

History Research Paper, *Chicago* (CMS) Style (Benjamin)

Wage Slavery or True Independence?
Women Workers in the Lowell, Massachusetts,
Textile Mills, 1820-1850

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American History 200, Section 4
Professor Jones
May 22, XXXX

Title page consists of a descriptive title and the writer's name in the center of the page and the course number, instructor, and date at the bottom of the page.

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Page header contains the writer's name followed by the page number. Since the title page is counted in the numbering, the first text page is numbered 2.

Introduction frames a debatable issue.

Research questions focus the essay.

Statement of thesis.

Section provides background about the historical period.

In 1813, New England merchant Francis Lowell introduced a new type of textile mill to Massachusetts that would have a permanent impact on family and village life. Over the next three decades, the transformation of home production to factory production of textiles would require a substantial labor force and would lead to the unprecedented hiring of thousands of women. The entrance of young women into the workforce sparked a passionate debate about whether factory work exploited young women and adversely affected society. The young women who worked in the mills received low pay for hard work and had little free time.¹ Were these women victims of the factory system? What was the long-term impact of their experiences? An analysis of the evidence reveals that rather than being exploited, these women workers shaped their experience for their own purposes and actively expanded the opportunities for women.

In the late eighteenth century, great changes in the production of textiles were taking place in England, with a transition from home production to factories using machines and employing children to do most of the work. Conditions in the factories were very bad, and stories of dark and dangerous mills reinforced Americans' prejudices against industrialization.² Meanwhile, New Englanders still spun yarn at home and some also wove their own cloth, mostly for their own families. Much of this work was done by women. A spinning wheel was a possession of almost every household.³ But in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, a slow shift took place in New England from home to factory production.

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Some American merchants, like Samuel Slater and Francis Cabot Lowell, began to envision an American textile industry. The first mills they built in the United States were in rural villages and employed whole families, not just children. Since the textile mills hired whole families who already lived in the villages, family and village life was not greatly altered.⁴

A dramatic change in textile production, however, came from a new machine, the power loom, and a new mechanized mill, built first in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1813 by Francis Lowell and a small group of wealthy Boston merchants.⁵ Waltham was not a village with a textile mill in it; it became a “mill town” in which the factory dominated the economic life of a rapidly growing city. Most significantly, the workers in Lowell’s mill were not local families but individuals who came from great distances to live and work in the new mill town. When Lowell died in 1817, his business partners spread the new factory system to other places, notably a town on the Merrimack and Concord Rivers twenty-seven miles from Boston; in honor of their friend, they named the town Lowell. It soon became the biggest mill town in the nation, with more than a dozen large integrated mills using mechanical looms.⁶

The growth of Lowell between 1821 and 1840 was unprecedented.⁷ A rapidly developing textile industry like the one at Lowell needed more and more people to work the machines in the factories. The mill owners, aware of the negative view of English mill towns, decided to create a community where workers would live in solid, clean housing rather than slums. For their

Historians write in the past tense when describing past events.

Note numbers in text refer to endnotes at the end of the paper.

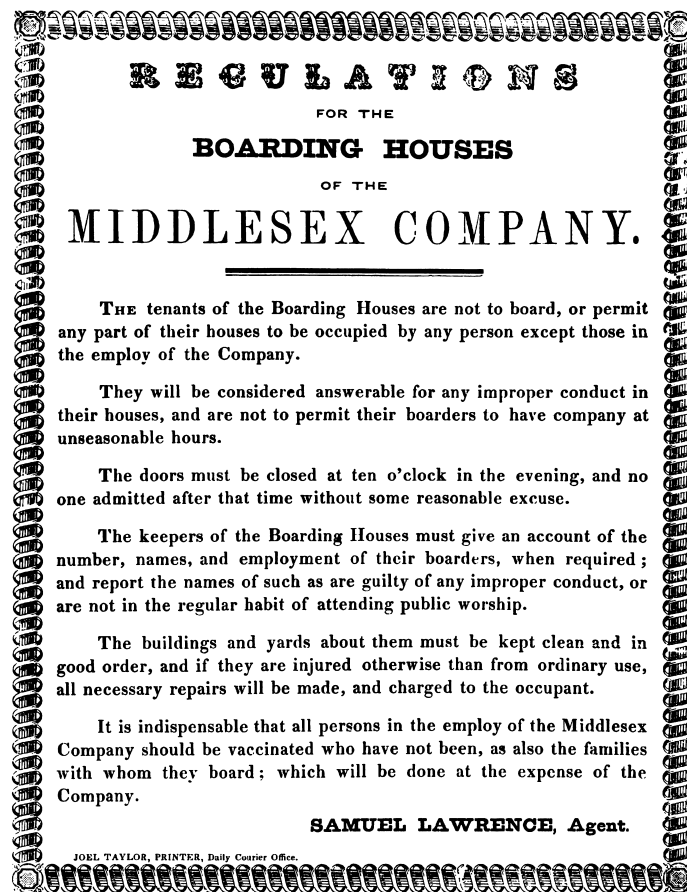
workers, they looked to a large group of people whose labor was not absolutely necessary to the New England farm economy—hundreds (later thousands) of young women who lived on the farms but who could be persuaded to come to Lowell and work in the mills.⁸

