At Levine Museum of the New South, we look at how Charlotte and the surrounding area has changed since the end of the American Civil War in 1865. These changes range from the types of jobs people have held to the constitutional rights we hold dear today. When we think about the New South, we like to define it as:

- A Time — The New South is the period of time from 1865, following the Civil War, to the present.
- A Place — The New South includes areas of the Southeast U.S. that began to grow and flourish after 1865.
- An Idea — The New South represents new ways of thinking about economic, political and cultural life in the South.

In Unit 1, we explored how the Civil War changed life in South and the different ways people reacted to those changes. Next, we’ll see how the textile industry reshaped the Carolina Piedmont region and what life was like as farmers left the fields to work in factories.

**Glossary:**

- **Textile Mill** - factories that turned cotton into cloth.
- **Mill Village** - a neighborhood built around a textile mill, where the workers lived.
- **Child labor** - children working in an industry or business.
- **Strike** - when factory or business workers refuse to work to gain better pay or conditions.
- **Segregation** - the forced separation of different racial groups in society, primarily African Americans and whites in the South.
- **Jim Crow** - laws that segregated whites and blacks in the United States.

Across the Carolina Piedmont, railways expanded the cotton industry. The opening of textile mills and mill villages in the South drew many farmers from their field to the factory, where they hoped for better wages. Children worked in the mills, often completing the same jobs as adults. In many cases, Jim Crow laws prevented African Americans from working the same jobs as whites. At times, mill hands went on strike to protest their working conditions and call for change.
Bring the Mills to the Cotton!
1880s-1930s

Section 1: Moving Off the Farm

Before the Civil War, most factories in the United States were in Northern states. Southern business leaders wanted to stop sending Southern cotton up North to be made into products that the South would then buy back. Instead, they wanted to keep that money in the Southern economy. Since farmers already grew a lot of cotton in the Charlotte area, the city became a popular place for businessmen to open new textile mills.

Trains brought the raw cotton from the farms to the mills where mill hands would then make textiles to be sold at the market. And where do you think the workers for the mills came from? The farms, of course!

Many tenant farmers and sharecroppers left the farms to work in the factories, seeking a steady paycheck and to make more money for their families. By the early 1900s Charlotte, NC was at the center of textile industry in the United States.

Think About It!

Look at the picture with all the textile machines. How do you think farmers felt leaving the fields to work in the factory?

Answer It!

How would you feel if your parents told you that your whole family would be packing up, moving, living and working in a new and different environment? Why would you feel that way?
Section 2: Working in the Mill

In the photos on the left, you’ll see the main steps in processing cotton. After a cotton gin removed the seeds, the cotton was packed into a large bale, which weighed about 500 pounds. Bales were taken to the mills on the train and unloaded.

The first machine cotton went through was the carding machine, the one with the large rollers. The carding machine stretched the cotton fiber out with “teeth” on the rollers.

In the second picture, there is a young boy standing between the other two machines, the spinning machine, which tightened the cotton fibers into thread, and the weaving machine, which completed the last step by weaving the thread into cloth.

The cloth might then be sent to another factory to be turned into products such as towels, sheets and bolts of cloth.
Just like on Carolina farms, the whole family usually worked in the mills. The mills provided housing for a cheap monthly rent if families supplied the mill with one employee for each room occupied in the house. Many children were pushed in to mill jobs by their families, as early as 6 or 7 years old.

Mill hands usually worked six days a week and twelve hours a day. The mills were hot and humid to keep the cotton fresh.

Mill jobs were very dangerous. There were moving belts throughout the mill that could cause serious injury to even a careful worker. There was a haze of cotton dust that could cause a sickness called brown lung disease.

Also, most African Americans did not have the same opportunity to work in the mills for more money, because segregation kept many blacks and whites from working together. Some African Americans did open their own mills to hire African American workers.

Eventually, workers began striking all over the United States for shorter working hours, higher wages, safer conditions, and to end child labor in factories, including Southern cotton mills.

Think About It!

Look at the photos of children working. What do you think would it have been like to be a child working in a cotton mill?

Answer It!

Many kids didn’t have a choice between attending school or working in the mill. If you had the choice, would you choose to work in a mill or go to school? Why?
Section 3: Living in the Mill Village

Mill owners often built mill villages around the factory for workers to live in. Living in the mill village did have some advantages. Neighbors were no longer so far away.

People could gather on porches and recount their day, play music, and gossip about courting couples. Workers mostly visited one another on Sundays, their one day off. Villagers had a network of communication that let everyone know when someone was sick or staying out too late.

There were also disadvantages. Mill owners had a lot of control over their employees. Many mills paid employees with a coin or paper money called scrip, which workers could only spend in the company-owned store. The mill also kept track of employees. If an employee stayed out too late or smoked cigarettes, the mill owner might discipline or fire them.
**Bring the Mills to the Cotton!**
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Think About It!

Go back to Unit 1 and compare and contrast the sharecropper’s cabin with what you can see in the mill house above.

Answer It!

What would you have liked about living in a mill village? What would you have disliked about living this way?