

The Quest for
Streetcar Unionism
in the Carolina
Piedmont, 1919-1922

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By

Jeffrey M. Leatherwood

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ALL WORKERS OF THE CAROLINAS.

IN MEMORIAM:

JAMES D. ALDRIDGE

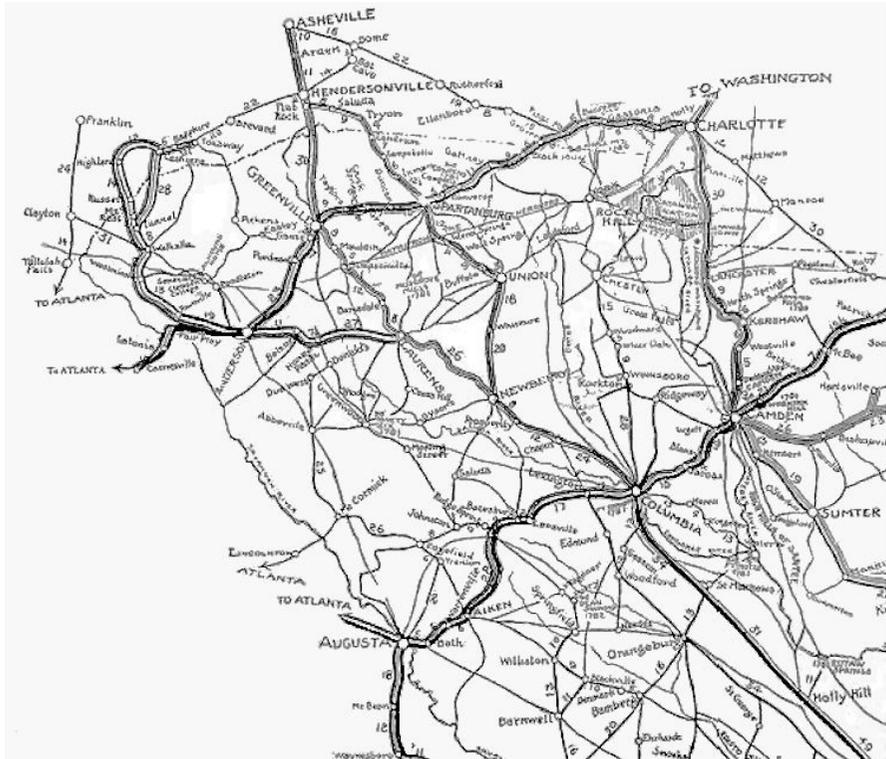
WILLIAM R. HAMMOND

CLAUDE HINSON

JAMES CALDWELL HOUSTON

WILLIAM C. POPE

FIVE WORKINGMEN SLAIN IN DOWNTOWN CHARLOTTE ON THE
NIGHT OF AUGUST 25-26, 1919.



This 1917 atlas map shows the Piedmont Carolina's hub with major roads connecting Charlotte, North Carolina's "Queen City," to the South Carolina capital of Columbia. Also integral to this network, the Tri-City region of Anderson, Greenville, and Spartanburg lies to the northwest. Note the connections to Atlanta and other major cities, such as Asheville. This region did not exist in a vacuum one hundred years ago.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began over a decade ago as a graduate history paper at Western Carolina University. I first researched the 1919 Charlotte Streetcar Strike for Dr. Gerald Schwartz's elective course, "Emerging Industrial America." I presented my initial findings at local and regional conferences and published a peer-reviewed article in WCU's *Tuckasegee Valley Historical Review*, never realizing that I would revisit the Charlotte Strike for my doctoral dissertation at West Virginia University, directed by Dr. Kenneth Fones-Wolf. This project, in turn, yielded two journal articles in the North and South Carolina historical publications.

Only two scholars have laid previous foundations for academic study of the 1919 Charlotte Streetcar Strike, and neither one has sufficiently addressed the correlated events of the Piedmont Carolina region. Carol Shaw's unpublished 1980 honors thesis, "A City in Conflict," broke the first ground on the Charlotte Strike. Lamentably, Shaw's original research halts with the strike settlement, only cursorily assessing the strike's political and legal aftermath.¹

Dr. Dan Morrill, professor emeritus of the University of Charlotte, is a respected expert on the Queen City's past. Since the 1980s, he has researched the transition from horse-drawn trolleys to electric streetcars in Mecklenburg County. Morrill has also championed historic preservation in Charlotte. Yet, most of Morrill's writings on the Charlotte Strike itself have been electronic publications or newspaper articles geared toward a popular audience.²

During its five-year expansion from graduate paper to dissertation, this story yielded some unanswered questions and unexplored avenues stemming from the Charlotte strike. In particular, I found two closely-related incidents in Spartanburg and Columbia, vital cities of South Carolina. This work has since evolved into a regional study of how the streetcar union fought and lost its greatest struggle in the Piedmont Carolinas, two contiguous foothill regions separated only by the North Carolina – South Carolina state boundary. The peoples of this region largely share the same culture and have a traditional hostility toward organized labor, or so we have been taught.

Most American historians are familiar with the textile mill heritage of the Carolinas. But fewer are as familiar with the struggles of trade unions

in gaining local and state recognition. In 1976, Gerald Carpenter presented his groundbreaking research on the New Orleans Street Railway Strike of 1929, noting that many Southern labor historians focused too much on textile workers, while “virtually ignoring” urban trade unions in the New South. He also criticized “standard generalizations.” Conventional wisdom insisted that the South presented a “united front against the alien doctrine of trade unionism.” Carpenter urged future labor scholars to re-examine these long-held interpretations of Southern history.³

Chronologically and thematically, this publication falls somewhere between Allen Tullos’ informative work on North Carolina Piedmont mill culture, *Habits of Industry*, and Bryant Simon’s *A Fabric of Defeat*, a notable study of the Depression-era National Textile Workers Union and its struggles during the ill-starred 1934 textile strike of South Carolina.⁴

Scholars of Southern mill worker protests have focused on the well-known Great Depression textile strikes, such as Loray Mill in 1929. In my research, I have discovered that foregoing efforts by textile mill workers frequently coincided with those of Piedmont streetcar workers, despite the fact that most textile workers were not organized during the post-war years of 1919-22. Part of this work re-examines the groundwork through which James B. Duke bounced back from his 1911 defeat by the Supreme Court to become a leading player in the Piedmont’s textile mill and public utilities market. Southern Power revolutionized both regions of the Carolina Piedmont by providing cheap hydro-electricity and streetcar transportation to mill towns, with Duke as the partial owner of many textile enterprises. By the time of the 1919 Wiscasset Mill strike in North Carolina, Duke and the other powerful mill owners recognized that if streetcar workers successfully organized, then the more numerous mill workers would follow suit, further challenging their authority.⁵

Conventional labor literature often suggests that Southern workers, in general, were difficult to organize, particularly before 1929. While the Piedmont Carolina streetcar employees were low-paid, much like the South’s textile workers, their streetcar union received local support, even contractual recognition, such as in the cases of Columbia, South Carolina, and Asheville, North Carolina. One therefore should question this popular image of the monolithic South, uniformly opposed toward organized labor.

