

Thompsonville Carpet Weavers Strike of 1834

Overview

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Overview

Market Revolution (1800-1840) and the beginnings of workers' unionization

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Compelling question: How much power do workers have?

Introduction

The Market Revolution (1800-1840), sometimes referred to as the First Industrial Revolution, changed the way consumers got goods and the way workers and employees related. Consumers had more disposable income in this time period and wanted to dress up their

homes with linens, curtains, tablecloths, wallpaper and carpets. Industrialists began to mass produce these goods.

Purpose

While often taught from the point of view of employers and industrial capitalists, this lesson asks students to see the Market Revolution from the point of view of workers.

Supporting questions/Connecticut State Standards:

Page numbers refer to the [Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks](#)

- Evaluate the history of individual cities and towns in the 19th century and analyze reasons for economic and/or social change in individual towns during this period, p. 91
- Explore how Connecticut contributed to various key events in United States history, such as pre-Revolutionary America, independence and development as a nation, slavery, abolitionist movement, the Civil War, and industrialization, p. 91
- Analyze the impact that immigrants had on the economic and cultural life of Connecticut communities during this era, p. 92
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[The Orrin Thompson House](#), built 1832

Historical Context

[The Thompsonville Carpet Weavers Case, Connecticut State Library, 2014](#)

1. In the 1820s, the carpet industry suddenly took off in the United States. One of the major manufacturers, the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company, was located in Enfield. The carpet weavers there, aside from helping to develop this industry, also significantly contributed to the early labor movement.
2. Carpet weaving at this time was done using a hand loom, and thus required a significant amount of skill. There were not enough American workers to fill the skilled jobs, so the Thompsonville Company recruited weavers, dyers, and machinists from Scotland.
3. Coming from the same few areas in Scotland and moving into Enfield in numbers that equaled the non-Scottish residents, the Scottish carpet weavers maintained an identity as a distinct group. This, along with the skilled nature of the work they were performing, gave the weavers both individual and collective bargaining power. Throughout the 1820s and into the 1830s, where there were disputes or minor strikes, they were settled quickly.
4. In 1833, a major dispute over wages emerged. Around that time, the company had introduced some new, fancier fabrics that were more difficult to weave. At a meeting with the factory's agent, workers asserted that the increase in the difficulty of the work should result in being paid a higher price per piece.
5. At the agent's suggestion, the weavers petitioned the company's board of directors, asking for higher wages. The board of directors declined to raise wages, stating that the carpets made from the new fabrics commanded no higher prices and that the duty on foreign carpets was steadily decreasing, resulting in competition from foreign manufacturers.
6. The weavers responded with a set of resolutions demanding certain rates of pay and resolving not to return to work unless their demands were met. In response, the company closed the

factory.

7. The agent made a number of attempts to procure other workers for the factory, but could not, as the Thompsonville Weavers had written to other carpet factories asking them not to come to Enfield to work for Thompsonville. Faced with few workers and unwilling to pay the higher wages, the company charged three of the weavers with conspiracy.
8. A five-day trial with seventy witnesses was held in Hartford Superior Court in January 1836. Testimony focused on the weavers' actions in preventing workers from coming to Thompsonville, the history of wages paid at the factory, and the reasons and procedures for dismissing a worker.
9. The case turned on the purpose of the agreement made by the weavers. If they agreed to combine to interrupt and destroy the plaintiff's business, they had engaged in a conspiracy, and the company was entitled to a verdict in its favor. If they merely agreed that they would not labor below certain wages, they had committed neither a criminal nor civil offense.
10. The morning after the conclusion of the case, the jury returned a verdict in favor of the weavers, meaning that striking for higher wages was a legal, legitimate way for workers to assert their demands.
11. Some of the weavers returned to the mill, and the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company continued on, eventually becoming part of the Bigelow-Sanford Carpet Company, which operated a carpet mill in Enfield until the 1970s. The era of bargaining power for skilled carpet weavers ended in the late 1840s, however, with the introduction of the power loom, which could be operated by unskilled workers.
12. The State Library has a copy of the report from the Thompsonville Carpet Weavers case, which includes the names of the jurors, copy of the summons, testimony, and the arguments advanced by each party's counsel. It also includes a number of exhibits, including the petition given to the board of directors by the weavers and an example of a contract signed by a weaver recruited from Scotland.

Sources:

[Connecticut State Library, "The Thompsonville Carpet Weavers Case," 2014.](#)

[Eric Foner, "The Market Revolution, Part 2," Give Me Liberty, 2011.](#)

[John R. Commons, ed., "A Documentary History of American Industrial Society, Volume X," 1911.](#)

[Photograph of Orrin Thompson's Home](#)

John S. Ewing and Nancy P. Norton, *Broadlooms and Businessmen: A History of the Bigelow-Sanford Carpet Company*, Harvard University Press, 1955.

