

## **The Industrial Revolution in the United States**

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For more than three decades now I have been exploring the industrialization and deindustrialization of the United States across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Over the course of two hundred years the work and family lives of typical Americans have undergone dramatic changes. Between 1800 and 1900, for instance, farming as the major occupation of Americans gave way to a variety of industrial employments and then in the second half of the twentieth century service employment increasingly came to replace manufacturing jobs. In these two essays, I will focus on the first half of these successive transformations: the industrial revolution in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century. This essay will focus on the economic and social changes wrought by industrialization with a particular emphasis on the impact of industrialization on women and the important roles that women played in the nation's industrial revolution.

The industrial revolution that transformed Western Europe and the United States during the course of the nineteenth century had its origins in the introduction of power-driven machinery in the English and Scottish textile industries in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is no exaggeration to claim, as E. J. Hobsbawm did, that "Whoever says Industrial Revolution says cotton."<sup>i</sup> And yet far more than the cotton textile industry was transformed in the course of capitalist industrialization; the growth of canal and railroad networks, the tremendous increase in coal production, and the emergence of

iron and steel all owe their development to the changes we call the industrial revolution. Moreover, the revolution was not narrowly “industrial,” but entailed a tremendous growth in non-industrial wage labor as well. The emergence of urban centers contributed to the skyrocketing growth of domestic service and unskilled laboring jobs in commercial cities. In farming areas the growth of outwork occupations and commercial agriculture transformed the rural labor market. Finally, these economic developments coincided with dramatic changes in family life, particularly declining family size and increasing life expectancy. We have to look at more than factories and machine production to understand the broader consequences of this great watershed in human history.

Central to the changes in work associated with the industrial revolution was the emergence of new social relations of production—what Marx and subsequent social theorists termed class relations. The growth of a capitalist employing class and of a working class relying upon the sale of its labor power to earn its subsistence had profound economic, cultural, and political implications in both English and American societies. Following the lead of English Marxists, American labor historians in the past three decades have devoted considerable energy to exploring the social consequences of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution in United States. My discussion over the next two days will follow the lead of these English and American scholars.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite this outpouring of scholarship, one is left with a strong sense that the industrial revolution is primarily a men’s story. The transformation of artisan crafts, the growth of railroads, the emergence of iron and steel, and later of mass-production industries—these are developments that primarily affected men’s work. Although women workers were drawn in large numbers into the first factories in the United

States—into the textile mills and early shoe factories of New England, for instance—one finds their stories at the margins of many of the studies that examine the nineteenth-century industrial revolution in the United States. My analysis seeks to restore an appropriate gender balance in viewing the impact of the industrial revolution and thus I will emphasize particularly women’s place in these broader changes.<sup>iii</sup>

The industrial revolution in the United States was dependent from the outset on British immigrants and British technology. Technological change in English textiles preceded parallel developments in other countries, and the adoption of the spinning jenny, water frame, and spinning mule led to a tremendous increase in the spinning of cotton yarns. By the 1780s and ‘90s numerous large water-powered spinning firms dotted the countryside in Lancashire and Derbyshire. This led first to the massive putting out of yarn for weaving on handlooms and later to the adoption of power looms to keep pace with spinning output.

After the American Revolution, a flood of English textile imports into the now independent United States stimulated efforts to replicate the inventions that gave English manufacturers such an advantage in the American marketplace. Several states offered prizes and merchants sought to employ immigrants who might harness English technology and break the monopoly that English manufacturers enjoyed at this time.

Out of these efforts emerged the first permanent cotton spinning mill in the United States in Pawtucket, R.I. English emigrant Samuel Slater—himself a former apprentice at the English textile firm of Arkwright & Strutt—reconstructed an Arkwright waterframe under the sponsorship of Providence merchants, William Almy and Moses Brown. Established on the banks of the Blackstone River, the firm of Almy, Brown, &

Slater pioneered in the machine production of cotton yarn between 1790 and 1840. This company expanded, gave rise to a number of spinoff firms, and established the basic set of business practices that came to be denominated the Rhode Island system. These southern New England textile firms followed British practices, employing entire families, with children comprising the vast majority of the mill workforce. Typically they signed up families a year at a time and paid workers with credit at company stores, settling accounts only at the expiration of their contracts in the spring. They focused on the carding and spinning steps in the production process and established widespread rural and urban networks of hand weavers to whom they put out cotton yarn and from whom they collected the finished cloth.

