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Northern Business and the Shape of Southern Progress: The Case of Tennessee's "Model City"

By EDWARD L. AYERS

The turn-of-the-century social and political movement known as "progressivism" still casts a shadow over the South. The sunny aspect of Southern progressivism—the attempt by Southerners to gain control from Northern monopolies—is well documented.¹ The darker side of that movement, the outlines of which are sketched in this essay, followed the relative failure of this initial effort. Large Northern businesses, little affected by earlier attempts to lessen their great influence in the region, consolidated their position in the Southern economy during the unprecedented prosperity following World War I—often by "progressive" means.² State governments, understandably eager to entice needed capital to their region, no longer entertained the earlier progressive ideal of an autonomous South. The perennially-tempting vision of rapid economic growth funded by plentiful Northern capital arose in new, distinctly modern, attire. This new faith, like the old nineteenth-century "New South creed," was essentially a businessman's ideology. But progressivism placed a new emphasis on order, on control of the burgeoning economy. The ideal government's role changed from that of stern policeman to one of a benign director of traffic.³

¹ Arthur Link first called attention to the phenomena in his "The Progressive Movement in the South, 1870-1914," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXXIII (1946), 172-195. There is no detailed general study of Southern progressivism; the best account of the movement remains C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 369-395. There are several good state studies, the best of which is Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, 1969). Also, see Raymond Pulley, *Old Virginia Restored: An Interpretation of the Progressive Impulse, 1870-1930* (Charlottesville, 1968); Albert Kirwan, *Revolt of the Rednecks: Mississippi Politics, 1876-1925* (Lexington, Ky., 1951) and Joseph Steelman, "The Progressive Era in North Carolina" (Ph.D. dissertation, U. of N.C. at Chapel Hill, 1955). There are useful and interesting insights in Dewey Grantham's elegant synthesis, *The Democratic South* (Athens, Ga., 1963) and in Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawn: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia, 1972).

² Grantham, 55, 59; Woodward, 379; Kirby, 43. In 1900 nearly ninety per cent of Southern railroads were dominated by Northern men and money. John Stover, *The Railroads of the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, 1955), xviii.

³ On the ideal of ordered growth, see Blaine Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-30* (Baton Rouge, 1975). George Tindall coined the term "business progressivism" to describe the reforms of the 1920s in *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967). He ignores any role Northern capital played in this new progressivism.

Enlightened Northern businessmen shared this vision of a really new South. They realized that not only was the latent wealth of the South virtually untapped, but the small towns of that region offered an almost totally pliable economic environment. Thousands of people in these towns were eager to win a share of the South's new bounty, and a new factory found a valuable labor supply impatiently waiting to work. Accordingly, the majority of the South's great urban and industrial growth of the first decades of the twentieth century took place in such towns.⁴ To understand the development of the modern South, then, one must understand how economic growth affected the small town.

Kingsport, Tennessee, is in many ways a microcosm of the changes this economic development brought to Southern cities. Here some of Southern progressivism's most permanent and widely extolled achievements—especially municipal planning and the city manager movements—emerge as efforts by Northern capitalists to rationalize the colonial Southern economy.⁵ Kingsport received national attention as the "Model City," as an example of what could be accomplished by Northern capital applied with intelligence. But the mountaineers paid a high price for their planned prosperity: the control of their city passed out of their hands and into those of New York bankers. The story of this transaction reveals much about the influence of Northern capital upon Southern progressivism.

In 1880, when Henry Grady and the other New South advocates began their campaign to attract Northern capital to their region, Kingsport was a muddy cow pasture. The town had once been a flourishing river port (thus its name: King's Port), but when a railroad by-passed the town in 1850 it began to die; the economic disorganization of the Civil War completed the process, and the town lay dormant for half a century. There was no Chamber of Commerce prostrating itself before Northern capital in Kingsport,

⁴ Tindall, 95; T. Lynn Smith, "The Emergence of Cities," in Rupert Vance and Nicholas Demerath, eds., *The Urban South* (Chapel Hill, 1954).

