

The Doorknob Collector

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From Niles to Sager

THE STORY OF THE CHICAGO HARDWARE COMPANY

By Raymond J. Nemec
(Originally published in 1995)

Turning south from 22nd Avenue on to Commonwealth, in North Chicago, Illinois, and glancing to the left my mind could see a complex of red brick buildings. Then reality took over. This was September 1994 and the red brick buildings had succumbed to the wrecking ball many years ago.

A large weed infested vacant lot covered most of the two-block parcel that occupied the east side of Commonwealth between 22nd and 24th Avenues. There were empty semi-trailers randomly parked and a building covered by tan colored corrugated metal sheets seemed to stand there ominously.

Had it been 54 years since the last piece of door hardware had been manufactured on this site? I was looking at property that was developed one hundred years ago by the Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company. Some of the finest door hardware was made here between 1895 and 1950. What happened here, the end of a once prosperous business, has happened many times and in many places.

I was aware that the names of the people, the dates and even the

names of the companies that were here had faded from memory as the old-timers passed away. I felt a story had to be told; the story of Chicago Hardware. I was also aware that all the parts of this story may not easily be obtained but it was important to bring to light what is known and maybe others will build from what I learned.

Arthur Paholke wrote a fine article about the Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company in the July/August 1992 issue of The Doorknob Collector and in an earlier issue, Maud Eastwood had written about it and other Chicago based hardware companies. Paholke wondered how a real estate agent, Milton C. Niles, came to invent a lock. He also wondered, why the different shank for doorknobs.

I, too, asked some questions. Who was Milton C. Niles? What actually became of the company? What role did Charles W. Sager play in all this? I would quickly find out, I thought, but after nearly three years the realization that a lot of research and time has brought answers to some question but other still remain unanswered.

Three companies were listed in the early history of Niles. . . Niles and Son in 1879, Gray Iron Company in 1880 and the Chicago Hardware Manufacturing company in 1882. With the latter two companies another name appeared. Art Paholke listed him as F. T. June.

The first information I found on Milton C. Niles was in a book called "History of Cook County," published in 1884. I learned a lot about him and his non-hardware interest, but it left me with another question. Paholke had wondered how one would go from real estate to lock manufacturer. Now I was asking, how does one go from farming to real estate, to inventor, to lock manufacturer?

With the help of three ladies, Leslie Symington, a genealogist in New York, Carol Kelm of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest and syndicated columnist Anita Gold, I uncovered a good deal about Milton Niles.

Milton Cleveland Niles was born in Spencertown, Columbia County, in the State of New York, on February 20, 1827. Just 81 days later, on May 12, 1827, his mother,

Theodotia, died. She was 32.

Milton's mother, her maiden name was Theodotia Cleveland, was born on November 5, 1794, at Williamburg, Massachusetts. Her ancestors came from England in the 1600s. The Cleveland family is remembered for Moses Cleveland, for whom the Ohio city was named and Grover Cleveland, the 22nd and 24th President of the United States. All the Cleveland's can be traced back to the original Moses Cleveland who came from England about 1635.

Milton's father was also named Milton Niles. The senior Niles was probably born in 1790. The 1850 New York census, however, lists his age as 58 and as having been born in the state of New York. By that time he had remarried, marrying a widow name Christian Pratt. The senior Niles listed his occupation as a farmer. He served as Town Clerk of Austerlitz in 1821 and 1823. It probably should be pointed out that in Columbia County, a town was a subdivision of the county, frequently called a township. Milton Niles, Sr., died on May 29, 1852. His grave marker at the Spencertown Community Cemetery listed his age as 62.

Milton Niles, Sr., married Theodotia Cleveland probably about 1820. On August 28, 1822, their first child, a son, Smith, was born. Milton C. would be the second child from this union.

Not a great deal of Milton Cleveland Niles' youth is known, a boy growing up on a farm learning what would be his first occupation. His education consisted of "attending the common school of the day" and in academies at Great Barrington and Westfield, Massachusetts.

