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Lowell: The Early Years 1822-1840

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LOWELL: THE EARLY YEARS, 1822-1840

From the outset, the Lowell mills were an extension of the highly profitable Boston Manufacturing Company. The initial organizers of the Lowell mills, P.T. Jackson and Nathan Appleton, were large stockholders of the Waltham firm. The Merrimack Corporation, Lowell's first cotton mill, chartered in 1822, paid $75,000 in cash and $150,000 in stocks to the Boston Manufacturing Company for patent rights, initial machinery, and the services of Paul Moody, the parent company's chief mechanic.[1] In 1823 the boards of directors of the two firms agreed to equalize dividends paid to their respective stockholders. The two firms were one in all but name.

The Merrimack Corporation and the surrounding town of Lowell grew rapidly after the opening of the first mill in November, 1823. Irish laborers dug canals and constructed additional mills and boarding houses. The work force in the mills grew from 300 to 1000 in the years between 1824 and 1826.[2] By 1826 the Merrimack Corporation had in operation

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1. Nathan Appleton, Origin of Lowell (Lowell, Mass.: B.H. Penhallow, 1858), p. 24.
2. George F. Kenngott, The Record of a City: A Social Survey of Lowell, Massachusetts (New York: MacMillan Company, 1912), p. 12; Frederick Coburn, History of Lowell, I (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1920), pp. 162-163.

three mills, a print works, and a machine shop. In addition, the company transferred its water rights and land holdings to the Locks and Canals Company, which also handled all mill and canal construction in Lowell. More than half of Lowell's population of 2500 worked in the mills or in related activities.[3]

After 1826 new corporations occupied the water power sites in Lowell in rapid succession. The Hamilton Corporation (incorporated in 1825), the Appleton and Lowell Corporations (1828), and the Suffolk, Lawrence, and Tremont Corporations (1831) were all owned and organized by an expanding circle of Boston capitalists which included the largest stockholders of the Boston Manufacturing Company and the Merrimack Corporation. By 1836 investments in Lowell mills totalled more than $7.5 million in 29 mills, employing more than 7000 operatives.[4]

The corporations shared resources and developed parallel policies in many areas. They shared patent rights, water rights, and had access to the machine shop for repairs and new equipment. All the corporations marketed their cloth through a limited number of Boston commission merchants. They paid identical wages, established the same regulations for their operatives, and housed their workers in company boarding houses.

The rapid increase in the demand for cloth and the high

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3. Coburn, op. cit., pp. 162-163.
4. E. Gordon Keith, "The Financial History of Two Textile Cities" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1936), p. 38.

level of profits generated by the large-scale integrated mills made this expanded production possible. In the years between 1828 and 1835, the Merrimack averaged earnings of 14 per cent annually.[5] The corporations paid out virtually all of the earnings as dividends to stockholders, many of whom then reinvested these earnings in the new companies incorporated in this period.

Several of the features of the Lowell mills described thus far had important direct effects on the working and living conditions of women workers. The unified control of the mills accounts for the standardization of wage levels and working and living conditions. Rapid expansion meant that there were _always_ openings for workers; the companies had to maintain wage levels and working conditions in order to attract enough workers to operate reasonably close to capacity. The economies achieved by technological and organizational innovations enabled the Lowell firms to pay relatively high wages and still undersell smaller competitors. The first years of production in Lowell were prosperous, and the operatives benefitted from this prosperity.

The overwhelming majority of workers in the Lowell mills were single women, daughters of New England farmers, between the ages of 16 and 25. Mill agents, overseers, first assistants, and certain skilled machine operators were men. Children worked only in the spinning rooms, replacing bobbins as they filled with yarn.

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5. Paul F. McGouldrick, _New England Textiles in the Nineteenth Century_ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 84.

The women came from the surrounding rural communities of northern New England. An analysis of a sample of women registered as working in the Hamilton Corporation between 1830 and 1839 reveals that more than one-quarter of the women came from Massachusetts, with the remainder from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Only 2 of 157 women came from Canada or Ireland.[6] As time progressed, the corporations had to expand recruiting into northern New England and Canada. A contemporary study of more than 6000 women working in the Lowell mills in 1845 found that only one-eighth came from Massachusetts, four-fifths from northern New England, and the remainder were Irish and Canadian.[7]

The Yankee women in the mill labor force were overwhelmingly young, single, and educated. More than 80 per cent of the women in the decade of the 1830's were under thirty years old, and only 3 per cent of a sample of women employed in the Lawrence Corporation were married.[8] Over 90 per cent of the Yankee women were literate,[9] and more than 8 per cent of the Lowell operatives in 1845 had been teachers in common schools.[10] Clearly the Yankee operatives did not

