



A Tale of Three Cities: The Origins and Early History of the Vermont Maid Brand of Blended Syrup

Vermont Maid syrup was a blend of cane sugar syrup containing between 15 to 25 percent maple syrup. As a blended table syrup with more cane than maple, it became anathema to the state's values. It has occasionally been written that Vermont Maid had its start in Burlington, but the beginnings and circuitous path of the Vermont Maid brand is more complex and covers a few more stops on the map of Vermont.

By MATTHEW M. THOMAS

For a good portion of the twentieth century, outside of New England, the Vermont maple syrup most Americans were familiar with was the Vermont Maid brand of table syrup. Such an association with Vermont was a dubious honor at best. Vermont Maid syrup was not actually pure maple syrup but instead was a blend of cane sugar syrup containing between 15 to 25 percent maple syrup.¹ In Vermont, which takes its maple syrup very seriously, and aggressively protects its name and brand identity, Vermont Maid syrup as a blended table syrup with more cane than maple became anathema to the state's values. To make matters worse, the Vermont Maid syrup of today no longer contains any maple syrup in its list of ingredients.² For many, using the Ver-

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MATTHEW THOMAS is a Minnesota-based independent researcher and historian who specializes in the history of the maple syrup industry. He is the author of two books, *The Maple King: The Making of a Maple Syrup Empire*, and *A Sugarbush Like None Other: Adirondack Maple Syrup and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company*, and is the author of the website "Maple Syrup History," www.maplesyruphistory.com.

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mont name and identity to sell “fake” maple syrup, which is not even manufactured or bottled in Vermont, borders on the absurd. Public outcry against the Vermont Maid name dates back to the 1930s, when Governor Stanley C. Wilson declared, “I am for Vermont made syrup spelled M-A-D-E.”³ More recent disagreement and concern with Vermont Maid syrup’s use of the word Vermont in its name contributed to the debate that led to the creation of the 2006 Vermont Origin Rule to protect use of the Vermont brand.⁴ As much as questions about the Vermont Maid brand are sure to elicit an opinion from most Vermonters, an understanding of where and when Vermont Maid began is less well known.

It has occasionally been written that Vermont Maid syrup had its start in Burlington in the former Welch Bros. Maple Company syrup plant.⁵ In truth, the beginnings and circuitous path of the Vermont Maid brand is much more complex and covers a few more stops on the map of Vermont than just Burlington. Vermont Maid began as a brand of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company in 1919 in Essex Junction, Vermont. From there, production moved to St. Johnsbury in 1922, and finally to Burlington in 1926, spanning three cities across the state of Vermont.



Circa 1916 image by Frederick H. Tims of the Essex Junction syrup-bottling facility in which Vermont Maid syrup was first bottled in 1919 by the Vermont Maple Syrup Company. Courtesy of the New England Maple Museum and Tom Olson Collections.

DEALERS, PROCESSORS, PACKERS, AND BLENDEES

The maple industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was going through a transition from a focus on producing maple sugar on a small scale with simple and inexpensive technology, to producing maple syrup at a larger, commercial scale, using more sophisticated, expensive boiling equipment and dedicated production facilities.⁶ Although Vermont was slower than some states to make the shift from producing maple sugar to producing maple syrup, it was still tapping more trees and making more maple products than any other state.⁷

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An important participant in the process of getting syrup from the farmer to the consumer was the sugar or syrup dealer, also referred to as a processor, packer, or blender. Unlike farmer producers, syrup processors were well capitalized, with business and marketing knowledge, who understood the economic realities of modernizing modes of transportation, packaging, and print media for reaching consumers, while taking advantage of economies of scale and the newest technology.

The maple industry was structured differently in late nineteenth and early twentieth century than it is today. A substantial portion of the maple syrup produced in Vermont was sold to processors and blenders. As an example, as early as 1894, the Towle Maple Products Company, maker of the blended Log Cabin Syrup, had a standing order for the delivery of 80,000 pounds of maple sugar a month from Vermont, nearly one million pounds a year.⁸ A 1925 University of Vermont study of the economics of maple production found that one-half of all the maple products sold by producers in Vermont was bulk maple syrup handled by dealers.⁹

There were a handful of maple sugar and syrup dealers scattered around the state. Some worked as brokers, buying, selling, and shipping sugar and syrup to blenders in the bigger cities like Boston, Chicago, and St. Paul. They included Isaac H. McClary of Albany, J. M. Beeman and Son of Fairfax, and the Vermont Maple Sugar Exchange in Brattleboro.¹⁰ Others were local bottlers and blenders, most notably the Welch Bros. Maple Company of Burlington, who established a company in 1890 for packing syrup into bottles and cans under their Green Mountain Boy Maple Sap Syrup label.¹¹ In other cases, equipment manufacturers like G. H. Grimm in Rutland accepted maple sugar and syrup as payment for equipment purchases in lieu of money, putting Grimm in the role of buyer and packer, moving both bulk and packaged maple products on to other customers.¹² One of the largest Vermont-based buyers of maple sugar was George C. Cary of St. Johnsbury, who primarily purchased maple sugar, not for bottling and blending as a food item, but instead for use as a sweetener for the tobacco industry.¹³

Syrup blenders of this era were notorious for falsely claiming that their blends of cane, corn, and maple syrup were pure maple syrup. Maple producers at the time, such as the Vermont Maple Sugar Maker's Association, considered blending a form of adulteration and wanted a ban on sales of any form of maple syrup that was not 100 percent pure maple. Initially, no effective chemical test existed to determine the constituent sugars in a sample of syrup, making accurate identification of such blends impossible. Later, a test was developed to identify glucose or corn syrup, but it was still not possible to clearly differentiate be-

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tween cane syrup and maple syrup, both primarily forms of sucrose. In 1906, with the passage of the Food and Drug Act, which was targeted at preventing misbranding and adulteration, blenders were spared the shame of having their syrups identified as adulterated, which the new law reserved for products determined to be dangerous and unsafe for human consumption. Blended syrups were deemed safe to eat but the act included requirements that food labels clearly identify the primary contents of the container, including whether a syrup was a blend or was pure maple syrup.¹⁴ Over time there were increasing demands for accuracy in food labeling and by the late 1930s, with the passage of the 1938 revisions to the Food and Drug Act, syrup labels included more detailed information that most blended table syrups contained between 15 and 25 percent pure maple syrup; that percentage would only decrease over time to zero today.

