

Rocky Mount Mills “Living Musuem”

Overview

Students will creatively interact with and display what they learn about a topic related to Rocky Mount Mills by creating a group museum exhibit.

Grade

8

Materials

- “History of Rocky Mount Mills” handouts (attached and available at <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/>)
 - Early Mill History
 - The Civil War
 - The Historical Origins of the 1871 Nash-Edgecombe County Line
 - The Great Depression
 - Integration
- Create a Living Musuem Exhibit, assignment sheet attached

Optional Readings (not attached):

- These readings providing additional history about the area surrounding Rocky Mount Mills, but were not included because they were not closely related to industrialization and North Carolina. That said, the assignment an easily be expanded to include aspects of the Mill’s history outside of industrialization.
 - “Landscape & Environment”: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/geography-and-landscape/>
 - “Native American Connections”: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/native-american-history-and-archaeology/>

Duration

Varies pending the amount of class time and homework time provided for group’s to complete their projects.

Procedure

1. Begin class with a warm-up discussion, posing the questions: Why should we learn about and remember the history of North Carolina’s mills? Ask probing follow up questions as students share their thoughts.
2. Next, inform students that they are going to further examine the history of industrialization by studying history of Rocky Mount Mills, one of North Carolina’s first textile mills. They will be reading about a specific era in Rocky Mount Mills’ history and then desiging a mural to teacher their classmates about their assigned time period.
3. Distribute the attached “Rocky Mount Mills Living Musuem” handout and review the instructions as a class. Provide students with a due date for the final exhibit and answer any questions before dividing students into 5 groups; one for each of the following topics (provide the coordinating attached handout or weblink for each topic):
 - “Early Mill History”

- “The Civil War”
 - “The Historical Origins of the 1871 Nash-Edgecombe County Line”
 - “The Great Depression”
 - “Integration”
4. Let students know that they should first read and discuss the handout provided on their topic. Using this as a starting place, they can do further research into Rocky Mount Mills. As students read and research, then transition to brainstorming and creating their exhibits, provide check-ins and guidance during in-class worksessions. Teachers may also want to make art supplies and other resources available as possible. This activity can be done as a longer and detailed project, or as a shorter in-class activity. Depending on your school’s schedule and set up, teachers may consider reserving the media center or another larger space for the presentation of exhibits on the due date.
 5. On the day that exhibits are due to be set up and presented, allow students time to set up their museum exhibit and presentation (time will vary based on class composition and teacher’s pacing). review the expectations of respectful audience members with students. Handout the attached “Observations Sheet” and instruct students to take detailed notes as they learn about the various topics each group describes. Ask half of the class’s groups to assume the position of their exhibits, and instruct the other half of the class to join you. The teacher should now assume the personality of a museum docent, taking half the class on a “gallery walk.” Lead students to each of their classmates “living” exhibits and ask them:
 - What do you see here? What first catches your eye and why?
 - What is this exhibit teaching us about Rocky Mount Mills? About other history? What story do you think is being told?
 - Why do you think the artist has placed the clay in this position? What might this represent?
 6. Once students have viewed the material components of the exhibit, the teacher should tap the exhibit to “bring it to life”, at which point the student(s) will share the “live presentation” they’ve prepared in whatever creative way they have chosen to present. Afterwards, students can again briefly discuss and fill out their observation sheets. The tour will continue on to the next exhibit. (Once a student’s exhibit has been visited, they can join the tour as well. Also, students can relax their statue positions while they are waiting for the tour to arrive to their exhibit.)
 7. Once all exhibits have been viewed, the class should swap places, with all students who presented their exhibits now becoming tourists, and the students who took the tour now assuming the positions for their exhibit. Repeat the same process.
 8. After all students have presented, debrief the museum by discussing:
 - Which exhibit did you find most interesting and why?
 - What might someone who is unfamiliar with the history of industrialization in North Carolina or the Rocky Mount Mills learn from touring this musuem?
 - How was slavery related to industrialization?
 - In what way did racial tensions throughout North Carolina’s history play out at Rocky Mount Mills?
 - Why is it important to study the history of industrialization in North Carolina?
 - In what ways is society today still feeling the effects of industrialization?
 - How would you characterize this history of Rocky Mount Mills and the people involved throughout time overall? In what ways did struggle? Perserver? Stick together and/or alienate others? Engage themselves and others to bring about change in their community? etc.
 - What name should we give the museum that houses all of our exhibits? Why?
 - What do you think they should do with Rocky Mount Mills?
 -

Name _____

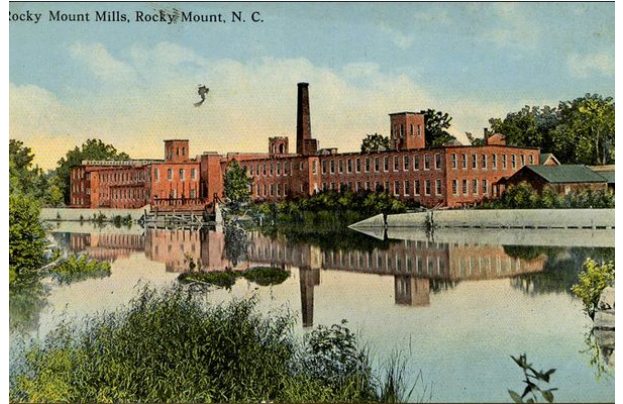
History of Rocky Mount Mills – Early Mill History

For 200 years, the site of the Rocky Mount Mills in Rocky Mount, N.C., has been a defining feature of the community's natural and built environment. There the long history of the state's coastal plain has been enacted: as a riverine resource for American Indians and early European settlers, as a site of industrial slave labor, as a nexus of plantation cotton production, as one of the largest textile operations in the state, as a racially segregated mill community, as the center of a way of life for thousands of white families over many generations, as the site of an important civil rights victory, and since 1996 as a shuttered reminder of the collapse of the state's most important industry for more than a century. The mill was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980; the mill village in 1999.

