Bell Factory and the Mill Industry in Madison County

Sara Curtis
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By Sara Curtis

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The Bell Factory in Madison County imparted a significant historical legacy in local and state history as the earliest important textile mill in Madison County and Alabama. It stood ten miles northeast of Huntsville on the Flint River, a short distance south of Winchester Road on Bell Factory Road. After the Bell factory’s incorporation in 1832 it operated until about 1885 except for a brief period during the Civil War.

Raw cotton was plentiful in the pioneer days of Madison County and for years afterward. Converting the ginned cotton into marketable merchandise was the next step. E. C. Betts, in his Early History of Huntsville, 1916, found that: “The most noteworthy single industrial development of the times was the ‘Bell Factory.’” This was the first plant which converted the
raw cotton product into yarn and cloth for large scale commercial purposes. *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* of 18 Sep 1849 proclaimed “The first samples of Southern manufacture ever sent, it was believed, to the New Orleans market, consisted of cottonades, gingham, osnaburgs, drillings, sail duck, bed ticking, striped shirting, etc., from the ‘Bell factory,’ Huntsville, Alabama, and were available to dry goods merchants at Messrs. Fearn, Donegan & Co.”


In the early 1800s Madison County’s territorial land sales, rich soil for abundant cotton production, rivers for water power and transportation, and businessmen to establish gins and mills, resulted in the manufacture of the textile. In 1808, Madison County was created by the governor of the Mississippi territory who named it after President James Madison (1751-1836). To raise money for its development, the U.S. government almost immediately ordered land sales in the northern part of Alabama Territory. In 1811 the land office was moved from Nashville to Huntsville, attracting many people from the eastern states to buy land in the Tennessee Valley. Hunt’s Spring and the surrounding acreage were bought at a price of $23 an acre by the influential Georgian capitalist LeRoy Pope. As a result of his efforts, the settlement was selected as County seat and its name changed to Twickenham - after the English town
his forefathers came from. But, in 1811 the territorial legislature decided to revert to the old name Huntsville.


During the early 1800s in Huntsville, milling establishments began, prior to the Bell Factory. The Barren Forks of the Flint River provided water power for the development of initial milling operations. Historically, the cotton milling industry was a home based, cottage industry with family members as workers. The mills progressed from small scale mass production operations to large scale factories.

The first operating mill was “In 1809, a full decade before Alabama would become a state and when Textile industry in New England was still in its infancy, a Tennessee contractor named Charles Cabaniss, with the help of Engineer C.P. Poole, began designing the first spinning Mill in the South. The spot chosen for his Mill was the Barren Fork of the Flint River, twelve miles North east of Huntsville (then known as Twickenham). In this area there where two streams of water converging to became the single, continuous flow of the river known as Three Forks. It was an excellent site to harness the water for power. site. The Cabaniss Mill was completed in 1815. There are few accurate records about this mill factory; most have been pieced together


From 1818 Cotton was an important component of the booming economy as Huntsville evolved into a frontier metropolis - a flourishing cultural, commercial, and social center of "King Cotton's" realm. One thousand pounds of cotton per acre could be consistently harvested by the farmers of Madison County. The high cotton price was the financial backbone of the prospering city. The streets of Huntsville were dotted with the small offices of cotton merchants, lawyers, and bankers, most of which were located on the west side of the square facing the courthouse. This area became known as "Cotton Row". Farmers brought cotton by wagon and cart to these merchants to be classified for staple and grade, and would then sell to the highest bidder. The town's economy was so dependent on cotton that the entire west side of the square was reserved for cotton wagons and carts.

The wealthy cotton planters started building distinctive plantation style houses. A weekly paper provided information, a bank the necessary credits for the flourishing plantations and farms. It was vital for the town's economic survival to ship its cotton down the Tennessee River to New Orleans. Therefore, in 1831, the Indian Creek Canal was opened from Hunt's Spring to Triana on the Tennessee River. Transportation over
land was possible along the Meridian Road, which connects the city to Ditto Landing, a point on the river where John Ditto had established a trading post and ferry service in 1802.


*Our Alabama Bicentennial celebration of 2017-2019* commigrates the year 1819 as the year when Alabama progressed from territorial status to statehood as the 22nd state of the Union. Huntsville was chosen as the temporary capital where Alabama's first constitution was drafted, its first governor inaugurated, and its first legislature convened. Similar to our state’s progression from territory to state, in 1819 the milling industry grew and evolved in Madison County.

