The Great De-Industrialization

NAFTA, China, and the Death of Mill Towns · 1980–2005

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

GUIDING QUESTION

Was the collapse of American textile jobs the unavoidable price of progress, or the result of policy choices that could have gone differently?

PART 1 Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.

2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2 Read

The end of the American mill. Globalization, trade agreements, and relentless cost competition emptied entire regions of the industry that had built them. The communities left behind became a defining political force in the twenty-first century.

The closing decades of the twentieth century brought brutal consolidation: hundreds of mills shut, hundreds of thousands of jobs disappeared or moved to lower-cost countries, and towns that had centered on a single mill for a century were hollowed out. The North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) accelerated the trend; China's entry into the World Trade Organization (2001) intensified it; and the end of the last import quotas on January 1, 2005, removed the final layer of protection. By the 2010s, roughly ninety-seven percent of the apparel sold in the United States was imported. The consequences of this loss—depopulation, collapsing local tax bases, addiction, and a deep wound in civic life—continue to reshape American politics.



An abandoned, partly demolished Dan River mill in Danville, Virginia-emblem of American de-industrialization. Acroterion, "Dan River mill VA1" (2016). Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

PART 3

Timeline

For each event, write one sentence on why it mattered.

1994

NAFTA Takes Effect

The North American Free Trade Agreement phases out tariffs and quotas on qualifying apparel and textiles among the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, accelerating offshoring.

2001

China Joins the WTO

China's accession in December sets the stage for a surge of low-cost textile and apparel exports once quotas end.

2003

The Pillowtex Collapse

On July 30, Pillowtex—heir to Cannon Mills—shuts its plants and eliminates thousands of jobs, more than four thousand in the Kannapolis area alone: the largest single layoff in North Carolina history.

2005

The Quotas End

The WTO Agreement on Textiles and Clothing completes the ten-year phase-out of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement's quotas; Chinese imports surge so sharply that the U.S. imposes temporary safeguards.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **NAFTA**

_____ **Offshoring**

_____ **Multi-Fiber Arrangement**

_____ **Trade Adjustment Assistance**

_____ **Automation**

A. An international system of quotas, from 1974 to 2004, that limited how much clothing and textiles countries could export.

B. Using machines and computers to do work that people once did by hand.

C. The North American Free Trade Agreement, which removed most tariffs among the United States, Canada, and Mexico beginning in 1994.

D. A federal program that offers retraining and income support to workers who lose jobs because of foreign trade.

E. Moving production or jobs to another country, usually to lower costs.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Remarks on Signing the North American Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act

William J. Clinton, December 8, 1993

> NAFTA will tear down trade barriers between our three nations. It will create the world's largest trade zone and create 200,000 jobs in this country by 1995 alone. ... For two decades, most people have worked harder for less. Seemingly secure jobs have been lost. ... productivity means the same people can produce more or, very often, that fewer people can produce more. This is the world we face. We cannot stop global change.

Context: Clinton signed NAFTA after a close congressional fight in which textile-state representatives warned of mill closings. Combined with the 2005 end of global textile quotas, the agreement accelerated the move of apparel and textile production abroad.

Source: William J. Clinton. Remarks on Signing the North American Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act. The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara. 1993. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-the-north-american-free-trade-agreement-implementation-act

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Interview with Janet Patterson, Pillowtex Worker

Janet Patterson, interviewed by PBS NewsHour, September 23, 2003

> I started five days after I turned 18. I was the first black hemmer in the sheet department ... It's like they took everything from us. And going to try and fill out applications, the only thing you can put on there is "Pillowtex, 38 years." ... It hurts.

Context: Patterson lost her job when Pillowtex, maker of Cannon and Fieldcrest towels and sheets, closed in July 2003, eliminating about 4,800 jobs in Kannapolis, North Carolina, and surrounding plants. It was the largest single layoff in North Carolina history.

Source: Textile Jobs in Decline. PBS NewsHour. 2003. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/textile-jobs-in-decline

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
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Corroborate
Compare "Remarks on Signing the North American Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act" (William J. Clinton, December 8, 1993) with "Interview with Janet Patterson, Pillowtex Worker" (Janet Patterson, interviewed by PBS NewsHour, September 23, 2003). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. What did Clinton predict NAFTA would do for American jobs, and what did he say about productivity?

2. Clinton was persuading a divided Congress and public; Patterson spoke to a television reporter after her plant closed. How do their situations affect what each emphasizes?

3. Clinton said that "fewer people can produce more." Using the chapter narrative, how much of textile job loss came from trade, and how much from automation?

4. The United States is again using tariffs to protect manufacturing. Based on the textile experience, should government shield industries from global competition? Argue.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?

2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

IMPACT

The Kannapolis Collapse

When the world's best-known towel company closed in a single day.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/kannapolis-collapse

IMPACT

The End of the Quotas

The night the quotas died.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/the-mfa-ends

MATERIAL CULTURE

Ghosts of the Mill Town

What remains in the buildings the looms left behind.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/ghosts-of-the-mill-town

Places: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Pillowtex press release, July 30, 2003 (Exhibit 99.2). U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, EDGAR. 2003-. https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/896265/000119312503032712/dex992.htm

Agreement on Textiles and Clothing. World Trade Organization. 1995

Textile Jobs in Decline. PBS NewsHour. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/textile-jobs-in-decline

Image: Acroterion, "Dan River mill VA1" (2016). Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/de-industrialization. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.