

“A Week in the Mill”

Anonymous, *Lowell Offering*, Volume V 1845

Much has been said of the factory girl and her employment. By some she has been represented as dwelling in a sort of brick-and-mortar paradise, having little to occupy thought save the weaving of romantic fancies, while the spindle or the wheel flies obediently beneath her glance. Others have deemed her a mere servile drudge, chained to her labor by almost as strong a power as that which holds a bondman in his fetters; and, indeed, some have already given her the title of "*the white slave of the North*." Her real situation approaches neither one nor the other of these extremes. Her occupation is as laborious as that of almost any female who earns her own living, while it has also its sunny spots and its cheerful intervals, which make her hard labor seem comparatively pleasant and easy.

Look at her as she commences her weekly task. The rest of the Sabbath [Sunday] has made her heart and her step light, and she is early at her accustomed place, awaiting the starting of the machinery. Everything having been cleaned and neatly arranged on the Saturday night, she has less to occupy her on Monday than on other days; and you may see her leaning from the window to watch the glitter of the sunrise on the water, or looking away at the distant forests and fields, while memory wanders to her beloved country home; or, it may be that she is conversing with a sister-laborer near; returning at regular intervals to see that her work is in order.

Soon the breakfast bell rings; in a moment the whirling wheels are stopped, and she hastens to join the throng which is pouring through the open gate. At the table she mingles with a various group. Each dispatches the meal hurriedly, though not often in silence; and if, as is sometimes the case, the rules of politeness are not punctiliously observed by all, the excuse of some lively country girl would be, "They don't give us time for *manners*."

The short half-hour is soon over; the bell rings again; and now our factory girl feels that she has commenced her day's work in earnest. The time is often apt to drag heavily till the dinner hour arrives. Perhaps some part of the work becomes deranged and stops; the constant friction causes a belt of leather to burst into a flame; a stranger visits the room, and scans the features and dress of its inmates inquiringly; and there is little else to break the monotony. The afternoon passes in much the same manner. Now and then she mingles with a knot of busy talkers who have collected to discuss some new occurrence, or holds pleasant converse with some intelligent and agreeable friend, whose acquaintance she has formed since her factory life commenced; but much of the time she is left to her own thoughts. While at her work, the clattering and rumbling around her prevent any other noise from her attention, and she *must think*, or her life would be dull indeed.

Thus the day passes on, and evening comes; the time which she feels to be exclusively her own. How much is done in the three short hours from seven to ten o'clock. She has a new dress

to finish; a call to make on some distant corporation; a meeting to attend; there is a lecture or a concert at some one of the public halls, and the attendance will be thin if she and her associates are not present; or, if nothing more imperative demands her time, she takes a stroll through the street or to the river with some of her mates, or sits down at home to peruse a new book. At ten o'clock all is still for the night.

The clang of the early bell awakes her to another day, very nearly the counterpart of the one which preceded it. And so the week rolls on, in the same routine, till Saturday comes. Saturday! the welcome sound! She busies herself to remove every particle of cotton and dust from her frame or looms, cheering herself meanwhile with sweet thoughts of the coming Sabbath; and when, at an earlier hour than usual, the mill is stopped, it looks almost beautiful in its neatness.

Background on the Source

Harriet Hanson Robinson worked in the Lowell Mill from 1832 until her marriage in 1848 and published an autobiography of her experiences at the mill in 1898. In addition to her autobiography, she also contributed works to the *Lowell Offering* and published a book on women's voting entitled, *Massachusetts in the Woman*

Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle, or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, 1898

The early mill girls were of different ages. Some were not over ten years old; a few were in middle life, but the majority were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. The very young girls were called "doffers." They "doffed," or took off, the full bobbins from the spinning frames, and replaced them with empty ones. These mites worked about fifteen minutes every hour and the rest of the time was their own. When the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or go outside the mill yard to play. They were paid two dollars a week. The working hours of all the girls extended from five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one half-hour each, for breakfast and dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day. This was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children. Several years later a ten-hour law was passed, but not until long after some of these little doffers were old enough to appear before the legislative committee on the subject, and plead, by their presence, for a reduction of the hours of labor.

Those of the mill girls who had homes generally worked from eight to ten months in the year; the rest of the time was spent with parents or friends. A few taught school during the summer months. Their life in the factory was made pleasant to them. In those days there was no need of advocating the doctrine of the proper relation between employer and employed.

