

THE GENESIS OF CAMPERDOWN

By Penelope Forrester

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INTRODUCTION: Through this series on the history of Camperdown we hope to set to rest some misperceptions and misinterpretations (myths) perpetuated in newspaper articles and histories over the years. This first installment is meant to cover only the beginnings of Greenville's first downtown textile mill, and set the scene for the venture of opening of our first major mill. The materials used in the documentation are either primary or secondary sources of the time. Future articles will feature the various stages of development and a survey of the earliest known mill operatives.

Reedy River falls in downtown Greenville was termed the "most important on the stream, amounting to 64 feet in 500 yards, over a layer of gneiss-rock" in an 1880 government document.ⁱ Richard Pearis first realized this when he established his home and mill here in 1760. Vardry McBee realized it when he purchased the 400 acres that became downtown Greenville from Lemuel J. Alston in 1815. And, Oscar H. Sampson & Charles Hall realized it in 1874 when they leased the property on which the Camperdown Mills was established.

Water-Power of the United States, a document published in 1885 as part of the 1880 Federal Census of the Population, described the businesses "currently" located on and availing themselves of the power of the river and the falls.

"The fall is used in two parts. The upper part is used on the left bank by Camperdown Mill No. 2, and on the right bank by a machine-shop and box-factory, both using a fall of 32 feet."ⁱⁱ

The dam was described as made of timber bolted to the rock, 60 feet long and 3 feet high, making scarcely any pond; the race was 325 feet long, and the power used about 245 horse-power, which however, can only be obtained for about six months of the year. The factory uses 225 horse-power.ⁱⁱⁱ

"The Lower fall is 32 feet and used on the right bank by the Camperdown Mill No. 1, with a triangular wooden frame dam 105 feet long and 14 feet high, bolted to the rock and planked over, and built in 1875 at a cost of \$1000. It ponds the water up to the tail-race of the upper factory, about 300 yards, and the head-race is 165 feet long. The power used is 160 horse-power, while the upper mill uses up to 200 horse-power steam, the machine shop using none."^{iv}

Most Greenvillians recognize that Camperdown Mill was the brainchild of Boston businessmen Oscar H. Sampson and George F. Hall. Why did they make the decision to come to Greenville? Some say Sampson lost his business in the Great Boston Fire. Some refer to him in the most derogatory term that could be attached to a northern businessman in the post-Civil War south – "carpetbagger." Was he an opportunist? Yes. Carpetbagger? Perhaps. Did the Boston fire play a part in his decision? Maybe.

More likely, he saw an opportunity to expand into a new field – the manufacture his own yarn - and in so doing cut out the middleman in his dealings with the northern textile markets. To be sure, he was a shrewd businessman. And the McBee brothers (Vardry A. & Alexander) were ripe for a major deal.

Vardry E. McBee, while not the "founder" of Greenville, certainly had the vision and the brains to develop a plan and see it through. He advertised in northern papers for artisans and craftsmen and manufacturers and merchants. He brought tinsmiths, coppersmiths, brick makers, bricklayers, gunsmiths, blacksmiths, tanners and merchants to the area. He developed and leased property to interested parties, he took the lead in the establishment of the railroad, thereby making Greenville the place to be in the early to mid-19th Century. His sons, Vardry A. and Alexander McBee learned at his knee.

Greenville County had already established a presence in the textile field. Thomas Hutchings, William Bates, and John Weaver were among the earliest New England transplants to establish small textile enterprises in the area. Vardry E. McBee also had a small cotton manufactory near present day (2008) Conestee.

It is entirely possible that the elder McBee, or one of his sons, established a relationship with Oscar Sampson on a trip north to sell cotton or woolen products in the northern climes. Or, Sampson visited Greenville in search of mills to represent.

Sampson was a cotton broker and commission merchant for 20 years before investing in Greenville's economy. He is listed in the 1855 Boston Business Directory as a partner in Curtis, Tobey & Sampson. By 1865, he was operating as Oscar H. Sampson & Co., dry goods commission merchant. In 1872 he is listed as a cotton broker, doing business as Sampson, Hall, & Co., at 168 Devonshire Street.^v He had apparently taken his son-in-law into the business between the former and latter years and he was still in business as Sampson, Hall & Co., in 1875.^{vi} He continued his business in Boston, New York and Philadelphia until his death in 1893.