Topic sentence signals a transition to a specific discussion of the women workers.

Several factors in the social and economic history of New England made this group of workers available. Population growth and scarcity of land to pass down to younger generations of sons caused many New England farmers to send their sons to work on neighboring farms or as apprentices to craftsmen in towns or villages.⁹ In addition, the position of women (wives and, especially, daughters) in the family was an inferior one. Adult, property-holding males were citizens with full civil rights, but the same was not true for women *of any age*. Wives had no legal rights, and daughters had no independence. Daughters were bound by social conventions to obey their fathers and rarely were able to earn money of their own. Even travel away from home was unusual. Although the family could not have functioned without the labor of wives and daughters at field work, food preparation, cleaning, washing, and so on, women gained no independent income or freedom as a result. For some young women, their subordinate position in family and society gave them an incentive to embrace the opportunities offered by mill work. Unlike the limited occupation of teaching, which was poorly paid and lasted for only a few months a year, the new mill work was steady, and it paid well.¹⁰

Hiring young women, of course, met strong resistance from fathers who saw their role as protecting their daughters and

preparing them for marriage.¹¹ To confront this resistance, the mill owners created boardinghouses around the mills where groups of girls—ranging in age from fifteen to mid-twenties—lived and took their meals under the care of a housekeeper, usually an older woman. Strict boardinghouse rules were laid down by each company (see fig. 1). Moreover, the girls would never grow into a permanent



A primary source (a document) provides concrete evidence and adds historical interest.

Fig. 1. Each mill company established strict rules for the boardinghouses where its women workers lived. (American Textile History Museum, Lowell, Massachusetts.)

working class, as it was expected that they would return to their homes for visits and after a year or two would go back to their villages permanently.¹² The mill owners did not advertise for help. They sent recruiters into the countryside to assure parents that their daughters would live under strict supervision in the boardinghouses and at work and that their behavior would be monitored. The owners' efforts were successful: over the years, thousands of young women took the long trip by stagecoach or wagon from their rural homes to mill towns like Lowell.¹³

Benjamin introduces evidence that appears to contradict her thesis (counterargument).

Besides having to adjust to living in a city in a strange house with a dozen or more other girls, the young women had to get used to the rigorous rules and long hours at the mills.¹⁴ Mill work was an opportunity, but it also was hard work. The girls worked an average of twelve hours a day. The mills operated six days a week, so the only day off was Sunday, part of which was usually spent at church. Thus free time was confined to two or three hours in the evening and to Sunday afternoon.¹⁵ For many, however, this was still more leisure (and more freedom) than they would have had at home.

Despite a workday that took up fourteen hours, including time spent traveling to and from their houses for meals, most of the young women did not find the work very strenuous or particularly dangerous. As the mill owners had promised, Lowell did not resemble the grimy, packed mill towns of England.¹⁶ Still, the work was tedious and confining, with the girls doing the same operation over and over again under the watchful eye of the overseer.¹⁷

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The young women earned an average of three to four dollars a week, from which their board of \$1.25 a week was deducted. At that time, no other jobs open to women paid as well.¹⁸ Three or four dollars a week was enough to pay board, send badly needed money home, and still have enough left over for new clothes once in a while. Many women mill workers even established savings accounts, and some eventually left Lowell with several hundred dollars, something they never could have done at home.¹⁹

