

ELISHA WATERS, MORE THAN JUST AN INK MAKER

By Ed and Lucy Faulkner



Elisha Waters, known to bottle collectors as E. Waters, was an amazing businessman with many interests, perhaps the most unusual being the manufacturer of paper boats and paper domes for buildings in the late 1800s. Yes, you read right—paper boats and domes. But let's start with his early years and background information.

Elisha Waters was born in Bennington, Vermont in 1815. He was educated in the public schools of Bennington, but moved with his parents to Troy, New York in 1831. Shortly thereafter, Elisha entered the employ of Oliver C. Hull, a druggist on River Street. When Mr. Hull moved to New York City, Waters got a job with Fassett and Selden, another well known drug company in Troy. He was such a hard worker, the owners of this drug company, offering their support, advised him to start his own business when he turned twenty-one. At first he planned to head west to Ohio to start a business, but after traveling through Ohio and other western states, he decided to return to Troy. Once again he got a job with another druggist before opening his first store, in 1838, at the corner of River and Second streets. He later went into business with a Jared S. Weed and the company was known as Weed and Waters. (Note: This is the spelling in the obituary. An 1850s ad spells the "Weed" name "Wickes.") This venture at 271 River Street was not successful and Waters again returned to operating his own druggist business. Later, he and John Van Schaick

purchased another drug store and when Mr. Van Schaick retired, he took full control of the business. He made various drug articles, such as Waters Pulmonica (a cough medicine), as well as ink, hair dye, and blacking. The ink bottles are found most often, but blacking and hair dye are known. The pontiled ink bottles are a unique shape and very sought after by ink collectors. The umbrella shown here has a label for the 271 River Street address. The author has not seen the Pulmonica bottle, but it is listed in the *Pontil Medicine Encyclopedia* by John Odell.

By 1852, Waters was a very successful businessman who needed good packing boxes for shipping his ink and drug products. The paper boxes at the time were flimsy and not very good for heavy items. His box manufacturing came about because of this need for good shipping containers. He set to work making a better box and obtained patents for at least two improved boxes, the first in 1855. In the beginning, these were just for his products, but as word spread, other companies wanted to order from him. This led to a box factory in 1857, producing on a large scale for the shirt, collar, and hosiery industries and probably other companies.

In the next twenty years, Waters obtained a number of other patents involving paper products. By this time, we believe he had sold his druggist business because an ad by another

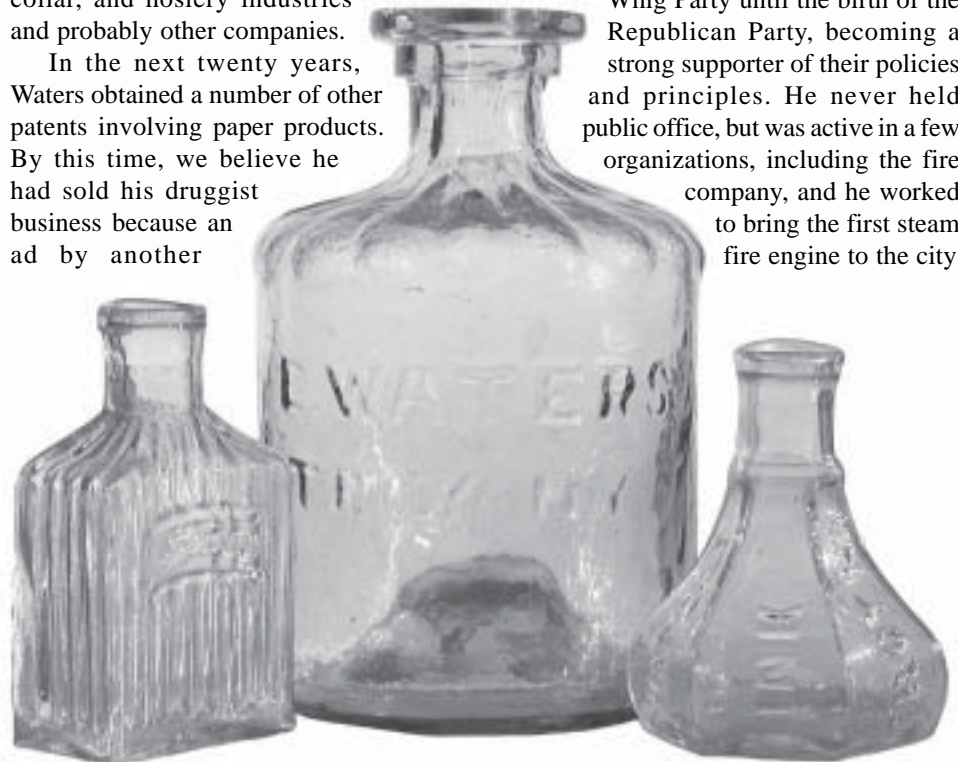


Elisha Waters

druggist noted they were the successors to Waters. This ad listed their business at his last location.

