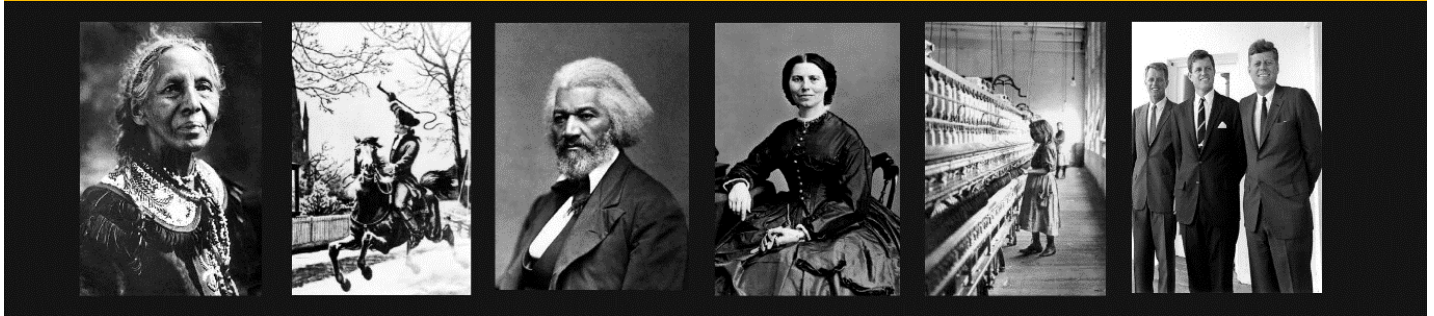


The Historical Journal of Massachusetts



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Source: *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Volume 45, No. 2, Summer 2017, pp. 80-143.

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University



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Downtown North Adams in 1906: a prosperous mill town of over 24,000.

Image courtesy of the North Adams Historical Society

The Great Depression in the North Berkshires: The New Deal, Textile Union Organizing, and a Pro-Labor Mayor

MAYNARD SEIDER



Abstract: *By the end of the nineteenth century, the predominantly immigrant North Adams and North Berkshire working class had organized in the trades and to some extent in the textile mills. The unions in those mills, however, whether craft or industrial, tended to be local and independent. That reality reflected the area's relative geographical isolation as well as the self-sufficiency of its residents. With the Great Depression, strong outside forces impinged on the community, not only coming from the collapsed US economy, but from an expansive federal government and national unions. This article focuses on the leading industry, textiles, and examines how both outside forces as well as local traditions and institutions changed the area and its residents. The experience of union organizing during the national 1934 textile strike and a regional strike in 1935 along with New Deal jobs and social programs impacted the region in crucial ways. Local residents demonstrated both a greater willingness to accept government programs and a stronger labor consciousness. In 1940, North Adams voters elected their first pro-labor mayor. Union organizing increased during the 1940s, although*

the region's historically localized and self-sufficient character delayed the coming of militant, nationally-affiliated CIO unions. Maynard Seider has written extensively on the history of North Adams, particularly its labor history. He is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

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For most outsiders, Berkshire County calls to mind the natural beauty of its hills and rivers, summer theater and music, varied winter sports, and year-round attendance at numerous museums. But in this westernmost county in



The Berkshires Region

Massachusetts, gritty industrial cities also dot the landscape and although less sizable than the state's better-known mill towns such as Lawrence, Lowell, and New Bedford, they nonetheless share some of the same physical and historical characteristics as those places. One of these cities is North Adams, located in the

northwestern corner of Massachusetts on the Hoosac River in the shadow of Mount Greylock, the state's tallest mountain, just a few miles from Vermont to the north and New York State to the west.

During most of the nineteenth century, the area we now call North Adams was simply the north village of the town of Adams. As the north village industrialized in the mid-1800s, however, it developed a separate identity from the more agricultural south village. Ultimately North Adams separated from Adams in 1878 and became its own town. In 1896, as it continued to grow, North Adams incorporated a mayor-council form of government, transitioning from town to city.¹ The initial growth of industry in North Adams was largely due to the area's natural features. Mill owners built on the Hoosac River to take advantage of its power. In the 1850s, the state as well as several private investors chose the Hoosac Range to the east as a site to drill a 4.5 mile railway tunnel offering a western gateway for local and regional trade. It would take twenty years and the deaths of nearly two-hundred workers for the Hoosac Tunnel to be completed. Already well-known as the home of the tunnel, the city achieved national publicity in 1870 when its largest shoe manufacturer, Calvin Sampson, imported seventy-five young Chinese men to replace striking workers who were members of the Knights of St. Crispin, a secret union of shoemakers. It was the first time that Chinese workers had been brought east of the Mississippi to break a strike.²

By 1900, with a population of 24,200, North Adams surpassed Pittsfield to its south to become the largest community in Berkshire County. Immigrants and the children of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and French Canada predominated, although smaller numbers of Russian Jews, Welsh, and African Americans also settled in the area. North Adams also served as the trading center and railroad hub for nearby communities in the Berkshires and for some rural towns in nearby Vermont and New York. In 1939, a WPA guide book writer described the city in the following way:

North Adams is nervous with the energy of twentieth-century America. No city of twenty-five thousand people in New England has a greater variety of retail establishments: merchants must stock goods for workers of different nationalities and notions, and for a large farming population whose lean pocketbooks force their owners to “close buying.”³

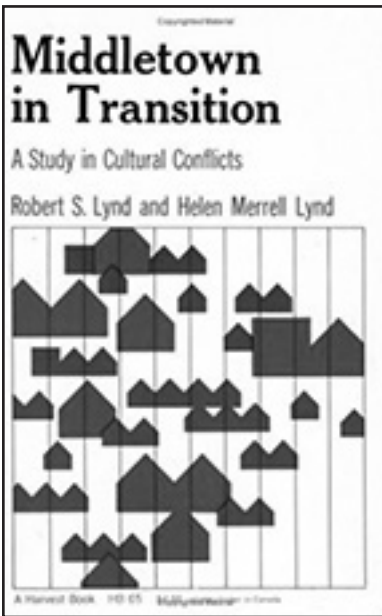
Despite the railroad and trading centers, the mountains surrounding the small city limited access to other sizable communities in Massachusetts and neighboring states. This sense of isolation, and the reality of it, tended to bring with it a culture of self-sufficiency, along with a skepticism—if not suspicion—of newer ideas. For the working class, this led to the formation of local, independent unions in the area’s mills in which local organizers often worked to keep outside national labor unions at bay.

Although life and work were never easy in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Great Depression was the first major crisis faced by the city and its residents. The economic collapse hit North Adams hard, resulting in shortened hours of work and reduced wages. Similar conditions plagued workers throughout the nation, and social movements pressured the federal government to act, resulting in a variety of New Deal programs that helped to ease the pain of the Depression.⁴ That same activism led to legislation guaranteeing workers the right to form unions and collectively bargain.⁵

A national textile strike in 1934 proved to be one harbinger of the new labor movement. The strike, which began in the South, quickly spread to New England. For three weeks, textile workers in North Adams and surrounding towns attended mass rallies, went on strike, organized in their mills, and made connections with each other in nearby workplaces. Although the national strike failed, it heightened the need for a new labor federation. In 1937, the birth of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) satisfied that need. Soon the CIO sponsored militant organizing campaigns that spread like wildfire through all branches of industry across the nation.

These programs, enacted during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first two terms, were communicated to the American people through radio, a new technological medium which broke through the relative isolation in North Berkshire and countless other rural communities in the United States. Roosevelt's famous "fireside chats" delivered a new version of an activist government to a population that had become used to a "national ideology . . . [of] laissez-faire economics and rugged individualism, and . . . [a] federal government . . . small in scope and ambition."⁶

Coincidentally, at the same time, a company built on the production of capacitors used in the commercial use of radios had set up shop in an abandoned textile mill in North Adams. Sprague Specialties (later to be renamed Sprague Electric Company) left its small quarters in Quincy, Massachusetts and began to manufacture capacitors in the Beaver Mill by the north branch of the Hoosac River. The company and its employees struggled during the Depression years, but World War II orders boosted Sprague's growth in the 1940s, and postwar military, aerospace and commercial orders combined to make the company the world's leading producer of capacitors by the 1950s. At its height, Sprague employed 4,137 workers in North Adams alone.⁷



During the 1930s, however, textile mills dominated the North Adams landscape. The new economic, political, and technological forces unleashed in that decade first impacted the textile industry and its thousands of employees. The increased activism from the national government and a revitalized labor movement played an important role in determining how North Adams residents would make it through the 1930s, breaking through the region's relative isolation. North Adams' evolution reflected developments in other small cities throughout the nation. In their pioneering 1937 study, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, sociologists Robert S. Lynd and Helen

Merrell Lynd concluded that in Muncie, Indiana, "events outside the control of" the community became "[t]he major impetus" in understanding the

social changes its residents underwent in the 1930s.⁸ A similar finding could have been reached for North Adams.

This article focuses on how similar outside forces, unleashed by the Depression, affected North Adams, and how this previously isolated community was changed in a deep and long-term way. The story of how North Adams and its populace dealt with and survived that decade must not only address the national forces that the Lynds highlighted, but also recognize the power of the local traditions and institutions that city residents had developed over the years. By the decade's end, North Adams adapted just in time for additional winds of change to envelop the area as a result of World War II.

Textiles, mostly cotton-based cloth and print production, served as the key area of employment in North Adams during the first forty years of the twentieth century. A focus on that industry shines a light on the most important national and local forces that impacted life in the 1930s. It would be difficult and unrealistic, however, to focus on this small city in isolation from the neighboring towns in an area commonly known as North Berkshire, since they all share common geographical, historical, demographic, political, and cultural patterns. The towns of Adams, Williamstown, and Clarksburg border North Adams, and travel through all three communities has always been common. The Hoosac River flows north through Adams to North Adams, where the north branch moves to Clarksburg while the main branch heads through Williamstown, then into Pownal, Vermont, on its way to the Hudson River. In the nineteenth century, industrialists constructed a variety of mills along the Hoosac, harnessing the river's power as it crossed the political boundaries of adjoining North Berkshire communities.

Travel for residents of those communities tended to be limited to their small region because of both the mountains to the east and west and the poor quality of the roads. Although some headed south to Pittsfield, residents rarely ventured east to Greenfield or southeast to Northampton. The local press covered the North Berkshire region, providing its readers with mainly area news, and the fact that they shared a single state representative meant that they were politically integrated as well.

Work also tied the region together. To provide just one example, the Plunkett family owned the bulk of the cotton mills in the area, including four mills in Adams, one in North Adams, and one in Williamstown. Just over the border in Vermont, a seventh mill operated in North Pownal. The cloth produced in all of those factories was shipped to the Arnold Print Works and Windsor Print Works, both in North Adams, where they were printed and fashioned for retail sale. During the national strike of 1934,

workers from these neighboring communities grew even closer together as strikers from one mill traveled to another, and then another, helping to unify the North Berkshire textile workforce. This article traces the growth in labor consciousness and union organizing efforts in the context of the national changes wrought by the Great Depression and New Deal economic policy.

NORTH BERKSHIRES INDUSTRY IN 1930

The North Berkshire region attained a population of about 43,000 in 1930. The three biggest communities—North Adams (21,621), Adams (12,697) and Williamstown (3,900)—accounted for 89% of the total.⁹ In North Adams, 20% of the population had been born in foreign lands and in Adams, the figure was 24%. Ethnically, the Irish, French Canadians and Italians dominated in North Adams. Next door, in Adams, Poles made up the largest ethnic group, having migrated in great numbers at the turn of the century to work in the Plunkett mills in that town.¹⁰ Ethnicity helped to define neighborhood, church, club, and organizational membership. Although the local mills suffered a decline after World War I (along with the rest of New England industry), factory work in textiles and other manufacturing still appeared to be robust as the decade of the Great Depression approached.

In the 1920s, North Adams boasted a diversity of industrial production, from shoes, printing materials, textiles, and textile machinery to rugs, brushes, boxes, bricks, brass, neckties, and aluminum casting. Local production also included biscuits and related foods. Out of a three-story building by the railroad tracks on Ashland Avenue, the Clark Biscuit Company employed some 200 workers who produced cookies, crackers, and cakes.

More than two dozen local unions served the workers of the region, representing trades from barbering to yarn finishing. These included the traditional trade or “craft” unions like bricklayers, carpenters, cigar makers, electrical workers, molders, painters, plumbers, steamfitters, and tailors. Two different unions represented local railway workers and a Pittsfield-based local served North Berkshire trolley employees. White collar postal clerks had their own union, as did local musicians, motion picture operators, theatrical stage employees, and newspaper typographers. Many had affiliations with the national American Federation of Labor (AFL) and met regularly as part of the North Adams Central Labor Union (CLU). Working through the CLU, members of the trades fought hard for union hiring, boycotted non-union workplaces, and engaged in political action to defend their interests and those of working people in general. In 1940, when North Adams elected its first pro-labor mayor, Faxon Bowen, the CLU proved to be his biggest champion.¹¹

Neglected by the AFL, which focused on organizing craft workers, the less skilled industrial workers, even when organized, tended to be in local, relatively conservative unions, which often disdained the strike weapon.¹² To complicate matters, within any industrial plant, a small number of skilled workers might belong to an AFL craft union and have little to do with the other employees. At the Arnold Print Works, for example, the printers and engravers had their own union, while the vast bulk of the less skilled employees belonged to the Calico Workers' Union #1, a relatively weak organization.¹³ Although women made up a sizable portion of the local workforce, because they were primarily unskilled workers, they comprised only about 20% of union members. With the diversity of small craft unions and the weakness of industrial unions, one would have to characterize organized labor in the region as relatively weak in 1930.¹⁴

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND NEW DEAL IN NORTH BERKSHIRE

In North Berkshire, the Great Depression reached its nadir in 1933. In their struggle to remain employed, local industrial workers changed jobs and occupations and, at times, endured partial work weeks, temporary shutdowns, and pay cuts.¹⁵ Younger couples moved in with their parents or in-laws and some had to relocate elsewhere to find work. Stella Zawislak's sister moved to Albany, New York "to do domestic work" in 1933 because "[t] here was no job in the Berkshires."¹⁶

For Arthur Paul Boucher, attending high school in the mid-1930s, it was a very bleak time. He lived in a condemned house. He recalled:

We had no windows, we had no heat. We had a little stove in the kitchen. My brother was stealin' electricity from the neighbors, so we could have a bulb in the kitchen. I was living with my father. He wasn't working. . . . He was a carpenter, but there was no work in those days, '29, '30, '31.

One year was so bad, I went deer huntin', caught a deer, came home, and we cooked the deer with rotten tomatoes. That's what we ate all winter long. And we'd go down and steal coal behind the Windsor Print Works to keep warm.

The teenager sought work everywhere, but was unsuccessful:

Once I went down to the city to get a snow job. The guy says to me, "Well, we can't give you a job 'cause your father owns a house." I says, "The goddam house that's condemned? What am I supposed to do, go home and eat the goddam house? Nobody's workin'. We haven't got any food, we haven't got any heat." And he says, "Sorry." That's the way it was in those times.¹⁷

Although Vera Uberti managed to find some work at Sprague Specialties, the times were "very rough." Her mother had tuberculosis and was in a sanitarium. Her paycheck barely covered the rent; her family was "charging the groceries." She recalled that:

It was quite a long time before I got the grocery bill paid. Things weren't easy. . . . You ate a lot of hamburger. . . . You didn't have any frills. . . . You made do with what you had. So it was hard. . . . [F]or awhile there you didn't go to movies, or anything like that. . . . [Y]ou listened to the radio. You did a lot of reading. But it was rough for a long time. . . . [A] lot of people were out of work.