The most prevailing incentive to labor was to secure the means of education for some *male* member of the family. To make a *gentleman* of a brother or a son, to give him a college education, was the dominant thought in the minds of a great many of the better class of mill girls. I have known more than one to give every cent of her wages, month after month, to her brother, that he might get the education necessary to enter some profession. I have known a mother to work years in this way for her boy. I have known women to educate young men by



Sweeper and doffer boys in Lancaster Cotton Mills, December 1, 1908.
Records of the Children's Bureau.
(102-LH-347)

their earnings, who were not sons or relatives. There are many men now living who were helped to an education by the wages of the early mill girls.

One of the first strikes that ever took place in this country was in Lowell in 1836. When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike or "turn out" en masse. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went from their several corporations in procession to the grove on Chapel Hill, and listened to incendiary speeches from some early labor reformers.

One of the girls stood on a pump and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience

It is hardly necessary to say that, so far as practical results are concerned, this strike did no good. The corporation would not come to terms. The girls were soon tired of holding out, and they went back to their work at the reduced rate of wages. The ill-success of this early attempt at resistance on the part of the wage element seems to have made a precedent for the issue of many succeeding strikes.

Background on the Source

The *Lowell Offering* ran from 1840 – 1845 and was a collection of essays, poems, and stories published monthly by the workers. There this media, workers could express themselves creatively or voice complaints about the working and living conditions at the mill. The 16 page *Offering* sold for about 6 cents an issue.

“Letters from Susan,” Harriet Farley, *Lowell Offering*, Volume IV, 1844 (EDITED)

LETTER FOURTH

Dear Mary: You say that you wish to come to Lowell, and that some others of my old acquaintance wish to come, if I think it advisable; and, as I have but a few moments to write, I will devote all my letter to this subject.

There are girls here for every reason, and for no reason at all. I will speak to you of my acquaintances in the family here. One, who sits at my right hand at table, is in the factory because she hates her mother-in-law. She has a kind father, and an otherwise excellent home, but, as she and her mama agree about as well as cat and mouse, she has come to the factory. The one next her has a wealthy father, but, like many of our country farmers, he is very penurious [cheap], and he wishes his daughters to maintain themselves. The next is here because there is no better place for her, unless it is a Shaker settlement. The next has a "well-off" mother, but she is a very pious [religious] woman, and will not buy her daughter so many pretty gowns and collars and ribbons and other etceteras of "Vanity Fair" as she likes; so she concluded to "help herself." The next is here because her parents and family are wicked infidels, and she cannot be allowed to enjoy the privileges of religion at home. The next is here because she must labor somewhere, and she has been ill treated in so many families that she has a horror of domestic service. The next has left a good home because her lover, who has gone on a whaling voyage, wishes to be married when he returns, and she would like more money than her father will give her. The next is here because her home is in a lonesome country village, and she cannot bear to remain where it is so dull. The next is here because her parents are poor, and she wishes to acquire the means to educate herself. The next is here because her beau [male companion] came, and she did not like to trust him alone among so many pretty girls. And so I might go on and give you the variety of reasons, but this is enough for the present. I cannot advise you to come. You must act according to your own judgment. Your only reasons are a desire to see a new place, a city, and to be with me. You have now an excellent home, but, dear M., it may not seem the same to you after you have been here a year or two--for it is not advisable to come and learn a new occupation unless you can stay as long as that. The reasons are that you may become unaccustomed to your present routine of home duties, and lose your relish for them, and also for the very quiet pleasures of our little village. Many, who are dissatisfied here, have also acquired a dissatisfaction for their homes, so that they cannot be contented anywhere, and wish they had never seen Lowell.

Factory Rules from the Handbook to Lowell, 1848

REGULATIONS TO BE OBSERVED by all persons employed in the factories of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company. The overseers are to be always in their rooms at the starting of the mill, and not absent unnecessarily during working hours. They are to see that all those employed in their rooms, are in their places in due season, and keep a correct account of their time and work. They may grant leave of absence to those employed under them, when they have spare hands to supply their places, and not otherwise, except in cases of absolute necessity.