Slater's undertaking in Pawtucket proved an immediate success and led to imitation elsewhere. Slater made a lot of money that he subsequently invested in additional factories. His brother came over to the States and as his sons came of age they too assumed managerial roles in an array of mills controlled by the Slater family. There were mills in Rehoboth, Oxford, and Dudley in Massachusetts, Smithfield, R.I., and Jewett City, CT. Although large, integrated textile mills such as those in Lowell came to dominate perceptions of cotton textile manufacturing in the antebellum decades, even as late as 1860 fully half of textile firms and workers in Massachusetts were found in towns of under 5,000.<sup>iv</sup>

Between the small size of early textile towns in southern New England and their incorporation in a widely dispersed network of outwork weaving, the first cotton textile mills were very much a part of the rural landscape in the first third of the nineteenth century. The success of these first factories spawned new competitors, however, and the

new factories contributed to a wave of urbanization in northern New England. The new wave of textile investment followed on the heels of a famous bit of industrial espionage. A Boston merchant, Francis Cabot Lowell, took advantage of his connections with English and Scottish textile manufacturers to visit a number of mills during a trip abroad to recover his health. Back in Boston, Lowell set about reconstructing the power loom he had seen on his mill tour. By 1814 he had succeeded and armed with a charter of incorporation from the state legislature, he established the Boston Manufacturing Company on the Charles River in Waltham, Massachusetts.<sup>v</sup>

Foreign trade was suffering in this period as war with England undercut Atlantic shipping. Lowell and fellow Boston merchants invested \$400,000 in their new firm, an unprecedented sum at this early date. The key innovation that the adoption of the power loom permitted was the vertical integration of all steps in the cloth manufacturing process under a single roof. From opening the bales, to carding, spinning, dressing the warp yarn, and finally weaving the cloth, all production steps were conducted within the mill.

Moreover, the Waltham company came to depend from the outset on a workforce of young, single women recruited from the countryside. Both the power loom and the dressing frame required fairly tall workers and children simply wouldn't do as they had for the carding machines and spinning frames in the southern New England mills. Furthermore, given its large working capital, the Boston Manufacturing Company set up a large operation from the outset, to take advantage of economies of scale; that decision coupled with the need for adult labor required that the firm recruit labor from a considerable distance. This need in turn led the Waltham firm to construct boardinghouses to accommodate the new workforce of rural women recruited from the

surrounding countryside. Finally, to entice this new pool of labor, management offered monthly cash wages, a definite competitive advantage in comparison to practices in the family-style Rhode Island mills.

Even with the end of hostilities in 1815 and the resumption of British textile imports, the Boston Manufacturing Company thrived. The passage of tariff legislation that provided particularly good protection for cheap cloth contributed to the firm's success in the 1810s. Management erected two additional mills along the Charles River, but by 1820 they had fully occupied their limited waterpower site. Scouting for a new location for expansion, owners of the company learned of the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River in East Chelmsford, Massachusetts. The site had several advantages over the Waltham location. The greater flow of the river and the height of the falls meant there was far more waterpower available in East Chelmsford than in Waltham. And although the site was 27 miles from Boston, the existence of the Middlesex Canal connecting the Merrimack just north of the falls to the Mystic River at Boston was a signal advantage. Finally, a small transportation canal skirted Pawtucket Falls, which, with the competition of the much more extensive Middlesex Canal, had fallen into disuse. Boston capitalists could purchase the canal and surrounding lands at modest prices and in the construction of their factory sites they would modify the transportation canal around the falls to create the power canals needed for mill operations. The East Chelmsford site dwarfed the more cramped Waltham location and stimulated much grander visions. One of the new millowners remarked that they might "live to see the place contain twenty thousand inhabitants."<sup>vi</sup> His seemingly grandiose prediction vastly underestimated the mill city that Lowell would become. And by 1900 additional mill cities emerged in New

England—notably Lawrence, Manchester, and Fall River—comparable to or larger than Lowell.

Textile mills of the Waltham-Lowell system sprang up across the northern New England countryside between 1814 and 1850 and grew steadily across the second half of the century. Mills of the Rhode Island variety expanded as well, and the earlier regional differences faded over time. At mid-century New England's textile workforce had grown to number 85,000 producing cloth goods valued at \$68 million annually.<sup>vii</sup> Adding in a substantial textile industry in the Philadelphia area, cotton and woolen textile mills were no doubt the nation's leading industrial employers at this date.

