

UNRAVELED THREADS: THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE CONNECTICUT TEXTILE INDUSTRY, A STORY OF DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

Curated by Jamie Eves, Beverly L. York, and Jared Leitzel

One of the most important parts of the story of industrialization in Connecticut, the rest of New England, and elsewhere is the story of how it ended. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Connecticut was a “maker state,” part of the “cockpit of the American Industrial Revolution.” Today, industry in Connecticut is in sharp decline. “Unraveled Threads” was an exhibit at the Mill Museum (Windham Textile and History Museum) in 2018. The exhibit focused on the concept of deindustrialization — why the Connecticut textile industry, once a dominant feature of the state’s economy, first declined, and then disappeared almost entirely. The exhibit also explored postindustrialization, what had emerged to take the place of the vanished textile industry, what had happened to the state’s scores of abandoned mills, and the fates of the people who lived in the former mill cities and towns. As we researched the story, we found that it was not what we had expected it to be. We found that deindustrialization had begun far earlier than we supposed, in the 1880s. And we discovered that the reasons for deindustrialization were more complicated and complex than we had thought. The exhibit was sponsored by a grant from Connecticut Humanities. One product was the following exhibit display boards. The boards still exist, and the exhibit can be taken “on the road” to other locations. And they tell the story of deindustrialization and postindustrialization in Connecticut.



1. DEINDUSTRIALIZATION: MYTH & REALITY

"I initially thought — as many New Englanders still do — that the [textile] industry's decline was a simple case of corporate efforts to evade unionization; and as the unions moved in, the mills moved out."

William F. Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1950* (1996)

"The textile industry in New England had been in a secular decline for more than 30 years when the research for this study was done in 1961. The depression of the 1930s, the flight of the industry to the South, and the increase in foreign competition all contributed to this decline in the region's most substantial employer. A major reversal in the trend was occasioned by the military demands of World War II, and a brief respite came during the Korean conflict. But the decline continued after each of these periods."

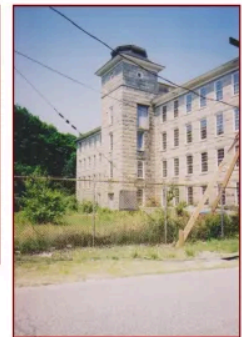
W. Stanley Devino, Arnold H. Raphaelson, and James A. Storer, *A Study of Textile Mill Closings in Selected New England Communities* (1966)

There is a mythology about why the mills left. According to this myth, once upon a time Connecticut had had a thriving textile industry that provided a firm economic base and lots of well-paying jobs. But then, in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, under pressure from labor unions, environmentalists, and "big government," it left, driven out by spiraling wages, environmental protection laws, and burdensome taxes. Seeking escape, it moved first to the South, and then overseas.

While there is a kernel of truth to this interpretation, much of it is wrong. What really happened was much more complex, and is still open to interpretation.

Economists, historians, sociologists, and others who have studied factory flight and the decline of traditional industries like textiles, steel, and brass refer to what happened as **deindustrialization**. Deindustrialization is a global phenomenon. It has occurred (and continues to occur) not just in Connecticut, but throughout the industrialized world. Even many of the places that once absorbed the industries that had left other, older industrial centers — places like the U. S. South — eventually began to experience deindustrialization themselves.

The purpose of this exhibit is to place the decline and eventual fall of the Connecticut textile industry — once a key component of the state's economy, but now mostly departed — within the context of deindustrialization. We want to explore deindustrialization as a complex process. And we hope to pose questions for further discussion: Why did this happen? Could it have been stopped, and if so, how? Will the textile industry ever come back, and if so, in what form? And perhaps most important, what does the future hold for Connecticut's former textile mill towns in the postindustrial future? Can we rebuild those communities, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old? We don't claim to have answers to all these questions. But we think they are worth talking about.

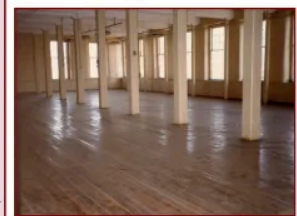


What Scholars Say

Scholars who study deindustrialization agree that it began "in the early twentieth century and accelerat[ed] after World War II." Traditional "**smokestack**" industries like textiles, steel, brass, precision machinery, rubber, and automobiles — industries that historically had relied on cheap labor — relocated their factories to places with very low prevailing wages. Industry, in effect, decentralized — "management functions and professional services" remained in the skyscrapers of modern cities, while the factories moved to places with "third world" economies, where labor was cheap, unions powerless, taxes low, and environmental protection and workplace safety laws practically nonexistent. Also remaining in the central cities were the service jobs that provided for the needs of the managers and professionals: janitors, waitresses, maids, and others who received minimal wages. (Tracy Neuman, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America*, 2016.)

