

CHAPTER

7

Away from Home: The Working Girls of Lowell

* THE PROBLEM *

Just before the War of 1812, the successful New England merchant Francis Cabot Lowell toured Great Britain. Among other things, Lowell was very interested in the English textile industry. The invention of the power loom enabled spinning and weaving operations to be combined within one factory, but the factory system had spawned mill towns with overcrowded slums, horrible living conditions, and high death rates. The potential profits that the new technology offered were great, yet Lowell knew that Americans already feared the Old World evils that appeared to accompany the factory system.

Back in Boston once again, Lowell and his brother-in-law built a power

loom, patented it, raised money, formed a company, and built a textile factory. Realizing that their best source of available labor would be young women from the surrounding New England rural areas and that farm families would have to be persuaded to let their daughters work far from home in the new factories, the company managers developed what eventually came to be known as the Lowell system.

In this chapter, you will be looking at what happened when people's ideas about women's "proper place" conflicted with the labor needs of the new factory system. What did the general public fear? How did the working girls react?

* BACKGROUND *

By the end of the eighteenth century, the American economy began undergoing a process that historians call modernization. This process involves a number of changes, including the rapid expansion of markets, commercial specialization, improved transportation networks, the growth of credit transactions, the proliferation of towns and cities, and the rise of manufacturing and the factory system. Quite obviously, all these factors are interrelated. Furthermore, such changes always have profound effects on people's lifestyles as well as on the pace of life itself.

While the frontier moved steadily westward, the South was primarily agrarian—tied to cash crops such as cotton and tobacco. New England's economy, however, quickly became modernized. Although agriculture was never completely abandoned in New England, by the early 1800s it was increasingly difficult to obtain land, and many small New England farms suffered from soil exhaustion. Young men, of course, could go west—in fact, so many of them left New England that soon there was a "surplus" of young women in the area. In addition, the transformation of New England agriculture and the demise of much of the "putting-out" system of the first local textile manufacturing left many single female workers underemployed or unemployed. What were these farmers' daughters supposed to do? What were their options?

At the same time that these economic developments were occurring,

ideas about white middle-class women and their place in society also were changing. Even before the American Revolution, sharp distinctions between the "better sort" and the "poorer sort" were noticeable, especially in cities like Boston. The Revolution itself, with its emphasis on "republican virtues," drew many women away from their purely domestic duties and into patriotic work for the cause. The uncertainties of the early national period, which followed the Revolution, only intensified the concern about the new republic: How could such a daring experiment in representative government succeed? An essential part of the answer to this question was the concept of "republican motherhood": Women would take on the important task of raising children to be responsible citizens who possessed the virtues (and value system) necessary for the success of the newly independent nation.

Those who study women's history disagree on the question of whether women's status improved or declined as a result of the emphasis on republican motherhood. Nevertheless, it was clear that the new focus on motherhood and child rearing would not only reduce the variety of roles women could play but also limit women's proper place to their own homes.

As historian Alice Kessler-Harris notes in her study of wage-earning women in the United States, there was a direct conflict for poorer or unmarried women between their need to earn money and the ideology that

home and family should be central to *all* women's lives.¹ This emphasis on domestic ideology, Kessler-Harris concludes, sharpened class divisions and eroded any possibility of real independence for women. Historian Christine Stansell reaches many of the same conclusions in her study of gender and class in New York City.² In addition, according to Stansell, young unmarried working women often dressed and behaved in ways that directly challenged domestic ideology and women's place within the home. Such alternative ways of living, especially on the part of young, white, native-born, Protestant women, were deeply disturbing to many Americans, both male and female.

In periods of rapid change, people often try to cling to absolute beliefs and even create stereotypes that implicitly punish those who do not conform. Such a stereotype began to emerge after the American Revolution. According to this stereotype, every "true" woman was a "lady" who behaved in certain ways because of her female nature. Historian Barbara Welter has called this phenomenon the "cult of true womanhood."³ True women possessed four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These characteristics, it was thought, were not so much learned as

they were biologically natural, simply an inherent part of being born female. Women's magazines, etiquette books for young ladies, sermons and religious tracts, and popular short stories and novels all told women what they were like and how they should feel about themselves. Such sources are called "prescriptive literature" because they literally prescribe how people should—and should not—behave.

Of course, historians of women do not argue that there was a direct correlation between how people were *supposed* to behave and how they actually *did* behave. The doctrine of separate spheres could also be both restrictive for women and beneficial for women. At best, it was a complex metaphor for the negotiation and renegotiation of gender relations. But it is clear that in the nineteenth century, the cult of domesticity (the doctrine of separate spheres) established a very powerful and long-lasting set of gender expectations that influenced local and public policy decisions as well as interpersonal relationships.⁴

What, then, was expected of New England farmers' daughters and other respectable (white) women? They were supposed to be pious, more naturally religious than men (real men might occasionally swear, but real women never did). Because they were naturally logical and rational, men

1. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of America's Wage-Earning Women* (New York: Oxford, 1982).

2. Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

3. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-174.

4. Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, and Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 9-39; Nancy Cott, review of *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender*, edited by Laura McCall and Donald Yacovne, *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 170-171.

might pursue education, but true women should not because they might be led into error if they strayed from the Bible. As daughters, wives, or even sisters, women had the important responsibility of being the spiritual uplifters to whom men could turn when necessary.

Just as important as piety was the true woman's purity. This purity was absolute because whereas a man might "sow his wild oats" and then be saved by the love of a good woman, a "fallen woman" could never be saved. In the popular fiction of the period, a woman who had been seduced usually became insane, died, or did both. If she had a baby, it also came to a bad end. Only on her wedding night did a true woman surrender her virginity, and then out of duty rather than passion, because it was widely believed that pure women were not sexually responsive. In fact, many young women of this era knew nothing at all about their own bodies or the nature of sexual intercourse until they married.

Submission and domesticity were perhaps not as vital as piety and purity. Although women who did not submit to men's leadership were destined to be unhappy (according to the thought of the day), they could correct their mistaken behavior. Men were, after all, stronger and more intelligent, the natural protectors of women. A true woman, wrote then-popular author Grace Greenwood, should be like a "perpetual child," who is always "timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent." Such pious, pure, submissive women were particularly well suited to the important task of creating a pleasant, cheerful home—a place

where men could escape from their worldly struggles and be fed, clothed, comforted, and nursed if they were ill. Even a woman who did not have very much money could create such a haven, people believed, simply by using her natural talents of sewing, cooking, cleaning, and flower arranging.

Simultaneously, then, two important trends were occurring in the early 1800s: the northern economy was modernizing, and sexual stereotypes that assigned very different roles to men and women were developing. Whereas a man should be out in the world of education, work, and politics, a woman's place was in the home, a sphere where she could be sheltered.

But what would happen if the economic need for an increased supply of labor clashed with the new ideas about women's place in society? If a young unmarried woman went to work in a factory far away from her parents' farm, would she still be respectable? Where would she live? Who would protect her? Perhaps the experience of factory work itself would destroy those special feminine characteristics all true women possessed. All these fears and more would have to be confronted in the course of the development of the New England textile industry during the 1830s and 1840s.