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6. The Hamilton Corporation Register books are Volumes 481-497 of the company's records on deposit in Baker Library of the Harvard Business School. The books, written in longhand, cover the years 1830-1876. They list women who worked in the mills, date hired, date discharged, local address, place of origin, room worked in, and additional comments. Unfortunately many entries are incomplete or inconsistent.
7. Henry A. Miles, <u>Lowell, As It Was, and As It Is</u> (Lowell: Nathaniel Dayton, 1847, 2nd ed.), p. 193
8. Abbott, <u>op. cit.</u>, pp. 122,124.
9. Harold S. Luft, "The New England Textile Industry and Irish Immigration in the 1840's"(unpublished graduate seminar paper, Harvard University, 1969), p. 21.
10. Miles, <u>op. cit.</u>, p.194.

fit either of the stereotypes of simple rural folks or of impoverished urban workers.

Women worked in the mills for an average of three to five years. Most women, though, only worked six to ten months at a stretch. This low average length of employment occurred at a time when the mills formally required new workers to remain in the mills for a minimum of one year. There also was a provision in the contract which required all operatives to give two weeks' notice before departure. Nevertheless, during this period, demand for operatives was so great that the Hamilton Corporation, the only firm on which data exists, did not enforce these regulations. This is clear from numerous entries in the company's Register books for the period 1830-1839. Several entries, bringing together data from successive volumes of the register books are summarized below:

(1) Rosina Armon of Chelsea, Vermont, a new worker, remained in employment only 2½ months in early 1837, and yet was rehired in December of that year.

(2) Sarah Atkinson of Sandwich, New Hampshire worked only two days in June 1835, leaving without giving two weeks' notice, but was rehired in June, 1836.

(3) Mary Jane Aiken of Londonderry, New Hampshire, a new worker, worked four months in 1835, took off six weeks, and then worked for two more months before leaving once again.

(4) Eliza Adams of Beverly, Massachusetts worked one month in 1830, and was listed as a "bad worker."[11] Still she was working for the company again in 1834.

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11. Volumes 481-485 of the Hamilton Corporation records in the Baker Library, Harvard Business School.

The picture of the women workers in Lowell in the 1830's which emerges from these register books is one of a very transient labor force. While women on the average may have worked three to five years in the mills, they constantly left and returned, changing corporations perhaps, or alternating work with vacations in their rural homes.[12] Although the corporations enacted strict regulations regarding the length of stay in the mills, they had too great a need for labor to enforce them systematically. There is much truth in the statement of Harriet Robinson describing labor conditions in this early period: "Help was too valuable to be ill-treated." [13](her italics)

The early mills were large four- to six-story buildings arranged in numerous rooms of varying size. One task in the production process was assigned to each room. In the carding room raw cotton travelled between revolving wire "cards" which set the fibers pointing in the same direction. In a continuous process, the cotton was then wound into coarse ropes called roving. In the spinning rooms women tended the Arkwright frames which stretched and twisted the roving into yarn. In the dressing room women threaded the yarn by hand onto warp beams for use in the weaving process. In the weaving room women tended power looms, tying the weft thread when it

12. As the extant register books come from only one of the many Lowell firms, we can have no idea how many of the women who signed out of the firm actually went home to the country and how many simply switched companies.
13. Robinson, op. cit., p. 72.

broke and replacing the shuttle when its bobbin was empty. In the cloth room , women measured and folded the finished cloth, and then recorded the amount produced.

Specific status attached to the work in each of the rooms, with carding and spinning carrying the least status, weaving more, and dressing and working in the cloth room the most. The reminiscences of women who worked in the mills suggest some of the values which determined the status of the various jobs. Harriet Robinson described her work in the dressing room, where women "dressed" the warp beams for the looms by drawing individual threads through the loom harness:

> . . . I learned. . . to be a drawing-in girl which was considered to be one of the most desirable employments, as about only a dozen girls were needed in each mill. We drew in, one by one, the threads of the warp, through the harness and the reed, and so made the beams ready for the weaver's loom.[14]

Another former operative, Lucy Larcom, described her privileged status as a worker in the cloth room:

> There were only half a dozen of us [in the cloth room] , who measured the cloth and kept an account of the pieces baled. . . . Our work and the room itself were so clean that in summer we could wear fresh muslin dresses. . . . This slight difference of apparel and our fewer work hours seemed to give us a slight advantage over the toilers in the mills opposite, and we occasionally heard ourselves spoken of as the "cloth-room aristocracy."[15]

