited with opening the first freshwater pearl button factory in the country in Muscatine in 1891, bringing his knowledge of button making to the United States from Germany. The production of freshwater pearl buttons attracted additional attention over the next few years, as the process utilizing mussel shells from the Mississippi River was refined. By the 1897 city directory, there were three button factories listed in Muscatine: Boepple Button Company at 3rd and Oak streets (extant, on HON/HNI property), Muscatine Pearl Button Company at 311 Mulberry (demolished), and the Peerless Button Company at 401 W. Front Street (Mississippi Dr) (demolished), associated with James S. McKee and William E. Bliven.²⁷³ These few companies pre-dated the boom of the freshwater pearl button industry over the next few years, expanding the industry from Muscatine to cities along the Mississippi River.

The McKee Button Company evolved from the early button factory of Dan Womochel, established in January 1895 in South Muscatine. The southern part of Muscatine had developed around the Musser lumber mill and Hershey lumber mill in the middle to late 19th century, as the lumber business boomed along on the Mississippi River. By the 1880s, this section of the city was known as "South Muscatine" or "Musserville," and the lumber business was declining due to the depleted timber lands to the north in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Thus, laborers that lived in this part of the city walked further to work in other businesses. The "Musserville Musings" in the *Journal* in November 15 reported that Dan Womochel was contemplating building a button factory in this part of town, and then the neighborhood girls would not have to walk so far to work. On December 14, the *Journal* reported that Dan Womochel and Christ Middleton had a small button factory nearly ready for operation, planning to start operations with just the two of them and then to expand. On January 17, 1895, the Womochel button factory was reported as "steaming along," with confidence for its success. The 1895 city directory does not list this button factory, with D.F. Womochel noted as a laborer residing at 1120 3rd St, South Muscatine. A larger engine was installed in the factory in January 1896, and Dan Womochel was running his factory 10 hours per day for six days each week in March 1896.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Chas A. Barker's *Muscatine City Directory*, 1897-98. In collection of Musser Public Library, Muscatine, IA

²⁷⁴ "Musserville Musings," *Muscatine Journal*, November 15, 1894, 1; "Musserville," *Muscatine Journal*, December 14, 1894, 4; "Musserville," *Muscatine Journal*, January 17, 1895, 4; "Musserville," *Muscatine Journal*, January 31, 1896, 3; "Musserville," *Muscatine Journal*, March 13, 1896, 8

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Similar to other new companies, Daniel F. Womochel sought other investors to be able to further expand his button factory, and he interested William E. Bliven and his brother-in-law James S. McKee in investing in his button business in 1896. William E. Bliven was born in Columbus City (just south of Columbus Junction in Louisa Co), Iowa in 1860, and he was raised to the north in Conesville in southwest Muscatine County. He attended a high school academy program and then the State University of Iowa in Iowa City. He married Nellie Canon in June 1888, and he opened a clothing store with S.A. Borger in Muscatine, known as Borger & Bliven.²⁷⁵ James Shakespeare McKee was born in Louisa County south of Conesville in 1865, and he attended schools in Conesville and four years at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. He then married William's sister Anna Bliven in 1889, and they lived in Conesville. In August 1893, James and Anna McKee moved to Muscatine, and he worked for the Muscatine Oatmeal Company as a grain buyer.²⁷⁶ The additional investment permitted Dan Womochel to continue to expand his factory. In March 1896, the *Journal* noted that Dan Womochel had added more machines to his factory, and he had built an addition by April 14. Only a week later, he had found that the addition was insufficient, and he was constructing an addition to his addition.²⁷⁷ The business continued to grow, and the partners sought new quarters to move the business. In early August, the button factory left Mussererville to move into the former cheese factory building on Front Street (Mississippi Drive), which would be larger and warmer for the winter. All machinery had been moved by August 14, and residents from Mussererville could still hear the whirl of machinery on their way into downtown Muscatine at their new location at Front and Linn streets.²⁷⁸

It appears to have been with this move to the new building in 1896 and investment of William E. Bliven and James S. McKee that the name became the Peerless Button Company. Dan Womochel continued as superintendent of the factory. The 1897 city directory lists the Peerless Button Company at 401 W. Front Street (northwest corner of Front (Mississippi Dr) and Linn St) (demolished) as one of the three button companies operating in Muscatine. D.F. Womochel is listed as working for the company, still living at 1120 3rd St in South Muscatine. William E. Bliven is listed with the clothing store of Borger & Bliven, living at 206 Cherry, and James S. McKee is listed as a grain buyer for the Oatmeal Company, living at 701 W. 3rd St, both more fashionable addresses for businessmen in Muscatine.²⁷⁹ This business structure for Peerless Button Company would continue through 1899. This freshwater pearl button factory of McKee, Bliven, and Womochel was not only one of the earliest button companies in Muscatine, it was also one of the initial firms in Iowa and one of the first freshwater pearl button companies in the United States.

Throughout 1897 and 1898, there were a large number of companies that were started in Muscatine, both making freshwater pearl buttons as well as only making blanks that were then turned into buttons by other factories. By the end of 1897, there were reported 13 button or blank factories in four cities on the Mississippi River (including the nine in Muscatine), a number that grew by July 1898 to 49 button factories operating in 13 towns on the Mississippi River in Iowa and Illinois, with at least 12 button factories on other rivers that were tributaries.²⁸⁰ Muscatine remained the largest button manufacturing community in Iowa, with overwhelmingly the largest number of companies and most production of any single city. Additionally, the majority of freshwater pearl buttons in the United States were manufactured in Muscatine and the other Mississippi River cities in this period. The 14 button companies listed in the 1899 city directory for Muscatine included a mix of local companies and Eastern firms with local branches or subsidiaries in Muscatine.

²⁷⁵ "William E. Bliven Dies at New York City Home," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1915, 2; "Lingering Illness Finally is Fatal," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, December 28, 1915, 10

²⁷⁶ "James M'Kee is Dead," *Muscatine Journal*, January 22, 1927, 1, 10; "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6

²⁷⁷ "Mussererville," *Muscatine Journal*, March 20, 1896, 4; "Mussererville," *Muscatine Journal*, April 14, 1896, 2; "Mussererville," *Muscatine Journal*, April 24, 1896, 4

²⁷⁸ "Mussererville," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 2, 1896, 4; "Mussererville," *Muscatine Journal*, August 14, 1896, 5

²⁷⁹ Chas A. Barker's *Muscatine City Directory*, 1897-98. In collection of Musser Public Library, Muscatine, IA; "Mussererville," *Muscatine Journal*, March 28, 1897, 1; "A Hot Runaway," *Muscatine Journal*, June 8, 1897, 5

²⁸⁰ Coker 1919: 65; USTC 1918: 20; Smith 1898: 304-305, cited in Claassen 1994: 83

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The Peerless Button Company stood out in Muscatine and among the other freshwater pearl button companies along the Mississippi River in this early period of button production. In February 1898, the "Conesville boys" - W.E. Bliven and J.S. McKee – were noted as operating the second largest pearl button factory in Muscatine, the Peerless Button Company. J.F. Boepple continued to run the largest factory not only in Muscatine but in the world.²⁸¹ The Peerless Button Company sought larger quarters in the building that would easily transform into a button factory. They moved to the two-story brick building formerly occupied by Citizen's Electric Light and Power Company on the block to their east at 317 W. Front Street (Mississippi Drive). The capacity of the "Bliven button factory" was noted as having doubled by July 1898, and they were adding six additional cutting machines to keep up with orders. The name of "Peerless" was noted as appropriate as they were one of the most flourishing and longest established of the button factories in town.²⁸²

The Peerless Button Company evolved in this period with a change in active management. In 1898, William E. Bliven and James S. McKee had bought out the remaining interest of Daniel F. Womochel in the company, with the company noted as the Peerless Pearl Button Company. Womochel continued to serve as superintendent of the "Bliven & McKee button factory" through the summer of 1899.²⁸³ In September 1899, D.F. Womochel severed his connection with the factory to move to Lyons, Iowa, to start a button company in that city. A Boston button company had secured a lease on a building in that city in August, intending to install 54 machines and employ up to 100 workers in this location near well-stocked mussel beds on the Mississippi River near Clinton. Womochel was noted with a reputation as a first-class button man, starting in the business when he was young and buttons were made with foot power. D.F. Womochel oversaw the shipment of machinery from Muscatine and installation in the new factory in Lyons.²⁸⁴ As William E. Bliven had moved to Tacoma, Washington in 1898, James S. McKee assumed active management of the button factory with the departure of Womochel. McKee had continued to work for the oatmeal company while investing in and expanding the factory, and he formally quit this other job in July 1899, likely working in conjunction with Womochel prior to his departure. Bliven continued to spend some time in Muscatine and remained involved with the factory, though not with its active management. The 1900 city directory then lists Peerless Pearl Button Company at 317-319 W. Front Street, with Bliven & McKee noted as proprietors.²⁸⁵

By 1899, the Peerless Button Company stood out among the growing number of button companies in Muscatine and along the Mississippi River. The special "Pearls and Prosperity" edition of the Muscatine *Evening Journal* from December 9, 1899, highlighted the Peerless Button Company, operated by James McKee and William Bliven, as the second oldest company and one of the largest companies within the booming pearl button industry in Muscatine, which was the center of the freshwater pearl button industry in the country. As it had moved to the former Electric Light and Power Company building, it was unique as having its own electric plant. They produced about 2,500 buttons and 1,500 blanks each week.²⁸⁶ The Sanborn fire insurance map from August 1899 shows the Peerless Pearl Button Company as a two-story building with sawing and sorting on the first story and finishing on the second story (Figure 19). Small additions to the rear provided space for shell storage. Their former location is the smaller one-story building to the west at 401 W. Front was then occupied by the Becker Button Company, a blank manufacturer.

²⁸¹ "The 'Bend-Pearl Button City,'" *Muscatine Journal*, February 15, 1898, 11

²⁸² "Larger Quarters," *Muscatine News Tribune*, April 7, 1898, 1; "Local Laconics," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 14, 1898, 4; ("Local Laconics," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 19, 1898, 4

²⁸³ "Local Happenings," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 15, 1899, 4

²⁸⁴ "Musserville," *Muscatine Journal*, September 9, 1899, 4; *Dubuque Daily Times*, August 1, 1899, 2; "Button Factory for Lyons," *Adams County Free Press*, Corning, IA, September 14, 1899, 1; *Muscatine Journal*, February 13, 1900, 5

²⁸⁵ "James M'Kee is Dead," *Muscatine Journal*, January 22, 1927, 1, 10; "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6; "William E. Bliven Dies at New York City Home," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1915, 2; Claassen 1994: 94

²⁸⁶ "Pearls and Prosperity" edition, *Muscatine Journal*, December 9, 1899; McCarley 2008: E46-47

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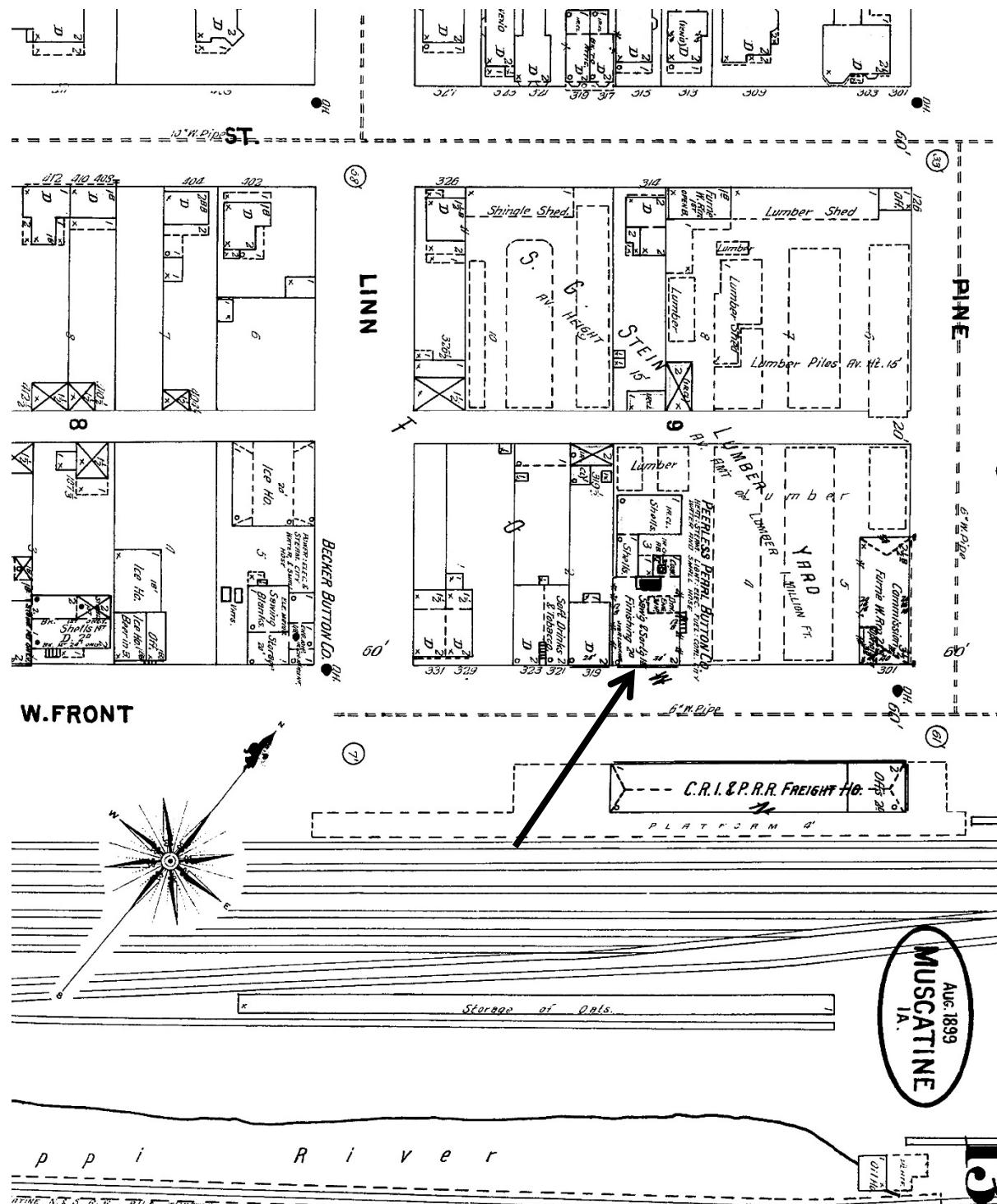


Figure 19. The Peerless Button Company at 315-317 W. Front St (Mississippi Ave) in August 1899 (Sanborn Map Company 1899: 13).

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The Strength of the Freshwater Pearl Button Business as an American Industry, 1900-1914

James S. McKee worked diligently to advance the Peerless Button Company to the next level in the first years of the 20th century, positioning it to retain its status among the other button companies in Muscatine and to grow as McKee and Bliven Button Company after 1904. By 1905, the freshwater pearl button industry was truly a significant aspect of industry in the United States, linked with the garment industry in the production of clothing for the entire nation. The prosperous condition of the pearl button industry in the United States and its center in Muscatine led to the construction of this three-story brick factory for the McKee and Bliven Button Company in 1907, reflecting their significant development by this date and their prominence within this national industry. The construction of this building is significant within the history of the pearl button industry in the nation, noted as the largest freshwater pearl button company in Muscatine and in the world. McKee and Bliven Button Company also continued to grow in this period by opening branch factory locations to produce blanks more economically closer to shell sources and supplement their button production in Muscatine with additional machines in some locations. By January 1914, they operated their main office and factory in this building at 1000 Hershey Ave in Muscatine, a sales office in New York City, and seven branch factories. They were known to have the “largest pearl button manufacturing plant in the world,” with a capacity of a weekly output of 100,000 gross (over 14 million) finished buttons.²⁸⁷ With the main factory and branch locations, the overall breadth of their operations and pearl button production was larger than any other identified pearl button company in the United States. Thus, McKee and Bliven Button Company retained its position as one of the most significant button companies in the country.

The overproduction at the turn of the 20th century closed many of the smaller button companies, while the larger companies like Peerless Button Company sustained operations through the slowdown and then were able to expand with increased demand for pearl buttons. With the advent of new automatic machinery that increased output for those companies able to invest in it, James S. McKee purchased new equipment for their plant at 317-319 W. Front Street in Muscatine, increasing their production capacity. As the older New York companies had expanded into freshwater pearl buttons by opening branches in Muscatine and other Mississippi River communities close to the freshwater shells, James McKee and W.E. Bliven investigated opening another factory in a location easily reached from Muscatine and close to other shell sources. They settled on Columbus Junction, connected by railroad to Muscatine in nearby Louisa County on the Iowa River (and close to Bliven’s childhood home), as a possible location for a second factory. The *Morning Sun News Herald* reported in April 1902 that the bonus asked by James McKee in order to start a button factory in Columbus Junction had been raised, and the factory was expected to be located in the old soap factory building. The older building was remodeled for use as the button factory, including wiring the building and equipping it with a complete electric plant. The factory was then opened in May 1902. The factory had around 30 blank cutting saws installed, and it employed 35 men by February 1903.²⁸⁸ This model of using branch factories to expand capacity, particularly blank factories, was one advanced by the Eastern button companies when opening factories in Muscatine. McKee was the first from a Muscatine company known to open a branch factory location for this purpose that would continue to be successfully to operate as a support branch for several decades. This model would subsequently be followed by other major Muscatine companies over the next five years to expand their freshwater pearl button production.

With the increased capacity for production of blanks, the main finishing factory in Muscatine for Peerless Button Company then could expand. James S. McKee of Peerless Button Company announced in November 1902 that he intended to build a 40 by 80 foot addition to his factory on Front Street opposite the freight depot.

²⁸⁷ *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, January 1, 1914, 50; *Moline Evening Mail*, February 25, 1914, 14; “South End Factory to Install Twenty New Machines Here,” *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 19, 1914, 5; “Harold McKee to Work in New York,” *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 27, 1914, 2; “South End Locals,” *Muscatine Journal*, December 8, 1914, 5

²⁸⁸ “Columbus Junction,” *Morning Sun News Herald*, Morning Sun, IA, April 17, 1902, 1; “At Columbus Junction,” *Muscatine Journal*, April 24, 1902, 8; “To Install Dynamo,” *Muscatine Journal*, October 7, 1902, 5; “All Over Iowa,” *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, February 6, 1903, 2

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The addition would have good ventilation and the best sanitary conditions. The lower level would be utilized for storing shells and soaking vats, the main level for the cutting department, and the upper level for packing, sorting, and business department. The latest Barry automatic machinery would be installed for this new modern factory.²⁸⁹ An advertisement for the Peerless Pearl Button Company in December 1902 noted that they manufactured pearl buttons and button blanks from freshwater shells, with a capacity of nearly 15,000 gross (2.1 million) buttons per week. The company continued to operate as the second oldest button company in Muscatine, a fact that the advertisement also noted. While 1895 is typically considered the start of this precursor to the McKee Button Company, the ad notes a start date of February 1896, which likely indicates when McKee and Bliven became investors with D.F. Womochel and the start of the company under this name.²⁹⁰ A December 13, 1902 article in the *Journal* that proclaimed "Muscatine is Button Center of World" noted that a total of 3,500,000 gross (504 million) blanks were cut with 2,750,000 gross (396 million) finished buttons produced in Muscatine in 1902. A significant number of these buttons were produced by Peerless Button Company. The 18 factories operating in Muscatine were divided into three types: cutting and finishing plants, blank manufacturers, and feeders for eastern finishing plants. The six button factories (cutting/finishing) included the Peerless Pearl Button Company along with three other local companies (Automatic Button Company, Boepple Pearl Button Company, Royal Pearl Button Company) and two companies associated with New York firms (Leo H. Hirsch & Company, Vienna Pearl Button Manufacturing Company).²⁹¹

Figure 20. Peerless Button Company advertisement (*Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 13).

²⁸⁹ "Will Enlarge Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, November 7, 1902, 1

²⁹⁰ *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 13

²⁹¹ "Muscatine is Button Center of World," *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 24; "Button Industry Claims First Place," *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1902, 33

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The freshwater pearl buttons produced in Muscatine were linked to the clothing industry throughout the United States, as the clothing industry provided the largest market for the buttons. Thus, the freshwater pearl button industry was linked to the success of cotton crop of the South and the cotton mills of New England, working with these other American industries to produce the buttons required for the clothing produced in the United States.²⁹² As one of the largest producers of pearl buttons in Muscatine and with a company focus on pearl buttons for the garment industry, James S. McKee traveled to the Eastern cities to investigate the conditions when the market dropped in early 1904, noting that he did not see the market for buttons improving until the garment industry improved. As a result, McKee saw the smaller button companies selling their machinery and closing, while the larger button company were expanding and building larger factories. As blanks were inconsistent from smaller factories, he also saw a shift towards the larger companies opening branches to cut their own blanks. Peerless Pearl Button Company was continuing to run a day shift only, with the night shift stopped earlier in the year.²⁹³

Market conditions did improve in 1905, and James S. McKee and William E. Bliven positioned their company to remain among the larger pearl button companies in Muscatine and thus among the largest in the United States. In November 1904, they incorporated and changed the name of the company from Peerless Button Company to McKee and Bliven Button Company.²⁹⁴ The *Des Moines Register* noted in March 1905: "Iowa will continue to hold the name of being one of the principal pearl button manufacturing states during the coming year. From Mississippi river towns, especially from Muscatine, regarded as the center of the fresh water pearl button business of the world, comes the word that shops are working overtime, and that prospects are very bright for a busy season."²⁹⁵ Larger button companies including McKee and Bliven Button Company employed their own machinists in this period, working to improve production by tweaking machinery to gain an edge over their competition. William C. Hopkins, the cutting foreman for McKee and Bliven Button Company, modified the Barry cutting machine to hold rotating chucks and cat's eye cutting attachments, filing for a patent in December 1905 that was granted in January 1907. Fred M. Hopkins, who also worked for McKee and Bliven Button Company, filed for a patent in June 1906 for an improvement on the Barry machine that mounted all the tools on a single plate. John Miller patented improved button machinery in 1905 and 1906, and he was employed by McKee and Bliven by 1907.²⁹⁶ By 1906, general improvements to the Barry machinery had reduced the cost of a gross of buttons from 4 cents to 1 cent and eliminated three workers from the process.²⁹⁷

With improved production efficiency and an eye for future expansion, William E. Bliven moved from Tacoma, Washington, back to Muscatine in September 1905 to join his brother-in-law James S. McKee in the active operations and expansion of the McKee and Bliven Button Company over the next few years.²⁹⁸ They remained one of the two oldest button manufacturers in Muscatine, having operated in town for 10 years. The Sanborn fire insurance map from December 1905 shows their factory on W. Front Street (Mississippi Ave), with the large 40 by 80 foot rear addition constructed in 1902-03 (Figure 21). The uses of the front portion of the factory remained the same, with the rear addition noted with soaking in the basement, cutting and sorting on the first story, and finishing and office on the second story. In January 1906, McKee and Bliven bought the Royal Button Factory at Green and Grandview in South Muscatine to expand their operations. This smaller

²⁹² "One of Iowa's Best Cities," House-Warming Edition, *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1904, 9

²⁹³ "Bad for Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, May 5, 1904, 7

²⁹⁴ "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6

²⁹⁵ "Iowa to Make Many Buttons This Year," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, March 9, 1905, 3

²⁹⁶ Claassen 1994: 57, 59

²⁹⁷ Claassen 1994: 59 – per Longstreth 1906: 77

²⁹⁸ "Will Return to Muscatine," *Muscatine Journal*, September 7, 1905, 10; "Lingering Illness Finally is Fatal," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, December 28, 1915, 10

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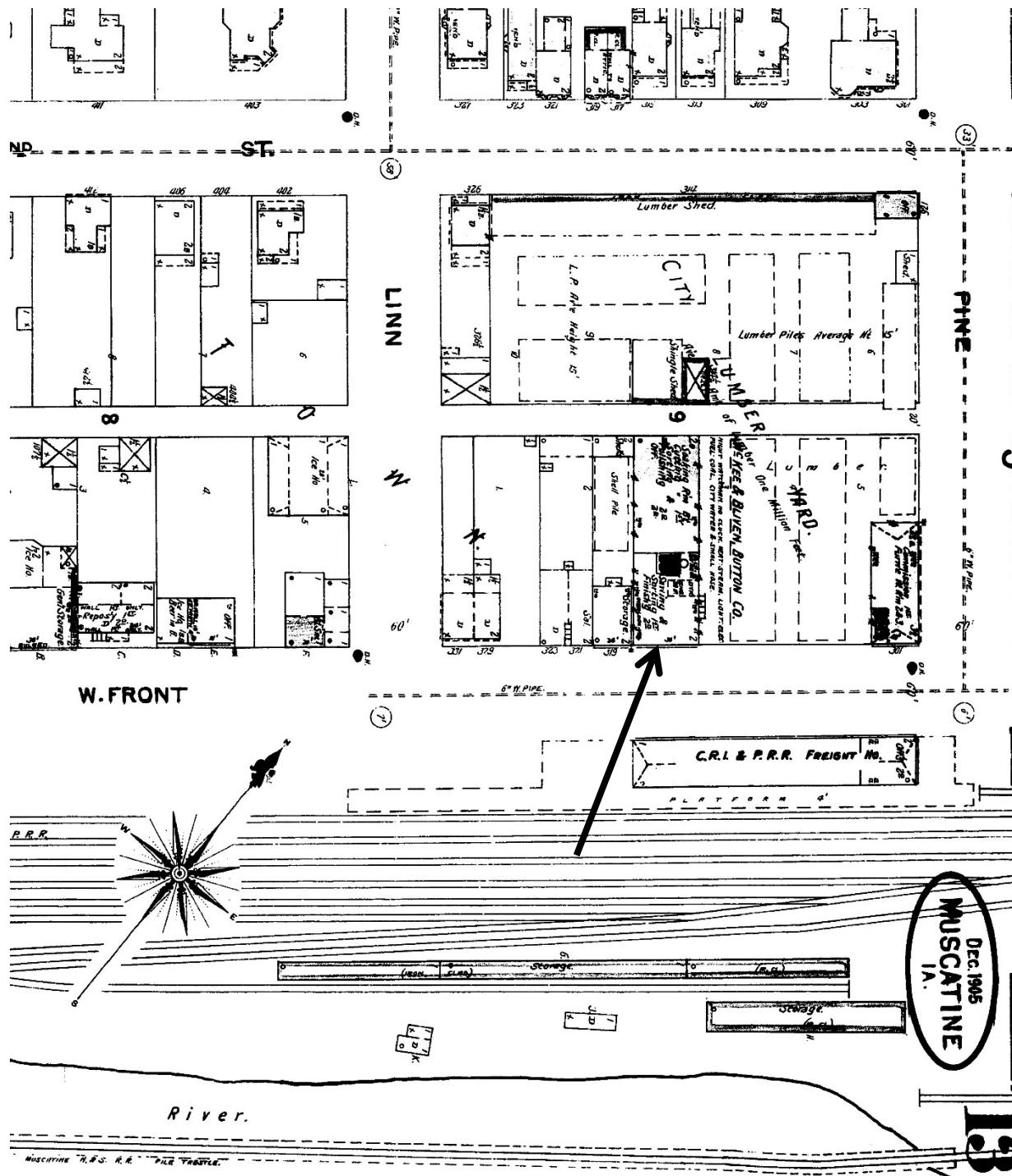


Figure 21. McKee and Bliven Button Company at 315-317 W. Front St (Mississippi Ave) in December 1905
 (Sanborn Map Company 1905: 13).

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plant was once one of the largest factories in Muscatine, and the acquisition added a large number of cutting machines and increased production of finished buttons. The company then operated their main plant at 315 W. Front Street (Mississippi Ave), as well as the former Royal factory in South Muscatine. The combined operations made it one of the largest button companies in the West.²⁹⁹ Thus, the company had grown to occupy a significant place in the national button industry, specializing in freshwater pearl buttons for the garment industry. McKee and Bliven was likewise noted in November 1906 as one of the most important button companies in Muscatine. They had acquired the Block and Giesler button factory in South Muscatine as well, which they continued to operate along with their main plant on Front Street, the former Royal button factory in South Muscatine, and the earlier branch factory that they had opened at Columbus Junction in Louisa County.³⁰⁰ Their operations over four locations ranked them as the largest button company in Muscatine, though not operating under one roof as a large factory.

