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Secretary of State

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Petition to appoint a Labor Commissioner, 1863

Child labor was common in Rhode Island, beginning in 1793 with the Slater Mill in Pawtucket. In the following decades, the state passed laws limiting the number of hours children were permitted to work in factories, and requiring school attendance. These laws, however, were not well enforced. In this 1863 petition, residents of Woonsocket ask the state to appoint a commissioner with the power to ensure that employers follow existing laws.

To the Honorable the general Assembly of the State of Rhode Island

The undersigned citizens of Woonsocket, respectfully represent that the laws of this state in relation to the hours of labor in the manufacturing establishment are in many cases not lived up to, that many of the corporations holding their charters under the act of the General Assembly as well as individuals, employ minors under the age of fifteen years more than eleven hours per day- to wit - thirteen hours and over per day, for a considerable portion of the year. Your petitioners would represent, that there is no adequate way to enforce said laws, therefore they pray that your honorable body will appoint a commissioner with full powers, and whose duty it shall be to see that the laws are fully enforced.

Woonsocket March 4th 1863

This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, C#0869 – Petitions to the General Assembly, Failed / Withdrawn, January 1863.

*This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document.
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