Nancy P. Norton, *Labor in the Early New England Carpet Industry*, *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 19-26 (Mar. 1952). Available on JStor. *Report of the Case of the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company versus William Taylor, Edward Gorman, & Thomas Norton, 1836.*

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How To

Classroom Setup

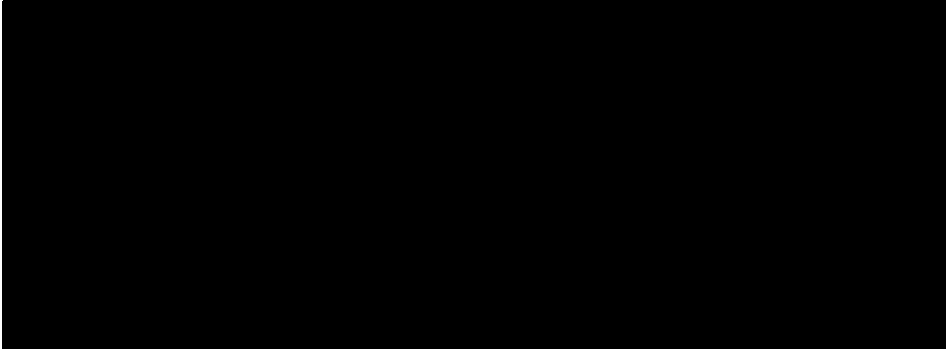
This lesson begins with a short lecture and video on the market revolution to the whole class. Then students will read two articles and respond to prompts provided in guided reading sheets. Finally, they will construct a narrative to add to the Enfield history website about the carpet weavers strike.

Activity 1

- A. Give students a context of the economic change that came in the beginning of the 19th century. Distinguish between workers and employers/owners/industrialists. Brainstorm how their interests would be the same and how their interests might be different.

[Watch the short video \(2:02\) on the Market Revolution narrated by Eric Foner.](#) Help students to define what factors made the Market Revolution happen.

Eric Foner on the market revolution, pt 2

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- B. [Read the 12-paragraph secondary source, "The Thompsonville Carpet Weavers Case,"](#) written by historians at the Connecticut State Library.

From the first paragraph we find out that "the carpet weavers...significantly contributed to the early labor movement." Your job in this exercise is to figure out what their contributions were. [Answer the following questions on the accompanying worksheet.](#)

1. When the author uses the term "labor movement," they mean that the workers got together to stand up for their rights. This was unusual in the 1830s when this story occurs. Before you read anymore, for what issues do you think workers would band together? Use paragraph 1 and your background knowledge.
2. In the 1820s and 1830s, what did weavers need to weave carpets? Use paragraph 2.
3. What do you think the author means when they say that the "weavers had both individual and collective bargaining power"? Use paragraph 3.
4. Give an example of what workers might bargain over. Use paragraph 4 and background knowledge.
5. What specifically did the weavers ask for? Use paragraph 4.
6. Why did the company's board of trustees say the weavers did not deserve a raise in pay? Use paragraph 5.
7. How did the weavers respond to the board of trustees saying no? Use paragraph 6.
8. Why did the weavers feel like they had the power to do this? Use inference and paragraph 5.

9. What did the weavers do to keep the agent from hiring replacement workers? Use paragraph 7.
10. With what did the company charge the weavers? Use paragraph 7.
11. The case went to a five day trial. What were the three issues brought up in the trial? Use paragraph 8.
12. Paragraph 9 describes two types of agreements the workers might have made - which do you think they made?
13. In whose favor did the jury decide? Use paragraph 10.
14. Why did the era of bargaining power of carpet weavers end in the late 1840s? Use paragraph 11.
15. What is this story about in relationship to the Market Revolution?
16. Why was their case significant? Use paragraph 10.

C. [Read Diana McCain's "Enfield weavers loom large in history,"](#) an 11-paragraph secondary source.

From the title, we find out that the carpet weavers had an impact on our history. As you read the article, it is your job to figure out what the significance is of these weavers.

Now read the article and [answer the questions on the accompanying worksheet as you go through it](#) .



Even more ominous was the company's warning that "all those who occupy houses belonging to said company are hereby notified to quit the same on Monday next, unless they return to work." Most of the weavers, many of whom had families, lived in company housing. The carpet company also hired strikebreakers, whom "the old workers tried to keep . . . from going to the shops, not by the use of violence, but by persuasion, hurling . . . opprobrious epithets rather than brickbats," notes historian Jarvis Means Morse in his book "A Neglected Period of Connecticut's History. 1818-1850."



McCain

Just five years off the boat that brought them to America, a group of Scottish weavers employed by the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Co. in Enfield banded together in 1833 to request a pay increase. Historian Frank Stone calls the action "one of the earliest attempts at collective bargaining in the United States," which "set a precedent for American labor relations."

