

WHO WERE THE LOWELL MILL GIRLS: THEIR LEGACY, WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE
AND THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

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The “Lowell Mill Girls,” refers to the group composed primarily of daughters of New England farmers who worked in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts throughout the early 19th century. These young women played a pivotal role in shifting the social and economic environment during this era by empowering young white women from rural backgrounds to gain confidence and independence to secure their own livelihoods, free from male reliance. This research paper explores the multifaceted identities of the Lowell girls, delves into the challenging realities of factory life, and dissects how their time spent in Lowell created this newfound sense of independence that influenced the women's suffrage movement. The narratives of the Lowell girls within these factory walls affected their own lives as well as the broader women's movement. Examining the Lowell girls' journey explores complex themes of labor, gender, and empowerment during a pivotal moment in the early women's rights movement in America.

During the years of 1790 and 1830, white settlers from areas such as southern Maine, southeastern New Hampshire, the Connecticut river valleys, and southeastern Vermont ventured more north into mountains such as White Mountain and Longfellow Mountain. Though there was an initial surge in population growth in New England, the first decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a noticeable decline as many families and individuals migrated to seek employment in eastern cities such as New York City and Philadelphia or migrated for land in the west. After the population decline many of those who remained made a living working as dairy farmers due to there being a soil fertility decline.¹

Even before the Lowell Mills were opened, women engaged in a myriad of tasks essential to the economy. Although there was a gendered division of labor, women's labor encompassed a

¹ Chad Montrie, “I Think Less of the Factory than of My Native Dell’: Labor, Nature, and The Lowell 'Mill Girls,” *Environmental History* 9, No. 2 (2004): 275-295.

broad spectrum of unpaid labor. During this period women not only worked both indoors and outdoors but also worked throughout the various seasons. Their work consisted of:

Feeding poultry, milking cows, making butter and cheese, tending the garden, berry picking and other gathering, preserving and pickling, shucking corn, apple-paring, making cider and applesauce, cooking, washing, tidying the house, making soap and candles, preparing flax and cleaning fleece, spinning, knitting, weaving, and dyeing cloth, as well as bearing and caring for children.²

Despite not receiving monetary compensation, these women played an essential role in their communities, and the economy depended heavily on their labor.

In 1821, a group of Boston investors acquired 350 acres of land from local farmers that would form the foundation for Lowell, Massachusetts. Initially, this land consisted of “woodlots, fields, orchards, houses, and a couple of dirt roads.”³ This landscape underwent a transformative evolution and by 1814, an intricate system of locks and canals had been implemented that interconnected Lowell with Concord, New Hampshire, and Boston. Despite these advancements, it was not until the mid-1820s that the Boston financiers started to construct their textile mills in Lowell. These new textile mills marked Lowell’s transition from a semi-rural agricultural community to an industrial factory town that was primarily dependent on the labor of young white women.

At the time many, young women played economic roles within their communities, but between the years of 1830 and 1860 a new pronounced surge in female employment emerged. Many of these young women who worked on the farms, actively sought opportunities beyond their domestic spheres. Lowell offered a plethora of opportunities, including the pleasures of urban life. During this time there had been a notable expansion of textile manufacturing in several northern states, most notably Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine. Amongst these

² Montrie, 278.

³ Montrie, 282.

northern states, there would be a change in women's dynamics as there was a "predominantly female labor force"⁴ cultivated. The appeal of these budding opportunities prompted numerous women to venture beyond familial confines for the radical environments presented by the industrial landscape. Though many states had buzzing industrial cities, Lowell distinguished itself as the "leading textile center in the nation during this period."⁵ It fostered a transformative community, setting itself apart from other popular cities.

