

# THE LOCKSMITHS OF RAILROAD AVENUE

## An Introduction to the Early Lock Manufacturers of Newark, NJ By David Hamilton

Shortly after departing from Newark, NJ toward Philadelphia on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, passengers who aren't busy with their smart phones or computers are given a typical view of urban scenery, consisting of parking lots, junkyards, and industries. Those sitting on the left side of the train may see a few original 19th century brick factory buildings across the parallel New Jersey Railroad Avenue, just south of the station. These structures are the remnants of what was once one of Newark's most important industrial neighborhoods, where many significant innovations in technology were brought to life. New Jersey Railroad Avenue, so named because of the adjacent New Jersey Railroad & Transportation Company (and not to be confused with Morris & Essex Railroad Avenue), was home to several early railroad padlock manufacturers. Locks stamped with familiar names such as Slight, Romer, and Ritchie were all at one time or another produced in factories here.

One of the first lock manufacturers in Newark was Henry C. Jones, who started a small shop on Church Street in 1837. In the early 1840's, he obtained a lucrative contract to supply the United States Postal Service with locks for mail bags. H.C. Jones was eventually established as a company, with a factory



A brass lock stamped "H.C. Jones Patent Newark, NJ" and marked on the reverse for the Boston & Worcester Railroad. Photo courtesy of Railroad Memories Auctions.

their patents to H.C. Jones. Thomson, Slight, and Ritchie were also involved with the business aspects of the company, becoming signatory parties to the contract when Henry Jones renewed his government mail bag deal in January of 1852. However, by the end of the year, all three men left H.C. Jones to go into business for themselves.

Henry Jones acted quickly to fill the void left by their departure, promoting Charles W. A. Romer to the position of superintendent of the factory. Romer had only been with the



**ROMER & CO.,**  
(Established 1837.)  
MANUFACTURERS OF  
**Patent Padlocks**  
OF EVERY DESCRIPTION.  
*Patent Stationary Railroad Freight*  
AND PASSENGER CAR DOOR LOCKS,  
AND PATENT PIANO AND SEWING MACHINE LOCKS,  
ALSO,  
**BUILDERS' HARDWARE,**  
AND ALL KINDS OF  
BRONZE DOOR KNOBS AND TRIMMINGS,  
141-145 N. J. RAILROAD AVENUE,  
**NEWARK, N. J.**

All kinds of BRASS and COMPOSITION CASTINGS made to Order.

After serving as superintendent of H.C. Jones since 1852, Charles W.A. Romer took over the business in 1863 and renamed it Romer & Co., as shown in this listing in the 1875 edition of Holbrook's Newark City Directory.

at 114 New Jersey Railroad Avenue. Among the workers at this factory during the late 1840's were Samuel C. Thomson, Thomas Slight, and Henry Ritchie. Interestingly, Slight and Ritchie only lived a few doors apart, and both were involved in the development of improvements to lock designs, assigning

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**ROMER & CO.,**  
MANUFACTURERS OF  
**PADLOCKS**  
OF EVERY DESCRIPTION. ALSO  
RAILROAD CAR DOOR and SWITCH LOCKS,  
CARRIAGE LAMPS, Lanterns, DASH LAMPS, &c.  
**28 to 42 Summer Avenue,**  
Corner Seventh Avenue, NEWARK, N. J.

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An 1885 advertisement in Holbrook's Newark City Directory shows that Romer & Co. had moved to Summer Avenue.

company for about two years, but he had impressed Jones with his skill as a locksmith. Over the next decade, Romer became increasingly involved with the various aspects of the company's business, and he succeeded Henry C. Jones as its owner in 1863. He soon took on Peter Hassinger and John H. Wilkins as partners, adopting the name of Romer & Company, and offering a line of padlocks, piano locks, and sewing machine locks. In 1870, Hassinger left the firm, and production was moved to a larger factory at 141 to 145 NJ Railroad Avenue.

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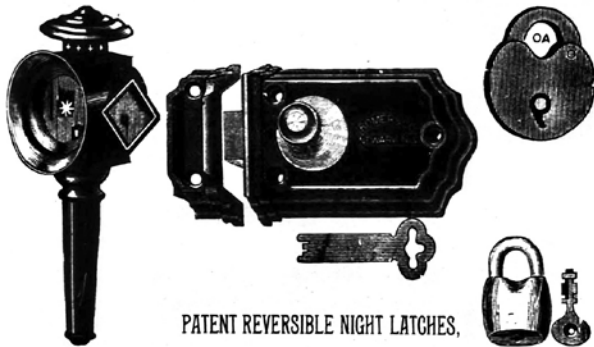
Over the next decade, Romer & Co. continued to expand its product line to include door knobs, trimmings, a variety of railroad locks, and brass castings. In 1874, 30 workers were employed at the factory, with an annual output of 240,000 locks. By the early 1880's, lamps and lanterns were added to its catalog, although they may have been obtained from other manufacturers.