⁵ On the colonial economy, see Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 291-320; Harold Vatter, *The Drive to Industrial Maturity: The United States Economy, 1860-1914* (Westport, Ct., 1975); Rupert Vance, *Human Geography of the South: A Study in Regional Resources and Human Adequacy* (Chapel Hill, 1932). For a contrasting view, see Clarence Danhof, "Four Decades of Thought on the South's Economic Problems" in Melvin Greenhut and W. Tate Whitman, eds., *Essays in Southern Economic Development* (Chapel Hill, 1964), 7-68. Danhof, while attacking much of the literature on the colonial economy as "paranoid," relegates what he terms the "sophisticated view of the exploitative conspiracy" (as expressed by Donald Davidson) to a footnote: "I do not argue that it represents some deliberate highly wrought conspiracy against the South but rather that it is in the nature of an urban industrialized society to behave thus toward whatever stands in its path." See 36.

only vast mineral wealth and a strategic shipping location awaiting the completion of the Carolina, Clinchfield and Ohio Railroad in 1909.⁶ The railroad's geologist reported to the New York banker in charge of the operation, John B. Dennis, that Kingsport was a likely site for manufacturing: all the materials necessary for the production of brick and cement, for a tannery, and for a pulp mill were gathered there. Dennis and his company bought the seven thousand acres that had been the old town of Kingsport and began to build a new one.⁷

Dennis was confident that the new town would prosper. Not only was there an abundance of lumber, coal, sand, limestone, silica and feldspar, but an untapped labor supply seemed waiting for an opportunity to man his machinery. As a business magazine later described the genesis of Kingsport, "a band of curious natives came down to a saucer-like depression in northeastern Tennessee's mountains and stared in awe as a train rocked by to signalize completion of a railroad linking them with the world."⁸ Much was made of the fact that the work force these natives represented was "an almost 100 per cent pure American population."⁹ The paeans to this labor supply, however, were muddled by a basic ambiguity: images of independent frontiersmen fill the promotional literature on Kingsport, but the eulogists who claimed that "the same moral stamina which enables people to wrest a wilderness from the hands of savages in a pioneer age . . . will make industrial empire builders in a commercial age" did not seem to recognize that the natives were to build an empire only in the sense that they were to work in its factories.¹⁰ The Jacksonian imagery of the boosters did not mesh well with their Hamiltonian methods.

Other writers were more forthright: the pliability of the mountain population was often stressed as the major advantage of the enterprise. One article, entitled "Kingsport, Tennessee, Where the Mountain People of the Cumberlands Are Being Taught the Advantages of Industry," opened with the observation that "they make exceedingly apt pupils." And well they should, thought the

⁶ On the early history of Kingsport, see Oliver Taylor, *Historic Sullivan County* (Bristol, Tennessee, 1909).

⁷ John Piquet, *Kingsport: The Planned Industrial City* (Kingsport, 1951); Ben Haden, *Kingsport, Tennessee: A Modern American City-Developed Through Industry* (Kingsport, 1963).

⁸ Charles Stevenson, "Contrast in Perfect Towns: Norris and Kingsport, Tennessee, Federal Show Case and Industry Yardstick Town," *Nation's Business* (December, 1937), 19.

⁹ Piquet, 27.

¹⁰ Howard Long, *Kingsport: A Romance of Industry* (Kingsport, 1927), 84.

author, since Northern industry promised "a transformation from gloom to sunshine and happiness."¹¹ Another writer fell into redundancy in his attempt to convey the pitiable situation of these "sturdy inhabitants of this Southern Appalachian region," who for generations "have been eking out a bare existence in endeavoring to wring a living from steep hillside farms." Though such an existence "could do naught but dull all ambition and kill every initiative . . . these mountain folks have shown themselves splendid workmen; quick to adapt themselves; readily catching on to the requirements of the work assigned them; reliable in attending to their duties, and self-reliant, loyal, faithful."¹² This adaptability was not immediately apparent. At first, the town undertaker was forced to stand at the door of the book factory and collect guns "as the boys came to work for ten cents an hour."¹³