Phyllis Griswold remembered her father being unemployed before getting a WPA job. "[Y]ou made your own clothes and you grew your own food," she recalled. Both women pointed out, though, that it seemed that everyone in the area shared the same problems. A third woman, Ruth A. Bernardi, stated: "I don't remember them as Depression years. I mean we were all . . . sort of equal. Nobody had that much anyway. So we didn't feel as though there was a depression."¹⁸

Despite these vivid memories of deprivation, the region's diverse industrial base helped many others weather the 1930s. As one former teacher remembered, "There were various industries here. [If] there [had] been one industry . . . we'd have been down and out."¹⁹ Similarly, the local Italian community "generally worked through the depression of the 1930's without too much difficulty." According to two local researchers:

The depression in North Adams was not so severe as it was in larger cities: the employment levels in stores and shops, in the two print works and Hunter Machine Shop remained about the same as before, even though men who may have earned thirty-four dollars a week before were now earning eighteen a week, and sometimes had to put their whole family to work to be able to eat.²⁰

Textiles, however, remained far and away the number one employer in the region, with over five thousand workers engaged in woolen and cotton manufacturing. Nonetheless, during the Depression, the future for textile production seemed dim. Mills closed with regularity in New England. In the quarter century since 1908, twenty-five mills had been shuttered in Western Massachusetts alone.²¹

While labor remained quiescent, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs made a significant impact in North Adams and North Berkshire, creating jobs, improving the area's infrastructure and environment, and providing relief for many in need. The legislation included aid to families in need, protection for union organizing, and Social Security. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) comprised two of the most important New Deal jobs programs.

The CCC employed more than three million young men who planted trees, constructed roads, campgrounds and sewerage systems, built fire towers, and brought phone service and electricity to rural America. CCC youth in North Adams excavated trails to the top of Mt. Greylock, built Bascom Lodge on its summit, and constructed the Thunderbolt Ski Trail to the valley below, among other improvements. Outside of the city, another CCC contingent opened up the Savoy State Forest for recreation by making pathways, constructing log cabins, and building dams for water recreation.²²

The WPA, an even larger program than the CCC, employed eight and a half million men and women across the country who built thousands of schools, airports, bridges, playgrounds, and a host of other community projects. The WPA also employed artists who painted public murals and crafted public art installations like sculptures and reliefs, actors and theater personnel who presented plays, and writers who produced guidebooks covering all of the states.²³ WPA projects proved to be vital in North Adams during the Depression. Hundreds of unemployed men and women joined the workforce repairing and enhancing the city's infrastructure, planting trees, providing free school lunches, sewing clothes, and bringing nursing care to homebound residents. The artistic legacy of the New Deal can be viewed today in the lobby of the North Adams Post Office. A 1942 sculpture by Louis Slobodkin shows a family man leaving his wife and child behind and heading off to a distant mill, while a second sculpture depicts men digging in what would become the Hoosac Tunnel.²⁴

Beyond the material aid that the New Deal programs provided, a fresh way of looking at the national government, of moving beyond self-sufficiency, seemed to be taking hold. As early as 1934, that perspective could

be seen in Mayor Archie Pratt's annual address. After expressing gratitude for federal assistance which provided jobs "at fair wages" for the unemployed, he concluded his remarks with a lengthy quote from the *Boston Herald*, which he noted was "a conservative Republican newspaper." Beginning with the huge changes the country had experienced since the inauguration of FDR, the paper editorialized:

"Local self-sufficiency" is now merely a phrase in many places. The smaller units of government have frequently been unable to carry on, and they would have collapsed . . . if Washington and the state capitols had not come to their aid. We have seen the rapid growth of a belief, strange to this country but not novel to Europe, that society owes everybody a living. . . . At least, the nation has been pulled out of the quicksands of despair which were pulling it down in 1931 and 1932. The remarkable surge in spirit is a cause for deep satisfaction and prayerful thanks.²⁵

Although New Deal programs certainly helped, hardship still characterized life in Northern Berkshire. The Annual Reports of the City of North Adams during the Depression help document the difficult times, even amidst the positive federal programs. The 1933 Report put it in stark terms: "Like all other cities and towns throughout the country, North Adams had many of its inhabitants out of work [and] in a great many cases, in dire need." The City Engineer described a state-funded program of street repair and the work that the previously unemployed men, many mill workers, performed. These men worked hard, with "blistered hands, aches and pains" and "stuck through the job from beginning to end." Data from the city's dental clinic for 1932 clearly indicates the nutritional problems faced by the children and the absence of preventive care for too many North Adams youngsters. Of the 404 children that the dentists examined, 89% had "defective teeth," and 19% of the total had "permanent teeth extracted." That is, one out of five second graders needed false teeth, or else they would sport one or more gaps in their mouth, with more attendant problems.²⁶

In his annual address of 1935, Mayor William Johnson declared:

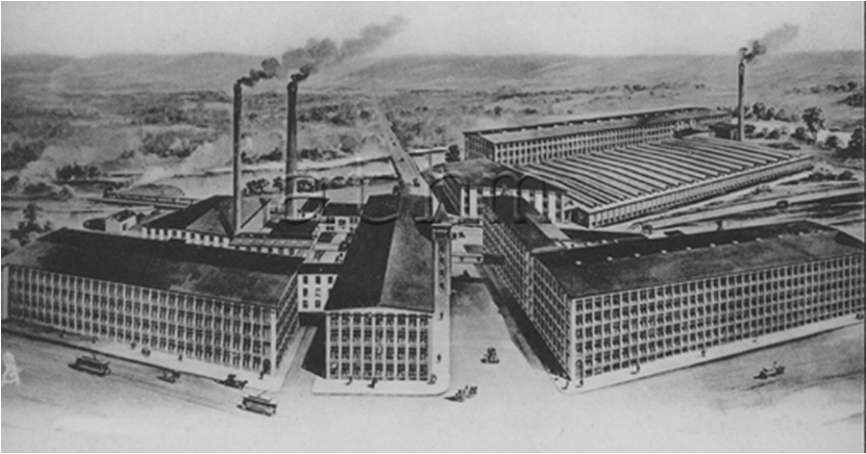
We confront a new order of things. We have to plan to carry on with less. Welfare is the great problem we have to solve. We must provide food, clothing and shelter for the unfortunate victims of the depression, people who are in need and going to be in need. No man knows the time when the call for aid will cease.²⁷

At a time when Social Security and decent pensions remained a future hope, destitute individuals and families had only charity to turn to, or they would have to live in the city's "poor farm," officially called the "city infirmary." The 1937 Annual Report from the Commissioner of Public Welfare sounded sympathetic to the status of the 679 families (representing 2,674 persons) aided in 1936, "people, who through no fault of their own, were obliged to apply for aid because of unemployment and decreased resources." The report added that "physically able" heads of families were expected to work, presumably on a WPA project.²⁸ The mayor's speech demonstrated a new willingness to accept the need for government intervention in the economy and aid to unemployed workers.

THE BERKSHIRE FINE SPINNING ASSOCIATES AND THE GREYLOCK MILL

Those fortunate enough to have employment outside of the New Deal programs mostly worked in the cotton mills. A minority who toiled in the woolen mills received higher wages. The Plunketts of Adams owned half a dozen local mills as part of the Berkshire Cotton Manufacturing Company, along with eleven thousand acres of cotton land in Mississippi.²⁹ Although local workers continued to refer to the mill they worked in by its neighborhood name (e.g., the Greylock Mill), more and more of those mills had fallen victim to consolidation, especially takeovers by holding companies. In 1929, the Plunketts sold their sizable holdings to one such entity, the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates. The BFSA gained control over thirteen factories in southern New England, including the four mills in Adams, the Greylock Mill in North Adams, a mill in Williamstown, and a factory just over the Vermont border in North Pownal. Even though the local mills had already been integrated through Plunkett ownership, the wider integration of BFSA expanded the geographic connections and, in one ironic consequence, helped make it possible for thousands of mill workers in three states to participate in one of the more significant local and national strikes of the 1930s.

The BFSA, with a local labor force of between three and four thousand workers, manufactured light, smooth untextured fabrics or cotton "lawns," which were then imprinted at the Arnold and Windsor Print Works in North Adams. The three-story brick Greylock Mill stands on State Road and Protection (as in tariff protection) Avenue, where it dominates the south side of the street. Its predominantly French-Canadian workers rented tenements from the company on streets right near the plant. The paternalistic owners allowed employees to grow food in garden plots behind the mill and



Berkshire Mills, Adams, 1910

A bird's-eye drawing of the huge complex of multiple buildings.

Founded in 1889 in Adams as the Berkshire Cotton Manufacturing Company, by 1917 the company contained 6,500 looms and was one of the largest cotton textile companies in the world. In 1929 it merged with a Rhode Island company and became known as the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates. Unlike many New England textile companies that failed during the 1920s and 1930s, the BFSA survived the Great Depression intact.

to charge their provisions at the company store during hard times. As one former employee remembered, “You bought your coal from the company. The grocery was there. They found out how much you made and you had about twenty cents left over.”³⁰ Each mill had its own baseball team, and the friendly competition that ensued brought some good times to the hard-working employees.

Cotton manufacturing at the Greylock Mill began in the cotton shed, where workers cleaned the debris from bales of raw cotton with picker machines. Workers needed to wear facemasks to avoid inhaling dust and lint from the cotton fibers. Next, carding machines untangled and aligned the fibers, making them ready for skilled speeder tenders. As future labor leader Rene Ouellette recalled:

I was a speeder tender, making the thread. Yarn is put on a bobbin; it goes from a good size to a smaller size, to an even smaller size. It was a good job, and then if you wanted to [make] a good week’s

pay, you had to work overtime. I was making \$31 a week, but after the strike I was making \$17. You couldn't make it go.³¹

In the mule room, where the largest number of employees toiled, the workers spun the yarns into stronger, twisted threads on large frames (mules). The steam from the humidifiers kept the cotton damp and pliable but produced an uncomfortable, tropic-like environment. Men went without shirts and often without shoes or socks to better endure the oppressive heat and humidity. In the slasher room, employees starched spun cotton to prepare it for the weaver. Highly skilled weavers, paid by piece work, operated the huge, noisy power looms. The production clock on each loom registered the weaver's total count. The "loom fixers", all male, represented a unique group of highly skilled and highly paid employees. They had joined the American Federation of Textile Operatives in 1915, and prior to 1934, they remained the only unionized sector of the Greylock workforce. Their participation could make or break a strike, since the mills couldn't operate without them.



A card room in the Berkshire Mills c. 1925

When the whistle blew to signal the end of the work day, each employee had to clean his or her own work area, at no extra pay. Like most other mills, Greylock sometimes closed for weeks when business slowed down, leaving employees with no pay or benefits. However, the vast majority of the relatively unskilled workers received very low wages regardless of the speed of business.

NORTH BERKSHIRE AND THE NATIONAL TEXTILE STRIKE OF 1934

Throughout the early 1930s, the national textile industry suffered from serious problems. Manufacturing had already begun to shift from the Northeast to the South in search of cheaper labor. Mill owners blamed their poor sales on foreign competition and increased wage demands. Overproduction led to lower prices, mill closings and unemployment.³²

The textile industry was not, of course, the only Depression-era industry facing difficult circumstances. In an attempt to stabilize American industry and increase employment, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent one of his key New Deal pieces of legislation, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), to Congress on May 17, 1933. The act, though very controversial, gave business leaders the right to work together and set “codes of fair competition” and avoid “destructive . . . price cutting.” For labor leaders, Section 7(a) gave workers government protection to unionize and collectively bargain with their employers for the first time.³³

Specifics of the Act set minimum wages (\$13 a week in the North and \$12 in the South) for cotton textile workers, mandated a forty-hour work week, and ended child labor in the mills. Despite the law, textile industrialists continued to increase the notorious “stretch-out,” the process of assigning more and more machines for individual workers to tend, and ignored many of the law’s provisions, including Section 7(a). In pushing the stretch-out, employers deliberately violated the executive order “to prevent improper speeding up of work to the disadvantage of employees.”³⁴

By the time the national United Textile Workers of America (UTWA), an American Federation of Labor affiliate, met in convention in August of 1934, labor leaders and workers, whose hopes had been raised by the NIRA but dashed by employer opposition, proved ready to act. The 500 delegates of the UTWA from textiles mills across the country voted to strike. Two members of the Adams local attended the New York convention, representing “several hundred” Berkshire Mills employees.³⁵ On the eve of Labor Day weekend,

September 1, 1934, the UTWA proclaimed a national strike. The *North Adams Transcript* reported the situation as follows:

They called out 425,000 cotton workers and 100,000 wool and worsted workers from 1500 mills in 21 states, most of them in the eastern part of the country. A number of mill owners saw no support for the strike and said that the “code” had helped workers by providing more and continuous employment. Owners disliked the term “stretch-out” and would prefer to call their policy “specialization,” which lightens the work load and increases wages.³⁶

Support for the national strike began locally in the four big Adams mills owned by the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates. At the time, of the 2,900 cotton workers in Adams, only a few hundred belonged to the UTWA. However, four hundred employees belonged to their own local union of Polish workers, the Textile Workers of Adams. Poles made up a significant segment of the immigrant community in Adams, and formed a cohesive workforce in the Plunkett cotton mills. Some 1,400 Poles had immigrated to Adams from 1895-1905, many coming directly from the Galicia region of Austrian Poland, and others from communities already in the US, such as Chicopee and New Bedford, Massachusetts. For Plunkett, they represented a low-wage, hard-working workforce, one more immigrant group that hoped to improve their conditions in the “New World.” They worked from fifty-four to sixty hours a week in the cotton mills, and received relatively low wages, laboring in the poorest paid industry in the country.³⁷

In 1905, skilled Polish weavers had formed a union, “one of the largest unions ever organized in town,” according to the local weekly newspaper, the *Adams Freeman*.³⁸ Some of the English-speaking Polish weavers who already belonged to a mixed-nationality weavers’ union helped their fellow workers with the procedures necessary to start their own organization. With some three hundred members, the Polish weavers joined the Adams Central Labor Union (CLU). They successfully won a wage increase and joined with representatives of the other nationalities—the English, French, and Germans—in striking for better conditions in the mill in 1906. Keith Melder, a historian of the Polish workforce in Adams, concluded that “because of its strong ties of nationality and community, [the Polish union] had succeeded in establishing a strong labor organization. Despite their low wages, the Poles had built a strong financial basis for their union in a remarkably short time.”³⁹

The Plunkett mills experienced increased labor-management conflict in the 1920s, and two strikes, in 1923 and 1926, ensued. Although the union lost the first strike, the second brought a victory. In June of 1926, the company had increased the pace of work, thereby reducing the number of women on a given job from three to two. The women struck, and a week later two thousand employees engaged in a sympathy strike. The company responded with a lockout, the union began a picket line, and the mill found itself with too few willing workers to reopen the plant. Finally, management gave in and returned to employing a full complement of three women on each job. The union helped support its members during the strike with more than \$10,000 in strike benefits, and its membership numbers increased to 1,100.⁴⁰

By 1934, the Polish weavers and employees in the Adams cotton mills had already built a strong foundation of solidarity and activism. Unlike the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates (BFSA) workers in neighboring North Adams and Williamstown who had no union, the Adams workers had already organized, some into a small Loomfixers' Union and a greater number, some four hundred, into the independent Polish workers' union, the Textile Workers of Adams.⁴¹ Not surprisingly then, the call to heed the national strike drew an initial answer first in Adams.⁴²

While the low wages and conditions in the mill clearly energized the union workers, their ethnicity proved to be the glue or power that bound them together. In examining the Polish union over time, Melder defines it as a "Polish organization rather than a group of laborers."⁴³ As members of the largest ethnic group in Adams, the Polish workers had a history of union struggle and lived, shopped, and worshipped in ethnic institutions, even into the 1940s. With a strong cultural foundation in the huge, ornate St. Stanislaus Church, the Polish community supported a parochial school which opened in 1913, a wide array of Polish associations and societies, including a veterans' group, a charity, and boys' and girls' clubs. Further, Polish residents could shop in numerous Polish-run retail stores and, before long, be served by a Polish professional class. The first Polish selectman, elected in 1933, heralded the increased political power Adams' Polish community would enjoy.⁴⁴ If the history of the Polish union and the strong Polish communal institutions helps to explain why the walkout emanated from Adams, the absence of unionized cotton textile workers in North Adams, Clarksburg and Williamstown suggests at least one key factor for their initial quiescence.

