

Middle School Social Studies – Changes in Textile Industry

Compelling Question	
What happened to Beaumont Mill?	
State Content Standard	South Carolina History (8th Grade) Standard 5: Demonstrate an understanding of the impact of world events on South Carolina and the United States from 1929 to the present. 8.5.P: Analyze the transformation of South Carolina’s economy from the Great Depression to its current economic diversification 8.5.E: Utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources to analyze multiple perspectives on the cultural changes in South Carolina and the U.S.
Disciplinary Practice	Working with evidence
Staging the Question	Look at aerial images of Beaumont Mill at different points in time. Ask students what they notice. Talk about students’ knowledge of and experiences with Beaumont Mill.
Supporting Question	
What led to the closing of Beaumont Mill?	
Formative Performance Task	
Make a list of factors that contributed to the closing of Beaumont Mill.	
Featured Sources	
Source A: “Textile Mills Squeezed in Modernization Drive” (<i>New York Times</i>) Source B: Excerpts from <i>Textile Town</i> Source C: Excerpts from Walter Montgomery Jr.’s Oral History	
Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT <i>What happened to Beaumont Mill?</i> Construct an argument using specific claims and relevant evidence from sources while acknowledging competing views.
	EXTENSION Locate another source (e.g., interview someone who worked at Beaumont Mill) and explain how it supports or challenges your original response to the compelling question.

What happened to Beaumont Mill?

Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry prompts students to examine the various factors that contributed to the collapse of the domestic textile industry. By investigating the closing of Beaumont Mill in Spartanburg, South Carolina, students consider ways in which politicians, business owners, and consumers both weakened and attempted to protect textile mills. Through this inquiry, students consider the impact of globalization on South Carolina, specifically the individual and collective efforts that resisted and spurred economic diversification. This inquiry focuses on the disciplinary practice of *working with evidence*. Students use primary and secondary sources to analyze how different perspectives were impacted by changes in the textile industry. This inquiry can be completed in one to two class periods.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “What happened to Beaumont Mill?” students work through a supporting question, formative performance task, and featured sources to construct an argument supported by evidence while also acknowledging competing perspectives. The featured sources reflect different formats, time periods, and perspectives that situate events at Beaumont within the broader context.

Staging the Compelling Question

To introduce the inquiry, teachers may guide students in examining aerial photographs of Beaumont Mill. Teachers may choose to use select photographs from the Spartanburg County Public Library Downtown Spartanburg Aerial Photograph collection (e.g., [1948](#) and [1981](#)) and compare those to 3D images from [Google Earth](#). Teachers may have students identify significant changes across the photographs (e.g., new roads, fewer mill buildings) and then transition the discussion to what students know about Beaumont Mill and why it is no longer operational. If students are unfamiliar with Beaumont Mill, the teacher may elicit their knowledge about textile mills in general.

Supporting Question

The supporting question “What led to the closing of Beaumont Mill?” directs students’ attention to specific events that prompted changes at Beaumont Mill, which students may draw upon when answering the compelling question. Students examine three sources: a *New York Times* article that pre-dated the mill’s closure by approximately a decade, excerpts from a community history published a few years following the mill’s closure, and an interview with the owner of Beaumont Mill conducted more than twenty years after the mill’s closure. These sources introduce different perspectives and allow students to consider if the explanations for the mill’s closure change over time. Prior to reading the sources, teachers may need to explain that Beaumont Mill was one piece of the larger Spartan Mill organization. Students may be directed to read all three sources, or students may read a single source and compare their findings with peers who read a different source. The formative performance task helps students organize their thoughts by listing various factors that led to the mill’s closure. Teachers may also prompt students to evaluate the relative influence of individual factors and the ways select factors interacted to worsen the situation.

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined several explanations for the weakening of the textile industry. Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument using multiple sources to answer the compelling question “What happened to Beaumont Mill?” Students may be directed to compose an individual written response, or teachers may facilitate a group discussion. Since the focal disciplinary practice of this inquiry is *working with evidence*, teachers may engage students in discussing the strengths and shortcomings of the different types of evidence used in the inquiry (e.g., oral history, national newspaper).

Students’ arguments will likely vary but could include any of the following:

- Beaumont Mill could not compete with foreign companies who produced cheaper goods due to lower costs (materials/labor) and made the expensive machinery on which the company spent its limited capital.
- Beaumont Mill was weakened by U.S. consumers’ unwillingness to pay more for American-made goods and the federal government’s aversion to protectionist policy.
- Despite stated desires to protect workers, Beaumont Mill closed because of the owner’s decision to shut down the mill to protect their company.

As an extension task, students may be asked to further practice the skill of working with evidence by locating an additional source and explaining how that source supports or challenges their initial argument. Students should be encouraged to locate types of source not represented in the featured sources or perspectives less-represented in the featured sources (e.g., Beaumont mill employees, foreign textile companies).

Featured Sources

Source A: Dudley Clendinen, “Textile Mills Squeezed in Modernization Drive,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1985 ([Linked Here](#))

Source B: Betsy W. Teter, “Textile Town in Transition, 1975 to 2002”, *Textile Town*, 2002 (excerpt from p. 278-279)

Fighting for its life, Spartan Mills already had closed Whitney and Startex and shut down weaving at Chesnee in 1996. It put a plant in Augusta, Georgia up for sale and tried to change its product line by purchasing a knit fabric plant in Jefferson, North Carolina. Walter Montgomery Sr., by then an icon to his local employees, died in October 1996 at the age of 95, and it seemed the wind went out of the company’s sails. Three years later, Walter Montgomery Jr. brought in a 46-year-old executive from Springs Industries to run his family company. Saying he wanted to reposition Spartan as a global marketing company – not just a manufacturer, but a selling agent for multiple product lines – new President Barry Leonard immediately closed what was left of Beaumont and Chesnee and ended both spinning and weaving at the historic downtown plant.

Source C: Walter Montgomery Jr., Oral interview conducted at USC Upstate, 2021

As an American textile producer, we used American cotton, and during the war period, and following the depression of cotton growing in the 30s, our government had put in programs to support the farmers with a price of cotton that the

government would pay for if they couldn't sell it in the market. And during the war, a lot of cotton was produced and, of course, a lot of it was used, but after the war, the program supporting the price of cotton continued, and foreigners could buy other cottons from Mexico or South America or India at cheaper rates than what the American cotton was being priced by our government. So the warehouses were booming, were completely filled with high-priced cotton versus the world's price of cotton. So at that point, our government said we got to cut the price for exports, so if you were a Japanese [company], at that time you could buy American cotton 30% cheaper than I could buy it in Spartanburg, than I could buy U.S. cotton, so, of course, that gave them a great advantage because cotton products, about 50% of the value is the raw material, the fiber, and 30% is usually the cost of the labor component, and they were buying much, much cheaper labor and, obviously, greatly lower cost of cotton. So it was very, it was just impossible to compete with a big disadvantage or cotton cost and labor cost, and that's when the imports just flooded in.

...

The industry in the 80s and early 90s was busy. The price structure of the products were [sic] good, and the textile companies were making very good profit, and that was true up until about 1991 or 1992, along in there, and then the imports really started to come in, particularly from southeast Asia and also, I think by that time, the Chinese were beginning to have access to our markets, so it was a period when, at Spartan Mills, we reinvested almost all of our profits, our cash flow, into trying to lower our costs. Putting in new machinery, new methods, and that was where our capital went, to try to lower our costs, improve our efficiency, improve our quality. That was a big commitment that we made, but it wasn't enough to offset the cost advantage that the imported goods had.