Dennis, following a pattern of Northern investors before and after him, enlisted a Southerner to act as a liaison between New York and these mountain people. His choice was J. Fred Johnson, a small businessman from nearby southwest Virginia. Dennis and Johnson decided that their town should not fall victim to the problems that plagued many of the company towns that dotted the South: dependence upon one industry, ugliness, unplanned growth, and the resulting labor difficulties. The obvious answer was to diversify the industry that they brought to Kingsport, to plan the growth of the city before it could get out of their control. They began a highly successful campaign to attract several interrelated Northern industries to their fledgling enterprise and enlisted the aid of one of the most famous city planners in the nation, John Nolen of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Fortunately for the historian, Nolen published a detailed account of his part in the establishment of Kingsport. "The story of it all reads like a romance," he began. The result of his cooperation with Kingsport's leaders, Nolen modestly claimed, "was one of the best-planned industrial communities in the annals of modern town planning—remarkable by reason of the harmonious cooperation of several independent agencies in an achievement that may well be called ideal in the quality of their respective function: industrial, economic, hygienic, civic, cultural and aesthetic."¹⁴ This

¹¹ Frank Gould, in *Manufacturer's Record*, 88 (December 10, 1925), 77.

¹² William Stone, "Book Production on Enormous Scale by Huge Printing Plant at Kingsport, Tennessee," *Manufacturer's Record*, 83 (March 8, 1923), 70.

¹³ Walter Smith, *Kingsport Press, Inc.—Bookmaker to America* (New York, 1959), 23.

¹⁴ John Nolen, *New Towns for Old: Achievements in Civic Improvement in Some American Small Towns* (Boston, 1927), 53, 51.

cooperation led to rapid growth for Kingsport: the town swelled from less than one hundred inhabitants in 1909 to over 12,000 in the decade following the city's incorporation in 1917.¹⁵ Ten large factories, all subsidiaries of Northern firms, established operations there within the first decade.

The plan Nolen devised says much of the vision he and his clients shared. The major street terminated on either end with the two poles of the city's life: on one end was Kingsport's railroad depot and factories, and on the other, "Church Circle." Many of the city fathers, especially Johnson, were highly religious men and valued the religiosity of their employees. The limits of their vision, however, were demonstrated in another aspect of the city blueprint. Though the population of Kingsport was ninety-five per cent white, Nolen's plan devoted special attention to the black population.

Appreciating the value of the colored element in the local labor situation, Kingsport aims to counteract the tendency to migrate to the North, by developing its colored section in marked contrast to the squalid 'Niggertown' districts so common in Southern communities.

Nolen made sure that the playgrounds, schools and churches for blacks "were planned for in ways commensurate with the advanced standards set for the rest of the community."¹⁶ Kingsport's "colored section" was carefully set off from the rest of town by surrounding it with parks and by locating it on the lower ground near the railroad tracks.

For the first eight years of Kingsport's life the city had no municipal government. J. Fred Johnson and the managers of the ten factories that formed the town's economy had instead chartered an organization called the "Kingsport Improvement Corporation"; this group owned the water, electricity, sewer, and telephone services as well as nearly all real estate. All major decisions were made by the corporation in lieu of a government. After the city was incorporated in 1917, however, state law required that a municipal government be formed. Not surprisingly, the form chosen for this

¹⁵ John Fred Holly, "The Social and Economic Effects produced upon Small Towns by Rapid Industrialization," (master's thesis, University of Tennessee, 1938), 193.

