

Cannon, James William ^[1]

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by Brent D. Glass, 1979

25 Apr. 1852–19 Dec. 1921

See also: [Cannon Mills](#) ^[2]

James William Cannon, [textile manufacturer](#) ^[3], was born near Sugaw Creek Church in [Mecklenburg County](#) ^[4]. His father was Joseph Allison Cannon and his mother, Eliza Long. As a boy he worked on his father's farm and attended private school in the session house of the Sugaw Creek Presbyterian Church. At the age of thirteen he went to Charlotte and worked in a general store, where he was paid at first only room and board and later four dollars a month. In 1868 he moved to Concord and was employed as a clerk in the general store of Cannon, Fetzer, and Wadsworth, in which his brother, David Franklin, was a partner. Within three years, he was able to purchase an interest in the store, and he became active head of the business. During the next fifteen years, he developed this mercantile operation into one of Concord's leading firms. He became a leader of the community and took an interest in its business and social life.

Cannon's career as an [industrialist](#) ^[5] was exemplary of the economic movement in the late nineteenth century that became known as the New South. As chief cotton purchaser for his store, he noted the weak economic structure in the Piedmont of North Carolina, whereby farmers sold cheap raw materials to northern manufacturers and in turn bought expensive finished goods. Like some of his more ambitious contemporaries, he set out to develop the local industrial potential of his community as a means of escaping this ruinous business cycle. In 1887 he founded the [Cannon Manufacturing Company](#) ^[2]. In this venture he himself was dependent upon outside capital to supplement his own investment. He borrowed seventy-five thousand dollars from northern banks and enlisted the technical assistance of the McGill and Wood Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia. Cannon's experience was in trading cotton, not processing it, and in this respect he was typical of many textile pioneers in the South. The testimony of a former employee, who went to work at the first Cannon plant in Concord at age eleven, recalled that Cannon was acutely aware of his lack of technical knowledge: "He would often come to the mill and look me up, [a small boy](#) ^[6], and ask me to show him how to operate the machinery. I remember very distinctly teaching him how to put up ends on the spinning frames and to dolph and many other things. At one time when we were cleaning and overhauling the spinning frames, Mr. Cannon donned blue overalls and came into the mill and worked by my side helping in this that he might get this experience. He asked many questions about the work and I tried in my boyish way to answer them."

This first mill, which operated at the site of the present Plant Number 2 in Concord, was completed in 1888 [John M. Odell](#) ^[7], then Concord's most prominent manufacturer, served as president of the company, and Cannon was secretary-treasurer as well as general manager and superintendent. The plant was small, only four thousand spindles and a few looms, but Cannon cloth rapidly achieved widespread popularity in the South, and by 1900 the company had expanded to Salisbury, Albemarle, Mt. Pleasant, and China Grove. Cannon's success was due in great measure to his marketing skill and his ability to develop a sophisticated sales organization. It was his marketing sense that led to the change in 1898 from Cannon cloth to Cannon towels, the first ever produced in the South. Cannon recognized that the era of home sewing was passing and that the cloth market was becoming more competitive. He also realized that middle- and lower-class southerners could not purchase towels cheaply.

Ultimately, Cannon decided to manufacture towels exclusively, a decision that led to the establishment of Kannapolis in 1906. This mill village was originally founded upon a six-hundred-acre tract of land seven miles from Concord on the border of [Rowan](#) ^[8] and [Cabarrus](#) ^[9] counties. As the Cannon empire grew—eventually plants were established in South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama—Kannapolis became its capital, one of the world's largest unincorporated towns. Designed by E. S. Draper and Company, Kannapolis provided its inhabitants with religious, educational, and recreational facilities. Schools, parks, churches, dormitories, and the South's largest [YMCA](#) ^[10] were built, owned, and operated by the company. The Cannon Manufacturing Company, which became the largest producer of towels in the world, and Kannapolis, sometimes known as City of Towels, stood as the capstones to Cannon's career.

Cannon was married on 24 Nov. 1875 to Mary Ella Bost of Concord. They had ten children: Joseph Franklin, Adelaide, Margaret, [James William](#) ^[1], Mary, Martin Luther, Eugene Thomas, James Ross, [Charles Albert](#) ^[11], and Laura. Cannon was a member of the [Masonic Order](#) ^[12], a political independent, and an active member of the First Presbyterian Church in Concord. He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Concord. A portrait is owned by the Cannon family.

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Subjects:

Biographies [14]

Business leaders [15]

Businesses [16]

Cotton [17]

Industry [18]

N.C. Industrial Revolution (1900-1929) [5]

Textile industry [19]

Authors:

Glass, Brent D. [20]

Origin - location:

Piedmont [21]

Cabarrus County [22]

Concord [23]

Mecklenburg County [24]

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[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/cannon-james-william> [2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/cannon-mills> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/textiles> [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/mecklenburg> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/nc-industrial-rev> [6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/child-labor> [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/odell-john-milton> [8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/rowan> [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/cabarrus> [10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/ymca-and-ywca> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/cannon-charles-albert> [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/freemasons> [13] <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/cannon/> [14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/business-leaders> [16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/businesses> [17] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/cotton> [18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/industry> [19] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/textile-industry> [20] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/glass-brent-d> [21] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont> [22] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-18> [23] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-42> [24] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmont/m> [25] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>