

**THE LOWELL MILL GIRLS:
THE COST OF ACADEMIC ACCESS FOR WOMEN IN
ANTEBELLUM NEW ENGLAND**

Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The antebellum period in American history began at the end of the War of 1812, and lasted till the outbreak of the Civil War. This was a time of growth for the new country of the United States of America, and largely coincided with the industrial revolution, which spanned the 18th and 19th centuries. The 1830s through the 1860s was a time which saw the rise of industrial labor in America, and the instillation of cotton and textile mills. As cities began to crop up around industrial centers, typically built along waterways and canals, new societies were quickly formed. In the case Lowell Massachusetts, the mills were largely operated by women. These operatives, who would become known as the Lowell Mill Girls, formed their own society rooted in New England's self-improvement ideology. With the absence of men from their daily lives, these women were able to exist in a city beyond the confines of their own home and domestic endeavors. Seizing access to literature and creating opportunities for their own academic advancement, the women of Lowell thrived in their own community, despite the sacrifices it cost them

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THESIS

The term “The Lowell Mill Girls,” which is generally familiar to the present day New England public, refers to the young women, typically aged between 15 and 25, who worked in the mills built in Lowell Massachusetts along the Merrimack river. The notoriety and fame that still follows these women is unique, given the Mill Girl era lasted merely a generation, gaining momentum by 1830, and trickling out by the 1860s. Their mark on history is also distinct because they were women, and of the working class; two demographics that frequently fail to fill history books. Though men too worked in Lowell, particularly after 1860, “the women so outnumbered the men and left such interesting written record that they have provided us with the perfect opportunity to teach about women’s history.”¹

The reason the Lowell Mill Girls are so memorable, interesting to modern historians, and enshrined in the history of Lowell, Massachusetts is because their daily lives were revolutionary in antebellum period New England. The mills not only provided regular employment and higher wages than the limited occupations afforded to women, such as teaching, nursing, and sewing, but they also offered educational opportunities, which many of the operatives valued most.² Access to education and financial independence for young women in the mid 19th century were remarkable feats for the mills to host.

¹ Kirschbaum, Sheila. ""Mill Girls" and Labor Movements: Integrating Women's History into Early Industrialization Studies." *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (2005): 42-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163762>.

² Abbott, Edith. "History of the Employment of Women in the American Cotton Mills: II." *Journal of Political Economy* 16, no. 10 (1908): 680-92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1821966>.

Harriet Hanson Robinson was a local Massachusetts girl, born in 1825, who worked in the Lowell Mills from the age ten till twenty-three, with only a two-year absence to further her education. During her time in Lowell, Robinson participated in several of the literary societies available to the operatives working in the mills. She was able to write and publish her own poetry through the *Lowell Journal* and formed many friendships with writers for the *Lowell Offering*, a local publication written and published by women who worked in the mills, which Charles Dickens, upon visiting Lowell and reading the magazine, claimed “breathes through its pages like wholesome village air.”³ In her memoir, *Loom and Spindle: Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, which was published in 1898, Robinson reflects that a sizable number of women came to work in Lowell because of the literary and educational opportunities available to the female mill operatives. Initially the mills recruited female workers from New England farms. In contrast to their previous lives “in secluded parts of New England, where books were scarce, and there was no cultivated society,”⁴ Lowell provided young women in the mid 19th century with access to libraries, lectures, and the opportunity for night classes. Several of the boarding houses offered periodicals, such as *The Dial* and *Ladies’ Book*.⁵ According to Robinson, some of the women even took their academic passions into work with them, reflecting that they would, in secret from the mill managers, write during their shifts “on scraps of paper which we hid ‘between whiles’ in the waste-boxes upon which we sat while waiting for the looms or frames to need attention.”⁶ Robinson’s personal

³ Stewart, Dough. “Proud to Be a Mill Girl.” AMERICAN HERITAGE. Spring 2012. <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/proud-be-mill-girl> Volume 62, Issue I

⁴ Robinson, Harriet Jane Hanson. *Loom and Spindle: Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, n.p.: New York :T. Y. Crowell, 1898., 1970.

