*The Other High Point: A Case Study in Industrialization 1900 to 1920*

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High Point, NC has long been known as the furniture capital of the world. For many years it was the U.S. location of both major furniture companies and the largest furniture market showrooms (“High Point: Furniture,” n.d.). Within the shadow of this furniture empire was a large and prosperous textile industry. Prior to 1900, High Point had a large cotton mill that was spinning cotton and weaving plaid fabrics (Scarborough, 1890). Additional segments of the textile industry grew rapidly during the first two decades of the 1900s. By the 1920s, several early mills merged into what became one of the world’s largest hosiery mills (“Adams-Millis,” 2023).

Yes, a small interior city located in a rural area of North Carolina seemed primed for the furniture industry, but the question is posited “Why did High Point become a region of industrialization for the textile industry?” Other cities were larger or more prominent even in 1900 (e.g., Raleigh, Charlotte). The answer to the question was explored with the framework of the following theories: Weber’s 1929 theory of industrial location (Weber & Friedrich, 2017) and a supply chain management (SCM) theory built by Chen and Paulraj (2004). According to Weber, the following multiple factors must be in place for industry growth: transportation availability, labor resources and potential for agglomeration. Key SCM constructs are focused on collaboration among the network of suppliers and buyers (Chen & Paulrajy, 2044). The SCM theory intersects with Weber’s agglomeration factor in that supply chains work best when linkages are in collaboration.

Methods. To explore this topic, the researchers used qualitative research with historical analysis (Thorpe & Holtz, 2008). Similar methods were used by clothing and textile researchers for historical analysis (e.g., Kincade, Quesenberry, & Dull, 2015; Swanson, Rabolt & Markova, 2014). With this approach, descriptive analysis as well as quantitative information is given about the High Point textile industry. Primary sources written during the early 1900s and secondary sources included: company literature, government documents, labor data and newspaper accounts; many archived and obtained from museums, government repositories and university collections. Factors from Weber and Friedrich (2017) were used to guide data collection and analysis. Additional content gleaned from historic sources included number and profile of plants, location of plants and marketing of products. Validity and reliability were enhanced by a review from a panel of experts, including one expert with 30 years of industry experience and an expert in historic analysis. With multiple sources, triangulation of data further verified findings.

Findings and Discussion. An examination of High Point in the early 1900s shows that the three major factors of Weber and Friedrich’s (2017) theory, along with other supporting factors for industrialization growth, are in place for this tiny spot in the NC piedmont. Regarding transportation availability, High Point is, as its name states, the high point in the NC piedmont and is a mid-point to major distribution points (Farriss, 1903). By 1900, the roads were well developed and linked the city to many large southern markets (Farriss, 1903). The city also had a railroad (i.e., Southern Railway Company) connecting High Point to major points to the north and to the city of Fayetteville to the south, on the Cape Fear River. The railroad and river combination provided easy access to the ocean port in Wilmington, NC (“Cape Fear River,” 2023). Regarding labor resources, the city had available labor as workers move into town for amenities (e.g., schools for children, running water, electricity) and away from agrarian jobs (Varner & Faison, 1903).

Agglomeration (i.e., Weber’s third factor, 1917) was also exhibited in the examination of High Point’s textile industry growth. By 1900, the city of High Point had several mercantile establishments that were doing brisk business and the demand for finished apparel goods was high (Farriss, 1903). As population grew, need for apparel products increased demand for more yarns and fabrics. Several companies across the textile pipeline were established in a centralized part of High Point. This garment district became an area where resources could be shared and business partners could network. In addition to substantiating the importance of Weber’s three factors of industrialization, the development of the textile industry in High Point follows the patterns established by Chen and Paulraj (2004) for supply chain management.

A specific example of this agglomeration of resources and the supply chain effect of networking is the establishment of the High Point Shirt Manufacturing Co, located in the loft above one of the mercantile establishments (Sanborne Map Company, 1902). This cut-and-sew loft was expanded and joined with the High Point Overall Company (Varner & Faison, 1904). These businesses were formed and managed by the partnership of J. H. Adams and J. H. Millis. Through various business deals, Adams and Millis, along with multiple investors, established and built the High Point Hosiery Mill (Shipman & Justice, 1909). To provide a convenient and steady supply of raw materials (i.e., hosiery yarn), various and subsequent cotton mills were built, and growth continued as the industry shifted from local sales to export of industry output sold through agents in New York (Shipman, 1918). Data in more period documentation show additional examples of the growth of industrialization for the textile industry within High Point. The move from local retailer to an industry power is noted when examining the history of other companies in High Point (Farriss, 1918; Shipman, 1918).

Conclusions and Implications. The framework from the confluence of theories from industrialization and supply chain management were useful in reviewing this historical data and assisted the researchers in organizing the findings. Using the factors noted in the two theories, a rich and detailed context was developed for this example of industrialization. High Point in the first two decades of the 1920s easily met the criteria from the industrialization theory and the factors proposed in the supply chain theory. In confirmation of this, a prominent businessman in 1918 stated that “We had not yet realized that the logical way to build an independent community with its accompanying wealth and superior advantages, was to work raw material into useful articles and have the world as a market” (Farriss, 1918, pp. 7-8).

To add verification of application of these theories, the researchers recommend the use of merger of the industrialization theory and the SCM theory for studying other NC locations and other Southern regions. In addition, recognizing the important of agglomeration of industrial factors and the need for collaboration could be used by practitioners as a method for exploring the potential for industrialization of a region. Local businesses interested in expanding onshoring may find the study of these factors for a region to be potentially insightful.

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