McKee and Bliven operated a side business to the manufacture of buttons in this period, similar to many of the other pearl button companies. By the early 20th century, industries focused on the use of the byproducts of the button industry had taken hold. By 1901, the City of Muscatine had realized the potential of crushed waste shells as a paving material, substituting it for the crushed rock in a traditional macadam surface. The shells with holes left over from button manufacturing were crushed and laid about 12 inches deep on the street. This layer was covered with three inches of gravel, and the layers were compacted with a heavy roller to create a hard surface. Crushed shell roads could be found in Muscatine into the 1950s.³⁰¹ In March 1906, city council approved a motion for the street and alley committee to confer with McKee & Bliven button manufacturers in regards to arrangements for purchase of waste shells.³⁰² The Universal Crushed Shell Company formed in 1906 to specifically market uses for shell fragments and crushed shells. Over the next decade, crushed shells became a staple in mineral feeds for chickens, hogs, and cattle, with the high calcium content contributing to the increased hardness of shells for chicken and ability to ship eggs for a greater distance. The high lime content of ground shells also created a fertilizer for farmers, and pearl chips were used in fish bowls, flower pots, and other decorative items. Crushed shells were also used for exterior stucco applications.³⁰³

The construction of the massive factory building for McKee and Bliven Button Company at 1000 Hershey Avenue was the next step in their development as a company, both representing their prominence in the button industry leading up to the construction and signaling their future plans for further growth to continue as a significant company in the button industry of the United States. In November 1906, James S. McKee and William E. Bliven acquired the former site occupied by the Hershey Lumber Company mill at the north end of South Muscatine along the Mississippi River. They proposed to consolidate their operations into one large modern factory, with the site along the railroad favorable for their manufacture of buttons. New machinery would then be installed throughout the factory, which would be designed as a model factory for workers.³⁰⁴ The *Journal* reported: "That Muscatine is the greatest pearl button center in the United States has been generally conceded for some time by all authorities in the pearl button industry, and the city has claimed, with good authority, that there is no place in the world that can equal our own city in this industry. This reputation will be maintained and increased in the future by the local manufacturers, who are continually increasing the output of their plants, improving their factories and facilities for the manufacture of pearl and shell buttons." The construction of a new modern factory for McKee and Bliven was an important step in that direction.³⁰⁵

²⁹⁹ "Factory is Sold," *Muscatine Journal*, January 12, 1906, 8

³⁰⁰ "Will Build Big Modern Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1906, 5

³⁰¹ *Muscatine Journal*, December 14, 1901, 4; Carlson 1984: 95

³⁰² "City Council," *Muscatine Journal*, March 20, 1906, 6

³⁰³ "Universal Crushed Shell Firm Turns out Unique Product," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1927, 3; "American Shell Products Co. Originated Some of its Articles Here," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1927, 2; Hurd 1966: 410

³⁰⁴ "Will Build Big Modern Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1906, 5; "Lumber Site for Button Plant," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, November 29, 1906, 3

³⁰⁵ "Will Build Big Modern Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, November 29, 1906, 5

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Design and construction of the new factory for McKee and Bliven Button Company moved forward quickly in early 1907. The *Journal* reported in February that "Muscatine is soon to have the largest and most complete button factory in the United States." Initial plans for the building called for a three-story brick building with a footprint of 330 feet by 48 feet. The first story (lower level) would be the cutting room, the second story (main level) would be the finishing department, and the third story (upper level) would be the store room for finished stock and shipping department. The latest machinery would be installed in the plant, making it "one of the most up-to-date in the west and capable of accommodating several thousand employees." Additionally, a 280-foot by 20-foot shell house would be built along the switch track for ease of unloading shells from railroad cars.³⁰⁶ A week later, the *Journal* reported that McKee and Bliven had decided to also build a large crushing plant, a two-story building measuring 62 by 54. It would be located on the site of the former engine room of the Hershey mill and crush waste shells from the button factory for sale.³⁰⁷ Construction of the factory was sorely needed as production was outpacing their current space. In February 1907, McKee and Bliven announced that they would start running all day and night, with many orders being received. The cutting department had been unable to keep up with demand, and the finishing department would now be operating on a 12-hour shift. As a result, they were looking to employ at least 100 more women, with the wage scale higher than standard. The factory was equipped with the best method of electric lighting for night shifts, and it would continue to run 24 hours per day until the new factory was complete on Hershey Ave.³⁰⁸

While the majority of factory or industrial buildings in Muscatine were built with little stylistic detailing in this period, the design of the McKee and Bliven Button Company was more refined, reflecting elements of the Romanesque Revival design. The design was a local product of the well-known Zeidler family. An article on February 5 noted that plans were available at Architect Zeidler's office for bids for excavating the foundation of the McKee-Bliven Button Co factory.³⁰⁹ On February 12, the *Journal* notes that architect Zeidler and city engineer Ryan have laid off grounds for the foundations of various buildings, with excavation work to start soon.³¹⁰ Excavation for the basement was started on February 16, with car loads of lumber and a quantity of brick on site. No contract had been let for the construction yet, with several contractors having examined the plans and specifications in office of architect William Zeidler.³¹¹ Plans were then altered to decrease the size of the factory on March 1, reducing it to 48 by 245 feet instead of 330 feet and reducing capacity by more than 100 machines. The article notes that the plans were changed that morning by architect William Zeidler, who did the original plans.³¹²

William Zeidler worked as a contractor and builder in Muscatine from the 1860s to the early 20th century, building many residential and commercial buildings throughout Muscatine. Contractor-builders served as architects in the early years of Muscatine, without architects operating in town. His son, Henry William Zeidler, was noted to be a natural architect, designing many of the buildings that they built in the 1880s and 1890s. By 1893, he had opened his own architectural practice. Throughout the first decades of the 20th century, Henry W. Zeidler was Muscatine's primary architect. The *Journal* stated in 1906 that "The majority of Muscatine's fine homes and business blocks that have been built during the past fifteen years are standing guarantees of Mr. Zeidler's ability." He operated from an office over 107 W. 2nd Street in this period, furnishing designs, specifications, plans, and estimates for his clients. Newspaper accounts for the construction of McKee and Bliven Button Company in 1907 reference "architect Zeidler" on several occasions, which would typically refer to Henry W. Zeidler. However, the accounts on February 16 and March 1 specifically note "architect William Zeidler," which would seem to be the father/contractor as opposed to the son/architect. It is unknown if it might be in error and referencing the son. The more refined styling on a

³⁰⁶ "Will Build Big Button Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, February 2, 1907, 4

³⁰⁷ "Will Build Big Shell Crusher," *Muscatine Journal*, February 12, 1907, 5

³⁰⁸ "Button Factory to Run Night and Day," *Muscatine Journal*, February 21, 1907, 4

³⁰⁹ "Notice to Excavators," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, February 5, 1907, 4

³¹⁰ "Will Build Big Shell Crusher," *Muscatine Journal*, February 12, 1907, 5

³¹¹ "Excavating Started for Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, February 16, 1907, 5

³¹² "Alter Plans for the Big Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, March 1, 1907, 4

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factory building indicates involvement of a skilled architect. The 1907 city directory lists William Zeidler as retired, with son Charles as a carpenter and son Henry W. Zeidler as an architect and superintendent. The 1908 city directory again lists Henry W. Zeidler as the architect and superintendent in the family, with William C. Zeidler listed in the carpentry and building firm of Wm. Zeidler and Son with son Charles A. Zeidler. William later permanently retired from the contracting business after his wife died in 1912. Henry W. Zeidler continued to practice as an architect with his own company in Muscatine through the 1920s.³¹³ Drawings of the original/larger building that were found in the McKee Button Company vault do not include a title block as would be typical of drawings by Henry W. Zeidler and other architects, perhaps indicating that the building was designed by contractor William Zeidler. However, some of the drawings are stamped with a circle imprint stamp in the corner, which is the stamp of Henry W. Zeidler. It is then unclear if he stamped them for official / formal review by an architect for construction purposes or if Henry then actually designed the building. It may be that the design was a team effort between father/contractor William Zeidler and son/architect Henry W. Zeidler, with each bringing their own expertise to the overall design and construction.

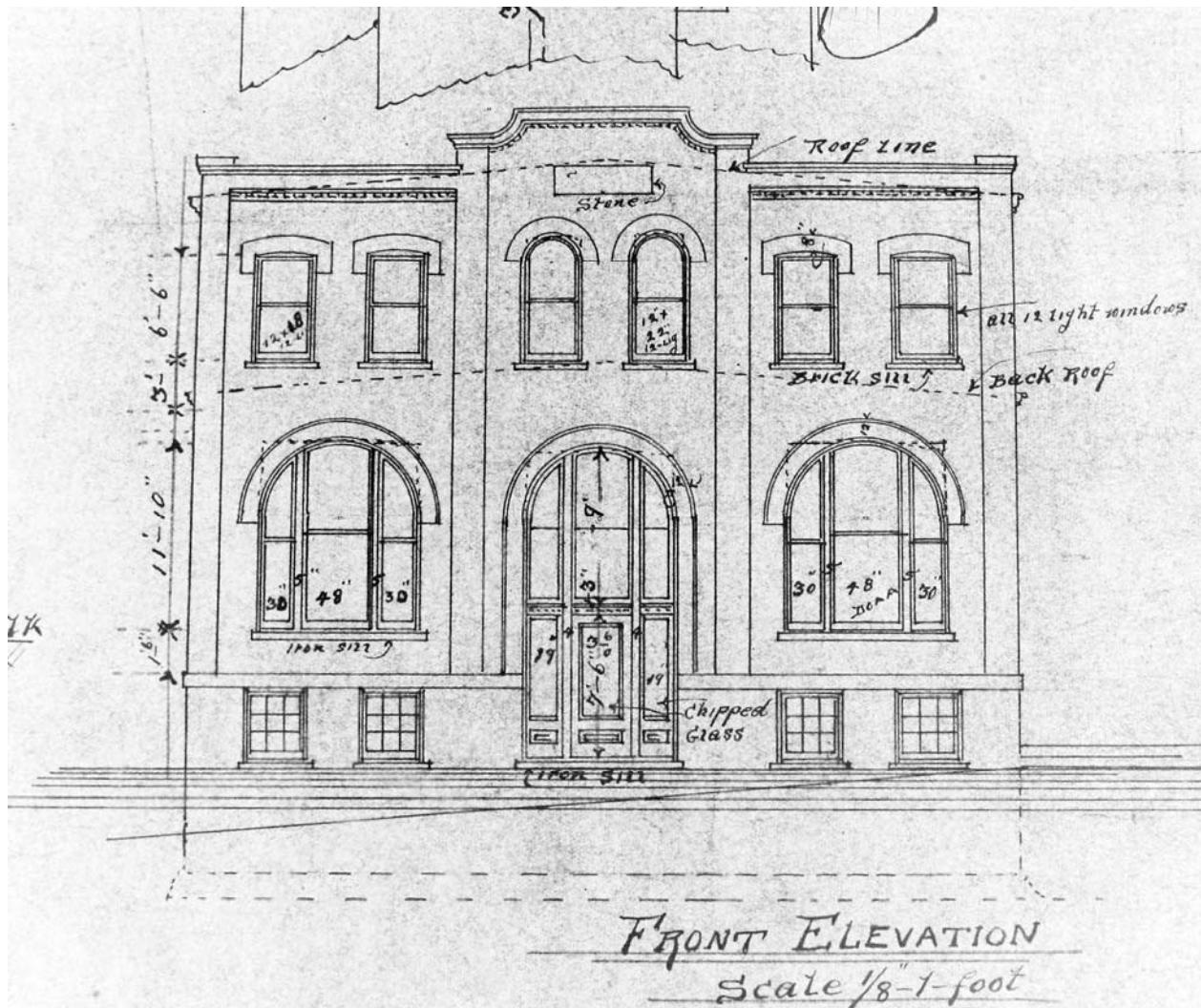


Figure 22. Design drawing for east/front elevation of McKee Button Company, 1907 (McKee collection).

³¹³ Semi-Centennial Souvenir Edition of the *Muscatine Journal* 1891; "Henry W. Zeidler," ad, *Muscatine Journal*, June 1, 1893, 1; "Henry W. Zeidler," *Muscatine Journal*, December 20, 1906, 9; "Pioneer Local Builder Dies," *Muscatine Journal*, November 14, 1919,

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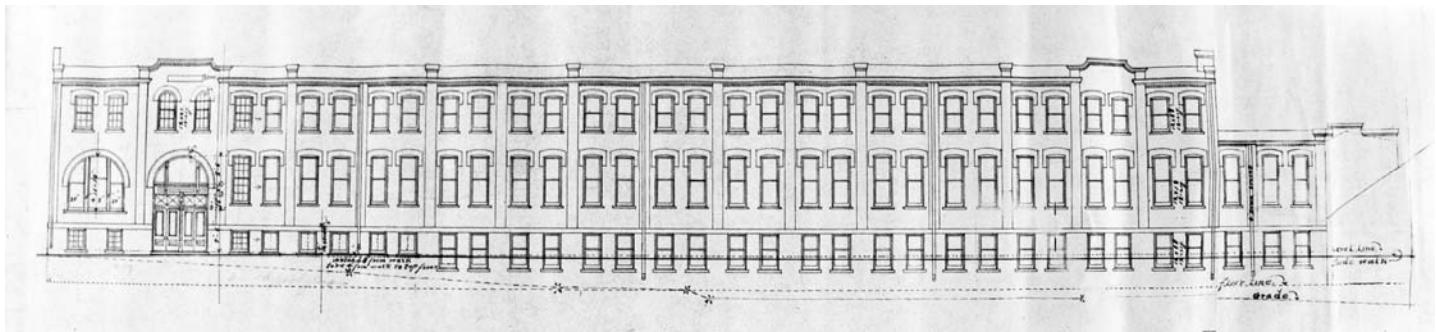


Figure 23. Revised design drawing for north elevation of McKee Button Company, 1907 (McKee collection).

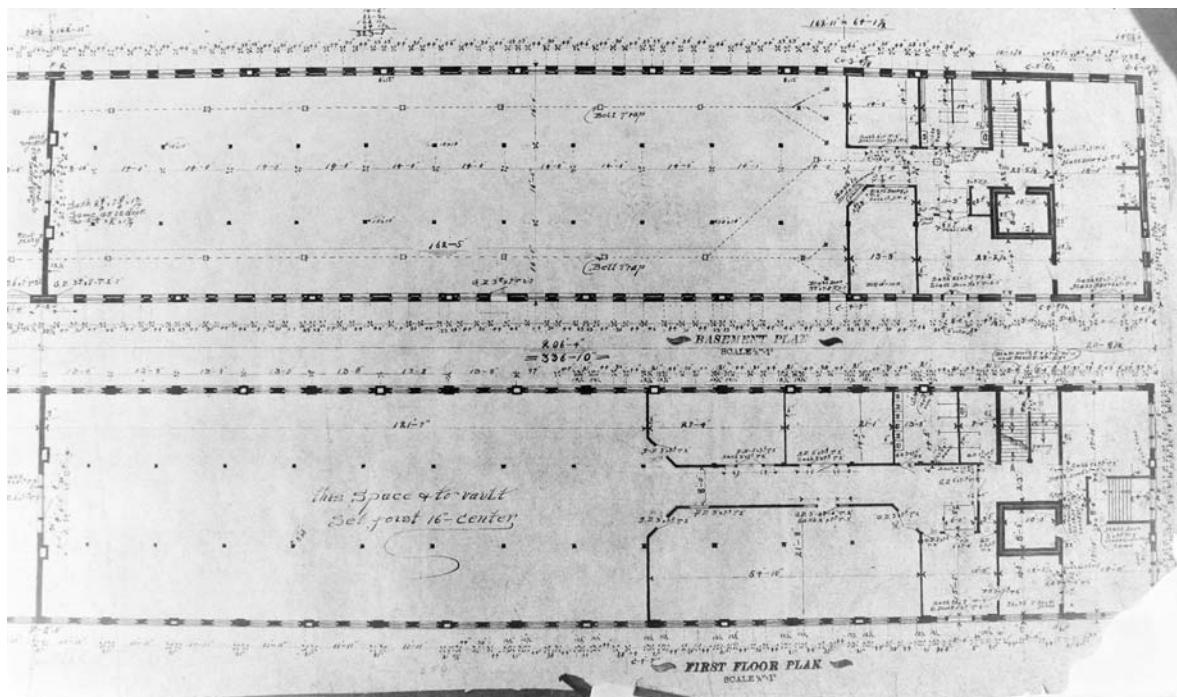


Figure 24. Design drawings for interior layouts of lower level (basement) and main level (first story) for McKee Button Company, 1907 (McKee collection).

north is roughly up on interior plans, so the plans are effectively rotated from north elevation above

Construction on the factory proceeded throughout spring 1907, with the reduction in the anticipated size of the factory in early March. In late February, a large number of employees of the South Muscatine plant had walked out on strike due to grievances with the company. While they soon returned to work with minimal interruptions, the strike caused McKee and Bliven to pause on the massive consolidation of their operation into one large factory. As noted above, plans thus were altered to reduce the size of building by 85 feet and the capacity by about 100 machines – a loss to the city of 100 workers. As they also operated a plant in Columbus Junction, that town was hopeful that the change in plans in Muscatine might trickle into a larger plant for their community.³¹⁴ Construction thus proceeded on the 245 by 48 foot factory, still the largest in town with over 35,000 square feet among the three stories. The general contract was awarded to Joseph Nyenhuis, with the concrete contract to George Maurer and the brick contract to William Ribbink. The *Journal* reported on March 18: “The work on the Bliven & McKee button factory on Hershey Avenue, which will be one

³¹⁴ “Alter Plans for the Big Button Factory,” *Muscatine Journal*, March 1, 1907, 4

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of the largest in the country, is being pushed along as rapidly as possible.³¹⁵ Masonry work was progressing on the second story by April 19, with the boilers arrived on site. The *Journal* noted: "The McKee and Bliven factory will be a model plant in every respect and one of the largest and most substantial buildings ever erected for that industry. The entire plant will be equipped with improved machines put out by the Central Manufacturing company and promises to be far more sanitary than any other factory in this city."³¹⁶ The more refined design of the factory building was also noted: "The structure itself is a handsome building, built on graceful lines and not resembling the usual factory building."³¹⁷

Work shifted from construction on the exterior to the interior and the installation of machinery by June 1907. The roof was completed by June 15, with the large window sash being installed to complete the last of the exterior work. The interior walls were to be plastered, with flooring then installed. Wood flooring would be utilized for the departments on the second and third stories, with a concrete floor to be poured for the cutting department on the first story (lower level). The concrete floor was more sanitary with the water utilized in the cutting process, less absorbent than wood and thus easier to clean and maintain.³¹⁸ The building would be a model factory, with light, airy, and well-ventilated rooms. Machinery would then be installed as soon as possible, with the anticipation of sufficient machinery to employ 250-300 men and nearly as many women. This number would make it one of the largest, if not the largest, factory in the city in terms of number employed – truly the "World's Biggest Button Factory."³¹⁹ McKee & Bliven Button Company was also granted their request for an exemption from city taxes for five years in June, the same provision that had been granted to other button manufacturers in the city.³²⁰ By June 28, the plastering and wainscoting of the interior of the new McKee and Bliven button factory was complete on the second and third stories, with the work nearly done in the basement (first story). Freshwater shells had begun to be shipped to the new site, stored in anticipation of the start of operations.³²¹ However, a delay in the arrival of the large fly wheel for engine room paused their planned opening on July 15, as they worked to finish installing button machinery. The factory would be "the largest of its kind in existence," with plans to produce two varieties of buttons and manufacture more buttons per day than any other plant in the country.³²² The large one-story frame warehouse for storing shells and other materials was completed by late July, providing additional storage space.³²³ The fly wheel finally arrived in the middle of August, and the first signs of activity was noted on August 19 with smoke out of the chimney as they tested the boiler.³²⁴

The transition plan for McKee and Bliven Button Company was then fully developed and executed to move operations from their multiple other locations in Muscatine into their new modern factory. The former Royal Pearl factory in South Muscatine was the first to close, with machinery then transferred to the new building and installed along with additional new machinery. A number of skilled mechanics were working on the installation of machinery in the new factory on August 29, placing the shafts along the ceiling of the large rooms and installing the pulleys and shaft connections.³²⁵ All machines from the old Royal Pearl button factory were transferred by September 10, and the installed machinery was started to be tested. The Front

³¹⁵ "Award Contract for Big Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, February 22, 1907, 4; "Are Pushing Work on Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, March 18, 1907, 5

³¹⁶ "Receive Boilers for New Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, April 19, 1907, 5

³¹⁷ "World's Biggest Button Factory," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, June 3, 1907, 7

³¹⁸ "Complete Outside Work on Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, June 15, 1907, 8

³¹⁹ "World's Biggest Button Factory," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, June 3, 1907, 7

³²⁰ "City Council Proceedings," *Muscatine Journal*, June 27, 1907, 6

³²¹ "Complete Interior," *Muscatine Journal*, June 28, 1907, 8

³²² "Lack of Material is Cause of Delay," *Muscatine Journal*, July 16, 1907, 7

³²³ "Complete Warehouse," *Muscatine Journal*, July 25, 1907, 7

³²⁴ "Test Boiler," *Muscatine Journal*, August 19, 1907, 8; "To Occupy Factory by September First," *Muscatine Journal*, August 14, 1907, 6

³²⁵ "To Occupy Factory by September First," *Muscatine Journal*, August 14, 1907, 6; "Install Machinery at Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, August 29, 1907, 5

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Street factory continued to produce buttons, as they worked to get the new plant fully operational.³²⁶ More than 50 men were working in the cutting department of the new plant by September 13, with all departments anticipated to be operational within the month.³²⁷ The main plant on W. Front Street was then closed on September 20, and a number of men were working to transfer the improved machines of that factory to the new factory on Hershey Avenue. Over 100 machines were already in operation at the new plant, with the transfer of the additional machinery anticipated to be completed by the latter part of the following week. The transition to the new building was successfully completed with very few employees out of work for any length of time.³²⁸



Figure 25. McKee and Bliven Button Company at 1000 Hershey Avenue, December 12, 1907, looking southwest (Grossheim collection, image mus795).

Completion of the new McKee and Bliven Button Company factory did not signal the end of the development of the new property. The building for the shell crusher and installation of the shell crusher was complete by November 27, with the shell crusher put into operation. The shell crusher was noted as a profitable investment as it converts useless material into various powders to be sold. Crushed shell was noted to make excellent chicken feeds, as well as being used as a cleaner.³²⁹ McKee and Bliven planned to dismantle and move the former Royal Pearl Button factory building to their new site in September to use for shell storage, and the building was noted as considered the largest factory of its kind when built. However, the building proved difficult to dismantle and move, so they started construction on a new large shell shed at the rear of

³²⁶ "McKee and Bliven Plant is Started," *Muscatine Journal*, September 10, 1907, 6

³²⁷ "Many Employed at New Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, September 13, 1907, 5

³²⁸ "Old Uptown Button Factory is Closed," *Muscatine Journal*, September 21, 1907, 5

³²⁹ "Start Shell Crusher at South End Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, November 27, 1907, 5

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the factory instead in December.³³⁰ However, they then made a second attempt in June 1908, with the building divided into four pieces and then moved to the new property piece by piece. The first section arrived on the new site on July 9 and the last section arrived on August 7, moved by Elliott Construction Company.³³¹ The railroad switch to the factory for unloading shells was lengthened to service other businesses in South Muscatine in December, a benefit for the local community felt by the construction of the factory.³³²

The new McKee and Bliven button factory was proclaimed to be the "Largest Button Plant in the World" by the *Journal* in their end of the year edition on December 19, 1907.³³³ While this claim may be typical of a local newspaper boasting of their city, as the largest button factory in Muscatine, it does appear likely to have been the largest pearl button factory in the United States and thus the world, as the industry was unique to the United States. The company was noted as having survived the recent financial crisis, with all employees kept at work. The factory was noted as the greatest of many improvements in last year in Muscatine from an economic standpoint, with around \$50,000 spent on the building. The building was the greatest of its kind in the world, and the number of employed was also the greatest. It was noted as constructed entirely of brick to make it as fireproof as possible and designed for sanitary conditions. The basement floor was concrete and graded so that water from the machines would be carried away immediately as to not endanger the health of the cutters. The cutting department occupied the full first story (lower level). The offices and the finishing department were located on the second story (main level). The department was noted to have a commodious arrangement of machines with many women employed in finishing and sorting buttons. Another part of the finishing department was located on the third story (upper level), along with the stock rooms. The interior finish was noted to be hard wood on the upper two floors. The factory employed about 400 people, including 300 men in the cutting department and 100 women in the finishing department. The machinery in the building was valued at more than \$100,000, including new machines and machines transferred from their old factories. The engine room was located at the rear of the building, with many thousands of dollars in boilers and furnaces to adequately supply power for the plant. The construction of the building not only showed residents of Muscatine that the button industry was stable, it further showed them that it was profitable.³³⁴

McKee and Bliven Button Company also appear to have opened their sales office in New York in 1907 as they were completing the construction of this building. With the larger factory building, they were then able to increase their production of pearl buttons to fill additional orders, and the sales office in New York City provided their salesmen ready access to the businesses associated with the thriving garment industry of the city. The first mention of their New York City office appears in advertisements and articles at the end of 1907, though they were working with New York companies for years prior to this date. Their sales office was located in the Watson Building at 256-262 Church Street for several subsequent decades. As the company was primarily a wholesale supplier to the garment industry, they did not sell pearl buttons at the retail level, and thus they did not generally advertise their product in newspapers. However, local advertisements in the *Muscatine Journal* in this period noted that they were both manufacturers of pearl buttons and crushed shells utilized for poultry feed, a side business that was operated by several pearl button companies and other businesses in Muscatine. The crushed shell and poultry feed aspect of the business did operate locally on a retail level, with newspaper advertisements then targeting these customers.

³³⁰ "Pearl Factory Dismantled," *Quad Cities Times*, Davenport, IA, September 20, 1907, 2; "Convert Old Factory into a Store House," *Muscatine Journal*, September 25, 1907, 5; "Local Company Will Erect Warehouse," *Muscatine Journal*, December 13, 1907, 7

³³¹ "Once Largest Button Factory to be Moved," *Muscatine Journal*, June 25, 1908, 5; "Section Arrives at Destination," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 9, 1908, 3; "Old Site Will be Vacant Soon," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 6, 1908, 6

³³² "An Accommodation Switch to Be Built," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, December 4, 1907, 5

³³³ *Muscatine Journal*, December 19, 1907, 12

³³⁴ "Largest Button Plant in the World," *Muscatine Journal*, December 19, 1907, 11

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Figure 26. McKee and Bliven Button Company advertisement from December 1907
(*Journal*, December 19, 1907, 12).

Even after its initial completion, the new factory for McKee and Bliven Button Company was enhanced and expanded in 1908. The *Journal* reported in February 1908 that a novel feature was being introduced in the McKee & Bliven factory with two rest rooms being fitted up to be opened next week, one for ladies and one for men. This feature would make it one of most up-to-date factories in state.³³⁵ In August 1908, a two-story brick addition was started for the plant to increase the output of the shell crushing department. The department had proved to be profitable, with more attention to be devoted to it. The crushed shells made excellent poultry food, and several new machines were being installed to increase output.³³⁶ The Muscatine Y.M.C.A worked out an agreement with McKee and Bliven to donate the use of a room at the factory to the establishment of an industrial branch of the Y.M.C.A. in August 1908. The goal of the organization was to reach young men not affiliated with any religious organization. In September, rooms in the front of the factory were fitted up for a reading room, rest room, and game room to be available for all employees of the factory. A dinner was held in October to mark the opening of the industrial branch of the Y.M.C.A., with more than 130 employees attending.³³⁷ The woman's auxiliary of the industrial branch of the Y.M.C.A. was then formed in November. Their first project was beautifying the association room at the plant.³³⁸ A number of Russian immigrants were employed at the factory, and a night school was opened by the industrial branch of the Y.M.C.A. to teach an English class and a basic elementary education class (arithmetic, grammar, spelling,

³³⁵ "50 Years Ago," *Muscatine Journal*, February 4, 1958, 4

³³⁶ "Enlarging the Shell Crushing Department," *Muscatine Journal*, August 22, 1908, 5

³³⁷ "Branch of Y.M.C.A. in Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, August 29, 1908, 5; "Branch Y.M.C.A. at M'Kee & Bliven," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, September 25, 1908, 5; "Many Will Attend Association Dinner," *Muscatine Journal*, October 2, 1908, 4; "Officers Elected by Button Workers," *Muscatine Journal*, October 31, 1908, 4

³³⁸ "Elect Officers at Auxiliary Meeting," *Muscatine Journal*, November 5, 1908, 7

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and writing). Classes were open to any employee of the firm wishing to improve himself, with classes conducted in the Y.M.C.A. room on Wednesday evenings. The branch was also open on Monday and Friday evenings for social hours.³³⁹

McKee and Bliven Button Company continued to prosper after the construction of this main plant and office building, further competing with other large freshwater pearl button manufacturers with the formation of branch plants in several locations along the railroads and rivers of the Midwest. This local factory and its network of additional factories made McKee and Bliven one of the largest button companies in the United States, within any aspect of the button industry. As a leader within the button industry, James S. McKee and William E. Bliven were involved with the industry on a national level during this period as well. The National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers consisted of 50 leaders of button companies in Iowa, New York, Wisconsin, and Missouri in 1909, with H.W. Huttig of Muscatine as president and W.E. Bliven of Muscatine as vice president, two of the earliest men in the freshwater pearl button industry. Among other concerns, the association was active in the establishment of an experiment station and hatchery at Fairport, working with the Bureau of Fisheries on methods to replenish the dwindling mussel population of the Mississippi River.³⁴⁰ William E. Bliven continued as vice president for the organization over the next several years.³⁴¹

In 1909, James S. McKee and William E. Bliven sought other locations to supplement the factory of the McKee and Bliven Button Company. They worked with leaders in Columbus Junction, where they had operated their first branch plant outside of Muscatine since 1902, to secure favorable terms for a new building there in 1909. The Columbus Improvement Company was organized in April 1909 to construct a building to be occupied rent-free as a button factory by McKee and Bliven. The newspaper noted on May 1 that citizens had raised \$1,800 for the construction of one building, with another similar building to be built by McKee and Bliven of Muscatine. They anticipated installation of 100 machines in the buildings (same as the reduced number in 1907 from the redesign of the factory in Muscatine), as well as installing shell crusher machinery. The large engine and boiler from the old Royal Pearl Button company was moved to Columbus Junction to be installed there. Additionally, McKee & Bliven proposed in June to build a power and light plant in Columbus Junction large enough to provide light for the city if sufficient patronage was assured., as they needed a power and light plant for their branch of button factory.³⁴² As they were working with Columbus Junction on this branch, James S. McKee and William E. Bliven were also working with leaders in Keithsburg, Illinois, to start a blank factory there. Keithsburg, located on the Mississippi River about 25 miles south of Muscatine, had several earlier factories that had eventually closed, and thus there was a skilled labor base for the button industry there (Figure 27). This factor likely played a role in the decision for a branch in that community. McKee & Bliven Button Company constructed a building for 100 cutting machines as well as a large warehouse to store up to 600 tons of shells, with the city agreeing to provide free water and exemption from taxes. McKee & Bliven also agreed to run steadily and employ 50-100 workers.³⁴³ The two large boilers from the old factory on W. Front Street were then moved to Keithsburg in October for use in the branch factory there.³⁴⁴ Charles Holzhauer was appointed manager of the growing Chicago branch of McKee and Bliven in August 1909, which employed 50 men and had 50 additional machines being installed. In 1910, it was noted that it was too expensive to install a shell crusher at the cutting plant in Chicago, and it is unknown how much longer this plant in Chicago then operated.³⁴⁵

³³⁹ "Open Night School at Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, November 25, 1908, 3; "Association Work at Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1908, 5

³⁴⁰ "Muscatine Men Officers of National Pearl Button Men," *Muscatine News Tribune*, August 3, 1909, 8

³⁴¹ "Huttig at Head of Manufacturers," *Journal*, April 7, 1911, 5

³⁴² "Unit to Aid Pool Fund," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, November 12, 1908, 4; "Col. Junction Advances," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, May 2, 1909, 3; "Huge Engine Being Removed," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 20, 1909, 15; "South End Firm Would Light City," *Muscatine Journal*, June 25, 1909, 7

³⁴³ "Factory at Keithsburg," *Fort Madison Weekly Democrat*, April 29, 1909, 1

³⁴⁴ "Ships Boilers Away," *Muscatine Journal*, October 27, 1909, 10

³⁴⁵ "Wed and Go to Chicago to Live," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 25, 1909, 8; "Young Man Receives a Merited Promotion," *Muscatine Journal*, July 28, 1909, 5; Claassen 1994: 95

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Figure 27. Branch locations for McKee and Bliven Button Company in the 1900s-1920s (McCarley 2019).

some additional branch locations may have operated briefly during these decades that have not been currently identified in research or on this map
base map obtained from <http://ontheworldmap.com/usa/usa-rivers-and-lakes-map.html>, with branch information added by McCarley

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While McKee and Bliven Button Company opened branch locations, the large factory and main offices in Muscatine continued to serve as their headquarters. Their advertisement in December 1909 continued to list their Muscatine factory and office at 1000 Hershey Avenue and their New York sales office in the Watson Building at 256-262 Church Street, without noting any other branch locations.³⁴⁶ William E. Bliven spent a large amount of time in the New York office by this time, with James S. McKee in charge of the company in Muscatine. The further development of the business required additional construction in Muscatine as well. A large frame building with a concrete floor was constructed for a shell storage shed to the south of the factory in summer 1909, measuring 88 by 33 feet with a capacity to hold over 1,600 tons of shells.³⁴⁷ A second shell shed was then also constructed. At the same time, they also started construction in July on a two-story brick addition on the south side of the factory. The addition was constructed for additional space for the finishing department and for storage of blanks, and it was completed in September.³⁴⁸ A new railroad spur was laid directly to the engine room in October 1909, providing more efficient delivery of coal. The former lumber side track was then also connected with the button factory side tracks, creating a double track condition.³⁴⁹ John W. Miller was finally granted a patent for a new button machine in February 1910, with the assignment given by Miller to his employer McKee and Bliven Button Company.³⁵⁰

The scope of the business of McKee and Bliven Button Company is revealed in some correspondence from J.S. McKee in Muscatine to W.E. Bliven in New York in this period. In March 1910, in addition to operating at full capacity in Columbus Junction and in Grandview, and with 65 men in Keithsburg, they also had Jones in South Muscatine, Steinbaugh on West Hill, and Dr. Morgan's small plant along Mad Creek cutting blanks for them. Additionally, they were running the Model Button Co (Holmes' plant) in South Muscatine, as Pioneer had run out of shells to supply them. McKee and Bliven Button Company was working to fill orders for Max Lowenthal & Bro, L.B. Supply Co, Salant & Salent, Gilbert Knitting Co, and E. Watson Gardiner Co, as well as other companies.³⁵¹ Through this period, McKee and Bliven Button Company primarily supplied buttons wholesale to garment manufacturers. The company was noted to employ around 500 workers in August 1910.³⁵²

Working conditions in the button factories and morale among employees was thus a source of discussion throughout Muscatine in this period. Small strikes over grievances occurred at various companies throughout the early 20th century, typically over issues of weighing products as the workers were paid by piece. For example, a strike of 45 women at McKee & Bliven Button Company occurred on August 17, 1909, over their claim that the weighmaster had not weighing buttons correctly over the last two weeks for them be paid correctly.³⁵³ Issues were typically quickly resolved with workers back on the job. At the same time, management sought to take care of their workers, wishing to retain good employees and retain the quality of their work. The first annual picnic for employees of McKee & Bliven button factory was held on a farm to the south of Muscatine in July 1909, an event enjoyed by over 200 employees.³⁵⁴ While most companies operated six days a week in this period, summer hours gave workers Saturday afternoons off. W.E. Bliven noted in September 1910 that he had found that workers were more refreshed and efficient on Monday by allowing them to have Saturday afternoons off, and he intended to continue the hours through the winter.³⁵⁵

³⁴⁶ *Muscatine Journal*, December 16, 1909, 44 (24)