Although the first American textile mill using water-powered spinning machines was built in 1790, it and the countless other mills that sprang up throughout New England during the next thirty years depended heavily on the putting-out system. The mills made only the yarn, which was then distributed ("put out") to women who

wove the cloth in their own homes and returned the finished products to the mills. In 1820, two-thirds of all American cloth was still being produced by women working at home. But the pace of modernization accelerated sharply with the formation of the Boston Manufacturing Company, a heavily capitalized firm that purchased a large tract of rural land in the Merrimack River valley. The Boston Associates adopted the latest technology and, more important, concentrated all aspects of cloth production inside their factories. Because they no longer put out work, they had to attract large numbers of workers, especially young women from New England farms, to their mills. Lowell, Massachusetts (the "City of Spindles"), and the Lowell mills became a kind of model, an experiment that received a good deal of attention in both Europe and America. As historian Thomas Dublin has shown, most of the young women at the Lowell mills were fifteen to thirty years old, unmarried, and from farm families that were neither the richest nor the poorest in their area. Although some of the Lowell girls occasionally sent small amounts of money back to their families, most used their wages for new clothes, education, and dowries.⁵ These wages were significantly higher than those for teaching, farm labor, or domestic services, the three other major occupations open to women.

The factory girls were required to live and eat in boardinghouses run according to company rules and super-

vised by respectable landladies. The company partially subsidized the cost of room and board and also encouraged the numerous lecture series, evening schools, and church-related activities in Lowell. Girls worked together in the mills, filling the unskilled and semiskilled positions, and men (about one-fourth of the work force) performed the skilled jobs and served as overseers (foremen). Work in the mills also was characterized by strict regulations and an elaborate system of bells that signaled meal-times and work times.

During the 1840s, factory girls occasionally published their own magazines, the most famous of which was the *Lowell Offering*. This journal grew out of a working women's self-improvement society and was sponsored by a local Lowell minister. When the minister was transferred, the mill owners partially subsidized the magazine. The female editors, who were former mill workers, insisted that the magazine was for "literary" work rather than for labor reform. The Evidence section presents a description of Lowell mills and boardinghouses and several selections from the *Lowell Offering* and other sources.

The conflict between economic modernization and the cult of true womanhood was indirectly recognized by many New Englanders and directly experienced by the Lowell mill girls. What forms did this conflict take? What fears and anxieties did it reveal? How did the mill girls attempt to cope with this tension?

5. A dowry is the money, goods, or property that a woman brings into her marriage.

* THE METHOD *

When historians use prescriptive literature as evidence, they ask (1) what message is being conveyed, (2) who is sending the message, (3) why it is being sent, and (4) for whom it is intended. Most of the evidence you are using in this chapter is in some ways prescriptive—that is, it tells people how women *should* behave.

An early major criticism of the effects of factory work on young women was written by Orestes Brownson, a well-known New England editor and reformer. A sharply contrasting view appears in the excerpts from a brief, popular book about Lowell written by Reverend Henry Mills in 1845. Reverend Mills was a local Protestant minister who was asked by the textile company owners to conduct surveys into the workers' habits, health, and moral character. Depending heavily on information provided by company officials, overseers, and landladies, Reverend Mills published *Lowell, As It Was, and As It Is*.

Yet the controversy continued, because only one year later, the journal owned by the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, *Voice of Industry*, painted a much darker picture of the factory girls' "slavery." Although purchased by a militant group of women factory workers, the *Voice* had originated as a labor reform paper. Its editorial policy always addressed larger, worker-oriented issues such as a shorter workday and dedicated a special column to women workers' concerns.

The young women who worked in the textile mills also actively partici-

pated in the debate. The evidence in the selections from the *Lowell Offering* was written by factory girls during the years 1840 to 1843. Also presented is an excerpt from a book written by Lucy Larcom, one of the few children (under age fifteen) employed in the Lowell mills in the late 1830s. She was a factory girl for more than ten years, after which she went west and obtained a college education. She became a well-known teacher and author when she returned to New England. Larcom published a book about her New England girlhood when she was sixty-five years old. The final set of evidence includes two pictures of "typical" mill girls in 1860 and letters written by mill girls and their families. Although the letters were *descriptive*, the girls were also presenting an image of themselves as they wished to be seen. Thus, in that sense, the letters were also *prescriptive*.

First read through the evidence, looking for elements of the cult of true womanhood in the factory girls' writings and in the Lowell system itself. Be sure to consider all four questions: What message is being conveyed? Who is sending the message? Why is it being sent? For whom is it intended? This will tell you a great deal not only about the social standards for respectable young white women but also about the fears and anxieties aroused by a factory system that employed women away from their homes.

Reading about how people *should* behave, however, does not tell us how people actually behaved. Remember that the central question of this prob-

lem involves a clash: a conflict between ideas (the cult) and reality (the factory system). Go through the evidence again, this time trying to reconstruct what it was really like for the young women who lived and worked in Lowell. Ask yourself to what degree and in what ways they might have deviated from the ideal of "true" women.

Also ask whether they could have achieved this ideal goal—and whether they really wanted to—while working and living in Lowell. In other words, try to clarify in your own mind the forms of the conflict and the reactions (of both society and the young women) to that conflict.

* THE EVIDENCE *

Source 1 from Orestes A. Brownson, *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840): 368-370.

1. Slave Labor Versus Free Labor, 1840.

In regard to labor, two systems obtain: one that of slave labor, the other that of free labor. Of the two, the first is, in our judgment, except so far as the feelings are concerned, decidedly the least oppressive. If the slave has never been a free man, we think, as a general rule, his sufferings are less than those of the free laborer at wages. As to actual freedom, one has just about as much as the other. The laborer at wages has all the disadvantages of freedom and none of its blessings, while the slave, if denied the blessings, is freed from the disadvantages. . . .

It is said there is no want in this country. There may be less in some other countries. But death by actual starvation in this country is, we apprehend, no uncommon occurrence. The sufferings of a quiet, unassuming but useful class of females in our cities, in general seamstresses, too proud to beg or to apply to the almshouse, are not easily told. They are industrious; they do all that they can find to do. But yet the little there is for them to do, and the miserable pittance they receive for it, is hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together. . . .

The average life—working life, we mean—of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry⁶; fewer still ever return to their native places with repu-

6. According to historian Thomas Dublin in *Women at Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), the working women of Lowell tended to marry in about the same proportion as

tations unimpaired. "She has worked in a factory" is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl. . . .

Source 2 from Reverend Henry A. Mills, *Lowell, As It Was, and As It Is* (Lowell, Mass.: Powers, Bagley, and Dayton, 1845).

2. A Lowell Boardinghouse, 1845.

[Reverend Mills began by describing the long blocks of boardinghouses, each three stories high, which were built in a style reminiscent of country farmhouses. Clean, well painted, and neat, these houses contained common eating rooms, parlors, and sleeping rooms for two to six boarders. The boarders, Reverend Mills observed, were sometimes a bit crowded but actually lived under better conditions than seamstresses and milliners in other towns. Men and women lived in separate houses with strict rules.]

