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.

This lesson plan explores the life and work of southern cotton mill workers after the Civil War.

**Objective**: Students will learn about the life of mill workers, who often moved from the farm to the factory as textile mills sprung up around the Carolina Piedmont in the late 1800s.

**Essential Question**: What was life like as a millhand?

**Standards Addressed**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.G.1</td>
<td>Understand how human, environmental and technological factors affect the growth and development of North Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.E.1</td>
<td>Understand how a market economy impacts life in North Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.H.2</td>
<td>Understand the political, economic and/or social significance of historical events, issues, individuals and cultural groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.H.1</td>
<td>Use historical thinking to analyze various modern societies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.H.1</td>
<td>Apply historical thinking to understand the creation and development of North Carolina and the United States.</td>
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<td>8.H.3</td>
<td>Understand the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.1.2</td>
<td>Use historical comprehension to reconstruct meaning of a passage, differentiate between facts and interpretation, analyze data in maps and analyze visual literary and musical sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH1.H.1.4</td>
<td>Use historical research to formulate historical questions obtain data from a variety of sources, support interpretations with evidence and construct analytical essays using evidence to support arguments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.4/ AH2.H.4</td>
<td>Analyze how conflict and compromise have shaped politics, economics and culture in the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.5/ AH2.H.5</td>
<td>Understand how tensions between freedom, equality and power have shaped the political, economic and social development of the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AH1.H.7/ AH2.H.7</td>
<td>Understand the impact of war on American politics, economics, society and culture.</td>
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Bring the Mills to the Cotton:  
**Life as a Millhand Part 1**  
1880s-1930s

**Glossary:**

- **Textile** - cloth or goods produced by weaving, knitting or felting.
- **Textile Mill** - factories that turned cotton into cloth.
- **Mill Village** - a neighborhood built around a textile mill, where the workers lived.
- **Millhand** - a worker in a mill.

**Moving Off the Farm**

Before the Civil War, Southern cotton was shipped to Northern factories to be made into textiles, such as cloth and other products. After the Civil War, people questioned why the South should continue to lose money by sending its cotton North and buying back the finished products. Businessmen began investing in building and running textile mills in the Carolina Piedmont. The expanding railroads helped transport raw cotton to the mills and finished products to the markets. The economy of the New South quickly changed and grew, as a region of farms became a region of factories.

By 1900s there were more than 300 textile mills near Charlotte. Textile factories included the mill itself and a surrounding mill village. Many people left farms to work in the factories. Some farmers thought it would be a good way to earn a steady living and save money to buy their own farms.

Other farmers were pushed off the land and forced into the mills. Millhands lived in mill houses, surrounded by churches, a company store, and a school. They received a steady income, although it was a low wage.

A millhand’s day usually began before sunrise and ended after sunset. Employees worked 11-12 hours per day and six days a week. The large amounts of dust and lint particles inside the mills made breathing difficult and could cause respiratory diseases like brown lung disease. Dirt, noise, and intense cold in winter and heat in summer made working conditions difficult. Mills were dangerous places to work, too. Unsafe conditions led to many injuries and deaths.

Mill families needed everyone in the family to work because wages were so low. Men usually did the most labor-intensive jobs and could be supervisors. They also typically made the highest wages. Both men and women did weaving and spinning. Children as young as six began working the same long hours in the mills sweeping floors, changing bobbins, doffing (removing spindles from fast moving machines), and other small jobs. Due to segregation, almost all of the jobs inside mills were unavailable to African Americans.
Bring the Mills to the Cotton: 
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Activity 1: Studying Historical Documents

Use the Document Interpretation Guide below to analyze the Textile Mill Documents 1-4. Complete the four steps for each document. Write your responses on a separate sheet of paper.

Document Interpretation Guide
Use the following questions to help you understand the meaning a historical document.

1. Who is the author of this document?

2. What is the author’s purpose in writing this document?

3. What is the tone of this passage?

4. Write down any word you do not know. Use the words around them as clues for the meaning. If you still have trouble, look up the definition online or in a dictionary.
WORKING IN A TEXTILE MILL

Textile mills sprang up across North Carolina in the late 1800s. Most workers were women and children. Most were white because mill owners would not hire African Americans.

Long hours, low wages, and noisy, dangerous, clattering machines were part of mill life. People worked six days a week and half day on Sunday. The day shift often lasted from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. the night shift from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M.

Wages were so low that everyone in the family had to work, even children as young as 8 or 9. In 1916, a federal law set the minimum age for child labor at 14, but the courts overturned it. “I went to the mill when I was 14 years old,” one woman later recalled, “and my mother learnt me to reel.” We worked 11 hours a day and got an hour for dinner. We got up of a morning to be at work by 6 A.M.

