

Robert C. McMath, Jr.

HISTORY *by a* GRAVEYARD

The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Records

PASSENGERS HEADING EAST FROM downtown Atlanta, Georgia, on the rapid rail line are, without knowing it, retracing the arch of the city's nineteenth century industrial crescent. Following the curve of the main railroad corridor, the MARTA train glides past Oakland Cemetery, where lie buried many of the city's illustrious citizens—among them novelist Margaret Mitchell, golfer Bobby Jones and industrialist Jacob Elsas. Just beyond Oakland Cemetery is another graveyard of sorts, the massive red brick remains of the textile complex which Jacob Elsas built, the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills.

The sprawling complex of turn-of-the-century mill buildings, flanked by frame houses which once comprised a mill village known as Cabbagetown, stands vacant and in disrepair. Most MARTA passengers would be surprised to know that less than two decades ago Fulton Bag employed two thousand workers and every *week* consumed one thousand bales of cotton and produced two million yards of textile goods. For almost a century

Fulton Bag was one of Atlanta's largest industrial firms. Now it shows no more signs of life than Oakland Cemetery.

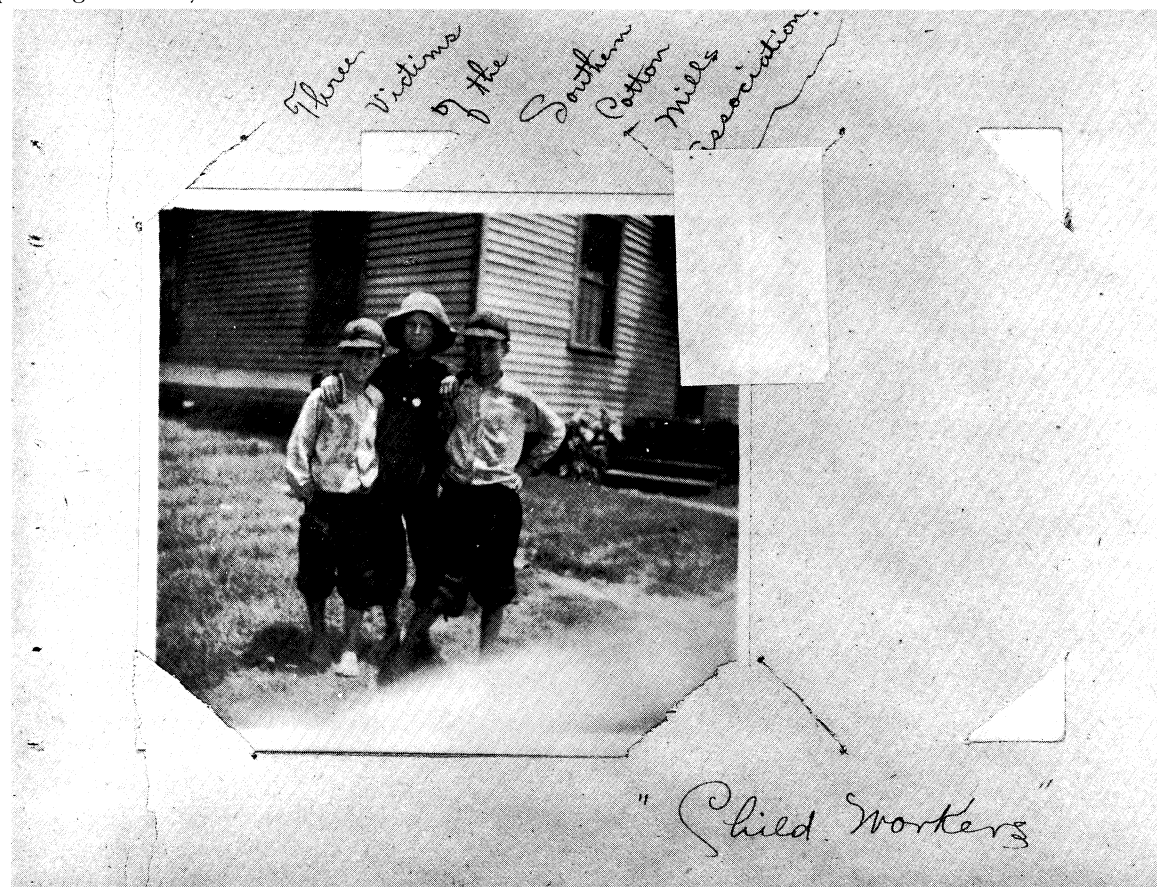
Sometimes archivists and industrial historians must,