QUICK FACTS

- built in 1818 and closed operations in 1996
- the city of Rocky Mount grew around the mill
- was burned down twice (1863, 1869) and rebuilt
- spun fabric for Confederate uniforms
- was built by enslaved persons and utilized slave labor until 1852
- bought by Capitol Broadcasting Corp. in 1997 and re-opening in 2018
- took advantage of hydropower from the Tar River
- established by the Battle Family, prominent figures in state history
- air conditioning was added in the 1960s

By the time Rocky Mount Mills was founded in 1818, it had been a site of habitation and industry for hundreds of years. In addition to the Tuscarora people who had used the Falls for centuries, white settlers established grist mills on both sides of the Falls of the Tar in the late 18th century. So the new mill was far from the first time someone had used the water power of the falls. But it did inaugurate an almost unbroken two centuries of industrial production and help kick off the North Carolina textile mill industry.



The mill itself was founded in the very deepest eastern reaches of what would become the Piedmont textile belt. Situated right at the fall line between the Piedmont and coastal plain, the mill was also an experiment in production and labor in a border region that was rapidly transitioning to the thrall of King Cotton in the eighteen-teens. The mill then was a response to a growing global market for southern-grown cotton. As textile mills began populating New England – unseating Great Britain as the great textile producer of the early industrial revolution – southern planters responded. This eventually led to the opening up of huge swaths of new southern territory and helped spur the migration of millions of enslaved people. Rocky Mount Mills represented a particular ingenuity and a desire to take a greater share of the profits that could be eeked out of the confluence of cotton, slaves, and water.

The mill was founded by three partners: the local planters Joel Battle and Peter Evans, and a man named Henry A. Donaldson. At least one historian has credited Donaldson with “furnish[ing] the technical knowledge for the enterprise” because of his “practical experience in the cotton mill business” in his native New England. Whatever his origins, it was Donaldson who supplied and controlled the mill’s labor force. The 1820 census shows his household at the Falls of the Tar with twenty-one people “engaged in Manufactures”: fifteen enslaved people, and six free people of color, all the age of twenty six or younger. Of the fifteen enslaved people employed by Donaldson, eight were under fourteen with the remaining seven all under twenty six. Those demographics match with the free people of color part of the census definition of household as well: four under fourteen and just two under twenty six. Besides the question of ownership, this arrangement also begs questions about the nature of the mill’s labor management. If indeed Henry Donaldson had experience in northern textile manufacturing, then we might find him more inclined to employ younger people following the New England model then being implemented. But this was obviously a significant departure from early industrial labor in the rest of the country. Rocky Mount Mills became part of an emerging conversation in North Carolina and the South more broadly about slave labor and its uses in a changing economy. Reports poured out of southern legislatures in the late 1820s extolling the virtues of using enslaved workers for manufacturing. Their findings are best summarized in a telling statement that the great advantage of black labor [is] that you can attach it permanently to the establishment by purchase.”

Very few archival records exist that illustrate the way either enslaved or free African American people thought of their labor at the mill. Most documents speak for or about them if they mention the enslaved workers at all. By the early 1850s, the experiment in enslaved labor at Rocky Mount Mills was coming to an end. In an unsigned letter from the mill's last antebellum superintendent to the historian Holland Thompson, the overseer claims to have "introduced white labor in 1851." He goes on to say that these new workers "seemed to think it humiliating to work in a cotton mill and I had much difficulty in getting them to go in." There is less clarity as to why they stopped using enslaved workers – only a short note that "the owners of the slaves began to object to their working in the mill." It's likely that the many enslavers who were leasing enslaved workers to the mill held them back for fieldwork in the bull cotton market of the 1850s. We can see here a struggle over who this work was for that would define much of the next generation's conversation around the mill. This translation to a new and more expensive form of labor seemed to take its toll on the mill almost immediately. By 1856 the mill's owner, William S. Battle, placed the first of what would be dozens of advertisements for the sale of the mill in a Wilmington newspaper. He tried to capitalize on the mill's potential in comparison to the still-dominant New England operations.

Among the many virtues of the mill in his seller's estimation was the "help to be had 25 to 50 per cent cheaper than in the Northern States." An 1860 advertisement in a Raleigh newspaper found Battle still more enthusiastic about the prospects of his mill —"SPLENDID WATER POWER!" lot of exclamation points!—and also with more hints about the labor force of the mill with promise of "fourteen cottages for the operatives" on site. All his efforts failed to find a buyer. As the sectional crisis (events leading to the Civil War) in national politics deepened, the experiment that the mill at the Falls of the Tar represented seemed to be in danger of complete failure. It would take the coming of Civil War to both give the mill new purpose and solve William Battle's ownership crisis.

