

HOBBY HISTORY

First Friction Matches In America?

Ever heard of Joseph Weller? How about Jacob Weller? No? Well, sources can't agree which gave the U.S. its first friction match (or "Lucifer"), but although the two brothers worked together, it seems that Jacob was the brains behind the duo. You decide.

Version 1: In 1825, about seven years before the town was incorporated, Mechanicstown, MD, scored a first—not only for the Colony of Maryland, but for the whole New World. The very first lucifer matches ever manufactured in America were made in Mechanicstown.

Everywhere in the colonies at this time, fire was produced solely by striking steel against flint, igniting a piece of punk or other inflammable material and blowing the spark into a flame. "Ignition matches" had only recently been introduced in the Old World and a rare few had found their way to this continent.

Jacob Weller came across such matches in Frederick in the early 1820s, and, since he was scientifically inclined, he was determined to find out what made them work. He also showed them to his brother, Joseph. Once Jacob found the secret, he hit upon a scheme of using a solid cube of soft wood when he cut through into two series of parallel cuts, perpendicular to each other. This made a solid block from which a nest of sticks protruded. The matches were first subdivided by hand and later by machinery, and then dipped into the brimstone mixture, etc., and then set aside to dry. The result was a marketable block of matches. The matches were boxed and peddled throughout Frederick County at 25¢ a box. With each box went a piece of sand paper upon which to ignite the matches. America's first match factory was established in 1825 in the little gray

stone house that had been a family blacksmith shop (which, as of 1969, was still standing).

Peddlers whom Jacob Weller sent out to market his matches often encountered problems, the least of which were dogs. Frontier folk warned each other that these new fire sticks would explode and blow a man, his family, and his earthly possessions into Kingdom Come. Was this the reason that the business eventually folded? No one knows? [*from Wireman, George, Gateway to the Mountains, 1969, pp. 45-47*]

Version 2: "The first lucifer-matches made in America were manufactured in this town [*Mechanicstown*]. Their inventor and discoverer was Joseph Weller, who in 1825, at Frederick, purchased some matches of French importation. On his return home he started an investigation of the material, etc., and the result was his discovery of their ingredients and the manufacture of them immediately with the assistance of his brothers. They were twice burned out. The matches were peddled out through the country at twenty-five cents per package, and with the paper box of matches went a piece of sand-paper on which to ignite them. Many of the farmers drove away the peddlers with dogs, because they feared the burning of their houses and barns by this new invention." [*Scharf, J. Thomas, History of Western Maryland, 1968, p. 6.28*]

You can see they're both the same story, but one has Jacob as the protagonist, and the other has Joseph as the star. Scharf's text has the earliest copyright date, but both are a year or less apart, so it may be that both authors used the same earlier sources, but either one researcher got the wrong brother's name as the focal point...or the earlier sources were vague enough to allow 'guessing' as to which brother was the mastermind...and each later author chose a different brother!

This is a good example for my students on why one should never rely solely on one source when doing such research!