

A Brief History of Thomaston Mills

In 1899 Thomaston Mills was organized by a group of men whose vision was to build a major cotton mill. In December of that year, the vision came to fruition; a charter was granted to Thomaston Cotton Mills on application of W.S. Witham, F.R. Lane, W.A. Andrews, R.A. Matthews, T.M. Matthews, G.W.T. Hannah, R.E. Hightower, Sr., I.C. Thompson and M.W. Reid.

When the corporation was first organized, Mr. R.A. Matthews acted as president and chairman of the board. During a reorganization meeting, by unanimous vote, R.E. Hightower was made president. He assumed the presidency of Thomaston Cotton Mills in the spring of 1901. The company began producing cotton sheeting, and through the years it diversified for the industrial apparel and home furnishing markets. During the next 25 years the Mill experienced expansions noted in the growth of 5,000 spindles to an impressive 75,000. In 1915 Mill Number 2 was added to the existing structure and then in 1917 Mill Number 3 was also added to the original mill.

In 1914 and 1915 the corporation officers were: R.E. Hightower, Sr., President; William Harrison Hightower, Sr., Vice President; A.T. Matthews, Vice President and Manager; R.E. Hightower, Jr., Treasurer. Beginning in the early years, Thomaston Mills and the Hightower family became almost synonymous.

Expanding volume demanded still new plants. First was the Peerless Mill, chartered in 1919, for the manufacture of wide sheeting, sheets, and pillowcases. The Thomaston Bleachery was built in 1924 to supply facilities for bleaching and finishing Thomaston products, as well as additional capacity for sheet and pillow case production and commission bleaching, dyeing and finishing.

In Griffin, 29 miles to the north, the Company acquired and rebuilt another mill for the production of combed yarns and broadcloths and other combed yarn woven fabrics in 1929. In 1938, all properties were consolidated as Thomaston Mills, the various units becoming divisions of the parent company.

In 1926, the B.F. Goodrich and Fisk Rubber Companies were in search of a connection with one textile mill to be their supplier for tire cord. Thomaston Cotton Mills was awarded the contract. A totally new mill was built for the purpose of producing tire cord. In the contract B.F. Goodrich had the option of buying out the Hightower interests at any time. The plant was named Martha Mill in honor of Mattie Lou Hightower, wife of Robert E. Hightower. When B.F. Goodrich bought out the Hightower interests and on December 28, 1929 Martha Mill became the property of B.F. Goodrich. Like East Thomaston evolving to house the Thomaston Mills workers, the mill village of Silvertown grew up around the Martha Mill. Sixty-four years later, in 1993, the Lakeside Plant, a 15 million dollar facility was built to handle the company's sewing operation.

Consumer products were about two-thirds of the Thomaston Mills business, and apparel fabrics for the other one-third. In an interview with Neil H. Hightower from the Wall Street Transcript Corporation in 2000, the consumer products business entails sheets, pillowcases, comforters, and accessories. These products are sold to the retail and institutional markets. The retail part went to mass merchants and department stores while the institutional part went to hospitals, hotels, and motels.

With the growth of the company, additional housing was needed for the workers. The Griffin Mill consisted of a village of 150 houses that had been built in the late 1880's. Beginning with the construction of the first Thomaston mill in 1899 to 1918, there was consistent growth. The village that developed around the original Thomaston Cotton Mill was called East Thomaston, and was chartered as a separate municipality with its own mayor and city council. Also, East Thomaston had its own mill-operated school system. Mill-employed teachers instructed grades 1-8. Another completely separate mill village developed around the Martha Mill. The Martha Mill village was called Silvertown for the new advanced Silvertown tire cord produced at the plant. Silvertown was annexed by the city of Thomaston in 1958 and East Thomaston was also annexed in 1970. The termination of the company ownership of mill villages ended the era of the mill village for Upson County.

In 1989 the company bought a 65,000 square foot plant, which became the Northside Division. In 1993, the Lakeside Plant, a 15 million dollar, 242,000 square foot facility was built to handle the company's sewing operation. Production and distribution for the Rattlers Brand line took over the Northside facility.

