The Lowell Mill Girls: An Examination of Their Unique Situation Employed in the Cotton Mills of Lowell During the Rise of the Cotton Manufacture in America, 1820-1840, and, also Including an Explanation for the Rise and Demise of the Lowell Mill Girls

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As one travels through the towns of New England, the remains of the cotton factories can still be seen rising up along the shores of the rivers. Towns such as North Andover, Lawrence and Lowell, located along the mighty Merrimack River, are constant reminders of a time when cotton manufacturing was becoming a powerful and important factor in the rapidly growing industrial economy of pre-Civil War America. The mills today are far from their nineteenth-century appearance. Most are run down and boarded up, while others house factory outlets, business offices, or have been restored for history's sake. The cotton manufacture has left New England for various reasons, leaving behind these abandoned mills.

But during the early nineteenth-century, when the cotton manufacturing enterprise was flourishing and expanding, so were the towns of New England. One in particular, Lowell, went from a dozen houses in 1821[1] out of to a booming city, in 1845, with a population of about 30,000 that boasted thirty-three mills[2] owned by twelve manufacturing corporations, with a capital of between thirteen and fourteen million dollars and whose factories employed between 13,000 and 14,000 persons.[3]

The corporations, in order to run their factories, sought out

the young folk of the neighboring towns and states. In response to the wages offered and many other advantages offered by the mill city, the youth of the countryside flocked to Lowell. Surprisingly, a majority of the operatives employed in the Lowell mills were female. These factory girls, as they so endearingly called themselves, came to Lowell from middle class farming families.[4] Though their reasons for moving varied, while in Lowell, they experienced a lifestyle far different than that back home. Moreover, they became a part of labor and manufacturing history that was quite unique while it lasted.

During the early 1800's, the cotton manufacturing business started to expand throughout New England. But it took a couple of forces to provide an environment that would be conducive to its rise. A vast majority of Americans still farmed on isolated farms, meaning that households were self-sufficient.[5] The households produced a majority of the cloth, linens and textiles needed. The main occupations of the people centered around agriculture, commerce and the necessary mechanical arts. The exportation of agricultural produce paid for anything imported into the county.[6] Capitalists had little interest in investing in manufacturing and found huge fortunes in foreign commerce and shipping.[7] A few attempted to introduce manufacturing, especially cotton, into America but most of them failed. The manufacture of textile goods hardly maintained an sort of a hold in the country. In 1803, only four small factories existed.[8]

At this time, England experienced a rapid growth of

manufacturing industries. This industry put more products on the market and the range of articles that could be imported grew wider and wider. The number of cotton and woolen goods that the United States imported increased as more and more people purchased imported goods rather than making them at home.[9] In 1807, the United States imported an estimated eleven million dollars worth of cotton goods.[10] The demand for agricultural products from the United States grew and since goods could be imported at a cheap price, little inducement existed to engage in the production of similiar goods at home.[11] And the government saw no need to encourage the production of textiles through protective tariffs, a duty on imported goods to encourage the manufacture of a certain industry.[12]

The situation changed abruptly around 1808. Complications with England led the United States to pass the Embargo Act of 1807 and the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809. In 1812, the United States and England went to war against each other. During the conflict, the United States prohibited trade with England. As a protective measure, the government doubled all import duties which caused foreign trade to practically cease to exist. The restrictive measures of the United States blocked accustomed channels of trade and, as a result, gave enormous stimulus to certain branches of industry whose products had previously been imported.[13]

Some felt that war could be waged with England through the purse. In 1812, the attitude for some was that "the best mode of warfare against England [would] be to attack the sources of their

wealth".[14] Americans saw the cotton manufactures as the most productive and, by setting up spinning works and manufactures of cotton at home, war could be waged on England economically.[15]

During the war, establishments for the manufacture of cotton, woolen cloths, iron, glass, etc. sprang up throughout the country, especially in the North, to supply the people with products no longer imported.[16] The cotton manufacture, itself, grew rapidly. In 1808, manufacturers built fifteen mills that ran 8,000 spindles. By 1809, sixty-two mills existed that ran 31,000 spindles while twenty-five more mills were in the process of being built. In 1811, factories used 80,000 spindles and, in 1815, the number had increased to 500,000 spindles. The number of bales of cotton used jumped from 500 bales in 1800 to 90,000 bales in 1815.[17] The government, to assist in this production, passed extremely protective economic legislation during the years of 1808-1815. The government, also, encouraged the home production of a number of manufactured articles.

At this time, in Congress, there existed strong feelings that the manufacturing establishments should be assisted in their early stages. But many did not favor a permanent strong protective policy. Therefore, Congress granted higher duties on those goods in whose production there was the most interest, but only for limited times.[18]

At the end of the war, few pressures existed for a more vigorous and continuous application of the protective principle. Many believed that the United States would return to the way it

had existed economically before 1808 with agriculture and commerce as the profitable occupations of the people. And for a while, this appeared to be true. Europe needed United States agricultural products since the Napoleonic wars had destroyed their fields. Plus, most manufactured goods from Europe brought a low price. As things changed in Europe, the situation in the United States, also, changed. The demand for agricultural products from the United States fell as Europe produced good harvests in 1818. The price of manufactured goods, in general, continued to decrease.[19]

Along with the peace of 1815, came an increase in importation. Manufacturers abandoned many of the previously established factories for they were badly equipted and loosely managed. Some manufactures, though, would not give up and petitioned Congress for assistance.

The manufacturers received initial protection when Congress passed the Tariff of 1816, which levied a duty of twenty-five percent on imported cotton goods costing twenty-five cents a yard for a period of three years. All cotton cloth costing less than twenty-five cents a yard would be considered as costing twenty-five cents and charged with the duty accordingly. The duty averaged out to about six and one-fourth cents for each yard of cloth at twenty-five cents.[20] The Tariff of 1818 extended the twenty-five percent duty on cotton and woollens to 1826.[21]

The Tariff of 1816 was not sufficient to prevent a depression in the cotton manufacture due to competition abroad. But when the

crisis of 1818-1819 brought about a rearrangement of prices, matters began to mend and the minimum duty became more effective in handicapping foreign competitors. After 1819, three factors existed that assisted the growth of the cotton manufacture; the great alteration in the position and the prospect of the manufacturing industries, the rise of a strong public feeling in favor of protecting these manufacturing industries and the enactment of legislation to protect the industries. The fall of the prices of manufactured goods did not affect cotton as it did other goods. The result of this was very adventageous to manufacturers. The manufacturers believed they were in a position to produce cotton goods with a profit at these lower prices and this would help them compete more easily with foreign competion.[22]

Improvements in machinery, also, increased the prospect of the cotton manufacturing industry. During this time, manufacturers in England had introduced the power loom. Brought over to the United States in the mind of Francis Cabot Lowell and perfected by him, the power loom enabled cotton to be manufactured at a profit. The power loom allowed the entire process of converting cotton into cloth to take place under one roof. Earlier factories could only spin the yarn while the weaving was done on handlooms in the home.[23] The decrease of foreign demand and the fall of prices of staple products gave rise to a cry for a home market and for the protection of young industries. And, along with all this, the government enacted more legislation that protected certain manufactured goods. Congress passed protective

tariffs in the 1820's that increased the duty from six and one-fourth cents to seven and one-half cents and, then, eight and three-fourths cents on a yard.[24]

Besides favorable economic conditions, social and political factors played a role in the emergence of the "Lowell mill girls". In the early 1800's, people tended to view the rise of industry with a certain disfavor that stemmed from the belief that in its wake came vice and demoralization. The leaders of the government debated the establishment of manufacturing in the United States for years. Thomas Jefferson felt that the United States should not industralize because it would go through the same demoralizing experience that England went through.[25] He expressed the hope, in his Notes on Virginia, that America would "never see its citizens occupied at a workbench" and believed that it would best for the country if "for the general operations of manufacture...our workshops remain in Europe".[26] Alexander Hamilton, seeing the benefits of manufacturing, urged the national government to foster the development of industry.[27] In time, though, Jefferson changed his views on industralization and advocated its development. He saw that the United States needed to have all possible economic strength in order to protect itself from the might of Europe. And he realized that manufacturing was necessary for independence and for comfort.[28]

The people of the United States, also, debated over the rise of industry. Many Americans felt that industry should stay in England. Americans had heard of the horrors of child and female

labor. They knew about the miserable living conditions of the working class, of the transformation of workers into a machine and of the ill effects it had on the operatives. No one wanted a repitition of England's industrial experience in America.[29]

Even though conditions enabled a rise of industry in the United States, many wanted to avoid it because of the demoralizing conditions that were believed to follow. But a few existed who believed industry could be developed without the accompanying "human degradation characteristics" associated with the English factory system. A leading figure behind this was Francis Cabot Lowell, who created a remarkable mill system in Waltham which set out to introduce large scale manufacturing into the United States without reproducing the horrors of the English factory system. He, also, attempted to avoid the creation of conditions characteristic of the Rhode Island factory system that had emerged late in the eighteenth century.[30]

