

Topic: Thompsonville Carpet Weavers Strike, 1834

Activity 1

- C. Read Diana McCain's "Enfield weavers loom large in history," an 11-paragraph secondary source.

From the title, we find out that the carpet weavers had an impact on our history. As you read the article, it is your job to figure out what the significance is of these weavers.

Now read the article and answer the questions as you go through it.

Enfield weavers loom large in labor history
Diana Ross McCain
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Enfield weavers loom large in labor history



Diana Ross McCain

Just five years off the boat that brought them to America, a group of Scottish weavers employed by the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Co. in Enfield banded together in 1833 to request a pay increase. Historian Frank Stone calls the action "one of the earliest attempts at collective bargaining in the United States," which "set a precedent for American labor relations."

The weavers were skilled workmen who had been brought to Enfield in 1828 from the town of Kilmarnock, Scotland, to operate hand looms in the mill of the carpet company, founded that same year by Orrin Thompson. They had emigrated to America in the wake of a severe economic downturn that had struck Kilmarnock two years earlier.

In Connecticut the weavers were paid not by the hour, but for each piece of carpet they produced. Seventy-one of the Scottish weavers, on July 23, 1833, in a petition to carpet company management, pointed out that they had been assigned to produce "new and fancy fabrics" that required extra labor to make. They asked that, in light of these circumstances, they receive a 3 percent increase in the amount they were paid for each piece of carpet completed. The weavers also expressed the belief that they were being paid less than weavers in other parts of the country.

The company responded the next day, denying the weavers' request with the explanation that "the profits on the business are not such as to warrant any increase on the prices now paid for weaving." The weavers immediately met in a nearby lot and informed the company "that we shall not return to work" until the grievance was resolved. According to the weavers, the company then "sent down their foreman, with orders to turn us out and lock the doors of the factory."

The following day the company informed "the weavers who lately have left their employ, that unless they return to work by Monday morning next, they will not after that day be allowed to enter the company's employ on the same terms as heretofore." That is, their pay would be cut by 17 percent.

Even more ominous was the company's warning that "all those who occupy houses belonging to said company are hereby notified to quit the same on Monday next, unless they return to work." Most of the weavers, many of whom had families, lived in company housing.

The carpet company also hired strikebreakers, whom "the old workers tried to keep . . . from going to the shops, not by the use of violence, but by persuasion, hurling . . . opprobrious epithets rather than brickbats," notes historian Jarvis Means Morse in his book "A Neglected Period of Connecticut's History, 1818-1850." In addition, the company sued the weavers "under the common law doctrine of conspiracy . . . the laborers being charged with conspiring to damage the prosperity of the employer's business," Morse writes.

The weavers fought back by writing for moral and financial support from carpet workers in other states, and by publicizing their struggle through workers' newspapers. But they had little chance of success against the carpet company, which owned, in addition to the workers' houses, the looms with which the weavers plied their trade. Facing such pressure, most of the weavers had returned to work within a month.

But although they failed to achieve their immediate goal, the workers' protest was not entirely in vain. When the Superior Court, three years later, finally got around to rendering a decision on the lawsuits involved, it found in favor of the weavers, "on the ground that it was legal to combine to raise wages, al-

though a conspiracy to ruin the business — which was not proven — would have been unlawful," explains Nelson Burr in his book "The Early Labor Movement in Connecticut 1790-1860."

Historians consider the incident an early milestone in the history of organized labor in America. Significantly, "the carpet workers . . . had developed most of the features common to present day trade unions," notes Morse. The similarities, he said, include organizing for a common purpose, if only on a simple level; meeting regularly and electing officers; establishing regular communications with fellow workers at other locations; and building up funds to aid unemployed workers.

In addition, says Stone in his article on "Connecticut's Kilmarnock Scots" in *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, "apparently, both sides in this confrontation learned a lesson, and subsequently the Thompsonville Manufacturing Company got along better with its workers."

1. What did the Scottish weavers want from the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company? Use paragraph 1.

2. What did these weavers do to get what they wanted? Use paragraph 1.

3. What were two reasons the Scottish weavers migrated to Enfield? Use paragraph 2.

4. How did the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Co. figure out how much to pay the weavers? Use paragraph 3.

5. What specifically did the weavers ask for when they got together on July 23, 1833, and what were the 2 reasons why they asked for it? Use paragraph 3.

6. Did the company give the raise and what was the reason? Use paragraph 4.

Raise? YES NO (Circle one)

Reason:

7. How did the weavers respond to this decision? And what did the company do in return? Use paragraph 4.

Weavers' Response:

Company Response to Weavers:

8. How did the company threaten the workers? Use paragraph 5 and paragraph 6.

Threat 1:

Threat 2:

9. What 2 other actions did the company take to hurt the weavers who went on strike? Use paragraph 7.

10. The weavers fought back! What did they do? Use paragraph 8.

11. Why did the company have so much power to get the weavers back to work? Use paragraph 8.

12. Why would the author say that the weavers won, even though they were forced to go back to work with no raise in wages? Use paragraph 9.

13. Historians say that this strike was important for organized labor - often called unions. What did the carpet weavers do that is similar to modern day unions? Use paragraph 10.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

14. What is the significance of this strike to workers today?

15. What is this story about in relationship to the Market Revolution?

16. Which piece of information is most important to understand in this story? Look back at the answers you gave and tell which box helped you understand this issue the best and why.