⁵ Montrie, Chad. "I Think Less of the Factory than of My Native Dell": Labor, Nature, and the Lowell 'Mill Girls'." *Environmental History* 9, no. 2 (2004): 275-95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3986087>. 287

⁶ Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*.

account of her life as a Lowell Mill girl, and her portrayal of her, and her fellow operatives' passion and dedication for academic advancement demonstrate New England's self-improvement ideology, while painting a heartwarming picture of young women desperate to join the literary world, in a time and place where they seldom had the opportunity.

Robinson's life and writing is an example of the educational opportunities that women in Lowell were allowed at the time. From unique educational opportunities, financial independence never before experienced by young women in New England, access to the Lowell Lyceum and the lectures it sponsored, and the community formed among these young women, the Lowell Mill Girls sacrificed hard work in exchange for the distinctive literary opportunities they created for and amongst themselves in antebellum period New England.

In 1822, the Merrimack Canal brought water to the Merrimack Manufacturing Co, marking the beginning of the industrialization of what was then East Chelmsford, and would later become Lowell Massachusetts.⁷ Throughout the Lowell Mill Girl era, between 1830 and 1860, tens of thousands of New England farm girls chose the life of urban employment and made the transition from farm to factory.⁸ The young women in Lowell lived on the highest wages afforded to female employees anywhere in America.⁹ The women grossed pay that "compared favorably with earnings in domestic service,

⁷ Golec, Pauline, Lewis T. Karabatsos, and Tom Langan. *Lowell: The Mill City*. n.p.: Arcadia, 2005.

⁸ Dublin, Thomas. *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994. 116.

⁹ Eisler, Benita, *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840-1845)*, (New York: Norton, 1998), 15.

teaching, or sewing, three of the major alternatives open to women in those years.”¹⁰ The mills employed young single women, giving them a role in the economic world, along with social and financial independence “unknown to previous generations of New England women.”¹¹ Women in Lowell were allowed to save their money as they saw fit and spend it on things they chose; a freedom that was widely uncommon in for 19th century women.

The mills intentionally “recruited mostly young women from New England farms to work in the mills.”¹² By 1850, Lowell was home to ten textile companies, and had a population of 33,000, consisting mostly of female employees of the mills.¹³ Though “the belief that single daughters ‘should’ contribute to help support their families was widespread in New England in this period,”¹⁴ “family economic need was not the principal motivation that led them to enter the mills.”¹⁵ Instead, the promise of a better life drew many women to Lowell, as “the mills offered greater independence than did women’s lives on family owned farms.”¹⁶ The economic freedom from the patriarchal farming communities in which these women came from allowed for independence and an self-sufficient lifestyle.

Though Lowell would become a center for academic and literary opportunity for young women, it is important to note that the society created was not utopian. The

¹⁰ Dublin, Thomas. *Farm to Factory: Women’s Letters, 1830-1860*. n.p.: New York : Columbia University Press, c1993., 1993. NOBLE catalog, EBSCOhost.

¹¹ Dublin, Thomas. *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994. 118.

¹² Golec, Pauline, Lewis T. Karabatsos, and Tom Langan. *Lowell: The Mill City*. n.p.: Arcadia, 2005. 21.

¹³ Golec, *Lowell*, 21.

¹⁴ Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work*, 94.

¹⁵ Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work*, 118.

¹⁶ Husband, Julie. ““The White Slave of the North”: Lowell Mill Women and the Reproduction of “Free” Labor.” *Legacy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 11-21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25679285>. Page 11

operatives worked in large weave rooms where “dozens of women tended noisy looms weaving yarn into cotton cloth.”¹⁷ The large windows lining the mills were nailed shut to ensure humidity, creating temperatures in the summer to reach between 90°F and 115°F.¹⁸ The women worked on average 73-hour work weeks, in which their days “were regulated from the first pre-dawn bell until the evening bell some fourteen hours later.”¹⁹

TIME TABLE OF THE LOWELL MILLS,
To take effect on and after Oct. 21st, 1851.

