

## Chatham Manufacturing Company <sup>[1]</sup>

### Chatham Manufacturing Company

by James L. Hunt, 2006



Image of letterhead for the Chatham Manufacturing Company, ca. 1920-1930. Item H.19XX.321.17 from the collection of the North Carolina Museum of History. Used courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.

<sup>[1]</sup>Chatham Manufacturing Company, one of North Carolina's oldest textile firms, was established in the late 1860s, when [Alexander Chatham](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and Thomas L. Gwyn, owners of a store and grain mill in Elkin, began to process local wool into yarn and cloth. By the time Chatham and Gwyn formed a partnership in 1877, their Elkin Mills produced woollen blankets, flannels, jeans, and knitting yarns. After a railroad line was completed to Elkin in 1890, the operation was enlarged and reorganized. Alexander Chatham retired from the business, Gwyn sold his interest to the Chatham family, and [Hugh Gwyn Chatham](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, Alexander's son, became president. The new operation was incorporated as Chatham Manufacturing Company in 1894. Modern buildings with new machinery were built in the 1890s. The company's famous products included woollen "Chatham Blankets," which were sold in all parts of the United States.

In 1907 a second factory was built in [Winston-Salem](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. Sales offices were established in large urban centers throughout the United States. Large amounts of blankets and uniform cloth were produced for American armies in [World Wars I](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and [II](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. In 1936 Chatham Manufacturing abandoned its primary reliance on blanket sales and began to produce upholstery material for automobiles. In 1960 the company extended its upholstery business to include furniture fabrics. After World War II, a bitter fight took place over the unionization of Chatham's employees. In 1965 Chatham workers in Elkin chose to be represented by the [Textile Workers Union of America](#) <sup>[7]</sup>.

In the late 1980s, Chatham Manufacturing owned plants in Elkin, Eden, and [Charlotte](#) <sup>[8]</sup>. About two-thirds of the company's more than \$125 million in sales in 1987 derived from upholstery products, while most of the rest of the company's revenues were from the sale of bedding products, including blankets. A majority of the company's stock was still owned by descendants of Alexander Chatham. However, in 1988, [Northern Feather, Ltd.](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, a Danish textile maker, outbid family members and senior management for control of Chatham Manufacturing and purchased the blanket-maker for more than \$92 million. This ended the company's more than 110 years of North Carolina ownership. Northern Feather went bankrupt within four years, however, and Chatham Manufacturing was sold to CMI Industries of Columbia, S.C., in 1992. In 2000 Atlanta-based Interface, Inc., acquired the firm from CMI Industries, and, as Chatham, Inc., it became part of the Interface Fabrics Group, with a focus on upholstery for commercial and residential uses.

#### Reference:

"Mr. Chatham's Mill," *Rohn & Haas Reporter* 17 (November-December 1959).

#### Additional Resources:

Digital Forsyth: <http://www.digitalforsyth.org/photos/browse/business-industry-businesses-chatham-manufacturing-company> <sup>[10]</sup>

#### Image Credit:

[Chatham Manufacturing Company letterhead]. 1920-1930. Item H.19XX.321.17 from the collection of the North Carolina Museum of History.

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[N.C. Industrial Revolution \(1900-1929\)](#) <sup>[12]</sup>

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[Textile industry](#) <sup>[14]</sup>

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