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## The “Valley of Opportunity”: Morality in a Shoe Empire

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## The “Valley of Opportunity”: Morality in a Shoe Empire

### Abstract

George F. Johnson followed in his father’s footsteps as a factory worker in the 1800s. While learning all of the different processes that went into making good quality shoes, he realized the importance of having a dedicated workforce that was behind the scenes, ensuring even the most obscure details were attended to. Through hard work, Johnson rose through the ranks of a shoe manufacturing company and eventually became part of the executive leadership team. However, unlike most who rose to this position, he did not forget where he came from and how much hard work it took to produce these goods. Embracing ideas about the importance of ethical actions that emerged from The Second Great Awakening, he instilled practices in his company that put employees first. This paper will show how George F. Johnson truly embraced ideas from the Second Great Awakening, how he implemented ethical policies and a “Square Deal” for all employees, and the overall effect this had on the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company.

## The “Valley of Opportunity”: Morality in a Shoe Empire

Life in the 1800s was completely centered around one’s job. Men spent the entire day working to provide for their families in unsatisfactory conditions for little pay. Women and children eventually joined them working in factories in the late 1800s. Many questioned the purpose of doing the same thing every day for such little in return. Nevertheless, the Second Great Awakening provided a reason for their hard work and labor. It promised people that they could save themselves from eternal damnation through their actions on Earth. However, this did not address the immoral business practices implemented by self-centered capitalist business owners. Workers received just enough to get by each week and did not have any additional benefits besides the base pay that they received. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, this concept was changing in Endicott, New York. George F. Johnson had risen through the ranks to become a leader in a shoe manufacturing company and had the mission of improving the lives of his employees. Through this pursuit, George F. Johnson defied the ideals of traditional capitalism, embracing beliefs that emerged from the Second Great Awakening to promote a “Square Deal” for his workers.

For many, the Second Great Awakening promoted religious revivalism. People once again became more focused on religious beliefs through new and old forms of faith. From approximately 1790 to 1840, this religious fervor reminded people that there was more to life than just spending time on Earth. They were also reminded that their fate was not predetermined by a higher power but something that could be influenced by the actions that they took in

their everyday lives. While many working people had vested their faith in this idea, there was one small group that did not seem to be phased by this change in tone. Wealthy business owners who oversaw operations on farms and in factories did not endorse these new ideas. They were still in it to maximize their profits, no matter the cost. How could one argue with the ideals of American Capitalism?

This unfair treatment of workers would remain prominent for several decades until one influential individual could rise to the top of the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company. George F. Johnson was born in 1857 to a family that was supported by the shoe industry. Johnson’s father worked as a shoemaker in Massachusetts, leading the way for his son to follow in his footsteps. Johnson did just that as a thirteen-year-old and continued to pursue a career in the shoe industry (“George F. Johnson Papers,” 2008). Throughout his early years in shoe factories, he accumulated knowledge from his peers and the companies that he worked for on the most effective ways to operate a shoe factory that prioritized efficiency while also treating workers with the respect that they rightfully deserve.

Throughout his time as a factory worker, Johnson was also aware of the labor wars that were occurring throughout the United States between workers and company leaders. As the United States became more industrialized, factory owners grew their wealth exponentially, while workers who were a big component of this wealth development did not share in the exponential revenue increase. More and

more workers became fed up with this idea and started to band together to force better treatment from their employers. Workers walked out of the factories that they worked in and protested to acquire more fair treatment for all the hard work that they put into their jobs. This cost factory owners an enormous amount of money as goods were not being produced, leading to a decline in sales.

While some of these protests were peaceful, many erupted into chaos due to the unprecedented situation that was occurring. Workers were not permitted to leave their jobs without consent from their boss unless they wanted to be terminated. However, when all the laborers left the factory floor, managers could not bear to find new staff and train them from the beginning. While factories were shuttered, money was left on the table not only for owners but for the government. Without sales, tax revenue could not be collected. This led to local, state, and federal law enforcement getting involved which quickly led to violent protests on the streets (“Labor Wars in the U.S.,” n.d.). Johnson took note of the situation that was unfolding across the country and knew that it could all be solved with company leaders who invested in their workers and were not solely focused on building their wealth. Additionally, this would later influence Johnson’s view of labor unions as the Chief Executive Officer of the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company.