At a mass Labor Day meeting on the Valley Street grounds in Adams in 1934, UTWA organizer Joseph R. White spoke before a crowd of approximately one thousand. The three local Adams unions had already met to endorse the national strike. A prototype of the fiery 1930s labor leader, White

directly appealed to the rank and file. Based in Cohoes, New York, he had responsibility for organizing in the Albany, New York and North Berkshire areas. A UTWA national vice president, he represented the leadership that would break from the more conservative American Federation of Labor in 1935 to form the militant Committee for Industrial Organizations which became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1937. Unlike the far older American Federation of Labor (AFL) which organized by individual crafts, the CIO organized across an entire industry and included in a single union local the majority of workers in a factory, mill, or business. These comprised the vast bulk of unskilled workers, including those more likely to be recent immigrants, African Americans, Catholics, and Jews.⁴⁵

White, who had just arrived from Washington, where he had participated in pre-strike meetings with other national leaders, told his audience that the textile owners had responded to the federal code by cutting the workforce and increasing the stretch-out. Workers who had serviced twenty looms in 1929 now cared for forty and even sixty, "And there have been no improvements in the looms. They are the same that were used in 1929 . . . with the result that workers are sent into tuberculosis, starvation and death."⁴⁶

The union hoped to achieve a thirty-hour work week without a reduction in pay. The cutback in individuals' hours would provide work for the tens of thousands of unemployed mill workers and also lower the risk of overproduction. White not only spoke of the national situation to the one thousand local workers, but also seemed well-versed in Adams politics and advised the crowd that if the town selectmen told them not to strike, "we will know who our friends are and what to do when they come up for election in the spring." He concluded by turning back to the national scene:

I hope you people are not going to disappoint the old South. The South is out on strike now. We are trying to get this through for you because if we get a 30 hour week it will mean four weeks' work a month and four pay envelopes a month instead of only three. This is the time to get it and if you stick together you can get it.

The meeting ended with Fred Hish of Local No. 1711, speaking to the crowd in Polish, making sure all of those assembled got the main points of White's talk and stayed "united."⁴⁷

And united they stayed, and strike they did. The following day, September 4th, three hundred unionized picketers met the 1,700 morning shift employees at the BFSAs plants at the six o'clock starting bell. Only two

Woman Orator Stirs Strikers

Josephine Kaczor, from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, speaks to the crowd of strikers (estimated at 2,000) in Polish on Sept. 6, 1934. Women played important roles in the strike both locally and nationally. (*Transcript*, Sept. 7, 1934, 10).

TWUA organizers Joseph White and Horace Riviere, who played key roles in both the 1934 strike and the CIO's 1937 organizing drive, are pictured later in this article.

2000 Adams Strikers Hear Union Orators

dozen or so workers crossed the lines, forcing the company to close down all four plants about an hour later. As for the afternoon shift, according to the *Transcript* reporter:

When workers began arriving on Columbia and Hoosac streets . . . there were about 1,000 assembled and automobiles lined both sides of Hoosac street as far as Mill street and on Columbia street to Valley street from McKinley square. Not a single employe entered the mill and the power was not started.⁴⁸

A well-organized worker's committee divided the pickets into groups of about twenty-five, each under the direction of a captain. A twenty-four hour strike headquarters was set up on Spring Street at the former Hermann Hall. The reporter continued:

Representatives of the employes who remained away from work today expressed themselves as much pleased with the manner in which the general strike began in Adams . . . The fact that only a very few independent union members and non-union employes went into the mills this morning was the occasion of comment.⁴⁹

In the afternoon, Joseph White spoke to four hundred strikers who enjoyed accordion music along with White's oratory. White had already met with five hundred workers in Cohoes, NY and was headed to Easthampton, MA later in the day.⁵⁰ As it turned out, the Adams plants had been the only ones in the BFSa chain to be shut down on the first day of the strike; work went on not only in North Adams and Williamstown, but also in the affiliated mills in Brattleboro, Vermont, eastern Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

The next day, White spoke to a crowd estimated at 2,000, the largest rally of the campaign, at the Valley Street grounds. Following a mini-concert by local musicians, and with the aid of an amplifying system, White told the gathering that the mills in Utica and Fall River had been shut by the strikers and exhorted them to "keep the Flying Brigade in action until every mill in North Adams is closed." Josephine Kaczor, from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, spoke to the crowd in Polish. Like White, she was interrupted by applause, commending the local strikers on their "courage," and labeling the growing national strike "one of the grandest in history" (*Transcript*, 9/7/1934, 10).

Nationally and regionally, events moved quickly. Several states in the South called out their National Guard to maintain order after an increase in

violence and the deaths of several workers. By the second day, 360,000 textile workers across the South and North had joined the strike. The United Textile Workers union refused to consider arbitration until all mills nationwide shut down. Regionally, all the mills in Fall River, including the BFSA affiliates, had been idled, and in New Bedford, 14,000 workers struck in twenty-five mills.

THE STRIKE SPREADS LOCALLY

Locally, the strike spread quickly. By the end of the week, Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates mill workers in North Adams and in Williamstown walked off their jobs. During the supper hour on the day following the initial Adams strike, over one hundred Adams unionists, men and women alike, came to North Adams' Greylock Mill to picket and talk to their fellow workers about the strike. (A *Transcript* photo, headlined "Picketing at Greylock Mill Succeeds," pictured a line of more than a dozen women pickets with a leading placard stating "WE ALL ARE ONE."⁵¹) As was the custom, a delegation of four workers had previously informed North Adams Police Chief Michael W. Conlon of their intentions. The *Transcript* reported that:

The pickets moved steadily up and down before the mill carrying placards urging its employees to join them, and this invitation was verbally extended to some of the Greylock help who came out of the mill during the supper hour. When the machinery started to turn again for the evening operations after the supper hour a number of the force failed to go back in, while in the next half hour others came out by twos and threes. By 7:45 o'clock operations had been seriously crippled and the plant shut down, turning out the remainder of the night shift of approximately 250 people.⁵²

The next day, picketing at Greylock began before 6 o'clock with only fifteen to thirty of the 250-member day shift crossing the line. Within ten minutes even those holdouts had to leave as the company couldn't continue

production. In an ominous note, North Adams Public Welfare Commissioner James B. Ruane took the position that voluntary strikers at Greylock would be ineligible for city relief. At a BFSA plant in Warren, Rhode Island, local readers learned that fellow workers faced tear gas and police clubs as the strike there turned ugly. Nonetheless, local union officials began recruiting

unaffiliated Greylock employees and more than two hundred paid the one dollar membership fee to enroll in the growing union.⁵³

Worker solidarity in the neighborhood emerged during this period as well, reflecting nationwide struggles of activists to protect the homes of workers and the unemployed.⁵⁴ In early September, 1934, Strong, Hewat & Company attempted to auction off its mill housing in the Briggsville section of Clarksburg. In an article headlined "STRONG COMMUNITY SPIRIT IS SHOWN," the reporter described how a group of tenants, all of English background, formed their own corporation (the Co-operative Home Plan) to buy a twelve-tenement building. The local community used its power to pressure the auctioneer to reward local residents with housing at the right price. According to the *Transcript*:

The assembled crowd took an active and vociferous interest in the proceedings and cries of "sell it" were directed at the auctioneer in many cases where the occupant of the house had bid what the crowd considered a sufficient sum for the property.

The reporter gave an example of a woman who bid on her own house. Her determination wavered as the bidding climbed higher. After her final offer, presumably the highest she could afford, "the shouts of 'sell it' were so strong that the auctioneer stated his doubt of the advisability of any further bidding against the woman and sold her the house at this price." The pressure apparently remained strong throughout and, as it turned out, only four of the twenty pieces of property went to people living outside of Briggsville.⁵⁵ Community solidarity clearly overlapped with worker solidarity.

As the Greylock strike continued, Joseph White once again addressed an open air mass rally of some four hundred at a field near the Greylock Mill in North Adams on September 7. Standing on the back of a truck in the middle of the field, White told the crowd through an amplifying system "that he was gratified to see the workers out in Greylock in view of his inability to organize them two years ago." With the cotton workers virtually all out in support of the strike, he saw the next task as one of enlisting local woolen and print workers in the cause, a unified effort which would bring stability to the industry and decent hours and wages to textile workers. Using the popular term for groups of strikers moving from mill to mill to spread the strike, White expressed hope "that your flying squadron will go to Blackinton and Briggsville so as to have the woolen workers join in this great cause which means the stabilization of industry . . . and that can be done only by collective action." He also stated that "we want to know if the employes of local print

Adams Pickets Close Williamstown Mill



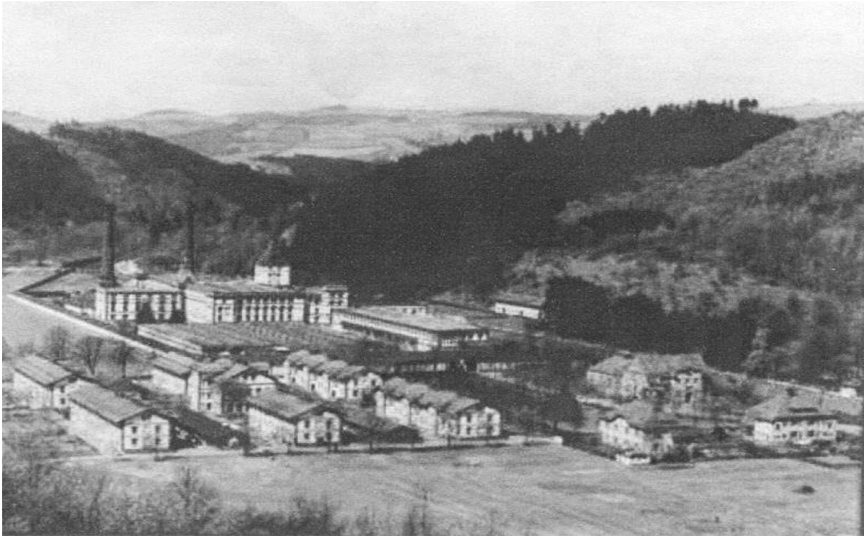
Picketing At Greylock Mill Succeeds



Both images from the *Transcript*, September 7, 1934

EDITOR'S NOTE: Despite the event's importance, this strike has been all but forgotten in Berkshires. The only images that remain are these grainy photos captured from microfilm reels of the local North Adams Transcript newspaper. They are reprinted here to provide a lens into a forgotten local past.

Branded as "The Voice of the Northern Berkshires Since 1843," the daily *Transcript* covered North Adams and Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, Hancock, Lanesborough, New Ashford, and Williamstown, Massachusetts, along with Pownal and Stamford, Vermont. In 1896 the *Transcript* was bought by the Hardman family who were widely regarded as "good stewards" for the next eighty years. In 1975 it was named the best small daily newspaper in New England. In 2014 it was merged into the Berkshire Eagle and an important voice of local history was lost. In the process, it is not clear what happened to the original photos held in the *Transcript's* photo archives. Author Maynard Seider writes that "The best I can get from asking people who really care is that they were 'lost.'" If any HJM readers are aware of other surviving photos of the 1934 strike events, please contact the editor.



Overview of the Greylock Mills in North Adams and the company housing surrounding the mill, date unknown.

Greylock mill was acquired by the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates.
Photo Courtesy of North Adams Historical Society.

works are with us or against us.” White concluded by invoking what he called the Biblical reminder that “God helps those who help themselves.”⁵⁶

The union leader’s harshest words were reserved for North Adams welfare commissioner James Ruane, who had threatened the withholding of city aid from striking workers. White called Ruane “the first understrapper, the first small city official who has had the audacity to tell the people who employ and support him that they will not get anything if they do not agree with his policy and scab.” White warned that if Ruane followed through on his threats, then the mayor would be asked to remove him. If the mayor refused, White announced that the voters should remove the mayor.

Mary Hillyer, a representative of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers union, assailed the industry’s treatment of workers over the previous few years. She called on the strikers to build good unions to “keep their employers in line and be sure of proper treatment for themselves.” She concluded by exhorting the crowd to go on to greater victories: “We have been living in a bosses’ world but we are building a workers’ world now to plan our future destiny. Continue the fight until you win.”⁵⁷

Once the workforces from Adams and North Adams had joined together, over two hundred strikers from both communities traveled to Williamstown, where they met their fellow Berkshire Fine Spinning Association workers at the Greylock “B” mill during their supper hour. According to the local reporter, about half “shuffled up and down the sidewalk in front of the Cole Avenue gate while the others walked the backyards lying between Mill and Arnold streets where many of the mill employes have homes.” Replicating the pattern at the North Adams Greylock plant the night before, very few of the roughly 250-member night shift of the Williamston workforce returned after the break, and the mill closed down.⁵⁸ The next morning, although a quarter of the one hundred employee day shift crossed the picket line, the plant simply shut down. The caption under a *Transcript* photo headlined “Adams Pickets Close Williamstown Mill” reads as follows:

Photo shows scene at gate of Williamstown mill, varying emotions of indecision, determination, confusion and apprehension being registered by the expressions and attitudes of those leaving their work for a period, the length of which no one knows while the pickets, who do not appear in the picture, are keeping up their march.”⁵⁹

It had been a good week for North Berkshire strikers. In a matter of only three days, four thousand local textile workers had joined the national

strike. Having produced not a yard of cloth, they filled their week with mass rallies, picketing, meetings, and discussions. In an atmosphere of increasing solidarity, the local workforce had discovered the power of its numbers and determination, as they forced the shutdown of one mill after another. Although beginning with just one base of experienced, unionized workers, North Berkshire residents responded with enthusiasm to national events and local needs. Clearly energized by the thousands across the South and Northeast who had walked out, and spearheaded by the militant Adams textile workers who initiated the local strike, non-unionized workers in neighboring North Adams and Williamstown proved receptive to the presence and arguments of the “flying squadrons” which had become a common tactic in the national strike and a very effective one. An historian of the national strike notes that “the initial success of the strikers’ flying squadrons in shutting down mills, especially in the Carolinas and Georgia, gave the public ample reasons to be impressed by the UTWA’s apparent formidability.”⁶⁰

With the closing of the Williamstown mill, the Hoosac mill on Union Street in North Adams remained the only local cotton mill in operation. The mill’s legal receivership status kept its owners from directly running the business and also made it illegal to picket or interfere there. So while the flying squadrons stayed away, the *Transcript* reported that “personal visits had been made over the week-end to some of the mill’s employes and the strike situation was discussed during the supper hour with the result that a few (about a quarter of the weavers) stayed out.”⁶¹

WOOLEN MILL WORKERS REFUSE TO STRIKE

Local woolen mills, however, remained in operation despite the call for a national strike. UTWA Vice President White encouraged the North Berkshire cotton mill strikers to bring their “flying squadron . . . to the Blackinton and Briggsville woolen mills and induce their workers to join in the general strike.”⁶² In response to the plans to widen the local strike, the Strong, Hewat & Company office in Briggsville stated that the firm would be open on Monday and that “[w]e welcome a show-down.” The company statement added that its “wages are the highest in the industry,” and that “[t] here is general contentment among our workers” who “are not interested in the least in the strike movement.”⁶³ Indeed, this may very well have been the case. The hesitancy of the woolen workers to strike undoubtedly reflected their higher status and pay as compared to cotton workers. But they also feared for their jobs because at the same time that the company trumpeted their high wages, management announced a downturn in business. The

latter, they explained, meant only 80 instead of 150 workers would be called to work on Monday.⁶⁴

With the national strike into its second week, the number of idled textile workers climbed to over 409,000 nationwide. Violence had spread from the South into New England, and several states asked for Federal troop intervention. In Honea Path, South Carolina, private guards shot and killed seven mill picketers. In Saylesville, Rhode Island, thousands of strikers trying to shut their mill battled state troopers, resulting in 132 injuries.⁶⁵ North Berkshire residents surely knew of the physical dangers of striking. The local press covered the national scene and, for example, a photo of state troopers firing tear gas appeared in the *Transcript* on September 12, 1934 under the headline “Three Shot in Rhode Island Textile Strike Riot.”

