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# Through the Mill

## Documenting the Southern Textile Industry

*Gothic Revival worker housing in Graniteville, South Carolina, built c. 1848. Photo by Jet Lowe, 1998.*

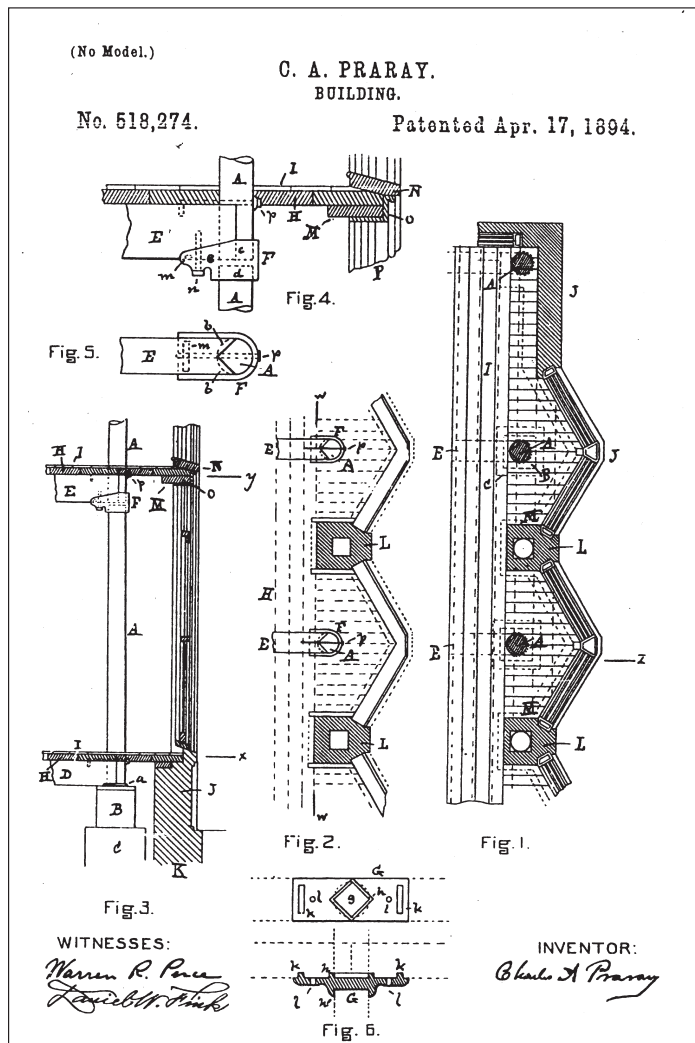
The development of the textile industry created a unique industrial landscape in the Piedmont area of the southeastern United States. Particularly during the “New South” growth of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, construction of mills, worker housing, and community buildings reshaped many southern towns. The Historic American Engineering Record documented several southern textile mills in the 1970s, but since 1997, HAER’s Southern Textile Industry Project has attempted a more comprehensive and contextual regional documentation program. Mills, worker housing, and community structures have been studied and recorded in LaGrange and Hogansville, Georgia; Valley, Selma, and Huntsville, Alabama; and Graniteville, South Carolina. The most recent project examined mills in Gaston County, North Carolina. A database of textile directory information has been created, research information, inventories, and bibliographic materials gathered for a study collection, and a typology of southern textile mill housing prepared as part of the project. Most importantly, relationships have been developed with state historic preservation offices, local historical organizations, textile companies, regional universities, National Park Service regional staff, and others to insure a broad-based and inclusive examination of a regional industry. The artifacts of this industry often are deceptively ordinary; decades of use frequently cause historic features to be hidden by additions or changes. When examined more closely, however, southern textile mills, housing, and related town structures can reveal important aspects of local history that enhance the larger regional and national historical narrative.

Combined study of both mill industrial complexes and surrounding residential and commercial structures has been crucial, given the integrated nature of southern textile mill town



development. Often the housing, community facilities like schools and gymnasiums, and commercial structures were all built and owned by the textile company. Intense interest in the history of the mill and workers in many of the places HAER has documented also indicates the vital importance of the history of the southern textile industry to the local community. In one community, for example, HAER researchers arriving at a mill early one morning were surprised to be greeted by a large welcoming committee of town officials and members of the local historical organization, all of whom wanted to express their gratitude for HAER’s interest in “their” mill. People in southern mill towns recognize the importance of textile industry history to their own sense of place, even as these mills close and face uncertain futures. Many mills have already been demolished or drastically altered. Before vestiges of the industry disappear forever, the Southern Textile Industry Project aims to study these important sites and structures that defined life and work in numerous southern towns and cities.

The remarkable survival of one of the earliest southern textile mills at Graniteville, South Carolina gave HAER an opportunity to include an important antebellum example in the Southern Textile Industry Project. Erected in 1846-49, the Graniteville Mill took its name from the blue granite quarried locally to build the two-and-a-half story mill building and water-power canal. Entrepreneur William Gregg envisioned Graniteville as an important southern industrial prototype, proving the viability of cotton textile production to diversify the predominantly agricultural regional economy. The original mill, now enclosed within a sprawling industrial complex, stands as evidence of this



Charles A. M. Praray's patent drawing for a "new and useful improvement in buildings," 1894. United States Patent Office, Patent No. 518,274, 17 April 1894.

ambitious early southern manufacturing project. In the surrounding town of Graniteville, Gregg created the entire infrastructure of housing, hotel, shops, and railroad access for a complete mill village. Surviving examples of original Gothic Revival cottages show Gregg's belief in the civilizing influence of tasteful houses on a community of new industrial laborers. The themes of entrepreneurship, technology, and community building revealed by Graniteville's story continue across HAER's other Southern Textile Industry Project sites, highlighting the regional and national significance of local history.