¹⁶ Nolen, 62-64. On the general role of planning, see Roy Lubove, *The Urban Community: Housing and Planning in the Progressive Era* (Englewood Cliffs, 1967). For an interesting comparison, see Stanley Buder, *Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1930* (New York, 1967).

government was the city manager plan, the plan closest to that of the organization of a large business. Once again, advice was solicited from Northern professionals; this time the Rockefeller Foundation's Bureau of Municipal Research helped draft the plan.¹⁷

The Kingsport Improvement Corporation adopted the charter without a popular referendum of any kind, and saw its passage through the Tennessee state legislature. The city manager plan had the distinct advantage for the businessmen of removing "politics" from the administration of the city; the manager was appointed, not elected. In fact, there were no important elected officials, because the city manager in turn appointed the heads of the finance, legal, police, fire, health, and public works departments. This was important to the Improvement Corporation, for county and municipal politics in the region around Kingsport were "characterized by intense individualism and bitter conflicts between parties, factions, families, and individuals," a situation "distinctly unfavorable to the growth of governmental services administered by experts."¹⁸ As an indication of how these disorderly politics were kept from disrupting the efficient management of the city, it is interesting that at least until the Second World War every councilman elected was sponsored by the corporation. "Several of the leading citizens usually spent part of an election day at the polling place to encourage the voters to cast their ballots properly."¹⁹ A reporter for *Nation's Business* was surprised with the ease with which Johnson and the industrial interests directed the town.

'How are you able to get away with that?' I asked bluntly. 'Simply because we have no partisan politics or professional politicians, because we want to manage our own affairs and the city is small enough that we can,' Johnson answered.²⁰

¹⁷ Harold Stone, et al, *City Manager Government in Nine Cities* (Chicago, 1940). On the attraction of the city manager plan for businessmen, see James Weinstein's influential essay, "Organized Business and the City Commission and Manager Movements," *Journal of Southern History*, 38 (1962), 166-82; also important is Samuel Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," in David Kennedy, ed., *Progressivism: The Critical Issues* (Boston, 1971), 87-108. A recent overview of the progressive commission government movement, an important predecessor to the city manager plan, is Bradley Robert Rice, *Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920* (Austin, 1977).

¹⁸ Stone, 508; Long, 97-98.

¹⁹ Stone, 519.

²⁰ Quote from Stevenson, 125.

As testimony to the lack of interest in partisan politics, even after Kingsport grew to fifteen thousand residents no candidate ever received more than eight hundred votes.²¹

Johnson and the Improvement Corporation were able to manage their own affairs so effectively largely because of the progressive measures they adopted. The potential for disorder had been great as the agrarian economy of the mountain community was transformed almost overnight into a boom town. The *Kingsport Times*, founded in 1916, was left almost breathless in its attempt to keep abreast of the economic development of the town; news of the Great War and other world affairs became buried on the inside pages of the paper to make space for reprints of articles from the *Manufacturer's Record* extolling the growth of the "Magic City of the South." With thousands of people streaming from their mountain farms to take jobs in the factories of Kingsport, there was a great possibility that the efficient order of the Improvement Corporation would be disrupted. Though the *Times* almost never discussed any negative aspects of Kingsport, it was forced to admit that there were rumors that the boom town had a "tough" population, because "in a great manufacturing city like Kingsport 'odds' and 'ends' will naturally drift in." The editorial hastened to add, however, that "the criminal class is given undivided attention," and that Kingsport was secure.²² As an example of the strict order maintained, the biggest local news six months later was that a dance hall, "The Days of '49," had been closed for selling soft drinks illegally.²³

This concern with illegal beverages formed the major reform thrust of the town's managers. The editor of the *Times* repeatedly called for stricter enforcement of the prohibition laws; nearly all crimes reported in the paper were attributed to the influence of alcohol. As numerous students of Southern progressivism have noted, the campaign against liquor increasingly became the focal point for the movement as the years passed, "smoothing over the more natural patterns of conflict in the body politic and shifting attention from more pressing economic and social patterns."²⁴ The prohibition cause was not a front, however; it was an integral part of the vague ideology held by the progressives and their booster allies. The line between these two groups was never drawn very

²¹ Stone, 518.

²² *Kingsport Times*, November 9, 1916.

²³ *Kingsport Times*, March 22, 1917.

