

When obscurity loomed, Fall River bobbed and weaved

City stayed true to its “Spindle City” nickname and even attracted new craftspeople.

By **Christina Poletto** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 20, 2022, 12:00 a.m.

In and around the Fall River area, the spirit of “Spindle City” lingers on as a small number of niche home brands, including [Merida](#), [Matouk & Co.](#), and [O&G Studio](#), carry on crafting and manufacturing specialty items like rugs, linens, and furniture for consumers seeking high-quality home goods.

In the 19th century, this city on the river was the main hub of cotton textile production for the country, and by 1880, half a million spindles created half of all the print cloth production in the world, earning it the nickname.

By 1920, more than 100 mills were in operation. Within 40 years, many were razed or abandoned when business dwindled or went overseas. Yet the indelible mark of the bustling bygone textile industry and its mills wasn't so easily erased, and the community has been reimagined as a go-to area for handcrafted American-made products as companies moved to the area to produce their goods.

These days, umpteen spindles still spin, but there are also looms, tufters, lathes, planers, irons, and embroidery machines, among many other gadgets and contraptions humming as they construct home goods.


In one expansive 40,000-square-foot workshop in an industrial park in Fall River, [Merida](#) creates natural rugs using heritage looms and classically rooted weaving methods accomplished by hand and machine. The majority of the rugs in the world. [about 90](#)

[percent, are plastic or composed of synthetic materials](#), but Merida uses materials that include wool, linen, mohair, and cotton, among other fibers that are all-natural and rapidly replenishable, safe for the environment, and healthy for homes and their inhabitants.


“Our mission is and has been to be a counter-cultural company that reimagines textile manufacturing and design,” said Catherine Connolly, CEO of the company since 2007.

Merida’s mission is further anchored in the practice of keeping timeless traditions alive and providing opportunities for craftspeople to master techniques, gain confidence to innovate, and develop viable careers. The brand employs about 50 people in Fall River, with external showrooms in the [Boston Design Center](#) and New York Design Center.

The Merida workshop is a place of wonder for the senses: a colorful and voluminous assemblage of yarn (one of, if not the largest yarn libraries in the country), the mesmeric focus of artisans engaged in slow and precise work on looms and with their hands, and even the occasional scent of a different place altogether.

 Merida CEO Catherine Connolly snags gold-colored yarn from a supply shelf. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

“We use a lot of wool, so you will sometimes get a faint smell of sheep or a barn, but all of our products are natural so it is a very pleasant smell,” Connolly said.

 At Merida, Edson Oliveira walks on his knees as he uses scissors to cut a rug into three stair runners. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The company was originally founded in 1978 in Syracuse, N.Y., but settled in its current space in 1998. This arrival followed a dedicated stint on Summer Street in Boston.

In December, the brand launched [Atelier](#), an artist-inspired collection of prismatic rugs combining organic shapes with specialized weaving techniques.

The brand is now 100 percent direct to trade and busier than ever. According to

Connolly, “our orders were up 40 percent over last year.”

[Matouk](#), a legacy brand known for its fine bed linens and other home products, shares the spirit and the territory of its Merida neighbors, as well as the commitment to providing luxury home goods.

Because Matouk offers a more retail-oriented approach, the brand sustains consistent demand from loyalists, especially around the holiday season, due to its popular monogram service. According to the brand, its primary customers are direct consumers through [Matouk.com](#), independent specialty retailers, national retailers such as Bloomingdale’s and Nordstrom, interior designers, and hotels.



A worker puts the finishing touches on a towel monogram. COURTESY OF MATOUK

The first few months of the pandemic resulted in a dramatic shift to PPE production — mainly face masks, said George Matouk Jr., CEO. But it’s been mostly business as usual

since last summer, when the home furnishings industry recovered. “In some ways we have been trying to catch up with demand ever since,” Matouk said.

These days, the brand spreads out across multiple buildings and approximately 117,000 square feet. This is not your ancestors’ mill building, Matouk said, explaining that while Matouk previously inhabited a historic mill building in New Bedford, the multilevel brick and stone structures of the 19th and early 20th centuries actually produced a lot of impediments to the business.

In 2005, the company moved to the Fall River Industrial Park with 50 employees, where they have the space to move large swaths of fabric like 120-inch-long bed linens, for example. There’s also high ceilings to maximize storage space, wide aisles, reinforced floors, and ample room to operate large-format machinery safely and efficiently. “Our manufacturing environment is bright, safe, productive, collaborative, and modern,” Matouk said.

The company employs 280 people and has added a second shift to accommodate additional staff and production requirements.

The space is tailored to the workers and their needs, too. “We have a full campus approach with multiple outdoor gathering and private spaces,” Matouk said. “We have created the kind of work experience that would never be possible in a traditional mill building. Personally, I think that mill buildings are more suited to residential and commercial uses than to modern manufacturing.”



A worker at Matouk stacks towels. COURTESY OF MATOUK



A worker presses towels at Matouk. COURTESY OF MATOUK



A worker sews linens at Matouk. COURTESY OF MATOUK

[O&G Studio](#), the smallest of the trio of maker brands, is no less committed to crafting specialty items meant to endure. Located 10 miles from Fall River in a 20,000-square-foot studio inside the historic Cutler Mill in Warren, R.I, the studio's specialty is handmade furniture, including its line of iconic, modern Windsor chairs.

Owner Jonathan Glatt spent his collegiate years studying metalsmithing and jewelry making, but a lifelong interest in antiques and historic decorative arts, augmented by an internship in early American furniture at Sotheby's, changed the trajectory of his career.



A colt low-back armchair in persimmon on the chair shop floor at O&G Studio. ANGEL TUCKER

The Windsor chair — identifiable by its wooden seat, splayed wooden legs, and multi-spindled back frame — dates to the early 18th century. It's an iconic and historic style and one Glatt gravitated toward because it's both interesting and identifiable. Now O&G Studio puts its own spin on Windsor chairs, benches, and kitchen stools, sometimes painting them in unusual colors like hunter green and persimmon, which are applied using O&G's unique dyeing process. (Customers can choose from a select range of 19 stain options and two wood types.)

Visitors also will find collections of dining tables, bed frames, and dressers with a more contemporary vibe, as well as custom lighting accessories and metal hardware sets that

draw on Glatt's metalsmithing experience.

Sense of place is so important to Glatt, who opened O&G Studio in 2009 with a co-owner who has since left the company. The brand views everything it does holistically, Glatt explained, from the design of regionally inspired furniture to using natural materials that have a geographic and aesthetic connection to the designs.





Jonathan Glatt with furniture at O&G Studio. ANGEL TUCKER

These days, the studio employs 27 people, who handle everything from woodworking to upholstery, finishing, and more. “We consider ourselves ‘in-sourcers,’ meaning we do as much as we can in-house,” Glatt said. Aside from a few small components sourced from partner firms in the United States, everything is made within its factory. “We love that these designs have created opportunities for our employees to build a personal life through the creation of work they can be proud of.”

Business for the studio has only grown since it was founded, with a noticeable uptick in furniture orders the past two years, primarily from interior designers and architecture firms. The O&G Studio team has met this demand head on.

“I’m amazed at the quality and volume of beautiful furniture that our team builds every day,” Glatt said. “It’s humbling to think of the many families who are out there sharing dinner on O&G chairs or over an O&G dining table. One of the most exciting parts is the legacy that will outlive us when our furniture is passed onto future generations.”

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