



Child Labor

One stain on the history of the textile industry is child labor. Using children as workers in industrial plants was commonly done in many industries besides textiles. However, in the United States, it seems to have held on in textile mills longer than other places. It was not stopped until laws were passed forbidding it in about 1938. The above picture shows two small boys standing up on a piece of textile machinery during their workday in a mill. It is not known where this picture was taken.

Many of us whose families have been associated with the mills for several generations have relatives who worked in the mill as children – sometimes as very small children. My maternal grandfather started working at [Pacolet Mills](#) when he was only six years old in 1896. A shift at that time was for 12 hours a day for six days a week. He worked for [Pacolet Mills](#) for 59 years until he retired in 1955.

The picture below was taken of workers at [Pacolet Mills](#) No.1 and No. 2 in the 1800s. Note that about half of the workers are children, some of them very young. It is a distinct possibility that one of these little workers is my grandfather.



Child workers were used throughout the mill. The following picture from 1900 shows two little boys that worked alongside of the older workers in the Weaving Department at Pacolet. The boys appear to be eight or nine years old. The boy on the left is Carl Whitlock. As an adult, Mr. Whitlock went on to open and run [Whitlocks's store](#) in [Kegtown](#).



Young boys in Mollahan Mills in Newberry, South Carolina, on December 3, 1908.

It is hard to believe, but childhood as we know it, is a fairly recent invention. For most of human history, children were seen as just little workers who had to work as soon as they were able. This was true for farm children up until recent times. Because of their small size that allowed them to work in tight spaces, children were especially prized by at least two industries. One was mining for coal and other minerals. The other surprisingly, was the United States Navy. As recently as the Civil War, the Navy used small boys, called “powder monkeys” to carry powder bags from the magazines to the gun emplacements. The pictures below show some of these small sailors.



Above - 12 year old Henry Messhage
Below - 6 1/2 year old Jimmie Johnson



Above - unidentified “powder monkey” onboard the *USS New Hampshire* during the blockade of Charleston.

Below - These boy sailors are not identified.





An interesting story has recently occurred that has put a human face on children working in the mill. This is not about [Pacolet Mills](#) but about a mill in Lincolnton, North Carolina about 50 miles away from Pacolet. It could just as easily have been about [Pacolet Mills](#).

The picture shown above has been often used in stories and books and magazines about children working in textile mills. However, the little girl's identity was not known. Recently, the mystery has been solved and the touching story was printed in the *Lincoln Times – News* newspaper of Lincolnton – North Carolina. See it at:

[Lincoln Times News Article from Jan. 8, 2014 - Mystery Solved - Historian Identifies Child Mill Worker](#)

We like to think that the practice of child labor is now something that is behind us. However, that is certainly not true. Many hundreds of thousands of children are still being used as workers in countries around the world.