. . . Regulations to be observed by persons occupying the Boarding-houses belonging to the Merrimack Manufacturing company.

They must not board any persons not employed by the company, unless by special permission.

No disorderly or improper conduct must be allowed in the houses.

The doors must be closed at 10 o'clock in the evening; and no person admitted after that time, unless a sufficient excuse can be given.

Those who keep the houses, when required, must give an account of the number, names, and employment of their boarders; also with regard to their general conduct and whether they are in the habit of attending public worship.

The buildings, both inside and out, and the yards about them, must be kept clean and in good order. If the buildings or fences are injured, they will be repaired and charged to the occupant.

No one will be allowed to keep swine.

[The meals might seem rushed, Mills noted, but that was common among all Americans, particularly businesspeople. Working girls could choose whichever boardinghouses they preferred, rents were very low, and their living arrangements were very respectable.]

nonworking New England women, although the Lowell women married three to five years later in life and had a distinct tendency to marry men who were tradesmen or skilled workers rather than farmers.

No tenant is admitted who has not hitherto borne a good character, and who does not continue to sustain it. In many cases the tenant has long been keeper of the house, for six, eight, or twelve years, and is well known to hundreds of her girls as their adviser and friend and second mother. . . .

. . . Employing chiefly those who have no permanent residence in Lowell, but are only temporary boarders, upon any embarrassment of affairs they return to their country homes, and do not sink down here a helpless caste, clamouring for work, starving unless employed, and hence ready for a riot, for the destruction of property, and repeating here the scenes enacted in the manufacturing villages of England. . . .

To obtain this constant importation of female hands from the country, it is necessary to secure *the moral protection of their characters while they are resident in Lowell*. This, therefore, is the chief object of that moral police referred to, some details of which will now be given.

It should be stated, in the outset, that no persons are employed on the Corporations who are addicted to intemperance, or who are known to be guilty of any immoralities of conduct. As the parent of all other vices, intemperance is most carefully excluded. Absolute freedom from intoxicating liquors is understood, throughout the city, to be a prerequisite to obtaining employment in the mills, and any person known to be addicted to their use is at once dismissed. . . . In relation to other immoralities, it may be stated, that the suspicion of criminal conduct, association with suspected persons, and general and habitual light behavior and conversation, are regarded as sufficient reasons for dismissals, and for which delinquent operatives are discharged.

[Reverend Mills also described the discharge system at the factories. For those girls whose conduct was satisfactory and who had worked at least a year, honorable discharges were issued. Discharge letters could be used as recommendations for other jobs. Those who received dishonorable discharges for infractions such as stealing, lying, leaving the job without permission, or other "improper conduct" would have difficulty finding other employment.]

This system, which has been in operation in Lowell from the beginning, is of great and important effect in driving unworthy persons from our city, and in preserving the high character of our operatives.

[Male overseers, or foremen, also were closely screened and had to possess good moral character. In response to Reverend Mills's questions about the male overseers, one factory owner responded as follows.]

Lowell, May 10, 1841

Dear Sir:—

I employ in our mills, and in the various departments connected with them, thirty overseers, and as many second overseers. My overseers are married men, with families, with a single exception, and even he has engaged a tenement, and is to be married soon. Our second overseers are younger men, but upwards of twenty of them are married, and several others are soon to be married. Sixteen of our overseers are members of some regular church, and four of them are deacons. Ten of our second overseers are also members of the church, and one of them is the Superintendent of a Sunday School. I have no hesitation in saying that in all the sterling requisites of character, in native intelligence, and practical good sense, in sound morality, and as active, useful, and exemplary citizens, they may, as a class, safely challenge comparison with any class in our community. I know not, among them all, an intemperate man, nor, at this time, even what is called a moderate drinker.

[Furthermore, the girls were expected to obey numerous rules.]

Still another source of trust which a Corporation has, for the good character of its operatives, is the moral control which they have over one another. Of course this control would be nothing among a generally corrupt and degraded class. But among virtuous and high-minded young women, who feel that they have the keeping of their characters, and that any stain upon their associates brings reproach upon themselves, the power of opinion becomes an ever-present, and ever-active restraint. A girl, *suspected* of immoralities, or serious improprieties of conduct, at once loses caste. Her fellow-boarders will at once leave the house, if the keeper does not dismiss the offender. In self-protection, therefore, the matron is obliged to put the offender away. Nor will her former companions walk with, or work with her; till at length, finding herself everywhere talked about, and pointed at, and shunned, she is obliged to relieve her fellow-operatives of a presence which they feel brings disgrace. From this power of opinion, there is no appeal; and as long as it is exerted in favor of propriety of behavior and purity of life, it is one of the most active and effectual safeguards of character. . . .

[Punctuality was required of both overseers and workers.]

All persons are required to observe the regulations of the room in which they are employed. They are not allowed to be absent from their work without the consent of their overseer, except in case of sickness, and then they are required to send him word of the cause of their absence.

CHAPTER 7
AWAY FROM
HOME: THE
WORKING GIRLS
OF LOWELL

All persons are required to board in one of the boarding-houses belonging to the company, and conform to the regulations of the house in which they board.

All persons are required to be constant in attendance on public worship, at one of the regular places of worship in this place.

Persons who do not comply with the above regulations will not be employed by the company.

Persons entering the employment of the company are considered as engaging to work one year.

All persons intending to leave the employment of the company, are required to give notice of the same to their overseer, at least two weeks previous to the time of leaving.

Any one who shall take from the mills, or the yard, any yarn, cloth, or other article belonging to the company, will be considered guilty of STEALING—and prosecuted accordingly.

. . . All persons who shall have complied with [the rules], on leaving the employment of the company, shall be entitled to an honorable discharge, which will serve as a recommendation to any of the factories in Lowell. No one who shall not have complied with them will be entitled to such a discharge.

Source 3 courtesy of the American Textile History Museum.

3. Timetable of the Lowell Mills, 1853.

TIME TABLE OF THE LOWELL MILLS,

Arranged to make the working time throughout the year average 11 hours per day.
TO TAKE EFFECT SEPTEMBER 21st, 1853.
 The Standard time being that of the meridian of Lowell, as shown by the Regulator
 Clock of AMOS SANBORN, Post Office Corner, Central Street.

From March 20th to September 19th, inclusive.

COMMENCE WORK, at 6.30 A. M. LEAVE OFF WORK, at 6.30 P. M., except on Saturday Evenings.
 BREAKFAST at 6 A. M. DINNER, at 12 M. Commence Work, after dinner, 12.45 P. M.

From September 20th to March 19th, inclusive.

COMMENCE WORK at 7.00 A. M. LEAVE OFF WORK, at 7.00 P. M., except on Saturday Evenings.
 BREAKFAST at 6.30 A. M. DINNER, at 12.30 P. M. Commence Work, after dinner, 1.15 P. M.

BELLS.

