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Foundry Laborers and the Long Depression

In America, the Long Depression of 1873-1879 came after the 1873 financial panic, which caused a number of banking institutions, most notably Jay Cooke & Company, to fail. The restructuring of the economy resulted in distressingly high unemployment, waves of foreclosures and a deflationary economy. These changes were ruinous for thousands of American families, some were evicted from their homes, and many workmen dealt with a reduction in their wages. Some were laid-off. A new emphasis was placed on charities and soup kitchens and a new battle over government funded social services developed.¹

1870s America hosted a complex intersection of developments—the Long Depression began in 1873, Reconstruction was still in full swing, and the industrial sector began to replace agriculture as the major source of wealth. My goal is to examine how the impressive rise of industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century affected workers in the context of the Long Depression, however difficult it is to get a detailed look. Through this paper, I seek to present a unique view of the conditions confronting foundry employees. I analyze the Pennsylvania and Ohio Bureau of Labor Statistics reports compiled during this period in order to provide a microscopic view.

From a macroeconomic point of view, there was still plenty of growth. Some historians, like O.V. Wells analyzed the agricultural sectors of the economy and concluded that major sectors of agriculture prospered.² He could at least conclude that the economic conditions varied by region. Furthermore, the country was industrializing quickly with the help of novel

¹ Samuel Reznick, "Distress, Relief, and Discontent in the United States during the Depression of 1873-1879," *Journal of Political Economy* 58 (1950): 494-500.

² O. V. Wells, "The Depression of 1873-1879," *Agriculture History* 11 (1973): 240.

machinery and imported ideas from Europe. Agriculture was still a very important strain of American wealth, but by the 1880s it was no longer the most lucrative national product. Actually, by 1890, “the value of manufactures was three times that of agricultural products.”³ And foundry goods were second only to machinery by the 1880s, overcoming cotton as the preeminent product.⁴ In this paper, I hope to elicit an understanding of how these confounding, yet impressive, changes affected foundry workers in the 1870s.

Wages generally fell over this period. As Table 1 indicates, hourly wages fell from \$0.211 to \$0.177 from 1873 to 1879. Foundry workers received higher pay than other manufacturing jobs like textiles and paper, but they were paid below the printing and stone industries. Their wages fell from to \$0.24 to \$0.19. Although the men had less money, it needs to be placed in the era’s general deflationary context. The real debate is over the population’s level of “real” wages, rather than “nominal” ones.

Table 1: Hourly wages Hourly wages in manufacturing, by industry: 1870-1883

Trade	1872	1873	1874	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880
Cotton Textile	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.11	0.12
Foundries/Machine Shops	0.23	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.2	0.2	0.19	0.19	0.2
Leather	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.17	0.16	0.16	0.16	0.15	0.15
Paper	0.18	0.19	0.2	0.2	0.17	0.14	0.15	0.14	0.16
Printing (Books & Newspapers)	0.3	0.29	0.29	0.29	0.3	0.29	0.27	0.26	0.26
Stone Industry	0.29	0.28	0.28	0.28	0.28	0.22	0.23	0.23	0.21
Woolen Textile	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13
Average of All Trades	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.2	0.19	0.19	0.18	0.18	0.18

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/>

The aforementioned analyses all rely on aggregate statistics. Obviously, this sort of analysis is very important, but it seems to neglect the finer details. This is partly because

³ Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell, *A New Economic View of American History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994) 457.

⁴ *Ibid*, 468.

detailed data based on the lives of individual workmen is scarce, but that does not mean it does not exist. State Labor and Statistics Bureaus began popping up around the U.S. at around this time. They were in charge of writing up annual reports. These reports are primarily based upon “blanks”—blank forms sent to employees and employers. Those sent to employees contained questions about daily/weekly/annual wages, estimated wage reductions, family size, union and strike participation, etc. But they also contained space where employees were able to make comments and suggestions. Not all of the blanks were returned partly because of low and uneven literacy rates in the 1870’s. Nevertheless, the bureaus selected and published a few of the responses. Those sent to employers contained questions about company size, employees, average wages, etc. and components were also selected, while the rest of the information was averaged.