All persons in the employ of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company, are to observe the regulations of the room where they are employed. They are not to be absent from their work without the consent of the over-seer, except in cases of sickness, and then they are to send him word of the cause of their absence. They are to board in one of the houses of the company and give information at the counting room, where they board, when they begin, or, whenever they change their boarding place; and are to observe the regulations of their boarding-house.

Those intending to leave the employment of the company are to give at least two weeks' notice thereof to their overseer.

All persons entering into the employment of the company, are considered as engaged for twelve months, and those who leave sooner, or do not comply with all these regulations, will not be entitled to a regular discharge.

The company will not employ anyone who is habitually absent from public worship on the Sabbath, or known to be guilty of immorality.

A physician will attend once in every month at the counting-room, to vaccinate all who may need it, free of expense.

Anyone who shall take from the mills or the yard, any yarn, cloth or other article belonging to the company, will be considered guilty of stealing and be liable to prosecution.

Payment will be made monthly, including board and wages. The accounts will be made up to the last Saturday but one in every month, and paid in the course of the following week.

These regulations are considered part of the contract, with which all persons entering into the employment of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company, engage to comply.

JOHN AVERY, Agent.

Excerpted from *Massachusetts House Document*, no. 50, March of 1845.

The Special Committee to which was referred sundry petitions relating to the hours of labor, have considered the same and submit the following Report:

... On the 13th of February, the Committee held a session to hear the petitioners from the city of Lowell. Six of the female and three of the male petitioners were present, and gave in their testimony.

... Miss Sarah G. Bagely said she had worked in the Lowell Mills eight years and a half, six years and a half on the Hamilton Corporation, and two years on the Middlesex. She is a weaver, and works by the piece. She worked in the mills three years before her health began to fail. She is a native of New Hampshire, and went home six weeks during the summer. Last year she was out of the mill a third of the time. She thinks the health of the operatives is not so good as the health of females who do housework or millinery business. The chief evil, so far as health is concerned, is the shortness of time allowed for meals. The next evil is the length of time employed -not giving them time to cultivate their minds. She spoke of the high moral and intellectual character of the girls. That many were engaged as teachers in the Sunday schools. That many attended the lectures of the Lowell Institute; and she thought, if more time was allowed, that more lectures would be given and more girls attend. She thought that the girls generally were favorable to the ten hour system. She had presented a petition, same as the one before the Committee, to 132 girls, most of whom said that they would prefer to work but ten hours. In a pecuniary point of view, it would be better, as their health would be improved. They would have more time for sewing. Their intellectual, moral and religious habits would also be benefited by the change.

... From Mr. Clark, the agent of the Merrimack Corporation, we obtained the following table of the time which the mills run during the year.

There are four days in the year which are observed as holidays, and on which the mills are never put in motion. These are Fast Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. These make one day more than is usually devoted to pastime in any other place in New England. The following table shows the average hours of work per day, throughout the year.

	Hours	Minutes		Hours	Minutes
January	11	24	July	12	45
February	12		August	12	45
March	11	52	September	12	23
April	13	31	October	12	10
May	12	45	November	11	56
June	12	45	December	11	24

An Account of a Visitor to Lowell (1836) - *The Harbinger*, November 14, 1836

We have lately visited the cities of Lowell [Massachusetts] and Manchester [New Hampshire] and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the accounts which we had heard from persons engaged in the labor reform now beginning to agitate New England...

We went through many of the mills, talked particularly to a large number of the operatives, and ate at their boardinghouses, on purpose to ascertain by personal inspection the facts of the case...

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

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

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

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

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

The girls attend upon an average three looms; many attend four, but this requires a very active person, and the most unremitting care. However, a great many do it. Attention to two is as much

as should be demanded of an operative. This gives us some idea of the application required during the thirteen hours of daily labor. The atmosphere of such a room cannot of course be pure; on the contrary, it is charged with cotton filaments and dust, which, we are told, are very injurious to the lungs.

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

...

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

TIME TABLE OF THE LOWELL MILLS,

Arranged to make the working time throughout the year average 11 hours per day.
TO TAKE EFFECT SEPTEMBER 21st., 1853.
 The Standard time being that of the meridian of Lowell, as shown by the Regulator
 Clock of AMOS SANBORN, Post Office Corner, Central Street.

From March 20th to September 19th, inclusive.