In the first phase of America's industrial revolution inexpensive, mass-market consumer goods—particularly clothing—predominated. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a boot and shoe industry shot up in New England, while a garment industry producing ready-made clothing took root in seaboard cities, such as Boston, New York and Philadelphia. In 1870--the first year for which we have reasonably reliable figures—more than 300,000 women found paid employment in textile, boot and shoe, and clothing sectors of the national economy. While factory production grew dramatically in these decades, much of urban garment employment consisted of putting-out work completed in urban homes and tenements.

Male industrial employment also expanded exponentially in the middle of the nineteenth century, but there was little overlap of male and female jobs. Men's work was spread across a broader spectrum of industries and entailed a much wider range of skills than was true for women in this period. As women's work moved from home to factory, male labor was more likely to shift from home to workshop. Male shoemakers plied their

craft in small shops known as ten-footers; building sites, railroads, and machine shops also offered employment to skilled workingmen in significant numbers. Also in contrast to the experiences of women, workingmen continued at mid-century to enjoy opportunities for movement up a job ladder over the course of their working lives from apprentice to journeyman to master. Degradation of artisan skills and the emergence of the semi-skilled industrial worker were important elements of the male experience of the industrial revolution, but immigration and ethnic divisions sheltered white, native-born workingmen from the harshest treatment doled out by industrial employers in the early industrial revolution. Even as more involved divisions of labor emerged and the all-around skills of earlier artisans became less common, many urban male workers continued to work in small shops or other non-factory settings.<sup>viii</sup>

In the rapid expansion of industrial America following the conclusion of the Civil War, the character of the industrial revolution shifted significantly. In the final third of the century, heavy industry and male employments began to feel the impact of industrialization. Railroads, coalmining, and iron and steel became increasingly important in the changing national economy and technological change transformed these sectors of the economy in ways that had been common in consumer sectors of the economy earlier. If the first half of the nineteenth century had seen breathtaking expansion in the application of waterpower in industry, steam power took the leading role in the drama of the second half of the century. And with these technological changes heavy industry displaced light manufacturing as the leading edge of economic growth.

Employment figures approaching the turn of the twentieth century reflected this major shift. A quarter million iron and steel workers surpassed the number of textile

workers across the country. Some 677,000 coalminers in 1900 equaled the number of garment workers. And the almost three quarters of a million railroad workers in 1890 easily outdistanced the numbers in these other economic sectors.<sup>ix</sup> By 1900 more than 37 percent of all gainful workers in the United States were employed in manufacturing, mining, construction, and transportation sectors, eclipsing for the first time the numbers employed in agriculture.<sup>x</sup>

As the industrial revolution changed the face of the American economy, it also transformed how individual workers experienced their daily work and broader lives. As a social historian, my focus has been on examining the impact of the industrial revolution on working people who lived through and contributed to its changes. I've been reminded of the importance of viewing these transformative changes "from the bottom up," for the perspectives of working men and women. A poet and dramatist made this point most vividly in a poem entitled, "A Worker Reads History":

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?  
 The books are filled with the names of kings.  
 Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?  
 And Babylon, so many times destroyed,  
 Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,  
 The city glittering with Gold, lived those who built it?  
 In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished  
 Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome  
 Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom  
 Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,  
 Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend  
 The night the sea rushed in,  
 The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

My response to the challenge that Bertolt Brecht issued has been to explore the lives of working women in the New England across this industrial revolution. Let me focus the remainder of this presentation on two groups of women that we know a great deal about women textile workers in the mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts and women shoeworkers some twenty-five miles away in Lynn. Together their experiences encapsulate the changes in women's lives wrought by the first stage of the industrial revolution in the United States.

Women were in high demand in the years between 1830 and 1860 to work in the first cotton textile mills that were established along the lines pioneered in Waltham and Lowell. One surviving letter from a mill superintendent in Lowell set out the terms that were to govern one mill recruiter as he set out on a trip to New York and Vermont:

I will thank you to engage for the Merrimack Company any smart, active & healthy girls whom you may happen to meet who would like to come to Lowell. We can give employment to from 50 to 100 girls, at the usual wages paid in this place. [After describing wage rates, he went on,] I wish you to make no exaggerated statements with regard to wages, nor raise any extravagant expectations which will be likely to be disappointed. ... We can employ none under 15 years of age, & those of weakly or sickly constitutions should not be encouraged to come.... You will please engage only such persons as sustain a good character; and as you may think will prove useful hands to the Company, and all such as you may judge it expedient to engage, we will employ on their arrival.<sup>xi</sup>

