Lowell Factory System Sources

General context for all sources: [1]

In the 1820s, industrialist Francis Cabot Lowell developed a new system for organizing textile factories in Massachusetts, called the Lowell-Waltham system. Towns like Lowell, Massachusetts and others were built around the textile factories there. Factory agents recruited women and teenage girls (as well as men) to live in the town and work at the factories, guaranteeing that their moral conduct would be upheld. "Lowell girls" were paid wages (though less than men's) and were required to live in the official boardinghouses and to attend church. Lowell also became known for the number of opportunities for "self-improvement", such as learning music, libraries, "literary societies" or book clubs, and even a magazine, *The Lowell Offering*, written and edited by female Lowell factory workers. In 1836 Lowell had 17,000 inhabitants, and women composed nearly 70 percent of the laboring population.[2]

In the 1830s, the factory owners lowered wages and the Lowell workers went on strike in 1834 and 1836 (though unsuccessfully), making them one of the first organized labor groups in the U.S. In the 1840s, the Irish Potato Famine caused a new wave of immigrants willing to work for lower wages, which led to the end of the "Lowell system".

Josephine L. Baker, Article in *The Lowell Offering*, 1845[3]

The magazine The Lowell Offering *began publication in 1842. It was edited and written by female Lowell factory employees; it circulated not only in Lowell but to a wider readership. This article appeared in 1845. It gives the reader a "virtual tour" of a factory and boarding house.*

[At the entrance] swings the ponderous gate that shuts the mills in from the world without. But, stop; we must get "a pass" ere we go through, or "the watchman will be after us." Having obtained this, we will stop on the slight elevation by the gate, and view the mills. The one to the left rears high its huge sides of brick and mortar, and the belfry, towering far above the rest, stands out in bold relief against the rosy sky. The almost innumerable windows glitter, like gems, in the morning sunlight. It is six and a half stories high, and, like the fabled monster of old, who guarded the sacred waters of Mars, it seems to guard its less aspiring sister to the right; that is five and a half stories high, and to it is attached the repair-shop. If you please, we will pass to the larger factory,-but be careful, or you will get lost in the mud, for this yard is not laid out in such beautiful order, as some of the factory yards are, nor can it be.

We will just look into the first room. It is used for cleaning cloth. You see the scrubbing and scouring-machines are in full operation, and gigging and fulling are going on in full perfection. As it is very damp, and the labor is performed by the other half of creation [I.e. men, not women], we will pass on, for fear of incurring their jealousy. But the very appearance might indicate that there are, occasionally, *fogs* and *clouds;* and not only fogs and clouds, but sometimes plentiful showers. In the second room the cloth is *"finished,"* going through the various operations of burling, shearing, brushing, inking, fine-drawing, pressing, and packing for market. This is the pleasantest room on the corporation, and consequently they are never in want of help. The shearing, brushing, pressing and packing is done by males; while the burling, inking, marking and fine-drawing is performed byfemales. We will pass to the third room, called the "cassimere weaving-room," where all kinds of cloths are woven, from plain to the most exquisite fancy. There are between eighty and ninety looms, and part of the dressing is also done here. The fourth is the "broad weaving-room," and contains between thirty and forty looms; and broad sure enough they are. Just see how lazily the lathe drags backward and forward, and the shuttle—how spitefully it hops from one end of it to the other. But we must not stop longer, or perchance it will hop at us. You look weary; but, never mind! there was an end to Jacob's ladder, and *so*

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[1] Introduction taken from Anthony Marcus et al., ed, *America Firsthand, Vol. 1* (9th ed., Boston: Bedford/St.Martins, 2012), 204-5.

[2] Bruce Borland, ed. *America Through the Eyes of Its People: Primary Sources in American History,* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 99-100.

[3] From Benita Eisler, ed., *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840-1845)* (1977; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1998), pp. 77-82. From David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, ed., *For the Record: A Documentary History of America: Volume One* (New York: W.W.Norton and Co., 1999), 391-396.

there is a termination to these stairs. Now if you please we will go up to the next room, where the spinning is done. Here we have spinning jacks or jennies that dance merrily along whizzing and singing, as they spin out their "long yarns," and it seems but pleasure to watch their movements; but it is hard work, and requires good health and much strength. Do not go too near, as we shall find that they do not understand the established rules of etiquette, and might unceremoniously knock us over. We must not stop here longer, for it is twelve o'clock, and we have the "carding-room" to visit before dinner. There are between twenty and thirty set of cards located closely together, and I beg of you to be careful as we go amongst them, or you will get caught in the machinery. You walk as though you were afraid of getting blue. Please excuse me, if I ask you not to be afraid. 'Tis a wholesome color, and soap and water will wash it off. The girls, you see, are partially guarded against it, by over-skirts and sleeves; but as it is not fashionable to wear masks, they cannot keep it from their faces. You appear surprised at the hurry and bustle now going on in the room, but your attention has been so engaged that you have forgotten the hour. Just look at the clock, and you will find that it wants but five minutes to "bell time." We will go to the door, and be ready to start when the others do; and now, while we are waiting, just cast your eyes to the stair-way, and you will see another flight of stairs, leading to another spinning-room; a picker is located somewhere in that region, but I cannot give you a description of it, as I have never had the courage to ascend more than five flights of stairs at a time. And-but the bell rings.

