

New Albany Box & Basket Company, Incorporated

Founded: ca. 1880

Location: Main Street, New Albany (1880–88); 144 West Market Street (1889); Water Street, between West First and West Second Streets (ca. 1889–ca. 1892); Thomas and East Streets (1892–1996)

John T. Smith and George Young started a fruit-packaging company in the early 1880s. After 1884 the two owners added John Haberson as a partner. The group made crates, boxes, and wood-veneer baskets. The technology to create machine-made veneer baskets was relatively new (it had been available only since 1865), but it would be longlasting; for almost a century, until the widespread use of plastics, the production of veneer fruit and vegetable baskets was a big business. Smith and Young picked a good spot to set up a wood-veneer packaging factory. The choicest wood to use in such an operation—gum, sycamore, beech, poplar, oak, elm, cottonwood, and ash—could be easily gathered in the New Albany area.

Within six years of the company's founding, William R. Heath, a native of Benton Harbor, Michigan, bought the factory. He formed a partnership with William F. Morris in 1887. Heath was a graduate of the New Albany Business College and after becoming a partner in the firm supervised the plant. He had worked in a similar concern for twelve years before coming to New Albany. Morris was also a graduate of the New Albany Business College. The partners renamed the firm, in accordance with the change in ownership, to the Heath-Morris Company.

The enterprise continued to grow after 1887. Because of the increased business, the partners rented a warehouse on Water Street. The building was close to the Ohio River and was also connected to the railroads by sidetracks. Within two years the duo

needed even more space, so they purchased a plot of land on Market and East Streets and constructed a second warehouse. The new warehouse was three stories tall and was also connected to the railroad. By 1892 the company was producing three railroad carloads of goods a day and was purportedly the largest enterprise of its kind in the United States. The firm employed as many as 120 people, a majority of whom were continuously employed. The company's primary markets were in the South and West. In 1893 the partners incorporated their business. Five years later they sold their interest to Charles and Margaret Schwartzel.

The Schwartzels immediately faced a serious setback. A fire in June 1898 destroyed the Water Street warehouse and, along with it, easy access to both the river and the railroad. All business was transferred to the Market and East Streets warehouse, where it remained for the company's duration. In 1907 the Schwartzels changed the name of the operation to the New Albany Box & Basket Company. The business reached new heights in the 1930s, but plastics and a declining rural population meant decreased sales after the depression.

Several generations of the Schwartzel family presided over the declining fortunes of the company. They weren't the only ones facing difficulty in the industry. In the early part of the twentieth century more than thirty-two veneer-packaging companies thrived in Indiana. By the 1990s only twenty veneer-basket companies survived throughout the United States. As the demand for its product declined, so did employment at the New Albany firm. By the last decade of the twentieth century the baskets were more of a novelty item than a necessity; the chief customers were candy companies, florists, and craft hobbyists. Charles P. Marguet, a New Albany native and a Notre Dame graduate,

was the third generation of his family to operate the plant. After Charles died in 1981, Joseph I. and Patrick Marguet, great-grandsons of Charles Schwartzel, presided over the company until it stopped production on 20 December 1996.