Even in parts of the Piedmont, labor flourished for a time. They did so by adhering to a conservative model of organized labor, as espoused by Samuel L. Gompers and his close friend, William D. Mahon, the International President of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees (alternately referred to in this work as the AASERE or the Amalgamated Association).

This research also examines the First Red Scare as it affected labor unions in the Piedmont Carolinas after World War I. Reactionary impulses unleashed during the war against Germany swiftly tilted against the Left as U.S. troops combatted Bolshevism in Archangel and Siberia. Further developments, such as the Palmer Raids, led to paranoia on the home front. While progressive in their general outlooks, the governors of North and South Carolina at the time were suspicious toward labor unions, particularly if the organizers were Northerners. Nonetheless, starting in late 1918, the AASERE and other AFL unions seized windows of opportunity to penetrate the Carolina Upcountry.⁶

By 1919, Woodrow Wilson's political force had ebbed in Washington due to a backlash. Meanwhile, industrialists across the United States had begun to retrench against the wartime gains of labor. Republicans had regained control of Congress in 1918, forcing the premature closure of the National War Labor Board in early 1919. Consequently, American businessmen revitalized the "open-shop" movement, using conspiracy theories and manipulation of the press to tar the whole of the American organized labor community with exaggerated or false connections to the "Red Menace."⁷

In addition to labor history, this book touches on regional transportation history. Most street railway scholars have heretofore focused mostly on the North and Midwest. Those few transportation scholars who have paid attention to the South often deal less with streetcar workers themselves, and more with infrastructure and geography. The best of these, *Palmetto Traction*, is Thomas Fetters' exhaustive study of South Carolina streetcar lines, and it covers parts of North Carolina and Georgia as well. Fetters also co-authored the official history of Duke's Piedmont & Northern electric railway, Southern Power's own challenge to the extensive Southern Railway system, owned by J.P. Morgan.⁸

Competition between transportation interests in Appalachia and the Piedmont did not abate the spread of unionism, as shown by other historians. James B. Jones Jr. wrote about organization efforts in Chattanooga at the turn of the century, culminating with a violent two-month strike in the fall of 1917, during the height of U.S. mobilization for World War I. James Burran also published research concerning the October 1919 Knoxville strike, which took place shortly after the Charlotte streetcar strike in August. This further suggests that the Charlotte Strike did not occur in a vacuum.⁹

Grant us a Contract is also informed by selected works on New South urban history. Charlotte has been well-researched by scholars and local historians. Janette T. Greenwood's *The Black and White Better Classes in*

Charlotte leaves off before 1919, but it discusses the creation of Charlotte suburbs, noting the rise of future Charlotte mayor Frank R. McNinch in city politics. Miriam Mitchell and Edward Perzel compiled their sourcebook on the city's role during the Great War, detailing the importance of SPU President Zebulon V. Taylor as a wartime booster. During his tenure as curator of the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte, Thomas W. Hanchett documented the drab yet historically compelling world of textile mill workers in *Sorting out the New South City*.¹⁰

This work also touches upon the concept of Southern Progressivism, a distinct branch of the early 1900s movement. William Link's seminal research on this topic has identified "two fundamental values" clashing in the New South: "the paternalism of [Northern] reformers and the... community power of [Southern] traditionalists." Both themes are evident in this work. According to Dewey Grantham, one of Southern Progressivism's chief goals was its "desire to expand the regulatory function of the state in behalf of economic opportunity."¹¹

Southern Progressives in the Carolinas embraced many political economic reforms, including the right for workingmen to organize for better pay and treatment. Whether Republican or Democrat, these reformers increasingly came to view James B. Duke's Southern Power corporation as a monopolistic threat to economic opportunity. This feeling culminated with North Carolina's 1920 regulation war against Southern Power. This regulatory impulse to protect smaller businesses fits historically with Woodrow Wilson's presidential platform for a "New Freedom."

Like President Wilson, many Southern reformers were also proponents of racial segregation. Labor unions won patronage in New South cities like Columbia by observing the color line. Other reform leaders, like Charlotte Mayor Frank McNinch, expressed their nativism by supporting immigration restriction. Janet G. Hudson's new research focuses on the contradictions between progressive policy and Jim Crow. While this is a vital study, in the context of their time, most Southern Progressives saw no dichotomy in this value system, and in fact, they believed that both blacks and whites would benefit from progressivism, as long as such reform movements observed the "color line" of segregation.¹²

As this work demonstrates, neither race nor gender played a significant role within the strikes of 1919-22. According to labor historian Philip S. Foner, black employees in streetcar companies typically held servile positions, such as porters and sweepers. SPU's streetcar lines seem to represent the era's policies. James B. Duke hired a handful of exceptional African-Americans, but he did not engage them as conductors, nor did he emulate New York City's hiring of female "conductorettes" during World

War I. Such innovations in public transportation certainly would have challenged the New South's values on race and gender. However, the absence of such dynamics should not make this book less relevant.¹³

Using government documents from North and South Carolina, plus many hard-to-locate local newspapers, the author has sought to capture the exact state of the Upcountry-Piedmont Carolina region during the turbulent era following World War I. As the centennial approaches for the Charlotte Streetcar Strike, parallels have become evident in the present day. Then as now, we are largely isolated from a distant war, and it is easy to forget that global conflict has many ways of coming home. Mistrust and paranoia toward "outsiders" have become constant companions in today's media, just as the newspapers communicated the "Red Menace" to our ancestors. This fear tends to cloud the judgment of not only we the people, but our leaders as well. We will need wiser leadership to prepare our nation for future transitions and challenges.

Many individuals and institutions have contributed to this book in inspirational and material ways. In the first category, Dr. Gerald Schwartz encouraged me to become a historian, and not only did he shepherd the original research project, he took part as an independent reader at the dissertation stage. I would also like to honor my WVU dissertation committee, led by Dr. Kenneth Fones-Wolf.