On September 4, 1819 Horatio Jones formed a cotton spinning factory on the Flint River and began producing slave clothing. By 1823, the company had dissolved due to financial problems. Jones, however, refused to give up and soon formed a new endeavor. On October 21, he announced his plan, once again to spin cotton and coarse shirting, and moved the factory downstream. That Mill also became unsuccessful, and later that year, Jones sold the company to a North Carolinian, William Houghton (Houghton’s Mill).
In 1829, Houghton chartered the mill to a group of individuals, including William Patton, and James D. Donegan. In December 1832, the mill renamed the Bell factory was incorporated by an Act of the Alabama Legislature General Assembly for $100,000. But the property was not purchased until two years later. On April 3, 1834, when Patton, Donagen and Company gave the sum of $20,000 for the mill and one hundred acres of land to some of the other men from the original charter. It was operated for the most part by Patton, Donegan and Company with C.P, Cabaniss, the son of Charles Cabaniss, later becoming affiliated. William Tabor was one of the earliest superintendents of the factory. W.H. Echols was secretary/treasurer and in the factory’s later years served as superintendent. In addition to the three-story Mill, a store and warehouse were maintained in Huntsville on the Square.


The Bell Factory was the first spinning and weaving factory in Alabama. The mill building containing the machinery had three and a half stories, plus a water wheel room under the ground floor. The power used in the operation of the three thousand spindles and one hundred looms was furnished by damming the water of the Flint River and forcing it over a wheel rimmed with buckets. A shaft connected to the wheel was geared to turn the machinery inside the mill. The mill would not
become steam powered until 1868; therefore, in lieu of a steam whistle, the slave laborers were called to work by the ringing of the large Bell, hence the name. (Bell Factory).


The factory workers lived in thirty-eight cabins organized by household inside the factory compound, surrounded by a wall. The wall had a night watch and was closed to outsiders. While workers were confined, they were usually not mistreated, as their hard work and loyalty were essential to the profitability of the business. Some of the larger mills employed northern born supervisors to train and guide their workers, but such employees were too expensive for smaller manufacturers, which sometimes entrusted talented slaves to such duties. At the Bell Factory, a slave named Branch managed forty hands in the spinning room on the third floor. He was the middleman, dispensing the master’s orders and acting as spokesman for the workers. This is not to say everything always ran smoothly. Bondsmen toiled long hours in tight spaces to produce the sheeting, plaid, ticking, and yearn. Their fatigue and lack of freedom sometimes fostered discontent. Thievery was a problem. Some disgruntled workers took cuttings and scraps for their own use or exchanged stolen raw cotton for food and other items. Frustration and resentment could also take the form of arson. A slave was rumored to have set fire to the mill, though other sources cite the cause of the fire as a mystery. In 1841, Bell Factory burned to the ground.
By June the following year (1842), Patton, Donnegon and Company had rebuilt the mill and installed an auxiliary steam plant. The plant ceased operations for a brief time during the Civil War. In 1868, it became the Bell Factory manufacturing Company and transitioned totally to steam power. While prior to the war, operatives were exclusively slave laborers, now mainly white women and children were employed, working twelve hour shifts five days a week and earning between eight and twenty dollars a month. Instead of cabins and a wall, there was now a mill village of nearly three hundred residents. In 1881, a visitor to the mill described the mill and mill village as follows:

*The factory is large and roomy for the machinery, and everything seems more cozy than in Northern factories... each family has a house on the land of the corporation, a large garden, and a cow...In every home I saw a swing machine. All I have open fireplaces. Major Echols was evidently regarded as a friend but he families on whom we called... no liquor is sold except under his direction. There are a church and a school... I thought it seemed a happy little community.*


The hard workers of the factory helped to make Bell Factory highly successful. In the *Alabama Manual of Statistical Register* for 1869, Robert Patton, the twentieth Governor of Alabama and son of William Patton, noted one extraordinary accomplishment of the manufacturer, “The Bell factory near Huntsville ... specimens of the Bell factory were forwarded to the Paris expedition, and in the report for the committee, honorable mention is made of them.”


