

II. THE MILL GIRL'S DILEMMA

Most textile mills in the early United States, as you have seen in the previous essays, were relatively small “Slater-style” mills and employed whole families. However, the very large manufacturing experiments in Lowell, Massachusetts, were intended from the beginning to employ young country girls who were old enough to be away from home but not yet married and settled. The men developing Lowell in the 1820s knew well the prevailing prejudice in America against urban industrial employment (England’s mills already were notorious), and they set up a system of employment and supervision that was supposed to guarantee the health and character of the operatives. Housed in safe dormitories, fed wholesome fare, provided with sociable activities and paternalistic oversight, young women (and thus their parents) were supposed to feel comfortable working in Lowell for a few years before continuing their “natural” domestic careers as wives and mothers. Cash wages would sustain the girls in Lowell, supplement the family income back home, and build up their wedding dowries.

As with so many things in the market revolution, the best intentions turned out to be very hard to deliver. Large scale manufacturing of cotton cloth, both at home and in England, progressed more dramatically than anyone imagined. Capital inputs kept rising with innovations in machinery as prices for cloth tumbled; manufacturers were forced to look for every kind of efficiency just to keep ahead of the competition. By the mid-1830s the inevitable pressure to economize, the wage bill clashed with the benevolent designs of Lowell’s original promoters. Work hours grew longer, conditions less safe and secure, food and rooms less wholesome, and overall conditions more damaging and dispiriting than anyone had imagined.

The rise of Lowell, and the appeal of urban factory work for young women, occurred simultaneously with the decline of the fortunes of rural New England. Population growth together with the natural

limits of economic opportunity in cold, stony Vermont and New Hampshire caused a steady out-migration and cast a shadow over the prospects of daughters ever marrying neighborhood farm boys and settling near their homes. Therefore, girls thinking about their futures found themselves sorely tempted to try their hand at factory employment, knowing full well they had no intention of making it their life's work. Even as women already at Lowell complained of their disappointment, other, youngsters stood ready to exchange dismal prospects at home – raising their mothers’ babies – for the brass ring of modern opportunity.

Pretend you are a New Hampshire country girl, 18 years old, with two brothers (to divide the farm), three sisters, and no dowry (and little prospect of getting one at home). You want to go to Lowell to work in the mills. Your parents are skeptical but can be persuaded. Mom wants you to stay and help with the housework and dairy, but Dad is attracted to the prospect of your sending home a little cash. Think of the following questions:

- What is in it for you?
- What can you look forward to in Lowell?
- What type of income can you expect to generate?
- What opportunities exist for excitement? Society? Travel? Freedom?
- What risks do you need to consider? Health? Habits? Virtue?
- Will you lose your reputation?
- Will it be hard to find a husband?
- What is the worst case scenario if you stay at home on the farm? The best?
- What is the worst case scenario if you go to work in Lowell? The best?

After you have studied the documents and considered the questions, what do you think is the best choice for you? Do race, religion, ethnicity, sex, and family connections have any impact on your analysis?

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DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

1. Below are some fragments of employment documents you might have seen.

Help Wanted!

“October 1, 1829

“The subscribers are in want of Twenty-four good [female] Water Loom Weavers, to whom good wages will be given, part cash or all, if particularly required. None need apply unless they are willing to work twelve hours per-day [sic], and be subject to good rules and regulations while weaving.

J. Underwood & Co.”

[Source: Reproduced in Gary Kulik, Roger Parks, and Theodore Z. Penn, eds., *The New England Mill Village, 1790-1860* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1982], 410.]

Factory Rules

“From 20th Sept to 20th March the Wheel Starts at Sunrise, Stops at half past Seven O Clock—One half hour is allowed for Breakfast—Three Quarters for Dinner—From 20th March to 20th Sept Starts at Sunrise & Stops at Sunset—One half hour is allowed for breakfast—One [Hour] for Dinner—It is expected every person will be at their places ready to work at the Starling of the Wheel, which will be at the above mentioned hours—Any Person being absent 15 Minutes after the Wheel is Started will have ¼ of a day deducted from their wages—

“No person will leave the room under any pretence [sic] without permission from the Overseer.

“The Overseer will pay particular attention to the hands under his charge, that they perform the Work allotted them—He will not permit them to leave the

room without sufficient reason—Nor allow any Person not employed in the Establishment to Visit his room without permission—“

[Source: from an unnamed mill, in the Zachariah Allen Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, reproduced in *The New England Mill Village*, ed. Kulick, Parks, and Penn, 464)

Employment Agreements with rates of pay, board, and terms of payment

October 3, 1828

“Chloe Bugbee agrees to recommence work at weaving in the old mill tomorrow morning and her sister Rhoda Bugbee agrees to commence at the same time to weave in the old mill. Both on the customary terms. Board at Thomas Richmonds’. Began as agreed. Rhoda chooses to weave 2 wks by the wk at 12/ [12 shillings = \$2] then by the yard.”