I would like to recognize the state archives for North Carolina and South Carolina, as well as the University of South Carolina's Caroliniana Library for their assistance. The Richland County Library of South Carolina cooperated with the University of Wisconsin at Madison to bring invaluable research materials within easy access.

This book contains many rare photographs. Many of the images came from the Duke Energy Library, and the Duke Mansion likewise granted the use of James B. Duke's portrait for this work. While critical of Duke's policies, this book pays due respect to his achievements. Greensboro's History Museum provided a photograph of Zebulon V. Taylor of Southern Public Utilities. The cover illustration of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees is used with the kind permission of the Amalgamated Transit Union, its modern-day counterpart headquartered in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Finally, the author would like to thank his wife, Jennifer Beck, for assisting with the images for this manuscript. He would also like to thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their patience and support.

Notes

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- ¹ Carol Shaw, "A City in Conflict: the 1919 Charlotte Streetcar Strike" (unpublished honors thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980).
- ² Dan L. Morrill, "The Trolley Car," *Charlotte Observer*, 24 April 1983, 4E; "A Brief History of the Mule-drawn or Horse-drawn Streetcar System in Charlotte, North Carolina 1883-1891" (unpublished research paper, 27 November 1991); Lew Powell, "Close, But No Trolley," *Charlotte Observer*, 24 April 1984, 3E; "Tracking Trolleys," *Charlotte Observer*, 17 April 1984, 3E; Maschal, 1E-2E.
- ³ Gerald Carpenter, "Public Opinion in the New Orleans Street Railway Strike of 1929-1930," from *Essays in Southern Labor History: Selected Papers, Southern Labor History Conference, 1976* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 191-207.
- ⁴ Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 134-71.
- ⁵ For the most up to date study on harnessing Southern waterways, see Christopher J. Mangianello, *Southern Water, Southern Power* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); See also John A. Salmond, *Gastonia 1929* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
- ⁶ Robert M. Burts, *Richard Irvine Manning and the Progressive Movement in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973); Frank L. Grubb Jr., *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1968); William Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); McCartin, 69-75.
- ⁷ See Allen Wakstein, "The Origins of the Open Shop Movement," *Journal of American History*. Vol. 51, No. 3 (Dec. 1964), 460-75; David Mitchell, *1919: Red Mirage* (MacMillan Company: New York City, NY, 1970); William Millikan, *A Union against Unions* (Minnesota Historical Society Press: St. Paul, Minn., 2001).
- ⁸ Scott Malloy, *Trolley Wars: Streetcar Workers on the Line* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C. and London, 1996); Thomas T. Fetters and Peter W. Swanson, *Piedmont & Northern: The Great Electric System of the South* (San Marino, Calif.: Golden West Books, 1976); *Palmetto Traction*, 86-94.
- ⁹ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor in the United States: Volume VIII: Postwar Struggles, 1918-1920* (International Publishers, New York City, 1988), 102-116; Mark V. Wetherington, "Street Car City: Knoxville, Tennessee, 1876-1947," *East Tennessee Historical Society* (Vols. 54 and 55, 1982-1983), 70-110; James A. Burran, "Labor Conflict in Urban Appalachia: The Knoxville Streetcar Strike of 1919," *Tennessee History Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, (Spring 1979), 62-78; James B. Jones, Jr., "The Other Side of the 'Dynamo of Dixie': Class Consciousness and Worker Solidarity in Urban Tennessee: The Chattanooga Carmen's Strikes of 1899-1917," *Tennessee History Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2, (Summer 1993), 98-112.

¹⁰ Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 73-4; Janette T. Greenwood, *The Black and White Better Classes in Charlotte* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London, 1994); Miriam G. Mitchell and Edward S. Perzel, *The Echo of the Bugle Call: Charlotte's Role in World War I* (Charlotte: Heritage Printers, Inc., 1979), 2-7.

¹¹ William Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xii; Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1983), 258.

¹² See Janet G. Hudson, *Entangled by White Supremacy: Reform in WWI-era South Carolina* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2009) for more on the black struggles for civil equality after 1919. (Grantham, 111, 360-1).

¹³ 171 New York women applied to become conductorettes within one day, with 91 being employed by late 1918. While no proof indicates that SPU ever considered hiring white women, Southern gender expectations did not preclude one editorial suggesting the employment of black women in hazardous jobs, such as gas line installation. (Grace E. Hale, *Making Whiteness* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 133-5; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906," *Journal of American History*, 55, 4, (March 1969), 756-775; Jennifer Roback, "The Political Economy of Segregation: The Case of Segregated Streetcars," *Journal of Economic History*, 46, 4, (December 1986), 893-917; *Southern Public Utilities Magazine*, Vol. 4, No. 6, (July 1918), 8-10, 27, 44; *Southern Public Utilities Magazine*, Vol. 4, No. 8, (September 1918), 8-9, 13-16).

INTRODUCTION

In late June 1919, Albert Essex Jones, special organizer for the streetcar workers' union, arrived in Spartanburg, South Carolina. His arrival heralded the American Federation of Labor's most ambitious campaign in a region long perceived as hostile toward unionism. For nearly a decade, the trade union known as the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees (or the AASERE) had sought to organize the Carolina Piedmont. Often viewed in isolation, this foothill region of the Carolinas bore witness to the same developments affecting the nation through the decade encompassing the First World War. The AASERE's struggle to organize the Charlotte region and its tension-filled aftermath occurred contemporaneously with the Great Steel Strike, West Virginia's Mine Wars, Washington's Centralia Massacre, and the Railroad Shopmen's Strike of 1922. Just as many workingmen died in Charlotte on August 25, 1919 as in the Boston Massacre of 1770. Yet, this tragic incident has languished as a mere curiosity in the Queen City's annals, without any markers to commemorate it.¹

Were these men revolutionaries in league with the Reds? Were they mindless rubes for outsiders to manipulate? This writing deems that many union supporters from North Carolina's Piedmont and South Carolina's Upcountry, raised in farming communities endangered by the growth of textile mills, had a natural antipathy toward industrialists. Trade unions like AASERE stood on the shoulders of previous efforts by the National Farmers' Union to organize the region. Furthermore, textile mills drew their employees principally from the same farming communities, and disaffected mill-hands, with their own hopes for unionization, made effective sympathizers for the streetcar union. "Bread and butter" issues, such as better pay and work conditions, united those laborers far more than the shadowy conspiracies often alleged by their bosses.

