Lowell Factory System Sources

General context for all sources: [1]

In the 1820s, industrialist Francis Cabot Lowell developed a new system for organizing textile factories in Massachusetts, called the Lowell-Waltham system. Towns like Lowell, Massachusetts and others were built around the textile factories there. Factory agents recruited women and teenage girls (as well as men) to live in the town and work at the factories, guaranteeing that their moral conduct would be upheld. "Lowell girls" were paid wages (though less than men's) and were required to live in the official boardinghouses and to attend church. Lowell also became known for the number of opportunities for "self-improvement", such as learning music, libraries, "literary societies" or book clubs, and even a magazine, *The Lowell Offering*, written and edited by female Lowell factory workers. In 1836 Lowell had 17,000 inhabitants, and women composed nearly 70 percent of the laboring population.[2]

In the 1830s, the factory owners lowered wages and the Lowell workers went on strike in 1834 and 1836 (though unsuccessfully), making them one of the first organized labor groups in the U.S. In the 1840s, the Irish Potato Famine caused a new wave of immigrants willing to work for lower wages, which led to the end of the "Lowell system".

Josephine L. Baker, Article in *The Lowell Offering*, 1845[3]

The magazine The Lowell Offering *began publication in 1842. It was edited and written by female Lowell factory employees; it circulated not only in Lowell but to a wider readership. This article appeared in 1845. It gives the reader a "virtual tour" of a factory and boarding house.*

[At the entrance] swings the ponderous gate that shuts the mills in from the world without. But, stop; we must get "a pass" ere we go through, or "the watchman will be after us." Having obtained this, we will stop on the slight elevation by the gate, and view the mills. The one to the left rears high its huge sides of brick and mortar, and the belfry, towering far above the rest, stands out in bold relief against the rosy sky. The almost innumerable windows glitter, like gems, in the morning sunlight. It is six and a half stories high, and, like the fabled monster of old, who guarded the sacred waters of Mars, it seems to guard its less aspiring sister to the right; that is five and a half stories high, and to it is attached the repair-shop. If you please, we will pass to the larger factory,-but be careful, or you will get lost in the mud, for this yard is not laid out in such beautiful order, as some of the factory yards are, nor can it be.

We will just look into the first room. It is used for cleaning cloth. You see the scrubbing and scouring-machines are in full operation, and gigging and fulling are going on in full perfection. As it is very damp, and the labor is performed by the other half of creation [I.e. men, not women], we will pass on, for fear of incurring their jealousy. But the very appearance might indicate that there are, occasionally, *fogs* and *clouds;* and not only fogs and clouds, but sometimes plentiful showers. In the second room the cloth is *"finished,"* going through the various operations of burling, shearing, brushing, inking, fine-drawing, pressing, and packing for market. This is the pleasantest room on the corporation, and consequently they are never in want of help. The shearing, brushing, pressing and packing is done by males; while the burling, inking, marking and fine-drawing is performed byfemales. We will pass to the third room, called the "cassimere weaving-room," where all kinds of cloths are woven, from plain to the most exquisite fancy. There are between eighty and ninety looms, and part of the dressing is also done here. The fourth is the "broad weaving-room," and contains between thirty and forty looms; and broad sure enough they are. Just see how lazily the lathe drags backward and forward, and the shuttle—how spitefully it hops from one end of it to the other. But we must not stop longer, or perchance it will hop at us. You look weary; but, never mind! there was an end to Jacob's ladder, and *so*

[1] Introduction taken from Anthony Marcus et al., ed, *America Firsthand, Vol. 1* (9th ed., Boston: Bedford/St.Martins, 2012), 204-5.

[2] Bruce Borland, ed. *America Through the Eyes of Its People: Primary Sources in American History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 99-100.