³⁴⁷ "Large Shell House Now Being Erected," *Muscatine Journal*, June 23, 1909, 6; "New Shell Shed Being Completed," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 6, 1909, 5

³⁴⁸ "Erect Two-Story Brick Addition," *Muscatine Journal*, July 14, 1909, 7; "Record of Building Improvements for Past Year," *Muscatine Journal*, December 16, 1909, 33; "Complete Addition," *Muscatine Journal*, September 11, 1909, 6

³⁴⁹ "Are Filling in for New Spur," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, October 13, 1909, 3; "Unite Side Tracks Will Benefit Co," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, November 2, 1909, 5

³⁵⁰ "Local Plant to Protect Patent," *Muscatine Journal*, February 10, 1910, 7

³⁵¹ McKee & Bliven correspondence, 1907-1912, cited in Claassen 1994: 68-69

³⁵² "Waterloo will not go bankrupt without saloons," *Courier*, Waterloo, IA, August 1, 1910, 7

³⁵³ "Forty-Five Girls Strike at Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, August 17, 1909, 3

³⁵⁴ "Big Picnic will be Held Saturday," *Muscatine Journal*, July 16, 1909, 4

³⁵⁵ "Will Continue Half Holidays," *Muscatine Journal*, September 15, 1910, 8

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Employees of McKee & Bliven Button Company in Muscatine each received a bucket of oysters as a gift from the New York office in December 1910, with 400 pails sent from traveling salesman Charles McColm.³⁵⁶

The *History of Muscatine County* published in 1911 reported that at least 4,000 men women and children were employed in the button industry in Muscatine. The three largest local button manufacturers in this period were McKee and Bliven Button Company (1000 Hershey Ave), Automatic Button Company (303-311 Mulberry), and Hawkeye Button Company (209 Orange), with only the building for McKee and Bliven Button Company remaining extant in Muscatine among these companies. The firm of McKee and Bliven was operated by James S. McKee and William E. Bliven, and they had been in the button business since 1895 and incorporated under this name in 1904. They employed 500 to 600 workers in 1911, with branch plants in several other cities.³⁵⁷ Henry Umlandt continued to serve as president of the Automatic Button Company since it was founded in 1898 and incorporated in 1903. The business had the capacity of producing 7,000 gross buttons per day, which were sold throughout the world.³⁵⁸ The Hawkeye Button Company was operated by William F. Bishop, F.C. Vetter, and C.C. Hagermann, who had years of experience in the button industry prior to incorporating this company in 1903. They employed 700 to 800 workers in 1911 with branch factories in Keokuk (Iowa), Oskaloosa (Iowa), and Canton (Missouri).³⁵⁹ The most prominent other button and blank factories in town included Bishop & Hagermann, Empire City Pearl Button Company, Fred C. Grau, Leo. Hirsch & Co, Ideal Button Co, Model Button Co, Muscatine Button Co, Pioneer Button Co, Richards-Smith Co, Schildberg Brothers, Schmalz Bros, and Vienna Button Company. Annual payroll among these button companies was over \$1 million. While the industry was found in other cities, Muscatine was recognized as the freshwater pearl button center of the world, with many of the other locations connected to the companies in Muscatine.³⁶⁰

As tensions with the Button Workers Protective Union flared in spring 1911 with workers on strike across all button companies in town, operations at the main factory of McKee and Bliven Button Company in Muscatine were impacted, and the company looked to expand operations in other locations. They had opened a branch at Marietta, Ohio, strategically locating closer to the shelling operations that had moved to the Ohio River. The company was noted by a nearby newspaper in June 1911 as "the largest manufacturer of pearl buttons at Muscatine, Iowa, and one of the largest manufacturers in the world." They were constructing a branch factory further up the Ohio River at Paden City, West Virginia, with a contract with the city to employ 100 workers to cut blanks.³⁶¹ The blank factory in Keithsburg, Illinois, had to be repaired and rebuilt after a fire in August 1911.³⁶² As workers in Muscatine were again on strike in fall 1911, W.E. Bliven traveled to Columbus Junction to expand operations at the McKee and Bliven Button Company there in September 1911, with the establishment of a sorting department and construction of a shell crushing plant. The sorting department was started with 20 women, with plans to expand as needed.³⁶³ At the same time, James S. McKee traveled to Moline, Illinois, to open a branch of the finishing department there. *The Dispatch* in Moline reported that James S. McKee had decided to pass on further expansion in Muscatine: "Our experience in that city has taught us a lesson. Hereafter we will make no attempt to centralize our industries and it is hardly probable that a cutting plant will be established in Moline." McKee and Bliven Button Company intended to open more cutting plants along the Ohio River and at points in the south to keep those operations close to the raw materials and to open finishing departments in other locations as well. Then, if trouble arose at one plant, it would not extend to others and halt all operations. The branch in Moline was started with 40 automatic machines and women sent from Muscatine to train new employees. The equipment was installed in October,

³⁵⁶ "Shell Oysters for 400 Workers," *Muscatine Journal*, December 22, 1910, 8

³⁵⁷ Richman 1911, Vol 2: 118

³⁵⁸ Richman 1911, Vol 2: 621-622

³⁵⁹ Richman 1911, Vol 2: 625

³⁶⁰ Richman 1911, Vol 1: 304

³⁶¹ "Grand Auction Sale of Lots," *Clarksburg Telegram*, Clarksburg, WV, June 29, 1911, 6

³⁶² "Fire Loss at Button Plant," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, St. Louis, MO, August 22, 1911, 4

³⁶³ "Install Crusher at Columbus Jct.," *Muscatine Journal*, September 1, 1911, 8

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with the new finishing department then opened. George R. Isted, who had worked for the company for 16 years, was sent to be manager of the Moline branch factory.³⁶⁴

The main factory in Muscatine was thus not expanded after 1911, with the footprint shown on the 1912 Sanborn fire insurance map likely completed by 1910. The map provides additional information about the various parts of the building shown in the image (Figure 28). The east end of the building, closest to downtown, had the offices on the main level, with sorting on the upper level. The main section of the factory building stretching to the west had cutting blanks in the lower level, finishing, grinding, and soaking on the main level, and polishing, sorting, and storage on the upper level. The west end had the boiler room, shell storage, shell crushing, and storage of crushed shells. A large soaking room extended south towards the railroad tracks, with large shell storage sheds along the tracks. The various parts of the building complex are

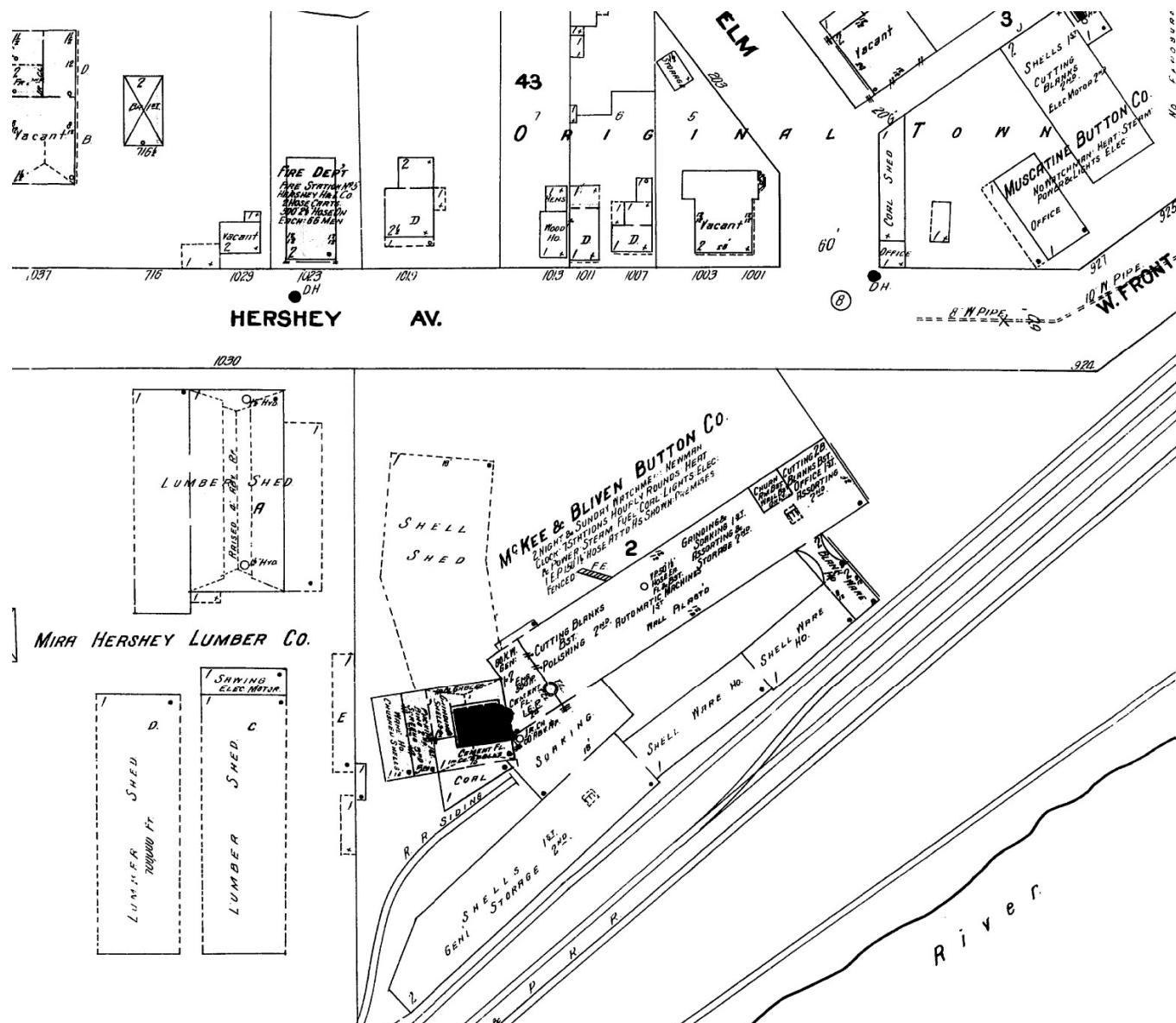


Figure 28. McKee and Bliven Button Company at 1000 Hershey Ave in 1912 (Sanborn Map Company 1912: 13).

³⁶⁴ "Manufacturer Here to Look Over Field," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, September 20, 1911, 4; "George R. Isted," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, March 26, 1913, 4

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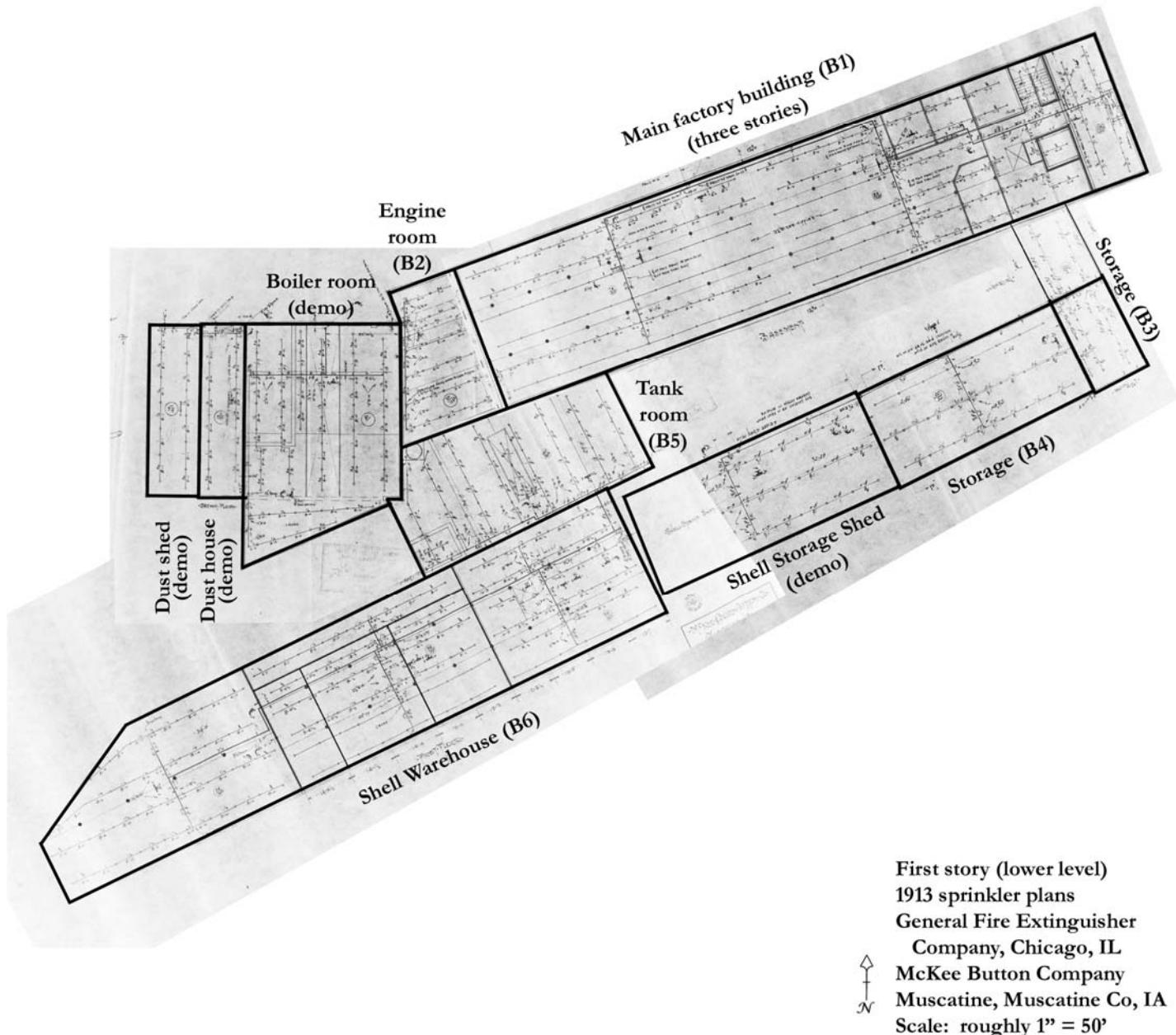


Figure 29. Sprinkler plans for McKee Button Company by General Fire Extinguisher Company of Chicago, IL, showing layouts from 1913 for main factory and other sections/additions (McKee collection).

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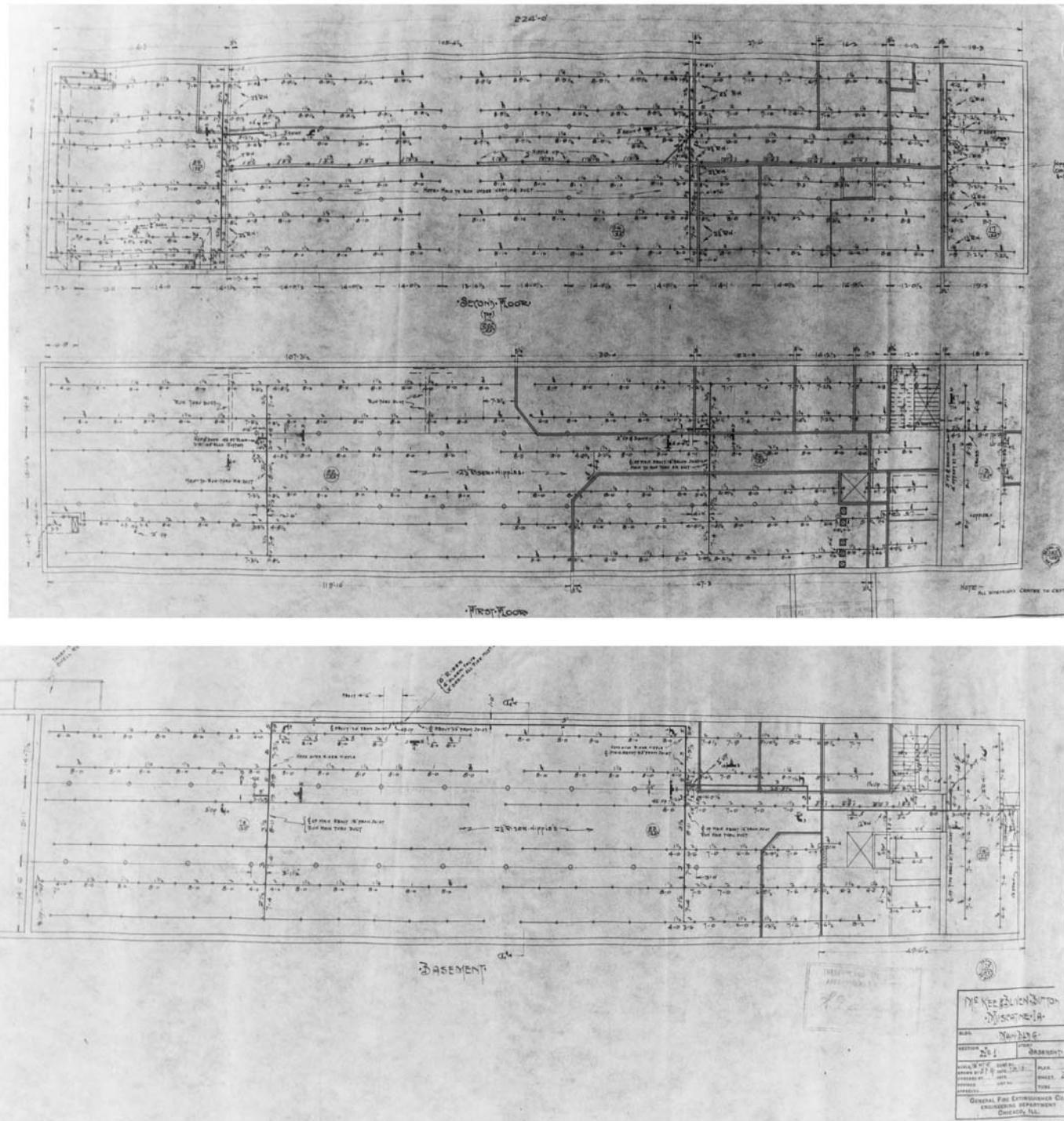


Figure 30. Sprinkler plans for McKee Button Company by General Fire Extinguisher Company of Chicago, IL, showing layouts from 1913 for all three stories of main factory building (McKee collection).

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then further identified on a set of plans from 1913 for sprinkler installation throughout the main factory building and its various additional sections (Figures 5, 29-30). The wall locations are noted throughout these plans, with no door or window openings indicated. The main factory has a layout similar on all three stories to the current layout, with the east end divided into rooms and open factory space stretching to the west. The various additional sections are labeled on these drawings, with the engine room (B2) and boiler room (demolished) at the west end. The brick addition (B3) added in 1909 to the south is noted as storage, as well as the additions to its west. The large shell warehouse (B6) was located along the tracks as also shown on the Sanborn map, with the intermediary addition (B5) noted as the tank room (used for soaking shells).

The men associated the McKee and Bliven Button Company continued to be active on the national level in the 1910s. With the passage of the Revenue Act of 1913, or the Underwood Tariff, the duty on most imported buttons was removed, eliminating the edge for American manufacturers. The competition with imported ocean pearl buttons from Europe was felt even among the largest of the freshwater pearl button manufacturers in Muscatine, though varied by the company. The freshwater pearl button industry continued to be reported as the most important branch of the button industry in the United States in 1914 per a report by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. Over 21 million gross freshwater pearl buttons were produced in the United States in 1914 (Table 7). Freshwater pearl buttons composed 43.2% of total quantity and 45.4% of total value of button produced in the United States. The report noted: "Muscatine, Iowa, is still a center of the industry, and Iowa leads in the production and buttons and blanks; New York State takes second place in the output of the finished product."³⁶⁵ In addition to working to protect the industry through tariffs, the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers also continued to work on other issues to protect the future of the industry, particularly on a plan for the propagation of mussels in the Mississippi River and its tributaries. William E. Bliven continued to serve as vice president of the organization, with other officers also re-elected at their annual meeting in Chicago in April 1914 including W.F. Bishop (Hawkeye Button Co, Muscatine) as president, Henry Umlandt (Automatic Button Co, Muscatine) as treasurer, and David W. MacWillie (Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, WI) as secretary. Harold McKee, son of James, also represented McKee and Bliven Button Company at the convention.³⁶⁶

By 1913, McKee and Bliven Button Company occupied a prominent position with a national presence within the freshwater pearl button industry. The 1913 city directory lists the company as manufacturers of pearl buttons and pearl grit at 1000 Hershey Ave, run by James S. McKee and William E. Bliven. In January 1914, James S. McKee operated their main office and factory at 1000 Hershey Avenue in Muscatine, with W.E. Bliven in charge of the New York office in the Watson Building at 256-262 Church St. They operated seven branch factories in Columbus Junction, IA; Grandview, IA; Keithsburg, IL; Moline, IL, Marietta, OH; Paden City, WV, and Delphi, IN (Figure 27). J. Harold McKee operated the branch in Moline, with various managers at the other locations. They advertised as the "largest pearl button manufacturing plant in the world," with a capacity of a weekly output of 100,000 gross (over 14 million) finished buttons. They operated over 80 finishing machines on the main level of their factory in June 1914, with another 20 new finishing machines being installed. The company was running a full force of over 100 button cutters in the main factory in Muscatine by December 1914.³⁶⁷ Two of the smaller branch locations appear to have closed with the impact of the Underwood Tariff of 1913 and foreign competition over the next year. In December 1915, the company operated five branch plants in Columbus Junction, IA, Keithsburg, IL, Moline, IL, Marietta, OH, and Paden

³⁶⁵ USTC 1918: 21-22

³⁶⁶ "Meeting of Pearl Button Association," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, November 5, 1913, 9; "Manufacturers to Draft New Statutes," *Journal*, March 25, 1914, 12; "Re-Elected Bishop Association Head," *Muscatine Journal*, April 1, 1914, 10

³⁶⁷ *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, January 1, 1914, 50; *Moline Evening Mail*, February 25, 1914, 14; "South End Factory to Install Twenty New Machines Here," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 19, 1914, 5; "Harold McKee to Work in New York," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 27, 1914, 2; "South End Locals," *Muscatine Journal*, December 8, 1914, 5

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City, WV.³⁶⁸ The retention of five branches in the midst of economic conditions in the button industry that partially or fully closed many other button companies further reinforces the strength and prominence of McKee and Bliven Button Company within the button industry in this period.

McKee and Bliven was selected as one of the four prominent button companies in Muscatine to be depicted in the 1914 publication entitled *Muscatine, Iowa, The Pearl City*. The image of the McKee and Bliven Button Company shows the large three-story factory built along Hershey Avenue in 1907, with engine room on the far end as well as various additions, shell sheds, and supporting spaces on the property (Figure 14). The unique Romanesque Revival architecture of the building is clearly conveyed through this image, as well as its distinction among the other button factories in the community. Three other button factories in Muscatine are also pictured in this publication (Figures 15-17). The McKee and Bliven Button Company stands out for its design as a comprehensive factory building for button production in 1914. Other similar images of the building dating from the 1910s similarly show the overall large operations of the McKee Button Company and refined detail of this factory building (Figure 31). With the challenges for the freshwater pearl button industry starting in 1914, there would be no demand for the construction of larger or newer pearl button factories in Muscatine or other communities. The factory of the McKee Button Company thus stands as a testimony to the widespread prosperity of the freshwater pearl button industry in the first decades of the 20th century.

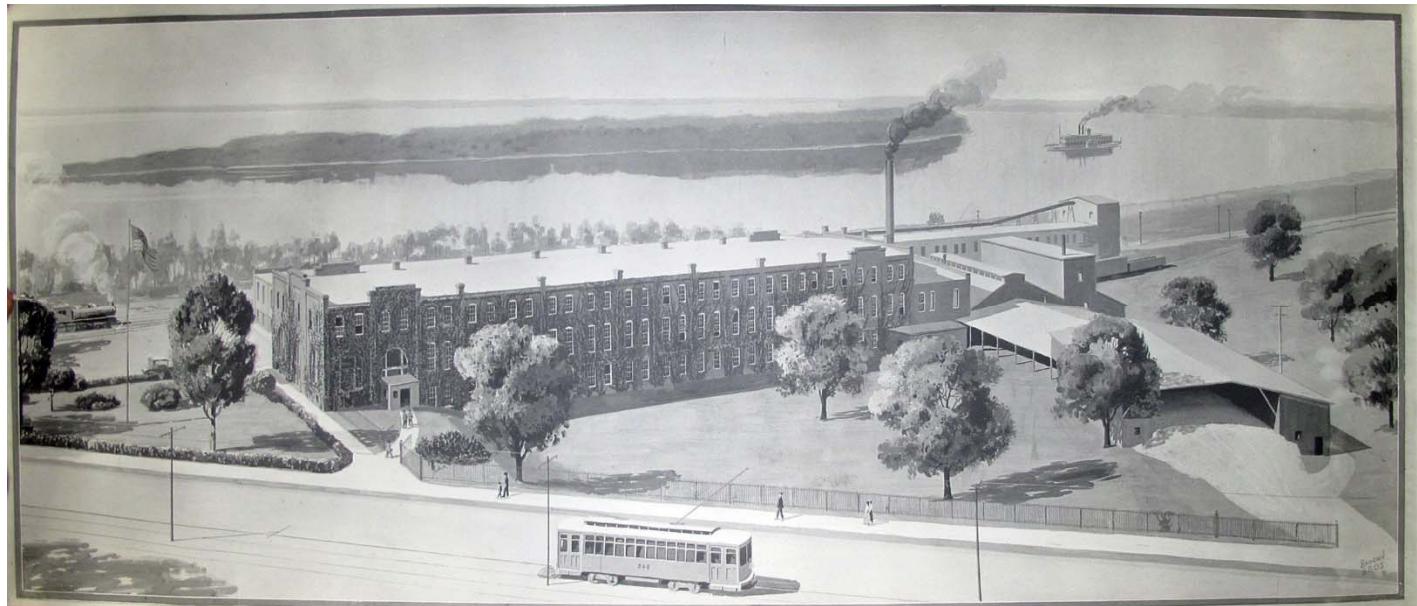


Figure 31. McKee and Bliven Button Company (undated) (McKee Button Company collection).

³⁶⁸ "William E. Bliven Dies at New York City Home," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1915, 2; "Lingering Illness Finally is Fatal," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, December 28, 1915, 10; "Hold Funeral of W.E. Bliven," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, December 31, 1915, 10

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Competition from Foreign Countries and Strengthening of Domestic Button Companies, 1914-1930

The McKee and Bliven Button Company entered the next tumultuous decade from a position of strength within the national button industry, and James S. McKee was an active voice on the national level for the button industry. The market for freshwater pearl buttons produced in the United States grew tight after passage of the Underwood Tariff in 1913 with an increased number of imported buttons. The start of World War I in Europe then impacted imported buttons from European countries, as well as leading to further blossoming of the freshwater pearl button industry in Japan. The end of the war brought the creation of the National Association of Button Manufacturers to lobby in Washington with the Muscatine and other pearl button manufacturers for a new specific duty on freshwater pearl buttons to ensure the continuity of the domestic industry. James S. McKee of the McKee & Bliven Button Company was among these key delegates to Congress, representing the largest freshwater pearl button company in the United States. A new tariff was then enacted due to the efforts of McKee and other prominent button manufacturers, sustaining the American button industry. McKee & Bliven Button Company grew through this period, opening additional branch factories by the middle of the 1920s to expand their production while other pearl button companies closed in the face of continued foreign competition. The company was then incorporated as the McKee Button Company in 1926 by James S. McKee and his sons Albert S. McKee and J. Harold McKee. James S. McKee was noted as the largest individual manufacturer of buttons in the United States at the time of his death in 1927. He was clearly the largest among the Iowa pearl button companies, as well as prominent within the button industry as a whole in the United States. McKee Button Company continued its prosperity and significance in the button industry through the end of the 1920s under the leadership of his sons.

The scope of the McKee and Bliven Button Company was among the largest button companies in the United States during World War I, and the death of William E. Bliven was mourned throughout the industry. On December 17, 1915, William E. Bliven died in New York City, where he had been living for the last two years and running the sales office for the company. He was known as one of the most prominent button manufacturers of the country, as well as being involved in banking. Bliven had been living in New York to work on further enlarging the business of McKee & Bliven and increasing its European trade. McKee and Bliven Button Company had grown significantly over its 20 years of existence to employ from 500 to 600 people, selling buttons throughout the United States and Europe. The plant in Muscatine was noted as one of the largest button companies in America, and it was equipped with the latest machinery. Their five branch plants in Columbus Junction, IA, Keithsburg, IL, Moline, IL, Paden City, WV, and Marietta, OH were closed on the day of his funeral (Figure 27). Additionally, the local members of the National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers were closed in Muscatine on the morning of his funeral out of respect for this leader within the industry, including the Automatic Button Co, Empire Button Co, Hawkeye Button Co, Leo Hirsch & Co, Pioneer Button Co, U.S. Button Co, and Vienna Button Company. Other local plants that provided work for the McKee & Bliven button factory by supplying blanks or in another capacity also closed for the morning, including the Weels, Harget, Schmalz, Doty, Block, Wasserman, and Schreurs factories.³⁶⁹ These closures reinforce the broad scope and operations of the McKee and Bliven Button Company.

Operations of the McKee and Bliven Button Company were continued by James S. McKee, with his sons Albert S. and J. Harold then taking more prominent roles within the company after World War I. Officials in LeClaire, Iowa, talked to the company about operating a branch in town in spring 1916, primarily to process a stockpile of shells from the Mississippi River removed with the construction of the new government dam. The town of LeClaire built a new factory on the site of one destroyed by fire previously and leased it to McKee &

³⁶⁹ "William E. Bliven Dies at New York City Home," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1915, 2; "Lingering Illness Finally is Fatal," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, December 28, 1915, 10; "Hold Funeral of W.E. Bliven," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, December 31, 1915, 10

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Bliven, who opened the factory in June 1916 with 25 saws to cut blanks.³⁷⁰ The branch appears to have only operated for a year or so, likely closing when the locally available shells were depleted. Operations were then started in July 1916 in a new branch plant along the Ohio River at Brookport in southern Illinois.³⁷¹ This branch would operate much longer, continuing to produce blanks into the 1950s.

With wartime demand for pearl buttons, the freshwater pearl button manufacturers in Muscatine returned to more prosperous conditions. While the freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine were not the only ones to benefit from the economic conditions brought by the start of World War I, the impact of the shift in the industry was greatest for Muscatine as they had the largest number of companies. By 1917, the button industry had reported overall growth, as the elimination of European competition due to the war encouraged manufacturers to enlarge existing plants and expand into other types of buttons that were formerly imported. Exports of buttons rose from \$650,000 in 1914 to \$1,171,232 in 1915 to nearly \$2,000,000 in 1917. One-third of all buttons exported were noted to be pearl buttons, serving markets previously served by European countries such as Latin America, Canada, and Australia.³⁷² Additionally, McKee and Bliven Button Company were among the primary exporters of freshwater pearl buttons to Europe, with an agent sent to a London office to coordinate sales and market their product to customers on that side of the Atlantic Ocean. Andrew Asthalter of Muscatine served as the London representative for McKee and Bliven Button Company through World War I and into the early 1920s. In addition to customers in England, his noted travels on company business through Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Holland illustrate the breadth and reach of McKee and Bliven Button Company in this period.³⁷³

With the entry of the United States into World War I in April 1917, McKee and Bliven Button Company, along with the other major button companies, had to find new strategies to compete, particularly with embargoes put in place. The button companies were keenly aware of the need to reduce their costs to be able to compete with imported buttons flooding the market from Japan, with utilization of the cheaper Japanese button industry as perhaps the best solution. In June 1917, Albert S. McKee was sent from McKee & Bliven to Osaka, Japan, to establish a branch office there to purchase button blanks and ship them to Muscatine for finishing. Thus, the cost of producing the blanks, a costly part of the button manufacturing process, would be reduced.³⁷⁴ By July, the importation of blanks from Japan was common among a number of other American companies as well. Overall, the shells obtained from rivers in China created a blank of a superior quality to those manufactured domestically, and the blanks were produced at a much lower cost due to lower labor rates. At the same time, the Japanese started exporting "Dobu" shirt buttons to the United States, selling for as low as 5 cents per gross, carded and duty paid. This cost was cheaper than cost of simply producing a blank in the U.S.³⁷⁵ The McKee Button Company ordered 2,000 great gross (3.4 million) of Chinese Dobu blanks per month for six months from the Asahi Trading Company in Japan in September 1917, indicating nearly a full shift in their business strategy for blanks for production of freshwater pearl buttons.³⁷⁶ With increased competition from Japanese buttons, other button companies in the United States began to close. Those companies closely associated with the ocean pearl button industry were the hardest hit, with the high quality Japanese pearl buttons grossly underselling this more expensive domestic product.

