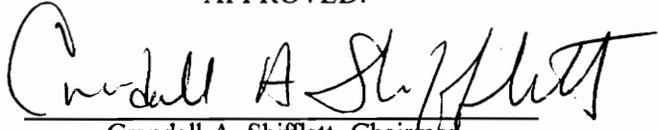


**"Daughters of Freemen Still":
Female Textile Operatives and the Changing Face of Lowell,
1820-1850**

by
John B. Murphy

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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in
History

APPROVED:


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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis investigates the female labor force of the Lowell textile mills from 1820 to 1850. First, it describes the development of the Lowell system and the philosophy on which it was founded. Next, it examines the working conditions in the mills and the daily lives of the women who worked in them. Finally, it describes the circumstances that brought about labor unrest and ultimately a complete change in the work force at Lowell, from the young, single, New England farm women to immigrant laborers. A variety of primary sources, such as letters, diaries, essays and poems written by the mill workers themselves, provide insights into how these women viewed their work, their lives, and the events that transformed the factories and city of Lowell.

Acknowledgements

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I wish to thank the other members of my committee. Dr. Kathleen Hilton's expertise in women's history helped me examine and redefine my assumptions as I interpreted the lives of women workers in the early nineteenth century. I appreciate her careful reading and thoughtful comments on my drafts.

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No graduate study could be successful without the help of the secretaries in the departmental office. I wish to thank Judy Duston and Linda Harris for their cheerful assistance in processing the forms necessary to graduate and in untangling the mysteries of the mainframe computer.

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INTRODUCTION

From 1790 to 1860 New England was transformed from a largely agrarian to a mostly industrial society. The textile industry was at the forefront of change. Starting with Samuel Slater's factory at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, textile mills began to appear along the rushing rivers and streams of New England. Of all the textile operations in New England, the Lowell mills were the most significant. Francis Cabot Lowell began construction on his first mill by the Charles River in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1814, and later expanded to other locations along the Merrimack River. A small group of investors, incorporated as the Boston Manufacturing Company, owned ten mills in Lowell, as well as mills in Chicopee, Lawrence, and other factories in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine. Rich in capital investment, the company, through advanced technology and innovative organization, became the dominant textile manufacturer in the United States.

The Lowell mills occupy an important place in the history of American industrialization for another reason. Lowell had a different view of industrialization and labor than the English textile magnates and Samuel Slater. When Lowell toured northern England in the early nineteenth century, he observed the unpleasant side-effects of industrialization. He wanted American industry to avoid the creation of a permanent proletariat, the crowded slums, and labor abuses that

characterized the English system. Lowell believed that America could industrialize, and at the same time preserve a great deal of Thomas Jefferson's vision of America as an agrarian society.

An important part of Lowell's plan was the labor force that would work in his textile factory. He envisioned a work force made up of young, single, New England farm women. These women would work at the mills for only a few years, and then would marry and return to their husbands' farms. This turnover would prevent the creation of a large, permanent working class. While working at the mills, the young women would gain an education, receive moral and religious training, and live in company boardinghouses under strict supervision. The mill experience would help prepare them for the important task of motherhood in the young republic.

Historians have written a great deal about the Lowell system. Economic historians, social historians, business historians, labor historians, and scholars of women's history all have focused on different aspects of the Lowell factories. Perhaps the earliest comprehensive works on Lowell were by Caroline Ware and Hannah Josephson. Ware, in *The Early New England Cotton Manufacture* (1931), argues that the story of the textile industry is the story of the industrialization of America. Not only did textile manufacturing exemplify the successful application of the corporate form, but it also brought dignity to factory labor and gave women their first experience at wage labor.¹ Although Ware discusses the female labor force at Lowell, Josephson's *The Golden Threads: New England's Mill Girls and Magnates* (1949) gives the subject more treatment, using contemporary sources of newspapers, company records, and observers' accounts.²

Business and economic historians also have looked at the Lowell system. George S. Gibb's *The Saco-Lowell Shops: Textile Machine Building in New England 1813-1949* (1950) gives a detailed examination of the technological advances in textile machinery as well as the economics of their application.³ Robert McGouldrick of the Harvard Graduate School of Business wrote a

¹ Caroline Ware, *The New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1931.

² Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England Mill Girls and Magnates*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1949.

³ George S. Gibb, *The Saco-Lowell Shops: Textile Machinery Building in New England, 1813-1949*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950.

micro-study, *New England Textiles in the Nineteenth Century: Profits and Investment* (1968). McGouldrick explores individual New England cotton textile companies with respect to profits, dividends, investments in plants and equipment, and borrowing during the period of 1830-1880.⁴ Alfred D. Chandler, in *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (1977), places the Lowell system in the context of traditional enterprises of production. While the Lowell Companies were still family enterprises as opposed to the modern industrial corporation, they did represent the first integrated factory system in America, where all processes of manufacture were carried out under one roof.⁵ Recently, business historian Robert E. Dalzell, Jr. examined in detail the Boston associates, the small group of investors who controlled the Lowell mills. In *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (1987), Dalzell traces the history of the investors from the beginnings in 1814 through the Civil War, placing them in a broader social context than businessmen merely out for quick profit. The Associates were also philanthropists, who used their resources, in part, to help check the thrust of undesirable changes brought on by American industrial development.⁶ Although no full-length biography of Francis Cabot Lowell has been written, Robert Sobel, in *The Entrepreneurs: Explorations Within the American Business Tradition* (1974), devotes his first chapter to the life and work of Lowell. Sobel believes that "in many respects Lowell was a more significant and influential figure [than Samuel Slater], and was certainly a greater innovator."⁷

A good deal of work has explored the impact of early industrialization on the people and countryside of New England. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964); Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America* (1975); and Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town*

⁴ Robert McGouldrick, *New England Textiles in the Nineteenth Century: Profits and Investment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁵ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁶ Robert E. Dalzell, Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁷ Robert Sobel, *The Entrepreneurs: Explorations Within the American Business Tradition* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1974), x.

and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts (1983) all look at the tensions and changes that industrialization created in the New England region.⁸ John Kasson, in *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (1976), argues that the establishment of manufactures created great concern on the part of many Americans. They wondered if manufactures would “nurture, and protect the health, intelligence, independence, and virtue of their operatives, qualities essential for a republic? Or would factories breed disease, ignorance, dependence, and corruption?” It was in this context, Kasson states, that the Lowell experiment grew, and was carefully watched by newspapers reporters, writers, philosophers, politicians, and businessmen.⁹

The Lowell experiment also provides interest for scholars of women’s history, as well as for labor historians in general. At Waltham and later Lowell, American women, for the first time, went “out to work” in large numbers, earning cash wages. An early work, *Women in Industry* (1910), by Edith Abbott, surveyed wage-earning women in a number of industries, with the cotton textile industry occupying an important place.¹⁰ More recent historians like Mary Beth Norton and Nancy F. Cott have looked at women’s wage labor in a broader context of women’s roles in early American society. Cott, in *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (1977), looks at the concept of the cult of domesticity and the woman’s sphere, deliberately created and nurtured by church ministers, school teachers, writers, lawmakers and many women themselves. By exalting virtues of family and motherhood, these proponents saw the domestic sphere as the ideal place for women. The importance of this role overshadowed any temporary wage-earning in factories.¹¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, in *Out To Work: A History of*

⁸ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975). Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁹ John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1778-1900* (New York: Grossman, 1976), 55.

¹⁰ Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1910).

¹¹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

Wage-Earning Women in the United States (1982), surveys the struggle of women workers to juggle family responsibilities with outside work, from colonial times to the mid-twentieth century.

Kessler-Harris, as well as other scholars of women's history, have posed important questions. Did women in early nineteenth-century New England hope to gain economic independence by earning wages, or did they see their work in the mills as a temporary condition that would allow them an opportunity to give financial help to their families and accumulate a dowry so they could marry and return fully to the domestic sphere? Was there a growing collective consciousness among women workers at this time, a potential for group action to improve their wages and working conditions?¹²

One way of examining the goals and intentions of mill women is to look at what they wrote. From the 1970s on, many social historians have become interested in a "new social history." It is not enough, they say, to be satisfied with only traditional sources of history-- newspaper reports, government studies, statistics, and corporate records. While these sources are still important, the views of the not-so-famous participants can give us a much broader picture, and perhaps a more intimate view of the past. For example, if the history of slavery in America was limited only to narratives and records provided by plantation owners, the picture of slavery could be quite distorted. If the history of the coal industry was written only by the owners of coal companies, it most likely would leave out all the experiences, opinions, and frustrations of the coal miners and their families.

Herbert Gutman, in his provocative book, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (1976), stressed the importance of "history from the bottom up." American workers, Gutman argues, were not just passive objects, but active participants who interacted with the processes of industrialization. Labor historians, in seeking explanations of why American workers reacted to changes brought about by industrialization, have, according to Gutman, traditionally studied the leaders of trade unions, utopian dreamers, and socialist radicals. Although these views are valuable, "'the mind' of the worker--the modes of thought and perception through which he

¹² Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

confronted the industrialization process and which helped shape his behavior--has received scant and inadequate attention."¹³

Social historian Thomas Dublin is one of the many scholars who have answered Gutman's call. Dublin has produced two books on the Lowell experiment. His first, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (1977), looks at the establishment of the Lowell system and the sweeping changes that the company, the city of Lowell, and the workers underwent from the mid-1820s to the start of the Civil War. Dublin uses, among others, two important sources in his analysis. One of the Lowell companies, the Hamilton Manufacturing firm, left an impressive quantity of company records. Nearly complete payroll records, register books, rental volumes, and a large collection of company correspondence allowed him to examine the make-up of the work force, wages, and changes that characterized the antebellum period. The company records, along with census information, also allowed Dublin to trace the origins of the mill women to the many towns of New England. These records also provided important information about the families of the girls--size, occupations, and income.¹⁴

Dublin uses another important source in his book--diaries and correspondence of some of the mill women. Fortunately for the interested historian, nearly all of the mill women were literate, and a number of letter collections remain to be examined. Dublin compiled four sets of letters in *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters 1830-1860* (1981). These letters are from private collections and from the special collections of various libraries and museums in New England. Other, unpublished letters and diaries are available for examination at the Lowell Historical Society at the University of Lowell, the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, the Vermont Historical Society, the Haverhill Public Library, the Lowell National Historical Park, and several other depositories.¹⁵

¹³ Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 1976), 79.

¹⁴ Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters 1830-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

In this thesis, I will investigate the labor force of the Lowell textile mills from the early 1820s until about 1850, when the work force had changed from mostly young, single New England farm women to immigrant labor, mostly Irish. Letters and diaries of Lowell operatives will be an important part of this thesis. Although the women who wrote the surviving letters and diaries make up a small sample of the tens of thousands of women who worked at the Lowell mills over the years, the thoughts that these women expressed can give rich insights into their daily lives at the mill, their hopes for the future, and their reactions to the changes in mill work that they observed. These letters also can allow me to pursue the larger questions: Did the Lowell system lead to permanent changes in the role of women in the work force? Were women gaining financial autonomy and forming a collective sense of their rights as American laborers?

This thesis has three chapters. In chapter one, I survey the history of the textile industry development in New England, with an emphasis on the growth and development of the Lowell system, first at Waltham and later on the Merrimack River, the site of present-day Lowell. By tracing the development of the Lowell system, we can see the distinction between Francis Lowell's philosophy of industrialization and that of the British textile manufacturers and their counterparts in America, like Samuel Slater. Chapter one also examines the organization and management of the Boston Associates, the major investors in the Lowell enterprise.

Chapter two explores the day-to-day operations of the Lowell mills. What was mill work like for young, single women? How did the women adjust as wage earners, living away from home in large boardinghouses, supervised by matrons? Were they changed by this experience? If so, how? Chapter two relies heavily on the letters and diaries of the girls. Two diaries, not fully examined by Dublin or other historians of Lowell, shed particular light on the daily activities of the Lowell operatives. Mary Hall's diary (1831-36) gives insights into the experiences of one mill girl who worked on and off in the mills during the early 1830s. Susan Brown, another diarist, worked in the mills from January to September, 1843. Her diary concentrates more on her social life than her work, and records the many family outings, lectures, and lyceum offerings that she attended during her short stay in Lowell. *The Lowell Offering*, a publication written by and for the working women of Lowell, contains poems and essays submitted by the operatives. Two other primary source

works, *Loom and Spindle* (1898), by Harriet Hanson Robinson, and *A New England Girlhood Outlined from Memory* (1889) by Lucy Larcom, are first-hand reminiscences written by two women who worked in the Lowell mills and, years later, reflected upon their experiences.¹⁶

The final chapter focuses on the changes in the work force at Lowell. Increased competition from other mills led the Lowell management to extend work hours, speed up the machinery and make each worker responsible for watching and operating more textile machines. These changes, along with falling wages, led to strikes and induced large numbers of the single farm women to leave the mills, to be replaced by immigrant workers--men as well as women. The workers were no longer housed only in boardinghouses. Cheap, substandard housing began to surround the mill, and the face of Lowell itself changed. The Massachusetts government began to conduct investigations into the conditions of the mills, and medical investigators like Dr. Elisha Bartlett studied the health of workers who toiled in hot, stuffy rooms, and breathed air filled with particles of cotton.¹⁷ The ideal factory community, envisioned by Lowell and the early investors, no longer existed.

¹⁶ Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*. (New York: Crowell, 1898). Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889).

¹⁷ Elisha Bartlett, *Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills*. (Lowell: Leonard Huntress, printer, 1841).

CHAPTER ONE: THE FOUNDING OF THE LOWELL MILLS

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the economy of New England had two main facets: trade and agriculture. The urban areas along the Atlantic coast--Boston, Salem, New Bedford, and others--were closely tied to foreign trade. The markets, shipyards, taverns and shops of these towns depended upon trade for their livelihood.¹⁸ Most New Englanders, however, were engaged in agriculture. As late as 1820, 75 percent of the work force farmed.¹⁹ New England farms were family enterprises, and employed all family members year round. The men worked the fields, transported goods to market, and repaired farm implements like wagons and tools. They also built and fixed fences and barns. The women tended poultry and dairy animals and made many products for home use and sale to the local stores, such as butter, cheese, yarn, brooms and cloth.²⁰ Of these home industries, cloth-making was most important.²¹ Though many small wool and flax-carding mills grew along the rushing streams of New England, they did not replace household cloth-making, but

¹⁸ Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 14-15.

²¹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 4.

merely supplemented it.²² The young farm women received a small but important income from making cloth. Most of the money was turned over directly to the family--usually to the father.²³

Between 1790 and 1808 changes occurred in the New England farm economy. Due to an increased demand for foodstuffs, farming expanded onto the marginal, hilly lands of northern New England. The growth of seaboard cities, as well as a growing European market, created the demand. The short-lived prosperity was disrupted, though, when Congress, acting on a plea from President Thomas Jefferson, passed the Embargo Act of 1807. Since the Embargo Act prohibited exports, demand for farm products quickly diminished. While some farmers in the hinterlands of urban areas still prospered by shifting production to specialized agriculture, most farmers on the marginal lands suffered. Overextended on credit, they even had trouble making their mortgage payments.²⁴ Just when the farm families most needed income from home-made cloth, mechanized textile mills entered the scene and undermined the profitability of home textiles.²⁵

After the American Revolution, forces worked to change the business of foreign trade in New England. Working within the British colonial empire, colonial merchants had followed established trade routes, and benefitted from imperial protection. Following independence, these traders no longer enjoyed the advantages of British protection. After 1800, increasing tensions between England and France put additional strains upon New England merchants, as their cargoes and seamen were at peril.²⁶

When Congress passed the Embargo Act of 1807, New England merchants felt a great economic burden, for Massachusetts had over one-third of registered ship tonnage in the nation, and her fishing fleets made up nine-tenths of the American total. Frustrated Boston merchants

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 15.

²⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 5.

²⁶ Robert E. Dalzell, Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 8.

searched for another enterprise, and textiles seemed to be a good choice.²⁷ First, the American South was the world's leading producer of cotton, and most of it was shipped to England to be woven into cloth. Therefore, the raw material needed for textiles was grown in the United States. Second, there was growing sentiment that America must industrialize. Alexander Hamilton, in his Report on Manufactures issued in 1791, called for the nation to become self-sufficient in all its needs, including textiles.²⁸ Even Thomas Jefferson, who vehemently opposed large scale industrialization in America, conceded in 1816 that "To be independent for the comforts of life, we must fabricate them [textiles] ourselves. . . . He, therefore, who is now against domestic manufactures must be reducing us, either to a dependence on that nation [England], or be clothed in skins. . . . Experience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort."²⁹

Although the Lowell textile mills became the largest in the United States, they were not the first. Samuel Slater, an Englishman, built the first mechanized textile mill in America at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1790. Slater learned the mysteries of textile machinery as an apprentice to Jedediah Strutt at Strutt's factory in Belper, England. A quick learner, Slater was promoted to middle management, where he was given oversight of the mill. In this role, he supervised the blending of cotton, repaired machinery, recruited workers, and supervised the payroll.³⁰ For reasons still unknown, Slater decided to emigrate to America in 1789. He left England disguised as a farmer, since the English government prohibited persons familiar with textile technology from leaving the country.³¹

In America, Slater was interested in building his own textile mill based on the technology that he learned in England. While in Rhode Island, he befriended Quaker merchants William Almy and

²⁷ Robert Sobel, *The Entrepreneurs: Explorations Within the American Business Tradition* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1974), 10-11.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Quoted in Caroline Ware, *The New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), 217.

³⁰ Barbara M. Tucker, *Samuel Slater the the Origins of the American Textile Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 45.

³¹ Ibid., 48.

Moses Brown, and received from them financial support for his venture. From memory, Slater drew plans of the Arkwright spinning machine, the most technologically advanced spinner in England. With the help of David Wilkinson, a local blacksmith, Slater constructed a workable copy.³² After selecting a mill site on the Blackstone River, at Pawtucket, Slater built his factory. By 1793 the mill was operational, and workers were hired. Similar to the English mill system, the Pawtucket mill employed children, many under twelve years of age. Small and agile, the children were well-suited to operate the simple machines, and they could be paid lower wages than adult workers.³³ By 1799 Slater had constructed a second mill, and by 1805 three more textile factories were built in Pawtucket, all constructed by men trained by Slater.³⁴

With the Arkwright machine, spinning technology was efficient and productive, but weaving, the second component of the cloth-making process, was not. For the most part, weaving was still done in private homes. Slater often depended on over six hundred workers, working at piece rates, to make cloth from machine-made thread. This “putting out system,” as it was called, could not keep up with the spinning machines.³⁵ The time was right for mechanized weaving, but textile industrialists like Slater had to wait for inventors to solve the complicated engineering problems that mechanized weaving posed. Mechanization had to duplicate the subtle hand motions of the weaver--shed changing, weft insertion, beating, and cloth take-up--all of which require precise timing and delicate motion.³⁶

The earliest mechanical power looms were built in England. In 1785 Dr. Edmund Cartwright, a Kentish preacher with no experience in weaving or mechanics, built the first functional power loom. But the machine was heavy and awkward, and required great physical strength to operate. Moreover, it completed only part of the weaving process. Mechanization for advancing the warp, regulating the width, and taking up the finished cloth was still needed. Because

³² Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 20.

³³ Tucker, 72-73.

³⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 16.

³⁵ Steven Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1978), 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

of these limitations, Cartwright's loom required constant attending.³⁷ By 1803 Thomas Johnson built a power loom that solved the problems of the Cartwright loom and was commercially viable. By 1813 over 2,400 power looms were operating in England.³⁸

In the United States, Francis Cabot Lowell was the first to apply the power loom to the textile industry. Lowell was born in 1775 into a wealthy and influential old Boston family that traced its roots in America to 1639. He attended Harvard University, where the Reverend Zedekiah Sawyer, his tutor and a friend of his father, wrote of him that he had "a happy genius for mathematics."³⁹ After graduating from Harvard, Lowell showed an interest in trade, and opened an office on Long Wharf, Boston, setting himself up as a merchant. Lowell expected success, and he had the right name, family capital, and good connections at his disposal. In practice, Lowell demonstrated his skill as a businessman. By 1802, he owned twenty parcels of land along Boston's docks, and owned considerable real estate in Maine. In 1789 Lowell made an important connection with a prosperous New England merchant family, the Jacksons, when he married Patrick Tracy Jackson's sister. Jackson, who would later become Lowell's major partner in the Boston Manufacturing Company, specialized in the India and China trade. Lowell, in his business, set up trade relationships in Europe.⁴⁰

Lowell, like other New England merchants, found his business hurt by the Embargo of 1807. Seeking other opportunities to invest, Lowell became interested in the textile industry. With finished cloth imports from England cut off, there was great potential to supply a growing American market. In 1807, there were only fifteen cotton-spinning mills operating in the United States. Most were small partnerships or were owned and operated by single families. These enterprises sold their goods mainly in Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.⁴¹ In 1809 Albert Gallatin, Treasury Secretary

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sobel, 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

⁴¹ Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 57.

of the United States, pointed out that 62 spinning mills were in operation in the nation, and 25 more were being built, especially in Southeastern New England.⁴² Lowell realized that he had to find something different--some innovation--to give him an edge in an increasingly competitive industry.

In the Autumn of 1810, Lowell, his wife, and three children and set off for England. Lowell let it be known that he was going for health reasons. He was a frail man, so his explanation was credible. There may have been other reasons, however, for Lowell's visit. For a sickly man, the seas, especially in the tense years before the War of 1812, were dangerous. Moreover, Lowell had no direct investments in England. Although Lowell wrote little of his visit, evidence indicates that he may have gone to learn as much as possible about England's textile industry. Lowell and his family rented a house in Edinburgh, Scotland, and then toured England like other well-heeled Americans of the day. While in Edinburgh, Lowell met with fellow Boston merchant Nathan Appleton. In his memoirs, written in 1858, Appleton remembers, "We [Appleton and Lowell] had frequent conversations on the subject of the Cotton Manufacture, and he informed me that he had determined, before his return to America, to visit Manchester, for the purpose of obtaining all possible information on the subject, with a view to the introduction of the improved manufacture in the United States."⁴³

Lowell toured the textile mills as an "interested merchant," but not as a future textile manufacturer. England closely guarded the secrets of its textile technology. Lowell, therefore, had to subdue his great interest, but in his own mind he was absorbing, in detail, all he could. He produced no written accounts of his visit to England. If he kept a diary, it no longer exists. Even his letters home reveal little on the subject of manufacturing. He mostly wrote of family matters.⁴⁴ To protect the knowledge of its technology, English officials often opened and read mail sent by foreigners. Perhaps Lowell feared that this would happen, and therefore was silent on

⁴² Ibid., 58.

