

The Charlottesville Woolen Mills, Clothing a Nation

by Rick Britton

[Albemarle County] is a section with the greatest capabilities of self support, having minerals, timber, materials for fabrics and an unexcelled water power for factories.—

From The Albemarle Handbook, published in 1888 by Wm. H. Prout

During the Confederacy's last winter, as prospects for victory dwindled, the clatter of approaching Union cavalry was an ominous sound. Most often it foreshadowed destruction and despair. So it was on the afternoon of March 3, 1865, when a Federal force of 10,000 horsemen--two full divisions--under Major General Philip Sheridan, captured Charlottesville after annihilating the last organized Southern army in the Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan's progress eastward through Albemarle County had been marked with billowing plumes of black smoke.

"The long expected hordes have come at last," wrote nineteen-year-old Sarah Ann Strickler, a student at the Albemarle Female Institute on Charlottesville's East Jefferson Street. "They came shouting & galloping through town, waving their banners aloft." Vandals, pests, and

rogues she called the Union troopers, scribbling furiously in her diary, and confided that if she were a boy, she would fight them. Later that evening, after everything that could benefit Confederate arms had been put to the torch, Sarah Ann watched in horror as a jubilant Federal incendiary detail rode past. "They have burned part of the iron bridge, & the cotton factory" [on the easternmost edge of town], she wrote. "The conflagration was magnificent, sublime, it illuminated the whole canopy of heaven, with a lurid glare."

March of 1865 was not the last time the "cotton factory"--or the Charlottesville Woolen Mills, as it was later known--was destroyed by fire. Nor were the fires the only travails suffered by the firm. Nonetheless, through the latter half of the 1800s the business weathered all storms due to the vigilant stewardship of a father and son: John Adams and Henry Clay Marchant. Thanks to their efforts the Woolen Mills prospered and grew to become, as wrote O. Allan Gianniny, Jr., "Charlottesville's most prominent industry of the late nineteenth century."

The story of Charlottesville's most famous mill complex is also the tale of a section of Albemarle County, specifically the plot of land approxi-

mately one mile east of Charlottesville's original downtown. "At that point," wrote Harry E. Poindexter, "Moore's Creek empties into the [Rivanna] river from the southwest, forming a narrow triangle of land which rises rapidly to a rocky crest some one hundred feet high."

The earliest known enterprise on the site was a water grist mill built in 1795 by Edward Moore, who owned 500 acres thereabouts. In 1805 William D. Meriwether purchased Moore's property. Approximately twelve years later, after navigation on the Rivanna had opened up, Meriwether constructed there a large merchant mill, an operation that was soon expanded to include a sawmill. In 1826 the forward-thinking Meriwether erected a wooden toll-bridge and began charging folks to cross the Rivanna. A dam was thrown across the river four years later.

Why so much activity at this one location? Since Charlottesville's earliest days the "triangle," or spit, of land between the two streams had played an important role--that of eastern access to the town's low range of hills. Here was located the Rivanna crossing known as Secretary's Ford, so named, according to James Alexander, after "Col. Carter the Colonial Secretary under George the Second,

King of Great Britain." The second highway into Albemarle County, the Mountain Ridge Road, constructed circa 1740, led to Secretary's Ford from the east. When later extended west to a gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains, this well-traveled thoroughfare was dubbed Three Notched Road.

On the same "triangle" of land was also located the port of Charlottesville, "called Pireus," wrote Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, "since the town itself liked to be spoken of as the Athens of the South. It seems to have been just above the dam. . .with entrance through a lock and canal on the right bank." A subsequent improvement came about in the early 1830s, when the Blue Ridge and Rivanna Turnpike was built connecting Meriwether's Bridge, and the port, to Brooksville in western Albemarle. "Its construction," wrote county historian Edgar Woods, "occasioned the laying out of the straight road from the [span] to the east end of Market Street." By 1835 Pireus was a bustling commercial center, "a depot for the produce of the northern and middle part of [Albemarle County]," according to a visitor.

Circa 1840, Meriwether's son, William H. Meriwether, along with partners Robert S. Jones and James S. Crewdson, dramatically advanced

the business of the area. Tapping the Rivanna's powerful flow, a group of structures known collectively as "the Charlottesville Factory" was erected for carding and weaving cotton and wool, sawing timber, and grinding flour. A plaster mill was also included. Housed nearby was a mechanical shop capable of turning out iron and wooden machinery.