Two years before Woodrow Wilson's liberal victory in 1912, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had inaugurated the "Labor Forward" movement. At its heart, "Labor Forward" was a conservative labor movement, especially when compared to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose radical agitators were occasionally active in the Piedmont's mill towns. At the direction of their union president, William D. Mahon, the AASERE organizers exercised more caution concerning

local politics, and made better progress on the Piedmont's periphery. By 1912, the national streetcar union had already established two promising footholds in the mountain cities of Asheville, North Carolina and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

In 1913, the AASERE successfully unionized in the state capital of Columbia, where two prominent union members took seats in the South Carolina General Assembly. However, labor organizers also recognized their need to consolidate individual successes into a stronger regional network. For a complete victory, the AASERE needed to wage a campaign for the hearts and minds of streetcar workers in Charlotte, the proverbial hole in the doughnut, while a favorable political climate still existed in the adjacent Midlands and Upcountry regions of South Carolina.

Charlotte, the "Queen City" of North Carolina, had served as the economic keystone that united the North Carolina Piedmont and South Carolina Upcountry during the Progressive Era. James Buchanan Duke's ambitious electrification program became a significant catalyst in this urbanization process, which had accelerated during the First World War. Headquartered in Charlotte, Southern Power quickly accumulated most of the traction companies in nearby North and South Carolina mill-towns. Duke and his fellow New South industrialists further acquired textile mills and other manufacturing assets across the entire Carolina Piedmont. Therefore, when Albert E. Jones expanded his union's post-war organization drive into Charlotte, he had chosen to enter the proverbial lion's den.

Duke, the undisputable king of Piedmont industry, had dissolved his tobacco monopoly pursuant to a 1911 U.S. Supreme Court decision. Duke's tobacco empire had permeated even the British and Japanese markets. By 1916, Duke had partially restored his lost fortunes through Southern Power's competitive electrification projects, which extended his influence over most textile mills and many public transportation outlets in the Carolinas. All of Southern Power's street railways relied on low wages and were administrated by Southern Public Utilities, Inc. (SPU), the principal subsidiary involved in the forthcoming events of 1919.²

Duke had long opposed unionization in his tobacco fields, but he chose to fight this battle against the AASERE through his junior partners, especially Zebulon V. Taylor of Southern Public Utilities (SPU). Prior to 1917, Charlotte entrepreneurs like Taylor had come to view the AASERE as an advance guard of a movement to organize the city's wage-laborers. At least two previous union drives in the "Queen City" had been foiled by local businessmen. Nevertheless, while trained streetcar workers represented mere hundreds of workingmen, Carolina textile barons employed *thousands* of unskilled mill-hands, both men and women, who were

usually low-paid and poorly treated by their employers and foremen. Many middle-class Southerners similarly looked down upon these “factory classes,” who usually inhabited mill villages or urban tenements within growing New South cities like Charlotte.³

Mill owners and their investors especially feared that a successful streetcar union could influence textile mill workers to strike over union recognition, particularly since streetcars were conduits of information for working-class riders. Mill hands also had a documented history of resentment toward their employers, as evidenced by two strikes in Greenville and Anderson, both located in the South Carolina Upcountry. Unsurprisingly, labor organizers and rank-and-file unionists often valued these mill-hands as significant, if rather volatile, potential recruits.

During the war years, the AFL had enjoyed a spurt in general membership growth, chiefly owing to Samuel Gompers’s political alliance with the Wilson Administration. Several key appointments reinforced this commitment. Frank Walsh, a prominent labor reformer, became chairman of the influential U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, a bipartisan Congressional body that investigated labor abuses across America. Wilson further rewarded his labor supporters by appointing a former United Mine Workers leader, William B. Wilson, as U.S. Labor Secretary. During the war years, Woodrow Wilson’s administration also established the National War Labor Board to arbitrate wage disputes and strikes with relative impartiality. Former U.S. President William H. Taft, a Republican with progressive leanings, served as a leading member of this court.⁴

During this period, both the Carolinas were under governorship by a series of progressive Democrats. Locke Craig and Thomas W. Bickett, along with their Palmetto counterparts, Robert A. Cooper and Richard I. Manning, tolerated the presence of trade unions. Moreover, some local leaders favored unions to a degree. One principal in the Charlotte strike, Mayor Frank R. McNinch, espoused labor unionism, albeit a conservative model. Later in his career, McNinch consistently fought against utility monopolies. Charles O. Hearon, a Spartanburg newspaper editor and one-time state highway commissioner, opined that well-disciplined labor unions might help ensure higher safety standards in public transportation. Charlotte lawyer Marvin L. Ritch, who never forgot his Piedmont farming roots, sacrificed his position as city attorney to support streetcar and textile unions. Meanwhile, one South Carolina state congressman, Ambrose A. Gerald, even served as Columbia, South Carolina’s AASERE chapter president. Columbia’s labor community also boasted a union newspaper, which circulated briefly during the postwar years. All these elements would factor into the AASERE’s mounting campaign.⁵

Yet, by the end of World War I, the AASERE had nearly expended its momentum at the national level. Washington's mood had grown conservative, as demonstrated by President Woodrow Wilson's political downfall in the 1918 elections. General backlash toward Wilson quickly weakened the government's wartime alliance with the American Federation of Labor, and its Southern unions were especially vulnerable to attack. In the spirit of the times, regional businessmen capitalized on the Bolshevik Red Scare in order to discredit trade unions. For the struggling transportation workers in Upcountry South Carolina and Piedmont North Carolina, union recognition became more urgent than ever. Who would be their allies in this quest?

Albert Jones and his fellow AFL organizers could still count on the good will of state governors. Woodrow Wilson's two-term presidency had swept in state governments with reformist agendas. After the 1915 defeat of Coleman L. Blease, one of South Carolina's most infamous demagogues, two progressive South Carolina governors emerged to fight the power of the mills. Richard I. Manning and Robert A. Cooper still preserved the forms of segregation, but they also launched tax-based efforts to improve state highways and public education. Legislative allies even broke the power of company stores in Upcountry mill towns. Meanwhile, Governor Thomas H. Bickett and the N.C. General Assembly launched an ongoing anti-monopolist "rate war" against Southern Power, a potent legal challenge that kept Duke occupied for years.⁶

Given these conditions, the AASERE could hope for some tolerance at the state level. However, at the local level, city and town-dwellers remained to be convinced about the need for a national streetcar union. Most of these Carolinians merely desired cheap and reliable public transportation, and as strikes disrupted the normal flow, these citizens would turn to alternative modes, such as new motorbuses, self-styled taxis called "jitneys," and increasingly, cheap-to-buy personal automobiles. How could the AASERE hope to win hearts and minds?⁷

In early July 1919, Spartanburg's streetcar workers declared a strike for better wages and union recognition. Partly owned by James B. Duke's Southern Power, the South Carolina Light, Power, and Railway Company (SCLP&R) supplied electrical power and transportation for local textile mills. Manager Franklin H. Knox, a no-nonsense businessman known for his opposition to unionism, engaged strikebreakers. Hostilities broke out between Knox's men and strikers, but Governor Cooper interceded before serious violence overwhelmed Spartanburg. Arbitrators secured Knox's agreement for better wages and schedules – albeit without union recognition.

