

Textile Mill Villages, Evolution of ^[1]



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The Evolution of Textile Mill Villages

by Bennett M. Judkins and Dorothy Lodge

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^[4]Large-scale expansion of southern textile mills began in the 1880s. Many people left the farms and the mountains to begin work in these mills. Although they would have preferred to stay on their farms and remain independent, they had lost their land because they could not pay taxes and were indebted to merchants as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. Mill companies offered to move them, their families, and their possessions to the new mill villages to encourage them to undertake “public work,” or work for wages outside the home. Steady wages, the company store, and mill houses were strong attractions.

From 1880 until about 1930 southern mill towns showed a continuation of the paternalism that marked plantations worked by enslaved people. Paternalism, which comes from a word that means father, indicates that the mill owner had many of the rights and responsibilities of a father to his workers. The mill owner provided shelter, jobs, medical care, and schooling, and maintained authority over the private lives of his employees.

The pattern of paternalism gained hold in part because of the large number of workers coming into towns to work in the mills. They all needed housing and services, and only the mill owners had the money to provide these. Houses, company stores, churches, and schools all became a part of the emerging mill villages. The villages remained under the complete control of the mill management.

Some of the people who lived in mill villages in [Gaston County](#) ^[5] in the 1920s and 1930s described their lives in the mills and mill villages for a 1985 oral history project conducted for the [North Carolina Humanities Committee](#) ^[6]. They remembered the houses, the work, and the strong sense of community the workers shared. Mill housing, for instance, consisted of small, often crowded rooms. Many had no bathrooms or indoor plumbing. As one millworker reflected, “We had an outhouse in the back. . . . We had a big old white commode thing. Didn’t have water to flush it. You washed it with slop jars full of water. That toilet was really nice. You wouldn’t be afraid to go and set on it.”

By the 1920s almost all the houses had electric lights, something infrequently found at that time even on prosperous rural farms. The number of light bulbs a house burned determined the rent paid by that household. “That was the way you paid your rent, was 25 cents a light bulb. A lot of them didn’t have a light bulb on the back porch because that would have cost a quarter. That paid for all the utilities, too.”

The benefits of mill housing caused some discontent among workers in the twentieth century who did not rent homes from the company. Employees living outside company housing enjoyed independence. They disliked losing the advantages offered those living in the mill villages, however.

. . . [T]his town has always had two classes of workers—the ones in company houses, and the ones like me who have their own places. People in the Cannon houses were taken care of. They paid low rent, no taxes, and the company did all of the maintenance. They had it made all of their lives. The rest of us had to pay for all of this. What it meant was the man working beside you at the same job for the same pay was getting two dollars an hour more in benefits you weren't getting.

Mill owners required that at least two, sometimes three, members of a family work in the mill before the company would rent a mill house to that family. Fathers, mothers, and children often would work together in the same mill. This kept the families together, but it also meant that children faced demanding jobs at an early age. From the 1880s well into the twentieth century children as young as eight and nine years of age would work at least part-time in the factories. Full-time work began around the start of the teenage years. A seventy-four-year-old millworker recalled what it was like when she began to work in the mill at the age of eleven as an assistant to the women spinners. She described the big machinery and how hard it was to learn the work at the speed required.

There are rollers on the spinning frames. . . . [Y]ou had to pick them with your fingers. And oh my fingers would get so sore! I would tear the spinners' ends down—see I didn't know how to put up an end—and of course they would get furious because it would get them behind in their work. I learned to put up the ends that I tore down picking the rollers, and that was the way I learned to spin.

Another mill employee began work at the age of fourteen. Her mother trained her on the job, and together they put in a very long day. "I went to the mill when I was fourteen years old, and my mother learnt me to reel. We worked eleven hours a day and got an hour for dinner... We got up of a morning to be at work by 6:00 [A.M.]."



[//millvillagemuseum.org/history/](http://millvillagemuseum.org/history/) [4]After work the family shopping was done at the company store, a practice encouraged by mill owners who frequently charged more for goods than stores outside the mill villages. As one employee stated, "Almost everything you bought was bought out of the store. At one time they had these coupon books, and they were worth 5, 10, 15, 20 cents, and so on. They'd give you one of the books as part of your pay. You'd take that into the store and use it for a Coca-Cola, or whatever you wanted."

The prosperity of mill villages remained closely tied to the economic health of the textile industry. When trouble hit the management, it quickly filtered down to the workers. After 1930 many changes occurred as mill owners sought to increase their profits during times of depression and low prices. The paternalistic image fostered by the companies gave way to more "modern" industrial relations. The owners and managers stressed technology and performance over a sense of family. Less and less did the owners know the names of their workers or show a fatherly concern over their welfare. The textile industry met falling prices and increasing American and foreign competition with improved automation in the mills. This cost many workers their jobs. Small family-owned mill companies, unable to compete, were sold to large corporations. New workers entered the labor pool, especially African Americans recruited from outside the mill community. These trends weakened the close interactions of mill village residents. The sense of being one big family disappeared. One worker mourned, "I use to know everybody who lived up and down that street... and over the street behind me. No more, everybody's moving." An employee who worked at [Cannon Mills](#) [7] for thirty-nine years deplored the sale of that family mill to investor David Murdock and summed up the difference it made in the work atmosphere. "Mr. Cannon was family. Mr. Murdock's the Boss."

The sale of mill villages by mill companies has increased as textile plants have closed or merged with other companies. From 1982 to 1985 more than 10,000 North Carolina textile workers lost their jobs when sixty-seven plants closed. Factories continued to shut down every year. The workers often faced hardships in finding new jobs after spending a lifetime at one job in one factory. It is a sad end to the cotton textile industry that for 100 years served as the economic foundation of North Carolina. Those who built the companies, and those who worked in this industry, have had a major impact on our state and its people.

At the time of this article's publication, Bennett M. Judkins was professor of sociology at [Belmont Abbey College](#) [8] in Belmont. Dorothy Lodge taught eighth-grade history in the Gaston County school system.

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"Mill Village map." Edenton Cotton Mill. Edenton Cotton Mill Museum of History. Online at

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"Mill Village Residents in 1959." Edenton Cotton Mill Museum of History. Online at <http://millvillagemuseum.org/history/> [4]

References and additional resources:

Documenting the American South, UNC Libraries. Resources on [mill villages](#).

Edenton Cotton Mill Museum of History. <http://millvillagemuseum.org/> [9]

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[Textile industry](#) [13]

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[Lodge, Dorothy](#) [15]

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1 January 1986 | Judkins, Bennett M.; Lodge, Dorothy

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