

## Mill Work and Mill Villages

### Overview

In this lesson, students will examine the nature of mill work and life in mill villages through reading and oral history interviews conducted with former employees of Rocky Mount Mills. Students will then independently research a particular aspect of the diverse history of Rocky Mount Mills and creatively demonstrate what they've learned by creating a class mural.

### Materials

- Internet access and speakers
- Mill Work & Life in Mill Villages, reading and worksheet attached on pg. 4-7
- Laptops with internet access and headphones with splitters for students to utilize in small groups for listening to oral history clips hyperlinked throughout the "Mill Work & Life In Mill Villages" worksheet
  - If multiple laptops are not available, teachers can also play the various clips for the class as a whole
- Rocky Mount Mills Mural Panel assignment sheet, attached
- Sample Mural Scoring Rubric, attached (optional)

### Duration

60+ minutes (varies depending on implementation of mural project)

### Procedure

#### Warm Up: Images of Mill Work

1. As a warm up, select several images from the interior of Rocky Mount Mills (RMM) during the 1900s: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/prsp-exhibit/rocky-mount-mills-archive/> (Select "Machinery" and "Work" in the legend to filter the images.) Print these out and provide them to pairs or small groups of students to examine. Alternatively, teachers can choose one image to project in front of the class for all students to examine (individually, in pairs, or in small groups.) Do not share any information about the image at this time; rather just have students discuss and consider questions such as:
  - What do you see/first notice about this image?
  - What do you think this is a picture of and what evidence makes you think this?
  - What kind of work do you think took place here? What do you imagine it would have been like to be a worker in charge of operating one of these machines? Would this work have been hard or easy and why? What would it have sounded like when the machines were operating? Smelled like? Felt like (in summer? In winter?) What would the air in this room be like?
  - What dangers might working in this room pose?
  - Who do you imagine worked here and what might their pay have been like?
2. After around 5-8 minutes of discussion, let students know that the images they are viewing are from Rocky Mount Mills, and allow the class to share what they already know about the Mill and surrounding area (i.e., Have they visited? Do they know anything about its history? Do they have any family members who worked there? etc.) Let students know that they are going to be focusing on what mill work and life was like during the 1900s in today's lesson while listening to some local voices from Rocky Mount Mills. (If teachers want to provide brief overview of the Mill's history, or gain more indepth knowledge about RMM, go [here](#).)

#### An Overview of Mill Work & Life in Mill Villages with Oral History Excerpts

3. Provide students with the attached "Mill Work & Life in Mill Villages" reading and worksheet.

- Teachers who have access to multiple laptops and headphones for students to utilize independently in this activity can provide the worksheet in electronic format. This way, students can click the hyperlinked interviews directly.
  - Teachers without multiple laptops can play the clips for the class as a whole. In this case, students should be provided with a photo copy of the handout.
4. Let students know that throughout this reading as they explore general mill work and life, they will encounter oral history excerpts that discuss Rocky Mount Mills and the mill village in particular. As an introduction to the voices they will encounter throughout the reading, play [this excerpt](#) from an interview with Lo Bowen (5 minutes) for the class as a whole and instruct them to jot down their thoughts to what they hear at the top of their handout. Let students know that born in 1927, Lo started working at RMM as a 15-year-old in 1942. In the clip she discusses her family’s work history at RMM and the difficulty of the work there. Allow students to share their thoughts after listening.
  5. Next, instruct students to continue with the worksheet reading, listening to the oral history excerpts that are hyperlinked throughout, and answering the corresponding questions. Afterwards allow students to discuss their answers, share their thoughts on what they heard and make further connections by posing discussion questions such as:
    - Did anyone hear or read anything that stood out, was surprising or particularly interesting? Did anyone connect to anything in particular (either on a personal note or based on something previously learned/discussed?)
    - What commonalities did you hear among the various interviewees?
    - Do you think memories are reliable in terms of learning history? Why or why not?
    - Overall, how would you describe life and work in Rocky Mount Mills and surrounding communities during the early 1900s?

