

Caswell County Textile Mill History

For well over a century textile manufacturing has been important to Caswell County, North Carolina (with some notable gaps during this period). This industry began in Milton in the early 1800s, was revived in Yanceyville in the 1930s, and continues today near Yanceyville.

Milton

In 1824, a new newspaper began publication in Milton, *The Milton Gazette and Roanoke Advertiser*, and it was in this newspaper that Thomas Day and others soon were advertising their goods and services. By the mid-1820s, Milton had cabinet makers, saddlers, coach makers, blacksmiths, doctors, lawyers, dentists, and various retail outlets offering goods from sweets to tin ware. Milton eventually was to be home to an insurance company and two banks. A substantial cotton mill, Milton Mills, was established in the late 1830s that eventually produced both cotton and woolen goods. By 1850, the name apparently was changed to the Milton Cotton Factory, and it surpassed anything comparable in Danville, which eventually would become one of the leading textile centers of the South. However, the Milton Cotton Factory was offered for sale in 1855 and soon burned, not to be rebuilt.

The Civil War then changed Milton's destiny. A number of factors conspired to prevent Milton from becoming the textile giant that Danville became or the tobacco center that evolved in Durham. While Milton did have the Dan River, that waterway did not connect directly to the main sources of raw materials or to the principle markets for Milton's goods. Moreover, it was marginally navigable. An early railroad connection might have changed the course of Milton's commercial history; but the railroad running to Danville and on to Richmond was built north of the Dan River. Nor did Milton have adequate roads connecting with its markets, with the new plank road being built between Yanceyville and Danville, but not to Milton. Add to this mix the devastating impact of the Civil War, and Milton's economic fate was sealed. Even though Milton did finally obtain rail service in 1877, it was too late. Milton would continue to lose business to towns with superior infrastructure, especially railroad connections.

Much of the following with respect to the Milton Cotton Mill is from *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*, William S. Powell (1977) at 327 et seq:

The earliest Caswell County textile mill probably was a cotton mill in Milton, which is known to exist as early as 1836-1837 (and probably before). At the 1836-1837 session of the North Carolina state legislature, the Milton Manufacturing Company was incorporated by Stephen Dodson, Warner M. Lewis, William M. McGehee, Augustus Finley, John Wilson, and others of Milton and vicinity. The new corporation was formed to manufacture yarns and cloth as well as to carry on the milling business. With this in

mind the stockholders named in the charter had purchased the mills in and near the town heretofore known as the Milton Mills. They also had acquired six acres of land and were already erecting suitable buildings for the work they planned. Capital stock was to be not less than \$30,000 nor more than \$100,000.

Stockholder Thomas McGehee wrote on February 6, 1836, to Congressman Willie P. Mangum: "Pardon me for troubling you with a letter of business when you have cause to be more than troubled with politics. We have it in contemplation to erect a cotton factory at Milton and before I proceed further with the subject should like to know something more of the expence—will you please do me the favour to inquire of some of your acquaintances what would be the cost of 2000 spindles and all the fixtures necessary to set them to work—not including the water power for that I can calculate myself—I have no doubt but there Gentlemen in Congress owning property and can give me useful information will you please confur [*sic*] with them and give me their [*sic*] estimate p spindle." Warner M. Lewis became president of the Milton Manufacturing Company while A. C. Finley was agent to collect installments on the capital stock. In July, 1837, Finley called for a payment of \$13 per share, and he asked that all persons having open accounts "upon the Book of the Milton Mills" close them either by cash or bond.

In 1844 the mill was in difficulty and the stockholders were called to a meeting on May 28 "to make the necessary arrangement for the Sale of the property belonging to said Company, in the manner directed by legal council [*sic*]." J. Wilson, agent for the mill, issued the call, and the business at hand must have been attended to satisfactorily. By 1846 the mill was described as producing "kerseys" and "sattinetts." Both of these were made of wool and the mill had either switched from cotton to wool or more likely was producing both. The agricultural census at the end of the decade indicated that sheep in considerable numbers were being raised in the county.

W. W. Holden, editor of the North Carolina Standard published in Raleigh, visited Milton in the spring of 1847 and was very much impressed by the cotton mill. It was the first one he had ever seen and he paid a good deal of attention to it. He noted that it had been begun a few years previously by a company of gentlemen whose expectations in the business were not met and that they had sold it. It was purchased by Messrs. Barrett, Newsom, and Holden and operated with considerable success. "We saw the Cotton in various stages of preparation," the visitor wrote, "from the rough article down to the yarn and the cloth; and what struck us more than anything else, in connection with the operations of the Factory, was the precision and neatness with which so much power is divided and applied to the production of so many different results. The entire machinery, in fact, seemed to have a mind of its own, and to carry forward its operations without reference to the attention or the control of man. This Factory is large and in excellent order; and we should think it ought to be highly profitable, so long as it is properly managed and conducted." The factory employed about sixty workers.