⁴³ Nathan Appleton, *The Power Loom and the Origin of Lowell* (Lowell: B. H. Penhallow, 1858), 7.

⁴⁴ Dalzell, 6.

matters of business.⁴⁵ When he left England in 1813 his baggage was searched twice. Lowell, however, had memorized the features of the large power looms he observed in Manchester. When he got home, he would set out to build his own version.⁴⁶

Upon returning to America in 1813, Lowell learned that his trade business, like the businesses of others, was hurt by the Embargo and war with England. He had, however, set aside profits from better years, and had a good amount of working capital that was available for his textile venture. The years 1813-1814 were a busy time in Massachusetts for the burgeoning young textile industry. Twenty-five mills had sprung up in the Commonwealth, 9 in Connecticut, and 6 in Rhode Island. Massachusetts led the way for several reasons. The state, with its many rivers and streams, had an excellent source of water power. There was also a large supply of capital remaining from the many years of prosperous trade. Moreover, Massachusetts already had an established class of entrepreneurs.⁴⁷ Aware of these advantages, Lowell returned from England with four goals that he hoped would put him at the forefront of the mill industry. He wanted to build a workable power loom, accumulate capital (in concert with other partners), choose a mill site and begin construction, and develop a plan to recruit a stable, morally upright work force that would contrast with the sordid labor force that he observed in England.⁴⁸

While Lowell was busy recruiting investors for his mill endeavor, he wanted to begin work on a power loom. Although Lowell had an excellent mathematical aptitude, and could envision (from his visit to Manchester) the power loom, he needed a practical mechanic to help him build it. Lowell first approached Jacob Perkins, who built and owned a nail factory, and enjoyed a reputation as one of Massachusetts' top inventors. But Perkins rejected Lowell's offer, as he had his own plans for the textile industry. He did, however, recommend Paul Moody, a 34 year-old mechanic of considerable talent from nearby Amesbury. Moody, a largely self-taught mechanic,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷ Sobel, 22-23.

⁴⁸ Ware, p. 61.

accepted Lowell's offer in October 1813.⁴⁹ Both Slater in 1790 and Lowell in 1813 were able to find skilled native mechanics, the sons and grandsons of the farmer-mechanics who worked in the shops of colonial New England. The number of mechanics in the eighteenth-century New England countryside was a portent for future industrial development.⁵⁰ Unlike the brawny sons of yeoman farmers who learned mechanical skills from the forges and mills, Moody came from a prominent and educated family in Newbury. Before 1812 Moody worked for Kendrick and Worhem, builders of carding machines in Amesbury, so he was familiar with textile machinery.⁵¹

Lowell rented a workroom in Boston where he and Moody "tried, altered, and rearranged" the machinery. In reality, they were reinventing the power loom. When they finished their models, Lowell and Moody had constructed a cotton-spinning frame and a labor-saving dressing frame better than those used in England. The machinery, for example, would not stop every time a thread was broken.⁵² Building a loom in the early 1800s was a formidable task. Machine tools--the file, hammer, and chisel--were primitive. Moreover, the state of metallurgy was crude. Steel was not yet produced in America, and ironwork was still rough. Despite these handicaps, the two pressed on, and in 1814 they finished building a nearly all-wood loom. By early 1815 the loom was fully operative.⁵³

While he and Moody were working in the shop, Lowell sought investors to raise the capital he needed to build his textile company. It is uncertain when Lowell first gathered his group of potential investors. Who was there at the beginning is also unclear. Certainly Patrick Tracy Jackson, Lowell's brother-in-law, was there, as was Nathan Appleton. Lowell set out to raise \$400,000, a very large sum in the early nineteenth century. The company would raise the money

⁴⁹ Sobel, 27-28.

⁵⁰ George S. Bigg, *The Saco-Lowell Shops: Textile Machinery Building in New England, 1813-1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵² Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England Mill Girls and Magnates* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1949), 20-21.

⁵³ Dunwell, 31.

in steps, with \$100,000 the goal at the outset. Two-thirds of the money would be invested in machinery and land, and the remainder would be used to begin operations.

The Boston Manufacturing Company, as the small group called themselves, issued 100 shares of capital stock, to be taken by 12 shareholders paying \$1,000 per share. The group of initial investors were all Boston aristocrats, family, and relatives. Patrick Tracy Jackson bought 20 shares for \$20,000, and thus became the major investor. His brothers, James and Charles Jackson, bought 15 shares between them, for \$15,000. Lowell purchased 15 shares himself. Half the shares, then, were owned by the Lowells and the Jacksons. Nathan Appleton, one of Lowell's early confidants, and a cautious man, took only 10 shares. Other shareholders included Israel Thorndike and son, 10 shares; John Gore and James Lloyd, 5 shares each; and Benjamin Gorham and Warren Dutton, two more Lowell relatives, 5 shares between them. With a makeup of family and relatives, the Boston Manufacturing Company was not a modern industrial enterprise, but a family-owned undertaking.⁵⁴

The scope of building a new textile operation was large and complicated, so Lowell delegated some authority to others. Paul Moody supervised the installation of the textile machinery. Patrick Tracy Jackson took charge of all operations. He was named mill agent at a salary of \$3,000 per year.⁵⁵

Jackson and Lowell set out to find a suitable site for their mill. First, they had to find a favorable waterpower site and purchase the surrounding lands. Fortunately, the New England topography, with a series of bedrock plateaus, produced an extensive system of rapid streams and rivers. An ideal location would have great water power, so little investment would be required to build dams and waterworks. After locating and purchasing a site, the company had to obtain a "mill privilege," which gave the owner the right to control all or part of the available water power. In 1813, they succeeded, buying a site on the Charles River at Waltham, Massachusetts. A ten-foot waterfall made the location a perfect source for power. Moreover, a nearby road would connect

⁵⁴ Sobel, 24.

⁵⁵ Josephson, 27.

the mill to the port.⁵⁶ Nathan Appleton recalled that Lowell and Jackson “had purchased a water power in Waltham, (Bemis’s Paper Mill), and that they had obtained an act of Corporation, and Mr. Jackson had agreed to give up all other business and take the management of the concern.”⁵⁷

In November 1813 the company purchased 6,000 feet of planking and began construction on Mill Number One. The mill would be a brick structure, 90 feet long and 45 feet wide, with four stories above the basement. The basement would house a workshop where carpenters, blacksmiths, and masons would work. There is no evidence of a machine shop yet, nor that any of the machinery would be built on the premises during the first year. The first year efforts would be limited to the construction of the mill buildings and the installation of a power transmission system.

In December 1813 Jackson and Moody ordered spinning and carding machines from Luther Metcalf and Company of Medway, Massachusetts. At this early stage, it seems that the Boston Manufacturing Company would use its technical innovation only in the construction of a power weaving loom. Jacob Perkins, former employer of Paul Moody, installed a patented water wheel, which eliminated the backwater flow caused by freshets and high tides, and provided a stable flow of water through the mill. By 1814, the mill, except for the installation of the power loom, was complete, and the managers placed the first orders for raw cotton.⁵⁸

As the mills and machinery were being built and purchased, Lowell and his associates had three major decisions to make. They had to decide what kind of product to make, how to market the product, and what system of labor to establish. The first of the three problems seemed easiest to solve. Lowell’s factory would not be capable of producing fancy cloth without making many technological modifications and adding a printing process. Besides, Lowell believed that, as a largely agricultural and pioneering country, America would buy great amounts of coarse material, which could be manufactured cheaply. For years, coarse cotton cloth had been imported from India. Compared to the kind of cloth that Lowell could produce, this “India cloth” was flimsy and uneven in quality. If Lowell could produce a more durable, but low-cost cotton material, he

⁵⁶ Dunwell, 30.

⁵⁷ Appleton, 7.

⁵⁸ Gibb, 22-26.

believed he could corner the market and make great profits. Thus, the Boston Company decided to produce heavy, unbleached cotton sheets, 37 inches wide, with 44 picks to the inch, weighing about a pound per three yards.⁵⁹

Investors in the Boston Company were anxious to start production, but the power loom was taking longer to install than expected. Nathan Appleton was impatient. When the war with Britain ended and international shipping recommenced, Appleton feared that the British would flood the American market with cheap cotton cloth, undermining Lowell's textile operations. Fortunately, the power loom and remaining textile machinery were installed at the Waltham mill, and production began in February of 1815.⁶⁰

The Waltham mill agent sent the first shipments of cotton cloth to a shop owned by Mrs. Isaac Bowers in the Cornhill section of Boston, but the material languished there unsold. Nathan Appleton remembered,

Mr. Lowell said to me one day that there was one difficulty which he had not apprehended, the goods did not sell. We went together to see Mrs. Bowers. She said every body praised the goods, but they still made no sales. I told Mr. Lowell, the next time they sent a parcel of goods to town, to send them to the store of B. C. Ward & Co., and I would see what would be done.⁶¹

The Ward Company, where Appleton had a significant investment, agreed to sell the goods to an auctioneer, who auctioned them off at 30 cents a yard. The Ward Company would take one percent commission on the deal. Hiring a selling agent turned out to be a good move for the Boston Company, since it freed them of the complicated dealings with separate agents and jobbers. B. C. Ward and Company also made substantial profits. Although the commission rate was low, the great volume produced by the Waltham mill netted Ward a handsome sum.⁶²

Nathan Appleton's fears that competition from Britain and other American textile mills would undermine the Boston Company did not materialize. Although many other textile factories in New England suffered, the Boston Company, with its efficient operation, held its own against all competition. People of the growing settlements along the Alleghenies wanted the cotton

⁵⁹ Dalzell, 30-31.

⁶⁰ Josephson, 27.

⁶¹ Appleton, 11.

⁶² Dalzell, 31.

sheeting, and the company sold all that it could produce. Lowell's integrated factory outproduced and outsold any other cotton mill in the nation. The initial capital of \$100,000 grew to \$300,000, and within several years reached \$600,000. Profits ranged from 16 to 26 percent annually, even during the price-cutting wars following the panic of 1819. Within seven years of operation, the Lowell investors received over 100 percent return on their investment.⁶³

Besides constructing the mill and marketing the cloth, Lowell and his cohorts had to devise a suitable system of labor. Lowell remembered the decrepit state of mill labor in England from his visit a few years before. He believed that British-style industrialization could create resentment against industrialists and undermine the stability of the republic. After all, many Americans still held the belief that America's strength lay in the countryside and they feared industrialization. Samuel Slater's mill in Pawtucket, for example, hired whole families, children included, to work in his mills. Those who visited the mills of Pawtucket noticed a kind of "dull dejection" on the faces of the operatives. Though by no means as dismal a group as the "frightened denizens" of Manchester, the Pawtucket workers appeared "often very ignorant and too often vicious"⁶⁴ Lowell wanted to do things differently.

Unlike Slater's management, the Boston Company at Waltham would hire no children. The speed and technical problems of operating Lowell's machinery would overwhelm children. Instead, Lowell turned to adult labor, mainly young, single women from the surrounding New England countryside. Although Waltham today is a densely populated suburb of Boston, in the early nineteenth century, the area was quite remote--in the midst of forest and farmland. It would be necessary, therefore, to house the workers in boardinghouses that would be built adjacent to the factory.⁶⁵

To Lowell and his associates, female adult labor made sense. First, it would keep males in agriculture, a pursuit he felt was still the backbone of the republic. Tenche Coxe, considered to be the "father of the American cotton industry," stated that "female aid in manufacture . . . prevents

⁶³ Chandler, 58.

⁶⁴ Dalzell, 32.

⁶⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 17-18.

the diversion of men and boys from agriculture.” A report issued by Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin declared that 3,500 women would be needed to work in the 87 mills in operation or near operation in New England.⁶⁶ Another benefit was the chance for women to supplement the family income by earning cash wages--relatively rare for females in the United States. Moreover, women’s employment opportunities of any type were limited at the time. Domestic service had low status and low pay. Teaching, another choice, paid better but was seasonal and left women in need of earnings during the rest of the year. Finally, spinning and weaving cloth was traditional work for women in early nineteenth-century New England. Manufactured cloth was replacing homespun, and women could earn much more money in the factories.⁶⁷

The Boston associates, however, had to convince upright New England parents of Puritan stock that factory work would not corrupt their daughters. According to plan, Lowell visited the nearby farmers and tried to persuade them to let their daughters work in his mill. The farmers’ response was at first unfavorable. They resented the intrusion of the Waltham mill onto their landscape. Moreover, they were leery of letting their young daughters live and work in Waltham unless assured that strict moral supervision would be provided. Some farmers even visited the newly-built factory and boardinghouses. They observed conditions of neatness and cleanliness, with flowers planted between the buildings. The newly-hired matrons of the boardinghouses seemed strict and proper.⁶⁸ Nathan Appleton remembered, “The most efficient guards were adopted in establishing boardinghouses, at the cost of the Company, under the charge of respectable women with every provision of religious worship. Under these circumstances, the daughters of respectable farmers were readily induced to come into these mills for a temporary period.”⁶⁹

Lowell envisioned his female work force to be of a transitory nature. Ideally, the young women would work at the mill for a few years, send money home to their families, and keep a tidy sum of savings for themselves. They would then leave the mills and marry. They would have

⁶⁶ Foner, 20.

⁶⁷ Dalzell, 34.

⁶⁸ Sobel, 28-29.

⁶⁹ Appleton, 15-16.

received education and religious upbringing, and their future husbands would be assured of their virtue, since the young women would be closely supervised. The farmers and their daughters must have found the prospect of this employment enticing. Young women came to Waltham in such large numbers that the Boston Company formed a waiting list.⁷⁰ Lowell's plan for a new kind of work force seemed to be succeeding--at least for the time being.

With management, capital, a power loom, a mill, and a system of labor established, the Waltham mill produced and sold large quantities of cotton cloth. In his memoirs, Nathan Appleton recalled his pleasure in watching the power loom at Waltham turn out finished cloth: "I well recollect the state of admiration and satisfaction with which we sat by the hour, watching the beautiful movement of this new and wonderful machine, destined as it evidently was, to change the character of the textile industry."⁷¹ The Waltham mill, in addition to producing more cotton cloth than any other textile mill in America, also made significant profits in the sale of textile machinery. The machine shop, built at Waltham late in 1815, provided power looms not only for the Waltham plant, but for other textile factories as well. One business historian states, "In time, the company seemed to be a machine shop with a textile mill as a subsidiary."⁷² The machine shop workers, nearly all mechanics, were a crucial element to the factory. Lowell carefully recruited them, and Paul Moody sought to keep them happy. In 1817, the Boston Manufacturing Company had 26 machinists. Each earned \$1.43 per day, twice the wage of weavers.⁷³

Although the Waltham mill was humming along profitably, other textile mills in New England were not so fortunate. After the war, cheap English cloth predictably flooded the American market, undercutting many American firms. Half of the textile spindles in the Providence and Fall River mills were silent in 1816. In Massachusetts, for example, the once-rapid increase in textile mills leveled off. The state issued 34 new business charters in 1814. That number fell to 23 in 1815, 8 in 1816, none in 1817, 2 in 1818, one in 1819, and 3 in 1820. Some mills failed outright,

⁷⁰ Dalzell, 33.

⁷¹ Appleton, 9.

⁷² Sobel, 30.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 32.

others feebly struggled along, laying off workers. Most of the failed mills had no power looms, and continued to operate on the “putting out” system. Technology and efficient management kept Waltham competitive in cloth, but the sale of textile machinery slumped, causing great concern to Francis Lowell.⁷⁴ Lowell, however, was a true innovator, and the Waltham system, which integrated spinning and weaving under one roof, is an example of his capacity to adapt and succeed.

Lowell also demonstrated that he had good political and persuasive skills. In the spring of 1816, he traveled to Washington to urge the Congress to pass a protective tariff. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Dallas had introduced a tariff bill in February 1816, which recognized three classes of manufacturing in the United States. In the first category were firmly established businesses. These would be granted absolute protection. In the second category were recently established businesses, which would receive lesser protection. The third group included businesses that produced items in insufficient quantities, so that imports were still clearly needed. This group would be afforded no protection. Secretary Dallas placed textiles in the second category. Lowell argued that textiles should be placed in the first category.

The debate over the tariff was intense. Most of the shipping and foreign trade interests fought the tariff, fearing that their businesses would be most hurt. As a rule, manufacturers tended to favor the tariff. Southerners tended to oppose it, since they would pay higher prices for many goods. Lowell played a skillful hand. He argued that New England textile manufacturers were natural allies of the Southern cotton-growers. American cloth produced from American cotton fibers, Lowell stated, needed protection from foreign cloth made from foreign fibers. To overcome opposition from Southerners, Lowell asked that only a modest duty be placed on imported cotton cloth. For the first three years, a 25 percent duty would be placed on imported cloth. After three years, the rate would drop to 20 percent. Surprisingly, Lowell found an ally in John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Calhoun, in those years a nationalist and supporter of domestic manufactures, viewed Lowell’s proposal as reasonable.

⁷⁴ Ware, 66.

Debate raged over the tariff. The small cotton textile manufacturers were furious with Lowell's modest tariff rate proposal. Mr. Hulbert, a House member from Massachusetts, declared, "Although intelligent and honorable, [Lowell] was a manufacturer of large capital" and could hold up under low tariffs more than those "whose means were limited and who had not got well-established."⁷⁵ In the end, other large textile interests, as well as many cotton growers and some China trade merchants (who saw a moderate tariff as better than a large one), joined forces, and Lowell's "reasonable" arguments prevailed.⁷⁶ The tariff bill passed in the form Lowell wanted. A number of semi-large textile firms, now more protected from foreign competition, were ready to invest in the power loom and other improved textile machinery, items that Lowell's Waltham machine shop would be happy to provide. The Boston Manufacturing Company's machinery sales went from \$8,700 in 1818 to \$28,800 in 1819.⁷⁷

Francis Cabot Lowell, nearly always in poor health, died in 1817. In the year before his death, however, Lowell and his associates actively sought to expand their textile business. The Waltham mill prospered, and cornered the market for plain, economical, mass-produced cloth. Dividends paid 18 3/4 percent, and the mill grew and modernized. Unfortunately, the sluggish waters of the Charles River prevented additional expansion of the Waltham mill. The Boston Manufacturing Company searched for a new site with more potential water power.⁷⁸

In 1821, four years after Lowell's death, partners Patrick Tracy Jackson and Nathan Appleton learned of the little-used Pawtucket Canal and the connecting Merrimack River in northern Massachusetts. After surveying the site, they chose Pawtucket Falls, a location where the Merrimack drained a basin of over 4,000 square miles, and then tumbled 32 feet down through rocky rapids, making a quarter turn new East Chelmsford. A dam built at the top of the rapids could generate 3,000 horsepower--enough for 50 mills the size of Waltham. Moreover, two barge canals passed nearby, the Pawtucket (one of the nation's earliest) and the Middlesex, which

⁷⁵ Josephson, 30.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁷⁷ Sobel, 37-38.

⁷⁸ Dunwell, 30.

connected the river above the falls with Boston.⁷⁹ Nathan Appleton recalled the day he and Jackson visited the site:

Our first visit to the spot was in the month of November, 1821, and a slight snow covered the ground. The party consisted of Patrick T. Jackson, Kirk Boott, Warren Dutton, Paul Moody, John Boott, and myself. We perambulated the grounds, and scanned the capabilities of the place, and the remark was made that some of us might live to see the place contain twenty-thousand inhabitants. At that time there were, I think, less than a dozen houses on what now constitutes the city of Lowell, or rather the thickly settled part of it.⁸⁰

The Waltham partners proceeded to buy up all the land enclosed by the river's bend for \$70,000. In 1822, the enterprise incorporated as the Merrimack Manufacturing Company. Jackson and Appleton restricted stock ownership to themselves and close associates.⁸¹ The Company worked quickly to plan the factories. The first group would be placed along the river, close to the greatest source of water power. Housing units were constructed near the mill, and feeder canals were built to connect future mills to the first one. The huge task of building the mills, boardinghouses, and widening and deepening the canals required a large, unskilled labor force. Some of the sons of New England farmers were attracted to the work force, but there was no really large pool of available domestic laborers. Kirk Boott, the agent for the new mills, wanted to build the mill village fast, but did not want to exhaust what little domestic labor there was, since farmers' sons would be needed for planting and harvesting crops.

Since 1790 there had been a small Irish community in the region surrounding the mill site. Records of the Middlesex Canal Company show names of Irish workers, but many of them came from Boston and returned when canal work was complete. Boott began to hire local unskilled Irish workers, and the word spread fast that Irish workers were needed. From settled areas along the Middlesex canal all the way to Boston, Irish laborers flocked to the mill site. Irish workers, however, were limited to unskilled, temporary tasks. No evidence exists to suggest that Irish

⁷⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁸⁰ Appleton, 19.

⁸¹ Dunwell, 34-35.

workers, male or female, were intended to become part of the textile work force at the outset of the Lowell operation.⁸²

These new mills eventually became the most amazing industrial complex in early nineteenth-century American history. The owners named the factories the “Lowell” mills after the Company’s founder, who first envisioned the integrated mill system.⁸³ From the beginning, the Merrimack directors decided not to compete directly with the Waltham factory, which produced only plain cloth. The East Chelmsford mill produced only printed cloths, and pioneered the manufacture of calico prints and other higher-priced materials. The Chelmsford plant gained great profits, as it also became the main developer of the whole mill town. As the number of mills grew, so did the surrounding communities. By 1826, the communities incorporated as the town of Lowell, and reached a population of 2,500 that year. By 1850, Lowell, with a population of 33,000 was the second largest city in Massachusetts, after Boston, and the mill complex was the leading textile producer in the nation.⁸⁴

The Lowell companies were all related and tied together under the control of a small, powerful group of capitalists, known as the Boston associates. The cooperative structure of the companies increased the efficiency of textile production. All the companies shared patent rights on technological innovations, water rights, and access to a common machine shop. They all marketed their cloth through the same Boston commission house, paid the same wages, had the same work hours, made the same rules for workers, and housed the women employees in boardinghouses built by the Company. The mill construction and architecture of all companies were also identical. Perhaps, most importantly, the companies used the same system of management and internal organization.

