

Swayne, Robinson & Company

Founded: 1842

Location: 214 East Main Street, Richmond (1842–1997)

Francis W. Robinson, a Quaker from Baltimore, moved to Richmond in 1833. A carpenter and builder by trade, Robinson quickly became interested in farm machinery. Most early models of threshers were inefficient collectors of grain because they could not separate the grain from the chaff and large quantities of grain was wasted. Robinson set out to make a more efficient thresher that would prevent waste and increase farmers' profits.

In 1842 Robinson bought out a competitor, Edward Borton & Son, and began making "traveling separators" that permitted the farmer to collect more grain per acre more quickly than with previous machinery. By 1860 Robinson held several patents, and his Robinson Works produced not only "separators," but also portable steam engines. After the Civil War his son Henry. E. Robinson and his sons-in-law Jonas Yeo and Samuel E. Swayne bought out the other parties in the company. After 1872 the company would remain a family-owned business and would change its name to the Robinson Machine Works.

By the 1880s the company held several patents, including those for a steam-engine governor, a straw stacker, and a clover-gathering attachment. Most sales before the turn of the century were confined to the Midwest and the upper South. Francis W. Robinson continued to manage his company until his death in the 1890s.

Before World War I the company was nearing a pinnacle as a successful farm equipment producer. In 1912 the firm was spread over three city blocks in four buildings. Branches were located in Indianapolis, Columbus, and St. Louis and in several other states across the Midwest

and the South. While the largest percentage of sales came from the Midwest, Robinson machinery could also be found in India, Africa, the Dutch East Indies, and Argentina.

As competition from John Deere and International Harvester squeezed it from the market, the company switched to making lawn mower castings and pieces for the Starr Piano Company. The company also began the iron casting division of the business, a portion that would later dominate its production line. Samuel E. Swayne advanced to the executive office after the death of Henry E. Robinson in 1909. The name of the company changed to Swayne, Robinson & Company to reflect the work of Swayne. During World War II the company received a contract to make piston rings for American aircraft. During the war the plant reached a peak of 250 employees. After the Second World War the company made parts for the auto industry. By the mid-1950s, 20 percent of American cars included parts made by the Richmond factory.

After the death of Swayne, Charles Robinson, Sr., became president. The decades after 1950 saw a steady decline in the company's fortunes. The firm began focusing on the production of iron castings for other companies, and boat anchors, transmission parts, gears, and pulley parts headed the plant's list of products. By 1993 the company employed 80 workers.

Sadly, the iron castings market had become too tight for Swayne, Robinson & Company to compete. In July 1997, sixty-five workers lost their jobs and a 155-year tradition came to a close.