

Lowell Mill Girls and the factory system, 1840

Introduction

Lowell, Massachusetts, named in honor of Francis Cabot Lowell, was founded in the early 1820s as a planned town for the manufacture of textiles. It introduced a new system of integrated manufacturing to the United States and established new patterns of employment and urban development that were soon replicated around New England and elsewhere.

By 1840, the factories in Lowell employed at some estimates more than 8,000 textile workers, commonly known as mill girls or factory girls. These “operatives”—so-called because they operated the looms and other machinery—were primarily women and children from farming backgrounds.

The Lowell mills were the first hint of the industrial revolution to come in the United States, and with their success came two different views of the factories. For many of the mill girls, employment brought a sense of freedom. Unlike most young women of that era, they were free from parental authority, were able to earn their own money, and had broader educational opportunities. Many observers saw this challenge to the traditional roles of women as a threat to the American way of life. Others criticized the entire wage-labor factory system as a form of slavery and actively condemned and campaigned against the harsh working conditions and long hours and the increasing divisions between workers and factory owners.

The Transcendentalist reformer Orestes Brownson first published “The Laboring Classes” in his journal, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, in July 1840. It is an attack on the entire wage system but particularly focuses on how factory jobs affect the mill girls: ““She has worked in a Factory,”” Brownson argues, “is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.” In response, “A Factory Girl” published a defense of the mill girls in the December 1840 issue of the *Lowell Offering*, a journal of articles, fiction, and poetry written by and for the Lowell factory operatives. The author was probably Harriet Jane Farley, a mill girl who eventually became editor of the *Lowell Offering*.¹

Excerpts

Orestes Brownson, *The Laboring Classes: An Article from the Boston Quarterly Review*, Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1840.

The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture . . . There is a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence . . . the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than

¹ “The Lowell Offering Index,” by Judith Ranta, Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell Libraries, <http://library.uml.edu/clh/index.Html>.

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when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever 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.

A Factory Girl, "Factory Girls," *Lowell Offering*, December 1840

Whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? . . . girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England and the mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans. Think, for a moment, how many of the next generation are to spring from mothers doomed to infamy! . . . It has been asserted that to put ourselves under the influence and restraints of corporate bodies, is contrary to the spirit of our institutions, and to that love of independence which we ought to cherish. . . . We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. Neither have I ever discovered that any restraints were imposed upon us but those which were necessary for the peace and comfort of the whole, and for the promotion of the design for which we are collected, namely, to get money, as much of it and as fast as we can; and it is because our toil is so unremitting, that the wages of factory girls are higher than those of females engaged in most other occupations. It is these wages which, in spite of toil, restraint, discomfort, and prejudice, have drawn so many worthy, virtuous, intelligent, and well-educated girls to Lowell, and other factories; and it is the wages which are in great degree to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. . . . Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him *God speed*, if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls

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have too much *independence* for that. . . . And now, if Mr. Brownson is a *man*, he will endeavor to retrieve the injury he has done; . . . though he will find error, ignorance, and folly among us, (and where would he find them not?) yet he would not see worthy and virtuous girls consigned to infamy, because they work in a factory.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the images of the two original documents, and read the edited excerpts. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Locate the following words and attempt to define them from context clues: *slander*, *mortality*, *infamy*, *virtuous*, *folly*. If necessary, employ a dictionary.
2. Describe the conditions in America around 1840 that encouraged young women to seek employment outside of their home.
3. List and explain three reasons Orestes Brownson used to oppose the employment of women as factory “operatives.”
4. Identify an argument from the “Lowell Offering” and explain how it countered the position of Orestes Brownson.

Extended Activity:

In 2013 the United States Postal Service issued a commemorative plate block of twelve first-class stamps titled “Made in America: Building a Nation.” Honoring workers of the 1930s, the photographic images on the stamps depicted three women—two identified as working in the textile and millinery trades and the third as a typist. (The men in the images are engaged in factory work, construction of skyscrapers, and working on the railroads.)

