

The Historic Dimension Series

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Company Housing Designs in the South: Progressives, Planners, and Practice

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"The old mill hill is unsanitary and totally un-inspiring. This kind of village is rapidly being displaced by modern scientifically planned housing operations as employers grow to realize the need of helping their workers in home life as well as in the factory."

~ Lockwood, Greene, & Company Engineers brochure, 1920

Investigating the ideas behind the mill towns of the South is a task that involves looking beyond the houses themselves and into the texts written at the time. The turn of the century brought with it new ideology throughout the manufacturing industries, and while the concepts took some time to make it to the Southern textile mills, they brought with them a new era of village design and management. The old methods of Paternalism, where the mill owner "may in a spirit of genuine benevolence believe that the living conditions of his employees can best be improved by his direct intervention" (Hamlin, 3), gave way to welfare work, Progressivism, and professional design.

The textile industry began in the United States in the early 19th century in the Northeast; the patterns set there continued for another hundred years. Much of the American mill system was created in reaction to the English textile industry, where large cities such as Manchester were overrun by poor, destitute factory families. American industry sought solutions to the multifaceted problems created by this working class, and gradually found different ways of attempting to keep employees happy and housed.

This problem was common to all industrialized countries, and the first international conference on worker housing, complete with exhibits, lectures, and displays, was held during the 1889 Paris Exposition. Sociologists, architects,

landscape architects, planners, and reformers all proposed various ways of creating communities for industrial workers that would keep the employees healthy and happy. The conferences were at their peak in 1900, and in the United States, company towns were built for a myriad of different industries, and many won international awards. Continually, the designers debated whether workers should rent or own their houses; whether they should live in apartments, duplexes, or single-family homes; and what floor plan would be most beneficial. All plans sought to solve the problems in a way that was economically sound yet still responsive to the perceived needs of the workers.

Progressive Ideas and Examples

The Progressive movement grew out of a rejection of the 19th century's paternalistic control of company towns. Pullman, Illinois, was an extreme example from the 1880s, where the company owner dictated every moment of the workers' lives. After the employees in Pullman brought Chicago to a standstill with a major strike, many industrialists and advisors thought paternalism should be avoided at all costs. While some companies pulled out of their employees' lives, the majority of them continued to keep a watchful eye over what the workers did outside of work. Instead of calling it paternalism, however, the industrialists' ideology started to focus on self-interest, justifying good works in terms of economic rationality. In reality, employers favored schemes that stressed

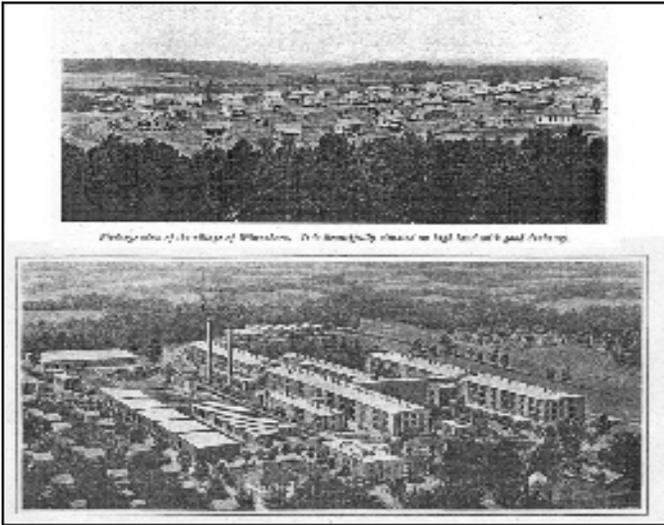


Fig. 2: Two birds-eye views of Southern textile mills from the Lockwood, Greene, & Company Engineers brochure, 1920. Note the small houses in the fore- and background of the bottom image.

self-reliance and promoted entrepreneurial virtues of thrift and hard work instead of direct charity. This shift away from paternalism into a socially and economically responsible management defined the change to the Progressive era.

The Progressive movement was motivated by an urban middle class that was neither mill owner nor mill worker. Its members “urged cooperation between capital and labor in the interests of a greater social good,” away from both the large labor unions and massive corporations (Crawford, 46). Religious and humanitarian concerns combined with ideas of rationality and organization to create a new ideal for society, and the concerned citizen evolved into the professional. Beginning with the turn of the 20th century, Progressive reformers sought to inspect the working situations at factories all over the world and improve the conditions for the employees. Recommendations were made on every subject, from working hours to the cleanliness of the washrooms. The reformers saw upgrading of working conditions as valuable to the employees, certainly, but also couched their improvements as beneficial to the bottom line. Happy employees would produce better, work harder, have fewer illnesses, and in general make the company more money. As the movement grew, the identity of the Progressive individual gradually changed from an ordinary citizen seeking to better the lives of the working class into a professional expert who could reorganize and rationalize society.

