Past the Myth: Confronting Real Issues about Southern Industrialization

Matthew Hild
Georgia Institute of Technology

The Southern Industrialization Project (SIP), an organization of over 100 academic and public historians devoted to the study of southern industrialization, held its fifth annual meeting at Kennesaw State University in suburban Atlanta on March 23–24, 2001. In keeping with the theme of getting "past the myth" in considering southern industrialization, many of the papers presented at the meeting dealt with industry in the supposedly nonindustrialized antebellum South. The roles of labor and technology in the industrialization of both the Old and New South received particular attention. The meeting included three sessions and a keynote address.

The first session examined the role of slavery in Virginia's antebellum coal industry and the impact of the American system and bureaucratic control in the Confederate ordnance industry. In "Nature's Blessing, Slavery's Curse: The Frustrating Story of Virginia's Richmond Coal Basin," Sean P. Adams (University of Central Florida) explained why the Richmond coal mining industry, which dated back to 1767, failed to live up to the promise predicted by luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. Adams placed much of the blame on colliers' use of slaves in the mines. The use of slave labor—which was often rented—was expensive, and the costs limited possibilities for the expansion of the mines or investment in technological improvements. East Virginia coal production peaked in the 1830s but dwindled to insignificance by 1860, largely because of its reliance on slave labor.

Moving slightly ahead in time, Steven G. Collins (St. Louis Community College, Meramec) delivered a paper entitled "The Confederate Ordnance Department and Southern Industrialization." This paper examined the influence of the American system of interchangeable parts and the system of bureaucratic control developed in the railroad industry upon the Confederate Ordnance Department. The Confederate Ordnance Department tried to adopt the American system and bureaucratic control and succeeded to a greater extent than most other Confederate enterprises. These efforts improved the efficiency and quality of production at many Confederate arsenals, despite the emergence of obstacles as the war dragged on, such as shortages of necessary materials. Collins concluded that the Confederate Ordnance Department achieved significant results in implementing bureaucratic control and developing technological improvements in manufacturing. Moreover, the department's achievements led to greater emphasis on the need for scientific education in the postbellum South.

The second session examined technology and industry in two southern

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 61, Spring 2002, pp. 165–168
© 2002 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547902000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cities. Donna M. Neary (independent historical consultant, Louisville, KY) provided a look at "Industrial Development in Louisville, Kentucky." Focusing primarily upon the antebellum period, Neary examined the transformation of Louisville from a distribution center with virtually no manufacturing in the late eighteenth century to a city of importance in both distribution and manufacturing by the end of the nineteenth century. The location of Louisville on the falls of the Ohio River made it a key center of Ohio Valley commerce and spurred the development of the shipping and transit industries as well as auxiliary businesses such as hotels and restaurants. The construction of a canal at Louisville in 1830, however, shifted the city's economy: the city remained a major distribution center but developed a variety of manufacturing industries as well. By 1832, Louisville had factories, mills, foundries, potteries, breweries, and a sheet lead factory. Tanneries, binderies, and hemp rope factories soon followed; the latter utilized slave labor. The construction of railroad lines in Louisville in 1851 led to an "explosion" in manufacturing. The city contained 436 manufacturing plants and factories in 1860 and 1,200 by 1900.

Richard O'Connor (Historic American Engineering Record, Washington, D.C.) shifted the focus to the Deep South of the early twentieth century in "Making Brick in Montgomery: Technical Ability and Regional Support Networks in the Southern Brick Industry." Examining the Jenkins Brick Company, which began in 1901 in Wetumpka, Alabama, just outside Montgomery, O'Connor emphasized the importance of technical ability and relationships with equipment manufacturers as key factors in the company's success. Jenkins Brick displayed outstanding ability in inventing and modifying brick-making equipment and developed cooperative working relationships with regional equipment manufacturers. The company relied on southern equipment manufacturers to a great extent, and often suggested successful modifications in the design and manufacturing of equipment. The company also used local contractors, building supply firms and architects. The high degree of regional cooperation and mutual assistance that characterized the dealings of the Jenkins Brick Company with these supporting players enabled the company to prosper over the course of the twentieth century. The Wetumpka plant closed in the 1970s but two others still remain in operation.

