

Famous New Yorker Edwin Binney

Edwin Binney made the world a more colorful place in more ways than one. But, he earned his place in American history by making it easier for everyone else to make the world more colorful with crayons.

Edwin Binney was born in Shrub Oak, Westchester County, on November 24, 1866. Although he never finished college, Edwin had a career waiting for him at his father's business, the Peekskill Chemical Company. Edwin and a cousin, C. Harold Smith, took over the business when Edwin's father retired in 1885. They changed the company name to Binney & Smith. Peekskill Chemical made "lamp black," a popular pigment derived from soot. Binney & Smith developed a superior black pigment from natural gas called "carbon black" and popularized its use in automobile tires. Tire manufacturers adopted carbon black because the pigment reinforces a tire's treads. Their Peerless Black brand won a Gold Medal from the Paris Exposition of 1900. The company's red oxide pigment was an equally popular ingredient for house paint. People visualize red barns to this day because of Binney & Smith.

Binney was always looking for new uses for his company's pigment technology. Binney & Smith soon expanded into the art and school supply business. In 1900, their newly-acquired mill in Easton, Pennsylvania began making pencils for writing on erasable slates. In 1903 Binney & Smith made learning cleaner and healthier by inventing a dustless chalk for blackboards. That invention earned the company a Gold Medal from the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904.

The crayon was a natural product for Binney & Smith. Colored sticks have long been used in drawing, starting with blends of charcoal and oil. In 1902 Binney developed the Staonal marking crayon for use by shipping companies on crates and barrels. Staonals left permanent waterproof marks on any surface, while paper sleeves made them neat and easy to handle. The same technology could be put to more creative uses. Binney and Smith's process, using carbon, paraffin wax and dustless talc, was much cheaper than imported artistic crayons but would also last longer than the cheaper crayons made by competitors. Binney also made sure that his crayons were non-toxic, so families wouldn't sacrifice safety to save money.

Binney's wife gave the new crayon a name. She dubbed it the Crayola, combining the French words for chalk (*craie*) and oily (*ola*). Binney contributed ingenious packaging. He gave customers an expanding number of options to choose from, starting with a five-cent pack of eight different-colored crayons and a ten-cent box of sixteen crayons. Binney & Smith created attractive, eye-catching boxes that highlighted the gold medals the company had won. Within a decade, shoppers could choose Crayola boxes from the original eight-pack to a big box of 24 crayons, all in different colors.

Binney & Smith continued to expand its selection of coloring products. It was so much identified with its crayons that in 2007 the company officially changed its name to Crayola. In later life, Edwin Binney moved to Florida where he became a community leader for St. Lucie County. Long after his death on December 17, 1934, his crayons continue to leave an indelible mark on American culture.



Edwin Binney,
Photo Courtesy of Crayola.



Shrub Oak is a small hamlet in the town of Yorktown a little more than 6 miles northeast of Peekskill in Westchester County.

For more information about Crayola crayons go to the company's website at www.crayola.com. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.