

Thomas Blanchard Biography

Thomas Blanchard

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Biography

Blanchard is considered one of the founders of the American machine tool industry. His contributions anticipated the development of mass production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Born in Sutton, Massachusetts, in 1788, Blanchard worked in his brother's factory while still a boy, designing and producing such inventions as an apple parer and a tack-making machine. His most important work, however, came with his employment at the U.S. arsenal in Springfield, which sought his services after his construction of a lathe that could produce irregular gunstocks. Around 1818, while focusing on the problem of manufacturing identical gunstocks in rapid succession, Blanchard conceived of a lathe capable of endlessly duplicating any pre-set machine pattern. Integral to Blanchard's invention was the movement of a friction wheel over the pattern and the transmission of the movement to a cutting wheel. In addition to gunstocks, among the model patterns that Blanchard experimented with were shoe lasts, wheel spokes, and hat-blocks.

Because of his machine's ability to produce not only exact duplicates but replicas in various sizes as well, Blanchard is considered an inventor of the first rank. Lathes based on his original became the foundation of many modern manufacturing processes. Unfortunately, pirating of his idea, complicated by weak patents, was common until Congress eventually reaffirmed the primacy of his work.

Blanchard is also respected for his visionary, though failed, promotion of railroads and for his work with steam carriages and steamboats.