Women at the Looms: An Analysis of Gender, Capital, and Textiles in 19th Century New England

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Introduction: Gender, Capital, and Textiles

“I can see myself now” wrote Harriet Hanson Robinson in 1898, “racing down the alley, between the spinning-frames, carrying in front of me a bobbin-box bigger than I was”.\(^1\) Harriet Robinson was a woman who worked in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, beginning at age 10. Many years later, she wrote a detailed memoir chronicling how the world in which she lived had changed since her employment in the mills. According to Robinson, before the mills opened in Lowell, the people of New England led lives not much different from their ancestors: they travelled only as fast as a canal boat, often bartered instead of using money, and wore clothes made at home.\(^2\) Only a child, Harriet began working in the Tremont Corporation as a “doffer,” or someone who carried bobbins, the cylinders which held yarn, between the looms in 1831 after her father died. Although she worked from 5am to 7pm every day except Sunday, she moved the bobbins for 15 minutes and spent 45 minutes of each hour not working.\(^3\) While Harriet Robinson’s experience in a Lowell mill was exceptional because she recorded the details of it so vividly in her memoir Loom and Spindle, the conditions she encountered were shared by many other “mill girls.”

Lucy Larcom was another young woman who worked in the textile mills of Lowell. Like Robinson, Larcom’s father had died an untimely death, and this necessitated a change in her family’s sources of income.\(^4\) Just like Robinson’s family, Lucy Larcom’s mother decided to move to Lowell, where Lucy and her sister worked in a textile mill while her mother operated a

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\(^1\) Harriet H. Robinson, Loom and Spindle, or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls (Kailua, Hawaii: Press Pacifica, 1976 [1898]), ix, 19.
\(^2\) Ibid, 1-2.
\(^3\) Ibid, 16-24.
company-owned boarding house for mill workers. Larcom described her family’s boarding house as “filled with a large feminine family...from fifteen to thirty years”. Although this description may seem unremarkable, it is actually an accurate snapshot of the workforce of textile mills in New England in the early decades of the 19th century.

Between about 1790 and 1855, a social transformation occurred in New England that made the lives of Harriet Robinson, Lucy Larcom, and others like them possible. Whereas at the end of the 18th century most labor in New England revolved around family farms or mercantile ventures, by the mid-19th century factories provided a new form of labor with new forms of labor organization, new social structures, new hierarchies, and new working identities. According to the prevailing gender norms of late 18th century and early 19th century New England, society expected women to remain in the household and not contribute to the cash economy. However, the economic incentives of market capitalism and early industrialization changed the New England economy significantly by 1830. Before the widespread adoption of industrialized textile production in the 1830s, women produced goods within households. Significantly, textile manufacture in homes was a common and time-consuming activity of women, so much so that it became quintessentially women’s work. Therefore, even before women began working in factories, the occupation of textile manufacture was gendered towards women.

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Gender became a prominent aspect of factory life in New England over the first few decades of the 19th century. Much of this trend came from a decision from one of the most influential industrialists of the century. When Francis Cabot Lowell, the namesake of the most prominent Massachusetts mill city, opened his first textile mill in Waltham in 1814, he consciously chose to employ mostly young, unmarried women from the New England countryside. Even though women and men both held occupations in mills, a clear power differential based on gender existed; in the Hamilton mills for example, men received a mean daily pay of $1.05 while women only received $0.60. When women were not working in the mills, they often lived in company-owned boarding houses exclusively with other women working in their company's mills. Even outside of the mill walls, moral regulations bound the actions of women workers.

Aside from the customary role that women performed in producing textiles, it is difficult to pinpoint why exactly Lowell chose to hire almost exclusively women for factory work, as Lowell left no surviving diary and devoted most of his letters to familial and business matters rather than his personal motives. However, Nathan Appleton, one of Francis Cabot Lowell’s close associates, reflected on Lowell’s choice to hire women in 1858. According to Appleton, a combination of moral concern and labor supply influenced Lowell’s decision. Appleton stressed the importance of “moral character” for people working in the factories, as

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12 Dalzell, Enterprising Elite, 6.
Appleton found it necessary to stress the paternalism shown towards women workers.\textsuperscript{13} Appleton assumed female labor to be inherently domestic, but matter-of-factly explains why the mills adopted women workers:

There was little demand for female labor, as household manufacture was superseded by the improvements in machinery. Here was in New England a fund of labor, well educated and virtuous. It was not perceived how a profitable employment has any tendency to deteriorate the character. The most efficient guards were adopted in establishing boarding houses, at the cost of the Company, under the charge of respectable women, with every provision for religious worship. Under these circumstances, the daughters of respectable farmers were readily induced to come into these mills for a temporary period.\textsuperscript{14}

Appleton justified female labor in several ways. Firstly, he noted the obvious availability of women for work. Secondly, he portrayed New England women as “well educated and virtuous”, thus combating the fear of mill “degradation”. Additionally, he outlined protections and gender segregation, including boarding houses and religious opportunities, as methods of stopping adverse conditions from forming. Finally, he clarified the employment as “temporary”, reflecting the actual work patterns of female operatives while acknowledging expectations of women’s domesticity.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the hiring practices at Lowell’s mills had a tremendous impact on the textile industry and its relationship to women working, this pattern did not emerge immediately. The mechanized production of textiles in the United States began in 1790 when two Rhode Island merchants, Smith Brown and William Almy, sought mechanical help for yarn-spinning equipment they bought from a recent British immigrant named Samuel Slater. Instead of fixing Almy and Brown’s machines, Slater built new equipment and a mill on the Blackstone River in

\textsuperscript{13} Nathan Appleton, \textit{Introduction of the Power Loom, and Origin of Lowell} (Lowell, Massachusetts: B.H. Penhallow, 1858), v.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15-16.
\textsuperscript{15} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 70.
Pawtucket, Rhode Island on the condition that he could operate it. While Almy and Brown controlled the supply of raw materials and sale of finished textiles, Slater employed children in his mill to make yarn and women outside of it to spin the yarn into textiles.\textsuperscript{16} Unlike Lowell, Slater recruited children to work in his factories regardless of their genders. Under Slater’s system, entire families would participate in textile production; children worked spinning and carding cloth with water-powered machinery in mills, women worked spinning yarn by hand in their homes, and men worked outside on farms and in construction.\textsuperscript{17}

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how gender became a defining aspect of the industrial transformation of New England in the first half of the 19th century. To do this, I will explore how women and men normalized these gender-based working and living conditions. I will document how some contemporary observers understood the separation of women and men in industrial occupations as something justifiable and naturalized while others fought against this order. Both women and men raised objections against the gendered factory system in Lowell; while Sarah Bagley formed the Lowell Factory Girls Association to deal with corporate grievances,\textsuperscript{18} the male orator Seth Luther spoke out against the “evils” of factory work to workers in Massachusetts towns in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{19} I intend to balance conflicting contemporary perspectives to understand how people reacted to the division of mill labor by gender.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 74-86.
However, the contemporary concept of gender does not map neatly onto the social conditions of 19th century New England, and thus the definition of “gender” must align with how the women and men working in and around textile mills envisioned themselves. Despite this, there is no need to shun modern interpretations of gender when analyzing mill workers’ lives. In particular, Joan W. Scott’s work “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” specifies that gender must be used as an analytical category for discussing historical phenomena. She mentions the segregation of labor by gender as a primary concern of historians, a concern which is directly addressed in this thesis. According to Scott, gender as a social category achieves two things: it separates the male and female “sexes”, and it signifies power dynamics. Importantly, Scott also highlights that the term “gender” can serve as a synonym for “women”, yet the word “gender” also encompasses men and social relations while denying biological determinism as a cause of these relations. For the purpose of this thesis, gender will be defined as the socially-constructed binary between women and men that created differences in social expectations, occupational and educational opportunities, and life experiences for women and men living in 19th century New England.

Many academics have commented on the creation of textile mills in New England during the early 19th century, and thus this project stands upon the work that others have done. Additionally, scholars have discussed both the family system of textile manufacture and the “mill girls” of Lowell extensively, making the possibility of new scholarship seem sparse. However, my project will work with the existing literature to analyze how specific occupations gained

21 Ibid., 1056-1057.
gendered connotations, thus lending a new angle to both the study of American textile mills and the study of women workers.

I have consulted several secondary sources to understand what academics have already said about the relationship between gender and labor in New England textile mills. Thomas Dublin’s book *Women at Work* has been particularly helpful in describing how women became paid workers who participated in the New England economy and labor force. In particular, Dublin focuses on the city of Lowell, focusing extensively on various aspects of women’s experiences in mill jobs, in boarding houses, and in labor movements between the 1820s and the 1860s. I use his insights to describe more broadly how women and men worked according to notions of gender. Additionally, I have used Barbara M. Tucker’s book *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790-1860* to gain insights into the early chronology of New England textile mills. Tucker argues that Slater’s factories did not disrupt the traditional labor patterns of southern New England. Instead, Slater followed mercantile-inspired apprenticeships, family labor based on specialized tasks, and child labor in mills and outwork by women. Although Tucker does not address gender directly, she hints at how mothers and fathers reacted differently to the mill employment of their children. I use Tucker’s work to examine gender’s impact on labor at the start of the 19th century.

Although the works of Dublin, Tucker, and other authors focus on the growth of New England textile mills and the increased participation of women in the textile labor force, these works do not explain how different aspects of textile manufacturing such as management, ownership, and machine operation gained gendered connotations by the 1830s. Existing

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24 Ibid., 80-82.
scholarship clearly notes the phenomena of women working in mills as implicitly male industrialists built these mills, but does not clearly explain how these differing roles existed on gendered lines. This thesis synthesizes the phenomena of mill labor and mill construction through gender dynamics.