By the late 1830s, Lowell had employed eight thousand workers to work in twenty-eight mills, most of whom were women from major cities in New England. The population of these female workers consisted "almost exclusively of young, single, native-born women,"⁶ who were between the "ages of fifteen and thirty."⁷ These women worked at the machines which were mainly "powered by turning water wheels in the factory basements."⁸ They were responsible for producing products like "sheetings, calicoes, broadcloths, carpets, and rugs."⁹ Since most of their experiences at Lowell were extremely similar or "inextricably intertwined,"¹⁰ it allowed them to form a close-knit community amongst themselves. These women usually worked 72 hours a week in the mills and even lived together in the boarding houses owned by the company. These women were truly able to learn from each other in relation to work and their everyday lives.

Despite finding comfort in their mutual companionship, the operatives in the mills experienced a notable separation from their families and general societal isolation. The prescribed female-male division of labor was said to ensure that "women and men had little

⁴ Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and the Family: Female Operatives in the Lowell Mills, 1830-1860." *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (1975): 30-39.

⁵ Dublin, 30.

⁶ Dublin, 30.

⁷ Dublin, 30.

⁸ Montrie, 282.

⁹ Montrie, 282.

¹⁰ Dublin, 30.

contact within the mills.”¹¹ The women were often confined to their assigned machines, rarely having contact with men, except through their supervisors. Within an average workroom, there were “two male supervisors, eighty female operatives, and a couple of children assisting.”¹² On top of these women working amongst themselves, they would also live in an all-female boarding house. Even when there were instances open to both sexes like churches and lectures, “women comprised the vast majority.”¹³ In Lowell, women comprised more than half the population and contributed to the reinforced isolation within the operational dynamics of Lowell.

The Lowell Mill girls, amidst leading isolated lifestyles, endured unethical working conditions characterized by strenuous hours, toiling "thirteen hours a day in the summertime, and from daylight to dark in the winter.”¹⁴ Between these tiresome hours, there was a meager thirty minutes allotted for meals. Worn out from the long hours they went to often went to bed after eating their evening meal and “endeavor by a comparatively long sleep to resuscitate their weakened frames for the toil of the coming day.” Punctuality was highly prized and called for them to persist in adverse conditions despite the weather. The work environment, poorly regulated, was charged with “cotton filaments and dust, which, we are told, are very injurious to the lungs.”¹⁵ When the young women became ill, “they at once went back to their homes.”¹⁶ Though they worked only for a duration of around eight to ten months, being in those working conditions for that length of time still caused illness amongst the masses.

¹¹ Dublin, 31.

¹² Dublin, 31.

¹³ Dublin, 31.

¹⁴ “An Account of a Visitor to Lowell,” *The Harbinger*, (1836).

¹⁵ “An Account of a Visitor to Lowell,” *The Harbinger*, (1836).

¹⁶ Edith Abbott, "History of the Employment of Women in the American Cotton Mills: II," *Journal of Political Economy* 16, no. 10 (1908): 680-92.

Beyond the confines of the workplace, the Lowell Mill girls faced deplorable living conditions. Their living quarters provided minimal space, with an average of "twenty-five female boarders sleeping four to six in a bedroom."¹⁷ Privacy was unfortunately a luxury they could not afford, as solitary activities like reading and writing were impossible. Despite these constraints, the shared living quarters allowed for communal activities, as they collectively "ate meals, rested, talked, sewed, wrote letters, and read books and magazines."¹⁸ This close-knit living arrangement led to the formation of companionship for excursions to shops, lectures, and church events. Though the intimacy of tight living quarters may have cultivated a sense of camaraderie and independence among these young women, the prevailing working and living conditions were unequivocally unethical.

From 1836 to 1850 there was a notable surge in employees. They escalated from "the population of the city grew from 17,000 in 1836 to 33,000 in 1850."¹⁹ In the 1850s, Lowell was reconstituted along new lines. Though there was a group of women who continued to live in the company boarding houses by the 1860s, Lowell was dominated by Irish immigrant families. Lowell became "not exclusively a female community."²⁰ Textile mill owners in Lowell took advantage of this new supply of families and brought in larger numbers of the male population as they were "willing to work at wages comparable to those of females."²¹

Though there had been a change in the work population, women continued to play a role within this community. The Lowell mill girls actively relied on each other in their daily life and in the face of their labor struggles. Fueled by this rise of population growth and expansion, these women confronted the unethical working conditions by prevailing in Lowell. These women

¹⁷ Dublin, 31.