Beginning operation in late 1841, the mill complex at Pireus continued through the decade under first the above-named partnership, then subsequently Thomas L. Farish, a local farmer and Baptist minister, and finally the firm of "Farish, [Henry W.] Jones and [John T.] Randolph." "As the years went by," wrote Poin-dexter, "the textile end of the business became the major concern. By 1850, besides carding fibers for home weaving, the mill manufactured a cheap grade of cloth for servants and slaves."

That same year, wrote Newton Bond Jones, "the Charlottesville Factory, one of three cloth-making establishments [in Albemarle], was valued at \$90,000." With an average payroll of twenty-eight hands, cloth production totaled 70,000 yards. The facilities at the time included, according to Jones: "a saw mill; a grist mill; a plaster mill; 552 spindles for mak-

ing cotton yarn, a double carder, two dressers, and twelve looms."

Enter John Adams Marchant. Of French Huguenot ancestry, Marchant's father had run a packet-boat line from Baltimore to Norfolk. John A. Marchant arrived in Albemarle sometime before 1826. Doing business out of a large, double brick building at 101 East Main Street, the dry goods merchant was, wrote Poin-dexter, a "stern man, full of energy, and a staunch Episcopalian. . . ." He was also ambitious. "I expect I shall surprise you," the storekeeper wrote a niece in January of 1851, "when I tell you that I sold every house and every foot of ground I owned in Charlottesville in exchange for the bridge Cotton factory. . . ."

Evidently the family was taken aback, for another niece wrote, the following month: "Most persons think he has made a bad trade but he does not think so. Well, I hope he is in the right. . . ."

It seems that he was. Under the direct management of Henry W. Jones, a partner in the previous administration, the firm made a few physical improvements then charged ahead. "Within a short time [Marchant and Jones] offered, when customers furnished three-fourths of a pound of washed and picked wool for each yard

of cloth," wrote John Hammond Moore, "to turn out white jeans for twenty-one cents a yard and colored jeans for twenty-four cents per yard. The success of this venture, essentially the production of slave clothing, encouraged Marchant to enter other textile fields. . . ."

At first, business was good for "the Charlottesville Factory"--sitting astride, as it was, one of the Old Dominion's main arteries. And the site's transportation options had recently been expanded. The Central Virginia Railroad, in 1848, had built a 200-foot-long iron bridge across the Rivanna right alongside Secretary's Ford. Regular service to Charlottesville had begun in 1850. "It was in 1852," penned Wertenbaker, that the mill's advertising boasted "that though the [railway line] passed within a few yards of their factory, they also had the advantage of navigation on the Rivanna."

But the beautiful waters of the Rivanna brought disaster that same year. A devastating flood destroyed the dam and forced Marchant to suspend manufacturing for three years. By borrowing money and mortgaging property, the plucky entrepreneur was barely able to keep "the Charlottesville Factory" out of the hands of his creditors. As the 1850s

came to an end, of course, another monstrous, nationwide crisis rose over the horizon. Despite the Civil War, however, John A. Marchant, like so many businessmen North and South, succeeded in finding a ready market for his products.

During the conflict Marchant's firm--as of 1860 known as "the Charlottesville Manufacturing Company"--produced cloth and uniforms for the Confederate Army. So did other local businesses. The county at the time, as mentioned above, included at least two other cloth-making concerns. In a directory of Southern wartime manufacturers, William A. Albaugh III wrote that the "Charlottesville Factory Co." [sic] employed fifteen hands, and "spun cotton and wool into cloth suitable for uniforms." Albaugh also listed the Buckeye Land Factory," located "ten miles from Charlottesville," and "B.C. Flannagan & Co.," which, with its forty workers, "[m]anufactured cotton and woolen goods for the C.S. Gov't."

In 1864 John A. Marchant dissolved the Charlottesville Manufacturing Company by buying up the outstanding stock and turning it over to his son, Henry. It was a wise move. Born in Albemarle County on April Fool's Day of 1838, Henry Clay

Marchant by the war's fourth year, wrote Poindexter, had grown into "a robust man, as ambitious and forceful as his father. . . ." He attended private schools as a child and early on began laboring in his father's factory by the river. When war came to the Old Dominion young Marchant was working in Petersburg. On July 3, 1861, he enlisted in Company A of the 12th Virginia Volunteer Infantry, the "Petersburg City Guard." Corporal Marchant was severely wounded one year later, on June 25, 1862, in the action at King's School House, or Oak Grove, Virginia, just east of Richmond. The minié ball wound disabled him from further military service. Discharged from a hospital in Petersburg four months later, Marchant soon thereafter returned to his native county.