The foundation of my project lies on primary sources that tell the story of women and men who worked in and around New England textile mills in the first half of the 19th century. While a few of these first-hand accounts exists in books written by ex-mill operatives, such as Robinson and Larcom, the majority of reactions to the phenomenon of occupations divided by gender in textile mills live in archival materials. Some of these materials, especially newspapers and labor magazines, have been digitized, which expedites the research process tremendously. Many others, however, exist only in physical form. It is with a combination of memoirs, newspapers, letters, and labor magazines that I will answer the question of how gender impacted labor patterns in 19th century New England textile mills.

I have primarily used the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston and the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester to obtain these materials. I have also used online databases such as the “Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000” and the “North American Women’s Letters and Diaries” databases. After reading primary sources, I integrate what contemporaries said or did with concepts of gender relations, power dynamics, and assumed occupational differences revolving around gender. Although this can become tedious and challenging, it has yielded interesting results.
For example, when Francis Cabot Lowell died in 1817, his will reveals that he left slightly more money to his son John than his daughter Susan.\textsuperscript{25} While this may seem trivial, it demonstrates that even within his own family, Lowell gave more money to his male children, which replicates how he paid his mill operatives. To discover the intentions of Francis Cabot Lowell, I have mostly used his letters and account books at the Massachusetts Historical Society. These letters provide a surprisingly formal account of his life, and have been useful in tracking Lowell’s major life events.

The American Antiquarian Society of Worcester has provided many useful materials for this project. I have analyzed letters, newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines there which have provided the bulk of my primary source research material. Their digitized and physical copies of labor magazines such as \textit{The Lowell Offering, The New England Offering}, and the \textit{Voice of Industry} have proved especially useful because they offer conflicting perspectives on the same events. For example, while an entry into \textit{The New England Offering}, a late-1840s offshoot of \textit{The Lowell Offering}, derides the Ten-Hour labor movement as an excuse for women not properly caring for their health,\textsuperscript{26} the \textit{Voice of Industry}, a more radical labor magazine, devoted extensive coverage to the development of Ten-Hour labor laws.\textsuperscript{27} Using these conflicting primary sources, I have been able to see the contemporary debates surrounding labor and gender in textile mills. This has allowed me to determine how gender informed contrasting opinions about work in textile mills.

\textsuperscript{25} Francis Cabot Lowell, Francis Cabot Lowell Papers, Box 10, Volume 6, accessed at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass..
Since my project aims to describe a sixty-five-year transition between 1790 and 1855, chapters will serve the vital purpose of dividing the narrative based on time periods and major events. I intend to organize the project’s chapters in a manner that both focuses on major events while connecting the entire project together. Each chapter will explain how gender contributed to the labor patterns of each period and event, thus keeping the project focused on the central argument that gender influenced labor patterns in 19th century New England textile mills.

After an introduction that describes the project with a significant narrative hook, the first main chapter will discuss the economy of New England immediately before mechanized textile manufacture. Specifically, Chapter One will focus on how gender influenced entry into and participation in pre-industrial economic activities such as farming, mercantile trade, and craft production. This chapter will serve as the base upon which changes to gender’s role in labor occurred.

Chapter Two will introduce textile manufacturing into the New England economy with the opening of Slater’s mill in 1790. It will then proceed to describe how Francis Cabot Lowell and his Boston Associates opened up a textile mill in Waltham in 1814. This chapter will examine how pre-existing conceptions of gender determined who worked in what occupations, while also examining how occupations transformed pre-existing gender norms. Specifically, Chapter Two will contrast Slater’s reinforcement of pre-industrial labor organization around gender with Lowell’s choice to hire primarily female factory workers.¹⁸ I will explain how this was an important change in women’s place in the New England economy.

Chapter Three will expand upon the new trend of women working in factories while chronicling the growth of this labor pattern in Waltham and eventually Lowell between 1815 and 1830. This chapter will focus the most on the business aspects of the Boston Associates’ textile mills; it was the immense financial success of these mills that allowed the spread of a female workforce to the new city of Lowell. I will argue that between 1815 and 1830, it became common for young women to work in textile factories in New England. At this point, the entrance of women into the wage-earning economy became noticeable.

Chapters Four and Five will both cover the period from 1830 to 1850, but they will focus on this period from different angles. Chapter Four will describe the quotidian aspects of work in Lowell as understood from letters and other first-hand accounts. It will also cover the social and economic conditions of “female operatives” in Lowell, such as boarding houses, long working hours, the ability to attend libraries and lectures, and leisure activities like shopping and travel. In other words, Chapter Four will reconstruct the daily life of most women textile workers in Lowell.

Whereas Chapter Four focuses on the quotidian, Chapter Five will explain the period between 1830 and 1850 from the lens of activism, labor reform, and other factory literature. This chapter will deconstruct the ideals of Lowell to focus on what caused unrest. Specifically, Chapter Five will look at Ten-Hour law campaigns, “turn outs” (strikes), pro-union activism, and the interaction between working women and capitalism. Chapter Five will end with the entry of male immigrants into previously female-dominated work spaces in mills in the 1850s.²⁹

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²⁹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 141-142.
While the project will begin in 1790, it will end in the 1850s because the rigid gendered lines of mill labor eroded in this decade. This will be the subject of Chapter Six. By the mid-1840s, Irish immigrants began to work in large numbers in the Lowell mills. Simultaneously, native New England women started to find mill employment less appealing because of lower wages, job growth in other sectors like teaching, and more intense working hours. Faced with an abundant supply of Irish laborers and a decreasing supply of rural New England women, the gender lines of occupations blurred. Since mill owners could pay Irish men the same wages that they paid New England women, significant numbers of men began to perform spinning, carding, and weaving jobs for the first time.\textsuperscript{30} The gender-integration of occupations in textile mills after the 1850s, coupled with changes in mill operation during the Civil War, are thus beyond the scope of this project.

As factories grew, the occupations revolving around factories became gendered. While young women predominated inside the mills tending to power looms and other machinery, men owned the factories and oversaw production as worksite overseers and corporate agents. Textile mills encouraged women to work in mill towns like Waltham and Lowell while men remained on farms or performed other labor. Gender closely influenced how industrialization occurred in New England; the employment of women for cash wages in textile mills created a new social phenomenon with myriad effects.

\textsuperscript{30} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 138-144.
Chapter 1: The Pre-Industrial Economy of New England

The town in which Lucy Larcom grew up, Beverly, Massachusetts, embodied several of the characteristics of New England towns before industrialization. Since Beverly is along the coast, it contained both maritime activities and farming, representing nearly all the economic opportunities of Massachusetts before the nineteenth century. While some farmers fished all the way in Newfoundland as they grew potatoes, sailors travelled to Europe and Asia bringing fruits, currency, clothing, and wealth. Notably, Larcom describes seafaring occupations as markedly male. As women wore foreign silks, men bragged about their travels around the world. Even young boys aspired to travel the oceans, contributing to what Larcom calls “manliness.” Even as a child, Larcom perceived how some occupations like seafaring were gendered.31

If men aspired to leave home and find work, society did not expect women to make significant economic contributions to their families. Instead, according to Historian Nancy Cott, women in the 18th century worked for cash wages only if they were unmarried and widowed, and only out of economic necessity. Married women effectively forfeited their savings and property to their husbands, whom society unquestionably expected to work for money or food. However, women did extensive, unpaid work in households often performed on farms: women made everything from dairy products to soap. Significantly, women also made cloth at home.32 Although women’s manufacture of items at home became less important by the mid-19th century because of industrialization,33 it provided a crucial array of products that men did not produce.

To understand the attitudes of both men and women towards the work of women requires an understanding of the concept of domesticity. As Nancy Cott explains in The Bonds of

33 Ibid., 42-23.
Womanhood, the growth of capitalism and industry in early nineteenth century New England ironically made female domesticity more pronounced. Whereas before industrial capitalism both men and women worked where they lived, capitalism and its resultant wage labor, impersonality, and mechanization separated the dangerous outside world from the safe, nurturing home. In this gendered role play of opposing spheres, men played the role of financial provider at the risk of moral degradation while women restored men’s dignity with the supposed moral superiority of the home. Clearly, this gendered pattern of female domesticity and male economic activity could exist only if the nexus of economic activity existed outside households.

Although the image of a New England “family farm” brings to mind the archetypal “pastoral simplicity” of preindustrial life that Harriet Robinson envisioned, New England farms owned and run by individual families performed a vital and unique role in the region’s economy from seventeenth century colonization through the emergence of large-scale manufacturing in the nineteenth century. The lives of the Felton family of Marlborough, Massachusetts reveal what life in rural New England was like around the year 1800. Property records indicate that Jacob Felton, the patriarch of the family, purchased a farm in Marlborough in 1750 which he then passed on to his family. About a half-century later, his grandson Silas Felton wrote an autobiography in which he describes his life living on the family farm in Marlborough, after which he became a school teacher. The vitality of farm labor emerges when Silas describes his fondness for learning and his ineptitude for farm work. Before 1790, Massachusetts children

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34 Ibid., 64-69.  
35 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 2.  
only needed to attend school for a little over seven weeks per year. The rest of this time was spent contributing to the family economy. Silas earned the nickname “Lazy” after he began reading books in his spare time. Although women’s job opportunities were more limited, men like Silas Felton also felt strict occupational expectations revolving around family farms.

Unlike other English colonies in the early seventeenth century, mostly middle-income families came to New England. Once these families arrived, they settled on farms on cheap, abundant land. In fact, families predominated in farm labor to such an extent that a rural labor market of farm workers not bound to familial obligations barely existed. Furthermore, these early families had many children because children contributed to the cultivation of land. Since almost all farm land became private by the mid-seventeenth century, the economic model of a large family in which everyone worked on the family farm predominated.

