

Beldens who are board members and/or employees pose for a family photo during The Belden Brick Co.'s 125th anniversary celebration.



# THE NATION'S BRICK COMPANY

Family-Owned *Belden Brick Co.* Celebrates  
132 Years of Excellence

by Erica Bender



*Pay attention. Listen to your customers. Learn as much as you can about the industry so that your decisions will help to advance it.*

These are the words of wisdom that inspire many business decisions made by Robert F. "Bob" Belden, President and CEO of The Belden Brick Co., currently the largest family-owned and managed brick company in the United States. The

Canton, Ohio-based manufacturer and distributor can trace its roots all the way back to 1885, when Bob's great-grandfather Henry Belden, an inventor and attorney, helped establish what was then known as the Diebold Fire Brick Co.

Little did Henry know that his pioneering efforts would serve to anchor the Belden name in the brick industry for well over a century.

COURTESY OF JIM MAGUIRE



## PAVING A LEGACY IN LEADERSHIP

In 1876, a stiff mud brick-making machine featured at the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia, Pa., is what first inspired Henry to launch his brick-making business. He started out making clay pavers and fire brick in his hometown of Canton—the first known use of the product in the city. Unlike concrete, a clay paver’s color does not fade or require sealers because the color is literally fired through the body of the unit. Soon, brick pavements were seen across the county, then the state.

Henry’s youngest son, Paul Belden Sr., is credited with nimbly guiding The Belden Brick Co. past some of its most challenging capital shortfalls and business reorganizations, as well as through economic downturns and market restrictions resulting from wartime crises, depressions and recessions.

Bob speaks reverently of his grandfather, Paul Sr., who worked in the business for 66 years. “He was a very accomplished businessman, civic leader, and a ‘Captain of Industry’ kind of guy who was instrumental in the development of our company and the industry,” he says.



**Henry Belden, Founder of the Diebold Fire Brick Co.**  
(which was later reorganized into The Belden Brick Co.).



**Robert F. "Bob" Belden, President and CEO of The Belden Brick Co.**



**Brian Belden, Vice President of Sales and Marketing at The Belden Brick Co.**

COURTESY OF THE BELDEN BRICK CO. (TOP); JOE SMITHBERGER (BOTTOM LEFT); JIM MAGUIRE (BOTTOM RIGHT)

A number of Paul Sr.'s descendants have helped steer the company in the direction of progress, including Bob, one of the first fourth-generation Beldens to join the team.

"In my generation of family members, there were 24 first cousins. It was implied that there wasn't room in the company for all of us," explains Bob. "As time went on, my dad (Richard Belden) and his brothers looked around and said, 'We need to get some new Beldens in here.' They asked my cousin, William H. "Bill" Belden Jr., to join them. Bill, in turn, invited me to help him run the company."

The decision to leave a lucrative career as a market maker in Chicago was not an easy one. Bob and his wife, Kathy, had established a comfortable life for themselves and their four children. Plus, he had no real experience in the brick industry.

But the opportunity to play a meaningful role in his family's business prompted Bob to take a chance. "To be involved in an enterprise that actually makes things, things that last



An employee unloads a kiln car and palletizes brick, which will later be sent to packaging.

and have enduring value, was very appealing to me," he recalls. Bob started out as the company's Vice President of Marketing from 1983 to 1995, was elected President in 1995, added CEO to his job responsibilities in 2008, and just last year was named Chair of the Board.

For someone who's straddling the fence on working in a family-operated company, Bob's advice is this: "You need to have an interest in the business, and a passion for what the business stands for. You also must identify how your contributions will ultimately

support the company's success. It's individual contributions that bring value to a business—not just the fact that you're a family member."

Now, a fifth generation of Beldens is involved in the family operation, including Bill Jr.'s son, Brian Belden (the first in his generation to be employed full-time), Bob's son, Robert T. Belden, and cousins Bradley Belden and John Streb. Bob's daughter, Julia, also used to work in the company.

In addition to the Beldens, several generations from many different families have worked at The Belden Brick Co. Families such as the Hartungs, Swindermans, Schrocks, Myers, and Finzers. Longstanding employees like Bettie Rairigh and Burke Wentz, who each gave 59 years of faithful service before they retired, exemplify how employees' allegiance serves to sustain and strengthen an organization.

