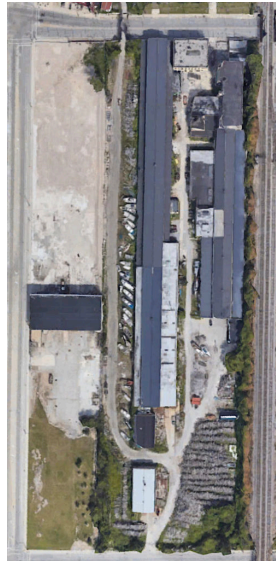


The Remarkable John Stowell of Filer and Stowell Company

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Story by Bay View Compass

By Anna Passante
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Aerial view of what remains of the enormous Filer & Stowell Company on the southeast corner of East Becher and South First streets.



John Maxwell Stowell

The old Filer & Stowell Company manufacturing complex at 147 E. Becher St. may soon be converted to affordable workforce housing. The developer is Kenosha-based Bear Development LLC.

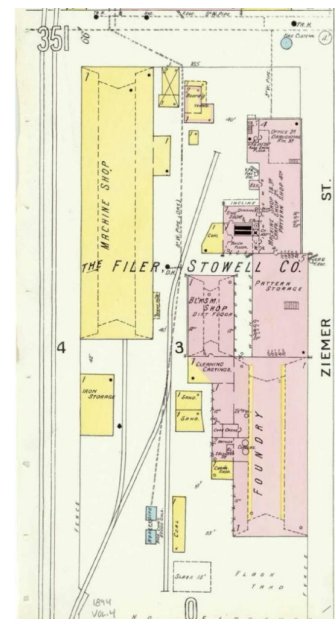
Filer & Stowell manufactured sawmill and woodworking machinery at the Becher site from 1890 to 1963. The company, still in existence, is one of Milwaukee's oldest continuously operating manufacturing firms.

Sawmill machinery was in great demand in the 1850s when Wisconsin was experiencing a surge in logging. Numerous sawmills popped up in the north woods to mill logs into lumber. Wisconsin author Jerry Apps wrote in his book *When the White Pine Was King*, "As many as 40 places in northern Wisconsin were once major sawmill centers, and the population of the lumber towns in the north grew four times as fast as the population of the state as a whole during the years 1860 to 1870."

Many of these towns were growing rapidly, like many others across the Midwest, resulting in a great need for lumber to build houses and furniture. Entrepreneurs like John Stowell took advantage of this surge and invested in the manufacture of lumber mill equipment.

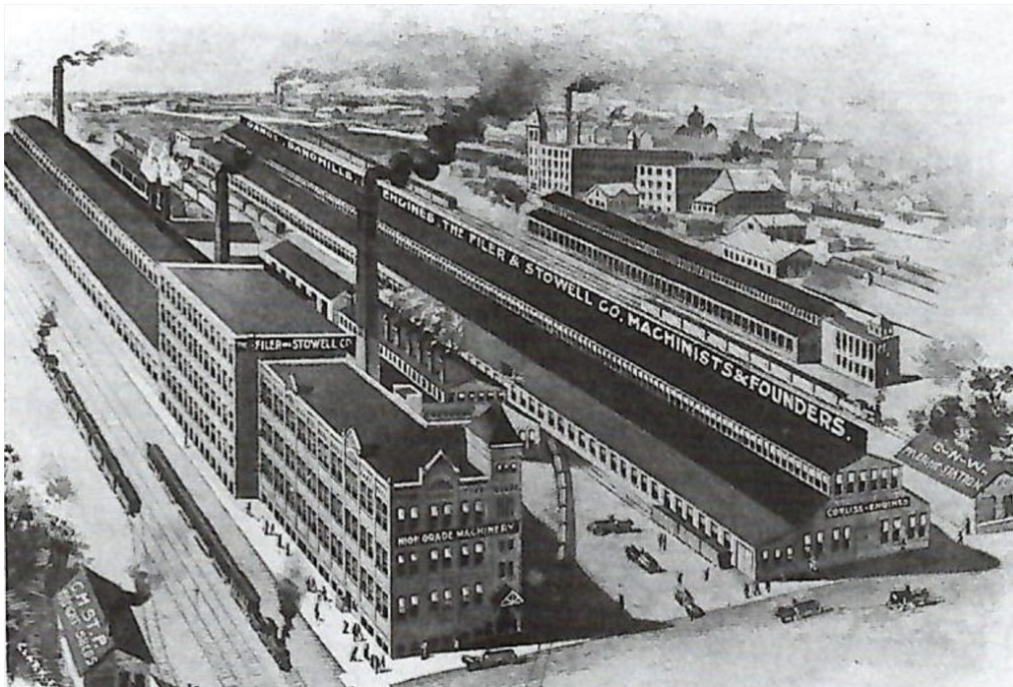
Stowell was born in Alexander, NY, March 9, 1824. There he spent his childhood on his father's farm, where he helped his father except when he was in school or teaching. He enrolled in Marietta College in Marietta, OH, in 1848, but dropped out. He moved to St. Louis, MO, where he published *The Literary Emporium*, a profitable monthly periodical, that he sold after a year.