³⁷⁰ "Le Claire Wants Button Factory," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, February 27, 1916, 12; "Finish Work on LeClaire Plant," *Davenport Daily Times*, April 28, 1916, 8; "M'Kee and Bliven Le Claire Factory Starts Operations," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 7, 1916, 10

³⁷¹ *News-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, July 15, 1916, 7

³⁷² United States Tariff Commission (USTC). *The Button Industry*. Tariff Information Series, No. 4. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918, 15-18

³⁷³ "U.S. Doesn't Know What Dull Times Are, Asserts Ashwalter on his Return," *Muscatine Journal*, July 23, 1921, 8; "Times Dull Here? You Ought to See Europe!" *Quad-City Times*, July 26, 1921, 6

³⁷⁴ "Will Open Branch House in Orient," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, June 25, 1917, 5; "Thirty Years Ago," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, June 24, 1947, 6

³⁷⁵ USTC 1918: 24-25

³⁷⁶ McKee Button Company records, letter/contract signed by James S. McKee and Asahi Trading Company, Kobe, September 7, 1917.

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McKee and Bliven Button Company stands out among the largest of the freshwater pearl button companies in the United States at this time, producing a large percentage of the overall domestic production of pearl buttons. The United States Tariff Commission from 1918 noted that the 21.6 million gross in freshwater pearl buttons were produced by a decreasing number of overall button companies, associated with an increase in size and production of the larger companies and closure of smaller companies. The National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers was composed of 21 companies producing freshwater pearl buttons, representing 90% of the total industry and operating factories in 17 states - New York, Iowa, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Kansas, Arkansas, Ohio, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Massachusetts. Overall, the machinery for freshwater pearl buttons was from American invention and manufacturers, and companies were well equipped to meet all American demand for freshwater pearl buttons.³⁷⁷

The need for restored protection for the button industry through a new tariff led to the creation of the National Association of Button Manufacturers in May 1919. A total of 40 button manufacturers, including the freshwater pearl button companies, joined the new association as charter members. All types of buttons were represented in the new organization for the industry - pearl, vegetable ivory, metal, bone, horn, celluloid, cloth covered, etc.³⁷⁸ In June 1919, leading pearl button manufacturers, including James S. McKee, appeared before a subcommittee of Ways and Means in the House to testify on the conditions within the button industry since the passage of the Underwood bill in 1913 and ask for emergency legislation to restore the duty on imported buttons.³⁷⁹ The House passed legislation to amend the tariff on buttons of shell and pearl, and testimony was then held in the Senate as they considered the legislation. Those men who testified reflect the national leaders within the button industry as well as the nine leading companies of the pearl button industry in the United States after World War I:

- James S. McKee, McKee & Bliven Button Co, Muscatine, IA
- Fred C. Vetter, Hawkeye Pearl Button Co, Muscatine, IA
- Henry Umlandt, Automatic Button Co, Muscatine, IA;
- D.A. Willis, Ralph Willis, Pennant Pearl Button Co, Muscatine, IA
- A.C. Adams, United States Button Co., Muscatine, IA
- J.E. Krouse, Davenport Pearl Button Co, Davenport, IA
- Leon Lemaire, James Moir, Mississippi Pearl Button Co, Burlington, IA
- D.W. MacWillie, Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, WI
- Edward Cooper, Harvey Chalmers & Son, Amsterdam, NY

W. P. Fickett, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, New York City, also testified on behalf of the industry. Action on the Payne-Aldrich tariff bill to restore duty on pearl buttons was delayed until after the holiday break, with the legislation passed in January 1920 and tariff restored for this significant segment of the button industry.³⁸⁰ Of these prominent button companies from 1919, buildings remain extant for the McKee & Bliven Button Company and the United States Button Company (former Boepple building) among the five companies noted in Muscatine. Davenport Pearl Button Company (1235 W. 5th St, Davenport) is the only one among the other four other button companies to have any identified extant buildings, and it is a much smaller two-story building in comparison to the Muscatine factories.

Recovery spanned the early years of the 1920s, as stockpiles of imported Japanese buttons were utilized by companies that had acquired them under the lower duty rate. American factories continued to operate around 40% capacity in 1921, increasing to 50% by the end of 1922. Japanese buttons continued to be exported to

³⁷⁷ USTC 1918: 109

³⁷⁸ "Button Men Vote for Tariff Wall," *New York Herald*, New York, NY, March 6, 1919, 11; "Button Makers Organized for Industry's Good," *New York Tribune*, New York, March 6, 1919, 14

³⁷⁹ "Japanese Competition Worries Button Makers," *New York Tribune*, May 23, 1919, 18; "Ask for Tariff; Japs Get Trade," *Daily Times*, Davenport, Iowa, June 24, 1919, 2

³⁸⁰ ("Senate to Act on New Tariff," *Muscatine Journal*, December 27, 1919, 7; Claassen 1994: 70, 117

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the United States, sold at higher rates than without the tariff and more competitive with domestic pearl buttons.³⁸¹ The eleven button manufacturers in Muscatine in 1921 represented roughly half of the remaining companies in the pearl button industry of the United States. McKee and Bliven Button Company continued to operate under the leadership of James S. McKee through the early 1920s. The 1921 city directory lists his eldest sons Albert S. and J. Harold McKee as also working for the company, with the younger son Theodore B. McKee as a student at the University of Iowa.

The 1919 Sanborn map shows the large building complex associated with the McKee and Bliven Button Company operating similar as in 1912 (Figure 32). The east end of the building, closest to downtown, has the offices on the main level, with sorting on the upper level. The lower level has cutting blanks throughout the building. The main section of the factory building stretching to the west has automatic machines throughout the main level as well as grinding and soaking, and the upper level has polishing, sorting, and storage. The west end has shell storage, shell crushing, and storage of crushed shells, with a coal room added to the south. A large soaking room extends south towards the railroad tracks, with large shell storage sheds along the tracks. The Sanborn map and other images from the 1910s show this large button factory along the bank of the Mississippi in Muscatine. The factory received increased flood protection from the city in fall 1921 with the extension of the levee from north of McKee and Bliven Button Company, past the factory, and to the south near Port Louisa.³⁸² The levee would be further expanded and strengthened in the 1930s.

Similar to other freshwater pearl button companies, McKee and Bliven Button Company continued to run at reduced capacity in this period. J. Harold McKee noted in a local article in January 1921 that the reduced operations of the textile mills in the East was limiting the market for their buttons, particularly the companies more specifically related to the manufacture of shirts and underwear. Pearl buttons were utilized primarily for these products, which were supplied wholesale to the manufacturers by McKee & Bliven Button Company. Freshwater pearl buttons were utilized for general shirts and underwear, with more expensive ocean pearl buttons utilized for higher priced shirts. The company was waiting to proceed with increased manufacturing of buttons until the garment manufacturers had orders to be filled.³⁸³ Andrew Asthalter of Muscatine, who spent the past eight years as the London representative for McKee and Bliven Button Company, visited Muscatine in July 1921 and noted that the "hard times" in Muscatine would be considered prosperous business conditions in Europe.³⁸⁴ J. Harold McKee and H.C. Asthalter from McKee & Bliven attended the national garment convention at La Salle hotel in Chicago in May 1922 to market their buttons to customers. The company, along with Hawkeye Button Company, had created unique and elaborate displays of products to exhibit throughout the convention, with the displays noted to surpass any ever shown by local button manufacturers at the annual garment convention. Representatives from Iowa Pearl Button and Automatic Button Company also attended the convention.³⁸⁵

In addition to their main factory and offices in Muscatine, McKee & Bliven Button Company continued to operate several branch factories in the early 1920s. The factory in Muscatine was again noted in 1923 as the "largest factory for the manufacture of fresh water pearl buttons in the world."³⁸⁶ Operations at the blank factories ebbed and flowed with the demand for pearl buttons, but the company branches at Columbus Junction, IA; Keithsburg, IL; Moline, IL, Brookport, IL, and Marietta, OH, continued to supply and supplement the main factory in Muscatine (Figure 27). With improved industry conditions, the company looked to further improve and expand their branch locations. The company installed a power plant for the factory in Keithsburg

³⁸¹ Claassen 1994: 70, 117

³⁸² "Levee Banishes Fear of Floods," *Muscatine Journal*, March 23, 1922, 4

³⁸³ "Market Conditions Not Yet Favorable to Button Trade," *Muscatine Journal*, January 29, 1921, 10

³⁸⁴ "U.S. Doesn't Know What Dull Times Are, Asserts Ashwalter on his Return," *Muscatine Journal*, July 23, 1921, 8; "Times Dull Here? You Ought to See Europe!" *Quad-City Times*, July 26, 1921, 6

³⁸⁵ "Button Men at Big Convention," *Muscatine Journal*, May 15, 1922, 7

³⁸⁶ "Muscatine Factory Expands," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, June 10, 1923, 39

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in July 1922 and added new sheds with concrete floors for additional storage.³⁸⁷ As shelling operations on the Ohio River moved into Kentucky in the 1920s, McKee and Bliven Button Company of Muscatine reopened their blank factory at Brookport, IL in November 1921 with 75 workers, and they acquired property in

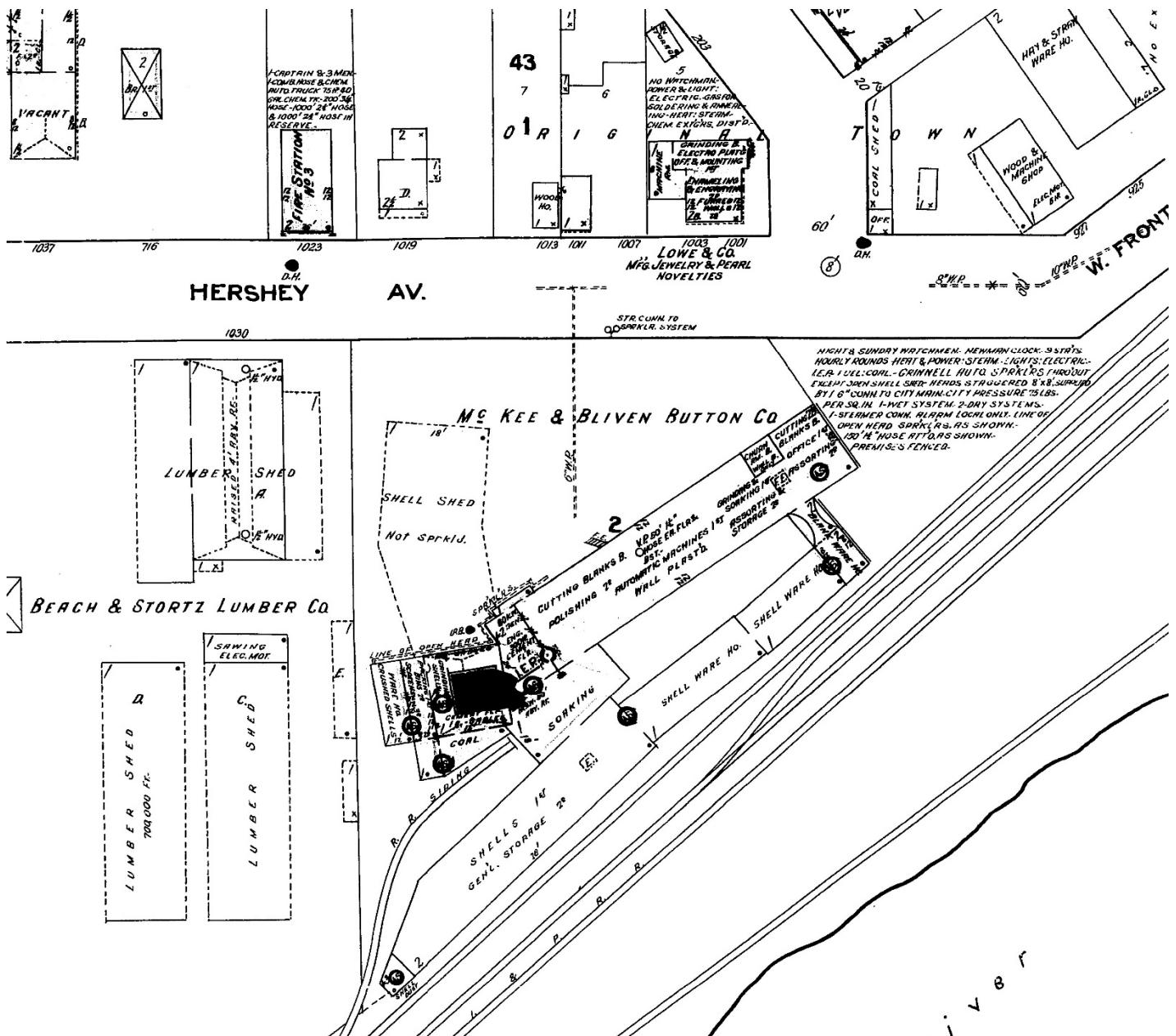


Figure 32. McKee and Bliven Button Company at 1000 Hershey Ave in 1919 (Sanborn Map Company 1919: 12).

³⁸⁷ "Power Plant is Installed," *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, July 21, 1922, 22

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Figure 33. First story cutting room (McKee collection, undated).



Figure 34. Second story grinding room (McKee collection, undated).

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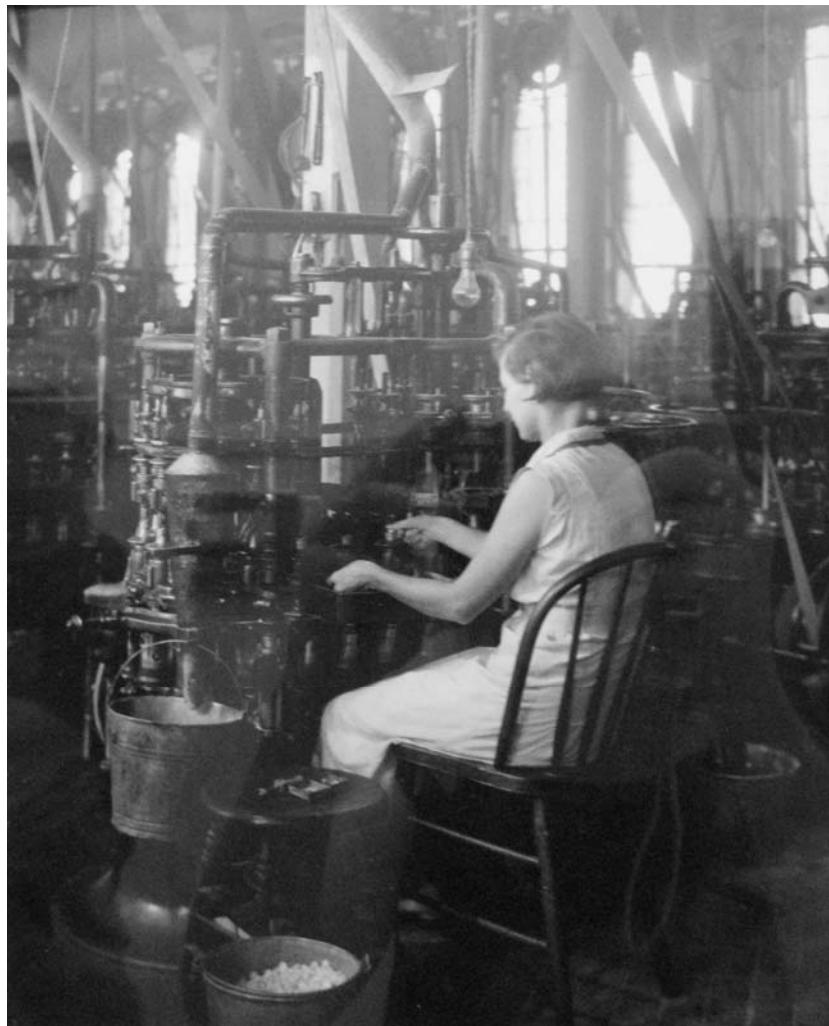


Figure 35. Second story finishing room with automatic machines (McKee collection, undated).



Figure 36. Polishing process (McKee collection, undated).

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Figure 37. Third story sorting room (McKee collection, undated).

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Figure 38. Display panel on freshwater pearl buttons, with production steps on right and variety of finished buttons on left (McKee collection).

nearby Paducah, Kentucky.³⁸⁸ Construction was delayed as the industry recovered. They worked with the city of Paducah, Kentucky, in spring 1923 to construct a \$30,000 factory at 1234 S. 3rd Street, which was expanded to a length of 180 feet during the construction process. They installed 96 machines in the factory to begin, starting operations on July 30 with 50 employees. Blanks were manufactured here and shipped to Muscatine for finishing.³⁸⁹ As part of the expansion, the company also built a towboat capable of carrying \$15,000 worth of shells in one trip, primarily utilized to supply the Paducah plant.³⁹⁰ The opening of a new branch required a shift in personnel. A.L. Miller, manager of the Columbus Junction branch, moved to Paducah, with Charles Doty of Marietta, Ohio, then appointed to position of manager in Columbus Junction. His move to Columbus Junction and the opening of the Paducah branch also coincided with the closure of the branch in Marietta, Ohio. The Paducah branch was anticipated to be enlarged to 250 machines as it grew.³⁹¹ The Moline branch moved to 401 7th St in April 1924, continuing to be utilized for sorting, packing, and shipping buttons. The branch was managed by Edward H. Barry (who married James McKee's daughter Nellie), and it averaged 20 employees, mostly women.³⁹²

³⁸⁸ "Button Factory to Open Monday, Brookport, ILL.," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, November 18, 1921, 1

³⁸⁹ "Year to Witness," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, March 24, 1923, 8; "Volume of Trade for Year's First Half Shows Gain," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, June 30, 1923, 1; "Button Plant Begins Working," *News-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, July 31, 1923, 10

³⁹⁰ "Business Pulses Vigorous," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, March 31, 1923, 1

³⁹¹ "Paducah Factory Built By M'Kee," *Muscatine Journal*, June 6, 1923, 7; "Muscatine Factory Expands," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, June 10, 1923, 39; Marietta, Ohio city directories, 1922, 1924

³⁹² "Your Chamber of Commerce," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, April 18, 1924, 2

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The changing market conditions for freshwater pearl buttons once again favored the expansion of larger companies and the closure of small companies. As head of one of the largest freshwater pearl button companies in the United States, James McKee looked to position McKee and Bliven Button Company for the future. He had bought out the Bliven estate interests after the death of William E. Bliven in 1915, but the name of the company had remained the same. In June 1926, articles of incorporation were filed for the McKee Button Company, successor to the McKee & Bliven company. The board of directors included the McKee family members – James S. McKee, Albert S. McKee, and J. Harold McKee. Similar to the previous company and other local button companies, the company was structured so that no stock would be sold to a non-stockholder until first offered to the board of directors and each current stockholder. With this arrangement, the company would stay within the McKee family for the next century. The McKee Button Company became official on July 1, 1926 under its new incorporation.³⁹³

James Shakespeare McKee would remain as the head and president of the incorporated McKee Button Company for less than a year, as he died on January 22, 1927 at age 61. At the time of his death, he was noted as “the largest individual button manufacturer in the world.” His death was announced with a banner headline across the front page, a rarity for obituaries and indication of his prominence. His obituary was printed in the *Muscatine Journal* and reprinted in several other newspapers throughout Iowa and the Midwest. James S. McKee had continued to be active in the button company until October 1926 when his health began to deteriorate. He was survived by three sons and two daughters: Albert S., J. Harold, Theodore, Mrs. Edward H. (Nellie) Barry, and Ruth McKee. He was active in the First Congregationalist Church, Knights Templar – 32nd degree, Iowa Lodge No. 2, Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Y.M.C.A, and Y.W.C.A. He was also on the board of directors of the Muscatine State Bank and Hotel Muscatine. McKee led the movement to convert the old armory building for community purposes, and he was president of the Muscatine Armory company at the time of his death.³⁹⁴ The main factory in Muscatine and various branch factories were closed for his funeral. Pearl button manufacturers who traveled to Muscatine for his funeral represent the most prominent men within the button industry operating other large companies, showing the respect for James S. McKee throughout the button industry.³⁹⁵

McKee Button Company then continued with son J. Harold McKee elected as president of the company. The board of directors included J. Harold McKee, Albert S. McKee, and Nellie (McKee) Barry, per the 1927 city directory. They appear to have analyzed the company operations in spring 1927, particularly the branch locations (Figure 27). The Moline branch was continued, noted with around 40 workers in 1927. Edward H. Barry had been manager until James’ health worsened, and he returned to Muscatine, with Ray Carter appointed as the new manager.³⁹⁶ The Columbus Junction branch was their oldest location outside of Muscatine, operating in 1926 with over 30 men employed in blank cutting. However, shells had to be shipped to this location for cutting, and other factories such as Keithsburg and Paducah were better located for this purpose. Thus, the branch in Columbus Junction was closed in spring 1927. The building, constructed in 1909 by the Columbus Junction Improvement Company, was then leased to the Iowa Pearl Button company,

³⁹³ “McKee & Bliven Becomes McKee Button Company,” *Muscatine Journal*, June 26, 1926, 7; “McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World’s Largest Button Factory Here,” *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6

³⁹⁴ “James M’Kee is Dead,” *Muscatine Journal*, January 22, 1927, 1, 10; “James S. M’Kee, Head of Button Firm, Is Dead,” *Daily Times*, Davenport, IA, January 22, 1927, 1; “Moline Honors Button Maker,” *Moline Daily Dispatch*, Moline, IL, January 24, 1927, 7

³⁹⁵ “Vittum Speaker at M’Kee Rites,” *Muscatine Journal*, January 25, 1927, 6; These men and companies include: Leon LeMaire, Alexander Moir, and James Moir of the Mississippi Pearl Button Company in Burlington, IA; J.E. Krause of the Davenport Pearl Button Co of Davenport, IA; E.M. Denniston and E.G. Girard of the Harvey Chalmers and Sons of Amsterdam, NY; D.W. MacWillie of Wisconsin Pearl Button Company of La Crosse, WI; E.A. Hammer and Carl Jungbluth of the American Pearl Button Co of Washington, IA; Mr. Nord of the Nord-Buffum Pearl Button Company of Louisiana, MO; and W.P. Fickett, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers of New York City, NY.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁶ “James S. M’Kee of Muscatine, Button Plant Head, Dies,” *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, January 14, 1927, 3

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the newest manufacturer in Muscatine who remodeled the building and installed new equipment.³⁹⁷ This reuse of closed button factories for other larger button companies is echoed in several other branch locations in other cities in Iowa and Illinois as well. Harold McKee and Albert S. McKee also remained active in the National Association of Button Manufacturers in this period, which continued to support of the propagation of mussels and the Fairport biological station.³⁹⁸

While other pearl button companies throughout the country ceased operations, McKee Button Company at 1000 Hershey Avenue was among the eight button manufacturers still operating in Muscatine per the 1927 city directory. The other companies included the Automatic Button Company (301 Mulberry, demolished), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601-605 E. 2nd St, demolished for HON), Iowa Pearl Button Company (315 W. Front, extant, also 407 W. Front), Leo H. Hirsch & Company (801-827 E. 4th St, demolished), Pennant Pearl Button Company (600 E. 3rd St, demolished/remodeled for HON), U.S. Button Company (701 E. 3rd St, extant), and Weber & Sons Button Company (1008-1014 E. 6th St, extant). The McKee Button Company complex continued to stand out among these companies as the largest factory for button production in Muscatine, and it remains as the most prominent factory of the four extant buildings associated with button factories in Muscatine with integrity from this period.

The McKee Button Company was highlighted in an article on the pearl button industry in the *Journal of Business* at the University of Iowa in June 1928. The industry and company history were reviewed in this article, with the note that the present main factory of the company was built in 1907 in Muscatine. The capacity of the company was more than 80,000 gross buttons per week, and the buttons were sold across the country and around the world, particularly to the textile mills for the garment industry. The shells were obtained from the Wabash, Ohio, Tennessee, White, St. Francis, Mississippi and other rivers in Midwest. The firm operated eight branch locations throughout the Midwest, most of which supplied blanks for the main plant in Muscatine. The shells were sent to a cutting factory, with blanks produced by a cutting machine with a tubular steel saw and then a grinding machine to get the correct thickness. The blanks were then sent to the automatic finishing department, where they were fed into the automatic machine by a women operator. The machine created the pattern for the center of the button and drilled the correct number of holes. The button was then polished and sorted by quality. Buttons were bleached and colored as needed for orders from garment manufacturers.³⁹⁹

The pearl button industry was also profiled in the year end edition of the *Muscatine Journal* on December 31, 1928, with McKee Button Company noted as one of the most prominent companies. Muscatine was noted to produce more than half of all the freshwater pearl buttons in the United States. The McKee Button Company was noted to have "enjoyed a growth which made its reputation worldwide and now is one of the largest manufacturers of pearl buttons in the world." The company had been continued by the sons of James S. McKee after his death, and the company maintained "an extensive organization for the distribution of buttons, maintaining several offices in large business centers."⁴⁰⁰ The extent of the main factory and offices in Muscatine is depicted on the 1928 Sanborn fire insurance map (Figure 39). The footprint appears to be the same as the 1919 map, with the notations on the building simplified for this new map. The main section of the building is simply labeled as the factory, with the engine room at the west end and then the shell crusher to the west and polishing room to the south. Large storage sheds continue to extend along the railroad tracks, with a garage ("A" = auto) noted at the east end. The factory was noted as having steam heat, electric lights, and an automatic sprinkler system. At the end of the 1920s, the number of freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine continued to outnumber the total of the remaining freshwater pearl button companies

³⁹⁷ "Columbus Junction," *Washington Evening Journal*, July 12, 1926, 4; "Columbus Junction Button Factory to Be Remodeled Soon," *Quad-City Times*, April 24, 1927, 6; "Muscatine Firm Buys Junction Button Plant," *Fairfield Daily Ledger*, April 30, 1927, 6; "Columbus Junction Factory Opens," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, May 19, 1927, 11

³⁹⁸ "Local Men Go to Button Meeting," *Muscatine Journal*, April 6, 1927, 11

³⁹⁹ "University Magazine Reviews Button Industry," *Muscatine Journal*, June 2, 1928, 5

⁴⁰⁰ "One of World's Largest," *Muscatine Journal*, December 31, 1928, s2, p8 (18)

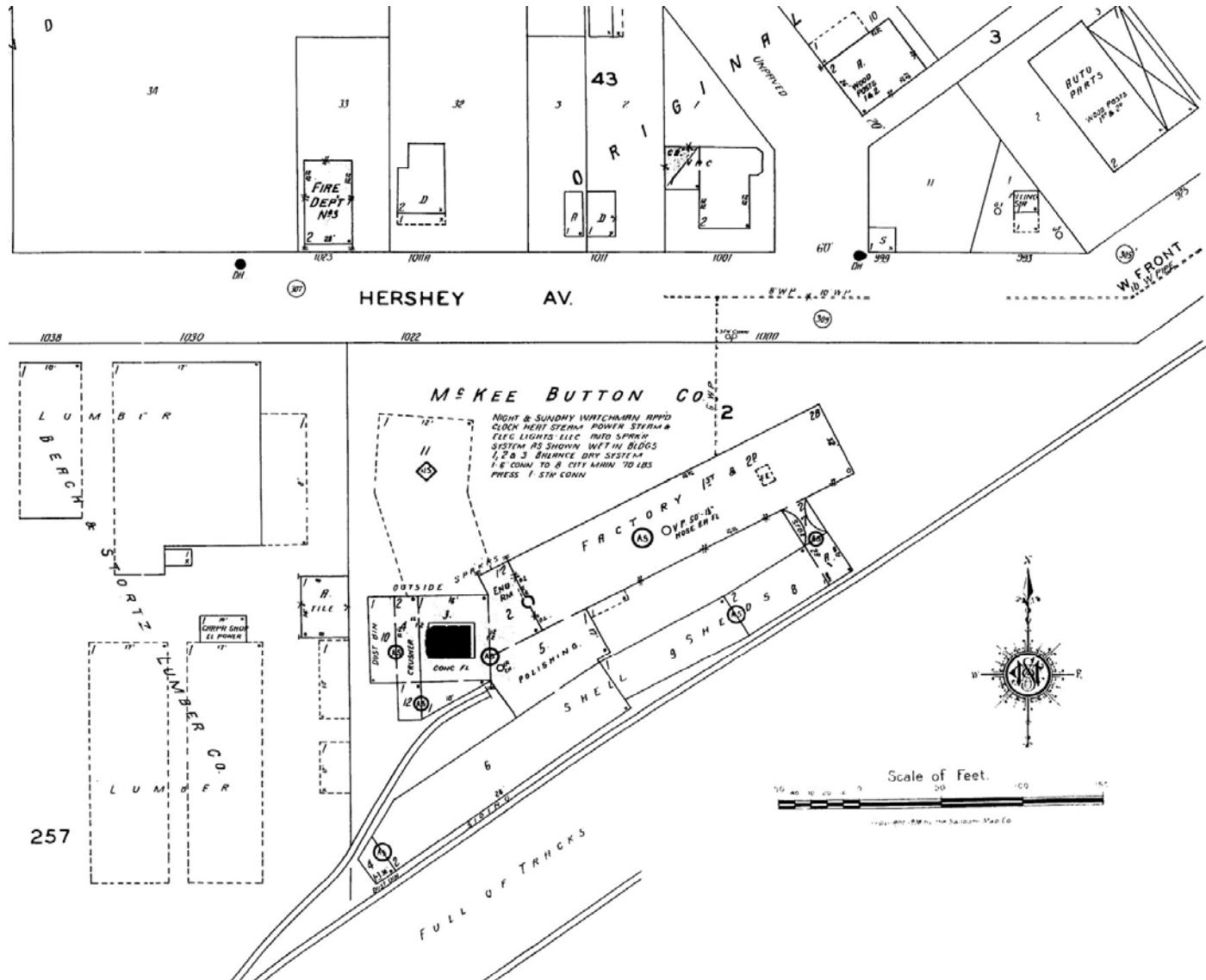
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that operated in any other town or state. Among the leading pearl button companies of the United States in 1929, Muscatine had seven companies including McKee Button Company, with four other companies in Iowa (Burlington, Davenport, Lansing, and Washington), one company in Wisconsin (LaCrosse), and one company in New York (Amsterdam).⁴⁰¹ Several of these other companies would then close over the next decade, further reinforcing Muscatine as the center of freshwater pearl button production in the United States.



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The Freshwater Pearl Button Industry in the United States through the Depression and World War II, 1930-1945

McKee Button Company remained prominent among the freshwater pearl button manufacturers of the United States through the 1930s and into the 1940s. As economic conditions worsened in the country and multiple button companies closed, freshwater pearl buttons were produced by a decreasing number of companies, which then could expand their production to meet demand for this leading type of button for the United States. Muscatine remained the center of the production of freshwater pearl buttons through this period, and McKee Button Company remained as one of the largest manufacturers of pearl buttons in the country. Their 1907 factory building in Muscatine remained recognized as the largest individual pearl button factory in the world, and McKee Button Company continued to operate several branches in other cities and states. The declining number of freshwater pearl button manufacturers banded together to market pearl buttons amid increasing competition from new types of plastic buttons. The luster and quality of pearl buttons were key points in their marketing campaigns, with pearl buttons as a sign of quality that could not be matched by the cheaper plastic buttons. McKee Button Company expanded through opening several other branch cutting plants in the late 1930s as other companies ceased operations. Thus, they retained a national presence and produced an increasing percent of the overall pearl buttons in the country. McKee Button Company likewise continued to expand during World War II, becoming even more dominant within the button industry. Expansion included diversification into other button types, through freshwater pearl buttons remained the focus of their production. This positioning through the early 1940s permitted McKee Button Company to both thrive and further expand in the years following World War II in a button industry no longer dominated by pearl buttons.