Inspired by this partial victory, Jones glimpsed a greater opportunity to unionize three major Piedmont cities – the aforementioned Charlotte plus Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Greenville, South Carolina. All three cities followed the same railway lines and had streetcar services courtesy of Southern Public Utilities (SPU), a major branch of Southern Power under Zebulon V. Taylor. Just a month later, Jones mobilized nearly 300 streetcar men, who declared a strike on August 10, 1919 for better pay and union recognition. This transit strike paralyzed several Piedmont and Upcountry towns, as AASERE mobilized sympathy among the region's impoverished textile workers. SPU President Taylor refused to acknowledge Jones as a legitimate representative, despite pressure from local and federal adjudicators. As a result, Charlotte's strike developed into a political impasse, with union sympathizers and progressive politicians challenging the region's corporate establishment.⁸

Charlotte's 1919 streetcar strike still stands as one of the largest labor demonstrations in the New South era. Hundreds of mill-workers rallied across Charlotte to protest Southern Public Utilities, especially after Zebulon Taylor sent armed replacements to man his streetcars. Several acts of strikebreaker intimidation, including gunplay, had worsened relations. On the night of August 25, matters came to a crisis as perhaps 2,000 townsfolk picketed the Dilworth car-barn.

After a teenager sustained minor injuries in a scuffle with an officer, Charlotte's Police Chief, Walter B. Orr, panicked in the face of the angry mob. Policemen and strikebreakers guarding SPU property opened fire on the crowd. Three protesters fell outright to lethal bullets, while two more succumbed to mortal wounds. Neither policemen nor replacement workers were among the dozens of injured reported at the "Battle of the Barn." Considerable property damage resulted during a subsequent riot on August 26, which subsided only when National Guardsmen patrolled uneasy streets. Most of the thwarted strikers returned to their jobs in early September.⁹

In the ensuing months, the political repercussions and legal proceedings dominated headlines in many regional newspapers. Mayor Frank R. McNinch, a noted progressive who had earlier argued for a year-long trial period for the union, suddenly found himself the subject of a recall election. Chief Orr also braved a wrongful death trial that retraced the events of the night of August 25, 1919. In sympathy, Charlotte's conservative press transformed labor organizers into alien invaders, pawns of the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, the repressive violence perpetrated by the city police and strikebreakers underwent a similar transfiguration, ultimately finding sanctification in Charlotte's courts. Thereafter, the

Queen City chose to forget the unpleasant strike for decades, except for occasional references on its anniversary.

In the wake of its centennial, local interest in the 1919 Charlotte strike has resurfaced. But its impact on organized labor goes beyond Mecklenburg County, or North Carolina for that matter. While it is true that Charlotte's streetcar union withered on the vine, so too did their new regional affiliates as far north as Winston-Salem and as far south as Greenville, South Carolina, neither of which sent representatives to national AASERE meetings. Ultimately, Charlotte's crackdown on the streetcar and textile unions retarded further organization within the Piedmont Carolinas, while the backlash dealt a widespread reversal to ten years' worth of union progress.

Organizing streetcar workers outside Charlotte's immediate sphere of influence soon felt these consequences. In Knoxville, Tennessee, another streetcar strike over union recognition occurred in October 1919. Knoxville's ruthless suppression of transit workers and allied coal-miners further weakened the tenuous grasp of unionism in eastern Tennessee. More ominously, South Carolina Light, Power, and Railway soon revoked Spartanburg's modest labor gains, which had been mandated by South Carolina's governor in the summer of 1919.¹⁰

The AASERE's final gasp of union activity in the Carolina Piedmont ended with the bitter Columbia Street Railway Strike of 1922. During World War I, South Carolina's state capital had forged a mutually beneficial relationship with its streetcar union. With twenty war veterans and 100 percent unionization, they were highly disciplined professional workers. Two members had even won election to the General Assembly. After his successful union rollback in Spartanburg, Franklin H. Knox took over management of the ailing Columbia Railway, Gas, and Electricity Company in January 1922. To avoid bankruptcy, Knox discharged many employees, nearly all of them members of AASERE Division 590. Most of Knox's streetcarmen elected to strike in sympathy, resulting in a yearlong deadlock in the courts and state legislature. Columbia's outcome virtually overturned the union's modest gains in Upcountry South Carolina, much as Charlotte had done to Piedmont North Carolina. In claiming this Pyrrhic victory against AASERE, however, Knox blacklisted his most experienced streetcar crewmen, ensuring the Columbia Railway, Gas & Electricity's (CRG&E) inevitable loss of streetcar revenues. As with most New South cities, motor-buses, jitneys, and private cars would bring the golden age of trolleys to a close for most towns within the Charlotte-Spartanburg-Columbia triangle.¹¹

Notes

¹ See David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: the Steel Strike of 1919* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1965, 1987); Colin J. Davis, *Power at Odds: the 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Gene Smith, *When the Cheering Stopped* (William Morrow: New York, 1971). For more analysis on the First Red Scare, see also Eliot Asinof, *1919: America's Loss of Innocence* (Donald Fine, Inc.: New York City, NY, 1990); Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); William Millikan, *A Union against Unions* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001); David Mitchell, *1919: Red Mirage* (MacMillan Company: New York City, NY, 1970).

² Robert F. Durden, the official Duke biographer uniformly favorable toward Duke, often used the word "empire" to describe the businessman's holdings. Robert F. Durden, *Bold Entrepreneur: A Life of James B. Duke* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003), 39-55, 39-55, 67-84.