Edited by Carolina K-12 for content & formatting from the following source, written by Elijah Gaddis:
<https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/early-mill-history/>

Focus Questions:

- Why do you think Northern textiles factories were more dominant in the North, despite the fact that some used enslaved labor?
- Why do some historians think that mills stopped using enslaved labor?
- What effect did moving away from enslaved labor have on the mill's operations?

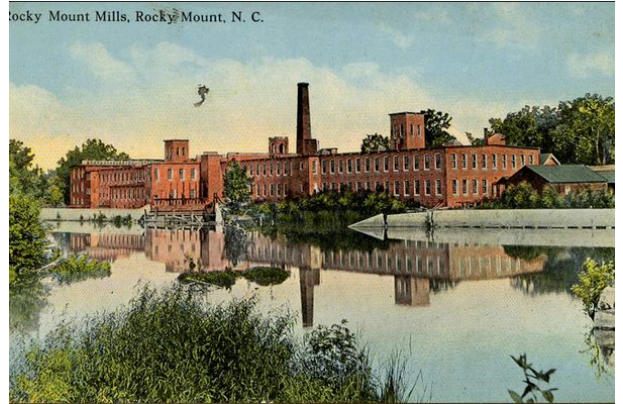
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History of Rocky Mount Mills – The Civil War

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In the predawn hours of July 20, 1863, Union troops under the command of Major Ferris Jacobs of the Third New York Cavalry rode into Rocky Mount, North Carolina, intending to destroy the vital railroad bridge across the Tar River. They successfully burned the bridge, before turning their guns and torches to the rest of Rocky Mount. By the time Jacobs's forces left town, they'd burned a railroad train and the city depot, the local telegraph office, a smaller county-operated bridge across the river, a four-story tall flour mill, Confederate supplies waiting for shipment, cotton bales, and around thirty wagons. In Jacobs's own words "the destruction of property was large and complete." Among the most important of their targets was Rocky Mount Mills. Union burned the building to the ground, stalling operations for years and changing the course of the mill's history.

Military raids were common throughout the Civil War, but the situation in eastern North Carolina during 1863 meant that the region was especially prone to them. Union troops had occupied islands along the Outer Banks since the earliest months of the war and captured the coastal cities of New Bern and Beaufort in March of 1862. For the next two years, however, Union forces were not strong enough to move inland away from their Atlantic supply lines, and the Confederate Army couldn't assemble enough troops to repel the occupying Northern soldiers. A military stalemate existed in eastern North Carolina with both sides raiding the other's supply lines but making little headway otherwise.

The July 1863 raid against Rocky Mount was an example of a supply line attack. The small town was a strategic location because of the long railroad bridge that spanned the nearby Tar river. The bridge was part of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad which connected the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, with Wilmington, North Carolina, one of the few Confederate held ports. During the war, military supplies and foodstuffs streamed into Wilmington and were quickly transported up the railroad to Richmond where it could be shipped to Confederate armies in the field. Union commanders realized that destroying the railroad bridge at Rocky Mount could make life much more difficult for the Confederacy, and Confederate troops likely suffered from the raid's success.

The raid began on July 17 when the Union expedition commanded by Brigadier General Edward E. Potter set out from its base at New Bern. Marching toward Tarborough, the main body destroyed the bridge over the Tar River at Greenville. At three o'clock in the morning on July 20, Potter detached Major Jacobs and his cavalry troopers from the expedition's main body. While Potter's force defeated a small band of Confederates stationed at Tarborough and burned Confederate property and a bridge there, Jacobs's force rode to Rocky Mount and arrived in the town at 8:30 a.m. There, they set about destroying any material that could be useful for the Confederate war effort. They targeted Rocky Mount Mills since it produced yarn and cloth for the Confederate government.

Before burning it, Jacobs described the mill as “employing 150 white girls, built of stone and six stories high.” Although the mill was destroyed, local legend explains how Union troops were about to burn the house of William S. Battle, the mill’s owner, until the mill’s superintendent pleaded with Jacobs to spare it, explaining that he, the superintendent, was a Northern man himself and a Mason.

By eleven o’clock, Jacobs’ troops left Rocky Mount and rejoined the main force five hours later. Although several bodies of Confederate troops did attack the Potter’s expedition during its return to New Bern, none were successful, and the Union force arrived back at its base in the morning of July 23, with sixty-four casualties from the six-day raid.

The Union raid was successful, but only temporarily. The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad company soon replaced the burned bridge with one that lasted until the end of the war, and the telegraph lines were also quickly repaired. Rocky Mount Mills, however, remained closed for the next year, and William S. Battle was only able to reopen in 1865, constructing a new brick building of a similar size. The mill remained successful during the postwar years, but it’s future held many financial difficulties and at least one more fire.

Formatted by Carolina K-12 from the following source, written by Lucas Kelley: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/the-civil-war/>

Focus questions:

- What happened to the mill during the Civil War?
- Why was it targeted by Union forces?
- Who worked at the Mill during the Civil War?
- Why was the area near the Mill important to the Confederate war effort?