Another recruiter, in July 1859 printed a broadside that he used while seeking "75 Young Women From 15 to 35 years of Age...to work in the Cotton Mills in Lowell and Chicopee." He set out the terms under which he would engage new hands:

I am authorized by the Agents of said Mills to make the following proposition to persons suitable for their work, viz:—They will be paid \$1.00 per work, and board, for the first month. It is presumed they will then be able to go to work at job prices. They will be considered as engaged for one year, cases of sickness excepted. I will pay the expenses of those who have not the means to pay for themselves, and the girls will pay it to the Company by their first labor. All that remain in the employ of the Company eighteen months will have the amount of their expenses to the Mills refunded to them.”<sup>xii</sup>

These first two documents speak to the labor recruiting process from the point of view of the mill agent and the labor recruiter. It is also possible to explore this process from the point of view of the women workers themselves, those who left their hard-scrabble farms in the New England hill country to work in the early cotton textile mills of New England.

What motivated young women to leave their families in the countryside to work in the mills of New England’s growing urban centers—between analysis of the economic backgrounds of the families of mill women and what they had to say in their correspondence I sensed that, first, mill employment permitted young women to earn their own support without depending on their families; and, second, the wages permitted young women to save something for their future marriages. In an earlier period, rural farm families could provide something of a dowry or dowry-equivalent for their marrying daughters and land for their sons setting up their own family farms. This sort of support was more difficult to provide in the middle third of the nineteenth century as rural population expanded, there was less available farm land throughout New England, and the cost of land was moving steadily upward. Consider a couple of quotes from mill

letters that speak to the issue of motivation. Anna Mason wrote from Manchester, N.H. to her parents back home in Vermont: “I am not living upon my friends or doing housework for my board but am a factory girl.” The independence of mill employment appealed to young women in comparison with working as a domestic servant in a city or a farm servant in the country. Parents often lent their support to daughters who moved away in pursuit of mill wages. Eben Jennison of Charleston, Maine wrote to a daughter in Lowell in 1849: “The season with us has been verry Dry and the Drough[t] verry severe. The crops are very light indeed and business verry Dull. If you should be blessed with your health and are contented I think you will do better where you are than you could do here.”<sup>xiii</sup>

In both of these instances, mill daughters also sent money home to assist their families. Eben Jennison, in one letter, acknowledged receipt of five dollars from his Lowell daughters, but expressed his intention to pay it back someday with interest. This letter provides an interesting expression of independence on the part of the farmer father who did not like the idea that he was in fact dependent in part on his daughters for his support. In the Mason family’s case, circumstances were more trying. The family had been forced to give up the homestead and Anna sent store goods and money to help them out. Once she sent \$10; another time, \$30, and there were probably other times, though the letters are not explicit on this score.<sup>xiv</sup>

On the whole a mix of personal and familial motivations were involved in the decisions of daughters to leave their farming homes and take up mill employment. There was, in fact, a continuum stretching from those who went to the mills for entirely personal, selfish reasons, and those who went to earn money to help support their

families. I would argue that long-term economic considerations--particularly how to save in anticipation of marriage—had more to do with the migration than the short-term consideration of immediate self support. Women came from farming families that were able to maintain a modest standard of living. But, because they were large families at a point in time when undeveloped land no longer existed in large quantities in rural New England, family members had to give thought to the long-term reproduction of the family. They could not settle all male children on plots of land and they had to find a way to help daughters bring something of a dowry into marriage. Migration to mill towns and mill employment offered just that sort of opportunity to farmers' daughters. So it was not poverty, *per se*, but the lack of future opportunities that pushed young women into the mills. And while young women were attending to their futures, and supporting themselves in mill towns, they achieved a measure of economic and social independence not possible while living under the parental roof.

