

= Lowell Mill Girls =

The " Mill Girls " were female workers who came to work for the textile corporations in Lowell , Massachusetts , during the Industrial Revolution in the United States . The workers initially recruited by the corporations were daughters of propertied New England farmers , between the ages of 15 and 30 . (There also could be " little girls " who worked there about the age of 13 .) By 1840 , at the height of the Industrial Revolution , the textile mills had recruited over 80,000 women , who came to make up nearly seventy percent of the mill workforce .

During the early period , women came to the mills of their own accord , for various reasons : to help a brother pay for college , for the educational opportunities offered in Lowell , or to earn a supplementary income for themselves . While their wages were only half of what men were paid , many were able to attain economic independence for the first time , free from controlling fathers and husbands . As a result , while factory life would soon come to be experienced as oppressive , it enabled these women to challenge assumptions of female inferiority and dependence .

As the nature of the new " factory system " became clear , however , many women joined the broader American labor movement , to protest the dramatic social changes being brought by the Industrial Revolution . While they decried the deteriorating factory conditions , worker unrest in the 1840s was directed mainly against the loss of control over economic life . This loss of control , which came with the dependence on the corporations for a wage , was experienced as an attack on their dignity and independence . In 1845 , after a number of protests and strikes , many operatives came together to form the first union of working women in the United States , the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association . The Association adopted a newspaper called the Voice of Industry , in which workers published sharp critiques of the new industrialism . The Voice stood in sharp contrast to other literary magazines published by female operatives , such as the Lowell Offering , which painted a sanguine picture of life in the mills .

= = Industrialization of Lowell = =

In 1813 , businessman Francis Cabot Lowell formed a company , the Boston Manufacturing Company and built a textile mill next to the Charles River in Waltham , Massachusetts . Differing from the earlier Rhode Island System , where only carding and spinning were done in a factory while the weaving was often put out to neighboring farms to be done by hand , the Waltham mill was the first integrated mill in the United States , transforming raw cotton into cotton cloth in one mill building .

In 1821 , Francis C. Lowell 's business associates , looking to expand the Waltham textile operations , purchased land around the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River in East Chelmsford , Massachusetts . Incorporated as the Town of Lowell in 1826 , by 1840 , the textile mills employed almost 80,000 workers ? mostly women between the ages of 16 and 35 .

The " City of Spindles , " as Lowell came to be known , quickly became the center of the Industrial Revolution in America . New , large scale machinery , which had come to dominate the production of cloth by 1840 , was being rapidly developed in lockstep with the equally new ways of organizing workers for mass production . Together , these mutually reinforcing technological and social changes produced staggering increases : between 1840 and 1860 , the number of spindles in use went from 2 ¼ million to almost 5 ¼ million ; bales of cotton used from 300,000 to nearly 1 million , and the number of workers from 72,000 to nearly 122,000 . This tremendous growth translated directly into large profits for the textile corporations : between 1846 and 1850 , for instance , the dividends of the Boston-based investors , the group of textile companies that founded Lowell , averaged 14 percent per year . Most corporations recorded similarly high profits during this period .

= = Work and living environment = =

The social position of the factory girls had been degraded considerably in France and England . In

her autobiography , Harriet Hanson Robinson (who worked in the Lowell mills from 1834 ? 1848) suggests that " It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill girls , in spite of the opprobrium that still clung to this degrading occupation . ? "

= = = Factory conditions = = =

The Lowell System combined large @-@ scale mechanization with an attempt to improve the stature of its female workforce and workers . A few girls who came with their mothers or older sisters were as young as ten years old , some were middle @-@ aged , but the average age was about 24 . Usually hired for contracts of one year (the average stay was about four years) , new employees were given assorted tasks as spare hands and paid a fixed daily wage while more experienced loom operators would be paid by the piece . They were paired with more experienced women , who trained them in the ways of the factory .