With this ideology in mind, a number of guidebooks were developed for mill managers and owners. Edwin Shuey’s *Factory People and their Employers* was written in 1900, with advice for how to improve relations between owners and employees and to reform factory conditions

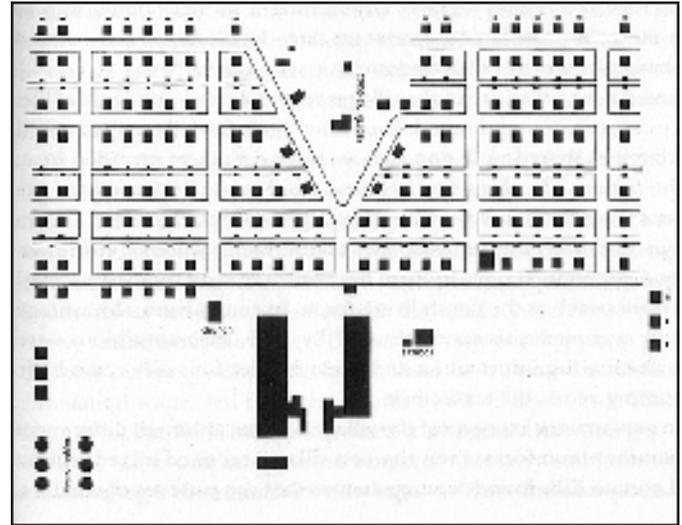


Fig. 3: Site plan of standard mill plan.

in general. The majority of the text is based on examples from existing factories of successful efforts to improve working conditions and profits in various industries. The principles tend to involve simple ideas of respect and the Golden Rule, but the sections on housing and its beautification lead to some interesting ideas. First, Shuey dismisses the idea of building the company town for rental: “American independence is inclined to resent some of the ‘paternal’ things done in English factory towns... The experience of Pullman and similar efforts has not encouraged others to do much toward building towns owned and controlled by the company” (131). A number of examples of successful company towns follow this assertion. Shuey points out that in the South the idea of full company ownership of the village is more acceptable and successful. Shuey continues and focuses on Pelzer and Piedmont as Southern cotton factory examples – although “how successful this idea will be can be told better after a few years more of experience” (137).

Shuey’s rejection of paternalism does not mean that companies should stay out of their employees’ lives; on the contrary, he thought that with a combination of awards, model homes, lectures, slideshows and so on, mill workers could be motivated to live in the way the industrialists valued. This is a hallmark of the Progressives – the idea that the workers should do for themselves instead of having things done for them.

The Progressive Movement in the South

The textile industry in the American South began half a century later than that in the Northeast; the investors took the previous experiences of earlier mill owners and applied them piecemeal in a new context. In Northern companies, paternalism had been a recurring theme that was sometimes accepted and other times rejected. In the South, it was simply a given. There was resistance to the Progressives, particularly around the turn of

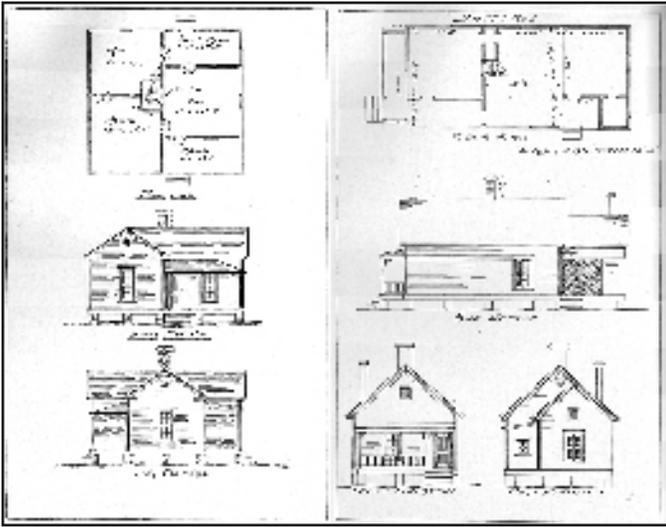


Fig. 4: Two three-bedroom mill houses by Tompkins, each cost \$325 to build circa 1900.