He moved to Mansfield, OH, where he went into merchandising (probably a dry goods/grocer business). In 1850, he sold that business, moved back to St. Louis, and was hired as a clerk for Eagle Foundry and Machine Shops.



The 1894 Sanborn & Perris Insurance Map indicates a foundry, coal and iron storage, a blacksmith shop, carpentry shops, machine shops, an office and drafting building, and a pattern storage building, among others, were part of the Filer & Stowell Company complex. East Becher Street is at the top edge of the map and illustration.

In 1855, perhaps bored or restless or looking for his path, he moved to Moline, IL, and formed a partnership with Orlando Child to build a circular saw factory. It was the first large sawmill that exclusively used circular saws. His business was immediately successful because he was able to mill lumber of better quality than competitors who used older, less efficient saws. An excerpt about Stowell in the book *The History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin: From Prehistoric Times to the Present*, published in 1881, reported, “[Stowell’s sawmill] was an unwelcome rival of the old competing saw-mills, and at the end of a year, mysteriously took fire and burned down. Mr. Stowell had no insurance, and was left penniless and powerless to rebuild.”



The enormous Filer & Stowell complex stood on 10 acres bounded by East Becher, South First Street, East Lincoln Avenue, and a railroad. Becher is seen at the bottom of this illustration.



A comparison of this photo with the building in the left forefront of the illustration above shows that the pyramid tower on its roof is gone, as are the three triangular decorative façades that extended above the parapet. The porch roof that protected the front door has also been removed. Photo Katherine Keller



He borrowed \$1,000 with a 24 percent interest rate. (Some sources state it was 25 percent). He moved to Milwaukee in 1856 to be nearer the lumber regions in Wisconsin and Michigan and leased the old Menomonee Works building near Reed (now Second) and South Water streets. He established J.M. Stowell & Co. and began manufacturing circular saws. An economic depression hit Wisconsin due to the impending Civil War. Stowell suspended operations in 1862 and 1863. To make ends meet, he served as editor of the Juneau County Argus and then as commercial editor of the Milwaukee News.

In 1863 he rented the shop room of Wm. Melms and again built circular saws, trading his bookkeeping services for rent. As his business grew, he needed larger quarters. In 1866 Stowell arranged to move into quarters owned by Eagle Foundry. In the midst of the move, the foundry burned. According to the account in The History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, "By the fire he lost his entire stock, as during the day of removal it was impossible to define the place for issuance of insurance policy. It was the only day since his loss ten years before, that he had not been fully insured against loss by fire."