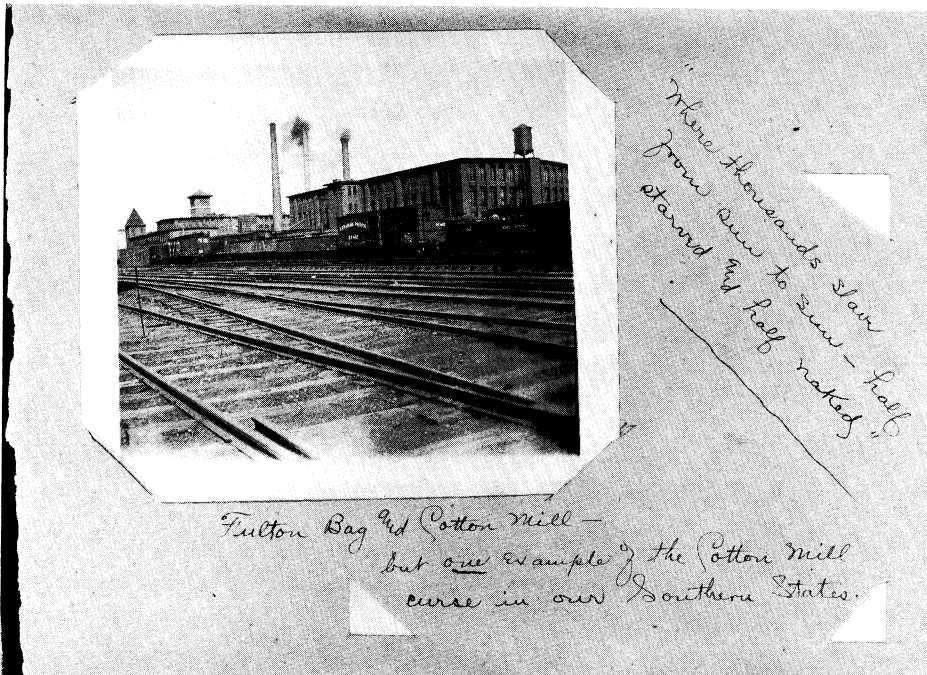


like undertakers, practice their craft just after a death has occurred—a mill closing or the takeover of a family-owned business by a conglomerate. It was in just such a situation that my colleague Jim Brittain and I began our association with Fulton Bag. In the late 1970s, soon after the mill closed, we used it as a research site for a class in industrial archeology. Along with our students we toured the mill complex, guided by a former president of the firm (a grandson of Jacob Elsas) and the company's last plant engineer, who was employed by the successor firm to keep an eye on the property. Visual inspection of the buildings and machinery, interviews, examination of public records, and research in the small collection of Fulton Bag records at Emory University provided the students with material for papers on the technological, economic and labor history of the mill. However, no one seemed to know where the bulk of the company records were, although filing cabinets of some description had been seen in a dark basement of the mill.

In 1985, when the mill property was about to be sold again, an official of the firm which had bought the company from the Elsas family called me to say that the company was interested in donating Fulton Bag records to the Georgia Institute of Technology. Although Georgia Tech had only a small archival facility, university officials agreed to accept the papers, process them for scholarly use, and use that collection as the foundation of a larger archival program focusing on industrial and technological history.

When our crew of librarians and historians arrived





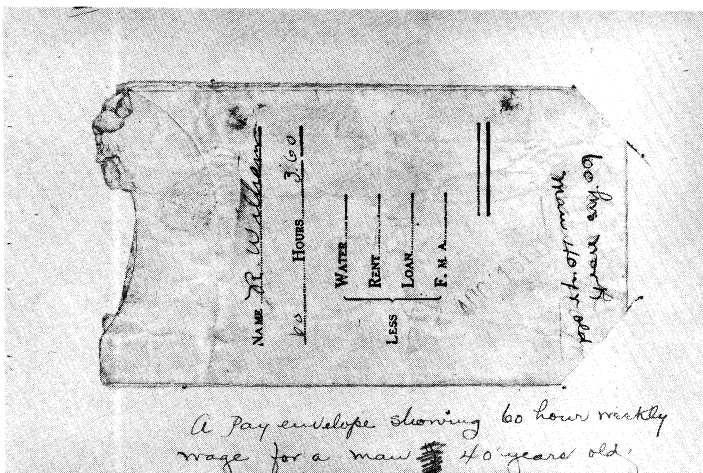
at the mill to pick up the papers, officials proudly showed us to the former executive offices where bound ledger volumes were neatly stacked. After loading these business records (257 volumes in all), we asked about the other materials which we had seen earlier in the basement. Our guide expressed surprise at our interest, but said we were welcome to whatever was down there. We retrieved a large set of architectural and engineering drawings, five file cabinets full of personnel cards, and an assortment of other materials. Not un-

til the materials were out of the basement and in temporary storage at Georgia Tech did we fully comprehend their significance. Despite some serious gaps, the Fulton Bag papers provide an unusual and in some regards unique view of life inside a southern textile mill and mill community.