The Standard time being that of the meridian of Lowell, as shown by the regulator clock of JOSEPH RAYNES, 43 Central Street.

	From 1st to 10th inclusive.			From 11th to 20th inclusive.			From 21st to last day of month.					
	1st Bell	2d Bell	3d Bell	1st Bell	2d Bell	3d Bell	1st Bell	2d Bell	3d Bell	Eve. Bell		
January,	5.00	6.00	6.50	*7.30	5.00	6.00	6.50	*7.30	5.00	6.00	6.50	*7.30
February,	4.30	5.30	6.40	*7.30	4.30	5.30	6.25	*7.30	4.30	5.30	6.15	*7.30
March,	5.40	6.00		*7.30	5.20	5.40		*7.30	5.05	5.25		6.35
April,	4.45	5.05		6.45	4.30	4.50		6.55	4.30	4.50		7.00
May,	4.30	4.50		7.00	4.30	4.50		7.00	4.30	4.50		7.00
June,	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
July,	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
August,	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
September,	4.40	5.00		6.45	4.50	5.10		6.30	5.00	5.20		*7.30
October,	5.10	5.30		*7.30	5.20	5.40		*7.30	5.35	5.55		*7.30
November,	4.30	5.30	6.10	*7.30	4.30	5.30	6.20	*7.30	5.00	6.00	6.35	*7.30
December,	6.00	6.00	6.45	*7.30	5.00	6.00	6.50	*7.30	5.00	6.00	6.50	*7.30

* Excepting on Saturdays from Sept. 21st to March 20th inclusive, when it is rung at 20 minutes after sunset.

YARD GATES,
Will be opened at ringing of last morning bell, of meal bells, and of evening bells; and kept open Ten minutes.

MILL GATES.
Commence hoisting Mill Gates, Two minutes before commencing work.

WORK COMMENCES,
At Ten minutes after last morning bell, and at Ten minutes after bell which “rings in” from Meals.

BREAKFAST BELLS.
During March “Ring out”.....at....7.30 a. m.....“Ring in” at 8.05 a. m.
April 1st to Sept. 20th inclusive.....at....7.00 “ “ “ “ “ “ at 7.35 “ “
Sept. 21st to Oct. 31st inclusive.....at....7.30 “ “ “ “ “ “ at 8.05 “ “
Remainder of year work commences after Breakfast.

DINNER BELLS.
“Ring out”.....12.30 p. m.....“Ring in”.... 1.05 p. m.
In all cases, the *first* stroke of the bell is considered as marking the time.

B. H. Penhallow, Printer, 28 Merrimack Street.

Merrimack Valley Textile Museum

*Time Table of the Lowell Mills*²⁰

¹⁷ Golec, *Lowell*, 130.

¹⁸ Weisman, JoAnne B. *The Lowell Mill Girls: Life in the Factory*. n.p.: Carlisle, MA: Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1998., 1998. NOBLE Catalog, EBSCOhost.

¹⁹ Division of Publications, National Park Service, “Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City: A Guide to Lowell National Historical Park and Lowell Heritage State Park, Lowell, Massachusetts,” *U.S. Dept. of Interior: Supt. Of Dics., U.S G.P.O.*, 1992.

²⁰ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 41.

The bell system ran the entire city, and its presence was felt heavily by the workers. A published poem in the Lowell Offering reflected on the effect the schedule had on the women, writing that

Up before the day, at the clog of the bell
 And out of the mill by the clang of the bell
 Into the mill, and at work, to the obedience of the that ding
 Dang o the bell
 Just as though we were so many living machines ²¹

In the 1820s and 1830s “there were many instances in which operators brought books to read while keeping one ear open for changes in the rhythm of the machines.”²² If this practice was tolerated in the early years of the mills, these work habits disappeared by the 1840s.²³ As the mills grew in size and production, and the demographics of the workers changed, the literary pursuits of the operatives were cultivated far less by the mill managers.