It is often said that to effectively lead a group of people, you must have been led before. In other words, people who have been in the worker’s shoes at some point in time will know to be successful leaders of the group themselves. As someone who started as a factory worker, George F. Johnson knew

what it was like to be in a worker’s shoes. Therefore, when he finally made his way up to senior-level management at Endicott Johnson, he knew what it would take to develop a company that was not only beneficial for its leaders but supported its workers as well.

The “Square Deal” was Johnson’s agreement with his workers. In return for showing up to the factory and putting in an effortful day’s work, employees would receive numerous benefits that would help improve their everyday lives. These benefits included a forty-hour work week, paid medical care, a fair wage, community recreational facilities, and affordable housing options (Smith, 2016). All of these benefits provided by Johnson and the company showcased his commitment to one of the key ideas of the Second Great Awakening: treating other community members with respect and dignity. Pictured below is an arch that was erected showing Johnson’s commitment to “The Square Deal” and the appreciation that his workers had for the agreement.



(Library of Congress, n.d.)

As a senior company official, Johnson oversaw an ethnically diverse workforce (*Johnson, 2011*). The company employed not only people who were raised in the surrounding areas but also hired many immigrants who came to the United States in search of a better and more stable life. This provided individuals an opportunity to work in a more controlled environment, beyond the common work that was available for immigrants at the time such as construction and other manual labor. While working in a shoe factory was not a simple task, it was more manageable, especially for those who were not accepted into manual labor professions, including women. Johnson became accepting of women working in the factories and hired them before 1900 (Karetsky, n.d.). This is significant given the fact that women played much less of a role in the workforce and were not quite accepted until the United States entered the First World War. This acceptance by Johnson shows how he embraced ideas that emerged from the Second Great Awakening. Emerging from this period was the idea that women were just as important in society as men and should have the same rights that men had, including employment outside of the home. Johnson acknowledged this by overseeing a workforce comprised of a significant percentage of female workers.

While having a job at this time in history was necessary to provide for a family, conditions were often suboptimal. Employees were often working at least ten to twelve hours each day and were sequestered in the factory until they accomplished the tasks for the day (“America at Work,” n.d.). However, Johnson knew what it was like to have to work those long shifts every day. He went

on to study his worker’s output throughout the day and noticed that there was a sharp decline in the number of shoes that were produced later in the day. After about eight hours of work, employees seemed to become tired enough to show a dramatic output the reduction that was costing the company. Therefore, Endicott-Johnson was among the first companies in the United States to cut the workday to an eight-hour shift. While this was a significant step, the most surprising part of the situation was that workers at the company continued to receive the same pay for the day (*Johnson, 2011*). This beneficial change for workers, which was spearheaded by George F. Johnson, was just the beginning of a new age of capitalism for the treatment of workers.

Johnson viewed his workers as the backbone of the Endicott-Johnson corporation. Without them, the company could not function. However, he knew that workers who were concerned with problems outside of their jobs while at work were costing the organization money. People who worked for Johnson were often concerned about where they lived and how they would travel to work each day. The company was built in a new village, Endicott, and was quite a distance from the nearest city, Binghamton. Johnson, aiming to appease his workers and build a community surrounding the factory convinced the co-owner of the company, Henry B. Endicott, to institute a new home-building program in the surrounding area (*Johnson, 2011*). The company provided the financing for these homes to be built so that employees could find and afford a place to live.

The construction of these homes was one of Johnson’s most prominent achievements outside of solely business

development. This put the surrounding area on a path to become a thriving village that was an ideal place for parents who worked at the factory to raise children and accumulate wealth and later became known as the “Valley of Opportunity.” The mere formation of these homes was an astonishing commitment for a for-profit corporation to make. What was even more stunning was that they were sold to employees of the company at cost with no profit for the Endicott-Johnson corporation (Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, careful steps were taken to ensure that the homes did not all resemble each other to make sure the area did not seem uniform. Each house was designed differently on the outside with different colors to display a unique sense of different homes for a diverse group of people from all over the world who came to work at the company.