It has not been the central cities — New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Providence, Pittsburgh — that suffered the most from deindustrialization, scholars say (although they often have had other problems), but what are sometimes called the "**industrial suburbs**," smaller factory and mill cities in the orbits of the larger metropolises. These industrial suburbs include the textile mill towns and cities of Connecticut and the rest of New England: Lowell and Lawrence in Massachusetts, Woonsocket and Pawtucket in Rhode Island, and Norwich, Williamstown, Danielson, Rockville, and other textile mill communities in Connecticut. While the central cities at least retained the managerial and professional jobs, the industrial suburbs too often were left with nothing but abandoned buildings. (Andrew Hurley, "The Transformation of Industrial Suburbs Since the Second World War," in Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard, eds., *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places*, 2015; Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*, 2006.)

Few scholars believe that deindustrialization was caused solely or even primarily by unionization, environmental protection and workplace safety laws, or high taxes, not if it began in the 1920s (or earlier), when textile unions were weak, environmental and workplace safety laws largely nonexistent, and taxes relatively low. Some see it linked instead to new forms of corporate ownership, as smaller manufacturers were gobbled up by national and transnational conglomerates that could afford to decouple production from management — or which simply gave up manufacturing altogether for more profitable business in the expanding postindustrial service sector. (Jeremy Brecher, *Banded Together: Economic Democratization in the Brass Valley*, 2011).



Photos from the collections of the Windham Textile & History Museum (the Mill Museum). Credit: Bev York and Stephanie Conforti.







The Mill Museum
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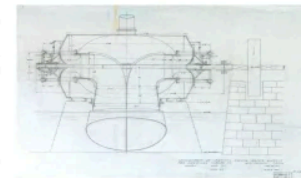
2. WHY THE MILLS WERE HERE

The story of industry in Connecticut began in the early 1800s, not with modern smokestacks, steam engines, and electricity, but with old-fashioned stone dams, raceways, and creaking wooden waterwheels. Like the rest of southern New England, post-Revolutionary Connecticut abounded with steep hills, free-flowing rivers, and fast-moving streams. Furious and foaming, swift and swirling, powerful enough to drive industrial-sized waterwheels but also narrow enough to dam with early 19th-century construction technology, the Quinnebaug, Willimantic, Shetucket, Hop, Hockanum, Yantic, and other rivers tumbled out of the granite hills, surged through narrow gneiss gorges, and — unlike Southern rivers, which had to cross wide, flat coastal plains to meet the sea — quickly reached the busy ports of tidewater. The American Industrial Revolution started in 1793, just over the border in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, with Samuel Slater's Mill, which harnessed waterpower to spin thread and yarn from wool provided by local farmers. It wasn't long before similar mills sprang up along other waterfalls in an area the stretched from southern Maine, through New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, and into eastern and central Connecticut. (There were mills in western Connecticut, too, but these manufactured mostly metal, tools, and precision machines, rather than textiles.)

According to the English historian Phyllis Deane in *The First Industrial Revolution* (1965), industrialization occurs when a number of "identifiable changes in the methods and characteristics of economic organization" all happen at the same time.

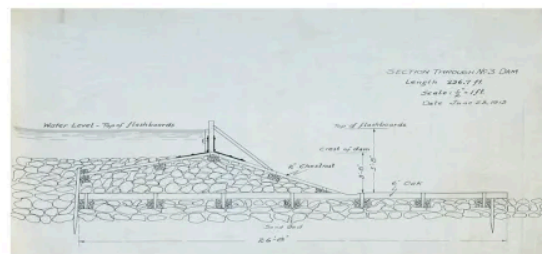
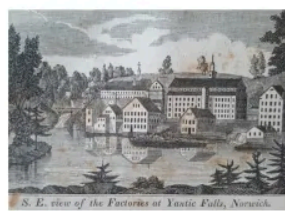
These include the following related changes: (1) widespread and systematic application of modern science ... to the process of production for the market; (2) specialization of economic activity directed towards production for national and international markets rather than for family or [local] use; (3) movement of population from rural to urban communities; (4) enlargement ... of the typical unit of production so that it comes to be based less on the family ... and more on the corporate or public enterprise; (5) movement of labour from ... the production of primary products to the production of manufactured goods and services; (6) ... extensive use of capital resources ...; (7) emergence of new social ... classes determined by ... means of production other than land.... (Deane, 1965)

At the beginning of the 19th century it was Connecticut and the rest of southern New England that became the "cockpit of the American Industrial Revolution" because — unlike other regions of the new United States — it had in place not just some, but **all** of the ingredients necessary for a water-powered industrial revolution: access to pirated British textile technology; the benefit of a high protective national tariff on imported manufactures (the result of Alexander Hamilton's economic system); a ready source of energy in the form of water-power; seaports located only short distances from that waterpower; a burgeoning population that elbowed small farmers out of agriculture and into other jobs; an extensive shipping industry that provided cheap transportation in bulk and generated a large amount of surplus investment capital; the end of the international slave trade in 1807 (which pushed shippers to seek alternative cargos and new investment opportunities); access to expanding urban markets; and the emergence of a large, educated, non-slave working class.



