

Washstands, Sideboards, and Parlor Suites

BY ROBERT LACY

Making Furniture and Progress in North Carolina's Piedmont

Furniture making has a long tradition in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Many years before High Point, Drexel, and Thomasville became famous for furniture manufacturing, craftsmen in the area provided the overwhelmingly rural populace with handmade chairs, tables, and beds.

In the 1800s, exceptional cabinet-makers in the Moravian settlement of Salem (now Winston-Salem) and in Quaker communities in Randolph and Rowan counties worked wonders with wood, creating furniture pieces that are collectors' items today. And Thomas Day, a free African-American in antebellum Milton, N.C., had both the artistic talent to design fine furniture and the business acumen to run the largest furniture-making operation in North Carolina in the 1850s.

With such precedents, it's not surprising that a modern, mechanized furniture manufacturing industry would take root in North Carolina at the turn of the 20th century. There were huge timber operations in the state. Plenty of oak, poplar, maple, and other trees suitable for furniture making remained to be harvested. There were also plenty of men available to work in furniture factories, an attractive alternative to the drudgery of farm work during the era.

Early Hickory factory workers take a break to pose in 1901.



What was remarkable was just how quickly the furniture-manufacturing industry in Piedmont North Carolina would grow in the early decades of the 20th century. By 1929, North Carolina was among the top-five states in the nation in the production of wooden household furniture. Small towns in the region were becoming as famous for furniture as the more industrialized cities like Chicago, Cincinnati, and Grand Rapids, Mich. A Southern furniture industry had emerged in the Piedmont region, with High Point as its center.

During its formative years, from 1880 to 1930, furniture manufacturing played a key role in the industrialization of North Carolina. Along with the textiles and tobacco industries, the furniture industry would demonstrate that Southern manufacturers could attract capital and develop the management and labor skills necessary to grow and prosper.

While agriculture would continue to dominate North Carolina's economy for years to come, the state would benefit greatly from the economic diversification that manufacturing offered. As the most industrialized state in the South, North Carolina was considered a model for other Southern states to follow in promoting industry and economic development.

The Early Years

Manufacturing meant progress in North Carolina in the late 19th century. In the decades following Reconstruction, civic and business leaders, in almost frenzied tones, touted the advantages of manufacturing in creating wealth and prosperity.

Lacking the resources and capital to emulate many of the successful manufacturing operations in Northern states, North Carolina manufacturers looked to what natural resources they had and added value where they could.

What they had in abundance — and what they knew — was cotton, tobacco, and timber. They merged agriculture with light industry, and by 1880 the industrial revolution was under way in earnest in North Carolina. Over time, three industries — textiles, tobacco processing, and furniture manufacturing — would become symbols of progress not only in North Carolina, but also in the entire South.

Large-scale, mechanized furniture operations first emerged in the Piedmont region in the 1880s. Among the earliest was the White Furniture Company in Mebane, organized by brothers David and William White in 1881. With a little cash and a loan from a family friend, they began producing oak dining room tables. Known for years as the South's oldest maker of fine furniture, White Furniture would remain in Mebane for more than 100 years.

Another early enterprise was the High Point Furniture Manufacturing Company in High Point. It was founded in 1889 by Ernest A. Snow, a lumber salesman, and local merchants John Tate and Thomas Wrenn. The High Point factory was small, amounting to no more than a two-story shed according to one account, and it produced mainly wooden beds and sideboards. But it grew quickly: Total sales were \$75,000 the first year and twice that the second.

In nearby Thomasville, manufacturers were gaining a reputation for making good chairs. D. S. Westmoreland operated a factory there in the 1880s, and H. E. Clement founded the Thomasville Manufacturing Company in 1895. A Thomasville factory could turn out as many as 1,500 chairs a day in the early 1900s. A huge wooden chair, some 13 feet tall, would be erected on the main street in Thomasville in 1922, a monument to its heritage as the "chair town of the South."