The third session featured two papers on labor in one of the South's former leading industries, textiles, and another on labor in one of its current leading industries, poultry growing and processing. Bess Beatty (Oregon State University) presented a reflective essay entitled "Writing About the Beginnings of a Southern Industrial Working Class: Problems and Potentials." Drawing in part on data contained in the US Census of 1860, Beatty suggested that historians have not yet unraveled the complexity of the early southern textile workforce. In particular, the 1860 Census suggests that not all women and children who were part of that labor force in Alamance County, NC were poor. For women, mill work may have represented an extension of their work in the home, and may not have carried any class stigma. Furthermore, the stigma against the use of black laborers in southern textile mills that would be so apparent in the postbellum

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547902000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

South did not exist in the antebellum period. (Mills in North Carolina and Georgia employed slaves as well as white workers.) Nor, noted Beatty, were female mill workers of the antebellum South so grateful for their jobs that they would not protest low wages.

Michele Gillespie (Wake Forest University) presented a somewhat different view of female workers in antebellum mills in "'To Harden a Lady's Hand': Gender Politics, Racial Realities and Women Mill Workers in Antebellum Georgia." Gillespie noted that females outnumbered males in Georgia's textile workforce by a margin of three-to-two by 1850, and that, at least in Athens, most mill workers were poor. Many female mill workers were the heads of their households, and often their children worked in the mills as well. Sometimes children worked in the mills without their parents. Mill owners preferred to hire women and children as a cheap and malleable labor force. The mill owners portrayed themselves as benefactors who prevented the impoverishment and ruin of poor whites. Their rhetoric overlooked how their reluctance to hire white men when sufficient numbers of women and children were available led some of these men to become dependent upon their wives and children for support. While Gillespie portrayed antebellum female mill workers as poorer and less militant than their North Carolina counterparts described by Beatty, the two scholars presented similar findings regarding the racial composition of the textile workforce. In the late 1830s, three Athens mills utilized slave labor.

Carl Weinberg (North Georgia College and State University) examined labor relations and the changing demographics of the workforce in a major southern industry of more recent vintage in "Labor, Migration and Change in the Northeast Georgia Poultry Industry." Jesse Jewell of Gainesville, Georgia vertically integrated this industry in the 1940s. As a poultry processor, Jewell replicated the landowner-tenant farmer relationship with chicken growers, providing chicks, feed, and medicine, and paying cash for the grown chickens, which were processed in his plant. This arrangement provided considerable upward mobility for some chicken growers, although the expense of necessary technological advancements (electricity, automatic feeders) put some growers out of business. Growers also faced the insecurity of doing business with processors on an annual basis with no guarantee of continued patronage, an ongoing grievance that contributed to the recent formation of a union of sorts, the United Poultry Growers' Association. In the processing plants, the workforce has shifted from one consisting largely of rural white women and African Americans to one of Latino immigrants, partly because increased mechanization has made the jobs less attractive. Latinos now comprise about seventy percent of this workforce in Hall County, Georgia, but their influx into the community has caused a political backlash in this conservative region.

Stanley L. Engerman (University of Rochester) delivered the keynote address, "Slaves, Free Labor, and the Southern Industrial Labor Force: Myths in Southern Industrialization." Engerman argued against notions of a stagnant antebellum southern economy, incapable slaves, and incompetent slave owners. He emphasized that slaves performed many tasks in rural and urban areas of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547902000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

South, and that the heavy use of a slave labor force did not retard southern industrialization. Slave owners exhibited a calculating, economic rationale about slavery. The economic strength rather than the economic limits of the agricultural antebellum South held back its industrial development. This strength drew free laborers to agriculture just as it induced slave owners to use their slaves in agricultural pursuits. Slave owners, Engerman asserted, used slaves where their labor would be most profitable, and the heavily agricultural antebellum South had one of the most profitable economies in the world.

The diverse array of papers presented at this conference emphasized some common themes: the crucial role of an effective labor force in successful industrial development, the role of local entrepreneurial and technical ability in that development, and the evolution of gender and racial roles and composition in the southern workforce. In sum, this conference highlighted promising new directions for research and suggested that the close integration of labor history and the history of industrialization can benefit scholars in both fields.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547902000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press