

WINNSBORO PLANT
1898 - 1998

*“Celebrating the First
Hundred Years
of Progress”*

A Short History of Winnsboro Mills

By

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The 19th century was nearing its end when a group of business men signed their names to an historic document, the charter creating Fairfield Cotton Mills.

These business men took a brave step. Winnsboro and Fairfield County, like most of the south, had experienced major changes in socio-economic status after the Civil War. While other areas of South Carolina had cotton mills that had begun in the 1800s, Fairfield County still relied primarily on an agricultural-based economy. There was no local precedent for industry, but the group of business men plunged forward and gave the county hope for a new life in the 20th century.

The organization of the mill in January 1896 was heralded by "The News and Herald," Winnsboro's newspaper, as the beginning of a new era for the community. This new industry, the paper's editor believed, would prove to the country that Fairfield County was helping herself. The editor also hoped, as did his fellow citizens, that the Fairfield Cotton Mills would be only the beginning of industrial growth in the town and county.

An editorial that appeared in the paper on Jan. 6, 1897, when construction was well underway, said, "...And we hope that it will not be long before it (the mill) will be duplicated and our town become a thriving manufacturing point."

This hope was realized over the next hundred years, but not in the way envisioned. Fairfield Cotton Mills, as the only mill in the county, grew and prospered. It evolved into the industrial center of the county, employing at its heyday perhaps as many as 1,500 people. Most families living in the county were touched by the mill, and many fine families were brought to the county to work in the mill.

The "factory," as it was called in the early years, began as the hope and glory of Fairfield County. As the years passed, it did become the county's economic glory, contributed to the cultural heritage of the community and, in many ways, put Winnsboro "on the map" as hoped.

Early records of the founding of Fairfield Cotton Mills: exist only in legal documents and in microfilmed issues of "The News and Herald." Those copies of the paper that survived are a rich source for the beginning years of the mill.

A group of local men, according to the newspaper, had attempted to begin a cotton mill in the 1880s, but the project did not materialize. It was 10 years later, when Winnsboro's two banks merged their funds and local business interests, that the dream of a cotton mill in the county began to become a reality. An editorial printed on Dec. 17, 1895 said, "...feeling greatly assured we are on a working basis we will give the public a meager outline of the facts (about the beginning of a mill)." The editor reported that D.A. Tompkins of Charlotte, president of three cotton mills in North Carolina, had worked with local business men and himself "subscribed liberally to the \$65,000 needed stock." A few weeks later, on Jan 15, 1896, the document setting capital stock at \$65,000 was filed with the South Carolina Secretary of State. The actual charter for Fairfield Cotton Mills was recorded on Jan. 31, 1896.

Tompkins was listed as president, T. W. Lauderdale was vice president and J.M. Beaty was secretary-treasurer. The directors were W.C. Beaty, T.K. ^ELliott, J.Q. Davis and J. F. McMaster. All except Tompkins were from families deeply entrenched in Fairfield County.

The construction contract was awarded in March 1896 to D. Cecil of Salisbury, N.C. "The News and Herald" proudly announced that the brick would be made on the grounds, possibly from Fairfield's red clay. The editor also reported that enough of the stock subscriptions had been paid to "...guarantee success of the undertaking." 

The work went on through 1896. The paper reported in January 1897 that construction had been hampered by snow and cold weather, but the roof would soon begin and excavations were being made for "...the huge 400 horse power engine made by Lane and Bodeley Manufacturing Co., ...makers of some of the finest machinery in the country." The smoke stack

was nearly 80 feet high, and a complete system of water works was in place. A reservoir at the rear of the building was 38 feet in diameter and had a 100,000 gallon capacity.

Later in January 1897, the mill whistle was installed and sounded for the first time. The newspaper editor wrote, "It (the sound of the whistle) means so much it would take all day to tell it. It means... Fairfield County has decided to help herself ...a large increase in population...a market to be opened for our eggs, meat, vegetables, etc...real estate enhanced. It means Winnsboro is to put on new life."

The contractor's work was finished in March 1897. The work was inspected, accepted and paid for, and the keys were turned over to the owners. The engine was in place and other machinery was on order, some of it coming from England. Ten cottages for families were completed and more were under construction.