Monday came, and fifty Adams strikers responded to Strong Hewat’s challenge by traveling to Briggsville. Not intimidated by “squads of police patrolmen appear[ing] on Church street and Ashland street, taking up stations on the main approaches to the city from the south,” the Adams



1934 National Textile Strike (Woonsocket, RI)

Nearly one million textile workers struck from Maine to Alabama. In Rhode Island the national guard was called out, a state of emergency was declared, and workers were shot and killed.

contingent crossed the city line.⁶⁶ The Strong Hewat employees spent much of the day away from their work stations, meeting amongst themselves to discuss the strike and to voice their intentions. Although no union existed at Strong Hewat, departmental committee members regularly represented the workforce.⁶⁷ The weave shop employees began the discussions, but workers from the picker room and dye shop, the only other departments on the clock that morning, joined them. But since only a reduced workforce attended the meeting, the participants decided to call in all the workers and vote again that afternoon. The full group (said by the *Transcript* to be “the highest paid woolen workers in New England”) did meet but voted to oppose a strike by a margin of 129-116.⁶⁸

In contrast, the company’s sixty skilled weavers deliberated and decided not to return to work. They felt that the vote underrepresented “the mill’s real workers” since the election included “some people who had not worked for six months and some girls who had been working only for the summer.” Although refusing to work, they nonetheless “assured Mr. Hewat that they had no complaints or grievances against the mill or its management but felt that they ought to participate in the general textile strike for the betterment of conditions in the industry.” As a further gesture of goodwill, the weavers “offered to send one or two men in to make samples,” that could be used for future business. The company responded by closing the mill down “until further notice.”⁶⁹

On another front, a twenty-five car convoy headed from Adams to Pittsfield, where police stopped them alongside Pontoosuc Lake.⁷⁰ They arrested two men who could not produce a license and registration and impounded their cars. The rest of the flying squadron reached the Berkshire mill gates in Pittsfield, but left when ordered by Chief of Police J. L. Sullivan, who claimed “that Pittsfield workers were contented and did not want to strike, that the picketers were there to incite trouble and that they would be kept out.” John Hall, a spokesman for the strikers and organizer of the Electric Industrial Workers in Pittsfield, claimed that the strikers “were ordered out illegally, that they had a right to picket and that they would return to reassert and exercise that right.”⁷¹ According to a Pittsfield historian, “back they came, individually or in small groups, and a Pittsfield local of the United Textile Workers of America was organized at a large meeting in Curtin Hall on Peck’s Road.”⁷² The *Transcript* also reported that the Boston police commissioner had received an order for 100 night sticks from the North Adams police department, and that the clubs had been delivered. However, according to Chief Conlon, “this was a routine order for departmental supplies which would have gone in regardless of the strike situation.”⁷³

The following day, about seventy-five picketers arrived at North Adams' Blackinton woolen mill in private cars and began a quiet march in front of the mill during the employee lunch break. For the first time, the flying squadron had not given advance notice to the police. Chief Conlon and a squad of officers rushed to Blackinton. The *Transcript* reported:

Jumping from his car there, the chief strode up to the leader of the pickets and demanded that he and his followers leave North Adams. The picket leader promptly drew from his pocket a piece of paper on which was typed what purported to be an excerpt from the law which stated that peaceful picketing might be done provided there was no molestation of or talking with those who desired to work.

Stymied, Chief Conlon ordered the picketers to "throw away the sticks to which their placards were attached." The strikers complied, "resuming their march holding the cards in their hands.

The Blackinton employees, numbering more than one hundred, crossed the line, but rather than actually begin work, they decided to meet and take a strike vote. As the Strong Hewat workers had done previously, they called in as many fellow employees as they could reach who had not been at work that day. Before the vote, an overseer reminded the workers of the company's financial difficulties, stating that "a shut-down might mean that it would collapse and be permanently closed." Influenced perhaps by the overseer's warning, the strike vote lost 99 to 28 and the workers returned to work "[j]ubilantly for the most part."⁷⁴

At this point, the recognized cotton strike leaders lowered the level of their rhetoric. In an informal discussion with the Strong Hewat wool weavers, Fred Major informed them that no matter what decision was reached, "there would be no further picketing at the mill." The company had closed down the operation after the weavers walked out, with no immediate sign of a re-opening. According to the *Transcript*, at least some of the weavers had regretted their action.⁷⁵

STRIKE STANDOFF

The next day, on his way to a speech in Easthampton, United Textile Workers of America Vice President Joseph R. White gave a pep talk to a crowd of about sixty at strike headquarters in Adams. Claiming he was "very well satisfied" with the strike so far, White went on to say that if all mill workers

in the nation joined the strike, it would be settled in two days. According to White, every single cotton mill made profits, but paid out much more in dividends than wages. Then White exhorted the crowd, "You're not on strike in sympathy with anyone except that you are on strike in sympathy with yourselves. . . . [W]e've got to hold our line."⁷⁶

Strikers also received support from a Democratic candidate for state representative whose district covered the northern Berkshires, Attorney Daniel E. Kiley. Speaking to members of Local 1711, United Textile Workers, Kiley stated, "I am heartily in accord with this strike and feel sure that its spirit cannot be beaten." Kiley lamented the fact that labor had been harmed by the Depression. Then he made the point that:

Instead of the man who was able to pay carrying the burden, the load was shifted onto the shoulders of the man who was not able to bear it. The sound economic principle that ability to buy creates demand was discarded in the hope that diminished coffers could be refilled over-night.

Kiley promised if elected to confer with the unions to see if legislation could be enacted to protect wages and the conditions of work without the need for striking. And finally, he concluded that he would "do all in my power to help Roosevelt give the workingman better conditions in the future than he has had in the past."⁷⁷

As the local strike entered its third week, the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates mills remained closed. About 60% of the Adams textile workers had joined the UTWA. Local activism continued as some one hundred Adams strikers journeyed to Cohoes, NY, Joseph White's hometown, for possible picket duty.⁷⁸ That same day the *Transcript* printed a declaration from the Adams strike committee comparing their situation to that of the slaves in the South:

[T]he manufacturers have invaded the rights of the workingman so deeply that they do not wish to give up their usurped ownership of the working man's right to a decent living without a bitter battle. Just as in the days of slavery the slave owners would not give up their rights to the slaves' freedom without a civil war.

Waxing eloquent, the strike committee's declaration continued on a fiery note:

Now will we be crushed? Will we go back 150 years and become slaves like the colored men of the South used to be? No. This strike is a strike not only to prevent future strikes but to prevent something worse than a strike. We are now fighting for a right to live as human beings are fit to live. This is not a battle of revenge but a battle for a decent living.

The strike committee praised Francis J. Gorman, the UTWA's national president, who had proclaimed that both President Roosevelt and the UTWA (as opposed to the textile manufacturers) did "that which was right and constitutional." Gorman criticized the manufacturers' violation of worker rights to "free speech, free picket and free public expression of our rights as given by the constitution." He also deplored the fact that they didn't have the right to work. He asked:

[W]hy in God's world were not we given that right [to work] during the depression? And why in God's world again do they as our bread givers, if we call them that, throw many good men and women upon pauper lists because of their so-called efficiency or stretch out? And where in God's world is there a law or principle which gives us the right to starve or commit slow suicide?

According to Gorman, such actions could not be justified. In contrast to the greed and selfishness of mill owners he lauded the ethics of the working class:

[W]e working men will justly say that there is a law and principle that says "Thou shalt not starve thyself nor permit thy neighbor to starve." And that is why we are fighting to avoid this slow starvation in this land of plenty.

Although the strike committee wanted equity, it didn't endorse total equality. In criticizing one of the manufacturers' responses to the code, the lowering of all workers' wages towards the same minimum, they supported the recognition of skill differences and differential rewards among textile workers: the spinner is, after all, "more skilled than the bobbin boy," and the weaver deserves "more pay than the scrubber."⁷⁹

At around the same time, a second candidate for the northern Berkshire district seat in the state legislature, Edmund R. St. John, spoke to Local 43 of the United Textile Workers union. He highlighted his strong record in support

of workers and criticized two of his opponents in the upcoming primary, making the point that he had the best chance of defeating the Republican incumbent. St. John then reminded his audience of his background in organized labor as a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. He asserted that “strikes and walkouts are not new to me. I have been in both and have been chairman of a strike which cost me a job . . . I am telling you about myself to show that my love for labor was not acquired with my desire to run for office.”⁸⁰

A few days later, in one final burst of militancy, “a crowd of cheering marchers” picketed the Berkshire Woolen and Wyandotte mills in Pittsfield, whose workers also joined the strike. Albert Sprague Coolidge, a Harvard professor and Socialist candidate for U.S. Senate, led the crowd. That evening, Coolidge traveled to an outdoor meeting at Monument Square in North Adams where he discussed the principles of socialism and pointed out the vital differences between his party and the Democratic Party, a strong supporter of capitalism. “All that has increased under the NRA,” said Coolidge, “is the profits of the big corporations.” The candidate “called upon the workers to unite and build up a strong, clean, and independent party which should be able to win control of the government to make and carry out the laws which will be necessary to make the Socialist plan a reality.”⁸¹

President Roosevelt had appointed Governor John G. Winant of New Hampshire to chair a three-person board to study and make recommendations for industry and labor. The mill owners refused the board’s offer to arbitrate the strike issues. It quickly became clear that the board would have no power beyond recommendations. On September 22, in response to an appeal from President Roosevelt, the UTWA agreed to call off the national strike with no apparent formal changes in the code’s application.⁸²

The following day, Joseph R. White addressed the local strikers at their Adams headquarters. He discussed the terms of the settlement, declaring it a “big victory” for the workers who are “vindicated and received everything they contended for.” In reality, although the settlement made it more difficult for employers to increase employee workloads, wages and benefits generally remained the same.⁸³ On the whole, the strike proved to be a failure.

In North Berkshire, 3,600 strikers returned to work a week later, on Monday, October 1, 1934. On Monday, October 1, 1934.⁸⁴ Now the local unions tried to augment the assistance the strapped workers needed. In Adams the union asked merchants and others for commodities and cash contributions for a relief fund. A benefit show for the fund was held in Adams at the Atlas Theatre. In North Adams, besides those on welfare, about

forty Greylock Mill workers had received employment through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.⁸⁵

The *Transcript* closed its coverage of the strike on October 1, 1934 with a final hopeful paragraph:

Particular efforts were made by the idle hands and their leaders, by mill management and by public authorities in all the Northern Berkshire communities to avoid irritations and conflict and consequently in this section the tie-up of production was marked by none of the incidents that occurred in other sections and it was possible for the mills to reopen and the workers to return in this vicinity today with no special local problems and no bitter local issues to be met.⁸⁶

Using the same adjective—bitter—but employed in a more realistic vein, a leading historian of the strike concluded that “[t]he great textile strike of September 1934 left no heritage beyond bitter memories.”⁸⁷

1935: LOCAL STRIKERS ON THEIR OWN

Despite the widespread activism and solidarity throughout the Northeast and South, textile industrialists held firm and the National Recovery Administration’s promises to aid workers didn’t materialize. Nationally, the United Textile Workers of America leadership suffered a huge loss of prestige by the strike’s failure. Locals expressed less confidence in the UTWA. The following year, North Berkshire workers would refuse outside union intervention during a three-month strike that began at the Greylock Mill in North Adams.

Depression-era work remained slack. By April of 1935 the Greylock Mill had been shut down for several weeks. The company offered to reopen the mill, but with wage reductions as high as 50%. In a secret ballot, 450 workers voted against the reduction, while only twenty-five voted to accept. Despite the vote, management stood firm on its offer and the local newspaper headlined “Greylock Strike Looms; Mill Liquidation.”⁸⁸

Faced with a weak treasury, the local tried to raise money by selling beer at dances for twenty cents a glass, in violation of a law that the North Adams police enforced. Nonetheless, the local union continued to hold fundraising dances. At the same time, union members from throughout the Berkshire Fine Spinning chain in North Berkshire, Fall River, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island had come together to form the Berkshire Textile Council.

The Council held its meetings in Springfield, Massachusetts and elected Greylock's union president Rene Ouellette as president of the entire Council. Born in Fall River, where his family ran a boarding house for mill workers, Ouellette moved with his family to Utica, New York and then North Adams, where they had relatives. In 1917, at the age of fourteen, he began work in the Greylock Mill. By the time of his election to the local's presidency he had eighteen years of seniority. Physically strong and outspoken, he must have been a very popular co-worker.⁸⁹ However, throughout the month of May 1935, organizers struggled to obtain strike support. As Ouellette remembered it, "We went out on strike because they were going to put more work on everyone. Some workers thought unions were no good; some didn't want to pay out money for dues."⁹⁰

Craft unions and older skilled loom weavers opposed the strike, and division among the 2,900 Adams employees soon became obvious. On May 17, 1935, the Textile Workers of Adams, an independent union of Polish workers, voted 400-40 to go back to work under the company's new offer. Even though a previous mass meeting for all Adams workers had rejected that offer, the Polish union stood as the largest organization, bigger than the total membership of the three local UTWA unions. More significantly, about two-thirds of all the Adams employees belonged to no union at all.⁹¹ At the same time that Adams workers wavered in their commitment to the strike, workers at the Fall River and Rhode Island plants also reneged on their promise to strike.

The UTWA's national leadership threatened a national strike if old wage rates were not restored. Local unions, however, refused any national intervention. Rene Ouellette recalled telling a UTWA representative, "Stay the hell away. When we need you, we will call you."⁹² Locals now apparently preferred to handle their own problems with management, since the national leadership had failed in obtaining benefits from the 1934 strike.