Above: the Willimantic River, one of Connecticut's many mill rivers, as it looked c. 1900; one of Connecticut's many stone mill dams, at Willimantic Falls, constructed c. 1865; engineering diagram of waterpower at American Thread Company in Willimantic, 1902.

Below: engineering diagram of the stone-and-wood dam at Mill No. 3 of the Willimantic Linen Company on the Willimantic River, 1918.



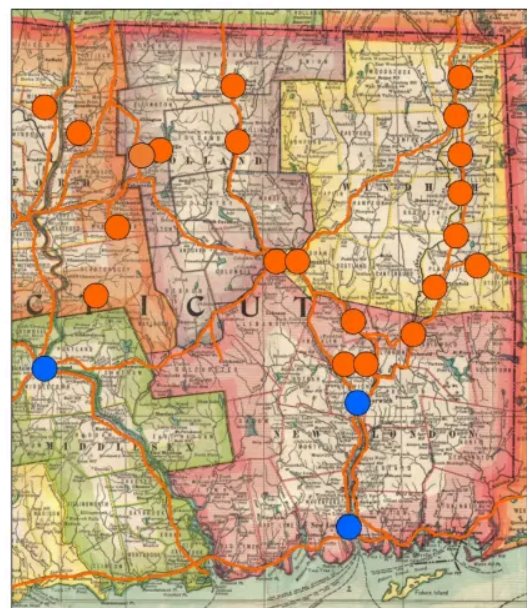
Right: Detail from a 1900 railroad map of southern New England, upon which we have superimposed Connecticut's major textile mill centers (orange circles), the major ports serving those mills (blue circles: Norwich, New London, and Middletown [not shown: Providence, RI]), and railroads (orange lines). Most of the rail lines were built in the 1840s and 1850s.

Upper left: Etchings of early Connecticut textile mill communities from John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections* (1836).

Lower left: Norwich, Connecticut's major textile port in the early 1800s, from Barber (1836).



All illustrations from materials in the collections of the Windham Textile & History Museum (the Mill Museum).





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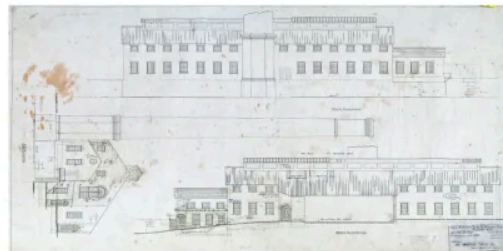
3. WHY THE MILLS LEFT: NEW ENERGY, NEW TECHNOLOGY

In 1876 William Barrows, Civil War veteran, resident of Hartford, and Assistant Treasurer the Willimantic Linen Company, one of Connecticut's largest manufacturers of cotton thread, journeyed to Philadelphia. His task was to oversee the installation of the Company's exhibit at Machinery Hall of the Centennial Exhibition, a colossal world's fair celebrating the 100th birthday of the United States. Barrows brought with him one of the Company's brand new spool winders, along with a supply of the Company's six-ply sewing thread — of such uniform thickness and quality that it could be used in what was still a novel invention — the sewing machine — without jamming or breaking. Like other manufacturers exhibiting in Machinery Hall — including two Connecticut companies that made sewing machines — Barrows intended actually to operate the winder. Waterpower was unavailable, but the Exposition's organizers had solved that problem by purchasing and installing a giant, new Corliss steam engine, manufactured Rhode Island, capable of running every machine in Machinery Hall. Barrows — along with executives from Palmer and Kendall in Middletown, which manufactured cord and twine; the Neptune Twine Company in East Haddam; John Turner's twine mill in Norwich; the brand new Ponemah cotton mill in Taftville (opened in 1870); the Wauregan cotton mill in Wauregan; the Pocahontas cotton mill in Putnam; the American Hosiery Company in New Britain; the Cheney silk mill in Manchester; the Belding silk mill in Rockville; the Holland silk mill in Willimantic; the Hayden silk mill in Windsor Locks; the Thames River Worsted Company in Norwich; and a host of other Connecticut manufacturers — received a firsthand demonstration of the efficiency and dependability of steam power over waterpower.