²⁴ Grantham, 56.

clearly in the South in the 1920's because the ideals and methods of progressives and boosters were identical. Those who proposed progressive measures for the new small towns of the South were not reformers, but formers: they had a clean slate on which to draw. The boosters and the progressives, often the same groups, directed their rhetoric and their actions toward the future rather than toward correcting the mistakes of the past. They were guided by no well-articulated ideology, only by a faith that what was good for one was good for all and that more was always better.

There is little doubt that the members of the Improvement Corporation saw themselves as "progressive." Their city charter was modeled after that of other "ultra progressive American cities," and the *Times* applauded the "progressive" outlook of Johnson and his associates.²⁵ The Improvement Corporation believed and proclaimed that it was progressive in its ideals of diversified industry, of city planning, of efficient government, of effective law enforcement, of race policy, and of its treatment of labor. They saw themselves as missionaries, bringing the best of a new world to ignorant, yet noble, mountaineers; they saw themselves not as ruthless capitalists, but as apostles of progress and free enterprise. Their ideals and actions were those of the vanguard of the progressive spirit in the South in the 1920's.

Johnson, Dennis and the other members of the Improvement Corporation, in their attempt to make their city a showplace for the South, adopted many progressive innovations besides planning and efficient municipal government. Kingsport was far ahead of the rest of Southern Appalachia and most of the South in its advances in education, health, recreational facilities and good roads. These improvements were not forced upon the men who controlled the city: in fact, they "could not wait for the rank and file of the voters to demand or even to sanction these services, so they provided them by cooperative action among themselves."²⁶ When Kingsport was reborn in the second decade of the twentieth century, there had been only one two-room school in the county. Within ten years the city could boast modern brick buildings and a school system planned by Columbia University. Illiteracy declined from 10.2 per cent of the population in 1920 to only 3.6 per cent by the end of the

²⁵ Kingsport *Times*, June 3, 1917; July 18, 1919.

²⁶ Stone, 511. See, too, Lewis Chase, "Changes in Social and Economic Status of the People of Sullivan County for a Thirty Year Period," (master's thesis, University of Tennessee, 1936); Charles Allred and J. C. Fitch, "Effects of Industrial Development on Rural Life in Sullivan County, Tennessee," University of Tennessee *Record*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Knoxville, 1928).

decade. Health services witnessed a similar revolution, though many of the mountain people showed a strong aversion to prenatal care and to giving birth in hospitals. The Improvement Corporation and its allied industries also provided attractive and abundant recreational facilities.²⁷

Kingsport saw itself as a model of racial cooperation as well as one of civic improvement. Editorials in the *Times* attacked Northern newspapers for referring to blacks as "the subject race" and pointed to Kingsport as a model of what could be accomplished when enlightened men were in power. There is no record on any racial disturbance in the "Magic City" during the progressive era, only of the formation of the Negro Commercial League and a picnic for the "colored population" sponsored by the Improvement Corporation. Since the principle of segregation was unquestioned and since blacks were living in the separate community designed by John Nolen, a hospital was built for Kingsport's "industrious Negroes": J. Fred Johnson contributed the first two hundred dollars toward the project.²⁸ Much was later made of an incident when the black community collected money to help capture one of their number who had raped a black girl: "There would be no negro problem anywhere if negroes everywhere were like the negroes of Kingsport."²⁹

The attitudes of the rulers of Kingsport toward workers were similar to those toward blacks: condescending yet benevolent, enlightened yet manipulative. Workers were granted rights, but only within limits drawn according to the ideals of efficiency and order. The Improvement Corporation had difficulty understanding why any of the workers should want to unionize; the mountain people were paid more than they had been accustomed to, homes were provided for them, and the industries were always more than happy to provide money for new uniforms for the workers' baseball team and annual picnics for their families. Since, as J. Fred Johnson told a Northern business magazine, "a workman in Kingsport on the local wage scale, which is considerably below that prevailing in the industrial districts of the North, is still able to live in extremely comfortable fashion," there existed the best of all possible worlds for the employer: "profitable manufacturing operations . . . without any oppression of labor."³⁰ Despite Johnson's opinion,

²⁷ Chase and Holly detail these developments.