On June 3, the Berkshire Textile Council issued a strike call in two days if the old wages were not restored. Unfortunately, at the same time, the loomfixers' local, UTWA #43 in Adams, voted to return to work. The company outflanked the union by agreeing to cut the loomfixers' wages by "only" a dollar a week and also threatened to remove the looms from one of the Adams mills if a strike materialized. With that vote, the loomfixers broke a large chunk of the regional textile solidarity.⁹³

The Fine Spinning workers had reached the ninth week of efforts to regain their old wage rates. Management promised to reopen the mills even if a strike became official. Not many Adams workers were expected to strike at that time, as everyone felt the economic pressure of being out of work for so

long. Community pressure added to the wavering support of employees to the cause. Ouellette remembered the advice given to parishioners by the priest at the Holy Family Church, the French church, in the Greylock neighborhood of North Adams: “The priest told us, ‘Half a loaf is better than none.’”⁹⁴

Still, at a mass meeting of union members, local officials continued to plan a strike if the mills dared to reopen with the wage reductions.⁹⁵ After two more days of stalemate, the *Transcript* reported that on June 13 the BFSA had closed its Warren, Rhode Island plant. The newspaper highlighted the economic distress faced by the unemployed Warren workers. Finally, the local union accepted defeat. As Ouellette put it, “We were supposed to be one,” but the company divided the workforce by offering some occupational groups better deals than others, by threatening to remove the looms out of one of the Adams mills, and finally by simply closing down the BFSA mill in Warren. “They [BFSA] told us, ‘Take [the wage reductions] or we will shut the mill down here too.’”⁹⁶

Mill #3 in Adams reopened first, with five hundred employees called to work on June 17 and three hundred more the following day. The returnees faced no pickets. Two days later, Greylock reopened after nearly eleven weeks. The corporation applied the wage reductions unevenly, with some employees losing only a few cents and others much more. Most workers returned to hated stretch-outs. As Nicholas Thores recalled, “They increased the work load. Weavers used to run eight to twelve looms; now [it has] more than doubled. Some of the people were put out of work.” Weavers now had to operate ten more looms with no increase in wages. A weaver who had asked Ouellette to change his vote now apologized to him and told him, “You were right to want to strike.”⁹⁷

Ouellette’s own wage declined from \$31 a week before the strike to \$17 after. Immediately after the mill reopened, the company brought in the hated time and motion “systematizers” to check the workers’ time rate on each job. As Ouellette remembers:

The systematizer would get on a window over there and he’d watch us work. And if you had two minutes to yourself, he’d put that down. If I had five minutes to myself, he’d put that down and the next day you had another pile of work to keep you busy . . . I had to leave that job to go to the shoe shop. I put in my notice that I was done, and twenty minutes later, they knew it in Fall River [BFSA headquarters]. They were happy that I wasn’t going to cause them any more trouble.

Although his presidency was relatively short, Ouellette “enjoyed” it, “trying to do something good for people, and it was for my own good too. I’d fight like hell.”⁹⁸ Years later Ouellette became a heavy equipment operator for the city of North Adams and president of the public employees’ union.

The failure of the 1934 and 1935 strikes undoubtedly weighed heavily on North Adams cotton mill workers. They had organized, mobilized and sacrificed, but with little material payback. They worked without striking during the coming years, trying to survive the Depression. Their connection with national unions had grown, though with a skepticism of their efficacy. Even when the economy improved during the World War II years, they held back from joining the newer CIO unions, although it also seemed that the more militant CIO textile union, the Textile Workers Union of America, hesitated to organize in North Berkshire.

1937 CIO TEXTILE ORGANIZING DRIVE

With plants throughout New England, the Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates had become the “World’s Largest Manufacturers of Fine Cotton Goods” by the late 1930s. Some 6,600 North Berkshire residents worked in textiles, a little more than half in BFSA plants. In March, 1937, the BFSA announced a 10% wage increase for all its employees, a raise that affected 2,750 employees in their Adams and North Adams mills. The previous October, the BFSA had increased wages by 5% and “[a] second increase of like amount was made less than two months later when the general wage increase movement was sweeping the country just before Christmas.” With the add-on of all three raises, BFSA employees were earning over 20% more than they had just five months earlier.

Although, at first glance, these local wage hikes seem to have been attributable to an uptick in the textile industry, they might also have been instituted as a defensive measure against militant organizing by the new labor federation, the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a likelihood noted by the *Transcript*:

The increases were announced on the eve of the campaign which the Committee for Industrial Organization has declared it would conduct to organize New England’s textile workers. Sidney Hillman of New York, who will direct the unionization campaign, proclaimed yesterday [March 18, 1937] that this would be the greatest effort of the C.I.O. and the greatest effort of its kind in labor history and added “It will succeed.”⁹⁹

In fact, nationwide, the textile industry tried to counter the CIO drive by raising wages by 10% and cutting back on the typical fifty-hour work week.¹⁰⁰

Fresh off major victories in organizing workers in auto and steel, the CIO launched the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC) in March of 1937. Nationally known labor leader Sidney Hillman, who also headed the



United Textile Workers of America (UTWA) Leadership, c. 1933

The UTWA Emergency Committee, which included Horace Riviere and Joseph White, shown filing a protest against textile mills that had refused to obey rulings of the National Textile Labor Relations board. From the left, seated: Francis J. Gorman, Thomas F. McMahon, James Starr, and John A. Peel. Standing: Horace A. Riviere, William F. Kelly, and Joseph R. White. Source: Library of Congress. Thomas F. McMahon served as president of the UTWA until 1937, when he was succeeded by Francis J. Gorman, who headed the union's strike committee in 1934. Horace A. Riviere had spoken in North Adams in 1932 (see endnote 37) and in 1937 he came a CIO organizer for the Textile Workers Organizing Committee.

Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America union, led the textile campaign. Historian Clete Daniel writes that

The momentum created by its triumphs in steel and autos and by the lesser but still important victories it had won in rubber, electrical manufacturing, and other mass-production industries over the preceding months, invested the CIO . . . with a mythic power and presence it would never again enjoy.¹⁰¹

These victories in other industries had been achieved through a bold and unprecedented new tactic: the sit-down strike. An increasingly common tactic employed by the CIO, workers would refuse to work, but would remain in the plant, until a deal, often union recognition, was negotiated with the employer.¹⁰² According to Daniel, “The sit-down strike, a tactic that, by virtue of its audacity and frequency, came to symbolize the bold and unruly character of the new industrial unionism, was, by the time the TWOC appeared on the scene, an almost normal feature of the new labor organizing.”¹⁰³

Hillman’s proclamation to organize textile workers came just a month before the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Wagner Act (the National Labor Relations Act), granting workers the legal right to join unions and collectively bargain. Since the collective bargaining provision (7a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act had been struck down by the Court in 1935 along with the entire National Recovery Administration in May, uncertainty had reigned in labor circles about legal and social support for unionization. Passage of the Wagner Act in late August, 1935 brought back some optimism, but employers continued to fiercely resist unionization efforts. The Supreme Court decision on April 12, 1937 declaring the Wagner Act constitutional proved to be a major victory for union campaigns.

In fact, just nine days later, the reenergized textile union, now known as the Textile Workers Organizing Committee, announced plans to organize some 10,000 textile workers in the Holyoke, Massachusetts area under the direction of Horace A. Riviere of Manchester, New Hampshire. The CIO union expected to focus on Holyoke, with its 8,000 textile workers, but was also committed to organizing in Springfield, Ludlow, Chicopee, Easthampton, Westfield and Northampton.¹⁰⁴ However, the notice excluded North Berkshire and even Berkshire County as a whole.

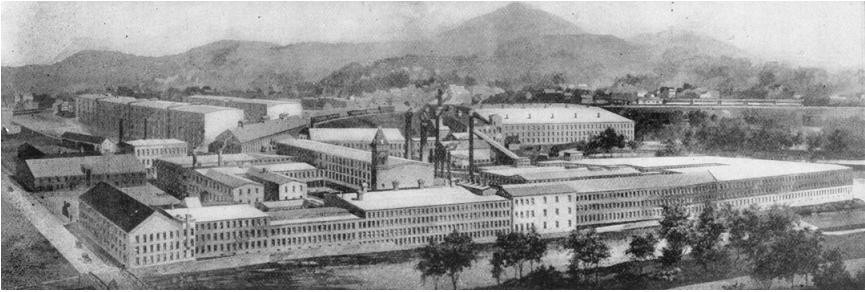
Still in its infancy, with a focus on organizing, the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC) followed the earlier organizing drives in auto (Automobile Workers Organizing Committee) and steel (Steel Workers

Organizing Committee). Despite the omission of Berkshire County from its territory, textile workers in the southern part of the county reached out to Horace Riviere for help. Striking workers at the Monument Mills in the small town of Housatonic, some 37 miles south of North Adams, contacted Riviere for aid and he obliged, sending organizers from the Holyoke office. After a short two-week campaign, the CIO union overwhelmingly won an election at the plant by a vote of 402 to 32.¹⁰⁵

Around the same time, further north in Pittsfield, 115 tannery workers at the Dichtman-Widen plant struck, demanding that the company recognize their CIO-affiliated union, the National Leather Workers Association. Further CIO organizing continued in Pittsfield with the announcement that employees of two factories, Glix Brand Underwear and Berkshire Button, would meet to discuss affiliation with the CIO-affiliated International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. In addition, the United Electrical and Radio Workers of America (UE) scheduled a union drive at the giant General Electric plant in Pittsfield. Also in the month of April, 1937, readers of the local North Berkshire newspaper learned that a CIO organizer had met with workers at the Greenfield Tap and Dye Corporation, located 36 miles to the east of North Adams, in Franklin County.¹⁰⁶

The Supreme Court's upholding of the constitutionality of the Wagner Act led to an ambitious plan for organizing in North Berkshire in that same month of April. However, this ultimately unsuccessful proposal did not emanate from a CIO affiliate but from a far more conservative union. On April 15, beneath the headline "Plan Independent Union of Print Works Workers," readers learned that a nationwide union of textile printers hoped to organize over 1,800 unorganized workers in the Arnold Print Works, with a plant in Adams and in North Adams, and the Windsor Print Works in North Adams. The union, the Associated Workers of Printing, Finishing and Allied Industries, favored working with management to solve problems rather than using the strike weapon. Although the union hoped to organize all print works employees under a CIO-type industrial model, its no-strike policy sharply differentiated it from its competitor, the TWOC. As it turned out, however, the diversity of crafts within the several print works led to competing interests, undermining any general desire for a union of all print workers. Only forty workers attended what had been billed as a "mass meeting."¹⁰⁷

A local union then jumped into the print works fray, attempting to succeed where the national union had met defeat. The Calico Workers' Union, an independent union which had been formed in 1934 at the Arnold Print Works, announced its intention to organize fellow employees who had



The Arnold Print Works' Marshall Street plant, c. 1890.

It was one of three complexes the company operated in North Adams.

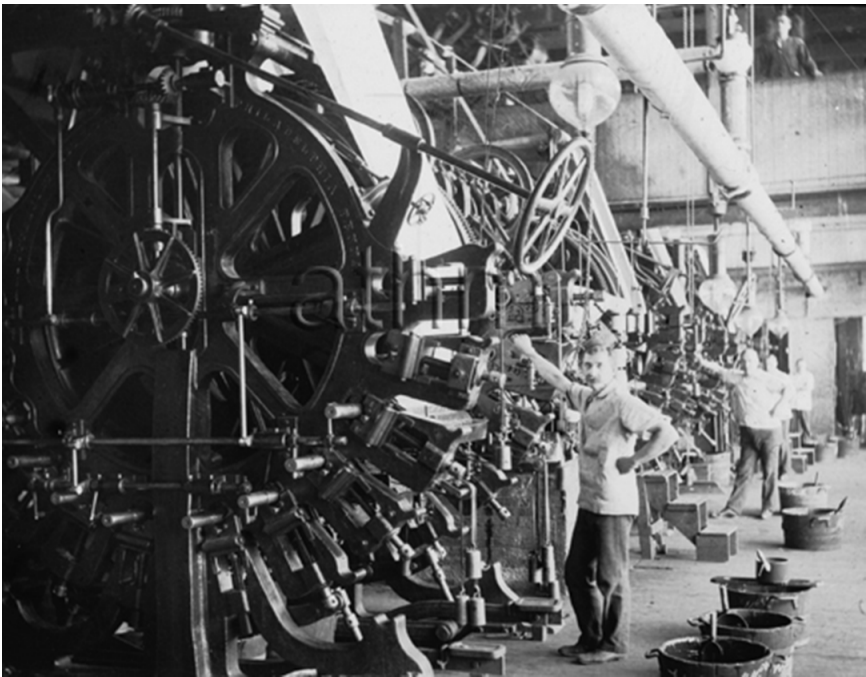
no union affiliation. They had some success with the less skilled workers, who earned significantly less than the printers and engravers, who already had their own craft unions, but did not generate large-scale worker involvement at that point.¹⁰⁸

Although neither AFL nor CIO unions initiated organizing drives among North Berkshire textile workers as the 1930s neared an end, it did not mean that other workers foreswore the possibility of militant action.¹⁰⁹ In late summer, 1938, workers at the Brightwater Paper Company in the Zylonite section of Adams went out on strike. All 250 non-unionized papermaking employees walked out, protesting a five cent an hour wage reduction. Frustration had built up for some time as the reduction had been put into effect two months earlier. The *Transcript* reported that a “sizable group” had assembled:

across the road from the Brightwater plant and there seated in chairs and on steps . . . remained during the greater part of the morning discussing the strike situation in general. . . . They . . . stated that they are not organized in any union, as was the case in the past when different groups at the plant went out on short-lived strikes, but instead on “their own.” . . . It was said that today’s strike is the first one at the Brightwater plant in which all of the employees, except executives and the office force, have participated.¹¹⁰

The lack of newspaper coverage suggests that the strike lasted no more than two days, and that specific work stoppage appears to be the only one in the North Berkshire region during the late 1930s. Wages of mill workers in the region increased from 1937 to 1940, a key factor that might

account for the absence of union activity, and as noted earlier, may have been brought about as a defensive measure by the mill owners to keep the CIO from organizing in their plants.¹¹¹ In Adams, the Polish unionists who initiated the local textile strike in 1934 and widened the strike with their flying squadrons had also benefitted from wage increases, but by the late thirties, had found other higher wage opportunities for work at General Electric in Pittsfield and Sprague Electric in North Adams.¹¹² In any case, the lack of CIO textile activity in North Berkshire, whether because of lack of interest from local workers or CIO organizers themselves, meant that the area would have to wait until 1945 for the new labor federation to take hold in the region. This contrasted with the nearby Pioneer Valley, where Textile Workers Union of America organizers affiliated with the CIO would prove successful at organizing unions for textile workers in Holyoke, Chicopee, and Easthampton in the late 1930s and 1940s.



Arnold Print Works, Printing Machines.

Four men stand in front of large print rollers that could produce 16 colors in 1/2 revolution for printing on textiles. 1906.