Samuel Slater had set up spinning mills based on English inventions in 1790 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island and that had copied the English system of labor. Slater employed whole families to tend the carding and spinning machinery and, also, worked children long hours doffing. Manufacturing villages emerged as Slater induced families with large numbers of children to settle in the factory neighborhood near the mills. The owner took pride in the amount of children working in the mills, believing that the children were aiding their parents and serving God, by keeping out of mischief.[31]

The Pawtucket factory was by no means a fullfledged factory. It only had machinery to turn raw cotton into yarn. Local farmers still did all the weaving. Lowell's Waltham introduced both the first modern factory in America and a new labor system far different from the English factory system.[32]

Lowell, while touring the British Isles during 1810-1812, investigated the textile industry in England, Ireland and Scotland. He noticed two develpoments in his travels. He came in contact with the newly invented power loom that enabled spinning and weaving machines to be placed under one roof. Lowell realized that the combination of the spinning and weaving in one place would increase the profits from textiles. He, also, saw the ill effects that the factory had produced on its operatives and its environment, seeing real life in English mill towns with its overcrowded slums. Lowell understood that the duplication of the horrors of the English factory would intensify the opposition to industrial growth in America.[33] But Lowell believed that the cotton manufacture could be successful in America. Raw cotton could be procured cheaper in America and water power, then unemployed, existed in abundance in every part of New England.[34] Lowell, also, thought that the "superior intelligence and enterprise of the American population would ensure the success of the cotton manufacture" in the United States.[35]

When Lowell returned to America, he brought with him his ideas for a power loom in his mind. The construction of the power loom remained a secret in England and English law forbade the

exportation of any information concerning the textile industry.[36] Back in America, Lowell's brother-in-law, Patrick T. Jackson, joined him in his venture and they started rounding up the initial capital of $100,000.[37] Lowell and Jackson approached Nathan Appleton, a Boston merchant, and told him that they had decided to establish a "cotton manufactory and had purchased a water-power in Waltham".[38] They then proposed that Appleton invest $10,000 in their company. Appleton, a little cautious about the success of the venture, agreed to take five shares worth $5,000.[39] They "associated with themselves [a few] of the most intelligent merchants of Boston" and formed the Boston Manufacturing Company, incorporated in 1813, for the sole purpose of producing cotton, woolen and linen cloth.[40]

Lowell secured the services of Paul Moody, a well-known mechanic, to assist in the building of his power loom.[41] While the men worked on the loom, the company built the mill and gathered the other machinery. By 1815, the first power loom in the United States operated in the factory in Waltham and manufactured cotton textiles. From the first starting of the power loom, no doubt existed about the success of this manufacture. The company expanded the capital to $400,000 and then to $600,000 when they purchased some land in Watertown for another mill.[42] The company sought adult females for labor instead of families and children. Lowell and his company set up the "Waltham system", which they used in their factories in Lowell, and it was under this system that the Lowell mill girls became famous. The factories in

Waltham employed approximately 400 operatives who worked 8,064 spindles and 231 looms and produced two million yards of cloth per year during the early 1800's.[43]

The enterprise proved to be quite successful and the proprietors believed that the time had arrived when the cotton manufacture could be successsfully introduced in the country on a larger scale.[44] The Charles River, from which the factories at Waltham received their power, prohibited further expansion because of the limited water power capacity of the slow flowing water.[45] But Lowell died in 1817 and Jackson, the largest stockholder in the company, along with Appleton took over Lowell's leadership role in the project.[46] Their first act was to find a new suitable water power site and, after careful searches of surrounding areas, they finally selected the farming community of East Chelmsford which lay at the junction of the Concord and Merrimack River, some twenty-five miles from Boston. The Pawtucket Falls, located near the community, provided an excellent site due to the ample supply of water from the Merrimack and the advantage of the thirty-two foot fall.[47]

The land choosen by the company had once been the head-quarters of one of the most powerful Indian tribes in the north of Massachusetts, the Pawtuckets.[48] Little by little, the increasing number of English settlers forced the Indians to give up their lands around the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and by 1726, these lands totally belonged to the English.[49] Abundant forests, that could be used as timber, lumber and fuel lined the shores of the

Merrimack. Unfortunately, a thirty-two foot Pawtucket Falls stood in the way of getting the wood to Newburyport for the necessary processing.[50] To deal with this problem, legislators passed an act in June of 1792 incorporating a group of men into the Proprietors of Locks and Canals on the Merrimack River that would build a canal on the falls.[51] The Proprietors completed this canal, the first ever in the United States, in 1797.[52] But the value and importance of this property diminished with the completion of the Middlesex Canal, connecting the Merrimack River with Boston Harbor, in 1804.[53] But in time, the old canal would soon find a new use.

When Jackson and Appleton arrived at the site on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in 1820, they found a few farmhouses, a store, a tavern, a saw and grist mill(1815) and a gunpowder factory(1818).[54] The company asked Kirk Boott to join in their venture and, upon his entering into the project, sent him out to purchase the land. He shrewdly bought the land around the Pawtucket Falls from the farmers by informing them that it was to be used to raise fruit and wool.[55] In all, Boott purchased the 400 acres at prices averaging about a hundred dollars an acre.

Due to the deflated value of the Pawtucket Canal, Boott easily obtained the 500 shares of stock of the Locks and Canal Company for about eighty to a hundred dollars per share,[56] therefore, buying the "greatest water power in New England for almost nothing."[57] Upon purchase, the company set out to enlarge the canal to sixty feet wide by eight feet deep, in order to

furnish power for fifty mills.[58] They also dug a lateral canal from the Pawtucket Falls to the Merrimack River and rebuilt the locks.[59] The men decided to place their mills at the Pawtucket Canal, where it would utilize the whole thirty-two foot trap[60] and began the erection of their first mills in 1822.[61]

Jackson and Appleton formed the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, incorporated on December 1, 1821, and they each subscribed 180 shares. They sold ninety shares each to Kirk and John Boott and sixty shares to Moody. Shortly afterwards, the company allowed nine other investors to purchases shares: Dudley Atkins Tyng, Warren Dutton, Timothy Wiggin, William Appleton, Esen Appleton, Thomas M. Clark, Benjamin Gorham, Nathaniel Bowditch and Daniel Webster.[62]

The first wheel of the Merrimack Corporation went into motion on September 1, 1823[63] and the first cotton cloth made was coarse in texture, thick and firm and cost two to three pence a yard.[64] The business of printing calicoes was new in America and the process of printing was difficult and time consuming.[65] The Merrimack Corporation had dyers and calico printers sent from England to establish the art of calico printing in Lowell. The first calico printing was of poor texture and color. The cloth sold for thirty cents a yard and was "warranted not to fade."[66] Harriet Robinson, a mill operative, remembered a gown that she had of this cloth. She refered to it as the garb of humiliation because the white spots washed out, cloth and all, leaving her covered with holes. Her brother accused her of being more "holy than righteous." The

first enduring color in print was indigo blue as groundwork with minute white spots sprinkled over it. The cloth looked lively and pretty yet wore like iron.[67]

The Merrimack Manufacturing Corporation held water power and land enough for several independent manufacturing companies and they decided to form one independent company that would be in charge of the disposal and sale of the land and waterpower and of furnishing machinery for the mills without directly being involved in the manufacture of cotton. The corporation examined the old charter of 1792 that established the Proprietors of Locks and Canals Company, and with a legislative amendment in January 1825, authorized the reformation of the Locks and Canals Company. This company received the right to purchase and hold all of the real estate held by the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, to purchase and hold any other real estate in the towns of Chelmsford, Dracut and Tewksbury, and to sell or lease the land and waterpower.[68] The Locks and Canal Company proceeded to reorganize itself and purchased all the water privilege and real estate held by the Merrimack Corporation, who kept for themselves enough waterpower and land for five mills and boardinghouses.[69] The restored Locks and Canals Company then went about to sell the water and land power to other corporations. Their first sale was to the Hamilton Manufacturing Corporation in 1825, followed by sales to the Appleton and Lowell Corporations, 1828, the Suffolk, Tremont, and Lawrence Corporations, 1830, the Boott Corporation, 1835, and the Massachusetts Corporation, 1839.[70]

As the mills went up, the town expanded in otherways. Each

corporation built between two to five mills. Besides the mills, a corresponding quantity of other buildings sprung up, such as houses, warehouses, shops, hotels, churches, and public buildings, along with a number of appropriate buildings for carrying on other manufacturing besides cotton.[71] The Merrimack Corporation voted liberal land grants for places of worship and set aside money for a library.[73] The first stage was set up in 1822 and the Stone House, offering agreeable accomodations to visitors of the city, was erected in 1825.[73] The first bank in town, the Lowell Bank(1828) was incorporated with a capital of $100,000 followed by the Institution for Savings(1829) and The Railroad Bank(1831).[74] The Suffolk Canal(1831-32) divided the Falls into two sixteen foot falls and created power for three additional corporations and the Boott Corporation built a canal to carry water to their mills.[75] Lowell continued to grow with the building of two public halls(1830, 1835), churches, the Merrimack House(1832), two large Grammar School Houses, a large almhouse, a Market House(1837), a foundry(1840), a hospital(1839), a jail(1838), a cemetery(1840), and a City Library(1840).[76]