The most important official in the mill organization was the agent, appointed by the board of directors. The agent lived in a large house near the mills, and was charged with the supervision

⁸² Brian Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell 1821-61* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1988), 14.

⁸³ Dunwell, 37.

⁸⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 20-21.

of all part of company operations--mill construction, replacement of worn machinery, inventories of cotton and finished cloth, and any production problems. He kept in daily contact with the company treasurer, who, in turn, informed him of decisions made by the board of directors. At the same time, however, the board gave the agent a good deal of flexibility in carrying out instructions.

A number of salaried assistants helped the agent run the daily operations of the mill. The superintendent oversaw the day-to-day production in the many departments of the mills. A clerk assisted the superintendent by keeping financial records and making out the payroll lists. An overseer, helped by a "second hand," supervised each room of the mill. Together, they maintained and adjusted the machinery, and supplied the operatives, or workers, with the materials they needed. The overseers were also charged with discipline and, if necessary, dismissal of mill operatives.⁸⁵ The last part of the textile production chain was the operatives. These women--their backgrounds and lives at the mill and boardinghouses--will be the subject of the following chapters.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 22.

CHAPTER TWO: LIVING AND WORKING AT THE LOWELL MILLS

The Layout of the Lowell Mill Complex: Philosophy and Practicality

One feature that set the Lowell mill system apart from the British and Slater systems was the plan of the Lowell management to create a planned industrial village. Within the plan lay both philosophical and practical considerations. Francis Cabot Lowell saw first-hand the undesirable consequences of British industrialization. Around the factories of Manchester grew squalid slums where the families who toiled in the mills lived. Lowell and many of his contemporaries viewed the creation of a large, uneducated mass of workers as a threat not only to the efficient operation of an industry, but to the survival of the newly-created American republic. There is evidence that the Lowell founders were truly determined to avoid the English model of industrialization and labor. Nathan Appleton, one of the partners in the Lowell venture, wrote, "What would be its [industrialization] effect on the character of our population was a matter of deep interest. The

operatives in the manufacturing cities of Europe, were notoriously of the lowest character, for intelligence and morals. The question, therefore, arose, and was deeply considered, whether this degradation was the result of the peculiar occupation, or of other and distinct causes."⁸⁶

It was not only the perception of Lowell and Appleton that British industrialization had its shortcomings. As early as 1808 (two years before Lowell's visit), a British visitor to Manchester wrote, "The town is abominably filthy, the Steam Engine is pestiferous, the Dyehouses noisesome [sic] and offensive, and the water of the river as black as ink or the Stygian lake."⁸⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, on his visit to Manchester, noted the lack of any organized plan of urban growth. He observed, "Everything in the exterior appearance of the city attests the individual powers of man; nothing the directing power of society." Neither did the factories pose a pleasant view. Tocqueville continued, "Thirty or forty factories rise on the tops of hills I have just described. Their six stories up, their huge enclosures give notice from afar of the centralization of industry. The wretched dwellings of the poor are scattered haphazard around them. Round them stretches land uncultivated but without charm of rustic nature, and still without amenities of a town. The soil has been taken away, scratched and torn up in a thousand places . . . the land is given over to industry's use." Manchester, according to Tocqueville, represented industrialization at its worst, and had great social consequences. "These vast structures," he lamented, "keep air and light out of the human habitations which they dominate; they envelop them in perpetual fog; here is the slave, there is the master; there the wealth of some, here the poverty of most . . . here the weakness of the individual seems more feeble and helpless even than in the middle of the wilderness; here are the effects, there the causes."⁸⁸

There are many more travelers' accounts of Manchester, Bradford, Leeds, and other centers of British industrialization, and all paint a similarly depressing picture.⁸⁹ These writings were not

⁸⁶ Nathan Appleton, *Introduction of the Power Loom and Origin of Lowell* (Lowell: B. H. Penhallow, 1858), 15.

⁸⁷ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams Books, Limited, 1963), 86.

⁸⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, translated by George Lawrence and K. P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 106-107.

⁸⁹ See Benjamin Silliman, an American scientist who visited Britain and wrote *A Journey of Travels in*

lost on the management of the Lowell companies. They felt that Lowell was a paradise in contrast to places like Manchester, and were eager to let it be known. The mill complex at Lowell with its well-planned factories and boardinghouses, and its morally and educationally upright work force, showed, according to its owners, that industrialization need not be equated with social degeneracy. In 1845, the Reverend Henry Miles of Lowell, a proponent and frequent defender of the Lowell management, wrote *Lowell As It Was, As It Is*, a history of the city and its factories. In the preface he stated, "Independent of the gratification of a natural curiosity respecting the rise and progress of one of the greatest enterprises of the age, the present publication will answer a more palpably useful purpose, it shall recommend, to other manufacturing towns and cities, that well devised system, and more careful regime, which have here been established."⁹⁰ In 1848, *The Handbook for the Visiter [sic] to Lowell* boasted that "Lowell, taken as a whole, may be considered a magnificent and successful experiment. It has shown . . . that degradation does not necessarily result from manufacturing, and that the class of operatives will compare in moral worth and intelligence with any, either country or city."⁹¹

To this day, historians are debating whether the Lowell system emerged from a grand social vision on behalf of the workers or from purely practical, business considerations. Economist Howard Gitelman argues that practical considerations were foremost in the minds of Lowell management as they devised their system. First, according to Gitelman, the Lowell machinery was complex to operate, making child labor in the mills unfeasible. The family labor system, as used in Britain and in Slater's mills, therefore, was practically unsuitable at Lowell. Secondly, the rural location of the Lowell mill complex, as well as the boardinghouse system at Lowell, resulted from practical rather than philosophical considerations. Unlike the steam powered factories in Britain,

England, Holland, and Scotland, and of Two Passages Over the Atlantic, in the Years 1805 and 1806 (New Haven, 1820), 105-108. Also see James Kirk Paulding, *A Sketch of Old England by a New England Man* (New York, 1822), 144-149. Also check C. Edwards Lester, *The Glory and the Shame of England, 1850* (New York, 1850). The secondary work, *Civilizing the Machine*, by John Kasson, gives a full discussion of these impressions in chapter 2.

⁹⁰ Henry A. Miles, *Lowell As It Was, As It Is* (Lowell: Nathaniel L. Dayton, Merrill and Heywood, 1846), 8.

⁹¹ *A Handbook for the Visiter to Lowell, 1848* (no author indicated) (Lowell: D. Bixby and Company, 1848), 34.

the Lowell mills used waterpower, and thus had to be placed near a river. In the early 1820s, the site of present-day Lowell was an area of farms and forest, with few people. The company had to build boardinghouses, since there were no towns to house the many workers. Moreover, the New England farmers would not allow their daughters to leave home to work in distant mills unless they were assured that the girls would be carefully supervised in a controlled living environment. Thus, the boardinghouses were necessary to obtain the desired work force.⁹²

Gitelman's argument oversimplifies the motives of the Lowell founders. It seems likely that both philosophical and pragmatic forces were at work in creating the unique Lowell system. The Boston associates were men of business and commerce and surely saw profits as important. But the Appletons and Lawrences, like others of Boston's elite, followed a tradition of public-spiritedness and philanthropy, as they gave large sums to libraries, universities, orphanages, and charitable organizations.⁹³ Nathan Appleton wrote, "My mind has always been devoted to many other things rather than money-making."⁹⁴ Amos Lawrence, who joined the Lowell investors in 1830, gave \$639,000 in cash to charitable and educational organizations between 1829 and 1852, and once instructed a mill agent that "we must make a good thing out of this establishment [the mills] unless you ruin us by working on Sundays." Francis Cabot Lowell's son, John Lowell, started the Lowell Institute in 1835, which sponsored public lectures widely attended by the mill operatives. He wrote, "The prosperity of my native land, New England, which is sterile and unproductive, must depend first on the moral qualities and secondly on the intelligence and information of its inhabitants."⁹⁵

To produce an intelligent and informed work force, free of exploitation and corruption, the Boston associates turned to, as sociologist Erving Goffman puts it, a "total institution." These institutions, Goffman states, were places "of residence and work where a large number of like-suited

⁹² Howard Gitelman, "The Waltham System and the Coming of the Irish," *Labor History* 8 (Fall 1967): 228-232.

⁹³ Kasson, 72.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

individuals, cut off from a wider society for an appreciable period of time, together led an enclosed formally administered round of life.”⁹⁶ To Lowell management, the “total institution” consisted of the mills, the boardinghouses, and the agents’ housing. The closed arrangement would allow management to control the work and lives of the mill force, which, the owners believed, would be good for their textile company in particular and good for New England in general.

Between 1820 and 1840, ten textile companies were established in Lowell, all under the control of the Boston associates. By 1850, the associates also controlled and operated textile mills in Chicopee, Taunton, and Lawrence, Massachusetts; Manchester, Dover, Somersworth, and Nashua, New Hampshire; and Saco and Biddeford, Maine.⁹⁷ The cooperative structure of the companies increased the efficiency of textile production. All the companies shared patent rights on technological innovations, water rights, and access to a common machine shop. They all marketed their cloth through the same Boston commission house. They paid the same wages, and their employees worked the same hours. All of their operatives followed the same rules and lived in boardinghouses built and maintained by the company. The mill construction and architecture were also identical. Perhaps most importantly, the companies used the same system of management, bookkeeping, and internal organization.⁹⁸

The first factory complex, the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, set the architectural style for the mills that followed. Six factory buildings were grouped in a large quadrangle next to the river. The central mill dominated, with a Georgian cupola and large bell. The mill buildings were four to six stories high, 45 feet wide and 150 feet long. Made of red brick, they had regular rows of windows that extended their entire length and width. Outside, the bell tower rose upward from the roof, giving a visible and audible symbol of the new time discipline ushered in by the Lowell system. Since most of the operatives were from farms, they had little experience with time-discipline, and Lowell management wanted “to standardize irregular labor rhythms and to

⁹⁶ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1961), xiii.

⁹⁷ Kasson, 64.

⁹⁸ Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 20.

make time the measurement of work.” The cupolas, then, were more than ornamental. The bells reminded workers that “time was money.”⁹⁹

The architecture and arrangement of the buildings by management also indicated a concern for control. The workplace was isolated from the outside world, and no one could disrupt the daily work routine.¹⁰⁰ As historian John Kasson states, the mill complex presented a “neat, orderly, and efficient, appearance, which symbolized the institution’s goals and would be emulated by many of the penitentiaries, insane asylums, and reformatories of the period.”¹⁰¹ The interior of the mills also reflected uniformity. The source of power for the mill, a huge waterwheel, was in the basement, to maximize the power generated, and to keep the water from freezing in the winter. Above the basement, on successive floors, the carding, spinning, weaving, and dressing rooms transformed raw cotton into finished cloth. An elevator connected the floors, and moved materials from one step of the manufacturing process to the next.¹⁰² In the quadrangle between the mill buildings management planted trees, flowers and shrubbery.¹⁰³

The boardinghouses were a short walking distance from the mills. The lodgings at the Merrimack Company set the style that would be emulated by the other Lowell mill companies. The houses had three stories and an attic with dormer windows. The kitchen, dining room, and living quarters of the keeper and her family were on the first floor. The workers’ bedrooms took up the second and third floors, and the attic. Each boardinghouse held about 25-30 people, with four to six girls to a bedroom.¹⁰⁴ At the ends of both rows of boardinghouses lived the overseers of the mills. Residing in simple, but large quarters, they were positioned in a way to provide additional surveillance of the workers.

⁹⁹ Kasson, 74-75.

¹⁰⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 61.

¹⁰¹ Kasson, 73.

¹⁰² Dublin, *Women at Work*, 62.

¹⁰³ Kasson, 73.

¹⁰⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 80.

The mill agents, like Kirk Boott and others, lived in large, well-furnished housing. Boott's house, for example, was a sizeable Georgian mansion with an Ionic portico, a symbol of his authority, and stood between Merrimack Street and the river, just below the Merrimack Company.¹⁰⁵ From his home, the agent could view the boardinghouses and mills. Distinct from the mill complex and boardinghouses were the squalid homes of the Irish laborers who dug the canals and built the mills. They lived in hundred of shanties in an area of Lowell known as "New Dublin" or "the Acre." From the beginning of the Lowell mills, the Irish were not seen as an integral part of the mill operation (other than heavy construction labor), and until much later, few, if any, Irish worked as operatives in the mills.¹⁰⁶

From Farm to Mill: The Recruitment of Farm Women to the Lowell Mills

From all over New England, young farm women migrated to Lowell and other textile mills owned and operated by the Boston associates. Several factors contributed to the desirability of a large female work force. First, the earliest industrialization in America occurred in a developing economy where labor was in short supply. For the most part, men farmed or worked as wheelwrights, blacksmiths, merchants, or general laborers in the towns and cities.¹⁰⁷ In addition, a great many young men migrated out of rural New England during the first half of the nineteenth century. Opportunities to own land in the new states of the Midwest drew them west across the

¹⁰⁵ Kasson, 74. Also see John Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion: A Study of Architecture and Society in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 40.

¹⁰⁶ Kasson, 73-74.

¹⁰⁷ Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Mid-Continent American Studies Journal* 10 (1969): 10.

Appalachians. Others sought work in the expanding cities of southern and central New England.¹⁰⁸ The migration of single men west changed the demographics of New England towns and countryside. Beginning in the late 1700s, the number of single women grew in proportion to the number of men. Some of the women, unable to support themselves, went into almshouses. Proponents of manufactures claimed that factory labor would put to use the large numbers of “idle women” that increasingly populated New England.¹⁰⁹ A second factor that encouraged the use of women in the early textile mills was that the manufacture of cloth in the home had traditionally been “women’s work.” By selling the products of their spinning, women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were able to turn their domestic occupations into wage earnings. In fact, sales of homespun cloth had provided young women with the primary means of earning money to supplement the family income.¹¹⁰

The number of farm women moving into mill work increased more rapidly in the period after 1825, and the textile factories themselves accelerated the increase. Manufactured cloth was cheaper to make than homespun, and its lower price encouraged farm families (as well as urban dwellers) to buy rather than make cloth. Rolla Tryon, an historian of household manufacture, estimates that between 1815 and 1830, the price of factory-made brown shirting dropped from 42 cents to 7 1/2 cents a yard. As a result, the amount of homespun cloth decreased from an estimated 16.5 million yards in 1825 to 8.8 million yards in 1835. Household spinning, then, was becoming a dying art. The implication of these trends to the daughters of farmers were clear--they could no longer give significant support to their families from the sales of homespun cloth. Many farmers, from a financial standpoint, could be persuaded to allow their daughters to work for cash wages in the textile mills.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 17.

¹⁰⁹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 23-24.

¹¹⁰ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 27-28.

¹¹¹ Kessler-Harris, 26-28. Household production of cloth from the McLane Report, I.

The movement of young women into factories in the first part of the nineteenth century was not enthusiastically supported by all. Many Americans at the time did not hold factory work in high regard. Even as late as 1840 (twenty-five years after Lowell opened his first mill at Waltham), a magazine editor wrote in the *Farmer's Monthly Visitor*, "The ambition of women should be to beautify and adorn the domestic circle." The editor contended that domestic service was the only suitable training for a vocation in the home, and lamented, "yet how often do we see them declining to labor in a family and preferring the quasi-slavery of a cotton factory, the last place in the world, a fashionable female academy excepted, to fit a woman for domestic society and usefulness."¹¹²

Letters and reminiscences by mill girls confirm this anti-factory attitude. Harriet Hanson Robinson, who worked at the Lowell mills from 1835 to 1848, recalled that "At the time the Lowell cotton mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women." Robinson concluded that high wages were needed to induce the girls to enter such an occupation as mill work.¹¹³ In *The Factory Girl*, a novel written in 1814 by an unknown author, Mary, a young New England girl, has just told her grandmother that she had a job in a factory. Grandmother was greatly disappointed and told her, "It will indeed, be a sad day to me when you go to the factory, for I shall be thinking all the time, what your poor father would say, were he alive, to have you get your bread in such a manner . . . I am sure he would not consent to your being with people who were not good and serious."¹¹⁴ Lucy Larcom, who worked at the Lowell mills from 1835 to 1845, recalled the prejudices many New Englanders had about factory work. Larcom went to Lowell with her mother, who ran a boardinghouse for mill girls. She remembered that "Some of the family objected, for the Old World traditions about factory life were anything but attractive; and they were current in New England until the experiment at Lowell had shown that independent and intelligent

¹¹² Caroline Ware, *The New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), 217.

¹¹³ Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (New York: Crowell, 1898), 37.

¹¹⁴ Sarah Savage (pseudonym), *The Factory Girl* (Boston: Munroe, Francis, and Parker, 1814), 4. Quoted in Kessler-Harris, 31.

workers invariably give their own character to their occupation.”¹¹⁵ Sabrina Bennett, daughter of a New Hampshire farmer, worked as a dressmaker in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Between the years 1836 and 1851, she corresponded with a wide network of family and friends. In one letter, Aunt Malinda Edwards wrote to Sabrina, “I suppose your mother would think it far beneath your dignity to be a factory girl.”¹¹⁶

Other views, though, supported the new opportunities for women in the cotton factories. In 1831, the editor of the *State Herald* of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, stated, “Instead of speaking reproachfully of young women for leaving their homes to learn an honest trade . . . you ought to praise them. For respectability and intelligence, we do know that at many of the factories, the best of females are employed-- even the daughters of judges, ministers, and representatives.”¹¹⁷ The mill women themselves sought to improve the image of the factory girl. One way was to partake in “improvement circles.” In these circles, the mill women read and discussed books, attended lyceum lectures, and even began to write their own essays and poems. Two of these circles started their own publications, and printed some of the works of the mill women. The most famous journal, *The Lowell Offering*, was published from 1840 to 1845, and its successor, the *New England Offering*, ran from 1848 to 1850. The writers in these magazines sought to vindicate their reputations, and “to remove unjust prejudice--to prove that the female operatives of Lowell were, as a class, intelligent and virtuous.”¹¹⁸

A number of writings stressed the point that factory work at Lowell was not degrading or corrupting. The opportunities at Lowell, they claimed, stimulated the intellect and solidified the character of the operatives.¹¹⁹ One article, written by Harriet Farley in the December, 1840 issue of the *Lowell Offering*, responded to a critical picture of mill life written by Orestes Brownson, editor of the *Boston Quarterly Review*. Farley accused Brownson of slandering “a class of girls who

¹¹⁵ Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889), 146.

¹¹⁶ Kessler-Harris, 32.

¹¹⁷ Ware, 217.

¹¹⁸ “Editorial,” *Lowell Offering*, January, 1845, 22.

¹¹⁹ Kasson, 78.

in this city alone are numbered in the thousands . . . and who will become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England and mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans.” Farley argued that involuntary constraints were not placed on the factory women. The operatives worked at the mills by their own choice and, besides earning wages, enjoyed access to much information, including lectures at the Lyceum.¹²⁰ Sarah Bagley, another contributor to the *Offering*, wrote in the “Pleasures of Factory Life” that the atmosphere at Lowell was fruitful for contemplation and growth. “We . . . enjoy much pleasure in cultivating flowers and plants. A large and beautiful variety of plants is placed around the walls of the rooms, giving them more the appearance of a flower garden than a workshop.”¹²¹

Whatever the range of editorial opinion, many young women were coming to Lowell, learning of the mills by word-of-mouth. Perhaps a relative or neighbor of a Lowell girl heard of the mill and decided to give factory work a try. Mill girls returning to work from a vacation on the farm often brought back a friend.¹²² In April, 1839, for example, Malinda Edwards wrote to her niece, Sabrina Bennett, “If you should have any idea of working in the factory I will do the best I can to get you a place with us.”¹²³

Kinship, in fact, seemed to be important in the recruitment of young farm girls into the mills. Kinship also provided a support system to aid newcomers in adjusting to life and work in the mills. Thomas Dublin, who studied mill records of the Hamilton Company of Lowell, found that many sisters and cousins lived together in the boardinghouses of the mills, suggesting the importance of a kin network in the textile factories. Moreover, having relatives at the Hamilton Company seemed to help newcomers get better paying jobs at the mill. Dublin found that 70 percent of those women with relatives working at the Hamilton Company got jobs in the higher-paying weaving and

¹²⁰ Harriet Farley, “Factory Girls.” *Lowell Offering* (Lowell, Massachusetts: A. Watson) 1-2.

¹²¹ Sarah Bagley, “Pleasures of Factory Life.” *Lowell Offering*, December, 1840, 23-24.

¹²² Ware, 214.

