The Silk City

Paterson and the Rise of American Silk · 1840–1920

GUIDING QUESTION

Did Paterson's founding plan to rely on cheap machine labor make conflict like the 1913 silk strike inevitable?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1840 to 1920s, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 2 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Four-loom system, Picket line, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, Broad silk.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 4 (1800–1848), Period 5 (1844–1877), Period 6 (1865–1898), Period 7 (1890–1945)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

Day 2 (50 minutes)
5 min · Key terms matching

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (2 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms
Four-loom system: D · Picket line: B · Industrial Workers of the World (IWW): A · Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures: E · Broad silk: C

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

While cotton was king, silk was luxury. Paterson, New Jersey, became 'Silk City'—the center of a specialized, high-skill industry that drew immigrant weavers from Lyon, Macclesfield, and northern Italy to the falls of the Passaic.

Silk demanded more skill than cotton. The fiber was costly, the looms intricate, the patterns commercially sensitive. Paterson's Great Falls of the Passaic, about seventy-seven feet high, provided power, and Alexander Hamilton's Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, chartered by New Jersey in 1791, had laid the legal and hydraulic scaffolding of an industrial town. Silk manufacturing took root around 1840 and grew explosively after the Civil War, supplying everything from ribbons and thread to broad dress silks.

With that skilled workforce came radical politics: Paterson became one of the most militant labor cities in America, culminating in the 1913 silk strike led by the Industrial Workers of the World.



IWW poster for the Paterson Silk Strike pageant at Madison Square Garden, June 7, 1913. Robert Edmond Jones, poster for the Paterson Strike Pageant, Madison Square Garden, June 7, 1913. Public domain (published 1913).

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1840

Silk Takes Root

Silk manufacturing begins in Paterson's water-powered mills; Christopher Colt's early venture is traditionally counted among the first.

1880s

Immigrant Weavers Arrive

Skilled silk workers from Lyon, Macclesfield, and northern Italy settle in Paterson, importing both technique and radical labor politics.

1913

The Paterson Silk Strike

Beginning February 25, roughly twenty-four thousand workers strike for an eight-hour day and against multiple-loom assignments; the strike lasts about five months and ends in defeat.

1920s

The Industry Disperses

Silk manufacturers increasingly move work to lower-wage mills in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, eroding Paterson's dominance.

PART 4

Key terms

Four-loom system (answer D)
A management plan requiring each silk weaver to run four looms instead of two, which workers saw as a speed-up that would cut jobs and pay.

Picket line (answer B)
A line of striking workers outside a workplace who try to persuade others not to enter.

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (answer A)
A radical labor union founded in 1905 that aimed to organize all workers, skilled and unskilled, into "one big union."

Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures (answer E)
A private corporation chartered by New Jersey in 1791 to build an industrial city; it founded Paterson.

Broad silk (answer C)
Wide silk cloth woven for dresses and linings, Paterson's most important product in the early 1900s.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

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

DOCUMENT A

Prospectus of the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures

Alexander Hamilton (attributed), August 1791

> The dearness of labour and the want of Capital are the two great objections to the success of manufactures in the United States. The first objection ceases to be formidable when it is recollected how prodigiously the proportion of manual labour in a variety of manufactures has been decreased by the late improvements in the construction and application of Machines—and when it is also considered to what an extent women and even children in the populous parts of the Country may be rendered auxiliary to undertakings of this nature. It is also to be taken into calculation that emigrants may be engaged on reasonable terms in countries where labour is cheap, and brought over to the United States.

Context: This prospectus launched the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, which founded Paterson, New Jersey, at the Great Falls of the Passaic River in 1792. Its plan to rely on machines, women, children, and imported workers foreshadowed the labor system of the later Silk City.

Source: Alexander Hamilton. Prospectus of the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, August 1791. Founders Online, National Archives. 1791. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-09-02-0114

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

War in Paterson

John Reed, June 1913

> There's war in Paterson. But it's a curious kind of war. All the violence is the work of one side—the Mill Owners. Their servants, the Police, club unresisting men and women and ride down law-abiding crowds on horseback. Their paid mercenaries, the armed Detectives, shoot and kill innocent people. ... They control absolutely the Police, the Press, the Courts. Opposing them are about twenty-five thousand striking silk-workers, of whom perhaps ten thousand are active, and their weapon is the picket-line.

Context: Reed wrote this for the socialist magazine The Masses after being jailed while observing a picket line during the 1913 Paterson silk strike. The strike, led by the IWW against the multi-loom system, lasted about five months and ended in defeat for the workers.

Source: John Reed. War in Paterson. The Masses (via Marxists Internet Archive). 1913-. https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1913/masses06.htm

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Corroborate
Compare "Prospectus of the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures" (Alexander Hamilton (attributed), August 1791) with "War in Paterson" (John Reed, June 1913). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. What two "objections" to American manufacturing does the 1791 prospectus identify, and what solutions does it propose?
2. John Reed was a radical journalist who openly supported the strikers and the IWW. Which words reveal his point of view, and what would a mill owner's account of the same events likely emphasize?
3. The prospectus planned to recruit "emigrants … in countries where labour is cheap." How did that plan play out a century later, when Paterson's skilled weavers arrived from Europe with their own traditions of labor activism?
4. Companies today debate automation and staffing levels much as Paterson's weavers fought the four-loom system. Is requiring one worker to tend more machines a fair productivity gain or an unfair "speed-up"? Defend your answer.

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

The Paterson Pageant
The 1913 strike that staged itself in Madison Square Garden.
https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/paterson-pageant

IMPACT

The Multiple-Loom System
The speed-up that triggered an industrial uprising.
https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/four-loom-system

BIOGRAPHY

Hannah Silverman, Strike Captain
A teenager who led the women's picket lines.
https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/hannah-silverman

Places: New Jersey, Connecticut

SOURCES AND CREDITS

The 1913 Paterson Silk Strike. PBS American Experience-
. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldman-paterson-silk-strike-1913/

Steve Golin. The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913. Temple University Press. 1988

Philip B. Scranton (editor). Silk City: Studies on the Paterson Silk Industry, 1860–1940. New Jersey Historical Society. 1985

Image: Robert Edmond Jones, poster for the Paterson Strike Pageant, Madison Square Garden, June 7, 1913. Public domain (published 1913).

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