

Emry, Thomas Leyburn ^[1]

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by Ralph Hardee Rives, 1986

18 Dec. 1842–8 Sept. 1910

Thomas Leyburn Emry, industrial organizer and promoter, is remembered for his role in discovering the advantages of what is now the city of Roanoke Rapids as a manufacturing site. A prosperous merchant and farmer of Weldon, he realized the value of harnessing the power of the [Roanoke River](#) ^[2] to increase the prospects of industrialization and persuaded a group of northern and Virginia investors to provide capital of \$200,000 for the construction of a dam (known as the "bulkhead") and canal between the old Roanoke Navigation Company and the river.

Born in Petersburg, Va., Emry was orphaned at the age of six. In 1859 he moved to [Halifax](#) ^[3], N.C., where he worked as a tinner for more than a year and joined the Halifax Light Infantry. Following the secession of South Carolina in December 1860, Emry, then only eighteen, went there and volunteered his services in the war effort. Attached to the Sixth Regiment of the South Carolina Volunteers, he was present at the bombardment of Fort Sumter on 12 Apr. 1861. In July he and his regiment were ordered to Virginia, reaching the battlefield of Bull Run on the afternoon of 22 July. At his request, Emry was later transferred to the Halifax Light Infantry. He served in the Seven Days' Battle around Richmond, and his gallantry at Malvern Hill elicited the commendation of Colonel B. O. Wade. As a result of wounds received in the latter battle, "Major Emry"—as he was later known—was forced to retire from active service in the [Confederate Army](#) ^[4].

After the war, Emry returned to Halifax and engaged in the mercantile business. In 1869, he moved to nearby Weldon where he took an active part in the industrial development of the town. For nearly twenty years he served as mayor of Weldon and for over fifteen years he was president of the Roanoke and Tar River Agricultural Society. In 1886 he was elected to the Halifax County Board of Commissioners; two years later he was elected to the state senate as a [Democrat](#) ^[5].

Turning his attention to development of the water power of the Roanoke River, Emry purchased a large tract of land near Great Falls (now Roanoke Rapids), about five miles west of Weldon. In 1892 he succeeded in gaining the interest of several capitalists in the possibility of utilizing the more than 50,000-horsepower river for industrial development. This resulted in the formation of the Great Falls Waterpower Manufacturing and Improvement Company (later the Roanoke Rapids Power Company), which by 1894 owned about 2,285 acres of land, of which some 774 acres—the largest tract—belonged to Emry. In April 1891 he had already assembled a crew of one hundred laborers, including convicts, to build the canal. The job was completed in early 1893.

In December 1893 John Armstrong Chaloner, a scion of the wealthy Astor family, visited Great Falls and negotiated with Emry's company to build the first industrial building in the area. The bricks for this factory were hauled by barge from Emry's brickyard up the Roanoke Navigation Canal. The United Industrial Company, a knitting mill, turned out cotton yarn; due to financial losses, it closed around 1901. But other factories followed. The Roanoke Mills Company began operations in 1897 with more than 12,000 spindles and 320 looms and employed two hundred workers. Within five years, it was producing more than seven million yards of cloth annually; later it became one of the largest producers of fancy flannels in the United States. The Rosemary Manufacturing Company, which was organized in 1900 and started production the next year, became the largest maker of cotton damask in the world. The Patterson Mill Company, which produced chambray, flannel, and gingham, was founded in 1909 and began operations in 1910, the year of Emry's death.

Emry and his wife, Emma Jane Spiers (20 May 1847–3 July 1913) were buried in the Weldon Cemetery. They had one child, Charles Ransom Emry.

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