Lowell annexed some land from Tewksbury in 1834, increasing the town's size.[77] The town of Lowell, named for Francis Cabot Lowell, was incorporated in 1826[78] and, in 1836, the municipal government of Lowell was changed to that of a city.[79] The fortunes of Lowell were affected by the depression of 1827 and 1828 and the great rage for speculation of 1831 and the few following years. But through all this, Lowell grew steadily.[80] Upon becoming a city in 1836, the

government set out to improve the general condition of the city by constructing sidewalks, lighting the streets, preserving the public health, erecting public schools, and establishing a sewer system.[81] The government purchased two large commons to be kept open forever for walks and parades.[82]

Prior to 1835, the United States had no railway system, steamboat, telegraph or telephone. People communicated from town to town by the stage coach or the slow canal.[83] All that changed, in 1835, with the establishment of the first railroad in the United States, the Boston and Lowell Railroad.[84] The railroad continued on as an independent line for about sixty years until it merged with the Boston and Maine railroad.[85]

Cotton manufacturing, in the United States, was a fast growing business and Lowell was probably the most important manufacturing town in the United States.[86] In 1810, the cotton manufactures consumed only 10,000 bales of raw cotton and by 1815, the number had increased nine fold. In 1835, the number of looms was estimated at 48,000 and 250,000 bales of cotton were consumed, with the value of produce being $50,000,000. In 1841-42, there were 807 cotton mills in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. The amount of capital invested in them was about forty million dollars with an annual production of 181-400,000,000 yards of cloth. In 1843, Lowell, with a capital above ten million, consumed one-fourth of all the cotton in the country.[87]

The factory population of Lowell consisted of four classes.

The first class was the superintendents or agents of the corporations. The office that they held made the superintendents aristocrats of the city. Their position held great responsibility and required a knowledge of the business, a certain tact in managing, and the ability to utilize the number of operatives to secure the best return for their investment. The superintendent was considered an autocrat of his mill because there was "no appeal from his decision,[88] his mind regulated all, his character inspired all, and his plans controlled all."[89] A factory operative, in a letter, described them as "not the overbearing tyrants which many suppose them to be."[90] The superintendent resided in a very large house near his mill but not too near the boardinghouses, where the operatives of his mill lived.

The second class consisted of the overseers. Every mill had a carefully selected overseer, responsible for the work, good order and proper management of each of his rooms.[91] The overseer's post was of great importance and the superintendents exercised much care over the appointments of overseers. The superintendents always had a huge pool of applicants to chose from, since they received two dollars a day in pay, and never choose raw hands or unknown characters for the position.[92] Overseers were usually married men with families and were among the most permanent residents and the most trustworthy and valuable citizens from the area.[93] Among the overseers were "many very likely intelligent, public spirited men among them [who were] interested in the good movements of the day; teachers in the Sabbath Schools; and some have represented the city

in the state legislature."[94]

The operatives made up the third class of the factory population. The operatives were drawn from the surrounding areas and were predominantly female, though males were hired to do the heavier work in the mills. The "lords of the spade and shovel" made up the lowest class.[95] They were the constant labor supply, who built the factories and the rest of the city. They were usually immigrants and lived in hundreds of tiny shanties with their wives and numerous children.[96]

The mills, themselves, were similar to the mills of England, except they were built of brick instead of stone. The corporations constructed their mills along the banks of the river or along the canals, in order to receive the necessary supply of water as conveniently as possible. Each mill, usually four to five stories high, had long ladders extending from the ground to the roof on both sides and ends of the building serving as fire escapes. These ladders provided a means of escape outside, aside from the wooden stairs, from every floor and almost every subdivision of the factory. The corporations built the mills to harmonize with the surrounding New England countryside.[97] The mills were very neat and clean. Many of the mills had beautiful gardens or plots of grass with trees and shrubs, giving the area a fresh and peaceful appearance.[98] The inside was as neat and clean as the outside of the building. The floors and stairs were beautifully clean and painted. The rooms were very light, spacious, nicely whitewashed, and extremely neat. The windows of the mills, in some departments,

were decorated with plants and flowers, giving a "pleasant aspect to things."[99] The mills were kept at uniform temperatures, as best as possible, to provide comfort and protect the health of the operatives. On cold days, steam or hot air furnaces provided heat. The rooms were lofty and well ventilated and kept as dust free as possible. "There was much fresh air, cleanliness and comfort, as the nature of the occupation would possibly admit it." The machinery was carefully boxed to prevent accidents.[100] A factory operative remembered the machinery as being "very handsomely made and printed, and [...] placed in regular rows; thus, in a large mill, presenting a beautiful and uniform appearance."[101]

The cotton mills, incorporated by the gentlemen from Boston, required many operatives. These gentlemen knew that in order to have a work force, they had to create an environment different from the old world factory system.[102] They saw the need to overcome the arguement that the factory system would bring in its wake an impoverished, vice-ridden, ignorant laboring class as it had in England, which would be a threat to democratic republic.[103] The owners desired to create a labor force that would be a "shining example of those ultimate Yankee ideals: profit and virtue, doing good and doing well".[104] The mill owners decided to employ hundreds of farm girls from the surrounding communities. They chose farm girls because the West had already attracted a good percentage of the young men and those who remained were busy working the land.[105] But the owners had to devise a system so the Yankee farmers would send their daughters since they would not allow their daughters to

work in factories that were breeding places for sin and corruption.[106] The answer was a paternalistic supervised system full of rules and regulations "designed to guarantee their productivity and respectability."[107]

The manufacturing companies "with what thoughtful care did they establish, at their own cost, their admirable system of boardinghouses, with the most efficient moral police and with every provision for religious worship. For to them, the condition of their operatives was a matter of the highest interest."[108] The companies built boardinghouses to provide accomodations for the operatives and placed them under the direction of a matron who represented the company and its interests. They established a system of regulations to oversee the girls.[109] These regulations were aimed at protecting the reputations of the female mill workers and at assuring the farmers "that they might safely permit their daughters to leave home for factory work."[110] The company, also, required mandatory church attendance. These young girls, who arrived in Lowell to live and work, came from all over New England, were "assured of an unobjectionable occupation, the privileges and wholesome restrictions of home, and a moral atmosphere as clear and bracing as that of the mountains from whose breezy slopes many of them were to come."[111] And to further entice the young girls to the factories, the corporations paid the highest wages offered to female employees anywhere in America at that time promptly in cash.[112]

"By the erection of boardinghouses at the expense and under the control of the factory; putting it at the head of matrons of tried

character, and allowing no boarders to be received except the female operatives of the mill; by stringent regulations for the government of these houses; by all these precautions, they gained the confidence of the rural population who were no longer afraid to trust their daughters in a manufacturing town."[113] The corporations obtained a supply of respectable girls from the countrysides to work in the mills.[114]

The factory girls faced many demeaning stereotypes and had to work extremely hard to overcome them. The stereotypes labeled them in a fixed position to earn their daily bread and that they must continue to spin and weave to the end of their lives. Nothing was expected of them but to weave and spin. They were not supposed to be capable of any sort of social or mental improvement. The idea that these factory girls could be educated and develop into anything more than "work-people" did not enter into many minds.[115]

The early factory girls had to and did succeed in educating the public that the type of labor they had engaged in was not at all degrading and that a mill operative was not "only capable of virtue but also capable of self-cultivation."[116] When these girls sought employment in Lowell, the factory girl was considered as the lowest among women. This attitude stemmed from the factories of England and France, where great injustice was done to the factory girl's real character. The female mill workers in England and France appeared as women who had been subjected to influences that destroyed purity and self-respect. And to the

overseers, they appeared as slaves to be "beaten, pinched and pushed about."[117]

The girls demonstrated that factory labor brought about no degradation of character and did not impede a "reputable connection in marriage."[118] They proved to be "as superior in intelligence and efficiency to the degraded population elsewhere employed in manufactures, as they are in morals."[119] And the girls were not condemned to pursue the vocation of factory labor for life.

In order to attract the young women to their mills, the manufacturers, also, offered high wages. The process of carding, spinning and weaving was a necessary and not disagreeable form of employment that most females participated in at their family farm. Therefore, it was absurd to assume that their character would be changed with the use of machinery or with the bringing together of large amounts of young women. The founders of the cotton manufacture in Lowell realized the importance of keeping the surroundings free from anything detrimental to personal character. So along with good salaries, the manufacturers offered their workers an environment not harmful to character or health of any who chose to work there.[120]

At first few came to Lowell, though many were tempted by the high wages. Girls still preferred domestic employment, earning anywhere from fifty cents to a dollar a week plus room and board. Within a few years, "Lowell had a reputation for good order, morality, piety, and all that was dear to the old-fashioned New

Englander's heart"[121] and soon "blooming, energetic New England women" filled the mills.[122]

The factory girls, who left the comfort of their homes and placed themselves "confidingly under the arrangements made by the different manufacturing corporations,"[123] came from all over New England but predominantly from Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. A few travelled to Lowell from as far as Canada. The majority of the factory girls were daughters of the respectable, middle class of farmers, not children of factory workers, who had grown up working in the factories.[124]

The factory girls ventured to Lowell for a variety of reasons. At the mills, there were "girls [there] for every reason, and for no reason at all."[125] Each girl had a different reason for wanting to come to Lowell. But no matter the specific excuse given, they could usually be categorized in economic, purely personal, social and literary, and/or adventurous reasons.