At the age of 20, in early 1847, young Milton traveled to Chicago and then by stage and the Illinois

River, he went to St. Louis. From St. Louis he traveled up the Mississippi River to Galena, Illinois, and back to the Chicago area by stage, arriving in August. He then returned to New York.

A year later, in March 1848, Milton again set out for Illinois, traveling by "mud-wagon" four days and five nights through Canada, by stage to Lake Michigan and across the lake by boat to reach Chicago. Then it was on to Belvidere and into Wisconsin where his brother, Smith, was engaged in the lumber business. All this took less than two months.

Milton was back in New York and on May 15, 1848, he married Mary Caroline Bailey at her father's home in North Salem, Westchester County, New York. Milton was 21. Mary was 18. She was born on March 1, 1830. They settled into farming near Spencertown. A son, Clarence Marcellus, was born in September 1849. a second child, Marian Augustus, was born on September 9, 1851.

Having seen the opportunities and the progressive spirit of the then new west, Niles could not remain, as he called it, "in the dull East." His wife, Mary, cheerfully joined him in moving to the "Wild West." In the fall of 1852, Milton and Mary and their two children settled on the "Parsons Farm," one of the early settlements in DuPage County in Illinois. The farm was located in Milton Township, southeast of Wheaton. Today, the land that once was farmed by Niles is now a part of the City of Wheaton. In 1854, their second year on the farm, their third child, a son, Sidney Soloman, was born.

Traveling from the farm to Chicago, a trip of 25 miles, Niles passed through an area that would someday become Oak Park. It occurred to him that its proximity

to Chicago made it a good place to invest in land. In December 1856, in partnership with W. W. Bemis, they bought nine lots (approximately ten acres) and in 1857 they bought two more lots. On March 3, 1860, Bemis quit-claimed his entire holding to Niles.

In the spring of 1858 Niles sold his property in DuPage County and he, his wife and three children moved to Oak Ridge (as Oak Park was then called). Niles had been married ten years, working all of them in agriculture with the last 5- 1/2 year in central DuPage County. He was now to embark on an entirely new career, a career in real estate.

Milton Niles became a school director in 1859 and helped establish a fine school system in Oak Park. He was instrumental in purchasing land and built a school for the village. During this time he built homes for several prominent people. Also in 1859, Niles was elected Supervisor in the Town of Cicero, Illinois, and held the office for five years. He was chairman of the Finance Committee of Cook County during the Civil War.

During the period of 1863 and 1866, Niles purchased over 400 acres in Oak Park and Maywood, some for as low as \$20 per acre. In 1866, Niles, along with James W. Scoville, subdivided a 40-acre tract in Oak Park. Known as the Scoville and Niles subdivision, they built a number of homes there.

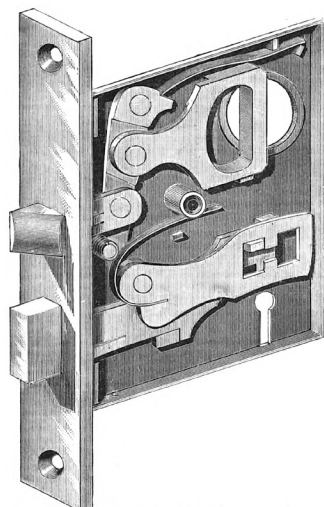
In 1864 Niles built a home for his family between Marion Street and Park Place in Oak Park. Known as the Park House, it was situated on a full city block. Marion Street was named for Niles' daughter although she had two "A's" in her name. Park Place has since been renamed Forest Street.

Farming, the number one occupation in America during the early 1800s, was the source for many inventions. Farmers, faced with the laborious task of planting, harvesting and storing crops, searched their minds for ideas to improve their lot in life.

Milton C. Niles was born in this era. His parents farmed and so it seemed only natural that he, too, would seek a career in agriculture. Milton learned early that simple implements or mechanisms could not only make life easier on the farm but also more profitable.

When he went into the building of homes and other structures it was natural, with his farm training, to improve methods, thus was born the idea for a new lock and doorknob system.