An 1846 editorial printed in the *Voice of Industry* entitled the “Recruitment of Female Operatives” accused New England mill recruiters of luring young women with promises that they would “dress in silks and spend half their time reading,”²⁴ knowing that women were relocating to Lowell in the pursuit of literary opportunities. However deceitful the recruiters may have been, “by the 1840s, the myth that textile factory work was an opportunity and the ‘factory girls’ a privileged lot had been dispelled.”²⁵ Though the city provided literary opportunities for women that could scarcely be found outside of Lowell, the city required an enormous amount of work from the women living in it.

²¹ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 40

²² Pershey, Edward Jay. "Lowell and the Industrial City in Nineteenth-Century America." *OAH Magazine of History* 5, no. 2 (1990): 5-10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162729>.

²³ Pershey, "Lowell and the Industrial City in Nineteenth-Century America."

²⁴ Editorial, “Recruitment of Female Operatives,” *Voice of Industry*, 2 January 1846.

²⁵ Rosalyn Fraad, Baxandall, *America’s Workign Women: A Documentary History, 1600 to the Present* (Sara F. Yoseloff Memorial Publications, 1995).

Life as a Mill Girl was hard work, entailing long hours and separation from one's family and traditional way of life. In a letter home, an operative expressed that the work she was required to complete was "very hard indeed" and that she often felt she "shall not be able to endure it," claiming she'd "never worked so hard" in her life.²⁶ Though difficult, the work was a sacrifice for the opportunity to live in a city that offered cultural, religious, and social opportunities.²⁷ Lowell became a city of women who were "resultantly bent upon obtaining a better education," very few of whom were "without some distinct plan for bettering the conditions of themselves."²⁸ In the mill girl period the mills offered women a ticket away from life on their fathers' farms, only to be passed to the farm of a husband, with no control over their own financial situation, and many seized this opportunity.²⁹

Lowell became a city of young women "faithfully improving their opportunities"³⁰ through the extracurricular activities they could fit into their lives outside of the demanding work the mills required. Between supper and the nightly curfew implemented on the women, they "might attend a lecture, exhibition, or play"³¹ put together by either the operatives themselves, or the mill owners. New England's self-improvement ideology was well indoctrinated into the psyche of these women, and they exerted all excess time and efforts into "improving themselves... in every possible way, by purchasing and reading standard books, by attending lectures and even classes of their

²⁶ Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 106.

²⁷ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*," 40

²⁸ Larcom, Lucy. *A New England Girlhood: Outlined Form Memory*. n.p.: Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986. 222.

²⁹ Dublin *Transforming Women's Work* 118.

³⁰ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 255.

³¹ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*," 40

own getting up, and by meeting each other for reading and conversation.”³² The women “joined lending libraries or literary circles that offered intellectual stimulation,”³³ seizing all available opportunities, and where there were none, creating them.

Many women were “supporting themselves at schools like Bradford Academy or Ipswich Seminary half the year, by working in the mills the other half.”³⁴ Lucy Larcom, an operative at the mills and writer for the *Lowell Offering*, wrote and published an autobiography entitled *A New England Girlhood* in the 1890s. In her book, she reflects on childhood in New England, what life was like as a young woman living and working in Lowell, and the literary opportunities she had, such as being the youngest published writer for the *Lowell Offering*. In her memoir, she reflects on her life among other women in the city, remembering that “their mental activity was overflowing at every possible outlet.”³⁵

Larcom reflects on the numerous opportunities she had living in Lowell, talking about a German class she took and algebra night classes which were offered. She recalls an ethics class she took, taught by a local minister who used Wayland’s *Moral Science* as a text book, something she enjoyed reading.³⁶ After work classes had a large variety in content, as Larcom recalled “a botany class was formed in town by a literary lady who was preparing school text-book.”³⁷ These academic classes met under the title of “improvement circles” and would meet at night between the dinner hour and the strictly

³² Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 223.

³³ Pershey, "Lowell and the Industrial City in Nineteenth-Century America."

³⁴ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 223.

³⁵ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 223.

³⁶ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 241.