Conditions in the Lowell mills were severe by modern American standards . Employees worked from 5 : 00 am until 7 : 00 pm , for an average 73 hours per week . Each room usually had 80 women working at machines , with two male overseers managing the operation . The noise of the machines was described by one worker as " something frightful and infernal , " and although the rooms were hot , windows were often kept closed during the summer so that conditions for thread work remained optimal . The air , meanwhile , was filled with particles of thread and cloth .

The English novelist Charles Dickens , who visited in 1842 , remarked favorably on the conditions : " I cannot recall or separate one young face that gave me a painful impression ; not one young girl whom , assuming it to be matter of necessity that she should gain her daily bread by the labour of her hands , I would have removed from those works if I had had the power " " However , there was concern among many workers that foreign visitors were being presented with a sanitized view of the mills , by textile corporations who were trading on the image of the ? literary operative ? to mask the grim realities of factory life . ? Very pretty picture , ? wrote an operative in the Voice of Industry , responding to a rosy account of life and learning in the mills , ? but we who work in the factory know the sober reality to be quite another thing altogether . ? The ? sober reality ? was twelve to fourteen hours of dreary , exhausting work , which many workers experienced as hostile to intellectual development .

= = = Living quarters = = =

The investors or factory owners built hundreds of boarding houses near the mills , where textile workers lived year @-@ round . A curfew of 10 : 00 pm was common , and men were generally not allowed inside . About 25 women lived in each boarding house , with up to six sharing a bedroom . One worker described her quarters as " a small , comfortless , half @-@ ventilated apartment containing some half a dozen occupants " . Trips away from the boarding house were uncommon ; the Lowell girls worked and ate together . However , half @-@ days and short paid vacations were possible due to the nature of the piece @-@ work ; one girl would work the machines of another in addition to her own such that no wages would be lost .

These close quarters fostered community as well as resentment . Newcomers were mentored by older women in areas such as dress , speech , behavior , and the general ways of the community . Workers often recruited their friends or relatives to the factories , creating a familial atmosphere among many of the rank and file . The Lowell girls were expected to attend church and demonstrate morals befitting proper society . The 1848 Handbook to Lowell proclaimed that " The company will not employ anyone who is habitually absent from public worship on the Sabbath , or known to be guilty of immorality . "

= = = Working Class Intellectual Culture = = =

For many young women , the allure of Lowell was in the opportunities afforded for further study and

learning . Most had already completed some measure of formal education and were resolutely bent on self @-@ improvement . Upon their arrival , they found a vibrant , lively working class intellectual culture : workers read voraciously in Lowell ? s city library and Reading Rooms , and subscribed to the large , informal ? circulating libraries ? which trafficked in novels . Many even pursued literary composition . Defying factory rules , operatives would affix verses to their spinning frames , ? to train their memories , ? and pin up mathematical problems in the rooms where they worked . In the evenings , many enrolled in courses offered by the mills and attended public lectures at the Lyceum , a theatre built at company expense (offering 25 lectures per season for 25 cents) . The Voice of Industry is alive with notices for upcoming lectures , courses , and meetings on topics ranging from astronomy to music . (" Lectures and Learning " , Voice of Industry)

The corporations happily publicized the efforts of these ? literary mill girls ? , boasting that they were the ? most superior class of factory operative , ? which greatly impressed foreign visitors to Lowell . But this masked the bitter opposition of many workers to the twelve to fourteen hours of monotonous , exhausting work , which they saw was corrosive to their desire to learn and educate themselves . ? Who , ? asked an operative writing in the Voice , ? after thirteen hours of steady application to monotonous work , can sit down and apply her mind to deep and long continued thought ? ? Where is the opportunity for mental improvement ? ? A former Lowell operative , looking back on her experience in the mills , expressed a similar view : ? After one has worked from ten to fourteen hours at manual labor , it is impossible to study History , Philosophy , or Science , ? she wrote , ? I well remember the chagrin I often felt when attending lectures , to find myself unable to keep awake ? I am sure few possessed a more ardent desire for knowledge than I did , but such was the effect of the long hour system , that my chief delight was , after the evening meal , to place my aching feet in an easy position , and read a novel . ?