²⁸ Kingsport *Times*, June 3, 1919.

²⁹ Kingsport *Times*, March 23, 1920.

³⁰ J. Fred Johnson, "Neighbors: How a Dozen Plants Work Together (Part Two)," *Factory and Industrial Management*, 75 (May, 1928), 974.

some workers were dissatisfied with the methods of the Improvement Corporation. Though there were no labor unions permitted in any of the factories, a carpenters' strike in 1919 threatened to disrupt the orderly growth of the "Magic City." Johnson protested in the paper that those striking were hurting the community by not working ten hours a day for him without overtime pay. The *Times*, always on the side of the community, pronounced that "if the workman is unwilling to accept the employer's terms he is free to seek employment elsewhere. If the employer is not willing to accept the employe's terms he should be allowed the freedom to seek other men."³¹ Kingsport's manufacturers did provide more services to their workers than did most employers in the South; unions were seen as potentially disruptive forces and generous benefits were granted to prevent their organization.

A writer in *Business* magazine in 1920 praised this approach by the Improvement Corporation; it was well known that "improper housing, insufficient amusement, lack of care in illness, poor food—all these things tend to lower industrial efficiency."³² John Nolen, intimately involved with the city fathers in the making of the town, explained why so much money was invested in public services and employees' benefits by men who were not compelled in any way to do so.

It was primarily a business proposition, undertaken with a common-sense view to profitable returns. With such enlightened perception as to the directions in which true self-interest lay, these other advantages were added thereto as by-products.³³

To protect such an investment, the Kingsport Improvement Corporation brought every worker in the city under one giant health and accident insurance policy—an unprecedented measure.³⁴

The sort of cooperation that allowed one insurance policy to cover a city of fifteen thousand people was made possible by a unified elite of Northern managers and Southern allies free of any organized opposition. An analyst of Kingsport's city government noted its "unity of control" and "singleness of purpose," and a friendly contemporary observer was impressed by the fact that the

³¹ Kingsport *Times*, March 9, 1920.

³² Quoted in Nolen, 59.

³³ Nolen, 54.

³⁴ Nolen, 57.

control of key-men in the City government, various businesses, and industries by the officials of the Kingsport Improvement Corporation has insured control of the development of the City for the enterprisers. These men controlled development to such an extent that "competition has been impossible, therefore the profits of the company have been great."³⁵ In an article titled "Neighbors: How a Dozen Plants Work Together," the manager of one of Kingsport's factories exclaimed that "It is downright astonishing how many ideas can come up when a lot of men see each other frequently, and sincerely want to work together to their mutual advantage."³⁶ The strategy of achieving this mutual advantage was decided upon in Kingsport's Rotary, Kiwanis and Optimist clubs, where "a well balanced proportion of industrial men, business men and professional men" met. "The result is that a call made upon the industries by the business interests of the city is answered even before it is made, and any request coming to the business men from the factory heads has absolute assurance of being granted."³⁷ This cooperation of businessmen and professionals shows that there is no need to suppose that Northerners and Southerners were monolithic groups, and dispenses with the need for the conspiratorial mentality so often ascribed to those who posit a colonial economy. Civic clubs and Chambers of Commerce represented the combined aspiration of businesses large and small, Northern and Southern; usually, the larger and more influential businesses *were* Northern-controlled. The wide internal divisions within Southern society must not be masked by a rigid Northern/Southern dichotomy, but neither must the tremendous influence of Northern capital on Southern life be neglected.

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The adulatory literature that appeared in subsequent years in the publications of the Rotary Club, in John Nolen's book, and magazines such as *Reader's Digest* and *Time* did not discuss Kingsport's shortcomings.³⁸ Indeed, the members of the Kingsport Improvement Corporation could afford to be so honest about their motives because they and most of their contemporaries felt that their results were so nearly perfect. A reporter for the *Nation*

³⁵ Stone, 533; Holly, 143-144.

³⁶ Quoted in Johnson, Part One, *Factory and Industrial Management*, 75 (April, 1928), 750.