With this expansion, the company once again relocated to a new factory, moving away from Railroad Avenue in 1883 to 28 through 42 Summer Avenue. Another move, to 275 Passaic

## ROMER & CO.

MANUFACTURERS OF PATENT

### Jail Locks, Brass and Iron Pad Locks,



PATENT REVERSIBLE NIGHT LATCHES,

RAILROAD CAR DOOR AND SWITCH LOCKS.

Also, Conductors' Hand and Signal Lanterns,

Dash, Carriage and Bicycle Lamps, Etc.

275, 277, 279 Passaic Street, Near Erie and Del., L. & W. R. R. Depots,

C. W. A. ROMER.

NEWARK, N. J.

J. H. WILKINS.

*A final move by the Romer & Co factory to Passaic Street took place in 1889. Ad from Holbrook's Newark Directory.*

Avenue, took place in 1889. By this time, Charles Romer was in his early 60's, and was thinking about retirement. John H. Wilkins began to take on a more active role in the organization, and he took over management of the company by 1904. In 1906, the firm was renamed the JHW Climax Company, with John H. Wilkins serving as president.

Turning back to the year 1852, Samuel C. Thomson and Henry Ritchie left H.C. Jones and partnered with another locksmith, George W. Westerfield, to form S.C. Thomson & Company. The

## S. C. THOMSON & CO.,

MANUFACTURERS OF

### PATENT PAD LOCKS,

For Railroad Switches, Merchandise Cars, Stores, Cemeteries, Iron Safes, &c.,

No. 11 Railroad Avenue, Newark, N. J.

S. C. Thomson, H. Ritchie, G. W. Westerfield.

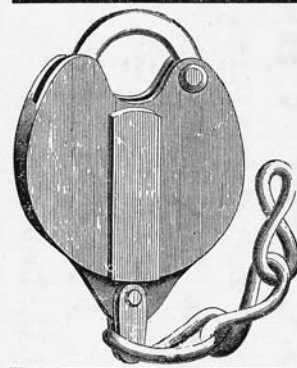
*Samuel Thomson, Henry Ritchie, and George Westerfield left H.C. Jones in 1852 to form their own company. Ad from the 1861 edition of the Newark City Directory.*



*A brass heart lock manufactured by H. Ritchie & Co. for the Central Pacific RR. Photo by Railroad Memories Auctions.*

new company focused its efforts on the sale of padlocks, with a factory at 11 NJ Railroad Avenue. While Samuel Thomson was evidently the senior partner, it was Henry Ritchie who appears to have done the most work on developing the company's products, receiving several patents during the 1850's. Perhaps this is what eventually led Ritchie to strike out on his own, as the partnership was dissolved in 1866.

Still maintaining the factory at 11 NJ Railroad Avenue, the newly formed H. Ritchie & Company advertised itself as the successor to S.C. Thomson in 1867. One of the locksmiths employed by Henry Ritchie at his new company was Edward A. Boyden. Over the next few years, Boyden took on greater



## RITCHIE & BOYDEN,

(Late H. RITCHIE & CO.,)

MANUFACTURERS OF

### Patent Padlocks

FOR RAILROADS, STORES, &C.,

NO. 15 RAILROAD AVENUE,

NEWARK, N. J.

*Henry Ritchie did business as H. Ritchie & Co., Ritchie & Boyden, and finally Ritchie & Son. This ad was his listing in the 1870 edition of Holbrook's Newark City Directory.*

responsibilities with the firm, until he was made a partner in 1870. The new company, now named Ritchie & Boyden, remained focused on the manufacture of padlocks, but moved to a new location at 15 NJ Railroad Avenue.

This partnership proved to be even shorter lived than Henry Ritchie's previous ventures. Edward Boyden left to start his own company in 1872, and Henry Ritchie's son Joseph became involved with the business. Taking on the name Ritchie & Son, by 1874 Joseph H. Ritchie and G. Ritchie were running the

Continued on Page 10

# Locksmiths of Railroad Avenue

Continued from Page 9

company, with a small workforce of 10 craftsmen turning out \$25,000 worth of padlocks each year. The company remained small, specializing in railroad locks, and moving to 294 Market Street in 1880. The last year that Ritchie & Son appears in the Newark City Directory is 1895, and the assets of the company are thought to have been acquired by Thomas Slaughter shortly thereafter.