³⁷ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 242.

enforced curfew.³⁸ In these improvement circles, the women were able to discuss books, share writing, host debates, often touching on the abolition of slavery and importance of women's rights. As most of the Lowell Mill Girls came from rural backgrounds, the variety of academic opportunities was not only a draw to Lowell, it was a unique opportunity in New England for all women in the antebellum period.

Larcom's reflection that "Lowell might have been looked upon as a rather select industrial school for young people"³⁹ might have been an oversimplification, and mitigates the harsh labor conditions the women were subjected to. However, with the wide spread cultural gender based discrimination in the academic realm, Lowell was one of the only paths for a working-class woman to have access to academic advancement. The lasting value placed on female education by these women can be seen through census classifications, noting that "the granddaughters of the first mill girls are now to be found in the women's colleges," while the people who took their place in the mills shifted to immigrants or first generation Americans.⁴⁰

The magazines and newspapers, such as *The Dial*, *The Ladies Book*, and the *Lowell Offering* that were available to the women in Lowell were "unknown in the countryside,"⁴¹ reinforcing Hansen's summation that women came to Lowell for access to literature that was not available in rural New England towns.

³⁸ Doug Stewart, "Proud to be a Mill Girl," *American Heritage*, Vol. 62 Issue I (Spring 2012). <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/proud-be-mill-girl>.

³⁹ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 222.

⁴⁰ Abbott, Edith. "History of the Employment of Women in the American Cotton Mills: II." *Journal of Political Economy* 16, no. 10 (1908): 680-92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1821966>.

⁴¹ Pershey, "Lowell and the Industrial City in Nineteenth-Century America."

As women left their families to move to Lowell, they needed a new place to live. In order to house these women, the companies built boarding houses.⁴² The women would earn \$12 to \$14 a month, and “after paying \$5 monthly for room and board in a company boarding house”⁴³ one would be able to use the rest of the money as she chose, or send it home to family. A woman could never have earned this much money at farm work, and quite likely “had more real cash than her father.”⁴⁴

Each boarding house housed 30 to 40 young women, in which they slept two to a bed.⁴⁵ These close quarters of living helped alleviate loneliness away from home, and allowed for the young women to form connections and a society among themselves. The boardinghouses were company owned, and operated by the mill owners, who sought to promote pure living so they could advertise virtuous women to the rest of New England. This fact distinguished the Lowell Mills from the industrial life in England, where the working class was used exclusively for labor. The Mill Girls were tied to the virtue assigned to them as New England Yankee Christian young women, and the mill owners wanted to preserve this fabricated purity, at least in appearance, so as to promote their mills. The women were “treated as children, because they were young and female.”⁴⁶ Though Lowell had grown into a city of women, it was still plagued by paternalism of the men in charge.

⁴² National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 40.

⁴³ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 40.

⁴⁴ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 40.

⁴⁵ “The Boardinghouse System.” National Parks Service.

<https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/photosmultimedia/boardinghouses.htm>.

⁴⁶ Baxandall, *America’s Working Women*.

Young women whose family lived too far away for them to stay with were required to live in the boardinghouses, and unable to rent rooms on their own.⁴⁷ Their behavior was monitored by the boardinghouse keepers who were required to report any misconduct or rule violation to mill management.⁴⁸ In addition to being supervised with the threat of being reported to their boss, Larcom recalled that “it was one of the mill regulations that everybody should go to church somewhere.”⁴⁹

Independence was a weighted term for the Lowell Mill Girls, and women in antebellum period America in general. They had freedom to live from their families, the freedom to study in the city and manage their own finances, however their social lives were still heavily regulated by the men in charge of them. Though ahead of its time in offering educational opportunities for women, Lowell was still a city influenced by the patriarchal system.

The women of Lowell were not only “reading books, wearing gold watches, and purchasing sweetmeats, they were also beginning to write and publish their own literary magazine.”⁵⁰ The *Lowell Offering*, active from 1840 till 1845, captured the life of the mill girls, enshrining their work in a way that is accessible to study in the 21st century. The publications developed in 1840 out of one of the seven Self-Improvement Clubs that existed in Lowell.⁵¹ The women of Lowell had a literary focus, so they took the *Offering* as an outlet to share their talent. The magazine is the largest source of mill girl writings,

⁴⁷ "The Boardinghouse System." National Parks Service.
<https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/photosmultimedia/boardinghouses.htm>.