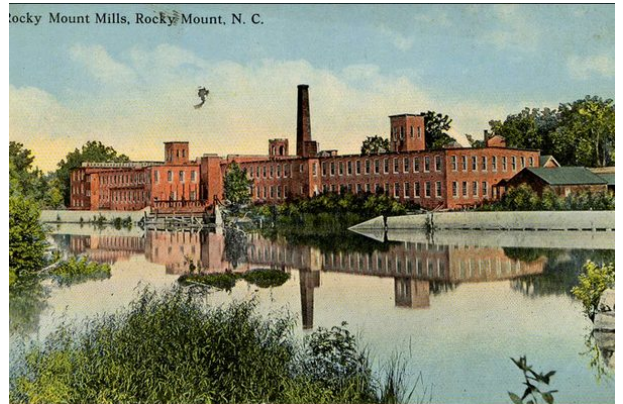
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History of Rocky Mount Mills – Movement of the County Line

For 200 years, the site of the Rocky Mount Mills in Rocky Mount, N.C., has been a defining feature of the community's natural and built environment. There the long history of the state's coastal plain has been enacted: as a riverine resource for American Indians and early European settlers, as a site of industrial slave labor, as a nexus of plantation cotton production, as one of the largest textile operations in the state, as a racially segregated mill community, as the center of a way of life for thousands of white families over many generations, as the site of an important civil rights victory, and since 1996 as a shuttered reminder of the collapse of the state's most important industry for more than a century. The mill was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980; the mill village in 1999.

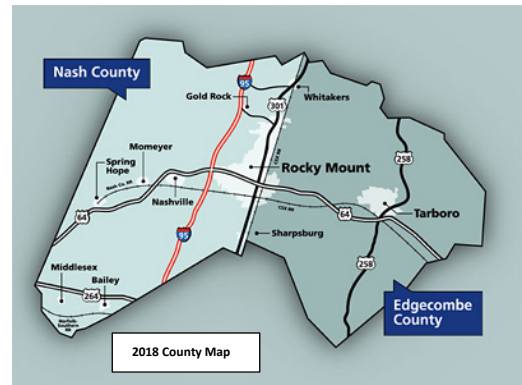
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In the spring of 1871, state legislators voted to relocate the boundary line between Nash and Edgecombe counties. This change in the boundary line was controversial in 1871, and it remains so to this day. Uncovering the lost history of the county line change is therefore important for discussing the broader historical development of Nash and Edgecombe Counties. The mill and many of the mill workers were directly affected by the change in the county line, and residents of both counties were politically divided on the issue.

The change in the Nash-Edgecombe county line disrupted political boundaries that had existed for nearly a century. Since the creation of Nash County out of Edgecombe County in 1777, the boundary between the two counties had been based on the Falls of the Tar River. Nash County had jurisdiction on all land west of the Falls, and Edgecombe governed everything east of the Falls. As communities developed over the ensuing decades, most of Rocky Mount's population lived on the Edgecombe side of the line, and the rural settlements of Battleboro and Sharpsburg were located entirely in Edgecombe County. Completed in 1840 as the longest railroad in the world, the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad (renamed Wilmington and Weldon in 1855) transformed these towns into commercial hubs for transporting agricultural products to distant markets north and south. Though the railroad would initially come to be a major political and social dividing line within the towns of Rocky Mount, Sharpsburg, and Battleboro, it was the political, economic, and social upheaval of the 1860s that had the most direct impact on the change in the county line.



The Civil War and Reconstruction brought dramatic changes to eastern North Carolina. Death and destruction took its toll on the region, but the emancipation of the area's enslaved population and the postwar economic downturn were the most lasting impacts of the decade. On the one hand, Reconstruction provided the region's African Americans with newfound political and social freedoms guaranteed to them by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Between 1868 and 1872, Edgecombe voters elected three African American men to represent them in North Carolina's House of Representatives, including Willis Bunn, Henry Cherry, and R.M. Johnson, and African Americans held prominent roles in Edgecombe County local government, as well.

Yet on the other hand, African Americans and the region's white population suffered from the economic downturn after the war. Crops had gone to feed Union and Confederate armies; much of the state's industry had been destroyed; and money and credit were scarce. "The state's economy," notes historian William Link, "lay in ruins, with the value of property in the state having been reduced by half." Economics would most directly impact the change in the Edgecombe-Nash county line, but the racial politics of the region and state served as a powerful undercurrent.

The first attempt to change the political boundaries surrounding Rocky Mount occurred in the spring of 1869 and was most assuredly a result of the economic disparities in the region. Leading the push to create a new county called Rocky Mount was Senator John Respass. Respass was a Republican, allied with many of the leading African American politicians against conservative Democrats' attempts to "redeem" the state from Republican control and roll back the rights of newly emancipated African Americans. Yet Republicans, more so than their Democratic opponents, were supporters of a diversified economy, represented in the railroad transportation network that Rocky Mount was a part of. With Rocky Mount at its center, the proposed new county would take territory from Nash, Edgecombe, and Wilson counties and be composed of territory surrounding the railroad, a region known to be relatively wealthy and valuable compared to the agricultural hinterlands in the more rural parts of the counties. In the end, the legislature took no action on the measure, likely because of the popular uproar and the financial burden of organizing a new county. Residents of Edgecombe petitioned the legislature to reject the new county because it would impoverish existing counties, and the legislature's finance committee ultimately refused to endorse the bill.

Like the attempt to create a new county, the 1871 change in the Edgecombe-Nash boundary line was certainly related to economic issues but was not as popular with many of the area residents, both white and black, Democratic and Republican. According to even the most critical newspaper reports, the movement for a new county had significant local support. Legislation moving the county line, however, originated in the North Carolina Senate and succeeded despite opposition in the General Assembly and among local residents.

