History of the Barber-Colman Company

- Historically one of Rockford's largest manufacturers.
- Began with the founding of the Barber & Colman Company in 1894 – partnership between Howard Colman, an inventor and entrepreneur, and W. A. Barber, an investor. [Today he would probably be considered a venture capitalist.] Colman's first patent and marketable invention was the Creamery Check Pump used to separate buttermilk and dispense skimmed milk.
- Colman's textile production inventions led the company on its rapid rise as a worldwide leader in the design and manufacture of diversified products. Specific items designed for the textile industry included the Hand Knotter and the Warp Tying Machine. Through these innovations, Barber & Colman was able to build its first plant on Rock Street in Rockford's Water Power District, and to establish branch offices in Boston MA and Manchester, England.
- Incorporated as Barber-Colman in 1904 and built 5 new major structures on their site by 1907.
- Later innovations for the textile industry included an Automatic Winder, High Speed Warper and Automatic Spoolers. By 1931, the textile machinery division had branch production facilities in Framingham MA; Greenville SC; Munich, Germany; and Manchester. This part of the business flourished through the mid-1960s but then declined as other divisions expanded.
- Branched out from the textile industry into machine tools in 1908 with Milling Cutters. Barber-Colman created machines used at the Fiat plant in Italy (1927) and the Royal Typewriter Co. outside Hartford CT. By 1931, the Machine Tool and Small Tool Division of Barber-Colman listed branch offices in Chicago, Cincinnati and Rochester NY.
- As part of its commitment to developing a skilled work force, Barber-Colman began the Barber-Colman Continuation School for boys 16 and older shortly after the company was founded. It was a 3-year apprentice program that trained them for manufacturing jobs at Barber-Colman and paid them hourly for their work at rate that increased as their proficiency improved. The program was operated in conjunction with the Rockford Vocational School.
- To foster continued inventions, an Experimental Department was established with the responsibility of continually developing new machines. A lab was first installed in 1914 and was divided into two parts – a chemistry lab to provide thorough analysis of all metals and their component properties, and a metallurgical lab to test the effectiveness of heat treatment for hardening materials. Innovations in the Experimental Department laid the groundwork for the company's movement into the design and development of electrical and electronic products, and energy management controls.
- BARBER-COLMAN became involved in the electrical and electronics industry in 1924 with the founding of the Electrical Division. First product was a radio operated electric garage door opener controlled from the dashboard of a car. Unfortunately, it was too expensive to be practical at the time. The division's major product in its early years was Barcol OVERdoors, a paneled wood garage door that opened on an overhead track. Several designs were offered in 1931, some of which had the appearance of wood hinged doors. This division eventually expanded into four separate ones that designed and produced electronic control instruments and systems for manufacturing processes; small motors and gear motors used in products such as vending machines, antennas and X-ray machines; electronic and pneumatic controls for aircraft and marine operations; and electrical and electronic controls for engine-powered systems.
- In the late 1920s, the Experimental Department began conducting experiments with temperature control instruments to be used in homes and other buildings and the Temperature Control Division was born. Over time, BARBER-COLMAN became known worldwide leader in electronic controls for heating, ventilating and air conditioning. These are the products that continue its name and reputation today.

- The death of founder Howard Colman in 1942 was sudden but the company continued to expand its operations under changing leadership. Ground was broken in 1953 for a manufacturing building in neighboring Loves Park IL to house the overhead door division and the Uni-Flow division. Three later additions were made to that plant.
- The divestiture of BARBER-COLMAN divisions began in 1984 with the sale of the textile division to Reed-Chatwood Inc which remained at BARBER-COLMAN's original site on Rock Street until 2001. The machine tool division, the company's second oldest unit, was spun off in 1985 to Bourn and Koch, another Rockford company. At that time, it was announced that the remaining divisions of the BARBER-COLMAN Company would concentrate their efforts on process controls and cutting tools. These moves reduced local employment at BARBER-COLMAN's several locations to about 2200. The remaining divisions were eventually sold as well, but the BARBER-COLMAN Company name continues to exist today as one of five subsidiaries of Eurotherm Controls Inc whose worldwide headquarters are in Leesburg VA. The Aerospace Division and the Industrial Instruments Division still operate at the Loves Park plant, employing 1100 workers in 2000. The historic complex on Rock Street was vacated in 2001 and the property purchased by the City of Rockford in 2002.
- Extensive documentation from the Experimental Department was left at the Rock Street plant when the company moved out and was still there when the site was purchased by the City of Rockford. These documents are now housed at the Midway Village Museum.