EXCEPTIONS: THE CIO, TRADES WORKERS, AND SPRAGUE

Although historians describe and celebrate CIO victories that sparked huge labor movements in large cities like Detroit, Akron, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Pittsburgh, with militant sit-downs and general strikes, the experience of smaller locales may more likely match the localism evidenced in North Berkshire. In Muncie, Indiana, for example, the representative small city that the Lynds studied in their famous 1937 study, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, General Motors workers also rebuffed the efforts of CIO organizers.¹¹³

A review of labor activism in North Berkshire during the 1930s also fails to find examples of coalitions forming between textile employees and other industrial workers or workers in the trades. The trades employed some five hundred North Berkshire workers, many in unions that came together in the North Adams Central Labor Union (CLU). A diverse group, CLU's membership included AFL affiliates of carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, musicians and bartenders. More politically active, and with a much longer history than any of the industrial unions, the CLU picketed non-union shops and boycotted non-union tradespeople.¹¹⁴ Besides advocating for their own members, the CLU took outside political stands. For example, they called for an end to child labor nationwide and locally. They also opposed the North Adams city council proposal mandating a police permit to picket, assemble, parade, or speak out in public, which was considered a civil liberties issue.¹¹⁵ However, their labor/union activity remained inward, their chief political citywide influence coming in 1940, when they endorsed Faxon Bowen for mayor.

However, another significant twist to the story of unionism in the North Berkshires in the 1930s is illustrated by the case of Sprague Specialties, a new firm producing capacitors. While CIO organizers bypassed local textile mills, they made their way to Sprague, where they found a critical mass of support.¹¹⁶

In an abandoned textile mill in the Beaver section of North Adams, Sprague Specialties Company had begun operation in 1930, turning out capacitors for the growing radio market. The company, renamed Sprague Electric Company in the 1940s, had relocated from Quincy, Massachusetts. It would soon become the biggest employer in the North Berkshires. In the 1930s, however, production stayed relatively stagnant, although employee organizing had begun.¹¹⁷ The national electrical worker's union affiliated with the CIO, United Electrical (UE), had shown an interest in organizing at Sprague, seeking to replace the complacent company union. UE had



Arnold Print Works/Sprague Electric Company

Today the famed MASS MoCA (Museum of Contemporary Arts) is located on the site of this complex of 26 renovated 19th-century factory buildings. The site was formerly the home of Arnold Print Works (1860-1942) and Sprague Electric Company (1942-1985). In 1860, the print works O. Arnold and Company was established. It utilized the latest equipment for printing cloth and greatly profited from large government contracts to supply fabric for the Union Army. By 1900 Arnold Print Works was the largest employer in North Adams. Encompassing twenty-six buildings, it employed some 3,200 people and was one of the leading producers of printed textiles in the world. However, falling cloth prices and the lingering effects of the great Depression forced the company to close its Marshall Street operation in 1942, consolidating to smaller facilities in neighboring Adams. Sprague Electric Company bought the site, converting the mill into an electronics plant. Sprague scientists and technicians designed and manufactured crucial components for advanced systems, including the atomic bomb. After WWII, Sprague was a major research and development center. By 1966 Sprague employed 4,137 workers in a community of 18,000, existing almost as a city within a city. Until the mid-1980s Sprague produced electrical components for the consumer electronics market, but competition from lower-priced goods produced abroad led to declining sales. In 1985, the company, now owned by Penn Central Corporation, closed this plant.

Source: www.massmoca.org/about/history

already established an organizing foothold at the sizable General Electric plant eighteen miles to the south.

Sparked by a growing interest shown by Sprague workers, UE President James Carey traveled to North Adams in 1938, where he spoke to four hundred Sprague employees. Encouraged by the UE perspective, local workers voted to form UE Local #249; not surprisingly, management refused to recognize it.

The first union at Sprague, founded in 1937 and fully supported by the company, was appropriately named the Sprague Company Union (SCU). However, it lasted less than a year: on April 12, the Supreme Court ruled the Wagner Act constitutional, thereby making company unions illegal. At that point, Sprague management buried the SCU and helped birth the Independent Condenser Workers Union (ICW). A year later, after UE established its own local, taking in some of the ICW leadership, ICW #2 was formed. UE appealed to the National Labor Relations Board, arguing that it too was a company union. In 1940, however, the NLRB ruled that while ICW # 1 could be called a company union, ICW #2 met the criteria of a genuine, independent union.¹¹⁸ That union remained in place for over a quarter of a century, fending off another militant UE challenge in 1944 and finally being voted out by the International Union of Electrical workers (IUE), part of the merged AFL-CIO labor federation, in 1967.¹¹⁹

NEW DEAL SOCIAL PROGRAMS IN THE LATE 1930s

While labor organizers worked to carry out Roosevelt's policies and support legislation to improve worker rights, many area residents continued to need help from New Deal social programs. Inconsistent reporting in the city's "Annual Reports" makes it difficult to determine the numbers and scope of the work done through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and other work-related New Deal programs in North Adams, but it does appear that New Deal projects came to play an even bigger role in the area by the late 1930s. For example, the 1938 Report focused on the previous year's joint city-WPA work for "sewers, waterworks, sidewalks, and road construction." Emphasizing its importance to the city, and pushing back against negative stereotypes of the WPA, the report added that the work done "eliminate[d] all suggestions of 'boondoggling.'" In total, 157 men and 78 women were employed (the women most likely in WPA sewing, nursing care, and household aide programs).¹²⁰

The following year, WPA work continued to expand. Termed "by far the most active in WPA history," local employment rose to an average of 445. Besides laboring outdoors on infrastructure projects repairing five schools and building a new city park, WPA workers also updated the city's fire and

cemetery records. Suggestive of the ideological change that the New Deal fostered, North Adams' conservative Mayor Francis J. O'Hara declared that "There can be no doubt that social security, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, and aid to dependent children are all blessings and no one would want to return to the old order of caring for those out of work or infirm by disease or old age."¹²¹

WPA project work continued through 1941. In his 1942 Report, Mayor Faxon Bowen lauded the WPA school lunch program which fed 600 children warm lunches:

Well-fed, well-nourished, happy youngsters do not become a social problem . . . Call it communism or socialism or what you please. The time has passed forever in the course of human progress when municipalities and those entrusted with the public funds can stand forth and under any pretext ask, "Am I my Brother's Keeper?"¹²²



FAXON BOWEN
Mayor of North Adams

Writing in 1942, Jay Louis Nierenberg argued that "[t]he Federal Government's entire New Deal program, and particularly the Social Security legislation, the Works Progress Administration, and the relief program have instituted changes that never could have been effected within North Adams." Nierenberg saw the infusion of federal funds and job creation as a challenge to the economic and political domination of the industrial elites in the city and viewed the current mayor, Faxon Bowen, as a breath of fresh air and honesty in a city administration previously characterized by corruption.¹²³ Bowen encapsulated support for labor and the forgotten man.

LABOR HELPS ELECT A MAYOR (1940)

In 1940, Faxon Bowen, a sixty-four-year-old millwright who worked at the Arnold Print Works, became the first seemingly pro-labor candidate to

be elected mayor of North Adams. A complex man, Bowen, the son of a county judge and the grandson of a Universalist minister, grew up in rural Vermont and New York State. He had enough money to buy land in a water power project, but, as he put it, the New England Power Company “bought out us little fellows.” He enjoyed working with his hands doing skilled work, yet allegedly never worked for a boss. He was known as the “poor man’s Roosevelt,” a spokesman for the little guy and working people. An upsurge in organized labor support led to his upset election for mayor, but he lasted only one term, as that initial labor backing appeared to dissipate. In the end, Bowen proved to be more of a “good government” advocate than a supporter of labor unions.¹²⁴

Bowen was forty-nine years of age when he moved to North Adams in 1925 to live with his sister and mother. An avid reader and civic activist, he soon became well known in the community for his letters to the editor of the *Transcript* criticizing corruption and inefficiency in city government.¹²⁵ Elected to City Council in 1929 and again in 1932, he resigned in 1935 to become superintendent for the Civilian Conservation Corps in Sandisfield, in south Berkshire County near the Connecticut border. Soon after, however, conflicts with administrators led to his firing and he moved back to North Adams.¹²⁶

In 1938 the voters once more elected him to the City Council. He took office in 1939 and the following year became an outspoken advocate for a city manager form of government, known as Plan E, which would professionalize the administration of city government and lessen the power of the mayor. For Bowen and other advocates, this shift would lead to greater efficiencies in city services, lower taxes, and decreased possibility of graft. The incumbent mayor, Dr. Francis J. O’Hara, the Democrats, and the Republicans all opposed Plan E, as did the business community, which raised a good deal of money for newspaper and radio advertising. The plan was defeated on Election Day, November 5, 1940.

Two days later, Bowen resigned from the City Council, apparently because of Plan E’s defeat, claiming that “he was ‘done with politics.’” But that exit lasted less than two weeks, and on November 18, 1940, just three weeks before the mayoral election, Bowen announced that he would run for the city’s highest office. Bowen ran as an independent against the incumbent Democrat, O’Hara, and his Republican challenger, Clinton E. Whitney. Bowen had always been a vocal critic of Mayor O’Hara, accusing him of graft, corruption, and waste. Although initially seen as the only friend of labor on a very conservative City Council, Bowen focused primarily on

improving city services and good government reforms such as his support for a city manager.¹²⁷

Two weeks into the campaign, in an interview with a local reporter, Mayor O'Hara stated that "since Bowen was just a common laborer, he was not worthy of a public office." That remark infuriated many in North Adams, including Bowen, who responded the next day:

[A]lready [Mayor O'Hara] . . . has started his campaign of ridicule, belittling a man who wears overalls and works with his hands. Sneeringly he says, "Bowen is a common laborer." Since when has this status of human existence been a crime in America? Does the O'Hara philosophy of government create also a caste of untouchable and unapproachable aristocracy? HELL! I am proud of my record as laboring man!"¹²⁸

O'Hara's disparagement of Bowen, and Bowen's quick rejoinder, brought energy to the challenger's campaign, particularly within a key segment of organized labor. The three biggest trades unions—representing the carpenters, the bricklayers and the painters—endorsed Bowen, and soon the entire North Adams Central Labor Union, a federation of thirteen craft unions with a membership of five hundred, followed suit. As it turned out, however, that endorsement lacked unanimity. The president of the Bricklayers' Union, William J. Timothy, publicly stated that his union never backed candidates and that the authority to include the union in the advertisement had not been given.¹²⁹

Bowen's publicity highlighted his personal laboring background and concern for working people. In fact, two planks of his electoral platform stated that "The workingman's overalls should evoke respect, and not ridicule" and "Labor should receive the recognition which it justly deserves in the civic affairs of the community." Much of Bowen's campaign, however, focused on accusations of graft and corruption which he aimed at the current mayor. In addition, he promised to close a city dump in the middle of a densely populated neighborhood, restore antiquated bridges, improve flood control, and distribute city business and contracts "among all citizens," showing "no partiality."¹³⁰ Bowen also talked favorably of a city-owned electrical power plant.¹³¹

Revealingly, a systematic reading of the two western Massachusetts newspapers that covered North Adams during the campaign finds virtually no discussion of labor issues, including Bowen's labor backing. Bowen's pro-labor platform made the *Transcript* only as a paid advertisement. Accusations

of graft and influence-buying made by the candidates or their supporters received the most press attention, with Bowen and the Republican candidate attacking O'Hara and the latter's solicitor hurling accusations against Bowen.¹³²

Bowen's supporters staged two big rallies, including one the evening before the election, reputed to be the largest in the city's history. Almost one thousand people jammed the Sons of Italy Hall and loudspeakers outside brought the sounds of the rally to the hundreds more who couldn't get inside. The *Transcript* reported: "Bowen himself spoke and the crowd went wild. There was a torchlight parade afterwards and four hundred cars, all covered with Bowen stickers, drove noisily through the excited city."¹³³

On December 10, Election Day, just three weeks after Bowen first announced his candidacy, he won the election, receiving 4,706 votes (53.5% of the total), some six hundred votes more than the combined totals of the Democratic incumbent (3,189) and his Republican challenger (901). It proved to be the second-largest plurality in city history for the mayor's race. Even more surprising, in a historic first, Bowen won every ward in the city, even the fifth, often called the "Silk-stocking Ward," where the city's well-to-do and professional class lived. The results showed that Bowen not only did well among workers across lines of ethnicity and religion, but also gained considerable support from the wealthier class tired of the corruption in city government.¹³⁴ His accomplishment seems even more notable as he entered the campaign late and defeated a two-term mayor who had the local newspaper's endorsement.¹³⁵ Bowen undoubtedly benefitted from his identification with the very popular Roosevelt New Deal programs that provided employment and economic support in the city. He also tapped into a "desire on the part of the people for at least an experiment in . . . 'Honest Government.'" The voters of the city proved ready for a change.¹³⁶

In his inaugural address, the mayor spoke in fiscally conservative tones, highlighting the need to reduce the city's debt service which "now takes a ruinous proportion of our tax revenues." Calling expenditures on relief "the second greatest strain upon the city's finances," Bowen vowed to professionalize the welfare office, removing it from political control. He also promised to do the same with the public works department. He concluded by calling for "justice for labor . . . for the unfortunate and the underprivileged . . . and clean government."¹³⁷

Within two weeks, he tried to force the welfare commissioner to resign, asked for an outside evaluation of the welfare department, and announced that he would take on the post of Commissioner of Public Works himself (without an additional salary). His first year in office brought him

contentious relations with the City Council, personnel controversies over Civil Service jurisdiction, and antagonistic relations with both the police and fire departments over raises.¹³⁸ Although Rene Ouellette thought he was a “good mayor,” he recognized that Bowen’s “rough and ready” style didn’t please a lot of people.¹³⁹

As he began his second year in office, Mayor Bowen claimed success in ending gambling operations and in improving the conditions of North Adams streets as well as city offices. Reflecting on the numerous conflicts he experienced during his first year, he admitted that he “sometimes . . . [ran] rough shod [sic] over red tape and political opposition.”¹⁴⁰ In 1942, he fulfilled a campaign promise to close a city dump in a poor residential neighborhood and he tried, without success, to build a new “poor house” in a different location, outside of the city cemetery where it stood by a small farm. Still, he improved the conditions for the residents who lived there.¹⁴¹

The mayor demonstrated particular pride in starting a federally supported free lunch program for city schoolchildren. He also began and saw the completion of a major project to rip up the unused city trolley tracks for use in the war effort. Both initiatives led to controversy over costs and responsibility, yet Bowen persevered. As his first term in office came to an end, his supporters called for his reelection, emphasizing his fiscal responsibility and honesty.¹⁴²

But those virtues weren’t enough and Bowen came in second in a five-man field, losing by over five hundred votes to Cornelius O’Brien. Why did Bowen lose? The *Transcript* put it simply:

Mayor Bowen was retired from his office for the same reason that he was elected two years ago because a large number of people were tired of Dr. O’Hara. He lost this year because an even larger number of people . . . were tired of Faxon Bowen. In each instance the majority of them were not voting “for” a candidate. They were voting “against” one.

O’Brien had the strength of the Democratic Party behind him while Bowen, an Independent, split the vote along with three other candidates. Moreover, O’Brien didn’t make the same mistake former Mayor O’Hara did when he disparaged laboring people in the 1940 campaign, which catalyzed the Central Labor Union to back Bowen.¹⁴³ Bowen’s City Council and mayoralty terms had been filled with controversy, including disputes over the pay of city workers. By the end of 1942, he had undoubtedly lost much of the labor support he previously held. A close reading of newspaper coverage

during the campaign failed to show any indication of organized labor's support for Bowen, either from the trades or industrial workers.

