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Reinventing ‘Towel City USA’:
Textiles, Tourism and the Future of the Southeastern Mill Town

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Throughout the southeastern region of the United States it is common to find towns that were built by textile companies in the late 19th century with the express purpose of manufacturing textile products. Textile companies sought rural areas within this region to build factories and then surrounded the factories with homes, schools, and stores designed to attract and keep workers (Suggs, 2002). Established to serve the needs of the company, such areas would ultimately grow to become towns in their own right (McHugh, 1988). Yet because these rural communities often relied on textile product manufacturing as the sole economic anchor, many of these “towel cities” now face a future defined by uncertainty, as the founding industry has all but disappeared (Gereffi, Denniston, & Hensen, 2007). Business and community leaders, along with the government have sought ways to counter the deleterious effects of unemployment and economic strain resulting from textile industry dynamics throughout the southeast (Hodges & Lentz, 2010). In particular, tourism has been identified as one of the primary industries with the potential to assist local communities in the process of economic recovery and to avoid similar levels of economic distress in the future (Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009; Gannon, 1994).

Despite the importance of understanding what industry changes mean for the United States economy (Taplin, 2003), few studies examine how former textile towns are surviving the post-textile product manufacturing economic era. To address this gap, the purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which two such communities in the southeastern U.S. are focusing on the future by including tourism in their economic development strategies, as well as how the textile industry still has a part to play within these strategies. Both towns were built by companies that produced home textiles, and both towns ultimately shared the same fate when the companies merged to become one and then went bankrupt. Because a single company served as the axis of economic sustainability within both communities, they were left without their primary employer and economic benefactor and have since sought to focus on survival by creating a new, more diversified economic foundation.

For the purposes of this study, a total of 33 in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders in both towns, including local elected officials, business leaders and government representatives as well as displaced workers, former textile firm executives, local community college administrators, and small business owners. Interviews were audio-taped with participants’ consent. Questions focused on participants’ hopes and vision for the future, as well as goals and strategies being implemented in order to move the towns forward. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through an iterative process wherein the researchers moved back and forth between in-depth examinations of responses to identify patterns within the data (Silverman, 2006). This process resulted in the development of three broad thematic areas that

reflect participants' shared experiences and structure the interpretation: *Facing the New Normal*, *Building a Community of Partners*, and *Back to the Future*. Each follows the stages that the towns progressed through after the industry was gone. In *Facing the New Normal*, the collective realization of what the loss of textile product manufacturing meant for the towns, including jobs as well as community support and leadership, is discussed. *Building a Community of Partners* examines efforts to help the communities recover through such means as education and retraining as well as supporting rural entrepreneurship. Last, *Back to the Future* examines the ways that the two towns are moving into the future, specifically through recreational, agricultural and heritage tourism. That is, both towns are promoting their textile history along with the natural and agricultural resources that initially attracted the industry to this region in order to market themselves as tourist destinations.

Combined with a declining job economy in general and prolonged recessionary period, the shift to manufacturing products in countries other than the U.S. has left many rural southeastern textile communities with an urgent need to reinvent themselves in order to survive (Anderson, 2000). This study sheds light on how two such communities are transitioning from a manufacturing-based economy by focusing on other sectors, including textile-related tourism, to meet the economic challenges of the future. Ultimately, this study points to the difficulties involved in this transition while highlighting the ways that the industry can remain an important part of a textile town's identity.

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