¹⁸ Dublin, 31.

¹⁹ Dublin, 34.

²⁰ Dublin, 34.

²¹ Dublin, 34.

participated in labor activism within Lowell and not only wanted to shorten their work days but also planned on “improving health conditions in Lowell's factories.”²² From the span of 1834 to 1836, “large numbers of women operatives struck to protest wage cuts.”²³ These early strike participation rates surpassed previous women-led strikes, one mill agent even states that “386 women and 3 men-out of a workforce of 1300-were absent from the mills under his charge.”²⁴ Their advocacy continued with the creation of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, by a group of Lowell mill girls, “which spearheaded the Ten-Hour Movement in Lowell and worked actively to organize similar operatives' associations in other mill towns.”²⁵

The mistreatment faced in their work environments was paralleled by advocacy stemming from their living conditions. Statistical insights illuminate the prevalence of female boarders among strikers in the mid-1830s,

“more than 95 percent lived in boarding houses. Among female boarding house residents, 28 percent went on strike; among those living at home, only 12 percent did so. In other words, women living in boarding houses were more than twice as likely as those living at home to take part in the strike. Similarly, the ten-hour petition campaigns of the 1840s were promoted by numerous meetings held in company boarding houses.”²⁶

In these gatherings, organizers from the Female Labor Reform Association recruited new members and garnered additional signatures for their petitions to the state legislature. Thus, the boarding houses served not only as the backdrop for participant engagement but also as the foundational organizational structure of the labor movement.

The strikes and advocacy spearheaded by the Lowell mill girls prompted Congress to “investigate their complaints.”²⁷ Unfortunately, in the short term, their efforts were unsuccessful

²²Sheila Kirschbaum, “‘Mill Girls’ and Labor Movements: Integrating Women's History into Early Industrialization Studies,” *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (2005): 42-46.

²³ Dublin, 32.

²⁴ Dublin, 32.

²⁵ Dublin, 32.

²⁶ Dublin, 33.

²⁷ Kirschbaum, 43.

and their strikes were forcefully suppressed. The objectives of the strikers remained elusive as mill owners knew how to navigate the challenges posed by the strikes, leading to a resolution where a considerable number of participants “either left Lowell or returned to work.”²⁸ The sole legislative outcome emerged in 1847 when “New Hampshire became the first state to pass a 10-hour workday law,”²⁹ though dubiously enforced. Despite the immediate setbacks, the young women at Lowell were able to initiate a transformative movement spanning across multiple generations. It represented the first instance of women collectively asserting their individual rights and striving for independence.

Lowell, despite its controversies, served as a gateway of opportunities for many women during that era, establishing a transformative path for future generations. The mills not only provided employment but also educational opportunities. Since they learned proper etiquette, these advantages further elevated their social status and instilled a sense of independence. They gained more respect and more recognition amongst their communities. In contrast to their lives on family-owned farms, Lowell asserted that “wage-labor in the mills offered greater independence,”³⁰ providing an entrance to a completely different world than they were used to. This departure from their previous lives laid the foundation for the evolution of modern-day society, where women across the globe now have opportunities to pursue their careers and shape their futures. Lowell's impact lay beyond its controversies, as it creates a pivotal force toward

²⁸ “Labor Reform: Early Strikes,” National Parks Service, <https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/historyculture/earlystrikes.htm>.

²⁹ “Lowell Mill Women Create the First Union of Working Women: AFL-CIO,” AFL, <https://aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/lowell-mill-women-form-union>.

³⁰ Julie Husband, “‘The White Slave of the North’: Lowell Mill Women and the Reproduction of ‘Free’ Labor,” *Legacy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 11-21.

greater gender equality and empowerment. This era proved to be the genesis of a broader movement, like the Women's Suffrage Movement.

