



History of the Southern Apparel and Textile Industry: Through the Photographer's Lens

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Reconstruction of the post-Civil War South was fueled in part by entrepreneurs who moved south for plentiful nonunion labor, readily available land and geographic closeness to raw materials. Although extensive documentation exists about textile and apparel manufacturing in Northeast U.S. communities (e.g., Kulik, Parks, & Penn, 1982), with a few exceptions, limited documentation exists about Southern textile and apparel manufacturing. Exceptions, such as the case study of West Point Manufacturing Company (AL), concentrate primarily on mill life (Blythe, 2003). This study focuses on technological changes and documentation of these changes in textile and apparel manufacturing buildings.

Through chronotopic methods, this study examined over 100 mills, plants, and factories in the Southeast United States. Chronotope is used widely to examine time and place meanings and to section types of literature by genre or similarity in characteristics (Bemong & Borghart, 2010). Implications from these procedures are that chronotope theory can be employed to help process information with memory genre to identify items within context of time and place. Suggestions are made in recent studies that applications of the theory may be used in other fields. Using memory organizing packets, a content analysis was performed with onsite photographic evidence, historical news documents, and interviews, which resulted in four groups of buildings: pre-1880, 1880 to 1920s, from 1950s to 1960s, and from 1970s to current times. Limited new construction occurred during the U.S. depression and WWII. Technology use in context relative to time is fitted with chronotopic methods to each group. Interviews with former plant owners and workers as well as memory schema of the researchers provided verification.

Early period (pre-1880) buildings housed spinning mills. As with the introduction of the textile and apparel industry into England and then into northern U.S. states, spinning is the first process to be housed in manufacturing buildings. Following the industrialization theory of cascading events, spinning mills built in the South helped maximize utilization of the cotton crop from local communities, providing a faster time to market with less distribution costs. These spinning mills are copy-cats of factories throughout the Northeast. Construction is typically red brick, multi-story, load-bearing with or without iron columns providing open spaces for newly mechanized equipment and featuring large multi-paned windows for light and ventilation.

By the late 1880s, weaving plants were built in the South to use the abundance of cotton fiber coming from the spinning mills, further supporting cascading events theory for technology growth (Hsieh & Chen, 2011). To house these multi-stage processes, buildings in the 1880-1920 group were generally single story, large footprint buildings with high ceilings, awning type

windows and saw-tooth roof structures, which provided coolness and light for production floors; necessary for the detailed work needed for weaving and sewing. Because of the heat from long hot summers, dye houses, which had been placed on ground floors of the early spinning mills, were often placed in separate buildings. As business grew and more machines were needed to meet demand, these buildings became large rambling structures.

Buildings in the third group (1950s to 1960s) were larger than earlier buildings and were often windowless; the largest structures exceeded 500,000 square feet (e.g., Hanes, Mooresville, NC). In addition to spinning and weaving, many of these buildings housed cut and sew apparel operations to use the increased fabric yardage being produced and to meet the rising demand for ready-to-wear apparel. Significant capital investment by manufacturers took advantage of new technologies as well as Fordist theory (Braham, Hale, & Sada, 2007). These buildings were functional for the long fabric runs and huge assembly line production for apparel, common to the textile and apparel industry at this time. The saw-tooth rooflines were no longer present as electrification came to the rural South, providing a steady electrical supply for the rapid-speed weaving machines and interior lighting for detailed sewing work.

The fourth group (1970s to current times) consisted of aluminum-sided buildings, set on concrete slabs, as ubiquitous as they are non-descript. These buildings are once again primarily fiber production, as the South adjusts to off-shoring for apparel production and a reshoring for fiber production. However, these windowless plants are lights-out buildings as the highly efficient spinning machines for engineered fibers now fill the factory floors; once again changing with technology processes to cascade into a new cycle of technology and buildings.

The researchers concluded that the features of these buildings are clearly functions of cascading events of raw materials, demand for product and technology advancement, linking both time and space with their structures. This study provides an outline for improved cataloging of these historic structures, for documentation of technology changes in the textile and apparel industry, and a theoretical foundation for examining their characteristics and influences.

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