³ See David Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Janelle T. Greenwood, *The Black and White Better Classes in Charlotte* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London, 1994); Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁴ McCartin, *Labor's Great War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 19-20; See also Samuel Yellen, *American Labor Struggles* (Harcourt, Brace and Company: New York City, NY, 1936); Graham Adams, Jr., *Age of Industrial Violence, 1910-1915* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1966); P.K. Edwards, *Strikes in the United States, 1881-1974* (New York City, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

⁵ Robert M. Burts, Richard Irvine Manning and the Progressive Movement in South Carolina (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 70-144.

⁶ Ibid. See also Thomas W. Bickett, *Public Letters and Papers of Thomas Walter Bickett, Governor of North Carolina, 1917-21*. R.B. House, ed. (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1923).

⁷ Burts, 70-144. See also Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: a History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

⁸ *The Charlotte Observer*, 10 August to 23 November 1919; *Greenville Daily News*, 12 August 1919, 10; 15 August 1919, 10; 17 August 1919, 10.

⁹ This epithet for the Charlotte Strike appeared twenty years later in the official city history sponsored by the North Carolina Work Projects Administration; see *Charlotte: a Guide to the Queen City of North Carolina* (Charlotte: News Printing House, 1939), 31-2.

¹⁰ James A. Burran, "Labor Conflict in Urban Appalachia: The Knoxville Streetcar Strike of 1919." *Tennessee History Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, (Spring 1979), 62-78.

¹¹ Thomas Fetters did not mention the prior Spartanburg strikes of 1919 and 1920, despite the Knox connection. Duke's South Carolina transportation interests

receive comprehensive treatment in Thomas T. Feters, *Palmetto Traction* (Forty Fort, PA: Harold E. Cox, 1978), 46-9; 86-94.

CHAPTER ONE

AGAINST THE RUN OF THE MILL

The story of Southern Power's massive electrification campaign interweaves with that of the development of powered textile mills across the New South. While public utilities began as a secondary consideration for James B. Duke and his contemporaries, municipal and inter-urban traction corporations were profitable outgrowths of this burgeoning market, which in turn, derived its existence from hydro-electrical power plants. As electrification projects multiplied, so grew interests in the lucrative realms of textiles and later on, public transportation. Given this staggering dynamic, how did these environmental and structural changes affect the yeomanry of the Upcountry-Piedmont?¹

After the close of Reconstruction, Henry W. Grady of Georgia hailed the birth of a "New South," which would replace an old agrarian society with a modern industrial one. South Carolina's Midlands and Upcountry regions, as well as North Carolina's corresponding Piedmont area, became focal points of intensive manufacturing and profiteering. Northern developers looked southward, where raw materials such as coal, tin, and lumber were plentiful. Yet, no industry proved more vital to the entire Carolina Upcountry than textile manufacture.²

While the region's cloth and fabric industry did not reach its zenith after the Great War, mills were already evident beforehand. During the 1880s, South Carolina launched pilot mills in Anderson, Greenville, and Spartanburg counties. These Upcountry county seats soon became citadels of Grady's "New South," exemplified by Greenville's 1915 Southern Textile Exposition. North Carolina's Piedmont towns also enjoyed spurts of growth in textiles as well as furniture manufacturing. By 1900, Gastonia boasted the "million-dollar" Loray Mill; its size and output of raw materials equaled anything standing in New England at this time.³

Local boosters – principally merchants and wealthy landowners -- were able to channel their wealth into such ventures, becoming stockholders in new industries. These economic and industrial advancements came with a steep price, however. According to regional historians, much of this investment capital accumulated at the expense of Piedmont farmers, who

had the wealthier merchant classes to blame for poor credit flow and unfavorable crop prices. In some ways, the Reconstruction cycle had not ended. This situation gave rise to friction between industrialists and farmers, who came to resent urbanization and industrial progress.⁴

Rural families of the Upcountry-Piedmont also suffered serious agricultural downturns throughout the 1880s and 1890s, forcing them to sell their lands and move into cities and towns. This important trend began with the Piedmont Manufacturing Company in 1876, near Greenville, South Carolina. According to C. Vann Woodward, ex-farmers who “almost overnight left the old farm for the new factory” were among the first enthusiastic recruits.⁵

Over a crucial period of twenty years, North Carolina’s Department of Labor published annual reports on the state’s growing industrial sector. The results are astounding. In 1890, only 49 textile mills existed in North Carolina. By 1905, this number had grown to 287, with the majority concentrated in the Piedmont region. In 1907, 52,178 employees worked for 329 North Carolina textile mills, earning a high daily wage of \$2.56, with a low of 82 cents. This 1907-08 boom coincided with an upsurge in farmer unionism, no doubt spurred on by inequities that came with the textile industry. For example, knitting mill employees, numbering about 4,700 men and women, brought home less pay than did other mill workers. Two in five of these employees were women, who typically earned about half the wages paid to males. Children usually brought home 60 cents per day – their exact percentage of labor went unreported.⁶

From this initial development, a veritable textile boom ensued in the Piedmont over the next two decades. Four mills sprung up in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina alone in the 1890s. Jeanette Greenwood, a scholar of Charlotte history, describes it thus: a “string of mill villages [that had] encircled” the “Queen City” by 1900. As in the North, certain Southern mill towns were “model villages,” masking their drudgery behind the façade of company-owned housing, even while “property-less and seemingly rootless mill workers” migrated seasonally between city, country, and mill. Unsurprisingly, turnover rates in these diverse company towns exceeded 100 percent, as massive layoffs and epidemics took their toll.⁷

Not to be outdone by their Tarheel neighbors, Spartanburg, Greenville, and Anderson had transformed the Upcountry into a rival textile region. Spartanburg’s Converse Mill, one of the largest in the nation, began its eighty-year lifespan in 1892. Nicknamed “The City of Success” by their ebullient boosters, Spartanburg also benefited from the recent decline of Northern textile mills. Overproduction and labor disputes forced many New England mill owners to transfer assets to the Upcountry-Piedmont

region, perceived as being anti-union in sentiment. For this reason alone, Spartanburg also gained a new sobriquet, the “Lowell of the South.”⁸

From 1910 to 1920, Spartanburg grew steadily from 17,517 to 22,638 inhabitants. Four major railroads converged at this major hub, including Duke’s Piedmont & Northern electric railway. During World War I, Spartanburg County benefited from Camp Wadsworth, one of several military bases established in the South. However, Camp Wadsworth dried up following the Armistice, so its presence had only a short-term impact on growth. Textile mills continued to attract new Spartanburg citizenry, even as Northern mills continued relocating to this profitable location. Ten unincorporated mill towns orbited this county seat, connected by a series of roads, and significantly, trolley lines.⁹