For people who did not have families or land, government-sponsored employment in “manufacture”, or the manual creation of goods, provided employment. For example, a town committee in Boston in 1768 established a factory run by the town government for making cloth. The committee expressly addressed reducing poverty as an aim of the cloth factory, hoping to both make a profit from the venture by producing the most profitable linens while also bringing people out of poverty. It is notable that in 1768 textile manufacturing emerged as an ideal occupation for reducing poverty: the lack of educational or physical qualifications in producing textiles must have made it a common unskilled occupation. This pattern of impoverished people

40 Ibid., 33-37.
41 *Proposals for Carrying on a Manufacture in the Town of Boston, for Employing the Poor of Said Town* (Boston, 1768), accessed at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.
making textiles continued even after mechanized textile manufacturing began. Early industrialist Samuel Slater followed the pattern of employing the poor in textile manufacturing, using the pauper apprenticeship method of labor, which taught children a practical skill so that they could provide for themselves. At first, Slater filled his Pawtucket, Rhode Island factory with impoverished children. Not only was this labor system supported by the larger society, but Slater saw it as ideal because it made poor children economically productive while doling out low wages.42 Before mechanized textile factories became common in New England, poor individuals who did not own land often produced textiles by hand.

Although the economic model of a family farm integrated men and women by location, the tasks performed on family farms were gender-specific. Whereas women engaged in small-scale craft production of items for home use, as well as animal husbandry,43 men who worked on farms cleared fields, plowed land, chopped wood, and harvested crops.44 For example, the recently-married Olive Brown wrote to her cousin Sabrina Bennett, who at the time was working in Lowell, about her work producing dairy products. She proudly states how the year before she made 1,100 pounds of cheese and 400 pounds of butter on the Franklin, New Hampshire farm which her husband Simeon owned.45 Unlike textiles in a mill, Brown created a product at home intended for non-monetary domestic consumption. Aside from the fact that a record survives of Olive Brown’s dairy production, nothing is remarkable about her role in producing butter and cheese on a New Hampshire farm in the 1830s.

44 Ibid., 140.
The work of Olive’s brother Jeremiah demonstrates both what New England society expected of men working on farms as well as the economic primacy of male farm-hands. Jeremiah Brown left the family farm to find manual labor in Quincy, Massachusetts, yet struggled with his work because of a hand injury, revealing that men’s work consisted of physically demanding activities. In an unusual move for the time, he decided to work in the predominantly-female setting of a Lowell textile mill because of his hand injury. While able-bodied young women worked with textile machinery, only an injury would make a man like Jeremiah take up textile production. Tragically, Jeremiah died from a Typhus fever outbreak, which had negative repercussions on his parents; since they assumed that Jeremiah would provide for them in old age, his premature death hurt their economic position significantly.\(^{46}\)

In addition to labor to create food and goods, the occupation of parenting fell disproportionately on women in preindustrial New England. This focus on motherhood as the most important act of parenting became more pronounced by the early nineteenth century; as more men left family farms for outside work, motherhood became more important. Under this paradigm, society expected women to provide children with the majority of the intellectual and moral teachings they would receive before adulthood, thus categorizing women as arbiters of virtue.\(^{47}\) As mothers, women both sacrificed personal freedom and access to the outside world while trying to find satisfaction at home.\(^{48}\) Because of this, the prospect of married women with children seeking employment in nineteenth century New England seemed impossible.

However, a notable exception to married women’s expectation to remain unemployed emerged by the late eighteenth century and grew in the early nineteenth century as a result of

\(^{46}\) Olive Brown to Sabrina Bennett, November 14, 1840, in Farm to Factory, ed. Dublin, 68-69.
\(^{47}\) Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood, 84-87.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 91-93.
early industrialization. Married women helped create commercial products by spinning and weaving textiles, along with other items such as shoes and hats, in their homes. This system of commercial home manufacture differed from the earlier production of household items by women because the items produced were sent to homes by merchants and then returned to merchants for sale when finished. Women in this labor system did not produce for their subsistence, but rather for wages from capitalistic merchants.\textsuperscript{49} This shift from subsistence production to a “putting out” system of commercial production occurred as a result of increasing merchant activity in New England after the American Revolution. New England essentially became capitalist by the beginning of the nineteenth century due to increased profits from exports and shipping, and these profits would later establish important manufacturing ventures. While men accumulated capital as merchants, women held specific jobs in goods production in homes.\textsuperscript{50}

Even after mechanized manufacturing of textiles began, some ventures still employed the putting-out system. In particular, Samuel Slater, who developed the first textile mill in New England, did not mechanize the process of weaving cloth. Instead of adopting the power loom like his contemporary Francis Cabot Lowell, he gave out yarn produced in his mill to women workers from surrounding towns and expected them to make cloth from it with hand looms within four months.\textsuperscript{51} Slater’s mix of mechanized carding and spinning with domestic, hand-driven weaving shows that the mechanized production of textiles did not occur immediately. Depending on location and manufacturer, individuals encountered mechanization at different times.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} Newell, “The Birth of New England in the Atlantic Economy”, 61-62.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Cott, \textit{The Bonds of Womanhood}, 24-25.
\end{itemize}
Of course, not all people in pre-industrial New England worked on farms or in manufacturing. For a wealthy few merchants, foreign trade provided a lucrative form of employment in the late eighteenth century. Not only did merchants in New England export local products like wood and fish to European markets, but they also “re-exported” Caribbean goods like sugar and tobacco. At this time, some merchants even travelled to China, India, Arabia, and Russia to obtain fine silk, spices, coffee, and tea. The profits of these worldwide mercantile ventures made a few men very wealthy. As Lucy Larcom vividly remembers, men and only men worked as merchants to become wealthy. Notably, it would be these wealthy merchants who would establish the first textile mills in New England, thus perpetuating a pattern of

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53 Larcom, A New England Girlhood, 93-95.
economic patriarchy.

Outside of New England, slavery became a labor system which both relied on economic patriarchy and trade while enriching New England merchants. Within textile mills, women alluded to slavery when working conditions became unfavorable. For example, during a strike in 1836, Harriet Robinson remembered that women sang “Oh! I cannot be a slave, / I will not be a slave, / For I’m so fond of liberty / That I cannot be a slave”. Although Robinson labelled the song as a “rather inappropriate” parody of another song, the seemingly-joking lyrics reveal a fear that textile work resembled African-American slavery.\textsuperscript{54} According to male mill critic Orestes Brownson, women who worked in factories sold their independence and social desirability and

\textsuperscript{54} Robinson, \textit{Loom and Spindle}, 51.
thus became worse off than slaves. While Brownson attempted to elicit sympathy from working women, this backfired when women textile workers strongly condemned his comparing them to slaves.\textsuperscript{55} Ironically, many women actually felt that working in a textile mill in a city like Lowell represented liberation from the lack of opportunities and restricted activities of life on northern New England family farms. Despite this, most Americans still saw family farm labor as normative, and thus opposed the idea that women could be free while working for wages.\textsuperscript{56}

While mill critics compared working conditions to slavery, the capital to fund mills themselves often came at least indirectly from slavery. Beginning in the 17th century, New England merchants profited immensely off the slave trade, and this wealth would later be invested in industry.\textsuperscript{57} Throughout the first half of the 19th century, as American cotton production from slavery increased precipitously, production of cotton textiles followed suit. The two primary individuals discussed in this thesis who were responsible for creating influential textile mills, Samuel Slater and Francis Cabot Lowell, gained at least some of their capital from slavery. While the Brown family of Rhode Island which funded Slater’s mill had been slave traders, some of Lowell’s financial investors such as Thomas Perkins made their primary profits from the slave trade.\textsuperscript{58} Although the comparisons of mill work to slave labor were inaccurate at best and slanderous at worst, the cotton and capital of textile mills definitely came from the slave trade and slavery.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 17-19.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 388-401.
Chapter 2: Early Mills and Capitalists, c. 1790-1815.

The industrial revolution came to New England quietly in the year 1790. The year before, an English immigrant named Samuel Slater came to the United States to work in New York. Meanwhile, the Brown family of Rhode Island, wealthy merchants, wanted to establish a domestic textile mill. Jumping on this opportunity to leave his job in New York, Slater offered to build new looms from British designs on the condition that business leader Smith Brown and his brother-in-law William Almy would provide the capital to do so. Ironically, Almy and Brown merely wanted mechanical help with spinning machines they had already purchased. Instead, Samuel Slater built and managed a water-powered mill, which carded and roved cotton on the Blackstone River in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. It was this action that began an entire industry in New England with profound economic and social consequences.

Despite the unprecedented nature of his mill in the United States, British textile mills had already existed for decades. However, Britain created strong protectionist laws against the spread of mechanized textile technology, exacting fines and even prison time on those caught trying to export designs. The technological breakthroughs that made British textile production so productive came in the 1760s. In 1764, James Hargreaves invented a machine called “the jenny” that spun cotton. Four years later, Richard Arkwright improved upon the jenny with a carding machine powered by water or horses.

These two inventions made the productivity of textile manufacturing increase markedly. While it took hand-spinners about 50,000 hours to process 100 pounds of cotton, spinning machines brought this down to 2,000 hours, thus making cotton spinning 25 times more efficient.

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60 Ibid., 48-49.
61 Ibid., 34-35.
overnight. Furthermore, the mechanization of spinning made the quality of yarn uniform, something nearly impossible with hand-woven yarn. By the early 1780s, the British government realized the potency of these inventions. A publication from 1782 echoed the fears of international competition in textiles from nations such as France, and “In Prevention of that Evil” banned people from nations other than Great Britain from viewing Arkwright’s invention. By that point, Arkwright had already opened factories in Derbyshire and Manchester, showing the practical economic potential of mechanical cotton spinning. Fears ran high about the possibility of international discovery of mechanized textile machinery, and these fears were warranted.

When Slater arrived in the United States in 1789, he brought with him not only knowledge of mechanized textile manufacturing from Britain, but also British conceptions of how to run a textile mill. Unlike the corporate mills that would later emerge in Lowell, British textile factories had been private, family-run partnerships. Furthermore, the seemingly natural system of payment in cash wages existed alongside apprenticeships and family labor. The workforce also differed from what would become standard later in the United States; mostly children worked in British textile mills. Notably, in Richard Arkwright’s early mills, most of the child workers were boys. This differed dramatically both from domestic textile production and the mechanized textile production that would follow.