= = The Lowell Offering = =

In October 1840 , the Reverend Abel Charles Thomas of the First Universalist Church organized a monthly publication by and for the Lowell girls . As the magazine grew in popularity , women contributed poems , ballads , essays and fiction ? often using their characters to report on conditions and situations in their lives .

The Offering 's contents were by turns serious and farcical . In a letter in the first issue , " A Letter about Old Maids " , the author suggested that " sisters , spinsters , lay @-@ nuns , & c " were an essential component of God 's " wise design " . Later issues ? particularly in the wake of labor unrest in the factories ? included an article about the value of organizing and an essay about suicide among the Lowell girls .

= = Strikes of 1834 and 1836 = =

The initial effort of the investors and managers to recruit female textile workers brought generous wages for the time (three to five dollars per week) , but with the economic depression of the early 1830s , the Board of Directors proposed a reduction in wages . This , in turn , led to organized " turn @-@ outs " or strikes .

In February 1834 , the Board of Directors of Lowell 's textile mills requested the managers or agents to impose a 15 % reduction in wages , to go into effect on March 1 . After a series of meetings , the female textile workers organized a " turn @-@ out " or strike . The women involved in " turn @-@ out " immediately withdrew their savings causing " a run " on two local banks .

The strike failed and within days the protesters had all returned to work at reduced pay or left town , but the " turn @-@ out " or strike was an indication of the determination among the Lowell female textile workers to take labor action . This dismayed the agents of the factories , who portrayed the turnout as a betrayal of femininity . William Austin , agent of the Lawrence Manufacturing Company , wrote to his Board of Directors , " notwithstanding the friendly and disinterested advice which has been on all proper occasions [sic] communicated to the girls of the Lawrence mills a spirit of evil omen ? has prevailed , and overcome the judgment and discretion of too many " .

Again , in response to a severe economic depression and the high costs of living , in January 1836 , the Board of Directors of Lowell 's textile mills absorbed an increase in the textile workers ' rent to help in the crisis faced by the company boarding house keepers . As the economic calamity continued in October 1836 , the Directors proposed an additional rent hike to be paid by the textile workers living in the company boarding houses . The female textile workers responded immediately in protest by forming the Factory Girls ' Association and organizing a " turn @-@ out " or strike . Harriet Hanson Robinson , an eleven @-@ year @-@ old doffer at the time of the strike , recalled in her memoirs : " One of the girls stood on a pump and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech , declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages . This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell , and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience . "

This " turn @-@ out " or strike attracted over 1 @,@ 500 workers ? nearly twice the number two years previously - causing Lowell 's textile mills to run far below capacity . Unlike the " turn @-@ out " or strike in 1834 , in 1836 there was enormous community support for the striking female textile workers . The proposed rent hike was seen as a violation of the written contract between the employers and the employees . The " turn @-@ out " persisted for weeks and eventually the Board of Directors of Lowell 's textile mills rescinded the rent hike . Although the " turn @-@ out " was a success , the weakness of the system was evident , and worsened further in the Panic of 1837 .

= = Lowell Female Labor Reform Association = =

The sense of community that arose from working and living together contributed directly to the energy and growth of the first union of women workers , the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association . Started by twelve operatives in January 1845 , its membership grew to 500 within six months , and continued to expand rapidly . The Association was run completely by the women themselves : they elected their own officers and held their own meetings ; they helped organize the city 's female workers , and set up branches in other mill towns . They organized fairs , parties , and social gatherings . Unlike many middle @-@ class women activists , the operatives found considerable support from working @-@ class men who welcomed them into their reform organizations and advocated for their treatment as equals .