the century when the movement was catching on in the North. Instead of accepting the arguments and justifications of the Progressives wholeheartedly, the Southern mill owners used a combination of Christian duty, Social Darwinism, and Progressive concepts to justify their own brand of paternalism and social control. Interestingly, the changes in the industrial culture often leaned towards ultimately the same Progressive ideas; company towns were updated, professionals started advising and designing, and the mill owners tried to move into a new rationality. Southerners gave advice for Southern industry; by far the best example of a guidebook was written by Dr. Tompkins, an engineer from Charlotte, NC, in 1899. The text ranges in its overview of the South, the region's history, and its capacity for industry, and it also supplies a full recipe for building and running a cotton mill, creating and governing the town around it, and overseeing all accompanying details. In terms of housing, he describes the houses owned by and gathered around the factory as the "...most satisfactory plan in the South, for both the mills and the operatives. They seem disposed to live to themselves and attend their own schools and churches even when the mill village is in a city" (Tompkins, 115).

The workers were treated as "ignorant and backwards people who needed training to prepare them for modern life" (Crawford, 181). Their situation in the mill village was often compared with their rural origins; everything, including wages, housing, education, and social community, was supposedly better. As for the houses, Dr. Tompkins had explicit ideas about the types of houses and their construction. While in the past mill houses had been built exactly alike, Tompkins' book advises a variety of house plans and types because "different families have different tastes" (116). His explicit plans call for a four room house on about a half acre, with brick piers not less than 24" high, window



Fig. 5: Example of the three-bedroom gable house, LaGrange, GA; from HABS Southern Textile Industry Survey.

sills 2" thick, and so on. "Weatherboarding," he writes, "to be 3/4" thick and show 5 1/4", to be of novelty pattern which will be selected by the President of the Company" (119). The house plans he includes describe a small shotgun style, a three-room gable and wing type, a "three-room narrow house," a four-room gable and wing house, and two others with a second story. Tompkins describes each type of house in plan, elevation, and price, and it is accompanied by a photograph of an existing house.

Dr. Tompkins' guidebook is an example of the early Southern version of the Progressive movement. Methods for making every element of the factory system more efficient gradually replaced the traditional family-run management, vernacular building types, and factory patterns. His book, from 1900, is the first example of a movement that gathered steam as the century progressed. While he does not address the layout of the company town as a whole, his thorough overview of how to build and run a mill town is a launching point for later professionals who would plan a town in its entirety.

Professional Planning in the South

The design of the company towns, once an unplanned evolution, began to shift to professional planning, such as that offered by Earle S. Draper. A young designer originally schooled in the North, Draper arrived in North Carolina in 1915 as a representative of John Nolen's planning firm and eventually went out on his own as the pre-eminent designer of the Piedmont mill village. Draper fit into the desire for rationalization and modernization of the cotton mill system, and he attempted to "balance the reformers' concern with improvement, the mill owners' economic priorities, and his own professional self-interest" in his

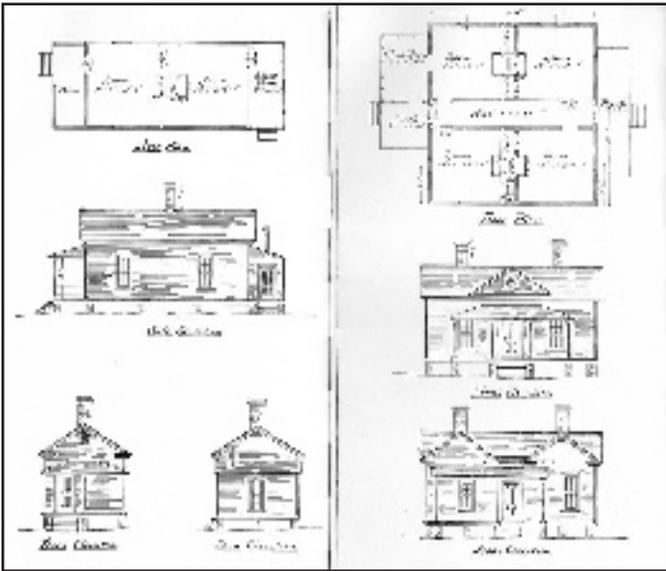


Fig. 6: Two more plans from Tompkins' 1900 book: a shotgun style two-room house, \$250; and a four-room center hall plan house, \$400.



Fig. 7: Example of a four-room house from the mill village in Swepsonville, NC. Photo by Jack Delano for HABS, 1940.

projects (Crawford, 183). He believed that with better educational, social, and recreational possibilities, as well as improved housing, the mill operatives would eventually raise themselves up to middle class. His village plans, full of Olmsted's holistic landscape ideals and the idea of the English garden city, reorganized the common town's layout. Instead of the mill building dominating the entire area, the industrial structures would be set to one side, and the public buildings would be the core of the village.