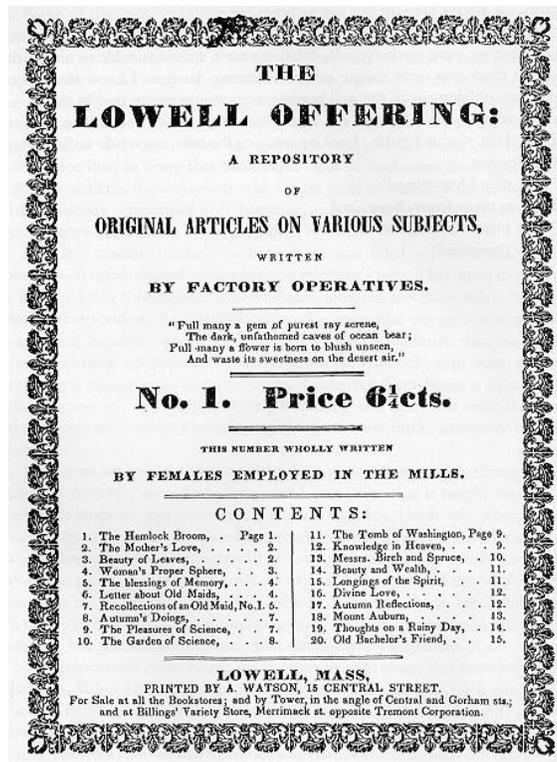
⁴⁸ National Parks Service, "The Boardinghouse System."

⁴⁹ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 204.

⁵⁰ Sylvia Jenkins Cook, "'Oh Dear! How the Factory Girls Do Rig Up!': Lowell's Self-Fashioning Workingwomen," *The New England Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2010): 219-49.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20752692>.

⁵¹ Katja Kanzler, "Texts, Commodities, and Genteel Factory Girls: The Textile Mill as a Feminine Space in Antebellum American Literature," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 50, no. 4 (2005): 555-73.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41158181>.

and provides and insight to the life of the women of Lowell.⁵² What started as a publication for pieces written by the improvement societies grew to publish poems, short stories, fiction, essays, and ballads. Lucy Larcom, one of the youngest operatives to be published in the magazine later wrote that it “gave evidence that we thought, and that we thought upon solid and serious matters.”⁵³



*The Lowell Offering*⁵⁴

The *Lowell Offering* was started by a local preacher named Abel Charles Thomas. It merged with another Lowell publication, *Operatives' Magazine*, which had been edited by two female mill operatives. When the two magazines merged to form the *Lowell Offering*, it became female written, produced, and published. Larcom noted that “people

⁵² Lazerow, Jama. "Religion and the New England Mill Girl: A New Perspective on an Old Theme." *The New England Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (1987): 429-53. doi:10.2307/365024: Contextualizes the *Lowell Offering*.

⁵³ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 211.

⁵⁴ Harris, Gordon. "The Lowell Offering." Historic Ipswich. September 02, 2017. <https://historicipswich.org/2017/01/05/the-lowell-offering/>.

seemed to be more interested in it after it passed entirely into the hands of the girls themselves.”⁵⁵

The operatives “enjoyed the freedom of writing what [they] pleased,”⁵⁶ and the publication served as a tool to unify the women through shared experiences. These women all left their home, which in most cases had been a New England family farm, to live in shared boarding houses and working in the same mills, all operating on the same city-wide bell schedule. Women were able to read about what their fellow workers were going through, and encourage each other through writing.

An 1844 editorial by Harriet Farley, an editor of the *Lowell Offering* from 1844-45, entitled “Two Suicides” following the suicides of fellow operatives memorialized their deaths, allowing Lowell to mourn them. Farley wrote

Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanly⁵⁷

The *Lowell Offering* has preserved the sentiments and sense of community formed by the Lowell Mill Girls. The text brings to life several women who frequently wrote for the magazine, depicting snapshots of their lives while living and working in Lowell.