¹²³ Letter to Sabrina Bennett from her aunt, Malinda M. Edwards dated April 4, 1839. Bennett family letters, printed in Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 75.

dressing rooms, while only 52 percent of those without kin at the company started in these rooms.¹²⁴

Company management also found kin networks to be good for their business, since women with kin stayed longer at the mill. At Hamilton Company of Lowell, for example, those with kin worked an average of 3.66 years at the mill, while those without kin stayed only an average of 2.21 years. By staying longer, workers reduced training costs and turnover, resulting in greater profits for the company.¹²⁵ During the period from 1830 to 1850, almost two-thirds of the workers employed at Hamilton mill had relatives working there. Sister pairs predominated, but cousins working together at Hamilton were also common.¹²⁶

Two sisters from Canterbury, New Hampshire, provide a good example of kin workers. In 1835, Lucy Jane and Caroline Ames, eighteen and fourteen years old respectively, began work at the Hamilton Company. They lived together in a boardinghouse but worked in different rooms at the mill. Lucy Jane was employed in the dressing room, and Caroline worked as a weaver. Lucy ended up staying at the mill for one year, perhaps leaving to marry. Caroline stayed for five years.¹²⁷ Letters written from Louisa and Olive Sawyer, also of Canterbury, reveal that five of the seven Sawyer children worked at the mills between 1835 and 1850. Sisters Hepzibah, Louisa, and Emeline all worked on and off at Lowell during these years, and brothers Daniel and Jeremiah did as well. One cousin, Lafayette Frisbie, also spent time in the mill in 1845. Not only letters, but the extensive Hamilton Company payroll records, as well as census and town record data examined by Thomas Dublin, show the prominence of kin networks among mill workers.¹²⁸ The evidence also shows that the social network of family and friends, rooted in the New England countryside, still played an important role in the mills and boardinghouses. According to Dublin, “women continued to provide crucial support to one another, as neighbors and family members had done

¹²⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 44, 48.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²⁸ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 27 and *Women at Work*, 16.

for years in the countryside. They recruited one another into the mills, secured jobs for each other, and helped newcomers make the numerous adjustments called for in a very new and different setting."¹²⁹

By 1836-1837, the popularity of the Lowell mills for young farm women peaked. There seemed to be "girls abundant" in Lowell.¹³⁰ Why were so many young farm women coming to Lowell? The decline of family income from homespun cloth was a broad force in the migration to Lowell and other textile factories. Individual women, however, had their own reasons for coming. Cash wages certainly seemed to be a factor. Harriet Hanson Robinson, reflecting on her years in the mills between 1834 and 1848, stated that "stories were told all over the country of the new factory town and the high wages it offered to all classes of working people, stories that reached the ears of mechanics' and farmers' sons, and gave new life to lonely and dependent women in distant towns and farmhouses."¹³¹ In the early nineteenth century, there were limited occupations for women--domestic service, making handicrafts, and school teaching.¹³² The new option of earning wages at Lowell was enticing to many young (and middle aged) farm women. It put a new kind of power--cash--into women's hands to be spent at their discretion, giving their lives new horizons. Harriet Hanson Robinson recalled that "For the first time in this country, a woman's labor had money value. She became not only an earner and producer, but also a spender of money," and in earning wages she had "learned to think and act for herself."¹³³

A sense of autonomy, then, seems to have been important to many of the working girls at Lowell. Large numbers of the women spent the money that they earned on articles for themselves. The letters and diaries of the mill women in the 1830s and 1840s are filled with descriptions of items that the girls purchased in the many shops that lined Merrimack and Central Streets in Lowell. Mary Paul, a millworker with the Lawrence Corporation in Lowell, wrote to her father in

¹²⁹ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 30.

¹³⁰ Ware, 228.

¹³¹ Robinson, x, 42.

¹³² Cott, 6.

¹³³ Robinson, 38.

December, 1845, "Last Tuesday we were paid. In all I had six dollars and sixty cents paid \$4.68 for board. With the rest I got me a pair of rubbers and a pair of 50.cts shoes."¹³⁴ Susan Brown, an operative at the Middlesex Woolen Mill in Lowell, kept a diary during the nine months she worked there in 1843. In her journal she kept detailed figures of her wages, expenses, and expenditures. She does not indicate in her diary that any of her earnings were sent home to her family. While in Lowell, she bought a pair of rubbers, a bonnet, mittens, a dress of calico cloth, an album, and \$2.00 shawl, a Bible, a trunk, and many other personal items. On June 7, 1843, Susan wrote, "Called Mrs. Pollard's and had my dress fitted--purchased my gaiters at Wrights on Merrimack Street."¹³⁵

In addition to purchasing items, large numbers of Lowell girls were able to save significant amounts of money during their work stints at Lowell. In 1846, the Reverend Henry Miles of Lowell estimated that the factory operatives had saved over \$100,000 in the Lowell Institute for Savings. Miles quotes cases in the Corporation discharge books that give some indication of individual savings of the mill women. Eunice***, for example, worked for 12 months, and brought 75 dollars net savings home with her. Harriet***, who worked in the mill for a year, returned home with 30 dollars.¹³⁶ Thomas Dublin examined financial records of 22 operatives at the Hamilton Company and found that 10 of them had savings accounts at the Lowell Institute for Savings, and the mean balance of these accounts was \$153, the equivalent of about 40 weeks' wages.¹³⁷

Some mill women, though, did not have the luxury of spending and saving significant sums for themselves. Jemima Sanborn, who moved with her family to the mill town of Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1843, describes her reasons for entering factory work in a letter to her sister,

you wil probely want to know the cause of our moveing here which are many. I will mension afew of them. One of them is the hard times to get aliving off the farm for so large a famely so we have devided our famely for this year. We have left Plummer and Luther to care for the farm and grandmarm and aunt Polly. The rest of us have moved to Nashvill [a part of Nashua] thinking the

¹³⁴ Mary Paul Letters, December 21, 1845, as printed in Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 103.

¹³⁵ Susan Brown Diary, 1843, transcribed by Mary Blewett, *Caught Between Two Worlds: The Diary of a Lowell Mill Girl* (Lowell: Lowell Museum, 1984), 45.

¹³⁶ Miles, 113-115.

¹³⁷ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 188.

girls and Charles they would probely work in the mill. But we have had bad luck giting them in only Jane has got in yet.¹³⁸

Both Harriet Hanson Robinson and Lucy Larcom moved to Lowell with their widowed mothers, who ran boardinghouses in Lowell. Both families faced financial hardships, and both girls had to enter the mills as children.

For the most part, though, the families of mill girls were not destitute (a further discussion of the operatives' family backgrounds will appear later in this chapter). The typical mill girl entered the mills of her own free will, and was not forced to send most of her earnings home to her family. In the *Lowell Offering*, writings of the young mill women strongly imply that they were not seduced to the mills by agents, but saw mill work as an adventure, and they were pursuing a noble occupation by their own choice.¹³⁹ Mary Paul, a young woman from Vermont, wrote to her father in 1845, "I want you to consent to let me go to Lowell if you can. I think it would be much better for me than to stay here. I could earn more to begin with than I can any where about here."¹⁴⁰ Work in the mills, then, may have served the same purpose for young women that westward migration served from men. The mills offered a chance at self-support, allowed women to enjoy the advantages of urban life, and gave them a sense of economic and social independence.¹⁴¹

Many young women came to Lowell to escape the loneliness of farm life, and they were often excited about the adventure of moving to the city, where they could live and socialize with other girls.¹⁴² After living and working at Lowell for a period of time, many women preferred it to the slower, more traditional life they experienced when younger. Many girls came to believe that their parents' world was not their own.¹⁴³ Harriet Robinson recalled, "If they [the mill girls] returned to their secluded homes again, instead of being looked down upon as 'factory girls' they were more

¹³⁸ Letters of Jemima Edwards Sanborn and Ann Blake, 1843-45, printed in Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 87.

¹³⁹ Ware, 216.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Paul Letter, September 13, 1845, from Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 100.

¹⁴¹ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 23.

¹⁴² Ware, 217.

¹⁴³ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 58.

often welcomed as coming back from the metropolis, bringing new fashions, new books, and new ideas with them.”¹⁴⁴

It is possible that women who went to Lowell in the first place were more open and receptive to the changes that urban life would present.¹⁴⁵ However, some women seemed ambivalent about Lowell, and missed certain aspects of the countryside, even though they were excited about urban life. In 1846, a young farm girl, H. E. Back, wrote to Harriet Robinson that she had recently returned to Lowell after receiving a note that her factory supervisor, Mr. Saunders, was saving her job at the mill for her. Back stated that “After reading it [Saunders’ note], my Lowell fever returned, and come I would, and come I did, but now, Ah, me! I rue the day . . . a feeling of loneliness comes over me when I think of *my home* now far away.”¹⁴⁶

Letters and writings of mill women (in the *Offering*) often indicate feelings of longing for the countryside as well as for family members back on the farm. Lucy Larcom recalled that one of the favorite activities of the factory girls on Sundays and holidays was to walk in the country paths on the other side of the Merrimack River, opposite the mills. As they strolled, the girls would gather wild roses, and brought bunches of them back to the boardinghouse. Larcom reminisced, “No matter if we must get up at five the next morning and go back to our humdrum toil, we should have the roses to take with us for company, and the sweet air of the woodland which lingered about them would scent our thoughts all day, and make us forget the oily smell of the machinery.” Larcom also reminds us that in the 1830s, the countryside was never far from Lowell. “The long stretches of open land”, she recalled, “between the corporation buildings and the street made the town seem country-like.”¹⁴⁷

Despite the occasional longings of some mill girls for the countryside, the lure of city life and the prospect of earning wages was a strong one, and young farm women arrived daily in Lowell and

¹⁴⁴ Robinson, 38.

¹⁴⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from H. E. Back to Harriet Hanson Robinson, September 7, 1846, as quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Factory Girls* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1977), 334.

¹⁴⁷ Larcom, 163.

other factory towns. From what we can tell by the writings of the women, there were many different reasons why they set out for the mills. Some came to earn money for fineries like silk, or other luxuries that their families could not supply them. Others wanted to help pay off their families' mortgages, or help a brother finance his education. Many young women were excited about getting an education from themselves, or listening to literary lectures at the Lyceum of Lowell.¹⁴⁸ An account from the *Lowell Offering* best describes the variety of motivations that drew the girls to the factories. A representative group included:

a young widow who hated her mother-in-law;
one who had a wealthy father, but he was very stingy and wished his daughters to "maintain themselves;"
another who had a well-off mother who was pious and would not buy her daughter the kinds of gowns and clothes she wanted;
another who needed to work, but had been ill-treated in domestic service;
another who was abandoned by her lover;
another who wanted an education, but had poor parents.¹⁴⁹

It seems, then, that young women came in great numbers to Lowell, and for a variety of reasons. From all over New England, and even French Canada, girls arrived daily by carriage or canal boat. Harriet Hanson Robinson described the arrival of a carriage full of country girls from the outer regions of New England. To Harriet, who was from Boston and had worked in the Lowell mills for some time, the newcomers appeared quite strange:

A very curious sight these country girls presented to the young eyes accustomed to a more modern style of things . . . they would descend from it [the carriage] dressed in outlandish fashions, and with their arms brimful of bandboxes containing all their worldly goods. . . . These country girls had queer names, which added to the singularity of the experience. Samantha, Triphena, Plumy, Kezia, Aseneth, Elgardy, Leafy, Ruhamah, Lovey, Almaretta, Sareptha, and Florilla were among them. . . . Their dialect was also very peculiar. On the broken English and Scotch of their ancestors was ingrafted the nasal Yankee twang; so that many of them, when they had just come "daown," spoke a language almost unintelligible. . . . Their dress was also peculiar, and was the plainest of homespun, cut in such old-fashioned style that each young girl looked as if she had borrowed her grandmother's gown.¹⁵⁰

Whatever their reasons for coming to the factories of Lowell--to escape the bleakness of rural life, to evade parental tyranny, or to forget a lost love--these young women gained an opportunity to start anew, to earn wages, and to be "on their own." The next section describes, in more detail, the characteristics of these young women.

¹⁴⁸ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 34.

¹⁴⁹ *Lowell Offering*, Vol. IV, 257-258.

¹⁵⁰ Robinson, 38-40.

Profile of Female Operatives: Age, Marriage, and Family Origins

Statistics from the New England textile mills during the 1830s to early 1840s indicate that young, single women made up a large portion of the work force.¹⁵¹ In July, 1836, for example, 85 percent of the mill workers (881 of 1030) at the Hamilton Company of Lowell were women and 80 percent of them were between the ages of 15 and 30. Almost 90 percent of the young women at Hamilton were single when they began to work for the company.¹⁵²

For these women workers, their stay at Hamilton seemed to represent a phase of life rather than a permanent wage-earning career. Thomas Dublin traced the records of 115 New Hampshire women who worked at Hamilton Company and found that, after a few years at the mill, 98 of the girls married.¹⁵³ These New Hampshire women did, however, marry later than their non-mill counterparts, and tended to marry men closer to their own ages, or in a number of instances, younger than they. The median age of the mill women at marriage was 25.2, compared to 22.9 for non-millworkers. Husbands of millhands had a median age of 24.5, compared to 26.5 for husbands of non-millhands. That the millhands had lived away from their families, had worked for several years in the mills, and had achieved a degree of financial independence, may explain this marriage pattern. Moreover, since most millhands also had savings, they may have entered their marriages as more equal partners than did non-mill women. Dublin's study also shows that mill women were less likely than rural women to marry farmers. Of the factory women who settled back in rural areas, only 42 percent married farmers, compared to 73 percent of rural women. A magazine article pointed out that "the most intelligent and enterprising of the farmer's daughters . . . will nine times out of ten, marry a mechanic in preference to a farmer. They remember their worn-out

¹⁵¹ Cott, 37.

¹⁵² Dublin, *Women at Work*, 27, 31.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32.

mothers."¹⁵⁴ Naturally, Lowell women were more likely to meet city men. Thus, even for a short time, the mill experience seems to have had a lasting impact on the young women of the Hamilton Company. All this marriage data seems to indicate that marriage of mill women departed from the traditional marriage patterns in rural New England during this time period.¹⁵⁵

Dublin's study of the Hamilton records also gives us clues about the familial origins of the girls who worked at the firm. Dublin examined the records of girls who came from three New Hampshire towns--Boscawan, Canterbury, and Sutton. These towns, in the Merrimack Valley of New Hampshire, sent large numbers of women to the Hamilton Company over the years. Two-thirds of the young women who came to the company from these towns were from farm families. The remaining girls came from families headed by blacksmiths, stonemasons, wheelwrights, and other skilled artisans.¹⁵⁶

Evidence also seems to indicate that these operatives' families were not destitute, but had property valued somewhere in the middle ranges of wealth in their home towns. Tax records indicate that 86 percent of the young women's families had property valued over \$100. The median taxable income of millhand fathers was \$338, compared to \$459 for all male household heads.¹⁵⁷ The operatives also tended to come from large families, with an average of seven children. Their departure for the mills meant one less mouth to feed, and may have given the families some relief from overcrowding. Mill work also gave a girl a chance to earn a marriage portion, thus reducing financial demands on their families.¹⁵⁸ Statistics also show that the first or second-born daughter was more likely to go off to the mills than younger siblings. This again might represent relief from population pressures within the family, but it could also indicate that the older girls were more adventuresome, and were treated with less protectiveness than younger siblings.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ "Farming Life in New England," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1858), 2:341, quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 55.

¹⁵⁵ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 33-34.

¹⁵⁶ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 33.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 19.

¹⁵⁹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 41.

In summary, the girls who worked at the Hamilton Company of Lowell, a typical textile firm of the period, tended to be young and single, and to work at the mill for several years before settling down and marrying at a slightly later age than non-millworkers. They came mostly from large families of modest means, and seemed to come to Lowell of their own accord.

It might be useful here to trace the lives of three mill girls from the farm to the mill and to marriage. Our information about their lives comes from their own writings as well as census data. It is difficult to say whether these three women were representative in their experiences at the mills, since many more women worked in the factories than there are letters and diaries available to study. But examining them can give us a glimpse into life and work of three women from another age.

Mary Hall, the daughter of James and Ruth Abbot Hall of Concord, Massachusetts, came to Lowell in September, 1831, at the age of 23, and she began work as a weaver at the Merrimack Corporation in Lowell. Her diary, which she kept from 1821 to 1836, has survived. Miss Hall wrote on September 27 of her arrival in Lowell, "This morning, very rainy again . . . This forenoon was carried to the countinghouse of Merrimac Corporation where I spoke for employment and then came to board with Mrs. Taylor on front row Number 9." The next day was "cool and pleasant. This morning commenced by employment, which is weaving."¹⁶⁰

Over the next 6 years, Mary Hall worked short stints in the mills, from 4 to 11 months at a time, and for 3 different Lowell firms. Between her mill work stretches, Mary made frequent visits home to Concord, including one stay of one-and-one-half years. What is apparent from her diary is the close communication she kept with her family. Her father and brothers visited her often in Lowell, even seeing her at the factory. "Very rainy," she wrote on October 27, 1831. "Brother R. called at the countinghouse to see me."¹⁶¹ She also had a sister and two cousins who worked at the mills, and one of her uncles resided in Lowell. In 1838, Mary Hall married Albert Capen, a rail worker, and both lived in Lowell until 1855. During her time at the mills, Mary Hall averaged \$3.25 per week, minus the \$1.25 that was deducted from her pay for room and board at the

¹⁶⁰ Mary Hall Diary, New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, N. H., September 27, 28, 1831.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, October 27, 1831.

boardinghouse. With these earnings, Mary could have supported herself well, and she seemed to have cash at her disposal, since she indicates in her diary frequently, “went shopping.”¹⁶²

Harriet Hanson Robinson worked in the mills of Lowell from 1834 to 1848, and in her autobiography, *Loom and Spindle: or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, published in 1898, she tells us of her experiences. Her mother, widowed in the early 1830s, came to Lowell from Boston to support herself and Harriet by operating a boardinghouse for the Lawrence Corporation. After helping her mother with chores and attending school for a few years, young Harriet entered the mills at age 10, and worked as a bobbin girl. She worked her way up in the factory, and after several years, she worked at the spinning, and later the drawing frames, one of the higher-skilled jobs in the plant. Harriet, although only 12 at the time, vividly remembered the strike of 1836. “One of the girls stood on a pump,” Harriet wrote, “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 to the public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience.”¹⁶³

Harriet left the mill in 1848, at the age of 24, and later married a newspaper man named William Robinson. The sense of independence Harriet gained from her mill experience is evident in her writings. She was actively involved with the *Lowell Offering*, and submitted articles to it.

A third woman, Susan Brown, was born in 1824 in Epsom, a small town in the upland country of southern New Hampshire. Her father, William Brown, was a farmer whose property value was about average for the town. Her mother was Lucretia Billings Gray of Epsom. And she had a sister, Mary Lucy. In 1841, Susan attended Pittsfield Academy, a private high school, and later that year, at age 17, she began teaching school in Epsom. Not enthralled with the experience, Susan wrote in her diary on May 13, “Spent the day at my school room--feeling very unlike the task before me--that of instructing thirteen urchins their A.B.C.'s.” She kept at it, however, and by 1842, she instructed a class full--47 students at Pittsfield Academy.

¹⁶² Dublin, *Women at Work*, 24.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25-26, Robinson, 51.

Susan still seemed unhappy with teaching, though, and in January, 1843, at age 18, she left for Lowell to become a mill operative. Like many other novices at mill work, she had a network of relatives and friends that had come to Lowell before. Unlike most other mill girls, however, she did not live in a company boardinghouse. She resided with a family that was familiar with her parents, the Stickneys, on Lawrence Street, and began work as a sparehand at the Middlesex Mills, a woolen mill in Lowell, on January 18, 1843. A week later, her sister Lucy joined her, boarding with the Stickney family as well.

In her diary, Susan Brown wrote much more about her social life in Lowell than her day-to-day work in the mill. Like Mary Hall, Susan Brown's diary is filled with references to visits from family and friends from Epsom. Baskets of home-made treats arrived regularly, and her mother visited her for a two-week stay in July, 1843. In addition to family visits, Susan socialized often with the Stickneys, and, in a sense, became like one of the family. Susan also had the chance to meet and visit with the Stickney's friends, the Hodgmans, the Fosses, the Whipples and the Hams.

In early March, Susan became sick, and for some reason, left the Stickneys to live with the Fosse family. She continued to visit the Stickneys, and her diary mentions numerous social calls. On February 15, for example, she "spent the eve at Mrs. Hams," and two days later, she wrote, "Almira and I made calls and dines at Wm Foss's." While in Lowell, Susan also attended numerous lectures and readings at the Lowell Institute, with topics ranging from the "New Geology" to Temperance. It seems obvious from her writings that her nine months in Lowell broadened her educational experience in addition to putting cash in her pocket. Like Mary Hall and Harriet Robinson, Susan shopped frequently. In her diary, Susan wrote down her cash earnings, and described the items that she purchased and what she paid for them. At the end of her nine-month stay at Middlesex Mills, she had earned \$78.07, \$20.00 of which went for room and board.

In September, 1843, Susan Brown left the mills and returned to school teaching, moving around and living in several New Hampshire towns. In 1856, she went to Boston and worked as a clerk in a department store. In Boston, she met Alexander Forbes, whom she married in 1859, and together they ran a boardinghouse. In 1866, she and her husband moved to Springfield,

Massachusetts to open a department store. She kept her diaries until 1907, and in 1910 she died in Springfield.

Compared to the other two operatives, Mary Hall and Harriet Hanson Robinson, Brown worked in the mills for an unusually short time. The mill experience, short as it was, however, did seem to give her many more experiences and life options than would likely have been available to her had she stayed on the farm and continued to live and teach in Epsom.¹⁶⁴

Daily Life in the Boardinghouses of Lowell

When studying the living and working conditions of the operatives in the Lowell mills, three things should be kept in mind. First, working and living conditions at Lowell were not static. The pace of work, wages, hours, and even the morale of the workers changed greatly in the period from about 1837 to 1850. Second, despite the general uniformity of wages and rules that all the Lowell mills shared, there was some variation in these conditions from company to company within the Lowell complex, since management skills and the individual personalities of agents and overseers differed. Third, the late-twentieth century conceptions of wages, working hours, housing, and general physical comforts did not exist in the early nineteenth century. Labor unions and government regulations have made 14 hour days, 6 days a week, a thing of the past. Most of the young farm women of the early nineteenth century expected a long work day, a lack of privacy, and strict moral supervision.

From the mid-1820s until the mid-1840s, a large percentage of mill operatives lived in company-owned boardinghouses. At the Hamilton Company, for example, 73.7 percent of operatives lived in the Hamilton boardinghouses in 1836.¹⁶⁵ The remaining 26.3 percent lived in

¹⁶⁴ Blewett, 78.

¹⁶⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 144.

private housing, but often, in cases like Susan Brown's, the private residence was with immediate family, relatives, or friends of the family--someone who would ease the worries of parents who wanted their daughters kept safely.