Even though their free time was very limited, the young women engaged in a variety of activities. In the evenings, they wrote letters home, entertained visitors (though there was little privacy), repaired their clothing, and talked about friends and relatives and also about conditions in the mills. They could go out to the shops, especially clothing shops. The mill girls at Lowell prided themselves on a wardrobe that, at least on Sunday, was not inferior to that of the wives of prosperous citizens.²⁰ In addition, they attended evening courses that enabled them to extend their education beyond their few years of schooling. They also attended lectures and read novels and essays. So strong was the girls' interest in reading that many mills put up signs warning "No reading in the mills."²¹ Some young women even began writing. Determined to challenge the idea that mill girls were mindless drones of the factory and lacked the refinement to ultimately be good wives, about seventy-five mill girls and women contributed in the 1840s to publications featuring stories and essays by the workers themselves.²²

The best known of these publications was the *Lowell Offering*. The *Offering* avoided sensitive issues about working

Benjamin develops a response to the counterargument, with strong evidence for her thesis.

Details about the beneficial effects on the young mill workers come from primary and secondary sources.

Benjamin paraphrases information from a secondary source, a late-nineteenth-century book.

conditions, but the women controlled the content of the publication and wrote on subjects (family, courtship, fashion, morality, nature) that interested them.²³ A few of the *Offering* writers even went on to literary careers, not the kind of future that most people expected of factory workers. Charles Dickens toured the mills in 1842 and later said of the girls' writing: "Of the merits of the *Lowell Offering*, as a literary production, I will only observe . . . that it will compare advantageously with a great many English annuals."²⁴

Direct quotation
provides evidence
from the period.

Though the *Offering* was a sign that something unusual was happening in this factory town, the women still worked in an industry that caused them hardship. By the 1830s, tensions in the mills had begun to rise as the companies became more interested in profits and less concerned about their role as protectors of their young workers. Factory owners, observing a decline in the price of their cloth and an increase in unsold inventories, decided to lower their workers' wages.²⁵ When the reduction was announced in February 1834, the women workers circulated petitions among themselves pledging to stop work (or "turn out") if wages were lowered.²⁶ When the leader of the petition drive at one mill was fired, many of the women left work and marched to the other mills to call out their workers. It is estimated that one-sixth of all women mill workers walked out as a result. The strikers wrote another petition stating that "we will not go back into the mills to work until our wages are continued . . . as they have been."²⁷

Although the "turn out" was brief and did not achieve its purpose, it demonstrated that the women workers did not accept

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the owners' view that they were minors under the owners' benevolent care. The sense of independence gained by factory work and cash wages led them to reject the idea that they were mere factory hands. Petitions referred to their "unquestionable rights" and to "the spirit of our patriotic ancestors, who preferred privation to bondage." One petition ended, "We are free, we would remain in possession of what kind providence has bestowed upon us, and remain *daughters of free men still*."²⁸ This language indicates that the women did not think of themselves as laborers complaining about low wages. They were free citizens of a republic and deserved respect as such. Many young women left the mills and went home when mill work came to seem more like "slavery" than independence (a comparison that appeared in the petitions). In 1836, another effort to lower wages led to an even larger "turn out."²⁹ The willingness of these young women to challenge the authority of the mill owners is a sign that their new lives had given them a feeling of personal strength and solidarity with one another.³⁰

Economic recession in the late 1830s and early 1840s led to the layoff of hundreds more women workers. In the 1840s and 1850s, the mill owners tried to maintain profits by increasing the workload and abandoning paternalism toward their workers. To save money, the companies stopped building boardinghouses.³¹ The look of Lowell changed as well. Mill buildings took up more of the green space that had been part of the original town plan. By 1850, Lowell did indeed look something like an English mill town.

As conditions in the mills and in the city declined, young New England women were replaced by young Irish immigrants

Benjamin analyzes the quotation to show how it supports the paragraph's main point.

Strong evidence supports the paper's thesis.

escaping the famine and the poor living conditions in Ireland. Slowly, Lowell became just another industrial city. It was dirty and overcrowded, and its mills were beginning to look run-down.³²

Concluding paragraph opens with a brief restatement of part of the thesis.

Conclusion considers the broader implications of the thesis.

By 1850, an era had passed. But from the 1820s to the 1840s, the majority of the textile workers were young women who helped make possible the industrialization of New England at the same time as they expanded their own opportunities. These early mill workers became models for later women reformers and radicals who raised the banner for equal rights for women in more and more areas of life. The independent mill girls of the 1830s and 1840s resisted pressures from their employers, gained both freedom and maturity by living and working on their own, and showed an intense desire for independence and learning.³³ Great fortunes were made from the textile mills of that era, but within those mills a generation of young women gained something even more precious: a sense of self-respect.