"You could say that brick-making is as much in their blood as it is in ours. The Belden Brick Co. has been fortunate to have many dedicated, loyal employees throughout its history whose commitment to excellence has been unwavering," says Bob.



Artisans from The Belden Brick Co.'s Special Shapes Division form bricks by hand, providing custom-tailored design options that fit the end-user's exact needs.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE ALBERT





In October 2016, Kent State University celebrated the grand opening of its new Center for Architecture and Environmental Design. The Belden Brick Co. supplied the 91,000 custom bricks used on the building's exterior.

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**Bob Belden, President and CEO, The Belden Brick Co.**

## A CUT ABOVE THE REST

Aside from having loyal employees, The Belden Brick Co.'s longevity is a testament to its ability to anticipate fluctuating consumer needs and adapt to industry advancements. Diversification in terms of manufacturing capabilities, product offerings, and distribution areas—as well as heavy investments in technology over the past two decades—has kept the company afloat.



In this beehive kiln—a round brick structure wrapped with steel bands to control heat expansion—bricks are stacked with narrow spaces between them so that heat will circulate completely around the product.

"One of our biggest transitions happened in 1946 when we purchased The Finzer Brothers Clay Co. in Sugarcreek, Ohio, where all our manufacturing takes place today," says Brian, who serves as Vice President of Sales and Marketing.

Later, in 1955, Belden management authorized construction of the country's largest face brick and building tile manufacturing plant at this site, which became operational in 1957. Buoyed by the area's plentiful supply of quality, raw material and a hardworking labor force, a decade later the company constructed the largest brick plant ever built under one roof.

Brian continues, "Now we have a total of five brick plants. The most recent one opened in 2001 and is state-of-the-art." This production facility's unique use of robotic systems enables brick to travel through the entire plant without being touched by human hands. "The kiln technology is different from our other plants. The brick is not stacked as high, which facilitates a 36-hour firing cycle versus the typical 72-hour firing cycle in our other facilities, cutting time nearly in half. We manufacture about 20 different sizes of product."

"We've built a reputation for providing a unique array of quality products. The offering of different sizes and





The company provided Monarch Commodore Smooth bricks for the Akron Children's Hospital in Akron, Ohio, one of the largest pediatric hospitals in the U.S.

textures—and staying within the tolerances specified—is what we pride ourselves on,” says Brian. He adds, “While a lot of other manufacturers will specialize in a limited number of products, we work more on an individual job-by-job basis and specify our production in accordance with each job’s requirements. We’ve got a great team of experienced production people and other staff who help us offer building solutions that many other manufacturers don’t offer.”

The company also runs a saw house facility in Sugarcreek and distributorships in New York and Michigan. It even ships chemical-resistant brick products internationally.

Belden Holding & Acquisition Co., Inc., is the parent company of several subsidiary companies, including The Belden Brick Co. and Redland Brick Co. Combined, these two subsidiaries have an annual production capacity of nearly 550 million SBE (standard brick equivalent). Belden Holdings & Acquisition Co. employs more than 700 staff,

with around 500 of those members working for The Belden Brick Co.

## STACKING FUTURE PROSPECTS

Though the team doesn’t regularly interact with end-users, understanding the needs of every job is key to successful customer relations—and repeat business.

“Keeping the lines of communication open is critical. Developing the job as it goes along and doing so in a timely fashion is always important. We work with our distributors—and in essence, the architects, owners and mason contractors who buy from them—to ensure they get exactly what they need,” says Brian.

As is the case in many industries, the last several years have been difficult due to economic decline. To overcome this challenge, The Belden Brick Co. is looking into expanding its product line and is considering new market opportunities in the U.S. and Canada.

With an attitude of optimism and hope, the Belden leadership team has a confident outlook on the future.

“By continuously reinvesting in our facilities, and by keeping up with information technology advances that make our people and machinery more productive, we can maneuver through this modern, fast-paced economy while maintaining our company’s core values and traditions,” says Brian.

Bob concludes: “Our ability to adapt, to advance our knowledge and the industry as a whole, has held strong for 132 years—and is what will carry us forward.”

One could say that The Belden Brick Co.’s legacy of entrepreneurship, invention, innovation and perseverance embodies the true essence of fulfilling the American dream. 🦉

*Author Bio: Erica Bender, a Texas-based freelance writer and communications consultant, has worked with clients in the AEC industry for 14 years.*