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 African Americans 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.
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 to for businessmen to open new textile mills.

Trains brought the raw cotton from the farms to the mills where mill hands then made textiles to be sold at the market.

Farmers flocked from the fields to factories. Sometimes they saw mill work as an opportunity to earn steady paycheck and make more money for their families. In other cases, farmers were forced off the land into textile work. By the early 1900s, Charlotte, NC was at the center of textile industry in the United States.

Think About It!

If you were a farmer when the textile industry began in Charlotte, would you have welcomed the change?

Answer It!

Thinking ahead, what benefits and challenges do you think people faced living and working in the mills? Do you think everyone received an equal opportunity in this new industry?
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 photo, 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 African Americans and whites from working together. If mill owners did hire African Americans, they usually had to work the most dirty and dangerous jobs. Warren C. Coleman, however, was able to open to the first black-owned and operated mill.

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

One famous example of this striking activity was the Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia, NC in which a striker named Ella Mae Wiggins was killed by strikebreakers. She became known as the Heroine of Loray Mill.

**Think About It!**

What arguments do you think people made in support of child labor and against child labor?

**Answer It!**

Who is treated unfairly in today’s workforce? What are some of the changes workers’ rights activist are calling for today?
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. For example, 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.
Think About It!

Compare and contrast the changes that the Civil War and the rise of the textile industry had on farming.

Answer It!

Thinking about what you know of the benefits and challenges in both farming and working in a mill, which job would you choose and why?

If you were a lawmaker or politician, what type of laws or rules would you create or enforce to address conditions in the mill factories and villages?