As early as 1608, cargoes of pine pitch made their way from Virginia to England. Pitch, and the tar derived from it, was used in large quantities to waterproof ships and their rigging. For that reason, the term naval stores arose and has persisted, even though modern usage has little to do with vessels.

In addition to gum naval stores, which is illustrated in the accompanying photo essay, there are wood naval stores and sulfate naval stores. The wood naval stores process uses destructive distilling of wood to extract the material, and the sulfate process is a fairly modern innovation that removes the product from pulp liquor.

The gum naval stores industry was located in a one hundred mile wide strip from Virginia to East Texas, but until the Civil War, North Carolina produced as much as 95 percent of the total. For that reason, the Forest History Society's home state is known as the Tar Heel State.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, the gum naval stores industry moved south, as it declined in North Carolina. By 1909 national production peaked at 750,000 50-gallon barrels of turpentine and 2.5 million 500-pound barrels of rosin, the two main products extracted from pine pitch.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, research accelerated on extraction technology. The chief goals were to find ways to increase production and at the same time do less damage to the living tree. Both goals were achieved.

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of the USDA Forest Service.

Top right: a "woods rider" oversees the workers.

Bottom right: Having poured gum-filled cups into "one-man" barrels, workers load a wagon for transport to the still.

The "new way" in the 1930s, with shallow and narrow cuts.
Left: A still could hold a ten-to fifteen-barrel charge, the gum being loaded through the top.

Below: Typical company-provided quarters for workers.
Left: A typical turpentine still.

Below: Barrels of turpentine being readied for export. PHS Collection.