During the 1840s and 1850s, the women's rights movement had found a natural alignment with the abolitionist movement. Many female labor activists found inspiration in the abolitionist movement as they related to many African Americans and sought reforms for their own rights. And Lowell, Massachusetts, a stronghold of industrial development, had been an early supporter of women's suffrage. By 1867, "a suffrage petition was introduced into the state legislature, while in 1870 the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association was established to further the cause."³¹ Though there were advancements to further help the suffrage movement, the conservative climate in the Bay State led to immediate opposition. Prominent men expressed concerns about the perceived threats to the "purity, dignity, and moral influence of women."³² In 1882, an informal anti-suffrage organization was formed by leading women in Massachusetts. Many suffragists persisted in presenting annual petitions to the legislature. Though they were granted the right to vote in 1879, their other demands were consistently rejected.

The women's suffrage movement in the United States marked the beginning of the pursuit of gender equality through women's right to vote. In July 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the historic Seneca Falls Convention in New York. The Seneca Falls convention produced the Declaration of Sentiments. This was created to essentially mirror the Declaration of Independence. It called for expanding educational and professional

³¹ James Kenneally, "Woman Suffrage and the Massachusetts 'Referendum' of 1895," *The Historian* 30, no.4 (1968): 617-633.

³² Kenneally, 617.

opportunities for women, as well as providing married women with the rights to control their wages and property.³³

The women's suffrage movement gained momentum and eventually led to the establishment of two key organizations: the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). There was eventually a merger between these groups in 1890, and it would form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). This group would be responsible for the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote. The journey for women's suffrage alone, involved many accounts of strategic activism, legal battles and continuous advocacy.³⁴

In Lowell, the influence of this movement was evident, as women in Massachusetts faced significant hurdles in their pursuit of suffrage. While initially centered on securing voting rights, the women's suffrage movement evolved into a broader quest for individual rights. The pivotal testimonies of Massachusetts women during committee hearings, particularly those from the Lowell mill girls, shaped legislators' perspectives. These testimonies not only highlighted the disparities in working conditions between women and men but also called for broader rights for women. Massachusetts women had various experiences in regards to their jobs, their education, and their opportunities. These diverse testimonies contributed to the complexity of legislative decisions but also helped create a broader movement concerning women's rights. While some say that the women's suffrage movement predominantly bore the imprint of middle-class women, the undeniable reality remains that the Lowell Mill girls played a crucial, often overlooked, role

³³ "Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment," National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/woman-suffrage#:~:text=Beginning%20in%20the%20mid%2D19th,women%20the%20right%20to%20vote.>

³⁴ "Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment"

in shaping the trajectory of this movement. Their time in Lowell, along with their persistent endeavors to reform working conditions, afforded them a significant role in providing testimonies and influencing legislative decisions. This is seen when examining the 19th amendment. Their engagement created representation further influencing anti-suffragists within the legislature and providing valuable insights into the complex challenges and dynamics prevalent in the women's suffrage movement in Massachusetts.

The young women who worked endlessly in the textile mills of Lowell, were only the beginning of women's rights movements. These persistent actions continued to influence generations on generations of women, and the women's suffrage movement was a prime example. Both the women's suffrage movement and the Lowell mill girls challenged gender roles and fought for women's rights. They both laid a foundation for women in our modern society in regards to individual rights, education, and the workforce. These historical movements fostered a spirit of empowerment and founded feminist movements still present today, such as the #MeToo movement, reproductive rights movement, and body positivity movement. Our modern society has grown beyond simply allowing women to earn wages. Society's leaders have continued to prove the impact that Lowell has in modern times as they not only played notable roles in the social and economic environment during this era but also played a significant role in the women's suffrage movement. These young women were able to secure their own money, fostering a newfound sense of independence. Their legacy creates a profound chapter in history, where their pursuit for economic independence seamlessly connects with the narrative of women's empowerment. During this highly critical period, the Lowell mill girls created a lasting legacy on future generations and modern society.

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