COMMENCE WORK, at 6.30 A. M. LEAVE OFF WORK, at 6.30 P. M., except on Saturday Evenings.
 BREAKFAST at 6 A. M. DINNER, at 12 M. Commence Work, after dinner, 12.45 P. M.

From September 20th to March 19th, inclusive.

COMMENCE WORK at 7.00 A. M. LEAVE OFF WORK, at 7.00 P. M., except on Saturday Evenings.
 BREAKFAST at 6.30 A. M. DINNER, at 12.30 P. M. Commence Work, after dinner, 1.15 P. M.

BELLS.

From March 20th to September 19th, inclusive.

<i>Morning Bells.</i>	<i>Dinner Bells.</i>	<i>Evening Bells.</i>
First bell,.....4.30 A. M.	Ring out,.....12.00 M.	Ring out,.....6.30 P. M.
Second, 5.30 A. M.; Third, 6.20.	Ring in,.....12.35 P. M.	Except on Saturday Evenings.

From September 20th to March 19th, inclusive.

<i>Morning Bells.</i>	<i>Dinner Bells.</i>	<i>Evening Bells.</i>
First bell,.....5.00 A. M.	Ring out,.....12.30 P. M.	Ring out at.....7.00 P. M.
Second, 6.00 A. M.; Third, 6.50.	Ring in,.....1.05 P. M.	Except on Saturday Evenings.

SATURDAY EVENING BELLS.

During APRIL, MAY, JUNE, JULY, and AUGUST, Ring Out, at 6.00 P. M.
 The remaining Saturday Evenings in the year, ring out as follows:

SEPTEMBER.	NOVEMBER.	JANUARY.
First Saturday, ring out 6.00 P. M.	Third Saturday ring out 4.00 P. M.	Third Saturday, ring out 4.25 P. M.
Second " " 5.45 "	Fourth " " 3.55 "	Fourth " " 4.35 "
Third " " 5.30 "		
Fourth " " 5.20 "		
OCTOBER.	DECEMBER.	FEBRUARY.
First Saturday, ring out 5.05 P. M.	First Saturday, ring out 3.50 P. M.	First Saturday, ring out 4.45 P. M.
Second " " 4.55 "	Second " " 3.55 "	Second " " 4.55 "
Third " " 4.45 "	Third " " 3.55 "	Third " " 5.00 "
Fourth " " 4.35 "	Fourth " " 4.00 "	Fourth " " 5.10 "
Fifth " " 4.25 "	Fifth " " 4.00 "	
NOVEMBER.	JANUARY.	MARCH.
First Saturday, ring out 4.15 P. M.	First Saturday, ring out 4.10 P. M.	First Saturday, ring out 5.25 P. M.
Second " " 4.05 "	Second " " 4.15 "	Second " " 5.30 "
		Third " " 5.35 "
		Fourth " " 5.45 "

YARD GATES will be opened at the first stroke of the bells for entering or leaving the Mills.

SPEED GATES commence hoisting three minutes before commencing work.

Background on the Source

The *Boston Transcript* started in 1830 as a daily “penny evening newspaper” that worked to write about local events while remaining neutral on political issues.

From the book, *The Boston Transcript – Its First Hundred Years*

1834 *Boston Transcript* reports on the Strike

“We learn that extraordinary excitement was occasioned at Lowell, last week, by an announcement that the wages paid in some of the departments would be reduced 15 percent on the 1st of March. The reduction principally affected the female operatives, and they held several meetings, or caucuses, at which a young woman presided, who took an active part in persuading her associates to give notice that they should quit the mills, and to induce them to ‘make a run’ on the Lowell Bank and the Savings Bank, which they did. On Friday morning, the young woman referred to was dismissed, by the Agent...and on leaving the office...waved her calash in the air, as a signal to the others, who were watching from the windows, when they immediately ‘struck’ and assembled about her, in despite of the overseers.

“The number soon increased to nearly 800. A procession was formed, and they marched about the town, to the amusement of a mob of idlers and boys, and we are sorry to add, not altogether to the credit of Yankee girls....We are told that one of the leaders mounted a stump and made a flaming Mary Wollstonecraft [English Feminist] speech on the rights of women and the iniquities of the ‘monied aristocracy,’ which produced a powerful effect on her auditors, and they determined to ‘have their way if they died for it.’”