Across the Upcountry-Piedmont region, paternalistic capitalism became the rule, as textile barons sent their agents to recruit mill workers from among poor tenant farmers, with promises of better wages and lodgings. In reality, these mills represented hardship and toil for adults and children alike. As New South scholar Tom Hanchett shows, adult earnings were so meager that children as young as eight had to “help their parents” in the mills – a situation most mill owners cheerfully exploited. Some mills, particularly in South Carolina, boasted private schools for mill-worker children whose parents could afford it, but their quality and effectiveness varied considerably. Due to a general shortage of physicians, inoculation programs, and poor sanitation, they died from preventable diseases. Furthermore, unsafe working conditions increased risks to these underage workers. Hence, the welfare of child laborers became a significant cause célèbre for both reformers and muckrakers concerned with the New South.¹⁰

Farmers had additional reasons to oppose the mills. Used to long hours themselves, farmers balked at the mills’ work schedules, which typically lasted between 10 to 12 hours, with many operators unofficially exceeding these arduous schedules. Quite a number of textile and knitting mills failed to report their actual hours of operation. So-called “stretch-outs” were grueling periods of overtime without compensation, increasing the likelihood of workplace accidents. In the Atherton Mill in Charlotte, workers often mangled their hands, and one overseer died after entanglement in the mill’s belting apparatus. Most employers, however, turned a deaf ear toward union appeals for eight-hour workdays, or living wages. Daniel “Gus” Tompkins, the influential owner of Atherton Mill, summed up the attitudes shared by many of his contemporaries in Charlotte and the surrounding region. He felt that “surplus time” would be “absolutely injurious” for the working class. Tompkins further asserted

that employers should not give their workers more money than they knew how to spend wisely.¹¹

Those workers who questioned their circumstances faced dire consequences. Employers routinely discharged workers suspected of joining unions. Mill workers were encouraged to “snitch” on their co-workers. In certain cases, evictions of whole families could take place at the company housing complexes, in plain sight of neighbors. When frustrated mill workers could not lash out directly at their employers, they sometimes brawled drunkenly in the streets. This compelling but not altogether balanced impression of textile mill culture tended to undermine support from the region’s more skilled workers, such as streetcar men and electricians.¹²

Employers often capitalized on their workers’ fears of outside competition from cheap immigrant labor. During this heyday of Atlantic Ocean liners, impoverished steerage passengers brought their families over to the United States, finding jobs in the Upcountry-Piedmont region through various agencies. What we would today consider “profiling” had become a matter of course in terms of a mill owner’s hiring preferences. Moreover, old hatreds toward Catholics and Jews often came into play. In this sense, a given mill owner’s prejudices toward nationality and religion played a greater role than racism. African-American laborers did receive lower wages and suffered adversities, but they were preferred by some textile operators partly because they were perceived as being Protestants and Southerners.¹³

In 1908, North Carolina’s Labor Department interviewed employers about the related topics of foreign labor and radicalism. H.L. Beck of Thomasville, the president of Norfolk & Southern Junction Mill, opposed hiring immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe, “where anarchy and dare-devils are bred.” L.F. Graves, the Secretary-Treasurer of Flint Manufacturing in Gastonia, attacked wandering “stirrers up of strife and hardship,” who sought to organize mill workers “against the men who give them employment and... honest bread.” J. Hirshinger of the Charlotte Duck Clothing Company sought the exclusion of “labor-disturbing, strike-causing... elements” from Central Europe, “for which North Carolina has no place.”¹⁴

Despite incidents of strife, Piedmont factory workers tended to side with their employers on matters of immigration and race. If nothing else, the specters of unwashed European immigrants affected American tradesmen on a far more individual scale. Potential strikers faced the threat of replacement by imported labor. Albert Smith of Gastonia remarked, “Our people don’t go to other countries hunting work, and we don’t need

any such people here.” Smith further characterized “the majority of foreigners” as being “worse than Negroes,” often leaving “their own countries by reason of crimes.” J.E. Torrence of Mecklenburg County also felt immigrants “flooding our land” were largely responsible for the high crime rates reported by newspapers. One Union County police officer, R.H. Moore of Monroe, went so far as to openly declare “ninety-five percent” of foreigners to be criminals.¹⁵

These perceptions dated back to incidents like the Haymarket Riot and the Homestead Strike, both of which had resulted in bloodshed. By labeling union organizers as “foreigners” and “anarchists,” businessmen discouraged their employees from seeking help from such labor organizations. Hence, the seeds for portraying trade unionism as a thoroughly “alien doctrine” were planted early in the rapidly industrializing Carolina Piedmont.

At this time, industrialists in the Carolinas had faced their greatest challenge yet from the National Farmers Union (NFU), which had just established a North Carolina chapter in 1908. Within four years, this militant NFU chapter had united white agricultural workers and small farm-owners. Their alliance boasted 33,688 members from 1,783 locals, becoming the “largest and most effective” labor organization in the Upper South. During its 1907-08 survey, the North Carolina Labor Department concluded that farmers in North Carolina had rallied since the downturns of decades past. The state Labor Department also interviewed the Piedmont’s industrial workers, primarily mill hands, who desired the same union representation enjoyed by farmers. One mill worker, J.A. Thompson of Montgomery County, believed North Carolina “farmers should be organized, as well as other trades and professions.”¹⁶

Despite the Piedmont’s overall reputation for anti-unionism, the NFU organized effective resistance against textile mill operators, whose recruitment efforts depleted white tenant populations. This change forced remaining farm-owners to consider hiring black sharecroppers or European immigrants. W.F. Logan of King’s Mountain (on the South Carolina border) voiced concerns shared by many regional farmers. Logan asserted that “We are getting our state organized as fast as we can, as farmers, so that we may get more profit out of farming... than we have in the past.” In particular, Logan blamed textile mills, with promises of year-round employment, for a recent farming decline: “The farm could be made to pay just as any other work if the people would only stick together... the Farmers’ Union will teach them,” he remarked. Another North Carolina farmer-activist, Avery G. Higgins of Belwood, brought up the debilitating lung illnesses associated with textile work: “While the mills are a great

benefit in an industrial way, they are filling graves with consumptive victims.”¹⁷

