

Petersburg's Cotton Industry

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Cotton manufacturing was one of the largest industries in Petersburg for about a century, beginning in the 1820s. In fact, Petersburg was the northernmost city in the United States that both received cotton from nearby fields and processed cotton into manufactured goods. The first large cotton factory in town, the Petersburg Manufacturing Company, opened in 1826. However, cotton had been grown south of Petersburg for many years before then. Cotton never did surpass tobacco as the primary commodity processed in Petersburg, but manufacturing of cotton products increased dramatically in the second quarter of the 19th century. Ultimately, Petersburg led Virginia in the manufacture of cotton products.

In the early years of cotton manufacturing in Petersburg, two local men invented a device that advanced cotton product technology. In 1829, Francis Follett and Jabez Smith of Petersburg designed and patented the first functional cottonseed huller. This machine separated the cotton seed kernels so oil could be manufactured easily. With Follett's financial support, Smith built and sold hullers and an improved press into the early 1830s. This invention by two Petersburg men made the manufacturing of cottonseed oil practicable in the United States.

Petersburg's cotton industry grew exponentially in the 1830s, with factories powered by dams and canals along the Appomattox River. In 1834, \$120,000 was raised in only two hours to fund the construction of cotton mills. A year later, Petersburg had three cotton mills with two more opening in 1836. The primary factories in the area were Petersburg, Merchants, Matoaca, Ettrick, Mechanics, and Battersea. In 1838, the cotton mills in and around Petersburg reported a capital investment totaling \$772,000. These mills consumed 5500 bales of cotton and produced 395,000,000 yards of cloth and 530,000 pounds of yarn. Thirty-two percent of all the capital invested in cotton manufacturing in Virginia was invested in building the Petersburg mills.

Numerous cotton mills were built near Campbell's Bridge on both sides of the Appomattox River, and many of their workers lived in mill villages that sprang up in Ettrick and Matoaca. The factories employed only white men and women and hired them in about equal numbers; in the 1830s, there were 260 male and 225 female workers. The men were paid \$192 a year and the women \$122. Cotton mill employees were paid more than the tobacco factory workers, and both blacks and whites worked in the tobacco industry. Entire families, including children as young as eight years old, worked in the cotton mills for approximately 60 hours per week. The mills did provide company housing, however. When the economy slowed, such as in the **Panic** of 1837 and the depression in 1857, the mills laid off many workers. The companies also cut back on their workforces when summer droughts did not leave sufficient water in the river to power the mills.

The 1850s were a boom time for cotton factories. By 1850, six mills were in operation in and around Petersburg and they employed approximately 700 female workers. Primary, cotton-related items manufactured in the late 1850s included gunny cloth, hoop iron for cotton bales, and cotton machinery. On the eve of the Civil War, almost 1/3 of Virginia cotton businesses were in Petersburg.

Unlike many other industries in Petersburg, during the Civil War the cotton mills maintained full-scale operations. Some Petersburg businessmen in late 1861 bought cotton and exported it to Great Britain on blockade runners sailing out of Wilmington, North Carolina. Ettrick Manufacturing Company, Battersea Mills, and Matoaca Manufacturing Company made shirts in unbleached cotton osnabrug for lining Confederate uniforms. In the summer of 1863, Charleston, South Carolina, needed sandbags for its defense, and Petersburg's cotton factories responded. The mills worked at full capacity in 1864, even as Petersburg's commission merchants closed their doors, its tobacco factories operated considerably under full capacity, and the city's two ironworks ceased production. The Confederate Army still needed uniforms, and it provided many contracts. Throughout the siege of June 1864 to April 1865, the cotton mills were out of range of Union artillery, so they were able to work steadily. More women were forced to work in the cotton mills with the

men away, leaving their children at home without adult supervision. During the 9 Yi-month siege, cotton provided other benefits to the citizens of Petersburg. For example, John Donnan was the half owner of Donnan and Johnston, a cotton brokerage firm. Mr. Donnan bought the c. 1810 Rambaut House on Perry Street in 1847. During the siege, cotton bales were placed on the front yard and porch to protect the basement, which served as a bomb shelter.

By 1870, at least six cotton factories employed over 500 workers in the vicinity of Petersburg. These factories continued to hire children. In 1903, out of 450 workers in the city's cotton mills, 52 were from 14 to 16 years old and 11 were under 12 years of age. The economic engine of cotton manufacturing continued to be strong into the 20th century. In 1915, the top four exports from Petersburg were tobacco, cotton yarns, luggage, and peanuts. Only a small amount of cotton was grown in the vicinity of Petersburg by that time, although large quantities of cotton were shipped to Petersburg to be manufactured and exported. The cotton industry eventually declined, largely due to the migration of cotton growing further south. But for approximately 100 years, cotton had been the queen of Petersburg industry.