To cover the cost of housing its workers, the Lowell companies deducted about \$1.25 weekly from the wages of mill operatives. Since this sum would not completely cover living costs, the company paid the matron of the house 25 cents per operative weekly. Each boardinghouse, by the terms of the contract with the matron, kept one room as an infirmary. After 1840, running water was installed in each of the boardinghouses. The cost of board included soap, laundry service, bed linen, and towels.¹⁶⁶ Overall, the boardinghouses served the Lowell companies well. They not only provided secure and supervised housing for most workers, but kept wages down. The boardinghouse system also allowed management to maintain social control over the workers, and this would help create a disciplined work force.¹⁶⁷

One impression that struck not only the residents of the boardinghouses, but visitors as well, was the crowded living conditions. Twenty-five to 30 operatives lived in close quarters, and sometimes four to six girls shared a single bedroom, with two girls to a bed. The small rooms had little space to spare. One observer in the 1840s found the bedrooms "absolutely choked with beds, trunks, band boxes, clothes, umbrellas, and people." Other than beds, the rooms had no space for furniture, and women often used the tops of bandboxes as desks for writing letters.¹⁶⁸ Although crowded, boardinghouse life did serve as an important transition for newcomers from their sheltered rural lives to urban millwork. The women worked in the mills together, ate their meals together, and socialized in the boardinghouses. The pressure to conform must have been strong.

For a newcomer, freshly arrived in the coach from a small New Hampshire town, entering the boardinghouse for the first time must have been an intimidating experience. One account in the *Lowell Offering* describes the feelings of a novice: "The first entrance into a factory boardinghouse seemed something dreadful. The room looked strange and comfortless, and the

¹⁶⁶ Josephson, 70.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

women cold and heartless; and when she sat down to the supper table, where more than twenty girls, all but one were strangers, she could not eat a mouthful.”¹⁶⁹ In a series of fictional “Letters from Susan,” submitted to the *Lowell Offering* by Harriet Farley, a new girl was moved by the kindness of the landlady, which “filled [her] heart with gratitude.” When Susan entered the dining room at supper-time, she saw that there were “three common-sized dining tables, and she [the landlady] seated me at one of them, and the girls thickened around me, until I was almost dizzy. At the table where I sat they were very still, for the presence of a stranger is usually a ‘damper’ upon them.”¹⁷⁰

The matron of the boardinghouse was usually a widow--often with children--and was responsible for assigning rooms, supervising the preparation of meals, buying groceries, and running the daily operation of the house. Accurate accounting records and careful purchasing were important practices in running an efficient boardinghouse. Lucy Larcom recalled that her mother’s lack of attention to detail as a boardinghouse matron cause the family financial difficulties that forced Lucy into the mills as a child. “It was not my mother’s nature,” wrote Lucy, “to calculate costs, and in this way there came to be a continually increasing leak in the family’s purse. The older members of the family did everything they could, but it was not enough. I heard it said one day, in a distressed tone, ‘the children will want to leave school and go into the mill.’”¹⁷¹

Company management took great care in selecting matrons. One mill agent boasted that he had over 40 applicants for one matron position, and therefore could be highly selective in his choice.¹⁷² In essence, boardinghouse matrons became surrogate parents for the operatives, and were answerable to company management for any improper conduct among their boarders. The Lawrence Company of Lowell made the duties of boardinghouse keepers clear:

The tenants will consider themselves responsible for the order, punctuality of meals, cleanliness, and general arrangements for rendering their houses comfortable, tranquil scenes for moral deportment and mutual good will. They will report, if requested, the names and occupations of their boarders,

¹⁶⁹ *Lowell Offering*, Vol. I, 1841, 169.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 1844, 145-148.

¹⁷¹ Larcom, 152-153.

¹⁷² Ware, 257.

also give timely warning to the unwary, and report all cases of intemperance, or of dissolute manners.¹⁷³

Although matrons were answerable for the conduct of their residents, the operatives themselves were, in the end, responsible for their own behavior, and strict adherence to company rules was expected. The rules of the Hamilton Company were typical of other companies at Lowell. Residents had to obey a strict curfew; all operatives had to be home and in their quarters by 10 p.m. No alcoholic beverages were allowed in the house, and if caught, operatives could be discharged “unless they reformed after due admonition.” The company also required that the young women attend church regularly. The Suffolk Company rules stated that, “the company will not employ a person who is habitually absent” from services. Repeated violations of any rule could result in dismissal from employment. By 1829, companies in Lowell required an honorable discharge to be shown before women could be hired from another mill. Those dishonorably discharged could be blacklisted, and could find no future employment in any of the affiliated textile mills in all New England.¹⁷⁴

From the beginning of the Lowell venture, the management saw church attendance as a fundamental activity to the operatives in the mills. The Boston associates gave Kirk Boott the authority to build the first church in Lowell, St. Anne’s Episcopal. Boott and Nathan Appleton were both Episcopalians, but by far the largest number of female operatives were of Puritan stock, and were used to meetinghouses rather than churches. As time passed, girls of “Congregationalist leanings,” like Harriet Robinson, formed study groups to discuss the scripture. During the next years, a wide variety of churches sprang up in Lowell, from Methodist to Roman Catholic, and the girls could attend the services of their choice. The operatives did have to pay pew rent, a common practice in the urban churches during that period.¹⁷⁵

As strict as these rules sound by today’s standards, they were largely accepted by the young women. Few complaints about the boardinghouse regulations appear in the letters and diaries of

¹⁷³ Lawrence Company, “Regulations of Boardinghouses,” as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 78-79.

¹⁷⁴ Josephson, 71.

¹⁷⁵ Brad Parker, *Kirk Boott: Master Spirit of Early Lowell* (Lowell: Landmark Printing, 1985), 48-49.

mill women during the 1830s and 1840s. In fact, the regulations merely reflected the standards of behavior expected of young New England women in the early nineteenth century. According to historian Hannah Josephson, the corporations just “bowed to the mores of the period.” Almost all New Englanders, for example, were church-goers, and followed the rules of the Sabbath. Consequently, the church attendance requirement would have seemed completely reasonable to most of the young women. “It would have been just as difficult to deny those New England operatives access to Sunday worship,” Josephson states, “as to deny their descendents access to the movies.”¹⁷⁶ In a letter from Mary Paul to her family in Vermont, she reflected one opinion of boardinghouse life and rules. She wrote, “I have a very good boarding place and enough to eat and that which is good enough . . . now I will tell you about our rules . . . we have none except we have to go to bed by ten o’clock.”¹⁷⁷ Harriet Robinson was never critical of boardinghouse rules. She stated that “life in the boardinghouses was very agreeable . . . there was a feeling of esprit de corps among the households.”¹⁷⁸

Although the boardinghouses were not fancy, they were usually comfortable, especially for the time. Flowers were planted in the yards in front of the houses, and the company painted the trim each spring. Each end of the boardinghouse had a chimney, and when entering the front door, the dining room was on the left. Tables and chairs crowded the dining area, and the room served not only as a place to eat, but as a center of evening social activity, where the young women would read, talk, sew, and write letters.¹⁷⁹ Harriet Robinson recalled, “there was a best room in the boardinghouse to entertain callers in . . . this room was furnished with a carpet, sometimes a piano . . . and with the best furniture, including oftentimes the relics of household treasures.”¹⁸⁰ Several contemporary accounts contain references to a common annoyance--the many peddlars and hucksters that visited the front room in the evening. One woman complained:

¹⁷⁶ Josephson, 71.

¹⁷⁷ Mary Paul Letter, April 12, 1846, from Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 105.

¹⁷⁸ Robinson, 55.

¹⁷⁹ Josephson, 68.

¹⁸⁰ Robinson, 55.

We now allude to the importunities of evening visitors, such as peddlars, candy and newspaper boys, shoe-dealers, book-sellers, etc. etc., breaking in upon the only hours of leisure we can call our own, and proffering their articles with tenacity which will admit of no denial. That these evening salesmen are always unwelcome, we will not assert, but they are too often inclined to remain where they know they are considered a nuisance. And then they often forget, if they ever knew, the rules of politeness which should regulate all transient visitors.¹⁸¹

The mill boardinghouse, then, provided a safe and generally comfortable home for the young female operatives. Living together gave the girls a sense of comradeship and provided a support network for newcomers as well as long-time residents. The houses also allowed the company to exert social control and discipline over their employees. Perhaps most important, the mill management saw the boardinghouses as an integral part of American industry, where rural New England values could be preserved and corrupting influences avoided.

Although the Lowell mill girls spent most of their waking hours working, they did make time for leisure. Shopping was popular, and purchasing new “city” articles of clothing served for many as a passage from country life to city life. The evenings would often find mill women “out on the street,” as the operatives called it, strolling arm in arm and peering excitedly into the windows of the many shops that lined Merrimack and Central Streets. Temptations abounded to separate the mill operative from her hard-earned cash. Although many give in to the temptation once in a while, most of them were determined to save a large portion of their wages, either placing the money in bank accounts or sending sums home to their families. According to Emmeline Larcom, sister of Lucy, most of the girls had but one dress in addition to their working clothes. Emmeline justified, at least to herself, her limited wardrobe, since it was “a great saving of trouble” to have so few clothes, because she “was not obliged to think what she would wear if she were invited out to spend an evening.”¹⁸²

Along with the lighter forms of entertainment like shopping and strolling, most Lowell girls actively sought self-improvement. There was great peer pressure to learn the “city way of speaking,” and newly arrived girls from the farms, with their country expressions, would be subject to teasing by “seasoned veterans.” Harriet Farley, in one issue of the *Offering*, tried to persuade

¹⁸¹ *Lowell Offering*, Vol. III, 1842, 69-70.

¹⁸² Josephson, 93.

the novices to drop phrases like “By the Lord Harry,” “I vow,” and “creation!”¹⁸³ Improvement, however, was not limited to superficialities. Although it is difficult to quantify, the evidence available indicates that large numbers of Lowell operatives took advantage of the many cultural and educational offerings that the city provided. Lowell had its Lyceum and Institute for the Diffusion of General Knowledge. For a small fee, the girls could attend 25 lectures per year sponsored by the Lyceum during the 1840s. Such notables as John Quincy Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, and Edward Everett spoke at the Lyceum, and large numbers in the audience were mill operatives. Professor A. P. Peabody of Harvard later remembered the scene:

I used to lecture every winter at the Lowell Lyceum. Not amusement, but instruction was then the lecturer’s aim . . . the Lowell Hall was always crowded and four-fifths of the audience were factory girls. When the lecturer entered, almost every girl had a book in her hand and was intent upon it. When he rose, the book was laid aside and paper and pencil taken instead . . . I have never seen anywhere so assiduous note-taking. No not even in college class, as in that assembly of young women laboring for their subsistence.¹⁸⁴

In the diaries of Mary Hall and Susan Brown, entries abound which refer to “going to the Lyceum.” On March 4, 1835, Mary Hall scribbled in her diary, “Been to lecture given by Dr. McMusy. Subject Zoology.” December 30 of the same year found her attending an evening lecture at the Lyceum to hear “Mr. Elliot from Boston. Subject Ancient Rome.”¹⁸⁵ In 1843, Susan Brown heard countless lectures, on Temperance, Geology, and anti-slavery, and even saw a staged reconstruction of the burning of Moscow, 1812!¹⁸⁶ Other lectures, on popular topics of the day, such as “Phrenology” and “Mesmerism” were also offered.

In addition to attending Lyceum offerings, most of the Lowell girls were avid readers. Lending libraries were very popular, and for twenty-five cents per month (a good sum in those days), the women could borrow as many books as they could read. Many girls like Lucy and Emmeline Larcom devoured classics like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and Thomas Carlyle’s *Heroes and Hero Worship*. Harriet Robinson admitted to occasional “girlish

¹⁸³ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸⁴ Benita Eisler, ed., *Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women, 1840-45* (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Company, 1977), 33.

¹⁸⁵ Mary Hall Diary, March 4, 1835; December 30, 1835.

¹⁸⁶ Susan Brown Diary, April 11, 1843.

weaknesses" in reading the more popular novels of the period, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Castle of Otranto*, and *Bravo of Venice*.¹⁸⁷ Those not content to read, tried their hands at writing their own prose and verse, some of it appearing in the operatives' magazine, *The Lowell Offering*. The mill girls were a literate group. Historian Hannah Josephson wrote in 1949 that many of them would have compared favorably to females attending college in the late 1940s. The ratio of "literary girls," those who wrote seriously for the *Offering*, Josephson stated, "was not very different from the ratio of would-be writers to the entire student body of our colleges today [1949]."¹⁸⁸

The great effort toward self-improvement among the mill women is remarkable considering that the work day was, in the 1830s and 1840s, 13 hours long. Eating meals and walking between the mills and boardinghouses added another two hours. With 8 hours set aside for sleep, this left very little time, perhaps an hour or two, for outside activities. The women must have been highly motivated to take all that their stay in Lowell could offer. Earning their own money, and acquiring education and culture seemed to give the women a new sense of assuredness. As one historian noted, "confidence replaced the country girl's shyness; she held her head up and looked you straight in the eye; she sang at her work and walked with a spring step."¹⁸⁹

Working in the Lowell Textile Mills

For all the shopping, reading, and enrichment lectures available to the Lowell women, the real reason for coming to Lowell was to work. The early-morning bells summoned the women out of their down-filled beds and into the mill buildings, usually a short walk from the boardinghouses. The work day was long, averaging 13 hours, Monday through Friday, and 8 hours on Saturday.

¹⁸⁷ Josephson, 88.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

In summer, the girls awakened at 4:30 a.m., dressed, and started work at 5:00. At 7:00, the operatives stopped work for a half-hour breakfast, then returned to work until noon, when they had a half-hour dinner. At around 5:00 p.m., supper was served, and the millhands returned to work until 7:30 p.m. The women then had several hours of free time, until the 10:00 p.m. curfew. During the winter, the work day were shorter, and the women had to work by the light of whale-oil lamps.

Through the 1830s, there were only three official holidays that closed the mills--Fast Day in the Spring, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving.¹⁹⁰ Several times a year, however, various mills had to close down for repairs or high water during the spring thaws. Illnesses struck the mill women frequently, and forced many to miss work days. In 1843, for example, Susan Brown was absent from the mills on five different days between February 16 and March 16.¹⁹¹ Mary Hall frequently complained of poor health in her diary, which caused her to miss a lot of work, too. Letters and diaries indicate that many of the operatives took time off each year, sometimes for weeks in the summer, and returned to their New England villages to stay with their families. Although company regulations required the operatives to sign on for at least one year, in practice the owners had trouble enforcing this rule. In the early 1830s, especially, when the textile industry was rapidly expanding, a labor shortage was a persistent problem, so the companies had less leverage over the comings and goings of workers than they would have liked.¹⁹²

Although women made up a large percentage of the mill labor force during the 1830s and 1840s, a number of jobs in the mills were dominated by men. Males held all supervisory positions--agents, overseers, and second hands. They also worked the heavy carding machines, staffed the repair shops, and made up the company watch force.¹⁹³ Some of their tasks, like machine repair, demanded mechanical training, while others, like the carding machine, demanded physical

¹⁹⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 59.

¹⁹¹ Susan Brown Diary, February 16-March 16, 1843.

¹⁹² Dublin, *Women at Work*, 60.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 65. Overseers and second hands supervised the work rooms, monitoring the production steps. This was especially important in a textile mill, where steps of production were highly integrated, and where disruptions at one step could force production to stop at other steps.

strength. The picking room, where the heavy bails of cotton were unloaded and opened, was also staffed by male workers, some of them unskilled Irish immigrants. In the carding room, there were 2 overseers, 3 hands who worked with the pickers, 2 grinders to sort the cards, and 5 persons to strip cotton from the cards. All of these jobs were held by men. In the same room, however, 8 females tended the drawing frames, 12 worked on the speeders, and 3 or 4 were spare hands, usually assigned to the room for the day.¹⁹⁴ Women held all machine-tending jobs after the carding process--drawing frames, double speeders, looms, winding, warping, and dressing machines. Working the drawing frames and throstles demanded the least skill and paid the lowest wages. The main task of these two job was to piece together broken yarns. When a break occurred, the machine stopped automatically. When the yarns were pieced together, the workers then restarted the machine.¹⁹⁵

In the spinning room, over 60 women were employed, along with 4 or 5 male spare hands. Three overseers watched the workers, and one of them roamed the room, watching for special problems. Spinning was lighter and easier work than drawing, and once learned, the main nemesis of the job was boredom.¹⁹⁶

For women workers, the dressing and weaving departments paid best and required the most skill. A weaver tended two machines at once, repairing broken yarn and replacing empty bobbins. Working in the dressing room was even higher-paying and carried more prestige than the weaving room. A demanding job, dressing required a worker to be alert for a number of potential problems. The level and temperature of the sizing (a glaze filler applied to the cloth) had to be just right, and the sizing had to dry before the yarn could be wound.¹⁹⁷ Lucy Larcom recalled her time in the dressing room, "It was more airy, and fewer girls were inside the room, for the dressing frame itself was a large, clumsy affair, that occupied a great deal of space ." Larcom lamented, "it was humiliating, but I had to acknowledge that there were some things I could not do, and I retired

¹⁹⁴ Miles, 79.

¹⁹⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Miles, 79-80.

¹⁹⁷ Dublin, *Women at Work.*, 67.

from the field, vanquished.”¹⁹⁸ “Susan,” writing in the *Lowell Offering*, mentioned that the dressing room paid good wages compared to other jobs like spinning and weaving, but the working conditions did not suit her. “The dressing rooms are very neat,” she wrote, “and the frames move with a gentle undulating motion which is really graceful. But these rooms are kept very warm, and are disagreeably scented with the ‘sizing’ or starch, which stiffens the ‘beams’ or unwoven webs”¹⁹⁹

Working the complicated machinery took some practice, and seemed to be an intimidating task, especially for newcomers to the mill. One girl wrote in the *Lowell Offering* of a first day at work in the weaving room:

At first, the sight of so many bands, and wheels, and springs in constant motion was very frightful. She felt afraid to touch the loom, and she was almost sure she could never learn to weave; the harness puzzled and the reel perplexed her, the shuttle flew out and made a new bump on her head; and the first time she tried to spring the lathe she broke out a quarter of the threads. It seemed as if the girls all stared at her, and the overseers watched every motion, and the day appeared as long as a month did at home.²⁰⁰

Some mill girls, like Mary Paul, seemed to take to the machinery quickly. In 1845 she wrote to her father:

I get along very well with my work. I can doff as fast as any girl in our room. I think I shall have frames before long. the usual time allowed for learning is six months but I think I shall have frames before I have been in three as I get along so fast. I think the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell.²⁰¹

Lucy Larcom, though, never really got used to all the clamor of the power looms:

I never cared much for machinery. The buzzing and hissing and whizzing of pulleys and rollers and spindles and flyers around me often grew tiresome. I could not see into their complications, or feel interested in them. But in a room below us were sometimes allowed to peer in through a sort of blind door at the great waterwheel that carried the works of the whole mill. It was so huge that we could only watch a few of the spokes at a time, and part of its dripping rim, moving with a slow, measured strength through the darkness that shut it in. It impressed me with something of the awe which comes to us when thinking of the great Power which keeps the mechanism of the universe in motion.²⁰²

Although the noise and motion of the mill machinery bothered Lucy Larcom, most accounts of the physical appearance of the mill rooms portray them as attractive places. One worker described her first view of the spinning room: “It looked very pleasant at first, the rooms were light,

¹⁹⁸ Larcom, 226.

¹⁹⁹ *Lowell Offering*, Vol. IV, June, 1844, 169-172.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 1840, 169.

²⁰¹ Mary Paul Letter, December 21, 1845, as quoted in Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 104.

²⁰² Larcom, 154-155.

spacious, and clean, the girls so pretty and neatly dressed, and the machinery was brightly polished or nicely painted. The plants in the windows, or on the overseers bench or desk, gave a pleasant aspect to things.”²⁰³ However attractive the rooms seemed, the constant din of the machines took its toll on the ears of the operatives. Again, our fictitious millworker “Susan” described her experience after the first day on the job, “When I went out at night the sound of the mill was in my ears, as of crickets, frogs, and jewsharps, all mingled together in a strange discord. After that it seemed as though cotton-wool was in my ears, but now I do not mind at all. You know that people learn to sleep with the thunder of Niagara in their ears, and a cotton mill is no worse.”²⁰⁴

In addition to noise, the mill women suffered from other afflictions as they tended the machines. A number of letters and diaries mention the stuffiness of the rooms. Air circulation was kept to a minimum by mill management. Humidity was necessary to keep the cotton strands from snapping during the spinning and weaving processes, therefore all windows were closed, and even nailed shut in some cases. By the late 1840s, steam was pumped into the rooms to increase the humidity even more. The combination of heat and humidity made mill work in the summer months most uncomfortable. In winter, the fumes of the whale-oil lamps polluted the still air. In both summer and winter, the mill women breathed air filled with lint.²⁰⁵

The combination of heat, humidity, and standing over the machines caused other discomforts for the operatives. One operative observed that

weaving makes my feet ache and swell to stand so much, but I suppose that I shall get accustomed to that too. The girls generally wear old shoes about their work . . . but almost all say that when they have worked here a year or two they have to procure shoes a size or two larger than before they came. The right hand, which is the one used in stopping and starting the loom, becomes larger than the left.²⁰⁶

Despite the physical discomforts, mill work, at least until the speed-ups of the 1840s, was not strenuous. Although alertness was required to catch the broken threads of the spinning and weaving machines, mill women were physically inactive for a good deal of the 12 or 13 hours that

²⁰³ “Letter from Susan,” *Lowell Offering*, Vol. IV, June, 1844, 169-172.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Josephson, 81.

²⁰⁶ *Lowell Offering*, Vol. IV, June, 1844, 169-172.

they spent in the mills. An operative's mind, therefore, could be occupied with her own thoughts.