[3] From Benita Eisler, ed., *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840-1845)* (1977; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1998), pp. 77-82. From David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, ed., *For the Record: A Documentary History of America: Volume One* (New York: W.W.Norton and Co., 1999), 391-396.

there is a termination to these stairs. Now if you please we will go up to the next room, where the spinning is done. Here we have spinning jacks or jennies that dance merrily along whizzing and singing, as they spin out their "long yarns," and it seems but pleasure to watch their movements; but it is hard work, and requires good health and much strength. Do not go too near, as we shall find that they do not understand the established rules of etiquette, and might unceremoniously knock us over. We must not stop here longer, for it is twelve o'clock, and we have the "carding-room" to visit before dinner. There are between twenty and thirty set of cards located closely together, and I beg of you to be careful as we go amongst them, or you will get caught in the machinery. You walk as though you were afraid of getting blue. Please excuse me, if I ask you not to be afraid. 'Tis a wholesome color, and soap and water will wash it off. The girls, you see, are partially guarded against it, by over-skirts and sleeves; but as it is not fashionable to wear masks, they cannot keep it from their faces. You appear surprised at the hurry and bustle now going on in the room, but your attention has been so engaged that you have forgotten the hour. Just look at the clock, and you will find that it wants but five minutes to "bell time." We will go to the door, and be ready to start when the others do; and now, while we are waiting, just cast your eyes to the stair-way, and you will see another flight of stairs, leading to another spinning-room; a picker is located somewhere in that region, but I cannot give you a description of it, as I have never had the courage to ascend more than five flights of stairs at a time. And-but the bell rings.

Now look out-not for the engine-but for the rush to the stair-way. O mercy! what a crowd. I do not wonder you gasp for breath; but, keep up courage; we shall soon be on terra firma again. Now, safely landed, I hope to be excused for taking you into such a crowd. Really, it would not be fair to let you see the factory girls and machinery for nothing. I shall be obliged to hurry you, as it is some way to the boarding-house, and we have but thirty minutes from the time the bell begins to ring till it is done ringing again; and then all are required to be at their work. There is a group of girls yonder, going our way; let us overtake them, and hear what they are talking about. Something unpleasant I dare say, from their earnest gestures and clouded brows.

"Well, I do think it is too bad," exclaims one.

"So do I," says another. "This cutting down wages *is not* what they cry it up to be. I wonder how they'd like to work as hard as we do, digging and drudging day after day, from morning till night, and then, every two or three years, have their wages reduced. I rather guess it wouldn't set very well."

"And, besides this, who ever heard, of such a thing as their being raised again," says the first speaker. "I confess that I never did, so long as I've worked in the mill, and that's been these ten years."

"Well, it is real provoking any how," returned the other, "for my part I should think they had made a clean sweep this time. I wonder what they'll do next."

"Listeners never hear any good of themselves" is a trite saying, and, for fear it may prove true in our case, we will leave this busy group, and get some dinner. There is an open door inviting us to enter. We will do so. You can hang your bonnet and shawl on one of those hooks, that extend the length of the entry for that purpose, or you can lay them on the banisters, as some do. Please to walk into the dining-room. Here are two large square tables, covered with checked clothes and loaded down with smoking viands, the odor of which is very inviting. But we will not stop here; there is the long table in the front room, at which ten or fifteen can be comfortably seated. You may place yourself at the head. Now do not be bashful or wait to be helped, but comply with the oftmade request, "help yourself" to whatever you like best; for you have but a few minutes allotted you to spend at the table. The reason why, is because you are a rational, intelligent, thinking being, and ought to know enough to swallow your food whole; whereas a horse or an ox, or any other dumb beast knows no better than to spend an hour in the *useless* process of mastication. The bell rings again, and the girls are hurrying to the mills; 'you, I suppose, have seen enough of them for one day, so we will walk up stairs and have a *tete-a-tete*.

You ask, if there are so many things objectionable, why we work in the mill. Well, simply for this reason,-every situation in life, has its trials which must be borne, and factory life has no more than any other. There are many things we do not like; many occurrences that send the warm blood mantling to the cheek when they must be borne in silence, and many harsh words and acts that are not called for. There are objections also to the number of hours we work, to the length of time allotted to our meals, and to the low wages allowed for labor; objections that must and will be answered; for the time has come when something, besides the clothing and feeding of the body is to be thought of; when the mind is to be clothed and fed; and this cannot be as it should be, with the present system of labor. Who, let me ask, can find that pleasure in life which they should, when it is spent in this way. Without time for the laborer's own work, and the improvement of the mind, save the few evening hours; and even then if the mind is enriched and stored with useful knowledge, it must be at the expense of health. And the feeling too, that comes over us (there is no use in denying it) when we hear the bell calling us away from repose that tired nature loudly claims-the feeling, that we are *obliged to go.* And these few hours, of which we have spoken, are far too short, three at the most at the close of day. Surely, methinks, every heart that lays claim to humanity will feel 'tis not enough. But this, we hope will, ere long, be done away with, and labor made what it should be; pleasant and inviting to every son and daughter of the human family.