It was twenty-seven-year-old ex-Confederate Henry Clay Marchant, therefore, who surveyed the smoldering remains of his factory on March 3, 1865. There was virtually nothing left. (Although none of the official Union reports mention the torching of Marchant's mill by name, one does include, however, an ominous list. Tallying up what was burnt by one of the Federal cavalry divisions, Provost Marshal Major E.H. Bailey recorded, among other items: 7 tons of cotton; 1500 pounds of wool; 2000 pairs of

pants, jackets, blankets, and drawers; 20 wagons loaded with Quartermaster stores--and 1 cotton factory. The other division, that of General George Armstrong Custer, reported destroying "1 cotton mill.")

The situation at war's end may have crushed someone of a different stripe but not Henry Clay Marchant. "Quickly clearing away the debris," wrote Poindexter, he "set about rebuilding his woolen mill. . . ." His decision was greatly influenced, no doubt, by the tremendous growth of the Northern wool industry. Spurred on by the conflict's demands--after all, the North had put three million men in uniform--the region's mills had multiplied from 1,200 in 1859 to almost 3,000 ten years later.

Unfortunately, Southern economic prospects were not so encouraging. An entire generation of able-bodied men had been decimated, and a large number of farms and industrial shops had been destroyed. One bright spot shined, however; in the South textiles were in demand and, wrote Poindexter, "an intrepid manufacturer like Marchant could find a ready market for fabrics in his immediate neighborhood."

By August of 1865, Henry Clay Marchant had purchased a set of

wool cards and had begun carding wool--that is, cleaning and untangling it--for Albemarle farmers. By floating a number of bonds Marchant was able to purchase, from the Philadelphia firm of Furbush and Gage, the equipment for a "one-set mill"--basically the machinery to process wool from one card. C.A. Furbush, one of the Pennsylvania's company's partners and a Quaker, gave the fledgling mill owner much useful advice, and later became an important stockholder in the enterprise.

"A factory building forty-five feet square with a basement and two upper floors was quickly constructed," wrote Poindexter, "and as the new machinery arrived it was installed. . . . Besides his old roll cards, Marchant now had a set of manufacturing cards, two hand jacks with 210 spindles each, nine narrow Crompton looms, a fulling mill, and other intermediate and finishing machinery." In December of 1868 the company was reorganized as a joint-stock venture, incorporated under the laws of Virginia, and renamed. With a labor force of fifty hands, and a healthy trust in the outcome of steady, hard work, Superintendent Henry Clay Marchant and "the Charlottesville Woolen Mills" were off and running.

Positive results were soon appar-

ent. Within five years of the company's reorganization, according to the Charlottesville *Jeffersonian Republican*, annual sales had grown from \$39,000 to \$70,000. "Such an increase," wrote William E. Webb, "is especially noteworthy when consideration is taken of the fact that a disastrous flood struck the county in the late summer of 1870 and forced the company virtually to suspend its activities for a period of several months."

The "Charlottesville Woolen Mills manufacture[s] Satinets, Kerseys, Diagonal and Doeskin Cassimeres, Flannels, etc." announced an advertising broadside from 1869. "WOOL, when sent by railroad, will be taken from [the] depot and [the] rolls returned thereto free of charge for drayage. . . . No effort shall be spared to facilitate the carding of wool as soon as practicable after its receipt. Relying upon the success of the past efforts to give satisfaction, we confidently bespeak a continuance of public patronage. . . ."

(Of the textile varieties listed on the large sheet: satinnet is cloth made with a satin-like weave; kersey is a coarse, ribbed woolen popularly used in uniforms, coats, and work clothes; and doeskin is cloth napped and felted for a smooth surface. Cassimere, of course, was a spelling variation for cashmere.)

As the South rebuilt, the factory on the Rivanna continued producing popular textiles. But for the Charlottesville Woolen Mills the twenty-five-year period after the Civil War was not without its share of major difficulties. The mill was seriously undercapitalized, and the business was operating, wrote Poindexter, “on the fringe of a highly competitive market. . .” Some of the stock owners, too, failed to pay in full their subscriptions, and much of the profit, in the early years, was consumed in interest payments against the debt. In January of 1873, a break in the dam race brought the mill to a grinding halt for an entire month.

