



Connecticut Industry During the Revolutionary War

This is the first entry into my ongoing series, *Connecticut Industry During Times of War*. The American Revolution (1775-1783) is a topic we are all familiar with. For us growing up in New England, history teachers never seemed to shy away from spending a few extra days on this topic while glossing over some later topic in order to still meet the curriculum. To oversimplify and ignore the contributions of other European powers assisting the US colonies for the time being, the Revolutionary War pitted the industrializing power of the British Empire against the agrarian society of the newly formed United States.

The industrial revolution was well underway in Great Britain by the time of the Revolutionary War. The United States' own industrial revolution would not start until the 1790s, decades after it began in England in 1740. The completion of the Slater Textile Mill in Rhode Island and the Beverly Cotton Manufactory in Massachusetts generally mark this period in American history.⁽¹⁾ Industrial activity in Connecticut was dominated by commercial farming up until the mid-18th century. Arguably the most important fixture in every community was the grist mill, used to grind grains into flour or meal. These were not what we think of as industrial mills, but smaller mills run by a handful of individuals at most or just one miller. So imperative were grist mills to the success of the town that they were built preceding town halls or incorporation.⁽²⁾ Interestingly, Connecticut's farming practices were quite wasteful and resulted in land shortages throughout the colony. This wasteful use of land was one contributing factor towards Connecticut's agricultural specialization. For instance, Windham and Litchfield county focused on dairy and meat production due their hilly topography and poor soil compared to the valley regions.



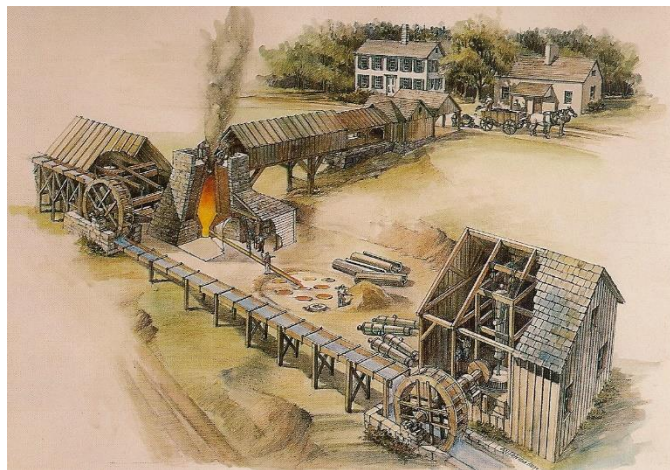
Painting of the USS Confederacy (undated).

Connecticut had a large merchant class at the outbreak of the war but was limited in external trading partners for its farmed goods. Roughly half of the colony's trade was with other colonies, with the other half going to the West Indies.⁽²⁾ With embargoes on external trade at the start of the American Revolution, Connecticut sought to supply the Continental Army and soon became the largest contributor of food to George Washington's Army compared to any other state.⁽³⁾

Shipbuilding was Connecticut's other major and well established industry during the Revolutionary period. In the years leading up to America's revolution, towns with access to Long Island Sound were producing an average of fifty ships per year. The effects of the war also opened up production and acquisition of new ships to be outfitted for privateering. Essentially, these would be pirates that get a commission from their state government. This form of raiding on British commercial and military shipping provided more supplies for America's own fledgling army and navy. The towns of Essex, Groton, Glastonbury, Norwich, and New London were just a few of the many towns contributing to this commercial, and now wartime, industry. Connecticut had begun building its state navy which soon counted fourteen vessels.⁽³⁾ Alas, it would lose all of them by 1779 to either destruction or capture. One of the most impressive ships built during the war was the *USS Confederacy*, a 36-gun frigate built in Norwich and brought to New London for fitting before entering the war in 1779.⁽⁴⁾ It would join the *Trumbull*, built in Chatham, now East Hampton, as Continental Navy Frigates until their capture in 1781.

Embargoes on English imports in the 1760s pushed Connecticut to increase its own manufacturing industries and the outbreak of war hastened this advancement with its high demand for material. The Salisbury Iron Furnace, supported by the ore-rich region of Northwest Connecticut, more than doubled its production during the years of the war and provided almost all of the cannon and shot used by the large ships built in Connecticut. The contribution of this Salisbury Iron Industry was crucial for the war effort, producing over three-fourths of all of the cannon made in

America at the time.⁽⁵⁾ Glastonbury helped supply gunpowder with the Stocking Gunpowder Mill even through tragedy. It immediately began production with the Revolution but suffered a catastrophic explosion, killing most members of the Stocking family and two additional workers. In a show of true courage and patriotism, the matriarch of the family, Eunice Stocking, along with her son and financial help from Howell Woodbridge, rebuilt the mill and continued to supply the army with gunpowder through the end of the war.⁽⁷⁾ The towns of Norwich and East Hartford emerged as Connecticut's



A reproduced drawing of the Salisbury Iron Furnace by Steven Patricia (1993). Source: Daily Life in Colonial America, Reader's Digest Association Inc.

leading factory towns in the beginning of the war. Indeed, by 1774 Norwich already hosted a chocolate factory, papermill, a felt-manufacturing plant, multiple fulling mills, a nail factory, a bookbindery, and a clock factory. Once the war was underway, more entrepreneurs opened their own manufacturing businesses in the same area. East Hartford had the Pitkin family, owners of several cloth mills, who used the State's assistance to manufacture gunpowder, paper, and iron for the war effort.⁽²⁾

All of these industries played a part in Connecticut earning the nickname, "The Provision State" as the leading steady supplier of food, clothing, and ammunition to the Continental Army.⁽³⁾ Even in the beginnings of the country, Connecticut held a major role in the Union for its industry and ingenuity. Over time, Connecticut's moniker of being a supply

state would continue to ring true. Connecticut would again prove instrumental to the survival of the Union during our next stop on this historical timeline: The Civil War.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.