From March 20th to September 19th, inclusive.

| <i>Morning Bells.</i> | <i>Dinner Bells.</i> | <i>Evening Bells.</i> |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| First bell,.....4.30 A. M. | Ring out,.....12.00 M. | Ring out,.....6.30 P. M. |
| Second, 5.30 A. M.; Third, 6.20. | Ring in,.....12.35 P. M. | Except on Saturday Evenings. |

From September 20th to March 19th, inclusive.

| <i>Morning Bells.</i> | <i>Dinner Bells.</i> | <i>Evening Bells.</i> |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| First bell,.....5.00 A. M. | Ring out,.....12.30 P. M. | Ring out at.....7.00 P. M. |
| Second, 6.00 A. M.; Third, 6.50. | Ring in,.....1.05 P. M. | Except on Saturday Evenings. |

SATURDAY EVENING BELLS.

During APRIL, MAY, JUNE, JULY, and AUGUST, Ring Out, at 6.00 P. M.
 The remaining Saturday Evenings in the year, ring out as follows:

| SEPTEMBER. | NOVEMBER. | JANUARY. |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| First Saturday, ring out 6.00 P. M. | Third Saturday ring out 4.00 P. M. | Third Saturday, ring out 4.25 P. M. |
| Second " " 5.45 " | Fourth " " 3.55 " | Fourth " " 4.35 " |
| Third " " 5.30 " | | |
| Fourth " " 5.20 " | | |

| OCTOBER. | DECEMBER. | FEBRUARY. |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| First Saturday, ring out 5.05 P. M. | First Saturday, ring out 3.50 P. M. | First Saturday, ring out 4.45 P. M. |
| Second " " 4.55 " | Second " " 3.55 " | Second " " 4.55 " |
| Third " " 4.45 " | Third " " 3.55 " | Third " " 5.00 " |
| Fourth " " 4.35 " | Fourth " " 4.00 " | Fourth " " 5.10 " |
| Fifth " " 4.25 " | Fifth " " 4.00 " | |

| NOVEMBER. | JANUARY. | MARCH. |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| First Saturday, ring out 4.15 P. M. | First Saturday, ring out 4.10 P. M. | First Saturday, ring out 5.25 P. M. |
| Second " " 4.05 " | Second " " 4.15 " | Second " " 5.30 " |
| | | Third " " 5.35 " |
| | | Fourth " " 5.45 " |

YARD GATES will be opened at the first stroke of the bells for entering or leaving the Mills.

*•• *SPEED GATES commence hoisting three minutes before commencing work.*

Penballow, Printer, Wyman's Exchange, 28 Merrimack St.

Source 4 from *Voice of Industry*, January 2, 1846, in H. R. Warfel et al., eds., *The American Mind* (New York: American Book Company, 1937), p. 392.

4. "Slaver" Wagons, 1846.

We were not aware, until within a few days, of the *modus operandi* of the factory powers in this village of forcing poor girls from their quiet homes to become their tools and, like the Southern slaves, to give up their life and liberty to the heartless tyrants and taskmasters.

Observing a singular-looking "long, low, black" wagon passing along the street, we made inquiries respecting it, and were informed that it was what we term a "slaver." She makes regular trips to the north of the state [Massachusetts], cruising around in Vermont and New Hampshire, with a "commander" whose heart must be as black as his craft, who is paid a dollar a head for all he brings to the market, and more in proportion to the distance—if they bring them from such a distance that they cannot easily get back.

This is done by "hoisting false colors," and representing to the girls that they can tend more machinery than is possible, and that the work is so very neat, and the wages such that they can dress in silks and spend half their time in reading. Now, is this true? Let those girls who have been thus deceived, answer.

Let us say a word in regard to the manner in which they are stowed in the wagon, which may find a similarity only in the manner in which slaves are fastened in the hold of a vessel. It is long, and the seats so close that it must be very inconvenient.

Is there any humanity in this? Philanthropists may talk of Negro slavery, but it would be well first to endeavor to emancipate the slaves at home. Let us not stretch our ears to catch the sound of the lash on the flesh of the oppressed black while the oppressed in our very midst are crying out in thunder tones, and calling upon us for assistance.

Source 5 from *Lowell Offering*, Series I, Issue 1 (1840). Courtesy of the American Textile History Museum.

5. Title Page of *Lowell Offering*.

**THE
LOWELL OFFERING:**

A REPOSITORY
OF
ORIGINAL ARTICLES ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
WRITTEN
BY FACTORY OPERATIVES.

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

No. 1. Price 6cts.

THIS NUMBER WHOLLY WRITTEN
BY FEMALES EMPLOYED IN THE MILLS.

C O N T E N T S :

| | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Hemlock Broom, . . . Page 1. 2. The Mother's Love, 2. 3. Beauty of Leaves, 2. 4. Woman's Proper Sphere, . . . 3. 5. The blessings of Memory, . . . 4. 6. Letter about Old Maids, . . . 4. 7. Recollections of an Old Maid, No. 1. 5. 8. Autumn's Doings, 7. 9. The Pleasures of Science, . . . 7. 10. The Garden of Science, 8. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11. The Tomb of Washington, Page 9. 12. Knowledge in Heaven, 9. 13. Messrs. Birch and Spruce, . . 10. 14. Beauty and Wealth, 11. 15. Longings of the Spirit, 11. 16. Divine Love, 12. 17. Autumn Reflections, 12. 18. Mount Auburn, 13. 19. Thoughts on a Rainy Day, . . 14. 20. Old Bachelor's Friend, . . . 15. |
|---|--|

LOWELL, MASS.
PRINTED BY A. WATSON, 15 CENTRAL STREET.
For Sale at all the Bookstores; and by Tower, in the angle of Central and Gorham sts;
and at Billings' Variety Store, Merrimack st. opposite Tremont Corporation.

Source 6 from *Lowell Offering*, Series I, Issue 1 (1840), p. 16.

6. Editorial Corner.

The Lowell Offering is strictly what it purports to be, a "Repository of original articles on various subjects, written by Factory Operatives."—The objects of the publication are, to encourage the cultivation of talent; to preserve such articles as are deemed most worthy of preservation; and to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills. This number is wholly the offering of Females. . . .

We are persuaded that the citizens generally, and those engaged in the Mills particularly, will feel and manifest a lively interest in the prosperity of the Lowell Offering. That it is faultless—that the severe and captious critic will find no room for his vocation, is not to be expected. Nevertheless, while the work makes no noisy pretensions to superior excellency, it would claim no unusual indulgences. It asks only that, all the circumstances incident to its peculiar character being duly weighed, it shall be fairly and candidly judged. The Editors do not hesitate to say, that they anticipate for a favorable reception at the hands of those who have at heart the interests of that important and interesting portion of our population, whose intellectual elevation and moral welfare it aims to promote. . . .

An opinion extensively prevails, not merely beyond the limits of Massachusetts, that the Manufacturing city of Lowell is a nucleus of depravity and ignorance.

Confessedly, wherever there exists *any* depravity or ignorance, there is *too much* of it. We have this to testify however, that they who know least of the people of Lowell, including the Factory Operatives, entertain the most unworthy and unjust opinions of them. Close personal observation has satisfied us, that in respect of morality and intelligence, they will not suffer in comparison with the inhabitants of any part of moral and enlightened New England. . . .

Sources 7 and 8 from *Lowell Offering*, Series II, Vol. II (1842), p. 192; Series II, Vol. III (1842), pp. 69–70.