Now look out-not for the engine-but for the rush to the stair-way. O mercy! what a crowd. I do not wonder you gasp for breath; but, keep up courage; we shall soon be on terra firma again. Now, safely landed, I hope to be excused for taking you into such a crowd. Really, it would not be fair to let you see the factory girls and machinery for nothing. I shall be obliged to hurry you, as it is some way to the boarding-house, and we have but thirty minutes from the time the bell begins to ring till it is done ringing again; and then all are required to be at their work. There is a group of girls yonder, going our way; let us overtake them, and hear what they are talking about. Something unpleasant I dare say, from their earnest gestures and clouded brows.

"Well, I do think it is too bad," exclaims one.

"So do I," says another. "This cutting down wages *is not* what they cry it up to be. I wonder how they'd like to work as hard as we do, digging and drudging day after day, from morning till night, and then, every two or three years, have their wages reduced. I rather guess it wouldn't set very well."

"And, besides this, who ever heard, of such a thing as their being raised again," says the first speaker. "I confess that I never did, so long as I've worked in the mill, and that's been these ten years."

"Well, it is real provoking any how," returned the other, "for my part I should think they had made a clean sweep this time. I wonder what they'll do next."

"Listeners never hear any good of themselves" is a trite saying, and, for fear it may prove true in our case, we will leave this busy group, and get some dinner. There is an open door inviting us to enter. We will do so. You can hang your bonnet and shawl on one of those hooks, that extend the length of the entry for that purpose, or you can lay them on the banisters, as some do. Please to walk into the dining-room. Here are two large square tables, covered with checked clothes and loaded down with smoking viands, the odor of which is very inviting. But we will not stop here; there is the long table in the front room, at which ten or fifteen can be comfortably seated. You may place yourself at the head. Now do not be bashful or wait to be helped, but comply with the oftmade request, "help yourself" to whatever you like best; for you have but a few minutes allotted you to spend at the table. The reason why, is because you are a rational, intelligent, thinking being, and ought to know enough to swallow your food whole; whereas a horse or an ox, or any other dumb beast knows no better than to spend an hour in the *useless* process of mastication. The bell rings again, and the girls are hurrying to the mills; 'you, I suppose, have seen enough of them for one day, so we will walk up stairs and have a *tete-a-tete*.

You ask, if there are so many things objectionable, why we work in the mill. Well, simply for this reason,-every situation in life, has its trials which must be borne, and factory life has no more than any other. There are many things we do not like; many occurrences that send the warm blood mantling to the cheek when they must be borne in silence, and many harsh words and acts that are not called for. There are objections also to the number of hours we work, to the length of time allotted to our meals, and to the low wages allowed for labor; objections that must and will be answered; for the time has come when something, besides the clothing and feeding of the body is to be thought of; when the mind is to be clothed and fed; and this cannot be as it should be, with the present system of labor. Who, let me ask, can find that pleasure in life which they should, when it is spent in this way. Without time for the laborer's own work, and the improvement of the mind, save the few evening hours; and even then if the mind is enriched and stored with useful knowledge, it must be at the expense of health. And the feeling too, that comes over us (there is no use in denying it) when we hear the bell calling us away from repose that tired nature loudly claims-the feeling, that we are *obliged to go*. And these few hours, of which we have spoken, are far too short, three at the most at the close of day. Surely, methinks, every heart that lays claim to humanity will feel 'tis not enough. But this, we hope will, ere long, be done away with, and labor made what it should be; pleasant and inviting to every son and daughter of the human family.

There is a brighter side to this picture, over which we would not willingly pass without notice, and an answer to the question, why we work here? The time we *do* have is our own. The money we earn comes·promptly; more so than in any other situation; and our work, though laborious is the same from day to day; we know what it is, and when finished we feel perfectly free, till it is time to commence it again.

Besides this, there are many pleasant associations connected with factory life, that are not to be found elsewhere.

There are lectures, evening schools and libraries, to which all may have access. The one thing needful here, is the time to improve them as we ought.

There is a class, of whom I would speak, that work in the mills, and will while they continue in operation. Namely, the many who have no home, and who come here to seek, in this busy, bustling "City of Spindles," a competency that shall enable them in after life, to live without being a burden to society,—the many who toil on, without a murmur, for the support of an aged mother or orphaned brother and sister. For the sake of them, we earnestly hope labor may be reformed; that the miserable, selfish spirit of competition, now in our midst, may be thrust from us and consigned to eternal oblivion.

There is one other thing that must be mentioned ere we part, that is the practice of sending agents through the country to decoy girls away from their homes with the promise of high wages; when the market is already stocked to overflowing. This is certainly wrong, for it lessens the value of labor, which should be ever held in high estimation, as the path marked out by the right hand of God, in which man should walk with dignity.

Hezekiah Niles, ed., *Niles' Weekly Register*, 1826 [4]

Hezekiah Niles was a newspaper editor in Baltimore. In the 1820s, almost every town had its own newspaper, and bigger towns had several to choose from. Although newspapers tried to report factual information, most were also very open and direct about endorsing particular views of contemporary question—in other words, almost all newspaper stories had as much "spin" as the editorial page in a present-day newspaper.

It is probable that the domestic consumption of cotton in the present year, [in 1816, 90,000 bales], will amount to about or more than one hundred and fifty thousand bales-possibly, to 175,000. Next year, unless because of some unlooked-for events, to 200,000! Suppose this were

[4] From "Great National Interests," 21 October 1826, in Hezekiah Niles, ed., *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore, MD). Bound originals in special collections, University) of Pittsburgh Library. From David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, ed., *For the Record: A Documentary History of America: Volume One* (New York: W.W.Norton and Co., 1999), 391-396.