On July 19, 1877, an application was filed with the United States Patent office. It began, "Be it known that we, Milton C. Niles and Sidney S. Niles of Oak Park in the County of Cook and State of Illinois, have invented a new and useful improvement in a door lock and knob."



Sidney was about 24-years old. He had attended Oak Park's first school, Temperance Hall, and Central School, which his father had built. He furthered his education by

going to the prestigious Lake Forest Academy and the University of Chicago.

The University of Chicago Sidney attended is not to be confused with the prestigious school that bears that name today. The institution Sidney attended was under Baptist auspices and closed its doors because of financial difficulties in 1886. The new university was founded in 1892.

After the patents had been granted on June 25, 1878, to the father and son, the company Niles and Son was established to sell the Niles locksets. Paholke, in his article, described the locksets as an innovative direct-action reversible latch lockset that was unique to the American builders' industry.

The company operated from Milton C. Niles' downtown Chicago real estate office. Indications are that the Niles contracted with several foundries to manufacture their locksets. Milton applied for an additional patent for the reversible latch system in 1879. The patent was granted on May 18, 1880.

In all probability the locksets were fabricated by the Standard Manufacturing Company, located at the northeast corner of Erie and Kingsbury Streets in Chicago.

On October 20, 1880, F.T. June, M.C. Niles and J. D. Hughes filed papers with the Illinois Secretary of State (George H. Harlow) to form a corporation. The following information was stated

1. The name of such corporation is Gray Iron Company.
2. The object for which it is formed is the manufacture of Iron Castings, Iron Machinery, and other articles composed of Wood, Iron and Metal or either of them.
3. The Capital Stock shall be \$25,000.00
4. The amount of each share is \$50.00.
5. The number of shares: 500.

6. The location of the principal office is in Chicago in the County of Cook State of Illinois.

7. The duration of the Corporation shall be 50 years.

These papers bore the signature of F. T. June, M. C. Niles and J. D. Hughes.

Two days later, October 22, 1880, Gray Iron Company submitted a list of its stockholders with the amount of shares, and price, they agreed to buy. Following were the stockholders:

Name	Shares	Amount
F. T. June	160	\$8,000.00
M.C. Niles	100	\$5,000.00
Charles J. Barnes	100	\$5,000.00
A.B.Meeker&Co.	40	\$2,000.00
W.G.Stephen	20	\$1,000.00
Standard Mfg. Co.	60	\$3,000.00

(By F.T. June, Pres.)

J. D. Hughes 20 \$1,000.00

Both F.T. June and J. D. Hughes were involved in the operation of Standard Manufacturing, June as President and Hughes as General Manager of the operations. There was also a tie in with A. B. Meeker Company, a supplier of pig iron and other raw materials to companies such as Standard. June, along with his employee, Hughes, controlled 48% of the stock. If you include his vendor, Meeker, June, probably controlled 56% of the stock. The Standard's manufacturing site, at the northeast corner of Erie and Kingsbury would also be the location for Gray Iron.

The Gray Iron Company was officially incorporated on November 11, 1880 and F. T. June, M. C. Niles and W. G. Stephens were elected as the company's first Board of Directors. June became President, Sidney S. Niles, although not a stock holder, became the Secretary.

Art Paholke pointed out, "The name 'Gray Iron Company' is deceiving, as the locksets using the

Niles patents seem to have been the firm's principal product." Advertising in the 1881 Chicago city directory listed the company as the "sole manufacturers Niles' patent Mortise Door Knobs and Locks."

On May 12, 1881, the stockholders of Gray Iron Company held a special meeting and increased the Capital Stock to fifty thousand dollars. The resolution was signed by S. S. Niles, Secretary, and Frank T. June, President.

A year later, on April 26, 1882, the Board of Directors of Gray Iron Company voted to change the name of the corporation to the Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company. The certificate was signed by Frank T. June, President.

Milton C. Niles continued to file for patents on Niles locksets. He filed for two patents on March 25, 1882, one for the latch and the other for the reversible latch. About two weeks later he filed for still another latch patent. They were all issued in December 1882.

