



South Carolina's Story The making of a state

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The town of Graniteville in Aiken County is, in many ways, a living museum. The neat white clapboard buildings, canals and azalea parks are attractively landscaped and strikingly reminiscent of an earlier age. The entire town, along with its industry, was created in 1847 by one man.

William Gregg, a Pennsylvania Quaker, came to Columbia as a watchmaker and silversmith in 1824. His silver work was of the highest quality and is still prized as works of art.

Gregg made a fortune and with the capital set himself on the course that earned him the distinction of being founder of the cotton mill industry of the South.

Gregg did not erect the first cotton mill; mills of various types and sizes are recorded as having been in South Carolina in as early as 1768. About 1816, a number of mills to manufacture cotton thread were erected by New Englanders across the Piedmont.

All of the mills had to be chartered by the state. Individual and partnership charters were not difficult to obtain, but, due largely to the leadership of Calhoun and Langdon Cheves, the state balked at the idea of creating corporations other than for banking and transportation purposes.

Gregg, a man of limited education, wrote three pamphlets that convinced the S.C. Legislature to issue him a charter for the Graniteville Manufacturing Company. There were 30 stockholders.

For Gregg the mill was the means for supporting a community that stopped just short of being utopian. Gregg was too practical to give the operatives a voice in the management.

The broad-shouldered, vigorous founder had a vision. He saw the Graniteville Manufacturing Company as the salvation of poor whites, the misfits of the plantation system. Gregg was horrified that one in five white adults in South Carolina could not read or write.

was fond of the children and constantly treated them to picnics, boat trips, fireworks and Mrs. Gregg's gingerbread horses.

Graniteville in 1849 was described as having mill buildings of hammered blue granite, 8,400 spindles, 300 looms, 150 acres of ground, two churches, the Academy, a hotel, 10 stores and 83 cottages. There was a company doctor and a clinic with very modest charges. Alcohol was absolutely forbidden in the village.

At first the operatives were young women who lived in boarding houses with matrons. That plan was quickly abandoned in favor of having the girls live in cottages with their families.

The sons and daughters worked in the mill. The parents, not so easily adaptable to the clock and the machinery, were permitted, and encouraged, to farm on the outskirts of the village.

Gregg had over 9,000 acres of land and was an ardent agricultural experimenter. At "Kalmia" he planted 8,000 peach trees, the first large commercial peach orchard in South Carolina. Northern markets paid premium prices for the fruit.

People flocked to Graniteville, often more than Gregg could employ. The feudal village yearly showed nice profits. Gregg proved that a company-owned cotton mill town could be a moneymaker. This encouraged the formation of more mill towns modeled after Graniteville.

Unfortunately, too often the imitators were men as despotic but less benevolent than William Gregg.

In forging the town of Graniteville, Gregg made himself a benevolent despot.

The Graniteville Academy was the first school in the south to establish compulsory attendance. Gregg described his policy this way: "All parents are required to keep their children, between the ages of 6 and 12, at school. Good teachers, books, etc., are furnished by the company, free of charge."

If a child was willfully absent, the family was fined 5 cents for each day of absence. Gregg was his own truant officer. He checked attendance on daily visits to the school, and he sought out the truants and personally punished them.

While he was known to chase naked boys from the swimming hole to the classroom with a buggy whip, Gregg, nevertheless,