The maple industry has often overlooked or minimized the importance of blended syrups to its history and overall success, as well as the role of blended syrups in navigating the transition out of maple sugar production into maple syrup. While not always working with the highest grades of maple syrup, the syrup buyers, packers, and blenders in the last century were responsible for providing a key market for a significant portion of the maple products produced in Vermont's commercial sugarbushes. For decades, blended syrup companies were spending millions of dollars advertising brands like Log Cabin and Vermont Maid syrups, while the pure maple syrup industry was enjoying the benefits of a growing new market. Large corporate blenders like the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, through their marketing, advertising, and promotion of brands like Vermont Maid syrup, helped grow consumer interest in pure and maple-flavored syrup as a standard item on America's breakfast tables. Blends paved the way for a broader appreciation in regions less familiar with the taste of maple. Over the later part of the twentieth century, all the major brands of blended syrups, including Vermont Maid, gradually reduced the amount of maple syrup in their recipes from around 15 percent to just a trace, until by the 2010s, maple as an ingredient was completely eliminated and they were simply table syrups made with corn syrup and imitation maple flavoring.

Blended syrup had a significant place alongside pure maple syrup in the overall market where maple products were consumed. It was pointed out that some households could not afford pure maple syrup, and in a 1927 speech, George C. Cary emphasized that "farmers should encourage the blending of maple sugar so that poor people may have maple flavor with their griddle cakes, the same as the rich."¹⁵

The year 1916 witnessed a new arrival to the Vermont maple sugar-

and syrup-packing landscape with the incorporation of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company in Essex Junction under Fletcher N. Johnson as chairman and primary shareholder.¹⁶ Johnson, better known as F. N. Johnson, was a syrup merchant from Bellefontaine, Ohio, and one of the country's largest wholesale dealers and bottlers of maple syrup, who for the previous fifteen years had shipped to Ohio trainloads of maple sugar and maple syrup bought from Vermont producers.¹⁷ In the early twentieth century, Johnson was doing a quarter of a million dollars in business and had established a number of syrup brands or labels for his Ohio-based F. N. Johnson & Company. Most notable of Johnson's brands at the time were the blended cane and maple Sugar Bird Syrup and Gold Bond pure maple syrup.¹⁸

Johnson chose Essex Junction as the home for the company, building a two-story, 192-foot by 48-foot wood-framed plant alongside the tracks of the Burlington & Lamoille Railroad.¹⁹ In establishing the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, Johnson began bottling his Sugar Bird and Golden Gate brands of cane and maple syrup in Vermont from his new Essex Junction plant.²⁰

SUGAR BIRD SYRUP CONTROVERSY

The Vermont Maid brand came into being in 1919 in reaction to a disagreement over the use of the Sugar Bird Syrup brand name that was meant to be a part of the sale of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company between founder F. N. Johnson and a group of minor shareholders, led by George C. Cary.

As noted above, Cary was a St. Johnsbury maple packer who specialized in buying and selling millions of pounds of maple sugar and syrup every year. Cary purchased maple sugar and syrup from across New England, New York, and adjacent Québec, arguably handling more maple products than all other dealers combined.²¹ Cary's sugar was primarily converted into seventy-pound blocks of pure maple sugar and sold to tobacco companies for flavoring and curing tobacco.²² By 1910, the Cary Maple Sugar Company was reported to control as much as 90 percent of the world's maple sugar, leading newspapers to begin referring to George C. Cary as the "Maple King."²³ In addition to his processing and storage facilities in St. Johnsbury, Cary controlled a small army of syrup buyers and over a dozen private warehouses scattered across the region.

In the late 1910s, George Cary began to diversify and expand his empire, investing in a wide range of New England maple companies as well as building a massive four-story processing factory in St. Johnsbury.²⁴ Cary's diversification efforts included entry into the bottled

syrup business, when he began packaging pure maple syrup for household consumption under the label Highland Pure Maple Sap Syrup.²⁵ Cary further expanded his syrup-bottling portfolio with investment in the Vermont Maple Syrup Company as a minor shareholder.²⁶

In early 1919, Cary arranged with F. N. Johnson to purchase Johnson's 50 percent share of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, making Cary the controlling shareholder. At the time, Cary assumed that the sale of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company included the Sugar Bird Syrup brand as well as the Essex Junction plant. However, Johnson had other plans, claiming that the Sugar Bird Syrup brand originated in Ohio, was trademarked to the F. N. Johnson Maple Syrup Company, and its use was only licensed to the Vermont Maple Syrup Company.²⁷ Further, Johnson never formally included transfer of the trademark in the sale. To protect his Sugar Bird Syrup brand, on April 18, 1919, the day after Johnson sold his shares to Cary, he served the Vermont Maple Syrup Company with notice that the Sugar Bird Syrup brand was not to be used by the Vermont Maple Syrup Company.²⁸ However, the Vermont Maple Syrup Company continued to use the Sugar Bird Syrup brand, leading Johnson to formally claim trademark infringement.²⁹ The matter was tried in United States District Court in Burlington in March 1921, before Judge Harland B. Howe. The Vermont Maple Syrup Company argued that through their use of the brand and spending money to grow the brand's reputation, they had acquired ownership of the trademark. It was further revealed that upon being informed that they were not granted use of the Sugar Bird Syrup brand, the new owners of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company attempted to register that brand name for use by their company in New England and adjacent states, an action which it was determined they had no right to do. Judge Howe issued a ruling in favor of F. N. Johnson in May 1921, stating that the trademark and use of the Sugar Bird Syrup name was owned and to be used only at the discretion of the F. J. Johnson Company and that the Vermont Maple Syrup Company was enjoined from use of that trademark and was liable for damages to F. N. Johnson.³⁰