7. Dignity of Labor.

From whence originated the idea, that it was derogatory to a lady's dignity, or a blot upon the female character, to labor? and who was the first to say,

sneeringly, "Oh, she *works* for a living"? Surely, such ideas and expressions ought not to grow on republican soil. The time has been, when ladies of the first rank were accustomed to busy themselves in domestic employment.

Homer tells us of princesses who used to draw water from the springs, and wash with their own hands the finest of the linen of their respective families. The famous Lucretia used to spin in the midst of her attendants; and the wife of Ulysses, after the siege of Troy, employed herself in weaving, until her husband returned to Ithaca. And in later times, the wife of George the Third of England, has been represented as spending a whole evening in hemming pocket-handkerchiefs, while her daughter Mary sat in the corner, darning stockings.

Few American fortunes will support a woman who is above the calls of her family; and a man of sense, in choosing a companion to jog with him through all the up-hills and down-hills of life, would sooner choose one who *had* to work for a living, than one who thought it beneath her to soil her pretty hands with manual labor, although she possessed her thousands. To be able to earn one's own living by laboring with the hands, should be reckoned among female accomplishments; and I hope the time is not far distant when none of my countrywomen will be ashamed to have it known that they are better versed in useful, than they are in ornamental accomplishments.

C.B.

8. Editorial: Home in a Boardinghouse.

[Factory boardinghouses were not really like homes, the editor pointed out. A place to eat and lodge, the boardinghouses often seemed crowded and impersonal.]

But these are all trifles, compared with the perplexities to which we are subjected in other ways; and some of these things might be remedied by the girls themselves. We now allude to the importunities of evening visitors, such as peddlers, candy and newspaper boys, shoe-dealers, book-sellers, &c., &c., breaking in upon the only hours of leisure we can call our own, and proffering their articles with a pertinacity which will admit of no denial. . . . And then they often forget, if they ever knew, the rules of politeness which should regulate all transient visitors. . . .

The remedy is entirely with the girls. Treat all of these comers with a politeness truly lady-like, when they appear as gentlemen, but let your

manners change to stern formality when they forget that they are in the company of respectable females. . . .

C.B.

Sources 9 through 11 from *Lowell Offering*, Series I, Issue 1 (1840), pp. 17-19, 61, 44-46.

9. Factory Girls.

"She has worked in a factory, *is sufficient to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.*"

So says Mr. Orestes A. Brownson; and either this horrible assertion is true, or Mr. Brownson is a slanderer. I assert that it is *not* true, and Mr. B. may consider himself called upon to prove his words, if he can.

This gentleman has read of an Israelitish boy who, with nothing but a stone and sling, once entered into a contest with a Philistine giant, arrayed in brass, whose spear was like a weaver's beam; and he may now see what will probably appear to him quite as marvellous; and that is, that a *factory girl* is not afraid to oppose herself to the *Editor of the Boston Quarterly Review*. True, he has upon his side fame, learning, and great talent; but I have what is better than either of these, or all combined, and that is *truth*. Mr. Brownson has not said that this thing should be so; or that he is glad it is so; or that he deeply regrets such a state of affairs; but he has said it *is* so; and I affirm that it is *not*.

And whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? A class of girls who in this city alone are numbered by thousands, and who collect in many of our smaller towns by hundreds; girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England and the mothers of quite a portion of our future republicans. Think, for a moment, how many of the next generation are to spring from mothers doomed to infamy! "Ah," it may be replied, "Mr. Brownson acknowledges that you may still be worthy and virtuous." Then we must be a set of worthy and virtuous idiots, for no virtuous girl of common sense would choose for an occupation one that would consign her to infamy. . . .

That there has been prejudice against us, we know; but it is wearing away, and has never been so deep nor universal as Mr. B's statement will lead many to believe. Even now it may be that "the mushroom aristocracy" and "would-be fashionables" of Boston, turn up their eyes in horror at the

sound of those vulgar words, *factory girls*; but *they* form but a small part of the community, and theirs are not the opinions which Mr. Brownson intended to represent. . . .

[*The prejudice against factory girls was connected to the degraded and exploited conditions of European workers, the angry letter writer asserted. "Yankee girls," she said, are independent, and although the work is hard, the wages are better than those in other kinds of employment. It is no wonder, she concluded, that so many intelligent, worthy, and virtuous young women have been drawn to Lowell.*]

The erroneous idea, wherever it exists, must be done away, that there is in factories but one sort of girls, and *that* the baser and degraded sort. There are among us *all* sorts of girls. I believe that there are few occupations which can exhibit so many gradations of piety and intelligence; but the majority may at least lay claim to as much of the former as females in other stations of life. . . . The Improvement Circles, the Lyceum and Institute, the social religious meetings, the Circulating and other libraries, can bear testimony that the little time they have is spent in a better manner. Our well filled churches and lecture halls and the high character of our clergymen and lecturers, will testify that the state of morals and intelligence is not low.

Mr. Brownson, I suppose, would not judge of our moral characters by our church-going tendencies; but as many do, a word on this subject may not be amiss. That there are many in Lowell who do not regularly attend any meeting, is as true as the correspondent of the Boston Times once represented it; but for this there are various reasons. . . .

And now, if Mr. Brownson is a *man*, he will endeavor to retrieve the injury he has done; he will resolve that "the dark shall be light, and the wrong made right," and the assertion he has publicly made will be as publicly retracted. If he still doubts upon the subject let him come among us: let him make himself as well acquainted with us as our pastors and superintendents are; and though he will find error, ignorance, and folly among us, (and where would he find them not?) yet he would not see worthy and virtuous girls consigned to infamy, because they work in a factory.

A FACTORY GIRL

10. A Familiar Letter.

Friends and Associates:—

With indescribable emotions of pleasure, mingled with feelings of deepest gratitude to Him who is the Author of every good and perfect gift, I have perused the second and third numbers of the Lowell Offering.

As a laborer among you, (tho' least of all) I rejoice that the time has arrived when a class of laboring females (who have long been made a reproach and byword, by those whom fortune or pride has placed above the avocation by which we have subjected ourselves to the sneers and scoffs of the idle, ignorant and envious part of community,) are bursting asunder the captive chains of prejudice. . . .

I know it has been affirmed, to the sorrow of many a would-be lady, that factory girls and ladies could not be distinguished by their apparel. What a lamentable evil! and no doubt it would be a source of much gratitude to such, if the awful name of "factory girl!" were branded on the forehead of every female who is, or ever was, employed in the Mills. Appalling as the name may sound in the delicate ears of a sensitive lady, as she contrasts the music of her piano with the rumblings of the factory machinery, we would not shrink from such a token of our calling, could the treasures of the mind be there displayed, and merit, in her own unbiased form be stamped there also. . . .

