

SECTION V

Textile Mill Communities

Charlotte's Textile Heritage: An Introduction

Mecklenburg County's location in the Piedmont of the Southeastern United States was a key factor in its eventual industrial development, but the county had been no pioneer in the creation of the textile industry. English native Samuel Slater had built America's first textile mill at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1793, sparking the rapid rise of the industry in New England.¹ Mills did not appear in the South until two decades later, a by-product of the hostilities with England that led to the War of 1812. President Thomas Jefferson's embargo of 1807 forbade most U.S. trade with England, and indirectly encouraged investors in the South and elsewhere to try to develop American manufacturing.² North Carolina investors Absolom Warlick and Michael Schenk built the state's first cotton mill near Lincolnton in 1813.³ By 1840, according to North Carolina historians Hugh Lefler and Albert Newsome, “there were twenty-five mills in fifteen

¹ Encyclopedia of Textiles, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), p. 75.

² Richard Griffin, "North Carolina Cotton Manufacturers, 1808-1960," in Marjorie Young, ed. Textile Leaders of the South (Columbia, S.C.: James R. Young, 1963), p. 462.

³ Ibid. There is evidently some uncertainty as to the date. The year 1815 is used in Hugh Lefler and Albert Newsome, The History of a Southern State: North Carolina, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), pp. 396-397.

counties, thirteen of them in the Piedmont.”⁴ This number increased to thirty-nine by the eve of the Civil War.⁵

The Piedmont was the logical place for the textile industry to start in the South. It was a productive cotton-growing area, and its rolling hills provided waterpower for the first factories. But the industry grew slowly before the Civil War because Southern investors tended to put their

TOP COTTON GROWING COUNTIES IN NORTH CAROLINA

1850 County	100 bales	1860 County	100 bales	1870 no data	1880 County	100 bales	1890 County	100 bales
Surry	214	Duplin	191		Wake	301	Mecklenburg	227
Anson	109	Halifax	104		Edgecombe	263	Wake	194
Mecklenburg	42	Anson	94		Mecklenburg	191	Richmond	179
Richmond	38	Pitt	76		Halifax	167	Robeson	162
Edgecomb	31	Rowan	70		Johnston	152	Johnston	140
Cabarrus	23	Bertie	67		Pitt	149	Edgecombe	135
Orange	23	Northampton	66		Wayne	146	Pitt	125
Robeson	23	Mecklenburg(tie)	61		Northampton	136	Wayne	124
Union	23	Wake (tie)	61		Wilson	130	Wilson	111
Wake	21	Richmond	57		Franklin	129	Anson	108
TOTAL STATE	738	TOTAL STATE	1455		TOTAL STATE	1435	TOTAL STATE	3363

Source: U.S. Agricultural Census data

Compiled by Thomas W. Hanchett
Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission

resources into agriculture and export trade. Most factories in the South were small, and often short-lived. The majority were spinning mills, which transformed the raw cotton into thread (known as “yarn” in the textile trade, no matter what its thickness). As late as 1860 the average North Carolina mill had barely a thousand spindles and only three employed as many as one hundred workers.⁶ A handful of plants had power looms to weave their yarn into cloth. Notable among these was Edwin M. Holt's Alamance Mill near present-day Burlington, North Carolina, which introduced the use of textile dyes in the state in 1853 and produced the South's first machine-woven colored cloth.⁷

Mecklenburg showed scant interest in the textile industry before the Civil War, despite its location in the heart of the Piedmont. In 1848 cotton farmer William Henry Neel constructed a modest factory on the banks of the Catawba River under the direction of a Rhode Island expert named George Brown.⁸ The same year, Charlotte investors Carson, Young and Grier founded the

⁴ Lefler and Newsome, p. 397.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 398-399.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 399. Griffin, p. 466.

⁸ Dan L. Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills in Charlotte, North Carolina..." (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1981). Griffin, p. 468. The Catawba factory's output evidently had a high reputation despite the factory's short life, according to Griffin: "equipped with new and improved Northern

Rock Island Manufacturing Company to produce both cotton and woolen yarn and cloth.⁹ Both mills apparently closed before the Civil War, though there is a record of a Grier-owned factory called the Glenroy Cotton Mill which operated for less than a year in 1874 near the community of Matthews.¹⁰

After the Civil War, the Southern attitude toward industry changed radically. The end of slavery crippled plantation agriculture, and the region's investors began to work toward a "New South" based instead on industrial development.¹¹ Under the slogan "Bring the Mills to the Cotton!" North Carolina emerged as the South's leading textile producer by the 1920s.¹²