Notes

1. Caroline F. Ware, *The Early New England Cotton Manufacture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 4-8; Barbara M. Tucker, *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry: 1790-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 38-41.
2. Tucker, *Samuel Slater*, 33-40.
3. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 14; Adrienne D. Hood, "The Gender Division of Labor in the Production of Textiles in Eighteenth-Century Rural Pennsylvania," *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 3 (1994), "Spinning as Women's Work" section, Academic OneFile (A15324645).
4. Tucker, *Samuel Slater*, 79, 85, 99-100, 111; Barbara M. Tucker, "The Family and Industrial Discipline in Ante-Bellum New England," *Labor History* 21, no. 1 (1979): 56-60.
5. Robert F. Dalzell, *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 26-30; Tucker, *Samuel Slater*, 111-16.
6. Tucker, *Samuel Slater*, 116-17.
7. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 19-21, 133-35.
8. *Ibid.*, 26, 76; Benita Eisler, ed., *The "Lowell Offering": Writings by New England Mill Women, 1840-1845* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977), 15-16.
9. Christopher Clark, "The Household Economy: Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley,

Endnotes begin on a new page.

Sources are cited in *Chicago* (CMS) style. Complete source information is also listed in the bibliography. (Some instructors may prefer shortened notes when a bibliography is included.)

Citation of a journal article from a database. Section locator is used for unpaginated source.

Second and subsequent references to a source include the author's name, a shortened title, and the page numbers.

1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 2 (1979): 175-76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787339>; Gail Fowler Mohanty, "Handloom Outwork and Outwork Weaving in Rural Rhode Island, 1810-1821," *American Studies* 30, no. 2 (1989): 42-43, 48-49.

10. Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 16, 193; Clark, "Household Economy," 178-79; Dalzell, *Enterprising Elite*, 33.

11. On the influence of patriarchy, see Tucker, *Samuel Slater*, 25-26; Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle; Or, Life among the Early Mill Girls* (1898), reprinted in *Women of Lowell* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 194; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, pt. 1 (1966): 151, 170-71. Also see *Sins of Our Mothers* (Boston: PBS Video, 1988), videocassette.

12. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 77-79; Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 19-24.

13. Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 18-19.

14. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 80; Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 73-74.

15. See table of mill hours printed in Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 30. For a very negative view of work hours and conditions, see A Citizen of Lowell, *Corporations and Operatives: Being an Exposition of the Condition [of] Factory Operatives and a Review of the "Vindication," by Elisha Bartlett, MD (1843)*, reprinted in *Women of Lowell*, 15-19, 21.

16. Lucy Larcom, "Among Lowell Mill-Girls: A Reminiscence" (1881), reprinted in *Women of Lowell*, 599-602; Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 56-66.

Primary source (Robinson) reprinted in a secondary source.

First line of each note is indented ½". All notes are single-spaced, with double-spacing between them. (Some instructors may prefer double-spacing throughout.)

17. "Factory Rules from the Handbook to Lowell, 1848," Illinois Labor History Society, Center for Law and Computers, Chicago-Kent School of Law, accessed May 12, 2010, <http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/lowell.html>.

18. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 66, 183, 185; Ware, *Cotton Manufacture*, 239, 240-42.

19. Elisha Bartlett, *A Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills* (1841), reprinted in *Women of Lowell*, 21; Dublin, *Women at Work*, 188.

20. Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 49-50.

21. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 91-93; Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 113-32. For mill rules concerning reading, see Eisler, 31.

22. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 97-102.

23. Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 33-40; Dublin, *Women at Work*, 12-24, 129-30; Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 114-20; Bertha Monica Stearns, "Early Factory Magazines in New England: The *Lowell Offering* and Its Contemporaries," *Journal of Economic and Business History* (1930): 690-91, 698.

24. Dickens is quoted in Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 11. Also see Larcom, "Among Lowell Mill-Girls," 609; Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 41.

25. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 87-90.

26. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 84; Dublin, *Women at Work*, 89-91.

27. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 91.

28. Ibid., 93. (Emphasis added to quotation.)

29. Ibid., 98-99.

30. Ibid., 44, 82-83, 103.

31. Ibid., 108, 134; Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 204, 208-9; Eisler, "Lowell Offering," 215.

32. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 140, 156, 197; Dalzell, *Enterprising Elite*, 69.

33. Dublin, *Women at Work*, 127-29; Ware, *Cotton Manufacture*, 292.

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