Using the Lowell and Brownson documents and the information from the stamps, develop an essay indicating the type of employment opportunities available to women in the 1840s and almost a century later in the 1930s.

ple in a no very populous village, in a wealthy portion of our common country, suffering for the want of the necessaries of life, willing to work, and yet finding no work to do. Many and many is the application of a poor man for work, merely for his food, we have seen rejected. These things are little thought of, for the applicants are poor; they fill no conspicuous place in society, and they have no biographers. But their wrongs are chronicled in heaven. It is said there is no want in this country. There may be less than in some other countries. But death by actual starvation in this country is we apprehend no uncommon occurrence. The sufferings of a quiet, unassuming but useful class of females in our cities, in general sempstresses, too proud to beg or to apply to the alms-house, are not easily told. They are industrious; they do all that they can find to do; but yet the little there is for them to do, and the miserable pittance they receive for it, is hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together. And yet there is a man who employs them to make shirts, trousers, &c., and grows rich on their labors. He is one of our respectable citizens, perhaps is praised in the newspapers for his liberal donations to some charitable institution. He passes among us as a pattern of morality, and is honored as a worthy Christian. And why should he not be, since our *Christian* community is made up of such as he, and since our clergy would not dare question his piety, lest they should incur the reproach of infidelity, and lose their standing, and their salaries? Nay, since our clergy are raised up, educated, fashioned, and sustained by such as he? Not a few of our churches rest on Mammon for their foundation. The basement is a trader's shop.



We pass through our manufacturing villages; most of them appear neat and flourishing. The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture; the side exhibited to distinguished visitors. There is a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence. A few of what Carlyle terms not inaptly the *body-servants* are well paid, and now and then an agent or an overseer rides in his coach. But the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever 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. We know no sadder sight on earth than one of our factory villages presents, when the bell at break of day, or at the hour of breakfast, or dinner, calls out its hundreds or thousands of operatives. We stand and look at these hard working men and women hurrying in all directions, and ask ourselves, where go the proceeds of their labors? The man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, revelling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket; or he is a member of Congress, contending for a high Tariff to tax the poor for the benefit of the rich; or in these times he is shedding crocodile tears over the deplorable condition of the poor laborer, while he docks his wages twenty-five per cent.; building miniature log cabins, shouting Harrison and "hard cider." And this man too would fain pass for a Christian and a

Orestes A. Brownson, *The Laboring Classes: An Article from the Boston Quarterly Review*, Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1840, page 11.

republican. He shouts for liberty, stickles for equality, and is horrified at a Southern planter who keeps slaves.

One thing is certain ; that of the amount actually produced by the operative, he retains a less proportion than it costs the master to feed, clothe, and lodge his slave. Wages is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, who would retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-holders.

Messrs. Thome and Kimball, in their account of the emancipation of slavery in the West Indies, establish the fact that the employer may have the same amount of labor done 25 per ct. cheaper than the master. What does this fact prove, if not that wages is a more successful method of taxing labor than slavery ? We really believe our Northern system of labor is more oppressive, and even more mischievous to morals, than the Southern. We, however, war against both. We have no toleration for either system. We would see a slave a man, but a free man, not a mere operative at wages. This he would not be were he now emancipated. Could the abolitionists effect all they propose, they would do the slave no service. Should emancipation work as well as they say, still it would do the slave no good. He would be a slave still, although with the title and cares of a freeman. If then we had no constitutional objections to abolitionism, we could not, for the reason here implied, be abolitionists.

The slave system, however, in name and form, is gradually disappearing from Christendom. It will not subsist much longer. But its place is taken by the system of labor at wages, and this system, we hold, is no improvement upon the one it supplants. Nevertheless the system of wages will triumph. It is the system which in name sounds honester than slavery, and in substance is more profitable to the master. It yields the wages of iniquity, without its opprobrium. It will therefore supplant slavery, and be sustained—for a time.