Mecklenburg County did not immediately join the post-bellum industrial rush. The county had been one of the state's most productive cotton growing counties before the conflict, with many medium-sized farmers rather than a few large plantations as was common elsewhere in the state.¹³ Such farms weathered the end of slavery well and continued to be profitable. There is evidence that Mecklenburg farmers invested their proceeds first in cotton trading rather than manufacturing. The opening of railroads in the 1850s had made the city a major cotton trading hub for farmers throughout the state's southern Piedmont.¹⁴ The city and its rail connections were barely touched by the Civil War, and after the close of the conflict the city experienced a trading boom.¹⁵ Farmers and shopkeepers in Mecklenburg County put their modest profits into the cotton trade, and eventually accumulated the substantial amounts of capital needed for industrial development.

machinery ... it quickly acquired a reputation that made all its products sell easily....' General Neal [sic] employed as agents two brothers, H.B. and L.L. Williams, who traveled over the State taking orders for the Catawba products. When these orders were received at the mills, the company's wagons would deliver the cotton yarn and cloth directly to the merchants. Such merchandising paid ample reward, and General Neal was widely respected as a 'pioneer industrialist.'" See also Dan L. Morrill, "The Neel House: Survey and Research Report" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1976).

⁹ Griffin, p. 468.

¹⁰ Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills...."

¹¹ For discussion of this era in general see Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: a Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); and Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1930), among others. A study of the New South era in a particular state is David Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

¹² Thirty Fourth Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing of the State of North Carolina, 1923-24, p. 3. Table based on U.S. census data shows that North Carolina surpassed South Carolina in spindles in 1921. See also Lefler and Newsome, p. 581; *Southern Textile Bulletin*, November 22, 1923, Section 2, p. 2.

¹³ United States Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census: 1860 - Agriculture, North Carolina section* pp. 235-236, 106-111.

¹⁴ When the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad opened to Columbia in 1852, it was the first railroad in the western part of North Carolina. By 1860 lines converged on Charlotte from four directions. The resulting competition kept freight prices low and allowed cotton brokers to pay farmers the highest possible prices. For more discussion see the chapter of this manuscript entitled "The Growth of Charlotte: a History." A good contemporary description may be found in Beasley and Emerson's *Charlotte Directory for 1875-76...*, pp. 131-141, in the city directory collection of the Carolina Room at the Charlotte Public Library.

¹⁵ This was partly fueled by the astronomical price of cotton immediately after the war. In 1866 and 1867 the staple sold for more than a dollar per pound, a price which has not been equaled since even with inflation. The Charlotte market handled 12,000 bales (four to five hundred pounds each) in 1866 alone, bringing huge amounts of cash into the city. For information on Charlotte's postwar surge see LeGette Blythe and Charles R. Brockman, *Hornets' Nest: the Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte: McNally of Charlotte, 1961), p. 123. For data on cotton prices nationally see Gilbert R. Merrill, et al., *American Cotton Handbook...*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Textile Book Publishers, 1949), p. 50. For information on the Charlotte market see Beasley and Emerson's *Charlotte Directory for 1875-76...*, p. 141.

By the 1880s the city had a number of “capitalists” looking for new ways to invest their cotton profits. The first to enter the textile business was R.M. Oates. Raised on a farm, Oates had come to Charlotte with the opening of the railroads to work in a grocery store and had risen to become one of the city's wealthiest cotton traders. In 1881 he opened the Charlotte Cotton Mill in the city's Fourth Ward, Mecklenburg's first successful textile concern.¹⁶



Charlotte Cotton Mill, 500 W. Fifth Street. *Google Street View 2020*

Once Oates showed the way, Mecklenburg's industrial growth was nothing short of meteoric. Thirteen years after the first mill, Mecklenburg County ranked third in number of spindles in the state, close behind leading Gaston and Alamance counties.¹⁷ The build-up seems to have been accomplished by local capital with little help from outside investors. “Charlotte is essentially a home-made city,” stated Charlotte publisher Wade Harris in 1899. “All the cotton mills and clothing factories...were built mainly by Charlotte people.”¹⁸ By 1900 Mecklenburg County boasted sixteen mills with a combined total of 94,392 spindles and 1,456 looms.¹⁹ It was now North Carolina’s second most important textile manufacturing county.²⁰

