

BUSINESS ADVOCATE

Henry County recently received a major economic investment when an abandoned textile factory was flipped into a state-of-the-art sawmill providing lumber to companies across Alabama.

VOLUME 12 ISSUE 9

*A publication of the
Business Council
of Alabama*

A large industrial sawmill facility with a crane and stacks of lumber. The image shows a vast yard filled with stacks of cut lumber and logs. In the background, there is a large wooden building and a complex metal structure with a crane. The sky is overcast.

RICH IN FIBER

THE BCA IS ALABAMA'S STATE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, LEARN MORE AT [BCATODAY.ORG](https://bcatoday.org)

FIBER COMPANY OFFERS A HISTORIC ECONOMIC INVESTMENT FOR ALABAMA COUNTY



With the August 27, 2019, grand opening of Abbeville Fiber, Henry County welcomed the largest economic investment in its 200-year history. Numerous city, state, and county partnerships came together to make this new sawmill possible. A noted businessman laid the groundwork, and honoring his father's legacy was part of the motivation.

In 2013, Abbeville's Jimmy Rane, who serves as president and CEO of Great Southern Wood Holdings, Inc., purchased the empty West Point Pepperell facility on Highway 431. This site was once the Alabama location for Pepperell Manufacturing Company and was a jewel in the crown of city leaders back in the early 1950s. Chief among them was Rane's father, Tony Rane.

Tony Rane had been a serial entrepreneur in the Wiregrass area and beyond. One of his many businesses, a fine dining establishment called The Village Inn

Restaurant, opened in June 1948 in downtown Abbeville. The food, service, and atmosphere made it a favorite stop for locals as well as travelers passing through town. It even earned a recommendation in the Duncan Hines Travel Guide for

Village Inn one of his regular stops. Carter was a big fan of Tony Rane's spaghetti, and he also enjoyed his visits with the local businessmen who always touted the wonderful opportunities in the Abbeville area. It didn't take long for community leaders to recognize that they had an opportunity to recruit

"NOT ONLY DID IT BRING JOBS TO THE AREA, IT'S GREAT FOR GREAT SOUTHERN, TOO... ENABLING US TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY, CONSISTENCY, AND QUALITY FOR OUR PRODUCTS."

best places to eat on the road.

Homer Carter, the president of Pepperell Manufacturing Company, would pass through Abbeville on the way to his Florida beach house, and he began to make The

a company that could provide new jobs and stable employment for the area. The widely supported recruitment paid off. Pepperell opened for business in Abbeville in 1952.

For the next 50 years, through different forms of ownership, the textile plant



provided employment for local residents – reaching 1300 at its peak in the 1990s within a 550,000-square-foot facility. Sadly, however, pressures on the textile industry affected job levels and eventually led to the plant's closure in 2008.

When Rane purchased the vacant building five years later, he had hoped to find a tenant that would bring new jobs to the area. Eventually, he made the choice to launch that new business himself.

"Jimmy Rane asked, 'Is there any reason you couldn't put a sawmill in that building?'" said Michael Lancaster, who was the industry professional he tapped to oversee the project. There were lots of reasons it couldn't be done, but Lancaster, who serves as Great Southern's vice president of sawmill operations, led the team that overcame each obstacle.

Transforming the facility into a state-of-the-art sawmill featuring the latest technology in the industry took more than a year to complete. The transformation involved more than forty major revisions, including removing rows of steel shelves, gutting the building, purchasing equipment from across North America, and drilling three-foot-deep holes to install steel support beams.

By July 2019, the facility returned to life as a sawmill servicing Great Southern Wood's treating plants in support of the company's YellaWood® brand products. The first load of logs arrived on July 8, and the first shipment left the sawmill on October 4.

The production of the sawmill is strictly intended for the consumption of Great Southern Wood Preserving treating plants to fill in those items that may be difficult to procure timely through regular sawmill vendors. An affiliate of Great Southern owns and operates sawmills in Northport and other locations that are part of the supply chain solution. The vast majority of lumber purchased by Great Southern treating plants, however, continues to be supplied from its outside vendors.

Though Great Southern initially thought all the production would go to the Abbeville plant, thanks to rail access, Abbeville Fiber has been able to ship products to other company plants as well. The facility is able to purchase as many as 100 loads of logs in a day, most of which comes from fifteen to twenty crews in the area.

Though the facility won't reach Pepperell's peak level of jobs, the local economy will benefit from the 115 new jobs at the

LEFT PAGE

Ribbon cutting ceremony during the grand opening of Abbeville Fiber, August 27, 2019

THIS PAGE

Left: Abbeville Fiber's log merchandizer scans logs and optimizes them to 8, 10, or 12-foot lengths

Right: Material is checked for accuracy at the gang saw outfeed

NEXT PAGE

Aerial photo of Abbeville Fiber, LLC



facility, which will be doubled by the one-to-one multiplier effect in job creation within the local logging industry.

“Not only did it bring jobs to the area, it’s great for Great Southern, too,” Lancaster said. “All the production from the sawmill goes to Great Southern treating plants, enabling us to improve efficiency, consistency, and quality for our products.”

The sawmill also offers another advantage—no waste. Residuals such as sawdust, bark, and chips, as well as green and dry shavings are marketed for a variety of uses including paper manufacturing, wood pellet production, power generation, and poultry farm bedding. Tree “tops” are also used for fence post manufacturing.

Abbeville Fiber is the biggest investment in Henry County’s history, and the impact of the project can be seen in tax revenues for the City of Abbeville that increased nearly 27% in the second quarter of 2019 versus the

same time period in 2018. The caliber of the jobs is also notable. The estimated average hourly rate is \$21.62, well above the current average wage in Henry County.

Just like the initial effort to recruit Pepperell to Abbeville, this project, too, is the result of the partnership and coordinated effort among city, county, state, and federal leaders to bring jobs and an economic boost to the community at large. The entities included Governor Kay Ivey, Alabama Department of Commerce, Alabama Industrial Development Training, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, Alabama

Department of Transportation, City of Abbeville, the City of Dothan, the Houston and Henry County Commissions, the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, the Dothan Area Chamber of Commerce – Grow Dothan economic development program, The Industrial Development Authority of Houston and Henry Counties, the federal, state and local legislative delegation, Southeast AlabamaWorks, Economic Development Administration, Alabama Power Company, Southeast Gas, and Genesee and Wyoming Railroad, who have all worked together to bring good-paying jobs to the citizens of Abbeville, Henry County and the Wiregrass region. **BA**

The Business Advocate is published by the Business Council of Alabama, a non-partisan, statewide business association representing the interests and concerns of nearly 1 million working Alabamians through its member companies and its partnership with the Chamber of Commerce Association of Alabama. For more information on the Business Council of Alabama please contact us at (800) 665-9647 or visit us online at bcatoday.org.