**American Manufacturers: The Quiet Heroes of the Pandemic**

By Eastman Machine Company

In the early 1990s, American apparel manufacturing was nearly wiped out with the passing of trade liberalization policies, including the [North American Free Trade Agreement](https://www.trade.gov/north-american-free-trade-agreement-nafta) (NAFTA) in 1994. With extremely low import restrictions and duties, retailers in the U.S. increasingly searched for cheap manufacturers overseas. In turn, about 750,000 apparel manufacturing jobs in the U.S. disappeared between 1990 and 2011, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/fashion/).

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of the U.S. textile industry, and a gap in the supply chain was evident. Aware of the rising demand, life-long friends Steve Hawkins and David Talton decided to act.

In November of 2019, Hawkins and Talton opened a manufacturing company dedicated to producing high-quality, Made in America apparel: [America Knits](https://www.americaknits.com/). The launch marked the re-establishment of apparel manufacturing in Swainsboro, Georgia, for the first time in over 20 years. The company’s commitment to a domestic supply chain extends to its machinery as well. An essential component of the cut-and-sew facility is a [Talon 75x™](https://www.eastmancuts.com/product/talon/), a multi-ply automated cutting machine from [Eastman Machine Company](https://www.eastmancuts.com/).

The Eastman Talon 75x is engineered and manufactured in America to automatically pull stacked material piles from the spreading table to a modular, bristle-block conveyor bed for reciprocating knife cutting patterns. The Talon offers an industrial-strength solution for cutting up to 7.5cm (3 inches) of compressed material goods at speeds up to 40 inches/second. Partnership with America Knits is just one example of how far Eastman Machine has come since its entrance into the apparel industry.

“Our continued focus on identifying and creating tools to enable modern manufacturing in the U.S. is what placed us in the position to assist in the revival of apparel production in America,” says Robert Stevenson, Eastman Machine Company President and CEO.

The Eastman Machine Company, a family business, was founded in 1888 after developing the first electric fabric cutting machine. The revolutionary straight knife machine put an end to tedious manual cutting room labor and remains a necessity among the apparel industry at a global scale. Almost five generations later, Eastman Machine continues to support American apparel manufacturers by customarily cultivating advanced technology. Eastman designs and manufactures a complete line of [equipment](https://www.eastmancuts.com/product-category/products/) for front-end preparation of material: manual cutters, single- to high-ply automated cutters, material spreaders, and handling equipment.

Beyond the machines manufactured at Eastman, the company supplies a worldwide customer network with critical parts, technical service, and remote support from its headquarters in Buffalo, New York. During the unanticipated ‘war’ against Covid-19, its trusted position within its customers’ network was exhibited.

American hospitals began to see an inundation of Covid-19 patients and the need for PPE was at an all-time high. While working from home, Eastman technicians assisted America Knits, along with many other customers, to convert operations to aid in relief by producing PPE.

Aware of the textile industry’s power, Andy Warlick, the CEO of Parkdale Mills, put together a coalition of nine high-profile American manufacturers, including America Knits, to join forces across the country and produce supplies for Covid-19 response efforts.

“Some of the largest manufacturers in the nation — Hanes, Fruit of the Loom, SanMar, Delta — and then he brought in some of the domestic cut and sew plants which included us,” says Hawkins, President of America Knits.

The powerful alliance was contracted by the U.S. government to produce millions of silver- and copper-infused cloth face coverings as well as isolation gowns. To meet the demand, America Knits quickly hired employees to work a night shift, enabling 20-hour days to manufacture supplies for the White House Coronavirus Task Force. With the help of the Talon 75x’s high-ply capabilities, America Knits was able to produce 25,000 3-ply masks and 2,000 reusable gowns per shift each day. The company ended up shipping out 1.5 million masks and gowns for the U.S. government and millions more for hospitals, assisted living sites, and universities across America. In just a few short days, America Knits employees became American heroes.

America Knits is just one example of the U.S. textile industry’s agile workforce. With a comprehensive [product line](https://www.eastmancuts.com/product-category/products/) for the modern cutting room, Eastman Machine is proud of its resilient role within the American supply chain. “In order to be in business and considered a world leader as long as we have, you have to innovate,” says Stevenson. “Luckily, innovation is in our DNA.”

Although Eastman Machine Company is a part of the process that end users don’t often consider, its material handling and cutting solutions have made the accurate cuts that shape the world’s textiles, windmills, automobiles, and life-saving medical equipment for over 130 years.