Samuel Slater was born on an estate in England upon which his father worked as an independent farmer. Just six miles from his birthplace in Belper stood mills built by Richard

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64 Tucker, Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 36-42.
Arkwright and Jedediah Strutt, pioneers of British textile manufacturing. Slater grew up very close to early mechanical textile production, and this undoubtedly helped him establish it in the United States. The young Slater served an indenture to Strutt in a cotton spinning mill in the 1780s when the textile industry in Britain was still tiny. Because of these factors, Slater lived and worked in the right place at the right time.65

George S. White, a personal friend of Samuel Slater and author of his posthumous “memoir” in 1836, explains how Slater became successful. Slater possessed a great memory, and this allowed him to remember Strutt’s mill and thus reproduce it in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, without blueprints. White characterizes Slater as determined, a determination which led him to perfect textile machinery in the absence of written plans. Interestingly, he compares Slater opening textile mills to the resource proliferation of extremely valuable Peruvian silver mines, which thus “gives to man his full enjoyment, in the pursuit of happiness”. In doing so, White emphasizes Slater’s ability to create wealth. Essentially, Slater portrays the gendered archetype of an industrialist: a man who reaps riches for himself and his partners. Meanwhile, women anonymously create this wealth through their labor but do not become wealthy themselves.66

In 1789, Samuel Slater decided to leave England because he believed that there would be too much competition for textile manufacturing there, although he kept these intentions private. Furthermore, he soon realized from newspaper advertisements that men with knowledge of mechanized textile production were extremely sparse in the United States, and therefore risked the punishments of leaving England with this knowledge. While at first he arrived in New York,

66 Ibid., 25-27, 35, quote on 27, emphasis added.
he soon became dissatisfied with the equipment he encountered there. Slater wrote to Moses Brown in Rhode Island about installing textile machines in his factory, and Brown replied that if Slater could do it, he would receive *all* the money from operations. Soon after, he left to create his first factory.\(^{67}\)

Samuel Slater had a strange and strained relationship with William Almy and Moses Brown, the Rhode Island capitalists who funded his first mill in Pawtucket. Slater did not have much autonomy in the relationship even though he managed the production of yarn at the Pawtucket factory. In fact, Almy and Brown viewed Slater as more of an employee in their larger mercantilistic ventures rather than as an independent manufacturer. This conflict arose from changing ideas about corporate control that came from pre-industrial trade. Whereas Almy and Brown came from established, wealthy merchant families in which personal connections meant much more than technical skill, Slater was a meritocratic outsider to this old guard philosophy. This snobbish mercantile nepotism in which wealthy men provided favors to friends and relatives created real-world negative effects for the children, women, and men that Slater employed. Almy and Brown controlled all supplies of cotton and other necessities to the mill from their Providence market, often intentionally limiting supply lines to a trickle. Slater retaliated by threatening to stop mill operations. Furthermore, mill workers did not always receive regular cash wages or goods in kind, further straining relations.\(^{68}\) The managerial and operational situations of Slater’s first mill were far from ideal.

Despite these setbacks, Samuel Slater managed to expand his mill operations significantly by the early decades of the nineteenth century. Slater advertised in newspapers

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\(^{67}\) Ibid., 35-37, 72-75.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 49-57.
when he opened new mills, stressing the quality of his product.\(^6^9\) After 1806, Slater acquired more independence from Almy and Brown, and after this he began to own and open more factories. He opened up a new mill and mill community in Webster, Massachusetts in 1832. By that point, Slater had already partially owned or owned outright several factories in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

Notably, Slater’s mills began to have a gender makeup in which women predominated. Although children by far received the most employment, Slater employed about a third more adult women than men.\(^7^0\) Slater conformed to the age and gender expectations of employment. While men refused to work in mills for the most part, households expected children to work there. Instead, men worked on farms in the summer and did odd jobs during the winter. The exception to this was supervision; exclusively men supervised mill workers, comprising about 10% of those employed in his mills. Meanwhile, married women often stayed at home or wove, while unmarried women would sometimes work in factories as well.\(^7^1\)

Although Samuel Slater significantly changed the technology of textile manufacturing, he attempted to retain a rural New England community around his mills by creating “factory villages”. The communities that Slater founded, such as Slatersville, Rhode Island, and Webster, Massachusetts, sought to keep traditional forms of town organization and community life while containing mechanized textile manufacturing. For example, the town of Slatersville revolved around a central road with a Congregational church in the town center and single-family homes on the outskirts. Slater intentionally made “factory villages” feel “traditional” by leaving

\(^6^9\) “Samuel Slater and Co”. Advertisement, United States Chronicle (Providence, Rhode Island), August 6, 1804, page 4, vol. 18, iss. 915, accessed from the Boston Public Library.
\(^7^0\) Tucker, Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 94-99.
\(^7^1\) Ibid., 139-141.
significant open land for animal pastures, planting trees, building only single-family homes set back from roads so that the homeowners could plant vegetable gardens, protestant churches to tie the community together, and a town meeting form of government which included all citizens regardless of class or occupation. Factory villages also preserved traditional, pre-industrial life patterns in ways that were more than aesthetic. For example, Slater permitted workers to graze their farm animals on land belonging to the factory. Furthermore, most mill workers would eat from their produce and animals rather than having food shipped to them from outside the community. Even the encroachment of 19th century institutions of the workhouse and asylum for the poor and mentally ill did not occur in factory villages until the middle of the century, as family care of dependent individuals remained. While Slater’s mills definitely changed the way textiles were produced, Slater intentionally maintained pre-existing and pre-industrial forms of community organization. However, it may seem hard to explain why Slater went to such great

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72 Ibid., 125-138.
lengths to retain a sense of traditional community in his villages.

Slater may have organized his mills around factory villages to maintain a sense of morality amidst manufacturing. At this time, many Americans were wary about the moral effects of bringing industrialization to the United States. Nathan Appleton, the merchant who would partner with Francis Cabot Lowell to create textile mills in Waltham and along the Merrimack River, expressed this fear of factories ruining the “moral character and respectability” of those who worked in them. Appleton identified with distaste the “degradation” and “lowest character” of European manufacturing cities, and directly addressed the notion that factory labor itself led to
these adverse conditions. However, Appleton had justified reasons for sincerely worrying about the “moral character” of women who would work in textile mills. By the early 19th century, moral and religious leaders had already constructed a widely-accepted image of women as arbiters of virtue and morality. For example, a Connecticut pastor named William Lyman outlined the attributes of a perfectly “virtuous woman” at the funeral of 54 year old Sarah Griswold. According to Lyman, a virtuous woman is one whose “Feelings do not carry her above taking the care and direction of her household; nor does she leave to others what she is in a situation for carrying into effect with her own hands. She does not think herself degraded, or any ways acting out of her sphere to be personally employed in the necessary services of her family.”

Lyman described the customary role of women as household workers in a separate “sphere” who were not “degraded”, thus making non-domestic and often-disparaged mill employment seem morally dangerous.

Just as Lyman defined the moral expectations of women, others commented on the believed immutability of a woman’s morality. Sarah Lewis anonymously translated the French author M. Martin in the 1839 book *Woman’s Mission*, writing that “It is from her being the depository [sic] and disseminator of such a spirit, that woman's influence is principally derived. It appears to be for this end that Providence has so lavishly endowed her with moral qualities.”

According to this view, women naturally possessed superior morals to men and thus were responsible for maintaining the moral order of society. Therefore, if factories threatened this natural, superior morality, society itself would become less moral.

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Interestingly, gender played a pivotal role in maintaining “moral” mill operations. In Lowell’s mills, the choice to employ young, unmarried women came from a notion that they were naturally “virtuous” while also more susceptible to social control. By instituting mandatory church attendance, highly-regulated boarding houses, and specifying employment as temporary, Appleton explains how the seemingly-degraded occupation of textile worker remained moral in the eyes of manufacturers and the general public. If Lowell’s mills were to forego these moral protections, those already skeptical of women working outside the home would condemn mill work harshly. In the opinions of religious, and likely male, authorities, the prospect of women leaving home could have dire consequences, as an 1830s Universalist publication warns: “It is in the domestic circle where the most powerful influence of woman is exerted; that is her heaven-ordained sphere...on the culture of the domestic affections, depends, in a great degree, the public happiness; as they become destroyed or corrupted, the moral health of the community is tainted.”

Although Francis Cabot Lowell instituted moral regulations to a meticulous degree, Slater did not ignore concerns about the moral appearance and reality of his factories. According to Slater’s friend George White, Slater was a moral industrialist who actively used industry as a way to fight immorality by providing religious instruction to his factory workers as well as giving them employment and thus subsistence. Significantly, this moralizing relationship between an industrialist and his workers existed in specifically gendered terms, as George White explained: “Multitudes of women and children have been kept out of vice, simply by being employed, and instead of being destitute, provided with an abundance for a comfortable

subsistence”. By arguing specifically that cotton manufacturing saves women and children from vice, White illustrates the gender dynamics of textile mills and the power relations that underlie them; while powerful men like Slater created the mills, women and children worked in these masculine creations, and the process, it was claimed, improved them morally. Whereas men hold the power to improve others’ morals in this situation by opening factories, women can only improve their own morals by working in factories.

Despite White’s claims of Slater’s morality, a clear anxiety between the growth of manufacturing and fears of immorality existed by the 1830s. It is perhaps for this reason that the Memoir of Samuel Slater devotes an entire chapter to addressing industrialization’s influence on common morality. The chapter does not unilaterally praise or condemn factories, but rather argues that the character of individual factories themselves determines the moral influences that they will have. Interestingly, White even concedes to the challenging view that industry can create “evil”, especially without schooling or religious worship. He even goes so far as to say that the creation of this evil is common. Predictably, however, he marks Slater as an exception.

Despite this, most of the chapter lacks specific examples of the good Slater promoted while providing abstract and superfluous arguments about the nature of morality. One of his few concrete arguments is unmistakably capitalist. Because industries create wealth and power, they further the well-being of entire societies. He uses the introduction of printing in Prussia as an example to show how factories promote morality; by dramatically increasing production,

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77 White, Memoir of Samuel Slater, 118.
78 Ibid, 117-118.
79 Ibid., 113, 116-117.
everyone benefits in the long run because of higher output. For Slater, and industries in general, to be moral, capitalism had to be moral.

