

Textiles

WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF BURKE COUNTY



Photos courtesy of the Burke County Public Library, Picture Burke

Life without textiles would be unimaginable!

Just look around you...textiles are everywhere!

From paper money, clothing, upholstery, bed sheets, car seats, to bath towels and so much more.

We depend on our clothing to be wrinkle-free, keep us cooler in the heat and warmer in the cold, and to shield us from UV rays as well as insect bites and stings. And yet, we seldom give textiles and the workers' who produced them a second thought, and how these materials changed how people dressed and decorated their homes.



Manufacturing in Burke County

North Carolina was able to build a thriving textile industry. In the decades after the 1860s when the Civil War ended, western piedmont North Carolina established itself as the manufacturing center of the textile industry. The process of producing fabric from cotton fibers was very complex and required many individual steps before the final product took shape.

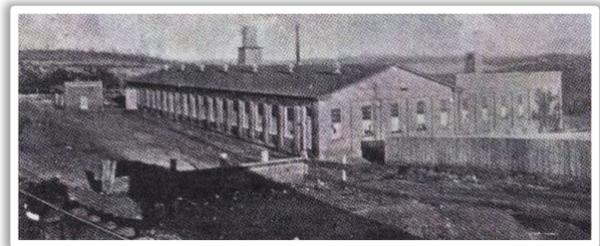


Photo Credit: Burke County Library Picture Burke

Often the Workers could not appreciate how their labor contributed to the final product enjoyed by others and what their contributions meant to their home counties and to North Carolina.

From the 1920s through the 1960s,

Textile unionists labored to organize mill workers in the southern Piedmont, a region stretching from north Georgia and central Alabama through the middle of the Carolinas and into southern Virginia. Flanked on the west by the Appalachian Mountains and to the east by the Atlantic coastal plain, the Piedmont was a stronghold of textile and apparel manufacturing, which provided the main source of industrial jobs for working-class white families.

From the 1920s through the 1950s, white women comprised at least one-third of the textile labor force; in 1929, their numbers in North Carolina peaked at 44.6 percent. By 1960, the United States textile labor force was overwhelmingly white, southern, and female. More than three-fourths of all textile manufacturing in the United States happened in the southern Piedmont, where 45 percent of all textile workers were female

African Americans, barred from all but the least-skilled and lowest-paid jobs in the mills, accounted for less than 5 percent of the work force. Wages in southern textile mills were always lower than the national average for factory workers, with the exception of the 1950s, when average wages in the southern mills equaled those in the North. About 5 percent of Piedmont mill workers belonged to a union in the 1960s, compared to 37 to 46 percent in New England and Mid-Atlantic states.

Despite low wages and harsh working conditions, most workers' standard of living improved when they traded agricultural and domestic work for manufacturing.

The Experiences of Mill Workers

First-generation millhands had to adjust from the rhythm of life on the farm, where they worked for themselves and according to the pace of the seasons, to the rhythm of the factory, where they worked for someone else's profit and synchronized their labor to the steady and quick pace of machines. Most millhands went to work early in the day and labored for ten to twelve hours straight, amid deafening noise, choking dust and lint, and overwhelming heat and humidity.

Families usually began mill work together, since employers paid adults poor wages and offered jobs to children to help make ends meet. "In this way, mills attracted a core of mature workers at low cost along with younger, even cheaper, laborers who could perform simple tasks and move in and out of the mills in response to market fluctuations." (p. 52) Critics opposed child labor and mill owners were often of a divided mind on the subject, but children remained an integral part of the labor force. Between 1880 and 1910, about one-fourth of all cotton mill workers in the South were below the age of sixteen.

Children grew up in homes regulated by the mills' schedule. Mothers brought nursing infants to work or adjusted feeding schedules around breaks in the factory day. Older children came and went in the mills as they pleased, bringing meals to parents and learning to do factory labor as they played with friends in the factory. Sometimes young children assisted parents or older brothers and sisters with their work, increasing the wage earner's paycheck while also learning skills that they would use as employees in their own right years later. Most children entered full-time work in the mill by age twelve, dropping out of school or moving between school and work as necessity dictated.

When new workers started their jobs, they often labored for up to six weeks without pay during a learning period. Children usually started in the entry-level jobs of spinning, spooling, or doffing. Often the heaviest work went to African American men, who moved large bales of cotton, loaded wagons or rail cars with finished goods, and worked amid the dirt and dust of the opening and picking rooms. Black women were excluded from mill work altogether. The spinning room was almost always female-dominated, and women sometimes also worked as weavers or drawing-in hands. Boys were usually employed as doffers or sweepers, and men worked as weavers, loom fixers, carders, or supervisors.

Mill workers usually worked six twelve-hour days each week. The jobs that went to adult white men tended to pay the best, followed by jobs worked by white women, jobs that employed black men, and, finally, jobs performed by children. Wage rates increased over time, but Southern millhands still made considerably less than northern textile workers. Below is a table showing the average weekly wages paid for a variety of jobs in North Carolina mills in 1904.

OCCUPATION	RATE PER WEEK
PICKER ROOM	
Opener	\$4.50
Picker hand	\$5.10
Card hand	\$4.50
Boss carder	\$12.00
SPINNING ROOM	
Drawing frame	\$4.50
Slubber hands	\$5.40
Intermediate hands	\$5.40
Speeder hands	\$4.50
Spinners	\$3.00a
Head doffer	\$3.60
Doffers	\$2.40
Spoolers	\$4.00
Twisters	\$4.80
Warpers	\$7.50
Overseer of spinning	\$10.50
Section hand	\$7.00
Overseer of twisting	\$7.00
Band boys	\$2.50
Sweepers	\$3.60
Oiler and bander	\$3.60
WEAVING ROOM	
Filler	\$3.90
Creelers	\$4.00
Beam warper	\$4.50
Slash tender	\$6.00
Drawing-in girls	\$6.00
Weavers	\$5.40b

Table information is from Like a Family, pp. 79-80. Source: Holland Thompson, From Cotton Field to Cotton Mill (New York: Mcmillan, 1906). (a) Ranges from \$1.20 to \$6.00. (b) Ranges from \$2.50 to \$9.00.

Workers endured difficult working conditions and significant health risks. Constantly breathing in cotton dust contributed to lung problems such as byssinosis, or as it was more commonly known, "brown lung." Workers could also be severely injured or killed on the job when fingers, limbs, or clothing became entangled in the rapidly moving machinery. When workers did get sick or injured, there was no insurance or worker's compensation to aid them in their recovery.

The disjuncture between mill owners' desire for maximum effort and mill workers' desire to regulate for themselves the pace of their labor and to enjoy a greater share of the profits it generated led to serious labor tensions. In the 1890s, the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) held meetings in most of the major textile areas of the Carolina Piedmont, organizing ninety-five locals by 1900. The NUTW, however, was not powerful enough to compel mill owners to cooperate with workers and, by 1902, only a handful of the locals remained. The tensions that spurred the beginnings of union activity in the South, however, did not disappear and would reemerge a few years later. For more information on the resurgence of union activity, see the [Work & Protest](#) section of this website.