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Deindustrialization: The Cigar Factory, Charleston, S.C.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the story of the Cigar Factory building shows how it struggled throughout history from construction through deindustrialization. This old building passed through many companies trying to survive. In addition, the story of the historical labor issues and events which took place in the old Cigar Factory justifies why the old building needed to survive deindustrialization as it was a historical landmark.

“The five-story brick Victorian building located at the intersections of East Bay, Columbus, and Blake Streets” started as a cotton manufacturing facility with the best and most current technology. In 1881, it had “electricity, steam heat and a fire safety system.” “It survived the Earthquake of 1886.” In 1903, the Cigar Factory opened its doors to business under the American Tobacco Company. The factory employed a large workforce consisting of young, working-class, white and black women and men to make the popular, highest selling cigars; Certified Cremo (five-cents) and Roi-Tan cigars(ten-cents). “Cremo College” is what they called it because of the all the young people who worked there.

Although working with young people might sound fun, like in all factories, an assembly line was tedious. Imagine each day what the eight-hour work day was like in factories. Specifically, at the Cigar Factory, “managers segregated factory floors by race, and assembly lines by gender. Black and white women typically rolled cigars, inspected tobacco leaves, packed cigars into boxes, or applied labels to cigar boxes. Black men rolled cigars or loaded boxes of tobacco onto the factory floor. White men often worked in the highest paid factory positions as machinists, foremen, or oilers.” These employees produced 1.5 million cigars each day for 70 years.

By the 1930s and the Depression, the Cigar Factory “was one of the few civilian workplaces that provided a full day of wages.” The Cigar Factory paid a yearly payroll of almost one million dollars for 1400 employees, but that was not enough, the workers needed an increase in their pay. The Cigar Factory tried to appease the workers with improved working conditions such as a lunch room, a piano and a kitchen. The employees still needed more pay. The Charleston Factory employees joined a labor union, referred to as “Local 15”, to get help to convince their managers they deserved more pay.

October 1, 1945, a manager fired a black male worker at the Charleston Cigar Factory because a white woman supervisor claimed he was “too familiar” with some of the black women employees. Due to the wage

dispute and the firing of the black worker, the union and the employees were furious. On October 3, 1945, workers protested with a sit-down; workers stood idle at their stations. On October 22, 1945, 1200 Cigar Factory workers walked off the job because of discrimination and low pay. It is important to note that while walking out, they were singing the gospel hymn, "I'll Overcome Someday". Later this same song was changed to "We Shall Overcome" and it became the anthem for Civil Rights. The Cigar Factory workers were only demanding a 25 cent increase, and management refused to give in, so the unions started encouraging a boycott of the American Tobacco Company products. After 5 months, the strike finally ended and the workers got many of their demands addressed.

In 1973, tobacco use plummeted and "the Cigar Factory closed its doors. The decline and eventual shut down of the factory occurred for a number of reasons; including the globalization of the tobacco industry, as well as the decline of tobacco use after a series of class action suits forced the American Tobacco Company to place warning labels on tobacco products and limit advertising."

The historic Cigar Factory was placed on the growing list of factories suffering from deindustrialization. Over the next 7 years, the Charleston Cigar Factory was used for offices and warehouses. In 1980, value was given to the old Cigar Factory and the City of Charleston placed it on the [National Register of Historic Places](#). The city government tried to "preserve the significance of the building's architecture as one of the last surviving Victorian-era industrial buildings in Charleston." The city government wanted "to highlight the site's prominent role in the region's textile and tobacco industries." Sadly, and unjustly, "the history of the massive labor strike that occurred at the Cigar Factory in the 1940s was not included in their preservation efforts."

Continuing in 1980, the Cigar Factory became a famous cooking school owned by Johnson and Wales, until a group came along and wanted to rebuild and bring back the true life and feeling of the old Cigar Factory. The group was from Georgia and called the old building "the Cigar Factory 2007." They would renovate the building and make condominiums, office space and retail space. Unfortunately, these plans fell through and the building remained on the list of deindustrialized buildings.

In 2014, another group, named Roi-Tan Investments, purchased the old Cigar Factory. The old building is now a classy beautiful "mixed-use" building with office space, fabulous restaurants, conference/meeting/wedding space, exquisite shopping and large amounts of parking. Today, the 244,000 square foot Cigar Factory is over 95% occupied. The Clemson Architecture Center and Master of Science Historic Preservation Program, as well as other prominent organizations are a part of this historical building. At one time the Cigar Factory building was the home

to the largest employer in Charleston. Although in 1980, the city of Charleston did not appear to want to preserve “the history of the massive labor strike that occurred” in the 1940s, they do appear now to be trying to recreate, not only the Victorian brick architecture, but the employment opportunities offered so many years ago. The Cigar Factory is giving back to the city while embracing the important historical elements of labor disputes, discrimination, civil rights, industrialization and deindustrialization. Thankfully companies like Roi-Investments have helped the old Cigar Factory survive deindustrialization in order to honor the history and ancestors who helped to give all of us the rights and freedoms we enjoy today.



Former Cigar Factory building, image by Luis F. Rojo, Charleston, South Carolina, September 2012. ("Introduction: Charleston's Cigar Factory Strike, 1945-1946." Lowcountry Digital History Initiative. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 June 2017.)



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