November 15, 1828

“Miss Louisa Packard agreed to go to weaving in the new mill week after visit on usual terms,, say 7 mills pr yard [7 cents per hundred yards] payable in board, 1/3 cash & residue in goods. To work by the yard from commencement & to stay if agreeable on six months at least, extras excepted.”

[Source: from Pomfret Manufacturing Company Records, Connecticut State library, Hartford, reproduced in *The New England Mill Village*, ed. Kulick, Parks, and Penn, 449-50.]

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2. Rare personal letters further testify to the mill girls' dilemma. The following excerpts trace the progress of a young women into and then again out of the mills.

Sally Rice to her mother and father, Union Village New York, n.d. 1839

[Rice is explaining why she cannot stay at home in the Vermont countryside but must try to find her way in the world by going out to work as a housekeeper.]

"I have got so that by next summer if I could stay I could begin to lay up something Think of it all around I am now most 19 years old I must of course have something of my own before many more years have passed over my head and where is that something coming from if I go home and earn nothing. What can we [get] of[f] of a Rocky farm only 2 or 3 cows. [I]t would be another thing if you kept 9 or 10 cows and could raise com to sell. It surely would be cheper [sic] for you to hire a girl that can do your work one that would be contented to stay in the desert than for me to come home and live in trouble all the time You may think me unkind but how can you blame me for wanting to stay here? I have but one life to live and I want to enjoy my self as well as I can while I live. If I go home I can not have the privelage [sic] of going to me[e]ting [church] nor eny [sic] thing else."

Sally Rice to her father, Masonville, CT Feb 23. 1845

[She has moved again and taken up work in a textile factory]

"Well knowing that you was dolefully prejudiced against a Cotton Factory, and being no less prejudiced myself I thought it best to wait and see how I prospered & also see whether I were going [to] stay or not. I well knew that if I could not make more in the mill than I can doing house work I should not stay. Now I will tell you how I happened to come. The Saturday after New Years I came to Masonville in Thompson Conneticut [sic] with James Alger on a visit to see his sister[s] who weave in the mill While here I was asked to come back and learn to weave. I did not fall in with the idea at all because I well knew that I should

not like as well as I should housework and knowing you would not approve of my working in the mill. But when I considered that I had got myself to take care off I ought to do that way that I can make the most and save the most. I concluded to come and try I get along as well as eny [sic] one could expect. I think verry [sic] likely that before the year is out I shall be able to tend 4 looms and then I can make more. O & P Alger [James Alger's sisters] make 3 dollars a week besides their board. We pay 1,25. cts for our board. We 3 girls board with a Widow Whitmore. She is a first rate homespun woman. I like quite as well as I expected but not as well as I do house work. To be sure it is a noisy [pl]ace and we are confined more than I like to be but I do not wear our my clothes and shoes as I do when I do house work. If I can make 2 dollars per week besides my board and save my clothes and shoes I think it will be better than to do house work for nine shillings. . . I mean for a year or two. I should not like to spend my days in a mill not by a good deal unless they are short because I like a Farm toto] well for that."

Sally Rice to her Father. Mother. Brother & Sister, Millbury. MA Sep 14.1845

[She has quit the mill and taken up housework again.]

"You surely cannot blame me for leaving the factory so long as I realized [sic] that it was killing me to work in it. I went to the factory because I expected to earn more than I can at housework. To be sure I might if I had my health. Could you have seen me att [sic] the time or a week before I came away you would advise me as many others did to leave immediately. I realise [sic] that if I lose my health which is all I possess on earth . . . that I shall be in a sad condition."

[Source: *The New England Mill Village*, ed. Kulik, Parks, and Penn, 387-92.]

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3. One of our richest sources for understanding the mill girls dilemma is the *Lowell Offering*, a magazine published in Lowell comprising only articles and poems written by working girls themselves. The anonymous essay below purports to describe the happy mill girls work week. Read it carefully: is it a celebration or a protest?

**“A Week in the Mill.” Anonymous.
Lowell Offering, Volume V 1845**

“Much has been said of the factory girl and her employment. By some she has been represented as dwelling in a sort of brick- and-mortar paradise, having little to occupy thought save the weaving of gay and romantic fancies, while the spindle or the wheel flies obediently beneath her glance. Others have deemed her a mere servile drudge, chained to her labor by almost as strong a power as that which holds a bondman in his fetters; and, indeed, some have already given her the title of ‘the white slave of the North.’ Her real situation approaches neither one nor the other of these extremes. Her occupation is as laborious as that of almost any female who earns her own living, while it has also its sunny spots and its cheerful intervals, which make her hard labor seem comparatively pleasant and easy.