The increased tariffs in the early 1930s initially assisted the freshwater pearl button industry, and McKee Button Company strategically expanded their operations. Arkansas was the leading mussel producer for the button industry in the 1930s, supplying up to one-third of the needed shells in a given year with the peak in 1936. The Ohio River, Tennessee River, and the Wabash River in Indiana also continued to provide a large number of shells for the industry.⁴⁰² The McKee Button Company looked for two locations for branch factories that would be well positioned to receive shells from these locations. The branch factory in Paducah was performing well, and Board of Trade worked with McKee Button Company to convince them to expand their operations in town. In July 1930, the Paducah Button Company was organized as a subsidiary of the McKee Button Company, who continued to also operate their original 1923 branch in town as well. The new company opened on September 9 with 50 machines in the building formerly occupied by Shelton Machinery Company. They cut blanks from mussel shells shipped here from the Ohio and Tennessee rivers.⁴⁰³ This factory appears to then have been dubbed as Paducah No. 2 in McKee company records. Between their two locations in Paducah, McKee Button Company employed 175 people there by February 1931, and they used five to six tons of shells per week. Blanks cut in Paducah were then sent to Muscatine to be finished into buttons. Buttons were then sold to wholesale dealers and clothing manufacturers.⁴⁰⁴ Arnold L. Miller continued as manager of the Paducah branch of McKee Button Company in this period.⁴⁰⁵ The branch cutting plant across the river at Brookport, IL, resumed full operations by February 1931 as well, with 40 men working there on a six day, 10 hour per day, schedule. That factory opening brought the total number of workers for the McKee Button Company in the three regional plants to 215 people.⁴⁰⁶

McKee Button Company with its main plant in Muscatine and multiple branch locations continued to stand out among the pearl button manufacturers of the period. By 1932, 10 of the remaining 16 freshwater pearl button companies were located in Iowa, with the majority in Muscatine. Overall, nearly 70% of the 15.1 million gross

⁴⁰² Claassen 1994: 36

⁴⁰³ "New Button Factory to Open Here," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, July 27, 1930, 1

⁴⁰⁴ "Paducah Button Factory," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, February 2, 1931, 9

⁴⁰⁵ "Arrives by Plane to Visit Friends," *Muscatine Journal*, July 27, 1931, 5

⁴⁰⁶ "3 Button Plants Now in Operation on Capacity Basis," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, February 23, 1931, 1

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freshwater pearl buttons were produced in Iowa, primarily in Muscatine.⁴⁰⁷ A large number of these buttons were produced by McKee Button Company. As with other button companies, the branch locations for McKee Button Company were closed and reopened with the need to produce blanks for finishing into buttons. For example, the branch plant in Paducah was shut down in spring 1932 and then reopened in December 1932 with all former employees asked to report. The factory normally employed 100 workers to cut blanks, and it was noted to be the largest of its kind in the region.⁴⁰⁸ It was the only button company operating in Paducah by 1934, with the Paducah Button Company closed. Their older branch further north in Keithsburg, IL, was improved in June 1933 by installation of new floors, partitions, windows, and heating and water system. It was then also enlarged by moving 25 machines from Paducah.⁴⁰⁹ The plant in Moline, IL, continued to operate close to normal capacity in July 1933, under the supervision of Mrs. Cora DeVoss. The branch operations were confined to sorting buttons made at the main factory in Muscatine and shipping them to garment manufacturers.⁴¹⁰ The plant in Keithsburg then closed in fall 1933 with less button production, reopening again in January with 70 men.⁴¹¹ While the branch locations operated as needed to produce blanks, the main factory in Muscatine continued to produce buttons throughout this period.

While the slowdown in the button industry appears to have affected primarily the branch plants for McKee Button Company, the dull market more strongly affected other button manufacturers in Muscatine. In August 1933, the large Hawkeye Button Company of Muscatine shut down their main cutting plant and branch shops, with a reduced force in the finishing department to finish out current orders before closing as well. The Automatic Button Company also suspended its operations. D.A. Willis then announced that the Pennant Button Company would close its cutting plant. Operations continued at McKee Button Company, Iowa Pearl Button Co, and Weber and Sons. The U.S. Button Company was ahead of demand on its production, but still operating as well. The Leo H. Hirsch branch in Muscatine continued to cut blanks to send to New York for finishing.⁴¹² Elsewhere, the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company of La Crosse, Wisconsin closed its doors permanently in 1933, with their stock and equipment then sold to the Hawkeye Pearl Button Company of Muscatine.⁴¹³

Both J. Harold McKee and Albert S. McKee of the McKee Button Company were industry leaders through the discussions in 1933 and 1934 related to standardization of the button industry through codes on wages and production promoted by the National Recovery Administration (NRA). They were active in the National Association of Button Manufacturers, which submitted the proposed code for the freshwater button industry including a 44 hour work week and minimum wage of 30 cents per hour (or about \$13 per week).⁴¹⁴ The freshwater pearl button industry was the largest branch of the button industry in the United States by production, composed of 16 plants that produced 37.8% of gross button production and 30.6% of gross value of buttons. Additionally, they represented over half of the 8,105 button workers in the 1931 manufacturing census, with more than one-quarter of these workers located in Muscatine. J. Harold McKee of Muscatine, J.C. Bishop of Muscatine, and W.P. Fickett of New York, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, spoke on behalf of the pearl button industry and their proposed code in October 1933, answering questions on current wages and other working conditions. J. Harold McKee noted that skilled operators currently earned 50 to 60 cents per hour. Women in sorting earned up to \$18 to \$20 per week, while men working in cutting earned up to \$19 to \$22 per week. Overall, 76% of the cost of making a pearl

⁴⁰⁷ Johnson, F.F. *Aquatic Shell Industries*. Bureau of Fisheries, U.S. Department of Commerce, Fishery Circular No. 15, April 1934, 7-8

⁴⁰⁸ "Button Plant to Re-Open Monday," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, December 11, 1932, 1

⁴⁰⁹ "Keithsburg Plant of McKee Button Company Improved," *Muscatine Journal*, June 17, 1933, 5; "Keithsburg Factory to Start Operations Soon," *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, July 7, 1933, 18

⁴¹⁰ "Moline Button Plant Employing 33 Girls," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, July 24, 1933, 2

⁴¹¹ "Button Factory is Re-opened at Keithsburg, ILL," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, January 24, 1934, 6

⁴¹² "Third Button Plant Here Shuts Down," *Muscatine Journal*, August 26, 1933, 1; "Button Cutting Plants Curtail Their Activity," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, August 22, 1933, 18

⁴¹³ Claassen 1994: 100

⁴¹⁴ "Button Code Meeting Will Be Held Soon," *Muscatine Journal*, August 26, 1933, 1

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button was labor, when including the payment for shells as labor.⁴¹⁵ With the button industry unable to agree upon a basic code among the nine branches of the industry, the Fresh Water Pearl Button Manufacturing Industry code went into effect on March 12, 1934. The code set a minimum weekly wage of \$13 and maximum hours of 40 hours per week, with no more than eight hours per day, for all the freshwater pearl button factories, including blank factories. The code authority to regulate the companies included six leading men of the industry: Albert S. McKee of McKee Button Company of Muscatine, Fred C. Vetter of Hawkeye Button Company of Muscatine, J.C. Bishop of Iowa Pearl Button Company of Muscatine, W.P. Fickett of New York City (National Association of Button Manufacturers), Edward Cooper of Hampshire Pearl Button Co (Chalmers company) of Amsterdam, NY, and Leo Hirsch of Leo H. Hirsch and Company of New York City. The code impacted about 2,500 factory workers and nearly 500 home carders in Muscatine.⁴¹⁶

The McKee Button Company continued to be known as the "largest individual freshwater pearl button factory in the United States" in December 1936. The company specialized in the manufacture and sale of freshwater pearl button products, shipping its product all over the world.⁴¹⁷ Other pearl button factories operating in Muscatine at this time included Automatic Button Company (301-15 Mulberry), Hawkeye Pearl Button Company (601 E. 2nd St), Iowa Pearl Button Company (315-319 W. Front), Pennant Pearl Button Company (600-04 E. 3rd St), U.S. Button Company (701 E. 3rd St), and Weber & Sons Button Company (1008-14 E. 6th St). Leo Hirsch & Company (821-827 E. 4th St) also continued to operate their branch in town, but it is unknown if they only cut blanks or also finished buttons in Muscatine in this period.⁴¹⁸ Freshwater pearl buttons also continued to be produced in four other factories in Iowa, located in Burlington, Davenport, Washington, and Lansing. The factory in Lansing was not as prominent as the other companies within the pearl button industry, and it would transition out of pearl button production over the next few years, with the business focusing on jobbing (selling) buttons.

New leadership with the McKee Button Company would continue to expand its operations over the next few years. The management of McKee Button Company was restructured in 1936 with the failing health and death of J. Harold McKee on June 27, 1936 at age 43. He was noted as a prominent Muscatine manufacturer and president of McKee Button Co for the past 10 years. The company was long known as "largest manufacturers of pearl buttons in the world." He was survived by his wife Helen, daughter Marjorie of Boston, mother Anna McKee, brothers Albert S. and Theodore B, and sisters Mrs. E.H. (Nellie) Barry of Dobbs Ferry, NY and Mrs. Robert (Ruth) Richards of Muscatine.⁴¹⁹ His estate transferred interest in the McKee Button Company property to brothers Albert S. McKee and Theodore B. McKee. His brothers and sister Nellie McKee Barry were also provided with one-year time to acquire his company stock at \$50 per share, keeping ownership of McKee Button Company within the McKee family.⁴²⁰ Albert S. McKee was then elected as president of McKee Button Company at age 46. The 1936 city directory then lists Albert S. McKee as president, Nellie Barry of Worcester, MA as vice president, and Gustav H. Ohlsen as secretary and treasurer of McKee Button Company at 1000 Hershey Ave.

⁴¹⁵ "Hearings Fail to Produce Agreements," *Muscatine Journal*, October 13, 1933, 1

⁴¹⁶ "Sanction Given to Button Code," *Muscatine Journal*, February 27, 1934, 1, 11; "Approval Given Code Authority," *Muscatine Journal*, March 15, 1934, 1

⁴¹⁷ "McKee Button Company is Pioneer in Its Field," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1936, 20

⁴¹⁸ Other listings that produced blanks included Wm Boldt – rear 913 Newell, Christopherson Button Company – ns Angle near Pine, Frank Cozzens – 1000 E. Front, Tandy R. Davis – 500 Jackson, Dollman Button Shop – Jefferson and Lincoln, Harry P Gabel – 203 Fillmore, Ivan Goddard – 531 Adams, Jules Gosset – 1108 Hershey, Fred Grau – 1031 Climer, Fred Guder – 1006 E. 7th, Otto Herron – ns Smith 1 w Howard, Edward Hoffman – 1220 Smalley rear, Fred Humpleby – rear 114 Sherman, Emil Lick – 306 Clinton, Earl Lipplegoes – 430 Jackson, Ross Mickey - Scott sw cor Isett, John F. Moore – 503 Adams, Resnick Button Factory – 900 Park Lane, Royster Button Company – 910 E. 7th, J. Arthur Schildberg – 608 Maple, Claus Schmarje Button Works – ss Sterneman blvd near League, Robert A. Schmitt – 500 Adams, Schwalm Cutting Plant – rear 705 E. 4th St, Albert Shepard – 414 Lee St, Wm I Symmonds – 203 Bridgman, Teichmiller Button Company – 413 Bond, Peter Umlandt – 1011 Grandview Ave (blanks), Whittaker Button Company – rear 613 E. 6th St, and Louis Yarek Button Company – 416 Liberty St.

⁴¹⁹ "Rites Arranged for James Harold McKee," *Muscatine Journal*, June 29, 1936, 1; "J.H. M'Kee Rites to be Tomorrow," *The Dispatch*, Moline, IL, June 30, 1936, 9

⁴²⁰ "Relatives Share in McKee Will," *Muscatine Journal*, August 7, 1936, 11

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In a period where other companies were closing or phasing out pearl button production, the McKee Button Company not only continued to run its main plant in Muscatine, but it also continued to operate branches in Moline, IL, Keithsburg, IL, Brookport, IL, and Paducah, KY, in June 1936 (Figure 40).⁴²¹ The branch in Moline continued to be focused on sorting and shipping, while the other branches were cutting factories to produce blanks to send to Muscatine. The branch in Paducah was planned to be expanded from 70 to 300 employees with a large 86 by 86 foot addition to the plant in October 1936. Similar to previous deals, the McKee Button Company worked with the Paducah Chamber of Commerce to raise \$4,000 of the estimated \$8,000 for the construction to retain the company in town. In addition to their current button production, McKee Button Company was also working on manufacturing 300 cutting machines in Paducah at the time, which would be utilized in Paducah and other cutting plants.⁴²² Frank Waters was then promoted from his position in Keithsburg to the factory in Paducah in the mechanical department.⁴²³

McKee Button Company also opened several new branch locations for blank cutting plants that only operated for a few years in the late 1930s. In October 1936, they were noted as having recently opened a cutting factory further up the Ohio River at Henderson, Kentucky.⁴²⁴ The former Fort Madison Button Company building at 1234 Avenue I in Fort Madison, IA, was remodeled for the McKee Button Company in February 1937, with 48 men previously employed by the former button company returned to work in the cutting department. The company had been run as a branch of the Mississippi Pearl Button Co of Burlington, IA, who had closed their operations in Fort Madison.⁴²⁵ The Fort Madison plant under McKee management cut blanks as shells were available and blanks in demand. The plant was closed in November 1937 for an indefinite period, and it reopened in September 1938 with 45 men employed to cut blanks. It would continue to run as needed over the next few years with the demand for blanks.⁴²⁶ Further south along the Mississippi River, the McKee Button Company built a new \$15,000 factory in Memphis, TN, in March 1937. The location was noted as selected by Albert S. McKee and Theodore B. McKee due to its proximity to the St. Francis and White rivers of Arkansas. The branch opened to manufacture blanks from mussel shells taken from these nearby Arkansas rivers.⁴²⁷ Paul McDaniel moved from Muscatine to Metropolis, IL, also on the Mississippi River, to serve as manager of the new branch of McKee Button Company in this period as well.⁴²⁸ Labor unrest among all of the factories in Paducah, KY, in 1937 resulted a strike of 33 women at McKee Button Co in May 1937. They reached an agreement of a 10 percent wage increase, 45 hour work week, and recognition of an employee union within a week, returning the women to work.⁴²⁹ This issue, along with the new cutting plants in other cities, may have contributed to the closure of the Paducah branch then in the following year.⁴³⁰

⁴²¹ "James Howard McKee Dies in Muscatine; Operated Plant Here," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, June 29, 1936, 1

⁴²² "Button Firm in City to Increase Employees to 300," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, October 6, 1936, 8; "Button Factory Drive is Opened by Field Teams," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, October 14, 1936, 12

⁴²³ "Keithsburg Family Will Leave for Paducah, Ky.," *Rock Island Argus*, October 14, 1936, 17

⁴²⁴ "Button Factory Drive is Opened by Field Teams," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, October 14, 1936, 12

⁴²⁵ "Button Plant in Operation," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, March 1, 1937, 5

⁴²⁶ "Button Plant is Closed Indefinitely," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, December 19, 1937, 7; "Button Plant Opens Monday," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, September 16, 1938, 5

⁴²⁷ "McKee Firm Builds New Button Factory at Memphis, Tenn.," *Muscatine Journal*, March 15, 1937, 1; "Hundreds of Industries Locate in Southland in First Months of '37," *Anniston Star*, Anniston, AL, April 14, 1937, 1

⁴²⁸ "Miss Lemon Bridge at Lovely Autumn Wedding in Church," *Muscatine Journal*, October 25, 1937, 5; "Paul McDaniel," *Paducah Sun*, Paducah, KY, June 27, 1988, 8

⁴²⁹ "1,300 on Strike," *Kingsport Times*, Kingsport, TN, May 4, 1937, 37; "Negotiations Opened on Button Factory Workers' Walk-out," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, May 12, 1937, 11; "Year End Finds Paducah Upon Threshold of Labor Peace," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, January 2, 1938, 13

⁴³⁰ McKee Button Company is no longer listed in the 1939 city directory for Paducah, KY. The company was last listed in the 1935 city directory, operating at 1310 S. 3rd St with G.W. Hopkins as manager.

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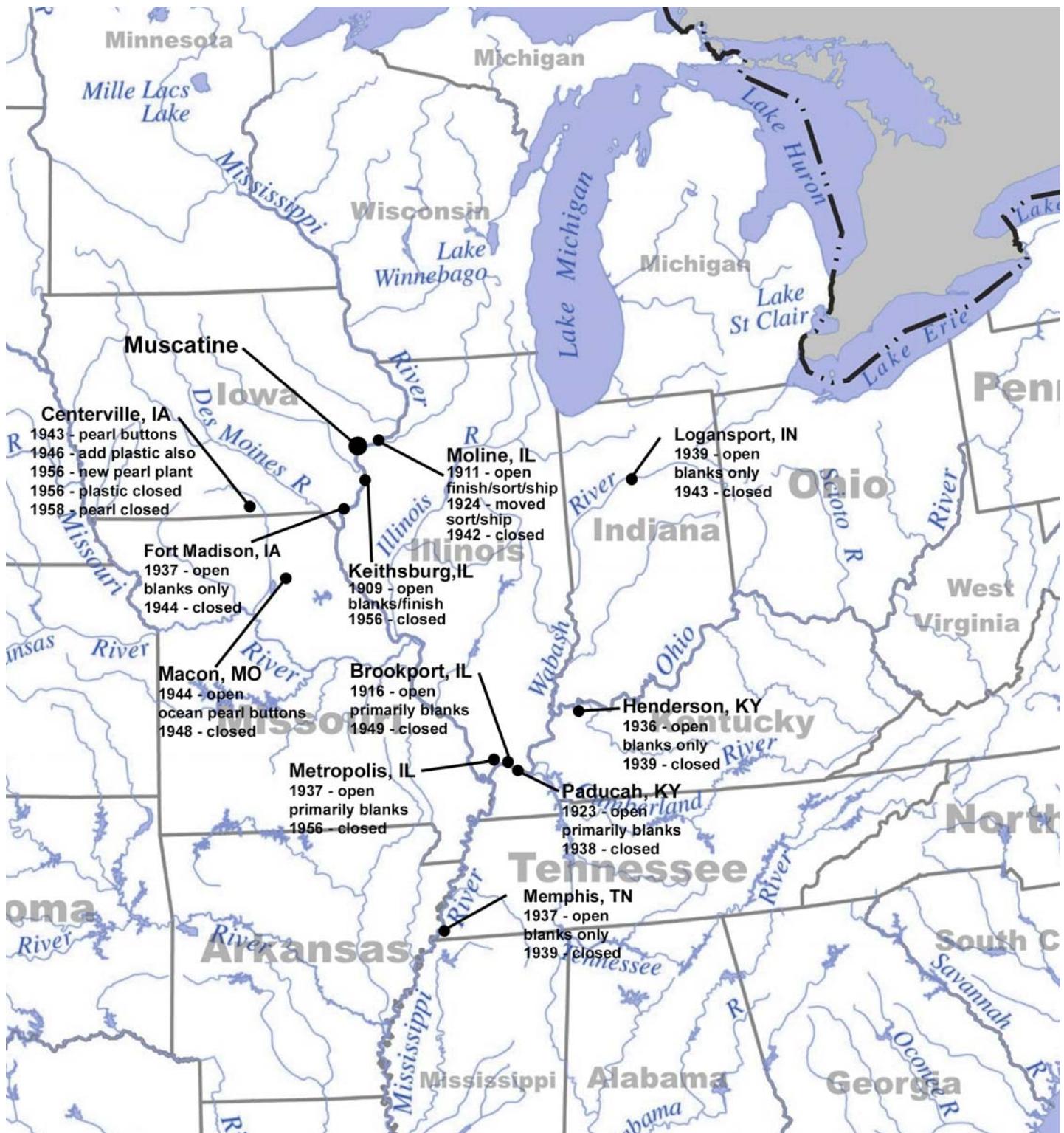


Figure 40. Branch locations for McKee Button Company in the 1930s-40s (McCarley 2019).

some additional branch locations may have operated briefly during the 1930s that have not been currently identified in research or on this map
base map obtained from <http://ontheworldmap.com/usa/usa-rivers-and-lakes-map.html>, with branch information added by McCarley

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Figure 41. Unidentified branch location for McKee Button Company (undated) (McKee collection).

McKee Button Company records provide insight into their operations and structure of the company, reinforcing the broad national scope of the company and significance within the button industry. For example, in 1937, blanks for the McKee Button Company were manufactured at the main factory in Muscatine (with \$152,655 in cost of manufacturing blanks) and branch factories that included Keithsburg (\$31,524), Keithsburg No. 2 (\$27,636), Metropolis (\$15,829), Metropolis No. 2 (\$21,252), Brookport (\$21,612), Paducah (\$402), Paducah No. 2 (\$32,064), Henderson (\$32,940), Memphis (\$34,241), Fort Madison (\$57,309), Block (\$31,388), and Leavenworth (\$1,268). The inventory retained at the end of the year at the branches for continued production in 1938 included shell in Fort Madison, Block, Brookport, Keithsburg, Metropolis, Paducah, Henderson, and Memphis. Finished buttons composed the year-end inventory at Moline (valued at \$48,982) and New York City (\$7,613). Muscatine was clearly the center of operations with the largest inventory of shell (\$32,382), blanks (\$70,775), and finished buttons (\$64,634) at the end of 1937.⁴³¹ All blanks produced at the branch factories were shipped to Muscatine for finishing, and they also continued their cutting department in Muscatine as well. The stock of finished buttons was split between Muscatine and Moline being sorted and waiting for shipment, with an inventory of pearl buttons maintained at their New York City sales office as well for immediate fulfillment of orders.

The McKee family continued to run the McKee Button Company in the late 1930s, with deaths impacting the next generation of family that would be associated with the company. Theodore Bliven McKee, the youngest son of James S. and Anna McKee, accidentally shot himself in his garage, and he died two days later on June 24,

⁴³¹ Report of the McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa, Robert J. Allison, CPA, Davenport, IA, December 31, 1937. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

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1937 due to other health conditions that prevented his recovery. He was survived by his wife Frances C. and two young sons, James S. McKee II and Theodore F. McKee.⁴³² In July 1938, Anna (Bliven) McKee, widow of James S. McKee, died in Muscatine at age 72. She had lived for a period in the East after the death of James in 1927, returning to Muscatine in 1936. She was survived by one son, Albert S. McKee, who was then president of McKee Button Company, and two daughters, Mrs. Robert L. (Ruth) Richards of Muscatine and Mrs. Edward H. (Nellie) Barry of Worcester, MA. Additionally, she had five grandchildren listed in her obituary: Harold's daughter Marjorie McKee of Worcester, MA, Nellie's sons Edward and James Barry of Worcester, MA, and Theodore's sons James S. (age 13) and Theodore F. McKee (age 11) of Muscatine.⁴³³ The latter two grandsons would later carry McKee Button Company through the middle of the 20th century. Ted F. McKee later recalled starting to help out at the factory in the late 1930s and early 1940s by making wooden boxes to ship buttons.⁴³⁴ The 1938 city directory continues to list McKee Button Company, with Albert S. McKee as president and Gustav H. Ohlsen as secretary and treasurer. Lloyd A. Foster worked as an accountant for McKee Button Company in the late 1930s, and he would be promoted to the position of secretary-treasurer by 1941.⁴³⁵

By the late 1930s, the transition to plastic buttons in the broader button industry was fully underway, with pearl button manufacturers committing to either continuing their lines or diversifying by adding plastic buttons. In 1937, there were 17.1 million gross of freshwater pearl buttons produced in the United States, valued at over \$4.7 million.⁴³⁶ McKee Button Company was one of eight companies to form Pearl Button Industries, Inc. in 1938 to promote the utilization and sale of pearl buttons, which included six other local Muscatine companies (Automatic Pearl Button Company, Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, Iowa Pearl Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, U.S. Button Company, and Weber & Sons Button Company) and one Washington, Iowa company (American Pearl Button Company). Plans were underway by December 1938 for a nationwide marketing campaign on the benefits of pearl buttons. These companies had recently passed laundering tests, and their buttons were awarded the seal of approval by the American Institute of Laundering.⁴³⁷

The McKee Button Company, still known as the largest freshwater pearl button factory in the United States in December 1938, continued to only manufacture freshwater pearl buttons. According to a local profile of the button companies in Muscatine, the company had its main office and plant in Muscatine, with a number of branch factories, warehouses, and sales offices throughout the country. Buttons were made in a wide variety of patterns and sizes for underwear, shirts, pajamas, and other wash garment factories, and their products were sold throughout the world. Albert S. McKee, son of James S. McKee, remained at the head of the company.⁴³⁸ Profiles of the other major button companies in Muscatine in December 1938 show that the transition from pearl buttons to composite buttons was underway even in Muscatine. The Automatic Button Company continued to produce a large number of pearl buttons, as well as having added composition buttons made from a catalin material. They operated branch offices in New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Utica, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, Kansas City, Dallas, and San Francisco.⁴³⁹ The Hawkeye Pearl Button Company likewise had diversified to include some catalin composition buttons as well. They continued to operate branch cutting plants in Keokuk, IA and Canton, MO, and they had branch offices in New York and Los Angeles.⁴⁴⁰ Of these three major pearl button companies in the late 1930s, McKee Button Company stands

⁴³² "M'Kee is Shot at Muscatine," *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, June 23, 1937, 2; "Theodore McKee Dies at Hospital; Services Saturday," *Muscatine Journal*, June 24, 1937, 1

⁴³³ "Heart Attack Claims Life of Mrs. McKee, 72," *Muscatine Journal*, July 28, 1938, 1; "Mrs. J.S. M'Kee of Muscatine Dies Suddenly, Quad-City Times, Davenport, IA, July 28, 1938, 2

⁴³⁴ "McKee is more than a name," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, s2, p3 (15)

⁴³⁵ "Houghton, Foster Vows to be Taken," *Muscatine Journal*, August 20, 1938, 5

⁴³⁶ Claassen 1994: 71

⁴³⁷ "Manufacturers Join in Promotional Drive," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938, 2; Claassen 1994: 72

⁴³⁸ "McKee Button Factory is Largest in Nation," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938, 4

⁴³⁹ "Automatic Button Company, One of Pioneers in Field, is Observing its 40th Anniversary this Year," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938

⁴⁴⁰ Claassen 1994: 91

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out for its significant pearl button production, as well as the only one of these companies associated with an extant building.



Figure 42. McKee Button Company in December 1938 (*Journal*, December 30, 1938, 55).

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Pictured Above Is Our Display of Buttons at the National Wash Goods Apparel Show at the Palmer House, Chicago, July, 1938.

*Our Firm and Its Employees Wish You
A Happy New Year*

Member of
Pearl Button
Industries,
Incorporated.

McKEE BUTTON COMPANY

1000 Hershey Avenue
Muscatine, Iowa

McKee Pearl
Buttons Approved
by American
Institute of
Laundering.

The City of Muscatine—

has the right to be proud of its pearl button industry—in this respect it stands alone as the largest producer of Pearl Buttons in the world. Many families look to this business for their livelihood.

Domestic pearl is the ideal button, both from the standpoint of utility and decorative value, for wash apparel.

Garments trimmed with pearl buttons are an assurance of quality and indicative of good workmanship and material throughout the garment.

The McKee Button Company is proud of the fact that its merchandising policies, and a standard quality product have stood the test of over 45 years with the leading manufacturers of cotton garments throughout America.

Figure 43. McKee Button Company advertisement in December 1938 (*Journal*, December 30, 1938, 17).

The two oldest branch locations for McKee Button Company continued to operate in Keithsburg, IL, and Moline, IL, as key components of the company's overall operations. The Moline branch remained focused on the end of the processing – sorting and shipping – while the Keithsburg branch provided support with the production of blanks. George E. Fleming remained as foreman of the Keithsburg plant in 1939, having worked for the company for 35 years. While shells were once taken from the Mississippi River at Keithsburg, shells were now shipped to Keithsburg from Wisconsin and Indiana rivers. The women's department had 25 women that operated automatic cutting machines that were designed to allow them to sit, and they worked a 40-hour work week. The men's department had 40 men that operated a standard type of cutting machine that required them to stand, and they worked a 44-hour work week. Large blanks were cut from shells first, and then the shells were passed along to workers to cut small blanks. While the Keithsburg branch once had 20 automatic finishing machines as well, the blanks produced were then taken by truck to Muscatine for finishing in the main plant there. The shells were also shipped to Muscatine and crushed for chicken grit or sold for road purposes.⁴⁴¹ The plant was closed for several weeks in August 1939 to install a new diesel engine so that the plant had its own power, reopening with 71 employees.⁴⁴² In July 1940, the men's department was shut down to install 45 new machines of the same type as used in the women's department.⁴⁴³ While the Keithsburg branch experienced periods of shut downs, it operated more consistently as the primary and oldest remaining of the McKee branches outside of Muscatine.

⁴⁴¹ "Button Cutting Industry in Keithsburg Important Business Enterprise for Year," *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, March 27, 1939, 18

⁴⁴² "Button Factory Starts Working at Keithsburg," *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, September 6, 1939, 12

⁴⁴³ "Men's Department is in Operation at Keithsburg Factory," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, July 27, 1940, 6

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Other branches for McKee Button Company operated as needed to meet demand for blanks for orders for buttons. The branch in southern Illinois on the Ohio River at Brookport, the second oldest operating cutting branch for McKee, closed in 1938 and opened again for a period of time in February 1939 with 53 men working.⁴⁴⁴ The 57 workers were then unemployed when the branch was then shut down in March 1940 and reopened with new orders in April. The more recent branch about five miles to the west at Metropolis also shut down in March, and it remained closed until October when it reopened with 85 workers. Women composed 120 of the workers at the two neighboring plants combined.⁴⁴⁵ In an effort to get a branch closer to the shells in Indiana, the closed Iroquois Pearl Button Factory on Tacoma Ave in Logansport, Indiana, along the Wabash River, was purchased by Albert S. McKee of McKee Button Co of Muscatine, Iowa, in March 1939. The plant was opened with its former manager M.F. Emerson in charge after it had old equipment relocated and new machinery installed. The factory had previously been organized and operated as a branch for the Harvey Chalmers & Son company of Amsterdam, NY. The branch was then closed in summer and operations resumed in August when more shells were on hand to cut blanks. McKee Button Company operated the branch in Logansport until 1943.⁴⁴⁶ The branch in Fort Madison continued to operate on a "as needed" basis through 1939 and 1940 as well, running from October 1938 to April 1939 with 60 men employed under manager H.D. Sharp, and then closing for two months before reopening in June 1939 with 40 men to start.⁴⁴⁷ The company closed again for most of August and then reopened in September with a sufficient quantity of shells received to work for some time.⁴⁴⁸ Clifford Erickson of Muscatine had been sent to reopen the plant in July 1939, but he was then transferred in October to the cutting plant at Logansport, Indiana, with Harry Sharp returning as manager.⁴⁴⁹ With a lack of shells, they then shut down again on November 11, resuming operations on January 22, 1940 when sufficient carloads of shells had been received to operate into the summer. Blanks produced here were sent to the main factory in Muscatine for finishing.⁴⁵⁰ Further south on the Mississippi, McKee Button Company was listed at 2165 Latham in Memphis with Clifford W. Gipson as manager in the 1938 and 1939 city directories, with that branch then closed by 1940.⁴⁵¹

While the overall number of buttons produced in the United States remained approximately 72 million from 1937 to 1939, the number of freshwater pearl buttons declined from 17.1 million to 11.2 million over those years. At the same time, the number of casein (plastic) buttons rose from 12.3 million to 13.8 million and the number of synthetic resin buttons rose from 9.4 million to 15.4 million. Thus, freshwater pearl buttons had been outpaced for the first time since 1905 as the leading type of button manufactured in the United States. The Centennial Edition of the *Muscatine Journal* in May 1940 noted that economic conditions and cheaper composition products had reduced the demand for freshwater pearl buttons. The article went on to note that steps were being taken to revitalize the industry, positively looking to the future.⁴⁵² The McKee Button Company was again noted in May 1940 as the "largest manufacturers of fresh water pearl buttons in the world," as well as the oldest pearl button company in Muscatine with its history dating to 1895. They operated their main office and factory in Muscatine, with several branch locations and sales offices in New York and St. Louis.⁴⁵³ Their advertisement encouraged consumers to do their part in ensuring the future of the pearl button industry by telling merchants "I want pearl buttons on my garments!" (Figure 44).