Later that year came “the Panic of 1873,” followed by a nationwide five-year depression. Many Northern mills closed down. Henry Clay Marchant kept the Charlottesville Woolen Mills running. “To shut down our gates,” he wrote, “would result in serious injury to machinery from rust and other causes; entail great suffering upon our help, and probably necessitate their seeking employment elsewhere . . . and injure our credit beyond hope of recovery. . . . [Instead, we reduced our prices] to so near an approximate to cost as would ensure sale to a good class of trade. . . .”

“As a result, sales went beyond production levels and disaster was averted,” wrote Poindexter. The board of directors heaped praise on Marchant, “a man in the prime of his life, with skill, capacity, energy and integrity,” noted Thomas Jefferson Randolph, “whose fortunes are indissolubly staked on the success” of the business. Devoutly religious, Henry Clay Marchant, in turn gave his credit to the Lord. “He conscientiously believes that whatever success he has achieved is due to the guidance of an overruling Providence,” wrote a friend. Marchant was an Episcopal layman and further manifested his faith through his benevolent treatment of his workers.

Indeed, he looked every inch a leader, bearing in no small manner a resemblance to the South’s wartime and early Reconstruction icon: Robert E. Lee. “His square-cut face was framed between a heavy beard and a healthy shock of hair,” penned Poindexter, “while massive eye-brows added an air of dignity that was softened by wrinkles about his eyes.”

An additional reason for the firm’s continued success was its specialization. Echoing its Civil War output, the Charlottesville Woolen Mills began reconcentrating on the pro-

duction of uniforms and military fabrics, albeit finer ones. In this manner it gained a national reputation for excellence. Municipal employees of Philadelphia, Chicago, and a number of other cities were at one time wearing Charlottesville-manufactured cloth. And in 1901 the firm became the official supplier of the “first-rate” cloth used in the uniforms worn by the United Confederate Veterans. Eventually the mill was furnishing the cloth for, according to Poindexter, “ninety percent of the military schools in the United States, including West Point.” The business later claimed that a traveler could journey coast to coast on railroads whose crewmen it had clothed.

This uniform cloth specialization is wonderfully illustrated by an 1888 ad for the company that appeared in *The Albemarle Handbook*, amidst others for the Albemarle Female Institute and the Monticello Wine Company. “Our specialties,” it read, “are Cadet Gray Meltons, Cadet Gray Doeskins, Cadet Gray Flannels, Dark Blue Flannels, Coatings and Overcoatings, Sky Blue Kerseys and Doeskins.”

In 1878 the Charlottesville Woolen Mills was in the news for installing the community’s first telephone system. Visiting the facility, a *Jeffersonian*

Republican reporter wrote that when the manager “wishes to communicate with the mills he springs a signal button which is attached to the instrument and that strikes an electric bell at the mills. . . . Then [the manager] adjusts his instrument and every word over the line is heard distinctly by him.”

Despite another fire four years later, by 1882 the mill complex was on stable financial footing. At that time the enterprise was employing sixty hands. In 1892 the business, wrote Webb, “paid in wages to its 115 employees, one-third of whom were women, the sum of \$45,000.” This prosperity, naturally, helped build up the neighborhood. In the nearby workers’ village a beautiful wooden chapel was erected during the late 1880s and was constantly improved over the next ten years. This structure was financed by funds raised by the mill workers themselves. “The location [for the mill] is admirable,” noted a *Washington Post* reporter, “nestling amidst the hills; the sound of machinery is drowned by the roar of the water flowing over the dam in the river, adding to the landscape.”

The Charlottesville Woolen Mills continued operating into the 1960s. During World War II the machin-

ery had turned out 15,000 yards of uniform cloth a month, “most of it going to the navy,” wrote Moore, “a regular customer since 1935.” Struggling through the 1950s, the business was eventually sold to a Pennsylvania concern that, in turn, closed the facility in 1964.

But the firm owed its admirable success, indeed its livelihood, to the indefatigable labors of Henry Clay Marchant, who died October 10, 1910. In his time he had done much to put little Charlottesville, Virginia, on the map. Rising up from the ashes of the Civil War, the Charlottesville Woolen Mills, under Marchant’s shrewd leadership, had grown into central Virginia’s leading manufacturing firm.

In the mid-1940s, as a cadet at John Marshall High School in Richmond, Contributing Editor Rick Britton’s father, Hughes L. Britton Jr., proudly wore a uniform of cloth manufactured at the Charlottesville Woolen Mills.