Now, what is the prospect of those who fall under the operation of this system ? We ask, is there a reasonable chance that any considerable portion of the present generation of laborers, shall ever become owners of a sufficient portion of the funds of production, to be able to sustain themselves by laboring on their own capital, that is, as independent laborers ? We need not ask this question, for everybody knows there is not. Well, is the condition of a laborer at wages the best that the great mass of the working people ought to be able to aspire to ? Is it a condition,—nay can it be made a condition,—with which a man should be satisfied ; in which he should be contented to live and die ?

In our own country this condition has existed under its most favorable aspects, and has been made as good as it can be. It has reached all the excellence of which it is susceptible. It is now not improving but growing worse. The actual condition of the working-man to-day, viewed in all its bearings, is not so good as it was fifty years ago. If we have not been altogether misinformed, fifty years ago, health and industrious habits, constituted no mean stock in trade, and with them almost any man might aspire to competence and independence. But it is so no longer. The wilderness has receded, and already the new lands are beyond the reach of the mere laborer, and the employer has him at his mercy. If the present relation subsist, we see nothing better for him in reserve than what he now possesses, but something altogether worse.

We are not ignorant of the fact that men born poor become wealthy, and that men born to wealth become poor ; but this fact does not necessarily

Orestes A. Brownson, *The Laboring Classes: An Article from the Boston Quarterly Review*, Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1840, page 12.

THE LOWELL OFFERING, FOR DECEMBER, 1840.

FACTORY GIRLS.

"SHE HAS WORKED IN A FACTORY, is sufficient to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl."

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

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

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

Mr. Brownson has also slandered the community; and far over the Atlantic the story will be told, that in New England, the land to which the Puritans fled for refuge from social as well as religious oppression—the land where the first blood was shed in defence of the opinion that all are born free and equal—the land which has

adopted the theory that morals and intellect are alone to be the criterions of superiority—that *there*, worthy and virtuous girls are consigned to infamy, if they work in a factory!

That there has been prejudice against us, we know; but it is wearing away, and has never been so deep nor universal as Mr. B's statement will lead many to believe. Even now it may be that "the mushroom aristocracy," and "would-be-fashionables" of Boston, turn up their eyes in horror at the sound of those vulgar words, *factory girls*; but *they* form but a small part of the community, and theirs are not the opinions which Mr. Brownson intended to represent.

Whence has arisen the degree of prejudice which has existed against factory girls, I cannot tell; but we often hear the condition of the factory population of England; and the station which the operatives hold in society there, referred to as descriptive of *our* condition. As well might it be said, as say the *nobility* of England, that *labor itself* is disgraceful, and that all who work should be consigned to contempt, if not to infamy. And again: it has been asserted that to put ourselves under the influence and restraints of corporate bodies, is contrary to the spirit of our institutions, and to that love of independence which we ought to cherish. There is a spirit of independence which is averse to social life itself; and I would advise all who wish to cherish it, to go far beyond the Rocky Mountains, and hold communion with none but the untamed Indian, and the wild beast of the forest. We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. Neither have I ever discovered that any restraints were imposed upon us, but those which were necessary for the peace and comfort of the whole, and for the promotion of the design for which we are collected, namely, to get money, as much of it and as fast as we can; and it is because our toil is so unremitting, that the wages of factory girls are higher than those of females engaged in most other occupations. It is these wages which, in spite of toil, restraint, discomfort, and prejudice, have drawn so many worthy, virtuous, intelligent, and well-educated girls to Lowell, and other factories; and it is the wages which are in a great degree

A Factory Girl, "Factory Girls," *Lowell Offering*, December 1840, page 17.