The products of the factory were the pride of the town in 1850. The *Milton Chronicle* on May 16 boasted that “the nearest Factory to Danville is the one in Milton—unsurpassed in the South for its splendor and magnificent operations, and we do not doubt but that this Factory sells more cotton yarns in 2 weeks than Danville sells in a whole year: Because here the article is manufactured—here it is not only sold at retail but wholesale—hundreds of bales re almost daily ordered—from Petersburg, Farmville, Lynchburg”

It was this mill to which George N. Thompson referred in his diary entry of January 6, 1851: “learned that the firm of Barret Newsom & Holden had dissolved copartnership—Barret & N. purchasing the Factory and Holden the Store. They Valued the Factory at \$30,000”

The Milton Cotton Factory was advertised for sale in the December 15, 1855, issue of the *Raleigh Register*. The property consisted of a four-story brick building, 46 by 80, covered with a zinc roof, and containing nearly 2,000 spindles, 14 cards, two drawing frames, and twenty looms. The power for operating the factory came from two water wheels and a steam engine. A part of the machinery was described as being quite new while the remainder was in good condition. Included with the factory were fifteen “comfortable dwelling houses, with lots and gardens attached to each, embracing about 16 or 17 acres of land in all.” It was soon afterwards that the factory burned and it was not rebuilt. The coming of the Civil War changed the course of events totally.

The Milton Cotton Factory in 1850 was described as belonging to Barrett, Neuson, and Holden with a capital investment of \$30,000. Water and steam power was used in the factory which employed eighteen men and fifty women, among whom may have been Robert Singleton and his wife Jane, both natives of Ireland and described in the census as weavers in Milton. The factory produced 146,200 bales of cotton valued at \$26,300 and ninety thousand yards of cloth valued at \$5,850.¹

Branson’s 1890 North Carolina Business Directory listed no textile mills in Caswell County.

Yanceyville Silk Factory

Yanceyville did not have a true textile industry until the late 1930s. However, it apparently did have a silk factory many decades earlier.

In the 1840s and 1850s there was considerable interest in the production of silk in the South. Nurserymen advertised mulberry trees² for sale and many people, full of hope and anticipation of a profitable business, planted groves of mulberry trees. As of 1977, a few ancient gnarled trees still survived, but no record exists indicating there was any successful production of silk in Caswell County. However, the Yanceyville Silk Growing

¹ *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*, William S. Powell (1977) at 116-117.

² Silk worms ate the mulberry tree leaves.

and manufacturing Company was in existence in 1840, and records refer to a Silk Factory building in Yanceyville.³

In 1839, at a cost of slightly over \$500, two tracts of land were purchased in Yanceyville by Paul A. Haralson and John A. Graves for the Yanceyville Silk Growing and Manufacturing Company. References suggest that a mill was built, but whether it actually produced any cloth is not stated. The mill's brick building survived a long time, however. It was located at what became the fair grounds and was used as the "Floral Hall" at the fair. This was a time when there was widespread interest in silk production in the state and countless mulberry trees were planted to feed silkworms. Occasionally [in 1977] a broken and gnarled tree may still be seen as a reminder of an ambitious project.

In the mid-1800s *The Rubicon* newspaper was published in Yanceyville by Edward A. Howard. One edition contained: "May 16, 1840, annual meeting of stockholders of Yanceyville Silk Growing and Manufacturing Co., Daniel L. McAlpin, Secretary."

Note the reference to the silk factory in an 1843 letter from Paul Haralson to his wife Leannah Graves Haralson. Paul Haralson was in Yanceyville, writing to his wife in Georgia:

"Two weeks ago John Kerr, Wm. Vallentine Daphny & Capt. Graves were baptized in the pool at the silk factory. The pool has been fitted up as a baptistery & is now a most convenient and excellent place. - I worked on it several days with all the hands I could get & fixed it nicely. - The night after Kerr was baptized he was called upon to pray in the Baptist Church & he arose at his seat and made one of the most eloquent & powerful exhortations that I ever heard or ever expect again to hear."⁴

A silk-production craze apparently swept through parts of the United States in the 1830s:

"A national silk convention was held at Baltimore in December, 1838; a silk convention in New Jersey, February, 1839; in New York, at Albany, February, 1839; in Connecticut, April, 1839; and there were many other gatherings of the kind. The list of stock companies formed for raising and manufacturing silk at this time is very long; their lives were very short. Many of them were slenderly equipped, in both knowledge and resources. Seven are named in Massachusetts, six in Pennsylvania, nearly as many in neighboring states, and a few at the west. A United States Silk Society was organized at the national convention. The number of private individuals engaged in silk raising cannot be estimated. In Burlington, New Jersey, says a writer of the day, "you can scarcely go into a house but you find the inmates engaged in feeding worms.""