Sidney S. Niles applied for a patent for a new and original design for doorknobs and escutcheons on November 7, 1884. The patents were issued March 31, 1885, to Sidney S. Niles, assignor to the Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company.



A major problem the company had was conveying the message to the building trade about the merits

of its thoroughly different hardware. Articles appearing in publications, such as the July 1882 issue of "Carpentry and Building," went a long way to bring attention to the Niles Patent Mortise doorknobs and locks. With the publicity, growth of the company continued.

By 1890 William Spooner had become president of the company. Sidney S. Niles continued as Secretary, having been with the company in that capacity since 1880.

On February 21, 1890, the company's first President, Frank T. June, died unexpectedly at his residence, known as Ames Park, in Belvidere, Illinois. He was 55. His wife, Jennie, and their children would move back to Oak Park and become prominent citizens of the community.

Later in 1890, Sidney S. Niles left the company to concentrate on the family's real estate and development business. Milton C. Niles remained active in real estate during the 1880's and early 1890's but by 1900, now in his seventies, he retired from active participation in business. During all this time he lived as 129 Park Place, the home he built in 1864. Sidney Niles had an office at 15 South Canal, Chicago in 1887 and still maintained it in 1894.

The Chicago Manufacturing Company maintained offices and show-rooms in downtown Chicago. In 1887, they were at 87 Washington. The factory remained at the original site, 29 Erie (northeast corner of Erie and Kingsbury). By 1895, after 15 years at the Erie street address, the company was looking for a new site.

Builder's Hardware had come a long way by 1895. Thirty years earlier, in 1865, the Civil War was ending, President Lincoln was assassinated and Milton C. Niles family was settling in to their new home in Oak Park. "The Island

Architect and News Record" reported that in 1865 "there was practically nothing known except common black japanned cast-iron hinges, dark mineral, white porcelain and glass knobs." The article went on to point out that if anyone "desired something better they were limited to the use of electro or hand plated silver or gold on plain surfaces."

This was to dramatically change in the next seven years. Companies in the East began coming out with hardware in bronze. Russell & Erwin brought out their line of compression bronze knobs and in 1872 Hopkins and Dickinson brought out their line that was called "art hardware."

It was not until 1886 when John W. Root, the famous architect, revealed his idea that hardware for a building should be "made to harmonize with the character of the building on which it was to be used." Almost immediately buildings were being given their own designed hardware. By 1895 specialty builders' hardware was at its peak.

In 1895 William Spooner continued firmly entrenched as Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company's president. Robert T. Fuller had become treasurer in 1891. The company, realizing the need for a new facility to stay competitive in the ever expanding and changing builders' hardware industry, settled on a site 32 miles north of Chicago in what is known today as North Chicago.

The area was settled as farmland in the mid-1800's. When real estate agents began offering extravagant prices for farms in the 1880's it was not long before the town of South

Waukegan was laid out in 15,000 lots, each lot was 25 x 125 feet; some sold for as much as \$1,000 per lot.

South Waukegan was advertised

as “ideal for manufacturing” and was ‘dry,’ with a motto of “No saloons.” In June 1892, the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad built a station. A post office was established and a hotel was constructed.

Development was rapid.

Other companies would follow and North Chicago would grow. The first U.S. census taken at North Chicago was in 1900. The population was 1,150. By 1910 it had grown to 3,306 up to 5,839 in 1920 and 8,466 in 1930. Many of the early settlers were immigrants from Eastern Europe, attracted by the availability of factory jobs.

Shortly after the move to North Chicago, the company would lease the iron foundry to two employees. John Shewin had started with the company as a molder at the Chicago plant but by 1895 he was the foundry foreman. E. P. Sedgwick was the factory superintendent.

There had been a general pick-up in business by 1895 after the panic of 1893. Sherwin and Sedgwick talked thoughtfully about gray iron castings, in which they both felt there was a future. The two were able to rent Chicago Hardware Manufacturing company’s foundry as the company was turning to other fields. Records show that Sedgwick remained as plant super-intendent at Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company through 1896.

