

Franklin Wesson (1826-1899)

Franklin Wesson was a designer and manufacturer of pistols and rifles in the 19th century, when numerous innovations such as automatic ejection of cartridges, were repeatedly redefining the market. Along with one of his brothers, named Daniel, he got his early lessons in the trade from another, much older, brother named Edwin.

Daniel moved to Springfield where he joined with Horace Smith in a partnership they at first called Smith and Wesson, and later the Volcanic Repeating Arms Company, and relocated to Norwich, Connecticut. After a short time there, the two original partners left the firm in the hands of one Oliver Winchester, who went on to great success with the company, and returned to Springfield where they started another partnership, again under the name Smith and Wesson. That firm, of course, was wildly successful and still is one of the world's leading makers of handguns.

Franklin, or Frank, as he was known in the trade, was also successful, though never on the scale of his brother, and his pistols and small rifles are today considered collectors' items and can be found at gun museums and online sites. The three brothers and their other siblings were the offspring of Rufus and Betsey (Baird) Wesson, and grew up on the family farm in what at one time was called the *Country Gore*, or the *Grafton Gore*,* at the lower end of Lake Quinsigamond, which in 1743 became part of Worcester by act of the legislature. Rufus was a son of Joel and Hannah (Bigelow) Wesson, and Hannah was a daughter of Joshua Bigelow, a significant figure in Worcester's dramatic lead-up to the revolution. The Bigelows and the Wessons appear in the 1771 survey of taxable properties used as the foundation of the community profile in "The Worcester of 1771" (*WorcesterThen*, 2018). Besides farming, Joel Wesson was a partner in a sawmill, and his son Rufus made plows and maintained a shop for their manufacture, being essentially a blacksmith rather than a large-scale manufacturer.

After spending about six years in California in the 1850s, Franklin returned to Worcester and established a firm for the manufacture of guns for the Union army and is said to have sold some 20,000 stands. In the 1870s he operated a facility on Manchester Street (parallel to Foster Street, no longer extant), and for a time partnered with his nephew Gilbert H. Harrington in Wesson and Harrington, manufacturing cartridge-ejecting rifles between 1871 and 1874. They hired a young man with valuable skills in business management and finance, rather than the intricacies of design and manufacturing of guns, whose name was William A. Richardson. In 1874, the two younger men bought out Wesson and formed their own partnership under the name Harrington and Richardson. Wesson continued designing and manufacturing pistols and rifles on his own, as he had done before, while the new partnership outgrew its space more than once, becoming highly successful as makers of pistols. In the 1890s they incorporated as the Harrington and Richardson Arms Company and moved into large new quarters on Park Avenue at Chandler Street (demolished in the late 1980s). While Wesson made a living, Harrington and Richardson made fortunes, as did his brother Daniel.

Frank Wesson continued his smaller concern on Manchester Street into the 1890s, but business during this period was not as good as he might have liked. In August, 1892, banks holding mortgages on his business and residential properties foreclosed on him for payment of taxes owed the city. His architecturally unique house on Claremont Street was sold for assumption of the defaulted mortgages, after which he and his wife and son moved into a smaller house on a portion of the property excised from the original lot, 9 Silver Street.

The obituary notices for Wesson shown below erroneously state that he resided at the Silver Street address for forty years. Actually he was at 8 Claremont Street from 1871 to the mid-1890s. Included in the part of the property going to the Wessons in the division was a greenhouse used by Frederick, the only child of Franklin and Harriet, for his florist business, which he operated into the 1930s.

Franklin Wesson died in 1899 of Bright's disease (kidney failure), at the age of 73.



City Directory, 1870



8 Claremont Street

Obituary notice in *Telegram* next page

FRANKLIN WESSON DEAD.

Pioneer Manufacturer of Fire Arms Succumbs to Brights Disease.

Franklin Wesson, one of Worcester's pioneer manufacturers of firearms, and closely identified with manufacturing interests for more than 40 years, died early yesterday afternoon at his residence, 9 Silver street, aged 73 years, 3 months and 23 days. Until two months ago he was active and apparently in good strength. The final symptoms of Bright's disease became apparent a few weeks ago and he failed rapidly.

He was a son of Rufus and Betsy Baird Wesson and was born Nov. 8, 1826, at the family homestead near the



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Telegram, Mar-07-1899

lower end of lake Quinsigamond. In 1853 he went to California, where he remained six years. On his return in 1859 he began to manufacture firearms in the old Merrifield building on Exchange street. During the war he manufactured 20,000 stand of arms for the government of the single-shot breech-loading cartridge pistol pattern.

In 1871 he became associated with G. H. Harrington under the firm name of Wesson & Harrington, for manufacturing a shell-ejecting revolver. Three years later the business was bought by G. H. Harrington, to which the Harrington & Richardson Arms Co. succeeded.

Mr. Wesson returned to business soon after selling out to Mr. Harrington and began the manufacture of pistols and rifles on a large scale at 20 Manchester street. Eight years ago he retired from business. He has lived at his Silver-street home for 40 years. His wife died over a year ago. He leaves a son, Frederick H., with whom he had made his home; a brother, D. B. Wesson, of Smith & Wesson, Springfield; and two sisters, Cornelia Harrington, widow of Francis Harrington, and Mrs. E. E. Boyden of Springfield. He was an attendant at Piedmont church for many years, although not a member.

The funeral will be from the residence Wednesday afternoon at 2 o'clock.