Factory employed 93 hands, though only one-third of the workers were African American. A Bennetville factory worked 35 hands from the age of 10 and up, only 5 enslaved workers.

These industries often used the enslaved labor of women and children. Enslaved children reportedly cost two-thirds as much as adults to feed and clothe, and women were much less expensive than men. However, one Carolinian noted, “In ditching, particularly in canals . . . a woman can do nearly as much work as a man.” The less strenuous work of textile mills was often preferred for those enslaved children, women, and senior adults who were not strong enough to work in the fields or in heavy industry.

Working on the Railroad

Another large employer of enslaved workers in South Carolina was the railroad industry. Labor intensive during construction, and in constant need of maintenance and repairs, railroads were steady employers of African Americans, mostly adult men.

The South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company, formed in 1827, completed its first track in 1833. At 136 miles it was the longest track in the world, and ran from Charleston to Hamburg, S.C., located north of Augusta, Georgia. It continued to build branch lines in the state, and soon realized that white workers, “Unwilling to risk their lives in the swampy situations,” abandoned the work as summer began. To make up for the lost men, the company hired enslaved people from plantations near the new roadbed, and purchased 89 African Americans between 1845 and 1860.

The Railroad Comes Through Town

The S.C. Canal and Railroad Company built its first branch line through Lewisville (later named St. Matthews) in 1840-41. Plantations and farmhouses, large summer homes, and slave cabins dotted the landscape around the town, and the railroad offered a quick way to send its farm goods to markets in Columbia and Charleston.

Two prominent land and slaveholders in Lewisville, Jacob M. Dantzler and John J. Wannamaker, made some of their land and enslaved workers available to the railroad. By 1841, the S.C. Canal and Railroad Company desired to drop the pay for their workers to only $13 per month, even though “the fellows re-hired are accustomed to the use of the axe, adze and saw, and lifting heavy timber, the work required of them.” For the new branch line through Lewisville, however, the company probably used local enslaved workers for unskilled labor such as digging the roadbed.

One 1840 report boasted that “The embankments . . . will compare with any similar work in the United States.” The enslaved workers owned by the company were praised “as efficient, as faithful, and as manageable as those hired.”

Working Conditions

William Pinckney McBee, a white worker for the S.C. Railroad Company in April of 1851, wrote a letter to his wife requesting a coat “made light – I cannot carry weight in the field on hot days – Also a pair of pants made of some light tweeds,” and a “light cheap oil cloth cap” as “We have rain nearly every day [and] mud – you never saw the like.” Conditions for African Americans were likely worse, as they could not request specialty clothing.

Legacy of Industrial Slavery

While slave-built railroad lines still exist today, there are very few industrial buildings from the antebellum years. The ruins of South Carolina’s Saluda Mill are the only obvious pieces of a structure built in 1834 to produce brown cloth for slave clothing. A few furnace stacks in the state, dating from the early 1800s, are the remains of the early ironwork industry, which typically had 100 enslaved workers for growing crops, cutting timber, mining ore and limestone, operating the furnace, and making charcoal at each factory. Other sites may still exist, but for modern St. Matthews, evidence of industrial slavery makes up the most important physical feature of the town.

The South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company is known today as Norfolk Southern. The St. Matthews Railroad cut still appears much as it did after construction. It reveals the contribution of African Americans building the South.

In Plain View

Industrial Slavery and the
St. Matthews Railroad Cut

LEARN MORE!

Industrial Slavery in the Old South, Robert S. Stasor, 1970
Slavery in the Cities: the South, 1820-1860, Richard C. Wade, 1967

FUNDING BY SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
Poster Concept and Design: New South Associates

An early 1900s postcard of St. Matthews. (Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.)
Industrial Slavery in the South

While 84% of American industry was centered in the North prior to the Civil War, industry was also a small but an important part of the southern economy. Many different industries used slave labor and by the 1850s around 5% of enslaved individuals worked in industrial settings. The remainder worked the fields. While only 200,000 individuals worked in industry, these men, women, and children made a distinct contribution through their labor and bear stories that provide a different perspective on slavery in the South.

Southern Industries which used Slave Labor

- Cotton gins
- Rice mills
- Indigo production
- Sugar mills
- Salt works
- Tobacco manufacture
- Turpentine industry
- S.C. Edgefield pottery
- Shoe factories
- Rope manufacturers
- Waterfront Labor
- Blacksmithing
- Cabinet makers
- Mining
- Iron manufacturing
- Lumber industry
- Road, bridge, canal building
- Brick works
- Bagging factories
- Railroad companies
- Tanneries

As one of the most important and largest industrial cities in the southern states, Richmond, Virginia had many factories that relied on slave labor. It was first in the nation for tobacco manufacturing, and by 1860, some of its factories employed over 100 workers each. Forty-nine industries employed enslaved black labor.

In the warm months of 1825, a visitor to a southern tobacco factory saw enslaved men groaning with effort from their work. Their hard labor would continue for 16 hours per day, depending on the season and the employer. Another antebellum visitor heard workers singing sometimes “all day long with great spirit.” Singing helped regulate the work pace in industry the same way it did in the fields, and some managers encouraged it.

Hiring Out

Industries often used a “hiring out” contract with the slave owner. Some enslaved people could hire themselves out, while giving all or a majority of their wages to their owner. One gold miner in North Carolina argued with a slave owner about his bill, as three of the women were pregnant before he hired them and they could not work. According to the Committee on Negro Population of the South Carolina Legislature, hiring out allowed slaves to “exercise all the privileges of the free persons, make contracts, do work, and in every way live and conduct themselves as if they were not slaves... The evil is, he buys the control of his own time from his owner... The evil lies in the breaking down the relation between master and slave.”

Provisions for Workers

While some factory owners hired temporary workers from nearby slave owners, around four-fifths of them brought laborers, and provided food, clothing, and shelter. Several used the same customs as plantations, and had weekly religious services, allowed a Christmas holiday, and provided medical care. One incentive not found on plantations, but offered at some industries, was the chance to earn money through overtime or extra work. Many railroads and some managers encouraged it.

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Guest workers were a frequent practice, and could result in the loss of valuable labor. Hiring out allowed the workers to have control over their own time. This was different from plantations, where they were bound to their master.

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