A year later, Barrows had been promoted to superintendent of the Willimantic Linen Company's massive stone mill complex in Willimantic, where he undertook a program of modernization. The Company already used steam for heat, but under Barrows it began using it to run some of its machinery, as well. And in addition to steam, in 1879 (the same year that Thomas Edison developed his incandescent electric light bulb), Barrows installed electric arc lights in the Linen Company's Mill No. 2, the first factory in the world to do so. The next year, Barrows hired Edison to come to Willimantic and replace the arc lights with incandescent bulbs. Also in 1880, Barrows commenced construction of a massive new mill in Willimantic — Mill No. 4 — that was designed both for electric lights and steam-driven machinery. Mill No. 4 was immense: at 3 1/2 acres, it was in 1880 the largest one-story building in the world. All on one floor, it was more efficient than older, multi-story mills. Powered by steam, it was located not directly on the Willimantic River, but nearer to the railroad. It had its own rail siding, to unload both raw cotton and the coal needed to fire its boilers. Proud of being on the cutting edge of technology (the Linen Company had also been among the first cotton mills to switch from mule to ring spinners), the Company staged a celebratory grand opening for the new mill. Visitors came by train from all over the country to see firsthand evidence of New England's technological primacy — unaware that what they were actually witnessing was the beginning of the end of the Connecticut textile industry. For now that mills no longer relied on waterpower — now that they could be powered instead by steam and electricity — they could be located anywhere. And now that ring spinners had replaced the older, more complicated mule spinners, the mills could replace more highly paid skilled operatives with lower paid semiskilled hands. It was no coincidence that in that very decade — the 1880s — the American textile industry began slowly to move to the South.



Above: The Willimantic Linen Company's booth at the Centennial Exposition; thread winders at the Linen Company, late 1800s, similar to those at the WLC booth; early 20th-century postcard depicting Mill No. 4 at the Willimantic Linen Company (which became the American Thread Company in 1898), the first mill building designed for both steam power and electric lights.



Above left: ring spinner, c. 1940, which required less skill than a mule spinner.

Above: engineering diagram of the boiler house and smokestack at Willimantic Linen Co. / American Thread Co.'s Mill No. 2.

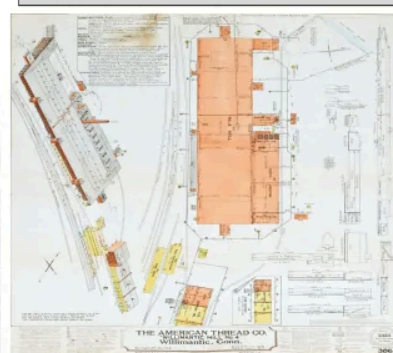
Lower right: insurance map of Mill No. 4. Below: ring spinner powered by an electric motor, American Thread Company, c. 1950.

Below left: Natchaug silk mill in Willimantic, a steam powered silk mill, c. 1890.



Horse Power Used in Manufacturing (All Products)				
Source: United States Census				
Region	Year	Waterpower	Steam	Electricity
U.S.A.	1904	12.2%	80.9%	4.7%
U.S.A.	1914	7.9%	69.5%	18.0%
New England	1927	13.1%	30.9%	56.0%
South Atlantic	1927	3.4%	34.6%	62.0%

By 1904, American industry had shifted from waterpower to steam as its chief source of energy. By 1914, electricity had overtaken traditional waterpower. By 1927, electricity had overtaken steam, pushing non-electric waterpower into third place. But in New England, the switch away from waterpower occurred more slowly than in the South. Its more modern energy systems gave Southern mills a competitive advantage over New England mills.



Coal Consumption (in long tons), American Thread Company, Willimantic, 1899, 1900, & 1901						
Period	Mill No. 1	Mill No. 2	Mill No. 3	Mill No. 4 Power	Mill No. 4 Heat	Total
3/31/99-4/01/00	423	4,710	99	2,947	711	8,890
3/31/00-4/01/01	672	5,058	31	4,017	826	10,604
Space heated, 1900	125,000	200,000	38,000		200,000	563,000
Space heated, 1901	125,000	303,000	38,000		250,000	716,000
Ave. horsepower, 1900				1,055		
Ave. horsepower, 1901				1,493		



All illustrations from materials in the collections of the Windham Textile & History Museum (the Mill Museum).



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4. WHY THE MILLS LEFT: THE SEARCH FOR CHEAP LABOR, 1880-1920

We saw on the previous display board that new technologies that developed in the years after the Civil War (bigger steam engines, electric lights and motors, a nationwide railroad network that reached into the South, more efficient one-story factories, and simpler, easier to operate ring spinning machines) all made it *possible* for the American textile industry to relocate to the South. And relocate it did. Between 1880 and 1920, the Piedmont area in the South Atlantic states — the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama — became an important textile manufacturing region, second only in the United States to New England. But in addition to advances in technology, several important economic factors underlay this development: The Piedmont was closer both to the Southern cotton fields and the Appalachian coal mines, reducing transportation costs. With the abolition of slavery and the end of the plantation system, Southern capital was looking for new types of investments. But the main reason was the ready availability in the Southern Piedmont of extremely cheap labor, cheaper than almost anywhere else in the United States.

