

Gem Cutting in Glen Cove (1919)

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In 1919, a commercial gem cutting operation was established in the City of Glen Cove by the American Gem Company of New York. Employing young women as lapidaries, the operation concentrated on cutting “colored stones” – precious and semiprecious gemstones other than diamonds.

The America Gem Company of New York was incorporated in New York State in 1900, for the stated purpose of dealing in precious stones. Originally headquartered at 14 Church Street, near the heart of Maiden Lane/Broadway diamond center of late 19th Century New York City, the company would relocate to 6 West Forty-Eighth Street in 1918. (NY Times, 1918).

Its directors were Louis Kahn, Moses Kahn and Meyer Goodfriend; the capitalization of the new company was a modest \$25,000. (NY Times, 1900) Louis and Moses Kahn were brothers, both immigrants from Wurtemberg, Germany. Together they owned L and M Kahn, one of the United States’ older diamond importing and cutting firms, located at 170 Broadway in Manhattan. (NY Times, 1910). Goodfriend, a native New Yorker, was likewise a dealer in gems and pearls, with offices on Fifth Avenue. (NY Times, 1927). By 1903, Meyer D Rothschild, president of the National Jewelers Board of Trade, assumed the presidency of the American Gem Company, at which time it appears that it was renamed the American Gem and Pearl Company. (Wilson, 2010)

In addition to selling cut precious and semi-precious stones, the American Gem Company was also actively engaged in mining gem rough. Between 1905

and 1908, the company mined emeralds at the renowned Crabtree Mine at Spruce Pine, Mitchell County, North Carolina. There,

the emeralds are small but well crystallized, varying in size from one to ten millimeters in width and five to twenty-five millimeters in length. They are of a very fine emerald green color, but only occasionally are they transparent enough to cut into faceted stones. This property was operated by the American Gem and Pearl Company of New York, who developed a new gem material by cutting the emerald bearing rock (emerald, quartz, and



The small building atop the hill at left is the Presbyterian Church, soon to be converted into a lapidary workshop.

feldspar with occasionally some tourmaline) en cabochon, and calling the cut stone "Emerald Matrix." The green and white mixture with an occasional bit of black color was very pleasing and this gem stone had considerable sale. (Pratt, 1933)

Another of the American Gem Company's early operations was mining rhodolite, a gem garnet of an especially lively rose-pink to raspberry tint, in the gem bearing gravels of a stream near Franklin, North Carolina. The State Mineralogist for North Carolina noted "the American Gem Company of New York worked three or four men for a short time on their property" and that "they took out, however, a considerable quantity of gem material." (Pratt, 1901) In 1907, the company was engaged in mining gem beryl at the Wiseman mine near Spruce Pine, North Carolina. The mine produced aquamarine of very good to excellent color, and Tiffany's resident gemologist, George Frederick Kunz, noted that "large quantities – thousands even – of magnificent blue gems weighing from 1 to 20 carats, have been taken out" by the American Gem Company. (Kunz, 1907) The company operated the Rutherford Number 1 Mine at Amelia Courthouse, Amelia County, Virginia for "amazonite," an exquisite blue-green microcline feldspar, between 1912 and 1932, producing 15 tons of gem material valued at \$60,000. (Sinkankas, 1959) They also mined for amethyst at the Connally Mine near Smithbridge Township, Macon County, North Carolina. (Pratt, 1911). Clearly, the American Gem and Pearl Company actively sought to augment the humdrum array of commonly available gem materials which glutted most jewelers' inventories with more unusual stones. While they did not shy away from imported gem rough, establishing dependable domestic sources could at least partially buffer the company from attempts by competitors to monopolize major foreign gem sources, as Edwin Streeter and Sons attempted to do with the legendary ruby mines of Mogok in Myanmar.

The American Gem Company opened their Glen Cove cutting shop in October, 1919. The supervisor of the facility was a Mr. E Goldman. They selected the former Presbyterian Church

on Hendrick Avenue to house their operations. Whether the American Gem Company purchased or leased the building has not been established. Constructed in 1876, the church was a smallish wooden structure which the congregation had outgrown by the first decade of the 20th Century. Construction of a much larger church (still extant and located at the corner of School Street and North Lane) had rendered this structure obsolete. According to a reporter for the Glen Cove Echo, who was given a tour of the facility in the Spring of 1920, the building was well suited to the company's needs, as the "high ceilings and big windows let in lots of fresh air and sunshine and make working conditions ideal."

Initially the cutting shop had a single "bench" (a simple long wooden work bench at which the different stages of cutting, grinding and polishing gemstones were conducted) and employed "a half dozen inexperienced workers." Within six months, the number of gem cutters had expanded to 32, with room for 13 more. A period article seems to indicate that the gem cutters were almost exclusively young, unskilled women: "Glen Cove, Sea Cliff, Locust Valley and Oyster Bay girls are being taught a profitable trade – and earning pocket money while they learn."

Gem cutting is fascinating – especially to young girls in whom a love for the beautiful is always strong, and whose fingers are more deft in delicate work of this sort than those of men. There is a romantic side to it also which finds quick response in the feminine heart. Who wouldn't thrill at the thought of handling garnets from Africa, aquamarines from Brazil, tourmalines from California, amethysts from Siberia and South America, turquoise from Persia and Egypt, sapphires from India and Ceylon, and black opals from Australia? (GC Echo, 1920)

In addition to the cutting room, the American Gem Company adapted the church's basement into facilities for the female staff members. A "large cloakroom" was provided in the basement, as well as a lounge (then referred to as a "rest room") which contained a phonograph "well supplied with dance music, and here it is that the girls have a good time during the lunch hour when the weather happens to be bad." There was also a kitchenette "where the girls may if they desire make their own lunches."

Precisely how long beyond 1920 the American Gem Company maintained their Glen Cove operation is presently unknown. Gem cutting never became established as a major industry in the community.

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Gems—Girls!

Beautiful Sparkling Jewels.
Learn to Cut Them.

Good Pay Steady Work

AMERICAN GEM CO.

10 Hendrick Ave. Glen Cove

A 1920 recruiting advertisement for the American Gem Co's Glen Cove operation.

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