Yours, in the bonds of affection,
DOROTHEA

11. Gold Watches.

It is now nearly a year since an article appeared in the Ladies' Book, in the form of a tale, though it partakes more of the character of an essay. It was written by Mrs. Hale, and exhibits her usual judgment and talent. Her object evidently was to correct the many erroneous impressions which exist in society, with regard to the folly of extravagance in dress, and all outward show. I was much pleased with all of it, with the exception of a single sentence. Speaking of the impossibility of considering dress a mark of distinction, she observed,—(addressing herself, I presume, to the *ladies* of New England,)—"How stands the difference now? Many of the factory girls wear gold watches, and an imitation, at least, of all the ornaments which grace the daughters of our most opulent citizens."

O the times! O the manners! Alas! how very sadly the world has changed! The time was when the *lady* could be distinguished from the *no-lady* by her dress, as far as the eye could reach; but now, you might stand in the same room, and judging by their outward appearance, you could not tell "which was which." Even gold watches are now no *sure* indication—for they have been worn by the lowest, even by "many of the factory girls." No *lady* need

carry one now, for any other than the simple purpose of easily ascertaining the time of day, or night, if she so please! . . .

Those who do not labor for their living, have more time for the improvement of their minds, for the cultivation of conversational powers, and graceful manners; but if, with these advantages, they still need richer dress to distinguish them from *us*, the fault must be their own, and they should at least learn to honor merit, and acknowledge talent wherever they see it. . . .

And now I will address myself to my sister operatives in the Lowell factories. Good advice should be taken, from whatever quarter it may come, whether from friend or foe; and part of the advice which Mrs. Hale has given to the readers of the Ladies' Book, may be of advantage to us. Is there not among us, as a class, too much of this striving for distinction in dress? Is it not the only aim and object of too many of us, to wear something a little better than others can obtain? Do we not sometimes see the girl who has half a dozen silk gowns, toss her head, as if she felt herself six times better than her neighbor who has none? . . .

We all have many opportunities for the exercise of the kindly affections, and more than most females. We should look upon one another something as a band of orphans should do. We are fatherless and motherless: we are alone, and surrounded by temptation. Let us caution each other; let us watch over and endeavor to improve each other; and both at our boarding-houses and in the Mill, let us strive to promote each other's comfort and happiness. Above all, let us endeavor to improve ourselves by making good use of the many advantages we here possess. I say let us at least strive to do this; and if we succeed, it will finally be acknowledged that Factory Girls shine forth in ornaments far more valuable than *Gold Watches*.

A FACTORY GIRL

Source 12 from *Lowell Offering*, Series II, Vol. II (1842), p. 380.

12. Editor's Valedictory.

It has been the object of the editor to encourage the cultivation of talent, and thus open and enlarge the sources of enjoyment in the midst of a toilsome life. . . .

We hoped ere this to have seen a spacious room, with a Library, &c., established on each Corporation, for the accommodation of the female operatives in the evenings. The example, we trust, will shortly be set by the

Merrimack. And why should not bathing-rooms be fitted up in the basement of each Mill? The expense would not be felt by the Company, and the means of health and comfort thus provided, would be gratefully acknowledged. We suggest, in addition, a better ventilation of the boarding-houses. Diminution of the hours of mill-labor, and the entire abrogation of premiums to Overseers, should also be included in the list of improvements.

There is another matter, some time since presented to the operatives, and now repeated, namely, the payment of a small sum monthly, say 8 or 10 cents, to constitute a fund for the relief of the sick. The amount might be deducted by the pay-master, as agent of the Superintendent. The details of the plan could readily be agreed upon. Two cents each week would surely be well spent as insurance against the expenses of sickness, to be fixed at about three dollars weekly—to be received, not as *charity*, but as a lawful demand.

Source 13 from *Lowell Offering*, Series II, Vol. V (1845), p. 96.

13. Editorial: The Ten-Hour Movement.

[*The editor begins by reviewing the work of the Massachusetts legislature's Committee upon the Hours of Labor. Although she understands why the demand for a ten-hour workday was not accepted, she believes there were other improvements that might have been made.*]

It seems to have been generally conceded, that the time allotted to meals is very short—where the operatives have tolerable appetites: and this is usually the case with persons who *work so regularly* and indefatigably. Why not have compromised then with the petitioners, and allowed them one hour for dinner through the year, and three-quarters of an hour for breakfast? The dinner *hour* is given in some manufacturing places, therefore the plea with regard to competition is not unanswerable. We believe also that Lowell is expected to take the lead in all improvements of this nature, and, should she amend her present system, it is more probable that she would be imitated than successfully contended against. . . .

[*The editor then addresses employers' argument that there are girls waiting at the factory gate before the work bell rings, eager to get in and begin work. The author concedes that some girls compete with each other for the overseer's favors. But what of the others? she asks.*]

... They feel that they are unable to work all these hours, and "work upon the stretch," as they say. They are older, or weaker, or more heavily moulded, or unwilling, if not unable. Therefore they are not favorites with their overseer. They are not so "profitable servants," and the kind look and word, or obliging act, is not so often bestowed upon them. This is one instance where the testimony is liable to misconstruction, and had we space, we might find many more.

The Legislature seem to have doubted the propriety of their commencing action upon this subject. Where should it commence? How is it to be done? When, where, and by whom? All, connected with manufacturing establishments, feel confident that, "as surely as there is benevolence and justice in the heart of man," this wrong will be righted. But objections are brought against every movement. . . .

Source 14 from *Lowell Offering*, Series II, Vol. I (1841), p. 32. Courtesy of the American Textile History Museum.

14. "Song of the Spinners."

SONG OF THE SPINNERS.

1. The day is o'er, nor lon-ger we toil and spin; For ev'ning's hush withdraws from the dai-ly din. And

2. We spin all day, and then, in the time for rest, Sweet peace is found, A joyous and welcome guest. Des -

now we sing, with gladsome hearts, The theme of the spinner's song, That la-hor to lei-sure a zest imparts, Unknow'n to the i - - dle throng.

- pite of toil we all agree, or out of the Mills, or in, De-pen-dent on others we ne'er will be. So long as we're a-ble to spin.

Source 15 from Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889).

15. Selection from *A New England Girlhood*.

[After her husband's death, Lucy Larcom's mother moved to Lowell to run a boardinghouse. Because her mother could not earn enough to support the family, Lucy, age eleven, and her older sister went to work in the mills.]

So I went to my first day's work in the mill with a light heart. The novelty of it made it seem easy, and it really was not hard, just to change the bobbins on the spinning-frames every three quarters of an hour or so, with half a dozen other little girls who were doing the same thing. When I came back at night, the family began to pity me for my long, tiresome day's work, but I laughed, and said,—

“Why, it is nothing but fun. It is just like play.”

And for a little while it was only a new amusement; I liked it better than going to school and “making believe” I was learning when I was not. And there was a great deal of play mixed with it. We were not occupied more than half the time. The intervals were spent frolicking around among the spinning-frames, teasing and talking to the older girls, or entertaining ourselves with games and stories in a corner, or exploring, with the overseer's permission, the mysteries of the carding-room, the dressing-room, and the weaving-room. . . .

There were compensations for being shut in to daily toil so early. The mill itself had its lessons for us. But it was not, and could not be, the right sort of life for a child, and we were happy in the knowledge that, at the longest, our employment was only to be temporary. . . .

[Lucy loved elementary school and wanted to continue her studies, but her family needed her mill wages.]