Of all the reasons for seeking employment in Lowell, the most important were economic. Lowell offered liberal wages paid regularly in cash.[126] The money they earned came promptly and was their own to do as they wished.[127] This gave the girls the opportunity to save money or use it immediately as they desired. Some sought factory work to support themselves. One factory girl had a "wealthy father, but, like many of [the] country farmers, he [was] very penurious, and he [wished] his daughters to maintain themselves."[128] Another had to labor somewhere, and had "been ill-treated in so many families that she [had] a horror of domestic

service.[129] Another girl left a good home "because her lover had gone on a whaling voyage, [...], and she would [have liked] more money than her father [would] give her."[130] The girls, also, left their homes for employment in Lowell to provide additional financial support for the family left behind. Sometimes, a daughter sought work to relieve a father from debt or release him from the pressure of a mortgage on the farm. Often upon the death of a father, a girl would go to the factories to pay off the mortgage and help support the remaining family.[131] In times of financial difficulty, the older girls left home so there would be one less mouth to feed and to send home money to feed the younger brothers and sisters.

Indirectly related to economics, many girls had the desire to provide a primary or secondary education for younger brothers or sisters. One of the most prevalent incentives for the girls to seek work was to secure a college education for an older brother.[132] Often, a girl ventured to Lowell to save money to further her own education at a later date. One factory girl came because her parents were too poor and she wished "to acquire the means to educate herself."[133] Girls worked until they had "laid by a considerable sum of money; then they [went] away to school for awhile; then [worked] again in the mill; and in this way acquired a thorough education."[134]

Social and literary advantages of the mill city drew girls to Lowell to seek employment in the factories. Lowell offered the girls opportunities lacking in their hometowns. Their hometowns, often in secluded parts of New England, lacked a cultivated society

that could be found in Lowell. Literarily, Lowell offered a wide variety of books that could be found in the circulating libraries.[135] One operative came because her home was in a "lonesome country village, and she [could] not bear to remain where it [was] so dull."[136] Another girl came to work because her "parents and family [were] Wicked infidels and she [could] not be allowed to enjoy the privileges of religion at home."[137]

A number of the girls came from comfortable homes and did not need the money yet they came to Lowell to see the "City of Spindles". They learned about Lowell from neighbors and friends who had worked there.[138] At that time, Lowell was the place to go and "Lowell fever" spread rapidly throughout the New England communities.[139]

The less popular reasons why the girls came to Lowell were for purely personal choices. Some wanted money to satisfy personal vanities and buy fancy dresses and other accessories. One girl sought employment because she hated her step mother, even though she had a kind father and an excellent home. And one girl came because "her beau came, and she did not like to trust him alone among so many pretty girls." Some came because they were lonely in the distant towns and farmhouses.[140]

The girls, from the surrounding areas, came to Lowell for a variety of reasons but what were they like themselves? Robinson, in her memoirs, looked back at the factory girls, in general, herself included, and described them not as a "class of young women going to and from their daily work, like so many ants that can not

be distinguished one from another" but, instead, as individuals with personalities of their own.[141] Each girl carried with her an atmosphere of her early home and was driven by a strong and noble purpose. In a letter to a cousin, a factory operative wrote that she found the other factory girls "generally intellectual and virtuous, and many with capacious minds."[142] Besides being naturally intelligent, they adjusted easily into their new way of life. In Lowell, they associated with those who had founded the city. Upon their return home to their native villages, the townsfolk did not look down upon them but rather "welcomed them as coming from a metropolis, brinqinq new fashions, new books, and new ideas with them."[143]

Besides their intellect, their physical appearance was worth noting. Lucy Larcom, another factory operative, recalled the mill girls' appearance. Standing before the windows, she would look across the room and see the girls moving "backwards and forwards among the spinning frames, sometimes stooping, sometimes reaching up their arms, as work required with easy and not ungraceful movements."[144] On a whole, the girls dressed "neatly" and were "pretty" and bright looking. "The mill girls [were] the prettiest in the city."[145] Often in the summer, girls wore fresh muslin dresses, sometimes white, with no fear of ruining them because the rooms and the work were clean. They were able to keep neat because there was no restrictions as to the number of pieces washed at the boardinghouses. There was "plenty of water in the mill, the girls [could] wash their laces and muslins and other nice things

themselves, and no boarding woman ever refused the conveniences for starching and ironing."[146]

Visitors to the city found their appearance quite attractive. A British visitor to Lowell, Reverend William Scoresby, commented on the appearance of the factory girls as he saw them. Scoresby found them an interesting sight. He described them as being "orderly in their manner, very respectable in their appearance, neatly dressed, and clean in their persons."[147] Many girls had their hair neatly arranged with carefully curled ringlets. All wore calico bonnets or some sort of a caleche. Many wore veils and some carried silk parosols. Some were remarkably pretty or exceedingly "well-looking".[148] The girls were slight in their figure and did not have the slightest appearance of boldness or vulgarity.[149] Dickens commented that the girls had "manners and deportment of young women; not of degraded brutes of burden."[150] Scoresby commented that the young women appeared to be between the age of fifteen and twenty. He later learned that the average age of the women was twenty-three.[151]

Inside the mills, Scoresby conversed with the operatives and observed that their "manner was easy and unaffected, modest and respectful."[152] He detected, in many of them, intelligence, a rather refined expression of countenance, and thoughtfulness.

Due to their Puritan inheritance, the factory girls were religious by upbringing. Their parents brought them up to earn their own living in fear and love of God, as their mothers and fathers had done before them. Upon entering the mill, the

superintendents required each operative to sign a regulation paper, which required her to regularly attend some place of public worship. Lowell offered worship for many denominations and in 1843, Lowell boasted fourteen regularly organized religious societies. Ten of the religious societies formed a "Sabbath School Union" with over 5,000 scholars and teachers. Three-fourths of the scholars and a large proportion of teachers were mill girls.[153] A few girls did not attend regularly on account of having to pay "pew rent". Sarah Hodgdon wrote about not being able to afford the rent at first. She asked her parents to pay it so people would not say that she "had sold her soul for the gay vanities of this world." The mill girls regularly attended Sabbath school and Hodgdon remembered going to Bible class. She found the class quite hard. The teacher questioned them closely on all the chapters of the Old and New testament, going through about five chapters of the bible each lesson.[154]

The manufacturers invested a large amount of capital to put the cotton textile operation into motion. The productivity of this operation depended solely on the existence of an "industrious, sober, orderly and moral class of operatives." Without this class of operatives, the mills would have been worthless. Any existence of immorality in Lowell would cut off the supply of workers because the girls would no longer be allowed to come work in the factories. This need for a moral class of operatives led to a strict system of "moral police".[159]

The superintendents hired no one for their mills who was

"addicted to intemperance" or quilty of any immoralities. Any worker could be dismissed for suspicion of criminal conduct, association with suspected persons, "general or habitual light behavior and conservation", "captiousness" and "disobedience". The women had to agree to follow the regulations which were adopted by the corporation and not to engage in any activity that would cause work to be impeded. Operatives had the liberty to leave a mill upon giving two weeks notice. Workers of good character and who had been employed for at least a year received honorable discharges that served as letters of recommendations to any other mill in Lowell.[156] Workers dismissed for bad conduct or who left work irregularly would not be able to obtain employment in any of the Lowell mills. Superintendents kept records of all those dismissed and checked them carefully before hiring.[157] Superintendents carefully hired overseers to exercise watchful and beneficial influence over the moral tone of the operatives under their supervision.[158] Regulations for each corporation were given to the employees and were posted throughout the mills. The regulations stated what each operative must do in order to keep her job.[159] "The only punishment among the girls [was] dismission from their places. They did not withhold their wages; and as for corporal punishment-[...]To strike a female would cost any overseer his place."[160]

The moral control the operatives had over each other proved to be more effective in the protection of the morals than the regulations. Any girl suspected of immoralities or serious

improprieties would be talked about, pointed at, and shunned. Often, the factory girls shunned those suspected of immoralities to the point that the suspected ones usually left the boardinghouse, mill, the corporation or, even, Lowell.[161]

The corporations insured the rights of every mill girl. They subjected the girls to no extortion and always paid any extra work done in full, accepting one own's account of piece work. The employers treated each mill girl with consideration. The girls took pride in "spinning a smooth thread, drawing a perfect web, making good cloth." The feeling that the superintendents and overseers were interested in the girls' welfare caused many girls to return that interest through their work which the employers were responsible for. A feeling of respectful equality existed between employer and employee. Management made factory life pleasant for the girls and treated them well because help was too valuable to be ill-treated.[162]