THE VERMONT MAID BRAND

Finding that their plans for bottling and marketing syrup under the Sugar Bird Syrup brand were in jeopardy, the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, under the new control of George C. Cary, immediately put their energies behind a new syrup brand, Vermont Maid. On June 10, 1919, the Vermont Maple Syrup Company registered the trademark on the Vermont Maid name, claiming that it had been in use by the Vermont Maple Syrup Company since April 22, 1919, just a few days after

Johnson notified the company that they were not free to use the Sugar Bird Syrup brand name.³¹

Interestingly, George C. Cary and the Vermont Maple Syrup Company were not the first to make use of Vermont Maid as a maple syrup brand. The Vermont Maid name was first used nearly ten years earlier by the Towle Maple Products Company of St. Paul, Minnesota. In addition to making their nationally popular Log Cabin Syrup, the Towle Maple Products Company at the time packaged over a dozen other brands of syrups and molasses, solidifying its place as the leading manufacturer of table syrups in the United States.³² Following a devastating fire in the Towle Maple Products Company's St. Paul plant in December 1909, the Cary Maple Sugar Company offered its assistance to Towle, selling Cary's St. Johnsbury maple sugar and syrup processing facility to Patrick J. Towle in February 1910. Setting up operations in St. Johnsbury, the Towle Maple Products Company was able to continue bottling Log Cabin Syrup from Vermont while the damaged St. Paul plant was being repaired. With a new temporary home in Vermont, beginning in May 1910, the Towle Maple Products Company immediately took advantage of their location to add Towle's Vermont Maid Brand Pure Sap

Maple Syrup as a new brand for cans and bottles of pure maple syrup. Formal filing of the trademark registration for the Vermont Maid

brand name occurred in October that year.³³ Towle's Vermont Maid as a pure maple syrup was a bit of a departure for the Towle Maple Products Company, which primarily produced blended table syrups combining cane and maple sugars. The Towle Maple Products Company's tenure in St. Johnsbury lasted from early 1910 until the end of 1913, at which time the company left Vermont and consolidated all production and bottling back in their St. Paul plant.³⁴



The first use of Vermont Maid in a brand name for maple syrup was by the Towle Maple Products Company between 1910 and 1918. Courtesy of Richard Baum.

Production and sale of syrup under the Towle's Vermont Maid brand may have continued until the middle of 1918.³⁵

How George C. Cary and the Vermont Maple Syrup Company came to choose the Vermont Maid brand name in 1919 is not known. It is clear that Cary was fully aware of Towle's Vermont Maid brand name and had a strong relationship with the Towle Maple Products Company. In fact, the Towle family honored Cary years later with a plaque acknowledging that he helped save their company when he made available his Vermont facility following their fire in 1909.³⁶ Although records are lacking, it is possible that Cary purchased the trademark rights to the brand, or that the Towle Maple Products Company willingly discontinued their use of the brand and chose not to renew their trademark.

SHUFFLING SYRUP PLANTS

Under Cary's ownership, by mid-1919 the Vermont Maple Syrup Company began using the Essex Junction plant for packing cans and bottles of Vermont Maid syrup. The syrup was packed in small, medium, and large cans (pint, quart, and gallon) and sixteen-ounce and twenty-two-ounce bottles with paper labels featuring a maiden in a white bonnet holding a bouquet of flowers inside an art nouveau border on a solid green background. By June the following year, newspaper advertisements indicate that Vermont Maid syrup was being marketed across New England and sold by grocers as far away as Tacoma, Washington. In addition to Vermont Maid syrup, Cary's Vermont Maple Syrup Company also packed another blended syrup under the similar label of Vermont's Pride Syrup, which featured a circular portrait of a young woman in a white chef's hat over a splash of maple leaves, with text in a font nearly identical to that found in the Vermont Maid label.³⁷ Production of Vermont Maid syrup continued in Essex Junction for approximately four years.

In June 1922, George C. Cary and a handful of his Cary Maple Sugar Company associates reincorporated a new Vermont Maple Syrup Company in St. Johnsbury.³⁸ The following year in February 1923, the Vermont Maple Syrup Company relocated its Vermont Maid production line from Essex Junction to St. Johnsbury, thus establishing Vermont Maid in its second Vermont city.³⁹ Cary had recently completed construction of a modern, sprawling, four-story fireproof concrete-and-brick factory on the east side of St. Johnsbury and had plenty of room and staff to consolidate his maple enterprises under one roof.⁴⁰

With Vermont Maid syrup moving to St. Johnsbury, the empty Essex Junction plant was leased to the Vermont Maple Products Cooperative Exchange in 1923 before being sold to the cooperative in 1925. The building