ESTABLISHED 1850.

**RITCHIE & SON,**  
(Formerly Ritchie & Boyden.)  
Late H Ritchie & Co., and E. S. Thomson & Co.,

MANUFACTURERS OF

**PATENT PADLOCKS,**

FOR

RAILROADS, STORES, SAFES, &c.,

No. 15 RAILROAD AVENUE,  
NEWARK, N. J.

Henry Ritchie's business became known as Ritchie & Son, as shown in the 1875 edition of Holbrook's Newark City Directory, and was later absorbed by T. Slaughter after 1895.

Edward A. Boyden's business only lasted for a few years after he dissolved his partnership with Henry Ritchie in 1872. His first factory, in the Richardson Brothers building on Cherry Street, burned in September of that same year. In 1873, he resumed production of locks in the Whites Building on Commercial Avenue. In 1874, locksmith Phillip Meyer, who may have been employed by Boyden, succeeded him in ownership of the business. Meyer relocated to 39 & 41 Mechanic Street, where he continued to manufacture padlocks, along with "McCormick's Patent Washer Cutter." With only four employees, Phillip Meyer never became a major player in the lock market, and the business appears to have closed in 1877.



**P. MEYER,**  
Successor to E. A. Boyden, late of  
H. Ritchie & Co.,

MANUFACTURER OF

**Brass Padlocks**

For Railroads, Stores, &c.,

ALSO MANUFACTURER OF  
McCormick's Patent Washer Cutter,

**39 & 41 Mechanic St.,**  
NEWARK, N. J.

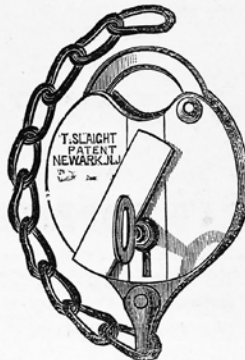
P. Meyer took over Edward Boyden's company from 1874 until 1877. Ad from 1874 Holbrook's Newark Directory.

Leaving H.C. Jones along with Henry Ritchie and Samuel Thomson in 1852, Thomas Slaughter proceeded to set up his own factory across the street at 111 & 113 NJ Railroad Avenue. Slaughter focused on the production of padlocks for a variety of railroad and business uses. He continued to perfect the designs that he had worked on at H.C. Jones, filing numerous



An Atlantic & Great Western Railroad car lock made by Thomas Slaughter. Photo by Railroad Memories Auctions.

patent applications throughout the 1870's. Like his competitor Charles Romer, Thomas Slaughter offered railroad lanterns in his catalog during this period, although there is no indication that he actually produced them. Despite having a somewhat narrow product line, the popularity of Slaughter's railroad locks resulted in the rapid growth of the company. In 1874, he employed 30 workers, producing an annual inventory valued at over \$100,000.



**T. SLAUGHT,**  
MANUFACTURER OF

**PATENT PAD LOCKS,**

FOR

Rail Road Switches, Freight Cars, Ticket  
Boxes, Stores, Cemeteries, Iron Safes, &c.  
Also, Stationary Locks for Freight and  
Passenger Cars.

**113 & 115**  
**RAILROAD AVENUE,**  
**NEWARK, N. J.**

A full assortment of Railroad Lanterns.

