

William Gregg Biography

William Gregg

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Biography

American manufacturer William Gregg (1800-1867) was known as the father of the textile industry of the South.

William Gregg was born in Monongalia County, Va., on Feb. 2, 1800. His mother died when he was 4. After several years with a neighbor he joined the household of his uncle, a successful watch-maker and textile machinery manufacturer in Virginia. Gregg's apprenticeship in watchmaking was interrupted when his uncle moved to Georgia and established a small cotton factory. Nor did Gregg's career in textiles last, for at the end of the War of 1812 a flood of goods from England swamped many American manufacturing enterprises.

In 1824 Gregg established a jewelry and watchmaking business in Columbia, S.C. He prospered until ill health interrupted his career. In 1829 he married Marina Jones of Edgefield District, where he made his home. Although retired, he acquired an interest in a cotton factory, which he reorganized and put on a paying basis.

In 1838 Gregg became a partner in a jewelry business in Charleston, S.C. Convinced that the salvation of the South lay in a diversified economy which combined manufacturing with agriculture, Gregg began to study the problems involved. Following a tour of Northern textile centers he wrote essays criticizing the South's emphasis on agriculture.

Gregg also began organizing a cotton factory, which was chartered subsequently by South Carolina. He was involved in every step of the enterprise, from corporate organization to design, construction, and administration. The Graniteville Manufacturing Company became the prototype of the Southern textile mill: it used native materials and labor for its buildings and consumed Southern raw materials which were fabricated by Southern operatives for the Southern market. Its first years were difficult because of an economic depression, but the company survived and then prospered.

As a representative in the state legislature and a member of the South Carolina Institute for the Encouragement of the Mechanical Arts, Gregg made strenuous efforts to industrialize the South. As the Civil War approached, he stressed that the South must place itself in a defensive posture. In 1860 he was a member of the convention that took South Carolina out of the Union. During the war he kept his mill operating despite commercial problems and the loss of a son in battle. Shortly after Appomattox he contracted a fatal illness. A benevolent despot, he had organized many social services for his employees, including housing, credit cooperatives, and education.