The Mill Village

Early mills were set up near rivers so that waterfront power could turn the machines. Because these factories were often in rural areas, mill owners built houses for workers. Later, when factories were built closer to cities, this practice continued.

In the 1890s, Daniel Tompkins built a mill village in a rural area to avoid city taxes and lawyers who might file lawsuits for workers hurt on the job. Another advantage, Tompkins noted, was that there was little to do in the village so “employees go to bed at a reasonable hour and are therefore in better condition to work in day time.”

By the 1920s, more than 200 mill villages dotted North Carolina. Some were small, with only 15 or 20 houses. Others like Kannapolis, in Cabarrus County, housed 30,000 people.

A typical village included a house for the superintendent, rows of small family homes, a church or two, a schoolhouse, and the company store. Most houses lacked running water or indoor plumbing. Workers paid low rents and kept their houses as long as they were employed by the mill.
Watchful Control
Owners kept a close watch on workers. They hired their own "police" who reported to the mill boss everything. "You don't have no private life at all," complained a Rolesville worker. If workers misbehaved, the company threatened to take away their houses. "They pretty well had the upperhand over you all the time."

The schoolhouse and churches were company property, too. Mill owners paid the salaries of teachers and ministers. They even set the school schedule. "The mill came first always, the school after," recalled one mill worker. If the mill needed extra hands, children were sent from the classroom to the factory.

Families brought what they needed from the company store, and the cost was deducted from their weekly earnings. If they had trouble making their money last each week, the store would let them buy on credit. As a result, many families became trapped in debt. Like the sharecroppers, they always owed money to the company store.

A Two-Hundred Headed Family
Despite long hours and low wages, most workers preferred mill jobs to farm work. Factory work was easier, and it paid a regular wage. (In the later 1800s, prices for many crops were so low that a number of small farmers went broke.)

In the mill village, people knew and relied on one another. One mill worker described the village as a "two-hundred-headed family." Workers often met their future husbands or wives in the village. Mill owners organized baseball teams. Players wore uniforms with company names. While the games were fun for workers, they also promoted company loyalty.

In later years, some workers looked back fondly on their mill village homes. Others, however, were less accepting of the grinding poverty in which they lived.

The [textile] industry’s growth was based on a vastly expanding number of women and children in the mills. In the four textile states in 1890, men formed only 35 percent of the work force, women made up 40 percent, and children between the ages of ten and fifteen made up 25 percent. A seventy-hour workweek earned about $2.50 in 1885 and slightly less in 1895. At the same time profits were phenomenal. According to historian Broadus Mitchell, “It was not unusual . . . in these years to make 30 to 70 percent profit.”

. . . . Lower wages and longer hours accounted for cheaper cotton manufacturing in the South. Southern states permitted night work for women, and the eleven-hour workday six days a week and twelve-hour worknight five nights a week were common. In the South, children of fourteen could, by law, work the same hours as adults, but at the Amazon mill, children started to work at a much younger age. . . .

These children, who might have worked a sixty-four hour workweek, were allowed to keep maybe twenty-five cents of their wages, if any, after household expenses were taken care of. Many children looked forward to becoming of age to work in the mill as a way of getting out of the hot and back-breaking work of farming, while others preferred to remain on the farm. The choice, however, was not theirs to make. If it had been, all the women I talked to would have chosen to be in school.

Victoria Byerly
Bring the Mills to the Cotton:  
Life as a Millhand Part 1  
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Textile Mills Document #3

I was eleven years old when I went to work in the mill. They learnt me to knit. Well, I was so little that they had to build me a box to get up on to put the sock in the machine. I worked in the hosiery mill for a long time and, well, then we finally moved back to the country. But me and my sister Molly finally went back up there in 1910 and I went to work in the silk mill. Molly went to work in the hosiery mill. . . . We worked twelve hours a day for fifty cents. When paydays come around, I drewed three dollars. That was for six days, seventy-two hours. I remember I lacked fifty cents having enough to pay my board.

Bertha Miller  
Thomasville, NC


Textile Mills Document #4

In the absence of schools, the discipline of the mill and its training down to twelve years of age is much better for children than idleness and no discipline or training. . . . It would be far better to have ample school facilities and compel all the children to go to school ten months in the year, and give them the other two months for vacations and recreation. But in the absence of such facilities, the discipline and training of the mill is best for the children of the working people.

DA Tompkins, Mill owner in Charlotte, NC