



Cook Brothers' Armory in Athens, Georgia: These Brits made Superior Confederate Rifles

Norman Dasinger, Jr., April 23, 2021

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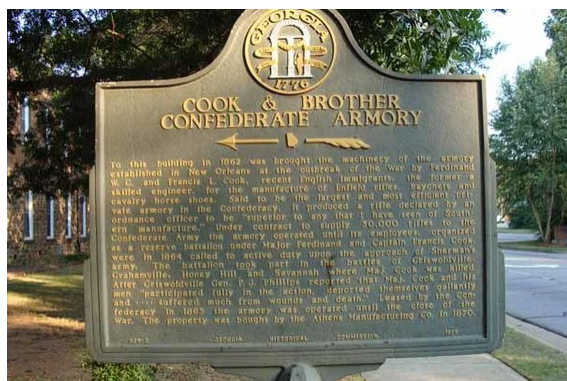


A Cook & Brother rifle | findagrave.com

Francis and Ferdinand Cook were both born in London, England, and had several siblings. By 1834, their father and another brother had all arrived in New York and established the Novelty Iron Works. The company was an engineering and manufacturing business producing large industrial equipment, foundry work, castings, and military armaments. Their products were considered to be top quality work.

Ferdinand visited New Orleans in the 1840s to meet with their cotton- and sugarcane-farming clients. Eventually, he would move to New Orleans, meet his future wife, and be joined by his brothers Francis and Frederick. Together, they would establish the Belleville Iron Works. Their reputation grew, and soon the Cook brothers were known as perhaps the best engineering firm in the South. In fact, they were one of the very few who could manufacture large-scale industrial and agricultural equipment.

In 1856, Ferdinand was in correspondence with U.S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis concerning a government contract to make military weapons and supplies. To better conduct such business, the brothers decided to form an auxiliary company known as Cook and Brothers Arms, N.O., and located it on Canal Street in New Orleans.



Historic marker | Georgia Historical Society

With Union forces approaching New Orleans in the spring of 1862, Francis and Ferdinand would follow their conscience, expertise, and business interests and continue with small armaments manufacture in the South. They loaded a barge with all they could and moved onto Vicksburg and later Selma and then Athens, Georgia, forming the Athens Armory by August 1862. Eventually, it would be, perhaps, the largest and most efficient private armory in the Confederacy. The two brothers were under contract to produce 30,000 rifles and employed over 200 people at their water-

powered mill on the North Oconee River.

The *Southern Watchman* of August 20, 1862, in announcing the establishment of the Cook brothers' business in Athens, wrote, "The proprietors should be welcomed among us and every facility afforded them for the successful prosecution of their undertakings."

The company produced a rifle declared by an ordnance officer to be "superior to any that I have seen of Southern manufacture."

The Cooks also organized their male employees into a reserve military unit in which Ferdinand was made the commander and a major and brother Francis was made a captain. Designated as part of the 23rd Georgia Infantry Battalion, it participated in combat in opposition to Union General Sherman as he marched across Georgia and South Carolina. They saw action at Griswoldville and Savannah, Georgia, and also Hardeeville, South Carolina, where, on December 11, 1864, Maj. Ferdinand Cook was killed. He is buried in Savannah.

An attempt by the federal government after the war to take possession of the Athens Armory was denied due to the fact Francis received a pardon from President Andrew Johnson and was, therefore, immune to confiscation.

The Cook brothers' property was bought by the Athens Manufacturing Company in 1870. Later known as Chicopee Mill, it is now owned by the University of Georgia, and some of the original Cook brothers buildings are used to house the school's Small Business Development Center.



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