Parents often tried to control their daughters from a distance, but found that mill experiences gave them grounds for making their own decisions. Anna Mason resisted parental attempts to get her to come home and take a teaching job. In a typical comment she wrote: "I want to see you all very much but I am making good wages now and if I go home I see no way of earning anything through the spring." In a subsequent letter she wrote her mother, "I did not mind you when you wished me to leave the mill. We were making such good pay that I wanted to work a little longer." Even though Anna Mason sent significant amounts of money home to help out her family, she decided how much to send and how long she would work in Manchester. Wage earning and the experience of

living on her own in a mill town gave her an independence that she would probably not have enjoyed had she remained living at home with her family in Vermont.<sup>xv</sup>

Similar examples abound in the correspondence of women mill operatives. Sarah Metcalf, a Maine migrant in Lowell, wrote home expressing plans for her future work:

And now Mother I am going to propose a plan that we Lowell folks have formed, which is, that I stay here all winter, and go home in the spring, and then I shall not feel obliged to come back again for a year, if ever, whereas if I go home this fall I shall have to come back in the spring. My reasons for this are, first, I am here now and very pleasantly situated which is a good deal for factory girls to say, and I think if I am going to work in Lowell any more, I had better stay now, for it is ten chances to one if I can get so good a chance to board, if I do to work. Secondly, I am making three dollars, and three and a half, a week, and Clough [the overseer] says he will do as well by me all winter if I will stay.

Several interesting things emerge from this letter. First, Sarah was not living in Lowell by herself, but several other family members worked there as well. Second, she did not take sole responsibility for the plan she proposed, but wrote that “we Lowell folks” had reached this conclusion jointly. She continued with several more good reasons for her plan and concluded by noting what led her to want to spend the winter and spring in Lowell: “I can probably lay up fifty dollars besides having my teeth fixed, and getting my next summers clothes.” She was nothing if not practical, and she evidently was confident that these reasons would sit well with her mother.<sup>xvi</sup> The tone of the letter suggests the degree of independence young people could enjoy while working in the mills.

This discussion of changes in family dynamics leads to a more general consideration of cultural changes that accompanied women's work in the early mills. Contemporaries repeatedly expressed concern that the mills were making young women unfit in a variety of ways for what was expected of them. Consider two quotes from New England men who were bothered by trends in the 1830s and '40s. The first, written in 1840, complained:

But the great mass [of operatives] wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming the whit better off than when they commenced labor....The average...working life...of the girls that come to Lowell...is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. "She has worked in a Factory," is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.

The second complaint, written in 1842, took a very different tack: "It is too common for farmers' daughters to grow up young ladies, play the piano...and spend their father's surplus funds for fine clothing." Critics of this variety likely felt that mill employment made farmers' daughters less fit for marriage—not because they had been exploited and worn down by their work in the mill but because they had become citified and uppity.<sup>xvii</sup>

This last complaint about the newfound tastes of farmers' daughters had a second consequence in the view of some commentators. These cultural changes made young women dissatisfied with the country life of their parents. Thus one writer complained in 1858:

The most intelligent and enterprising of the farmer's daughters become school-teachers, or tenders of shops, or factory-girls. They condemn the calling of their father, and will, nine times out of ten, marry a mechanic in preference to a farmer. They know that marrying a farmer is a very serious business. They remember their worn-out mothers.<sup>xviii</sup>

Needless to say, contemporary writers were not pleased to see farmers' daughters apparently rejecting young farmers and demonstrating a preference for urban artisans or white-collar workers.

And this perception was based to a considerable degree on reality. Young women, writing back to their families, on occasion expressed just the kind of preferences that this writer was complaining about. Sally Rice, from a farming family in Somerset, Vermont, left home in 1839. She worked first as a farm laborer in upstate New York and then in a mill in Thompson, Connecticut. She wrote home to her family explaining the reasons for her departure:

I never can be happy there in among so many mountains. I feel as tho I have worn out shoes and strenth enough riding and walking over the mountains. I think it would be more consistent to save my strength to raise my boys....I shall need all i have got and as for marrying and settling in that wilderness I wont. and if a person ever expects to take comfort it is while they are young I feel so.<sup>xix</sup>

Sally Rice was only eighteen and single when she penned these lines. Still, she had a sense of what her future would bring and how she would shape that future. Marrying a hard-pressed farmer and settling in northern Vermont was evidently not in her plans.

Another Vermont native, Mary Paul, echoed Sally Rice's sentiments. Paul arrived in Lowell in November 1845 and worked in the mills off and on for almost four years. Surviving letters to her father chronicle a series of subsequent moves and jobs until in 1857 at the age of 27, she married Isaac Guild, a marbleworker, and son of her former boardinghouse keeper in Lowell. The couple moved to Lynn, Massachusetts, where over the next five years Mary Paul Guild gave birth to two sons. For Mary Paul, the mill experience marked a permanent shift from a rural childhood to an adult life within the expanding urban, industrial world of Massachusetts. After Lowell, she lived briefly with her widowed father, but once married and settled in Lynn, she left her rural past behind. The cultural distance she traveled was reflected in an 1855 letter in which she described meeting hometown acquaintances whom she found "rather countryfied in their ideas."<sup>xx</sup> Young people like Sally Rice and Mary Paul threatened the future of rural New England. In a declining rural region, the migration of grown sons and daughters simply contributed to further decline. Young people voted with their feet and their elders did not approve.