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was again sold in 1927 to Maple Grove Candies of St. Johnsbury to serve as a warehouse space for their maple candy products. Two years later the building returned to the hands of George C. Cary when the Cary Maple Sugar Company purchased Maple Grove Candies. Cary again leased the building to both the Maple Products Cooperative Exchange and Vermont Maple Orchards, before selling again to the Cooperative Exchange in 1934.⁴¹ The Essex Junction syrup plant went on to be the home of a dozen different syrup-packing companies over its first seventy-five years, before being sold and converted to light industry in 1991.⁴²

PERSISTENCE OF F. N. JOHNSON

Despite separating from the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, F. N. Johnson never exited the maple syrup-buying and -bottling business in Vermont when he sold his share to George C. Cary. As part of the sale, Johnson handed over the keys to the Essex Junction plant he built in 1916. Choosing to continue to bottle and market Sugar Bird Syrup in New England and needing a bottling facility, on May 1, 1919, the F. N. Johnson Maple Syrup Company began leasing the unused former Welch Bros. Maple Company building on Battery Street in Burlington.⁴³ Johnson enlisted the assistance of his son R. Morton Johnson, who relocated from Ohio to manage the Burlington plant.

The Welch Bros. Maple Company was established in Burlington in 1890 by brothers C. B. and L. W. Welch, initially occupying a former creamery at Church and Maple Streets for two years before leasing the former Whiting Mill on Battery Street, refitting it for use as a maple syrup bottling plant.⁴⁴ The Welch Bros. Maple Company was a well-respected company and an important local dealer for syrup producers to sell their pure maple syrup. Outside of the Cary Maple Sugar Company, the Welch Bros. Maple Company handled more maple sugar and syrup than any other processor in Vermont.⁴⁵ The company grew over time, and in September 1917, it moved into a new, purpose-built, two-story brick plant at the corner of Pine Street and Marble Avenue in Burlington.⁴⁶

In 1925, regrouping from the setbacks of the messy sale of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, Johnson began to expand the F. N. Johnson Maple Company, acquiring a collection of established syrup-packing companies with national sales and marketing. Johnson began by purchasing a controlling interest in the Adirondack Maple Company of Lowville, New York; however, the expansion of Johnson's maple syrup holdings was just getting started. The greater focus was on a pair of bigger targets, the Welch Bros. Maple Company and reacquisition of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company.

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The Adirondack Maple Company was formed in Lowville, in Lewis County, New York, in 1910, selling pure maple syrup under the label *Pride of the Adirondacks*, as well as the cane and maple blend *Adirondack Maple Company Breakfast Syrup*.⁴⁷ Lewis County has a long history as the most productive county for maple syrup in New York, and through the 1910s and early 1920s, Lewis County producers sold most of their syrup in bulk barrels to the Adirondack Maple Company.⁴⁸ Johnson's purchase of that company in January 1925 occurred alongside his purchase of the Robinson Maple Syrup Company of Middleford, Ohio. The Adirondack Maple Company and the Robinson Maple Syrup Company were combined with Johnson's Burlington operations and renamed as one firm, the American Maple Corporation.⁴⁹ The consolidation included moving Johnson's son R. Morton Johnson, the manager in Burlington, along with all machinery and equipment from the Burlington and Middleford plants, to the Lowville location.⁵⁰

Johnson's plans marched forward, and in the middle of 1926, he announced the purchase of the Welch Bros. Maple Company from C. B. Welch, including the important acquisition of the company's large brick syrup-processing plant in Burlington.⁵¹ When this purchase was completed in July, the Welch Bros. Maple Company brand names of *Mayflower Syrup* and *Green Mountain Boy Syrup* were retired from use.

That same summer, F. N. Johnson continued the expansion of his holdings with the reacquisition of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company and its new Vermont Maid brand. The Vermont Maple Syrup Company had put the Vermont name to good use, establishing a national market for Vermont Maid. With this sale, the bottling of Vermont Maid syrup was moved from St. Johnsbury to the former Welch Bros. Maple Company building in Burlington, providing Vermont Maid syrup with its third and final Vermont home, while the business office was temporarily maintained in St. Johnsbury.⁵²

Johnson completed his program of acquisitions and mergers in September 1926, when he formally incorporated the American Maple Corporation in the state of Vermont.⁵³ Now working out of the former Welch Bros. Maple Company plant in Burlington, R. Morton Johnson returned from managing the Lowville plant to oversee operations in Vermont.⁵⁴ As one final step, in February 1927, Johnson came full circle and officially changed the name of the American Maple Company to the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, the name of his first and original Vermont maple syrup endeavor. With the consolidation of these various firms, Johnson also put all his Vermont syrup-bottling efforts behind the single brand of Vermont Maid.⁵⁵



Circa 1970 view of Vermont Maid syrup plant, the former Welch Bros. Maple Company, at the corner of Marble and Pine Streets in Burlington, Vermont. Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, Middlesex.

TRAGEDY STRIKES

A year after F. N. Johnson reestablished ownership of the Vermont Maple Syrup Company and established the Vermont Maid bottle operation in the former Welch Bros. Maple Company plant in Burlington, a tragedy befell his family. Helen Clark Johnson, the twenty-five-year-old wife of R. Morton Johnson experienced severe complications from her pregnancy. Following the premature still-born death of their son, Helen Johnson died four days later on March 22, 1928, at the Mary Fletcher Hospital in Burlington.⁵⁶ A little over a year before, R. Morton Johnson and his wife had relocated from Lowville, New York, to Burlington to manage the Vermont Maid syrup plant.