While Slater had a relatively humble upbringing, the next man who would bring textile manufacturing to New England enjoyed a privileged background. Born in 1775, Francis Cabot Lowell had many privileges in his early life, graduating from Harvard in 1794 along with wealthy family friends. At age eighteen, Lowell became a merchant in Boston. This brought him into a risky but possibly lucrative business that involved trade as far away as China and India. Francis Cabot Lowell had to balance selling commodities at high prices while buying them for less, all while hopefully avoiding the perils of sea travel. Francis’ father John was a judge, and he gave young Francis monthly allowances to help his trade business grow. By 1800, Lowell sold international goods to ports on the east coast, profiting significantly off of war in Europe. Significantly, before the proliferation of textile mills in the United States that Lowell himself would create, trade with India supplied most of the textiles to Europe. For textiles not made in homes, trade with India provided a source for commercial, handmade textiles.

In 1804, Lowell, along with the Boston merchant Uriah Cotting, constructed India Wharf as a new port to handle increasing trade from Asia and the Mediterranean. The wharf, along with the warehouses to handle goods, brought the nexus of trade with India and China to Boston from Salem, further increasing Francis Cabot Lowell’s wealth. Having established himself, Lowell helped Patrick Tracy Jackson, who would later become an associate of Lowell in the construction of textile mills, become a merchant. Therefore, even before Lowell built textile

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80 Ibid., 114-116.
82 Ibid., 67-68, 76, 78-79.
83 Ibid., 124-125
mills, he cemented relationships with business partners that would help industrialize New England. Once Lowell did become a textile manufacturer, the economy of New England, as well as the lives of the women and men there, would change forever.

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84 Ibid., 128-130.
Chapter 3: The Mills in Waltham and on the Merrimack, c. 1815-1830

By 1813, Francis Cabot Lowell began to look past his successful career as a merchant and take the first steps to establish a textile factory. He started purchasing land in February of that year, and he started signing his letters with the word “Industry” next to his name.\(^{85}\) By October, Lowell had capitalized $400,000 from shareholders, an enormous sum of money at that time, to build and operate a textile mill. For example, the mills in Rhode Island operated by Slater were ten times smaller than this. The Boston Associates, the group of capitalists led by Francis Cabot Lowell and including other shareholders that owned the Boston Manufacturing Company that Lowell created, built their first mill along the Charles River in Waltham, Massachusetts. The mill proved innovative and ambitious: while the corporate structure of the Boston Manufacturing Company defied the traditional personal proprietorship of textile mills that Slater utilized, it also took mechanized textile manufacturing to an unprecedented level. Instead of stopping at yarn, Lowell’s mill produced finished cloth from raw cotton all in one building, being the first American and perhaps the first person in the world to do so.\(^{86}\)

Typically, historians account for Lowell’s “reinvention” of the power loom to create machine-made cloth as a remarkable feat of memory accompanied by the help of a mechanic named Paul Moody. According to this narrative, when Lowell visited power looms in England, he committed their designs to memory while leaving no notes because of the laws against exporting textile technology.\(^{87}\) While memory may account for some of Lowell’s loom design,

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\(^{85}\) Francis Cabot Lowell to Henry Norton, February 25, 1813, and Francis Cabot Lowell to John Rumick, July 27, 1813, in Francis Cabot Lowell Papers, Ms. N-1602, box 9, volume 4, accessed at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass..


the true story of how Lowell built a power loom may be more insidious. When Francis Cabot Lowell wrote to his trusted mechanic Paul Moody on October 12, 1813 to encourage him to work for Lowell, he clearly suggested that he would send a spy to England to retrieve power loom designs: “We have a very good opportunity to send to England to get any information we wish...the gentleman will leave this for England in a few days”. Although Lowell’s use of a spy to obtain information does little to change subsequent effects of his mills, it both shows the power of Lowell to get information and demystifies how he created a power loom.\(^8^8\)

Crucially, Francis Cabot Lowell made the gendering of work in textile mills much more pronounced than his predecessors. On one side stood the proprietors of the mills themselves, who were exclusively men. These men, including Lowell himself and merchants such as Nathan Appleton, Patrick T. Jackson, and the crucial mechanic Paul Moody, controlled how the mill in Waltham ran, who became employed, and how the produced cloth was sold. On the other side stood the women who almost exclusively worked on the textile machines. While the Waltham mill provided higher wages than most other textile mills (and paid them in cash, which was rare at this time), the few men who worked in supervisory positions were paid significantly more than the mass of women workers.\(^8^9\)

In a retrospective account, merchant Nathan Appleton congratulated himself and his associates on how they as men in their perception helped masses of women workers. “I can claim for myself no other merit”, he wrote, “than...on the principle of making every possible provision for the moral character and respectability of the operatives”.\(^9^0\) According to Appleton’s account,

\(^{8^8}\) Francis Cabot Lowell to Paul Moody, October 12, 1813, in Francis Cabot Lowell Papers, Ms. N-1602, box 9, volume 4, accessed at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass..

\(^{8^9}\) Dalzell, *Enterprising Elite*, 29-33.

\(^{9^0}\) Appleton, *Introduction of the Power Loom*, v.
all aspects of the Boston Manufacturing Company that endowed power and influence on
dividuals fell to men. While Lowell and Patrick Jackson made the charter for the company and
designed the technology, male stockholders built up the capital and male merchants like Isaac
Bowers in Boston sold the cloth.\textsuperscript{91} By his account, all of the achievements of the mill lay in \textit{men}
who could control production and manage labor, as his acknowledgement of Francis Cabot
Lowell’s innovation to complete cloth manufacturing shows. It is only when discussing the male
efforts at preventing female moral “degradation” that women are even mentioned, and much of
the contemporary historiography also suffers from this. Appleton presents him and his associates
as deeply concerned for the well-being of factory workers, opposing “the lowest character” of
European factory workers’ lives. By contrasting their enterprise with Europe, they then boast
about the “guards” they as men implemented against women workers, including boarding
houses, mandatory church attendance, and temporary employment.\textsuperscript{92}

Appleton’s own matter-of-fact explanation of why the Boston Manufacturing Company
chose women and thus created a unique social environment with gendered connotations does
little to highlight the magnitude of this decision. As Appleton puts it, “There was little demand
for female labor, as household manufacture was superseded by the improvements in machinery.
Here was in New England a fund of labor, well educated and virtuous.”\textsuperscript{93} Appleton places the
choice to hire women as arising out of a simple capitalist supply of women and small demand for
women in other fields of work. However, Appleton does not directly confront the challenge to
domesticity that a workforce of women presented.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 8-11.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 14-16.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 15.
The manufacturing of textiles by women was in no way a new or revolutionary phenomenon. Well before mechanized textile production, young women characteristically made clothes from scratch in their homes for either familial consumption or for sale. Perhaps even more telling is that textile production was an important income source for women even before it became mechanized.\textsuperscript{94} However, the choice to employ women to produce textiles \textit{in factories} away from their homes proved new. By the early nineteenth century, many in New England considered the home as a realm of leisure and moral rejuvenation while claiming that the “world” outside of it could wound people. Specifically, society expected men to leave the home to obtain wages and possibly become degraded while women restored them morally, as the preacher William Lyman and a writer for the Universalist and Ladies’ Repository described.\textsuperscript{95} Under these conditions, Appleton’s insistent anxiety about moral safeguards for women seem much more understandable; much of New England society thought that women should remain at home so as not to suffer from outside immorality. Therefore, Appleton felt that he had to go to great lengths to explain why employment in Lowell’s factories did \textit{not} shatter morality.

On the outside, the factories created an impressive façade. In Waltham, the Boston Manufacturing Company built visually-pleasing brick and stone buildings that stood impressively by the river in that small town. At six stories, the mill represented the power of the new enterprise.\textsuperscript{96} Similarly, the mill buildings in the city of Lowell in the following years impressed workers and residents alike with tall red-brick exteriors, many windows, and even trees surrounding them to make the atmosphere around them attractive. Boarding houses made in

\textsuperscript{94} Cott, \textit{The Bonds of Womanhood}, 27-28.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 64-69; William Lyman, \textit{A Virtuous Woman}, 8; “Female Influence and Duties”, in “The Universalist and Ladies’ Repository”, ed. Daniel D. Smith, vol.4, August, 1835, 81-84, quote on 81-82.
\textsuperscript{96} Dalzell, \textit{Enterprising Elite}, 26, 112.
a similar style stood nearby, either as small detached brick houses or long, tall row houses.97

Despite these impressive appearances, conditions inside the mills were less savory. Loud machines surrounded the women for the twelve hours that they worked while low ceilings made conditions feel cramped. Furthermore, the unventilated rooms left behind lint from cloth production, causing sickness.98 Letters from mill workers show just how frequent a concern sickness was. For example, when Sarah Hodgdon and her friend Wealthy Page began working in a Lowell textile mill in 1830, health became one of the primary concerns they addressed in their letters home to parents and friends. In response, siblings and parents writing letters back to mill

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98 Dalzell, *Enterprising Elite*, 34.
workers would often ask about their health before anything else.\textsuperscript{99} The conditions within mills could be perilous enough to cause illness, likely from lint inhaled in closed spaces.

Although working in mills could be detrimental to a young woman’s health, they became very familiar settings nonetheless. Harriet Robinson, the girl who began working in the mills after her father died and wrote about it years later, fondly described her mill and its surroundings. Inside the mill were large spinning-frames that powered cotton spinning, and women would attend to two machines at once. Robinson mentions how excessive rushing water in the spring could close a mill, thus giving workers a “holiday” in which young children could run along the water channels of the Merrimack River.\textsuperscript{100} However, many other workers did not share Robinson’s enthusiasm. Even other children like Lucy Larcom, the poet whose experiences paralleled Harriet Robinson, performed her work lacklusterly. Although at first she marvelled at the water wheel powering her mill in Lowell, she soon bemoaned the “buzzing and hissing and whizzing” of machinery” and regretted that mill work, which she soon found boring, prevented her from attending high school.\textsuperscript{101} Larcom’s regret over missed opportunities and frustration at the banal repetition of her occupation must have affected many women mill workers.