The weavers were skilled workmen who had been brought to Enfield in 1828 from the town of Kilmarnock, Scotland, to operate hand looms in the mill of the carpet company, founded that same year by Orrin Thompson. They had emigrated to America in the wake of a severe economic downturn that had struck Kilmarnock two years earlier.

In Connecticut the weavers were paid not by the hour, but for each piece of carpet they produced. Seventy-one of the Scottish weavers, on July 23, 1833, in a petition to carpet company management, pointed out that they had been assigned to produce "new and fancy fabrics" that required extra labor to make. They asked that, in light of these circumstances, they receive a 3 percent increase in the amount they were paid for each piece of carpet completed. The weavers also expressed the belief that they were being paid less than weavers in other parts of the country.

The company responded the next day, denying the weavers' request with the explanation that "the profits on the business are not such as to warrant any increase on the prices now paid for weaving." The weavers immediately met in a nearby lot and informed the company "that we shall not return to work" until the grievance was resolved. According to the weavers, the company then "sent down their foreman, with orders to turn us out and lock the doors of the factory."

The following day the company

In addition, the company sued the weavers "under the common law doctrine of conspiracy . . . the laborers being charged with conspiring to damage the prosperity of the employer's business," Morse writes.

The weavers fought back by writing for moral and financial support from carpet workers in other states, and by publicizing their struggle through workers' newspapers. But they had little chance of success against the carpet company, which owned, in addition to the workers' houses, the looms with which the weavers plied their trade. Facing such pressure, most of the weavers had returned to work within a month.

But although they failed to achieve their immediate goal, the workers' protest was not entirely in vain. When the Superior Court, three years later, finally got around to rendering a decision on the lawsuits involved, it found in favor of the weavers, "on the ground that it was legal to combine to raise wages, al-

though a conspiracy to ruin the business — which was not proven — would have been unlawful," explains Nelson Burr in his book "The Early Labor Movement in Connecticut 1790-1860."

Historians consider the incident an early milestone in the history of organized labor in America. Significantly, "the carpet workers . . . had developed most of the features common to present day trade unions," notes Morse. The similarities, he said, include organizing for a common purpose, if only on a simple level; meeting regularly and electing officers; establishing regular communications with fellow workers at other locations; and building up funds to aid unemployed workers.

In addition, says Stone in his article on "Connecticut's Kilmarnock Scots" in *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, "apparently, both sides in this confrontation learned a lesson, and subsequently the Thompsonville Manufacturing Company got along better with its workers."

informed "the weavers who lately have left their employ, that unless they return to work by Monday morning next, they will not after that day be allowed to enter the company's employ on the same terms as heretofore." That is, their pay would be cut by 17 percent.

1. What did the Scottish weavers want from the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company? Use paragraph 1.
2. What did these weavers do to get what they wanted? Use paragraph 1.
3. What were two reasons the Scottish weavers migrated to Enfield? Use paragraph 2.
4. How did the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Co. figure out how much to pay the weavers? Use paragraph 3.
5. What specifically did the weavers ask for when they got together on July 23, 1833, and what were the 2 reasons why they asked for it? Use paragraph 3.
6. Did the company give the raise and what was the reason? Use paragraph 4.
7. How did the weavers respond to this decision? And what did the company do in return? Use paragraph 4.
8. How did the company threaten the workers? Use paragraph 5 and paragraph 6.
9. What 2 other actions did the company take to hurt the weavers who went on strike? Use paragraph 7.
10. The weavers fought back! What did they do? Use paragraph 8.
11. Why did the company have so much power to get the weavers back to work? Use paragraph 8.
12. Why would the author say that the weavers won, even though they were forced to go back to work with no raise in wages? Use paragraph 9.
13. Historians say that this strike was important for organized

labor - often called unions. What did the carpet weavers do that is similar to modern day unions? Use paragraph 10.

14. What is the significance of this strike to workers today?
15. What is this story about in relationship to the Market Revolution?
16. Which piece of information is most important to understand in this story? Look back at the answers you gave and tell which box helped you understand this issue the best and why.

D. Now tell the story of this worker action from a point of view from 1836 after the court case. What happened? What events were most important? Who won and what did they win? Who lost and what did they lose? Possible roles:

- Scottish migrant skilled carpet weaver
- Agent who runs the factory
- Strikebreaker
- Consumer who buys rugs
- Another point of view from 1836 who would have a point of view on the event

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What's Next

Informed Action

1. [Read the Enfield Historical Society's webpage on the Thompsonville Carpet Industry, 1829-1971.](#) Note the absence of any information on the carpet weavers strike. Write a few paragraphs to add to their narrative telling the story and significance of the strike. Send it to the historical society to add to their website.
2. The carpet workers in Enfield went on strike in 1928, 1930 1935, 1938, 1944, 1951 and 1954. Look these strikes up on the online Hartford Courant and find out what the demands of the workers were and what the answers of the employers were. How much did government regulation, starting with the Wagner Act in 1935, help the workers?

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