In truth, the textile industry has always relied on cheap labor. But also requires a nucleus of skilled (and hence better-paid) workers, to train and oversee the rest of the workforce, and to repair and maintain the machinery. The Piedmont had that, too. There had been a few small textile mills in the South before the Civil War, which had been located mainly in the Piedmont, to take advantage of the region's waterpower, and they had produced a nucleus of skilled workers. These skilled workers were uniformly whites, who after the Civil War resisted working with African Americans, who were mostly former slaves. So the Southern mills refused to hire African Americans. But as it turned out there was another ready source of inexpensive labor: an exodus of poor white Appalachian farmers streaming out of the mountains, pushed out of the "hollers" by a combination of overpopulation and environmental degradation. Desperate for work, the Appalachians accepted wages that were only 2/3 to 3/4 of those paid in New England, the Mid-Atlantic States, the Great Lakes States, or the Pacific Coast region.

The years 1880-1920 saw a massive growth in the Piedmont textile industry — so much so that by 1920 it rivaled New England as a center for textile production. And Southern labor remained cheap: indeed, Southern labor continued to be less expensive than in other parts of the United States throughout the 20th century. It wasn't that New England labor was especially expensive, as wages in New England remained on par with all other regions of the United States except for the South. Few mills moved to Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, or California. It was the Piedmont South, with its low wages and large pool of poor whites that became America's second textile center. Until 1920, the New England textile industry also prospered, so few people in New England really noticed what was happening. New England mills also succeeded in suppressing wages (although not to the extent in the South) by hiring poor immigrant laborers. When the massive Ponemah cotton mill in Taftville, CT, opened in 1870, the majority of its workers were Irish immigrants. In 1875, when the mill owners responded to the recession of the 1870s by cutting wages, the Ponemah workers went on strike. But the Company replaced them with French Canadians (who eventually constituted more than 70% of the Ponemah workforce), and broke the strike. It was only after 1920 that the decline of the New England — and Connecticut — textile industry became readily apparent.

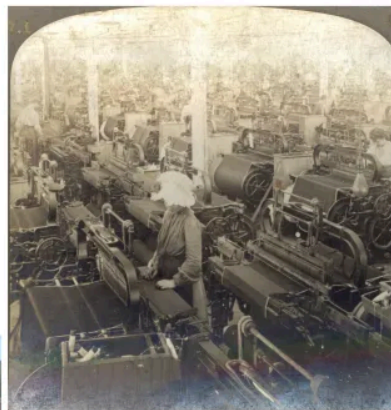


Above: Reconstruction of Appalachian house and barn, Blue Ridge Parkway and Smoky Mountains National Park, photos by Jamie Eves. After the Civil War, the small valleys and "hollers" of Appalachia became overcrowded and environmentally degraded, spurring out-migration.



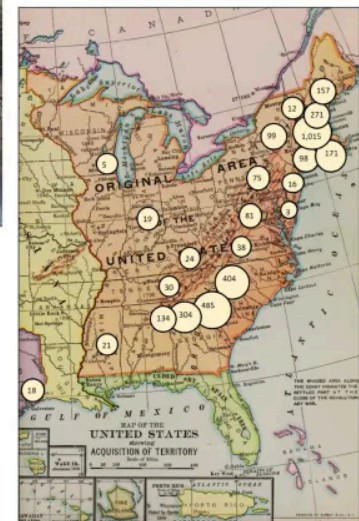
Above: Reconstruction of small water-powered mill, Smoky Mountains National Park, photo by Jamie Eves. A few water-powered textile mills existed in the Southern Piedmont before the Civil War, creating the skilled nucleus of a postwar all-white Southern mill labor force.

WAGES IN DOLLARS, NEW ENGLAND v. PIEDMONT					
DATE/STATE	DOFFER (M)	DRAWER-IN (F)	SPINNER (F)	WEAVER (M)	WEAVER (F)
1888-CT	.63/day	1.46/day	.67/day	1.36/day	.97/day
1888-MA	.70/day	.88/day	.90/day	1.21/day	.99/day
1888-RI	.66/day	1.41/day	.51/day	1.25/day	1.25/day
1888-NC	.30/day	—	.41/day	.76/day	.67/day
1888-SC	.33/day	—	.33/day	.69/day	.60/day
1918-CT	.25/hr	.23/hr	—	—	—
1918-MA	.28/hr	.30/hr	.28/hr	.33/hr	.30/hr
1918-RI	.34/hr	.28/hr	.30/hr	.36/hr	.33/hr
1918-NC	.19/hr	.20/hr	.19/hr	.25/hr	.22/hr
1918-SC	.19/hr	.18/hr	.17/hr	.23/hr	.20/hr



Above: Weaving room, Greensboro, NC, 1903.
Left: The last American Thread Co. (now absorbed into Coats & Clark and called Coats North America) left in the United States, the Sevier Plant in Marion, NC, at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains. The factory opened in the early 1900s. Photos by Jamie Eves.