There is a brighter side to this picture, over which we would not willingly pass without notice, and an answer to the question, why we work here? The time we *do* have is our own. The money we earn comes·promptly; more so than in any other situation; and our work, though laborious is the same from day to day; we know what it is, and when finished we feel perfectly free, till it is time to commence it again.

Besides this, there are many pleasant associations connected with factory life, that are not to be found elsewhere.

There are lectures, evening schools and libraries, to which all may have access. The one thing needful here, is the time to improve them as we ought.

There is a class, of whom I would speak, that work in the mills, and will while they continue in operation. Namely, the many who have no home, and who come here to seek, in this busy, bustling "City of Spindles," a competency that shall enable them in after life, to live without being a burden to society,—the many who toil on, without a murmur, for the support of an aged mother or orphaned brother and sister. For the sake of them, we earnestly hope labor may be reformed; that the miserable, selfish spirit of competition, now in our midst, may be thrust from us and consigned to eternal oblivion.

There is one other thing that must be mentioned ere we part, that is the practice of sending agents through the country to decoy girls away from their homes with the promise of high wages; when the market is already stocked to overflowing. This is certainly wrong, for it lessens the value of labor, which should be ever held in high estimation, as the path marked out by the right hand of God, in which man should walk with dignity.

Hezekiah Niles, ed., *Niles' Weekly Register*, 1826 [4]

Hezekiah Niles was a newspaper editor in Baltimore. In the 1820s, almost every town had its own newspaper, and bigger towns had several to choose from. Although newspapers tried to report factual information, most were also very open and direct about endorsing particular views of contemporary question—in other words, almost all newspaper stories had as much "spin" as the editorial page in a present-day newspaper.

It is probable that the domestic consumption of cotton in the present year, [in 1816, 90,000 bales], will amount to about or more than one hundred and fifty thousand bales-possibly, to 175,000. Next year, unless because of some unlooked-for events, to 200,000! Suppose this were

[4] From "Great National Interests," 21 October 1826, in Hezekiah Niles, ed., *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore, MD). Bound originals in special collections, University) of Pittsburgh Library. From David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, ed., *For the Record: A Documentary History of America: Volume One* (New York: W.W.Norton and Co., 1999), 391-396.

thrown into the European market! The price of cotton, paid to our planters, by our own manufacturers, has been greater, on the average, than they have received of the British purchasers of their staple. About 30,000 bales annually arrive at Providence, R. I. for the mills in the neighborhood. Many single establishments at other places use 1,000-some 1,500, some 2,000! The consumption at Baltimore is 4,000.

* * *

…The capital vested in manufactures in Massachusetts, including the new works, may be estimated at between twenty-five and thirty millions of dollars-the factories, in 1824, were 161. At Lowell, 1,700,000 dollars have been recently employed. At Waltham, about the same sum; its stock has been sold at 40 per cent. above par. At Merrimack 1,200,000, all paid in; .the Hamilton company has 600,000. At Taunton, 250 pieces of calico are made daily-employing 1,000, persons!-The furnaces at Wareham make 4,000 tons of metal annually, and there are two rolling and slitting mills and three forges at the same place, with large cotton mills, fulling mills, &c. Several villages, with with from 1,000 to 1,500 inhabitants have been built within a few years, all whose inhabitants were employed or subsisted by the faetories. A busy, healthful population teems on spots over which a rabbit, a little while since, could hardly have made his way...

