

Samuel Slater

In the early days of the Industrial Revolution, the knowledge of how to build machines was worth a great deal to the countries that had developed the new technology. As much as they wanted to keep that knowledge to themselves, there was a desire just as strong to acquire that knowledge in the countries that did not have it. Machines to spin and to weave textiles had been invented in England. This gave England a tremendous advantage in the textile business. American textile companies offered cash bounties to British millworkers who would come to the United States with knowledge of the machines' operation. To keep the knowledge of how to build these machines in Britain, Parliament made it a crime for anyone to leave the country with copies for textile machine plans.

Samuel Slater was among the Englishmen who took their knowledge of spinning and weaving machines and sold that information for a profit. Was he an enterprising, young American businessman or a British traitor?

Slater came from a working class family in Derbyshire, England. He worked as an apprentice and later a supervisor in a textile factory for six and half years. Sir Richard Arkwright, a partner with the inventor of water-powered spinning machines, was the factory owner. Slater was able to learn everything about the cotton yarn industry.

When he was 21, Slater decided to immigrate to the United States. He kept his decision secret and memorized the machinery plans and layout in the factory where he worked. When he had the information he needed, he used a false name to book passage on a ship and listed his occupation as a farmhand. Slater's family did not know he had gone until they received a letter from him several days after he had sailed.

Slater arrived at Philadelphia and soon moved to New York City. Here he landed a job in a textile business and talked openly about his unique employment qualifications. A few months later he was offered the chance to design a state-of-the-art cotton yarn factory in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. In return, the owner was willing to let Slater keep all of that plant's profits. Slater accepted this generous offer.

Making a profit proved to be more of a challenge than he expected, but it finally happened. It was three years before the plant was making high-quality yarn and another three before it made a profit. As they opened more mills, the company's success grew.

One of the ways the business prospered was by employing children between 4 and 10 years old. They could learn to tend the machines, and they were paid lower wages than adult workers. Children were happy to get the jobs, however, because working conditions in the plants were better and the hours shorter than work on their families' farms. The working conditions were also better than those endured by child laborers in textile plants and other industries in the latter part of the 1800s.

By 1798, at the age of 30, Slater started his own company with his brothers, who had come to the United States. They made sewing thread from cotton, replacing the more expensive linen thread. Slater's wife, Hanna, invented and patented this process. She was the first woman in American history to receive a patent.

Slater went on to build cotton mills and woolen mills in the 1800s, and he became interested in the iron foundry business as well. He also provided support services to his workers, such as opening one of the first Sunday schools in the United States in one of his mills. He later experimented with having whole families work at his mills, with fathers in supervisory jobs and wives and children tending the machines.

Slater and his company became very successful and prosperous; and he is credited with building the first modern factories in the United States. Would Slater have been as successful if he had remained in England and obeyed the law prohibiting the export of factory specifications? Was he correct to do what he did? Although the American textile industry competed with England's textile industry, the British industry remained strong. Was the spread of industrial technology inevitable, no matter what individuals such as Slater might have done? Was Samuel Slater an "American hero"?

Name: _____ Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the British government make it illegal to take information about their textile machines out of the country?
2. What might have been Slater's motivation to take his expertise to the United States rather than continue to work in England?
3. When Slater left England, what did he do to avoid detection?
4. By going to America, he made the knowledge he had more valuable. Why?

