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Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940) documented conditions of people—including many children—working in American industries in the early 20th century. This photo, which Hine took in December of 1908, depicts boys at work in a Lancaster, South Carolina cotton mill. Image online via the Library of Congress.

Industry throughout the US expanded rapidly as the 19th century due to a close. Discoveries of iron ore and coal in the west, and the need for steel for the ever-expanding railroad—as well as the role of entrepreneurs and new technologies—led to a growth in the steel and oil industries.

Meat packing and grain-processing plants were built to make the bounty of the ranches and farms of the west and Midwest available to people throughout the country. Immigrants, anxious to make their fortunes in America, provided the labor for expanding factories.

South Carolina, however, remained largely unaffected by the economic growth in the rest of the country.

Consequently the state did not attract large numbers of immigrants looking for work.

The planter elite looked down on the development of industry as a less-noble calling than their antebellum agricultural society. Conservatives did little to support SC's struggling industrial development, being more interested in reviving the "Old South" than in fostering the birth of a New South.

The railroad boom that spurred national industrialization in the post-war period, however, was also felt in South Carolina:

- Major cities grew as a result of their location on track routes connecting them to suppliers and markets throughout the country.
- Columbia was a regional railroad hub, served by over 100 trains a day.
- The transcontinental trains promoted the establishment of time zones and standard time, so time in South Carolina was standardized, too.

The textile industry, which had begun prior to the Civil War, eventually became very important to South Carolina. A ready supply of raw materials, and a changing attitude about the development of industry, led to the growth of the textile industry in SC's Upcountry.

New entrepreneurial leadership started to promote the concept of an industrialized "New South." Local investors provided most of the capital for the building of textile mills, located close to the cotton fields and along rivers that would supply power.

South Carolina, however, did not attract a large number of foreign immigrants. The state had a ready supply of workers. Poor farmers, who could no-longer make a living from the land, were attracted to mill villages which provided homes, schools, churches and stores (in addition to jobs). Most African-Americans, however, purposely were not considered for traditional textile mill labor.



The first mills, in South Carolina, were started in the upstate, but within 15 years there were mills in the Midlands and the Lowcountry. The boom for mill building came after 1895, due to technological innovations. Modeled after New England mills, these textile mills produced finished cloth on their many spindles. By 1910, South Carolina was the second-largest textile producing state in the nation.

Life for workers in the mill villages, however, was not ideal:

- Conditions depended upon the generosity of the mill owners and the economic conditions of the times.
- When economic downturns or depressions struck, workers were laid off and lost their homes as well as their

jobs.

- Many children worked in the mills where their small fingers made them better able to retie broken threads but their youth made them more susceptible to workplace accidents.



- Men, women and children worked long hours for low pay and were often looked down upon as "lint heads." (See, for example, *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties*, edited by Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, at page xiii.)
- Workers in SC earned less than half of what mill workers in other parts of the US earned while women and children were paid even less than men.
- They worked from 6 am until 6 pm until Governor Tillman's law reduced hours to 66 per week.
- Workers often suffered from diseases of the lung, including tuberculosis (TB)—formerly called "Consumption"—from breathing in the cotton fiber and from the crowded conditions of their workplace.
- Workplace accidents, which could end a worker's career, were also an ever-present possibility.
- Workers were unable to organize, to improve their lot, as union organizers were immediately fired and the organized labor movement consistently crushed by the mill owners.
- Low wages and poor conditions mirrored what was happening to workers throughout the US.
- Workers outside of SC were somewhat more effective in organizing unions and in launching some protests through strikes.
- National unions were not successful in improving conditions.

The US government backed the interests of the owners, just as the political leadership of SC supported the interests of the mill owners, rather than those of the workers. The production of cottonseed oil, lumber and phosphates for fertilizers all increased after Reconstruction. This increase was, in some measure, due to the states' ability to lure northern mill-owners to the south by offering a source of cheap and non-union labor.



Phosphate rock, found near Charleston and Beaufort, was a major part of the commercial fertilizer that was produced in the state for about twenty years after the Civil War. In the late-nineteenth century, phosphate mining brought a degree of wealth to the coastal area from Charleston to Beaufort.

In the Beaufort area, phosphate mining never recovered after the 1893 hurricane (known as "The Sea Island Hurricane"). When rich phosphate deposits were found in Florida, the South Carolina companies went out of business.

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Media Stream



Sweeper and Doffer Boys in South Carolina Cotton Mill

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Mill Village in South Carolina

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Shoeless Boys Working at a Cotton Mill in Belton, South Carolina

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