The manufactories of Rhode Island, Connecticut and Vermont make up a large amount of capital-In Rhode Island there are about ninety cotton mills, and new ones are building! We venture to assert that the *surplus* product of the people of Rhode Island, aided as they are by scientific power, is of greater value than the surplus products of the whole state of Virginia, in which that power is not much used. By "surplus" I mean a value beyond what is required for the subsistence of the people. One person, assisted by machinery, is equal to from 100 to 200 without it. One hundred and fifty persons are employed in making lace at Newport, R.I. It is made at several other places, splendid, and as good, and at a less price than the imported. Providence is, perhaps, the richest town of its size in the world-and its population rapidly increases.

* * *

Mr. Webster, at a late public dinner, gave the following appropriate and veritable sentiment: "The mechanics and manufacturers of New England-Men who teach us how a little country is to be made a great one." The females employed in the factories are remarkable for the propriety of their conduct-to be suspected of bad behaviour is to be dismissed…

* * *

A grand display of manufactures has just been made at the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia. It was estimated that the rooms were visited by seven thousand persons in one day, and the crowd was great during the whole time of the exhibition. Cloths, cottons, glass-wares, porcelain, silks, works in wood, in metals, and of almost every description of materials, many of the very best and most beautiful kinds, were shewn and in astonishing variety and quantity. . . . All these things were, of course, of American manufacture.

* * *

Four thousand weavers find employment in Philadelphia-and several new villages of manufacturers have been built in the neighborhood. Among them Manyunk, with 2,000 inhabitants. The furnaces of Huntingdon county, only, make 6,000 tons of iron, annually. There are 165 hatters in the small town of Reading. The city of Pittsburg contains 1,873 buildings and 12,796 inhabitants. One paper mill employs 190 persons-there are seven other paper mills in the city or its immediate neighborhood-seven rolling and slitting mills; eight air foundries, six steam engine factories, one large wire factory, seven glass works, &c. &c. Some of these are mighty establishments-one of them has two steam engines, of 100 and 120 horse power, to drive the machinery! *One* of the factories at Pittsburg makes glass to the value of 160,000 dollars a year-and others do nearly as much business. The whole glass manufacture in the United States is worth not less than three millions annually.

* * *

…Before the perfect establishment of the cotton manufacture in the United States, those kind of goods which now sell for 12 cents, cost the consumers 25 cents! Cotton, for the last two or three years, has averaged a

greater price for American consumption than it sold for in Europe! Let the planter look to this-it is true. In 1815, in a congressional report, it was estimated that 200,000 persons were employed in the cotton and woollen manufactories of the United States! The present number engaged in *all* sorts of manufactories cannot be less than *two millions.* What a market do they *create.* We shall attempt to *calculate* it hereafter.

The hats, caps and bonnets, of straw or grass, manufactured in the United States, employ about 25,000 persons, chiefly females, and produce $825,000, in Massachusetts, only! The whole value of this manufacture is, probably, about a million and a half yearly.

The quantity of flannel now made in the United States is considerably greater than the whole importation ever amounted to-as reported at the custom houses…

* * *

…What then would be the state of our country, if our work-shops were in Europe? We should have, as it were, to live in caves and be clothed in skins. But we shall speak of these things hereafter-the whole intent of my present undertaking being to afford some faint idea of the importance of the manufacturing interest, and to show the people what has been done by the encouragement of the national industry, that they may more and more attend to the subject, and resolve that their public agents, whether of the general government or of the states, *shall* rather accelerate than impede the progress of things so indispensable to the general welfare-so inseparably connected with the employment and profit of every citizen of the United States.

Charles Dickens, "General Appearance of Mill Workers," from *American Notes,* 1842[5]

American Notes *is an account of Charles Dickens' 1842 four-month-long tour of America, written for British readers. He was already a well-known journalist and novelist at the time. His itinerary included Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Baltimore, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Missouri, and Canada. In the following selection, he describes a visit to Lowell.*

There are several factories in Lowell, each of which belongs to what we should term a Company of Proprietors, but what they call in America a Corporation. I went over several of these; such as a woollen factory, a carpet factory, and a cotton factory: examined them in every part; and saw them in their ordinary working aspect, with no preparation of any kind, or departure from their ordinary everyday proceedings. I may add that I am well acquainted with our manufacturing towns in England, and have visited many mills in Manchester and elsewhere in the same manner.

