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**Level: Grades 3-5**

**Subjects:** English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies

**Skills:** Listening, communicating, internet researching, thinking creatively, writing, comparing, contrasting, drawing conclusions

## Lesson 7 Mills and Money

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By about 1800, making cloth at home had become Maine's biggest business. There were already mills in Maine, but these only existed to help the home spinners and weavers. At a *carding mill*, water-power turned a big wheel, which in turn powered large rollers covered with fine wire teeth. When wool was passed between these rollers, the fibers were straightened and fluffed up, made ready to spin into yarn so that home spinners and their children would have time for other chores. Wool cloth that was woven at home could be coarse and scratchy. At a *fulling mill*, a big water-powered wheel moved machines that would hammer and brush the surface of the cloth. This shrank the cloth a bit and firmed it up, but also made it feel softer and richer.

Because Maine was fortunate to have many rivers and streams to produce water power and many wise business people to understand what water power could do, it was not long before there were many mills for carding and fulling, for spinning and weaving, and even for making blankets, shirts, and other finished items. Mills soon moved beyond production of woolen goods, to working with the plentiful cotton fiber that came from the southern United States.

It might surprise you to learn that, in addition to its wool and cotton mills, Maine had an active silk industry for a brief time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some farmers in Maine planted thousands of mulberry trees to feed their new farm animals – insects! Silk moth caterpillars were kept on large trays, and the trays stacked on racks in farmhouse attics. Up and down the attic stairs the farm mothers and daughters would trudge, bringing leaves to the hungry caterpillars and carrying out the droppings of the insects. When the caterpillars were ready to change to adult moths, they expelled a strand of silk from their bodies, winding, and winding it around their bodies to create a plump little cocoon. It was the farm girls' job to heat the cocoons, killing the caterpillar inside before it could chew its way out, tearing apart the precious silk fibers. Then the strand of silk was carefully drawn from the cocoon and wound onto a small bobbin. Individual strands could be spun together to form a strong a lustrous sewing thread. At first this spinning took place at home, but some farm families could supplement their income by selling the silk to one of Maine's new silk mills. A mill at Hiram, Maine, successfully produced small quantities of silk thread as early as the 1830's. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Haskell Silk Mill in Westbrook was a large and successful manufacturing business.



Maine's mills became famous the world over for the fine textiles they produced. Perhaps someone you know once worked in one of Maine's great textile mills!