The editor of the *Lowell Offering* wrote:

In factory labor, it is sometimes an advantage, but also sometimes the contrary, that the mind is thrown back upon itself--it is forced to depend on its own resources, for a large proportion of the time of the operative. Excepting by sight, the females hold little companionship with each other. This is why the young girl's rush so furiously when they are set at liberty. This is why the sedate young woman, who loves contemplation, and enjoys her thoughts better than any other society, prefers this to any other employment.²⁰⁷

All the Lowell factories had rules against bringing books into the mills. Sometimes, depending on the strictness of the overseer, women pasted pages of poems or prose on their looms, and memorized them as they tended the machines. Harriet Robinson recalled:

It was very common for the spinners and weavers to do this, as they were not allowed to read books openly in the mill; but they brought their favorite "pieces" of poetry, hymns, and extracts, and pasted them up over their looms and frames, so that they could glance at them, and commit them to memory. We little girls were fond of reading these clippings, and no doubt they were an incentive to our thoughts as well as to those of the older girls, who went to "Improvement Circles," and wrote compositions.²⁰⁸

Women tolerated the heat, physical aches and pains, monotony, and rules governing mill work because the wages that they earned as mill operatives were sufficient to support them and left some money over for savings. Compared to the wages of other occupations open to women at the time, mill work paid best. After room and board were deducted from their pay, the average female operative earned just under two dollars per week in 1836. Domestic servants, in comparison, earned only an average of 75 cents per week after board. Seamstresses in Philadelphia averaged 94 cents per week in 1835, but the amount of work available to them varied, and some went weeks between jobs. Schoolmistresses earned a slightly higher wage than textile operatives, but the work was seasonal, as the school year in the early nineteenth century was often only 18 weeks long. In 1829, for example, a Lowell school teacher averaged just above \$2.25 per week above her room and board, but found herself nearly destitute for two-thirds of the year.²⁰⁹

Shoemaking and straw-hat making provided convenient ways for women to earn extra cash, since they could be done at home in addition to household duties. Shoemakers averaged 72 cents

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁰⁸ Robinson, 28.

²⁰⁹ Ware, 241-242.

to \$2.00 per week, and hatmakers made from \$.50 to \$1.75 per week. These jobs tended to provide only supplemental wages, though, and like teaching, they were highly seasonal. Cotton mills, then, were the only place where large numbers of women workers could become financially independent outside the home.²¹⁰

The female operatives in the Lowell mills were paid piece rates, so as the women became more skilled at their jobs, they could earn more. At the Hamilton Company of Lowell in 1836, salaries for female operatives ranged from 44 cents per day for apprentice sparehands to 73 cents per day for those employed in the dressing rooms. Pay was graded, and promotions within the mill led to increased pay. Female workers in the drawing rooms averaged 52 cents per day, those in the spinning room made an average of 58 cents per day, weavers made about 66 cents per day, and the dressing room paid an average of 73 cents per day. For those who could learn quickly, promotions came fast. Of the sparehands, only 20 percent had worked in the Hamilton mill more than one year. In contrast, over 72 percent of those working in the Hamilton dressing rooms were there over one year. In the spinning and drawing room, the lowest paying jobs for non-apprentices, only one worker out of the 51 studied by Thomas Dublin, 2 percent, had been in the Hamilton Company mill for more than 6 years.²¹¹

Compared to women, the men who worked at the Hamilton Company made higher wages, stayed longer, and could be promoted into supervisory positions. Between 1836 and 1850, 17 percent of male workers had worked at Hamilton during the entire 14-year period, compared with only 2 1/2 percent of female workers. At all levels and types of jobs, men earned more money than women. Of 266 workers at the Hamilton mill in 1836, wage comparisons verify this generalization:

<i>Years Experience</i>	<i>Mean Daily Pay For Men</i>	<i>Mean Daily Pay For Women</i>
0- .99	\$.69	\$.53
1-2.99	.94	.62
3-5.99	1.39	.69
6 +	2.08	.74 ²¹²

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 243.

²¹¹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 186-187.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 185

Although men's wages were higher than women's in all job categories, the female operatives seemed to accept the situation without complaint. In no letter or diary examined were there criticisms of the wage discrepancy. Indeed, a discrepancy in pay exists even today despite efforts of women's groups to achieve equal pay for similar work. Most of the Lowell women seemed to consider mill wages high, especially when compared to wages paid by the other occupations available to women in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Harriet Robinson remembered that the "high wages" paid to female operatives were necessary to overcome prejudices against factory work for women.

The operatives did, on occasion, complain and protest when management threatened to cut wages. In 1834, the female operatives conducted the first strike, or "turn-out," against the Lowell corporation when the company called for a cut in wages as well as a reduction in the company's contribution toward the boarding expense.²¹³ A second strike, in 1836, was even larger. Both strikes will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. These walk-outs marked the beginning of labor unrest among the operatives that would resurface several times in the following decade. The New England textile industrialists, facing increased competition, as well as a depression that struck the nation in 1837, would respond at the expense of the wages, working conditions, and hours of the Lowell operatives. The result greatly altered the make-up of the work force that characterized the Lowell system from its inception in 1815.

²¹³ Robinson, 52.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHANGING FACE OF LOWELL

By the early 1830s, the Lowell management hailed their mill complex and city as a model industrial enterprise. The mills and boardinghouses were clean, well-maintained, and efficient. Perhaps more importantly, the female work force was diligent, educated, and of high moral character. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, large numbers of visitors, from both America and abroad, were paraded through Lowell to see this industrial showplace for themselves. In June of 1833, for example, President Andrew Jackson traveled to Lowell, the first such visit by an American president to that city. Although the Boston associates held the “leader of the rabble” in rather low regard, Jackson was President, and great festivities were planned. “We will give him gold dust, if he will eat it,” proclaimed Lowell magnate Amos Lawrence.²¹⁴

During the two days before the President’s visit, sheets of rain fell on Lowell, and the reception committee feared that the festivities would be washed away. But on the morning of June 27, the skies began to clear, and the warm sun poked through the clouds. Thousands descended upon Lowell from surrounding villages, music filled the air, and the cracking sound of rifle fire

²¹⁴ Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England Mill Girls and Magnates* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1949), 58.

signalled the practice rounds for the presidential salute. The President sat in an open coach alongside Vice President Martin Van Buren. Two hickory trees, planted for the occasion, formed a natural gateway at the intersections of Central and Church Streets. All along the path of the procession arches of flowers proclaimed a welcome, and signs commemorating Jackson's heroism in the 1814 Battle of New Orleans dotted the carriage route. After a short speech by a welcoming committeeman and a few words by Jackson, the President was taken to the Merrimack House, the town's best hotel, and escorted to the balcony, where he viewed the parade given in his honor.

Jackson had seen many parades, but for him the highlight of this gathering was the procession of 2,500 Lowell girls, all wearing white muslin dresses and carrying green and blue parasols. "Very pretty women, by the Eternal," Jackson said to Van Buren. Following the parade, Jackson was taken to the Merrimack Mill to watch the operatives, still in their holiday dresses, tend their machines. Afterwards, a quick visit to the print works and the canal pumps completed the President's visit.²¹⁵

Although President Jackson may have been Lowell's most important visitor, he was certainly not the only celebrity to come away impressed with the "City of Spindles." A year later, in 1834, the French Minister of the Interior sent Micheal Chevalier to inspect public works in America, and the industrial experiment at Lowell was a major stop. Of particular interest to Chevalier was the use of the young female operatives from New England farms. He found it difficult to conceive of young girls in France, separated by 50-100 miles from their families, working where their parents could not watch over them. In Lowell, however, he observed that no bad effects seemed to come of it, and that Americans were not surprised to see girls working away from home in a state of "isolation and independence."²¹⁶ As Chevalier toured the boardinghouses, he found the lists of rules, posted on the walls, most interesting. The French, he concluded, would object to the numerous rules, but in America, "they are enforced without opposition or difficulty."²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 58-61.

²¹⁶ Micheal Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, and Company, 1839). Translation from the Third Paris Edition, 136.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 142.

In 1841 Charles Dickens, the famed British novelist, paid a visit to Lowell as part of his grand tour of America. Dickens, whose novels like *Hard Times* often criticized England's "dark, satanic mills," noted the youthfulness of Lowell, which gave it an "oddity of character." As he strolled down a Lowell street, he marvelled at the "fresh buildings of bright red brick and painted wood."²¹⁸ Dickens observed that the Lowell girls were well-dressed and took pride in their neatness. Many of the girls, he wrote, were "healthy in appearance" and had the "manners and deportment of young women, not of degraded beasts of burden." Of all the young women he saw in the different factories, he could not remember one painful or sad expression on their faces.²¹⁹

Of all that Dickens observed, the literary and cultural interests of the women made the keenest impression on him. He pointed out three facts about Lowell that would surprise his readers in Europe: Most of the boardinghouses had pianos, nearly all the mill girls used circulating libraries, and the girls had a literary publication, the *Lowell Offering*. Many Europeans would think that the interests of these working-class girls were "above their station," but Dickens said he would reply with, "what is their station?" He went on to state that the *Lowell Offering* would "compare advantageously with a great many English annals."²²⁰

The moral traits of the girls impressed Reverend William Scoresby of Bradford, England, who visited Lowell in 1844. Scoresby had come to see for himself how Britain could learn from the Lowell system, and improve the conditions in its textile factories and towns. Scoresby attributed the moral superiority of the Lowell girls to their social class--as daughters of New England yeomen--as well as to the supervision the operatives received at the mills and boardinghouses. To Scoresby, the education that the girls received was greatly beneficial to them, and helped them avoid the vices of the working classes in England. He also claimed that their ample wages "secure them from peculiar temptations incident to poverty and enables this cherished feeling of independence to take the line of self-respect."²²¹ Scoresby compared the Lowell girls to the factory girls in

²¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (London: Chapman, Hall, Limited; and Henry Frowde, 1842), 98.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

²²¹ Reverend William Scoresby, *American Factories and Their Operatives* (Boston: Burt Franklin, 1845), 98.

England, noting, “when I see some of our mill girls as they come out from their work into the street, I cannot but wish that I could show them how their sisters in America conduct themselves.” He remarked that many English mill girls were “bold, rude, vulgar, and immodest . . . disgusting creatures and a disgrace to their sex.”²²²

Both Dickens and Scoresby were impressed by the physical conditions of the mills and boardinghouses. When Dickens toured the workrooms of the mills, he noticed that they seemed “well-ordered,” and that “in the windows of some there were green plants, which were trained to shade the glass; in all there was as much fresh air, cleanliness, and comfort, as the nature of the occupation would possibly admit of.”²²³ Reverend Scoresby commented that “everything was clean and orderly [in the boardinghouses], presenting a comfortable experience. The rooms were better than I often had at some of the hotels.”²²⁴ Scoresby also praised the layout of the mill complex, especially the “nice, tasteful gardens or plots of grass, with trees and shrubs, [which] adorn the enclosures of many of the factories.”²²⁵

Although most accounts by these visitors were positive, some dignitaries expressed misgivings about the Lowell experiment. Even as early as 1834, when Chevalier toured Lowell, he believed that the high wages paid to the mill girls attracted a better class of worker, but wondered if wages could remain high. He speculated that the duties protecting American manufacture would be reduced by 20 percent during the decade, which could result in a decline in wages, and therefore, a decline in quality of the Lowell workforce.²²⁶

In 1849, Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish writer, visited Lowell and noticed that, while most of the mill girls were well-dressed, some were “not too well-clad” and those displayed a certain sadness. Bremer was also bothered by the relationship between the operatives and their machines, observing that the workers often looked harried as they “watched over and guarded them [the

²²² Ibid., 17.

²²³ Dickens, 78.

²²⁴ Scoresby, 28.

²²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²²⁶ Chevalier, 143-144.

spinning machines] much as a mother would watch over her children.”²²⁷ It should be noted, however, that Bremer visited the mills when speed-ups of the machinery and stretch-outs were in place.

Alfred Pairpoint, an Englishman who toured Lowell in 1854, noticed that the female workers were pretty and seemed “tolerably happy,” but they also had a “certain pallor and anxious sadness on their countenances; the result, no doubt, of their daily confinement for so many hours in a close, hot atmosphere.”²²⁸ Pairpoint also noticed the large number of foreigners working in the mills. He testified that, “of late years, I believe, many Germans and Irish have joined the ranks in these factories.”²²⁹

Pairpoint’s observation about the large number of immigrants in the textile mills was an accurate one. The Lowell workforce changed a great deal between the early 1830s and the mid-1850s. What factors led to the change? Why did immigrants largely replace the young New England farm women in the mills?

To a large extent, the changes at Lowell were a part of a larger change in the American textile industry, and in the American economy as a whole. During the 1830s the textile industry expanded throughout New England. As the nation grew, so did demand for cotton cloth. New settlers in the West, South, and rapidly growing urban areas stimulated the demand. The Lowell firms, with advanced technology, were in a good position to grow. From 1836 to 1850, for example, the number of Mills in Lowell grew from 20 to 40, and Lowell assets nearly doubled, from \$6.1 million to \$12.0 million. The number of spindles rose from 130,000 in 1836 to over 320,000 in 1850. During this same time span, the Lowell work force increased from 6,800 to 10,100, an increase of over 48 percent.²³⁰

²²⁷ Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956). Translated by Mary Howitt, 210.

²²⁸ Alfred Pairpoint, *Uncle Sam and His Country, or Sketches of America in 1854-56* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Company, 1857), 163.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

²³⁰ Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 132-133.

Though the Lowell operation grew during the 1830s and 1840s, the expansion of textiles in New England as a whole was even more impressive. The Lowell magnates established two new mill towns--Lawrence and Holyoke. Neither operation was as profitable as the Lowell mills, but their existence demonstrated the Boston associates' optimism about the future of textiles.²³¹ The growth of the textile mills at Lowell led not only to the construction of new mills, but to the expansion of existing factories. The Hamilton Company, for example, added 3,500 spindles in 1846. As the mill complexes grew, they began to encroach on the green areas between the mills, a feature that had made the mills so attractive to workers and visitors alike. The need for work space took precedence over aesthetic concerns.²³²

Although the growth of the Lowell enterprise continued, management was not able to anticipate or control the results of the expansion. Throughout the 1830s and into the 1840s, the Lowell companies possessed technological advantages, both in the production of textile machines and in the entire waterworks system that was the heart of the enterprise. Throughout the 1830s, however, many patents owned by the Lowell management expired. The textile firms of southern New England began to compete with Lowell head-on. They efficiently produced high quality cloth and marketed it with vigor. The result of the competition was falling prices. From 1830 to 1849, for example, the market price of factory-made brown shirting fell from 7.5 cents to 4.0 cents per yard.²³³ Caroline Ware's research indicates that the price decline was not caused by foreign competition or by the use of substitute products. Prices for New England textiles, according to Ware, suffered from a "crowding of the industry from the inside."²³⁴ In response, the New England textile industry had to increase sales and cut the costs of production. Since the price of raw cotton

²³¹ Ibid., p. 133.

²³² Ibid., 133-134.

²³³ Ibid., 136.

²³⁴ Caroline Ware. *The New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), 111.

was beyond its control, textile management had to increase productivity and, at the same time, hold wages in line.²³⁵

In 1834, Lowell management took action to decrease their costs. Mill agents posted broadsides announcing a reduction in piece wages that would take effect on March 1 of that year. Faced with falling prices for cloth, the Lowell directors met and recommended a 25 percent decrease in wage rates. Later, the mill agents met and suggested a smaller decrease, about 12 percent. The agents feared that a 25 percent decrease would have dire consequences. William Austin, a Lawrence Company agent, wrote that "The tendency will be unfavorable to the procurement of good help in future & reduce the character of those who remain to a lower standard rendering doubtful in my own mind whether the permanent interest of the manufacturing establishments here will be promoted by so great a reduction."²³⁶ As a compromise, agents and owners agreed to a reduction of roughly 15 percent in piece wages.²³⁷

Agents had good reason to fear the reaction of the Lowell operatives to the wage cuts. When the first broadsides appeared, petitions began to circulate among the operatives. One agent reported to management that "A good deal of excitement exists in the mills, not excepting ours, in relation to the proposed reduction. Papers in circulation, & as I am informed, extensively signed, by which females pledge themselves to leave if the reduction is made."²³⁸ The petition read:

We the undersigned considering ourselves wronged and our privileges invaded by the unjust and unreasonable oblidgment [sic] of our wages, do hereby mutually and cheerfully engage not to enter the factory on the first of March, nor after for the purpose of work, unless the paper which causes our dissatisfaction be removed and another signed . . . purport[ing] that our wages shall be after the same rate as previous to the first of March.²³⁹

Although only 50 workers signed the above petition, support for a work stoppage grew as management seemed intractable to any sort of accommodation to the operatives' demands. Soon nearly 800 operatives joined the "turn out." The striking workers poured out onto the streets and

²³⁵ Ibid., 112.

²³⁶ Lawrence Company, Vol. MAB-1, William Austin to Henry Hall, February 12, 1834, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 90.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ John Aiken to Henry Hall, February 12, 1834, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 90.

²³⁹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 90-91.

paraded toward other mills in an attempt to gain new recruits in a display of solidarity. The *Boston Evening Transcript* reported the protest movement and the rally that took place that evening:

The number [of marchers] increased to nearly eight hundred. A procession was formed and they marched about town. . . . We are told that one of the leaders made a flaming Mary Woolstonecroft [sic] speech on the rights of women and the inequities of the "moral aristocracy," which produced a powerful effect on her auditors, and they determined "to have their own way if they died for it."²⁴⁰

The walkout indeed caused a great deal of commotion in the mills and in the city. In her diary, Mary Hall wrote on February 14, 1834, "Today some excitement amongst the girls at the factories respecting the wages and many of the girls have left their work." The next day Hall continued, "The excitement increases and many more had left."²⁴¹ Hall does not indicate that she participated in the protest. She was, however, troubled by it. Nearly two weeks later, she wrote of the walkout, "My mind and thoughts at time are troubled and confused. Yet I dare not express them."²⁴²

Although the participants in the 1834 turn-out were enthusiastic, none of their demands were met by the Lowell owners. The 800 operatives who walked out represented only one-sixth of the total work force. Moreover, even if more operatives had turned out, the huge stockpile of cloth inventories would have allowed the mill to shut down temporarily without financial loss. "It was not," according to historian Thomas Dublin, "a good time to launch the first labor struggle in Lowell's history."²⁴³ The turnout, then, was brief. By the middle of the following week the operatives had either returned to work or left the mills. One week after the turnout the mills were operating at full capacity.²⁴⁴ All mill management in the Lowell companies acted in concert, and managers in nearby mill towns followed their example. The female operatives found that, if they wanted to keep their jobs, they had to accept the reduced wages.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Mary Hall Diary, February 14, 15, 1834.

²⁴² Ibid., February 27, 1834.

²⁴³ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 97.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 92.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 98.

Though work had returned to normal, Lowell management was still in shock. The group collectively criticized the women as “unfeminine and ungrateful.” William Austin wrote, “This afternoon we have paid off several of these Amazons & presume that they will leave town on Monday.” He continued, “Not withstanding the friendly and disinterested advice which has been on all proper occasions communicated to the girls of the Lawrence Mills a spirit of evil omen . . . has prevailed, and overcome the judgement & discretion of too many, and this morning a general turn-out from most of the rooms has been the consequence.”²⁴⁶

The attitudes of “benevolent paternalism” toward the female operatives by mill management prevented the owners from understanding the effect that the wage cuts had on the women. The wage cuts not only attacked the economic independence of mill women, but undermined the dignity and social equality so important to their “Yankee heritage.”²⁴⁷ Lowell women, in fact, saw themselves as social equals of the overseers and even of the owners of the mills. As daughters of New England yeomen, they believed that they represented the backbone of the Republic. It was their forefathers who fought and won independence from English tyranny, and the women, by their writings, indicated that they were highly conscious of that fact. In a February 18, 1834 proclamation, the striking women wrote:

The oppressing hand of avarice would enslave us, and to gain their object, they gravely tell us of the pressure of the times, this we are sensible of, and deplore it. If any are in want, the Ladies will be compassionate and assist them; but we prefer to have the disposing of our charities in our own hands; and as we are free, we would remain in possession of what kind Providence has bestowed upon us, and remain daughters of freemen still.²⁴⁸

The women were also quick to equate the actions of mill management with those of King George III of England. Like their ancestors, the women believed it was their patriotic duty to stand up against oppression. Along with a petition to management, the striking women included a poem:

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

²⁴⁶ Lawrence Company, vol. MAB-1, William Austin to Henry Hall, February 14, 1834, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 92.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁴⁸ Proclamation published in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 86.

Yet I value not the feeble threats
Of Tories in disguise,
While the flag of Independence
O'er our noble nation flies.²⁴⁹

Despite all the petitions, poems, and statements of social equality, most of the Lowell women did return to work, and, in essence, accepted the wage cuts. In the hierarchy of the factory, the women, in reality, were subordinate to male management, but never really accepted the fact. As Thomas Dublin puts it, "This fundamental contradiction between the objective position of the operatives and their consciousness of their status was at the root of the 1834 turn-out and of subsequent labor protests in Lowell before 1850."²⁵⁰ The 1834 strike, though not successful in stopping wage cuts, did rally many operatives to fight for a common cause--their perceived independence. Two years later, the mill women would get another chance to fight for their independence and dignity.

In October, 1836, Lowell management decided to raise the price of room and board in the company boardinghouses. Boardinghouse keepers had sent a petition to management complaining that inflation hurt their buying power and they could not make ends meet. The mill women would, therefore, have to bear the brunt of increased living expenses without a subsequent wage increase, as piece rates would stay the same. Operatives once again joined protests and marched in Lowell. As in the protests of 1834, their rhetoric again raised the spectre of "slavery." Feeling that their very liberty was in jeopardy, the operatives' strike resolution again paralleled their cause to that of the American Revolution. "As our fathers resisted unto blood the lordly avarice of the British ministry," the document read, "so we, their daughters, never will wear the yoke which has been prepared for us."²⁵¹ Harriet Hanson Robinson vividly remembered the protests of 1836. She recalled, "It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in procession through the streets. They had neither flags or music, but sang songs, a favorite (but rather inappropriate) one being a parody on 'I won't be a nun':"

Oh! Isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I--

²⁴⁹ *The Man*, February 22, 1834, as quoted in Ware, 274.