In Lowell, the work force was made up of almost entirely women, and of the women, almost all were single.⁵⁸ The demographic of single women allowed for a niche society to be formed, as everyone had left their families to be there. Among the

⁵⁵ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 212.

⁵⁶ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 221.

⁵⁷ Farley, Harriet. “Editorial: Two Suicides,” Harriet Farley, *Lowell Offering*, Volume IV, 1844. Annenberg Learner. <http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/lowell/docs/suicide.html>.

⁵⁸ Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*. 119.

community women helped one another adapt to a new way of life, and created close community of living and learning.⁵⁹ Lowell became a city of women, working, learning, and living together. A key aspect of what marked Lowell unique was the absence of men. For many, the most life-changing aspect of working in Lowell “was simply living and working closely with so many other independent young women.”⁶⁰ In the female dominated society, the operatives were allowed to have a social presence in the city, compared to farm life where the women had a much smaller social realm. Their “experience as self-supporting laborers imparted an enduring confidence,”⁶¹ and allowed to women to have a “tendency to speak up, often loudly,”⁶² which was not a common trait among New England women at the time. A society of codependence was formed based on shared experiences and conditions. When one girl fell ill “girls regularly covered the looms of absent fellow workers, so that she would not lose pay.”⁶³

An editorial published by the *Boston Quarterly Review* by Orestes Brownson in 1840 negatively reviewed the mill girls, claiming they were likely to lose their reputation as respectable women due to their time in Lowell and would have a difficult time marrying after their employment.⁶⁴ Brownson wrote that “few of them ever marry, fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired.”⁶⁵ This editorial represents the portion of the population that was threatened by the education and liberation of the women that Lowell allowed. Though Brownson may not have been alone

⁵⁹ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 40.

⁶⁰ Doug Stewart, “Proud to be a Mill Girl,” *American Heritage*, Vol. 62, Issue I (Spring 2012) <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/proud-be-mill-girl>.

⁶¹ Stewart, “Proud to be a Mill Girl.”

⁶² Stewart, “Proud to be a Mill Girl.”

⁶³ Eisler, *The Lowell Offering*, 15.

⁶⁴ Brownson, Orestes. “The Laboring Classes.” *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (1840): 370.

⁶⁵ Brownson, Orestes. “The Laboring Classes.” *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (1840): 370.

in his critique of the female operatives, “mill employment did not disqualify women for marriage,” and in fact 85% of mill operatives went on to get married, which was the same percent as the general female public in New England at the time, in which 14.6 percent of women born in 1830 Massachusetts were never married.⁶⁶ Not only were the marriage statistics equal to non-mill working women, but the character of the operatives was considered by some superior because the factory worker “inspired more selfless behavior and gave” the women “the resources to advance their family’s interests.”⁶⁷

While mill experience did not dissuade women from marriage, it did have an influence on who the operatives chose to marry. Coming into the mills three fourths of the operatives’ fathers had been farmers, but only half of their husbands were farmers.⁶⁸ While working at the mills provided independence, Lucy Larcom reflected that neither her nor the other women “had the least idea of continuing at that kind of work permanently.”⁶⁹ However, the type of lifestyle women experienced in Lowell including access to education and the literary avenues urban life provided are all factors which influenced who these women married and the futures they chose for themselves. Women were “reluctant to return to their family farms,” and many chose not to marry into farm families.⁷⁰ Looking at the women who left Lowell, a majority can be traced to cities and towns after leaving the mills. Many women chose to marry tradesmen, merchants, or

⁶⁶ Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 111.

⁶⁷ Husband, Julie. ““The White Slave of the North”: Lowell Mill Women and the Reproduction of “Free” Labor.” *Legacy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 11-21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25679285>.

⁶⁸ Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 115.

⁶⁹ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 222.

