

Creation of mill town led to what is now Great Falls

The 12-hour days were hard, but activities outside work were fun

A century ago, abundant hydroelectric power and cheap labor brought cotton mills to this region from New England.

James Buchanan Duke, the founding father of Duke Energy, sent out invitations to New York financiers and Carolina men of wealth to join him in setting up cotton mills with the aim of making more money from his hydroelectric plants.

By 1909, Fort Mill, Rock Hill, Chester and Lancaster had cotton mills, so Great Falls was selected by Duke Power as a site for a Duke complex. Duke would own the plant, build a village for the workers and supply electric power for both. They gave the new plant the name of Republic Textile Mills Co., which was built in 1910 and began operation in 1911 with 175 operatives.

The company built a village of 75 houses for workers who came from North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and the mountains of Virginia. The newcomers abandoned their red clay farms that were "farmed out" and brought the hope of a better life.

The houses were likely much superior to the ones the workers had lived in previously. A description of the early Republic Mills houses says that all of them were built of pine lumber with cypress

NEARBY HISTORY

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shingle roofs.

There was a fireplace in each room except the kitchen. The houses were three to six rooms and were allotted according to the size of the family. The rent was 25 cents per room per week and included lights and water. There were regulations about caring for the house and renters were forbidden to "give shelter or lodging to any foreign-born peddler."

Looking back, we can see that the society that resulted was almost medieval. The president (in the case of Republic, Robert Mebane) and the mill superintendent lived in mansions on the hill and the workers lived in small houses on streets - none hard-surfaced - built and maintained by the mill. A company store furnished the needs of the workers: everything from groceries and clothes to drugs and coffins. Because it had no competition, the company store was usually quite profitable for the mill owners.

Cotton was purchased locally and delivered to the mill in wagons. Coal, which was used both to heat the mill and the workers' homes, was carted by wagon. The employees worked 12 hours a day, 6 days a week.

When interviewed years later, early workers invariably said they worked long hours but fondly remembered the amusements the company sponsored. The com-

pany sponsored baseball teams, dances, picnics, ice cream suppers, "picture shows," etc.

They built a community center, a school and a church for the workers. The Seaboard Railroad served the area with two incoming and two outgoing passenger trains a day, besides several freight deliveries. It was not unusual for company towns to be created from scratch. In the case of Republic Mills, the town that grew around it was named Great Falls.

The mill prospered and, in 1916, plans were laid for a second mill, Republic No. 2. Mill No. 1 had been brick with pine flooring. Mill No. 2 was constructed of concrete and steel, 3 stories tall.

Mill No. 3 was built in 1924. By 1927, the population of Great Falls had risen to about 3,000 and peaked in 1980 to about 5,000.

Duke Power bought all of the mill stock (previously they had owned 51 percent). In 1946, Republic Cotton Mills merged with J. P. Stevens & Co. and that lasted until 1985 when all of the mills closed.

The closing of the mills in 1985 was a terrible blow to the local economy when it occurred, but the city of Great Falls and the Great Falls Hometown Association have joined hands to create a brighter future. As a result, Great Falls hopes to become much more than a textile town of the past.

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