Right: The number of bales of cotton (in thousands) used by cotton mills, per state, in 1900. New England remained the center of cotton manufacturing (for the time being), but a secondary region of cotton manufacturing had emerged in the Southern Piedmont.



Sources: Data is from United States Census, especially *Census Reports, Vol. IX, Manufactures, Part III, Special Reports on Selected Industries* (1902). Base map is from Benson Lossing, ed., *Harper's Encyclopedia of United States History* (1905). All images are from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum (the Mill Museum).





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5. WHY THE MILLS LEFT: YEARS OF DECLINE, 1920-1985

The Connecticut textile industry began to decline in the 1920s. World War I (1914-18) had been boom years. There were big government contracts to fill, and almost no competition from European mills. After the war, however, the demand for American cotton, wool, and silk textiles began to drop. Especially in New England, textile mills cut back on production, laid off workers, and cut piece rates. Strikes ensued, but unions were weak and management almost always prevailed. Connecticut's biggest strike in the 1920s was in 1925 at the American Thread Co. in Willimantic, where all 2,500 workers walked out over wage cuts. Nine months later, the strike ended with the union (the United Textile Workers of America) broken and the original 2,500 workers replaced by a downsized, non-union workforce of 1,700. The Great Depression (1929-37) exacerbated the industry's decline. It was during the 1930s that many of the mills sold their company housing to private landlords. World War II (1939-45) saw a temporary resurgence, based once more on government contracts and reduced foreign competition. The resurgence continued briefly after the war for mills that were able to produce new synthetic thread and cloth. But decline resumed in the 1950s, especially for smaller, family-owned firms like the Wauregan mill in Wauregan and the Gardiner Hall, Jr., mill in Willington. More mills closed in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, including the larger mills. The massive Cheney Silk Mills in Manchester were sold to J. P. Stevens in 1955, which broke up the property and sold it off in pieces. The last mill on the Cheney site shuttered in 1984. The Baltic Mills Co. in Baltic, successor to A. W. Sprague Co., founded in 1860, closed in 1963. The Danielson Cotton Mill ceased operations in 1964. The giant Ponemah Mill in Taftville closed in 1970. The massive American Thread Company in Willimantic, once the largest thread mill in North America, ceased operations in 1985, consolidating its operations into its plants in the U. S. South.



Above: The last shipment from the Gardiner Hall, Jr., Co. mill in Willington before it closed, 1954.

Right: Pay envelope from the American Thread Co., 1924. This worker took home \$9.65, a full week's wages.



1. The Decline of Cotton Textile Production After 1920

The production of cotton and woolen textiles in the United States peaked in the 1920s, and then began a long, slow decline. Initially, the decline reflected the collapse of textile production in New England, but after 1970 the South, too, faltered. There were three main causes for this decline: (a) the New England textile industry collapsed 1920-65, (b) synthetic textiles replaced natural fibers in many products, and (c) textile production in other countries, especially in Asia, rose, especially after World War II. Source: United States Census. (Note: The U. S. Census stopped publishing data on consumption of cotton by New England mills in 1960, because by then cotton thread and cloth production in New England had nearly collapsed, and the South dominated. In 1975, the Census stopped publishing data on consumption of cotton by mills by region. In 1985, the Census stopped recording consumption of cotton by mills by active spindles and instead recorded it in lbs.)

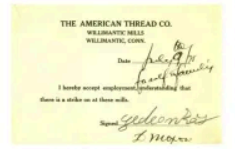
Active Cotton Spindles (Thousands)

Year	United States	New England	South
1920	35,481	18,287	15,231
1925	35,032	15,975	17,292
1930	31,245	11,351	18,586
1935	26,701	7,763	18,212
1940	23,586	5,279	17,641
1945	22,675	4,511	17,610
1950	21,790	3,739	17,673
1955	20,716	2,342	18,230
1960	19,221	DNA	17,801
1965	18,757	DNA	18,114
1970	19,656	DNA	18,653
1975	16,800	DNA	DNA
1980	16,000	DNA	DNA
1985	3,176 m lbs	DNA	DNA
2005	2,548 m lbs	DNA	DNA



Upper Left: As a young executive for the American Thread Co., English-born David Moxon led the Company's effort to recruit replacement workers during the divisive 1925 strike. Moxon's success helped break the union, the United Textile Workers of America, at the mill.

Center Left: Replacement workers signed cards like this.



