

This Day in History... September 15, 1852

Birth of Jan Matzeliger

Inventor Jan Matzeliger was born on September 15, 1852, in Paramaribo, Dutch Guyana (present-day Suriname).

As a boy, Matzeliger worked in his father's machine shop, the Colonial Ship Works. Early on, he showed a natural talent for working with machinery and mechanics. When he was 19, Matzeliger took a job on a merchant ship working as a mechanic. He did that for a few years before moving to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

It was in Philadelphia that he became acquainted with the shoe trade. In 1877, he moved to Lynn, Massachusetts to further explore the shoe industry. There he found work in the Harney Brothers Shoe Factory.

In those days, shoes were usually made by hand. The most challenging and time-consuming part of the process was attaching the soles to the top part of the shoe. Many believed this work was so intricate; it could only be performed by human hands. So the people that did this job, called lasters, held significant influence in the shoe industry.



Matzeliger's invention drastically cut down on shoe production time, making them more affordable.

Matzeliger witnessed this issue first hand. He spent five years inventing an automated shoe-laster that shaped and fastened the leather over the sole of the shoe. Up until that point, it took skilled craftsmen 10 hours to attach soles to 50 pairs of shoes. Matzeliger's machine could make up to 700 pairs of shoes in the same amount of time. Patented in 1883, his device led to the mass production of shoes, revolutionizing the industry and greatly reducing the cost of shoes for consumers.

Matzeliger continued to work on improving shoe production, receiving a few more patents in the years to come. Unfortunately, while he worked tirelessly on his inventions, he worked long hours and didn't eat for long periods of time, leading his health to suffer. He caught a cold that developed into tuberculosis and died on August 27, 1889, just weeks before his 37th birthday.

Matzeliger didn't have much time to enjoy the profits of his invention. He also didn't receive much recognition for his invention until recent years. But today his device is considered "the most important invention for New England" and the "greatest step forward in the shoe industry."



Stamp pictures Matzeliger's patent drawing in the background.

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