

The Mill Girls

Lowell National Historical Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



"Power Looms. One Girl Works Four," ca. 1867. Collection of Lowell NHP.

Who were the “mill girls”? The term “mill girls” was occasionally used in antebellum newspapers and periodicals to describe the young Yankee women, generally 15 - 30 years old, who worked in the large cotton factories. They were also called “female operatives.” Female textile workers often described themselves as mill girls, while affirming the virtue of their class and the dignity of their labor. During early labor protests, they asserted that they were “the daughters of freemen” whose rights could not be “trampled upon with impunity.” Despite the hardship of mill work, women remained an important part of the textile workforce for many years. In the late 19th century, women held nearly two-thirds of all textile jobs in Lowell, with many immigrant women joining Yankee mill girls in the textile industry.

and often grueling working conditions. Yet many female textile workers saved money and gained a measure of economic independence. In addition, the city’s shops and religious institutions, along with its educational and recreational activities, offered an exciting social life that most women from small villages had never experienced.

Leaving Home

Most of the women who came to Lowell were from farms and small villages. Some had labored in

75 Young Women
From 15 to 35 Years of Age,
WANTED TO WORK IN THE
COTTON MILLS!
IN LOWELL AND CHICOOPEE, MASS.



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Choices and Changes

To find workers for their mills in early Lowell, the textile corporations recruited women from New England farms and villages. These “daughters of Yankee farmers” had few economic opportunities, and many were enticed by the prospect of monthly cash wages and room and board in a comfortable boardinghouse. Beginning in 1823, with the opening of Lowell’s first factory, large numbers of young women moved to the growing city. In the mills, female workers faced long hours of toil

Recruitment flyer ca. 1875. Courtesy of Baker Library, Harvard University.

small textile mills. Others had produced cotton or woolen goods or shoes for merchants who employed men and women in their homes and paid them by the pieces they produced.

On many farms the father was the property owner and head of household. Family members shared daily and seasonal tasks. In addition to

strenuous chores outdoors, mothers and daughters toiled in the home, cooking, cleaning, and making clothes. This hardscrabble life proved increasingly difficult for young women, and by the early 1800s a growing number of Yankee farm families faced severe economic difficulties. For many young, rural women, the decision to leave home for a city like Lowell was often born of necessity.

A New Way to Live and Work

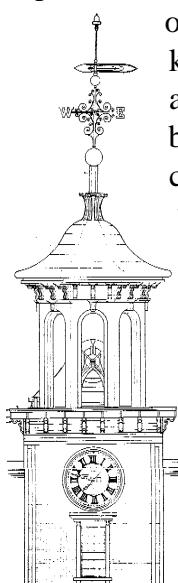
For most young women, Lowell's social and economic opportunities existed within the limits imposed by the powerful textile corporations. Most pronounced was the control corporations exerted over the lives of their workers. The men who ran the corporations and managed the mills sought to regulate the moral conduct and social behavior of their workforce. Within the factory, overseers were responsible for maintaining work discipline and meeting production schedules. In the boardinghouses, the keepers enforced curfews and strict codes of conduct. Male and female workers were expected to observe the Sabbath, and temperance was strongly encouraged.

The clanging factory bell summoned operatives to and from the mill, constantly reminding them that their days were structured around work. Most textile workers toiled for 12 to 14 hours a day and half a day on Saturdays; the mills were closed on Sundays. Typically, mill girls were employed for nine to ten months of the year, and many left the factories during part of the summer to visit back home.

Life in a Boardinghouse

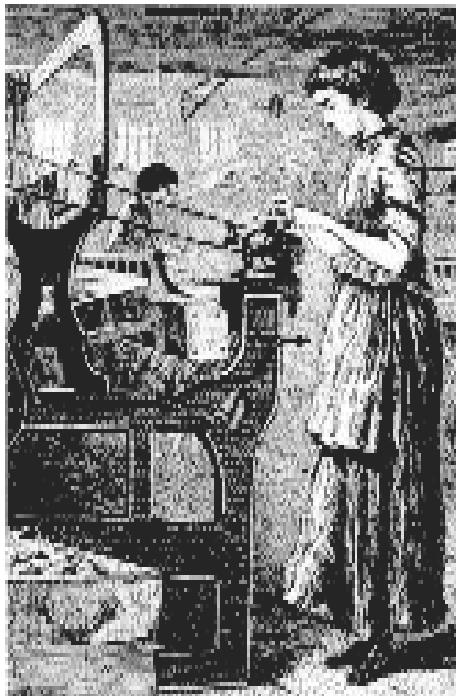
The majority of mill girls in Lowell lived in boardinghouses. These large, corporation-owned buildings were

often run by a female keeper, or a husband and wife. A typical boardinghouse consisted of four units, with 20 to 40 women living in each unit.



For most young women, life in the boardinghouse was dramatically different from life on the farm. Usually they shared a room with three other

Many newcomers to Lowell had never seen a structure larger than a barn or church steeple. What must it have been like to stand and gaze for the first time upon Lowell's massive factory buildings and marvel at their size? What might a young woman have felt? Excitement? Anxiety? Fear? How did mill girls cope with their new surroundings?



Mill girl tending a loom, 1871. Collection of Lowell NHP.

women, sleeping two to a bed. A fireplace in each room provided warmth in the colder seasons. The keeper prepared three meals a day, and the women dined together in a common room. Women formed many new friendships with other female boarders. The bonds created through daily social intercourse helped new workers adjust to the demands of factory life. And during the strife of labor protests, boardinghouses often became informal centers of organizing activity.

Voices of Protest

Lowell's textile corporations paid higher wages than those in other textile cities, but work was arduous and conditions were frequently unhealthy. Although the city's corporations threatened labor reformers with firing or blacklisting, many mill girls protested wage cuts and working conditions. Female workers struck twice in the 1830s. In the 1840s, female labor reformers banded together to promote the ten-hour day, in the face of strong corporate opposition. Few strikes succeeded, however, and Lowell's

workforce remained largely unorganized. Adding to the difficulties of organizing Lowell's operatives was the changing ethnic composition of the workforce. The number of Irish employed in Lowell's mills rose dramatically in the 1840s, as Irish men and women fled their famine-stricken land. Thousands of immigrants from many other countries settled in Lowell in the decades after the Civil War, yet women remained a major part of the Lowell's textile workforce. In large strikes against the textile manufacturers in 1903 and 1912, women workers played prominent roles.

One of Lowell's early leading labor reformers was a mill girl named Sarah Bagley. Born on a New Hampshire farm in 1806, Bagley arrived in Lowell in 1836 and worked in a number of mills. She became a powerful speaker on behalf of male and female workers, promoted the 10-hour workday, and edited the labor newspaper *The Voice of Industry*.

In a letter to a friend in 1846, Bagley promoted the labor-reform publication *Factory Tracts* as representing the interests of those "who are not willing to see our sex made into living machines to do the bidding of the incorporated aristocrats and reduced to a sum for their bodily services hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together." Although the struggles of Bagley and other mill girls to achieve legislation for a 10-hour day failed, Lowell's textile corporations did reduce the workday to 11 hours.



Weave room, Boott Cotton Mills Museum. Collection of Lowell NHP.