Lower Left: Valentine Allaire, c. 1990, when she was interviewed for an oral history of the 1925 ATCO strike. Her father-in-law, Philias Allaire, a French Canadian immigrant, had attempted to organize a union of loom fixers at ATCO in 1903, but afraid of retaliation from the Company, he had kept both his activities and the union charter a secret. In 1912 the Industrial Workers of the World led successful textile strikes in New England, including Willimantic, but the IWW were badly broken by the Wilson Administration during World War I. When Valentine went to work for ATCO in 1922, there was no longer any union there. The defeat of the 1925 strike, led by the United Textile Workers, broke the UTW at ATCO. The UTW did not return until after the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935. As a result, management controlled wages and other labor costs well into the 1920-85 era of decline. The cost of labor was higher in Connecticut than in the South, but it wasn't because of unions.

3. The 1950s: The Decline and Fall of the Wauregan Mills

Some of Connecticut's textile mills were behemoths, like the Willimantic Linen Company / American Thread Company in Willimantic, the Ponemah Mills in Taftville, the Cheney Silk Mills in Manchester, and the A. W. Sprague Co. / Baltic Mills Co. in Baltic. But many more were smaller, family-run businesses. An example of a family-owned mill was the Wauregan Mills in Wauregan. The Wauregan mills were founded in 1853-54 in a rural area of the town of Plainfield by Amos Lockwood, the owner of the Quinebaug Mill in Danielson. Lockwood hired James S. Atwood as superintendent. In 1858 Atwood purchased the company, which remained in the Atwood family for several generations. Under Atwood, the Wauregan Mills specialized in weaving cotton sheeting and flannel. An example of "industrial benevolence," Atwood created a "model village," also named Wauregan (Mohegan-Pequot for "Pleasant Valley") of 255 tenements, two boarding houses, a company store, a railroad station, a post office, a library, a dairy farm, and a large imposing home for himself. The Company made a switch to steam power 1891. In the 20th century, the Wauregan Mills developed new niche markets, benefitted from World War II military contracts, and diversified from cotton to woolsens and rayon. Profits plunged after World War II, though, and the Company went deeply into debt. Competition from Japanese manufacturers (protective tariffs having long since been abolished) undercut Wauregan's sales. And a 1955 hurricane caused severe flooding that damaged warehoused products and mill buildings alike. Two years later, in 1957, owner James A. Atwood III reluctantly closed the mill and put the buildings up for sale. He finally paid off the Company's debts in 1970. It was the end of an era.

Wauregan Mills Payroll, 1950-58

Year	Payroll	Employees (average)
1950	\$1,120,762	583
1951	\$1,702,693	693
1952	\$1,888,823	716
1953	\$1,850,453	707
1954	\$1,076,323	517
1955	\$1,414,522	605
1956	\$1,494,406	641
1957	\$ 825,724	471
1958	\$ 80,125	32

Source: W. Stanley DeVino, Arnold H. Raphaelson, and James A. Storer, *A Study of Textile Mill Closings in Selected New England Communities* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1966), pp. 124-142.



2. The 1920s: The Labor Strife Theory of Factory Flight (A Myth)

In the 1920s Charlotte Molyneux Holloway, a progressive Republican, was an investigator for the Connecticut Bureau of Labor. Holloway inspected factories — including textile mills — to make sure that they had restrooms and infirmaries, and gave their workers periodic breaks. A political moderate, Holloway sympathized with workers, especially women, but also with mill owners. In her 1926 report, she addressed the issue of factory flight. Mostly, she denied the problem existed, but then contradicted herself and gave reasons why it might be happening. "Great fear has been expressed lest the removal of the cotton mills to the South cripple this state," she wrote. "It is not even remotely possible." However, if the mills did leave, she continued, it would be because of "competition" from the South. Southern mills, she argued, were closer to the cotton fields, enjoyed cheaper labor, and had lower costs. More important, though, Holloway wrote, was the economic impact of changes in women's fashion (cotton undergarments were being replaced by silk), the end of the World War I boom, and labor troubles in Connecticut. Thus was born the "labor strife theory" of factory flight.

In fact, the 1920s did see increased conflict between management and labor in the Connecticut textile industry. Mills had raised wages during World War I, to attract the workers they needed to meet increased demand during the war years. But when the war ended, the mills had cut production and slashed piece rates. Angry workers struck. From 1924 to 1926, there were 50 strikes in Connecticut involving nearly 5,000 workers. Most of them — including the two largest — were at textile factories. The problem with this interpretation, though, is that the unions almost always lost these strikes, and frequently were broken by them. Of those Connecticut strikes settled by June 1926, management won 13, 14 were joint settlements mostly favoring management, and labor won only 3. Textile unions were weak throughout the United States until after 1935, when Congress passed the Wagner Act. If the Connecticut textile industry began its collapse in the 1920s — and it clearly did — unions could not have been the cause.