One of its first actions was to send petitions signed by thousands of textile workers to the Massachusetts General Court demanding a ten @-@ hour work day . In response , the Massachusetts Legislature established a committee chaired by William Schouler , Representative from Lowell , to investigate and hold public hearings , during which workers testified about conditions in the factories and the physical demands of their twelve @-@ hour days . These were the first investigations into labor conditions by a governmental body in the United States . The 1845 Legislative Committee determined that it was not state legislature 's responsibility to control the hours of work . The LFLRA called its chairman , William Schouler , a " tool " and worked to defeat him in his next campaign for the State Legislature . A complex election Schouler lost to another Whig candidate over the issue of railroads . The impact of working men [Democrats] and working women [non @-@ voting] was very limited . The next year Schouler was re @-@ elected to the State Legislature .

The Lowell female textile workers continued to petition the Massachusetts Legislature and legislative committee hearings became an annual event . Although the initial push for a ten @-@ hour workday was unsuccessful , the LFLRA continued to grow , affiliating with the New England Workingmen 's Association and publishing articles in that organization 's Voice of Industry , a pro @-@ labor newspaper . This direct pressure forced the Board of Directors of Lowell 's textile mills to reduce the workday by 30 minutes in 1847 . The FLRA 's organizing efforts spilled over into other nearby towns . In 1847 , New Hampshire became the first state to pass a law for a ten @-@ hour workday , although there was no enforcement and workers were often requested to work longer days . By 1848 , the LFLRA dissolved as a labor reform organization . Lowell textile workers continued to petition and pressure for improved working conditions , and in 1853 , the Lowell corporations reduced the workday to eleven hours .

The New England textile industry was rapidly expanding in the 1850s and 1860s . Unable to recruit enough Yankee women to fill all the new jobs , to supplement the workforce textile managers turned to survivors of the Great Irish Famine who had recently immigrated to the United States in large numbers . During the Civil War , many of Lowell 's cotton mills closed , unable to acquire bales of raw cotton from the South . After the war , the textile mills reopened , recruiting French Canadian men and women . Although large numbers of Irish and French Canadian immigrants moved to Lowell to work in the textile mills , Yankee women still dominated the workforce until the mid @-@ 1880s .

= = Political character of labor activity = =

The Lowell girls ' organizing efforts were notable not only for the " unfeminine " participation of women , but also for the political framework used to appeal to the public . Framing their struggle for shorter work days and better pay as a matter of rights and personal dignity , they sought to place themselves in the larger context of the American Revolution . During the 1834 " turn @-@ out " or strike ? they warned that " the oppressing hand of avarice would enslave us , " the women included a poem which read :

Let oppression shrug her shoulders ,
And a haughty tyrant frown ,
And little upstart Ignorance ,
In mockery look down .

Yet I value not the feeble threats
Of Tories in disguise ,
While the flag of Independence
O 'er our noble nation flies .

In the 1836 strike , this theme returned in a protest song :

Oh ! isn 't it a pity , such a pretty girl as I
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die ?
Oh ! I cannot be a slave , I will not be a slave ,
For I 'm so fond of liberty ,
That I cannot be a slave .

The most striking example of this political overtone can be found in a series of tracts published by the Female Labor Reform Association entitled *Factory Tracts* . In the first of these , subtitled " *Factory Life As It Is* " , the author proclaims " that our rights cannot be trampled upon with impunity ; that we WILL not longer submit to that arbitrary power which has for the last ten years been so abundantly exercised over us . "

This conceptualization of labor activity as philosophically linked with the American project in democracy has been instrumental for other labor organizing campaigns , as noted frequently by MIT professor and social critic Noam Chomsky , who has cited this extended quote from the Lowell Mill Girls on the topic of wage slavery :

" When you sell your product , you retain your person . But when you sell your labour , you sell yourself , losing the rights of free men and becoming vassals of mammoth establishments of a monied aristocracy that threatens annihilation to anyone who questions their right to enslave and oppress .

" Those who work in the mills ought to own them , not have the status of machines ruled by private despots who are entrenching monarchic principles on democratic soil as they drive downwards freedom and rights , civilization , health , morals and intellectuality in the new commercial feudalism .
"