The Gilded Age of Wool

Massive Mills and Southern Migration · 1880–1920

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

> **Content note:** This chapter includes accounts of people killed, injured, or held captive. Preview this story before class: The Pemberton Mill Collapse.

GUIDING QUESTION

Were child workers in Gilded Age mills the victims of greedy employers, desperate families, or weak laws?

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 New England woolen and worsted mills reached their zenith of size and power even as the cotton industry began its long migration south. The Gilded Age mill was among the largest industrial structures on earth—and among the most contested.

Massive structures like the American Woolen Company's Wood Worsted Mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts, billed by its owners as the largest worsted mill in the world, embodied New England's industrial confidence. Meanwhile, Southern boosters built cotton mills across the Piedmont of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia to employ cheap, rural, non-union white labor. The transition from water to steam to electric power restructured both regions. New England became a polyglot immigrant industrial society; the Piedmont became a network of segregated, company-owned mill villages. The two regions' labor histories would intersect violently in the strikes of 1912, 1929, and 1934.



Striking mill workers crowd a Lawrence street during the 1912 Bread and Roses strike. Bain News Service, "Crowd of strikers menacing strike-breakers, Lawrence," 1912. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, George Grantham Bain Collection (LCCN 2014690134). Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

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

1880s

The Piedmont Mill Campaign

Southern boosters launch a mill-building drive; North Carolina alone goes from about 75 cotton mills in 1884 to more than 200 additional mills over the next two decades.

1906

The Wood Worsted Mill

The American Woolen Company's Wood Mill begins operating in Lawrence—six stories, some thirty acres of floor space, and nicknamed locally 'the eighth wonder of the world.'

1912

The Lawrence Strike

More than twenty thousand workers of many nationalities strike at Lawrence and, after nine weeks, win raises of five to twenty-five percent.

1919

The Postwar Strike Wave

Textile strikes, including a sixteen-week walkout at Lawrence led by the minister A. J. Muste, win a forty-eight-hour week; the Red Scare and the slump of 1920–21 soon erode the gains.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **Spinner**

_____ **Doffer**

_____ **Mill village**

_____ **National Child Labor Committee**

_____ **Bread and Roses strike**

A. A company-owned town where the mill controlled housing, stores, churches, and schools.

B. A reform group founded in 1904 to investigate child labor and push for laws to end it.

C. A mill worker, often a child, who walked along rows of spinning frames repairing broken threads.

D. A worker, usually a boy, who removed full bobbins of thread from spinning machines and replaced them with empty ones.

E. The 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike, led largely by immigrant women and the IWW, against a pay cut.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

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

DOCUMENT A

Testimony of Camella Teoli, House Hearings on the Strike at Lawrence

Camella Teoli, before the House Committee on Rules, March 1912

> Miss TEOLI. Well, I used to go to school, and then a man came up to my house and asked my father why I didn't go to work, so my father says I don't know whether she is 13 or 14 years old. So, the man say you give me $4 and I will make the papers come from the old country saying you are 14. So, my father gave him the $4, and in one month came the papers that I was 14. I went to work, and about two weeks got hurt in my head. ... CHAIRMAN. Well, how were you hurt? Miss TEOLI. The machine pulled the scalp off.

Context: Teoli, a teenage worker from Lawrence, Massachusetts, testified to Congress during the 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike. Her testimony, given with First Lady Helen Taft in the audience, drew national attention to child labor and conditions in the woolen mills.

Source: Camella Teoli Testifies About the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike (House Document 671, 62nd Congress). American Social History Project, Who Built America?. 1912-. https://www.whobuiltamerica.org/item/camella-teoli-testifies-about-the-1912-lawrence-textile-strike

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

A Little Spinner in the Mollohan Mills, Newberry, S.C. (photograph caption)

Lewis Wickes Hine, National Child Labor Committee, December 3, 1908

> A little spinner in the Mollohan Mills, Newberry, S.C. She was tending her "sides" like a veteran, but after I took the photo, the overseer came up and said in an apologetic tone that was pathetic, "She just happened in." Then a moment later he repeated the information. The mills appear to be full of youngsters that "just happened in," or "are helping sister." Dec. 3, 08. Witness Sara R. Hine.

Context: Hine photographed child workers across the country for the National Child Labor Committee, often posing as a salesman to get into mills. His captions recorded names, ages, and managers' excuses as evidence for reform campaigns.

Source: Lewis Wickes Hine. A little spinner in the Mollohan Mills, Newberry, S.C. Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection. 1908. http://www.loc.gov/item/2018674890/

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Corroborate
Compare "Testimony of Camella Teoli, House Hearings on the Strike at Lawrence" (Camella Teoli, before the House Committee on Rules, March 1912) with "A Little Spinner in the Mollohan Mills, Newberry, S.C. (photograph caption)" (Lewis Wickes Hine, National Child Labor Committee, December 3, 1908). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. How did Camella Teoli end up working at age thirteen, and what happened to her?

2. Hine wrote his captions as an investigator for the National Child Labor Committee, which was campaigning for new laws. How does knowing his purpose affect how you read the overseer's words?

3. Teoli's family arranged false papers; Hine's caption suggests mill managers hid child workers. Using both sources, explain why child labor laws were so hard to enforce in both New England and the South.

4. Several states have recently loosened limits on teenagers' work hours, and federal investigators have found migrant children working in meatpacking plants. Do the arguments of 1912 still apply? Take a position.

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

LABOR

Bread and Roses

The 1912 Lawrence strike that united dozens of nationalities.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/bread-and-roses

INNOVATION

The Wood Worsted Behemoth

The 'eighth wonder of the world' on the Merrimack.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/wood-worsted-mill

IMPACT

The Piedmont Mill Village

A new social order built around the Southern cotton mill.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/mill-village-piedmont

TRAGEDY

The Pemberton Mill Collapse

Lawrence's first industrial catastrophe—the disaster that haunted the city for a century.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/pemberton-mill-collapse

IMPACT

'The Chinese of the Eastern States'

French-Canadian migration to the New England mills, and the 1881 report that slandered it.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/chinese-of-the-eastern-states

IMPACT

The Dagenhart Boys and the Law

How a Charlotte cotton mill family carried child labor to the Supreme Court, and why it took twenty-five years to end it.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/hammer-v-dagenhart

Places: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Maine, Alabama

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Bread and Roses Strike of 1912. The Samuel Gompers Papers, University of Maryland-. https://gompers.umd.edu/bread%20and%20roses%20strike.htm

Wood Worsted Mill, National Register of Historic Places nomination. National Park Service-. https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/6977827c-030d-4536-8d8b-2fe7db5a84aa

Cotton Mills. NCpedia (State Library of North Carolina). https://www.ncpedia.org/cotton-mills

Image: Bain News Service, "Crowd of strikers menacing strike-breakers, Lawrence," 1912. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, George Grantham Bain Collection (LCCN 2014690134). Public domain.

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