6. THE POSTINDUSTRIAL TRANSITION, 1985-PRESENT

In the 1970s, economists noticed that places like Connecticut with advanced industrial economies were undergoing a major transition. Traditional manufacturers were declining (deindustrialization), and a new kind of service economy was rising to take its place. Economists referred to the new economies as “**postindustrial**” economies — a temporary term meant to last only until economists learned what really made the new economies tick. In his 1973 book, *The Coming of Postindustrial Society*, economist Daniel Bell described what was happening. While the old industrial economy of the 19th and early 20th centuries had been characterized by manufacturing, the new postindustrial economy focused on providing services such as health care, information, art, computer software, investment, communications, restaurants, personal services, and companionship. According to Bell, the services provided were many and varied. Some jobs generated high incomes and others low. Four service sectors predominated: **health, education, research, and government.** “Ed and meds,” some people said.

The new postindustrial economy created a new postindustrial society. Blue-collar jobs declined. White-collar and pink-collar occupations increased. There was less demand for mill workers, masons, and machinists, but more jobs for lawyers, doctors, managers, scientists, teachers, social workers, information and technology providers, artists, waitresses, barbers, secretaries, and clerks. Mill towns declined; college, tourist, and residential communities grew. Practical knowledge seemed less relevant; theoretical information became more important. Status and leadership shifted from mill managers, tinkers, and main street merchants to scientists, investment specialists, surgeons, computer engineers, and university administrators. The middle class and upper classes moved away from the old industrial suburbs and the working class neighborhoods in the inner cities, and into residential suburbs and gentrified neighborhoods in the cities. The exponential growth of information networks like the internet and international banking contributed to globalization.

The result was that the old industrial suburbs — the mill towns — declined, as well. Mill owning families disappeared as a social class as family-run firms like the Cheney Silk Mills in Manchester were bought out by international conglomerates like J. P. Stevens. Mill managers relocated to corporate headquarters in central cities. The mill towns suffered from social decapitation, the loss of the old elite who, for good or ill, had provided civic leadership. As white mill workers moved away, property values declined, which in turn attracted nonwhites and other more marginal groups. Rents were cheap, and even homeownership was less expensive than in the tonier residential suburbs.

Some mill towns, though, contain the seeds for economic renewal. If the new postindustrial economy was going to be based on health, education, research, and government, mill towns that also had hospitals, colleges and universities, research facilities, and government centers had a chance of reforming around those activities. The largest single employer (not counting the State of Connecticut as a single employer) in eastern Connecticut today is the University of Connecticut, with more than 4,500 full-time and more than 850 part-time employees, along with more than 26,000 students, most of them at the University’s main campus in Storrs (which never was a factory town). The UConn Health Center in Farmington employs an additional 3,500+ faculty and staff. Pfizer Inc., a pharmaceuticals international conglomerate, maintains a large research lab in Groton. At its height, Pfizer employed 4,500 staff in eastern Connecticut, and still employs more than 3,000. In Willimantic, once home to the giant American Thread Co. with 2,500 employees, the largest single employer is now Eastern Connecticut State University, with more than 600 full-time employees, almost 400 part-timers, and more than 700 student workers — a total that matches ATCO’s post strike employment of 1,700 following the 1925 strike, but which also relies heavily on poorly paid part-time workers. Not all of the former mill towns have colleges, universities, hospitals, and research labs. The future is both uneven and uncertain.



Upper left: Early 20th-century postcard of Norwich, CT, City Hall. Mill towns and their ports were important government centers, even in the nineteenth century. Unlike rural communities, mill centers often achieved borough or city status, which entitled residents to establish police and fire departments, pave streets, install sewers and piped water, and set up municipal courts.



All illustrations from materials in the collections of the Windham Textile & History Museum.



Above: Mills were early research labs, especially in the 20th century. This late 1950s photo shows the research lab at the American Thread Company in Willimantic.

Right: Post offices, too, were centers of government activity. At top is an early 20th-century postcard of the Willimantic Post Office. It has been replaced by a larger building, and this structure is now a brew pub. Below right is the old Norwich Post Office in an early 20th-century postcard.



Above: Some of the seeds of a postindustrial economy and society of education, health, research, and government were planted in the industrial era. Connecticut’s mill towns had some of the state’s earliest high schools. Willimantic was home to a teachers’ college — now Eastern Connecticut State University — founded in 1889. The college’s first building is shown above as it appeared on an early 20th-century postcard.

Below: Both Norwich (which included the industrial suburbs of Taftville, Greenville, and Yantic) (top photo below) and Willimantic (second photo below) had hospitals founded in the industrial era. A much expanded Backus Hospital remains in Norwich. In Willimantic, St. Joseph’s Hospital was supplanted by the larger Windham Hospital. Both Backus and Windham are now owned by Hartford Healthcare, an expanding corporation.