A November issue of the paper reported that the grounds around the mill were "...clean and well kept and pretty vines have been planted...The vines will cover the factory...(they) will not only look beautiful but will preserve the brick by absorbing all moisture." Machinery was still arriving and being installed, and the mill seemed sure to open early in 1898.

That hope was realized, and the mill went into production on March 1, 1898, with the first payroll dated that day. (Note: "The News and Herald" dated March 16, 1898, carried a description of the work at the mill and a synopsis of its history. A copy of this story is included in the attached documents.) Many families had arrived and moved into the new cottages. The first religious service was held in a home during the week of March 16. The Rev. J.B. Ferris led the worship and preached on "The Pearl of Great Price." That week also saw the first "bale" of cloth come off the looms. It was purchased by Quay Donovan Williford, grandfather of Winnsboro's current mayor, Quay W. McMaster.

In April, "The News and Herald" quoted the "Southern and Western Textile Excelsior:" "We received a sample of the first batch of cloth (from Fairfield Cotton Mills)...We were surprised to find the sample so unique in yarns and weave. Indeed, we class the first yard and a

quarter 'firsts';' the remaining quarter 'seconds;' as sheetings go." The reputation of Winnsboro's gem was off and running.

Finishing work and installation of the last machinery continued through 1898, and families steadily moved into the mill village. The newspaper reported that by mid-October about 300 people were occupying the new houses.

The superintendent's home was completed early in 1899. The house was described as a "comfortable two-story building ...conveniently near the cotton mill." Superintendent Shipp and his family reportedly moved in during that month, but no information about Shipp was printed. The house, on Old Camden Road and currently owned by Kenneth Goode, continued to be the superintendent's house until the property was sold about 1960.

The village school, apparently a one-room school, opened in November 1899. The first teacher was Miss Mattie Sitgreaves, who taught "a good number of students" in the first classes.

August Kohn of Columbia published "The Cotton Mills of South Carolina" in 1907. His report of Fairfield Cotton Mills spoke well for the progress of the mill over its first eight years. According to Kohn, the mill employed 150 people with an annual payroll of \$70,000, and the village population was 350. No children under 12 worked in the mill, although there were 150 in that age group living in the community. Sixty students were enrolled in the village school, with an average daily attendance of 45.

The corporation had contributed 25 percent of the cost of construction and annually donated 25 percent to the operation of the two churches in the village, Kohn reported. The corporation also paid the \$1,000 cost of constructing a school, he said. "The company is liberal to its help in anything they may undertake," Kohn wrote.

The churches mentioned were the beginning of the present Gordon Memorial Methodist Church and Stephen Greene Baptist Church.

The Minutes of the Quarterly Conference of the Winnsboro Charge of the Methodist Church for October 1898 recorded that R.H. Jennings, a member of Winnsboro's First Methodist Church, held title to a lot donated by W.B. Creight and intended to be the site of a chapel.

Construction almost immediately began on a Creight's Chapel, a mission of First Methodist Church. The site was near Dunn Street, and the congregation met there until the chapel was destroyed by a fire about 1911. The congregation met in mill property, possibly upstairs over the grocery store, until a new church was built. The roll from Creight's Chapel is included in the historical archives of Gordon Memorial.

First Baptist Church in Winnsboro helped organize a Baptist congregation, and a chapel was completed about 1899. The building was across the street from the present Number 2 Plant. That building was destroyed by a wind storm, and a second building was erected about 1908. The new chapel was across the railroad track on the site where either the mill office or lab is now.

The corporation also designated land for a village cemetery near the plant. Several people were buried there, but the graves were moved to the present Royal Pines Cemetery when the mill expanded. These original graves are unmarked and are at the rear of the current cemetery.

Fairfield Cotton Mills remained a basically locally owned corporation until 1912, when it was bought by Hampton Mills of Greenville. The deed was not recorded until 1915, and just a year later the mill again changed hands. Three Columbia business men filed for a charter and stock issue in June 1916. The proposed corporation was to be named Winnsboro Mills. This corporation lasted about one year.

The future and fortunes of Winnsboro Mills took a major step forward in 1917, when Lockwood Greene and U.S. Rubber Company bought the mill. The new corporation was chartered as a Massachusetts company doing business also in South Carolina.