In the older times it was seldom said to little girls, as it always has been said to boys, that they ought to have some definite plan, while they were children, what to be and do when they were grown up. There was usually but one path open before them, to become good wives and housekeepers. And the ambition of most girls was to follow their mothers' footsteps in this direction; a natural and laudable ambition. But girls, as well as boys, must often have been conscious of their own peculiar capabilities,—must have desired to cultivate and make use of their individual powers. When I was growing up, they had already begun to be encouraged to do so. We were often told that it was our duty to develop any talent we might possess, or

at least learn how to do some one thing which the world needed, or which would make it a pleasanter world. . . .

At this time I had learned to do a spinner's work, and I obtained permission to tend some frames that stood directly in front of the river-windows, with only them and the wall behind me, extending half the length of the mill,—and one young woman beside me, at the farther end of the row. She was a sober, mature person, who scarcely thought it worth her while to speak often to a child like me; and I was, when with strangers, rather a reserved girl; so I kept myself occupied with the river, my work, and my thoughts. . . .

The printed regulations forbade us to bring books into the mill, so I made my window-seat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings. In those days we had only weekly papers, and they had always a "poet's corner," where standard writers were well represented, with anonymous ones, also. I was not, of course, much of a critic. I chose my verses for their sentiment, and because I wanted to commit them to memory; sometimes it was a long poem, sometimes a hymn, sometimes only a stray verse. . . .

Some of the girls could not believe that the Bible was meant to be counted among forbidden books. We all thought that the Scriptures had a right to go wherever we went, and that if we needed them anywhere, it was at our work. I evaded the law by carrying some leaves from a torn Testament in my pocket.

[In spite of the regulations, girls brought poetry and plants into the factory.]

One great advantage which came to these many stranger girls through being brought together, away from their own homes, was that it taught them to go out of themselves, and enter into the lives of others. Home-life, when one always stays at home, is necessarily narrowing. That is one reason why so many women are petty and unthoughtful of any except their own family's interests. We have hardly begun to live until we can take in the idea of the whole human family as the one to which we truly belong. To me, it was an incalculable help to find myself among so many working-girls, all of us thrown upon our own resources, but thrown much more upon each others' sympathies. . . .

CHAPTER 7
AWAY FROM
HOME: THE
WORKING GIRLS
OF LOWELL

Source 16 courtesy of the Mildred Tunis Tracey Memorial Library, New London,
New Hampshire.

16. A "Typical" Factory Girl, Delia Page, at Age 18 or 19 (c. 1860).



Source 17 courtesy of the American Textile History Museum.

17. Two Weavers (c. 1860).



Sources 18 through 22 from Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 42, 100-104, 170-172.

18. Letter from Sarah Hodgdon.

[In 1830, Sarah Hodgdon, age sixteen, and two friends went to Lowell to work in the textile mills. After approximately ten years of working in various factories, Hodgdon married a shoemaker from her home town. This is one of her early letters to her mother.]

[June 1830]

Dear mother

I take this oppertunity to write to you to informe you that I have gone into the mill and like [it] very well. I was here one week and three days before I went into the mill to work for my board. We boord t[o]gether. I like my boording place very well. I enjoy my health very well. I do not enjoy my mind so well as it is my desire to. I cant go to any meetings except I hire a seat therefore I have to stay home on that account.⁷ I desire you pay that it may not be said of me when I come home that I have sold my soul for the gay vanitys of this world. Give my love to my father and tell him not to forget me and to my dear sister and to my brothers and to my grammother tell her I do not forget her and to my Aunts and to all my enquiring friends. I want that you should write to me as soon as you can and when you write to me I want that you should write to me the particulars about sister and Aunt Betsy. Dont fail writing. I bege you not to let this scrabbling be seen.

Sarah Hodgdon

Mary Hodgdon

19. Letter from Mary Paul.

[Mary Paul left home in 1845 at age fifteen. She worked briefly and unsuccessfully as a domestic servant and then went to Lowell as a factory girl for four years. After leaving the mills, she returned home for a short while and then worked as a seamstress. Next she joined a utopian community, and finally she took a job as a housekeeper. In 1857, Paul married the son of the woman who ran the boarding-house where she had lived in Lowell.]

7. Urban churches in this period often charged people who attended services a fee called pew rent.

Dea
I
you
I
be
wit
can
or
mig
Gri
thir
I wa
A

Bel:

20.

Dea
I
wel
cut
inst
it b
nea
hav
six
Wit
alor
thir
is si
I ge
any

8. A

Saturday, Sept. 13th 1845

Dear Father

I received your letter this afternoon by Wm Griffith. . . . I am very glad you sent my shoes. They fit very well indeed they [are] large enough.

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. We all think if I could go with some steady girl that I might do well. I want you to think of it and make up your mind. Mercy Jane Griffith is going to start in four or five weeks. Aunt Miller and Aunt Sarah think it would be a good chance for me to go if you would consent—which I want you to do if possible. I want to see you and talk with you about it.

Aunt Sarah gains slowly.

Mary

Bela Paul

20. Letter from Mary Paul.

Lowell Dec 21st 1845

Dear Father

I received your letter on Thursday the 14th with much pleasure. I am well which is one comfort. My life and health are spared while others are cut off. Last Thursday one girl fell down and broke her neck which caused instant death. She was going in or coming out of the mill and slipped down it being very icy. The same day a man was killed by the cars. Another had nearly all of his ribs broken. Another was nearly killed by falling down and having a bale of cotton fall on him. Last Tuesday we were paid. In all I had six dollars and sixty cents paid four dollars and sixty-eight cents for board. With the rest I got me a pair of rubbers and a pair of 50.cts shoes. . . . I get along very well with my work. I can doff⁸ as fast as any girl in our room. I think I shall have frames before long. The usual time allowed for learning is six months but I think I shall have frames before I have been in three as I get along so fast. 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

8. A doffer replaced empty bobbins on the spinning frames with full ones.

that though she does not hear from me she is not forgotten. I have little time to devote to writing that I cannot write all I want to. . . .

This from
Mary S Paul

Bela Paul
Henry S Paul

21. Letter to Delia Page.⁹

[*Delia Page lived with a foster family, the Trussells, because she did not get along well with her stepmother. In 1859, at age eighteen, she went to work at a textile mill in Manchester, New Hampshire, where she fell in love with a mill worker who had evidently deserted his wife and child in Lowell. When reports of Delia's "affair" reached home, her foster family wrote her urgent letters trying to persuade her to reconsider. Eventually, in 1866, she married an eligible, respectable single man.*]

New London Sept. 7, 1860

Dear Delia,

I should thank you for your very good letter. I am glad to know your health is good. I trust I shall ever feel a deep interest in your welfare.

You say you are not so much in love as we imagine; if so I am very glad of it. Not that I should not be willing you should love a worthy object but the one referred to is no doubt an *unworthy* one; and should you fix you[r] affections on him, it will cause you sorrow such as you never knew; indeed we believe it would be *your ruin*. We have no reason to think, his pretensions notwithstanding, that he has any *real love for you*. Your father Trussell has told or rather written you what he has learned about him. I fear it will be hard for you to believe it, but if you will take the trouble to inquire, I think you will find it all true. He probably is incapable of even friendship, and in his apparent regard for you, is actuated by *low, base, selfish* motives.