The architect of the bill to change the county line was Lawrence Battle, a conservative Democrat from Nash County and a relative of the Battle family that owned Rocky Mount Mills. No sources exist explaining why Battle supported the bill, but based on newspaper accounts, the new county line was intended to reward those people of Nash County who had bought stock in the railroad and whose county had previously been unable to benefit from the economic gains of the railroad's presence. Yet the new county line would also bring the entire Tar River bridge under the control of Nash County. This was a significant issue for supporters of the bill who thought Edgecombe residents were benefitting from the bridge without paying their fair share for its upkeep. W.S. Battle, for example, the owner of Rocky Mount Mills, had contributed his personal funds to rebuild the bridge after its collapse in 1867.

The economic issues of local taxation and bridge maintenance were the main driving forces of the county line change, but the issue intersected with the region's existing racial and political divisions. Supporters of the measure were likely white, conservative Democrats from Nash County, but opponents spanned the racial and political spectrum. Many African American Republicans, for example, opposed changing the county line. In the state legislature, all three African American senators consistently voted against the bill to change the county line, and alongside four white legislators, they drafted a joint resolution to demonstrate publicly their opposition. Noting that the bill would "create confusion and dissatisfaction among the people," the senators were particularly upset that affected residents could not vote on the matter through a local referendum. They explained that without a popular vote on "the question of the transfer" the county's "qualified voters...are thus transferred from one county to another, like stock or dumb beasts upon a farm." Yet Edgecombe's white conservative Democrats also opposed the new county line. The editor of the Democratic *Tarborough Southerner*, for example, was one of the most vocal critics of the new boundary even as he opposed racial equality and black suffrage.

Yet it was white Democrats' shared commitment to limiting African Americans' newfound political power that reunited Edgecombe and Nash Democrats in the wake of the county line change. In a *Tarborough Southerner* editorial after the line change had become law, the editor noted that four hundred African Americans "were transferred from Edgecombe to Nash by the recent Change of the County Line." He confidently believed, however, "that Nash county can take care of herself in the coming [electoral] campaign and go overwhelmingly Conservative," a clear reference to the violence, fraud, and intimidation that accompanied Democrats' resurgence in North Carolina after Reconstruction. Nash County did, in fact, "take care of herself" with regard to African American voters. In the ensuing decades, Edgecombe County would be consistently represented by an African American in the United States Congress as part of the "Black Second" congressional district, while Nash voters overwhelmingly elected conservative white Democrats to Congress in their majority-white congressional district.

The new county line was controversial when state legislators approved it in 1871, and it remains so to this day. Economic inequities continue to divide Edgecombe and Nash Counties, with the city of Rocky Mount at the center of the controversy. Education, in particular, is a hot-button issue for many local residents. For decades, Nash County's Board of Education and the Rocky Mount City Board of Education clashed over the composition of African American students within the two school districts, a controversy that resulted in a significant legal battle and the merger of the two school systems in 1992. Yet the changing demographics of Rocky Mount and the region's economic downturn over the ensuing two decades have perpetuated economic and racial divisions between Edgecombe and Nash County, and some local leaders have called for the Nash-Rocky Mount Public School District to be replaced by two county-wide districts that would divide Rocky Mount's school children along the county boundary line. The historical context may have changed over time, but the Nash-Edgecombe boundary continues to intersect with political, economic, and racial issues faced by residents of Rocky Mount and the surrounding communities.

Edited for clarity and content by Carolina K-12 from the following source, written by Lucas Kelley:
<https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/moving-the-county-line/>

Focus questions:

- Why did some people support moving the county line?
- Why did some people oppose moving the county line?
- How did moving the county line affect the Rocky Mount Mills?
- What caused the economic downturn after the Civil War?
- How does moving the county line impact residents of Edgecombe and Nash counties today?

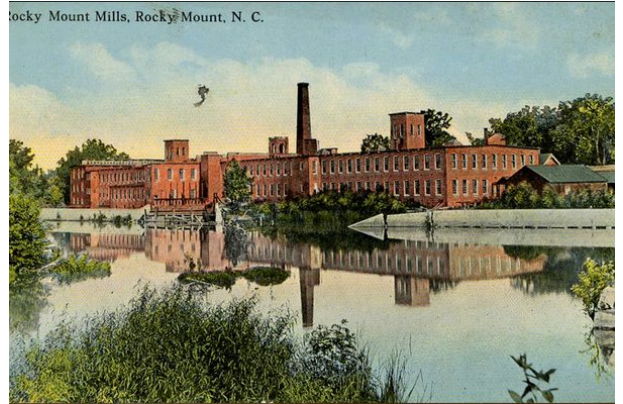
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By the start of the Great Depression in 1929, Rocky Mount Mills employed over 350 white men and women to spin cotton, as it had become an almost exclusively white operation like most other textile mills in the South. These laborers were affected by the national economic decline that troubled the nation throughout the 1930s, but they were fortunate in that they did not face the same harsh and dangerous circumstances most other textile workers during the Great Depression experienced. Although their hours and wages were both cut, they were still able to work in the mill without fear that it would shut down, and living in the mill village meant they had secured housing, plumbing, and electricity. Textile laborers across the nation worked together to survive these hard times of economic distress, but those at Rocky Mount had a different experience from most of them. Workers across the nation organized unions, protests, and strikes against the management of their mills due to the harsh conditions they established, but Rocky Mount workers never found the need to strike or protest for a variety of reasons. However, they still found themselves working together to overcome the hardships of the Depression.