Source: *Report on the silk manufacturing industry of the United States*, William Cornelius Wyckoff (1881).

³ *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*, William S. Powell (1977) at 111-112.

⁴ 5 February 1843 Letter from Paul Haralson to his wife Leannah Graves Haralson.

Yanceyville

The Rotary Club of Yanceyville took the initiative to begin the industrialization of Caswell County. In 1938, when the club was just in its second year, an industrial committee was appointed under the chairmanship of John O. Gunn, and it reported some specific plans to the club. The result was the organization of the Caswell Development Company with Gunn, T. E. Steed, and S. A. Malloy as incorporators. When the company was organized C. C. Cole became president while T. E. Steed and Hubert H. Page were vice president and secretary-treasurer, respectively. An intensive campaign was begun to raise funds to construct an industrial building, and with the full cooperation of the Rotary Club and other citizens in the county a substantial sum of money was raised to begin construction. Additional money was borrowed and construction was completed very early in 1939 so that the Caswell Knitting Mill opened in late February. A. Glenn Holt of Burlington (Company Shops) had recommended this particular type of industry and he became the operator of the mill, which gave employment to around 150 people. This was a significant beginning and it was symbolic of the future.



For many decades Carl Goerch published *The State: A Weekly Survey of North Carolina*, a very popular magazine. In December 1938 he visited Caswell County (Milton, Yanceyville, and Prospect Hill). Following is what Dr. Houston L. Gwynn (1896-1963) had to say about Yanceyville:

"Yes, sir," says Dr. Gwyn, who is just fixing to go bird hunting, "this old town is moving right along. Look over there, in front of the courthouse: that's our Community Christmas tree. First public Christmas tree ever to have been put up in Caswell County. On Christmas Eve we're going to have a big sing, with choirs in their vestments, and we're going to give away a lot of presents. "Look over there. That's the 'Sportsman' and it's just as fine a pool hall as you've got in Raleigh. And over there, on that other corner, is our moving picture show. Then back over in that direction--you can't see it from here--is where they're building the new hosiery mill. That's going to be another big asset in the progress of our town. There have been a number of new homes built recently and I really believe that we've moved ahead faster in the last two years than we did in ten years before then."



In 1957 through local effort a new hosiery mill was established and within a year it was employing twenty people, three shifts a day, and producing 1,200 dozen children's anklets each week. The Yanceyville [Caswell] Knitting Mills doubled its floor space in 1959 to permit the installation of machines to manufacture short-length hosiery. The Cole-Gunn Hosiery Mill at the same time completed an addition to its

building for the installation of fifty new seamless hosiery machines. That same summer the Caswell Seamless Hosiery Mill began operation with thirty-five machines.



In 1961 Hanover Mill of New York began installing equipment in the building formerly occupied by the Caswell Knitting Mill by way of preparation for manufacturing tricot knitted fabrics. It expected to employ between forty and fifty people. Business flourished for the Hanover Mills and by late 1962 expansion plans were being made. Additional space and new machinery, costing around a million dollars, made possible the employment of around eighty-five persons. When the six-story addition was completed in 1964 the Royal Hosiery Mill in Yanceyville also installed new equipment. The Royal Hosiery Mill was the successor to the Cole-Gunn Hosiery Mill.



The Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc., occupying the facilities of the former Caswell Seamless Hosiery Mill in Yanceyville, began an expansion program in 1968 to double both its manufacturing space and the number of employees. Royal produced special hosiery for a Siler City firm that sold directly to Sears and Roebuck. After about seven years Royal closed, however, because the style in hosiery changed to "pantyhose" which it was not equipped to produce.

Source: *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*, William S. Powell (1977) at 304-306.

Chronology

1836-1837

Milton Manufacturing Company incorporated.

1839

Yanceyville Silk Growing and Manufacturing Company established.

1850

Milton Cotton Factory in operation.

c.1855

Milton Cotton Factory burned.

1939

Caswell Knitting Mill opened on Wall Street in Yanceyville, North Carolina. The first operator was A. Glenn Holt of the Burlington, North Carolina, Holt textile family. This mill came about through the efforts of the Caswell Development Company and employed around 150 people. Clyde Caviness Cole was President of the Caswell Development Company, Thomas Edward Steed Vice-President, and Hubert Hodnett Page Secretary-Treasurer. William Richard (Dick) Grey, Jr. was assistant manager (under Glen Holt) and eventually became manager. When this occurred is unknown, but Dick Grey was the manager when he left for the Navy in 1942. After his World War II service, Dick Grey returned to manage the Caswell Knitting Mill and held that position until moving to Asheboro, North Carolina, in 1949. Robert Lee Brooks was Assistant Superintendent in 1939. Bud Saunders was Superintendent at the time. In 1941, Brooks became Superintendent. Whether this is the same as mill manager (the head person) is unknown. Later the Caswell Development Company sold stock and built the Atwater Hosiery Mill.