Defence of Factory Girls.

to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. It was observed (I have been told) by one of the Lowell overseers to his superintendent, that he could get girls enough who would work for one dollar per week. I very much doubt whether it would be possible; but supposing it true, they would not be such girls as will come and work for two, three and four dollars per week. Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him *God speed*, if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much *independence for that*.

But it may be remarked, "You certainly cannot mean to intimate, that all factory girls are virtuous, intelligent," &c. No, I do not; and Lowell would be a stranger place than it has ever been represented, if among eight thousand girls there were none of the ignorant and depraved. Calumniators have asserted, that *all* were vile, because they knew *some* to be so; and the sins of a *few* have been visited upon the *many*. While the mass of the worthy and virtuous have been unnoticed, in the even tenor of their way, the evil deeds of a few individuals have been trumpeted abroad, and they have been regarded as specimens of factory girls. It has been said, that factory girls are not thought as much of any where else as they are in Lowell. If this be true, I am very glad of it; it is quite to our credit to be most respected where we are best known. Still, I presume, there are girls here who are a disgrace to the city, to their sex, and to humanity. But *they* do not fix the tone of public sentiment, and their morals are not the standard. There is an old adage, that "Birds of a feather flock together;" and a Captain Marryatt could probably find many females here who do not appear like "woman as she should be"—but men of a better sort have found females here of whom they have made companions, not for an evening or a day, but for life. The erroneous idea, wherever it exists, must be done away, that there is in factories but one sort of girls, and *that* the baser and degraded sort. There are among us *all sorts* of girls. I believe that there are few occupations which can exhibit so many gradations of piety and intelligence; but the majority may at least lay claim to as much of the former as females

in other stations of life. The more intelligent among them would scorn to sit night after night to view the gestures of a Fanny Elssler. The Improvement Circles,* the Lyceum and Institute, the social religious meetings, the Circulating and other libraries, can bear testimony that the little time they have is spent in a better manner. Our well filled churches and lecture halls, and the high character of our clergymen and lecturers, will testify that the state of morals and intelligence is not low.

Mr. Brownson, I suppose, would not judge of our moral characters by our church-going tendencies; but as many do, a word on this subject may not be amiss. That there are many in Lowell who do not regularly attend any meeting, is as true as the correspondent of the Boston Times once represented it; but for this there are various reasons. There are many who come here for but a short time, and who are willing for a while to forego every usual privilege, that they may carry back to their homes the greatest possible sum they can save. There are widows earning money for the maintenance and education of their children; there are daughters providing for their aged and destitute parents; and there are widows, single women, and girls, endeavoring to obtain the wherewithal to furnish some other home than a factory boarding-house. Pew rent, and the dress which custom has wrongly rendered essential, are expenses which they cannot afford, and they spend their Sabbaths in rest, reading, and meditation. There may also be many other motives to prevent a regular attendance at church, besides a disinclination to gratify and cultivate the moral sentiments.

There have also been nice calculations made, as to the small proportion which the amount of money deposited in the Savings Bank bears to that earned in the city; but this is not all that is saved. Some is deposited in Banks at other places, and some is put into the hands of personal friends. Still, much that is earned is immediately, though not foolishly, spent. Much that none but the parties concerned will ever know of, goes to procure comforts and necessities for some lowly home, and a great deal is spent for public benevolent purposes. The fifteen hundred dollars which were collected in one day for Missionary purposes by a single denomination in our city, though it may speak of what Mrs. Gilman calls the "too great tendency to overflow in female benevolence," certainly does not tell of hearts sullied by vice, or souls steeped in infamy. And it is pleasing to view the interest which so many of the factory girls take in the social and religious institutions of this place.

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who do not call Lowell aught but a temporary home. Many of them stay here longer than they otherwise would, because these institutions have become so dear to them, and the letters which they send here after they do leave, show that the interest was too strong to be easily eradicated. I have known those who left homes of comfort and competence, that they might here enjoy religious privileges which country towns would not afford them. And the Lowell Offering may prove to all who will read it, that there are girls here whose education and intellect place them above the necessity of pursuing an avocation which will inevitably connect them with the ignorant and vicious.

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

* A social meeting, denominated Improvement Circle, was established in this city about a twelve-month since. At the sessions of this Circle, which have been holden one evening in a fortnight, communications (previously revised by the gentleman in charge) have been read, the names of the writers not being announced. The largest range of subject has been allowed, and the greatest variety of style indulged: Fiction and fact; poetry and prose; science and letters; religion and morals:—and in composition, the style has been humorous or otherwise, according to the various taste or talent of the writers. The reading of these articles has constituted the sole entertainment of the meetings of the Circle. The interest thus excited has given a remarkable impulse to the intellectual energies of our population.—At a social meeting for divine worship connected with one of our societies, communications, chiefly of a religious character, have been read, during several years past. The alternate weekly session of this conference was appropriated mainly to communications, and denominated Improvement Circle, soon after the institution of the one above mentioned; and the interest has thereby been greatly increased. A selection from the budgets of articles furnished to these circles, together with a few communications derived from other sources, constitutes THE LOWELL OFFERING, whereof the two gentlemen in charge of the meetings aforesaid are the Editors.

We have been thus particular, partly to gratify the curiosity of our readers, and partly to call attention to the advantage of such social institutions for improvement in knowledge and in the art of composition. The meetings being free to all who are disposed to attend, they may be likened to so many intellectual banquets; the writers furnishing "the feast of reason," while all present participate in "the flow of soul." EDITORS.

THE SPIRIT-FLOWER TRANSPLANTED.

Before us lies an extensive and splendid garden, overarched by the bright blue sky, with its myriad hosts, all-radiant with beauty and instruction; while beneath this glorious canopy are gathered all the pure, the lovely and beautiful things of the glowing earth. Lured by a scene of so much splendor, we would enter and revel amid nature's wealth; but our steps are arrested as we observe at the entrance an altar erected to the "Genius of Beauty," bearing this inscription, "Wanderer in search of happiness, it is well thou shouldst seek it amid the loveliest of nature's gifts; but forget not there is a far deeper, holier beauty than that of the dazzling hues which meet thine eye. Within even the lowliest flower is a temple-shrine of holy teachings, mightier far to reach the soul than all the eloquence of man. Tread lightly, thoughtfully, that their gentle tones may be heard by thee, and select the loveliest object here as an offering at the shrine of beauty."

We pass on, but have found it no light thing to choose amid such bewildering variety.—Bright flowers are here, from the lowliest wildling to the splendid exotic. And of these I asked a fadeless gift, but a mournful change passed over them, and then on each petal of earth's flowers was written, "Fading away;" and reproachfully they seemed to say, "Ask not of earth unfading beauty; seek not amid her transient bloom the priceless flower of immortality." Then there is naught in the wide world which may tell of beauty without blight, of loveliness which cannot fade and die? Father, hast thou given us all the beautiful of earth but for life's brief hour? A thousand voices around us answer, No—and from the fading flowers of earth, I have chosen one which in their hour of beauty, I had thought a kindred blossom; but the blighting tempest which swept over them, with the breath of decay, has left all undimmed the brightness of this sweet flower which, amid the wreck of loveliness around, shines with tenfold splendor. It seems a spirit of some purer sphere, smiling over the sad visions of earth. It is indeed an exotic—not from the rich gardens of the east, or the sunny vales of the south,—but from the bowers of paradise it came, and heaven is its native clime. It is a spirit enshrined within a flower of earth; and it would seem that nature, aware of its purity, had brought her choicest offerings to make beautiful its dwelling.

But as I gaze on this pure one, a dim shadow seems gathering over its brightness; for in earth's pathway lie temptation, sorrow and guilt; and stern must be their conflict with purity and truth.

A Factory Girl, "Factory Girls," *Lowell Offering*, December 1840, page 19.