Fulling Around: The Shaker Fulling Mill at South Union, Kentucky

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Comments

Abstract
The fulling mill was an essential component of any successful early-19th century woolen industry. Fullers applied finishing techniques to cloth in order to create a stronger, more attractive, and more useful fabric. In 1813 the Shakers at Kentucky's South Union community constructed a fulling mill that serviced their own demands for textile finishing processes as well as those of area residents. The fulling mill, aided by the Shakers' three-year-old carding mill, developed by the 1860s into a full-fledged woolen factory.

Disciplines
Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Religion | Sales and Merchandising | Work, Economy and Organizations

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Additional Files
Center House.jpg (115 kB)
The Center House at South Union. Construction on the structure began in 1822 and was completed in 1833. It housed the Center Family and included a large room for religious meetings and a commodious kitchen. This building and several others have been restored and are open for touring. (Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.)

FM broadside.jpg (168 kB)
Figure 1. Fulling mill broadside. 1815. South Union Shakers circulated this broadside to announce their fulling mill business. Another handbill, 'INSTRUCTIONS for the information and benefit of Domestic Manufacturers of Woolen Cloths,' advised customers on precise methods of preparing the wool before weaving. (Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.)

FM record book.jpg (122 kB)
Figure 2. Fulling mill record book. In their account books, South Union fullers recorded pertinent information about each transaction: customer's name and residence, finishing processes to perform, yardage, purpose of the cloth, and any special instructions from the customer. (Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.)
Figure 3. The authors chose these elements to extrapolate data for the database.

Figure 4. Water-operated fulling mill. As water turned the water wheel, tappet arms secured to the wheel raised and dropped the mallet handles. This action caused the mallets to alternately beat and turn the cloth placed in the stock. Hot water, soap, and agitation cleansed the fabric and caused its fiber to interlock forming a stronger, firmer material than that cut from the loom. (Illustration after "The Young Mill-Wright and Miller's Guide," by Oliver Evans, 1826 edition)

Figure 5. Map showing counties of residence for all South Union's fulling mill customers. (Illustration after S.E. Morse 1823 Kentucky and Tennessee map)

Figure 6. Blue woolen blanket from South Union. (Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.)

Back Cover: One of the first buildings constructed (1810) at the Shaker community at South Union, Kentucky. Although it served a number of purposes throughout the years, it was best known as the Shaker school house. The South Union Shakers also ran a fulling mill, the subject of the article beginning on the next page. (Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky.)