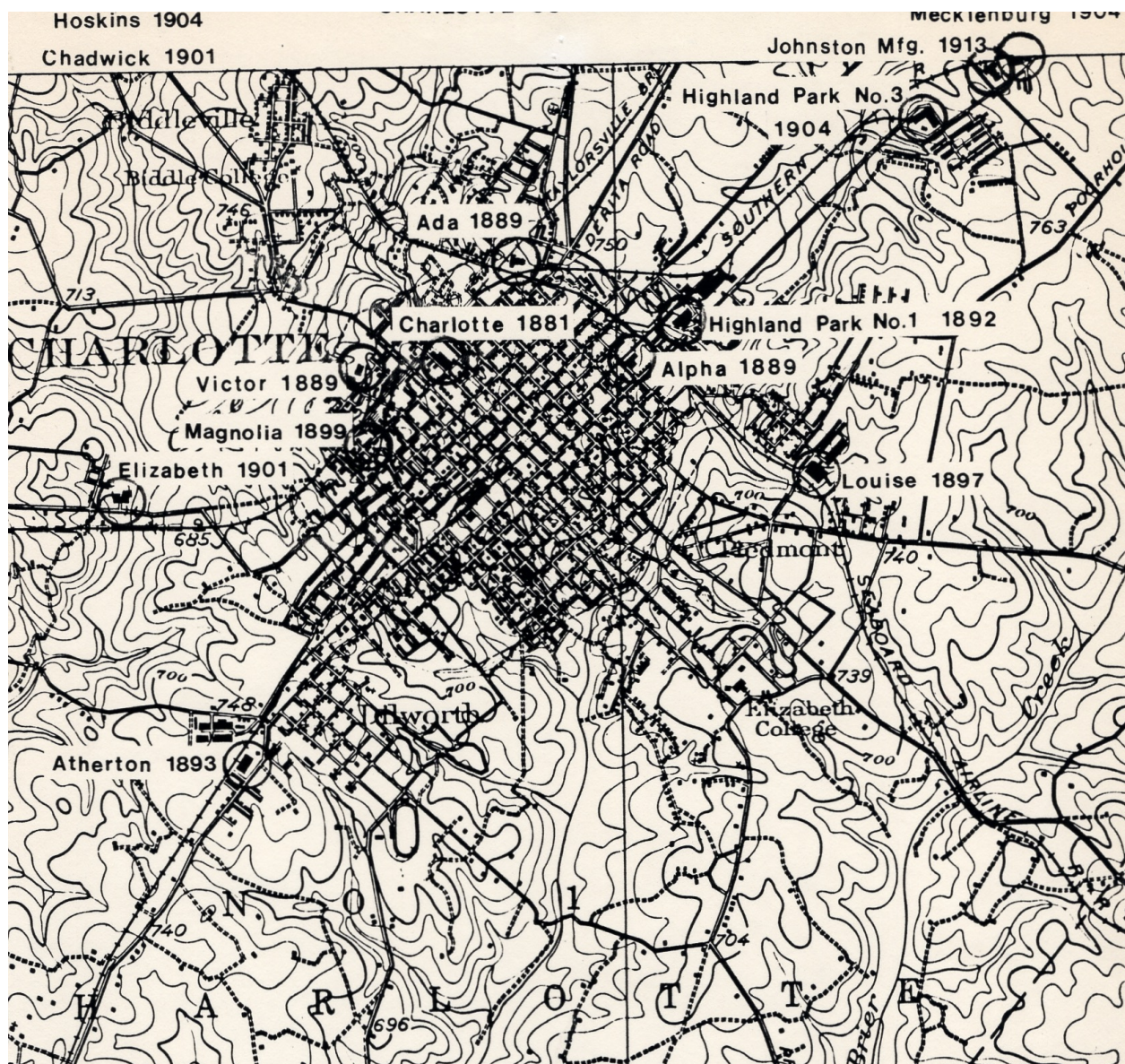
¹⁶ Morrill, "A Survey of Cotton Mills ..." William H. Huffman, "Charlotte Cotton Mill: Survey and Research Report" (Charlotte: Charlotte Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission, 1984).

¹⁷ Eighth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing for the State of North Carolina, 1894, pp. 33-36.

¹⁸ Wade Hampton Harris, Sketches of Charlotte (Charlotte: Observer Printing House, 1899), p. 4.

¹⁹ Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing for the State of North Carolina, 1900, p. 177. See also Harris, p. 3, for some data on South Carolina mill towns.

²⁰ Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor and Printing for the State of North Carolina, 1900, pp. 176-181.



Charlotte early textile mills, mapped onto the 1905 USGA topographic map.

Update 2026

Textile manufacturing in the Carolinas declined after World War II, and today the industry has largely disappeared. Cotton mills depended on cheap labor – mostly families drawn from the small farms of the region. During the 1950s, other regions of the world with even cheaper workers began competing with the U.S. South. By the end of the 1970s, textile manufacturing was almost dead in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.