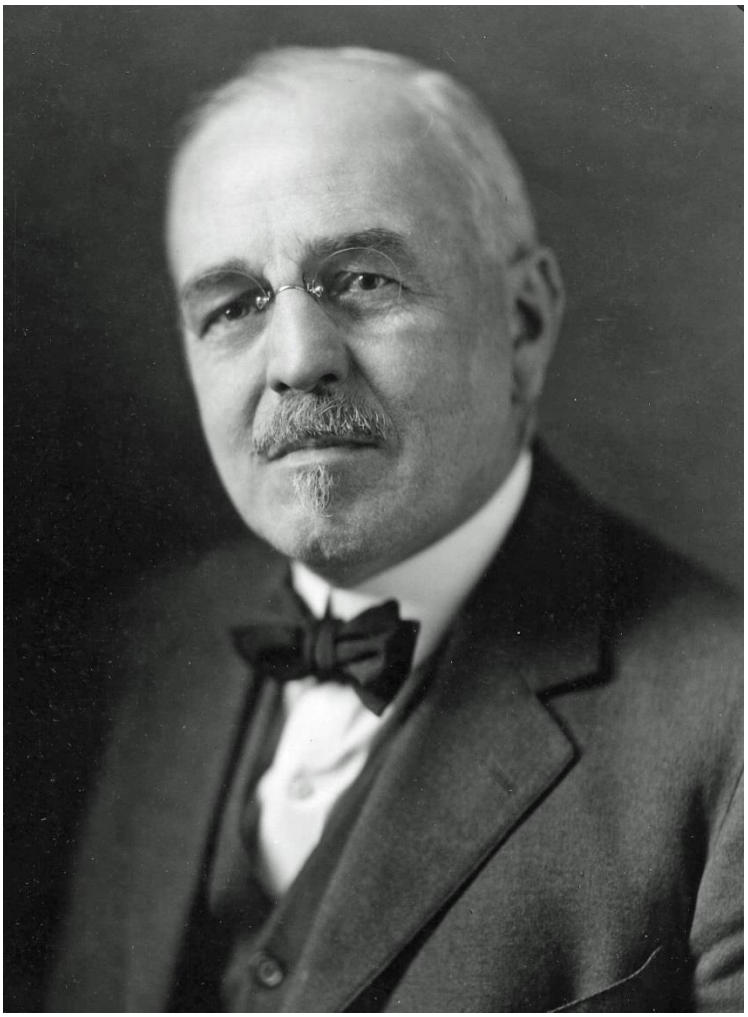

James A. Shepard (1864 – 1933)

Shepard-Niles Crane & Hoist Company

William H. Shepard, Sr. purchased a small foundry in Havana (now Montour Falls) in 1878. By 1880 he and his two sons, William Jr. and James, started their own company known as William H. Shepard & Sons. They produced small farm implements, such as barn door hangers, stump pullers, and plows at their original plant.

They soon expanded their business to include iron structural works and bridges. William Jr. died in a tragic accident in 1892. James, a mechanical genius, continued on but decided to focus on developing more reliable cranes and hoists. He became one of the early pioneers of the electric wire-rope hoist. His innovations continued unabated in the early 1900s. He invented the pneumatic riveter and pneumatic hoisting outfit used for building and erecting bridges. He designed air motors and the chain hoist driven by pneumatic motor. In 1903 he built the first electrically operated hoist and placed it on the market. His company was known as the Shepard Electric Crane & Hoist Company until its purchase of the Niles Crane Division of Niles, Bement and Pond in 1928. After this period it was known as Shepard-Niles Crane & Hoist Company.

James developed gearing systems and drive designs that are still in use today. In fact, Shepard products helped America triumph in World War I and II. They hoisted the first atomic device into place for testing. In 1959 their cranes helped in the production of the first nuclear powered merchant vessel. By 1962 they were helping NASA hoist missiles onto launching pads. Shepard Niles became synonymous with craftsmanship and ingenuity.

By the 1980s Shepard's started suffering from labor disputes and a sagging economy. Manufacturing jobs were being lost to overseas competition and the need for heavy industrial equipment in America dropped. In 2002 Finnish company Konecranes purchased Shepard Niles and continues to service and repair cranes as Shepard Niles with a much reduced staff. Shepard's also continues to make new heavy duty hoists and hot metal hoists under their own brand name. The extensive industrial campus, once used to make bridges and enormous cranes, is no longer needed to service current clients.

(Written by Andrew Tompkins, 2014)