“Look at her as she commences her weekly task. The rest of the sabbath has made her heart and her step light, and she is early at her accustomed place, awaiting the starting of the machinery. Every thing having been cleaned and neatly arranged on the Saturday night, she has less to occupy her on Monday than on other days; and you may see her leaning from the window to watch the glitter of the sunrise on the water, or looking away at the distant forests and fields, while memory wanders to her beloved country home; or, it may be that she is conversing with a sister-laborer near; returning at regular intervals to see that her work is in order.

“Soon the breakfast bell rings; in a moment the whirling wheels are stopped, and she hastens to join the throng which is pouring through the open gate. At the table she mingles with a various group. Each dispatches the meal hurriedly,

though not often in silence; and if, as is sometimes the case, the rules of politeness are not punctiliously observed by all, the excuse of some lively country girl would be, ‘They don't give us time for manners.’

“The short half-hour is soon over; the bell rings again; and now our factory girl feels that she has commenced her day's work in earnest. The time is often apt to drag heavily till the dinner hour arrives. Perhaps some part of the work becomes deranged and stops; the constant friction causes a belt of leather to burst into a flame; a stranger visits the room, and scans the features and dress of its inmates inquiringly; and there is little else to break the monotony. The afternoon passes in much the same manner. Now and then she mingles with a knot of busy talkers who have collected to discuss some new occurrence, or holds pleasant converse with some intelligent and agreeable friend, whose acquaintance she has formed since her factory life commenced; but much of the time she is left to her own thoughts. While at her work, the clattering and rumbling around her prevent any other noise from her attention, and she must think, or her life would be dull indeed.

“Thus the day passes on, and evening comes; the time which she feels to be exclusively her own. How much is done in the three short hours from seven to ten o'clock. She has a new dress to finish; a call to make on some distant corporation; a meeting to attend; there is a lecture or a concert at some one of the public halls, and the attendance will be thin if she and her associates are not present; or, if nothing more imperative demands her time, she takes a stroll through the street or to the river with some of her mates, or sits down at home to peruse a new book. At ten o'clock all

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is still for the night.

“The clang of the early bell awakes her to another day, very nearly the counterpart of the one which preceded it. And so the week rolls on, in the same routine, till Saturday comes. Saturday! the welcome sound! She busies herself to remove every particle of cotton and dust from her frame or looms, cheering herself meanwhile with sweet thoughts of the coming sabbath; and when, at an earlier hour than usual, the mill is stopped, it looks almost beautiful in its neatness.

“Then approaches the sabbath—the day of rest! If the factory girl keeps it well, it must be at church; for there are some in every boarding-house who find an excuse for staying at home half the day at least. One of her roommates is indisposed; another says she must write a letter to her friends; another has to work so hard during the week that she thinks she ought to make this literally a ‘day of rest,’ so that retirement and meditation are out of the question. But in the sabbath school and sanctuary her

time is well spent. No one is more constant at church, or earlier in her seat, than the operative who has been trained to know the value of the institution of the gospel. The instructions which she receives sink deep into her heart, giving her a fund of thought for the coming week. Her pastor and her sabbath school teacher are felt to be her best friends; and their kindness is a strong allurements to her spirit, often keeping her long from her less-favored home. If it is said that many a one has here found a grave, shall it not also be said that many a one has here found the path to Heaven?

“The writer is aware that this sketch is an imperfect one. Yet there is very little variety in an operative's lift, and little difference between it and any other lift of labor. It lies

‘half in sunlight—half in shade.’

“Few would wish to spend a whole life in a factory, and few are discontented who do thus seek a subsistence for a term of months or years.”

[Transcription from: <<http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/primarysources/lowell/docs/week.html>>.]

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4. Finally, below find a few statistics that show the market pressures faced by textile manufacturers.

TABLE 1. Price Index (Warren Pearson Index, 1910=100)

Year	Textiles	Change	All Goods	Change
1800	225		129	
1810	278	+53	131	+2
1820	211	-67	106	-25
1830	181	-30	91	-15
1840	146	-35	95	+4
1850	67	-79	84	-11
1860	77	+10	93	+9

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, Basic Books: 1976), 201-2.

TABLE 2. Cotton Prices, 1800-1860

Year	Raw Cotton (cents/pound)	Cotton Sheeting (cents/yd)
1800	24	17
1810	16	21
1820	17	16
1830	10	10
1840	08	09
1850	12	07
1860	11	08

Source: *Ibid.*, 208-9.