³⁷ Long, 134-135.

³⁸ See *Reader's Digest*, 48 (March, 1946), 39-42; "Test Tube Love Seat, Kingsport, Tennessee," *Time*, (Feb. 26, 1940), 74.

disagreed: Willson Whitman found the smug complacency of J. Fred Johnson and his colleagues unpleasant and their benevolence hypocritical. She complained that "within sight of the big beautiful Eastman plant—a ten-story building . . . looking in general like a Hollywood dream of the future" lay Long Island, an area that was "not anything the Kingsport Improvement company cares to show." The island was covered with shacks that rented for ten dollars a month: the blending of urban and rural life that Kingsport touted meant, in fact, "that you have rural sanitation with city crowding. The real miracle of Kingsport is that there has been no typhoid epidemic." As a result of this criticism, the city fathers secured a federal grant to erect a new housing project on the island.³⁹

Though the calm of Kingsport was to be rippled during the 1930's by some minor labor unrest, the "Model City" experienced nothing like the difficulties that racked other Southern factory-dominated towns during the depression. The same men who initially formed the Improvement Corporation maintained firm control of the city at least until the Second World War—after which John B. Dennis' brother came down from New York to assume command. Meanwhile, developments in nearby towns showed that the "progressive" measures of the founders of Kingsport rather than the inherent docility of the mountain people were responsible for keeping the factories running so smoothly. In Elizabethton, Tennessee, only twenty miles away, bloody riots broke out in 1929 when unplanned growth spawned by the arrival of Northern factories forced rents to rise while wages fell.⁴⁰ Where no powerful interest tried to maintain control in Southern towns, unplanned growth inflicted even greater suffering upon the workers than did planned exploitation.

John Nolen thus reasonably predicted that the path followed by Kingsport would be followed widely if "the new economic conditions of the South are to be intelligently provided for."⁴¹ While there was only one Kingsport, evidence suggests that Nolen was correct: Kingsport was representative of other Southern cities in some respects and a model toward which they consciously aspired in others. Despite the claims of Kingsport's Northern manufacturers that the area was not being merely stripped of its

³⁹ Willson Whitman, *God's Valley: People and Power Along the Tennessee River* (New York, 1939), 180; "Kingsport: They Planned It," *Nation*, 39 (Jan. 21, 1939), 88-90.

⁴⁰ Tindall, 342-343.

⁴¹ Nolen, 36.

raw materials, an investigation of the city's exports shows that its economy was built around the initial processing of local natural resources: cement, brick, hose, broad silk, lumber, charcoal, leather, soda pulp, paper, glass and books were its products. Only a very small percentage of these—mainly books—were finished goods. Even in a Southern industrial town famous for its diversified industry, the largest factory was a textile mill owned by a Massachusetts firm; it produced gray cloth.⁴² This picture of Kingsport's economy corresponds well with that of the *Report to the President on the Economic Conditions of the South* of 1938, where it was shown that almost all of the region's public utilities, major railroad systems, natural gas, iron ore, coal, limestone, bauxite, zinc, and sulphur deposits, as well as its cotton mills, were owned and controlled by Northern capital. Two-thirds of the businesses and nearly all of the public utilities of Memphis were owned by Northerners during the progressive era.⁴³

Kingsport was representative, too, in that its decision making process was heavily influenced (if not controlled) by these outside investors. In a study of Birmingham, Alabama, it was discovered that Northern-owned corporations were the most successful of any interest group in influencing public policy and that a "civic-commercial" elite much like that of Kingsport was the major force behind that city's governmental action.⁴⁴ Since no studies of other small Southern cities are available, it is impossible to know for certain whether this pattern was typical; it seems highly probable, however, that smaller towns possessed an even tighter, more compact power elite than did the region's large cities. In a town built around one or two Northern-owned factories—as many, of course, were—it is reasonable to assume that the interests of the major employer carried a great deal of weight.