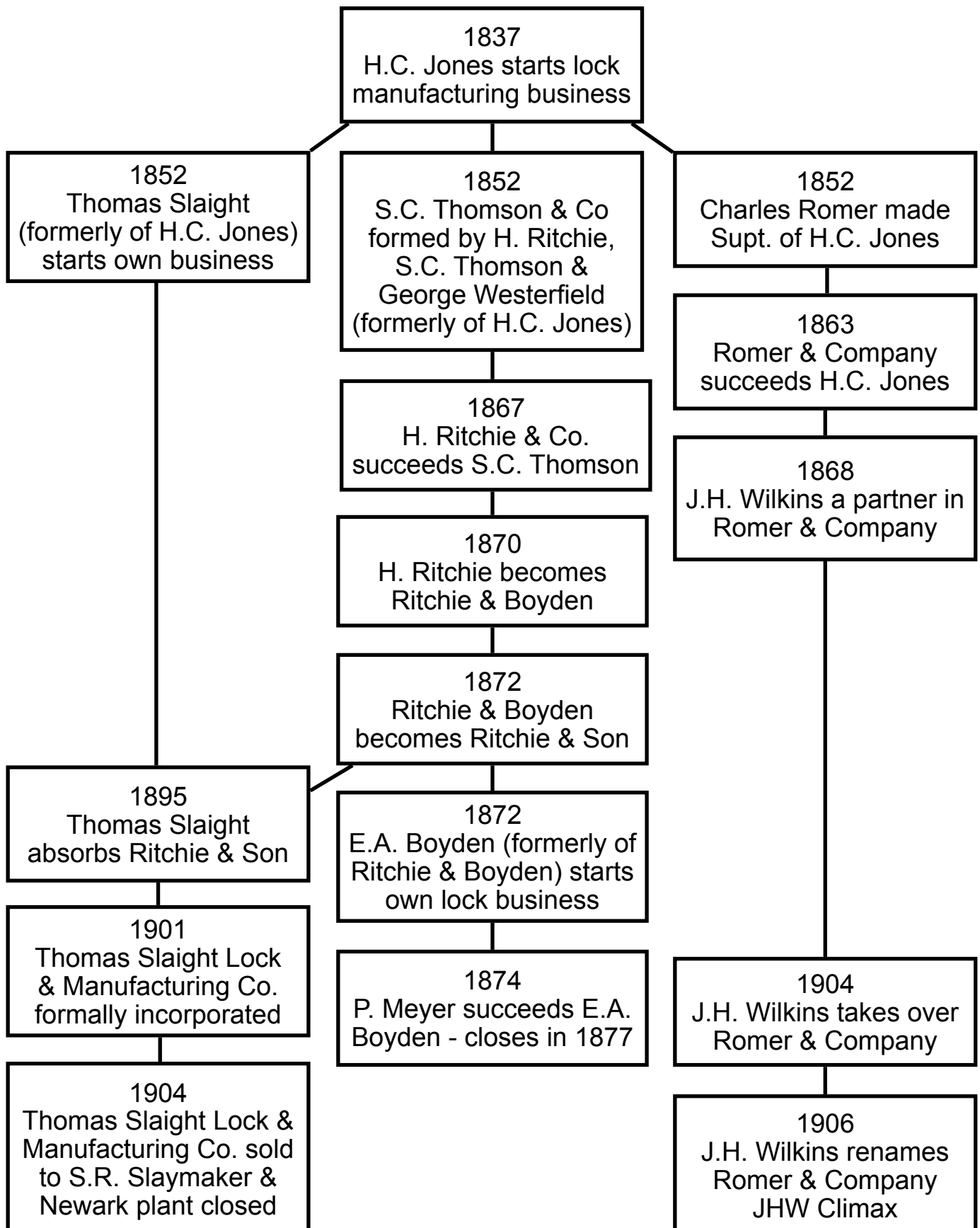
Thomas Slaughter's advertisement in the 1870 edition of the Holbrook Newark City Directory. Note that he offers "a full assortment of railroad lanterns" in addition to locks.

While the other lock manufacturers gradually moved away from New Jersey Railroad Avenue, Thomas Slaughter's factory remained there for the entire existence of the firm. In 1901, the company was formally incorporated as the Thomas Slaughter Lock & Manufacturing Company, shortly before Thomas Slaughter passed away in 1903. His son David assumed control of the organization, but negotiations soon began with S.R. Slaymaker of Lancaster, PA for the possible sale of the company.

Announcements were made in various trade journals during the first week of December, 1904 that the entire business of the Thomas Slaughter Lock & Manufacturing Company had

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# Chronology of Newark's Lock Makers