In both these rooms women did hand work and worked at some distance from the noise and cotton dust of the

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14. Robinson, op. cit., p. 38.
15. Lucy Larcom, A New England Girlhood (New York: Corinth Books, Inc., 1961), pp. 229,235. Originally published in 1889.

rapidly moving machinery. Also there were very few girls working in these rooms, while sometimes as many as a hundred would tend looms in one room. The work required more skill than in carding, spinning or weaving. Dressing was a skilled, hand operation, and women in the cloth room had to be able to read and write. Finally work in these rooms conferred specific privileges. Dressers were the best paid of the operatives as a group, and women in the cloth room had a shorter work day, often interrupted by half-hour breaks when they were allowed to talk or read.[16] In an age when machines were increasing the pace of work, and imposing an impersonal stamp on mill work, operatives preferred jobs untouched by machines, and looked up to those workers who had escaped into the cleaner, quieter, smaller, and unmechanized rooms.

Even where machinery was in operation, though, the pace of work in the early years was generally quite moderate. Women initially tended only one or two frames or looms. According to Harriet Robinson, women could set their own pace, tending no more looms or frames than they could handle; they even had time to sit and talk during their work.[17] A camaraderie developed among the mill women as they often assisted one another:

> The girls also stood by one another in the mills; when one wanted to be absent half a day, two or three others would tend an extra loom or frame apiece, so that the absent one might not lose her pay.[18]

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16. Larcom, op. cit., pp. 229, 233.
17. Robinson, op. cit., p. 71.
18. Ibid., p. 91.

Although the work may have been relatively easy, with limited demands for physical exertion, the working day was long. In the winter months, women entered the mills at 7:00 A.M. and worked until 7:00 P.M. with only a half-hour break for lunch. Oil lamps illuminated the rooms at both ends of the working day. In the summer, the working day was even longer, extending from 5:00 A.M. until 7:00 P.M. with only two half-hour breaks for breakfast and lunch. The working day thus ranged from 11½ to 13 hours a day, averaged from 72 to 75 hours a week for a six-day week.

Time not spent in the mills was spent in the corporation boarding houses. These houses were solid brick row houses, built in block-long rows. Downstairs, there was a large common dining room, a kitchen, and quarters for the boarding house keeper and her family. Bedrooms were on the second and third (or attic) stories, and were crowded with beds and belongings. A story in an operatives' magazine described the rooms as "absolutely choked with beds, trunks, bandboxes, clothes, umbrellas, and people."[19] With four to eight women in each room, there was usually no furniture except beds, and one operative noted in her correspondence that she had been writing on a bandbox for lack of a writing table.[20]

Though crowded, the boarding houses were in fact very <u>social</u> places for operatives and must have eased the adjustment to urban life for the rural women who settled temporarily

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19. <u>Operatives' Magazine</u>, II, 100, as quoted in Abbott, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 129.
20. Letter to Harriet Hansen from H.E. Back, September 7, 1846. Harriet Hansen Robinson collection in the Schlesinger Libary, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.

in Lowell. The operatives in this period were a homogeneous group, and their common backgrounds and common experiences in the mills must have contributed to the closeness among the women. Harriet Robinson described the social aspects of life in a boarding house which made living in a large city more bearable.

> Each [boarding] house was a village or a community in itself. There fifty or sixty young women from different parts of New England met and lived together. When not at their work. . . they sat in groups in their chambers; or in a corner of the large dining room, busy at some agreable employment. . . .[21]

By dividing the mass of women workers into smaller groups, the boarding houses played an important role in easing the transition to city life.

On the whole, the women liked the boarding houses. There they had a community and food and lodging for $1.25 . In the early days there was no alternative lodging for women whose families lived outside Lowell, and even when private accomodations did develop, the women preferred the lower rates of the company houses. The company houses represented subsidized housing, on which the corporations made little return.[22] They were a necessary investment for mills dependent on recruiting operatives from the surrounding countryside.

