

Paternalism ^[1]

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by Gene Purcell, 2006

See also: [Life in Textile Mill Villages](#) ^[2]; [Cotton Mills](#); ^[3][The Evolutions of Textile Mill Villages](#) ^[4]



Free dental dispensary for school children, Erlanger Mills, Lexington, NC, Davidson County, October 1918. From the Dr. George M. Cooper Photograph Collection, North

Paternalism, the controlling of all aspects of an employee's [Carolina State Archives](#), call #: PhC_41_161_4. ^[5]life by the employer, was characteristic of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North Carolina [mills](#) ^[4] and factories. The roots of paternalism were evident in an earlier era, when southern slaveholders came to regard taking good care of their slaves as of primary importance. Although partly a humanitarian concern, this focus on [slaves](#) ^[6] welfare derived mostly from business considerations; sufficient food, housing, medical care, and clothing kept slaves at least outwardly content and enabled them to work more efficiently. This understanding of the importance of the quality of life of one's workforce continued to motivate owners in the tenancy system and later in the creation of mill villages.

Paternalism was the philosophical and fiscal underpinning of many North Carolina [cotton mill](#) ^[3] villages, which were organized as "company towns" to keep workers and their families satisfied and thus loyal and more productive. Paternalistic mill owners also claimed the right to discipline employees. Violators of specific rules and laws were first warned, then fired and made to vacate their house after a second offense. Drunkenness, spouse abuse, sexual immorality, and stealing were some of the most serious offenses, and only a small legal force, usually one man, was needed for the entire village.

[World War II](#) ^[7] essentially brought an end to paternalism, as most North Carolina mill villages and all of their homes, hospitals, libraries, and even community buildings were incorporated into neighboring towns.

References:

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and others, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*(1987).

Harriet L. Herring, *Passing of the Mill Village: Revolution in a Southern Institution*(1949).

Additional Resources:

Oral Histories of the American South- Piedmont Industrialization- Employer Paternalism. Doc South, UNC Libraries: https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/browse/themes.html?theme_id=4&category_id=15&subcategory_id=131 ^[8]

Image Credit:

Free dental dispensary for school children, Erlanger Mills, Lexington, NC, Davidson County, October 1918. From the Dr. George M. Cooper Photograph Collection, North Carolina State Archives, call #: PhC_41_161_4. Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/north-carolina-state-archives/3059000658/> ^[5] (accessed October 12, 2012).

Subjects:

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Textile industry ^[14]

World War I (1914-1918) ^[15]

Authors:

Purcell, Gene ^[16]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[17]

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<https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/gilded-age-1876-1> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/great-depression-> [12]

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