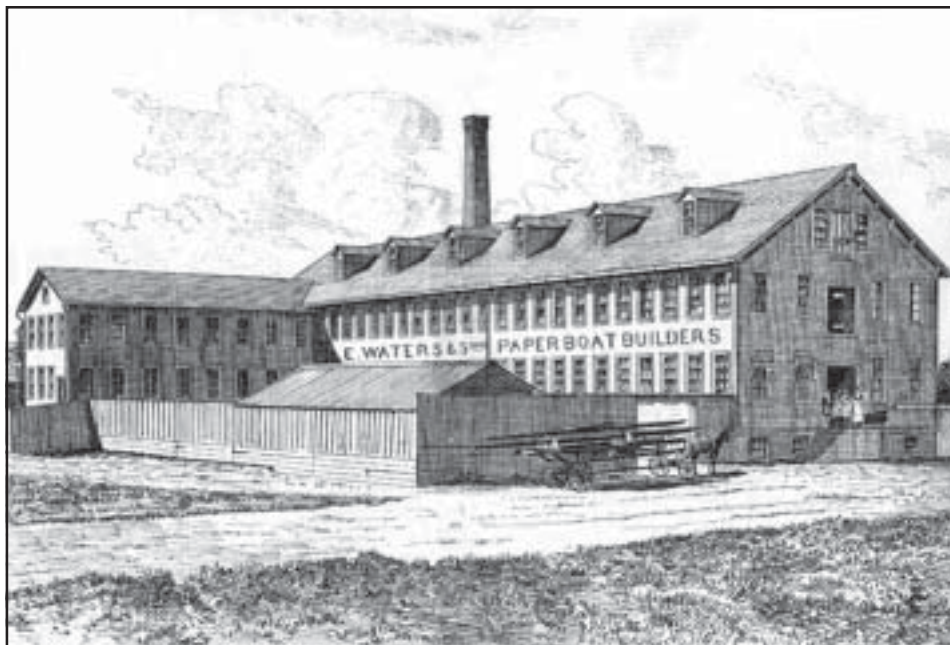
Records show Mr. Waters was active during the Civil War manufacturing 4,000,000 cartridge boxes and 65,000 saddle trees for the Union Forces. He was also engaged by the War Department to inspect saddle tree manufacturing plants elsewhere. Waters was a strict Northern supporter having been a strong Abolitionist prior to the war. He was a member of the

Whig Party until the birth of the Republican Party, becoming a strong supporter of their policies and principles. He never held public office, but was active in a few organizations, including the fire company, and he worked to bring the first steam fire engine to the city





George Waters, Elisha's son,
originator and inventor of the paper boats.



Factory of Waters and Sons.

of Troy. He was also interested in scientific progress and particularly in the field of aeronautics, having taken a balloon ride from Troy to Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Although continuing to manufacture paper boxes, his creative mind helped him make many innovations in the process and methods of paper manufacturing. One of these inventions was a paper can for oil and other liquids in 1877 for which he obtained a patent.

Searching for new product lines, he worked with his son George A. Waters, who invented the paper racing shell which attained world wide fame. They obtained a patent for the construction of a paper boat in 1868. This first boat was dubbed "The Experiment." Elisha had much practical knowledge in the manipulation of paper that helped make George's boat a success. These waterproof paper boats were lighter and faster and won many races. Waters was selling so many that he had to build a factory to manufacture just these boats. The firm was first called Waters and Balch, later just Waters and Sons. These boats were popular because in the last quarter of the 19th century rowing competitions were a big sport. Waters' catalog proudly said a total of 14 races were won by his paper boats in 1868 and 26 in 1869. By the 1870s and 80s, many were competing for prizes of several thousand dollars, a big prize in the 1880s. It was scandals resulting from gambling that caused the demise of paper boat racing.

The Waters product line grew to include rowing shells ranging from a 28-foot by 9.5-inch single shell to an 8-oared shell 60- feet by 24-inches. A typical 31-foot shell weighed only 22 pounds, compared to about 40 for a similar wood hull. These boats used thick manila paper made waterproof for the hull and deck. An 1878 catalog offered 44 different crafts for sale. His listing in the Troy City Directory was now as a boat, not box, manufacturer.

