

Massachusetts: Lowell National Historical Park

- 1 During the first half of the 19th century, Lowell, Massachusetts, quickly transformed itself from a farm town to a bustling industrial city. In time, Lowell became a model of industry, gaining global recognition for its state-of-the-art technology, innovative canal and dam system, mill architecture, boardinghouses, churches, and ethnic neighborhoods. Young Yankee¹ women, immigrant families, and European tourists all flocked to Lowell to find work at one of the many textile mills, or visit the industrious city that was becoming a popular tourist destination. As one Scottish traveler observed during his visit to America, “Niagara² and Lowell are the two objects I will longest remember in my American journey, the one the glory of American scenery, the other of American industry.” Today, Lowell National Historical Park welcomes visitors to enjoy the sights of Lowell and learn about the history of one of America’s most significant industrial cities.
- 2 The Boston merchants who founded Lowell in 1821 and named it after Francis Cabot Lowell chose to locate the town along Massachusetts’s Merrimack River to take advantage of the kinetic energy offered by the Pawtucket waterfalls. Over six miles of canals powered the waterwheels of Lowell’s mills, whose massive five- and six-story brick buildings dominated the city’s landscape. . . . The most recognized of these buildings are the Lowell Manufacturing Company chartered in 1821, the Suffolk or Wannalancit Mill completed around the 1880s, the Boott Mill Company established in 1835, and the Boott Mill Boardinghouse that opened in 1838. By the 1850s, 40 textile mills employing over 10,000 workers stretched for about a mile along the river. . . .
- 3 The city’s female workforce was significant in the history of Lowell. From the early to mid-1800s, women left the constricted lifestyle of small rural towns and rural areas for independent industrial city life. Most were young single Yankee girls, who were tired of the limited opportunities offered by their domestic work.³ Women found that Lowell’s mills offered monthly wages for their services and provided them room and board. Although these women gained economic independence in Lowell, the mill boardinghouse keepers constantly supervised their social activities, for which they hardly had any time, considering their daily 12- to 14-hour work schedules. At the end of the day, the factory bell signaled the “mill girls” to return to their boardinghouses. They were expected to adhere to the strict code of conduct respecting curfew and attending church.
- 4 Yankee “mill girls” continued to dominate the Lowell workforce until the 1840s, when the city began to find it difficult to compete with the growing industrial development in other New England communities. As profits fell, the mill industry cut wages. These wage cuts, deteriorating working conditions, and long workdays led the “mill girls” to protest and organize strikes. When their demands went unheard, the women left Lowell, and immigrant groups replaced them in the workforce. Despite the low wages and unhealthy work conditions, immigrants were eager to find work.
- 5 The immigrants replacing the Yankee “mill girls” during the 1840s were predominantly Irish Catholics, who traveled to America during the Great Potato Famine. Although Lowell received an influx of Irish families during this time, the Irish were a part of the city’s history from its birth, and before the “mill girls” arrived, they built Lowell’s historic canals, mills, and boardinghouses. Initially,

¹**Yankee:** native to New England

²**Niagra:** a town in northwestern New York State well known as the location of Niagara Falls, a series of waterfalls on the Canadian border

³**domestic work:** household duties like cooking and cleaning

Lowell's Protestant community was slow to welcome Irish immigrants, but the hostility between Yankee Protestants and Irish Catholics eventually disappeared. Irish immigrants dominated the industrial scene until the Civil War, when other immigrant groups began to work in the city mills.

- 6 Like the Irish, the French-Canadians, Greeks, Poles, Portuguese, Russian Jews, and Armenians who came to work in Lowell's mills faced long work hours, low wages, and poor living conditions in the city's crowded tenements. By the time Lowell's industry declined, the city had become an ethnic melting pot, where each group claimed its own distinct neighborhood, like the Irish immigrants' "New Dublin" or "Acre," and the French-Canadians' "Little Canada." The city officially began to close down its mills in the 1920s and '30s after Lowell's outdated mills could no longer compete against the state-of-the-art cotton mills in other communities and working conditions continued to decline as Lowell's companies stopped reinvesting in their mills. . . . Despite a brief resurgence during World War II, the city shut down its last surviving mill by the mid-1950s.

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