George Vila, Uniroyal's chief executive officer and president of the board of directors, spoke to The Newcomen Society in New York City in December 1967, and his address was published as "The Story of Uniroyal." According to Vila, U.S. Rubber Company was organized in 1896, the same year Fairfield Cotton Mills was organized.

A brief mention of the acquisition of Winnsboro Mills is mentioned by Vila: "In 1917, U.S. Rubber acquired Winnsboro Mills in South Carolina. The company felt it was spending too much money for tire cord and textile fabrics for other products. Textiles represented the second

largest volume of raw material utilized after crude rubber." These statements appear to indicate that Winnsboro Mills was the first U.S. Rubber textile facility in the south.

U.S. Rubber and Lockwood Greene immediately expanded the mill. The clock tower over the new entrance was completed in 1917. A new building also was completed and became known as the Number 2 Mill.

The involvement of the company in the village community kept pace with the expansion and growth of the mill. A deed recorded in November 1921 transferred, for \$5, the "school lot in the Winnsboro Mills Village" to Fairfield County School District 14. Everett School was constructed on the lot.

The grantor of the deed is stated as Winnsboro Mills, a Massachusetts Corporation, but a letter written in 1981 tells a different story. The daughter of Henry C. Everett, who was treasurer of the corporation in 1921 and who signed the deed on behalf of the corporation, wrote to the principal of the school that her father, Everett, bought and donated the tract of land for the school. Everett, who went to work for Lockwood Greene in 1913, spent much of his time at the Winnsboro plant and became very interested in the people, she wrote. This personal interest led to his involvement with the school. Photographs in Everett's personal album show his laying the cornerstone and also show the school after it was completed and landscaped, his daughter wrote.

The deed disputes his daughter's story, but Everett obviously had enough impact on the community for the school to bear his name. During the first years of the school, his daughter said, he began recognizing "the best boy and the best girl" with a book which he chose. He always arranged his schedule to attend the commencement exercises, she said. Everett left Lockwood Greene in 1928, the year that the company's connection with Winnsboro Mills ended, but, his daughter wrote, he continued to be interested in the school and gave books for the Everett Award until his death in 1963.

U.S. Rubber continued the first corporation's interest in the religious life of the community. The company gave land on the Columbia Road for the Stephen Greene Baptist Church, a successor the Second Baptist Church. The deed, recorded in November 1922, gave the site of the old Second Baptist Church back to the corporation in an exchange of property and includes the

condition, "It is expressly understood and agreed and this conveyance is made and accepted upon the express condition that the said premises, nor any part thereof, shall ever be used by the grantee, its successors or assigns as a bar room or saloon."

Land on Columbia Road was deeded to Gordon Memorial Church a year later, largely through the influence of G.A. Johnstone, superintendent of Winnsboro Mills and a member of First Methodist Church. The company also donated \$4,500 toward construction of the church. The Methodist Church mission fund also loaned the church \$4,500 so that the total \$9,000 construction cost was covered.

During the 1920s U.S. Rubber developed an almost paternalistic attitude toward the employees and residents of the mill. The village was a contained community with a store, a dispensary, an ice and coal house and other necessities of life. Employees were paid with loonies, which were exchanged for the products of the stores. The company also maintained a fire department and community garage and kept the roads surfaced and the village grounds landscaped.

A community house for recreation joined the scene about 1930. The site was on Columbia Road, between the Baptist and Methodist churches. The community house had a bowling alley, gym and other recreational facilities and also housed a small library. Instructors offered arts and crafts lessons, and dances and other social functions provided entertainment for employees and their families.

The community house was also home to the Royal Cords, the company's baseball, boxing and basketball teams. Many men moved to Winnsboro to work in the mill and participate on one of the teams. Berry Rhinehardt was among these young men. He was drawn not just by the team but by its manager, baseball great Shoeless Joe Jackson.

Rhinehardt was working in Anderson County at Appleton Mill when he heard Joe Jackson was in Winnsboro. Wanting to play under Jackson, who was manager of the Royal Cords' team, Rhinehardt signed on with U.S. Rubber and came to Winnsboro in 1934. Unfortunately, Jackson stayed in Winnsboro only one year and had left by the time Rhinehardt arrived in town.