W.F. Logan and his fellow farmers also came to view the NFU as a political instrument to prevent urban industrialism – and cheap mill labor - - from eclipsing their own communities. As Logan further observed, “Immigrants are giving trouble in some sections now; so we want to keep them out.” G.F. Hambright, also from King’s Mountain, put things even more bluntly: “I would rather my land lay out than to be worked by Negroes and foreigners.” C.A. Ridenour of Stanly County told state authorities “we don’t need anarchists and hoboes.” James Wilson of Mecklenburg County predicted that “hiring the scum of the world” for cheap labor would create a “hornet’s nest” in the countryside. Some regional farmers were a little more discerning toward foreign labor. B.F. Carpenter of Gaston County noted that the depopulation of tenant farmers lured to cotton mills opened the door to hiring “law-abiding” Germans. But Carpenter would employ “no Southern Italians,” owing to their alleged Mafia and Black Hand connections.”¹⁸

In July 1914, South Carolina witnessed a real “Red” in action when radical Joseph James Ettor organized the Monaghan Mill strike. Best-known for his role in the 1912 textile strike of Lawrence, Massachusetts, the IWW leader staged Socialist demonstrations in sympathy with the striking Greenville textile workers. One local Wobbly supporter even carried a red banner in a downtown parade. Many South Carolinians saw Ettor as the sort of “outside agitator” they most feared in organized labor. For nearly two months, Monaghan Mill ceased operation. However, when confronted by state troops, the Industrial Workers of the World quickly decamped from the South Carolina Upcountry. Monaghan Mill owner Lewis Parker promptly settled with his own workers, but neighboring mills sacked many workers suspected of being Wobblies.¹⁹

Governor Coleman Livingstone Blease, the man responsible for ruthlessly suppressing IWW strikers at Monaghan Mill, threw on “petty bickering and turbulence.” Ironically, “Coley” Blease courted support from local unions, including the state capital’s AASERE chapter, for his own patronage, an alliance that continued even after his political defeat in November 1915. Like their openly racist leader, the “Bleaseites” played to white supremacy, alleging that outsiders who ran the textile businesses treated white “lint-heads” worse than they did black slaves. Even after the progressive Richard I. Manning assumed the governor’s seat, “Bleaseites” continued their antics by encouraging several mill walkouts in the Upcountry. However, these agitators served more to undermine Manning’s

authority than to provide help to exploited textile workers. In the end, Bleasites did harm to legitimate unions in the eyes of the public.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, Governor Manning took a dim view toward local unions, given their conduct under Blease. In general, he would retain a somewhat provincial outlook toward organized labor. As a wealthy South Carolinian with conservative states-rights roots, Manning opposed labor agitators, linking their brand of radicalism to his immediate predecessor. One case in point arose during Manning's tenure in early 1916, when the small Upcountry city of Anderson erupted with labor unrest. Over the previous year, UTWA organizers had sought to unionize Brogon Mill. To punish their rebellious workers, Brogon Mill's owners sought to evict the striking workers from company housing, in violation of their rental contracts. Resistance ensued, forcing Governor Manning to employ the Palmetto Guard to enforce the company's eviction notices. This action brought the strike to a halt, intimidating workers into silence.²¹

David Carlton, a specialist in textile mill history, explains the governor's actions as those of a "scion of an old planter family" with banking interests. Manning disliked using state troops to evict people from their homes. But he also felt an obligation to uphold the social order, as a businessman as well as the state's chief executive. Manning's exercise in conservative policy also paid in election-year dividends. By sacrificing labor unions, he secured statewide political support for his reform programs. Upcountry mill owners even backed the governor's re-election against Coleman Blease later that November. Even the reactionary "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman supported Manning because he had dealt a sound blow to the "damned factory class." Moreover, urban workers in Anderson and Spartanburg became convinced by the Brogon Mill strike that outside unions like the UTWA were detrimental to their futures. This change of heart partly owed itself to employers who warned that union-dictated wage hikes would result in massive unemployment, a familiar refrain in the age of federally mandated minimum wages. Fearing a loss of steady income, many of these mill-hands toed the company line for years to come.²²

By 1916, the year before America entered World War I, Charlotte's own Piedmont region had experienced changes that hastened the general decline of state agriculture. Long winter months delayed the planting season, causing many hands to seek other work in the spring. According to state records, 89 counties reported a scarcity of farm labor during the summer. Except for Mecklenburg, all Piedmont North Carolina counties reported a dearth of overall labor. Charlotte-Gastonia's urban industrial powerbase acted as a magnet, offering better wages and housing to impoverished families. Mecklenburg men received \$1.25 per day, while

Gaston County reported its highest daily wage at \$1.30. While these were not North Carolina's highest wages at the time, Charlotte-Gastonia's daily wages were uniformly high in comparison with most of the Piedmont region, which often dipped below one dollar.²³

Further setbacks during the summer of 1916 hastened the demise of agriculture in the Piedmont. Beginning on July 15, two days of disastrous flooding wiped out acreage across the Piedmont and Western North Carolina. North Carolina's governor at the time, Locke Craig, a mountain native, responded quickly to the crisis. Millions of dollars were lost, even as engineers sought to rebuild Southern Power's hydroelectric plants in the Blue Ridge Mountains. As Duke's men worked to rebuild Falls Branch, their laconic employer could only mutter, "I'll be dinged," as he pondered the flood's impact on his wide-ranging Piedmont Carolina interests.²⁴

* * *

James Buchanan Duke's family had made its initial fortune the same way as their less fortunate neighbors -- through agriculture. Together with his father and elder brother, Duke (1856-1925) met the huge global demand for Southern tobacco by mass-producing cigarettes through the new Bonsack rolling machine. Taking early advantage of Gilded Age technology enabled James B. Duke to dominate the global market of the smoking industry from 1890 to 1910. Duke's sphere extended as far as Great Britain and the new Pacific markets of Japan.²⁵

Though originally hailing from Durham, North Carolina, Duke was an absentee owner, with his own Fifth Avenue mansion in New York City, as well as a New Jersey farm estate that he used as a retreat from his business. After a scandalous divorce from an unfaithful wife, Duke happily remarried in 1907 and began a new family. Meanwhile, Duke's sizable tobacco empire continued to acquire hundreds of tenant farms across the Piedmont. Allen Tullos, a historian familiar with Duke's business practices, describes his methods of success as a combination of "hidebound industriousness, utilitarian ruthlessness, and fierce practicality."²⁶

Even those who disagreed with Duke's laissez-faire Republican values could not help but admire the businessman's astuteness and austerity -- his only excess lay in his deep love for fine horses. Consistently paternalistic, Duke took an active interest in the welfare of white and black communities alike, donating thousands of dollars to build hospitals and orphanages in Charlotte and Durham.²⁷