Even outside the mills, the lives of operatives were dominated by the corporations. Women had to be in their boarding houses by 10:00 P.M. and boarding house keepers

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21. Robinson, op. cit., p. 89.
22. McGouldrick, op. cit., footnote 62, p. 275.

were required to report unbecoming conduct to the corporations.[23] Corporations could discharge women for failure to attend church regularly, improper conduct outside the mills, or disobedience or rudeness toward overseers.[24] In the 1820's the Merrimack Corporation built the first church, hired the minister, and even deducted pew rent from the operatives' pay regardless of their religious affiliation.[25]

While the Lowell mills established unified personnel and business policies, and attempted to dominate community life in Lowell, they were by no means omnipotent. In this period of rapid expansion of cotton production in Lowell and other towns of northern New England, the mills could not control the prices at which their finished cloth sold. Although the mills were among the largest business enterprises in the United States before 1840, none controlled a significant percentage of the market for a particular product. The price of Merrimack cotton prints fell from 23 cents per yard in 1825 to 12 cents per yard in 1840.[26] Profits were generally lower in the latter years of the 1830's than earlier.[27] To meet the increasingly competitive conditions of the cloth market, the Lowell firms attempted to reduce

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23. John R. Commons et al. (Eds.) A Documentary History of American Industrial Society, VII (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1910), pp. 135-136.
24. Hannah Josephson, The Golden Threads: New England's Mill Girls and Magnates (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1949), p. 221.
25. Abbott, op. cit., p. 115.
26. Appleton, Origin of Lowell, p. 34.
27. C. Ware, op. cit., p. 113.

labor costs by means of three interrelated strategies. They sped up machinery, assigned more machinery to each worker, and reduced the piece wage paid to operatives for a given unit of product. They did not carry out these policies all at once, but in successive steps. Typically, when the number of looms per worker increased, the speed of each loom was decreased. Then, the rate of each loom was slowly increased. The overall effect of the speed-up was to require more attention and concentration on the movement of the machinery by the women and to reduce the opportunities for talking and relaxing during the working day. The work surely became more monotonous and tiring for the women.

The women opposed these policies, and this opposition led to the first strikes in Lowell in 1834 and 1836. "UNION IS POWER" read a proclamation circulated among striking women in Lowell in 1834. A proposed 15 per cent reduction in the piece wage rate to take effect on March 1 led women to stop work. Over 800 women struck, marched about town, and passed the following resolutions:

> Resolved, that we will not go back into the mills to work unless our present wages are continued. . . .
> Resolved, that none of us will go back, unless they receive us all as one.
> Resolved, that if any have not money enough to carry them home, that they shall be supplied.[28]

Despite the militancy of the resolutions, the strike was short-lived and unsuccessful. The women did not form a permanent organization, and the outburst was more of a

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28. Boston *Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834.

demonstration than an organized strike. At this time, as on subsequent occasions, many women left Lowell during the strike and returned to their home communities. The fact that women had this option must have undermined their efforts to organize. They were not totally dependent on mill employment; as conditions deteriorated, they left.

The largest strike in Lowell in this early period occurred in October, 1836, in response to another reduction in wage rates and an increase in the cost of board. The strike once again had the character of a spontaneous mass demonstration. One participant described the strike:

> When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt and it was decided to strike _en masse_. This was done. The mills were shut down and the girls went in procession from their several corporations to the "grove" on Chapel Hill and listened to "incendiary" speeches from labor reformers.[29]

Fifteen hundred women met at Chapel Hill and later formed a "Factory Girls' Association" to carry out negotiations with the mill agents. There is no evidence that the agents recognized the association or met with representatives of the strikers. Although this strike lasted longer than the earlier one, the women returned to work before the end of the month at the reduced piece wages.

The very factors which led mill women to go on strike were probably responsible in part for the defeat of their strikes. Women viewed themselves primarily as independent "daughters of freemen" not as industrial workers. They

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29. Robinson, _op. cit._, p. 83.

perceived a sudden, apparently arbitrary, wage cut as a threat to their independent status. One of the women's resolutions in the 1834 strike captures this sentiment:

> The oppressing hand of avarice would enslave us, and to gain their object, they would gravely tell us of the pressure of the times; this we are already sensible of, and deplore it. If any are in want of assistance, the [factory] Ladies will be compassionate and assist them; but we prefer to have the disposing of our charities in our own hands; and as we are free, we would remain in possession of what kind Providence has bestowed upon us, and remain daughters of freemen still.[30]

The pride and independent spirit of the early mill operatives was part of their rural heritage and upbringing. They viewed themselves as "daughters of freemen" only temporarily engaged as wage earners. Not totally dependent on mill income, operatives did not accept wage cuts or speed-ups quietly. Yet this same pride led operatives not only to strike, but also to leave Lowell altogether. In other words, the independent spirit of the operatives gave rise to their early strike actions and undermined the success of these actions at the same time.

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30. Boston *Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834.