

Manufacturing- Part 2: Manufacturing in the Colonial and Antebellum Eras ^[1]

Manufacturing

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Part 2: Manufacturing in the Colonial and Antebellum Eras

In [colonial](#) ^[19] North Carolina, the British mercantile system, and acts such as the [Iron Act](#) ^[20] designed to support it, discouraged significant manufacturing. The very purpose of colonies under the British Empire was to provide raw materials to Britain's factories and a market for British manufactured goods. Nonetheless, craftsmen, farmers, and planters with access to waterfalls engaged in limited manufacturing. Millers, tinsmiths, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, and other artisans produced goods for strictly local markets. Free farmers and enslaved people owned by the planting class also engaged in home manufacturing, cutting lumber, tanning leather, spinning yarn, throwing pottery, weaving cloth, and making candles, furniture, and bricks. Many small iron deposits were exploited in the colonial period. The iron was most often used locally, although some raw iron was shipped to England by the 1720s and 1730s.

The [American Revolution](#) ^[21] cut off most British imports, leaving North Carolinians primarily to their own resources. The war spurred iron production along the Deep River in [Chatham County](#) ^[22]. The state government provided subsidies to those producing textiles (using the "put-out" system of home looms rather than factories), but once the war was over it offered little encouragement. In about 1790 [Michael Schenck](#) ^[23] arrived from Pennsylvania and subsequently established a gristmill, a sawmill, a small ironworks, and an early textile mill on the south fork of the [Catawba River](#) ^[24] in [Lincoln County](#) ^[25].

The [War of 1812](#) ^[26] was the main impetus for the beginning of the [Industrial Revolution](#) ^[27] in New England, which continued rapidly after that conflict. However, North Carolina and other southern states lacked the large sums of capital available to New England investors, and most new manufacturing enterprises in the South failed in the face of postwar competition, lack of business experience, and the flow of the region's limited capital to more certain profits in agriculture. Nonetheless, interest in manufacturing grew again in the South in the late 1820s. The North Carolina General Assembly issued a report in 1828 encouraging manufacturing, and it chartered 15 [textile](#) ^[28] corporations in the late 1820s and early 1830s (though the simultaneous interest in railroads siphoned off much of the available capital after 1834).

Factories, especially labor-intensive textile mills, were employment options for ordinary people as well as investment opportunities for the wealthy. Farm families (suffering as a result of low cotton prices), widows, and orphans could find work and a certain amount of security in the mills, though often in exchange for long hours and low wages. Indeed, supplying work for poor whites was often proffered as an added rationale for the establishment of cotton mills from the [antebellum](#) ^[29] period through the end of the nineteenth century, though profits remained the primary motive for investors. Enslaved people were sometimes employed, but mill owners generally found them to be too costly, especially after increases in prices for enslaved people in the 1850s. By 1843, the [Greensboro Patriot](#) ^[30] reported that North Carolina was home to 25 textile mills capitalized at more than \$1 million. These mills had 50,000 spindles, employed 1,200 to 1,500 workers, and consumed 15,000 bales of cotton. Seven years later, North Carolina investments in all kinds of manufacture totaled \$7.5 million in nearly 2,700 mills, shops, processing plants, and factories.

Keep reading >> [Manufacturing- Part 3: Decline of Iron Production and the Effects of the Civil War](#) ^[15] 

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