Building Cities:  
Technology and Inventions Part 1  
1900s-1940s

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 how life changed with the emergence of new technologies in the early 1900s.

**Objective:** Students will learn about the technological advancements that helped Charlotte grow in the early 20th century.

**Essential Question:** How did technology change everyday life for people in the first half of the 20th century?

**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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<td>7.H.1</td>
<td>Use historical thinking to analyze various modern societies.</td>
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<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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<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>
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<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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Glossary:

- **Booster** - a person who advocates for city growth and new businesses.
- **Streetcar (trolley)** - a small train that people use to get around town.
- **Leisure** - free time for someone to use as they please.
- **Great Depression (1929-1939)** - with the crash of the stock market, the world entered a period of widespread poverty as people lost jobs, homes, and bank accounts.
- **World War II (1939-1945)** - the second global war fought between the Allied and Axis powers.

Technology Boom

During the early 1900s, towns all across the Piedmont were growing around the mills that were built near the railways. Boosters advertised the qualities that made their towns great. Charlotte grew as a city and went on to surpass Charleston as the biggest city in the Carolinas. New inventions, skyscrapers, and social changes created a bustling downtown. The city's growth attracted many families in search of new jobs and better wages. Increased wages and free time encouraged people to participate in new leisure activities.

Southern textile mills developed their own power sources next to rivers. Soon electricity powered these mills. The electric company Southern Power united the mills’ power services and brought electricity to Piedmont cities, including Charlotte. You may know this company today as Duke Energy.

Other technologies and inventions developed during this time, such as radios, telephones, moving pictures, skyscrapers, streetcars, and automobiles, forever changed people's lives. Locally, Model T and Model A Fords were produced in a Charlotte factory off the Southern Railroad between the 1920s-1930s.

Communication technology was rapidly developing. Charlotte's WBT radio station was one of the largest stations on the East Coast. WBT brought advertising and programs to the Piedmont’s mill villages. During the early 1900s, movie theaters opened across the U.S. For about 10 cents, people could see a newsreel, cartoons, coming attractions, and a feature film. Charlotte's Carolina Theater opened in 1927 with a screening of the silent movie *A Kiss in a Taxi*. The Carolina Theater still stands today and is in the process of being renovated.

During this era, many new businesses were born in Charlotte and nearby towns. People traveled downtown to do their shopping. In general, people had more money to spend and were making fewer things at home, so they had to buy them instead. Department stores were seen in every Piedmont downtown. Belk, Iveys, and Efirds were all headquartered in Charlotte. William Henry Belk of Monroe, N.C. started the Belk Company. In 1915, Mary Lance and her two daughters spread peanut butter between two crackers, inventing the Lance snack cracker.
Activity 1: Studying Historical Photographs

Answer the following questions about each of the photographs of people interacting with technology or participating in leisure activities during the early 20th century.

Quickly scan the photo. What do you notice first?

1. Type of photo (check all that apply): □ Portrait □ Landscape □ Action □ Architectural □ Event □ Family
   □ Panoramic (wide view) □ Posed □ Candid □ Documentary (accurate representation of subject) □ Other

2. Is there a caption? □ yes □ no

Observe its parts.

3. List the people, objects and activities you see.

   PEOPLE
   OBJECTS
   ACTIVITIES

4. Write one sentence summarizing this photo.

Try to make sense of it.

Answer as best you can. The caption, if available, may help.

5. Who do you think took this photo?

6. Where is it from?

7. When is it from?

8. What do you think was happening at the time this photo was taken?

9. Why was it taken? List evidence from the photo or your knowledge about the photographer that led you to your conclusion.

Use it as historical evidence.

10. What did you find out from this photo that you might not learn anywhere else?
Photo 1: An African-American family leaves Florida for the North during the Great Depression; courtesy of MPI/Getty.
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Photo 2: A family listens to the radio in the 1930s; courtesy of the National Archives.
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Photo 3: Harry Shaw (seated) was the first to sell ice cream cones in Charlotte, NC, 1900 by Verdie Perille; courtesy of Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.
Photo 4: Group of children playing circa 1915; courtesy of the Library of Congress.
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Photo 5: Beachgoers at Folly Beach, SC early 1900s; courtesy of The Charleston Museum.
Photo 6: Belk Brothers flagship store in Charlotte, NC, 1910; courtesy of Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.