Due to these conditions set by the corporations and other circumstances, the factory girls had uniformly good morals. The girls came from quiet country homes where their "minds and manners [had] been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of Pilgrims and their virtuous partners."[163] A great percent of the girls were as "virtuous as the female population of any part of New England."[164] A factory girl, in defense of the operatives' morals, wrote that "no virtuous girl of common sense would choose for an occupation one that would consign her to infamy."[165] The corporations' requlations required each operative to be of good moral character. The girls

had high standards and the majority stayed away from those suspected of wrong doings. The boardinghouses provided pure surroundings and an atmosphere as refined as their own homes. The girls expected men to treat them with courtesy and looked forward to becoming the wives of good and honorable men. Of course, a few girls came to Lowell who no one knew anything about and were of questionable character. But they did not stay long because they found life there too simple and demure for them.[166] These girls were considered a disgrace to the city, to their sex, and to humanity but they did not set the tone of public sentiment and their morals were definitely not the standard. In Lowell, the well-filled churches and lecture halls demonstrated that the morals and intelligence of the mill girls were not low.[167]

To assist in the protection of the moral character of their operatives, each corporation built boarding houses to accomodate the operatives working in their mills. Long rows of blocks, with six to eight tenements of boarding houses in a block, lined the streets near the mills so that the mill workers could easily return for meals. The river supplied the houses with an abundant source of water and the houses all had suitable yards and outbuildings. The matrons kept everything very clean. Every spring the corporations paid for the buildings to be whitewashed.[168]

The corporations placed the boarding houses under the care of matrons, carefully selected for their respectability. The matrons were usually widows with good standing in the community. Like the mills, the boarding houses exerted influence upon the good order

and morals of the factory girls.[169] The matron had to answer to the corporation for "the moral and physical well being of the girls in the hours outside the mill walls."[170] The companies rented the boardinghouses to tenants of good character for small amounts, for the companies had no intentions to make money from this avenue. Like the position for overseer, the superintendents had numerous applications for boardinghouse keepers to choose from. The girls considered the matrons as friend, advisor, and second mother.[171] Due to the low rents of the keepers, the price of board for the factory girls was kept low, a dollar and a quarter a week.[172] The operative was not required to board in any particular tenement owned by her company, therefore, it was in the best interest of the matrons to keep their boardinghouses satisfactory.[173] A visitor commented that in the boardinghouses, "all was comfortable and nice."[174]

The front room served as a common eating room. The kitchen was in the rear of the house and some houses had sitting rooms for the boarders. The matron of the house had a parlor in some part of the house. The remaining rooms housed the sleeping quarters. The rooms had an air of neatness and comfort and between two and six boarders shared a room.[175]

Of course, each corporation established regulations that the boarders must observe. Men and women did not board together. Only those employed by the company could board in that company's boardinghouses. Disorderly or improper conduct was not allowed and the boarders were not allowed to have visitors at unreasonable hours. Doors locked at 10:00pm and no one was to be admitted after

that without a reasonable excuse. The corporations required the matrons to give an account of the number, names, and employment of their boarders and often had to report the names of boarders quilty of any improper conduct or not in the habit of regularly attending worship. The buildings and yards had to be kept clean and in good order. Some corporations required certain vaccinations and one corporation, the Merrimack Corporation, did not allow the keeping of swine.[176]

All the corporations' boardinghouses had uniform hours for meals, as previously mentioned. The matrons served substantial, wholesome, sufficiently abundant and neatly presented food. Along with similiar meal hours, all boardinghouses had generally the same food at meals. The girls ate warm biscuits, toast or pie, bread and butter, and coffee or tea for breakfast. Dinner consisted of meat and potatoes with vegetables, tomatoes, pickles, pudding or pie, bread and butter, and coffee or tea. For supper, similar to breakfast, the girls ate bread or warm biscuits with some kind of sauce, cake, pie and tea.[177]

The mill girls, generally, experienced good health. Their rural upbring gave them strong bodies and a fair share of endurance. The simple, plain but substantial food, provided by the matrons of the boardinghouses, kept them free from illness. Plus, they rose early and took their meals regularly, "both of which [were] conducive to health."[178]

To assist in keeping up the health of their operatives, the corporations jointly purchased a private residence in a beautifully

situated section of the city for $15,000 and converted it into an elegant hospital. Men were paid four dollars weekly and women were paid three dollars weekly to help cover the expense of the hospital. Only those able to pay were charged, no factory worker was excluded from the benefits of the hospital because of the lack of money. In the hospital, rooms, not wards, housed the patients. The rooms accomodated two to four beds and were nicely furnished.[179] Scoresby commented about the hospital after his visit to it: " For these young persons, far estranged from their parental home and a parent's watchful affectionate care, the best practicable compensation seems here to be provided. With the most skillful medical attention and advice, [was] combined a peculiar consideration, for it was evident that the patients were cared for, as if constituting a part of the family and household of the kind and intelligent superintendents."[180]

The relatively good health of the mill girls, stemmed from the generally light and easy work in the mills, along with other afore mentioned reasons. Even though the work was light, the girls worked long hours. But most of the girls had come from farms and they were used to rising at sunrise and working until sunset. During the summer months, the morning bell rang at 4:30 to get everyone up and again at five minutes to five to call everyone to the mill in order to start work at five. At 7:00 the bell rang for breakfast and a half hour was allowed for the meal. Between May and September, the bell rang at 12:30 for dinner and again at a quarter past to call everyone back to work. Otherwise the bell

rang at 1:00 to end dinner. The girls ate their meals at their boarding houses. Work ended at seven and the girls ate supper after the last bell. Winter hours were similar except the girls ate breakfast before coming to work at five and work ended for the day at 7:30.[181] The mills celebrated four holidays; Fast Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.[182] The corporations allowed the girls to take vacations home for a few weeks or for any other reason. And the girls stood by each other in the mills. When a girl wanted off for a half day, two or three girls took an extra loom so the absent girl would not lose any pay.

The corporation hired male operatives to handle the earlier laborious and disagreeable processes of the manufacture of the cotton to cloth. Mostly men work in the carding room. But a few women worked in that room, "where the cotton [flew] the most, and the girls [got] the dirtiest."[183] But the work was easy and often the girls finished early and got to leave before the bells rang, especially on Saturday nights. After the cotton had been carded, it passed through a drawing frame, where the girls laid out the fibers in one direction and brought them together in rope-like form. The frame twisted the cotton fibers into coarse "rovings" and drew them out tight. The operatives, then, packed the rovings into boxes and sent them to the spinning room. Eight females attended the drawing frames and earned $1.62 a week(all wages given exclude the $1.25 charge for room and board). In the spinning room, sixty girls worked the frames, warping and filling. The spinners watched the frames, kept them clean and mended the threads

if they broke. The doffers, in the spinning room, took off the full bobbins and put on empty ones. Young girls found jobs as doffers and raced up and down the alley between the spinning frames because the frames could not be stopped long. Doffers worked only about fifteen minutes every hour and the rest of the time was their own. When not doffing, the girls could go home, go outside, read or knit, whatever they wanted.[185] In some factories, the spinners did their own doffing. Spinning work was light and easy compared to the job of the weavers, yet required more skill than the drawers. Therefore, girls in the spinning room earned $1.75 a week.[186]

After the spinning room, the cotton went to the dressing room where the yarn was warped off from the spools onto section beams. The dressing rooms were kept neat and the frames moved with "a gentle undulating motion which [was] really graceful." But the rooms were kept very warm and were "disagreeably scented with the sizing or starch, which stiffened the beams or unwoven webs."[187] The girls kept many plants in these rooms because they were very good greenhouses. The dressers sized, brushed, and dried the yarn upon the beams.[188] The frames occupied a lot of space, therefore, required few dressers. The dressers were "generally quite tall girls, and must have [had] pretty tall minds too, as their work required much care and attention." They never had to work before breakfast and stayed out often in the afternoons because they only had to keep the weavers supplied with enough work.[189] Operatives then transferred the yarn on eight beams to a loom beam by hand. This process, warping, was hard work and required constant standing to reconnect

the threads that constantly ran off or broke. Warpers received, on the average, about $2.25 a week. Dressers, on the other hand, received higher salaries due to the demands of the peculiar skill and judgement, about $2.50 to $3.50 a week. Occasionally, a skillful dresser earned between $5.00 or $6.00 dollars, due to a larger amount of work completed. Between six to eight girls each worked as dressers, warpers and drawers-in, who earned about $2.00 to $3.00 a week.[190]

In the weaving room, weavers put the materials together to form the cloth. Each mill had two weaving rooms and employed between 130-145 females as weavers. The girls were paid by piece work and, on average, earned $2.00-$2.25 a week. After the fabric was woven together, operatives took it to the cloth room.[191]

In the cloth room, located a little apart from the mill, mill girls trimmed, measured, folded, stamped, recorded, and either baled it for market or sent to the print works. The cloth room's only machinery was a hydralic arrangement for pressing cloth into bales and the overseers allowed the girls to have books with them, due to the lack of machinery.[192] A dozen girls worked in the cloth room and when waiting for the cloth to be brought in, many read or wrote poetry or stories.[193] Management employed girls as sparehands, throughout the mill, to assist a more experienced worker while learning the skills. Sparehands earned about $1.00 a week.[194]