The political influence of these industries could have been diminished, however, by local factional politics, by the election of men unfriendly to the factories, and by inefficient government. The implementation of the city manager plan helped prevent these difficulties; the important public officials were appointed by a small council and disruptive "politics" were removed from

⁴² Long, 108-111.

⁴³ *Report to the President on the Economic Conditions of the South*, National Emergency Committee (Washington, 1938); the report is paraphrased in Danhof, 32-35. On Memphis, see William Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1957), 43.

⁴⁴ Brownell, 54-55.

municipal government. The city manager plan was beneficial to large businesses in another way as well: it was much more efficient than the old mayoral system. Decisions could be made quickly and implemented immediately, and the cost of government was reduced as its administration was streamlined. Taxes could remain low enough to help entice Northern capital to stay in town—if not always high enough to provide adequate schools and hospitals. That the benefits of this form of government were recognized by Southern industrial towns is certain: it is striking that the ratio of city manager cities in the South was higher than that of municipalities of the same population categories of the country as a whole.⁴⁵ A map of the fifty-one cities in the South with the city manager plan in 1927 shows that they were heavily placed in the Piedmont manufacturing region and along major railroads; forty-four of these towns were of less than thirty thousand in population. Two decades later there were 242 manager cities in the South.⁴⁶ James Weinstein has convincingly shown that the initiative for manager government in the United States came consistently from organized business groups; in Beaufort, South Carolina, the city manager and the secretary of the board of trade were actually combined.⁴⁷

The movement for this new kind of government was one of the few areas of change in which the South led the way during the progressive years; Kingsport was both a product of and model for this development. Implementing its manager plan in 1917, Kingsport was not a pioneer in the field, for the first such charters in the United States were granted to Staunton, Virginia, and Sumter, South Carolina, in 1911. Kingsport, however, having benefited from the advice of the Rockefeller Foundation, was thought to have a model constitution; more than a decade after it was put into force the managers of the town were still receiving more than one hundred inquiries a month from other small towns. Dozens of cities copied the plan almost verbatim.⁴⁸

Kingsport's planning, too, was unusual only in the sense that it was done so well. Though numerous Southern towns were designed

⁴⁵ Robert Highshaw, "City and County Manager Plans in the South," *Journal of Politics*, XI (1949), 497-517.

⁴⁶ Leonard White, *The City Manager* (Chicago, 1927), 140, 309-315; Highshaw, 501. There were no city manager towns in Alabama and Mississippi because their state constitutions prohibited them there.

⁴⁷ Weinstein, 222, 224.

⁴⁸ Long, 98.

as colonial outposts of Northern industries, more representative was the pattern of Kingsport: it was not a "company town," but a town dominated by several companies.⁴⁹ A study of city planning in North Carolina during the progressive era shows that virtually all planning efforts in that state were led by a coalition of business interests.⁵⁰ A substantial part of this influence was formed, of course, by the many Northern-owned textile and furniture factories that dominated that state's economy. The benefits of planning for these Northern businesses were similar to those provided by the city manager plan: they rationalized a potentially disorderly economic environment. By strict zoning, a city could insure industries that there would be room to expand, that competing factories would not arise, that public utilities would be at the service of the industry and that undesirable elements of the population could be effectively quarantined. By such measures the progressive ideal of orderly economic development could be assured.

The legacy of Southern progressivism, a movement whose ideals have never really died, is clearly mixed. Kingsport was by most material standards one of the more attractive small towns of the South in the early part of this century. But this progress had its price. Southern towns such as Kingsport traded autonomy, control over their own destinies, for paternalistic business. Their futures depended upon the needs and desires of companies owned and controlled in the North. Kingsport became the "Model City" because those needs and desires were thoroughly planned and coordinated; other Southern communities became traditional hard-luck company towns because their Northern creators did not plan their domination so thoroughly.

⁴⁹ Chicopee, Georgia, for instance, was planned for the Johnson and Johnson Company, and Clewiston, Florida was planned for the Celotex Company of Chicago.

⁵⁰ Kay Huggins, "City Planning in North Carolina, 1900-1929," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XLVI (Autumn, 1969).