#### **Rocky Mount Mills Mural Project**

6. Transition students into discussing mill spaces – what happens to these large campuses once a mill shuts down? And how should the history that took place in these buildings, given the incredible impact mill work had on North Carolina, be remembered? Allow students to share what they already know about the redevelopment of the Rocky Mount Mills site in particular, then share that in early 21st century, Capitol Broadcasting Company, which led the restoration of the acclaimed American Tobacco Campus in Durham, bought Rocky Mount Mills and began reinventing it as a mixed-use destination, currently comprised of office space, residences, and restaurants. The mill village homes surround Rocky Mount Mills are also being renovated. (Go to <https://www.rockymountmills.com> for additional information.) Allow students to consider the pros and cons of such redevelopment.
7. Next, tell students that they are going to dig deeper into the history of Rocky Mount Mills in particular by working in small groups to create a mural panel. Distribute the attached “Rocky Mount Mills Mural” handout and tell students to imagine that they work for an art firm that has been hired to create a multi-panel mural to be installed at the renovated Rocky Mount Mills site, the goal of which is to educate the public regarding the Mill’s diverse history. Review the instructions as a class and then in groups, assign (or let students choose) a particular topic/reading to base their mural panel on. Teachers can refer to the following narratives as potential topics/readings, or find their own alternatives:
  - [Landscape and Environment](#)
  - [Native American Connections](#)
  - [Early Mill History](#)
  - [The Civil War](#)
  - [Movement of the County Line](#)
  - [The Great Depression](#)

- [Integration](#)

8. Provide students with art supplies (this can be as simple as chart paper, or more elaborate materials can be provided) and let them know how much class and/or homework time will be provided for completion.
9. On the day that panels are due, teachers should display them and allow students to do a gallery walk and review the various works of art. expectations of respectful audience members with students. Handout the attached “Mural Notes Sheet” and instruct students to write down observations as the view their classmate’s work. Students should then present their mural panel to one another. This can be done in small groups via a “jigsaw” activity, where one student from each panel group makes several new groups; students then take turns presenting their group’s work to one another. Or this can be done as an entire class. Students should continue to take notes as they learn about the various topics each group describes. After each presentation, allow students to ask questions and offer positive feedback (i.e. “What I liked - What I learned - What questions I have.”)
10. Once all groups have presented, have students put the mural together. (Teachers should reserve a wall with ample space for doing so, such as the hall or a wall in the library.) Teachers may also want to have art supplies on hand to allow students to artistically fuse the pieces of the mural together. (For example, once all panels are hung side by side, students may overlay shapes or symbols at the seams of the panel; draw or write words or phrases across seams to connect panels, etc.) Once all the panels are displayed as one mural, instruct students to examine it and discuss:
  - What three things jump out at you first about this mural?
  - What might someone who is unfamiliar with the history of Rocky Mount Mills in North Carolina learn from viewing our mural?
  - What title should we give this mural? Why?
  - What do you think is most important to remember about the history of Rocky Mount Mills and why?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Mill Work and Life in Mill Villages

1. [Lo Bowen](#) started working at RMM as a 15-year-old in 1942. Listen as she discusses her family's history of working at Rocky Mount Mills (RMM), write down anything that you find interesting or surprising. Also, based on what you hear, how would you describe mill work?

#### Mill Work

Rural people who moved from farm to factory faced a difficult transition. Work in tobacco and textile mills was hard and dangerous, and it involved entire families, just as farm work had. But first-generation millhands had to adjust from the rhythm of life on the farm (where they worked for themselves and according to the pace of the seasons), to the rhythm of the factory (where they worked for someone else's profit and synchronized their labor to the steady and quick pace of machines.) Most millhands went to work early in the day and labored for ten to twelve hours straight, amid deafening noise, choking dust and lint, and overwhelming heat and humidity.

2. Listen to [Lo Bowen](#) and then [Jan Bowen](#) discuss how their families came to work in Rocky Mount Mills (RMM).
3. How and why did their families make their way to RMM?
4. At what various ages did you hear that they and/or their families began working at RMM?
5. How much was Lo's father paid per day? How much did Jan's father received for retirement after 50 years of labor?

Families often began mill work together, since employers paid adults poor wages and thus having children work could help make ends meet. Critics opposed child labor and mill owners were often of a divided mind on the subject, but children remained an integral part of the labor force. Between 1880 and 1910, about one-fourth of all cotton mill workers in the South were below the age of sixteen.