⁷⁰ Steward, “Proud to be a Mill Girl.”

other professionals that would secure a life in an urban setting, away from a rural farm life.⁷¹

The Lowell Lyceum was the center for educational advancement for the Lowell mill workers. The lyceum was patronized by the mill girls more than any entertainment offered in the city ever was.⁷² The Lyceum hosted world famous speakers including John Quincy Adams, Edward Everett, John Pierpont, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Edgar Allen Poe, and many rotating professors from Harvard University. A.P. Peabody, a Harvard professor who regularly lectured to packed audiences at the Lowell Lyceum recalled that he'd "never seen anywhere so assiduous note-taking" as the women of Lowell demonstrated, "not even in a college class."⁷³ The lectures were a large portion of the draw to Lowell. Women were desperate for the opportunity to learn in classes that their brothers and male counterparts had the opportunity to. However, by mid-century the mill owners no longer offered the two-cent lectures by Harvard faculty at the Lyceum.⁷⁴ As the demographic of mill operatives changed from New England farm girls to immigrant laborers, the mill managers reduced the opportunities offered to the employees, as their pseudo paternalistic care for young Yankee women was replaced with their distant managing of Irish men and women of various ages.

⁷¹ Steward, "Proud to be a Mill Girl."

⁷² Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 252.

⁷³ Doug Stewart, "Proud to be a Mill Girl," *American Heritage*, Vol. 62 Issue I (Spring 2012).
<https://www.americanheritage.com/content/proud-be-mill-girl>.

⁷⁴ Stewart, "Proud to be a Mill Girl."

Due to the high employee turnover rate the mill hosted, and the fact that women stayed in Lowell an average of 3 years,⁷⁵ the demographic of workers changed rapidly. As of 1836, less than four percent of the 7,000 workers had been foreign-born.⁷⁶ The end of the Mill Girl era began in the 1850s, when the mills began relying on Irish immigrant labor, an increasingly available resource in Lowell.⁷⁷ Mill owners became to draw workers from the poor or immigrant class, as they produced cheaper labor.⁷⁸ As more immigrants were employed, the mill managers let working conditions deteriorate, no longer motivated by preserving the virtue of New England Christian women. As the women left, the social programs of self-produced newspapers, night classes, improvement societies, and other academic opportunities that once made Lowell desirable to New England women deteriorated. Over the 1850s Lowell saw a rise of immigrant employment, and by 1860, 61.8 percent of the work force in Lowell were immigrants, primarily from Ireland.⁷⁹ By the 1870s and 1880s the work force had entirely transformed from a base of temporary young single females to “adult, immigrant, and permanent,”⁸⁰ solidifying the end of the Mill Girl Era.

⁷⁵ National Park Service, *Lowell, The Story of an Industrial City*,” 40.

⁷⁶ Eisler, *The Lowell Offering*, ” 29.

⁷⁷ Pershey, "Lowell and the Industrial City in Nineteenth-Century America.”

⁷⁸ Baxandall, *America's Working Women*.

⁷⁹ Eisler, *The Lowell Offering*, ” 29.

⁸⁰ Pershey, "Lowell and the Industrial City in Nineteenth-Century America.”

CONCLUSION

Though financially independent, many mill operatives sent money home to help their families. While working fourteen hour days to afford the advancement of her own education, “many a girl at Lowell was working to send her brother to college,”⁸¹ and at least “a quarter of the Harvard student population,” which was entirely male, “depended on the financial support from sisters who worked in the mills.”⁸² These women sacrificed their own hard labor, so that they could be in the vicinity of a literary society they could participate in. The women in Lowell were allowed to exist, not only in an academic realm through the Lowell Lyceum and night classes, but economically through their work and purchasing power, socially through their presence in improvement circles, the boarding house, and their interactions with each other, and literarily, through the publication of their magazines, most notably the *Lowell Offering*. Lucy Larcom recalled, on her time in Lowell and its influence on her life, that she “felt that [she] belonged to the world, that there was something for [her] to do in it.”⁸³

⁸¹ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 256.

⁸² Weisman, *The Lowell Mill Girls*.

⁸³ Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*.

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