

BUSINESS & ECONOMY

Pioneer Industries

Kentucky's earliest industries were home-based production of tools and clothing for self-sufficient family farms. Other important early industries included salt mining, iron mining and smelting, hemp and rope production, and niter mining and gunpowder production.

Because it served as a preservative, long hunters and settlers highly valued salt and the production of this mineral represented one of the state's first industries. Existing under the state's sandstone formations, salt was deposited in the soils as natural springs leached it from the rock. These deposits, known as "licks" because wild game licked the salt from the ground—became the sites of Kentucky salt works. After pioneer-producers excavated a salt spring, they dug a long trench, the longest was about three miles, which served as a "furnace." Salt makers placed large kettles, some of which held over twenty gallons, over a fire built in the furnace to evaporate the water and leave the salt.

Many salt producers obtained their kettles from yet another of Kentucky's pioneer industries—iron. In 1791 Jacob Myers constructed what probably was Kentucky's first iron furnace near what is now Owingsville, in Bath County. Iron makers constructed stone furnaces forty feet high in which they smelted limestone and ore with charcoal to produce iron. While some furnaces cast finished items including pots and stoves, others simply produced wrought iron for local blacksmiths.

Due to the number of interdependent operations, from woodcutters and miners to highly skilled furnace masters, the larger operations, such as the Aetna Furnace, built in 1816 in Hart County, utilized the labor of hundreds of people, both slave and free. These iron plantations, which included company houses, stores, and schools represented an interesting juxtaposition of antebellum labor systems with the company town system most commonly associated with the modern coal mining industry. The height of Kentucky's

iron industry was in the 1830s and 1840s, when the state ranked third in production behind Pennsylvania and New York. Kentucky's iron industry fell to seventh in the nation in 1870 and all but ceased by 1910.

Evidence indicates that niter mining at Saltpeter

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**Carpenter Shop
Fort Boonesborough**

Photo: Sid Webb

Cave in Carter County became a full-time operation during the War of 1812.

At Great Saltpeter Cave in Rockcastle County and at Mammoth Cave, the works essentially became large saltpeter factories that employed hundreds of laborers, free and slave, and utilized more advanced processing technology. These

mines ran twenty-four hours a day all year at the height of their operations. Moreover, saltpeter mining intensified in the Red River Gorge rockshelters during the war. This increase in niter production gave rise to what was the last, though not least of Kentucky's pioneer industries, gunpowder manufacturing.

Gunpowder, a combination of saltpeter, charcoal and sulfur, production began in Lexington as early as 1793, when Richard Foley advertised gunpowder for sale at his South Elkhorn mill. During the War of 1812 powder mills such as those owned by the Trotter family of Lexington became big business.

Products manufactured in Kentucky (1810)

ITEM	MEASURE ²	US RANK ³	% US TOTAL ³
Hemp ¹	5,755 tons	1	99.9
Hemp bagging	453,750 yards	1	98.0
Salt peter ¹	201,937 lbs	1	47.0
Salt	324,870 bushels	2	26.2
Maple sugar ¹	2,471,647 lbs	2	25.6
Blended & unnamed cloths	4,685,385 yards	1	21.2
Hemp rope	1,991.5 tons	2	18.4
Distilleries	2,000 establishments	3	14.0
Gunpowder	115,716 lbs	6	8.3
Looms for cotton or wool	23,559 looms	4	7.2
Tanneries	267 establishments	5	6.2
Cotton manufacturing	15 establishments	6	5.6
Iron furnaces	4 furnaces	9	2.6
Paper	6,200 reams	8	1.5
Spindles	1,656 spindles	12	1.3
Nails	196,000 lbs	11	1.2
Carding machines	75,100 lbs carded	11	1.0
Fulling mills	53,058 yards fulled	8	1.0
Flaxseed oil	4,605 gallons	11	< 1.0
Bar iron	52.5 tons	12	< 1.0

¹ The census noted that these products might not be considered as manufactured and listed them separately from the other products. Notable product groupings NOT shown as manufactured in Kentucky were most metals and metal products, finished wood products (wagons, barrels, furniture, etc.), ceramics and glassware, and chemical products such as paints and dyes.

² Measures chosen for this table are those for which data was most complete or best represented production. For these reasons value of production was not used as an indicator for individual products. Value of total US manufacturing production reported as \$153,545,397, of which Kentucky's share was \$5,153,863 or 3.4 percent.

³ US ranking and percent of total national production based on data reported for 26 states and territories. Leading manufacturing states, in order according to value of production, were Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, and Virginia.

Source: Coxe, Tench. 1814. A statement of the arts & manufactures of the United States for the year 1810. Philadelphia. Available online at <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1810v2-01.pdf>. The 1810 manufacturers census, the first such, was quite controversial at the time; representatives of several states claimed that production had been greatly underreported. The marshal for Kentucky noted, in particular, that iron production in the state was far greater than reported. This census should therefore be taken as indicative rather than definitive of manufacturing production.