In return for their work, the operatives paid the girls promptly in cash, not by barter, store orders, or company goods. They received notes from Railroad Bank, which could be converted to

gold or silver at any hour. Many factory girls deposited their money in the bank, in order to collect interest. In July 1840, the Lowell Institution of Savings had 1976 depositors and factory girls comprised 978 of those depositors. Of the total $300,000 deposited, about $100,000 belonged to the factory girls.[195]

The time after work until 10:00pm belonged to the operatives and during this time the girls went visiting, shopping, sewed or read. When not working, the girls engaged in a variety of agreeable and enjoyable activities. Girls could be found sitting in their rooms or in the corner of the dining room writing letters, reading, studying, or sewing. The girls exchanged books among themselves, shared letters, and offered up literary pieces for friendly criticism. They discussed books they had read, debated religious and social questions, compared thoughts and experiences, and advised and helped each other. In the best room in the boardinghouse, girls entertained their callers. Special evenings were set aside to receive regular gentlemen callers. The girls received them in a room furnished with carpet and all the best furniture, quite often containing a piano. The girls subscribed to magazines and periodicals, filling the boardinghouses with reading materials. Books were taken from the circulating libraries and read with delight. The girls went downtown to shop or took walks around the city, in the commons or alongside the river.[196] "The streets were crowded with young and old, the shop windows were adorned with every variety of fancy and domestic articles, from the toy to West India Goods and Groceries."[197]

In their leisure time after work, the girls attended meetings and lectures. The Lowell Institute, an association of gentlemen organized to manage a series of lectures to educate and convey the thought and results of study of the best minds to the people of Lowell, presented lectures at the City Hall. The factory girls attended these lectures in numbers to hear such speakers as John Quincy Adams, Edward Everett and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[198] The lectures were often scheduled to suit the convenience of the operatives. "A sad sight would [the lectures] be if operatives should absent themselves."[199] Some attended evening classes, often devoted to special studies like geography, writing or singing, to improve or supplement their educations. Lucy Larcom, an operative, remembered taking a class on the German language, formed by young women of the mills, a botany class, and an ethics class taught by a local minister. Often girls would get together and rent a piano, if they did not have one in their boardinghouses, and employ the services of a music teacher.[200]

The 1830's and 1840's represented an era of social reform, a time of movements seen as the "last struggle of the liberal spirit of the eighteenth century in conflict with the exploitative spirit of the nineteenth century."[201] and the girls were deeply involved. Public and current events, such as the Mexican War and anti-slavery issues, interested the girls. Nearly every year petitions to Congress for the abolition of slavery circulated among the mill girls and received thousands of signatures.[202] While the mill girls often compared themselves with the black slaves. The girls were

also active in the movement against capital punishment, for poor relief, for temperance, for a ten hour day and for women's rights.[203] Politically, the mill girls took part in presidential campaigns. Robinson remembered the campaign of William H. Harrison, the first Whig elected President, in 1840. The mill girls went to the political meetings, sat in the gallery and heard speeches against Martin Van Buren and the Democratic party. They sang the great campaign song with the famous line, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." They named their sunbonnets "log cabins" and set their teacups onto little glass teaplates with log cabins impressed on the bottom.[204]

Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, one of the early pioneers of the dress reform movement, found supporters in Lowell. The factory girls quite often became interested in the fads of their time. They adopted the "water cure"; doctoring by means of cold water in the form of packs, daily baths and immoderate drinks, and Professor Graham's regime of eating no meat or "anything that had life in it." People believed, that by following this certain diet, they would live longer, do better in work, and endure any hardships. The mill girls ate fruit, vegetables and unleavened or whole wheat bread without butter or relishes. Some became interested in phrenology, the examination of the bumps on the surface of the head to explain human characteristics, and had their heads examined by Professor Fowler, chief expert of the topic in Lowell.[205]

The mill girls had a desire for self-improvement and they enjoyed the benefits of the education. These girls were part of a larger movement of intellectual growth in America; "the feeling of

intellectual impetus that impelled [people] to put in writing their own crude thoughts."[206] Mill girls could often be seen writing on scraps of paper while waiting for the looms or frames to need attending to while others kept notebooks full of abstracts from readings and studies and their own thoughts. The regulations of the mills forbade girls from bringing books into the mills. So the girls got around the regulations by making the window seats into small libraries of literary works. They pasted the sides of the windows with newspaper clippings or their favorite pieces of poetry, hymns, or literary works, smuggled into the mills in their pockets, that they read, studied and committed to memory. Some girls had a hard time with that regulation since it included Bibles. They believed the scriptures had a right to go wherever they went. The girls evaded the regulation by carrying some pages from torn testaments in a pocket.[207] The Lowell Offering, a literary magazine written, published, and edited by mill girls, was a natural outgrowth of this mental habit of the early mill girls. Many of the pieces printed in it, the girls mentally composed while at work among the machinery.[208]

The Lowell Offering arose out of the meetings of an association of mill workers, "The Mutual Improvement Society" or "The Improvement Circle".[209] Reverend Abel C. Thomas and Reverend Thomas B. Thayer, pastors of the First and Second Universalist Churches, formed an improvement circle for the young people of their respective parishes. Articles were written and read aloud anonymously. A selection of articles from the meetings were

published in pamphlet form titled "The Lowell Offering, a Respitory of Original Articles Written by Females Employed in the Mills". The first series of these pamphlets were issued in four numbers from October 1840 to March 1841. Such a demand existed that a new series beqan. The Lowell Offering, which generally ran thirty-two pages, was issued regularly until 1842. The Lowell Offering then passed into the hands of Miss Harriot Curtis and Miss Harriet Farley.

Curtis and her immediate associates had previously established another society for the mental improvement to better "the talents which God had given them." They met and chose a president, vice-president and secretary, drafted a constitution and formed by-laws. At the first meeting, Curtis delievered a stirring speech stating the purpose of the organization and the urgent need that existed for working women to improve their minds. At each meeting, members contributed articles; prose or poetry. The largest range of subjects and the greatest variety of style was allowed; from "fiction and fact, poetry and prose, science and letters, religion and morals." Pieces were read at the meetings and subjected to criticism.

The first year, William Schouler published the magazine for Curtis and Farley but after that they published, edited, and proprieted the magazine themselves. The Lowell Offering was the only magazine at that time, America had ever produced. To date of the publications of The Lowell Offering, only three other women editors had existed, Cornelia W. Walter, Mrs. Green, and Lydia

Maria Child.

Subscription to The Lowell Offering was one dollar per year in advanced and people subscribed from all over the area. The leading men in the city endorsed the magazine in order to fight the prejudice against female editors. The magazine, itself, was small, thin and of thirty-two pages in length. The price paid for the first issue number was 6 1/4 ¢ . The magazine adopted the motto "Full many a gem of purest ray serene..." for two years then it changed to "Is Saul also among the prophets?" In January 1845, the editors adopted a vignette for the magazine of a young girl simply dressed with her feet visible and her sleeves rolled up. In one hand, she had a book and in the other, a shawl and bonnet. She stood with a very sentimental attitude contemplating a beehive. She represented New England school girls, who made up the factory girls. The beehive represented industry and intelligence. Behind the girl was a Yankee schoolhouse, a church, and a factory. The motto was "The worm on the earth may look up to the star." The contributors did not like the motto since they did not feel like worms. So the motto was changed to "And do you think the words of your book are certainly true? Yea, verily." But The Lowell Offering died in December 1845 under the favorite motto, "Is Saul..." when Curtis retired from the magazine.

The public welcomed The Lowell Offering with pleasant suprise and many spoke highly of it.[210] Charles Dickens wrote about it in his "American Notes" and compared it with a great many English annuals.[211] President Felton of Harvard, while in Paris, heard an entire

lecture on the history and literary merits of The Lowell Offering. George Sand(Madame Dudevant) thought it was wonderful that American mill girls could write and edit their own magazine. A London editor published a book of selections from The Lowell Offering in 1844.

The editors did not revise or rewrite any of the articles. Curtis and Farley published the articles exactly as the mill girls wrote them. The girls contributed articles on a great variety of subjects to the magazine. They wrote about common scenes, incidents that they had witnessed with their own eyes, and the beauties of nature. They described their homestowns and the society there. They presented accounts of factory ways and factory works and of factory girls' pursuits, hobbies and feelings. They wrote short novels, histories of local events and articles on domestic scenes and habits. They wrote poetry and allegories on a variety of topics.[212]

The Lowell Offering achieved the goals established for it by the editors. The editors wanted to remove any stigma attached to the name of the factory girl by showing that a worker in the mills was as able and intelligent as any other American lady and worthy of a place in society.[213] The aim of the magazine was not to promote controversy but rather to prove that goodness and intelligence, a "mind among the spindles", could and did exist among factory girls.[214] It was almost the only magazine that reached the secluded villages to be lent from house to house and read and reread. Robinson summed up The Lowell Offering and the writers: "The authors

represented what may be called the poetic element of factory life. They were the ideal mill girls, full of hopes, desires, aspirations; poets of the loom, spinners of verse, artists of factory-life."

