

Steele, John Hardy ^[1]

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by James S. Brawley, 1994; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

4 Jan. 1789–3 July 1865

John Hardy Steele, designer and builder of textile machinery, was the first man to weave cotton cloth by waterpower in New Hampshire. He served his adopted state as governor for two terms and in 1833 was a member of a committee that established the first free public library supported by taxation in the United States.

He was the baseborn son of Elizabeth Taylor and John Steele, a brick mason who immigrated to [Salisbury](#) ^[2], N.C., from Ireland. (The 1790 census suggests that he was married and had several children and enslaved sixteen people.) Although John Steele was compelled by the court to pay Elizabeth Taylor for the support of their illegitimate child, John Hardy Steele was probably raised by his grandfather, Absalom Taylor, the father of Elizabeth. He acquired the rudiments of education under teacher Edmund Burton at the little school located in front of the Old English Cemetery in Salisbury but probably gained most of his taste for learning in the law office of [Archibald Henderson](#) ^[3], whose extensive library provided him with a variety of books. Apprenticed at age fourteen to the cabinetmaker's trade, he became a journeyman in Salisbury before moving to [Fayetteville](#) ^[4] when he was about twenty-two.

In Fayetteville he so impressed his employer, Nathaniel Morison, a native of Peterborough, N.H., that when Morison returned to New Hampshire, he took Steele with him. Morison used the young man's natural mechanical skill to help him in the manufacture of spinning mules and looms in Peterborough. In the new mill that Morison and others were building, Steele was put to work with Nathaniel Holmes, Jr., a competent machinist only a year or two older than Steele, to make the spinning equipment. Upon completion of the mill, Steele, whose ability as a designer and builder of textile machinery was now recognized, was placed in charge of converting an old factory from a spinning mill to one that could also weave the yarn into cloth. When this mill was put into operation in May 1818, he became the first man in New Hampshire to weave cotton cloth by waterpower.

By 1824 it was apparent that other localities in the town promised waterpower on a much greater scale. He therefore joined others in organizing the Union Manufacturing Company to develop the falls on Nubanusit Brook in West Peterborough, a place often known as Steele's Village. Steele managed this mill for the next twenty-one years, acquiring a reputation for the high quality of the sheetings, skirtings, and fine yarn produced. The mill continued to produce cloth until 1947. Steele also is remembered for the quality of the workers' houses that he erected near his mill. Copying the southern style that he remembered from his childhood, he built houses with external chimneys and fireplaces at each end. They were laid out to follow the course of the stream.

Steele was a [Democrat](#) ^[5] in a town that was a Whig stronghold, yet because of his personal popularity and integrity he was elected to the state legislature in 1829. Having little taste for politics, he declined reelection. His role in the legislature was so impressive, however, that in 1831 he was nominated for a seat in the state senate, an opportunity that he also rejected. Nevertheless, in 1840 and 1841 he was elected counsellor for the old Hillsborough district. Well known in the state, he was elected governor in 1843 without effort or desire on his part and reelected for a second term the following year. Steele now regarded his political career closed and retired to his farm near Peterborough to practice skillful and scientific husbandry. Yet in 1850 when a convention was called to revise the state constitution, he became a member and served on the judiciary committee.

Steele never forgot that he was a native of North Carolina, that he had grown up in Salisbury where he had made many friends. In 1838 he noted that "with the lapse of time, my anxiety once more to revisit my native land increased," and with a friend he took the stage to visit Salisbury. Some years after his journey, he wrote to Thomas B. Long, a Salisbury friend, in tender terms of his old hometown. Steele observed that "while life lasts and reason holds her empire over my mind, I shall never forget our meeting at your uncle's [Richard Long, who operated the Mansion Hotel in Salisbury] in 1838."

He recalled that it had been thirty years since he had left Salisbury, and "when I entered the bar room I took a hasty survey of the many faces there assembled. My heart sank within me, for when I left Salisbury, there was not a man, woman, or child that I did not know. There was a room full of men, not one of them known to me or I to them. A stranger in my native place." However, he continued, he later encountered his old friends, Dr. Alexander Long and Mr. and Mrs. John Beard, whom he had known as a boy. He attended the Presbyterian Meeting House, built in 1825, and thought that the court-house, "which when erected [1800] was the largest and most imposing building" he had ever seen, now "was not an object of admiration."

John Hardy Steele was married twice. His first wife, whom he wed on 5 Nov. 1816, was the daughter of John and Jane Moore. She died on 30 July 1831. His second wife, Nancy Moore, whom he married on 8 Jan. 1833, was the sister of his first wife. Surviving her husband for nearly five years, she died on 26 Feb. 1870.

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Subjects:

[Biographies](#) [13]

[Textile industry](#) [14]

Authors:

[Brawley, James S.](#) [15]

Origin - location:

[Cumberland County](#) [16]

[Fayetteville](#) [17]

[Rowan County](#) [18]

[Salisbury](#) [19]

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1 January 1994 | Brawley, James S.

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