

Antebellum Georgia

Reading/ Lesson 4

Directions: Read this selection to go with Lesson Plan 4/ Antebellum Georgia

Mill Life

While the mills thrived and flourished, the mill workers were not so lucky. Paid in scrip, which they redeemed at the company-owned store for their goods and supplies, the laborers were too poor to own land and many lived in housing also owned by the company.

In the early days of textile mills, workers' houses often were three room cottages or six-room duplexes. As the industry grew stronger, some single-family four-room cottages cropped up. A general rule used by some mills was that the house would provide for one worker for each room: If a family occupied a three-room house, then that family should have three members working at the mill.

Minutes from the Roswell Manufacturing Company document efforts to keep the houses sanitary and to make them a bit more comfortable:

The tenement houses have been whitewashed which preserves the weathered boarding, acts as a disinfectant and adds to the external appearance of the buildings very much, and we contemplate having most of the unceiled houses made comfortable before very cold weather, using the ceiling taken from the new mill when the sprinklers were put in. Later, Roswell Manufacturing Company's President's Report states that "[s]ince the last report, we have ceiled one room in thirteen of the tenant houses."

Unskilled laborers almost always rented their homes from the company. Skilled workers and overseers were sometimes able to purchase their homes from the Company. As mill owners and managers struggled to keep a reliable work force, housing became an important incentive. Entire families, including children, often labored in the mills, working long hours.

In January, 1890, the State of Georgia found it necessary to regulate the hours of labor in all cotton or woolen manufacturing establishments: Hours were not to exceed eleven hours per day or sixty-six hours per week.

Harsh Realities

Across mill towns in the South, the mill workers were often referred to as "Lintheads," because the lint from the mill often settled on workers' clothes and hair. Wilt Browning, the author of *Lintheads*, writes that it "was never a term of endearment-but some people whose lives were formed in the cotton mill villages of the South wore it as a badge of honor."

For workers in the employ of a given mill, regardless of where it might be located, management controlled everything, from the type and amount of food they had to eat to the clothes they put on their backs.