

Petersburg's Tobacco Industry

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"Manufactured tobacco has always been among Petersburg's important exports." In fact, there were tobacco warehouses in Petersburg before there was a town of Petersburg. In 1730, Colonel Robert Bolling received authority to conduct an inspection at his tobacco warehouse on land known as Bolling's Point, probably on the site of the 1878-1879 Farmer's Market. It was not until December 17, 1748, that Governor William Gooch signed the act founding the towns of Petersburg and Blandford.

In the 18th century, "a nest of prosperous little tobacco towns" arose east of Fort Henry and the falls of the Appomattox River. In the 1770s, J.F.D. Smyth, a well-known traveler and authority visited Petersburg and wrote, "The principal tobacco trade in America centers at Petersburg, or Bolling's Point, which it is generally called." Nearby tobacco planters actually petitioned the city to build more warehouses, for the "importance of tobacco warehouses hardly could be exaggerated." Inspectors gave planters receipts for the quantity of good tobacco, and the tobacco was at that point considered sold. These receipts were circulated as money, and it is not overstating the case that tobacco was the currency of the day in this area of Virginia.

Tobacco also played a role in why Petersburg becoming a military objective of the British during the Revolutionary War. General Henry (Light Horse Harry) Lee wrote, "Petersburg, the great mart of... the state which lies south of Appomattox, and of the northern part of North Carolina... and, after the destruction of Norfolk, ranked first among the commercial towns of the state. Its chief export was tobacco, considered our best product, and at this time [during the war] its warehouses were filled." So much tobacco accumulated in Petersburg during the war because it was risky to export. On April 25, 1781, Major General William Phillips attacked Petersburg with his 2,500 British soldiers. One of the reasons Phillips attacked Petersburg was to destroy its tobacco and hence a major part of its wealth. The day after defeating the 1,000 American militiamen under Major General Friedrich von Steuben and Brigadier General Peter

Muhlenberg, the British burned 4,000 hogsheads of tobacco. Each of these hogsheads weighed approximately 1,000 pounds. Some have termed the Virginia campaign of 1781 a “tobacco war.”

Despite the economic losses suffered during the war, the tobacco industry continued to grow in the city after hostilities ceased. In 1786, Count Luigi Castiglione, an early Italian traveler to Virginia, wrote, “Great quantity of tobacco is brought to Petersburg, even from the North Carolina country, and is there exported to Europe as James River tobacco, which is the best sort.” Five years later, when President Washington visited Petersburg on April 14 and 15, 1791, he wrote in his diary that Petersburg inspected one-third of the tobacco that left Virginia. In 1793, the Reverend John Jones Spooner, rector of Martin’s Brandon Parish, wrote that Blandford’s three tobacco warehouses received approximately 6,000 to 7,000 hogsheads annually. (In May 1784 Blandford, Pocahontas, and Ravenscroft were incorporated as the borough of Petersburg.)

In the first half of the 19th century, transportation advances helped increase Petersburg’s status as a tobacco market, manufacturer, and exporter. In 1806, Scottish mapmaker John Melish wrote that Petersburg was “a place of considerable wealth and importance, carrying on a great trade in tobacco and flour, a considerable portion of which is with New York.” He wrote *Travels through the United States of America, in the years 1806 & 1807, and 1809, 1810, & 1811* and was famous as the first mapmaker to depict the United States extending to the Pacific Ocean. By the 1820s, as many as 125 bateaux (flat boats invented to transport cargo) navigated the Upper Appomattox Canal at the same time. Many of them carried from six to eight hogsheads from as far away as Farmville to the port of Petersburg. By 1820 the “streets of Petersburg were crowded with hogsheads of tobacco; and on the road we continually met with single hogsheads, drawn by two horses, coming 80 or a hundred miles from the interior.”

As many as 21 tobacco warehouses have operated in Petersburg since Bolling’s Point opened in 1730. Dr. John Herbert Claiborne, the physician in charge of the Petersburg hospitals during the Civil War, wrote, “Tobacco, not cotton, was king in Petersburg in 1850.” The

completion of the railroad from Wilmington to Weldon, North Carolina, and north to Petersburg became a boon to the city's tobacco industry.

Before the Civil War, there were generally 15 to 20 tobacco factories each employing between 75 and 100 workers. Slave labor was the predominant form of labor in these factories, and the manufacturer either owned his own slaves or hired them on an annual basis. Some slaves worked overtime for wages, and they could use this money to pay for their freedom. Unlike cotton factories and flour mills, tobacco factories did not need water power so they were located all over town, sometimes near the owner's fine residence. In the 1860 census, Petersburg contained 20 tobacco factories with a capital investment of \$587,000 and 2516 employees.

During the Civil War, unlike the cotton factories, many of the tobacco factories closed because of the great risk of exporting this product. Some of these factories served as hospitals during the war. Among these was the Virginia Hospital in the Leslie factory on Washington Street, the South Carolina Hospital in the Osborne and Chieves factory at the southeast corner of East Washington and Jefferson Streets, the North Carolina Hospital on Perry Street (still standing), and the Confederate States Hospital at the southeast corner of Washington and Jones Streets. *Grant's Petersburg's Progress* in April 1865 stated that there were five cotton factories, seven flour mills, and tobacco factories "too numerous to mention."

Much like the tobacco industry in Petersburg after the Revolutionary War, tobacco rebounded after the Civil War. In 1879 the second largest tobacco factory in the United States was in Petersburg. The following year, the city contained 12 Petersburg tobacco factories, and 68% of those employed worked in tobacco. The British American Tobacco Company increased its tobacco manufacturing of cigarettes and became the largest Petersburg employer and its largest single source of taxes from approximately 1910 to 1929. In 1917, the year the United States declared war on Germany, the city's tobacco factories manufactured 2.1 billion cigarettes, 13.2 million cigars, and 600,000 pounds of smoking tobacco, processed 50 million pounds of tobacco, and employed 4,000 people. From 1932 until October 1985, the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company was the largest employer in the city, with 4,000 workers in three daily shifts.

When the company vacated its facilities in Petersburg and moved to Macon, Georgia, the city suffered an economic downturn whose deleterious effects are still painfully evident.