Railroad expansion increased the cotton milling industry product distribution and bales. Industrialization gained momentum in Huntsville and Madison County with the completion of the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway in the 1880s. Northern and western capitalists invested in real estate and the distribution market for cotton was enlarged.

Source: *Mrs. Elfriede Richter-Haaser*, Huntsville, Alabama
http://www.madisoncountyal.gov/government/about-your-county/history

The Bell Factory continued operation until 1885, when more efficient equipment and other economic factors caused the mill to be abandoned. The buildings were torn down in the 1890s. All that remains of the
original building- is the bell from the factory. The history of Bell Factory Land Company was to be entwined in the history of the (Riverton school on Winchester Road) since the company’s 500-pound bell was donated to the school system. The family of C. R. Williams, who worked for the company, remembers his efforts to make this possible. The bell was carried from Bell Factory to Oliver Bierne Patton Academy in 1910 and was used there until the county sold the building to F. Stephenson in 1917, reserving the right to keep the bell. The bell was then moved to Riverton in 1973, where the workers beat on it with hammers to call construction workers to lunch. It remained there until 1973. The 500-pound bell was placed in a tower in front of the new Riverton Elementary School building on Winchester Road and dedicated in 1975. The bell has the date 1880 inscribed on it. Madison County resident, Talmadge Smithey’s research concluded that the original bell at the factory in 1832 was either confiscated or donated to be cast into cannons to support the Confederate cause, since many church bells were donated for this reason. If this is the case the bell in the tower now, is the bell used to replace the original one at the tower.

- Source: History of Riverton School 1918-1973, (the history from 1918 through 1973 is taken from the booklet commissioned by the 1972 Riverton PTA under the leadership of W. W. Wales, President. The committee consisted of Mrs. Sam W. Smith, Jr., Chairperson, Mrs. Joe Jones, Mrs. Leo Lawler, Mrs. Ray Renfroe, Mrs. Jim Sisco and Miss Grace Whitfield), 1.
Some questions about the date 1880 which is inscribed on the bell were raised when the bell was removed from the tower in 1972. Bell Factory was incorporated in 1832 and was still in operation in 1885. Talmadge Smithey did research on this and came up with the conclusion that the bell at the factory in 1832 was either confiscated or donated to be cast into cannons to help the Confederate cause, since many church bells were donated for this reason. If this is the case, the bell at Riverton is the one used to replace the original bell at the factory.

- Source: History of Riverton School 1918-1973, (the history from 1918 through 1973 is taken from the booklet commissioned by the 1972 Riverton PTA under the leadership of W. W. Wales, President. The committee consisted of Mrs. Sam W. Smith, Jr., Chairperson, Mrs. Joe Jones, Mrs. Leo Lawler, Mrs. Ray Renfroe, Mrs. Jim Sisco and Miss Grace Whitfield), 1

Thus, the history of the Bell Factory Land Company was intertwined with the history of Madison County and
Riverton School. Many citizens in the Huntsville area and Sharps Cove claim to have heard the Bell at various times. At that time the area was sparsely settled and there were no machines to interfere with the sound. As in its past, the bell is rung to announce the news of national celebrations such as the end of WWI and local Riverton community celebrations and concerns. This bell holds many memories for people in the community. Alice Williams Lay relates, "How well I remember hearing the ringing of the bell on the morning of November 11, 1918, when Dad and my brothers went to the school at 4 AM and rang it, spreading the news that World War I had ended."

- Source: History of Riverton School 1918-1973, (the history from 1918 through 1973 is taken from the booklet commissioned by the 1972 Riverton PTA under the leadership of W. W. Wales, President. The committee consisted of Mrs. Sam W. Smith, Jr., Chairperson, Mrs. Joe Jones, Mrs. Leo Lawler, Mrs. Ray Renfroe, Mrs. Jim Sisco and Miss Grace Whitfield),

The bell ringing tradition of the Old Bell Factory continued on December 14, 2017 as Madison County residents gathered and celebrated the relocation of the Bell Factory Marker by the Daughters of the American Colonists to the campus to Riverton Elementary School. They honored the rich history of The Bell Factory, its
legacy and important role it played in Madison County and our Alabama Bicentennial history.

The program mentioned above was presented by Sarah K. Curtis, Daughters of American Colonists Historian, Judge David Campbell Chapter, at the rededication of the Bell Factory Marker On 14 December 2017 at Riverton Elementary School, Madison County.