⁴⁴⁴ "McKee Button Plant at Brookport Will Reopen Next Monday," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, February 3, 1939, 12

⁴⁴⁵ "Button Factories in Massac County Close," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, March 14, 1940, 13; "Metropolis News," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, October 9, 1940, 11

⁴⁴⁶ "Install New Machinery at Factory," *Logansport Pharos-Tribune*, Logansport, IN, March 1, 1939, 2; "Button Factory Reopens Monday," *Logansport Press*, Logansport, IN, August 10, 1939, 1; "Ten Years Ago," *Logansport Pharos-Tribune*, Logansport, IN, October 7, 1954, 4; Annual reports, McKee collection.

⁴⁴⁷ "McKee Button Plant Closed," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, April 20, 1939, 11; "Operations at Button Plant Started Today," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, July 10, 1939, 1

⁴⁴⁸ "Button Plant Opens Sept. 5," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, August 26, 1939, 6

⁴⁴⁹ "Sharp Manager Button Plant," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, October 20, 1939, 1

⁴⁵⁰ "Button Plant to Resume January 23," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, January 15, 1940, 1

⁴⁵¹ Memphis, TN city directories, 1937-1940.

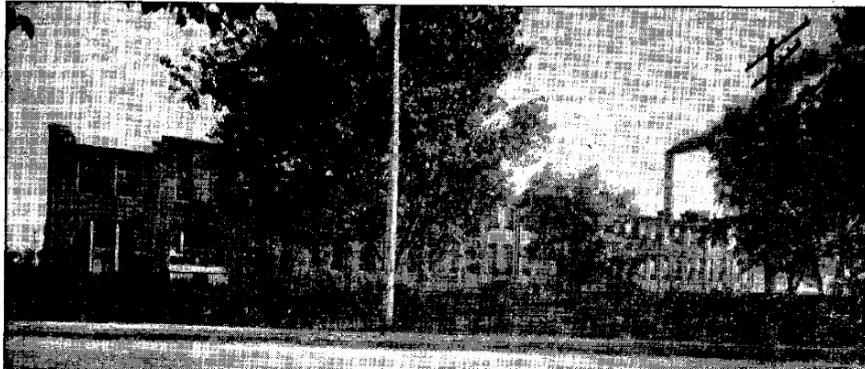
⁴⁵² "Button Industry Centers in Muscatine," Centennial Edition, *Muscatine Journal*, May 31, 1940, sec , p 20 (179)

⁴⁵³ "McKee Button Company," *Muscatine Journal*, Centennial Edition, May 31, 1940, sec 6, p 8 (139)

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CENTENNIAL EDITION—MUSCATINE JOURNAL, MAY 31, 1940



LOOKING FORWARD

It is our hope that this company may be privileged to continue in generous measure doing its bit to make Muscatine a busy, prosperous city in the years ahead.

You who read this are our neighbors . . . not so much in the mere circumstance of living in the same place, as in the fact that what hurts you,—hurts us, and what helps us also helps you. . . . Looking forward we hope that by our living and working together we all may have a bright future.

You can, if you wish, do your part by telling your merchant:—

“I Want Pearl Buttons on My Garments”

McKee Pearl Buttons are approved by
The American Institute of Laundering.

McKEE BUTTON COMPANY

*Muscatine's Oldest Button Manufacturer
Established In 1895*

Figure 44. McKee Button Company advertisement in May 1940 (*Journal*, May 31, 1940, 106).

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McKee Button Company continued to prosper with reduced overall operations in the early 1940s, maintaining their overall place of leadership within the pearl button industry. The 12 remaining pearl button companies in Iowa (nine in Muscatine, one in Davenport, one in Washington, one in Burlington) faced issues with complying with the labor laws put in place in the late 1930s in regards to wages and hours worked, with injunctions filed by the U.S. Department of Labor in July 1941.⁴⁵⁴ Agreements were reached with the companies, but the overall increase in the cost of labor impacted the remaining freshwater pearl button companies that were struggling to compete already against the cheaper plastic button. Branch factories were closed for many companies, as the cost of blank production was no longer profitable. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Local No. 289, in Muscatine continued to negotiate for better conditions for button workers in Muscatine through the 1940s, including reaching agreements for workers at the McKee Button Company.⁴⁵⁵ Related to increased labor costs and decreased markets for pearl buttons, two of the three Iowa companies outside of Muscatine then closed their doors in this period. The Mississippi Pearl Button Co of Burlington had its assets liquidated in February 1942, with the company then formally dissolved in October 1942.⁴⁵⁶ The building at 100-110 Columbia in downtown Burlington was later demolished. The Davenport Pearl Button Company then followed suit as they closed down in 1944.⁴⁵⁷ Their two-story building on the west side of Davenport at 1235 W. 5th St was utilized by later businesses, and it is currently vacant but extant. The building is significantly smaller than the factories that operated in Muscatine. Thus, the only other remaining pearl button company in Iowa at the end of World War II was the American Pearl Button Company in Washington, the company that had been started in Muscatine and then moved to Washington in 1908.

McKee Button Company continued to produce pearl buttons in their plant in Muscatine, benefitting from increases in business to fill wartime orders. The Fort Madison branch, closed in May 1940, resumed operations with 20 men in September 1941.⁴⁵⁸ In December 1941, it was noted that approximately half of the output of the McKee Button factory in Metropolis was going to the U.S. Army for use as soldiers' garments, and two full shifts were employed in the factory.⁴⁵⁹ Army specifications for cotton shorts required the use of pearl buttons, and American manufacturers were able to supply the buttons. When an amendment to the specification was passed to permit plastic buttons in August 1942, a fight was quickly taken up by W.P. Fickett, still president of National Association of Button Manufacturers, to rescind the amendment. The industry contended that while plastic materials had wide military use, clam shells were not critical war materials utilized by other facets. Additionally, the pearl button manufacturers had already bought large amount of heavy shells to make the thick buttons for army underwear, and they would have major losses without restoration of their previous business.⁴⁶⁰

While the McKee Button Company continued to stand out within the freshwater pearl button industry, records from the end of 1942 demonstrate the reduced scale of the operations of company in comparison to less than five years earlier. The main factory in Muscatine, noted still as the largest individual pearl button factory in the country, continued to serve as the headquarters for their operations. Inventory at the end of 1942 in Muscatine included shell (valued at \$11,436), blanks (valued at \$96,395), and finished buttons (valued at \$124,706). As noted in previous years, all blanks produced in Muscatine and at their branch cutting plants were shipped and stored in Muscatine for button production. The New York sales office included a stock of finished buttons (valued at \$112,890) available for ready supply to the garment industry, which remained the

⁴⁵⁴ "U.S. Department of Labor Cracks Down on Midwest Button Cutting Companies," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, July 3, 1941, 1; "Court Signs Decrees to Bring Pearl Button Plants Under Fair Labor Laws," *Quad-City Times*, August 1, 1941, 2

⁴⁵⁵ "Button Workers Given Vacation; Cutting Rates to be Equalized Here," *Muscatine Journal*, August 13, 1942, 2

⁴⁵⁶ "Notice of Dissolution," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, October 28, 1942, 12

⁴⁵⁷ Claassen 1994: 89

⁴⁵⁸ "Button Factory Here to Resume Operations," *Fort Madison Democrat*, Ft. Madison, IA, September 2, 1941, 1

⁴⁵⁹ "Metropolis News," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, December 3, 1941, 5

⁴⁶⁰ "Gillette Aiding Button Firms with War Orders," *Muscatine Journal*, August 21, 1942, 17

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company's primarily customer base and the focus of their business.⁴⁶¹ The Moline shipping branch had closed, with the building rented to a battery company, sold in 1944, and then demolished.⁴⁶² The inventory of the company includes shells retained for production of blanks in 1943 at five branch locations, including Metropolis, IL (\$35,705 of shell), Brookport, IL (\$17,743), Keithsburg, IL (\$10,971), Fort Madison, IA (\$7,615), and Logansport, IN (\$17,394). Additionally, a crushed shell operation was run in Fort Madison in 1942, utilizing the byproducts of the blank cutting.⁴⁶³

With increased orders, the McKee Button Company expanded their operations to two new factories in 1943 and 1944, seeking locations with available labor (Figure 40). The Centerville Association of Commerce worked with McKee Button Company to lease the former Home Fruit building on S. 18th Street in Centerville in southern Iowa to the company as a branch cutting plant. The branch was anticipated to employ up to 12 men and 96 women, providing the community with good factory jobs for women. The building was remodeled, and a new boiler installed for the factory. Eight large concrete tanks were installed in the basement to soak the shells before cutting. Operations started in Centerville in November 1943. The cutting department on the second story employed all women, with the grinding department on the first story employing men. Blanks were shipped to Muscatine for finishing. C.W. Gipson, who worked for McKee Button Company in Paducah and served as plant manager in Memphis, was sent to Centerville to manage the plant, and his wife Mae Belle Gipson was the floor supervisor for the women.⁴⁶⁴ The plant had 60 machines operating in March 1944, and the branch employed over 100 people in the small town of Centerville (population around 8,000).⁴⁶⁵ With available labor in the area, the cutting factory was expanded with 36 additional machines in 1945, bringing the total number of machines to 106 and employment to 130.⁴⁶⁶ The cutting factory in Fort Madison was then closed in 1944, and the property was then sold to the W.A. Sheaffer Pen Company in March 1945.⁴⁶⁷

McKee Button Company then opened a second new branch location in Macon, Missouri, in 1944, with the location again chosen for available labor and through the efforts of the local Chamber of Commerce. Macon, in north central Missouri, was a familiar town for Albert S. McKee, as he had attended the Blees Military Academy in Macon for prep school work.⁴⁶⁸ The factory was noted locally as a major step in local post-war development program, and the formerly the Teter Wholesale Grocery company was remodeled for use by McKee Button Company.⁴⁶⁹ The branch plant in Macon opened on October 30, 1944, with 50 employees, including large vats for soaking shells in the basement, 40 cutting machines, and three saw filing machines. The branch operated for McKee Button Company as one of their seven "cutting" plants. Only blanks were produced in Macon, with the blanks then sent to Muscatine for finishing into buttons. The plant in Macon was managed by John Whalen.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶¹ *Report of the McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1942. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn and Company, Davenport, IA, August 27, 1943. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa

⁴⁶² "Propose Skating Rink for Moline," *Daily Dispatch*, Moline, IL, August 2, 1944, 11

⁴⁶³ *Report of the McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1942. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn and Company, Davenport, IA, August 27, 1943. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

⁴⁶⁴ "McKee Firm to Operate Branch Cutting Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, September 16, 1943, 10; "Centerville," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, September 22, 1943, 16; "Centerville Button Factory Begins Work," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, November 27, 1943, 11; Bill Heusinkveld, "McKee Button Factory 1943," *Daily Iowegian*, September 10, 2008

⁴⁶⁵ "Hundred Employed at Button Factory," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, March 29, 1944, 7; "Discuss Postwar Work," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, April 19, 1944, 6

⁴⁶⁶ Bill Heusinkveld, "McKee Button Factory 1943," *Daily Iowegian*, September 10, 2008

⁴⁶⁷ "Deeds Filed," *Fort Madison Evening Democrat*, March 22, 1945, 6

⁴⁶⁸ "Funeral Today for A.S. McKee," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, July 12, 1948, 1

⁴⁶⁹ "McKee Button Factory Will Employ about 50 Persons," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, June 9, 1944, 1; "News and Views of the Week," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, June 10, 1944, 7; "News and Views," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, September 2, 1944, 4

⁴⁷⁰ "News and Views of the Week," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, November 4, 1944, 4; "Know Your Town," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, February 23, 1945, 11;

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The factory of the McKee Button Company in Muscatine continued to operate as the largest individual pearl button factory in the country at the end of World War II, as well as emerging from the war years as one of the decreasing number of freshwater pearl button companies in the United States. The main factory building for McKee Button Company was noticeably larger than any other single building used as a button company in Muscatine in 1946, with comparison of the factory buildings as depicted on the Sanborn fire insurance maps. The McKee Button Company included the main factory building, engine room at west end, shell crusher to the west, polishing room to the south, and shell sheds along the railroad tracks (Figure 45). An addition had been built to the north of the shell crushing operations at the west end, noted as used as a garage and for shell storage. The overall size of the main factory building is noticeably larger than the other pearl button factories in Muscatine, including those that spanned their original building and expansion into neighboring buildings (Figure 46). The other two large button companies in Muscatine in 1946 were the Automatic Button Company and the Hawkeye Button Company, both of which have been demolished over the last 50 years for the expansion of The HON Company / HNI Corporation on the east side of Muscatine. The former Pennant Pearl Button Company (originally Vienna Pearl Button Company) was likewise demolished in this expansion. The former Boepple Button Co / U.S. Button Co building at 701 E. 3rd St, vacant in 1946, remains extant in this section of town, remodeled as a factory for The HON Company. Buildings also remain extant in Muscatine associated with the smaller operations of the Weber & Sons Button Company at 1006 E. 6th St and the Iowa Pearl Button Company at 315 W. Front (former McKee & Bliven Button Company factory).

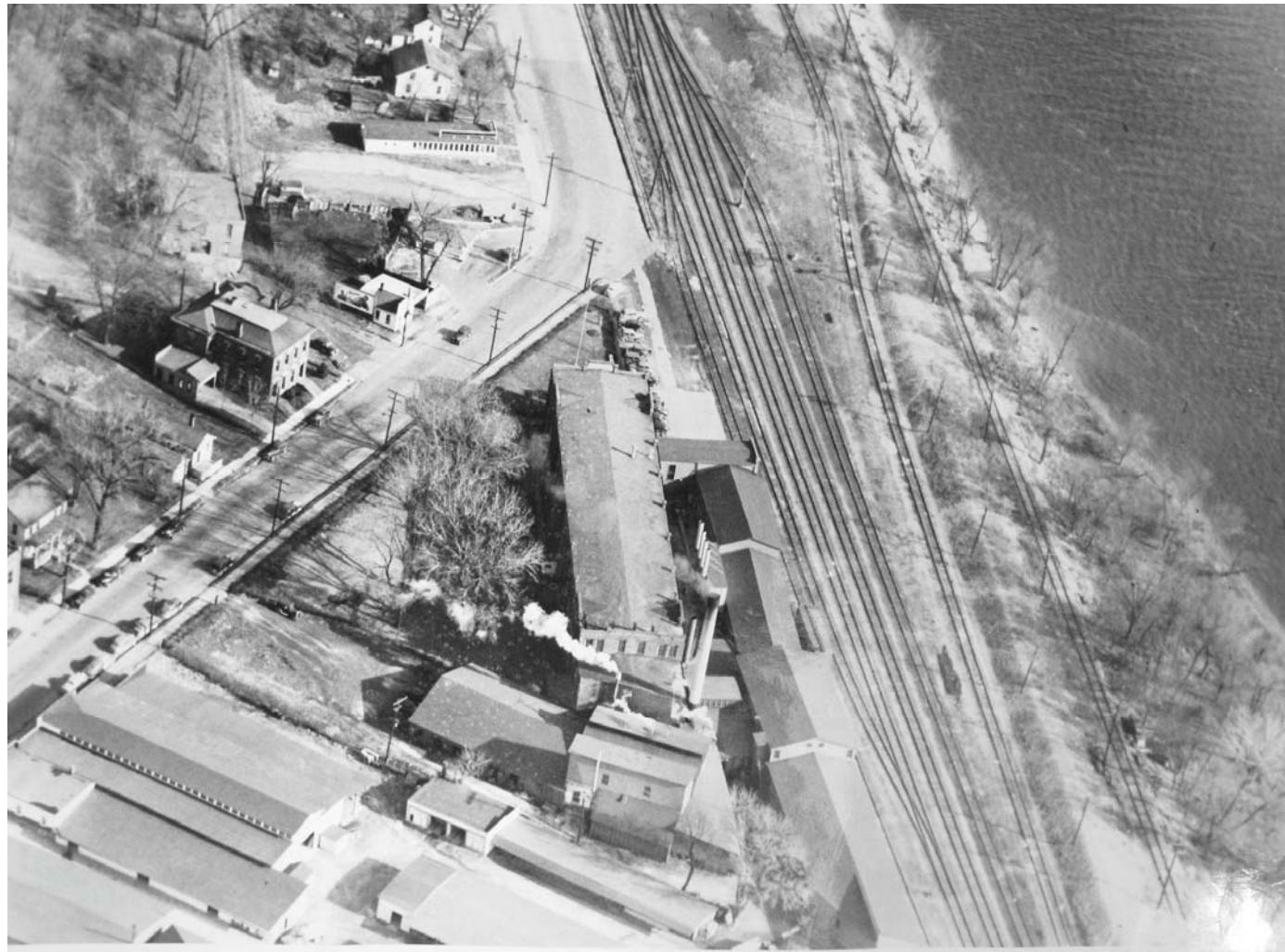


Figure 45. McKee Button Company in 1940s, looking northeast (McKee collection).

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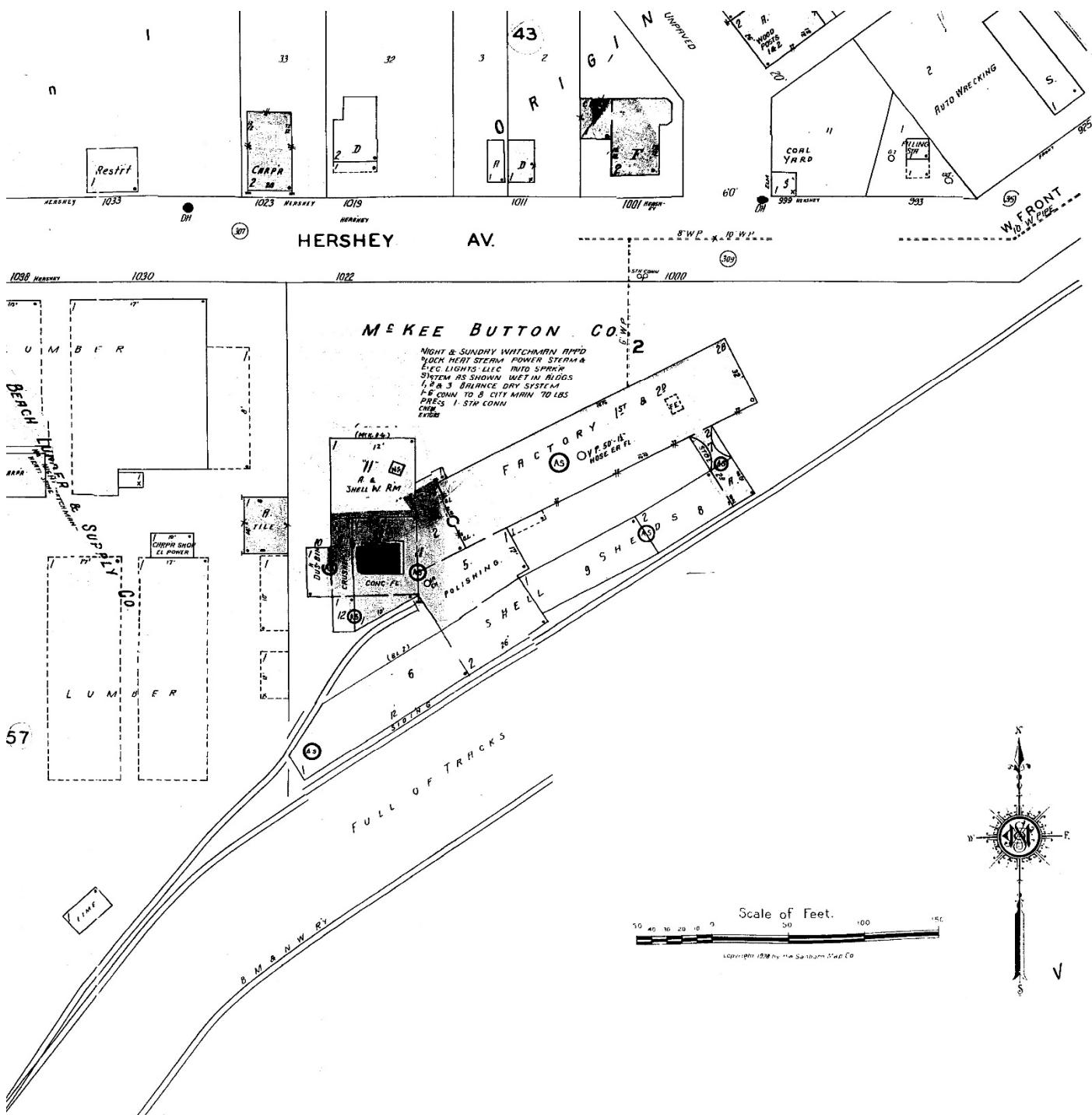


Figure 46. McKee Button Company at 1000 Hershey Ave in 1946 (Sanborn Map Company 1946: 12).

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Development of Plastic Buttons and Evolution of Pearl Button Companies, 1945-1970

The McKee Button Company continued to be a leading manufacturer of freshwater pearl buttons throughout the course of the end of the industry in the United States, diversifying to strengthen their business and finally transitioning out of freshwater pearl buttons to continue to compete in the changing button industry. The evolution of the button industry of the United States from a market dominated by freshwater pearl buttons to a market dominated by types of plastic buttons started in the 1930s. By the start of World War II, various types of plastic buttons outpaced the production of pearl buttons, a trend that would only continue with the development of new plastic products after World War II. The button companies in Muscatine dominated the freshwater pearl button industry in the decade after World War II, with few other button companies in the United States producing this type of button. At the same time, they began to expand into alternate types of buttons. McKee Button Company added lines of ocean pearl buttons in the 1940s and then molded plastic buttons after World War II, diversifying their product line to supplement but never replace freshwater pearl buttons. Throughout the decade following World War II, freshwater pearl buttons continued to be their primary product, continuing to be sold primarily to the garment/apparel industry. They maintained their New York City office throughout this period, employing salesmen to connect with the garment industry and maintaining an Eastern stock of buttons for ready supply of orders. Buttons were also custom dyed to match specifications of their customers. McKee Button Company was a leading producer of freshwater pearl buttons in this period, continuing to be noted as operating in the largest freshwater pearl button factory in the country. The freshwater pearl button industry took additional hits in the 1950s with the development of new synthetic types of plastic buttons and reduced tariff on Japanese buttons. By the end of the 1950s, the majority of freshwater pearl button companies in Muscatine had closed or shifted to manufacturing plastic buttons. McKee Button Company began the manufacture of synthetic buttons in the middle of the 1950s, with the end of freshwater pearl button production in 1959. They continued to sell their stock of freshwater pearl buttons, as well as buy and sell stock from other companies, throughout the 1960s and into later decades. While other major button companies closed in Muscatine, the McKee Button Company not only survived the transition from pearl to plastic, but they grew by the end of the 1960s to be one of the three primary manufacturers of plastic buttons in Muscatine and remained among the handful of larger button companies that continued to operate in the United States. They would retain this prominent place in the button industry of the United States until they ceased button production in 2019.

The McKee Button Company continued to focus on production of freshwater pearl buttons in their main factory in Muscatine in the late 1940s, while utilizing their branch locations to test ways to diversify. Advertisements in 1946 sought additional automatic button machine operators, grinders, and sorters in Muscatine, both experienced and those requiring training.⁴⁷¹ Over 125 women were employed in the finishing and sorting departments alone in Muscatine in December 1946.⁴⁷² The main factory was noted as supported by seven other plants in the Midwest in 1947, with these branch locations then serving as plants to explore other materials for button production.⁴⁷³ The branch in Centerville had been enlarged in 1945 with additional cutting machines, and new machinery in 1946 including a large hydraulic press was added to start manufacturing a limited quantity of plastic buttons.⁴⁷⁴ A freshwater button factory and a separate molded plastic button factory were then run in Centerville for the next decade by McKee Button Company. The larger investment was planned for the branch plant in Macon, Missouri. In July 1947, plans were announced by Albert S. McKee to have the plant specialize in the manufacture of ocean pearl buttons, with finishing machines shipped from Muscatine to bring the full process under one roof. Shells were shipped to Macon from Bombay, Calcutta, and Australia. The 36 current cutting machines cut around 7,000 pounds of shell per week, with plans to add 46 more cutting machines. John Emr continued as plant manager, and plans were

⁴⁷¹ *Muscatine Journal*, August 23, 1946, 11; *Muscatine Journal*, December 2, 1946, 9

⁴⁷² "Party is Enjoyed by McKee Button Workers," *Muscatine Journal*, December 19, 1946, 2

⁴⁷³ "300 May be Hired with Expansion of McKee Button Co," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, July 9, 1947, 1

⁴⁷⁴ Bill Heusinkveld, "McKee Button Factory 1943," *Daily Iowegian*, September 10, 2008

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made for a large addition to increase the workforce from 65 to 300.⁴⁷⁵ Similar to past construction projects, McKee Button Company struck a deal with the Chamber of Commerce for them to raise \$20,000 of the construction costs.⁴⁷⁶ However, while the shift was made to focus on the production of ocean pearl buttons in Macon, the conditions within the ocean pearl button industry in 1948 put the expansion plans on hold. By November, not only was the proposed addition was scrapped, but the factory was soon to be closed completely.⁴⁷⁷ Thus, freshwater pearl button production remained the focus of McKee Button Company.

McKee Button Company was profiled in June 1948, noted as the largest freshwater pearl button manufacturing concern in the world. The factory sprawled "conspicuously at the midpoint of Muscatine's long and extensively industrialized riverfront." Muscatine remained as the headquarters for this national company, with the main sales office in New York and additional sales offices in St. Louis and Los Angeles. About 60% of shells processed were purchased by the company from the Tennessee and Ohio rivers. Branch cutting plants for the company were operated in Keithsburg, IL, Metropolis, IL, Brookport, IL, and Centerville, IA (Figure 47). Additionally, the branch in Centerville also had a molded plastic button plant. Another branch factory was operated at Macon, MO, to manufacture ocean pearl buttons. The acquisition of ocean shells was noted to be a current issue, as the waters were generally fished by the Japanese prior to World War II and much of the equipment had been destroyed during the war. Thus, shelling was slow to resume in the late 1940s, driving up the price of shells. Operations in Muscatine were devoted almost exclusively to finishing and sorting work, with Will Hopkins serving as supervisor for the finishing department. The company was noted to have an improved type of machinery developed for the company that enabled cutters to sit down to work. In recent years, all button cutting had been completed by women. Buttons manufactured by McKee Button Company were sold throughout the United States as well as exported to several other countries. The company continued to operate with Albert S. McKee as president, Nellie (McKee) Barry as vice president, and Lloyd A. Foster as secretary and treasurer. William E. Spieth served as the general production manager.⁴⁷⁸

McKee Button Company was again noted a month later at the time of the death of president Albert S. McKee as the largest button company in the world with factories in Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri. When Albert S. McKee died on July 10, 1948 at age 58, he had served for 12 years as president of McKee Button Company, since the death of his brother J. Harold McKee. He was a member of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, The Pearl Button Industries of Iowa, and National Manufacturers Association, affiliated with these prominent organizations in the button industry. He was also a member of the Arkwright Club of New York City, Chicago Athletic Club, "I" club at the University of Iowa, several local fraternal orders, the Chamber of Commerce, and First Congregationalist Church. He was survived by his wife Madeline and daughter Mrs. Donald (Mercedes) Allbee of Davenport. Albert was the last surviving son of James and Anna McKee, though his two sisters were still living.⁴⁷⁹ With his death, his sister Mrs. Nellie McKee Barry of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts was named as president of McKee Button Company by the board of directors. Madeline McKee, Albert's widow, became vice president. Thus, these executive positions remained within the McKee family. Lloyd A. Foster continued as secretary-treasurer, and he was named as general manager of the company. William Spieth then became production manager, in charge of production and sales.⁴⁸⁰ The articles of incorporation were then amended in November 1948 to enlarge the board of directors from three to

⁴⁷⁵ "300 May be Hired with Expansion of McKee Button Co," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, July 9, 1947, 1

⁴⁷⁶ "Meet Tomorrow to Study Factory Fund," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, December 11, 1947, 1

⁴⁷⁷ "Reports on McKee Plant Expansion," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, October 29, 1948, 1; "Rotarians Hear Thanksgiving Talk," *Macon Chronicle-Herald*, Macon, MO, November 24, 1948, 1

⁴⁷⁸ "McKee Button Co., after Modest Start as Small Cutting Plant, Now Operates World's Largest Button Factory Here," *Muscatine Journal*, June 10, 1948, 6

⁴⁷⁹ "Albert McKee Dies at 58; Managed Local Button Co.," *Muscatine Journal*, July 10, 1948, 1

⁴⁸⁰ "Mrs. Barry is Elected to Head McKee Company," *Muscatine Journal*, July 26, 1948, 2; "McKee Button Co. Officers Named," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, July 27, 1948, 9

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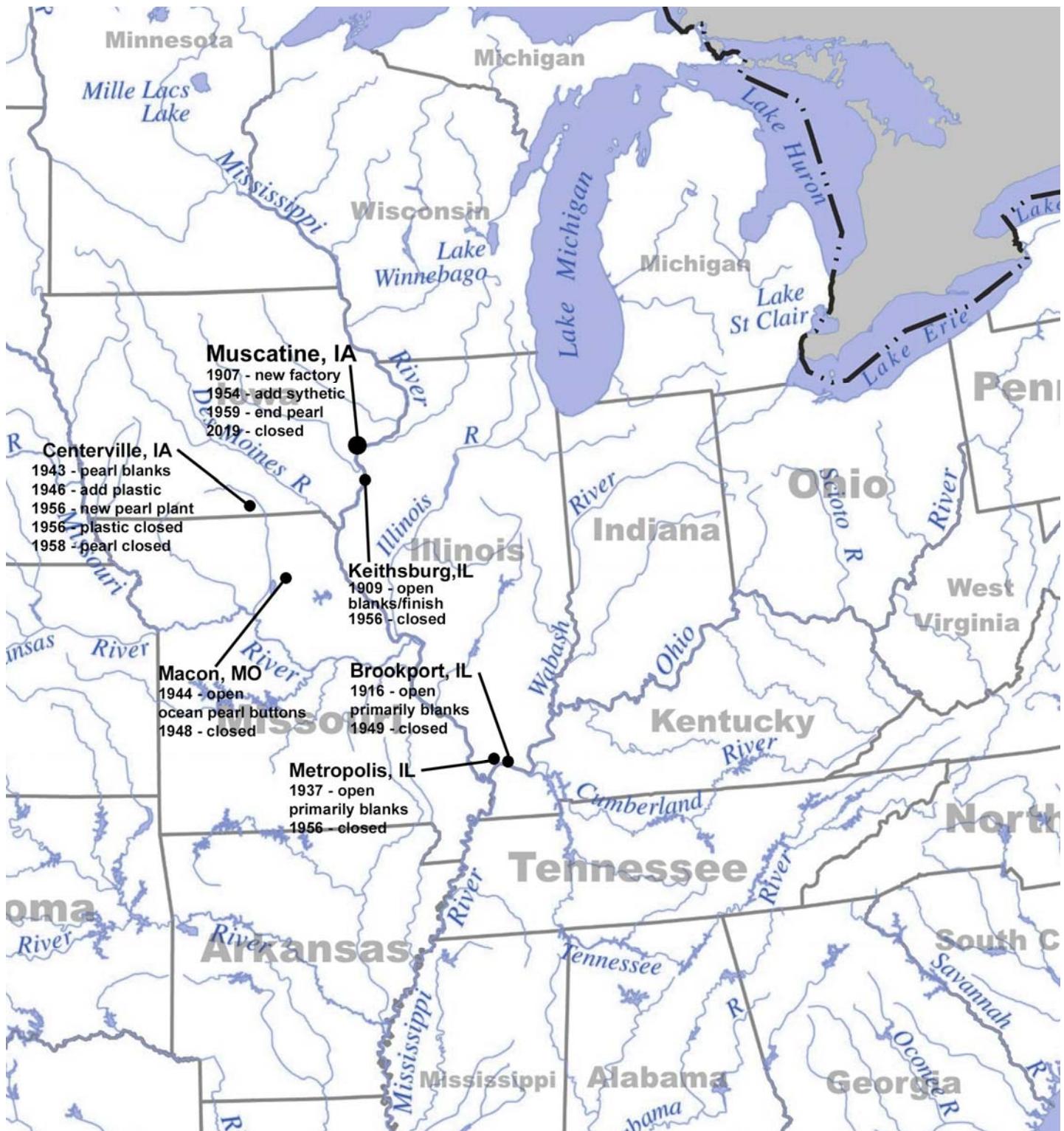