As labor troubles began to menace the pleasant world of the mill girls and industrial depressions sent wages downward, the female laborers became more outspoken in resisting the worsening conditions and the reduction of wages. The girls struck in the early 1830's.[8,15] One of the first strikes of cotton factory operatives in the United States took place in Lowell in October 1836. The strikes were acts of courage in light of the social convention of the day that frowned on such "unladylike behavior". The corporations, due to economic troubles, had decided to cut wages and the operatives, in return, planned to strike "en masse". They succeeded in doing so and the mills shut down. Between 1200 and 1500 girls went in progression to the grove on Chapel Hill and listened to "incendiary speeches" from early labor reformers. Robinson remembered that first strike very vividly. She worked in one of the lower rooms where she heard the proposed strike fully discussed. The upper rooms went on strike first and the girls in the lower rooms just stood around, uncertain of what they should do. Robinson, only eleven years old at the time, marched out of the mill with no thought at all, followed by others. But these early strikes only lasted a few days, at the most, and the operatives either returned to the mills or went home while the corporation continued in cutting wages, speeding up the machines,

etc.[216]

By the early 1840's, hours, wages and conditions had all become burning questions among the operatives. At the same time The Lowell Offering existed, different groups of factory girls published magazines, such as the Factory Girl's Advocate and the Voice of Industry, that called for reforms.[217] Besides writing about necessary changes, the magazines, especially the Voice of Industry, attacked The Lowell Offering, saying that it gave a false representation of the truth about factory life.[218]

The Voice of Industry also served as the voice of the Female Labor Reform Association(FLRA), one of the first unions of female factory workers. Twelve operatives organized the FRLA in January of 1845, for the male labor unions excluded the factory girls, and, six months later, the membership had grown to 500. FRLA's constitution called for every member to pledge herself to work "actively for reform in the present system of labor".[219] The FRLA led a tireless campaign to convince the public of the need for reform in the mills by attempting to expose and counteract the false impressions. They organized fairs, May parties, social gatherings and established the "Industrial Reform Lyceum", where outstanding lecturers spoke to the factory girls on the need for reform. They published and distributed factory tracts aimed at presenting the truth behind factory life.[220] The FRLA sent representatives to the convention of the New England Workingmen's Association and worked side by side with the men.

The FRLA seriously dedicated itself to the ten hour movement.[221]

The girls signed petitions calling for ten hour work days in great number.[222] They felt long hours impaired health, induced disease and casued premature old age and death while, also, bringing about intellectual degeneracy.[223] The girls believed they needed time to advance physically, socially, intellectually and morally.[224] Long work hours provided no time to devote oneself to moral, religious or intellectual instruction.[225] By shortening the work day to ten hours, the operatives lives would be lengthened and they would have time for mental and moral cultivation and they would have time to attend to their personal affairs.[226]

By 1847, the ten hour movement was clearly a failure and the FRLA changed their name to the "Lowell Female Industrial Reform and Mutual Aid Society". The society appealed to the self-love of the factory girls and their higher natures to bring about an improved society for the masses.[227]

The mill girls, though, were not lifelong mill workers. They worked in the factories for a few years and then returned home, moved West, or married and settled down. They went into business, entered trades, or went to college. They took with them their experiences from the cotton mills and used them in their future vocations.[228]

The class of mill workers known as the "Lowell mill girls" existed only for a short time during the early growth of cotton manufacturing. As with the origin of the "Lowell mill girls", the breakdown and disappearance of this unique class of factory workers was brought about by a number of forces-economic, social and

political. By the mid 1840's, owners instigated speedups in order to reduce unit costs of production to compete in the textile market. Operatives had to manage more spindles and looms, and the owner cut wages and allowed working conditions to deteriorate. As a result of these changes, the mill girls protested their condition and when that did not work, many left the factories to be replaced by the increasing flow of immigrants.

During the 1840's, the mill girls became increasingly aware that the corporations used the girls to "capitalize on the favorable image of the factory girl created by the operatives' own efforts." They realized that the favorable image was no compensation for exploitation.[229] The operatives revolted and reacted with "independent and solid character" to the existing working conditions. They had "grown tired of endless labor, of tending as many as three looms, of long hours of daily indoor work broken only for two hastily gulped meals with only Sundays and four holidays off during a year."[230]

But the question remains as to what brought about these working conditions that the girls protested against and what were the conditions that they now worked under. The economics of the country during the 1830's and 1840's had a great effect on bring about a decrease in the working environment. The system of protective legislation that had began in 1816 to encourage the manufacture of certain goods remained a policy of the country until the late 1830's and early 1840's. Congress passed protective tariffs in 1824, 1828 and 1832.[231] The Tariff of 1824 combined the

protective tariff and "an a national system of internal improvements as a means of expanding the domestic market and lessening the United States dependence upon overseas sources."[232] The tariff increased the minimum duty of twenty-five percent to thirty-three and one-third percent. But the tariff failed to eliminate British competition.[233] In 1828, protection reached its highest point with the Tariff of 1828 which kept the rate of duty at thirty-three and a third percent. But minimum valuations were added that carried the actual duty beyond the actual rate. Cloth costing less than forty cents a square yard would pay a duty as if it had cost forty cents. Cloth costing between forty cents and $2.50 would be charged the duty at the price of $2.50. And cloth costing between $2.50 and $4.00 would be charged a duty at the cost of $4.00.[234] The Tariff of 1832 continued the high duty on articles that need protection. The average duty levied on cotton goods was thirty-three percent.[235] Shortly after 1832, the movement in favor of protection lost its strength while the young industries argument began to be stressed less. Those manufactures had ceased to be young industries and the argument for their protection was no longer valid.[236]

Between 1832 and 1860, the trend of the government was to enact tariffs that lowered the duties and made a swing away from protection. The Compromise Act of 1833 gradually undermined the protective legislation. The Compromise Act called for a rapid reduction of the duties to a uniform rate of twenty percent. The Tariff of 1832 would be the starting point. All duties in which

the duty exceeded twenty percent would have one-tenth of the excess over the twenty percent taken off on January 1, 1834. One-tenth more would be taken off on January 1, 1836 and again in 1838 and 1840. By 1840, four-tenths of the excess over twenty percent would be gone. On January 1, 1842, one-half of the remaining excess wuld be taken off and on July 1, 1842, the other half of the remaining excess would be removed. The end result would be a uniform rate of twenty percent on all articles after July 1, 1842.[237]

And by July 1, 1842, a twenty percent duty existed that only remained in effect for two months, from July until September 1 when the Tariff Act of 1842 went into effect. The duty it levied was high in relation to previous tariffs but was lower that that which had existed in 1816. But the tariff did not have a strong popular feeling behind it as had existed in favor of the protective measures of 1824, 1828 and 1832. The Tariff of 1842 remained in effect for four years.[238]

The years between 1832 and 1860 were also a time of great fluctuations in the course of trade and industry. It was a time of low tariff, then high tariff, then low tariff and of undue inflation, great demoralization, prosperity and depression.[239] Economic depressions, which occurred in the years 1825-1826, 1833-1834 and 1837-1843, contributed to the decline of the Lowell mill girls. The depression of 1837-1843 affected the mills and their operatives the most. A good many farmers in New England lost their farms during the economic crisis. As the New England farm disappeared, the freedom of the mill operatives contracted. Many

of the mill girls could no longer escape from the mills to their homes on the farms when they were sick or just wanted to get away. The earlier mill girls had that advantage of returning home to get away from the mills. The mill girls needed this escape because of the pressures of hours, discipline and speed of the machines. The early factory population was extremely mobile and did not stay in the mills long, usually between nine months and four to five years. Plus, the majority of the girls were not the sole means of support for the family and they could leave whenever they desired. This tremendous labor turnover could not last forever and, sooner or later, a permanent factory population would have to appear. The depression brought about this more permanent factory population where the mill girls were often the primary wage earners in the family. This permanent station lead to the desire for the girls to improve the condition they worked and lived under. And for many, it meant a loss of the dream of making more out of their lives than being workers until the end.[240]

The early 1840's, also, saw a depression in all kinds of businesses that became so oppressive that many of the manufacturing establishments in New England were closed down or ran only part-time, leading to the dismissal of operatives. Also, textile mills, using water power,had been springing up all over New England and the Lowell mills faced competition. Prices fell causing a surplus of goods. The proprietors of the thirty large cotton mills in Lowell gravely considered whether the mills should be shut down, dividends to shareholders should be reduced or that wages should be

lowered. They decided, instead, to reduce wages, which was done several times bringing down wages a considerable amount, generally from twenty-five to fifty percent. In one corporation weekly wages were from seventy-five cents to about two dollars after room and board, in 1840. By 1846, wages ran from fifty-five cents to a dollar and a half, which made a twenty-five percent reduction in spite of the fact that the girls were doing thirty-three percent more work. This decision affected between 7,000 and 8,000 female operatives. The mills ran on but no sales were made because the South and West had no money or credit. The passage of the Tariff of 1842 assisted in keeping the mills running but wages continued at a low rate.[241]