Thomaston Mills became the largest employer in Thomaston. On October 5, 1979 the stockholders of Thomaston Mills voted to change the name to Thomaston Mills, Inc. to more fully portray the company operations. International sales served customers in Europe, South America, New Zealand, Canada, and the Middle East. Even with such a diverse customer base, Thomaston Mills could not compete with the 1992 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which opened U.S. doors to imports produced in Asia and the Caribbean, where workers labor for wages of pennies a day. Because of competition from the foreign market, Thomaston Mills Inc. continued to report losses quarter after quarter.

Julian Hightower, son of the founder, worked for the company for more than 60 years, serving as president and then chairman of the board before his death in 1987. His nephew, Neil H. Hightower, became last Hightower chairman. In 1987 the company employed more than 2,500 people in its mills, including the Zebulon and Griffin plants. The Zebulon Plant, which began operation on November 1, 1981, was closed in 1999 and sold October 2000. The Griffin plant closed in 1998.

On February 15, 2001 the Thomaston Mills, Inc. Board of Directors accepted the resignation of Neil H. Hightower, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Company, George H. Hightower, Jr., Executive Vice President and President of the Apparel Fabrics Division, and H. Stewart Davis, Executive Vice President of the Consumer Products Division. For the first time in its history, a president and chief executive officer who was not a member of the founding Hightower family led Thomaston Mills, Inc. On June 14, 2001 a memo distributed by the Company said that beginning on or about today the Peerless, Finishing and Lakeside divisions, along with the corporate office and a New York sales office, would be "permanently closed in their entirety." On Tuesday June 19, Thomaston Mills, Inc. announced filing for reorganization under chapter 11 in the U. S. Bankruptcy Court.

In the spring of 1999, the company announced that it would cut 700 jobs. June 2001 brought layoffs of 550; by August 2001 the company completely shut down. On June 14, 2001 a chapter of Upson County history ended with the announcement that 1,400 Thomaston Mills' workers would no longer have their jobs. Eventually, all of the Thomaston Mills buildings were sold to new businesses:

The 524,000-sq.-ft. Peerless Building sold to Standard Textile (based in Cincinnati, Ohio), which ramped up operations in March 2002. Standard Textile is an international textile firm with operations in France, Jordan and other U.S. locales; the company recently purchased Kings Mill plant in Augusta.

The 190,000 sq. ft. Thomaston Mills Sewing Plant sold to ATD American (based in Wyncote, Pennsylvania). ATD American also bought the "Thomaston Mills" brand name and plans to continue to manufacture institutional sheets and pillowcases.

The 542,000 sq. ft. Thomaston Mills Finishing Plant sold to 1888 Mills (based in Griffin, Georgia.) with plans to continue as a textile finishing plant.

The 320,000 sq. ft. Lakeside Plant sold to Atlanta Paper & Foil (a Hauppauge, New York based company) to manufacture commercial paper products and convert aluminum foil.

The 77,000 sq. ft. Zebulon Plant sold to Southern Mills (a Georgia company for 77 years) for a warping and weaving operation.

The legacy will live on in the Thomaston Mills Collection donated to the Thomaston-Upson Archives by the Hightower family. It is here that patrons and former employees of Thomaston Mills may study the history and

life of a mill that was an integral part of the community for over 100 years.

“A Brief History of Thomaston Mills” was written by Penny Cliff, February 2004.

For further information on the history of Thomaston Mills, or the Upson County mill villages, the following sources are available at the Thomaston-Upson Archives:

Hightower, Heidi H., Upson County's Textile Industry: A Worthwhile Dream, 2nd edition, Georgia: The Upson County Historical Society, 1989.

Josey, Charles, Hard Times Good Times: A Historical Perspective 1899-1999, Columbus, Georgia: Columbus Productions Inc., 1999.

The Thomaston Mills Collection, 1899-2001, Georgia: Thomaston-Upson Archives.

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