I happened to arrive at the first factory just as the dinner hour was over, and the girls were returning to their work; indeed the stairs of the mill were thronged with them as I ascended. They were all well dressed, but not to my thinking above their condition; for I like to see the humbler classes of society careful of their dress and appearance, and even, if they please, decorated with such little trinkets as come within the compass of their means. Supposing it confined within reasonable limits, I would always encourage this kind of pride, as a worthy element of self-respect, in any person I employed;…

These girls, as I have said, were all well dressed: and that phrase necessarily includes extreme cleanliness. They had serviceable bonnets, good warm cloaks, and shawls; and were not above clogs and patterns. Moreover, there were places in the mill in which they could deposit these things without injury; and there were conveniences for washing. They were healthy in appearance, many of them remarkably so, and had the manners and deportment of young women: not of degraded brutes of burden…

The rooms in which they worked, were as well ordered as themselves. In the windows of some, there were green plants, which were trained to shade the glass; in all, there was as much fresh air, cleanliness, and comfort, as the nature of the occupation would possibly admit of. Out of so large a number of females, many of whom were only then just verging upon womanhood, it may be reasonably supposed that some were delicate

[5] http://www.learner.org/workshops/primarysources/lowell/docs/dickens.html

and fragile in appearance: no doubt there were. But I solemnly declare, that from all the crowd I saw in the different factories that day, I cannot recall or separate one young face that gave me a painful impression; not one young girl whom, assuming it to be matter of necessity that she should gain her daily bread by the labour of her hands, I would have removed from those works if I had had the power.

They reside in various boarding-houses near at hand. The owners of the mills are particularly careful to allow no persons to enter upon the possession of these houses, whose characters have not undergone the most searching and thorough inquiry. Any complaint that is made against them, by the boarders, or by any one else, is fully investigated; and if good ground of complaint be shown to exist against them, they are removed, and their occupation is handed over to some more deserving person. There are a few children employed in these factories, but not many. The laws of the State forbid their working more than nine months in the year, and require that they be educated during the other three. For this purpose there are schools in Lowell; and there are churches and chapels of various persuasions, in which the young women may observe that form of worship in which they have been educated.

At some distance from the factories, and on the highest and pleasantest ground in the neighbourhood, stands their hospital, or boarding-house for the sick: it is the best house in those parts, and was built by an eminent merchant for his own residence. …The principal medical attendant resides under the same roof; and were the patients members of his own family, they could not be better cared for, or attended with greater tenderness and consideration. The weekly charge in this establishment for each female patient is three dollars, or twelve shillings English; but no girl employed by any of the corporations is ever excluded for want of the means of payment. That they do not very often want the means, may be gathered from the fact, that in July,1841, no fewer than nine hundred and seventy-eight of these girls were depositors in the Lowell Savings Bank: the amount of whose joint savings was estimated at one hundred thousand dollars, or twenty thousand English pounds.

I am now going to state three facts, which will startle a large class of readers on this side of the Atlantic, very much.

Firstly, there is a joint-stock piano in a great many of the boarding-houses. Secondly, nearly all these young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries. Thirdly, they have got up among themselves a periodical called *THE LOWELL OFFERING*, "A repository of original articles, written exclusively by females actively employed in the mills,"-which is duly printed, published, and sold; and whereof I brought away from Lowell four hundred good solid pages, which I have read from beginning to end.

The large class of readers, startled by these facts, will exclaim, with one voice, "How very preposterous!" On my deferentially inquiring why, they will answer, "These things are above their station." In reply to that objection, I would beg to ask what their station is.

It is their station to work. And they *do* work. They labour in these mills, upon an average, twelve hours a day, which is unquestionably work, and pretty tight work too. Perhaps it is above their station to indulge in such amusements, on any terms. Are we quite sure that we in England have not formed our ideas of the "station" of working people, from accustoming ourselves to the contemplation of that class as they are, and not as they might be? …

For myself, I know no station in which, the occupation of to-day cheerfully done and the occupation of to-morrow cheerfully looked to, any one of these pursuits is not most humanising and laudable. … I know no station which has a right to monopolise the means of mutual instruction, improvement, and rational entertainment; or which has ever continued to be a station very long, after seeking to do so.

