Industry cut from enduring cloth

■ Primitive mill in Chester County among predecessors of today's textile operations

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Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

In 1788, about the same time South Carolinians were debating whether to ratify the proposed U.S. Constitution, a fulling mill went up at the mouth of Fishing Creek in Chester County.

At first, the mill limited itself to shrinking, dying and pressing woolen cloth. Later, cotton cloth was added. The rather primitive establishment on the Catawba River was the first fulling mill south of Virginia.

There was no spinning or weaving mill in the area, and that brings up the question as to where the fulling mill got its cloth. Records are skimpy but provide enough evidence to say that the S.C. situation paralleled that of England and New England. The cloth came from "home industry."

In cottages of the area, women and a few men worked at either of two types of spinning wheels. One was operated by hand with the spinner walking back and forth drawing out the wool or cotton fibers and winding the yarn on reels. The other was foot-pedaled and produced a smoother yarn.

The next step was to get the yarn to a weaver. A good weaver could weave 2 to 3 yards of wool cloth a day and 4 yards of plain cotton cloth. Spinning and weaving skills came to the area with its Scotch-Irish settlers as early as the 1750s.

There seems to be no record of how long the Fishing Creek fulling mill operated, but apparently not long.

It was 1849 before there was a cotton factory in this area. That year Daniel McCullough built his water-powered McCullough Mill at the Great Falls of the Catawba, not very far from the earlier fulling mill. McCullough grew most of the cotton on his plantation (using about 300 bales a year). He hired an experienced cotton mill man from the North to install the equipment and train the operators, who were slaves from McCullough's plantation.

McCullough's Mill was strictly a spinning operation. The yarn was bundled into 5- and 10-pound bundles and peddled over the countryside to stores which carried the yarn in stock for their customers, who would take it home and weave the yarn into cloth.

During the 1850s there was a great deal of agitation over the slavery question. S.C. politicians and newspapers, by the late 1850s, were calling for "home industry" as a means of boycotting Northern goods. It was considered patriotic to not buy the products of New England's cotton mills. In that climate, McCullough prospered.

When the Civil War came along, there was an increased demand for cloth for soldier's uniforms. McCullough had all of the business he could handle.

Sherman's troops destroyed the McCullough Mill in 1865. Not long after that, McCullough died and the mill was never rebuilt.

Twenty-two years later, a much larger and far more productive cotton mill was erected in Fort Mill by Samuel E. White with the advice of an engineer-machinist-contractor, D.A. Tompkins of Charlotte. Tompkins was the Southern representative of Whitin Machine Works, which sold the machinery. But Tompkins also had a subscription plan that allowed local citizens to pool their money to raise the capital needed.

The Fort Mill Manufacturing Co. was chartered by South Carolina in October 1887. There was a world of difference between McCullough's tiny water-powered mill of 1849 and Samuel Elliott White's steam-driven mill of 1887. McCullough had a spinning operation. White's mill was a weaving operation. Within three months of opening, Fort Mill Manufacturing was producing 8,000 yards of gingham cloth each day using cotton bought from local farmers.

The Fort Mill Manufacturing Co. was the first plant of what was to become one of the nation's largest textile operations — Springs Industries Inc. — with the majority of the stock still held by descendants of Samuel Elliott White.

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Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.