Mill women's correspondence with family and friends goes a way to helping us recapture workers' perspectives on the industrial revolution, but they did not share all of their lives with folks back home. Notably absent from mill letters are references to broader economic and political conflicts that arose in mill towns in the antebellum decades. Yet there were labor struggles in Lowell and other New England mill towns in the 1830s and 1840s and examining contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides and petitions permits reconstruction of the values and concerns at stake. A good place to go to examine primary documents that speak to the responses of women workers to the new demands placed upon them by mill employment is an online document project that

Teresa Murphy and I have published on the Women and Social Movements website (<http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm>). There we explore the contributions of a New Hampshire-born mill operative, Sarah G. Bagley, and trace how her labor activism flowed into other reform movements in the antebellum period.

Sarah Bagley was one of the most important labor leaders in New England during the 1840s. An outspoken advocate of shorter workdays for factory operatives and mechanics, she campaigned tirelessly to make ten hours of labor per day the maximum in Massachusetts. As Sarah campaigned for this cause, she entered a much broader network of reformers in areas of women's rights, communitarianism, abolition, peace, prison, and health reform. The activities of Sarah Bagley and her coworkers reveal at once their familiarity with middle-class reform activities, and yet demonstrate the ways in which working people embraced this reform impulse at the same time that they transformed and critiqued some of its key elements. Moreover, Sarah's activities within the labor movement reveal many of the tensions that underlay relations between male and female working people as well as the constraints of gender that female activists had to overcome.<sup>xxi</sup>

The height of labor protest in the New England mills before the Civil War came with the emergence in the 1840s of a Ten Hour Movement aiming for reduction in the hours of labor in the mills. The mills ran for 73 hours a week in this period, averaging slightly more than twelve hours a day. As the pace of work in the mills increased without any wage gains, millworkers came to demand a ten-hour workday, giving them time to relax, attend meetings and lectures, and participate in the urban cultural scene around them. These protests built on earlier strikes, known as "turn-outs" in the language of the

time, and we can learn much about the sensibility that New England women brought to the mill experience by examining the language of protest they employed in these first protests. [Document 3] In October 1836, on the occasion of the second turn-out in Lowell, women founded the Lowell Factory Girls Association to organize their protest and assist those in need. The preamble to the association's constitution reveals mill women's sense of themselves as "daughters of freemen" and their connection to the young nation's republican tradition. They wrote:

Whereas we, the undersigned, residents of Lowell, moved by a love of honest industry and the expectation of a fair and liberal recompence, have left our homes, our relatives and youthful associates, and come hither, and subjected ourselves to all the danger and inconvenience, which necessarily, attend young and unprotected females, when among strangers, and in a strange land; and however humble the condition of Factory Girls, (as we are termed,) may seem, we firmly and fearlessly...claim for ourselves, that love of moral and intellectual culture, that admiration of, and desire to attain and preserve pure, elevated and refined characters, a true reverence for the divine principle which bids us render to every one his due; a due appreciation of those great and cardinal principles of our government, of justice and humanity, which enjoins on us "to live and let live"—that chivalrous and honorable feeling, which with equal force, forbids us to invade others rights, or suffer others, upon any consideration, to invade ours; and at the same time, that utter abhorrence and detestation of whatever is mean, sordid, dishonorable or unjust—all of which, can alone, in our estimation, entitle us to be called the daughters of freemen, or of Republican America.<sup>xxii</sup>

The mill women, some 2,500 in number, left the mills to protest an increase in the charges in company boardinghouses unaccompanied by a corresponding increase in their

wages. The women held out for several months and displayed a keen sense of tactics in their struggle with the mill agents. In the end, the companies reduced their boardinghouse charges for a good proportion of their workers, and the mill women returned to work.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Ten years later, women organized the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association with a view to restricting the hours of labor. The Association survived for two and a half and organized petition campaigns calling on the state legislature to set ten hours as the legal limit for the working day. The preamble of the group's constitution emphasized mental and moral reform rather than rights and justice and place the campaign squarely within a religious framework [Document 5]:

Whereas we, the Operatives of Lowell, believing that in the present age of improvement nothing can escape the searching glances of reform; and when men begin to inquire why the Laborer does not hold that place in the social, moral and intellectual world, which a bountiful Creator designed him to occupy, the *reason* is obvious. He is a slave to a false and debasing state of society. Our Merciful Father in his infinite wisdom surely, had not bestowed all his blessings, both mental and moral on a favored few, on whom also he had showered all of pecuniary gifts. No! to us *all* has he given minds capable of eternal progression and improvement!

