

EDWARD THOMPSON CO

HOME OFFICE AND PUBLISHING HOUSE

Like most small communities on Long Island in the 1800s, Northport's economy relied on waterfront related businesses such as shipbuilding, oyster farming and sand mining. These industries made small fortunes for several Northport entrepreneurs. But it was Edward Thompson and his law book publishing company that would prove to be the most influential enterprise in shaping the Village and ushering in Northport's Golden Age.

In 1881, Edward Thompson met attorney James Cockcroft who had been publishing law books on a small scale. With Thompson's financial backing from monies made with his oystering business and Cockcroft's legal expertise, they formed the Edward Thompson Company.

In their first office located in an old wooden building on Woodbine Avenue, they published *American and English Railroad Cases*. Cockcroft's idea to publish an encyclopedia of law was first met with ridicule, but in 1896, they published the country's first legal encyclopedia: *The American and English Encyclopedia of Law*. This publication proved to be so important and successful that the company was able to expand and build the modern brick fireproof building that still stands today on the corner of Woodbine and Scudder Avenues.

Construction began in 1889 and was completed in 1890. The first addition to the building was made a year later and a second addition was made in 1893. A separate building located at 33 Scudder Avenue, which served as the plate vault, was built in 1894.



Pidgeon, Thompson and Cockcroft seated second row center. McKinney standing between Pidgeon and Thompson.

The company's sales grew to over \$1,000,000 a year. They employed nearly 200 workers, including 25 lawyers, 12 stenographers and 40 traveling salesmen. They also established agencies in large cities across the country. Volumes of their law books, which include: *Encyclopedia of Pleading and Practice*, *Federal Statutes*, and *Law Notes*, a monthly journal, were shipped to Europe, India and Australia, which made the village of Northport known around the world.

When Edward Thompson, President and Edward Pidgeon, Secretary, retired from the business in 1897, James Cockcroft took over as President. William McKinney became Vice-President and David S. Garland became Secretary. The company stayed in Northport until 1935 when it moved to Brooklyn and was taken over by West Publishing.



James Cockcroft (1842 - 1911)

Born in New York City, James Cockcroft was educated as a lawyer and at a young age started in the law book publishing business with his uncle Peter Voorhees, then a well-known publisher. Cockcroft moved to Chicago and established his own publishing company, but he lost it all in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

He moved back to New York to start over, eventually settling in Northport. He began another small law book publishing company in some rented rooms on Woodbine Avenue, and in 1881, crossed paths with Edward Thompson. With Cockcroft's legal and publishing expertise and Thompson's financial backing, they founded the Edward Thompson Company. James Cockcroft became the company's first vice president.

The company, which published volumes of law encyclopedias, soon was successful enough to move out of the rented rooms and construct their own building. Because of Cockcroft's fear of fire, a modern fireproof brick building was erected on the corner of Woodbine and Scudder Avenues.

When Thompson retired in 1897, Cockcroft became president of the company, a title he held until just months before his death in 1911. He was instrumental in creating the Northport Fire Department. He provided the lot and helped to found the Trinity Episcopal Church on Main Street to accommodate the religious needs of the many young southern lawyers which the company employed.

He lived with his wife, Georgia, who also was very active in Northport affairs, and two sons on Bayview Avenue. He became an avid yachtsman and traveled extensively.



Edward Thompson (1845 - 1923)

A stowaway at age fifteen on a boat from Ireland, Edward Thompson grew up on the streets of New York City. It was while learning the trade as machinist that he was severely injured and was removed to Saint Luke's Hospital. He formed a friendship with one of the doctors, becoming his assistant and remained for several years. In 1867, Edward's hard work earned him the position of Superintendent of the St. Johnland Home in Smithtown.

While walking along the Nissequogue River one day, he stopped to observe oystermen working. He conceived the idea that if the beds could be controlled, a fortune could be made. Thompson started spawning oysters and began legal procedures which resulted in laws that controlled leasing the beds.

Thompson moved to nearby Northport and founded the Northport Oyster Company with fellow oysterman Dexter Cole. Together they developed thousands of acres of oyster beds in and around Huntington Bay. Thompson was soon named Commissioner of Fisheries for New York. During this time, he married Miss Sarah Buchanan and they had one daughter.

After a chance meeting with lawyer James Cockcroft in Northport, Thompson decided to put the money he made with oysters into a new venture: a law book publishing company. In 1881, with Cockcroft's legal expertise and experience in publishing and Thompson's financial backing, they founded the Edward Thompson Company.

During his 50 years of residence in Northport, Edward Thompson served not only as president of his company but also served as Village President. He was a Director of the First National Bank of Northport and was the Excise Commissioner and Assessor of the Town of Huntington.



Edward Pidgeon (1862 - 1933)

Edward Pidgeon was the son of John and Ann Pidgeon. Born in Brooklyn, the large family moved to a farm in Commack. Edward's father, who had served in the Navy in the Civil War, died when Edward was fourteen years old, leaving him to provide for the family. He found work as an errand boy, newspaper boy and in the shipyards of Jesse Carll. In 1880, at the age of 18, he became a clerk for Edward Thompson and was then promoted to bookkeeper. When Thompson's new company was incorporated, Pidgeon, who was a shareholder now, was chosen as secretary.

He married Francine Johnson in the late 1880s. They had two children, Julian Rutledge and Harold John. Pidgeon was very active in the Northport community. He served as a trustee of the village, was a Past Master of Alcyone Lodge, No. 695, and was a director in the First National Bank of Northport, the Electric Light Co., and the Northport Steamboat Company.

He died on March 8, 1933, at the age of 71, at his home on Main Street (now the rectory of St. Philip's Church).



William M. McKinney (1865 - 1955)

Former NY Senator William M. McKinney became Editor-in-Chief and Vice President of Thompson Publishing Co. He later went on to publish McKinney's Consolidated Laws of NY, a compilation still the standard for today.



Highland Avenue became known as "Lawyer Street" because so many of their employees lived there.

How the Books Were Made

“The Publishing House, which stands at the corner of the two principle thoroughfares, is naturally the hub of the local universe, and by its deep-throated whistle the daily life of the village is ordered.”

—*Making Of The Encyclopedia Of Law*

1. Editorial Department

The process of making the encyclopedias begins in the editorial department, which occupies the entire top floor. The writers have at their disposal a law library of over 20,000 books, one of the largest in the world. The editor writes his assigned article after combing through every statute from every jurisdiction regarding the topic. The draft copy is turned over to revising editors who will check for accuracy.

2. Composing Room

After copy readers correct punctuation and grammar, the article is sent to the composing room. Here they set up galleys, and galley proofs are struck off and sent back again to be scrutinized for errors. The final copy is sent to compositors who make the type into page form and is then delivered to the plating rooms.

3. Press Room

All the articles that are to be included in a volume are delivered to the press room where great printing presses reel off the printed sheets. When the edition is completed, the plates are stored in a fireproof vault.

4. Bindery

Once the sheets come from the presses, they are sent to the bindery where they are cut and sewn into the complete volume.

Plate Vault

When an edition was completed the plates were stored away in a fireproof vault for future prints. The vault was located in the brick building that stands today at 33 Scudder Avenue, now a retail store.

The packages are loaded onto the Publishing Company's steamboat, the "Northport," and leaves for New York City.

5. Shipping

Then the shipping department prepares the volumes for various destinations around the world. The American Express Company has an office at Northport – the only one on Long Island – especially for shipping these volumes.

Year by year, the list of subscribers grew until the books achieved more advance sales than any other legal work ever published.