

Made in Bronxville—
F. W. Kraft & Sons, Piano Action Leather Specialists
By Raymond Geselbracht

When Frederick W. Kraft opened a leather business in Yonkers in 1862, he had an advantage over most of his competitors. He had been trained to make leather by his father in Germany, but sometime after his migration to the United States in 1857 and his marriage a year later, one of his wife's relatives taught him how to make the kind of leather—very soft, and which did not harden over time—needed in the mechanism in pianos, called the piano action, by which a player's pressing of the keys caused a piano's hammers to hit the strings. Kraft called his process for making this special leather the "piano action leather process." This was his specialty, and his business prospered and grew.

In 1880, Kraft moved his business to Bronxville. He had bought a large tract of land covered with apple trees, extending north from Midland Avenue and along the railroad tracks. He also bought for himself and his family a large house on Cedar Street, on the future site of St. Joseph's Church. A short way up from Midland Avenue, at about the place where a brook flowed into the Bronx River, he built a two-story wooden factory building and two storage sheds for his tannery business. Besides piano action leather, he made buckskin gloves. Within five years of his move to Bronxville, his company had twenty employees and annual revenue of about \$15,000.



William F. Kraft (front row, center) with his employees, probably with the tannery factory as background. Kraft's son William is standing (wearing a cap) directly behind, and his brother John (wearing a homburg) is standing beside him, on his left.

For several years, the factory was off by itself in a sparsely populated part of the village. The Reformed Church was up on a rise to the east, and Crow's Nest was visible, at least in winter, on its prominent hill, but the small-scale development along Pondfield Road was probably mostly obscured by trees. Perhaps the factory was seldom noticed by the villagers. When it was noticed, it was probably because of the stench of rotting hides, which the winds sometimes carried all the way to Lawrence Park. As more houses were built in the vicinity of the factory, Kraft heard more and more complaints about the stink, and he began talking publicly about moving his factory somewhere else. He never did, though.

The other feature of the factory that became part of village life was its whistle, whose shrill call probably usually marked the beginning or end of work shifts, but also alerted the village, as a kind of alarm, whenever a fire was raging somewhere in town. On one occasion, the whistle was used to announce something more welcome than a blazing fire—the armistice that ended the fighting of World War I.



The only known photograph, other than the one of Frederick W. Kraft and his employees, showing the tannery buildings, c. 1913.

William and John Kraft worked in the business with their father, and in 1906, the name of the business was changed to F. W. Kraft & Sons. They built houses for their families directly across Cedar Street from their father's house.

In the early 1900s, Bronxville opened a new street, Maple Avenue (now Meadow Avenue), running west from Pondfield Road. Kraft saw the new street as an opportunity, and he cut his own street through his land, running north from Midland Avenue, and connecting with Maple Street and also with the next street to the north,

Cedar Street. His named his street after himself, Kraft Avenue. He kept it as his own private road and closed it to through traffic. Kraft and his sons began building houses along their new street, and by the end of the 1910s, they had built about twenty-five houses, most of them on Kraft and several also on Midland and Maple.

Toward the end of his life, Kraft gave portions of his land away. He gave Bronxville the part of Kraft Avenue between Maple and Cedar so it could become a public street. He gave the Reformed Church a small parcel of land along Midland; and he gave St. Joseph's Church the site on Park Place where its first church building—the old Bronxville School building—was dropped after being dragged from its former site on Pondfield Road.

Frederick W. Kraft died on September 3, 1916. At the time of his death, he had lived in Bronxville longer than any other living villager. He left an estate estimated to be worth \$500,000 (about \$13 million in 2021, and a great deal more if the estate were valued by the value in 2021 of the real estate Kraft owned).

William and John Kraft took over the family leather business, and also the business of managing the family's considerable real estate holdings on their Bronxville land. The factory burned down in 1922, and the brothers decided to relocate the leather business to Greenburgh. There may have been some disagreement between them at about this time, but whether for this or some other reason, William F. Kraft sold out his interest in the leather business to John. He started a real estate business in Bronxville, at which he worked until he was in his eighties.

The Kraft family continued over the years to keep Kraft Avenue from Meadow to Midland closed to through traffic. Bronxville had tried to purchase the street from Frederick W. Kraft years earlier, but he regarded his private street as part of the residential neighborhood which he and his sons had built, and he wouldn't sell. After his death, the village tried from time to time to persuade the family to sell the land, and it once tried to get it through condemnation proceedings, but every attempt failed. Finally, after John Kraft died in 1935, the family decided to sell all of its Bronxville land to two developers, who built a large apartment complex, Midland Gardens, on the site of the old factory buildings and gave Kraft Avenue to the village.

William F. Kraft lived into very old age and became one of the grand old men of his time, respected by everyone in Bronxville. According to the description on one of his passports that has survived, Kraft in his old age was a stocky gentleman, 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a round face and a ruddy complexion, blue eyes, aquiline nose, and gray, going to white, hair. He was celebrated for his service to the village—he was Bronxville's first appointed trustee when the village was incorporated in 1898—for his sixty-five years in the Masons, for his sixty-



William F. Kraft, 1915

year marriage, and just for looking so grand and old and fine. He made Bronxville solid, dependable, traditional.

William F. Kraft died on February 1, 1949. His funeral service was held in the house on Cedar Street where he had lived with his family for many years, and which was now part of the McGrath funeral home.

Maybe when we hear a performance of a Beethoven sonata, a Schubert impromptu, or a Chopin polonaise, something of what we hear will sound as it does because of piano action leather made in Bronxville, at the F. W. Kraft & Sons factory.