The Great Fire of Boston burned almost one square mile of Boston's central business district, including wharves and warehouses. Devonshire Street was one of the most devastated.^{vii} The fire of November 9th and 10th, 1872 probably razed Oscar Sampson's business. However, it is my opinion that the fire was NOT the central reason for Sampson's establishment of a business in South Carolina. Because he signed his first lease with the McBee boys on 9 January 1874,^{viii} just over a year after the disaster, so it seems reasonable that he had been seeking a site for some time and was probably in negotiations before the fire.

In a 1971 letter to a Mr. Haithcock, the late Mrs. Mildred Whitmire, for many years the custodian of all things McBee in Greenville, stated that the first legal document concerning Camperdown was a 10-year lease with five-year option, for waterpower and an existing building.

Within the letter Mrs. Whitmire cited impeccable sources – the original leases she had in her possession. She included wording from the leases as well as the notes accompanying them.

The following is a timeline of some of the earliest legal documents:

9 January 1874: The first lease from V. A. and Alex McBee to Sampson Hall & Co., provided a 10-year lease, with five-year additional lease, of waterpower and a building. This building was at least two stories because within the document the McBees agreed to put a new floor in the lower story. Formerly used as a flour or gristmill, the McBees were also to remove the millstones and all other grinding equipment. Mrs. Whitmire opined that the building could have had more than two stories, but the wording of the lease proves there were at least two.

11 May 1874: A plat was executed by W. D. Threlkeld, identifying a "factory house," near the dam at the Main St. ford, on the Furman University side of the river. While incomplete, the plat also shows a sawmill farther down the river.

7 May 1875: The McBees executed an agreement "in contemplation of a joint stock company," to extend their lease to Sampson Hall & Co. to 1891 and 1906, with rental increasing incrementally. It is within this document that the McBees agreed to build a 64' x 225' brick building on the site of the then "Cagle (Lumber) Planing Mill." The new structure would be two stories, each measuring 15' in height, and a tower for staircases. They would also build a 40' x 50' picker house. The ceiling height of the picker house would be 11 feet. Mrs. Whitmire also denies the tale that "northern capital" built Camperdown by enumerating the members of its joint stock company – Thomas M. Cox, Hamlin Beattie, Alexander McBee, T. Q. Donaldson, W. T. Shumate and H. C. Markley and Associates – all Greenville men. However, in reality, it was a joint North-South venture, with Sampson as the President.

29 July 1875: On this date, and on the back of the May 1874 lease, Sampson Hall and Co., "for good and sufficient reasons" transferred their lease to Camperdown Mills. In a second document of same date, Sampson Hall & Co., sold their lease, as well as "all machinery, tools, and everything used in the factory, except material on hand" to Camperdown Mills for 1150 shares of stock at \$100 per share. Note: The latter instrument effectively relieves Oscar Sampson and George F. Hall of personal liability should the company fail. It also becomes a pivotal phrase in at least two future litigations and has led several historians, including Mrs. Whitmire, to assume that Sampson had no right to move the machinery to his new mill on the outskirts of Greenville – Sampson Mill, later named American Spinning. The writer will address this misunderstanding in a future chapter.

25 Jan 1876: O. H. Sampson receipted the arrival of the original stock subscription list of Camperdown Mills, and the lease from the McBees.

12 Dec 1876: A Mr. L. Williams, appointed by the Board of Directors to audit the books, reported that Sampson Hall & Co. had on hand cotton valued \$4,521; \$1580 cotton in process of manufacture, and other supplies worth \$398.77. A trial balance dated this day and sworn to by Geo. F. Hall, for Camperdown Mills, showed an actual surplus of \$19,699 (almost a half-million in today's dollars).^{ix}

Within her letter to the mysterious Mr. Haithcock, Mrs. Whitmire rather vehemently denied that George Putnam was one of the original founders of the mill. However, if he wasn't "on the ground" the first day, he was certainly there very quickly. Putnam, who once had been a cotton broker as noted in the 1870 Census of Boston, and by 1872 occupied a business at the same Boston address as Oscar Sampson, DISAPPEARED from the Boston Directory on 1875, while Sampson & Hall remained. It is likely that he came to South Carolina to hire operatives and open the business. He was also listed as one of the directors when Camperdown was officially chartered the next year.