Although Bowen always highlighted the importance of labor and helping the unfortunate, he failed to articulate a strong labor union ideology. Perhaps he was too much of an individualist who valued the importance of hard work, regardless of the employer-employee context. This can be seen in Bowen's letter to R.C. Sprague, founder and president of Sprague Electric, a local company that was rapidly expanding with war orders in the 1940s. After losing the election, Bowen, in his late 60s, went to work as a millwright at Sprague in 1943. In 1945 he sent a letter to R.C. Sprague upon receiving a note from him thanking Bowen for his service on a Citizen's Committee, apparently set up to help mediate a strike at Sprague. The sentiments expressed in the letter demonstrate Bowen's harsh attitude toward unions and organized labor:

While [a strike] is unthinkable to any honest man, one never knows what the herd will do, once it is stampeded. . . . The curse on all labor is its love of easy money – the philosophy of something for nothing. Wartime economy aggravated this condition and the real problem of reconversion is to get men back into the habit of working. . . . Now to tighten up the slack and to get labor to realize that it is serving its own ends by delivering a day's work for a day's pay is a problem that faces our economy all over the Nation.

Bowen went on to praise R.C. Sprague's "spirit of humanity and fair play" in contrast to the "half-brained agitators" in the community. He also praised General Electric, where he had previously worked, for its concern over the employees' "well-being," and again castigated labor unions for their lack of "[k]indness and decency and fair play."¹⁴⁴ What makes these sentiments perhaps even more remarkable is that they were expressed at the end of World War II, when strikes erupted all over the United States, including North Adams, as workers tried to gain the wage increases that were denied them during the war.¹⁴⁵

This history forces a rethinking of the significance of Bowen's 1940 election. His mayoral victory may well have been a chance occurrence, a time when a misstep by the incumbent energized an important segment of the community and the economic and industrial elites of North Adams could not put it back together. As Bowen remembered it, right after becoming mayor and announcing that he would also be public works commissioner,

“the ‘power establishment’ of the city sent a delegation to tell him who else he should name to his cabinet.” At that time Bowen refused to listen, but two years later they had regained their influence and Bowen was defeated.¹⁴⁶ His lack of leadership on labor issues, and lack of union support in 1942, may have also weakened him.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Roosevelt administration’s New Deal programs did indeed make a difference in North Adams and its surrounding communities. The union organizing drives and the solidarity networks that blossomed in the mid-1930s changed the area as well, increasing the number of workers who experienced a union consciousness. Outside of the 1934 and 1935 textile strikes, the most active union members appeared to be from the trades, organized in the Central Labor Union (CLU). They followed a local tradition of activism going back to the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, it was the CLU members who had sparked the winning mayoral campaign of Faxon Bowen. Yet although the area had changed, that change still reflected narrow limits.

North Adams may be representative of many other small cities during the depression years. When sociologists Helen and Robert Lynd returned to “Middletown” (Muncie, Indiana) in the 1930s to explore the impact of the Great Depression on the city’s institutions and social classes, they found little apparent change: the community had held on to its pro-business, conservative values.¹⁴⁷ They noted, however, that “[a]mong the working class, tenuous and confused new positive values are apparent in such a thing as the aroused conception of the possible role of government in bolstering the exposed position of labor by social legislation, including direct relief for the unemployed.” In the 1936 presidential election, Roosevelt received a 59% majority vote, despite Middletown’s pro-Landon employers “prepared to go to great lengths to contrive to make their employees ‘vote right.’”¹⁴⁸

In North Adams, in the 1936 election Roosevelt received an even higher margin of victory. He beat Alfred Landon 63% to 37% (compared to 61% to 37% nationally) despite the vehement opposition against FDR expressed by nearly all of the major local employers.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, the 1940 election results in North Adams showed Roosevelt defeating Wendell Wilkie 62% to 38% (compared to 55% to 45% nationally). North Adams and even more so Adams (where FDR defeated Wilkie by an even higher margin, 71% to 29%) had become solidly Democratic and supportive of national government economic aid, including vibrant jobs programs. Looking back over the earlier

years of the century, 1924 was the last time that voters in North Adams and Adams supported a Republican presidential candidate -- until 1956.¹⁵⁰ Both communities had bucked the national tide in 1928 and backed Al Smith, the Democratic nominee, a vote aided no doubt by Smith's Catholicism.¹⁵¹ By 1940 North Adams' working class had pushed ethnicity aside to elect the city's first pro-labor mayor, one fully associated with President Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Although a culture and lifestyle of self-sufficiency had characterized the city's working people during the pre-Depression years, the hardships of the 1930s tested their focus on independence. In 1934, Mayor Archie Pratt told North Adams residents that "[l]ocal self-sufficiency" had outlived its usefulness. Pratt welcomed the New Deal programs that aided the city and the entire country. Later, in 1934 and beyond, national unions began to organize in the city and surrounding towns, breathing a greater union and national consciousness into the area. Local people didn't have to do it all by themselves. Outside help had become available, amidst greater national integration.

The city had changed, as had the North Berkshires. But not completely. The CIO upsurge that spread through industrial cities such as Flint, Detroit, Akron, and Pittsburgh, for example, did not manifest itself in the northern Berkshires in the 1930s.¹⁵² In retrospect, although the active participation of North Berkshire workers in the national textile strike of 1934 expanded their union consciousness, the overwhelming defeat of the strike only added to their suspicion of outside unions, thus delaying the time it took for CIO unions to receive a local welcome.¹⁵³ Union organizing did continue in the North Berkshire textile industry into the 1940s. However, not until 1946 did a CIO union, the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), gain membership in the region. That year the TWUA won elections at the Hoosac Cotton mill and the BFSA's Adams and Greylock plants. The area's tradition of self-sufficiency remained but, tempered by the social changes of the previous decade, the local work force gradually became more willing to join national labor federations, even if it took them longer than their fellow workers in larger cities.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Editorial Director L. Mara Dodge and an anonymous reviewer for their valuable suggestions for the article and editing; Linda Kaufmann, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Reference Librarian, Katie Nash, Williams College Archives & Special Collections Librarian; Eugene Michalenko, Adams Historical Society, and the staff at the North Adams Public Library for their research help; Gene Carlson, North Adams Historical Society,

for his help with photos; and Paul W. Marino, Northern Berkshire Community Television, for his technical assistance.

HJM

Notes

1. The mother town of Adams, incorporated in 1778, was named in honor of Samuel Adams, a Revolutionary War leader, signatory to the Declaration of Independence, and governor of Massachusetts. When North Adams became independent, the south village simply decided to remain Adams. W.F. Spear, *History of North Adams, Mass., 1749-1885* (North Adams: Hoosac Valley News Printing House, 1885).
2. See Terrence E. Coyne, "The Hoosac Tunnel: Massachusetts' Western Gateway," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 23: 1 (Winter 1995) on the building of the tunnel. For an early article on the Chinese in North Adams, see Frederick Rudolph, "Chinamen in Yankeedom: Anti-Unionism in Massachusetts in 1870," in *American Historical Review* 53 (October 1947). For a discussion of the Chinese experience in North Adams, including their militant strike against Sampson and the Crispin reaction to their job loss, see Benjamin T. Metcalf, "'Celestials' in a Shoe Factory: Middle Class, Labor, and the Chinese in North Adams, Massachusetts, 1870-1880" (Amherst, MA: Amherst College thesis, 1998) and Anthony W. Lee, *A Shoemaker's Story: Being Chiefly about French Canadian Immigrants, Enterprising Photographers, Rascal Yankees, and Chinese Cobblers in a Nineteenth-Century Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
3. Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for Massachusetts, *The Berkshire Hills* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1939), 10.
4. See Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) and Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969) for an economic and political history of the '20s and '30s.
5. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) section 7 (a) became law in June of 1933 (James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 140).

6. Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 11.
7. On Sprague's origins and growth, see Maynard Seider, "The Sprague Electric Strike in North Adams, 1970," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 42: 1 (Winter 2014) and John L. Sprague, *Sprague Electric: An Electronic Giant's Rise, Fall, and Life after Death* (North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).
8. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1937), 3.
9. "Historical United States Census Total for Berkshire County Massachusetts," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_United_States_Census_total_for_Berkshire_County_Massachusetts (accessed 8/15/16).
10. North Adams population statistics from Jay Louis Nierenberg, "North Adams: New England Mill Town: A Political, Economic, and Psychological Survey" (Williamstown, MA: Williams College, MA thesis, 1942), 37; Adams population figures from Keith E. Melder, "The Polish Immigration in Adams, Massachusetts: A Case Study of the American Melting Pot" (Williamstown, MA: Williams College, MA thesis, 1954), Chapters 1 and 2.
11. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1933, 78, 80, 125; William Carney, *A Berkshire Sourcebook: the History, Geography and Major Landmarks of Berkshire, Massachusetts* (Pittsfield, MA: Junior League of Berkshire County, 1976), 163 and Nierenberg, chapter 5.
12. Nierenberg, chapters 7 and 8. Ethnic and religious differences also served to divide the workforce.
13. Nierenberg, chapter 7.
14. The lack of Labor Day celebrations reflected the weak position of labor. The first Labor Day in Berkshire County had been celebrated in North Adams in 1886, sponsored by the Knights of Labor. More than three thousand attended and, besides enjoying the sporting events, singing, dancing and food, the crowd heard several pro-labor speeches. One leading member of the Knights, James Goodacre, called for "an end to child labor and the right to vote for women as well as 'equal pay for equal work'" (*North Adams Transcript* (hereafter cited as *Transcript*), September 6, 1999, A5). Over the next quarter century, Labor Day celebrations became more sporadic and, at times, not focused on the problems of labor. Although 1932 saw the first Labor Day celebration in 15 years, no mention could be found in the press of local workers' or organized labor's participation. The focus of the week's entertainment proved to be the muster, a North Adams tradition showcasing firefighting skills. Out-of-towners from all over New England and New York State descended on the city to partake in the muster, movies, dances, concessions, a midway and weekend ballgames. However, a labor

dispute did shadow the week's events. North Adams Mayor William Johnson had originated the idea of the 1932 celebration, but faced a setback when the project committee couldn't raise the necessary funds. The mayor turned to city firemen and police to help out, asking them to give a day's pay to help defray expenses. In what might be viewed as a gesture of labor solidarity, the city workers refused, "some taking the position that they would be willing to give a day's pay to charity but not to a fund which might be entirely absorbed by expenses, leaving nothing for charitable works." After the 1932 celebration, the next known commemoration occurred in 1953, sponsored by the Textile Workers Union of America, which then played a major role in the cotton mills of North Berkshire (*Transcript*, August 29, 1953, 10).

15. Maynard Seider, "The CIO in Rural Massachusetts: Sprague Electric and North Adams, 1937-1944," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 22: 1 (Winter 1994), 51-73.

16. On moving in with in-laws, see Florence Harris (May 16, 1988) and on leaving the Berkshires, see Stella Zawislak (May 18, 1988), both interviews from "Shifting Gears: The Changing Meaning of Work in Massachusetts, 1920-1980: North Adams, Massachusetts," Oral History Collection, University of Massachusetts-Lowell Libraries, Lowell, MA (hereafter cited as "Shifting Gears").

17. Arthur Paul Boucher, quoted in Joe Manning, *Steeple: Sketches of North Adams* (Florence, MA: Flatiron Press, third edition, 2001), 192.

18. Vera Uberti (May 11, 1988); Phyllis Griswold (May 18, 1988); and Ruth A. Bernardi (May 19, 1988), "Shifting Gears."

19. Interview dated January, 1984, Oral History Project, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Winter Study Term, 1984 (student project; notes in author's possession).

20. Dick Tavelli and John Hauck, "The Italians in North Adams: A History of Their Cultural and Political Contributions" (Williamstown, MA: Williams College, 1972) (undergraduate paper), 21.

21. L. Mara Dodge, "Anna B. Sullivan, 1903-83: The Formative Years of a Textile Mill Union Organizer (Holyoke, Massachusetts)," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 36: 2, (Summer 2008) 199. In North Berkshire, the exodus of textile manufacturing would continue. The last cotton mill closed its doors in Adams in 1958, although print work, fashion and garment sewing, and military contract work would continue through the 1980s and even, in some cases, the 1990s.

22. Figure on CCC employment from Irving Bernstein, *A Caring Society: The New Deal, the Worker and the Great Depression* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 158.

23. Figure on WPA employment from Cohen, 313.

24. Slobodkin visited North Adams in 1941, where he learned about the city's

history and researched his subject matter. A third sculpture that the artist made for the post office, *The Mohawks*, is missing. Deborah A Goldberg, "Louis Slobodkin's North Adams Reliefs" (Williamstown, MA: Williams College) (undergraduate paper), 1987. Photographic examples of WPA work in North Adams can be seen in *Farewell to Factory Towns?* (2012), a documentary written and directed by the author. Specifics on the projects and numbers of residents employed by the WPA and other government programs can be found in the *Annual Report of the City of North Adams* throughout the 1930s and early 1940s.

25. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1935, 12-13.

26. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1933, 78, 80, 125.

27. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1935, 9.

28. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1937, 48.

29. Carney, 163. Beneficiaries of late-nineteenth-century tariffs, particularly the 1890 McKinley Tariff, the Plunketts befriended Ohio Congressman, Governor and later President William McKinley, who visited them three times. McKinley spoke at the dedication of Mill No. 2 in 1892, and as President he laid the cornerstone of Mill No. 4 in 1899, a huge factory containing 2,500 looms. In 1897, at the invitation of the Plunketts, he laid the cornerstone of the ornate town library. When an assassin murdered McKinley in 1901, Adams became the first community in the country to erect a statue in his memory.

30. Interview with Rene Ouellette, Oral History Project, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Winter Study (January 24, 1984). Ouellette went on to recount how when he and his wife learned that the company store was overcharging them for groceries, they never went back and "paid cash" at a grocery store "downstreet."

31. *Ibid.*

32. In New England, "active spindles . . . declined to 5.4 million from 18.1; and nearly three of every eight production jobs were lost" in the period from 1919-1939. William F. Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 52.

33. See Cohen, 242-247.

34. See Hartford, 59-60.

35. Hartford, 61, and *Transcript*, August 17, 1934, 11. The two representatives, both women, included Delia Raymond, president of the local, and Lucy Giroux.

36. *Transcript*, September 4, 1934, 1.

37. A significant French-Canadian population also worked in the Adams mills. In 1932, UTWA organizer Horace A. Riviere from Manchester, New Hampshire spoke to members of Local No. 1711 and also delivered a speech in French at the Notre Dame Church to which all local French speakers were invited (*Transcript*, November 2, 1932). For a history of the Polish population in Adams, see Melder.

38. Quoted in Melder, 90.

39. *Ibid*, 90, 91.

40. *Ibid*, 92-93.

41. The Loomfixers' Union was an AFL affiliate and the Polish union briefly joined the labor federation (AFL) through membership in the UTWA. According to an historian of the Polish community in Adams, by 1937, the union broke its affiliation "since the unskilled workers were given little service by the United Textile Workers of America" (Melder, 93).

42. *Transcript*, August 17, 1934, p. 11. Some 1,100 textile employees worked in the three cotton mills in North Adams and Williamstown. Twenty to twenty-five loomfixers in the Hoosac Mill were unionized, though not affiliated with the UTWA. On the eve of the national strike on September 1, one local cotton mill worker "said that as far as he could judge, most of the local employes feel that their employers are doing the best that can be done for them under existing circumstances and that there is nothing to be gained by a walk-out" (*Transcript*, August 31, 1934, 3). However, within a week of the national strike, those employees walked out by the hundreds in North Adams and Williamstown.