The cotton and textile industries across country faced many significant challenges during the Depression. Poor marketing strategies and cotton overproduction resulted in mills being unable to sell much of their products. Instead of decreasing production, many mill owners and operators decided instead to cut worker salaries, increase daily hours, and force laborers to work every day of the week. Mills in the Piedmont and across the country experienced protests from workers suffering as a result of these harsh working conditions, which came to be known as the "stretch-out." However, it wasn't just the stretch-out that caused textile laborers across the country to band together to form the United Textile Workers union (whose membership increased from 27,500 workers in 1932 to 270,000 members in 1934) and go on strike. It was also the fact that the newly founded National Recovery Administration failed to incorporate worker representation into the new Textile Industry Committee, which created code that made conditions even worse for workers.

In September of 1934, textile laborers across the nation went on a unified strike for twenty-three days, including 65,000 North Carolinians from dozens of mills. They resumed work only after President Roosevelt himself demanded they return to the mills, and the United Textile Workers made no progress in having their requests for less hours, higher wages, or more representation met by the government. Although this movement gained national attention and the support of thousands of textile workers, the laborers at Rocky Mount never went on strike. If there was any tension between management and the workforce, it never resulted in protest or violence like it did in so many other mills. This is likely due to the fact they were isolated from much of the organizing and action, and their conditions were not as bad as those faced by many other workers in the region. The Loray Mill in Gastonia (which was the location of both the infamous 1929 Loray Mill strike and the 1934 Labor Day parade where 10,000 people came to celebrate and kick off the nationwide textile strike) was nearly 250 miles away on the other side of the state.

Not only were they isolated from much of the organizing action, but Rocky Mount textile workers also got most of their information about these strikes and protests through newspapers like the *Evening Telegram* and *Rocky Mount Herald*. These papers did not offer a lot of information on the strikes, but when they did they were often portrayed as violent, hopeless, and unnecessary actions. They showed pictures of labor organizers and mill employees clashing with members of the National Guard.

Although Rocky Mount Mills neither implemented this stretch-out nor completely shut down during the Depression like many other textile companies, their production and working hours were still significantly impacted. Until this period, mill workers typically worked twelve hour shifts six days a week. What mill treasurer Thomas H. Battle referred to as a “bad showing” in a letter to his brother William J. Battle in 1930 caused the mill’s management to eliminate all full-time schedules and reduce wages by ten percent across the board, including Battle’s own salary. In an oral history interview, mill villager Kermit Paris remembered a time in the 1930s where they only worked one day a week. Born in 1928, Paris grew up during the Depression in a mill village house with his parents, siblings, and grandmother. He played croquet, marbles, and hopscotch with other kids in the village, and he remembered eating collard greens, butter beans, and chickens that the neighbors grew. With hours severely cut, mill villagers had more time on their hands, and families could often be found sitting on their front porches together and talking to their neighbors, which helped form an increased sense of community among villagers.

Less time working meant less pay and resources, so many workers had to find other ways of supporting themselves. Kinship networks of extended families as well as workplace-based relationships helped the villagers think of themselves as one big family unit, and, as a family, they worked together to make sure they survived throughout the worst of the Depression. In order to make ends meet on this altered schedule with little pay, many resorted to subsistence living in order to supplement their meager wages. Families grew vegetables and raised chickens in their yards to put food on their own tables, but they also gave them to neighbors who didn’t own animals or a garden. Workers shared and cheaply sold the resources they had with each other in order to make sure no one went hungry or without necessary living items. Not only did they grow food for one another, but many also sewed and mended clothes and provided other skilled services to their neighbors.

Another reason Rocky Mount workers did not protest or join the textile strikes was because they saw daily the frightening reality of what life might be like if they lost their jobs. While those at Rocky Mount Mills were mostly able to get by during the Great Depression, the same could not be said for tenant farmers growing cotton or some other textile workers in the area. Many farmers came into Rocky Mount looking for work at the mills and other industries with no success, like this example from a *Rocky Mount Telegram* article from 1930: “A few weeks ago while there was so much discussion about the distress among the Eastern North Carolina tenant farmers, a cotton mill man of Rocky Mount was quoted as saying that scores of these farmers have come to town to look for work in the cotton mills. He added, ‘They do not want to know anything about wages or hours. They are hungry, and they will take any work, or any amount of it that promises them something to eat.’”

This large population of unemployed people entering the city also meant that if mill workers complained or tried to bargain with management, they could easily be replaced by those desperate for work. Mills were struggling to keep their own workers employed, and this influx of farmers looking for work only aided in decreasing wages and increasing unemployment levels. The article encouraged farmers to go back to their land and stop growing cash crops like cotton and tobacco, because they would be “much better off raising corn, potatoes, wheat, and hogs,” as there were “excellent opportunities for truckers and gardeners, who could make good money feeding those who are left at the mills.” Mill villagers in Rocky Mount didn’t have much, but what they did have was secured by their relationship with the mill’s management who owned the village.

Thomas H. Battle took charge of the Mills in 1898, and he continued to serve as Treasurer into the early years of the Depression until his death in 1936. He retired in 1933, and his son Hyman L. Battle took over his role while Thomas’ cousin Turner Battle Bunn served as Secretary through Depression years until his retirement in 1940. The Battle family was known for their generosity to their workers, especially by those who lived in the mill village. They would help villagers pay bills, allow them extra time to submit payments, and do small favors like give them rides. They also contributed to the workers’ mutual aid fund, where donations were taken in the Canteen where workers ate meals on breaks to help villagers pay medical bills. This support of workers by the mill executives was unlike most worker-management relationships in the textile industry at the time, and these acts of kindness likely helped the Battle family avoid any unrest from mistreated workers. “Mill villagers relied on the Battles to protect them from the worst material deprivations in

exchange for their continued peaceful employment at the mills,” writes Rocky Mount historian Lisa Gayle Hazirjian. While they relied on neighbors and family for the type of subsistence living that provided them with food, clothes, and crafted objects, they relied on the Battle family to keep their houses, keep their jobs, and get their bills paid.

