

Biggs Pump & Supply, Inc.

Founded: 1830

Location: Southwest corner of Main and Ninth Streets, Lafayette (1858, 1870); 138 Brown Street (1870–); corner of Brown, Erie, and Thirteenth Streets (later 1301 Brown Street) (1880, 1949); U.S. 52 bypass, 181 South Sagamore Parkway (1950–)

Benjamin F. Biggs was born in Frederick County, Maryland, in 1824, where he grew up on a farm and, after he reached the age of sixteen, began teaching school. He apprenticed with his uncle, a millwright, for four years, earning \$100 a year, before working as a journeyman millwright. Biggs married in 1849, and in 1851 he, his wife, and some relatives migrated to Lafayette. Disliking the separation from his family, Biggs quit his work as a millwright and became a foreman for R. A. Durbin, a pioneer pump manufacturer located at Ninth and Main Streets. The Durbin company claimed to date from 1830. Durbin eventually moved to Indianapolis, and Biggs and William Douglass formed a partnership to continue his pump-making business at the same location. Durbin opened a new pump-making factory in the Circle City, and Douglass joined him in the venture after 1870.

Biggs purchased Douglass's interest in the Lafayette company in 1870, but he soon entered into a new partnership with Curtis E. Wells. Biggs & Wells was located in a new three-story factory at the intersection of Brown and Erie Streets. The firm sold wooden pumps made from yellow poplar with sugar maple handles. As Biggs developed a mail-order business and improved the designs of his pumps, demand for the firm's products spread in neighboring states. Improvements made during the early 1870s made Biggs's pumps the industry standard. The pumps were unique for their water-lifting arrangement; Biggs used a wooden sucker, or plunger, which was skirted with leather in

order to make a flexible seal. In 1876 Biggs's pumps won a medal and diploma at the centennial exposition in Philadelphia.

In 1875 Biggs bought Wells's interest in the firm. Three years later Biggs's son-in-law Mahlon H. Timberlake joined the company. Upon Biggs's death in 1883, Timberlake took over the firm. By the 1880s the B. F. Biggs Pump Company was manufacturing wooden and chain pumps, including the Lafayette Pump and the Boss Chain Pump, as well as water tanks, veranda and porch columns (a specialty), ornamental grille work, kitchen cabinets, and the polar creamer. The polar creamer was a water-cooled, heavily insulated, air-pumped refrigerator that was used primarily as a cream separator. In addition, the company provided wood-turning services and stocked cast-iron pumps, pipes, pipe fittings, and valves. The company sold its products as far east as Pennsylvania and as far west as Idaho. The B. F. Biggs Pump Company was incorporated in 1893.

Beginning in the early 1880s the company began purchasing iron pumps and pipe materials manufactured by other firms for resale on the wholesale market and slowly retired from making its own wooden pumps and other products. By the early 1920s Biggs distributed only products made by other companies. In 1921 Frank Timberlake, Mahlon's son, assumed control of the firm upon his father's death.

In 1943, with the expiration of its charter, the B. F. Biggs Pump Company was renamed the Biggs Pump & Supply Company, Incorporated. George Needham, Sr., purchased it the following year. In 1950 George Needham, Jr., took the place of his father at the head of the company and moved the distributor to a new warehouse on the U.S. 52 bypass, later named the Sagamore Parkway. The additional space allowed Biggs to open

a kitchen showroom and add industrial maintenance, repair, and operating supplies to its inventory.

George Sr. had started his own plumbing and heating contracting business in Lafayette in 1936. After his retirement from Biggs in 1950 he opened Needham Engineering, Incorporated, of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, which became a subsidiary of Biggs Pump & Supply. George Jr. was a graduate of Purdue University and had served as an apprentice and a journeyman at the Acme Plumbing & Heating Company before becoming executive vice president of his father's firm. When he became president in 1950 he established an open-door policy to encourage employees to come to him with problems.

By the 1960s Biggs Pump & Supply provided industrial plumbing, pump, heating, and air-conditioning services; it also sold kitchen and bathroom cabinets and equipment. Needham Engineering designed and manufactured specialized industrial equipment for automated welding assemblies. G. Ronald Needham became the president of Biggs Pump & Supply upon the death of his father, George Jr. in 1979. During G. Ronald's tenure the company computerized much of its operation and opened a branch in Indianapolis.

G. Ronald graduated from Purdue University in 1964, but he did not join his family's firm until 1969. Before then he worked on the design of the Pratt & Whitney rocket engine used to power the NASA Apollo missions. He continued to enjoy aviation as a hobby, designing and building his own airplane in 1993.

In 1998 G. Ronald remained the president of the company. It was the area's leading distributor of plumbing, heating and cooling, kitchen, and industrial products and had also earned a place in the kitchen cabinet supply business, for tract home

development, in Indianapolis. The company was proud of its history and was taking steps to add to its already high quality of customer service.