Sherwin and Sedgwick named their new company the Chicago Hardware Foundry Company and it was incorporated on May 25, 1897. Apparently, Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company had no problems with the new company’s name; however, historians 100 years later, still grapple with the confusion.

The foundry company soon built a plant on a site across the street from the manufacturing company.

Sherwin became Chicago

Hardware Foundry Company’s first president and Sedgwick was Secretary-Treasurer. Their business flourished and expanded, by 1899, to manufacturing of small hardware items. Both Sherwin and Sedgwick in addition to taking an active role in their company found time to serve terms as mayor of North Chicago. John Sherwin remained President of Chicago Hardware Foundry Company until his death in 1921. E. P. Sedgwick succeeded him as President and remained the chief officer until his death in 1935.

Door Hardware Historian Art Paholke observed that “like the major hardware companies of the East, the Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company maintained an impressive catalog of stock patterns.” Their 1895 catalog featured a wide variety of styles and schools of design. In addition, Paholke reported, “These patterns were offered in an extensive choice of materials and finishes, including an authorized Bower-Barff finish for cast iron, licensed from the original British patent-holders.”

The company did custom design orders. The Schiller Building and the Federal Building (constructed between 1898 and 1905) both in Chicago, the Pabst Building in Milwaukee, the Wisconsin Power-Company and some of the Chicago public schools are a few examples of public and commercial buildings using Niles hardware. In many fine homes in large cities like Chicago and Milwaukee or smaller cities such as Kewanee, Illinois, the Niles hardware was used.

In 1900 James H. Shields became President and W. H. Gold was Secretary. A 1901 listing shows A. Weinberg was treasurer and their Chicago offices were at 308 Ashland Block. H. W. Pritchard was the plant superintendent at North Chicago.

Pritchard succeeded E. P. Sedgwick in 1897.

On May 14, 1901, at a special meeting of the stockholders, Chicago Hardware Manufacturing Company changed the name of the corporation to that of Chicago Hardware Company. Shields and Gold signed the papers. The change occurred just over 19 years from the date the company had adopted the former name.

The officers of the company in 1905 were Hiram B. Prentice, President, W. H. Gold, Vice President/Secretary and A. V. Allen; Treasurer. Chicago offices were now shown as 40 Dearborn Street.

The company placed an impressive ad in a new publication, the 1906 issue of “Sweet’s” Indexed Catalogue of Building Construction. The “ad” on pages 418 and 419 described in some detail products and services the company offered. The text described the Niles lock, the Bower-Barff process and showed a full page of Gothic school, Westminster design, a design found in homes throughout Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois. The Westminster design originally appeared in the 1895 C.H.M.C. catalog.



This would be the last major advertisement seen for Niles locks. A change was about to take place at North Chicago. Just how successful the Niles lock had been is hard to

determine. If we were to look at our collection of doorknobs, only 2- 1/2% of them are Niles. It would probably be safe to estimate that the Niles hardware captured less than 5¾% of the market. Never being accepted by many builders, it had now been 27 years since it was first introduced. The original Niles family was out of the picture.

Milton's brother, Smith Niles, had died on April 3, 1895, in Oak Park. On December 21, 1909, Milton C. Niles died at his home in Oak Park. The pioneer lock inventor was 82. Gastritis was listed as the cause of death.

On December 19, 1906, the Waukegan Sun's front page carried the headline, "Chicago Hardware Plant sold for \$60,000." The reporter told the story and elaborated on his attempt to get information. It read: "The North Chicago plant of the Chicago Hardware Company has been sold in the entirety to David B. Gann for \$60,000, subject to bonds amounting to \$50,000 that have been issued. The transfer of the property was entered in the courthouse today.

"The plant at North Chicago was called up but no information could be secured. Superintendent Pritchard was in Chicago and it was stated that the office there was not allowed to give any information.

"The Chicago offices of the company were then called up by the Sun. Nothing could be learned from them. 'It is a matter we want to keep secret for awhile,' was said. 'What is the reason for that?'" was asked. "Because we do not wish it known," was the answer.