The business records are themselves unusually rich by southern standards, though scores of such collections have survived for northern mills. Concentrated in the period between the 1890s and the 1930s, they include payroll records, ledgers and journals, accident reports and property inventories. While most of the records pertain to the Atlanta facility, there are some records for the company's branch plants in New Orleans, Brooklyn, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Denver and Dallas.

The architectural and engineering drawings are unusual among surviving mill records. Though not yet catalogued, there are approximately twelve hundred drawings, including elevations, floor plans and mechanical and electrical systems—which, taken together, document the evolution of the mill complex and power systems.

The personnel records are, so far as I know, unique among the collections of southern mill records under

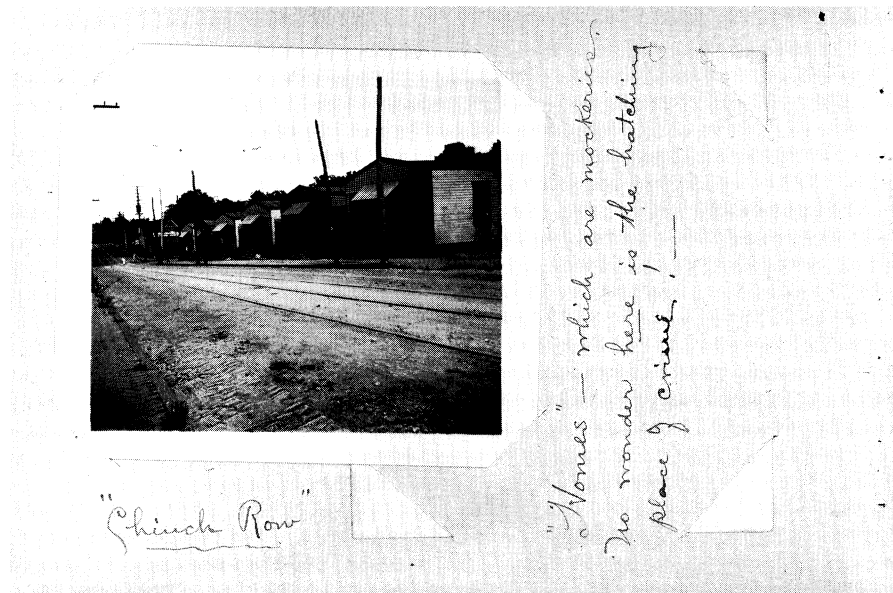


archival control, consisting of approximately fifty thousand personnel cards, and covering the period from 1915. Similar to the cards for the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company in Manchester, New Hampshire, used by Tamara Hareven,¹ the Fulton Bag personnel records provide a wealth of data on employment and family history for each worker, along with medical and other personal information. We have plans for converting all of the personnel cards to machine-readable form, but for the foreseeable future scholarly use of these records will be restricted so as to maintain confidentiality.

The Fulton Bag records include very little in the way of executive correspondence. However, the one cache of executive material that did find its way into the archive is the most remarkable sub-set of the collection: approximately five linear feet of correspondence to and from Oscar Elsas, president of the firm between 1913 and 1923. Approximately two-thirds of the material relates to the strike at Fulton Bag in 1914–15 and to other

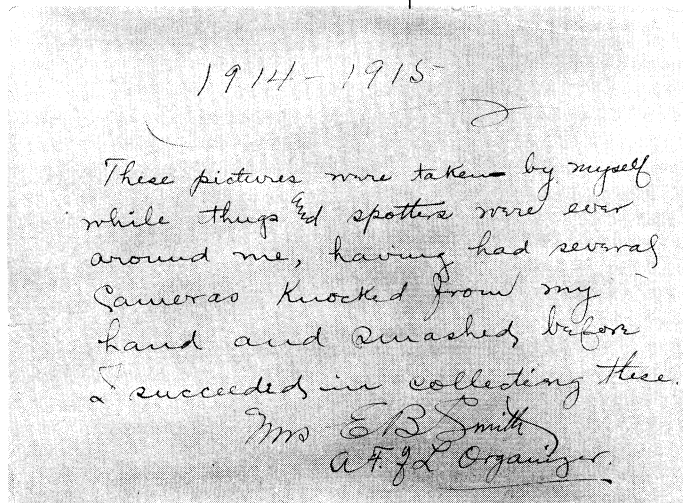
aspects of labor relations in the period 1913–15. The balance of the material relates to labor relations at Fulton Bag's Atlanta mill and its branch houses in Dallas, New Orleans, New York and St. Louis in the period 1918–23.

