

What Panic of 1893? Rock Hill

LOCAL

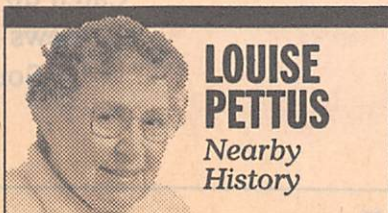
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cotton boom was in full swing

One hundred and one years ago, Rock Hill acquired its fifth cotton mill in 15 years.

When the Rock Hill Cotton Mill was built in 1880, the town had a population of around 1,200. By 1895, the population was 5,500. Almost all of the increase came from people attracted to the town because of higher wages.

In 1895, besides the five cotton mills (Rock Hill Cotton, Standard, Globe, Arcade and Manchester), there was the Rock Hill Buggy Co.; the Tobacco Factory Works; a door, sash and blind factory; a canning factory; an electric light plant; the Oakland Town Site Co.; street railway and water works company; and several machine shops. The combined weekly pay-



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Nearby
History

roll was \$6,000.

The Manchester Mill was three stories tall. An early newspaper reported, "To celebrate the completion of the tall brick chimney, Mr. Barron (John R. Barron, founder) is reported to have stood on his head on top of the 100-foot structure."

There was tremendous competition for labor among the area's

cotton mills. Cotton mill workers did not have to be highly skilled in that day — requiring far less experience than machine shops and construction companies. Anyone, including children as young as 5, was assured of work in the cotton mill.

Many mills sent out recruiters looking for whole families and offered cheap housing (Manchester's mill houses were built of pine for about \$300 each).

A representative of Lancaster Cotton Mills came to Manchester Cotton Mills in Rock Hill looking for workers. The Manchester management nabbed the Lancaster recruiter and threw him in Manchester's pond (used as storage in the mill). Then the Manchester super-

intendent and his assistant were spotted at the Lancaster depot. There was a free-for-all fight in the passenger station.

The Rock Hill Cotton Factory was the first steam-driven mill in South Carolina. The fuel was wood, much of it hauled in by wagon by local farmers who spent their time between harvest and spring planting cutting the timber off their land. The denuded fields were then planted with more cotton to sell to the same mills that were their timber customers.

The Manchester Mill was the first in Rock Hill to use coal (the various mills had so depleted the timber in the area by 1895 that it was cheaper to import coal by rail).

There were spinning mills and weaving mills. In the beginning, the mills tended to specialize. The Rock Hill Cotton Mill for its first 14 years made only cotton yarn, chiefly cotton rope. The rope was used by farmers for plow lines, sash cords, clothes lines, tent and awning cords. For this purpose, the mill used about 2,500 bales of cotton a year. Fort Mill Manufacturing Co. was a spinning mill first; it later added looms.

Before electricity, most mills did not have night shifts. The Rock Hill Cotton Mill was typical of the others, using one shift with 60 to 66 hours a work week. Some mills operated from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Some added six hours on Saturday.

To us, it all sounds excessive, especially when we consider there was no pay for overtime. The mill workers, however, tended to compare mill work to farm work and favored the former.

The investors in cotton mills prospered. The typical annual dividends were generally around 7 percent. While the rest of the United States was still suffering from the Panic of 1893, Rock Hill and all the cotton mill towns of the Piedmont were booming.

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