When new workers started their jobs, they often labored for up to six weeks without pay during a learning period. Children usually started in the entry-level jobs of spinning, spooling, or doffing. Often the heaviest work went to African American men, who moved large bales of cotton, loaded wagons or rail cars with finished goods, and worked amid the dirt and dust of the opening and picking rooms. Black women were excluded from mill work altogether. The spinning room was almost always female-dominated, and women sometimes also worked as weavers or drawing-in hands. Boys were usually employed as doffers or sweepers, and men worked as weavers, loom fixers, carders, or supervisors. By the start of the Great Depression in 1929, Rocky Mount Mills in particular employed over 350 white men and women to spin cotton, as it had become an almost exclusively white operation like most other textile mills in the South.

Mill workers usually worked six twelve-hour days each week. The jobs that went to adult white men tended to pay the best, followed by jobs worked by white women, jobs that employed black men, and, finally, jobs

performed by children. Wage rates increased over time, but Southern millhands still made considerably less than northern textile workers. Workers endured difficult working conditions and significant health risks. Constantly breathing in cotton dust contributed to lung problems such as byssinosis, or as it was more commonly known, "brown lung." Workers could also be severely injured or killed on the job when fingers, limbs, or clothing became entangled in the rapidly moving machinery. When workers did get sick or injured, there was no insurance or worker's compensation to aid them in their recovery.

**6. Why was child labor so common during the late 1800s-early 1900s?**

**7. Why didn't more African American people work in mills such as Rocky Mount Mills during the last 1800s/early 1900s?**

**8. [Timothy Lee Paris's](#) family worked at RMM for five generations. His great-great grandfather left the farm to come work in RMM in the 1890s and his grandfather began work in the mills as a 10 year old. In 1942, his father had to begin work at RMM as a 15-year-old. As you listen, write down what happened to Timothy's grandfather. What does this tell you about mill work? Why did his father have to start working at RMM? What does this tell you about how family's operated in the 1940s. How does this compare to how family's operate today?**

While the culture within each mill was unique, many mill workers often reported feeling strong connections to their co-workers. Despite the difficulty of mill work, workers sometimes had time to socialize on the job, singing together or gathering to talk on lunch breaks or when production slowed down or stopped due to machine failures. These connections were even deepened for workers who lived in the neighboring mill village.

### **Life in the Mill Villages**

By 1900, a full 92 percent of textile workers lived in mill villages owned by the companies that employed them. Usually, the mill village included a supervisor's home, houses for workers and their families, one or more churches, a school, and the company store. In the early 1900s, most mill houses were one-story, four-room structures, lit by kerosene lamps and heated by open fireplaces. Workers drew water from common wells and pumps, and less than 7 percent of mills in 1907-1908 had sewer facilities more elaborate than simple privies. (Many manufacturers had a rule that required families to supply one worker for each room occupied, further encouraging the entry of children into the mills.)

Mills operated company stores and often sponsored a variety of other small businesses such as barber shops and pool halls. Those establishments were a convenience to workers, but they could also serve to keep millhands in debt to their employers. Mills also provided social workers, recreational activities, clubs, and educational opportunities, in part to provide better living conditions to their employees, but also to make sure that, in a time of labor shortage, millhands were satisfied enough that they would not seek employment elsewhere.

9. Listen to [Jan Bowen](#) as she describes the community aspect of growing up in the mill village as well as her family's home there. How does she seem to feel about her childhood in the village?
  
10. She notes that by living in the village, she had limited exposure to other people. What could be negative about this?
  
11. Describe her house in the village. How does it compare to the types of homes people tend to want to live in today?
  
12. How does the community she describes compare to how community is experienced/viewed today?

Millhands brought remnants of their lives on the farm with them and insisted on having gardens, barns for their animals, and chicken coops in the villages. They socialized together, often gathering for music and dancing, children played together, and residents helped their neighbors during difficult times, just as many had done in rural communities.