Figure 47. Branch locations for McKee Button Company in the 1940s and 1950s (McCarley 2019).

some additional branch locations may have operated briefly during the 1940s that have not been currently identified in research or on this map

base map obtained from <http://ontheworldmap.com/usa/usa-rivers-and-lakes-map.html>, with branch information added by McCarley

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five members. Nellie McKee Barry, Madeline McKee, Lloyd A. Foster, Frances (McKee) Flanery, and William Spieth then composed the board of directors for McKee Button Company.⁴⁸¹

Freshwater pearl buttons continued to be the focus of the McKee Button Company through the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s. The annual report on the finances of the McKee Button Company from the end of 1948 included a summary of the operations of the company. The company was noted as engaged in the manufacture of freshwater pearl buttons and plastic buttons. The principal office was located in Muscatine, with branch cutting plants operated in Iowa and Illinois and a plastic button plant operated in Centerville. The sales, storage, and distribution facilities were maintained in New York City, with a major part of the company's sales to manufacturers of apparel. The manufacture of ocean pearl buttons in Macon was discontinued in 1948, with the plant held in standby condition. Small scale ocean pearl operations were being continued at the Muscatine plant. The new sales figures for the year show that in spite of their diversification, freshwater pearl buttons continued to dominate the business. Sales figures in 1948 for freshwater pearl buttons amounted to \$717,665 in comparison to \$104,854 in sales for ocean pearl buttons and \$95,100 for sales of molded plastic buttons. An inventory of shell was primarily maintained at Keithsburg, Metropolis, and Centerville for blank cutting operations, with an inventory also of plastic molding compound in Centerville. The New York office had an inventory of freshwater pearl buttons (valued at \$98,173), ocean pearl buttons (\$38,121), and plastic buttons (\$12,044).⁴⁸² The blank factory in Brookport, reopened again with demand for blanks, appears to have then closed the following year, with the same small inventory of shells noted in 1948 and 1949. The factory then operated locally for a few years in the early 1950s as the Roberts Button Factory.⁴⁸³ The net sales of pearl buttons declined and sales of plastic buttons increased over the next few years, though pearl buttons continued as the leading product. The sales for freshwater pearl buttons was reported only at \$497,915 in 1949 but rebounded slightly to \$591,235 in 1950. Sales of molded plastic buttons increased to \$76,947 in 1949 and \$87,735 in 1950, manufactured only at the plant in Centerville. The sales of the remaining stock of ocean pearl buttons was reported at \$41,875 in 1949 and \$19,022 in 1950.⁴⁸⁴

The leadership of McKee Button Company passed to the next generation of the McKee family in the early 1950s. James S. McKee II and Theodore F. McKee, sons of the late Theodore B. McKee, began to work at McKee Button Company after World War II, as they also pursued additional education and military service. James S. McKee married Anne Minton in 1950 at age 25, and he was added to the Board of Directors in 1950. He was then elected as the new president of McKee Button Company in 1951. The company remained firmly in the McKee family, with the board of directors and stockholders including James S. McKee as president (1977 1/3 shares of stock), Theodore McKee as vice president (444 1/3 shares), Leighton W. Brown as secretary/treasurer (1 share), Mrs. Frances (McKee) Flanery (344 1/3 shares) (mother of James and Ted), and Gerald W. Hilton (1 share).⁴⁸⁵ L.A. Foster retired from the company, and William Spieth continued as production manager. The 1952 city directory then lists McKee Button Company at 1000 Hershey Ave with James S. McKee as president, treasurer, and general manager (age 27), his younger brother Theodore F. McKee as vice president (age 25), and Leighton W. Brown as secretary. The company continues to be listed as manufacturers of pearl buttons. Theodore F. (Ted) McKee served in the Army

⁴⁸¹ "Notice of Amendment to Articles of Incorporation of McKee Button Company," *Muscatine Journal*, November 22, 1948, 9; *McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1948. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

⁴⁸² *McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1948. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

⁴⁸³ "Brookport, Once Named Brooklyn, Now Close 'Relative' of Paducah," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, Paducah, KY, June 18, 1950, sec 2, p 1, 7; "Shell Products to be Made by Brookport Firm," *Paducah Sun*, Paducah, KY, September 18, 1956, 13

⁴⁸⁴ *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1949. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA; *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1950. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

⁴⁸⁵ "McKee Dies of Crash Injuries," *Muscatine Journal*, March 6, 1962, 1; *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1951. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

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Mrs. Tripmacker Starting Her 42nd Straight Year in Button Industry



A lot of freshwater pearl buttons have passed under the eye of Mrs. Tena Tripmacker, 205 Roselawn avenue, during the past 41 years.

Most housewives, particularly those with a family of children, have a household acquaintance with buttons, particularly if they do any sewing.

But Mrs. Tripmacker has handled more of them than many a housewife. For, during the past 41 years, she has been employed in the

finishing department at the McKee Button Co. in Muscatine. Her employment has been continuous, and she's still going strong!

Mrs. Tripmacker is pictured here operating a Barry double automatic facing and drilling machine, which patterns the button and drills the holes. Buttons are partially finished in this machine and later go to another department for polishing and buffing.

Mrs. Tripmacker began working at the McKee Button Co. March 15, 1910.

Figure 48. McKee employee finishing buttons at automatic machine (*Muscatine Journal*, September 22, 1951, 2).

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through 1952, returning to Muscatine to work for the company at that point.⁴⁸⁶ He married Diane Walsh of Cincinnati in February 1953, and they made their home in Muscatine.⁴⁸⁷ While the 1952 city directory listed them as manufacturers of freshwater pearl buttons, the 1954 city directory lists them as manufacturers of plastic and pearl buttons. James S. McKee remained as president, treasurer, and general manager, with Theodore F. McKee as vice president and Leighton W. Brown as secretary.

McKee Button Company continued to operate their main factory in Muscatine, branch cutting factories at Keithsburg, IL, Metropolis, IL, and Centerville, IA, and the molded plastic factory in Centerville, IA, through the early 1950s (Figure 47). Flooding in April 1952 did not significantly affect the main factory in Muscatine due to the levee, but it completely surrounded their branch factory in Keithsburg, IL.⁴⁸⁸ The branch was cleaned up and reopened. Net sales in 1952 on freshwater pearl buttons amounted to \$730,159 in 1952, in comparison to \$83,983 in sales for molded plastic buttons and \$19,002 in sales of ocean pearl buttons. The company reported a profit of \$138,648 for freshwater pearl buttons, profit of \$18,175 for plastic buttons, and profit of \$9,242 for ocean pearl buttons. Shell inventory was primarily maintained in Metropolis at the end of 1952, with lesser amounts in Keithsburg and Centerville.⁴⁸⁹ With decreasing use of storage space in Muscatine, vacant space was then found at the factory in Muscatine. They were advertising storage space for rent in July 1954, approximately 3,500 square feet on a railroad side track with a sprinkler system.⁴⁹⁰ McKee Button Company continued to be committed to their company focus and history of freshwater pearl button production, working to become more efficient and profitable. In 1953, the cutting machines in all of the shell cutting plants were changed over to new type, high speed machines. The annual report noted that the changeover greatly increased the quantities of blanks which could be produced by each operator.⁴⁹¹

William Spieth served as the leading voice on the national level for the McKee Button Company, as well as the broader national pearl button industry, in the early 1950s on a number of national and international issues, working to protect the overall button industry. He traveled to Puerto Rico in June 1952 with W.P. Pickett, president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers, to testify at a hearing by the U.S. Department of Labor on the minimum wage for the button industry there. The current wage of 46 cents per hour was requested to be increased to protect the wage scales of button workers in the United States.⁴⁹² While trade had been restricted with Japan following World War II, a trade agreement was negotiated with Japan providing for reciprocal tariff concessions through the Trade Agreements Extension Act of 1954. William Spieth traveled to Washington, D.C. in July 1954 to testify as the representative for the National Association of Button Manufacturers before the U.S. Tariff Commission. The U.S. Senate finance committee had directed a study of all imports carrying duties of 50 percent or higher, and Spieth specifically requested tariff protection against Japanese importation of buttons. However, changes in tariff agreements resulted in the tariff on imported plastic buttons being cut in half.⁴⁹³ William Spieth then transitioned to president of the National Association of Button Manufacturers. In January 1955, the permanent offices of the National Association of Button Manufacturers were established in the Laurel Building in Muscatine, with William Spieth as the new president. This national organization remained in Muscatine until 1970 when Spieth retired as president and the association appears to have disbanded.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁸⁶ "Button industry grew out of accident," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, 19

⁴⁸⁷ "Walsh-McKee Wedding at Cathedral in Cincinnati," *Muscatine Journal*, March 17, 1953, 3

⁴⁸⁸ "Flood Waters Spread Over 25 Blocks in Keithsburg," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, Burlington, IA, April 25, 1952, 1

⁴⁸⁹ *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1952. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

⁴⁹⁰ *Muscatine Journal*, June 15, 1954, 10

⁴⁹¹ *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1953. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA

⁴⁹² "Spieth to Testify at U.S. Hearing," *Muscatine Journal*, June 17, 1942, 1

⁴⁹³ "Spieth Returns from Conference at Washington," *Muscatine Journal*, July 31, 1954, 5; "Spieth Elected New Head of Button Group," *Muscatine Journal*, December 17, 1954, 1; "Speaker Advocates Policy of 'Buy American to Save American Jobs,'" *Muscatine Journal*, November 30, 1960, 2

⁴⁹⁴ "William Spieth Has Office in Laurel Building," *Muscatine Journal*, January 13, 1955, 12; "Retired button executive William Spieth, 77, dies," *Muscatine Journal*, July 22, 1971, 1

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McKee Button Company began to take a serious look at the streamlining their button production in 1955. They continued to operate their main factory in Muscatine, which focused on pearl buttons, and their branch factories in Keithsburg, IL, Metropolis, IL, and Centerville, IA (Figure 47). Thus, McKee Button Company had continued to operate their multiple satellite factories longer than other freshwater pearl button companies. Discussions began in fall 1955 with a proposed plan to consolidate their Metropolis and Centerville facilities into one town, with the facilities expanded and the other branch closed. The Chamber of Commerce in both communities worked quickly to meet the request of McKee Button Company to fund \$8,000 of the expenses related to the move and expanded operations. While Metropolis was willing to cover \$8,000 of their expenses, Centerville was willing to build a new larger \$45,000 plant next door to current pearl button factory on S. 18th St, leasing it to McKee Button Company for \$250 per month. The new plant and expanded operations were expected to increase employment from 54 to 140 people, with a payroll increase from \$2,500 to \$6,000 per week.⁴⁹⁵ The plant at Metropolis continued to operate in spring 1956 while construction was underway in Centerville. In May 1956, McKee Button Company notified William Peetz, manager of the Keithsburg branch that they had plans to close the Keithsburg branch as well, with all equipment to be moved to the new factory in Centerville. Only 19 employees remained in Keithsburg at this time.⁴⁹⁶ An open house was held in the new building for McKee Button Company at 1222 S. 18th St in Centerville in September 1956. Manager Clifford W. Gipson was on hand, as well as the executives from Muscatine, James McKee, Ted McKee, and Layton Brown.⁴⁹⁷ The building was constructed as a new plant for freshwater pearl button production, consolidating the operations of the branch cutting plants into this one location to make the company more efficient in its production. The plastic plant also continued to operate in its separate building.⁴⁹⁸ Paul McDaniel, manager of the Metropolis branch for 19 years, then purchased the Metropolis factory from McKee Button Company. He opened the Ohio Shell Company here, and he manufactured pearl buttons and aggregate, as well as purchasing shells for manufacture and export.⁴⁹⁹

At the same time as McKee Button Company consolidated their operations outside of Muscatine to Centerville, they also had begun to experiment with a new type of plastic button at their main factory in Muscatine. The year-end report noted that the company had actively entered into the production of synthetic buttons in 1954, with a separate department established at the Muscatine plant to produce these buttons. The buttons were noted to bear a greater resemblance to regular pearl buttons than plastic buttons produced to date. The inventory at the end of 1954 then included freshwater pearl buttons (valued at \$227,867), molded plastic buttons (\$27,678), synthetic buttons (\$14,887), and ocean pearl buttons (\$1,060) in their main factory in Muscatine and sales office in New York City.⁵⁰⁰ This branch of button production would continue to grow through the middle of the 1950s (Table 13). As sales of freshwater pearl buttons declined from \$968,672 to \$649,363, sales of synthetic buttons rose from \$156,134 to \$202,819 in 1957. With the development of the line of synthetic buttons in Muscatine, the production of molded plastic buttons in Centerville was then decreased. The production and sales of molded plastic buttons fell through the early 1950s to \$48,086 in 1955. The line was then ended, with the \$2,302 in sales in 1957 associated with selling of remaining stock. Thus, the molded plastic plant in Centerville was closed in 1956, even as production of freshwater pearl buttons had been consolidated into the community in their new facility.

⁴⁹⁵ "Metropolis Plant May Combine," *Southern Illinoian*, Carbondale, IL, December 22, 1955, 15; "Metropolis May Win New Plant with \$8,000," *Southern Illinoian*, Carbondale, IL, December 29, 1955, 17; "McKee to Double Size of Centerville Button Plant," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, Ottumwa, IA, January 14, 1956, 9; "Metropolis Loses on McKee Bid for Factory," *Southern Illinoian*, Carbondale, IL, February 5, 1956, 3; "Centerville is Anticipating Record Industrial Progress," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, March 12, 1956, 4

⁴⁹⁶ "Increased Employment Foreseen at Centerville," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, Ottumwa, IA, March 12, 1956, 3; "Button Factory at Keithsburg Will Be Moved," *Muscatine Journal*, May 4, 1956, 14

⁴⁹⁷ "Centerville to Have Factory Open House," *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, Ottumwa, IA, September 11, 1956, 10; "Group Presents Factory Building to McKee Firm," *Muscatine Journal*, September 14, 1956, 2

⁴⁹⁸ "Industrial Committee Active through Years," *Centerville Iowegian*, Centerville, IA, February 26, 1960, 32

⁴⁹⁹ "Paul McDaniel," *Paducah Sun*, Paducah, KY, June 27, 1988, 8; per Paul McDaniel, cited in Claassen 1994: 95

⁵⁰⁰ *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1954. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, Iowa.

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Table 13. Shift in button production and sales at McKee Button Company, 1951-1960.⁵⁰¹

	1951 net sales	1953 net sales	1955 net sales	1957 gross sales	1959 gross sales	1960 gross sales
Freshwater pearl buttons	\$556,518	\$828,681	\$968,672	\$649,363	\$219,550	\$104,781
Synthetic buttons	\$0	\$0	\$156,134	\$202,819	\$507,771	\$625,637
Molded plastic buttons	\$121,988	\$81,294	\$48,086	\$2,302	\$0	\$0
Ocean pearl buttons	\$33,228	\$16,511	\$2,047	\$9,700	\$0	\$0
<i>Total sales</i>	<i>\$711,734</i>	<i>\$926,487</i>	<i>\$1,174,940</i>	<i>\$843,247</i>	<i>\$727,321</i>	<i>\$730,418</i>
<i>Adjusted to 2019</i>	<i>\$6,998,453</i>	<i>\$8,871,269</i>	<i>\$11,208,269</i>	<i>\$7,671,957</i>	<i>\$6,389,852</i>	<i>\$6,308,664</i>

Prominent local industries were profiled in the February 26, 1957 edition of the *Muscatine Journal*, including the McKee Button Company. The company was noted to have remained almost exclusively a producer of freshwater pearl buttons, even in comparison with other major button companies in town. The company had operated for more than 50 years in Muscatine, expanding after the introduction of the Barry automatic button machines. They sold their buttons wholesale to the garment industry. They had six sales offices, located in New York City, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Dallas, Atlanta, and Boston.⁵⁰² Both the Automatic Button Company and J&K Button Company were also profiled in this special industry edition, with their lines of plastic buttons highlighted. Five other button manufacturers continued to operate in Muscatine: Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, Iowa Pearl Button Co, Muscatine Pearl Works, Ronda Button Co, and Weber & Sons Button Co.

Discussions on the future of button production at McKee Button Company and the future of the business in general resulted in a decision to shift focus in 1957 that was then implemented over the next few years. Production of pearl buttons continued to be a very labor-intensive process, even with advances in machinery. The continuing dwindling supply of freshwater shells continued to drive up the cost of the raw material. The pearl buttons produced were less uniform and less able to withstand modern laundering than newer synthetic type of plastic buttons. According to an article in 1995, the management of McKee Button Company faced a decision in late 1957 to either close the button company or evolve the business to focus on the manufacture of plastic buttons. The two grandsons of James S. McKee – James S. (Jim) McKee (then president) and Theodore F. (Ted) McKee (then vice president) – sat down with Bill Cory and literally flipped a coin. As a result, they decided to stay in the button business, making plastic buttons. The plastic buttons required less labor, used cheaper materials, and created a more uniform and durable button.⁵⁰³ Initially, plastic blanks were bought from other companies for button manufacture.⁵⁰⁴

The shift of McKee Button Company from production of freshwater pearl buttons to focus on the production of synthetic plastic buttons was not immediate in 1957, but it was a transition that had already begun organically and was completely implemented over the next two years. The company noted that they manufactured freshwater pearl and synthetic buttons in 1957, though still selling off stock of molded plastic buttons and a handful of ocean pearl buttons. Gross sales of freshwater buttons continued to outpace synthetic buttons in 1957 by a margin of roughly three to one. At the end of 1957, McKee Button Company operated their main office and factory in Muscatine, the blank cutting plant at Centerville remained in use, and maintained their sales / storage / distribution facilities in New York City.⁵⁰⁵ The 1958 annual report noted that the major

⁵⁰¹ Bureau of the Census 1908: 206

⁵⁰² "McKee a Major Button Producer," *Muscatine Journal*, February 26, 1957, 14

⁵⁰³ "McKee is more than a name," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, s2, p3 (15)

⁵⁰⁴ "Clamshells go; McKee stays," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 1, 1989, sec F, p 1

⁵⁰⁵ *Report on McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*, December 31, 1957. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collection, Muscatine, IA.

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product of McKee Button Company since its incorporation had been freshwater pearl buttons, but drastic changes had been made in the button industry in recent years with the use of buttons from freshwater pearl transitioning to use of synthetic buttons due to the improved quality and lower production costs of synthetic buttons. Thus, "following the trend of the industry, the Company has now begun to place its emphasis on its synthetic buttons, and its entire operations, from production through sales, have been redesigned toward that end." The cutting plant in Centerville had ceased operations, and negotiations were ongoing with the City of Centerville to terminate its lease. The company maintained its main office/factory in Muscatine, along with its operations in New York City.⁵⁰⁶

Freshwater pearl buttons were then manufactured by McKee Button Company for the last time on a large scale in 1959: "Due to the changes in the button industry, the Company felt it advisable in 1959 to discontinue the manufacture of fresh water pearl buttons. Inventories of pearl buttons are being liquidated through normal sales channels and buttons are purchased for resale from other manufacturers when it is profitable to do so." A loan was obtained from the Small Business Administration to cover retaining the stock through the time of sale due to the slow movement in the pearl button industry. The sales of synthetic buttons (\$507,771) in 1959 was more than double the sales of freshwater pearl buttons (\$219,550) for McKee Button Company.⁵⁰⁷ The annual report for 1960 then noted McKee Button Company as a manufacturer of synthetic buttons only, with the buttons continuing to be sold primarily to manufacturers of apparel. The main factory and office remained in Muscatine, with their sales office in New York City.⁵⁰⁸ In 1962, their sales figures included polyester buttons (\$741,836), acrylic buttons (\$113,730), and some of the remaining freshwater pearl buttons (\$25,514). By 1963, the financial statement no longer included buttons or inventory by type, with only lump sales numbers provided.⁵⁰⁹ The company was primarily manufacturing and selling polyester buttons by this time. Thus, McKee Button Company transitioned successfully from pearl buttons to plastic buttons, and they remained as one of the leading button companies in Muscatine through the end of the 20th century.

Over the last 60 years, McKee Button Company has remained a leader within the button industry of the United States. The number employed in the button industry in Muscatine dropped from 1,200 in 1955 to 461 in August 1961, with eight button manufacturers continuing to operate in Muscatine in April 1962: Hawkeye Pearl Button Company, McKee Button Company, Pearl Products Company, Automatic Button Company, J&K Button Company, Muscatine Pearl Works, Ronda Button Company, and Weber & Sons Button Company. Only Ronda Button Company was noted as still producing freshwater pearl buttons, with the other companies retooled to plastic buttons.⁵¹⁰ In July 1966, the Ronda Button Company stopped production, continuing to sell pearl buttons from stock on hand. Clarence Schmarje noted that the cost to manufacture a pearl button was now five times more expensive than the cost of a plastic button, and the business did not warrant continued production.⁵¹¹ Hawkeye Button Company would then be dissolved in 1966 after the death of Fred W. Hermann, with the property sold to The HON Company for their expansion on the east side of Muscatine.⁵¹² The Automatic Button Company, with its history dating to 1898, was then closed by president Arthur M.

⁵⁰⁶ McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa, December 31, 1958. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collections, Muscatine, IA; "Industrial Committee Active through Years," *Centerville Iowegian*, Centerville, IA, February 26, 1960, 32; Bill Heusinkveld, "McKee Button Factory 1943," *Daily Iowegian*, September 10, 2008

⁵⁰⁷ McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa, December 31, 1959. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee Collection, Muscatine, IA.

⁵⁰⁸ McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa, December 31, 1960. McGladery, Hansen, Dunn & Co, Davenport, IA. McKee collections, Muscatine IA

⁵⁰⁹ McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa, December 31, 1962. Financial statements, prepared from the books without audit; McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa, December 31, 1963. Financial statements, prepared from the books without audit, McKee collection, Muscatine, IA

⁵¹⁰ "Muscatine Dreads Low Button Duty," *Muscatine Journal*, April 1, 1962, 6L, 40

⁵¹¹ Gene Raffensperger, "The Passing of an Era in Muscatine," *Des Moines Register*, Des Moines, IA, August 7, 1966, 20

⁵¹² The sale included lots 1-2-3-8-9-10 in block 28 ("Deeds Recorded," *Muscatine Journal*, October 6, 1966, 11). The alley was also vacated, allowing further development of this half block for HON ("Plan and Zoning Commission Continues Study of Rezoning," *Muscatine Journal*, April 13, 1966, 2).

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Umlandt in fall 1967. The company had converted from pearl buttons to plastic buttons in 1960, never reaching the same level of business as previously.⁵¹³ The United States was estimated in 1967 to only produce about 30 percent of world's buttons due to imports and modernization of industry in other nations.⁵¹⁴



Figure 49. Advertisement for McKee Button Company in December 1968
(*Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1968, 9).

As other companies closed, the McKee Button Company worked through the 1960s to develop their methods and lines of plastic buttons to stay competitive within the American button industry. Theodore F. (Ted) McKee became president of McKee Button Company in 1962 at age 34, after the death of his brother James S. McKee in an automobile accident.⁵¹⁵ The 1965 city directory lists the McKee Button Company with Theodore F. McKee as president and treasurer, his aunt Ruth W. (McKee) Grossklaus as vice president, and Charles Blair as secretary.⁵¹⁶ Plastic buttons produced by McKee Button Company continued to be primarily sold wholesale to customers within the garment industry. New machinery was developed and tested by the company to reduce the costs of button production. The company also developed the Buttonmatic, a machine that fed buttons on string to a sewing machine, which sewed the button directly on clothes, reducing costs of garment manufacturers.⁵¹⁷ McKee Button Company was one of the three primary companies producing buttons in Muscatine in 1967, along with Weber & Sons Button Company and J & K Button Company. McKee Button Company was the oldest, with history dating to 1895, and the company employed around 50 people.⁵¹⁸ In March 1969, they bought the manufacturing plant and equipment of the Patrician Plastic Corp of

⁵¹³ "Automatic Button Co. in Court Receivership," *Muscatine Journal*, October 31, 1967, 2

⁵¹⁴ Helen Weiershauser, "Button, Button – Muscatine Has Plastic Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, October 7, 1967, 1

⁵¹⁵ "McKee Dies of Crash Injuries," *Muscatine Journal*, March 6, 1962, 1; "James McKee, Muscatine, Dies," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, March 7, 1962, 4

⁵¹⁶ Ruth W. Grossklaus was the last living daughter of James S. and Anna Bliven McKee, sister to Albert S., J. Harold, Theodore B., and Nellie Barry. She was first married to Robert Richards, who died in 1955, and then married to Paul Grossklaus, who died in 1982. Ruth died in 1979.

⁵¹⁷ "Industry has seen plenty of changes," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, s2, p10 (23)

⁵¹⁸ Helen Weiershauser, "Button, Button – Muscatine Has Plastic Buttons," *Muscatine Journal*, October 7, 1967, 1

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Waldoboro, Maine, which manufactured plastic button blanks, buttons, shoe ornaments, and novelty items, along with the rights to their patents to manufacture plastic sheets and plastic button blanks. Through their process, plastic sheets were centrifugally cast in rotating circular drums, removed from drums, and then run through presses that stamped out button blanks. The button blanks produced in Maine were then shipped to Muscatine for machining and polishing as a finished button.⁵¹⁹ Maintaining the plastics plant in Maine became impractical by 1972, and the production of plastic sheets and blank cutting was moved to Muscatine.⁵²⁰ The research and development department also continued to work on new machinery to be manufactured by the company, building off of the Buttonmatic and a machine that automatically created spaced buttonholes. The Spacematic was patented in December 1969 for the company, which automatically spaced buttons correctly on the shirt when the Buttonmatic was utilized. The first were sold to plants for Arrow shirts, Manhattan shirts, and shirts for J.C. Penney.⁵²¹ Thus, McKee Button Company diversified its product line while ensuring its buttons would work well within the machinery designed for increased production for its customers within the garment manufacturers. The 1975 city directory then lists Theodore F. McKee as president and treasurer, his aunt Ruth W. Grossklaus as vice president, and his wife Diane W. McKee as secretary. The executives for McKee Button Company had returned to strictly McKee family members.

McKee Button Company was the largest of the button companies in Muscatine in 1978, employing 75 to 100 people in the manufacture of buttons and button feeding machines. They were noted as manufacturing an unlimited number of styles and patterns of buttons for style and fashion of clothing, able to custom dye their plastic buttons to match current fashion colors. They also manufactured machinery for use by clothing manufacturers that was shipped throughout the United States and around the world.⁵²² McKee Button Company tested out a new idea to expand and diversify their company in the early 1980s, resulting in some changes to the building. The office area at the east end of the main level (second story) was remodeled into a retail clothing store in 1981, with offices then moved into remodeled space above it on the upper level (third story). The three divisions of the company were then profiled in an article on January 30, 1982. The largest division remained the manufacture and sale of millions of buttons each year to the garment industry in the United States, as well as some exported to other countries. The buttons were "made from scratch" in the McKee factory from polyester resins were utilized to produce plastic sheets. Machines then made plastic buttons "by the gross" in a wide variety of patterns, styles, sizes, and colors. McKee Machinery was the second division of the company. It manufactured and assembled sewing equipment for buttons for the garment industry. The third division was McKee Fashions, which was opened in November 1981 as a factory outlet for women's clothing, managed by Madeline (McKee) Eagle (daughter of Theodore McKee). The company purchased clothing direct from garment manufacturers who used McKee buttons on their clothing, offering competitive retail prices. Some men's clothing was also carried in the store.⁵²³ The trial of McKee Fashions was discontinued after a few years of operation. A building permit was issued in May 1983 to remodel the main level space (east end of second story) back to office space, with offices also remaining on the third story. The windows in this section were then rebuilt in 1983-84.

McKee Button Company remained a prominent button company and strong family business over the next decade. The 1985 city directory lists Theodore F. (Ted) McKee as president and treasurer, his son John (Jay) McKee as vice president, his son James (Jim) McKee as vice president, and his wife Diane W. McKee as secretary. Ted McKee remained at the head of the company, the third generation of the McKee family to operate the company. His children were then the fourth generation involved in the company. Jim McKee was in charge of production at the factory, while Jay McKee focused on administration and sales. Madeline Eagle continued to work for the company in accounting. The company employed around 60 people in February 1986, and they continued to produce millions of plastic buttons. The entire process was now automated, a

⁵¹⁹ "McKee Button Company purchases plastic firm," *Muscatine Journal*, March 7, 1969, 3

⁵²⁰ "Clamshells go; McKee stays," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 1, 1989, sec F, p 1

⁵²¹ "Largest Shirt Manufacturers in Country to use a Machine Developed by McKee firm," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1969, 9

⁵²² "McKee Button Co," *Muscatine Journal*, October 12, 1978, 23B (57)

⁵²³ "McKee firm makes buttons, sells women fashions here," *Muscatine Journal*, January 30, 1982, 41

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change from the original process to make a pearl button. They also continued to manufacture the Buttonmatic, which was produced in two models.⁵²⁴ McKee Button Company was noted in October 1989 as one of three primary suppliers of buttons for men's high quality dress shirts in the United States, producing 100,000 gross buttons each week or nearly 750 million buttons per year. The company supplied buttons for manufacturers of well-known shirt companies such as Van Heusen, Hathaway, Cluett-Peabody, and Brooks Brothers. Annual sales of the company had increased from \$900,000 in 1953 to \$5 million in 1988.⁵²⁵ The closure of one of the largest button company conglomerates in the United States in 1990 left the McKee Button Company and Weber & Sons Button Company as two of the largest remaining button companies in the United States, with J & K Button Company as a smaller button manufacturer in Muscatine.⁵²⁶ Emsig Manufacturing Company was noted as the largest button manufacturer in the United States in a 1994 United Press article that was reprinted in several newspapers across the country. Producing durable buttons was the key for a successful button manufacturer in the 1990s, as the popularity of cotton shirts were increasing the heat utilized for laundering and warping buttons. McKee Button Company was cited in this national article as manufacturing a shirt button that stood up to the impact tests as well as the Super Durable. Both Emsig and McKee buttons were thoroughly tested by Lands End for their durability, and both were utilized for their clothing. These buttons were noted to be superior in quality to buttons imported from other countries.⁵²⁷ An addition was constructed in 1993 on the west end of the building where the shell crusher had been previously demolished, providing additional space for shipping.