In 1867, Stowell and Delos L. Filer formed a partnership. Like Stowell, Filer was a New York native. Filer had settled in Michigan. He made numerous trips between Wisconsin and Manistee, MI, to sell lumber and purchase sawmill equipment from J.M. Stowell & Co. After forming the partnership with Stowell, he remained in Michigan.

Previous to his lumber mill business, Filer was employed as a traveling salesman selling cigars and tobacco in Racine, WI. By 1853, he abandoned the tobacco trade and began buying up timberland and investing in lumber mills in Manistee, MI.

As demand increased for their product, the owners looked for a larger facility. In 1869, the company moved to a building at the intersection of East Florida and South Clinton (now South First) streets that had been vacated by the Bay State Works, a foundry and machine shop. The new owners rebuilt and enlarged the building, and named it Cream City Iron Works. They continued to specialize in sawmill and gristmill equipment.

During the 1870s, the company underwent two notable changes. Stowell hired his nephew Walter Read and Delos Filer died in 1879. The company was incorporated as The Filer & Stowell Company in 1880.



Delos L. Filer

THE FILER & STOWELL CO., Engineers and Manufacturers, MILWAUKEE, WIS.

HIGH DUTY
**Pumping
Machinery**
AND
Air Compressors.

**Power Transmission
Machinery.**

HIGH GRADE
**Saw Mill
Machinery**
A SPECIALTY.

CORLISS ENGINES

Single, Compound,
Triple Expansion,
Condensing,
Non-Condensing

COMPLETE PLANTS OF THE HIGHEST EFFICIENCY.

Filer & Stowell purchased the bankrupt Corliss Engine on East Becher and South First streets works in a sheriff's auction. An ad from the early 1900s features Corliss engines, but also lists sawmill equipment. John Stowell started the company by manufacturing and selling circular saws for the lumber industry.

The company continued to prosper and grow, employing 100 workers. In 1890, the company moved to 147 E. Becher Street. They purchased the Corliss Engine plant and equipment complex in a sheriff's auction. Filer and Stowell apparently added the manufacture of Corliss engines to its product line based on contemporary advertisements. A collection of trade catalogs in the National Museum of American History's archives includes ads for Filer & Stowell that list Corliss engines among its products. The new plant was located on 10 acres near a railroad right of way and track. Filer & Stowell used rail to transport their sawmill machinery to customers in businesses in the Northwest.

According to the Milwaukee Journal (August 5, 1905), Stowell disposed of his interests in the Filer & Stowell Company in 1895 and established the Stowell Manufacturing and Foundry Co. in South Milwaukee with Charles I. Sammond, his son-in-law. Stowell manufactured hardware, as well as iron and brass castings and machinery for haying. A 1911 South Milwaukee city directory states the firm was located on the corner of Madison and Fifth avenues.

The Filer & Stowell Company continued at the Becher Street site with the Read family at the helm. By 1963, it ceased operating its foundry business at the Becher Street site and moved to 3939 W. McKinley Ave. in Milwaukee. The company, according to its website, deals in machinery, industrial equipment, and supplies. Today, most of the machinery made by Filer & Stowell is crafted of welded steel. Patterns are used only to build smaller components or new parts for old equipment.