Of the merits of the *Lowell Offering* as a literary production, I will only observe, putting entirely out of sight the fact of the articles having been written by these girls after the arduous labours of the day, that it will compare advantageously with a great many English Annuals. It is pleasant to find that many of its Tales are of the Mills and of those who work in them; that they inculcate habits of self-denial and contentment, and teach good doctrines of enlarged benevolence. A strong feeling for the beauties of nature, as displayed in the solitudes the writers have left at home,

breathes through its pages like wholesome village air; and though a circulating library is a favourable school for the study of such topics, it has very scant allusion to fine clothes, fine marriages, fine houses, or fine life. …

In this brief account of Lowell, and inadequate expression of the gratification it yielded me, and cannot fail to afford to any foreigner to whom the condition of such people at home is a subject of interest and anxious speculation, I have carefully abstained from drawing a comparison between these factories and those of our own land. Many of the circumstances whose strong influence has been at work for years in our manufacturing towns have not arisen here; and there is no manufacturing population in Lowell, so to speak: for these girls (often the daughters of small farmers) come from other States, remain a few years in the mills, and then go home for good.

"Female Workers of Lowell," ***The Harbinger Magazine*****, Nov. 14, 1846** [6]

The following is a selection from a magazine report investigating the textile mills of New England. The authors are not named, but they were "staff writers" for The Harbinger *magazine. It was published by The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, an experimental commune in Massachusetts dedicated to merging work, leisure, and education through cooperation and to promoting humane treatment of workers. (It was influenced by Charles Fourier and other early socialist thinkers).*

We have lately visited the cities of Lowell [Mass.] and Manchester [N.H.] and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the accounts which we had heard from persons engaged in the labor reform now beginning to agitate New England. We could scarcely credit the statements made in relation to the exhausting nature of the labor in the mills, and to the manner in which the young women-the operatives-lived in their boardinghouses, six sleeping in a room, poorly ventilated.

We went through many of the mills, talked particularly to a large number of the operatives, and ate at their boardinghouses, on purpose to ascertain by personal inspection the facts of the case. We assure our readers that very little information is possessed, and no correct judgments formed, by the public at large, of our factory system, which is the first germ of the industrial or commercial feudalism that is to spread over our land ....

In Lowell live between seven and eight thousand young women, who are generally daughters of farmers of the different states of New England. Some of them are members of families that were rich in the generation before ....

The operatives work thirteen hours a day in the summer time, and from daylight to dark in the winter. At half past four in the morning the factory bell rings, and at five the girls must be in the mills. A clerk, placed as a watch, observes those who are a few minutes behind the time, and effectual means are taken to stimulate to punctuality. This is the morning commencement of the industrial discipline (should we not rather say industrial tyranny?) which is established in these associations of this moral and Christian community.

At seven the girls are allowed thirty minutes for breakfast, and at noon thirty minutes more for dinner, except during the first quarter of the year, when the time is extended to forty-five minutes. But within this time they must hurry to their boardinghouses and return to the factory, and that through the hot sun or the rain or the cold. A meal eaten under such circumstances must be quite unfavorable to digestion and health, as any medical man will inform us. After seven o'clock in the evening the factory bell sounds the close of the day's work.

Thus thirteen hours per day of close attention and monotonous labor are extracted from the young women in these manufactories....So fatigued—we should say, exhausted and worn out, but we wish to speak of the system in the simplest language—are numbers of girls that they go to bed soon after their evening meal, and endeavor by a comparatively

[6] Bruce Borland, ed. *America Through the Eyes of Its People: Primary Sources in American History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 99-100.

long sleep to resuscitate their weakened frames for the toil of the coming day.

When capital has got thirteen hours of labor daily out of a being, it can get nothing more. It would be a poor speculation in an industrial point of view to own the operative; for the trouble and expense of providing for times of sickness and old age would more than counterbalance the difference between the price of wages and the expenses of board and clothing. The far greater number of fortunes accumulated by the North in comparison with the South shows that hireling labor is more profitable for capital than slave labor.