It now only remains for us to throw off the shackles which are binding us in ignorance and servitude and which prevent us from rising to that scale of being for which God designed us.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Republicanism from the revolutionary tradition and perfectionism from evangelical Protestantism were two major threads that both workingmen and working

women drew upon to protest the new impositions of industrial capitalism in nineteenth-century America.

Mill women also became involved in a variety of other reform movements in the decades before the Civil War. Antislavery was strong in Lowell and mill women sent several petitions to Washington opposing slavery in the District of Columbia and opposing war with Mexico which might contribute to an expansion of slavery into the Southwest. [Document 19] Sarah Bagley herself visited prisons and reported on what she saw in the pages of the labor newspaper, the *Voice of Industry*. She commented that prisoners worked fewer hours as “punishment of a crime” than did her fellow operatives in the mills. She noted in particular, “In the winter they never ‘light up’ their work, but leave at dark.” She ended her letter to the editor using language common to the reform movements of the day, “yours for universal emancipation.”<sup>xxv</sup> [Document 20] Like others she came to see the need for the abolition of black slavery and wage slavery as related causes.

She also came to critique the subordination of women in terms that reflected her commitment to “universal emancipation.” After her years in Lowell, she moved to Springfield where she took a job as a telegraph operator, only to be disappointed in being paid less than the man who had preceded her in the position. She wrote in one letter [Document 27]:

I am sick at heart when I look into the social world and see woman so willingly made a dupe to the beastly selfishness of man. A mere donkey for his use and no right, even, to her own person. I most fervently thank Heaven that I have never introduced into existence a being to suffer the privations that I have endured. For instance—

the man who tended this office before me had four hundred dollars per year I three and still the business has been on the increase all the time. But I am a woman and it is not worth so much to a company for me to write a letter as it would be for a man. Well, the world is quite satisfied with the present arrangement, and we can only protest against such a state of things, and strive to arouse the minds of others to their state of servitude and dependence on the caprice and whims and selfishness of man.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Following this stint in Springfield, we next find Sarah Bagley in Philadelphia where she volunteered in the Rosine Society, working with the reformation of that city's prostitutes. She married a Scottish immigrant, James Durno, and the couple moved first to Albany and then New York City, where her husband developed a successful patent medicine business and she became a physician for women and children.<sup>xxvii</sup>

While we have no further surviving letters or other writings by Sarah Bagley, we know that some of her fellow labor activists participated in the woman's rights movement that took off after the first convention in Seneca Falls in July 1848. Mary Emerson, a fellow officer of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, attended a woman's rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts in October 1851. She described that event in one letter:

Our Woman's Rights Convention, or, if you please, as our gentlemanly Editors have it -- "The Hen Convention." came off according to notice, on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. I was present, (for which privilege I thank my God.) but to attempt any description thereof, that would do any thing like justice is beyond the daring of my feeble pen. You will form some conception of the a[b]sorbing interest when I tell you that hundreds stood upon their feet during each separate session, which lasted full two hours and a half, so interested in the exercises as to preserve the most perfect order. But you

say—“Why not get a hall large enough to seat them? Why, my dear Madam, we had the largest one in Worcester, which seats, I am told, twenty-five hundred, and then the aisles were filled beside. Speeches were made by the President -- Mrs. P.W. Davis. Mrs. Nichols. Editor of the Brattleborough Vt. True Democrat, Miss Lucy Stone, Mrs. Coe, Mr. W. Phillips of Boston, Dr. Channing, Dr. Harriet K. Hunt of Boston. Mrs. Rose. . . . and others. Letters read from Harriet Martineau, Estelle Anna Lewis. Ralph W. Emerson, Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher,--and many others.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Mary Emerson shared the broad reform perspective that launched women mill workers into labor protest in these two decades and contributed to the widening perspectives of American women in politics and social reform in the mid-nineteenth century.

