

The Mill Girls & Immigrants Exhibit

National Park Service
Department of the Interior



Lowell National Historical Park



Boott Mill boardinghouse residents, ca.1875.

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Dining room, Mill Girls & Immigrants Exhibit.

Through a self-guided tour, discover the history of Lowell’s “mill girls” and immigrants. Explore the kitchen, dining room, and bedrooms of a reconstructed corporation boardinghouse furnished in the style of the 1850s. Listen to conversations of 19th-century women workers whose experiences are brought to life by an audio program. Enter the social and cultural worlds of Lowell’s diverse ethnic groups, dating from the first Irish laborers in the 1820s to recent Southeast Asian emigres.

The Mill Girls & Immigrants Exhibit tells the human story of the Industrial Revolution by featuring the experiences of Lowell’s working people. The exhibit is housed in the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center, 40 French Street, in a reconstructed corporation boardinghouse.

The Boardinghouses



Merrimack Manufacturing Company boardinghouses, 1848.

Incorporated as a town in 1826, Lowell grew to contain numerous water-powered factories, as well as boardinghouses for its workers. To attract and meet the basic needs of a varied workforce, the textile corporations built low-cost, communal living units. Early boardinghouses in Lowell and other New England mill towns were two -and- a -half -story, whitewashed duplexes made of wood. By the mid-1830s, three-and-a-half-story brick rowhouses, reflecting the now more familiar Lowell boardinghouse design, became the norm. These dwellings housed 20 to 40 people and contained a kitchen, a dining room and parlor, a keeper’s quarters, and up to ten bedrooms. Row after row of boardinghouse blocks visually distinguished Lowell from earlier New England mill towns.

The majority of the residents in Lowell’s boardinghouses were single, female wage-earners employed in the city’s textile mills. Known as “mill girls,” these young women hailed largely from New England’s rural villages and farms. They lived in closely supervised corporation-controlled boardinghouses. The textile corporation managers sought control over their workers not only inside the mills, but also within the community. Their paternalistic practices extended to the moral guardianship and physical care of the young factory women.

Boardinghouse Life

Under this early form of corporate paternalism, the millworkers’ behavior came under the watchful eyes of the boardinghouse keepers. The corporations required the keepers to report any unacceptable conduct to mill managers. Intemperance, rowdiness, illicit relations with men, and “habitual absence from worship on the Sabbath” were grounds for dismissal from the factory and removal from the boardinghouse. The keepers were also responsible for purchasing or renting everything needed to furnish a house and feed its occupants. Room and

board costs, which ranged from \$1.25 to \$1.50 per week during the 1830s and 1840s, were deducted from wages. For this amount, workers received three meals a day, limited laundry service, and a bed in a shared room.

Most mill workers shared living space with relatives, friends from home villages, and strangers. Their bedrooms provided little privacy. Typically four to six people slept in a room and often two women shared a double bed. Despite the overcrowded conditions, communal living in the

boardinghouses fostered close bonds between working women and helped new hires adjust to factory toil and city life. Although boardinghouse keepers were employed by the corporations, they functioned as small businessmen and women.

Transitions

The boardinghouses remained an important part of the Lowell factory system through the late 19th and early 20th century. During these decades, Lowell’s textile corporations expanded their mills and improved their housing, adding such features as indoor plumbing, central heating and other amenities. The mill workers who lived in the boardinghouses, however, were increasingly foreign-born men and women. While the first workers in Lowell were of English, Scottish, and

Irish descent, later workers included French-Canadian, Greek, and Portuguese immigrants, as well as immigrants from Poland and other Eastern European countries. They took up the many unskilled jobs in the mills. Immigrant workers, often in family groups, predominated as boardinghouse residents. By 1900, male boardinghouse residents outnumbered female, a remarkable departure from Lowell’s first few decades of industrial development.

End of an Era



View from 1928 of Boott boardinghouse rows before demolition.

Changing social values and competitive capitalism rendered old forms of paternalism obsolete. When corporations found boardinghouse maintenance too expensive, they began selling off the buildings, converting them to storage facilities or demolishing them to make way for warehouses or other structures. The Boott Mills’ corporation housing continued to be home to mill workers and their families long after the Yankee “mill girls” ceased to be the major part of the labor force.

The boardinghouse system continued well into the 20th century, becoming mainly privately-run, family tenement housing, before finally expiring along with Lowell’s textile industry. Neglect and urban renewal resulted in the loss of almost all of Lowell’s boardinghouses.

Boott Cotton Mills' Boardinghouses

The Boott Cotton Mills, incorporated in 1835, originally built eight rows of boardinghouses directly across from its factory. Each row of dwellings contained four boardinghouse units in the center and a tenement unit on each end. Unmarried textile operatives lived in the boardinghouse units, while supervisors and skilled workers lived with their families in the tenement sections. Unlike the boardinghouse units, which resembled dormitories, the

tenements were more like apartments with individual kitchen facilities. Of brick construction, the boardinghouse rows measured 150 feet long, 36 feet wide, and were built in the early Georgian style. Their uniform appearance, which was visually enhanced by the lines of tall chimneys, gable-roof dormers, and symmetrically placed windows, expressed the Boott corporation’s desire for orderliness and rigid discipline.



Boott Mill Boardinghouse block #7, housing the Mill Girls & Immigrants Exhibit, as it appears today.