1948

Atwater Hosiery Mill was established through the sale of stock by the Caswell Development Company and operated by Roy Vincent Atwater and William Bennett Atwater. Financing was provided by T. E. Steed. The debt purportedly was repaid in three years. Presumably the building dates from 1948. Was part of the financing to construct the building? The product was ladies' hosiery (seam up the back). Were Roy and Bill the sole owners at the time? Was this a corporation or a partnership between the brothers?

1950's

Calvin Matkins began a small knitting operation on the County Home Road. Was it named the Yanceyville Knitting Mills? This business eventually was purchased by Roy Vincent Atwater. The building remains today as part of Royal Textile Mills, Inc./Duke Athletic Products.

1954-55

Atwater Hosiery Mill was sold to Clyde Caviness Cole, Johnny Oliver Gunn, William Bennett Atwater, and David Johnson. The name was changed to Cole-Gunn Hosiery Mills, Inc.

1958

Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc. was incorporated in May.

Cole-Gunn Hosiery Mills, Inc. was purchased by Roy Vincent Atwater and William Bennett Atwater. Name changed to Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc. It appears that William Bennett Atwater was part of the ownership from 1948-1974. Shifted production to ladies' seamless hosiery. Presumably Cole-Gunn Hosiery Mills, Inc. was purchased by Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc.

1959

Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc. completed an addition to its main building for the installation of fifty new seamless hosiery machines.

1961

Hanover Mills began installing equipment in the old Caswell Knitting Mill building. The product was tricot knitted fabrics.

1962

Hanover Mills expands.

1964

Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc. installed new equipment. Major \$1 million expansion.

1972

The annual financial statement for the year ending 1 April 1972 indicates the name of the company as Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc. Directors of the corporation were: Roy Vincent Atwater; William Bennett Atwater; John O. Gunn; Robert R. Blackwell; and Jerry Lea Cole.

1974

Production of ladies' hosiery ceased at Royal Hosiery Mills, Inc. However, the mill continued to sew "garters" for the ever popular Thigh-Hi stockings for ladies. These garters went exclusively to Kellwood Co., which was owned by Sears and constituted its hosiery division.

1975

Duke Athletic Products began operation initially producing athletic supporters and continues in business today. The following is from its website:

“At DUKE and LadyDUKE we have been providing top quality products and exceptional service to our institutional and retail customers since 1975. The secret of our success is our high standards of quality and personal service, which provides our reputation as one of the leading producers of athletic apparel. We make our products from the best materials available with durability and comfort in mind—so they won’t come apart when you need them most! Celebrate over 30 years of quality and value with DUKE and LadyDUKE. Royal Textile Mills, Inc. has endeavored to ensure accuracy of all information contained herein. We cannot, however, be responsible for errors or omissions. Prices subject to change without notice.”⁵

⁵ Note the following patents attributable to Royal Textile Mills, Inc.: Butler Carl D; Royal Textile Mills, Inc; United States 4120052 - Cushioned protector (1978-10-17); Atwater William D; Atwater Mark V; Royal Textile Mills, Inc; United States 5131100 - Athletic compression shorts (1992-07-21); Atwater W David; Royal Textile Mills, Inc; United States 4796303 - Knee protector pad (1989-01-10); Atwater Mark V; Atwater W David; Royal Textile Mills, Inc; United States 4217905 - Athletic brassiere (1980-08-19); Atwater Mark V; Atwater William D; Edwards Charles R; Royal Textile Mills, Inc; United States 7296307 - Athletic protector convertible from hard-cup to soft-cup configuration (2007-11-20); and Atwater William David; Atwater Mark V; Royal Textile Mills Inc; Canada CA 2065212 - Athletic compression shorts/Culotte de sport (1997-03-04).

19__ Hanover Mills shut down.

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This view of Yanceyville may contain the only know image of the Yanceyville Silk Factory building, but this is only speculation and has in no way be confirmed. Note the building with multiple chimneys to the right of the Caswell County Courthouse. The appearance of the land surrounding the courthouse suggests that this image was captured will before 1900. Whether the view is from the east or west, no improved roads are visible. The photograph came from the estate of Mary Kerr Motz (1917-2005), whose ancestors had been in Caswell County since the 1700s.

This image also may be viewed only as part of the Caswell County Photograph Collection. There the buildings a much clearer: