



A Tiny North Carolina Town You've Never Heard of Makes Most of America's Furniture

The story of High Point.

BY HADLEY KELLER MAR 27, 2019



One week each April and October, the basement of the First United Methodist Church in High Point, North Carolina, is bustling with designers, bloggers, and editors from New York, Los Angeles, and across the United States, Europe, and Asia, eating homemade turkey chili and pimento cheese sandwiches at folding plastic tables. This somewhat unlikely colliding of worlds is Parson's Table, a sort of pop-up restaurant run by entrepreneurial churchgoers—and one of the many quirky, beloved traditions of High Point Market, the biggest event that you may have never heard of.

So What *Is* High Point?

High Point, for most of the year, is a modestly sized city in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina, whose approximately 100,000 population (108,629 as of the 2014 census) is comprised largely of students, faculty, and staff at the tony private High Point University. Twice a year, though, the city nearly doubles in size, attracting more than 80,000 visitors as it plays host to High Point Furniture Market, the largest furniture trade fair in the world and a biannual showcase of the region's most historic industry.

The bed in this [Mark D Sikes-designed bedroom](#) is from Hickory Chair, which manufactures its furniture in North Carolina.

The biannual event draws in an estimated \$140 million in revenue for the city between hotel reservations, dining, transportation, and more. The First United Methodist Church congregation isn't the only group to smartly make an unconventional business out of the market: Dozens of food trucks and pop-up vendors head to the city for market, and the city's (and neighboring towns') fire department hires itself out as drivers for fairgoers—after all, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone knows the fastest routes around the city better.

How Did it Become So Huge?

High Point's niche industry comes, as most do, thanks to a combination of geographical and cultural factors. The city, situated amid forestland that offered a healthy supply of timber, saw its first surge of furniture-making in the 17th century, when English makers settled there and continued their craft in a new homeland. During the Reconstruction era, burgeoning manufacturers benefited from cheap labor, which only increased with the completion of the Southern Railway by the late 19th century, an advancement that also enabled for easy export of the region's products.

In 1909, the High Point Furniture Exposition Company and the Furniture Manufacturers Exposition Company joined forces to put on a new trade show, and the Southern Furniture Market was born. The event's history after that generally follows the course of American history at large: A standstill during World War I, a postwar boom, success in the 1920s followed by a devastating lull after the 1929 Crash, then the added blow of World War II and, subsequently, an even larger postwar boom. The market has continued to fluctuate since then (with a notable dip following the 2008 recession), but, nevertheless, High Point has remained the world's largest furniture market for decades.

Have you heard of High Point Market?

No, never.

Yes, duh!

Just How Big Is it?

The city comprises some 12 million square feet of showroom. Yes, *million*. These hold everything from carpets to canopy beds—and, truly, everything in between. In the Suites at Market Square, one of High Point's main buildings, dozens of [antique](#) and [vintage](#) vendors also offer a more aged alternative to the newness rolling out each season.

Though High Point's designation as a furniture capital stems largely from the manufacturing done in and around its city limits, by now its exhibitors hail from far and wide, with companies from all over the globe renting or operating space in the city to show at each market.



A Suzanne Kasler dining room featuring her dining chairs for Hickory Chair.

FRANCESCO LAGNESE

Even in our ever-globalized world, though, there's still plenty of manufacturing going on within a short distance of the city. Heritage brands like Hickory Chair and Century Furniture as well as younger companies like Mitchell Gold Bob Williams and Lee Industries make their furniture in factories in the area, some over a hundred years old. In recent years, new businesses have recognized the area's expertise in manufacturing by setting up shop there: Even though it doesn't show at the market, startup furniture brand [Maiden Home](#), for example, makes its direct-to-consumer furniture in 3rd- and 4th-generation family factories in the region.



Finishing a Maiden Home chair in a North Carolina factory.

LOGAN BRYAN FOR MAIDEN HOME

Why Have I Never Heard of it?

If you're not a professional designer—or even, possibly, if you are—chances are high you wouldn't know about the market unless you were either a fanatic furniture enthusiast or lived in the area. That's because, despite its large size, the market is open exclusively to the trade—that is, only licensed interior designers or retail buyers can enter the hundreds of showroom spaces throughout the city and its many convention centers (with the exception of selected events, which may be open to the public at the discretion of their hosts).

What Happens There the Rest of the Year?

In the off season, High Point becomes somewhat of a ghost town—12 million square feet of showroom space is a lot of empty space when those showrooms are closed. But, recent innovations in the city are striving to bridge that gap: [Plant Seven](#), a coworking and event space-meets-business incubator is looking to attract young businesses and entice them to work in the area year-round. Meanwhile, up the road, work at the factories will keep humming along, churning out your next sofa or armchair. And now you know where it comes from.

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