As the appearance and conditions inside of textile mills signaled their owners’ intentions and the mills’ working conditions, the locations of textile mills signaled available power sources. Since flowing water powered all the machinery, the Boston Associates had to place mills along fast-moving, powerful rivers. The Charles River became the first river the Boston Associates used to utilize water power to spin textiles, as its location near Boston made managing and

\textsuperscript{100} Robinson, \textit{Loom and Spindle}, 19, 22-24.
\textsuperscript{101} Larcom, \textit{A New England Girlhood}, 154-157.
constructing a mill along it convenient. Furthermore, nature dictated Waltham as the location of the first mill, as a waterfall along the Charles River there provided the necessary power to spin cotton. After Lowell modified a dam at the site to provide the correct amount of water power, the Waltham mill opened. However, the success of Lowell’s mill in Waltham ironically led to trouble. By 1822, there were three mills operating along the Charles at Waltham due to the enormous success of the enterprise. This significantly reduced the power of the already weak Charles River. Therefore, the Boston Associates realized that they needed a new source of water power to continue to expand. By doing so, they would create perhaps the premier industrial city of the United States in the nineteenth century.

The technological and social feats that a combination of the Boston Associates and working women from the New England countryside achieved stems partly from technological innovations that occurred decades before the city of Lowell was founded. In 1803, the Middlesex Canal, a 27-mile canal linking the Merrimack River at what would later be Lowell with Charlestown, near Boston, opened. Four years earlier, the commonwealth of Massachusetts formally incorporated a group of influential men to build the canal for the public interest. Not only was the canal an unprecedented technological feat with locks and aqueducts, but it also brought natural resources from New Hampshire directly into Boston by boat in an era when water travel was the only feasible way to move bulk cargo. A few years before the Boston Associates built factories near the canal, it had been used to transport thousands of boxes of glass

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103 Francis Cabot Lowell to Paul Moody, October 12, 1813, in Francis Cabot Lowell Papers, Ms. N-1602, box 9, volume 4, accessed at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass..
and merchandise and nearly ten thousand tons of wood products. Undoubtedly, the Middlesex Canal’s location influenced where the city of Lowell would be.\textsuperscript{106}

A desire to move New Hampshire goods to Newburyport along the Merrimack River preceded the Middlesex Canal. Between 1792 and 1796, wealthy Newburyport merchants built the Pawtucket Canal in what was then the town of East Chelmsford to allow ships to avoid the 32-foot drop in the river at Pawtucket Falls. By doing so, they hoped to bring trade to the sea town of Newburyport and thus make their town prosper. However, the Middlesex Canal ruined this plan.\textsuperscript{107} Instead, their navigation canal would be transformed into a power canal for the Boston Associates. Paul Moody, the mechanic that helped Lowell develop a power loom, suggested using the powerful Pawtucket Falls for new mills. In late 1821, Patrick Jackson, Nathan Appleton, and mill agent and owner Kirk Boott formed the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, the first new textile mill using the power of Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River. Boott had bought the surrounding farmland so that more mills could be built in the future. By 1848, at least ten separate mill companies used the power of this canal to spin textiles.\textsuperscript{108}

After Paul Moody suggested that they use the Pawtucket Canal, Moody himself, Kirk Boott, Patrick Jackson, and Nathan Appleton visited the site of the future city of Lowell. Someone said that they would live to see the place have 20,000 people, indicating that they foresaw the magnitude of the project ahead of them.\textsuperscript{109} By 1826, the area had grown enough that the mill agents wanted to form a separate town, as beforehand the area had been part of East

\textsuperscript{107} Dinmore, “Proprietors of the Locks and Canals”, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 69-73.
\textsuperscript{109} Appleton, \textit{Introduction of the Power Loom}, 17-19.
Chelmsford. Kirk Boott provided two possible names: Derby, as a reference to a place in England where he had roots and where textiles were manufactured, or Lowell, to honor Francis Cabot Lowell who had died in 1817. Nathan Appleton immediately chose the name Lowell, and thus immortalized one of the most important American industrialists into the name of one of nineteenth-century America’s most important industrial cities.\textsuperscript{110}

Once these men established the city of Lowell, the city itself and the scope of textile production there grew enormously. The off-hand statement made in 1821 that Lowell would someday have 20,000 people came true by 1840. Unlike the mills in Waltham, the site at Lowell was designed to grow. The Merrimack Manufacturing Company, the first textile mill in Lowell which began operating in September 1823, began with $600,000 in capital which soon increased to $1,200,000, three times the initial capital of the Waltham mill. Whereas the Charles River at Waltham provided an essentially communal source of power, the Boston Associates created the Locks and Canals Company in 1824 in Lowell to control the rights to waterpower that each mill would have. Therefore, the power for mills themselves became an object controlled by wealthy men. During the 1820s, new mills appeared which used the waterpower of the Pawtucket Canal. The Hamilton Manufacturing Company opened in 1825, followed by the Appleton and Lowell mills in 1828, the Suffolk, Tremont, and Lawrence mills in 1830, the Boott mill in 1835, and the Massachusetts mill in 1839. In terms of population, manufacturing, and wealth, Lowell became a boom town by the late 1820s.\textsuperscript{111} As Lowell grew, the workforce that made its growth possible, young women from rural New England, began to tell stories of life there and thus create a unique community of working women.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 32-34.
\textsuperscript{111} Dalzell, \textit{Enterprising Elite}, 47-51.
Chapter 4: “Female Operatives” and the City of Lowell, c. 1822-1841

In June 1830, sixteen year-old Sarah Hodgdon from Rochester, New Hampshire began working in a Lowell textile mill. When she arrived in Lowell, her friend Wealthy Page had already been working there, and thus Sarah, along with her younger sister Elizabeth, all lived together in a company boarding house.\footnote{Sarah Hodgdon to Mary Hodgdon, June 1830, in Farm to Factory, ed. Dublin, 42.} Within her first month there, she wrote several letters to those back home. In particular, Sarah Hodgdon kept a close correspondence with her family. She told them pleasant and unpleasant details about her new home, including being accosted by a Baptist woman who acted “cold and indifferent” towards her after they attended church together while also finding “one good friend here in Lowell that is a mother to me”. She also wrote separate letters imploring both her mother and father to write back to her soon, showing that even with the camaraderie she encountered, she still inevitably felt homesick.\footnote{Letters by Sarah Hodgdon to Mary Hodgdon and Abner Hodgdon, June 1830, in Farm to Factory, ed. Dublin, 43-45.} In many ways, the letters of Sarah Hodgdon reveal common feelings amongst young women workers who first arrived in Lowell.

Although Sarah felt homesick upon first arriving in Lowell, a vast majority of workers came to Lowell in positions very similar to hers. According to records from the Hamilton Manufacturing Company, an astounding 85 percent of their workforce was female, meaning that Sarah had many, many women to befriend. Additionally, an overwhelming 96.6 percent of Hamilton Company workers that year were born in the United States, with only a few Irish workers challenging this homogeneity. Like Sarah, about three-fourths of workers lived in boarding houses owned by the Hamilton Company, and nearly 90 percent of women lived in boarding houses overall. Perhaps most strikingly, a majority of women workers came from
agricultural towns from New Hampshire, and most of them first entered the Lowell mills in the late 1820s or early 1830s.\textsuperscript{114} Therefore, Sarah Hodgdon, a young American-born woman from an agricultural town in New Hampshire, represented a nearly archetypal “mill girl”.

Even as Sarah Hodgdon represented a very typical portrait of a woman mill worker, those like her would face pressures to conform to the community standards of other workers. Since women lived in such close quarters to each other, they could not escape the influence of their peers. When women came in large numbers from rural towns, the close interactions of workers helped newcomers form a close sense of community. However, this sense of community had a less positive side. Women would ostracize those who did not follow the moral norms of their communities, thus creating a possibility for rejection on account of boyfriends, drinking, or other infractions.\textsuperscript{115} Furthermore, even seemingly-minor characteristic such as speech and dress were critiqued by communities of women. Harriet Robinson recalled how women from the country with strange names faced “severe discipline and ridicule” until their speech matched that of other women in Lowell. Perhaps more predictably, women working in Lowell critiqued newcomers’ dress, with Robinson labelling it “the plainest homespun, cut...as if she had borrowed it from her grandmother’s gown”\textsuperscript{116}. In a city devoted to producing textiles, it is not surprising that fashion became a central object of conformity.

Much of the communal pressure that newcomers to Lowell faced played out in boarding houses. The boarding houses that mill owners constructed for workers to live in were the first new environments that young women encountered. To the general public, the fear of young women living alone without their families manifested itself in paternalistic regulations for

\textsuperscript{114} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 26-29.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 81-85.
\textsuperscript{116} Robinson, \textit{Loom and Spindle}, 40.
boarding house life. Not only did boarding houses require church attendance, but they also prohibited alcohol and mandated a curfew. Furthermore, the men who made the strict rules encouraged women in boarding houses to report rule-breaking behavior to overseers, thus making boarding houses extremely-disciplined living quarters with little privacy. In many ways, the male overseers acted like parents to female “children”, even if women were adults.\footnote{Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 77-79.}

Boarding houses enforced strict standards with even stricter punishments. For example, according to boarding house regulations at the Lawrence Company, those caught with alcohol would be fired and permanently barred from working in Lowell mills. Also, presumably to keep the women workers “pure” of immoral outside influences, only mill workers could live in boarding houses.\footnote{William Austin, “Regulations of Boarding Houses”, (Lowell: 1833), accessed at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass..}

When women were not at home in boarding houses, they inevitably worked inside textile mills. At times, this experience proved enormously challenging to working women. As not every task in the mill was the same, a change in the task of a mill worker could prove challenging. Mary Paul, who had worked spinning cloth, struggled when she transferred to the better-paying but more skilled and arduous task of warping, or preparing yarn for weaving. She characterized the work as the most difficult she had ever done, and although she suffered fatigue from her position, she promised her father that she would never spin again, as she expected to earn at least $2 per week.\footnote{Mary S. Paul to Bela Paul, November 5, 1848, in \textit{Farm to Factory}, ed. Dublin, 106-108.} Only three years earlier, however, Mary optimistically told her father that she would receive 50 cents per week. At first, she enjoyed her work in the spinning room and even

\footnote{William Austin, “Regulations of Boarding Houses”, (Lowell: 1833), accessed at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass..}
complimented the “first rate overseer” she had. Over her time in Lowell, Mary Paul gained higher expectations of what her working conditions and wages should be.