In the early years of Lowell, the corporations remained very largely under the orginal corporation control. But between 1840 and 1860, the Lowell corporations went through a series of internal changes that deprived them of all that had been commendable in early paternal administration. The corporations were originally formed and owned by a "few sincere and religiously minded men who were at least interested in welfare of their employers".[242] But as the corporations grew and the stock was put upon the market, control increasingly passed out of the shareholders and into the hands of the officers and the selling agencies who owned little stock in the corporation. The result of this and the bleeding of corporation by those in control was considerable agitation towards the end of the 1850's among the shareholders themselves.[243] The corporations suffered severly in 1850's from depredation of inner

rings and an infiltration of those of irresponsible in character and without interest in the welfare of corporations or the operatives. As the control of corporations passed out of the hands of the original owners, a chiefly exploitive purpose came to dominate the policy. Wages were cut, hours were not appreciably reduced in relation to the number of looms per worker or the speed of the looms.[244]

By 1843, the end of the depression neared and the cotton manufactures were busily employed. Every spindle was twirling and double sets of hands were engaged so as to work night and day. This meant a general prosperity and excellent profits but it did not mean an improvement of the conditions for the operatives. The Tariff of 1842 succeeded in increasing profits and maintained prices while wages fell or remained stationary. And at the first sign of a weakened market, wages cuts were made.[245]

Along with the lowering of wages was the speed-up policy and the addition of more looms tended by the operatives. In the 1830's, the operatives only had to tend two looms. In the 1840's, the girls did not have to tend any more looms and frames than they felt they could take care of and had plenty of time to sit and rest. By the end of the 1840's, the girls attended four looms.[246] Work increased without the corresponding increased pay. The speed of the machines increased causing the effort and attention required of the opertives to increase. In the 1820's and 30's, the looms made from 216 to 324 picks a minute. By the 1840's, the looms ran at 480 picks a minute.[247] So besides working more looms, the girls'

looms ran a faster speed. The increased speed of the looms and the increased number of looms that operatives attended meant that the girls could no longer relieve one another at their work, snatch rest of fifteen minutes or to read a book propped up on the frame.

Through education and the reform movements, the factory girls became aware of their situation and started to protest against it. The girls signed one-sided contracts where the corporation accepted no responsibility as to the length of employment and reserved the right to change the conditions as to wages, hours, speed and effort as they saw fit. Corporations were bound together by close agreements as to wages, hours and blacklists. The corporations used the blacklist as part of the "moral police" and believed it was a commendable method of maintaining the character of the mills and the operatives.

The girls found that the factory and boardinghouse regulations were innumerable and covered every smallest aspect of the operatives' lives. Only about one-tenth of all the regulations were printed and the corporations told the operatives "when, where, how and for how much they must work; when and where they were to eat and sleep." They ordered the girls to attend church and pay a pew rent. And the corporations would discharge an operative for immoral conduct, for bad language, for disrespect, for attending dancing classes or for any cause that the overseers thought sufficient. Once dismissed, the girls found themselves on the blacklist and they would not be able to find work in any other mill. In order to receive an "honorable discharge", a girl had to

work one full year and then had to give two weeks notice before leaving.[248]

Many saw themselves becoming no better than slaves, devoting fifteen out of the twenty-four hours in a day to the interest of the corporation while under strict restrictions and with no voice in their own condition.[249] "Factory labor incarcerated the girls within the walls of a factory" where they worked from five in the morning until seven at night, year after year and caused ignorance, misery and premature decay of both body and intellect.[250] They crowded into boardinghouses with no privacy and a lack of cleanliness where they were deprived of the opportunities for "quiet, undisturbed reflection, so important to moral and intellectual improvement of the mind."[251] Twelve and thirteen hour days led to a mind with no vigor, energy, ambition or pride. The owners had no concern for the bodies and intellects of those who worked for them.[252]

Socially, new definitions for men and women, in relation to class structure and the separation of work and home life, emerged. The possibility existed for the middle class woman to aspire to the status of lady, formerly reserved for upper class women. A lifestyle of genteel leisure became the status symbol and the ideal for all women, whether they could afford it or not. Idleness, formely seen as a sin for women in early colonial America, became a virtue. And the women of the growing wage work force were looked down upon for having to work. This attitude brought about a negative stereotype to factory that had earlier been seen

positively.[253]

The efforts to improve working conditions and raise wages by the mill girls led to dissatisfaction on both sides and opened the door for cheaper immigrant labor.[254] The increased number of immigrants became effective in breaking up any mass movements of the period aimed at reform.[255] The pressures of the mills drove the New England girls out and they were replaced by new immigrants. The immigrants did not drive the women out from the mills but, rather, took their place after the girls had been driven out by the conditions of the industry. When business revived in the late 1840's, the owners faced difficulties as the demands for high dividends remained constant and labor unrest intensified. The Irish who streamed into Lowell offered the mill owners a solution to the problem of finding an alternative to the employment of Yankee farm women.[256]

A small percentage of Irish were present in Lowell in the early 1820's. The mill owners used them to build the factories and the canals. The Irish were mostly men and there were almost no Irish women in the mills in the 1820's. By 1830, the Irish population in Lowell had increased to about 500.[257] The mills constantly had a need for additional workers due to the high turnover rates, labor agitation and increasing production.[258] The Irish provided a logical choice for a pool of additional workers. The influential Irish men believed in accomodation with the Yankees and they saw mill employment as a truimph of the accomodation policy. So the opening of the mills to the Irish was gradual and

reflected a need for extra hands.[259]

Once the first Irish were employed in the mills, more followed in an unorganized migration in which the Irish obtained jobs individually and without active solicitation by the mills. They received jobs when vacancies occurred or when the mills hired extra help. Many Irish women found employment through an extensive network of relatives and friends who recommended them to particular overseers. This network of relatives and friends increased the percentage of Irish in Lowell's overall workforce. In the Hamilton mill, eight percent of employees were Irish in 1845 but, by 1850, the number had increased to one-third.

Business recessions threw operatives out of work and many of the Yankee factory workers returned home or moved on. When the mills revived, labor was in demand and the Irish supplied labor who would work for whatever terms they could get. Many mills abandoned recruiting Yankee mill girls completely and employed Irish women instead. Some hired Irish girls to permanently replace the girls who had gone home during the warm seasons to visit friends and family. The Irish girls, according to the owners, had no friends to visit in the United States and would remain at their posts all through the year.[260] "Whereas before, the Irish women had filled vacancies or moved into newly created jobs, the Lowell mill agents now turned their back on the labor system which had made Lowell famous by substituting Irish women permanently for Yankee operatives."[261]

With the famine in Ireland, a stable and steady flow of

immigrants poured into cities like Lowell and provided a constant, almost inexhaustible source of labor. And by the late 1840's, the New England mill girls were rapidly being replaced by immigrants.[262]

Things were a lot different for these factory operatives of the late 1800's. The workers did not go to the mills with the same "jubilant feeling that the old mill girls used to have."[263] Work was drudgery and they did it without aim or purpose and took little interest in it beyond the thought that it was the means of earning their daily bread. The girls carried themselves with a tired hopelessness and had an underfed, prematurely old age look.

The hours of labor for them were less but the corporations required them to do far greater amount of work in a given time and tend more frames and looms. The girls were always on the jump and had no opportunity to improve themselves. They were too weary to read any good books and too overworked to digest what they had read.

The factories were not so pleasant nor healthy to work in as they used to be. Once the mills were well lighted, well ventilated, and moderately heated.[264] Each building stood detached with "pleasant sunlit windows, chcerful views and fresh air from all points''[265] During the late 1840's, the mills were made into a solid mass by connecting the annexes and half of the operatives had no view except for a brickwall. Windows and doors were kept shut and the air was unfit to breathe, since no fresh air could circulate in the confined space. The heat was so intense that one found it hard to breathe. Windows and doors were kept shut.

The boardinghouses were not kept clean or in repair as they used to be and were in the most dilapidated condition. Robinson, in a later visit to Lowell, commented that she felt as if she was "revisiting the ruins of an industry once clean and prosperous."[266]

The corporations, during the late 1800's, no longer represented a protecting care or exerted a paternalistic influence over its operatives. Instead, they became "soulless organizations whose members forgot that they were morally responsible for souls and bodies, as well as wages, of those whose labor was the source of their welfare."[267] The factory and its operatives appeared more like those in England.

During the rise of the cotton manufacture in America, one city stood out in its importance to the industry. Along with the role Lowell played in the cotton industry, the city, also, produced a unique "class" of factory workers. These mill operatives were predominately female and they came to Lowell from the surrounding area. These female mill girls lived, while in Lowell, under a paternalistic system aimed at protecting their moral characters. In Lowell, they earned good wages and experienced a life unlike that at home. They became involved in literary and social reforms of the time and, even, published a magazine as unique as the mill girls. This "class" of mill girl flourished in the mills only during the early rise of manufacturing.

By the 1850's, the day among the "mind of the spindles had passed". "The white gowned girl who marched to welcome Presidents, who talked so intelligently to foreign visitors, who wrote poetry

and stories filled with classical allusions were no longer found in the cotton mills".[208] They were driven out by the prolonged and fruitless struggle to protect their standards. Lower wages and poor working conditions led these girls to leave Lowell. But, while in Lowell, they made an impact on history.

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