An act of the South Carolina Legislature served as the official charter in January 1876, with Oscar H. Sampson, president; Hamlin Beattie, vice president; George L. Hall, treasurer; and Alexander McBee, secretary. The board of directors was composed of the above four plus Thomas M. Cox, H. C. Markley, and George Putnam.^x

It appears that from its earliest days, Camperdown was beset by problems in the three most critical areas of operation – financial, physical plant, and human resources. Multiple litigations among the principals certainly did nothing to enhance the development of the business the operatives worked so diligently to serve.

Camperdown was born in the era of the Long Depression (1873 – 1896), which was felt most sorely in the United States between 1873 and 1879. The failure of Jay Cooke & Company, the largest U.S. bank, burst the post-Civil War speculative bubble. Still, Camperdown began well, or so it seemed.^{xi}

By the end of its first full year of operation, Oscar Sampson probably felt he was doomed by fire, for the young company had suffered two fires. First, on 28 April 1875, a fire in the newly built picker room did damage estimated between \$500 and \$600 (\$11,208 in 2008 dollars not counting lost time). On 8 March 1876, another fire damaged cotton and batting worth eight hundred dollars, or \$14,944 today.

And, if that were not enough, it seems the company had difficulty in obtaining operatives. This situation was not unique to Camperdown. Most of the fledgling textile companies suffered the same problem and resorted to using interesting techniques in an effort to gain suitable employees. The most significant employee issue for Camperdown was a difficulty in securing an additional 250 operatives needed to run the mill at night. Why was it so difficult? The south, and certainly Greenville, was accustomed to a mostly agrarian economy prior to the Civil War. Greenville was a bit better off than some other counties, because there were elements of a textile industry prior to the war, and the Gower, Cox & Markley Carriage factory was thriving, but most county residents simply did not have a concept of working in a factory. In point of fact, many, many “country” or “mountain” people were suspicious of the “steady paycheck” offered the operatives.

Henry P. Hammett, later president of Camperdown, and still later president Piedmont Mills, expressed his frustration with the state’s labor market in a **Charleston News and Courier** interview in February, 1881, “It is clear that what the South needs more than anything else is diversified labor, and to realize that to labor is respectable, and to be idle is not respectable. With all the unemployed water power and other natural facilities, one of the main industries should be to convert into goods a part of the cotton produced by the soil.”^{xii}

The management used unique, for the time, recruiting efforts to secure good workers, including offering free railroad transportation to Greenville. After an expenditure of \$500, no more workers were in the factory and it was regretted that the mills were “receiving a large accumulation of orders it will be impossible for them to fill.”^{xiii}

The inability to fill orders translated into further financial strain, which eventually led to the company’s first bankruptcy.

George Putnam, superintendent and director, purchased Batesville Mill at auction in 1879 and left the company. John A. Sanford replaced him as superintendent, but it he does not appear to have held an office with the company (His brother, Campbell Sanford, was also the night watchman for a time.), and by 1880, Hamlin Beattie had begun his tenure as president.^{xiv}

Notes:

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- i Swain, George F. Water-Power of the United States, p. 122
 - ii Water-Power, p. 122.
 - iii Ibid, p. 122.
 - iv Ibid, p. 122
 - v Business Directories of Boston, Massachusetts, 1855, 1865, 1870, 1872, 1874 & 1875.
 - vi Boston Business Directory, 1875.
 - vii Map of the Great Fire, copyright 2003, Docema, LLC.
 - viii Whitmire, Mildred. Letter to Mr. Haithcock, dated 8 Oct 1971.
 - ix Ibid.
 - x Federal Reporter, Volume 66, p. 411-412. Enterprise and Mountaineer Newspaper, 26 Jan 1876.
 - xi Encarta Online.
 - xii Charleston News and Courier, 23 Feb 1881.
 - xiii Ibid.
 - xiv Davis City Directory of Greenville, 1883.