In the early years, the principal product was simple oak furniture, sold primarily in Southern markets at inexpensive prices. Bernhardt's furniture company in Lenoir sold thousands of oak chests and tables that cost less than \$4 each around the turn of the century.

Off the Farm

"Nobody could work a man harder or longer in a mill than he worked on the farm or his children either. Nobody would pay him less than he made there."

— Jonathan Daniels

Tar Heels: A Portrait of North Carolina, 1947

As industrialization began to take hold in Piedmont North Carolina in the closing decades of the 19th century, an increasing number of men, women and children went to work in textile mills, tobacco plants, or furniture factories. Many of them were just off the farm, attracted by a steady paycheck and the hope of a better life. For most, life at a North Carolina factory or mill would turn out to be a vast improvement over life on the farm.

It was, without a doubt, hard work in the new industries in the region. Workers there put in long hours, often 70 or more hours per week. And they didn't make much — as little as 40 to 50 cents per day in the 1890s for textile workers and sometimes paid in scrip, redeemable only at company stores.

But farming during the era seldom paid at all. Even in good years, North Carolina farmers barely made ends meet. In bad years, when crops failed or crop prices were low, they lost money. For most farmers, the last few decades of the 19th century were an interminable stretch of bad years.

Crop prices generally declined in the late 19th century as the farm sector languished in a protracted depression.

Cotton, the indispensable raw material for the cotton textile industry, fell sharply in price — from 15 cents per pound in the early 1870s to 6 cents per pound in the latter half of the 1890s. Most farmers lost money growing cotton, even as mill owners profited and the cotton textile industry flourished. Usually in debt, with farm land mortgaged, many North Carolina farmers lost their farms as well.

Of course, many of North Carolina's farmers never had their own land to lose in the first place. In 1880, more than a third of the state's farms were operated by tenants, who worked someone else's land and paid the landowner when the crops came in. Some paid in cash while others were sharecroppers who agreed to share the harvest with landowners. The vast majority of tenant farmers lived impoverished lives; many suffered physical maladies from improper diets and poor health care.

With miserable conditions in the agricultural sector, news of a mill or factory opening in the region was cause for celebration. Tenant farmers in particular flocked to the expanding industries in the state. Men, women, and even children found employment there. (About a quarter of textile mill workers in 1900 were children.) While the work was drudgery and the factory floor often hot and noisy, they stayed with it.

Once they left, few mill or factory workers ever returned to full-time farming.

— ROBERT LACY

A solid oak bedroom suite, consisting of a bed, dresser, and washstand, was available from White Furniture for \$9. A manufacturer in what is now Drexel sold a three-piece suite, with an oak bureau, washstand, and bed, for \$14.50 wholesale.

It was sturdy, inexpensive furniture intended for a largely rural population with modest means. "People [in the state] were dirt-poor," notes Patricia Marshall, curator of furnishings and decorative arts at the North Carolina

Museum of History in Raleigh. "They were just getting back on their feet in the years after Reconstruction." Even if North Carolina manufacturers could have produced higher-quality furniture in the early years of the industry, most of the people in the state could not have afforded it.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 44 furniture-manufacturing establishments in North Carolina in 1900, producing \$1.5 million worth of furniture. Although still

small compared to the textiles, tobacco, and lumber industries in the state, the furniture industry was firmly established at the turn of the century and growing fast.

Growth: 1900 to 1929

North Carolina's furniture industry would realize remarkable success in the early decades of the 20th century. The value of furniture manufactured in the state rose from \$1.5 million in 1900 to \$56.7 million in 1929, the highest in the South and sixth among states nationwide. North Carolina manufacturers excelled in the pro-

duction of household furniture; they ranked first in wooden dining room and bedroom furniture and second in wooden kitchen furniture by that time.

What accounted for their success? Proximity to suitable timber certainly helped. Oak, yellow poplar, maple, chestnut, and other hardwoods well-suited for furniture grew in abundance in North Carolina and nearby states. Oak, still the most widely used wood for furniture in the South in the early 1900s, came primarily from North Carolina and eastern Tennessee.

