

The Philbrook and Payne Reel:

Edward Fletcher Payne (1850-1914) was born in South Orrington, Maine. He apprenticed in a local machine shop while still a teenager, working his way up as a skilled machinist to shop foreman in a railroad car manufacturing company. By the mid 1870s, Ed Payne was making metal reel seats and other hardware for the small fishing rod industry that was emerging in Bangor, in a downtown shop listed in the local directories under the name "Paine." He worked for Hiram Lewis Leonard (1831-1907), acquainting himself with the innovative bamboo work of men like the Hawes brothers of the Leonard shop. Only twenty-six years old, Ed Payne caught the eye of Francis Jerome Philbrook (1840-1930). Philbrook had improved his machining skills with several firms, and by 1875 he listed himself under his name as a "Gunsmith Machinist & Model Maker," on Exchange Street in Bangor. As with most in that specialized profession his business was seasonal, which led him to look for someone who knew the fishing tackle trade, and who was familiar with the tools needed to make rods, and possibly even reels. Philbrook had an idea for a new single action reel design.

Francis Philbrook took rooms upstairs at 18 Broad in downtown Bangor under the listing of "Philbrook and Payne – Fishing Rod Makers." His raised pillar reel design incorporated two new features, both having to do with the placement and design of the click mechanism within the frame of the reel. He was granted a patent on June 12, 1877 (No. 191,813), which he immediately sold to Hiram Leonard.ⁱ Philbrook had also experimented with a "hot melt" of natural lacquer-like resins, known as "mud," which was a common decorative marketing tool in that era used by manufacturers of anything from Civil War picture frames, doll heads, toys and games, to ornamental gun cases.ⁱⁱ Philbrook's "marbled" side plates, a mixture of natural resins, along with orange and black pigments that were ground up, sprinkled into the hot mold, and then stirred slightly, was new to the fishing tackle industry which gave the assembled reels a very distinctive look. The first reels made, all with the orange and black marbling on the side plates as well as the handle knob, were usually stamped "Philbrook & Paine, Makers, Bangor, ME, Pat. Apld. For," with Ed Payne's name spelled "Paine." Once the patent was granted in the summer of 1877, the firm began to make a smaller winch model and a counterbalanced handle version out of a combination of nickel silver and bronze, known to collectors as the "bi-metal" reel, along with the marbled version, but with the name H. L. Leonard and the patent date stamped on the front plate. They went on to manufacture a small amount of large 4 1/2" diameter salmon reels in both variations. A unique planetary drive version of the bi-metal reel was later envisioned by William Mills & Sons, in only three sizes, two in trout and one salmon model, which was later made for the New York tackle concern in response to a patented design attributed to James D'A Boulton, July 11, 1882. It was a multiplying reel, made heavy by two gears that meshed with a larger circular gear (made by Brown and Sharp in Rhode Island) that was soldered to the inside of the front plate rim.ⁱⁱⁱ The increased friction of the extra set of revolving gears made the spool a chore to turn, which further led the public to reject it as unnecessary, as both versions, especially the large salmon model, are very rare indeed.

The "P & P" partnership lasted until 1885. Payne decided to dedicate himself to rod making, moving to Central Valley, New York that year to work at the Leonard factory as a ferrule maker. The now legendary reels, in much the same configuration, were manufactured by Julius vom Hofe by 1886 in his Brooklyn New York shop until World War II. By 1887, Francis Philbrook had reinvented himself, taking a position with several Bangor firms, most notably Parker and Peakes who were boot and shoe manufacturers as an engineer. In 1901 Philbrook took a mechanical engineering job working for the South American Development Co. who had recently taken over control of the gold mines near Portovelo in southwestern Ecuador. He moved back to Bangor in 1908 where he continued his hobbies as a photographer and an amateur beekeeper. He designed and patented (No. 104,109) an "Improvement in Air Intake Valve for Internal Combustion Engines," which was granted on April 17, 1917. Finally, he moved to Rockland, Massachusetts for six years where he died in 1930, having just passed his ninetieth birthday. Francis Philbrook and Ed Payne occupy a very special place in the history of reel making. Their innovations, the association with Leonard, and the excellent level of workmanship ordinarily would have been enough to secure their place in angling history.^{iv} But, it is the unique beauty of the orange and black marbled introductory model, and the grace of the long-standing bi-metal version that sets these gentlemen from Bangor, Maine apart. Owning one of their reels is a singular thrill.