

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Jan Ernst Matzeliger



(September 15, 1852 - August 24, 1889)

“Inventor / Patent Owner Shoe-Lasting Machine”

Jan Ernst Matzeliger was born on September 15, 1852, in Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana (now Suriname) to a Dutch engineer father and a native black Surinamese mother. Jan did not attend school but was educated by his father and mother. At the age of ten, he worked in the machine shop that his father supervised. When he was 19, he left Suriname to sail the world on an East Indian merchant ship. When the ship docked in Philadelphia in 1874, Jan ended his sea adventure to start anew. In 1877, Jan moved to Lynn, Massachusetts after he heard about the town's rapidly growing shoe industry. He learned to speak English more fluently and began looking for a job.

That same year, Jan became an apprentice in a shoe factory. Observing the struggles of hand lasters at the factory, he resolved to find a solution to the difficult and slow process of shoe bottoming. At that time, shoes were made mostly by hand. For a proper fit, wood or stone molds of customers' feet, called “lasts,” were made to size and shape the shoe. This was a difficult and tedious process and workers could not assemble a shoe as quickly as a machine could produce its other parts, thus creating a bottleneck in production.



A pair of wooden lasts.

With reference books and a secondhand set of drafting instruments, Jan worked late into the evenings, after long days at the factory. He built his first model lasting machine out of wooden cigar boxes, elastic, and wire. After two years, his prototype was complete. It took him several more years to construct a working model from assorted castings and iron parts. In 1883, he applied for a patent for his new machine. Because of the intricate movements required to stretch shoe leather around a last, the drawings he submitted were very complex. So much so, that the patent office in Washington dispatched a special representative to Jan's shop to observe the machine in operation before approving his patent. On March 20, 1883, Jan received a patent, US Patent No. 274,207, for a lasting machine. His laster machine held a shoe on a last, gripped and pulled the leather down around the heel, set and drove in the nails, and then discharged the completed shoe. His machine turned out between 150 to 700 pairs of shoes per day, compared to 50 from a typical skilled hand laster. The price of shoes dropped by nearly half, making quality shoes affordable, for the first time, to a large number of people.

The laster machine caught on very quickly. By 1889, demand for the shoe lasting machine was overwhelming. The Consolidated Lasting Machine Company was formed to manufacture the devices, and Jan Matzeliger was given a large amount of stock in the business. Jan received a total of five patents for his shoe lasting machine and its components.

On August 24, 1889, just three weeks shy of his 37th birthday, Jan Ernst Matzeliger succumbed to tuberculosis. With no family, Jan left his stock holdings to his friends and to the First Church of Christ in Lynn, Massachusetts. The United Shoe Machinery Company acquired his patents and company stock. The companies descended from the one he started are now worth more than a billion dollars.

On September 15, 1991, a Black Heritage postage stamp was issued in Jan Matzeliger's honor. He was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2006.