²⁵⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 95.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

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 am fond of liberty,
That I cannot be a slave.²⁵²

Robinson further recalls the day of the strike and her role in it:

My own recollection of this first strike (or “turn-out” as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed; I had been an ardent listener to what was said against the attempt at “oppression” on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other “Would you?” or “Shall we turn out?” and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, “I don’t care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether any one else does or not;” and I marched out, and was followed by others.²⁵³

To Robinson, the 1836 strike was the beginning of the end of the period where factory labor in Lowell was a strong draw for New England farm girls. Many years later she stated, “After a time, as the wages became more and more reduced, the best portion of the girls left and went to their homes, or to the other employments that were fast opening to women, until there were very few of the old guard left”²⁵⁴

Like the 1834 strike, the 1836 turn-out showed an organized effort of protest on the part of the Lowell operatives. Women in the mills talked about the effect of board increases on their pay, and planned rallies and wrote petitions and tracts. Despite the similarities, the differences between the two strikes are significant. In 1834, sales of cloth were stagnant, and inventories high. Too many mills were producing too much cloth. Mill management could have withstood a mill shut-down for a few months. In 1836, there was an upturn in the economy. Demand was high for cloth, and mill owners faced a shortage of labor. In August, 1836, two months before the strike, one agent lamented the shortage of workers in three mills. He wished to move workers from other mills to alleviate the shortage, but feared the operatives’ response. He wrote, “It will not meet the

²⁵² Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (New York: Crowell, 1898), 51.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

notions of the girls, who have a high sense of their value in the market & must be treated with corresponding delicacy and forbearance."²⁵⁵

The 1836 strike had greater worker participation than the 1834 strike. Compared to 800 strikers in 1834, between 1,500 and 2,000 women turned out in 1836, nearly one-third of the work force. The second strike also lasted several months, compared to a few days in 1834. One mill agent complained of the worsening conditions at his mill, "We must be feeble for months to come as probably not less than 250 of our former scanty supply of help have left town."²⁵⁶ At the Hamilton Company of Lowell, nearly one-fourth of the females left the mill during October. The firm was so short of operatives that owners closed one of the company's factories and shifted its employees to the other two mills still going. Other mills besides the Hamilton mill suffered the same consequences of the turn-out. The Lawrence Company reported that 386 of the normal work force of 1,300 were absent on the second day of the strike. The next day's absentees rose to nearly 450 workers. At the nearby Tremont mills of Lowell, nearly half of the 400 operatives were out of the mills.²⁵⁷

The strikers in 1836 were also much better organized than in 1834. Striking women formed the Factory Girls Association to coordinate strikes not only in the individual mills, but in the Lowell companies as a whole. Sometimes organizers focused on a particular section of the factory--the warping room, for example. Cotton mills were vertically integrated enterprises, and a walk-out in one section affected the smooth operation of the entire factory.

It was not only mill management that was impressed by the tactics of the 1836 strike. One Lowell storekeeper and lay clergyman was intrigued by the whole shutdown. He wrote, "It was remarkable, that a few, probably less than half a dozen young women, should manage this whole

²⁵⁵ Lawrence Company, William Austin to Henry Hall, August 13, 1836, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 99-100.

²⁵⁶ John Aiken to Henry Hall, October 14, 17, 1836, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 100.

²⁵⁷ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 100.

affair with so much dexterity and correct judgement, that no power, or skill, could be successfully employed against them."²⁵⁸

The strike of 1836 achieved some successes. A few of the Lowell companies--the Boott and Merrimack Houses--rescinded the room and board increases. Even though most companies held fast and raised boarding rates, many of the striking women were buoyed by small gains, and felt that they had stood up and defended their freedom, dignity, and economic independence. Harriet Robinson recalled later, "I was more proud than I shall ever be again until my own beloved State gives to its women citizens the right of suffrage."²⁵⁹

Some mill agents, though, sought revenge for strike activities. Harriet Robinson felt the wrath of the mill management first hand. She remembered that after the strike:

The agent of the corporation where I then worked took some small revenges on the supposed ringleaders [of the strike]; on the principle of sending the weaker to the wall, my mother was turned away from her boardinghouse. . . . It is hardly necessary to say that so far the results concerning the strike did no good. The dissatisfaction of the workers subsided, or burned itself out, and though the authorities did not accede to their demands, the majority returned to work, and the corporation went on cutting down the wages.²⁶⁰

It might be useful to examine what kinds of workers took the risk and walked out of the mills. Thomas Dublin studied the records of two mill corporations of Lowell--the Appleton Company and the Hamilton Company. The Appleton Company kept a list of those who participated in the strike of 1834. The list shows the names of 125 women, nearly 30 percent of the female work force at Appleton. The occupations of the workers reflects a relatively even distribution of women in the mill. About 40 percent worked in the carding and spinning rooms, the lowest paying jobs for mill women. Nearly 60 percent of the participants worked in the higher-paying weaving and dressing rooms. Both figures represent the proportions of female operatives normally employed in these rooms. At the Hamilton Company in 1836, a similar percentage participated in the turn-out from the carding-spinning rooms and the weaving-dressing rooms.²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ "Records of Some of the Principal Events in the Life of Aaron Lummus," as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 101.

²⁵⁹ Robinson, 52.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 102.

Interestingly, the walk-outs of 1834 and 1836 were not limited to the mills in Lowell. In 1834, operatives walked out at Dover and Nashua, New Hampshire. Reacting to board increases, leaders of the Dover strike wrote, "However freely the epithet of 'factory slaves' may be bestowed upon us, we will never deserve it by a base and cringing submission to proud wealth and haughty insolence."²⁶² A few days later, the strike leaders issued a resolution sounding much like the resolutions issued in Lowell:

We view this attempt to reduce our wages as part of a general plan of the proprietors of the different manufacturing establishments to reduce the Females in their employ to that state of dependence on them in which they openly, as they do now secretly abuse and insult them by calling them their slaves.²⁶³

In 1836, when management of the Chicopee (Massachusetts) factory followed the example of the Lowell mills and raised boarding-rates, workers imitated their sisters in Lowell and walked out in large numbers.²⁶⁴ The widespread nature of the strikes, as well as the similarity in their writings and resolutions, indicates feelings of solidarity among the female textile workers of the Lowell mills and their sisters in the surrounding New England mill towns. Even though they did not succeed in stopping wage cuts and most boarding-rate increases, their group action did sow the seeds of labor organization that would again come forth in the Ten-Hour movement of the 1840s.²⁶⁵

Although the mill strikes of 1834 and 1836 were somewhat disruptive to textile operations, they brought no real progress in halting the declining wages and increased work loads of the operatives. Working conditions and pay levels faced similar setbacks during the period 1837-1842, but not due primarily to actions of mill owners. The Panic of 1837 and subsequent depression led to a wave of layoffs in nearly all industries in New England, the textile industry included. In 1837 and again in 1840, mill management cut wages and laid off hundreds of workers. This time, though, no protests emerged.²⁶⁶ Moreover, the massive unemployment suffered by American workers as a

²⁶² *The Man*, March 8, 1834, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 106.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 106.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

whole (estimated at 33 percent) damaged the American union movement. As jobs became scarce, workingmen's groups increasingly felt threatened by female wage labor. Since women worked for less, they not only could cost men their jobs, but also could reduce their wages. In 1839, the National Trades' Union declared that women should stay at home, where they belonged. Female operatives could no longer count on the spokesmen for men's labor organizations, like Seth Luther, to speak for them.²⁶⁷

Workingmen's labor organizations were weak enough in the 1830s, but women had no "formal" labor organization at all. Their rallies, petitions, and turn-outs could not end the continuing slide of wages in the Lowell companies. A number of obstacles were in the way of a strong labor union movement among the female operatives of Lowell. As a "total institution," the Lowell system not only directed the factory lives of the operatives, but exerted control over their private lives as well. To protest, or to "turn-out," according to Lowell management, was to defy the whole philosophy of the Lowell system. The operatives were to be educated, cultured, and well-mannered. Agitation was not only "insubordinate," but also "unladylike." This belief was reinforced by the *Lowell Offering*, which later became the *New England Offering*. Though called "independent" publications, both seemed to sympathize with management. They sought to elevate the factory girl to a position of dignity and intellectual accomplishment. Harriet Farley, editor of the *Offering*, wrote, "Constant abuse of those [from] whom one is voluntarily receiving the means of subsistence was something more than bad taste."²⁶⁸ Another writer in the *Offering*, Lucy Larcom, wrote in her poem, *An Idyl of Work*:

Why should we,
Batling oppression, tyrants be ourselves,
Forcing mere brief concessions to our wish?
Are not employers human as employed?
Are not our interests common? If they grind
And cheat as brethren should not, let us go

²⁶⁷ John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776-1900* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 96. Luther, although primarily concerned with the fate of working men, did make a supportive reference to the struggles of the working women in the cotton mills in the mid-1830s. He compared the luxury enjoyed by the families of Boston's textile management with the hardships of the toiling women, stating, "The nerves of the poor women and children in the cotton mill are quivering with almost dying agony, from excessive labor, to support this splendor" (from Seth Luther, *Address to the Workingmen*, as quoted in Kasson, 88).

²⁶⁸ "Editor's Table," *The New England Offering*, No. 4, July 1848, p. 95.

Back to the music of the spinning wheel,
And clothe ourselves at hand-loom of our own,
As did our grandmothers.²⁶⁹

Another obstacle to union strength among female workers was the temporary nature of mill work. By design, the female labor force was transient. After a few years of work and saving, many of the women would return home, marry, and raise a family. At the Hamilton Company of Lowell, for example, the average length of stay for female operatives was 1.75 years in 1836. Over 77 percent of female workers had worked at the mill less than three years, and only 7 percent had worked there for more than six years.²⁷⁰ With this high turnover, it seems unlikely that large numbers of women would spend time organizing for extended union activity. Only when mill work was more permanent (and when more men worked as operatives), in the 1850s and 1860s, did serious union activity emerge at the textile mills of Lowell.

The period from 1837 to 1842 was a rather quiet one in Lowell. The Panic and Depression of 1837 temporarily quelled labor protests in the mills, and the company laid off hundreds of operatives. Wages fell in both 1837 and 1840, with little outward response from the mill workers. The economic hard times across the nation set the tone for hard times in Lowell.

Beginning in 1843, and lasting through 1848, labor agitation again erupted in Lowell. The focus of the new activity was the growing demand to shorten the work day in the mills. Workers sent petitions to the Massachusetts legislature, asking it to set ten hours as the maximum work day allowed in manufacturing companies. The persistent activities during 1843 led to the formation in 1844 of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA). This organization worked closely with the New England Workingmen's Association and the New England Labor Reform League, umbrella groups that united various small labor organizations that formed all over New England in the 1840s. According to Thomas Dublin, these union groups "represented a quantum leap beyond that of the preceding decade."²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Lucy Larcom, *An Idyl of Work* (Boston: 1875), 188-189.

²⁷⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 184.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

The LFLRA was founded by fifteen mill operatives, and the Association grew to 300 by April, 1845, and to 500 in October, 1845. Within months, female labor reform organizations formed in Dover and Manchester, New Hampshire, and then in Fall River, Massachusetts. These organizations met quarterly with the New England Workingmen's Association, and participated on equal footing with the men. By the fall of 1845, the *Voice of Industry*, the publication of the NEWA, added a women's department. In the Spring of 1846, *Factory Tracts*, the female publication, was in full operation. Although historians are uncertain about the identity of the three writers of the *Tracts*, one is believed to be Amelia Sargent, a writer of the *Lowell Offering*, and another is thought to be Hulda Stone, Secretary of the LFLRA, who published frequently in the *Voice* under the initials H.J.S.²⁷²

The LFLRA put its greatest effort into the Ten Hour Movement. Unlike the strikes of 1834 and 1836, no one event led to the Ten Hour Movement. Rather, it resulted from years of declining wages and worsening working conditions. To increase the productivity of its workers, Lowell management used three methods to cut costs--the premium system, speed-ups and stretch-outs. These three techniques caused great dissatisfaction among the operatives.

The premium system caused the most resentment. To increase output, management paid bonuses, or premiums, to overseers whose workers put out the most cloth. With bonuses as high as \$100, overseers competed for the extra money, which amounted to one-sixth of their annual wage. Operatives disliked the system, and claimed that overseers favored those workers who came in early, or worked late, over those who worked steadily, but not extraordinarily. Overseers often pitted worker against worker, with the faster ones prodding the slower to speed up the pace of work. One operative expressed her discontent in an article she wrote for the *Voice of Industry*:

The premium system is a curse to us. . . . I have worked under this plan, and know too well the base treatment of overseers in many instances. Often have girls been denied of receiving their friends, and been so afraid of the "Old Man" they dare not ask to go out when sick; for they know he would have a great deal to say. "The work must not be stopped, and if you are not able to work, you better stay out all the time."²⁷³

²⁷² Helena Wright, ed., *Factory Life As It Is, By An Operative* (Lowell: Lowell Publishing Company, 1982), iii.

²⁷³ *Voice*, September 11, 1846, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 111.

It was not only in publications like the *Voice of Labor* that mill women complained of working conditions in the factories. Mary Paul wrote in a letter to her father in 1848:

It is *very* hard indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life but perhaps I shall get used to it. I shall try hard to do so for there is no other work I can do unless I spin and that I shall not undertake on any account. I presume you heard that the wages are to be reduced on the 20th of the month. It is true, and there seems to be a good deal of excitement on the subject but I can not tell what will be the consequence. The companies pretend they are losing immense sums every day and therefore are obliged to lessen the wages, but this seems perfectly absurd to me for they are constantly making repairs and it seems to me this would not be if there were really any danger of their being obliged to stop the mills.²⁷⁴

It is interesting to compare Mary Paul's remarks with those she made three years earlier, when she wrote to her father, saying that "if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell."²⁷⁵ There is a noticeable touch of cynicism in this letter. The increasing speed of work and reduced wages took their toll on Mary Paul's optimism.

Stretch-outs and speed-ups also angered operatives, though their effects took longer to become apparent. The Lowell companies used operatives to conduct experiments to measure the effect that additional machines had on the workers. One weaver described the set of experiments tried on her. At the beginning, in 1842, she watched two looms that ran at 140 beats per minute, and she made wages of \$14.52 in a month's time. During the next two years, management increased her work load. Although the speed of her looms was reduced to 100 beats, she had responsibility for two more looms. The speed was steadily increased until the loom speed hit 120 beats per minute in June, 1844. Her earnings rose to \$16.92 per month, up 16 percent. Her productivity, however, rose by 70 percent. She seemed proud of the results. "I affirm," she stated, "that I have not in any of these, or other months, overworked myself. I have kept gaining in ability and skill, and as fast as I did so I was allowed to make more and more money, by the accommodation of the speed of the looms to my capacity."²⁷⁶ The company, too, was obviously pleased. Since the operative's productivity increase exceeded her wage increase by 54 percent, the corporation got the better deal.

²⁷⁴ Mary Paul Letters, November 5, 1848, as quoted in Thomas Dublin, ed. *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 106.

²⁷⁵ Mary Paul Letters, April 12, 1845, *ibid.*, 104.

²⁷⁶ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 110.

As these individual experiments succeeded, mill management began to apply the stretch-outs to more and more workers. Dublin's study of the Hamilton Company of Lowell showed that the work load of weavers more than doubled between 1840 and 1854. In the spinning room, the average number of spindles per worker went from 129 to 294, and in the weaving room the number of weaving machines per weaver increased from 1.3 to 2.9. Wages over the same period remained the same.²⁷⁷

Not all workers were as pleased with the stretch-out system as our "successful" operative. One dissatisfied operative wrote in the *Voice of Industry*:

It is the subject of comment and general complaint among the operatives, that while they tend three or four looms, where they used to tend but two, making nearly twice the number of yards of cloth, their pay is not increased to them, while the increase to the owners is very great. Is this just?²⁷⁸

A few sporadic protests about the premium system, stretch-outs and speed-ups occurred in Lowell. A group of operatives at the Massachusetts Company refused to work the extra looms assigned to them by management. They jointly pledged, "That we will not tend a fourth loom (except to oblige each other) unless we receive the same pay per piece as on three, and we will use our influence to prevent others from pursuing a course which has always had a tendency to reduce our wages."²⁷⁹

To mill women beleaguered by the increased pace of work, movements to shorten the work day made sense. If the work load was increased, with no corresponding increase in pay, fewer hours on the job would help ease the stress. The efforts of the female operatives would, therefore, concentrate on the fight for a ten-hour day.

The struggle for a shorter work day had precedents in New England. In 1825, Boston artisans fought for a ten-hour day. Although they did not succeed, their efforts sparked workingmen in other cities to reduce the work day. By 1835, tradesmen in Philadelphia, New York, and other cities used strikes to gain a bargaining position with employers' associations, and eventually won a ten-hour day. At the federal level, President Martin Van Buren ordered a ten-hour day for all

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 110-111.

²⁷⁸ *Voice of Industry*, March 13, 1846, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 110.

²⁷⁹ *Voice of Industry*, May 15, 1846, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 110.

federal employees in 1840. Massachusetts did not follow suit. Not wishing to duplicate the failed efforts of the tradesmen in Massachusetts, which had focused on economic activities (walk-outs, strikes), the female operatives sought help from the Massachusetts legislature. Since the legislature granted charters of corporation to the mill owners, the women believed that it could also act to enforce regulations on the companies.²⁸⁰

In 1842, mill workers from several Massachusetts towns submitted a petition to the Massachusetts legislature asking for a ten-hour day, but got no response. In 1843, workers sent a petition with 1,600 names to the legislature with the same results. A petition sent in 1844 was tabled by the legislature for one year, and in 1845 the governing body held committee hearings on labor conditions in the mills. Since no labor committee existed at the time, the legislature assigned William Schouler, owner and publisher of the *Lowell Courier*, to oversee the hearings. Schouler, a supporter of the corporations, heard witnesses on both sides of the issue. Sarah Bagley, former writer of the *Lowell Offering* and leader of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Committee, gathered petitions from workers and brought the workers before the legislative committee to testify. Operatives testified to long work days, low pay, and health risks associated with mill work. Eliza Hemingway described the poor ventilation in the room where she and 150 others toiled. In the winter, Hemingway revealed, 293 oil lamps polluted the air with thick, black smoke. Judith Payne described her own illnesses caused by work in the mills. The other witnesses testified to low wages, hurried meals, and long, tiring hours.²⁸¹

Countering the mill workers' testimony, the industry's spokesmen defended the textile companies. To examine the mill conditions themselves, members of the committee toured the factories. After inspecting the Boott Mills of Lowell, they reported, "The rooms are large and well-lighted, the temperature comfortable, and in most of the window sills were numerous shrubs and plants, such as geraniums, roses, and numerous varieties of cactus. These were the pets of the factory girls, and they were to the Committee convincing evidence of the elevated moral tone and

²⁸⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 112-113.

²⁸¹ Kasson, 98-99.

refined taste of the operatives."²⁸² The committee, then, saw the vision of Lowell's ideal factory environment in a group of potted plants, despite the protests all round.

In general, the committee believed that the mills were healthy working places, and it did not recommend that the Massachusetts legislature limit the work day to ten hours. The committee declared, "Labor is intelligent enough to make its own bargains and look out for its own interests without any interference from us." While some reforms could be instituted, the committee stated that "the remedy is not with us. We look for it in the progressive improvement in art and science, in a higher appreciation of man's destiny, in a less love for money and a more ardent love for social happiness and intellectual superiority."²⁸³

The disagreement between the committee headed by Mr. Schouler and the LFLRA, in a way, reflected the differences of opinion among the Lowell women themselves. While the *Voice of Industry* took a militant stand against the manufacturers, the *Lowell Offering* took a position more sympathetic to the companies. These differences reflect a split between the two most influential women in the female labor movement--Sarah Bagley and Harriet Farley. A few years earlier both had worked on the *Offering*, but they grew increasingly apart on the tactics to be used to improve the working conditions and the position of factory women in society. Farley had no time for labor militancy, and wrote in the *Offering*, "With wages, board, &c., we have nothing to do--these depend on circumstances over which we have no control." In an editorial, she continued:

They [the magazine's authors] have done honor to their heads and hearts. They have shown that their first and absorbing thought was not for an advance in wages or a reduction of labor hours. They have implied that it was quite important to be good as to have good. They have striven for improvement of head and heart before that of situation.²⁸⁴

To Farley and other writers of the *Offering*, women could best elevate their position by hard work at the mills and cultural achievement outside the mills. Each operative should strive to become "the smartest girl in the room" (the most productive worker). For many operatives at Lowell, the agitation over work hours was undesirable. Most came to Lowell on the temporary

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ *Lowell Offering*, Vol. 2, 24, Vol. 5, 263.

basis. They would work for a few years, put money in the bank, and move on, usually to marriage. Since reducing work hours might also reduce wages even further, their earning power was threatened. It is understandable that many female operatives would feel alienated from labor militancy.²⁸⁵

The writings of Sarah Bagley and others in the *Voice of Industry* contrasted with those of Farley and the *Offering*. To Bagley, women workers were degraded, not uplifted, by the speed-ups, the stretch-outs, and the premium system. The long day left them no time for the “intellectual improvements” so heralded by Farley. In 1846 Bagley wrote in the *Voice*:

But let us enquire how much time the operative has to look after herself. She has no time in the morning, for she is called from the table to the mill. She has no time at noon,--thirty minutes only are allowed her to go to her meals--eat and return to work. How is it at night? The lamps that have been burning from 30 to 50 minutes in the morning to assist the weary operative to labor before the morning light are again relighted, and she must toil on until seven and a half, or according to Boston time, within ten minutes of eight o'clock. . .²⁸⁶

Both Farley and Bagley responded to the Massachusetts Committee Report issued March 12, 1845. Farley timidly criticized the report. While she thought that it was not the right time to introduce a ten-hour day, she did ask, “Might not an arrangement have been made which would have shown some respect to the petitioners, and a regard for the ease and comfort of the operatives?”²⁸⁷ Bagley was not nearly so restrained. In a letter to the *New England Mechanic* on April 1, 1845, she issued a list of resolutions written by the LFLRA which denounced the report. Schouler, one resolution stated, was “merely a corporation machine, or tool.” The whole committee, the resolution accused, was “guilty of the grossest dishonesty in withholding from the legislature all the most important facts in the defence made by our delegates; and we regard them as mere corporate machines”²⁸⁸ Articles appeared over the next year in the *Voice* that further castigated the committee in its search for the true conditions of labor in the mills.