Following the death of his wife, R. Morton Johnson left Vermont and returned to Ohio. In October 1928, it was announced that his father had sold the Vermont Maple Syrup Company and Vermont Maid brand to the large syrup firm of Penick & Ford, Ltd., Inc.⁵⁷ With their return to Bellefontaine, Ohio, the Johnsons largely stepped away from the blended syrup business, although F. N. Johnson continued to bottle Gold Bond maple-flavored syrup from Bellefontaine until the beginning of World War II.⁵⁸ Instead, Johnson focused on the wholesale grocery business and in the coming decades, the F. N. Johnson Company grew to become a major supplier for the IGA grocery store chain across the Ohio region.⁵⁹

THE PENICK & FORD, LTD., INC. ERA

At the time of their purchase of Vermont Maid, Penick & Ford, Ltd., Inc. was arguably the largest packer of table syrups and molasses in the United States, with plants in Louisiana and Iowa.⁶⁰ The decision by the Johnsons to leave Vermont and sell the Vermont Maple Syrup Company was fortuitous for Penick & Ford, who were in a period of growth and expansion, adding a number of brands and facilities to their operations.⁶¹ Under Penick & Ford, the bottling of Vermont Maid syrup changed little; however, the brand did experience a massive increase in advertising and marketing, leading to further increases in production and the gradual growth of the Burlington facility.⁶² At its height of production in the 1950s and 1960s, the Pine Street and Marble Avenue plant in Burlington employed around forty to forty-five workers.⁶³ Penick & Ford also began packing Vermont Maid in a unique and double loop-handled clear glass bottle around 1934, which became an iconic and recognizable form of packaging, along with the ever-present image of the Vermont maiden on a green label.⁶⁴

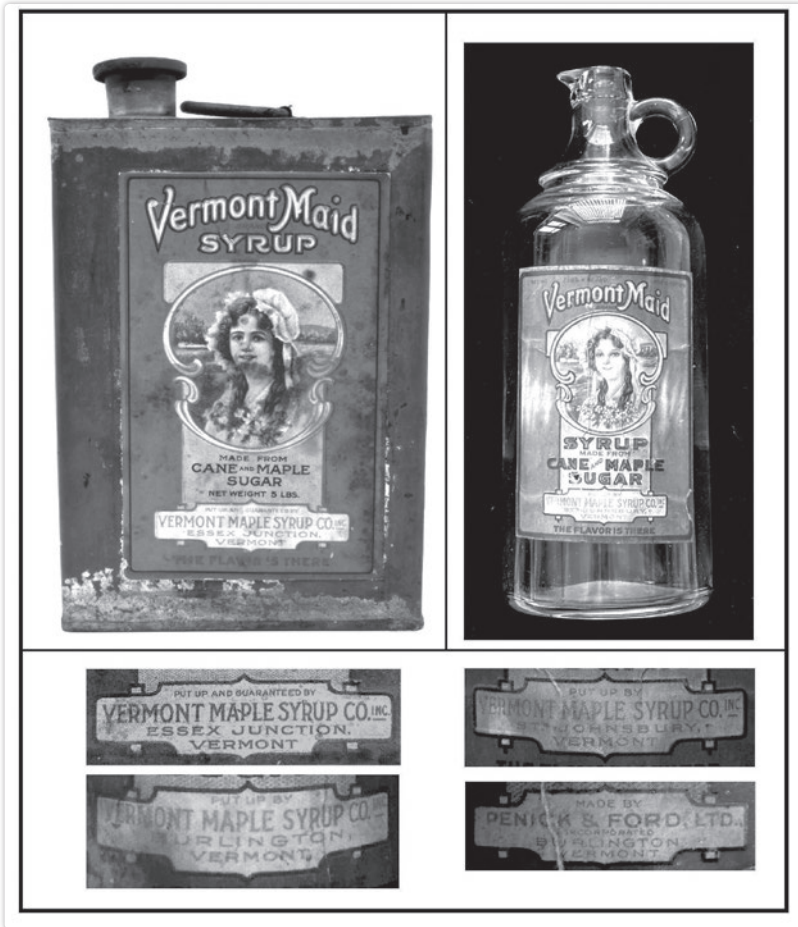
Penick & Ford continued as owners of Vermont Maid for the next thirty-seven years, until the Burlington plant was sold to the R. J. Reynolds company in 1965.⁶⁵ Production continued in Burlington for another ten years before the plant on the corner of Pine Street and Marble Avenue was closed in 1975 and the bottling of Vermont Maid was moved to New Jersey.⁶⁶ Under the ownership of R. J. Reynolds the amount of maple syrup in the Vermont Maid blend was reduced from 15 percent to 11 percent, just above the 10 percent minimum required at the time by federal regulations to use the term “maple flavored.” In the 1970s, the amount of maple syrup in Vermont Maid was further reduced to around 3 percent, and by the 1990s, Vermont Maid had eliminated maple syrup from the ingredients.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The first decade of the Vermont Maid brand was a rocky start, seeing the brand locate in three Vermont cities, beginning in Essex Junction, moving to St. Johnsbury, and finally settling in Burlington. Amazingly, all three of the buildings in which the brand was bottled are still standing.⁶⁸ The Vermont Maid brand came into being in response to the efforts of an ambitious maple merchant from Ohio who sought to expand his syrup-packing business in the heart of the maple world.

“Packed in Vermont by Vermonters” was a Vermont Maid slogan used by Penick & Ford, Ltd., Inc., and for four decades, that was arguably an honest statement.⁶⁹ The legacy of Vermont Maid is a story of

Vermont origins that shows the power of place.⁷⁰ An ambitious maple merchant came to Vermont to take his blended-syrup business to the next level, because Vermont was the center of the maple world and was the place where he needed to be to accomplish that task. Along the way, while navigating the bumpy road of a sometimes unpredictable landscape and industry, a famous and infamous syrup brand was born.



Top left and top right, examples of metal can and glass bottle with paper labels from original Vermont Maid syrup production location in Essex Junction, Vermont. Bottom four images show clips of the banner from the lower portion of the Vermont Maid paper label, indicating the progression of locations and parent companies from Essex Junction to St. Johnsbury to Burlington; and from the Vermont Maple Syrup Company to Penick & Ford, LTD., Inc. Courtesy of the author.

For a time in the 1920s, F. N. Johnson was arguably the most influential syrup bottler in New England, making great waves and challenging local maple power brokers like George C. Cary. Vermont Maid's early history was a story of the battle between two very different maple kings, Johnson and Cary. For a time, Johnson appeared to have succeeded in wresting control of the syrup-packing business in Vermont. However, in the end, Johnson's success in New England was short lived, and he returned to Ohio leaving the blended maple business to be managed by even larger corporate entities.

NOTES

¹ In its early years, Vermont Maid syrup blend was believed to be 25 percent maple syrup. By the 1930s, when owned by Penick & Ford, Ltd., Inc., the amount of maple syrup was reduced to 15 percent. Occasionally, the recipe was modified for different markets and state food and labeling laws, with the blend sometimes containing 20 and 25 percent maple syrup.

² Examination of the label of Vermont Maid syrup as well as information on the brand's website indicate maple syrup is no longer an ingredient in the recipe for the syrup.

³ "Stanley C. Wilson Steps Down from Governor's Chair After Four Years of Service," *Burlington (VT) Free Press*, 11 January 1935, 3.

⁴ <https://ago.vermont.gov/sites/ago/files/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Rule-CP-120.pdf>; "Made in Vermont: A label in Question," *Rutland (VT) Daily Herald*, 26 March 2000, 1; "Label Rules Proposed for Vermont Products," *Valley News* (Lebanon, NH), 22 February 2004, 14; "What's in a Name: State Tries To Restrict Use of 'Vermont' in Products," *Burlington Free Press*, 26 February 2005, 19.

⁵ Steve Perkins, "This Place in History: Vermont Maid Syrup," My Champlain Valley and Vermont Historical Society, www.mychamplainvalley.com/news/vt-history/this-place-in-history-vermont-maid-syrup/; "Vermont and Burlington Maple Leads the World," *Burlington Free Press*, 13 September 1932, 4.

⁶ Matthew M. Thomas and Melvin R. Koelling, "History of Maple Syrup and Sugar Production," *North American Maple Producers Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Burlington: University of Vermont, 2022).

⁷ "Discussion (Comments by E. J. Shrives of Ohio and Prof. Hills)," *Proceedings of the 14th Annual Meeting of the Vermont Maple Sugar Maker's Association* (Montpelier, VT: Edson the Printer, 1907), 27.

⁸ "Reduced Stocks of Maple Sugar," *American Agriculturalist* 54, no. 15 (8 December 1894): 423.

⁹ John A Hitchcock, "Economics of the Farm Manufacture of Maple Syrup and Sugar," *Bulletin* 285 (University of Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station, 1928): 25–26.

¹⁰ "Statement in Detail from Prominent Dealers in Maple Sugar and Syrup, 1892 and 1893." *Report of the Second Annual Meeting of the Vermont Maple Sugar Maker's Association* (Brattleboro, VT: Phoenix Job Printing Office, 1894), 134.

¹¹ "A New Maple Sugar Company," *Burlington Free Press*, 22 January 1891, 5; "Manufacturing Maple Products: A Very Sweet Industry Established in this City," *Burlington Free Press*, 24 April 1891, 4; "Welch Bros. Trade Mark," *Vermont Watchman and State Journal* (Montpelier), 7 August 1901, 18.

¹² "Refined Maple Syrup Manufactured in Rutland," *Rutland Daily Herald*, 13 May 1893, 4; "The Green Mountain Maple Sugar and Syrup Company," *Rutland Daily Herald*, 5 March 1897, 4.

¹³ Lois Goodwin Greer, "America's Maple Sugar King: George C. Cary," *Vermont* 34, no. 1 (1929): 38.

¹⁴ C. H. Jones, "The National Pure Food Law and the Vermont Maple Sugar Industry," *Proceedings of the 14th Annual Meeting of the Vermont Maple Sugar Maker's Association*, 20–25; Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906. Pub. L. No. 59-384. 34 Stat. 768 (June 30, 1906).

¹⁵ “Consolidation Necessary to Profitable Business Says Head of Cary Maple Sugar Company,” *Burlington Free Press*, 5 February 1927, 8.

¹⁶ “New Vermont Corporations,” *Barre (VT) Daily Times*, 28 September 1916, 1.

¹⁷ “Underhill,” *Burlington Free Press*, 17 April 1902, 2; *Bellevue (OH) Republican*, 1 May 1903, 3.

¹⁸ Robert P. Kennedy, “F. N. Johnson,” *Historical Review of Logan County, Ohio* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1903): 757–59.

¹⁹ “Essex Junction: Vermont Maple Syrup Co. to Build Factory—To Employ 35 to 40 Hands,” *Burlington Free Press*, 16 October 1916, 9; *St. Albans (VT) Daily Messenger*, 16 October 1916, 3.

²⁰ “Save Sugar by Using Sugar Bird Syrup,” *Barre Daily Times*, 27 August 1918, 5.

²¹ “Vermont Rum Once Exceeded in Value Maple Crop,” *Rutland Daily Herald*, 30 March 1926, 3.

²² Matthew M. Thomas, “The Forgotten Importance of Block Sugar to the 20th-Century Maple Industry,” *Maple Syrup Digest* 64, no. 3 (2025): 36–40.

²³ The assignment of the title of Maple King to George C. Cary appears as early as 1901. “Local Gatherings,” *St. Johnsbury (VT) Caledonian*, 1 October 1901, 1.

²⁴ Matthew M. Thomas, *Maple King: The Making of a Maple Syrup Empire* (Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2018).

²⁵ “To Bottle Maple Syrup,” *St. Johnsbury (VT) Republican*, 17 July 1918, 1; *Caledonian Record* (St. Johnsbury, VT), 30 April 1919, 2; “Big Candy Firm is Organized: Maple Grove Candy Co. to Organize for \$100,000—G. C. Cary at its Head,” *Evening Caledonian* (St. Johnsbury, VT), 6 January 1920, 1; *Brattleboro (VT) Reformer*, 9 May 1921, 2; “N.E. Maple Syrup Co. at Somerville Is Bankrupt,” *Caledonian Record*, 5 May 1921, 1.

²⁶ “‘Sugar Bird’ Brand Causes Suit in Court: George Cary Interested in Maple Sugar Suit in U.S. Court,” *Caledonian Record*, 18 March 1921, 7.

²⁷ “Plaintiff Wins in ‘Sugarbird’ Trademark Case: Judge Howe Decides Against the Vermont Maple Syrup Co.,” *Caledonian Record*, 9 May 1921, 2.

²⁸ “‘Sugar Bird’ Brand Causes Suit in Court.”

²⁹ “Vt. Maple Syrup Co. Ask Right To Use ‘Sugar Bird’ Brand,” *Burlington (VT) Daily News*, 17 March 1921, 3; “Decision Not Rendered in Maple Syrup Case,” *Caledonian Record*, 22 March 1921, 5.

³⁰ “Plaintiff Wins in ‘Sugarbird’ Trademark Case”; *Burlington Free Press*, 6 May 1921, 12; “Essex Junction Co. Is Denied Use of Trademark Brand on Its Product,” *Burlington Daily News* 6 May 1921, 3; *Vermont Maple Syrup Co., Inc. v. F. N. Johnson Maple Syrup Co. et al.*, 272 F. 478 (D. Vt. 1921), Nos. 58, 59.

³¹ “Ser. 119,459,” *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, vol. 274, no. 1 (4 May 1920): 156.

³² Some of the brand names bottled by the Towle Maple Products Company in the early part of the twentieth century included Towle’s Circus Brand Table Syrup, Towle’s Superior Rock Candy Drips, Towle’s Crown of Canada Syrup, Beeman’s Great Mountain Brand Syrup, Golden Harvest Sugar Syrup, Towle’s Old Colony Syrup, Towle’s Top Syrup, Standard Time Table Syrup, Towle’s Target Brand Table Syrup, and Towle’s Wigwam Brand Syrup, Royal Nectar Syrup, Towle’s White Rock Syrup, White Rose Sugar Syrup, Towle’s Old Hickory Molasses, and Towle’s New Orleans Molasses, as well as Towle’s Log Cabin Root Beer.

³³ “Ser. 53,432,” *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, vol. 87, no. 4, (25 February 1913): 1095.

³⁴ Matthew M. Thomas, “The Man and the Can: Patrick J. Towle and the St. Paul Origins of Log Cabin Syrup,” *Ramsey County History* 57 (2022): 1426; Thomas, *Maple King*, 54–59; Matthew M. Thomas, *Maple Center of the World: A Guide to Properties Related to the History of the Maple Syrup Industry in the St. Johnsbury Area* (St. Johnsbury, VT: Cary & Main Co. and North-east Kingdom Chamber of Commerce, 2025), 1520, 2731.

³⁵ It is difficult to be precisely sure of the date at which the Towle Maple Products Company stopped using the Vermont Maid label since bottled and canned syrup have a fairly long shelf life and grocers continued to advertise the sale of the syrup from their store shelves long after the company discontinued the label.

³⁶ Thomas, *Maple King*, 146–47.

³⁷ Hal Morton, *Symbols of America* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 134; *Lewiston (ME) Daily Sun*, 19 November 1925, 11.

³⁸ "Vt. Maple Syrup Co. Has Been Incorporated in St. Johnsbury," *Barre Daily Times*, 19 June 1922, 1.

³⁹ "Syrup Co. Moves to St. Johnsbury," *St. Albans Daily Messenger*, 16 February 1923, 3; "Syrup Company is Moving to St. Johnsbury," *Sherbrooke (ONT) Daily Record*, 16 February 1923, 3.

⁴⁰ "Cary Offers New Factory to Employ 100 Men," *Evening Caledonian*, 5 September 1919, 1; *Evening Caledonian Record*, 15 March 1921, 1.

⁴¹ A company called Farmers' Warehouse, Inc. was formed in early 1926 to serve as the actual entity purchasing the building on behalf of the Cooperative Exchange. "Excellent Work of Maple Sugar Exchange," *Burlington (VT) Clipper*, 11 March 1926, 6; "Maple Grove Candies, Inc. Buys Essex Junction Property," *Burlington Clipper*, 21 July 1927, 1.

⁴² Laurie Jordan, "A 'Vermont Maid' Landmark in Essex Junction," *ECHO: The Newsletter of the Essex Community Historical Society* (Spring 2025): 2–3; Matthew M. Thomas, "The Essex Junction Syrup Plant: Weaving Together Seventy-Five Years of Vermont Maple Syrup," presentation to the Chittenden County Historical Society, May 17, 2022; In addition to its many years as a syrup-processing facility, the plant was home to the Flex-a-Seal company from 1992 to 2019 and is currently home to a moving and storage firm.

⁴³ "New Sugar Company: Factory on Battery Street Leased to L. M. DeVore," *Burlington Free Press*, 1 May 1919, 9; "Maple Products Firm," *Montpelier (VT) Evening Argus*, 1 May 1919, 1.

⁴⁴ "Wanted! Maple Syrup—10,000 Gallons at Once," *Orleans County Monitor* (Barton, VT), 28 July 1890, 4; "Welch Bros. Maple Co.—Articles of Association," *Burlington Free Press*, 31 December 1890, 8; "Manufacturing Maple Products: A Very Sweet Industry Established in This City," *Burlington Free Press*, 24 April 1891, 4; *Burlington Free Press*, 21 April 1892, 8.

⁴⁵ "Statement in Detail from Prominent Dealers in Maple Sugar and Syrup, 1892 and 1893," *Report of the Second Annual Meeting of the Vermont Maple Sugar Maker's Association*, 134.

⁴⁶ "Contract for Factory: Welch Brothers' Maple Company to Build on Lower Pine Street," *Burlington Weekly Free Press*, 23 August 1917, 5.

⁴⁷ "Firm Organized to Sell Maple Syrup: Adirondack Maple Company of Lowville Has \$50,000 Capital," *Post Standard* (Syracuse, NY), 3 November 1910, 10.

⁴⁸ "Will Market Nearly 60,000 Gallons of Syrup," *Watertown (NY) Daily Times*, 30 March 1914, 2.

⁴⁹ "American Maple Company: Buy Controlling Interesting in Adirondack Maple Company and Will Operate in Lowville," *Journal and Republican* (Lowville, NY), 15 January 1925, 5.

⁵⁰ "Locate in Lowville," *Journal and Republican*, 12 March 1925, 5. Johnson began using the American Maple Corporation name in early 1925 and formally incorporated the name in the state of Ohio in July 1925. American Maple Corporation was later incorporated in Vermont on September 26, 1926, and headquartered in Burlington. The American Maple Corporation should not be confused with the American Maple Products Company of Newport, Vermont. They were two distinctly different and unrelated maple-packing companies with similar names.

⁵¹ *St. Albans Daily Messenger*, 24 July 1926, 3; "Welch Retires from Maple Co.," *Burlington Free Press*, 23 July 1926, 7.

⁵² "American Maple Corporation to Put Out 2942 Shares of Preferred Stock," *Burlington Free Press*, 11 November 1926, 2.

⁵³ "Maple Corp. Has \$600,000 Capital," *Burlington Free Press*, 27 September 1926, 2.

⁵⁴ "Remove to Burlington, Vt.," *Journal and Republican*, 16 December 1926, 9.

⁵⁵ *Burlington Free Press*, 28 Feb 1927, 2.

⁵⁶ "Young Mother, Former Local Girl, Is Dead," *Tribune* (Seymour, IN), 22 March 1928, 1; Vermont birth and death records for James Devore Johnson, March 19, 1928.

⁵⁷ "Maple Syrup Company Sold to New Yorkers," *Burlington Free Press*, 12 October 1928, 9; "VT. Maple Sugar Co. Sold: Penick & Ford of New York Buy Plant at Burlington," *Brattleboro Daily Reformer*, 12 October 1928, 1.

⁵⁸ Advertisements for Gold Bond syrup cease appearing in newspapers at the beginning of World War II.

⁵⁹ Fletcher N. Johnson died at age eighty on November 26, 1945, at his home in Bellefontaine, Ohio; "F. N. Johnson Dies," *Daily Examiner* (Bellefontaine, OH), 27 November 1945, 3; "Grocery Distributor Moves into Large New Quarters," *Journal Herald* (Bellefontaine, OH), 12 December 1955.

⁶⁰ “Maple Syrup Company Sold to New Yorkers”; “Maple Sugar,” *Burlington Free Press*, 1 January 1929, 15.

⁶¹ www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/penford-corporation-history/.

⁶² “Maple Sugar.”

⁶³ “Products Sold Coast to Coast,” *Burlington Free Press*, 29 February 1964, 27.

⁶⁴ U.S. Design Patent 90,963, “Design for a Container,” Joseph B. Vanderbilt, patented October 31, 1933.

⁶⁵ “R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Firm Buying Penick & Ford Ltd.,” *Burlington Free Press*, 2 March 1965, 6; “Vermont Maid Now with R. J. Reynolds Foods,” *Burlington Free Press*, 30 January 1967, 11.

⁶⁶ “RJR To Close Vermont Maid Syrup Plant, Burlington,” *Burlington Free Press*, 3 August 1975, 22.

⁶⁷ The progressive reduction in the amount of maple syrup in Vermont Maid can be tracked over the years by examining the ingredients list printed on the brand’s labels.

⁶⁸ The modern address of the Essex Junction plant is 1 Jackson Street, and its historic significance has been recognized with a listing on the Vermont State Register of Historic Places maintained by the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation. The St. Johnsbury plant is part of the Cary Maple Sugar Company/Maple Grove Company building complex and is currently located at 1052 Portland Ave. The Cary/Maple Grove complex has been listed on the Vermont State Register of Historic Places. The Welch Bros. Maple Company building is located at 382 Pine Street, Burlington, and has been formally listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing property of Burlington’s Pine Street Historic District.

⁶⁹ This slogan was first used in the 1920s by Welch Bros. Maple Company and it was carried forward into the corporate realm of Vermont Maid with the purchase and mergers of Welch Bros. Maple Company to the American Maple Corporation, the Vermont Maple Syrup Company, and finally Penick & Ford, Ltd., Inc.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, B&G Foods, which produces Vermont Maid syrup, also owns the Cary’s Maple Syrup brand and the Maple Grove Maple Syrup brand, both based out of the Cary Company’s original one hundred-year-old plant in St. Johnsbury.