Proximity to timber helped hold

raw material prices down; in 1929, the average cost of lumber used for making furniture was \$40.78 per 1,000 feet in North Carolina. In contrast, Illinois manufacturers paid \$72.68 while those in New York paid \$71.77. With materials costs accounting for about 45 percent of the total costs of manufacturing medium-quality furniture, Piedmont furniture manufacturers had secured a substantial cost advantage over Northern and Midwestern manufacturers.

North Carolina furniture manufacturers also paid lower wages than manufacturers in the North. The aver-

Master Cabinetmakers in the 19th Century: Fine Furniture from the Carolina Backcountry

Johann Belo. Mordica Collins. John Swisegood. Thomas Day. Unfamiliar names to most of us, but they were all master cabinetmakers in the 1800s. In small shops in the backcountry of North Carolina, they produced the finest furniture around.

Many of the most accomplished furniture makers in the region hailed from the Moravian community of Salem. The Moravians were a religious group that settled in North Carolina in the 1750s. Largely of German descent, they built furniture notable for solidity, simplicity of design, and careful construction. The Moravians believed that wood-working, pottery making, and metal crafting, like other daily routines, were ways of serving God; and many members of the Salem community became expert cabinetmakers, potters, and metalworkers in the 19th century.

"The Moravians were fine craftsmen in the backwoods," notes Patricia Marshall of the North Carolina Museum of History. "They had a unique style. There was also some sophistication to their work, with their use of wood inlays."

Cabinetmakers were a vital part of the Moravian community because they could build household necessities that would otherwise have to be freighted in over land to the somewhat isolated town of Salem. In addition to such items as chairs, tables, beds, chests of drawers, and desks, they constructed doors and window sashes for houses. Johann Belo, who operated a shop in Salem from 1806 to 1827, was but one of many Moravian cabinetmakers of the period.

About 20 miles to the south of Salem, in the Abbotts Creek area of what is currently Davidson County, N.C., another group of master craftsmen plied their trade. The most notable of these was John Swisegood. He learned cabinetmaking and joinery while apprenticed

to master craftsman Mordica Collins. By 1820, he was operating his own shop as a master cabinetmaker. He made desks, chests, cupboards, and chests of drawers, some of which were signed and thus can be easily attributed. A Swisegood piece can bring thousands of dollars at auction today.

In the small town of Milton, near the Virginia border, lived Thomas Day, one of the most impressive of North Carolina's 19th century cabinetmakers. Born in Dinwiddie County, Va., in 1801, he was a free

African-American who moved to Milton in the 1820s. Along with bureaus, tables, chairs, and beds, he built household fixtures such as fireplace mantles and stair railings.

Thomas Day had a reputation for innovative design, careful construction, and use of mahogany veneers. "He came up with designs of his own as well as using pattern books and styles of the period," says Marshall. "Other furniture makers gravitated to what he was doing and copied him."

Families in many of the plantation homes in the region, as well as in the governor's mansion in Raleigh, had furniture or millwork made by Day's shop.

By 1850, Day's furniture-making business was the largest in North Carolina. His shop employed free black, white, and slave laborers. He was one of only a handful of North Carolina furniture makers using steam-powered tools in 1850 and thus one of the earliest to begin the transition to a fully industrial production process.

Laurel Sneed, executive director of the Thomas Day Education Project, notes that Day is considered a major figure of the antebellum era. "He was quite active as an entrepreneur and left behind amazing furniture and interior woodwork. He certainly challenges stereotypes about African-Americans of the period." — ROBERT LACY

THOMAS DAY,
CABINET MAKER,
RETURNS his thanks for the patronage
he has received, and wishes to inform
his friends and the public that he has on
hand, and intends keeping, a handsome supply of
Mahogany, Walnut and Stained
FURNITURE,
the most fashionable and common BED
STEADS, &c. which he would be glad to sell
very low. All orders in his line, in Repair-
ing, Varnishing, &c. will be thankfully re-
ceived and punctuallo attended to.
Jan. 17.

