

Opportunities for Young Women in the Lowell Mills

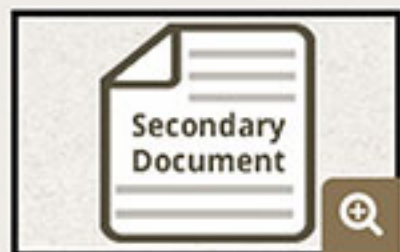
Creator: Mary H. Blewett

Date: 1984

Published in: Caught Between Two Worlds: The Diary of a Lowell Mill Girl

Source type: Historical Essay (secondary source, edited)

Introduction: Historian Mary Blewett describes why many young women in New England sought temporary employment in the new textile mills.



Young, unmarried women could be paid much less in **wages** than young men, but as **textile operatives** they earned higher wages than in any other **women's occupation**. Work for them was intended to be a brief

experience prior to marriage. An operative's job at the **loom** or the **spinning frame** was easily learned, and after several years, each mill girl would return home with savings in her pocket to become a bride...

Thousands and thousands of girls from the towns and villages of New England came to work in the Lowell textile mills in the four decades before the Civil War. One **compelling** reason for a New England farmer's daughter to step into the **stage coach** for Lowell were the new social experiences which the mills opened up. During the first weeks of her stay in the city, a Lowell girl might attend public lectures, and on Sundays investigate the various churches, observing the differences in **doctrine** and **services**. On evenings after work, she could take the opportunity to sample the cultural activities of the new city, including lectures by **anti-slavery advocates** and scientists, as well as theatrical performances and musical concerts.

Mary Stiles Paul Writes Home from Lowell

Creator: Mary Stiles Paul

Date: 1845

Source type: Letters (edited)

Introduction: The young women who worked in the Lowell textile mills were living away from their families, which was highly unusual for women at that time. In these letters home, mill worker Mary Paul describes her life in Lowell to her father back home in Vermont. From age 15 until she was married at 27, Paul moved frequently in search of work. During that time, she found employment at several different textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts.



Sept. 13, 1845; Woodstock, VT

I want you to **consent** to let me go to Lowell if you can. I think it would be much better for me than to stay about here. I could earn more to begin with than I can any where about here. I am in need of clothes which I cannot get if I stay about here and for that reason I want to go to Lowell **or some other place** .

December 21st, 1845; Lowell, MA

Perhaps you would like something about our **regulations**, about going in and coming out of the mill. At 5 o'clock in the morning the bell rings for the folks to get up and get breakfast. At half past six it rings for the girls to get up and at seven they are called into the mill. At half past 12 we have **dinner**, are called back again at one, and stay till half past seven. I get along very well with my work. I can **doff** as fast as any girl in our room. I think that the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell. Tell Harriet that though she does not hear from me she is not forgotten. There are half a dozen letters which I ought to write today but I have not time.

Apr. 12, 1846; Lowell, MA

The **overseer** tells me that he never had a girl get along better than I do and that he will do the best he can by me....I have a very good **boarding place**, have enough to eat and that which is good enough.

Nov. 5, 1848; Lowell, MA

I went to my old **overseer**. I had no idea that he would [give me a job], but he did, and I went to work last Tuesday—the same work I used to do.

It is very hard indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life but perhaps I shall get used to it. I shall try hard to do so for there is no other work that I can do.

Women at Work

Creator: Thomas Dublin

Date: 1993

Published in: *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*

Source type: Historical Essay (secondary source, edited)

Introduction: Historian Thomas Dublin describes the working conditions faced by the young women who worked at the Lowell mills.



From the beginning, Lowell **mill** owners used various strategies to increase the **productivity** of their workers and create **high profits**.

Employees worked an average of 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, 309 days a year. Only three regular holidays provided breaks in the normal work routine.

Women workers in the Lowell mills were known as operatives. They worked at large **machines** that spun thread and wove it into finished cloth. The work was hard, and most workers had difficulty keeping up at first. But, with the help of more experienced women, they learned to run complicated **mechanical looms**.

Farm women were **accustomed to** hard work, but laboring in the large, noisy mills was different. On the farm, women had controlled their own work schedule. And they did many different farm tasks, working at each until it was completed. In the **mill**, women did one task over and over again. The pace and the hours of work were now **determined** by factory owners.

Male workers in the Lowell mills worked as overseers and mechanics. Women never held any **supervisory positions** in the mills. Although they developed skills and helped to train newcomers in the use of the machinery, they never received the higher status and pay of supervisors.

Sarah Bagley Describes Working Conditions in the Lowell Mills

Creator: Sarah Bagley

Date: March, 1845

Published in: Massachusetts House Document, no. 50

Source type: Legal **Testimony** (Edited)

Introduction: In 1845, female workers at Lowell **petitioned** the Massachusetts legislature asking for a ten-hour day law. Female **operatives**, including Sarah Bagley, **testified** about unhealthy working conditions in the mills. State officials decided not to pass the law and to let companies continue to decide the hours of work.



Miss Sarah G. Bagley said she had worked in the Lowell Mills eight years and a half. She is a **weaver**, and **works by the piece**. She worked in the mills three years before her **health began to fail**. She is a native of New Hampshire, and went home six weeks during the summer. Last year she was out of the mill a third of the time.

She thinks the health of the **operatives** is not so good as the health of females who do house-work or **millinery** business. The chief evil, so far as health is concerned, is the shortness of time allowed for meals. The next evil is the length of time employed – not giving them time to **cultivate** their minds. She spoke of the high moral and intellectual character of the girls. That many were **engaged** as teachers in the **Sunday schools**. That many attended the lectures of the Lowell Institute; and she thought, if more time was allowed, that more lectures would be given and more girls attend.

She thought that the girls generally were **favorable** to the ten hour system. She had presented a **petition** to 132 girls, most of whom said that they would prefer to work **but** ten hours. In a [financial] point of view, it would be better, as their health would be improved. They would have more time for sewing. Their intellectual, moral and religious habits would also be benefited by the change.