43. As Melder puts it, "The Poles led the fight for union recognition in the town and have always been the leaders in the union organization. The union was successful because, like the other Polish societies, it was a manifestation of group unity . . . It could be maintained through many periods of trouble because it was an organization of Poles, representing the solidarity of the Polish community" (p. 95).

44. See Melder, chapters 4 and 5.

45. White had traveled to the area the previous June, where he spoke to members of Local No. 1711 of the need to lower the work week to increase employment opportunities for unemployed workers. White called for "30 hours work with 40 hours pay based on the present rate" (*Transcript*, June 6, 1934, 10). White had visited Adams frequently in the past and had organized local branches of the UTWA (*Transcript*, September 3, 1934, 10).

46. *Transcript*, September 4, 1934, 10.

47. *Ibid*.

48. *Ibid*.

49. *Ibid*.

50. *Springfield Republican*, September 6, 1934, 1.

51. For a similar photo and discussion of women's key role in the 1934 strike in another western Massachusetts community, see Dodge.

52. *Transcript*, September 6, 1934, 3. According to the *Springfield Republican* (September 6, 1934, 1), the work stoppage began when the bobbin boys stopped giving materials to the weavers. This newspaper put the number of Greylock

strikers at three hundred.

53. *Transcript*, September 6, 1934, 3.

54. See Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, *Poor People's Movements: How They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

55. *Transcript*, September 4, 1934, 5. See also *Transcript*, August 31, 1934, 2 and September 1, 1934, 5.

56. *Transcript*, September 8, 1934, 5.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Springfield Republican*, September 7, 1934, 1.

59. *Transcript*, September 7, 1934, 11. Under a headline of "Picketers Charge Official of Mill Endangered Lives," the *Springfield Republican* (September 7, 1934, 4) reported that strikers accused the Williamstown mill's superintendent, Silas Rooney, of driving through the picket line without warning.

60. Clete Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 48.

61. *Transcript*, September 11, 1934, 2.

62. *Ibid.*, 5.

63. *Transcript*, September 8, 1934, 5.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Hartford, 61-62 and Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995, revised and updated), 387-388.

66. *Transcript*, September 11, 1934, 3.

67. The following year the National Labor Relations Act outlawed such arrangements as illegal company unions. In 1940, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that the first such union at Sprague Specialties was in fact a company union. See Maynard Seider, "The CIO in Rural Massachusetts," 61.

68. *Transcript*, September 11, 1934, 3.

69. *Ibid.*, 3.

70. "Textile Strikers to Invade Pittsfield Tuesday in Effort to Force Local Mills to Close" headlined the *Springfield Republican* (September 10, 1934, 1), with a subhead, "Flying Squadrons from Adams Will Attempt to Make 1000 Workers in Four Local Mills Join Walkout."

71. *Ibid.*, 2.

72. George P. Willison, *The History of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, 1916-1955* (Pittsfield, MA: City of Pittsfield, 1957), 178.

73. *Transcript*, September 10, 1934, 3.

74. *Transcript*, September 11, 1934, 2. The hesitancy of woolen workers to strike undoubtedly reflected their higher status and pay as compared to cotton workers. Their relative conservatism may have also been influenced by other religious and

ethnic factors. An interesting item in the *Transcript* immediately after Herbert Hoover's election in 1928 reported that the Blackinton woolen mill workers "[a]ll reported for work as usual . . . but their elation at the victory of Mr. Hoover was so great that they soon decided that today was no day for such every day matters as work." Management agreed to their request to close down for the day so they could celebrate. A one-hour march down Massachusetts Avenue soon followed with cheering, horn blowing and Hoover banners. (*Transcript*, November 7, 1928, 16). Perhaps the religious factor influenced these pro-Hoover woolen workers, many of Welsh Protestant background, while Catholicism predominated among the North Adams and Adams population. In the 1928 election, North Adams went for Al Smith, who defeated Hoover 57% to 43%, and Adams did the same, defeating Hoover by a margin of 60% to 40%. In Massachusetts as a whole, however, Smith barely beat Hoover with less than 51% of the vote (*Transcript*, 7, 2, 6).

75. *Transcript*, September 11, 1934, 3, 2.

76. *Transcript*, September 12, 1934, 10.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Transcript*, September 17, 1934, 2.

79. *Ibid.*, 10.

80. *Ibid.*, 11.

81. *Transcript*, September 22, 1934, 5.

82. See Daniel, chapter 2, for a discussion of the Winant Board and reactions to it.

83. *Transcript*, September 24, 1934, 8.

84. *Transcript*, October 1, 1934, 5.

85. *Transcript*, September 28, 1934, 8, 10.

86. *Transcript*, October 1, 1934, 5.

87. Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years*, 315. More recently, Clete Daniel wrote that "even the most sanguine analysts ultimately agreed [that the strike] was a full-fledged calamity for the cause of textile unionism" (58). See Dodge for Anna Sullivan's "unusual bitterness" at the national union for leaving the Holyoke strikers "high and dry" (209).

88. *Transcript*, May 6, 1935, 2.

89. In 1986, Ouellette was interviewed for a middle school documentary project, "The Mills of North Adams" (copy housed at Visitor's Center, Western Gateway Heritage State Park, North Adams). He told the students about the difficult working conditions in the Greylock Mill, the long hours of laboring, and the workers' loss of fingers on the job, even in one case a hand. His grandson, Peter Breen, remembers hearing stories from older relatives about Ouellette and his work life. At Greylock, he would help his fellow workers with loom problems, untangling the threads and going from machine to machine throughout the plant.

“He was a very pleasant person. . . . He would talk to people. That’s the way he was through life . . . He would help people” (author interview, August 10, 2016).

90. Rene Ouellette, Oral History Project, interview by the author and Karen Rose, January 24, 1984.

91. *Transcript*, May 18, 1935, 8.

92. Rene Ouellette, Oral History Project.

93. *Transcript*, June 2, 1935, 3.

94. Rene Ouellette, Oral History Project. Similar remarks about textile unionization and strikes were made by priests in Holyoke, Massachusetts “where vigilant pastors warned their people against the possible and probable dangers of hastily considered actions in labor relations.” William F. Hartford, *The Working People of Holyoke: Class and Ethnicity in a Massachusetts Mill Town: 1850-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 180.

95. *Transcript*, June 10, 1935, 8.

96. Rene Ouellette, Oral History Project.

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.* Nearly 50 years later, Ouellette remembered the time back in the 1930s when he picked up a man who needed a ride. When Ouellette found out that his passenger was a “systematizer”, he told him to “Get the hell out.” See Maynard Seider, “Remembering Work in Depression Days,” *Transcript*, June 9, 1990, 6.

99. *Transcript*, March 19, 1937, 3.

100. Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years*, 620.

101. Daniel, 69.

102. Bernstein quotes Bureau of Labor Statistics’ conclusion that more than half a million workers participated in nearly six hundred sit-down strikes from 1936 to 1938 (*The Turbulent Years*, 500).

103. Daniel, 69.

104. *Transcript*, April 21, 1937, 1. As Daniel writes, “TWOC organizers were a highly visible presence in every important textile center in New England almost as soon as the [1937] campaign began. . . . [T]he legendary milltowns of New England—Fall River, New Bedford, Lawrence, Providence, Pawtucket—were again pulsating with promise as fervent TWOC organizers fanned the dying embers of textile unionism back to full candescence” (81).

105. *Transcript*, April 23, 1937, 6 and May 7, 1937, 5. Two years later, a CIO textile union successfully organized a plant even closer to North Berkshire, as the Berkshire Woolen Company of Pittsfield reached an agreement with the Textile Woolen Workers’ Union (*Transcript*, July 7, 1939, 5).

106. *Transcript*, April 6, 1937, 2; April 27, 1937, 5; and April 19, 1937, 7.

107. *Transcript*, April 15, 1937, 5; April 19, 1937, 14; and April 27, 1937, 5.

108. *Transcript*, May 3, 1937, 3 and Nierenberg, 136. The conservative character of

this union is suggested by the following quote. In an interview in 1941, the head of the Calico Workers Union at the Windsor Print Works spoke of his opposition to strikes and opposition to membership in national unions “on the grounds that most of the leaders are racketeers, and that his men can do better for themselves, without having to pay large dues into any national chest” (Nierenberg, 127). This type of sentiment could be found also among the leaders of the Independent Condenser Workers Union at the Sprague Electric Company (Seider, “The CIO in Rural Massachusetts”).

109. Nor should it be assumed that the supposedly militant TWOC always reflected the wishes of the workers it organized. In bargaining with a textile firm that threatened to move to a lower wage area, the TWOC in Holyoke, Massachusetts agreed to a wage cut of 12.5% at Farr Alpaca if the company officially recognized the union—this despite a 1338-6 vote of the rank and file rejecting the wage cut (Hartford, *The Working People of Holyoke*, 192).

110. *Transcript*, August 29, 1938, 8. The strike lasted at least one more day. The vice president and general manager of the company, Henry J. Guild, just back from New York City, met with a group of about 50 strikers. No resolution followed as Guild argued that the “wage cut was in line with similar reductions in the paper industry and that none of the other paper mills have yet restored the wage cuts as business conditions at present do not warrant such action” (*Transcript*, August 30, 1938, 8).

111. See, for example, *Transcript*, January 1, 1937, 12 (“Notable Progress Seen in Adams During Year”); *Transcript*, March 26, 1937, 3 (“Local Woolen Mills Announce Pay Raises For 900 Workers”); Nierenberg, 182.

112. Melder, 98.

113. Similarly, a delegation of striking United Auto Worker members from a nearby town were kept out of Muncie, Indiana by the police. When the Muncie Chevrolet plant had to close because it lacked parts due to the strike, all 1,500 employees signed a wire to the president of General Motors, “We . . . wish to assure you of our loyal support in the present labor crisis.” Further, the workers told the governor, “We are bitterly opposed to having anyone come in and try to tell us what we need; we know what we need. . . . We will go to any necessary extreme to get back to work” (Lynd and Lynd, 73). For a description of the CIO upsurges in major U.S. cities, see Green, chapter 5.

114. Nierenberg, 138.

115. *Transcript*, January 9, 1937, 3 and February 9, 1938, 5.

116. Without providing any evidence, one local analyst of CIO organizing at Sprague remarked that, if the CIO fails to organize Sprague, “defeat . . . might, psychologically, upset the C.I.O.’s plan to unionize the textile industry in the same city” (M.S. Stedman, “The C.I.O. Comes to North Adams,” *Sketch*, November,

1938, 18).

117. For a description of organizing at Sprague during the 1930s, see Seider, “The CIO in Rural Massachusetts.”

118. Ibid.

119. See Seider, “The CIO in Rural Massachusetts” and “The Sprague Electric Strike” for details.

120. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1938, 116.

121. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1939, 112, 113, 10.

122. Nierenberg, 239.

123. Ibid., see concluding chapter.

124. *Transcript*, October 6, 1971, 1; *Springfield Republican*, December 12, 1941, 4.

125. See Nierenberg, chapters 5 and 9 for Bowen’s biography before his election to mayor and his accomplishments as chief executive.

126. *Transcript*, October 6, 1971, 1; *Springfield Republican*, December 11, 1940, 4.

127. *Springfield Republican*, December 11, 1940, 1 and November 17, 1940, 4.

128. Nierenberg, 89 and *Transcript*, December 3, 1940, 2.

129. *Transcript*, December 10, 1940, 2; *Springfield Republican*, December 10, 1940, 4.

130. Nierenberg, 86 and *Transcript*, December 7, 1940, 3.

131. Rene Ouellette interview, January 24, 1984.

132. *Springfield Republican*, December 9, 1940, 4 and December 10, 1940, 4.

133. Nierenberg, 90.

134. *Transcript*, December 11, 1940, 2, and Nierenberg, 90. Much of the Irish vote, traditionally Democratic, must have moved over to the Independent column for Bowen. Further, many French and Italian voters, who historically had sometimes voted Republican, must have deserted that column to vote for Bowen. The Irish population was estimated at about 7,000, the French 4,000, and the Italian 3,000 (Nierenberg, chapter 3).

135. *Transcript*, December 9, 1940, 2.

136. FDR defeated his Republican opponent in North Adams in 1932 by a margin of 55%-45%; in 1936, 63%-37%; and in 1940, 62%-38%. As FDR’s margins grew from 1932, the support for the New Deal president most likely indicated a more class-based voting pattern in North Adams. And it continued with the candidacy of Bowen, even though he ran on an Independent ticket and campaigned for just three weeks. See Nierenberg, 91 for reporter’s statement in the *Springfield Republican*, December 12, 1940.

137. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1941, 9.

138. *Springfield Republican*, January 15, 1941, 4; *Transcript*, July 3, 1941, 2 and November 6, 1941, 2.

139. Regarding Bowen’s style, Ouellette remarked, “If he told you to jump, you

better jump” (January 24, 1984 interview with author).

140. *Annual Report of the City of North Adams*, 1942, 21.

141. *Transcript*, January 20, 1942, 4 and December 1, 1942, 1.

142. *Transcript*, December 5, 1942, 3.

143. In fact, in a long open-letter advertisement just before the election, O’Brien mentioned “Labor Unions” as one of the many organizations “I have enjoyed my activities in,” a statement vague enough to mean anything, but positive enough to keep organized labor from rebelling (*Transcript*, December 7, 1942, 2).

144. Sprague Company Archives, F-128, “Union Correspondence.” To add to Bowen’s complexity, or maybe inconsistency, in 1942, while mayor, he welcomed the American Federation of Textile Operatives to their annual convention in North Adams and claimed to hold “a union card for 40 years” (*Transcript*, June 29, 1942, 3).

145. See, for example, Green, 193-194.

146. Nierenberg, 237.

147. Echoing the findings of the Lynds, Nierenberg recognizes the continued power of the business class in North Adams (227-228).

148. Lynd and Lynd, 489, 497-8.

149. See Nierenberg, chapter 6, “How Management Thinks and Acts,” for interviews with local owners and managers, most of whom opposed New Deal programs, particularly the National Labor Relations Act.

150. In 1956, both Adams and North Adams chose President Dwight Eisenhower over the Democratic candidate, Adlai Stevenson. Since that time, including the 2016 presidential election, the Democratic candidate has always won. Thus, Adams and North Adams stayed Democratic while the state of Massachusetts went Republican with Eisenhower in 1952 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984.

151. On Smith’s religion and the Adams vote, see Melder, 105.

152. Nierenberg argues that the refusal of North Adams workers to join national unions contributed to their relatively low wage jobs and weak power position (229). See Nierenberg, chapter 10, for comparisons of the wages of North Adams industrial and municipal employees with similar workers in other Massachusetts mill towns. Only in a non-textile plant, Sprague Specialties, did a CIO union make a concerted, spirited organizing drive in the 1930s (Seider, “The CIO in Rural Massachusetts,” 148).

153. Of course, organizing became easier in the 1940s with the war economy and a resurgence of consumer buying power after the war. In the period from 1920 to 1940, “Massachusetts lost nearly 45 percent of its textile production jobs. But after 1940, a large infusion of military contracts, promising unprecedented profits, stabilized the regional industry and even led some manufacturers to reopen deserted plants” (Hartford, *Working People of Holyoke*, 194). The TWUA’s “most

important wartime growth . . . occurred in the northern branch of cotton textiles” (Daniel, 140).