Advertisement from the March 1, 1827
issue of The Milton Gazette.

age wage in the furniture-manufacturing industry in North Carolina in 1929 was 33 cents per hour. In major furniture-producing states in the North, wages were generally much higher: 57 cents per hour in New York, 56 cents per hour in Michigan, and 47 cents per hour in Pennsylvania.

In addition to receiving lower wages than their counterparts in Northern states, North Carolina furniture workers tended to work longer hours. Piedmont furniture workers in the 1920s typically worked 50 to 55 hours per week. A 40-hour workweek wouldn't become standard until the 1930s.

But compared to farming, the alternative for most North Carolina factory workers, a furniture factory job was a step up. Most North Carolina farmers lived hand to mouth on small farms of fewer than 100 acres. Many farmers during the period didn't even own the land they farmed; about 45 percent of North Carolina farms in 1925 were operated by tenants. Just about any job at a furniture factory was better than a hard scabbled life on the farm.

The existence of a grid of railroad tracks that provided reliable freight transportation services in the Piedmont region also spurred the industry's growth. The rail system enabled timber to be hauled to factories and bulky furniture to be transported throughout the region at reasonable costs. There were direct routes to markets in the Northeast and South, as well as to a major seaport at Norfolk, Va., where furniture could be shipped abroad. High Point, Hickory, Thomasville, Lenoir, and Morganton were among the North Carolina towns with furniture factories built along the railroad tracks.

Lower costs for labor and raw mate-

rials and easy access to markets allowed North Carolina manufacturers to steadily gain market share from competitors in the North and Midwest. In addition, they benefited from an expanding market for furniture. Rising incomes, a growing middle class, and a home-building boom after World War I helped fuel prosperity in the North Carolina furniture industry in the 1920s. Output from North Carolina factories nearly doubled during the decade. New factories were built and improved production methods implemented, in some cases emulating mass-production techniques used in the automobile industry.

By 1929, more than 16,000 people were at work making furniture in North Carolina, up from fewer than 2,000 in 1900. Value added in the furniture industry in 1929 amounted to \$27 million, well below that of the tobacco or textiles industries, but high enough to place furniture among the leading manufacturing industries in the state.

Economic Progress

In 1930, only a generation removed from the nascent industry of the turn of the century, North Carolina furniture manufacturers had every right to be proud of what had been accomplished. Their factories produced more furniture than those in any other state in the South, and they had proven to be worthy rivals to furniture makers in the North and Midwest. And they would continue to grow and prosper. While the Great Depression caused furniture demand to drop precipitously in the early 1930s — retail furniture sales in the nation declined by 63 percent between 1929 and 1933 — population growth and

North Carolina Factory-Produced Furniture (1890 and 1900)

	1890	1900
Establishments	6	44
Wage Earners	152	1,759
Value of Product	\$159,000	\$1,547,305
Capital	\$126,350	\$1,023,374

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 1900

Wood Used in Furniture Manufacturing (1909 to 1913)

	Percentage
Oak	64.0
Gum (red, tupelo, and black)	12.2
Yellow poplar	10.6
Southern yellow pine	4.4
Chestnut	2.6
Maple	1.4
All other woods	4.8

SOURCE: C.F. Korstian. *The Economic Development of the Furniture Industry of the South and Its Future Dependence Upon Forestry*. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development, 1926

rising incomes in the 1940s and afterward fostered long-term growth in the industry.

Fifty-five hour workweeks and 33 cents per hour earnings may not sound like much progress today. But North Carolina's furniture industry helped lead the way in the industrial development of the South in the early decades of the 20th century. The Rip Van Winkle state, as it was sometimes called in the 1800s for its backwardness and seeming indifference to social and educational reforms, was at the forefront of the economic progress that would eventually bring higher standards of living to the South. **RF**

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