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons Rocky Mount Mills workers did not strike was the fact that the mill did not suffer the same serious economic decline that so many others, even nearby mills, did. A June 1935 issue of the *Rocky Mount Telegram* announced the indefinite closing of the Hart and Fountain Mills across the Tar River in Tarboro, leaving 700 people out of work until the mills eventually reopened. Rocky Mount workers never had to suffer a loss like this. Although financial records from Rocky Mount indicate total salaries and wages decreased from \$241,987.81 in 1929 to just \$167,438.70 in 1931, the following year salaries and wages increased to \$204,253.07. By 1934 they had increased to \$342,556.10, and they continued to rise throughout the decade. Rocky Mount Mills only briefly faced the financial turmoil that affected so many others in the cotton and textile companies, but eventually the industry was able to bounce back. By the end of the decade, the textile industry saw an increased demand for business as the country prepared for World War II. A 1938 issue of the *Rocky Mount Herald* reported that mills across the region were looking for more workers, placing hundreds of them back into the industry.

Edited for clarity and content by Carolina K-12 from the following source, written by Sierra Dunne:
<https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/great-depression/>

Focus questions:

- Why was there a great deal of labor unrest in the 1920s & 30s?
- Why did Rocky Mount Mills avoid much of the unrest seen in other parts of the state or country?
- Describe the conditions that many workers faced during the Depression.

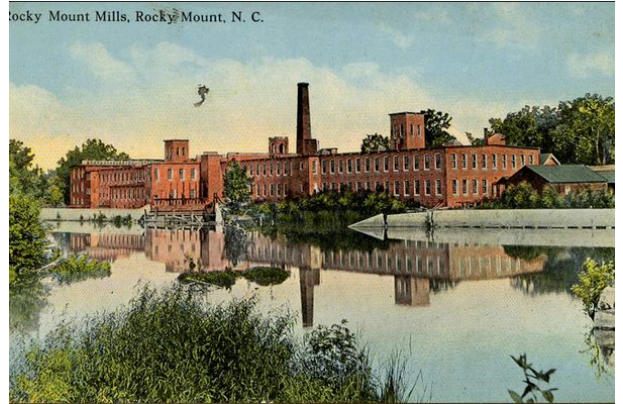
Name _____

History of Rocky Mount Mills – Integration

For 200 years, the site of the Rocky Mount Mills in Rocky Mount, N.C., has been a defining feature of the community's natural and built environment. There the long history of the state's coastal plain has been enacted: as a riverine resource for American Indians and early European settlers, as a site of industrial slave labor, as a nexus of plantation cotton production, as one of the largest textile operations in the state, as a racially segregated mill community, as the center of a way of life for thousands of white families over many generations, as the site of an important civil rights victory, and since 1996 as a shuttered reminder of the collapse of the state's most important industry for more than a century. The mill was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980; the mill village in 1999.

QUICK FACTS

- built in 1818 and closed operations in 1996
- the city of Rocky Mount grew around the mill
- was burned down twice (1863, 1869) and rebuilt
- spun fabric for Confederate uniforms
- was built by enslaved persons and utilized slave labor until 1852
- bought by Capitol Broadcasting Corp. in 1997 and re-opening in 2018
- took advantage of hydropower from the Tar River
- established by the Battle Family, prominent figures in state history
- air conditioning was added in the 1960s



Mill work in Southern textile mills was out of reach for many African Americans as white employees dominated the workforce.

That is until 1964. The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) mandated the integration of mill workforces across the United States. It banned segregation of public spaces and employment discrimination. Title VII of the act prohibited (and still prohibits) employers of 15 or more staff members from discriminating against prospective and current employees based on race, sex, color, nationality, or religion. Consequently, black employment soared in the 1960s and 70s. After this legislation, mills saw an influx of black workers until they became the dominant mill demographic by the 1990s and 2000s.

Textile employment in the South was largely closed off to African Americans before the Civil Rights Act. In the 19th 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 20th 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.). Certainly, right after Integration in Rocky Mount Mills, African Americans started off doing mostly unskilled work. Many, like Nelson Moody and James Hargrove, came from the farm and were the first generation in their families to enter into industrial work. The mills offered small but steady wages. Gradually, however, both black men and women were able to access more skilled and higher-level positions.

John Mebane, the mill's last president, recollected that the mill underwent a significant transition in its workforce over time in the second half of the 20th century, going from majority-white to majority-black by the time it closed in 1996. However, how did this transition play out? Some mills' journeys to an integrated workforce were bumpy; others complied with relative lack of drama. According to Pete Worrell, a doffer, described how the mill had begun to hire more black workers by the time he left in the late-60s. Linda Daniels and Helen Alston, African American ladies who began work at the mill after Integration, recalled that they had fun working there and were not treated as "slaves" as some people imagined. However, Annette Tyson Xavier was very explicit about the racial landscape of the mill. She admitted to oppression there, mainly manifested in segregated family days and the absence of black families in the mill village. Ms. Xavier noted that many black families lived in Happy Hill and South Rocky Mount, predominantly African American areas. She confessed to knowing that they were not treated equally but they needed to provide for their families. Yet, being able to work at the mill in the first place gave them pride; they were respected.