Looking at textile industry structures and technology in the South also complements the extensive body of HAER documentation previously done on the textile industry, mainly focusing on New England. The national scope of the

HAER program provides opportunities for broader regional and national analysis of local sites often not feasible for research being conducted on the state or local level. Southern textile growth also included important cross-regional transfer of textile expertise and technology. An unusual textile mill structural system patented by Charles A. M. Praray in 1894 illustrates the potential for linking discrete local documentation projects into a larger regional and national framework.

In 1997, HAER began researching Dixie Mill in LaGrange, Georgia, leading to the rediscovery of a mill design system patented by Providence, Rhode Island mill engineer Charles A. M. Praray in 1894. In April 1894, while he was working for Charles Makepeace & Co. in Providence, Praray received a patent on a "new and useful improvement in buildings." In both structure and appearance Praray's patented building system differed substantially from conventional slow-burning mill architecture. The "Praray Improved System of Construction" called for the support columns and outer walls to be built on two separate foundations, making the walls of the mill non-load bearing. Unusual triangular bays formed the exterior walls to allow more natural light into the mill and provide horizontal bracing.<sup>1</sup>

Praray built only five mills using his patented system, all located in the South. Local historians were unaware of the patented design for mills in LaGrange and Douglasville, Georgia; Selma, Alabama; and Haw River, North Carolina. Praray's patent was part of the larger context of mill architecture experimentation in the South during the late-19th century, including the first electric powered mill in Columbia, South Carolina in 1893. In this instance, HAER documentation revealed inventive mill construction taking place in the South, and possibilities for new regional and national perspectives on the southern textile industry.

Praray first used his "improved building method" in 1895-1896 when building Dixie Mill in LaGrange, Georgia. During the 1940s, the Praray walls were removed and Dixie Mill was expanded laterally. By this time, improvements in artificial lighting made natural light less important, and many mills began to brick in windows to increase air-conditioning efficiency. With the distinctive triangular bays gone, Dixie

Mill lost its most visible feature of the Praray patented system of construction, camouflaging this unique mill structural system within a series of conventional additions and alterations. Because the interior frame supported the original portion of the mill independent of the walls, the skeleton of Praray's structural system remained largely intact.

After designing Dixie, and also while still working for Makepeace, Praray designed two patented mills for the Thomas Holt Manufacturing Company in Haw River, North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> Praray built another patented mill for Georgia Western Cotton Mills at Douglasville, Georgia outside of Atlanta. The windows have been bricked-in, but the Praray walls are still intact, giving the mill in Douglasville a deceptively modern appearance that caused it to be overlooked in a Georgia Department of Transportation survey of historic resources along Route 20.

Another Praray patented mill opened in Selma, Alabama, in 1897. Eighteen months later the mill was expanded with a matching 100-foot-long addition.<sup>3</sup> The Selma Cotton Mill changed owners frequently during the early-20th century and by the 1940s had been converted to a cigar making plant. Today the original mill is still used by Phillis Cigar Co. The Praray design is

*Phillis Cigar Co. (formerly Selma Cotton Mill), Selma, Alabama, built c.1897 using Praray's patented building system. Photo by Jet Lowe, 1998.*



remarkably intact, including many of the original windows, giving the best view of the original appearance of a Praray patented mill structure.<sup>4</sup>

Only the five patented mills built between 1895-99 remain as evidence of Praray's contribution to mill construction innovation taking place in the New South.<sup>5</sup> Although Praray's long-term impact on textile mill design was minimal, uncovering his story suggests that there are many others still unrevealed that could contribute to a more nuanced, cross-regional analysis of the southern textile industry. As HAER's Southern Textile Industry Project is attempting to demonstrate, individual historic textile industry sites, from the antebellum innovation at Graniteville to the Praray patent mills, are better understood when viewed through the national context of industrial development.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Makepeace was listed as assignee of one-half of the patent. Charles A. Praray. "Building," United States Patent Office, Patent No. 518,274, (17 April 1894); William Whittam, Jr. Cotton Spinning, (Providence, RI: Charles A. M. Praray Co., 1898), I-III.
- <sup>2</sup> First Praray built a large addition on the pre-existing Thomas Holt Mill. Holt Manufacturing must have been pleased because the company had Praray design the Cora Cotton Mill nearby around the same time.
- <sup>3</sup> Sanborn Map Company, Selma, Alabama, (New York: Sanborn Map Company), 1898, 1903, 1925, 1944.
- <sup>4</sup> One other Praray patented mill was designed for African-American entrepreneurs in Anniston, Alabama, but never constructed.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1898, Praray left Makepeace's firm and founded C.A.M. Praray and Co., Architects and Mill Engineers, also based in Providence. "A New Firm of Mill Architects and Engineers," *Providence Journal of Commerce* 6:3 (March 1898): 61. Praray continued to work doing renovations and standard mill buildings until his death in 1910.

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