

# Timeline of the Life of Obed Hussey

## Inventor of the First Successful Reaper

By [Bob Rhode](#) and [Lee Hite](#)

### Late 1700s and early 1800s

Geographies and gazetteers proclaim Ohio one of the best coal-producing regions having abundant deposits of iron ore. Beyond the western slopes of the Appalachian Mountains are fertile lands promising to make farmers rich. With growing numbers of farmers, good iron to make machines for farming, bountiful coal to fire factoring making machines, and productive soil, Ohio is in the right place at the right time.

### 1790

Obed Hussey is born on the 7th of October in 1790 in Hallowell, Maine, to Samuel and Charlotte Hussey. In a letter to his friend Edward Stabler (dated March 12, 1854), Obed Hussey wrote, "I never experienced half the fatigue in rowing after a whale in the Pacific Ocean (which I have often done) as I experienced year after year for eighteen years in the harvest field ... " (quoted in Follett L. Greeno's biography titled *Obed Hussey: Who, of All Inventors, Made Bread Cheap*). Some writers have opined that the inventor lost an eye and an arm in an accident while on a whaling ship. That he wore a patch over one eye is not contested, as photographs depict the patch, but there is no evidence that he lost an arm. If he is the person depicted in an ad for one of his early reaping machines, he has both arms and is using them. A widely distributed photograph of Hussey from around 1850 includes two arms; whether both were functional cannot be determined today.

### 1830s

While living with the Chenoweth family in Baltimore, Maryland, Obed Hussey designs a model reaper fondly recalled years later by the Chenoweth children.

### 1833

Obed Hussey patents his reaper while living in Cincinnati, Ohio. Iron parts for his prototypes were forged at Jabez Reynolds and Thomas Kite, Jr.'s Cincinnati foundry named Reynolds & Kite. Hussey is boarding at Mrs. Tucker's and is a seller of candles (called a *tallow chandler*). In 1832, Hussey employs William Procter of the later Procter & Gamble in the candle

shop. When Hussey tests one of his prototypes, he is not yet satisfied with the results.

### **1835**

Obed Hussey oversees a test of his invention of the first successful reaper (grain mowing machine) in a barley field in Springfield Township, Hamilton County, Ohio. The machine moves quickly, cutting the grain cleanly and dropping the stalks neatly for forming into bundles, or sheaves. Hussey's reapers helped make bread cheap by mechanizing the harvesting of wheat. Although Cyrus McCormick is often credited with inventing the reaper, Hussey's patent for a reaper in 1833 predated McCormick's. Many farmers preferred Hussey's reaper to McCormick's. When Hussey and others sued McCormick for patent infringement in the late 1850s, they win, compelling the payment of damages by McCormick.

By the 6th of July in 1835, Hussey is in Palmyra, Missouri, demonstrating two of his reapers.

### **1836**

By the 1st of July, Hussey is in Oxford, Maryland, exhibiting his reaper. Hussey moves back to Baltimore from Cincinnati.

### **1842**

Hussey's brother Thomas R. Hussey begins selling Hussey reapers in Auburn, New York. Sometime in the 1840s, Hussey enters into partnership with his foreman, Thomas Judge Lovegrove, and the business may have been named Hussey & Lovegrove. Not many years later, Lovegrove is instrumental in helping Baltimore obtain steam-powered fire engines, and he eventually establishes Lovegrove & Company in Philadelphia—a large machinery firm.

### **1855**

Hussey tests a steam traction engine that he has designed to pull plows. The engine has been assembled at Hussey's reaper factory in Baltimore.

### **1850s**

McCormick pays Hussey and other damages after being sued for patent infringement and losing in a series of court cases. Meanwhile, Hussey's reaper wins several awards at agricultural fairs.

## 1858

After the financial panic in 1857, Hussey perceives his reaper business as declining and sells his rights to McCormick, who hastily incorporates Hussey's designs in what becomes the booming McCormick reaper business.

## 1860

Hussey dies when he tries to catch a car of a moving train while on his way to Portland, Maine, to visit his cousin. He had gone to fetch a glass of water for a thirsty child who was a passenger on the train, and the train had begun to pull away from the station before Hussey had boarded.

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Lee Hite leads frequent tours of [Old River Station](#) in Cincinnati, Ohio. If you have taken one or more of Lee's tours, you know how exciting it is to see the world's largest pumping engines under Lee's expert guidance. If you have not yet participated in a tour, you have a wonderful opportunity ahead of you. Simply click on [Old River Station](#) to sign up for your tour.

Bob Rhode is co-author of the nonfiction best seller [The Steam Tractor Encyclopedia](#) (available on Amazon). (One of the easiest ways to order the book is to visit the website of [Engineers and Engines Magazine](#) or to call 410-673-2414.) The hardcover book features over 600 historical pictures of farm steam engines. To preserve our agricultural heritage, *The Steam Tractor Encyclopedia* is packed with memorable stories. Bob has written sixteen books. Find out more about Bob and his publications by visiting Bob's [Books from the Heartland](#) website.