

Coppes Napanee Company, Inc.

Founded: 1873

Location: South of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad station (1873–83); 401 East Market Street, Napanee (1883–)

John C. Mellinger and Frank Meyers, both of Leetonia, Ohio, built a sawmill near present-day Napanee in 1873, forming the J. C. Mellinger Company. The partners principally provided ties to the local railroad, but also engaged in custom work for area customers. Three years later two brothers, Frank and John Coppes, Mellinger's brothers-in-law, took over the half interest of Meyers for \$1,300. John Coppes supervised the cutting of the wood and the hauling of the logs, while Frank oversaw the lumber machinery and the custom cutting of the timber once it reached the sawmill. By 1879 the Coppes and Millinger lumber mill was the largest in town.

Hoping to expand their business, the partners in April 1879 bought a box factory and planing mill that had belonged to Joseph Strohm. John Coppes had worked for Strohm before going to work for the Mellinger company and would later marry Strohm's daughter, Malinda. In 1881 Frank and John Coppes, with the help of their older brother Samuel, purchased Mellinger's portion of the business, changing the name of the enterprise to the Coppes Brothers Company. Less than a year later the brothers acquired the property owned by Anna DeFreese, moving the planing mill and box factory to the new address. Sometime before 1890 the organization consisted not only of a sawmill and box factory, but also included the Napanee Milling Company, which produced as much as 250 barrels of flour a day. By 1893 total sales of the company had reached more than \$450,000 a year, and approximately seventy-five men were employed at the various sites

throughout the year. The lumber felled was used in a variety of industries across the country, including shipbuilding and home and bridge construction.

Daniel Zook became a partner in 1890 by buying his father-in-law's interest in the concern, changing the name of the enterprise to Coppes Brothers and Zook, Inc. Zook, a local lawyer and an in-law of John and Frank Coppes, was placed in charge of the financial and clerical side of the business, while John supervised the sawmill and box factory and Frank ran the flour mill. After leaving the firm Samuel Coppes successfully organized a bank and a hotel, later hiring J. C. Mellinger as a teller.

On 1 May 1902 the Nappanee Furniture Company, under the management of Albert and Charles Mutschler, merged with Coppes Brothers and Zook, Inc., necessitating a change in the company's name to Coppes, Zook and Mutschler, Inc. John Coppes had been a junior partner in his nephew's furniture company for several years before the merger. After the consolidation the largest enterprise in Nappanee began to manufacture cabinets—the products that would make it both successful and well known.

By 1905 the conglomerate employed 260 men and women. Three different factories were employed in the making of extension and library tables, bedroom suites or sideboards, and kitchen furniture, respectively. The firm continued to mill grain, sending some of it overseas to Glasgow. After the merger, however, the company sold its box, retail lumber, and planing mill divisions to another business. After Daniel Zook's death in 1913 the partnership dissolved. The Coppes brothers, in honor of their beloved in-law, renamed the company Coppes Brothers and Zook. The Mutschler brothers opened their own furniture-making business, which survived until 1969.

On the eve of World War I the brothers made a momentous decision: They decided that kitchen cabinets would be their only product. They introduced a new line of cabinets, the Napanee Dutch Kitchenets. Since federal law prohibited the use of a city's name in a trademarked product, the brothers purposely misspelled Nappanee to include it in the name of their cabinets. The kitchenettes were a set of freestanding cupboards designed to free space in the kitchen and make the placement of items on shelves more convenient and efficient.

The cabinets were hailed as a time-saver for housewives. Harrington Emerson, the "father of efficiency engineers," found that if the average housewife had Napanee Dutch Kitchenet cabinets installed in her kitchen she would reduce her meal preparation time by more than half. Emerson's endorsement, and the press attention it received, caused a sensation for the new cabinets, which necessitated an expansion of the company's plant to accommodate the new orders. Large department stores all across the country sold the new cupboards, including Macy's and Gimble's.

As fashions changed, the company had to continue to be responsive to their customers. Designers at the company created the modular kitchen cabinet, popularly known as the "built-in" type of cabinet, introducing it to the public in 1928. It proved to be a popular design, one that continued to be used in about 90 percent of homes in 1999. The new "built-in" design permitted families to customize the kitchen in the way they wanted and made maximum use of storage space—an important component in a time when most people ate virtually every meal at home. When the Great Depression descended upon the country, orders fell off, but the company decided to keep its factory open and refused to lay off any workers. Several employees received loans from the

company, with a handshake as the only collateral. As the depression ended, cabinet orders again poured into the Nappanee-based company, and Coppes became one of the biggest names in the kitchen cabinet industry.

After the death of John Coppes in 1932 his family decided to rename the company in his honor and for the cabinets he pioneered. Innovation continued to be a hallmark of the organization. In 1942 engineers at the company designed a pie-cut cabinet that could be used in the corners of kitchens, making space that was generally wasted available for additional storage. The popularly termed lazy Susan cabinet provided eighteen cubic feet of usable space in only an eleven-inch door opening.

During World War II Coppes Nappanee stopped making cabinets in order to join the war effort. The company used its expertise to build gas tanks for bombers, collapsible roofs for military housing, ammunition boxes, tent floors, and motor mounts for life rafts. After 1945 the company again began to make its famous cabinets. Between 1950 and 1970 the Nappanee-based business continued to improve its cabinet design, creating new efficiencies without sacrificing quality. During the 1950s the company supplied Chrysler Corporation with wood panels that were used on the popular “woody” cars. Other carmakers, including General Motors, also used Coppes products for automobile interiors.

As with many other industries, the cabinet market changed during the 1970s. New low-cost, high-volume makers entered the market and, while the general quality of their work was inferior to the Indiana company’s design, Coppes Nappanee could not be price competitive with cheaper brands. Market share for the company dropped considerably, but the owners decided against giving up quality for quantity. In 1986 the

company was purchased by the Nappanee Investment Group, which hoped to revive the concern. Company leaders credit a return to quality-driven consumerism in the cabinet market with the firm's renaissance in the late 1980s. In 1999 Paul R. Herrold, Jr., presided over a company with fourteen employees and expected sales of more than \$1 million.