13. Listen to [Timothy Lee Paris](#) – how does he describe life in the mill village?

14. Why do you think some residents opened stores on their back porches?

Rocky Mount Mills village in particular was built between 1885 and 1940 and was located adjacent to the mill itself. The mill village allowed the mill to accommodate rapid increases in employee numbers owing to the post-Civil War cotton industry expansion. The mill village – called “mill hill” by mill employees – enabled workers and their families to develop close relationships with each other and a sense of community and community identity.

15. Listen to [Allison Kea Sikes & Miriam Sykes Pridgen](#) discuss their grandmother, who worked at RMM for 40 years, and life in the mill village. How would you describe their grandmother based on what they share about her?
  
16. How do they characterize life in the mill village?
  
17. How did people outside the village perceive it?

The village was incorporated into the City of Rocky Mount in the 1920s and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. The historic district includes about 70 houses. Mill employees, however, did live outside the mill village sometimes.

## Integration

Mill work in Southern textile mills was out of reach for many African Americans as white employees dominated the workforce throughout the 1800s-1900s. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, young white women and children were employed to operate machinery, especially after 1860 when new technologies introduced faster machines that required less physical power from operators. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at Rocky Mount Mills, white males occupied the highest skilled work – managers, officials, craftsmen – and the lowest skilled work – laborers and service workers. White females could be found in the office doing clerical work and on the floor as semi-skilled operatives. Other southern textile mills exhibited the same demographic patterns. When blacks were able to find work at mills, they often only did menial jobs (e.g. custodians, night watchmen, truck drivers, etc.).

That is until 1964, when the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) mandated the integration of mill workforces across the United States. The mills offered small but steady wages and gradually, both black men and women were able to access more skilled and higher-level positions.

Although textile mills across the South integrated after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, spurring a huge demographic shift in the industry in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sad irony is that US textiles became an industry in crisis, as the closing of Rocky Mount Mills attests. Cheaper foreign imports, resulting from various free trade agreements, replaced domestic products, leading to the closure of one mill after another during the past two to three decades. These closures meant loss of jobs and economic decline for whole communities. (Source: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/mill-history/narrative/integration>)

**18. Watch the 8 minute video on integration and Rocky Mount Mills, “[Closing Stories](#),” which will provide some information regarding the transformation of the Rocky Mount Mills workforce that took place after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. How did the Civil Rights Act of 1964 change Rocky Mount Mills? What were the positives and negatives for African Americans working at the Mill?**

Name \_\_\_\_\_



## Rocky Mount Mills Mural

**Directions:** As part of the redevelopment of Rocky Mount Mills, you and your group have been chosen to create a panel of a mural that explores the history of the mill and highlights important topics and themes related to the mill. Your panel will be combined with other panels to create one large mural that will be installed on the campus on the redeveloped Rocky Mount Mills in order to educate the community on its diverse history.

Your topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Begin by reading your assigned history of Rocky Mount Mills on the [webpage provided](#). Jot down important facts or interesting information as you read.

Consider the following questions as you brainstorm your panel design:

- What are the most important aspects of your assigned reading (facts, events, people, ideas, etc.) that you think people should know about?
- What types of artifacts, images, items, text, historical scenes, etc. do you feel would best represent these aspects and why?
- How can you creatively and educationally represent what you want people to know in an eye catching way?

As you brainstorm the mural design, remember that your ultimate goal is to teach visitors about your period (and related topics and themes) of the mill's history.

Upon finalizing your panel design, use the materials provided to create your panel. Be prepared to summarize your assigned history for the group, as well as explain your reasoning behind your design choices.

Due Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Notes:**



### Sample Mural Scoring Rubric

<b>Planning/organization</b>	Students can describe the intent and plan of the mural and how it represents the assigned historical period/topic. Works with team to brainstorm and execute a mural plan.	
<b>Thematic Accuracy</b>	Mural panel fits the theme of the assignment and is historically accurate and educational.	
<b>Collaboration and Teamwork</b>	The group worked well together with all members contributing significant amounts of quality work. All group members participated in discussion and actively listened to others.	
<b>Craftsmanship &amp; Creativity</b>	The team's portion of the mural has been crafted with great care; planning and commitment to a quality product are clear. The panel is creative and engaging to the viewer.	

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Mural Notes Sheet**

<b>Subject of Panel</b>	<b>What I learned about this topic</b>	<b>What I like about the panel/questions I have</b>