I think you will sooner or later come to this conclusion respecting him. The sooner the better. Your reputation your happiness all you hold dear are I fear at stake. You have done well, let not your high hopes be blasted. Do the best you can, keep no company but good and you stand fair to get a good husband, one who has a real regard for you. But if you keep this man's company, the virtuous must shun you. You will not like to read this. My only excuse for writing is that I am very anxious about you. If my anxiety

9. Delia Page's photograph is shown in Source 16.

is unfounded so much the better. Unfounded it cannot be if you are keeping the company of an unprincipled libertine.

Your affectionate Mother Trussell

22. Letter to Delia Page.

[Sept. 7 1860]

My Dear Delia,

I am going to trouble you a little longer (I speak for the whole family now). In your situation you must necessarily form many new acquaintance[s] and amongst them there will be not a few who will assure you of their friendship and seek your confidence. The less worthy they are the more earnestly they will seek to convince you of their sincerity. You spoke of one girl whom you highly prized. I hope she is all that you think her to be. If so you are certainly fortunate in making her acquaintance.

But the best have failings & I should hardly expect one of her age a safe counseller in all cases. You must in fact rely upon a principal of morality within your own bosom and if you [are] at a loss you may depend upon the council of Mrs. Piper.¹⁰ A safe way is not to allow yourself to say or do anything that you would not be willing anyone should know if necessary. You will say Humpf think I cant take care of myself. I have seen many who thought so and found their mistake when ruined. My dear girl. We fear much for those we love much, or the fear is in porportion [*sic*] to the Love. And although I have no reason to think that you go out nights or engage in anything that will injure your health or morrals [*sic*] yet the love I have for you leads me to fear lest among so much that is pleasant but evil you may be injured before you are aware of danger.

And now my Dear Girl I will finish by telling you what you must do for me.

You must take care of my little factory girl. Dont let her expose her health if you do she will be sick and loose [*sic*] all she has earned. Don't let her do any thing any time that she would be ashamed to have her father know. If you do she may loose her charracter [*sic*]. Try to have her improve some every day that she may be the wealthiest most respected & best beloved of all her sisters, brothers & kindred & so be fitted to make the best of husbands the best of wives.

[Luther M Trussell]

10. The Pipers were Trussell family friends who lived in Manchester.

✱ QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER ✱

Why did Brownson (Source 1) believe that slaves were better off than free laborers? What did he imply about women who worked? What major advantages did Reverend Mills observe in the Lowell system (Source 2)? In what important ways did the system (the factories and the boardinghouses) regulate the girls' lives? How did it protect the morals of its female employees? Of course, not all girls lived up to these standards. What did they do? How were they punished? Do you think Reverend Mills presented a relatively unbiased view? Why or why not? In what ways did the author of the article in *Voice of Industry* (Source 4) believe factory girls were being exploited?

Look carefully at the title page (Source 5) and the first editorial of the *Lowell Offering* (Source 6). What do they tell you about the factory girls, their interests, and their concerns? Was C.B. (Source 7) upholding the cult of true womanhood in her article about the dignity of labor? How did "home" in the boardinghouse (Source 8) differ from the girls' real homes? Based on what you read in Reverend Mills's account, in what ways might a boardinghouse have been similar to the girls' real homes?

The next three letters were written by girls who were rather angry. How did "a factory girl" (Source 9) try to disprove Brownson's view? What fears and anxieties do this letter and the one from Dorothea (Source 10) reveal? What were these two girls trying to prove? The third letter writer (Source 11) retained her sense of humor, but

she also was upset. In this case, the offensive remark to which she referred appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book*, the most popular American women's magazine of the period, and was written by the highly respected Sarah Josepha Hale, the magazine's editor and author of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." What had Mrs. Hale written? What was the factory girl's response? What advice did she give her coworkers about fashion? About being a true woman? Both the editor's valedictory and the editorial about the ten-hour-day petitions (Sources 12 and 13) want changes. What were they? How does the editor believe these changes can be achieved? Even "Song of the Spinners" (Source 14) contains a message. What do the lyrics tell you about the spinners' values and attitudes toward work?

What were the other realities of factory girls' lives? What does the bell schedule (Source 3) tell you? How would you describe the image that the pictures of the mill girls present (Sources 16 and 17)? The mill girls' letters make them seem very real to us, but we must not take them completely at face value. After all, they were often writing to their parents! What hopes (and fears) does the correspondence between the mill girls and their families (Sources 18 through 22) express? Why did Lucy Larcom (Source 15) have to go to work in the mills when she was so young? How did she feel about the work when she was a child? What contrast did she draw between young boys' and young girls' upbringing in the early nineteenth

century? Did she and the other girls always obey the factory rules? What advantages did she discover in her factory experience? What were the disadvantages? Be careful not to overgeneralize or rely too heavily on the girls' letters or Larcom's memoir.

Now that you are thoroughly familiar with the ideas about how the work-

ing girls of Lowell were supposed to behave and the realities of the system under which they lived, you are ready to frame an answer to the central question: How did people react when the needs of a modernizing economy came into conflict with the ideas about women's place in society?

* * EPILOGUE * *

The Lowell system was a very real attempt to prevent the spread of the evils associated with the factory system and to make work in the textile mills "respectable" for young New England women. Working conditions in Lowell were considerably better than in most other New England mill towns. However, several major strikes (or "turnouts," as they were called) occurred in the Lowell mills in the mid-1830s, and by the mid-1840s Lowell began to experience serious labor problems. To remain competitive yet at the same time maximize profits, companies introduced the "speedup" (a much faster work pace) and the "stretch-out" (one worker was put in charge of more machinery—sometimes as many as four looms). The mills also cut wages, even though boardinghouse rents were rising. In Lowell, workers first tried to have the length of the workday reduced and, as did many other American workers, united in support of the Ten-Hour Movement. When women workers joined such protests, they further challenged the ideas embodied in the

cult of true womanhood, especially that of submissiveness.

Even before the strikes, the Lowell system was breaking down, as more and more mills, far larger than their predecessors, were built. Construction of private housing (especially tenements) expanded, and a much smaller proportion of mill hands lived in boardinghouses. Both housing and neighborhoods became badly overcrowded. By 1850, mill owners were looking for still other ways besides the speedup and stretch-out to reduce the cost of labor. They found their answer in the waves of Irish immigrating to America to escape the economic hardships so widespread in their own country. Fewer and fewer "Yankee girls" were recruited for work in the textile mills. At one Lowell company, the number of native-born girls declined from 737 in 1836 to 324 in 1860, although the total number of female workers remained constant. Irish men, women, and increasing numbers of children filled the gap, because as wages declined, a family income became a necessity.

CHAPTER 7

AWAY FROM
HOME: THE
WORKING GIRLS
OF LOWELL

By 1860, what Reverend Mills had characterized as "the moral and intellectual advantages" of the Lowell system had come to an end. Indeed, many

Americans could see little or no difference between our own factory towns and those of Europe.