Through this action, Johnson lived out the ideals of the Second Great Awakening by embracing a moral approach to how he treated his workers. Throughout his tenure, the company continuously grew and acquired several contracts from major buyers which included securing contracts to be the main footwear provider to United States soldiers for the duration of World War I and World War II (Johnson, 2011). These major contracts and growth dramatically increased revenue for the company, making leaders in the company quite wealthy. Johnson could have done what most other capitalists do, taken his share, and not discussed it for fear the workers would feel betrayed. However, Johnson used this as an opportunity to give back to his workers through this new housing program and other employee benefits. He decided to take a morally

justifiable approach that not only benefited himself but also benefited his employees who worked to make the company better each day through his “Square Deal” approach.

Beyond housing options for workers, all employees and their families were eligible for medical coverage provided by the company (Smith, 2016). Endicott-Johnson opened medical facilities to support the health and well-being of employees and the greater community. Not only did this program have great benefits for the health of workers but after these clinics were opened, the community saw a decrease in the mortality of infants (Johnson, 2011). This shows that Johnson’s Square Deal affected more than just employees. The effects of these policies influenced the next generation of Endicott residents and the future of the village.

Finally, and probably the most evident in terms of the present day, was the support that Johnson provided to develop the land surrounding the factory into a place where people could look forward to spending time when their shift ended. When Johnson first suggested that the company develop a factory in the soon-to-be Endicott area, much of the land was used for farming. Subsequently, much of the land consisted of rolling hills with few houses and other community staples such as recreation facilities, places of worship, or community markets. Nevertheless, Johnson did not let this deter the company as he donated millions of dollars for community development (Johnson, 2011). Houses of worship for several different faiths popped up throughout the community relating to how immigrant workers who came to work for the company were identified. Plus, athletic centers, including a racetrack and a

golf course were constructed for the community. Given that he shortened the work week to forty hours, employees had the benefit of enjoying these facilities with their families.

Furthermore, parks became a staple of the community. These ended up being one of the most important parts of the area as they were a place where the entire family could spend time together and enjoy the great outdoors. Within these parks was where Johnson's dedication to children in the community was showcased as he donated six carousels that were housed in parks throughout the area (*Johnson, 2011*). These works of art provided a space for children to be kids and play with their friends and neighbors. Of particular importance is that upon Johnson's donation, he put forth one restriction on the village: the carousels had to remain free for all to use as long as they stood (*Johnson, 2011*). This remains the case to the present day as anyone can ride the carousels free of charge.

While George F. Johnson did an enormous amount of good for the Endicott community by applying the ideas of The Second Great Awakening to how he ran a company, he did have one belief that altered his legacy. Johnson, who grew up in an era where workers and factory owners clashed over what was expected of each other, was strongly opposed to unions. By the time the Great Depression hit, businesses were suffering, and the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company was no different. This ended up being the perfect time for union organizers to visit the company and try and persuade workers to form a union within the company. Johnson did everything he could to convince his workers that unions would only make the company worse. Moreover, his argument included the idea that the

company had already provided more to workers than any union would be able to bargain for. A union vote was eventually held and failed to pass within the company but the strong opposition from Johnson has been noted ever since.

While some may use this to take away from Johnson's accomplishments, it is evident that he did much more for his employees and the surrounding area than other leaders at the time were expected to do. He instituted programs that were well ahead of their time including building and providing homes for employees, providing free medical care, and developing the surrounding area with recreation facilities. While most factory owners during Johnson's time did not treat their employees with respect, Johnson took the moral approach. He embraced the ideals of The Second Great Awakening – making the well-being of the worker a priority. This is evident in part by the interaction seen in the photo below where Johnson is meeting and talking with his workers on the factory floor and is not secluded from his workers in a distant office.



All in all, morality emerged from The Second Great Awakening as the key to life and is certainly something that George F. Johnson embraced as a leader and Chief Executive Officer of the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company. His “Square Deal” promoted the fair and just treatment of workers, which led to happier employees who were more productive and supportive of the company. While Johnson gave to many, he was still a capitalist who ran a profitable company and should be seen as a role model for business leaders today. George F. Johnson demonstrated that one man with a vision could create a “Valley of Opportunity” for thousands just looking for a chance to live the “American Dream.”

(“George F. Johnson with Workers,” n.d.)



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