



IN HISTORY: IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC HERITAGE

Time Line

Early Indiana Industry: The Cannelton Mills in Perry County, Indiana

In addition to farmland and work on the canals and mines, one of the major attractions bringing new settlers to Indiana was its textile mills. By 1860 there were seventy-nine woolen mills in Indiana employing more than 530 workers and two cotton mills employing nearly 400 workers. The largest of these was the Indiana Cotton Mills, originally called the Cannelton Cotton Mill, founded in Perry County, Indiana, on the lower Ohio River in 1848.

The early mills used what was called a “putting out system” in which the mill did carding and spinning, but hand weavers were paid to weave the fabric and then return it to the mill for finishing. In the 1830s improved machinery allowed mills to do the entire process in-house, greatly reducing the cost of cotton cloth. In 1841 power looms were developed and affordable woollens appeared in local stores. Continued advances in textile machinery and the spread of railroads soon made inexpensive factory-produced fabrics available everywhere. By 1870 there were more than 2,400 woolen mills and hundreds of cotton mills all over the United States. The mills completely changed how people dressed and the way they decorated their homes.

By the 1830s clothing became far more affordable for the growing middle class throughout the

Midwest. Curtains and other decorative textiles increasingly appeared in homes in Indiana and the western states. By the middle of the century, families no longer had to spend time spinning and weaving. The factories provided a wide variety of textile products to everyone, everywhere. They were also an important source of new jobs. People moved from farms and small towns to larger towns and cities to work in factories and the many support businesses that grew up around them. The success of the textile industry fostered many other factory systems. Craftsmen and artisans of all types were replaced as stores and mail-order catalogs marketed inexpensive manufactured goods to an ever-growing population.

Originally, Cannelton’s mill owners intended to create a major manufacturing industry by importing the majority of their workers and their entire families from New England. The proprietors hoped to attract some of those New Englanders who were leaving eastern mills due to the influx of foreign workers. Although the owners felt certain that some workers from the community surrounding Cannelton could be hired, the numbers would not fill their needs. The proprietors also reasoned that by bringing in eastern workers, the mill would be able to begin operations with an experienced workforce. The mill owners were also concerned

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with the moral character of the workers they sought. In a letter from his home in Providence, Rhode Island, C. T. James outlined to Hamilton Smith his view of an acceptable labor force:

My mind was made up to send out families of various descriptions; some of which would be Scotch, some English, and some, though very few, Irish; but to send none what ever, which should not come highly recommended, with the very best of references. All the important departments will be filled with native New Englanders.

From this letter, it is clear that a “desirable immigrant laborer,” at least for the textile industry, could be American-born or British (including only “a few Irish”). Preferably, these workers would bring their family and neighbors to Indiana to join them working at the mills. Like the twentieth-century steel industry communities of Gary and East Chicago, the nineteenth-century mill owners at Cannelton were trying to construct a town to support their workforce rather than simply creating an industrial complex. From the outset of their operations, there were plans for rental houses that would accommodate up to four families. In addition, the company was willing to sell lots on which individual families might build. The mill proprietors also intended to provide for their workers’ spiritual and intellectual well-being by offering lots for churches and a large school.

There is very little evidence remaining that tells us how the mill owners at Cannelton went about attracting workers from New England. In one of Hamilton Smith’s scrapbooks, however, is an article from the *Portsmouth (NH) Journal* dating from 1850 inviting new workers to Indiana:

to the farmer, mechanic, or manufacturer, who is sober, industrious and economical; who cannot where he is, make a provision for himself and family suitable to their condition; who is looking to California, or Cuba, or some other distant point for support or wealth or distinction; to all

such I say—enquire a little about Cannelton before you ship to San Francisco or enlist with Gen. Lopez.

Broadsides (recruitment posters) distributed in the 1850s advertised high wages for family help. As was common to virtually all textile mills in the early- and mid-nineteenth century, women were generally paid less than men. Women’s and children’s wages were also restricted since certain jobs in the mill were not open to them. While working in the spinning and weaving rooms, “Girls make from \$4.50 to 4 Dollars per week on the average. . . . Board is \$1.50 per week. . . . If the girls . . . understand weaving on power looms they can make \$3.00 besides their board.” Other advertisements posted locally were printed in German, presumably to attract members of this dominant ethnic group in southern Indiana.

In 1850 250 workers, the majority of them young girls, arrived from New England by boat at Cannelton. According to the local newspaper, the *Cannelton Economist*, “It was dark and raining at the time, and of course remarkably muddy.” To make matters worse, the boarding and rental houses had not yet been completed, so it was difficult to find accommodations for the new arrivals.

In terms of the population of Cannelton as a whole, the majority (58.1 percent) were born in Indiana. Among the workers at the mill, however, more than 58 percent of the workforce was recruited from another state. Germans were unquestionably the dominant foreign-born group, with numerous Irish and English immigrants also hired. Despite the original intentions of the proprietors, less than half the workforce was from New England, quite different from the ideal envisioned by the mill’s founder, Hamilton Smith.

The cotton mill did not transform Cannelton into a premier manufacturing city. Investors were never attracted in sufficient numbers, and textile manufacturing became more profitable elsewhere in the country. The mill was sold in 1946 and the company dissolved a few years later. Cannelton remains a small town with limited industry and the mill

building now stands empty. What is significant in terms of immigration history is that the stream of workers to Cannelton, was part of a larger westward migration of the population in general, seeking land, jobs, and economic stability in the mid-nineteenth century.

For more information about the Indiana Cotton Mills, consult the Indiana Historical Society Collections, M 0156, Indiana Cotton Mill Records, 1849-1948. A collection guide is available online at http://www.indianahistory.org/library/manuscripts/collection_guides/m0156.html.