Another example of the new professional design industry can be found in a brochure for the Lockwood, Greene, & Company Engineers, who had offices all over the country. The pamphlet, published in 1920, is entitled "Industrial Housing" and advertises their services as designers and managers of company towns. One page compared older existing mill villages with the new and described the old as "unsanitary and totally uninspiring. This kind of village is rapidly being displaced by modern, scientifically-planned housing operations as employers grow to realize the need of helping their workers in home life as well as in the factory" (22). Floor plans of the new modern cottage are included, and while they retained the front porch of Dr. Tompkins' plans from the turn of the century, they showed bungalow detailing, varied rooflines and pitches, full brick foundations, and fireplaces in nearly every room.

The shift from Dr. Tompkins' houses to those of Lockwood, Greene & Co. evolved over twenty years, and a number of possible reasons may account for the change. Economically, World War I brought a boom of manufacturing and a shortage of workers to the Southern textile industry as a whole. In an effort to get and retain the increasingly skilled workforce, the mill

owners had to make their establishment more attractive to potential employees. Additionally, the manufactured homes of Aladdin, Sears, and the like started advertising to mill owners; instead of building whatever the local carpenters could assemble quickly and cheaply, bungalow style houses could be ordered and assembled quicker and cheaper. Aladdin Company claimed to need only 26 days to build a whole town (Ver Planck, 28). Indeed, the made-to-order bungalow was the favorite house type of Earle Draper, as well. Despite his holistic town design he did not bother to design the houses themselves, partially because of the new possibilities within the bungalow type. At Chicopee, Georgia, one of his major mill towns, Draper had "thirty-one different types built [which] overcame the uniformity of company housing" (Crawford, 193).

One interesting point about the brochure from Lockwood, Greene, & Co. is that while it must be recognized as an advertisement first and foremost, its appeal is not financial, and prices are not assigned to any of the structures or floor plans as they were in Dr. Tompkins' treatise. Instead, the writing appeals to the Progressive investor: "it is not difficult to believe that the people who live in [these modern cottages] will make far more capable and dependable workers as well as better citizens" (Lockwood, 22).

In Practice

In reality, only a small percentage of the mill villages in the South were designed by professionals. Most were constructed by the local carpenters in the local vernacular, although enough examples of Dr. Tompkins' houses exist that it is clear that some mill owners were looking for and taking professional advice early in the



Fig. 8: Possible examples of three-room narrow houses, LaGrange, GA; from HABS Southern Textile Industry Survey.

century. Within the company towns in general, most of the houses do not show the variety and decoration that Draper, the Lockwood engineers, or even Dr. Tompkins would have advocated. Instead the vast majority of the houses are extremely simple and undecorated, with the exception of the nicer, larger examples built for mill managers and overseers.

The way that the Southern mills did adopt the Progressives' notions was less in the design and building of the mill towns and more in the way they were run. Programs called 'welfare work' in town beautification, employee education, recreation, and home economics were similar to those recommended by the Progressives. Also, a number of mill villages throughout the South did make improvements to existing housing during the first quarter of the 20th century, partially in reaction to public opinion spurred on by the Progressive reformers.

The mill village system began to change with the boom times of the 1920s. Affordable transportation made it possible for mill workers to live outside of the confines of the company town, and financial stability made it less necessary for the companies to provide amenities to the workers. Many mills dropped their welfare programs, sometimes replacing them with financial benefits like pensions, employee representation, or company unions. The New Deal launched a concerted effort to end the era of the company town by starting programs to help people purchase their own homes. Indeed, by the late 1930s, some mills decided to start selling off their company housing through realties or auctions, and the era of the Progressive movement and its impact on the industrial town came to an end.

The Progressive movement left an impact on the Southern landscape in the design of mill villages and how they were run. Even companies that did not



Fig. 9: Example of a larger house built for management, LaGrange, GA; from HABS Southern Textile Industry Survey.

have their towns planned by professionals were often influenced by the Progressive ideals of rationality and organization in their factories. The businesses that chose to build model company towns have left a lasting mark in the built environment. It is tangible evidence of their commitment to a movement that steered them away from the old-fashioned paternalism and into a new methodology of industry.

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Fig. 10: Example of a three-room gable house with later screened-in porch, LaGrange, GA; from HABS Southern Textile Industry Survey.



Fig. 11: Example of a four-room house from outside of Atlanta, GA. Photo by Marion Wolcott for HABS, 1939.

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The Historic Dimension Series is a collection of briefs prepared by UNCG students under the direction of Professor Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll. For information on other topics in the series, contact Professor Leimenstoll. email: jrleimen@uncg.edu, phone: 336/256-0303.

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