Notably, Mary Paul did not move to Lowell out of economic pressuring from her parents, but rather under her own volition and for her own ambitions. She explained to her father that she could earn much more money in Lowell than in her native rural Vermont, and that she could buy clothes unavailable to her there. Also, she mentions that another woman and presumably a family friend, Mary Jane Griffith, would start working in Lowell, showing the influence of peer pressure in bringing young women to Lowell. Instead of her family pleading to her to work in Lowell, she pleads to them to work there. Mary Paul was not alone in choosing to go to Lowell for individual reasons. In what is perhaps an extreme example, the family of Sarah Hodgdon actually pleaded for her to stop working in Lowell. Her sister wrote to her that both herself and her mother felt that Sarah had worked there long enough to save enough spending money, and thus she should return home to New Hampshire. Although she begins the letter by trying to convince Sarah that she should feel she has been there long enough, it becomes clearer when Elizabeth writes “We all think you have staid long enough” that her family insists she return home. Clearly, Sarah’s individual will to earn money took precedent over her family’s wishes for her return, showing that individual aims, and not familial financial pressures, brought her to Lowell.

Certainly, exceptions exist to this general pattern of women entering the mills in Lowell for individual reasons. Perhaps most well-known are the mill careers of writers Lucy Larcom and Harriet Robinson. Both Larcom and Robinson entered the mills as children out of familial

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120 Mary S. Paul to Bela Paul, November 20, 1845, in Farm to Factory, ed. Dublin, 101.
121 Mary S. Paul to Bela Paul, September 13, 1845, in Farm to Factory, ed. Dublin, 100.
economic necessity, a reason for mill employment much more common in Slater’s Rhode Island mills than in Lowell. Larcom, as mentioned previously, began working in a mill as a child because her mother needed the income to survive. Although the new experience of the mill at first enchanted Lucy, she soon became distressed that mill work would prevent her from going to high school. Retrospectively, she plainly states how mill work “was not...the right sort of life for a child”, and how this caused her to brood over her life’s purpose at a young age. Harriet Robinson faced similar circumstances when in 1831 her father died, thus necessitating a move to Lowell in which a young Harriet had to work as a “doffer”, replacing bobbins, in a mill. While Robinson laments the hardship of a long fourteen-hour day, she does not condemn mill work like Larcom does.

Although these accounts of women working in Lowell are unusually detailed, most workers did not leave behind such detailed records. The brief diary entries of Susan Forbes of Epsom, New Hampshire reveal the daily experiences of Lowell workers. On January 15, 1843, she wrote “[I] am to leave home tomorrow for Lowell…& work in the Middlesex mills”. Three days later, she wrote that she “Began work in Lowell.” Despite what seems like a dry narrative, a few entries reveal the leisure activities and feelings of Susan. On March 1, 1843, Susan “Went to the Institute. Pro[fessor] James C. Smith lectured on Geology”. Just as mill promoters touted, Susan Forbes had the ability to attend an academic lecture. While this entry shows a positive event in Susan’s daily life, she soon longed for home and became bored of mill work. On May 1, she wrote “Very rainy.- Sick-did not go into the mill. I thought of going away.” By May 11, she expressed this sentiment more succinctly: “In the mill as usual. Wish I was at Epsom [her

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Unlike the detailed letters of Mary Paul or the vivid descriptions of Harriet Robinson, Susan Forbes wrote about starting work, attending lectures, and suffering from homesickness and physical sickness caused by mill work. Forbes, a typical mill worker who did not leave behind a prolific legacy, presents a commonplace account of factory life.

Statistical evidence, much of it performed by historian Thomas Dublin, confirms the primary source testimony that the vast majority of women working in mills did so out of individual economic goals rather than familial pressure. As Dublin’s records from the Hamilton Company in 1830 show, not only did a stunning 90 percent of women working at the Hamilton Company have a male-headed household (thus dispelling the myth of a widowed mother sending her daughters into the mills out of necessity), but a majority of families with daughters in the mills, about 70 percent, had middle-range property holdings suggesting most mill families were solidly middle-class. Neither extremely rich nor extremely poor families predominated among the women mill workers in Lowell. Instead, most had relatively successful family farms upon which the rest of a woman’s family earned a living. The letters women wrote home show that most had family farms on which they had previously relied. For example, the mill worker Olive Brown had a successful family farm on which her brother worked. Similarly, Sarah Hodgdon’s family’s pleas for her to return home show that she came from a secure economic background.

Just as most women came to Lowell from middle-class families, many women who came to work in textile mills in Lowell came in groups with family or friends. According to Dublin’s data from the Hamilton Manufacturing Company, about two-thirds of women workers had

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relatives who worked at the mill at the same time. Often times, one sibling would move to Lowell and others would follow. When women had siblings already working in a mill, this helped their prospects at securing a higher-paying job tremendously. With the help of relatives, women could obtain jobs in the weaving and dressing departments as opposed to the lower-paying carding and spinning jobs. Whereas about 70 percent of women with relatives began working in these departments, only about 52 percent of those without relatives working in the mills did so.\textsuperscript{129} Besides the economic advantages of travelling to Lowell in groups, women received emotional support from having family already there. Sarah Hodgdon, the nearly-archetypal Lowell “mill girl”, met Wealthy Page, her friend from home, in Lowell, and her younger sister Elizabeth accompanied her to Lowell. Because all three of them lived together, they could provide each other with a sense of home even while living in a new city.\textsuperscript{130}

The economic independence that working in a Lowell textile mill provided to a young woman is perhaps the primary reason that so many young, unmarried women went to work there in the 1830s and 1840s. Harriet Robinson, the author who moved to Lowell as a child, sums up this incentive succinctly: “For the first time in this country woman’s labor had a money value. She had become not only an earner and a producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time”.\textsuperscript{131} Despite this innovation, a noticeable differential existed between the pay that men could receive and the pay women could receive. Employment segregated strictly along gender lines, and the few men that did work in the mills received much higher wages. For example, women could not be supervisors. Instead, they could only occupy jobs tending to machinery. Whereas a male overseer earned $2.09 per day at the Hamilton

\textsuperscript{129} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 42-49
\textsuperscript{130} Letter of Wealthy Page, June 6, 1830, in \textit{Farm to Factory}, ed. Dublin, 42-43.
\textsuperscript{131} Robinson, \textit{Loom and Spindle}, 42.
Company in 1836, a female dresser, the highest-paid position for women, earned only $0.78. Most importantly, both women and men could operate the machinery and thus perform their jobs equally well, but men still earned higher wages. This adds to Nathan Appleton’s simple explanation of the “little demand for female labor” that caused mills in Lowell to hire women workers. Because of the lack of other employment opportunities, textile mills could get away with paying women workers significantly less than men, thus making their labor especially profitable to textile mills.\textsuperscript{132}

As women began to work in the textile mills in Lowell in large numbers, society at large reacted to this new social phenomenon. Many of these reactions were positive, especially when compared to the dismal preconceptions many had about factory life. One anonymous male traveller from the South had his negative perceptions of factory work shattered when he met women who worked at Lowell on a stagecoach ride in New England. Because the women were returning to their country homes for a temporary respite from mill work, he automatically assumed that this would create financial hardships on their families in line with the narrative of poverty-stricken factory workers. After the women dispelled this notion, they also dispelled his assumption that factory work meant confinement, insisting that working in a textile mill meant financial independence. Although his tale seems allegorical and hyperbolic, it directly addresses common objections to women performing textile work while admiring, if patronizingly, that women workers in factories were “intelligent and sweet.”\textsuperscript{133} This man’s awe at the women of Lowell was not unique. Even someone as renowned as Charles Dickens marvelled at what he saw in Lowell when he visited in 1842. Perhaps expecting the unfavorable conditions that


existed in English manufacturing towns at the time, Dickens saw vitality in Lowell, expressed by the Merrimack River, the magnificent mill buildings, and most of all, the healthy-looking women workers. To Dickens, Lowell seemed like a humane and habitable form of industrialism.\textsuperscript{134}

An 1850 Drawing of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company in Lowell, Massachusetts, c. 1850.

Although the appearance of vitality could fool visitors, the women of Lowell themselves commented on their large female workforce. Harriet Robinson thoroughly explains the transition from low and desperate to moral and healthy that the image of the “factory girl” underwent. When the mills in Lowell opened, she argued, women who worked in factories were seen as “the lowest among women...but a brute, a slave”, especially because of the connotations of European

\textsuperscript{134} Dalzell, \textit{Enterprising Elite}, 45-46.
factory work. This prejudice against working in textile mills, Robinson argues, led to the relatively high wages in Lowell. However, Robinson insists that this fear of textile work diminished as women integrated into textile-producing communities. She argues that factory managers did not extort operatives, and that the two groups even held relative equality. In addition, women working in factories excitedly attended academic lectures, read magazines, and saved enough money for themselves and even their family members. As Mary Paul succinctly expressed, “I think that the factory is the best place for me[,] and if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell”. Although Paul’s statement elides the variations that came with textile employment, women in general “liked” their work, showing that those most affected by textile mills often approved of their employment there.