**Bell Factory Dedication Dates**

On October 27, 1957, The Bell Factory Historical Marker was Judge David Campbell Daughter of the American Colonists dedicated. The Marker was located approximately ten miles northeast of Huntsville in Winchester Road.

On December 14, 2017, Judge David Campbell Daughters of the American Colonists rededicated the refurbished Bell Factory Marker. It was relocated to the campus of Riverton Elementary School on Winchester Road, adjacent to the tower housing the old Bell from the Bell Factory.
Historian Daughters of American Colonists Judge David Campbell Chapter

The following was not presented as part of the program presented but is submitted as additional information regarding the Bell Factory history.

**Ledger References**

The following list was taken from a time book ledger of the factory for the years Jan 1839 to Dec 1841. It is accessible at the Heritage Room of the Huntsville Public Library. Most of the labor in the early years was performed by slaves. The individuals listed in the book as “boys” were slaves. Their owners were paid for their labor. The slaves of the company partners are not listed. The ledger shows the days that each person worked but only their names are included below.

Some additional owners of the Bell Factory include

- Preston Yeatman was part owner of the Bell Factory. He died in Huntsville in 1841.
- Richard Forsey, born 1795. He was the third owner of the Bell Factory from 1829-1831.

**List of Workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allison, Samuel</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baron, Jas. M.</td>
<td>Perry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle, John</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle, Thomas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(son)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon’s boys:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Westley
Branham, Genj.
Chambers, Robt. T.
Champion, James N.
Cook, Geo. T.
Dyer, Capt. Justin
boy Westly
boy Tom Cain
boy Davy
boy Ned
boy Bill
boy Dick Luna
Ervin, C. F.
Hale, William
boy Sonny
boy Jacob
Hughey, John
Johnson, James M.
boy Grantland
Johnson, Robert B.
boy Brown
boy Baron
Kirk, Benj. L.
Leary, Cornelius
" Henry
" Leml.
" Thomas
boy Harry

boy Tom
McBride, Jack
McBride, L. A.
McGhee, Wesley
Malone, Nash’s team
Martin, Wm.
Mitchell, Wm. M.
Moore, Hugh N.
Moran, William
Patton, Bill
Sammons, G’s boy
And team
Smith, P. L.
" Perry L.
Smith, Wm.
Stonebreaker, Bill
Taft, Moses
Taylor, Stephen
Valiant, Wm.
Weatherly, Asa H.
White, Robert
Whitely, Frances L.
boy Curtis
boy Dean
boy Harrington
boy Jack
boy Littleton
boy Martin
boy Pleasant
Towards the end of the ledger a few more workers are listed for the year 1866 and appear as follows.

1866,
Azyor, M. R., Doolittle, ___
Gibson, ___,
Gibson,___
McDowell,
Mc Dowell
McQuerter,
McQuerter,—
Merrit, ___,
Tiller, ___,
Curtis, J.,
“ Jas. M.,
“ John,
“ Senior,
Dalton, G. W

The time sheets for the years 1842-65 and 1867 -85 were not found.

References

Bell Factory Time Book, located in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

Deed Book A, page 8, located in the Madison County Records Room, in the Huntsville Public Library.


Meet the Author

Sarah Kathryn Curtis was born in Eufaula, Alabama in 1949 and has resided in Huntsville for 38 years. She received her B.S. in Elementary Education from Auburn University, M.S. from Vanderbilt University in Speech Pathology, and Learning Disabilities Certification from Alabama A&M University. She retired from Huntsville City Schools with a focus on speech and language disorders, learning disabilities, and reading interventions. She was a consultant for Sopris West Educational Co. and the Ala. Dept. of Education. Sarah currently serves as Vice President of Judge David Campbell Chapter of The Nat. Soc. Daughters of American Colonists, President of the Colonel Walter Aston Chapter of Nat. Soc. Colonial Dames XVIIC, and Secretary of the Ala. Division of the Nat. Soc. Magna Charta Dames and Barons. She holds membership the Hunt’s Springs Chapter of Nat. Soc. Daughters of the American Revolution and other lineage, genealogical and historical organizations. Publications include articles in

Sarah presented the Bell article on December 14, 2017 at the DAC Historic Bell Factory Marker Rededication ceremonies at Riverton Elementary School in Madison Co, Ala.