These documents of women in the early industrial revolution are illuminating on a number of levels. First, they demonstrate how factory employment not only brought women’s work out of the home but provided women a collective experience that supported their participation in the world of broader social reform movements. Lowell women became involved in antislavery, moral reform, peace, labor reform, prison reform, and women’s rights campaigns. Furthermore, the documents reveal that working women, like workingmen in this period, drew initially on republican traditions to defend their rights and interests but ultimately came to justify their concern for social justice on a combination of religious and rationalist grounds. They came to oppose the growing inequality evident in American society and to demand for themselves as workers and as women greater rights and rewards in that society. Sarah Bagley’s reform efforts and those of other working women of her generation demonstrate the gendered strains of resistance

that were an integral part of the rise of early industrial capitalism in New England. I am confident that this history can speak to students today as much as it speaks to you and to me. Like young mill women before the Civil War young people today live in a world of dramatic cultural change. Perspectives on this past can help us all understand and navigate the present.

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<sup>i</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: The Making of Modern English Society, vol. 2, 1750 to the Present Day* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), 40.

<sup>ii</sup> For the English historiography, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1966); Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*; Raphael Samuel, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop* 3 (Spring, 1977): 6-72; Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980). On the American side, see Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For discussion of political and ideological developments that accompanied the early industrial revolution, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>iii</sup> I have explored these issues more fully with a focus on women in New England in *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>iv</sup> The best treatment of labor relations in mills owned and operated by the Slater family is found in Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Factory and Town Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

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<sup>v</sup> The story of Lowell's contribution and the early rise of the Boston Manufacturing Company is well told in Robert F. Dalzell, Jr, *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>vi</sup> Nathan Appleton, *Introduction of the Power Loom and the Origin of Lowell* (Lowell: B.H. Penhallow, 1858), 19.

<sup>vii</sup> J.D.B. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States . . . Being a Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington: Beverly Tucker, 1854), 180.

<sup>viii</sup> Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 35-46.

<sup>ix</sup> David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 27; Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 24; Priscilla Long, *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Bloody Coal Industry* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 117; Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 114.

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 74.

<sup>xi</sup> John Clark to Jesse Huse, 25 July 1847, Lowell Historical Society Collection, Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, Mass.

<sup>xii</sup> Baker Library, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, Boston, Mass.

<sup>xiii</sup> Anna Mason to parents, Manchester, N.H., n.d., Bronson Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; Eben Jennison to Elizabeth Jennison, Charleston, Maine, 2 Sept. 1849, Jennison Letters, courtesy of Mary A. Dinmore, Cheshire, Conn.

<sup>xiv</sup> Anna Mason to father, Manchester, 25 Sept. 1851, 28 March 1853; Anna Mason to mother, Manchester, 14 Oct. 1853, 13 Jan. [1856], Bronson Collection; Eben Jennison to Elizabeth and Amelia Jennison, 13 July 1858, Jennison Letters.

<sup>xv</sup> Anna Mason to parents, Manchester, 12 Feb. 1853; Anna Mason to mother, Boscawen, 18 March 1853, Bronson Collection.

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- <sup>xvi</sup> Sarah Metcalf to Chloe Adams Metcalf, Lowell, 25 Sept. 1846, Adams-Metcalf Letters, American Textile History Museum, Lowell, Mass.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Orestes Brownson, in the *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840): 369-70; Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont, Natural, Civil and Statistical* (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1842), 39.
- <sup>xviii</sup> "Farming Life in New England," *Atlantic Monthly* 2 (August, 1858): 341.
- <sup>xix</sup> Sally Rice to her father and mother, Union Village, 1839, Hazelton Rice Papers, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, VT.
- <sup>xx</sup> Mary Paul to Bela Paul, 11 June 1855. For the full text of this correspondence and an introduction to the letters, see Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860*, 2d. ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 121-53.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Teresa Murphy, *Ten Hours' Labor: Religion, Reform, and Gender in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
- <sup>xxii</sup> "Constitution of the Lowell Factory Girls Association," 26 September 1836, broadside, Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, Mass.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Dublin, *Women at Work*, 98-102.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> "Preamble [and Constitution] of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association," *Voice of Industry*, 27 February 1846, 2.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Sarah G. Bagley, Letter to the Editor, *Voice of Industry*, 11 September 1846, 3.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Sarah G. Bagley to Angelique Martin, 13 March 1847, Lilly Martin Spencer Family Papers (MSS 972), Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> See appropriate documents related to the Durnos' dual careers in the Bagley document project on *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Mary Emerson to Angelique Martin, 18 October 1851, Lilly Martin Spencer Family Papers (MSS 972), Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

