

## VII. A Brief History of Cotton Thread

Although Samuel Slater's wife is credited with making the first cotton sewing thread from yarns spun at the Pawtucket, Rhode Island, mill in about 1794, cotton thread did not become a manufactured item at that time. Slater turned all his interests to producing cotton-twist yarns needed for the warps of cotton fabrics. By 1809, however, the agents of Almy and Brown, partners and distributors for Slater, were advertising cotton thread as follows:

Factory Cotton and Thread Store, No. 26 Court Street opposite Concert Hall. George Connell, Agent for Almy and Brown of Providence and Pawtucket Manufactories, has now for sale from eight to ten thousand weight of yarn, for weaving . . . five hundred pounds cotton thread, in hanks, from No. 12 to 60 of a superior quality and very white.\*

Although it was a short hop from the spinning of cotton warps to the twisting of these cotton yarns to form a sewing thread, the general manufacture of cotton thread as an industry did not originate in the United States but rather in Scotland in the early 19th century. Napoleon's blockade, which curtailed Great Britain's importation of silk—needed not only for fabrics but also for making heddle strings for the looms—stimulated the production of cotton thread there. James and Patrick Clark, in desperation,

attempted to substitute cotton for silk in their manufacture of these heddle strings. When they were successful, they considered that if cotton could be used successfully for this purpose it could also be made suitable for sewing thread. In 1812 they built a factory in Paisley, Scotland, which had long been noted for its textile industries. The thread was sold in hanks. About 1820 James' sons, James and John, who were now running J. & J. Clark & Co., began to wind the thread on spools. For this service they charged an extra halfpenny, which was refunded when the empty spool was returned. The thread was usually a three-ply or so-called three-cord thread.

About 1815 James Coats, also of Paisley, started manufacturing thread at Ferguslie, Scotland. His two sons took over the company in 1826 and formed the J. & P. Coats Company. Another brother, Andrew Coats, became the selling agent in the United States about 1840. But the cotton-thread industry was not fully launched.

As reported in an 1853 *Scientific American*, there was "more American thread made ten years ago than there is today."\*\* It was not until the six-cord cabled cotton thread, which was suitable for both machine and hand sewing, was perfected that the industry progressed into full operation.

\*WILLIAM R. BAGNALL, *Textile Industries of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1893), vol. 1, p. 164.

\*\**Scientific American* (Oct. 22, 1853), vol. 9, no. 6, p. 46.