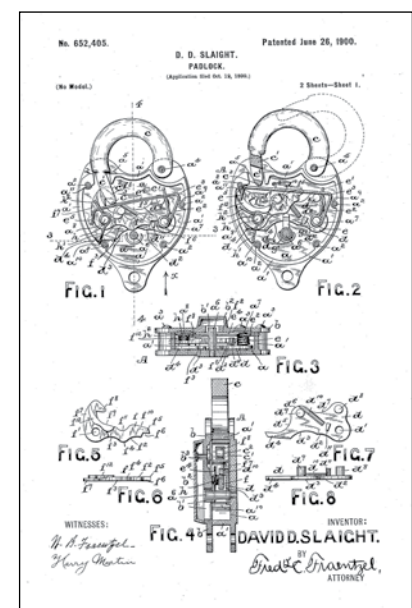
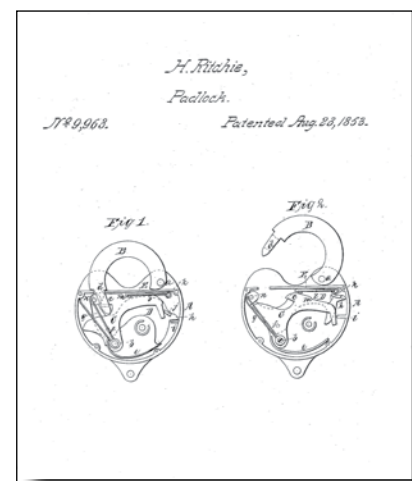
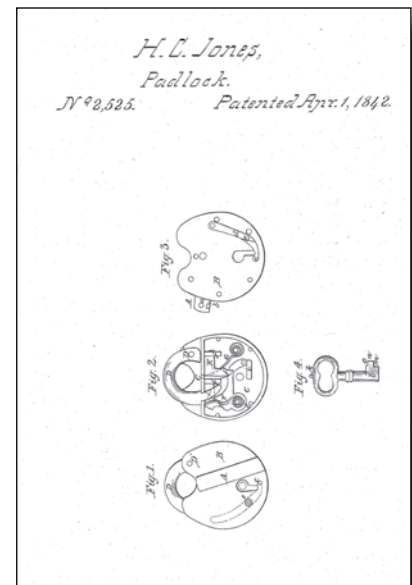


# Patents Awarded to Newark Locksmiths

Number	Filed	Issued	Name	Subject	Assigned
000440		10/23/37	Henry C. Jones	Mail Lock	
001036		12/15/38	Henry C. Jones	Trunk Lock	
002525		4/1/42	Henry C. Jones	Padlock	
004011		4/26/45	Henry C. Jones	Bank Lock	
006252		4/3/49	Henry Ritchie	Bank Lock	Jones
006555		6/26/49	Henry Ritchie	Plate Lock	Jones
007176		3/12/50	Thomas Slaight	Lock Bolt	Jones
008431		10/14/51	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
009963		8/23/53	Henry Ritchie	Padlock	Thomson
011149		6/20/54	Stephen White	Padlock	Jones
012186		1/2/55	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
013911		12/11/55	Henry C. Jones	Trunk Lock	
015783		9/23/56	Thomas Slaight	Car Lock	
017013		4/7/57	Henry Ritchie	Car Lock	Thomson
031332		2/5/61	Thomas Slaight	Car Lock	
033715		11/12/61	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
051488		12/12/65	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
057986		9/11/66	Thomas Slaight	Car Lock	
091174		6/8/69	Thomas Slaight	Lock Latch	
096968		11/16/69	Charles Romer	Hasp Lock	
097127		11/23/69	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
103525		5/24/70	Philipp Meyer	Piano Lock	
126583		5/7/72	Thomas Slaight	Hasp Lock	
130583		8/20/72	Christoph Kurz	Key Guard	Romer
141519	11/13/72	8/5/73	Thomas Slaight	Seal Lock	
146366	6/18/73	1/13/74	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
146856	1/8/74	1/27/74	Herrmann Ahrend	Padlock	Romer
147219	1/14/74	2/3/74	Herrmann Ahrend	Seal Lock	Romer
147585	1/14/74	2/17/74	Herrmann Ahrend	Padlock	Romer
156113	6/3/74	10/20/74	Herrmann Ahrend	Padlock	Romer
157643	7/14/74	12/8/74	Thomas Slaight	Master Key	
201147	2/20/78	3/12/78	Herrmann Ahrend	Seal Lock	Romer
206517	7/10/78	7/30/78	Herrmann Ahrend	Padlock	Romer
213300	1/18/79	3/18/79	Charles Romer	Padlock	
216062	6/3/79	4/7/79	Thomas Slaight	Padlock	
226949	3/11/80	4/27/80	Herrmann Ahrend	Handcuffs	Romer
623831	4/18/98	4/25/99	Charles Romer	Lock	
652405	10/12/99	6/26/00	David Slaight	Padlock	

Notes:

The patent number is the sequential number assigned by the Patent Office. The filed date is when the application was made, and the issued date is when the patent was granted. If the patent was assigned to a company or individual, the name is listed in the "assigned" column. Note that patents could be licensed to additional companies.





been sold to S.R. Slaymaker. All contracts and records passed to Slaymaker, and the tools, patterns and machinery were relocated to Lancaster.

