

Samuel Whitney Downer

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SAMUEL WHITNEY DOWNER – Since 1899, Samuel Downer has been engaged in the production of Silica Sands, beginning as a member of the firm of Downer Brothers, a business which had been established by his father and older brother. In September, 1902, he became sole owner and proprietor, producing washed sand for glass factories and exclusive unwashed sand for furnace bottom and steel casting purposes.

Mr. Downer was born on September 21, 1890, son of Arthur and Mary (Rulon) Downer, the latter a native of Richwood, New Jersey. Arthur Downer was born in Ireland, left there on May 28, 1849, and landed in the United States, at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 7, 1849, crossing the ocean in the ship named the "J. P. Whitney." When he came to this district, then undeveloped, Mr. Arthur Downer purchased some fifty acres of timber land from the firm of Whitney Brothers, Glassboro, New Jersey, three miles distant, and carved a farm therefrom. These brothers, Samuel A. and Thomas H. Whitney were engaged in the manufacture of glass bottles and jars. Strangely enough, the latter brother had a son named J. P. Whitney, while Mr. Downer named his third son for Samuel A. Whitney, while Mr. Downer named his third son for Samuel A. Whitney, Samuel W. Downer, the subject of this sketch.

Arthur Downer held the position of overseer of operations in the opening up of avenues through the extensive timberland by the Whitney Bros. There was a type of wood known as shider wood which was grown in the area and used for tempering glass. On September 21, 1870, two gangs of laborers that had been working from opposite directions, met and completed a roadbed that bisected Mr. Downer's farm and marked the location for a railroad that was finally completed some fourteen years later. In the meantime, in 1875, a very good grade of glass sand was discovered on the farm and but a few inches below the bottom of the roadbed mentioned above. For a quarter of a century Mr. Downer supplied the Whitney Brothers Glass Works with their requirements of washed sand, besides other glass manufacturers. During the last decade of the past century, a son, William A. Downer, built up an extensive trade in furnace bottom and steel casting sands from the same mine. Arthur Downer early identified himself with the Methodist Church after his arrival in the United States and after years of service as a local preacher was ordained a deacon in 1889. He was the prime mover in the establishment of the local public school as well as the Sunday school, when his efforts resulted in the erection of a beautiful stone church. He became an elder in 1895. His religious activities were not confined to the community in which he resided. For many years he had regular appointments to preach in outlying districts, under the appointment of the Local Preachers' Conference, societies that could not afford to pay a salary to a pastor. Incidentally, he also was instrumental in the establishment of the local post office, named Downer by the Post Office Department, becoming first postmaster.

Samuel Whitney Downer grew up in Gloucester County, receiving his early education in the public school here. At twelve years of age, he began driving a team, hauling glass sand to the Whitney Glass Works. At the age of twenty, he entered Pennington Seminary, studied there for a year, and continued at Phillips Exeter Academy, from which he graduated in the class of 1896. He then enrolled at Ohio Wesleyan University, where he was a student for a period of two years, entering in the sophomore class, or second year. He continued his studies at the University of Pennsylvania, completing the undergraduate curriculum there and taking the degree of Bachelor of Arts at the 1899 commencement of that institution.

Having completed his academic preparation, Mr. Downer in 1899 became a member of the firm of Downer Brothers, formed by John R. Downer and George E. Downer and and himself to conduct the business which had been established years before by his father and brother, and purchasing the interest of the latter, William A. Downer, Sr. Downer Bros. Operated the concern on a royalty basis until 1902, under a contract with Arthur Downer, and then, on September 10, 1902, Samuel W. Downer bought the firm's properties and interest. He has operated for himself to the present time.

This firm originally furnished sand to both glass factories and foundries, but now serves the latter exclusively, with unwashed sands, for furnace bottom and steel molding purposes. A characteristic loam bond of extreme durability and heat resisting quality is found in the sand on the Downer property, but nowhere else in the United State so far as is known, making it particularly adaptable for steel casting and open hearth furnaces. The United States Department of the Navy has used this sand almost exclusively in its steel foundry at the United States Navy Yard in Washington, District of Columbia. The sand is similar to the Belgian silica which was formerly imported in great quantity.

Peak production of the Downer firm came in 1941, when 20,365 tons were shipped from the plant; the average tonnage is about eighteen thousand per year. Modern equipment is used throughout the plant, and the product is distributed over much of the Eastern United States.

Mr. Downer served for several years as chaplain of the local post of the American Legion, following his return from France, where he spent a year at the front, earning a personal citation from the commanding officer of the 139th Regiment of Infantry. Like his father, he has been interested in church work here; where he served as a member of the executive committee for Gloucester County Sunday Schools from 1903 to 1913, and he is a past president of the New Jersey Sunday School Association.