Since Philadelphia and Cincinnati were major centers of industry in the U.S. at this time (Cincinnati, for example, 51,000 manufacturing workers), I will be analyzing wage data and pulling information from Pennsylvania’s Bureau, founded in 1873 and Ohio’s, founded in 1877. Heavy industry developed in the Midwest partly because of its rich coal and iron deposits.⁵

I came across this comparative data in the 1881-1882 Pennsylvania Bureau report. Overall, between the years 1873-1880 (or those with recorded data pertaining to the job) wages slumped, even with the massive growth of the foundry sector. Though, wages fluctuated a lot. They slumped 1876-1877 and then picked up again.

⁵ Ibid, 465.

Table 2: Iron Foundries: Average Daily Wages

Occupation	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882
Foremen	\$3.63		\$4	\$2.62	\$2.66	\$2.65	\$3.15	\$3.15
Iron molders	2.33	\$2.17	2.12	1.83	2.15	1.84	2.52	2.52
Machinists, (best)	2.57	2.37	2.15	1.88	1.83	2.16	2.48	2.48
Machinists, (ordinary)	2.12	2.01	1.78	1.5	1.67	1.61	2.22	2.22
Boiler-makers	2.66	2.25	2	1.87	1.92		2.14	2.14
Riveters	2.58	2.02	2	1.67	1.88		1.81	1.81
Holder-on	1.64	1.49	1.45	1.2	1.2		1.38	1.38
Flangers	2.83	2.54	1.8	1.84	2.47		2.31	2.31
Blacksmiths	2.56	2.14	2.03	1.6	1.87	2	2.12	2.12
Blacksmiths' helpers	1.48	1.44	1.3	1.05		1.17	1.42	1.42

Table 3: Rolling-Mills: Average Daily Wages

Occupations	1873	1874	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882
Puddlers	\$4.75	\$4.11	\$3.60	\$3	\$3.30	\$4.40	\$3.30	\$3.57	\$3.59	\$3.59
Puddlers' helpers	2.95	2.55	2.25	1.9	2	2	2	2.2	2.23	2.23
Heaters	6.1	5.7	5.8	4	4	4.7	4.7	5.2	5.01	5.01
Heaters' helpers	2.6	2.3	2	1.63	1.63	1.8	1.74	1.75	1.74	1.74
Rollers	8.5	8.25	8	7.24	6.5	6.4	6.4	7	7.24	7.24
Roughers	4.2	3.8	3.3	2.65	2.25	2.25	2.7	3.25	3.15	3.15
Catchers	4.25	3.8	3.3	2.65	2.25	2.95	2.7	3.25	3.36	3.36
Hookers	2	1.85	2.75	1.52	1.25	1.44	1.6	1.44	1.5	1.5
Shearmen			1.43	1.83	1.75	1.6	1.62	1.6	1.74	1.74
Straighteners			1.43	1.88		1.62	1.48	1.52	1.74	1.74
Engineers			2.54	2.66	1.83	2.37	2.57	1.87	2.66	2.66
Millwrights						3.03	2.76	2.24	2.92	2.92
Blacksmiths			2.24	2.78	2.55	2.48	2.44	1.83	2.67	2.67
Machinists			2.56	2.64	2.75	2.51	2.39	2.5	2.5	2.5

Source: Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Industrial Statistics 1881-1882.

The reports also gave workmen an opportunity to give advice. They took this opportunity to provide opinions that they had clearly thought long and hard about. While there were plenty of men who had been involved in strikes and who had strong ties to unions, many

emphatically disapproved of organized labor. The prohibition of alcohol and subsidization of children's textbooks were a couple of other common suggestions.

Works Cited

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