²⁸⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 124-125.

²⁸⁶ Sarah Bagley, *Voice of Industry*, January 16, 1846, as quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Factory Girls* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1977), 225.

²⁸⁷ *Lowell Offering*, April, 1845, as quoted in Foner, 231.

²⁸⁸ *Voice of Industry*, January 9, 1846, as quoted in Foner, 243.

Affronted by the criticisms of Bagley and other members of the LFLRA, a number of Lowellians came to the defense of the textile companies. A Lowell physician and former mayor of the city, Dr. Elisha Bartlett, studied the health of the mill operatives of Lowell. In 1841, he published a pamphlet, *Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills*. He wrote the pamphlet in response to charges made by the *Boston Times* and the *Boston Quarterly Review* that conditions in the Lowell mills were unhealthful to the women. Bartlett disagreed, stating that "The general and comparative good health of the girls employed in the mills here, and their freedom from serious disease, have long been subjects of common remark among our most intelligent and experienced physicians. The manufacturing population of this city is the healthiest portion of the population, and there is no reason why this should not be the case." In presenting an explanation for his claim, Bartlett continued:

They [the operatives] are but little exposed to many of the strongest and most prolific causes of disease, and very many of the circumstances which surround and act upon them are of the most favorable character. They are all regular in their habits. They are early up in the morning and early to bed at night. Their fare is plain, substantial, and good, and their labor is sufficiently active, and sufficiently light to avoid the evils arising from the two extremes of indolence and over-exertion. They are little exposed to the excessive heats and colds of the seasons, and they are very generally free from anxious and depressing cares.²⁸⁹

In 1846, Reverend Henry A. Miles also defended the conditions in the Lowell mills. A friend of the Lowell management and an active promoter of the City of Lowell, Miles concluded that "A walk through our mills must convince one, by the generally healthy and robust appearance of the girls, that their condition is not inferior, in this respect, to other working classes of their sex. Certainly, if multitudes of them went home to sicken and die, equal multitudes of their sisters and neighbors would not be very eager to take the fatal stations which were deserted."²⁹⁰

But the laudable conditions that had once characterized the mills, and which were still being praised by Bartlett, Miles and others, were deteriorating. The rapid expansion of the mills in the 1830s and 1840s led to a corresponding growth of the city of Lowell itself. The population soared from 17,000 in 1836 to over 33,000 in 1850. But the population growth was not accompanied by

²⁸⁹ Elisha Bartlett, M.D., *Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills* (Lowell: Leonard Huntress, Printer, 1841), 13.

²⁹⁰ Reverend Henry A. Miles, *Lowell As It Was, and As It is* (Lowell: Nathaniel L. Dayton, Merrill & Heywood, 1846), 127.

construction of new company housing. In earlier years, mill management had to maintain high standards to attract the daughters of New England farmers to factory labor. In the early to mid-1840s, however, the companies, in a profit squeeze, were reluctant to invest in the construction of quality housing. Only the Merrimack Corporation built new housing during this decade, two-story rowhouses called the "New Block," finished in 1848. Many residents crowded into the old, poorly maintained company boardinghouses. More and more mill hands lived in private boardinghouses and tenements, built on land auctioned off by the mill companies. In 1836, for example, over 70 percent of female operatives at the Hamilton company lived in company housing. By 1855, the number had dropped to 55 percent, and declined even more thereafter.²⁹¹

Even the expansion of private housing could not keep up with the demand for living space. Private builders constructed shoddy tenements, inferior to the company boardinghouses of the 1830s. The dense population of Lowell and the growth of crowded tenement slums drew comment from observers. One described a small 3.5-acre section of the city in 1849:

At this date . . . in a central district . . . we find the city hall . . . the post office, city library, two churches, three banks, one grammar and three primary schools . . . ninety stores . . . two smithies, several machine shops, a foundry, coal and wood yard, three livery stables, and two hundred and fifty four tenements, inhabited by one thousand and forty-five individuals.²⁹²

Another observer, writing in the *Lowell Courier*, pointed out in 1847 that a house near the center of town was "occupied by one store, and twenty-five different families embracing 120 persons, more than half of whom were adults. In one of the rooms . . . I found one of the families to consist of a man, his wife, and eight children . . . and four adult boarders . . . by no means the worst case."²⁹³

It was not only the city of Lowell that changed dramatically during the 1840s and 1850s. The composition of the work force changed as well. The mills increasingly employed Irish and German immigrants--men, women and children--instead of native-born females. Mill statistics bear this fact out. At the Hamilton Company of Lowell, for example, only 8 percent of the workers were immigrants in 1845; but by 1850, the number had increased to 33 percent, and in 1860, to 60

²⁹¹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 134-135, 143.

²⁹² Josiah Curtis, "Brief Remarks on Hygiene of Massachusetts," as quoted in Coolidge, *Mill and Mansion: A Study of Architecture and Society in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), note 53.

²⁹³ Quoted in Josephson, 217.

percent. At the same time, the number of native-born female operatives declined from 737 in 1836 to 539 in 1850, and fell further to 324 in 1860. Since the same number of women worked at the company in 1860 as in 1836, immigrant women made up an increasing percentage of the total.²⁹⁴ As fewer and fewer Yankee women applied for mill jobs, textile companies began to recruit females aggressively from the nearby countryside. One agent of the Merrimack Company, John Clark, sought to find “any smart, active, and healthy girls . . . who would like to come to Lowell.”²⁹⁵

Historians have sought to explain the decline in the numbers of New England women coming to the Lowell mills in the 1840s-1850s. Thomas Dublin believes that three factors contributed to the decline. First, there was a decline in the number of single young women in the rural communities of northern Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire during this period. In Boscawen, Canterbury, and Sutton, New Hampshire, for example, the population of young women between the ages of 15 and 29 fell by 7.5 percent between 1830 and 1840. Many may have moved west or migrated to Boston and other New England cities. A second, and perhaps more significant, factor was the growing opportunities for young women in other occupations. Teaching positions in Massachusetts increased from 3,000 in 1834 to over 5,500 in 1850, with an impressive rise in teacher’s salaries, especially when compared to the salaries of mill workers. Thirdly, the wage cuts, the speed-ups, the stretch-outs, and the premium system made textile work less attractive to young American women.²⁹⁶

As Thomas Dublin points out, it is difficult to sort out the causes and effects in the change of the Lowell mill labor force after 1845. Did the New England farm women leave because the Irish were arriving in force, or did the Irish enter the mills because Yankee women no longer wanted the jobs? Moreover, did American women leave because of declining conditions of work, or did the Lowell management take advantage of the cheap labor pool created by the masses of Irish immigrants who came to Lowell after 1845? Because the processes at work were so interrelated, the answers are difficult to determine, and are still debated today. The statistics, however, are clear.

²⁹⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 138-139.

²⁹⁵ John Clark to Jesse Huse, July 27, 1847, as quoted in Dublin, *Women at Work*, 139.

²⁹⁶ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 139-140.

After 1845, and up to the start of the Civil War, the number of immigrants working in the Lowell mills rose dramatically and the number of native-born women declined.

Another major change in the labor force at the Lowell companies in the 1840s and 1850s was the increased use of children in the mills. At the Hamilton Company, the percentage of children under 15 working at the mill went from 2.3 percent in 1836 to 6.5 percent by 1860. During the same time period, the number of “children’s” jobs at the mill--lap boys, doffers, and “back and front” jobs on the mule spinners--doubled.²⁹⁷

Men, mainly Irish immigrants, also made up a growing percentage of the total work force. At the Hamilton Company in 1836, for example, men made up only 14 percent of the labor force. This figure rose to 24 percent by 1850, and to 30 percent by 1860. This trend is evident at the other textile companies of Lowell as well. The male workers also moved into the jobs formerly dominated by females. No men worked in the weaving rooms in 1836. By 1850, men made up 4 percent of all weavers at Hamilton. This number increased to 9 percent in 1860.

Irish men had always been employed by the Lowell mills, but their jobs were outside the mills; they dug the canals and built the factories. Some hauled cotton “in the yard,” or worked in the crews that maintained the canal system or fixed machinery. Others worked in the bleacheries, or at the dyeworks. These were generally unpleasant, low-paying and sometimes dangerous jobs. More than 400 Irish laborers toiled to build canals in the winter of 1847, in spite of the normal Lowell practice of limiting construction projects to summer months. But Irish immigrants were desperate, especially those who arrived after the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s.²⁹⁸ No doubt many Irish men would have preferred the steady, indoor work in the textile factories. Mill management, however, sought to protect the “virtue” of the female operatives, and felt that immigrant men (or all male workers, for that matter) should be segregated. By the 1850s, however, economic conditions had changed, and mill management no longer exerted paternalistic control over its female work force. Fewer and fewer females lived in company housing, and the

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 140-141.

²⁹⁸ Brian Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell 1821-1861* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1988), 83.

church-attendance requirement had long since been abandoned. If immigrant men could do the jobs of weaving and spinning as well as the women could, management might as well employ them. After all, the Irish labor supply, both men and women, was plentiful. Mill owners felt that these immigrants would be grateful to have indoor jobs.²⁹⁹

To the Boston associates, the Irish would be logical choices to fill the textile mills. Many Irish lived in Lowell, and a few had already worked in the mills. Moreover, many Irish were products of Lowell's acclaimed public school system; they had enough education to learn the textile trade. The Boston associates also had a good relationship with the leaders of Lowell's Irish community--Hugh Cummiskey, Bishop Benedict Fenwick, and Father Peter McDermott. All three were "accommodationists" to the Yankee hierarchy, and saw opportunities for their Irish constituents as a triumph of their approach. The most distinctive feature of Irish mill employment, to the leaders of the Irish community, was the hiring of Irish women in the textile factories.³⁰⁰

Harriet Hanson Robinson, whose long tenure in the mills allowed her to witness the period of labor transformation, gives a good account of her impression of these new operatives:

Before 1840, the foreign element in the factory population was almost an unknown quantity. . . . The Irish came as "hewers of wood and drawers of water." The first Irishwomen to work in the mills were usually scrubbers and waste-pickers. They were always good-natured, and when excited, used their own language; the little mill-children learned many of the words (which all seemed to be joined together like compound words), and these mites would often answer back, in true Hibernian fashion. These women, as a rule, wore peasant cloaks, red or blue, made with hoods and several capes, in summer (as they told the children) to "kape cool," and in winter to "kape warrum." They were not intemperate, nor "bitterly poor." They earned good wages, and they and their children, especially their children, very soon adapted themselves to their changed conditions of life, and became as "good as anybody."³⁰¹

Robinson goes on to describe the Irish settlement in Lowell, known as "the Acre":

Here, clustered around a small stone Catholic church, were hundreds of little shanties, in which they [the Irish] dwelled with their wives and numerous children. Among them were sometimes found disorder and riot, for they had brought with them from the "ould counthrey" their feuds and quarrels, and the "Bloody Fardowners" and "Corkonians" were torn by intestinal strife.³⁰²

Like the Yankee women of previous decades, Irish women procured jobs at the mills through networks of kin and friends. With a high turnover rate, and the growing departure of native women,

²⁹⁹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 142-143.

³⁰⁰ Mitchell, 89.

³⁰¹ Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 8.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 9.

getting a mill job was fairly easy. According to Harriet Robinson, "First, whenever any vacancies occur or more help is, for any reason, required, every foreign operative has a cousin or friend standing nearby, whom she wishes to introduce. No people are more clannish, none will work harder for their particular friends than the Irish."³⁰³

Irish workers flocked to Lowell from Ireland, providing a seemingly inexhaustible source of labor for the mills. In 1860, for example, Irish millhands made up 47 percent of the total work force of the Hamilton Company.³⁰⁴ Although hiring foreign born labor seemed pragmatic to mill management, some long-standing Lowellians were determined to preserve the "Lowell System of labor." The ever-optimistic Reverend Miles wrote in 1846:

The great experiment of Lowell is an experiment of another kind: it is the experiment whether we can preserve here a pure and virtuous population; whether there are no causes secretly at work, and to be developed in the course of thirty or forty years, to lower our standards and to sink our character; whether we can run a career of half a century free from the corrupting and debasing influences which have almost universally marked manufacturing cities abroad. And a great experiment it is. We are deciding the question, not for ourselves alone, but for numerous other places around us--indeed, for New England itself.³⁰⁵

The earliest Irish female operatives entered the mills in the lowest-paying jobs--sparehands, drawers, carders, and spinners. As time passed, though, female Irish immigrants advanced to better-paying and more prestigious jobs within the mills. At the Hamilton Company, for example, 23.7 percent of female weavers in 1850 were foreign-born. Just ten years later, it was 60.0 percent. Likewise, in the dressing room, the highest-paid, foreign born women increased from 15.7 percent in 1850 to 27.4 percent in 1860. Were these advances at the expense of Yankee operatives? According to Thomas Dublin, they were not. Immigrants moved into higher paying jobs because there were no longer enough Yankee women to fill them. Over the decade of the 1850s, the absolute number of native-born women declined from 539 to 324, and foreign-born women entered to fill the void. Economic necessity caused by demographic changes transformed the work force.³⁰⁶

³⁰³ Ibid., 12.

³⁰⁴ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 147.

³⁰⁵ Miles, 215.

³⁰⁶ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 163-164.

The move toward immigrant labor also changed labor-management relations. The Yankee women who turned out or protested wage cuts and speed-ups in the 1830s and 1840s felt confident in taking on the mill management because they knew that they could, as a last resort, return to their New England farms--and many did. The situation of the Irish operatives was different. Since many had fled famine-plagued Ireland, they had no desire to return home. Many immigrant families were dependent on the mill wages to survive. Turn-outs would have created grave hardships for these struggling families. The new mill operatives were much less "independent minded." The Irish hungered for the opportunity to earn mill wages, and the chances for upward mobility within the mills dampened the likelihood of active protest.³⁰⁷

As New England women left the textile mills in the late 1840s, the tools that they used in their protests disappeared with them. In January, 1847, the name of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association became the Lowell Female Industrial Reform and Mutual Aid Society. This society drifted from the militant activities of the LFLRA. The organization sought to appeal to the "higher natures" of mill women, and to work through "enlightenment and education." A year later, in 1848, the Lowell Society disappeared altogether, along with the New England Labor Reform League, formerly the New England Workingmen's Association. With their demise, the publication of the *Voice of Industry* stopped. Since they had no formal organizations to represent their interests, Yankee women left the mills in greater and greater numbers. Some returned home. Others, like Lucy Larcom, moved to the West to teach school. As publications that challenged the moderate *Lowell Offering* disappeared, Harriet Farley attempted to recapture their lost audience. The *Offering* was reborn in April 1848 as the *New England Offering*. Farley received a stipend from mill magnate Amos Lawrence, and the new publication contained many articles similar to those in the early editions of the *Lowell Offering*, extolling the "beauties of factory life." Farley allowed her writers to launch bitter attacks on slavery in the South, but they could not address the "slavery of the mills" in New England. The *New England Offering* had a brief tenure. Its last issue appeared in 1850.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 200.

³⁰⁸ Foner, 325-326.

Of those Yankee women still in the mills, some envied those who left. A friend of Harriet Hanson, forced to go back into the mills for economic reasons, wrote to Hanson in late 1846, "With a feeling which you can better imagine than I can describe do I announce to you the horrible tidings that I am once more a *factory girl* . . . in vain do I try and soar in fancy and imagination above the dull reality around me but beyond the roof of the factory I can not rise. . . ." ³⁰⁹ A song, written in the early 1850s, reflects the spirit of many native-born operatives:

The Factory Girl's Come-All-Ye

Come all ye Lewiston fact'ry girls,
I want you to understand.
I'm a going to leave this factory,
And return to my native land.
Sing dum de wickety, dum de way.

No more will I take my Shaker and shawl
And hurry to the mill;
No more will I work so pesky hard
To earn a dollar bill.

No more will I take the towel and soap
To go to the sink and wash;
No more will the overseer say
"You're making a terrible splosh!"

No more will I take my comb and go
To the glass to comb my hair;
No more the overseer will say
"Oh! what are you doing there!" ³¹⁰

As masses of immigrant women (and men) moved into the mills, the ideal industrial setting, envisioned by Francis Cabot Lowell in 1814, came to an end. No longer were the mill complexes the "total institutions" that existed in the 1820s and 1830s. Economic forces were too powerful, and the Lowell enterprises, tested by growing competition, abandoned their mission of controlling the female operatives outside the work day. Fewer and fewer mill women lived in company-owned boardinghouses. Many shared crowded, slum tenements that builders hastily constructed throughout the city of Lowell. Unlike the earlier years, men and children, mainly Irish, filled the carding, weaving, and dressing rooms of the factories.

³⁰⁹ Letter to Harriet Hanson Robinson from her friend, H. E. Back, September, 1846. From the Harriet Hanson Robinson Papers, Radcliffe Library, as quoted in Foner, 353-355.

³¹⁰ Phillips Barry, "The Factory Girl's Come-All-Ye," *Bulletin of the Folk-Song Society of the Northeast*, No. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931), 12, as quoted in Foner, 338-339.

CONCLUSIONS

The Lowell mills provided the first opportunity for great numbers of American women to work for wages outside the home. For over 25 years, New England farm women flocked to Lowell. They lived in supervised boardinghouses and worked in the carding, spinning, weaving, and dressing rooms of the textile factories along the Merrimack River. Did this experience lead to permanent changes in the role of women in the work force? Did they form a collective sense of their rights as American laborers?

The young women who worked in the mills did not intend to become “career working women” as we understand the term today. They intended factory work to be a brief experience before marriage, after which they would assume the more important roles of wives and mothers. Since the women perceived mill work as temporary, efforts to organize them into permanent labor unions failed. The turn-outs, rallies, and parades that marked the strikes of 1834 and 1836, failed to stop the deteriorating conditions and falling wages. With the failure of the Ten Hour Movement in the 1840s, fewer native-born females came to work in Lowell.

While the Lowell experiment did not create a permanent female labor force, the women achieved, for a time, a measure of economic independence. They opened bank accounts at the Lowell Savings Institute, and they spent their *own* money on clothes and other goods at the shops on Merrimack Street. Moreover, they sent some money home to their families, or contributed to a brother’s education. When their economic independence was threatened by wage cuts, they rose as “daughters of freemen” and “defended their liberty.”

In a way, the Lowell philosophy, to provide its operatives with educational and cultural nourishment, undermined its control over the women. Operatives who attended the numerous lectures on literature, history, and science, were broadened by the experience. As they listened to William Lloyd Garrison and others speak against the evils of slavery, they must have wondered if they were “enslaved” as well, especially in the 1840s and 1850s. The writings in the *Voice of Industry* and *Factory Tracts* often refer to “Lowell Slavery,” and speak of the mill management as

“oppressors.”³¹¹ Moreover, many Lowell women heard lectures on temperance and suffrage, and some wrote of these topics in the *Lowell Offering*.³¹² A number of writers of the *Offering*, like Sarah Bagley, went on to contribute to labor publications such as the *Voice of Industry*, and became active leaders in the female labor movement of the late 1840s.

Although most Lowell operatives left the mills to marry and raise families, a number of them entered other professions. They taught school, became writers, entered missionary work, or joined the abolitionist and temperance movements. Harriet Farley, former editor of the *Offering*, married an inventor in 1854, moved to New York, and lectured until she died in 1907. Margaret Foley, another writer for the *Offering*, left the mills and taught art classes in Lowell. She became an accomplished sculptor and cameo cutter in Boston, and among her “customers” were Charles Sumner and Julie Ward Howe. Sarah Shedd, who worked in the mills to help fund her brother’s education, returned to Washington, New Hampshire, to teach school. She donated her life savings to found the Shedd Free Library in her home town. One of Shedd’s pupils, Carroll Wright, became the first U. S. Commissioner of Labor, and noted that Shedd had a great influence on his life.³¹³

Harriet Hanson Robinson married a journalist, and in 1898, published the best known reminiscence of life in the Lowell mills--*Loom and Spindle*. She was the “alumnae secretary” of the former writing staff of the *Offering*, and later became an officer in the National Women’s Suffrage Association. Robinson’s daughter, Harriete Shattuck, was the second woman admitted to the New England Bar. Sarah Bagley, the radical nemesis of Harriet Farley, became a correspondent, and wrote of conditions in the prisons and insane asylums of New England.³¹⁴

Though the writers of the *Offering* represent a small sample of the tens of thousands of Yankee women who toiled in the Lowell mills from the 1820s until the 1850s, most were changed by their temporary experience as mill operatives. Historian Benita Eisler speculates, “It is worth

³¹¹ Benita Eisler, ed., *The Lowell Offering: Writings of New England Farm Women, 1840-45* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1977), 211-212.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 215.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 212.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

pondering the influence and example provided over a period of twenty-five years by the 20,000 estimated 'graduates' of the mills; women who had left home as frightened farm girls and who became wage-earners, 'dependent on no one.'"³¹⁵

EPILOGUE

More and more immigrants entered the mills from the 1850s to the end of the nineteenth century. Wages continued to decline, and the work force, predominantly male, organized in the late 1850s. By 1859, Irish laborers themselves forged a strike against Lowell management. Conditions in the mills continued to deteriorate, and workers and their families huddled in the ethnic ghettos, where high infant mortality, disease, and poverty were the norm. Lowell, along with other New England mill towns, resembled Manchester, Leeds, and Bradford, England.

The Great Depression dealt a nearly-fatal blow to the textile industry of Lowell. One by one, the mills failed. Textile companies moved South, into the Carolinas and Georgia. The last textile mill closed in Lowell in the mid-1960s. Today, no textiles are manufactured in the city of Lowell.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 215.

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VITA

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John B. Murphy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'y' at the end.