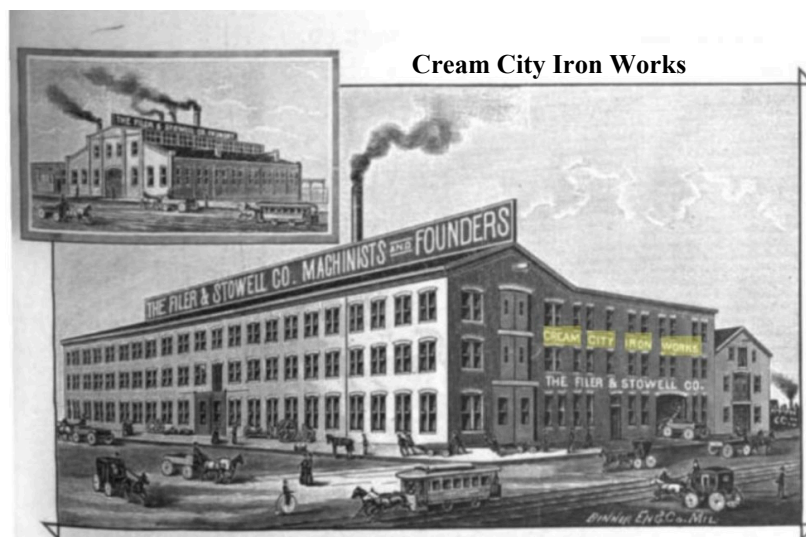
In addition to his business career, Stowell served as a representative in the Wisconsin Assembly in 1862; as the Milwaukee Ward 8 alderman in the Milwaukee Common Council, 1863-1864; and Milwaukee mayor from 1882-1884. He was involved in the temperance movement and took a strong stand against the liquor interests by shutting down tough Milwaukee dance halls because of too many brawls. In 1883 during Stowell's term as mayor, developer Edmund Burke named North Stowell Avenue in his honor. It is located on Milwaukee's Eastside. Stowell died in 1907 at age 84.

Filer & Stowell Company's WWII Contribution

"Filer & Stowell of Milwaukee was one of the companies selected to manufacture steam engines for the military in World War II. By May 1943, they produced more than 50 of the standard 2,500 horsepower, triple-expansion marine steam engines. Each engine weighed 135 tons.

The company was awarded the "M" pennant by the Maritime Commission—the first company in the state of Wisconsin to receive this designation for outstanding production achievement."

Source: warmemorialcenter.org/events/75th-commemoration/when-milwaukee-went-to-war-part-5/





Cream City Iron Works

The Cream City Iron Works was established in 1869, by Messrs. Filer, Stowell & Pierce. They are built on the site of the old Bay State Works, at the corner of Clinton and Florida streets, from which, during that year, the Bay State Company had removed to their new and more commodious buildings on Oregon and Barclay streets. The firm, on taking possession of the old establishment, rebuilt and enlarged it, and started under the present name.

The business was that of a general foundry and machine shop, building and making sawmills, grist-mills being their specialties. The number of men employed the first year was thirty, and the work turned out amounted to sixty thousand dollars (2021 equivalent \$1,168,575). The largest part of the present works has been built since. In 1871, the largest machine shop was built. In 1878, a department was added to the business, and buildings erected, for the manufacture of burr-stones.

The buildings of the establishment now occupy the entire area embraced by a frontage of 142 feet and a depth of 120 feet on Florida street and 150 feet on Clinton street; also the stone shops across Clinton street, north of the railroad crossing, with a frontage on the street of 125 feet and a depth of 120 feet. The extensive works, as now carried on, employ 135 men, and turn out manufactured iron machinery, annually, amounting to three hundred thousand dollars (2021 equivalent \$7,946,310).

The bulk of the work done is the building of steam engines, saw-mills, and flouring mills, both burr-stone and roller. Their orders come from all parts of the United States, but the bulk of their trade is with the South, and the quality of work in every department is excellent. The changes in the firm owning and managing the works since their establishment, in 1867, have been as follows: First firm was Filer, Stowell & Pierce. In 1868, Mr. Pierce retired, and G. Menzel and Geo. Hackney became partners. The new firm was Menzel, Stowell & Co. At the end of two years, Messrs. Menzel and Hackney had both sold out, and Delos Filer and John M. Stowell became sole proprietors of the concern, the firm being Filer, Stowell & Co. They continued the business with no further changes till the death of Mr. Filer, which occurred in June, 1879, since which time, under the same firm name, the business has been uninterruptedly carried on by Mr. Stowell and the heirs of his late partner.

Excerpted from: History of Milwaukee: From Prehistoric Times to the Present