"David B. Gann is a Chicago lawyer with offices in the Borland building. He was called up by the Sun and asked about the deal. "Well, I guess I have purchased it," he said. "I was acting for myself. The plant will be run by a new company of

which Charles W. Sager, of Lockport, will be the head. I will not be actively connected with the company as that is not my business. We are already running the plant and the change took place yesterday. We expect to make no changes, at least none we know of as yet." As they expect to make no changes it was stated by Mr. Gann that Mr. Pritchard would remain as superintendent of the plant.

Gann was no stranger to owning a hardware company. Records show that in 1906 he owned 91.7% of the stock in the Barrows Lock Company, in Lockport, Illinois, where Charles W. Sager was one of the directors.

Some interesting corporate moves were made just weeks prior to Gann revealing his takeover of the North Chicago hardware plant. It seems rather intriguing that Gann, who held control of Barrows, was not mentioned in any of the following transactions yet his influence was there.

On November 21, 1906, the Western Hardware Company was formed and papers were filed for incorporation in the State of West Virginia. The principal place of business was given as 181 LaSalle Street, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.

The objects and purpose for which the corporation was formed stated, "To manufacture, buy, sell and deal in builders' hardware of all kinds." This statement was followed by a rather lengthy continuation of other expected functions, all related to hardware and metals, the company would be involved in.

The company was officially incorporated on November 28, 1906 at Charleston, West Virginia. On that very day, November 28th, Western Hardware Company, with William C. Haight as President, held a meeting of stock holders and

changed the name of the corporation to Chicago Hardware Company. The certificate of change was officially dated December 10, 1906.

The Chicago Hardware Company, had operated under an Illinois charter since 1880, originally under the name of Gray Iron Company. It held a stockholders' meeting on December 7, 1906. They voted to change the name of the corporation from Chicago Hardware Company to North Chicago Iron Company. The certificate was signed by J. F. Stone, President, and W. J. Gold, Secretary, on December 8, 1906.

Then on December 18, 1906, David B. Gann's company now legally using the name of Chicago Hardware Company, took over operation of the North Chicago plant from the North Chicago Iron Company.

The new Chicago Hardware company, at a meeting of stockholders on December 15, 1906. Walter C. Haight was listed as President, G. E. Kerr, Secretary and J. Walter Stead as a Director. William Capron, Jr. and Harold Beach were listed as stockholders in addition to the three officers/directors. All gave Chicago addresses. Gann's name did not appear. However, in 1907, Charles W. Sager became President and David B. Gann would take a more active corporate role. (Article will continues in the next issue)



A block of King Suites has been reserved for the convention. The rate is \$152.00 plus 16.25% tax. These rooms will be held until July 16, 2026. Included is the made to order breakfast which those who attended last year will remember, an evening reception, free parking and Internet.

2026 DOORKNOB COLLECTORS CONVENTION

August 6th - August 8th 2026

at the

Embassy Suites by Hilton Philadelphia Airport
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Since it's our country's 250 birthday or semi-quincentennial the theme this year be patriotism sub-theme is portrait / medallion knobs. Get out your George and Martha Washington knobs, portraiture knobs commemorating important Americans, and knobs with USA inspired designs (flags, eagles, treasury, army, navy, etc.).

Philadelphia is known as the "Birthplace of America" with Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. Come early and enjoy it's history,



culture and food. The convention will start on Thursday, August 6 with a tour. Friday and Saturday morning will the time to show off your hardware as well as find that one piece you have been searching. The Saturday afternoon auction will be special. The last third of Allen Joslyn's collection will be auctioned. The previous two parts have shown a lot of good hardware and a several one-of-a-kind pieces. This year is sure to be the same. The convention ends with banquet and annual meeting.

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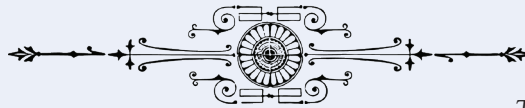
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