



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

“Geography of the Textile Industry” by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

The textile industry is a good one to study if you want to understand both industrial location principles and industrialization in developing countries. In many ways, textiles are a vanguard industry, one of the first types of manufacturing you'll find in developing areas of world. To understand why this requires us to go back nearly four centuries to England.

At the beginning of the 18th century, English textiles were produced in the home by families. A wife would spin thread and a husband weave the thread into cloth. Merchants would visit the family cottages from time to time to buy the cloth and sell the family raw cotton or wool.

In 1733, a man named John Kay invented a device known as the “flying shuttle.” This allowed

weaving to be done more quickly and allowed larger sizes of cloth to be made. Because weaving was now much faster, the spinners could not keep up. In 1764, James Hargreaves solved this problem with the invention of the “spinning jenny,” which allowed multiple threads to be spun at once.

By the late 1700s, these inventions had been improved upon even more. Richard Arkwright’s “water frame” was a spinning machine so large it required water power to operate, as did Edmund Cartwright’s “power loom.” This caused the industry to shift from cottages to factories along rivers.

In the 19th century, steam power came to replace water power to operate increasingly large textile equipment. Because coal is heavy and bulky, the textile industry in England moved to locations near coal fields, such as Manchester, Birmingham, and Liverpool. Thus the industry had moved from cottage to water to coal.

In the United States, the textile industry was originally concentrated in New England towns that had water power sites. Cities such as Manchester, New Hampshire and Lowell, Massachusetts were important early



textile centers. In time, the need for coal to produce steam caused the industry to shift to port cities where coal could be shipped in. Fall River, Massachusetts was one such city.

But at the end of the 19th century, New England was developing numerous profitable industries besides textiles. In time, competition for workers and the rise of unions forced up wages and the textile industry found it hard to compete with these newer industries. In addition, better transportation routes (and eventually electric power) made access to coal less and less of a problem, so the industry was freer to locate in other areas of the country.

Because wages were considerably lower in the south, the U.S. textile industry moved many operations to Southern states such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia.

In the last decades of the 20th century, wages in the South caught up (for the most part) with wages in the North. Seeking to lower costs, many domestic textile companies began to look for locations overseas where they could take advantage of lower wages. Thus, we see a shift in the textile industry to places such as Latin America and Asia. Today, while the United States still produces textiles, many consumer goods are produced in Indonesia, Thailand, or Central America.

Because textile factories require less capital input than some types of businesses, and because workers can be trained to operate the machinery without a lot of education, it is a good business for developing countries to attract. Therefore, it is one of the first export industries that many countries will develop as they seek to build an industrial base.

Further Research

1. Do an inventory of your clothes and, using a world map, indicate where each piece was produced. Is there a pattern?
2. What were the first industries that located in your region of the country? Why did that particular industry flourish in your area? Is the industry still there, or did it shift in time to somewhere else? If so, why?

Links:

- National Textile Association <http://www.textilenta.org/>
- Global Textile Statistics <http://www.bharattextile.com/industry.php>