McKee Button Company celebrated their 100th anniversary in April 1995, making it one of the oldest companies operating in Muscatine. The *Journal* profiled the company with a special anniversary section, including a wide range of information on the company and button industry. The company remained in the McKee family, with the fourth generation choosing to work at the company over the last couple decades. Jim McKee was in charge of production and sales, and Jay McKee was involved with administration and cost account. Madeleine (McKee) Eagle worked in the bookkeeping end of the business in Muscatine, and Margo (McKee) Hamsher worked on sales from her home in Tulsa, OK. The family was proud of their ability to adapt to new technologies and meet the specifications of customers. They had added a melamine button for rugged work shirts, known for their durability.⁵²⁸ McKee Button Company continued to supply buttons to well-known shirt manufacturers such as Van Heusen and Oxford.⁵²⁹ McKee Button Company employed around 100 people in 1995, manufacturing millions of finished buttons per week. The process was much less labor intensive than in previous decades, with one operator able to run 21 of the modern button machines. State-of-the-art equipment was custom designed to meet their needs. With computers installed in the early 1980s, the company could more easily track the millions of buttons that it sold. McKee Button Company also continued to manufacture their Buttonmatic to feed buttons to sew onto clothing.⁵³⁰ They were the only button company that made its own button feeder, with customers then guaranteed that it would work well with buttons manufactured by McKee. The company's niche remained shirt buttons, filling custom orders for buttons to match any thread or cloth from a garment manufacturer. The buttons were sold primarily to customers in the United States, mostly to the garment industry in the South. Additional buttons were exported to garment manufacturers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Some of these manufacturers were American companies with factories overseas, who then sent the clothing back to the United States.⁵³¹

⁵²⁴ Helen Weierschauser, "From Pearls to Plastics: Ted McKee Remembers," *Muscatine Journal*, February 14, 1986, 9

⁵²⁵ "Clamshells go; McKee stays," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 1, 1989, sec F, p 1

⁵²⁶ Linda Cook, "The Hole Truth: When it comes to buttons, there's no place like Muscatine," *Quad-City Times*, Davenport, IA, December 16, 1990, H1 (77); "Button Business Booming in Muscatine," *Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, IA, December 30, 1990, 15A;

"Factories in Iowa town roll out the buttons – millions every day," Associated Press article run in several newspapers, including *Argus-Leader*, Sioux Falls, SD, December 30, 1990, 41

⁵²⁷ Patricia McLaughlin, "Pushed to breaking point," *Elyria Chronicle Telegram*, February 20, 1994, 52 (G4)

⁵²⁸ "McKee is more than a name," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, s2, p3 (15)

⁵²⁹ "Button industry grew out of accident," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, s2, p5 (19)

⁵³⁰ "Industry has seen plenty of changes," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, s2, p10 (23)

⁵³¹ "Marketing technique hinges on custom orders," *Muscatine Journal*, April 28, 1995, 1A, 3A

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McKee Button Company was among the three button companies in Muscatine that survived into the second decade of the 21st century, among the last of the manufacturers of buttons in the United States. While McKee Button Company continued to focus on the manufacture of custom buttons, there were fewer shirts and blouses made in America, so they also worked to diversify into other products to sustain the company. The company launched McKee Surfaces in 2005 to create resin products for vertical surfaces such as backsplashes for local office furniture businesses such as HNI Corporation and Allsteel. The majority of the old factory building sat vacant and not utilized in 2011, with button machines mothballed for potential use again in the future.⁵³² The company produced Enduron buttons with a proprietary resin chemistry and casting through 2019. The buttons were designed to be super-tough to stand up to commercial laundries without breaking. The buttons were also designed to enhance a garment by custom color and a stylistic pattern. State-of-the-art machinery invented by McKee Button Company was utilized to ensure quality of buttons and improve productivity to keep customer costs low. They continued to operate “right on the button” for their customers, evolving with the fashion industry to meet custom orders. McKee Surfaces also continued to specialize in hand crafted, solid surface materials used for a variety of purposes for home, commercial, and retail interior designs.⁵³³ McKee Button Company ceased production of buttons and its other products in November 2019, after Weber and Sons Button Company closed earlier in the year. Only J&K Button Company continued to manufacture polyester buttons at the end of 2019, with three employees working to supply orders as needed. They sold their polyester buttons to Emsig Manufacturing Corporation.⁵³⁴ Thus, McKee Button Company was one of the first two button companies in Muscatine, and it was one of the last two companies manufacturing buttons in Muscatine. The significance of this company within the button industry, not only in Muscatine but throughout the United States, is truly unparalleled by any other company.



Figure 50. McKee Button Company, Muscatine (McCarley 2019)
button factory from 1907 to 2019

⁵³² Mike Ferguson, “U.S. Rep. Dave Loebsack tours McKee Button Co.,” *Muscatine Journal*, April 20, 2011

⁵³³ McKee Button Company / McKee Surfaces, <http://mckeesurfaces.com.ipage.com>, accessed in November 2019

⁵³⁴ Ron McGowan, J&K Button Company, November 15, 2019.

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The McKee Button Company in comparison to other button companies and extant resources

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the McKee Button Company was a leader in the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States throughout the period of significance for this property from 1907 to 1959. The company operations stand out among other freshwater pearl button companies within this industry that was started and flourished in Muscatine, Iowa. While other freshwater pearl button companies operated in the United States, Muscatine stood out nationally for its production and prominence in this type of button, and it is believed that a factory in Muscatine would best represent the freshwater pearl button industry on a national level. Among the factories in Muscatine and other cities, the McKee Button Company stands out as the largest factory building constructed for the manufacture of freshwater pearl buttons, as well as for its prominence within the freshwater pearl button industry (Figure 50). The McKee Button Company exemplifies all aspects of the freshwater pearl button industry from the growth of the industry in the early 1900s with new machinery, prominence of pearl buttons through the 1910s, fight to sustain the pearl button industry in the late 1910s and 1920s, maturation of the pearl button industry in the 1920s and 1930s, persistence of freshwater pearl buttons in the 1940s and 1950s, and eventual evolution from pearl buttons at the end of the 1950s. Few other companies in the United States represent the entire spectrum of the freshwater pearl button industry, as further discussed below. Additionally, McKee Button Company is among a limited number of freshwater pearl button companies that retains an extant factory building. Further, McKee Button Company building in Muscatine is a building that was constructed as a freshwater pearl button factory for the company.

While smaller freshwater pearl button companies certainly operated along the Mississippi River during some years of the early 20th century, the larger pearl button factories, such as those in Muscatine, stand out for their longevity as well as the scope of their operations. Thus, in compiling a list of comparable companies, there were certain criteria that were utilized to determine a truly comparable company. Only button factories were considered comparable, as blank factories represent only one segment of the production of freshwater pearl buttons. Button factories then were only considered comparable companies if they produced freshwater pearl buttons over a minimum of 25 years, focused on the production of freshwater pearl buttons throughout those years as their primary product, operated branch cutting plants to supply blanks for their main button factory, and occupied a place of national recognition within the freshwater pearl button industry.

The testimony and involvement of freshwater pearl button companies in the various discussions and organizations at the national level in the 1910s to 1930s was utilized to determine the companies that had national recognition within the freshwater pearl button industry, as noted in the historic context. It is also believed that no other company meets the other criteria for a comparable company other than the ones identified in this manner. The companies noted for their involvement that also continued to operate for a minimum of 25 years included the following companies:

- McKee Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa
- Hawkeye Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa
- Automatic Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa
- U.S. Button Co, Muscatine, Iowa
- Iowa Pearl Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa
- Davenport Pearl Button Co, Davenport, Iowa
- Mississippi Pearl Button Co, Burlington, Iowa
- American Pearl Button Co, Washington, Iowa
- Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, Wisconsin
- Vienna Pearl Button Company / Pennant Pearl Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa / New York
- Hampshire Pearl Button Co (Harvey Chalmers and Sons), Amsterdam, New York
- Leo H. Hirsch and Company, New York City, New York

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Further research was then completed on these companies to identify any extant factory buildings and determine how they compared to McKee Button Company. While there were a number of large button companies in Muscatine historically, the majority of these companies are not associated with extant buildings. As research was expanded to other towns in Iowa, the Midwest, and the East, this lack of extant buildings was also found among these companies. The firms that are the best comparable companies with the McKee Button Company in terms of their operations do not retain extant buildings. The three firms that retain extant button factory buildings were not as large or prominent as the McKee Button Company. None of these firms operated for the 50+ years that McKee Button Company operated as a freshwater pearl button factory in this building, both associated with the progression of the industry and significant within each of its periods of development. Finally, none of the other buildings reflect the same scale of construction and operations as this large factory of the McKee Button Company, noted as the largest freshwater pearl button company in the country. The following three companies among the above list were identified as retaining extant buildings.

Boepple Button Co / U.S. Button Co, Muscatine, Iowa

The building at 701 E. 3rd Street was associated with several button companies, the longest being the U.S. Button Company from 1913 to the early 1940s. The building was constructed as the first button factory in Muscatine for the Boepple Button Company in 1896. In April 1901, J.F. Boepple transferred his interest in the Muscatine plant to partner Harry W. Huttig. The Boepple Button Company evolved into the Huttig-McDermid Pearl Button Co by 1906, which was then transitioned to the Pioneer Pearl Button Company in 1908, with listings for both companies in this directory.⁵³⁵ They moved to 116 Chestnut by 1913. Archie C. Adams was operating the U.S. Button Company in Muscatine by 1911, located on E. 5th St. In 1913, the U.S. Button Company moved into the original Boepple Button Company (later Pioneer Button Co) building at 701 3rd Street, with the original building at the corner and addition to the east (Figure 17). They operated a cutting plant in Maquoketa by 1911 and one in Guttenberg, IA from 1918 to 1930. In 1928, the Guttenberg plant was noted as one of 16 plants operated by U.S. Button Company of Muscatine.⁵³⁶ After the death of Adams in 1941, the company closed, and Hawkeye Button Company and McKee Button Company absorbed the interests and equipment of U.S. Button Company.⁵³⁷ The Home-O-Nize Company incorporated in 1944, and they moved into this building in 1945. The HON Company would grow to one of Muscatine's largest firms and an international company, expanding to occupy several city blocks on the east side of downtown Muscatine. The button factory building remains extant among their complex, though it has been remodeled (Figure 51).

Iowa Pearl Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa

The Iowa Pearl Button Company likewise operated in a building of an earlier company at 317 W. Mississippi Ave (formerly Front St). James S. McKee and William E. Bliven moved the Peerless Button Company into this two-story brick building formerly occupied by Citizen's Electric Light and Power Company in 1898, which was then expanded with a three-story rear addition in 1902-03.⁵³⁸ The McKee & Bliven Button Company then moved to their new factory at 1000 Hershey Ave in 1907. The building was then acquired by the Hawkeye Pearl Button Company in 1912 for additional factory space. In September 1916, the Iowa Pearl Button Company was organized by W.F. Bishop, O.A. Hammer, and J. Bishop. The company purchased the building from Hawkeye Button Co, and they opened there with 10 Barry automatic machines driven by electricity instead of steam, an innovation that then spread to other factories.⁵³⁹ The Iowa Pearl Button Company focused more on buttons sold on cards, with this segment of the industry thriving in the early 1930s as more families chose to make their own clothes. Aluminum was obtained from Alcoa Aluminum Co in Riverdale, Iowa to sew buttons on cards, and they sold buttons to the Kresge chain. They operated branch plants at Mt

⁵³⁵ Claassen 1994: 88

⁵³⁶ "Guttenberg Button Factory One of the 'Last Survivors,'" *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 14, 1928, 9

⁵³⁷ "Clam Shells from the Bed of Mississippi Feed Muscatine's Most Important Industry," *Muscatine Journal*, March 18, 1948, 17

⁵³⁸ "Larger Quarters," *Muscatine News Tribune*, April 7, 1898, 1; "Local Laconics," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, June 14, 1898, 4; ("Local Laconics," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, July 19, 1898, 4; "Will Enlarge Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, November 7, 1902, 1

⁵³⁹ Claassen 1994: 93

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Carmel, IL; Wapello, IA; and Columbus Junction, IA in 1931, with a business office in New York.⁵⁴⁰ The company continued to operate in this building until 1954, then moved to other quarters to continue to sell carded buttons. William Umlandt formed J&K Button Company with his son-in-law Bernard Hahn in 1955 to make Jewel-Kist buttons from a heat resistant type of plastic resin. The company moved into this building, and they employed 20 people by December 1956.⁵⁴¹ The factory continued to be used by J&K Button Company in early 2020, the last button company operating in Muscatine (at a small scale). This building is listed as a contributing building within the Downtown Commercial Historic District in Muscatine (Figure 52).



Figure 51. Boepple / U.S. Button Company, Muscatine button factory from 1896 to 1941
see brief history on page 146



Figure 52. Iowa Button Co / J&K Button Co, Muscatine button factories here from 1898 to 2020
see brief history on page 146



Figure 53. Weber Button Company, Muscatine pearl button factory from 1911-1957
operated plastic button factory across street until 2019
see brief history on page 149



Figure 54. Davenport Pearl Button Co, Davenport button factory from 1908-1944
see brief history on page 148

⁵⁴⁰ Claassen 1994: 92

⁵⁴¹ "Carl H. Umlandt Elected President of Reorganized Automatic Button Company," *Muscatine Journal*, April 18, 1955, 5; "J. and K. Button Co. Looks Ahead to Bright Future," *Muscatine Journal*, December 29, 1956, 8 (76); *Muscatine Journal*, December 27, 1957, 8; Raffensperger, "The Passing of an Era in Muscatine," August 7, 1966, 20

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Davenport Pearl Button Co, Davenport, Iowa

The Davenport Pearl Button Company operated in Davenport from 1896 to 1944. The company formed in 1896, and they moved from 2nd and Warren to the old Eagle Brewery at 5th and Taylor in Davenport in 1908. J.E. Krouse served as president of the company from 1912 to 1939. No branch cutting factories have been identified for the company, and the factory building is similar in scale to the smaller button factories in Muscatine. The Davenport Pearl Button Company then closed in 1944.⁵⁴² The building remains extant at 1235 W. 5th Street in Davenport (Figure 54).

While the following eight companies were identified on the list above, these companies were not identified to have extant button factory buildings:

- *Hawkeye Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*: A major button company from 1903 to 1966 that remained as a large producer of pearl buttons in 1948, operating shops in Muscatine and cutting plants in Keokuk, IA, Canton, MO; Toledo, IA; and Warsaw, IL.⁵⁴³ After the company dissolved in 1966, the property on the east side of Muscatine was sold, and the factory building was demolished for The HON Company.
- *Automatic Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa*: A major button company from 1898 to 1967 that operated branch offices in New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Utica, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, Kansas City, Dallas, and San Francisco by the late 1930s. The company converted to plastic buttons in 1960 and closed in 1967.⁵⁴⁴ The property on the east side of Muscatine was later sold and demolished for parking.
- *Mississippi Pearl Button Co, Burlington, Iowa*: This button company operated from 1901 to 1942, with cutting plants in Fort Madison, IA; Oquawka, IL; and Warsaw, IL by 1919. The company was dissolved in 1942, and the building on the north edge of downtown was later demolished for highway construction.⁵⁴⁵
- *American Pearl Button Co, Washington, Iowa*: This button company started in Muscatine and moved to Washington in 1908, operated here until the 1970s. They operated a branch cutting factory in Guttenberg, Iowa from 1930 to 1960.⁵⁴⁶ The three-story factory building has been demolished.
- *Wisconsin Pearl Button Co, La Crosse, Wisconsin*: A major pearl button company not located in Iowa, this company operated from 1900 to 1933, operating branch cutting plants in Lake City, MN, Gutenberg, IA, and Corning, AR by 1915. The company closed in 1933 with stock/equipment sold to the Hawkeye Button Company of Muscatine. Their headquarters and factory building were demolished in 1982.⁵⁴⁷
- *Vienna Pearl Button Company / Pennant Pearl Button Company, Muscatine, Iowa / New York*: The men of B. Blumenthal & Company of New York City incorporated the Muscatine company in 1902, shifting names in 1918. The company closed in 1943, and the building on the east side of Muscatine was later sold and demolished (part of the HON / HNI complex).⁵⁴⁸
- *Hampshire Pearl Button Co (Harvey Chalmers and Sons), Amsterdam, New York*: Harvey Chalmers & Sons incorporated the Hampshire Pearl Button Company in 1898 for the production of freshwater pearl buttons, operating several branch cutting factories throughout the Midwest including several towns in Iowa. The pearl button factory in Amsterdam, New York, was demolished in 1966 for highway construction.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴² "Button Company Buys Property," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, November 14, 1907, 8; "Button Works is Running Again," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Davenport, IA, August 14, 1908, 10; "Men Volunteer Aid in Crisis," *Daily Times*, Davenport, IA, October 15, 1918, 7; "J.E. 'Ed' Krouse, Former Industrialist, Dies at 82," *Daily Times*, April 9, 1957, 4

⁵⁴³ "Hawkeye Pearl Button Co," *Centennial Edition, Journal*, May 31, 1940, 156; Claassen 1994: 89-91

⁵⁴⁴ "Automatic Button Company, One of Pioneers in Field, is Observing its 40th Anniversary this Year," *Muscatine Journal*, December 30, 1938; "Automatic Button Co. in Court Receivership," *Muscatine Journal*, October 31, 1967, 2

⁵⁴⁵ "New Factory," *Burlington Gazette*, February 7, 1901, 5; "The City," *Burlington Evening Gazette*, March 16, 1901, 8; "Bought Hotel," *Burlington Evening Gazette*, March 29, 1901, 5; *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 23, 1910, 4; Claassen 1994: 96; "Notice of Dissolution," *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, October 28, 1942, 12

⁵⁴⁶ "American Pearl Button Co," *Evening Journal* – Washington County Centennial Celebration, July 1936, 85; "Button Industry Important Factor in Progress," *Washington Evening Journal*, 60th Anniversary Edition, February 27, 1953, 68

⁵⁴⁷ Claassen 1994: 100

⁵⁴⁸ "Make More Buttons," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, February 18, 1897, 1; "Another Button Factory," *Muscatine Journal*, February 19, 1897, 4, *Muscatine Journal*, June 20, 1901, 8; "Finishing Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, September 25, 1901, 5; "Fine Button Plant," *Muscatine News Tribune*, May 13, 1902, "Factory Name to be Changed," *Journal*, May 17, 1918, 10; *Journal*, June 7, 1918, 6

⁵⁴⁹ "Fifteen Running," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, August 2, 1900, 1; "Local News," *Muscatine News-Tribune*, May 25, 1902, 4; Bob Cudmore, "Harvey Chalmers II: buttons and literature," *The Daily Gazette*, Schenectady, NY, March 21, 2017

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- *Leo H. Hirsch and Company, New York City, New York:* As a manufacturer of ocean pearl buttons, Leo H. Hirsch expanded into freshwater pearl buttons by opening a factory in Muscatine in 1899. The Muscatine factory produced both finished buttons and only blanks at various periods in time, and it was destroyed by fire in 1940.⁵⁵⁰ They reopened a small cutting shop in the former Block Button Co building at 407 Benham. The overall focus of their business in New York through the 1960s was ocean pearl buttons.

Other identified freshwater pearl button company resources

A number of other freshwater pearl button companies were identified through this project, which do not approach the level of significance as the McKee Button Company as outlined previously in this section and throughout the nomination. A brief discussion is included below on the most notable of these companies.

While the Weber & Sons Button Company in Muscatine was not historically as prominent on the national level of the broader pearl button industry nor did it operate extensive branch factories, this local company was known historically for its specialty of fancy pearl buttons, and it continued to manufacture buttons in Muscatine through 2019. John Weber was an Austrian butter cutter that immigrated in 1892, moved to Muscatine in 1896 as foreman for the Boepple Button Company, and opened the Automatic Pearl Works in 1898 with Henry Umlandt (later incorporated as Automatic Button Company in 1902). John Weber then left this company to start his own pearl button company in 1904, which grew slowly and moved into the former space of the U.S. Button Company at 1008-1010 E. 6th Street in 1915.⁵⁵¹ The closing of the Paris factories with the start of World War I greatly increased their business. By December 1915, they were noted as being the largest factory in the world devoted to the manufacture of fancy pearl buttons, employing from 100 to 200 workers.⁵⁵² The two-story extant building of the Weber & Sons Button Company at 1008-1014 E. 6th Street was a much smaller factory than the McKee Button Company, but it was sufficient space for their specialty in fancy buttons (Figure 53). They continued to produce this type of button here until 1957. Their cutting plant in Savannah, Tennessee, was then also closed. Five truckloads of pearl buttons were given to Des Moines for uniforms as they worked to reduce their stock. The company shifted fully then to the manufacture of plastic buttons.⁵⁵³ A newer one-story manufacturing building had been constructed across the street for this production, and they continued to produce buttons in Muscatine here until closing in 2019, as well as selling various other buttons.

Three other properties associated with the button industry in Muscatine are listed on the NRHP as part of the Downtown Commercial Historic District in Muscatine: Ronda Button Company, the Muscatine Pearl Works buildings on W. 2nd Street, and the Batterson-Wessels Company. While associated with the button industry, none of these properties are comparable to the McKee Button Company. Ronda Button Company manufactured freshwater pearl buttons from 1946 to 1966, located in a building that was constructed for earlier businesses at 109 Pine Street and expanding into the former oatmeal company building to the east. While the company is significant for its advances in machinery for the freshwater pearl button industry, the overall scope and time of operations is not comparable to the McKee Button Company. The Muscatine Pearl Works started as a pearl novelty business at 218 W. 2nd St, and they expanded into large manufacture of freshwater pearl buttons in 1939 by setting up factory space at 227-229 W. 2nd St, where they operated until fire destroyed this building in 1961. Thus, this is a later company and the historic factory site is non-extant. The Batterson Button Company was incorporated in Muscatine in 1903 by E.S. Batterson of Chicago and J.E.T. Wessels. This company did not manufacture buttons, but it served as a wholesaler and jobber for buttons produced by other companies. They operated from the 1910s to 1950s at 212-214 W. 2nd Street.

⁵⁵⁰ "Early Morning Blaze Completely Destroys Hirsch Button Plant," *Muscatine Journal*, June 22, 1940, 1

⁵⁵¹ "Weber Button Company Signals Most Prosperous Year by Expansion," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 56

⁵⁵² *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 79; "Weber Button Company Signals Most Prosperous Year by Expansion," *Muscatine Journal*, December 11, 1915, 56

⁵⁵³ Claassen 1994: 99

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Other pearl button companies operated regionally that were determined not to meet the criteria of a comparable company for the McKee Button Company. One of these companies was the Lansing Button Company in Lansing, Iowa, which did not operate branch cutting plants and ceased manufacture of freshwater pearl buttons in the 1930s to focus on other aspects of the industry. Another of these companies was the Nord-Buffum Pearl Button Company in Louisiana, Missouri, which was smaller in scale but continued to manufacture freshwater pearl buttons into the 1950s (demolished). Multiple other “button factories” in various towns in Iowa and Illinois operated primarily as blank factories throughout their history, with some extant buildings associated with these firms. Many of these factories were operated as branch locations for the larger companies that were based in Muscatine.

Other significant resources in the button industry of the United States

While the McKee Button Company is significant for its association within the freshwater pearl button industry of the United States, other button companies have been recognized as significant as related to other segments of the button industry. As other button factories across the country closed, efforts were made in other communities in the early 21st century to recognize their history and significance. It is unknown how many factories associated with button companies may still exist in the United States. A number of these factories were also originally buildings that were built for other purposes, then adapted for the button company, unlike this building for the McKee Button Company that was built as a button factory. Only a handful of other button companies are currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), with none associated with the production of freshwater pearl buttons specifically:

- Two buildings associated with button companies are listed in Rochester, New York. The Rochester Button Company, built for the company in 1905, was listed on the NRHP as part of Brown's Race Historic District in 1989.⁵⁵⁴ The Shantz Button Factory built in 1903-04, the only other remaining property associated with the button industry in Rochester, New York, was then listed on the NRHP in 2013.⁵⁵⁵ Both of these companies trace their history to Moses B. Shantz, who started the vegetable ivory button industry in Rochester in 1887 under his father's Canadian company, and they both manufactured vegetable ivory buttons. M.B. Shantz operated the International Button Company in part of his building in the 1910s, making some pearl buttons. Rochester Button Company then shifted to casein buttons by the 1930s, while Shantz Button Company closed in 1926. Rochester Button Company operated until 1990.
- The Auburn Button Works and Logan Silk Mills in Auburn, New York, was listed on the NRHP in 2007, an 1879 building constructed for both businesses. The Auburn Button Works started here in 1877 when John H. Woodruff moved his button company from New York City to Auburn. He manufactured ocean pearl and composition buttons in this building into the 1890s when it was moved to a larger facility.⁵⁵⁶
- The Scranton Button Company in Scranton, PA, was listed on the NRHP in 2017. Philip L. Sylvester worked for Woodruff and moved to Scranton in 1891 to develop a shellac composition button for Scranton Button Company. This brick building was built in 1899 for the expanding business. Sylvester also developed automatic machinery for shellac composition buttons. The company grew significantly over the next two decades, reportedly producing two-thirds of all shellac composition buttons in the U.S. in 1914. The company continued to make buttons into the 1920s, and then they began utilizing their shellac compound for records. They made records for Emerson Phonograph Company.⁵⁵⁷

The McKee Button Company represents a different segment of the button industry than these previously listed properties, and it was utilized as a button factory longer than any of these other buildings identified as significant within the button industry. Additionally, the company stands out as a leader on the national stage, in terms of both the scope of its operations as well as for its national presence within the button industry.

⁵⁵⁴ Robert D. Kuhn, Brown's Race Historic District, Rochester, NY, National Register of Historic Places nomination, January 1989

⁵⁵⁵ Saralinda Hooker, Canandaigua, NY, Shantz Button Factory, Rochester, NY, NRHP nomination, June 13, 2013.

⁵⁵⁶ Nancy L. Todd, Waterford, NY, Auburn Button Works and Logan Silk Mills, Auburn, NY, NRHP nomination, June 2007.

⁵⁵⁷ Lackawanna Mills and Scranton Button Historic District, Scranton, PA, NRHP nomination, February 28, 2017

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
 previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #

Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State Agency
 Federal Agency
 Local Government
 University
 Other

Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

Iowa Site #70-00428

Funding for this nomination project has been provided by the Friends of Muscatine Historic Preservation, Community Foundation of Greater Muscatine, the McKee family, the Dick Maeglin Foundation, and the Muscatine Historic Preservation Commission (City of Muscatine).

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10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of
Property** approximately 2 acres

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage; enter "Less than one" if the acreage is .99 or less)

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS8: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1 41.414888 _____
Latitude

_____ -91.055220
Longitude

3 _____
Latitude _____
Longitude

2 _____
Latitude

_____ Longitude

4 _____
Latitude _____
Longitude

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary begins at the northwest corner of the McKee property on the south side of Hershey Avenue, about 250 feet west of Elm Street. The boundary extends east from this corner along Hershey Avenue for about 485 feet to the edge of the railroad property, continues to the southwest along the railroad property line on the south side of the McKee additions for about 645 feet, turns to the north-northeast along the McKee property line for about 120 feet, and then continues to the north along the property line for about 290 feet to the point of beginning (see Figure 3, page 6).

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary for the National Register of Historic Places listing encompasses the property historically and currently associated with the McKee Button Company.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Rebecca Lawin McCarley date March 30, 2020
organization SPARK Consulting telephone 319-200-9767
street & number 1630 Park Ave SE email sparkconsulting@octaspark.com
city or town Cedar Rapids state IA zip code 52403

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

... **GIS Location Map (Google Earth or BING)**

... **Local Location Map**

... **Site Plan**

... **Floor Plans (As Applicable)**

... **Photo Location Map** (Key all photographs to this map and insert immediately after the photo log and before the list of figures).

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs under separate cover. The size of each image must be 3000x2000 pixels, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and does not need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: McKee Button Company

City or Vicinity: Muscatine

County: Muscatine County **State:** Iowa

Photographer: Rebecca Lawin McCarley

Date Photographed: June 27, 2019, July 29, 2019

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1. Setting of McKee Button Company along Hershey Avenue, camera facing south-southwest
2. East elevation, camera facing southwest
3. East and north elevations, camera facing south-southwest
4. East end of north elevation showing main factory entry, camera facing southeast
5. North elevation, camera facing east
6. West elevation, camera facing east
7. East and south elevations, including east side of south extension (B3), camera facing west
8. South elevation, camera facing west
9. South elevation, camera facing north
10. South elevation of main factory building from courtyard area, camera facing north
11. South elevations of west additions along railroad tracks, camera facing north
12. North elevation of west additions, camera facing southeast
13. Setting of McKee Button Company looking towards downtown from top of levee with Mississippi River at right, camera facing northeast
14. Stairs from second story (main level) in brick factory building (B1), camera facing north
15. Offices at east end of second story in building (B1), camera facing south
16. Main hall on second story to factory space in building (B1), camera facing northeast
17. Shipping/storage area on south side of second story in building (B1), camera facing north
18. Main factory space on second story in building (B1), camera facing southwest
19. Main factory space on second story in building (B1), camera facing northwest
20. Stairs hall on third story (upper level) in brick factory building (B1), camera facing southeast

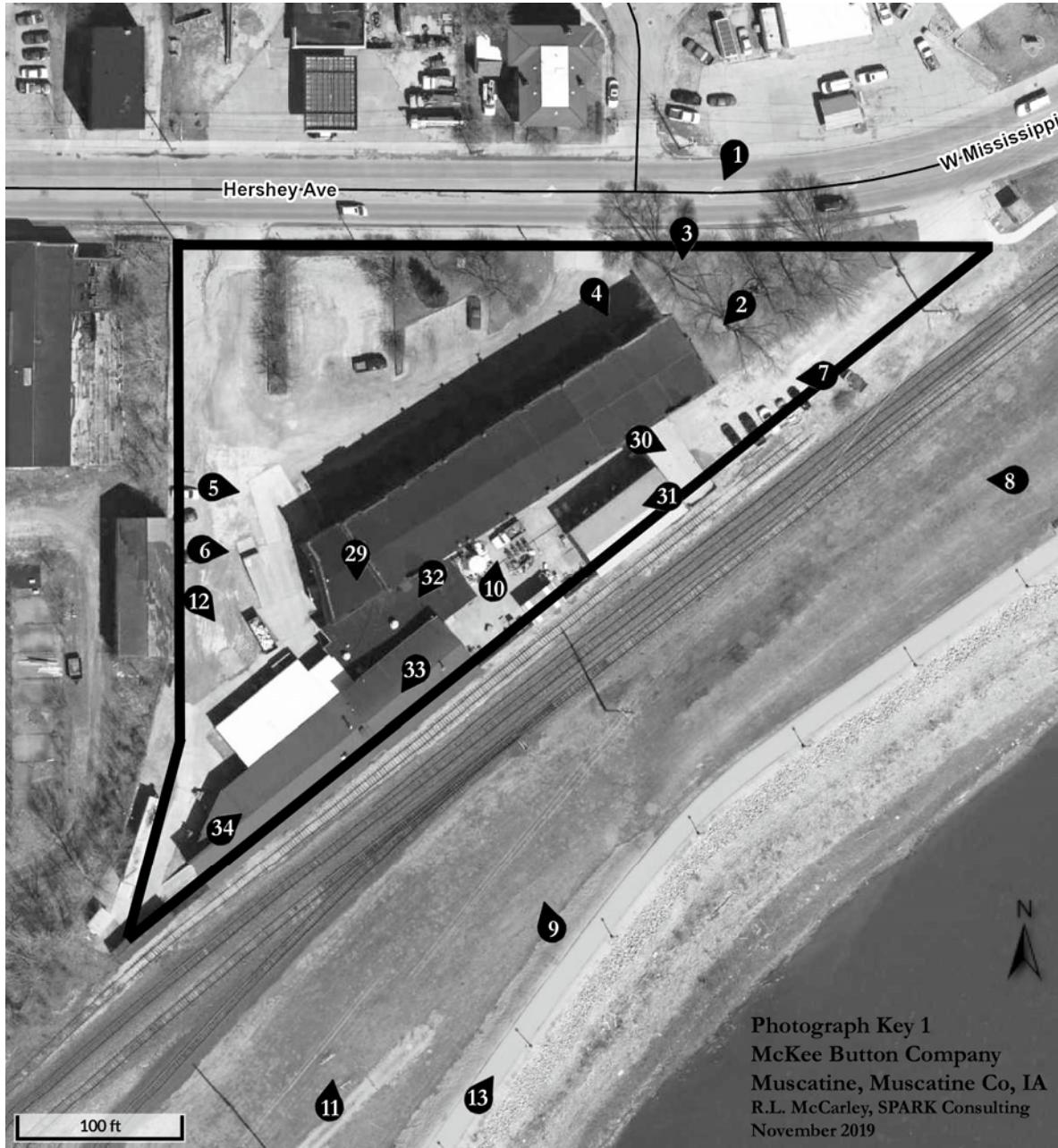
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21. South room at east end of third story in building (B1), camera facing southwest
22. Main hall on third story to factory space in building (B1), camera facing southwest
23. Main factory space on third story in building (B1), camera facing southwest
24. Hall at base of stairs on first story (lower level) in building (B1), camera facing north
25. Main factory space on first story in building (B1), camera facing southwest from east end
26. Room on north side of middle of first story in building (B1), camera facing northwest
27. Main factory space on first story in building (B1), camera facing northeast
28. West end of main factory space on first story in building (B1), camera facing west
29. Former engine room (B2) at west end, camera facing south
30. Second story of south brick addition at east end (B3), camera facing southeast
31. Second story of machine shop (B4), camera facing west
32. First story of south brick addition at west end (B5) looking into south storage shed (B6), camera facing southwest
33. First story of south storage shed (B6), camera facing southwest
34. Polyester resin room at west end of south storage shed (B6), camera facing northeast

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