

# ***IN THE CRADLE OF INDUSTRY AND LIBERTY***

## ***A History of Manufacturing in Philadelphia***

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# THE ROWLAND COMPANY



*Above: Maxwell Rowland pictured sometime in the 1800s.*

*Below: The Annex at Rowland Shovel Works.*



With a long and distinguished history that pre-dates the American Revolution by forty-four years, The Rowland Company is the oldest continually operated company in Pennsylvania and one of the oldest in the United States. After nearly three centuries, The Rowland Company continues as a prosperous and successful business, now specializing in the distribution and fabrication/assembly of industrial power transmission products.

The Rowland Company was founded in 1732 by Benjamin Rowland, a descendant of John Rowland who arrived in America with William Penn in 1682. In the beginning, the company manufactured shovels and other basic items needed by those carving a new nation from the wilderness. In addition to shovels, the company produced saws, axes, rakes, picks, and springs for wagon wheels.

The Rowland family was involved in a number of related businesses in the Delaware Valley and all were situated along creeks—mainly the Pennypack—because the streams powered giant water wheels that drove the machines used in the manufacturing process.

Rowland's sons continued the operation founded by their father, renaming it The William and Harvey Rowland Company. A section of Philadelphia once known as Rowlandville was located in the vicinity of Tacony Creek, near Wyoming Avenue. The community was named for the Rowland Shovel factory. Even though most of the buildings associated with the company have been destroyed, the Shovel Shop at 300 Ashbourne

Road remains. The large number of people employed by T. Rowland & Sons precipitated the development of Milltown, which later became known as Cheltenham Village.

The business was known by a number of names as it transitioned among various family members. Among these were William Rowland & Co., Rowland Saw Works, William & Harvey Rowland Company, Thomas Rowland & Sons Shovel Works, and Maxwell Rowland & Company.

The company that was founded in the rugged pioneer days before the Revolution survived and grew by adapting to new technology and products. A major factor in the company's development was the production of tools used by Union forces during the Civil War. A long, rectangular shovel exhibited at the Great Centennial in 1876 in Fairmount Park was awarded first prize. A fire in 1884 nearly ended the life of the company, but the plant was rebuilt.

As the company evolved into modern times, it became heavily involved in the distribution of automotive and truck parts, with branch locations in Atlanta, Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida.

In the early 1950s, the Rowland family sold all locations to outside interests, except the Philadelphia operation. It continued to distribute automotive parts and heavy duty items such as power take-offs and drive shafts for the truck market. The company continued in this line of distribution until 1962 when it was purchased by Gulf & Western Industries.

At the same time as The Rowland acquisition, Gulf & Western also purchased a Philadelphia company by the name of Gaul, Derr and Shearer, another automotive parts supplier. This company, which was owned by David Yost, was merged with Rowland's business and moved out to King of Prussia under the name American Parts System. Over the next five years the auto parts business was made the focus for Gulf & Western, and they wanted out of the heavy duty truck parts business.

In 1967, Yost, who was then an executive with Gulf & Western, decided to buy the old Rowland heavy duty truck parts operation, and moved The Rowland Company into a new era.

Under Yost's direction, The Rowland Company began selling power take-off and driveline parts to the heavy duty trucking market. Additional complimentary product lines, such as truck lighting, exhaust, and couplings were introduced as well.

During the 1970s, additional sales personnel were brought in to explore selling some of the trucking products into other markets. The Rowland Company became a second-generation company under the Yost family in 1972 when Steven Yost, David's son, joined the family business.

Steven succeeded his father as company president in 1983, and by the end of the 1980s, The Rowland Company had grown into two main business interests—engine parts and PTO's/drivelines for industrial markets.

The Rowland Company facilities were destroyed by fire in 1989, leaving nothing but embers. This tragedy would lead the company to its current location on North Twentieth Street in Philadelphia to begin the struggle to get back on its feet.

After the fire, a decision was made to focus solely on the industrial markets. The engine parts business was sold off due to low profit margins and high inventory values. The industrial market was better suited due to the 'value added' the company could provide, which included engineering and design services.

As the need for mechanical power transmission diminished in the 1990s, the company expanded to new products such as crane electrification, air starters and other related products. The company also provided machine shop services such as relining brake pads and shoes, rings and bands, and clutch plates; providing bonding and riveting of linings; fabrication of metal components; fabrication/repair of drive shafts; brake, clutch, and coupling repair; and fabrication/assembly of push-pull cables.

During the 2000s, The Rowland Company continued its expansion of new product lines and industries. Partnering with world-leading manufacturers to bring its customers the highest quality innovations in crane controls and electrification components, as well as applying for and receiving its first patent in the stage rigging industry in 2011. The safety



brake is designed specifically for use in raising and lowering of theater curtains and orchestra pits. Its design also has wide spread adaptability to other industries such as power generation, crane elevators and mining.

Today, The Rowland Company continues to specialize in the distribution and fabrication/assembly of industrial power transmission products. This involves application engineering, distribution and/or modification of products to meet a customer's specific needs. The Rowland Company prides itself as "The Problem Solver" in any type situation that involves the transmission of power from a driven force to a driving force. Products typically used in these power transmission applications include brakes, clutches, couplings, drive shafts, friction materials and other related items.

The customer base for The Rowland Company is both national and international, with a focus on the east coast of the United States. The company has shipped product to all seven continents, including Antarctica. Their expansive customer base includes steel, metalworking, marine (tugs and large ships), transit, paper, mining (oil, gas, gold, copper), cranes (overhead/port), entertainment (amusement park rides, stages), and the military.



*Above: Over forty flags line The Rowland Company's warehouse representing the numerous countries they do business with.*

*Below: David Yost made sure the Rowland family name lived on.*







Above: A few of the brake, clutch, and crane products that The Rowland Company currently offers.

Below: The Rowland Company Sales Engineer, Donald Morrissey, stands in front of a Ball Mill during a project in Columbia, South America.



joined the company. With a background and degree in engineering, he added support for a growing customer base. Adam Yost—Steve's son and Bart's brother—entered the company in 2006. His background and degree in business management provides support for the administrative/finance side of The Rowland Company. In 2014, Barton succeeded Helen as company president with Adam serving as vice president.

The Rowland Company operates from a 50,000 square foot facility at 4900

North Twentieth Street in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Annual revenues range between \$5 and \$10 million and the company has fourteen full-time employees.

In the early history of the company, the Rowland family was very involved in civic and community activities, including the building and support of new schools and churches. This tradition continues under the leadership of the Yost family. The company supports Philadelphia high schools by contributing funds for their robotics programs. Support of these robotic programs help young men and women explore their engineering capabilities and allows them to participate in activities that otherwise would not have proper funding. They are also heavily involved with the PTDA Foundation, which supports education and jobs in the field of industrial distribution.

In 2013, The Rowland Company was named to the Pennsylvania Governor's Advisory Council for Manufacturing.

Although the oldest continually operating company in Philadelphia and one of the oldest in the nation, The Rowland Company enjoys young, energetic leadership and continues to develop new products and services for its ever growing market.