

Force-drop Planter Origin

What was needed was a revolution in sowing technique.

Thousands of acres of plowed land were ready to be turned into waving cornfields once an efficient machine for rapidly dropping the seed kernels could be manufactured in quantity. The need was soon met by the construction of a horse-drawn implement capable of planting twenty acres of corn a day. Fuller and Johnson mechanics played a leading role in the early development of this machine by adding an invention of their own known as Starks Combined Force- Drop Planter and Check-Rower. The Starks attachment soon earned a recognized place in the market as an improvement over the old check- rower which only marked the place where the seed should fall. The force-drop device saved time and labor: it indicated the place and planted the seed at the same time. The kernels did not scatter as they were dropped, and the efficient spacing mechanism made it possible later on to cultivate the growing corn two ways. Concerning this valuable selling point, Johnson stressed in his advertisements that his improved corn planter would save its purchase price for every 100 acres planted by not having corn destroyed while cultivating.

The force-drop principle - which in the hands of Fuller and Johnson was to make such an important contribution to the development of mechanical corn planters - was the invention of a country schoolteacher. On October 25, 1878, Nils O. Starks, then an instructor in the village school at Nora in Dane County, Wisconsin, made application to the United States Patent office stating that he had invented certain new and useful improvements on Corn Planters."

It is likely that Starks had consulted Johnson in nearby Madison, for the inventor's patent dated February 25, 1879, was secured in Washington by the patent solicitors who had handled Johnson's earlier patent business. However that may be, Starks on the day of issuance of his patent assigned "one third his right to John A. Johnson of Madison, Wisconsin." From that date, the two men were to be closely associated in the manufacture of a new and mutually profitable piece of farm machinery.

Starks wrote Johnson on March 7, 1879, asking whether the latter's company would be willing to risk a part of the expense of putting the new attachment on the market. The answer was in the affirmative, and the inventor was soon engaged in testing his mechanism on the farm of John A. Johnson's brother Oliver. On August 14, 1879, he wrote to Johnson that the new device "worked nicely." Starks straightway gave up school teaching to become an employee of Fuller and Johnson, a move which soon resulted in his promotion to the position of shop superintendent.

The force-drop planter was a popular addition to the Fuller and Johnson line. In 1888 the firm sold every corn planter it had in stock, and as a result had to borrow from dealers to have available machines to exhibit at fairs. Exclamation points featured the half-page advertisements in the trade journal: "Force Drop! Wrought metal wheels! Iron seed boxes! Center lock lever! Very light draft". Johnson did not hesitate to show his pride by proclaiming his implement the best planter and check-rower on earth." Dealers added their highest point of praise, "It's a money maker," and farmers provided the clincher, "It's a money saver."