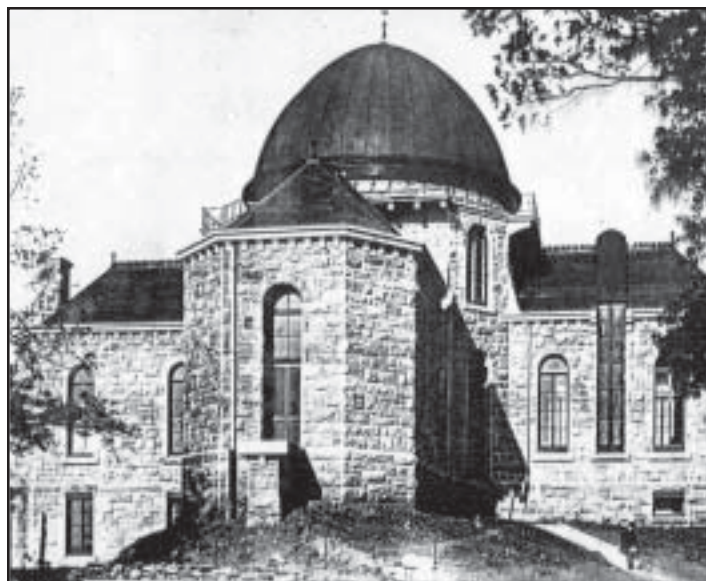
While boat building was the main interest of George Waters, Elisha was always looking for new things to do with paper. In 1878, they built a paper observatory dome at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy. The construction was almost identical to the paper boat construction. They first built a framework which they bolted together and the joints were weatherproofed with cotton cloth saturated with white lead. This dome lasted for twenty years. It was removed when the building

was converted to other uses, not because of decay. (A patent for paper domes was obtained in 1881.) Several other domes were built, including one for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (pictured). It contained over 2,000 pounds of paper and was 30-feet in diameter. This dome fell into disrepair and was dismantled in 1958/59.

According to a publication in Paper World of 1881:

"It weighs only 1/10 th as much as a copper dome of equal size. It is expected that the paper will act as a nonconductor of heat and electricity, will maintain a uniform temperature within the building, and will prevent any electrical disturbance from destroying the accuracy of the instruments."

In 1901, a fire destroyed the boat and dome factory and the business never reopened. It was stated at the time, the fire caused \$20,000 damage, and they had only \$ 5,000 insurance. This plus



The Lusk Observatory. This photo, taken in the 1880s,
shows the paper dome and the transit shutters.

age, health and competition, was probably the reason. Both George and Elisha died within two years of the fire. Another son, Clarence W. Waters, who had worked with them was still living. C. W. Waters is listed on some of the patents obtained by this firm. Waters may have been responsible for the many paper patents obtained by others who tried to emulate his success. Patents included paper stools, a paper casket, and even a paper locomotive wheel. Yes, an actual patent exists for that!

Elisha Waters' obituary says he was genial, pure minded and never lost an opportunity to help his fellow man. In business he was shrewd and determined, but honest, a family man cherishing moments with those he loved. The history of his life and career could be summed up with two words—Well Done. He died January 28, 1904.

We wish to thank Ken Cupery for allowing us to use information he has compiled as well as his pictures. He has an amazing website and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the paper industry of the second half of the 19th century.

References and credits:

Boat Factory picture courtesy of Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, N.Y.

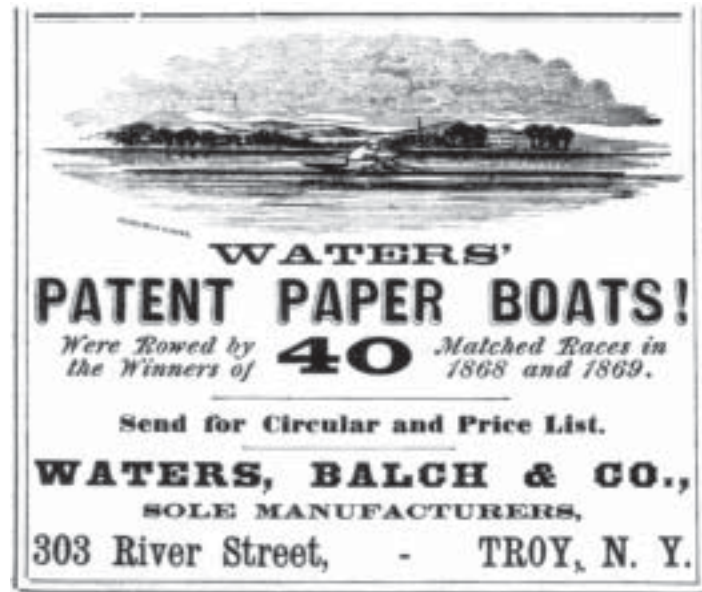
Website of Ken Cupery—Ken's Paper Boat Page and other articles. <http://kcupery.home.isp-direct.com/>

Obituaries courtesy of Ken Cupery:

Troy Times, January 28, 1904.

Northern Budget, January 31, 1904.

Pictures courtesy of Ken Cupery.



Ad from the *Gazeteer and Business Directory* of Rensselaer County, 1870.