The Thomas Saight plant was the last lock factory in business on New Jersey Railroad Avenue, and as the equipment was crated up for shipment to Lancaster, a chapter in Newark's history came to a close. Climax products continued to be made in the city, but it was no longer the hub of lock manufacturing that it had been throughout most of the 19th century. Over time, other industries on New Jersey Railroad Avenue closed, or moved to more modern factories in other locations.

One by one, the original brick factory buildings were torn down, until only a handful remained. Today, it is easy to miss New Jersey Railroad Avenue as the train pulls out of Newark's Penn Station, and there are only a few reminders of a time when the street was the city's industrial center and "lock makers row."

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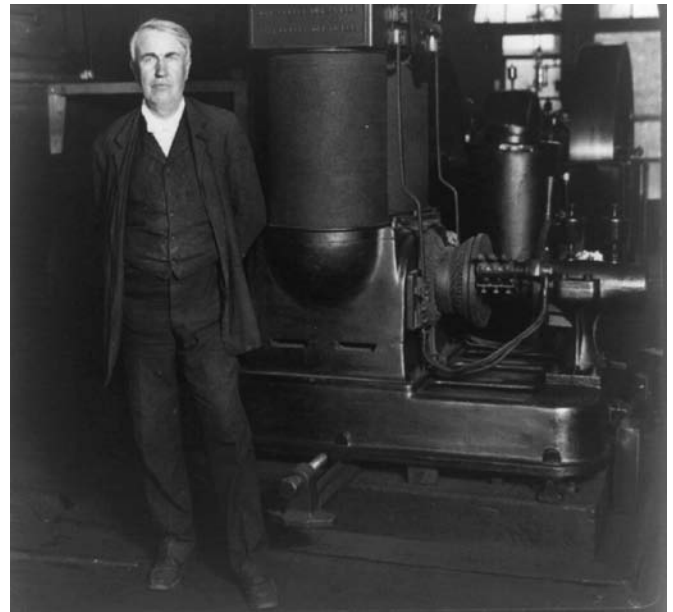
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## The Wizard of New Jersey Railroad Avenue

Thomas Edison, the "Wizard of Menlo Park," is well known to students of history as one of our nation's most famous inventors, with his development of the phonograph, the motion picture, and the modern light bulb. However, his connection with the lock manufacturers of Newark, NJ is perhaps a less familiar story. After an early career as a railroad telegrapher, Edison entered the world of technological innovation in 1869, with his work of repairing gold & stock price tickers in New York City. His success in this field led him to establish the Newark Telegraph Works in 1870.

The location of his first factory was 15 New Jersey Railroad Avenue, in the same building occupied by the lock shop of Ritchie & Boyden. In a September, 1870 letter to a business associate regarding the lease of space in the building and the erection of machinery, Edison notes that correspondence to him should be addressed "TA Edison, care Ritchie & Boyden." The following year, the Newark Telegraph Works moved to larger quarters on Ward Street, but Thomas Edison still kept an eye out for available factory space on New Jersey Railroad Avenue.

In 1872, he established a small research lab in the building at 111 & 113 NJ Railroad Avenue, owned by Thomas Saight. At the time, a local Newark law made tenants responsible for an entire year's rent, even if they only had a monthly rental agreement. In today's world of leases and security deposits, this practice seems reasonable, but Edison reportedly considered it to be "unjust." Under the threat of a lawsuit by Thomas Saight for payment of his annual obligation in 1876, Thomas Edison opted to move his research to a newly constructed facility in nearby Menlo Park.

If not for Thomas Saight's actions and a city ordinance that was ahead of its time, Edison may not have vacated his space in Newark when he did, and innovations such as the development of the light bulb and phonograph might have taken place there. Saight's lock factory could have become famous as the birthplace of the motion picture, but instead the memory of it simply faded away along with the other buildings on the street. It's probably just as well, though; the "Wizard of New Jersey Railroad Avenue" doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

**T. SLAIGHT & CO.,**  
MANUFACTURERS OF  
**Patent Pad Locks,**  
—FOR—  
*Railroad Switches, Freight Cars, Ticket Boxes, Stores,  
Cemeteries, Iron Safes, &c. Also, Stationary Locks  
for Freight and Passenger Cars.*  
**111 and 113 RAILROAD AVENUE,  
NEWARK, N. J.**