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The Roaring Twenties was also a decade of mixed blessings for black North Carolinians. Urbanization did provide new urban areas such as Asheville, Raleigh, Durham, Charlotte, Burlington, and High Point. Hard times in the country also pushed farmers off the land, and they came looking for jobs in rayon and cotton mills, tobacco manufacturing, road construction, and furniture factories. The manufacturing sector prospered in the 1920s. The value of all North Carolina’s manufactures was $944 million in 1920. By 1930 that value had grown to $1.3 billion.

Textile mills contributed to this urban prosperity. While technological advances mechanized more and more of textile manufacturing, the arrival of textile companies from the Northeast expanded the industry and increased jobs. Not all the growth came from outsiders moving in, however. J. Spencer Love was a native North Carolinian who took part in this expansion. In 1925 Love opened a rayon mill in Burlington that soon grew into Burlington Mills, the nation’s leading producer of “synthetic silk.” Another North Carolinian, Greensboro’s Bernard Cone, applied new theories about scientific management to minimize the waste of time, space, and manpower and, in turn, preserved the profits of the textile mills.

Tobacco manufacturing and furniture making also contributed to North Carolina’s prosperity. Black and white North Carolinians took jobs in the ever-expanding tobacco industry in Winston, Durham, and Reidsville. James B. Duke’s company made cigarettes, and its fabulous profits made his family rich. His philanthropy transformed Trinity College into Duke University, with its stone spires built from rock from nearby Hillsborough. His electric power company, Duke Power, expanded the number of steam plants and increased the availability of electricity to individuals and industries. Drawing upon the state’s wealth of timber, the furniture industry centered in High Point provided jobs, and in the 1920s, North Carolina surpassed Michigan as the nation’s leading furniture producer.

North Carolina’s governors and legislators used this industrial prosperity to help cement their state’s progressive reputation. During the 1920s, state income taxes rose, and the state’s coffers grew from automobile and gasoline tax revenues. The “Good Roads Governor,” Cameron Morrison, who served from 1921 to 1925, oversaw the expansion of the state’s highway and road system—a system that employed construction workers and brought trade and the freedom of travel to people from the Mountains to the coast. Increased state expenditures also improved the education and health-care systems. Some funds filtered down to prison reform and mental health services, making even the most vulnerable North Carolinians beneficiaries of the state’s prosperity.

But the prosperity of the 1920s was uneven and did not characterize the entire state. In 1930, 25 percent of North Carolinians lived in urban areas, but the vast majority still lived in rural areas eked out a living from agriculture-related enterprises. The Roaring Twenties was not a flush decade for the state’s farmers. As agricultural overproduction drove prices down, a depression settled over the state’s farms in the early 1920s. Many farmers lost their land. The number of tenant farmers—farmers who worked but did not own the land—grew during the decade. In fact, the total wealth of North Carolinians actually fell during the Roaring Twenties. Faced with such bleak economic news, many farmers left the land and headed toward the cities.

The cities did not always bring prosperity. The influx of people to urban areas meant that there were often more workers than jobs. With higher levels of unemployment, workers lost the power to negotiate for better wages or better working conditions. A manager could always replace unhappy workers with unemployed men and women. To make matters worse, unstable cotton prices and overproduction reduced the profit margin of the plants. Managers tried to make up for this loss of profit in a number of ways. With new technologies, textile workers could be forced to man more looms, and the number of workers could be reduced. Higher and higher production targets for workers—called the stretch-out—increased the level of labor discontent in the state.

The Roaring Twenties was also a decade of mixed blessings for black North Carolinians. Urbanization did provide new opportunities for African Americans. Many welcomed the jobs that the tobacco industry offered. They did not find jobs in the textile industry, though. In efforts to promote the textile industry in the New South, boosters had promised that the benefits of industrialization would go first to whites. As a result, African Americans were largely banned from textile work. As continued victims of a Jim Crow system, they suffered the economic costs of another decade of racial segregation. To
make matters worse, the Ku Klux Klan experienced unprecedented growth, and violence remained a fact of African American life in North Carolina.

While the 1920s was an age of prosperity for many North Carolinians, this prosperity left many behind. It was also an era of prosperity that did not last. The economic struggles that farmers, textile workers, and African Americans experienced suggested deeper problems with the overall economy. In 1929 textile workers tired of the stretch-out and frustrated by their inability to keep up economically went on strike. Several months later, the stock market crashed, and the age of buying goods on the promise of continued prosperity ended. During the Great Depression, the state government struggled with tighter budgets and less money to spend on projects begun in the 1920s. North Carolinians living in the cities now faced the hard times that farmers had been experiencing. More than a decade would pass before North Carolinians felt economically secure again.