During 1913–15 Elsas carried on extensive correspondence with other mill presidents, trade association officials, editors of textile journals, Atlanta governmental and civic leaders, and private security agencies concerning the strike and other aspects of labor relations. During and after the strike Elsas contracted with security companies to place agents in the mill and the surrounding community to pose as workers and infiltrate the union. During and even after the strike, operatives reported to Elsas on a daily basis concerning the mood of the workers, union organizing activities



MRS. E. B. SMITH

Mrs. E. B. Smith was a labor activist in the Atlanta, Georgia, area who was deeply involved with the strike against the Fulton Bag Cotton Mills in 1914–15. AFL records for the period indicate that for the weeks ending June 27 through November 21, 1914, Mrs. Smith was paid a weekly salary of \$20.00 (plus \$2.45 for expenses) out of funds the AFL had raised through an assessment on affiliates for the National Campaign to Organize Women Workers. There is no record that she received any compensation before or after those dates.



Smith and three other photographers documented the strike against the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Company, both to publicize conditions and to provide evidence for federal mediation and conciliation efforts during the strike. Their images depict the workers, housing conditions, union and management strike activities, worker evictions, and the tent city that housed the strikers from September 1, 1914, until the following May.

Smith collected many of the photographs in three albums she carefully captioned, titling the books “Conditions,” “Evictions” and “Tent City.” They, with 20 additional prints, form a unique collection of 149 images from which most of the illustrations in the articles by Robert McMath and Gary Fink have been drawn. As illustrations they not only enhance the narrative of the Fink article, but also provide a counterpoint to it, presenting Mrs. Smith’s view of the strike. The albums are in the photograph collection of The George Meany Memorial Archives.

and working conditions and technical problems in the various departments of the mill. Some of the reports bear pencilled notations in Oscar Elsas’ hand on actions to be taken as a result of the reports.

As with any other historical source, one must approach these operatives’ reports with a healthy skepticism. The operatives did, after all, have their own agenda which no doubt colored their reporting. But, when used with care, these documents provide a rare look inside a major strike, and provide new insights into a situation that was both volatile and complex.

In part, Elsas resorted to using labor spies because he did not trust city officials or the Atlanta police, nor did he believe that the commercial elite of the city were



Every night these men were out trying to cause trouble - all the way from picking fights with the men to the insulting of women pickets.

"A thug hired by the Cotton Mill"

sympathetic to him. Many leading Atlantans were then involved in a social gospel organization, the Men and Religion Forward Movement, which was intent on reforming factory working conditions, and which contained, in Elsas' view, an anti-Semitic streak.

Furthermore, the Fulton Bag strike coincided with an outbreak of mass hysteria in Georgia surrounding the trial, conviction and lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish pencil factory manager, for allegedly murdering a teen-aged employee, Mary Phagan. Cabbagetown was a center of anti-Frank sentiment, and some of that animus was transferred to members of the Elsas family because they too were Jewish and, perhaps, because workers connected the labor practices of Fulton Bag with the system of industrial efficiency which Frank had been installing at the pencil factory.

The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Papers reveal intimate details of the lives of both workers and owner—more intimate, no doubt, than either would wish to have revealed. But these are the kinds of records from which an honest reconstruction of southern textile history can be drawn. Unfortunately, for every Fulton Bag story there are many other archival stories with an unhappy ending—records lost, or destroyed or rotting in an unknown location. The family-owned mills which sprang up in the decades between the 1880s and 1910s are either closing or being swallowed up by conglomerates with no interest in the preservation of someone else's history.

We are now at a point in the preservation of the documentary and artifactual remains of post-Civil War southern industrialization which is analogous to the preservation in the 1920s and 1930s of records of antebellum plantations and Afro-American slavery. This part of our heritage will be preserved soon or not at all. If we wish the dry bones of southern industrial and labor history to rise up and take on flesh and blood, the time to act is now.

Notes

Robert C. McMath, Jr., is a professor of history at Georgia Institute of Technology and is author or co-author of five books, including *Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975) and *Engineering the New South: Georgia Tech, 1885-1985* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985). He is presently working on two books: a social history of American Populism (to be published by Hill and Wang); and a book about William Raoul, who grew up in Atlanta's high society before the turn of the century, set out to become a mechanical engineer, held a variety of industrial management jobs, and ended up being converted to socialism and moving to Greenwich Village (to be published by Louisiana State University Press).

¹ See Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); and Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).