

♦ ♦ THE HISTORY OF NORTH CAROLINA'S TEXTILE INDUSTRY ♦ ♦

PART 2: THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY COMES TO NORTH CAROLINA

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Explain the geographic and economic reasons why textile companies moved their factories to North Carolina in the 1800s and early 1900s.*

Textiles are products made of fabric that have been woven, knit, or sewn. Before the Industrial Revolution, people made clothing and other textiles in their homes. Then, in the early 1800s, groundbreaking entrepreneurs such as Samuel Slater and Francis Cabot Lowell built the first American textile mills in the northeastern United States.

By the end of the 1800s, textile production had moved from the northeast to North Carolina for several reasons. North Carolina's geography played an important role in the decision of textile company owners to move their factories to the state. North Carolina was closer to the states in the deep South (Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, etc.) where cotton was grown. Also, the Piedmont and western regions of North Carolina have many small rivers, which may not be very good for transportation by boat, but are excellent for pushing water wheels to provide power to textile mills. Many North Carolina textile mills were built right next to small rivers and creeks with fast-moving water. The water powered the machines used to spin thread, weave cloth, and sew that cloth into clothing and other textile products. Eventually, those same water wheels were converted to generate electricity to power modern machinery.

Economic reasons also persuaded textile company owners to move their production to North Carolina. Wages in North Carolina were much lower than in the crowded northeastern states where the cost of living had become very high. Also, many textile workers in the northeast had joined labor unions, a fact that had increased conflict between workers and textile company owners.

By contrast, in the 1800s, North Carolinians were not very interested in joining unions. Historian Brent D. Glass writes that in North Carolina, although a union called the Knights of Labor tried to persuade North Carolinians to join their union, "in no instance did any union achieve recognition or enjoy sustained success during this period."¹

Also, the government of North Carolina was willing to support education and research related to textiles. For example, in 1899, North Carolina State University in Raleigh started a textile education program. It taught students how to spin yarn, design cloth, weave it, and dye it. Many of the young people who graduated from this program went on to manage textile mills throughout the state. North Carolina State University also



Machines inside the White Oak Textile Mill in Greensboro, North Carolina, which has produced denim since the early 1900s.

sponsored research on new technology to update machines and make better dyes for cloth.

For these and other reasons, by the early 1900s, North Carolina had become a major textile-producing state, specializing in the production of cotton fabrics. By 1923, North Carolina became the largest textile-producing state in the country. By the 1980s, most of the blue jeans worn in the United States had been made in North Carolina.

Today, many large textile companies are still headquartered in North Carolina, although a large amount of the actual production of textiles now takes place outside of the United States.

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Explain three reasons why the geography of North Carolina is well suited for the production of textiles.

Explain two economic reasons that persuaded textile company owners to move their production from the northeastern United States to North Carolina.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Brent D. Glass, *The Textile Industry in North Carolina: A History* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992), 51.