Now let us examine the nature of the labor itself, and the conditions under which it is performed. Enter with us into the large rooms, when the looms are at work. The largest that we saw is in the Amoskeag Mills at Manchester .... The din and clatter of these five hundred looms, under full operation, struck us on first entering as something frightful and infernal, for it seemed such an atrocious violation of one of the faculties of the human soul, the sense of hearing. After a while we became somewhat used to it, and by speaking quite close to the ear of an operative and quite loud, we could hold a conversation and make the inquiries we wished.

The girls attended upon an average three looms; many attended four, but this requires a very active person, and the most unremitting care. However, a great many do it. Attention to two is as much as should be demanded of an operative. This gives us some idea of the application required during the thirteen hours of daily labor. The atmosphere of such a room cannot of course be pure; on the contrary, it is charged with cotton filaments and dust, which, we are told, are very injurious to the lungs.

On entering the room, although the day was warm, we remarked that the windows were down. We asked the reason, and a young woman answered very naively, and without seeming to be in the least aware that this privation of fresh air was anything else than perfectly natural, that "when the wind blew, the threads did not work well." After we had been in the room for fifteen or twenty minutes, we found ourselves, as did the persons who accompanied us, in quite a perspiration, produced by a certain moisture which we observed in the air, as well as by the heat....

The young women sleep upon an average six in a room, three beds to a room. There is no privacy, no retirement, here. It is almost impossible to read or write alone, as the parlor is full and so many sleep in the same chamber. A young woman remarked to us that if she had a letter to write, she did it on the head of a bandbox, sitting on a trunk, as there was no space for a table.

So live and toil the young women of our country in the boardinghouses and manufactories which the rich and influential of our land have built for them.

Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 1899[7]

After her husband's death, Lucy Larcom's mother moved to Lowell to run a boarding house. Because her mother could not earn enough to support the family, Lucy, age eleven, and her older sister went to work in the mills. Larcom later became a college teacher and poet. This book was written when she was 75 years old as a memoir of her childhood.

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

[7] Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889). From William Wheeler and Susan Becker, ed., *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence: Vol. 1 to 1877* (5th ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002), 168-175.

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 ....

…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.

…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...

…My grandfather came to see my mother once at about this time and visited the mills. When he had entered our room, and looked around for a moment, he took off his hat and made a low bow to the girls, first toward the right, and then toward the left. We were familiar with his courteous habits, partly due to his French descent; but we had never seen anybody bow to a room full of mill girls in that polite way, and some one of the family afterwards asked him why he did so. He looked a little surprised at the question, but answered promptly and with dignity, "I always take off my hat to ladies."

His courtesy was genuine. Still, we did not call ourselves ladies. We did not forget that we were working-girls, wearing coarse aprons suitable to our work, and that there was some danger of our becoming drudges. I know that sometimes the confinement of the mill became very wearisome to me. In the sweet June weather I would lean far out of the window, and try not to hear the unceasing clash of sound inside. Looking away to the hills, my whole stifled being would cry out, "Oh, that I had wings!"

Still I was there from choice, and "The prison unto which we doom ourselves, No prison is."

Letter from Mary Paul to her father, Dec 21st 1845[8]

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 did many other occupations: returned home for a short while, worked as a seamstress, joined a utopian community, took a job as a housekeeper, and got married.

[8] from Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 42, 100-104, 170-172. From William Wheeler and Susan Becker, ed., *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence: Vol. 1 to 1877* (5th ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002), 168-175.

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 doff[9] 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 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

Letter <u>to</u> Delia Page from her foster-father, Sept. 7 1860[10]

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. Luther Trussell, her foster-father, wrote this letter to her while she was there.

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 acquaintances 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 prised. 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 counciler 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.[11] 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.[12] 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]

[9] A doffer replaced empty bobbins on the spinning frames with full ones.

[10] from Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 42, 100-104, 170-172. From William Wheeler and Susan Becker, ed., *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence: Vol. 1 to 1877* (5th ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002), 168-175.

[11] The Pipers were Trussell family friends who lived in Manchester.

[12] That is, Delia.