Their experiences contrast with those of Herbert Tillman, an African American gentleman who previously worked at Burlington Industries in Rocky Mount. Applying to Burlington in 1966 right after military service, he recollected that the mill wanted to hire more African Americans for higher-paying jobs, ones that did not entail sweeping or cleaning. However, he met resistance from white colleagues who did not appreciate that he and three other black employees were being trained to become weavers. Mr. Tillman talked of sabotaged machines during training. Later, when working at Abbott Laboratories, he described an occasion where his maintenance supervisor tore up his application for a higher level job, assuming he was not qualified for it. It turns out, he was the most qualified person who had applied. Such instances of racial stereotyping and professional obstruction happened elsewhere as high-profile court cases demonstrate.

During the early years of the Civil Rights Act, there were about 15,000 complaints submitted within the first two years of its existence. There were a number of notable cases that demonstrated to textile mills all throughout the South how lengthy and damaging litigation can be.

As a government sub-contractor, Rocky Mount Mills was required to submit a special certification of integration to the federal government in order to remain considered for federal contracts.

Also within the Rocky Mount Mills Records are random items, including a newspaper clipping on Dan River Mills. The article describes the effects of the company's affirmative action program, which resulted in a 17% minority employee population out of 19,000 workers. Five years prior, in 1964, Dan River Mills had 9% minority employment. The mill pushed to place more minority workers in production and operation jobs to have more diversity across its job classifications. But Dan River Mills was also not exempt from litigation. In October 1969, 25 black workers, led by Julius Adams, sued the mill for having segregated plants and for its biased hiring and promotion policies.

In comparison, Rocky Mount Mills went from an average 9% minority workforce in 1966 to 30% in 1971. Rocky Mount Mills' demographic changes were more dramatic. Nevertheless, these two textile mills demonstrate that the Civil Rights Act did compel companies to be more proactive and intentional in their hiring practices (though of varying degrees of compliance); it was in their economic best interest to do so. The clipping in the Rocky Mount Records files suggests that Rocky Mount Mills kept an eye on employment trends at other mills. Perhaps mill administration wished to gauge the "success" of their integrative practices. Alternatively, it may have been a remnant of the earlier Cotton-Textile Institute, where a group of textile manufacturers met and organized in the 1920s to increase cooperation and reduce competition in light of cotton overproduction. The mills corresponded with each other to stabilize prices; maybe they approached minority employment in a similar fashion.

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 20th 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, such as Winnsboro, SC, Danville, VA, Rocky Mount, NC, and many others where textile was a major industry. For most of these communities, they have yet to recover and witnessed the old mills being demolished. Fortunately, some mills have been saved and are being redeveloped for other purposes. American Tobacco, Loray Mill, Revolution Mill, Rocky Mount Mills, Carr Mill, Saxapahaw Rivermill, and Trenton Mill are just a few examples of mills in North Carolina seeing new repurposed lives. It is the hope that these reused sites will spur community and/or economic development like the American Tobacco Campus did for downtown Durham.

Edited for clarity and content by Carolina K-12 from the following source, written by Nicole Coscolluela:
<https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/integration/>

- ART/LITERATURE/MUSIC – Are there creative resources related to your topic that exist, or that you might create, to help tell the story you think should be told?

- What TEXT/DESCRIPTIONS should accompany your exhibit? (Consider the amount of text you choose to include carefully. How much can a visitor be expected to read when visiting a museum?)

- “LIVING” SCULPTURES: How will you pose within your exhibit to engage visitors? Your final living sculptures must include:
 - *A statue/visual representation:* Think about how your group members can create sculptures with your own bodies that represent your topic. Decide on a final image that includes at least one person from your group. Your final product can also include additional people as sculptures, props, costumes, etc. The only requirement is that the final product is a visual representation of your Rocky Mount Mills topic, and it must be a form that can be held in place for a short period of time.
 - *A verbal presentation about your statue/visual representation:* When visitors walk up to the exhibit, the museum docent (tour guide) will tap one of the frozen sculptures, resulting in information about the exhibit being shared. This information will be shared by one or more people in the group (in character), and should be approximately 1-2 minutes long. (For example, a sculpture might come alive to tell his/her story in first person, or perhaps the sculpture remains frozen with another group member assumes the role of a narrator & shares information.) Once the information is shared, the exhibit returns to the frozen position it was originally in.

4. Remember that your final exhibit:

- ...must be based on the reading assigned to you regarding the rich history of Rocky Mount Mills and include each component outlined above.
- ...should be educational and creative, and provide the audience with more about the issues, people, events, etc. of your topic when “brought to life;” the presentation should be 2-3 minutes
- ...can utilize acting, music/singing, reenactments, dance, and any other theatrical techniques you choose; the “live” presentation should have clear characters, as well as a beginning, middle and

What questions do you have?

Museum Exhibit Due Date: _____

Name: _____

Exhibit Observation Sheet

Subject of Exhibit	What story was told/what I learned	What I liked & what questions I have
Early Mill History		
The Civil War		
Historical Origins of the Nash-Edgecomb County Lin		
The Great Depression		
Integration		