

Howard Watch Company/Sears Roebuck Co. Connection Finally Made!

(About Lewis Howard and his brothers)

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Barker Museum Newsletter
Fall 1993*

Over the years, Fredonia has laid claim to individuals and businesses with national significance, from the first natural gas well to Red Wing peanut butter. One of the most interesting has been the **Howard** Watch Co., under its various names.

Its story has been told and retold, beginning with 15-year-old **Lewis Howard** clerking in our post office in **1852** and starting a small book and magazine business on the side. Soon he added the sale of watches he imported from the East. By **1875** his brothers had taken over, starting the Independent Watch Co., the Lake Shore Watch Co. and the Empire Watch Co.

One frequently repeated account is that they began using railroad men as their salesmen for their mail-order business, that the young **Richard Sears**, himself working for a railroad, was influenced by their methods and went into business for himself in **1886** as the R.W. Sears Watch Co. of Minneapolis, which eventually became Sears, Roebuck and Company. Thus the **Howards** helped “create” Sears, Roebuck. Unfortunately, until now, that account has only been circumstantial.

The Barker Historical Museum had a visit in **1993** from **H.D. Childs**, a relative of the **Howards**. He was kind enough to give the Museum some **Howard** family materials. More importantly, his visit and gifts inspired us to look further into that bit of folklore about Sears, Roebuck. Well, we found it!

After trying a number of other trades, young **Sears** had ended up as a station agent in a tiny Midwestern town. Like the young **Lewis Howard** some thirty years earlier, **Sears** used his free time to establish a small business of his own.

As station agent, **Sears** had ample opportunity to read the trade catalogues which revealed both wholesale and retail prices for jewelry and other items. From packages received for delivery to local residents, he learned of parties in the East who were doing a mail-order business in watches. (**Boris Emmet** and **John E. Jeuck**, *Catalogues and Counters*, Chicago, **1950**, p.25)

The clincher is found in a letter from **Alvah C. Roebuck** of 17 July, **1918** in which he says “One of these companies, I believe, was Kirtland Bros. & Co. located in New York City and some other company located, I believe, in Fredonia, N.Y. (op. cit. p.722, n. 14).

As the only mail-order watch company in Fredonia at the time, the **Howard** Watch Co. must be the one. It is good to know that those vague accounts of the past stood on solid ground. Once again we see that the history of Fredonia has had a significant impact on the world of our past, our present and no doubt our future.