Just as praise met the social phenomenon of large numbers of women working in textile mills, so did criticism. This criticism came from a diverse group of people with a diverse set of reasons for criticizing textile mills. For Seth Luther, the working conditions of women workers troubled him deeply. He travelled to New England manufacturing towns to lecture on what he saw as “evils” of manufacturing, such as a 13-hour work day, short breaks, pay cuts for being late, huge wealth discrepancies between factory owners and workers, child labor which took away from schooling, and serious negative health effects on factory workers. Luther even went as far as to compare factory work to slavery, blurring the lines between southern slavery and northern factory work. Luther begins his speech by speaking about the sarcastic “splendid example” of English textile mills, noting that 40 percent of England and Wales struggled for

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137 Sarah Hodgdon to Mary Hodgdon, June 1830, in *Farm to Factory*, ed. Dublin, 42.
subsistence while the British aristocracy derided the “lower orders”. He also comments on the bleak conditions and drudgery of workers in Manchester, rhetorically asking if Lowell resembled Machesters. He then espouses the fears of American manufacturers by assuring that American factories also contained the abuses found in English mills, urging senators to go into a cotton mill incognito to experience “the worse than slavish confinement in the cotton mill” to earn 75 cents for 14 hours of work.

In short, Luther comments on the stark class differences that allowed cotton mills to prosper while harshly deriding the conditions of these mills. Although most critiques of working conditions were not this sharp, they still highlighted a disapproval of women working in textile factories. Some critiques were even fictionalized accounts of Lowell. For example, one story from 1849 tells of a man from Texas visiting Lowell after having lived there before. Although he remembers the city fondly, he is shocked by the moral decay, including prostitution, that he finds there. The story never expressly criticizes Lowell or its textile production, but it implies that moral decline has occurred. It is difficult to assess whether prostitution actually occurred in Lowell because of polarized opinions on the issue. While society at large, especially men critical of mill work like Orestes Brownson, assumed that women working in factories became unwilling prostitutes because of adverse economic conditions, the likes of Harriet Farley who edited *The Lowell Offering* strongly rejected these claims. Therefore, it is difficult to find the veracity of claims of prostitution in Lowell since the literature is so polarized.

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139 Ibid., 8-15.
140 Ibid., 15-19.
Other criticism of women’s employment in Lowell rested on the more conservative argument of women’s particular “domesticity”. Under this logic, the home became a redeeming and morally sacred place while the “outside” world became dangerous and immoral. This dichotomy mapped onto pre-existing Christian ideas of worldly evil, and thus adapted to anti-industrialism very well. This social ideal thus favored women living at home and not working in factories. However, a substantial portion of criticism of the mills came not from those who opposed women working in mills altogether, but those who wanted improved conditions and working rights. Many women themselves raised their voices for better conditions in an era where the public speech of women was taboo, and thus began a hugely significant activist movement.

Chapter 5: Literature and Activism from the Mills, c. 1841-c. 1850

In October 1836, an eleven year-old Harriet Robinson heard talk of the feelings of discontent among women workers at the management of her textile corporation, and how this discontent was brewing into a “turn out”, or strike. After hearing this passionate speech, Harriet led the women as they turned out of their mill. She remembered the event vividly with pride. After corporations announced lowered wages, 1,200 to 1,500 women walked through the streets of Lowell singing songs and even giving public speeches to the shock of other women. Although the corporations did not follow the demands of the workers, instead punishing those seen as ringleaders, the event left a huge impact on the life of Robinson.144

It was, in fact, not the first strike at the mills in Lowell. In February 1834, women turned out of the mills over a similar reduction in wages. The nearly eight hundred women promised in writing that they would not enter the mills again until the corporations restored wages to their previous levels. Although this 1834 strike withered away in a few days, it was the prototype for the larger 1836 strike. During these early years of industrialization, strikes became common as employers and employees worked out the kinks of this new system, adapting to changes from apprenticeship labor.145 The supposed harmony between workers and employers as expressed by some women workers was not universal.

When women workers staged turn outs, they also created associations to protect themselves from future abuses of corporate power. In the wake of the October 1836 turn out, Sarah Bagley and others formed the Lowell Factory Girls Association, perhaps the first female labor organization in the United States. In stark contrast to the supposed harmony between

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144 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 51-52.
factory ownership and workers, the Constitution of the organization explicitly defends the rights of women workers to unionize against “the capitalists” running the mills who could “defraud” them of their rights. A passage from the preamble shows the radical nature of the document:

And, whereas, we believe that those who have preceded us have been, we know that ourselves are, and that our successors are liable to be, assailed in various ways by the wicked and unprincipled, and cheated out of just, legal and constitutional dues, by ungenerous, illiberal and avaricious capitalists,—and convinced that "union is power," and that as the unprincipled consult and advise, that they may the more easily decoy and seduce—-and the capitalists that they may the more effectually defraud—we (being the weaker,) claim it to be our undeniable right, to associate and concentrate our power, that we may the more successfully repel their equally base and iniquitous aggressions.146

Strikingly, the aims of the Association not only advocate unionism as a safeguard against the supposedly paternalist owners of textile mills, but even question the very system of capitalism that created the mills. Even as these women workers made the then-radical arguments for unionism and against capitalism, they still abided by the standards of morality enforced by mill regulations. An article of their Constitution stipulates the expulsion of any members “for any immoral conduct or behavior unbecoming respectable and virtuous females”.147 Although the women held radical beliefs regarding labor, they maintained the more conventional assumption of female morality that permeated mill culture.

Women strikers and the capitalists they struck against also held agreeing views about American nationalism. Women workers who struck and advocated unionism frequently invoked nationalism as an impetus for their actions. When striking women in 1834 declared that “Union is Power”, they compared themselves to their “patriotic ancestors” while characterizing themselves as “daughters of freemen”. This allusion to the spirit of the American Revolution

147 Ibid.
brought both legitimacy and passion to labor activism, simultaneously making activists aims noble and exciting.\textsuperscript{148} The Lowell Factory Girls Association also picked up on the power of tying striking and union activities to the American Revolution, also characterizing its members as “the daughters of freemen” and daughters of “Republican America”. Also, the creation of a Constitution for their organization parallels the creation of a Constitution for the United States.\textsuperscript{149} Women activists in the mills clearly connected their causes to American nationalism.

From the onset of the opening of the textile mills in Lowell, women expressed great interest in literature. Despite the fact that mill management banned all reading material from workspaces, including the bible, women like Lucy Larcom managed to smuggle in small bits of reading. Women kept pieces of poetry or newspaper clippings hidden on windowsills where they could read as they worked.\textsuperscript{150} The stimulation of reading undoubtedly helped cut down the monotony of mill work. Outside of the mills, women in Lowell had a circulating library from which they could pay to borrow books. Women could also attend lectures given by professors on a wide range of topics, and according to one professor, the women of Lowell were voracious students.\textsuperscript{151} Reading and learning were integral parts of the daily lives of many women workers in Lowell.

While women read literature from the beginning of Lowell’s existence, by the late 1830s they began to create literature of their own. In the same spaces that women would hide poems, newspapers, and books in the mills, they would also write down their thoughts during work. In 1837, a mill operative named Harriet Curtis decided to create an “Improvement Circle” for mill

\textsuperscript{150} Larcom, \textit{A New England Girlhood}, 175-181.
\textsuperscript{151} Zaroulis, “Daughters of Freemen”, 113.
girls in which workers would bring in material they wrote, share it, and have the group comment on it. In the years to follow, women would create more literary clubs for their own mental “improvement”.

Within a few years, these private improvement circles became a public magazine. A Universalist reverend named Abel C. Thomas decided to form an improvement circle at his church in 1839, encouraging young women to share stories to the group. When women refused to share what they had to say vocally, Thomas had the women anonymously write out their thoughts and read them at meetings. From these literary meetings came *The Lowell Offering*, a magazine that existed between 1840 and 1845 which was written, edited, and published by women working in Lowell textile mills.

In the first issue of *The Offering*, editors Harriet Curtis and Harriet Farley revel in the achievements of women working in Lowell mills and of life in Lowell itself, including the libraries, public schools, literary associations, and the magazine itself. The magazine takes pride not only in the people and the city of Lowell, but also in how Lowell to them represented “true democracy.”

While the editors trumpeted the accomplishment of creating *The Lowell Offering* in the first place, the various anonymous writers expressed their thoughts, opinions, and anxieties in its pages. One writer compared the sadness that comes with autumn and the uncertain changes in the seasons to frailty in life and the possibility of death, comforting readers in the end by espousing a faith in God. Other writers spoke of more mundane, practical concerns. A writer described what she felt was a “woman’s proper sphere”, namely the conservative argument that women

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153 Ibid., 62-63.
hold powers of morality and sympathy to help men, and that these powers are better left out of the public sphere. Of course, the opinions of individual women contributing to the magazine varied greatly. Caroline Bean takes an opposing view of a woman’s “sphere” in an 1842 issue of *The Offering*, arguing that women should be proud to perform manual labor, using examples of noble women throughout history who worked. The topics and opinions of women in *The Lowell Offering* varied just as much as the women workers themselves.

In addition to diverse opinions about women, factory work, and philosophical thoughts, *The Lowell Offering* also provided an outlet for women to discuss serious, painful topics such as suffering, sickness, and death. One woman describes the feelings of grief that met her while walking through a cemetery, comparing the lonely desolation of the cemetery to the reassurance of the afterlife. Another writer remains unsure of the nature of heaven, pondering over the question of whether relationships on Earth will still exist in heaven as she remembers friends and family members who have died. Further still, one woman addressed the pain of death from a more secular perspective, arguing that the power of memories with their ability to retrospect surpasses that of hope when dealing with death. All of these entries demonstrate the sophisticated thoughts of women working in Lowell textile factories. While this fact seemed obvious to editors Curtis and Farley, the opportunity for average working women to express

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156 B……., “Woman’s Proper Sphere”, in “The Lowell Offering”, ed. Farley and Curtis, Issue 1, October 1, 1840, 3-4, accessed at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass..
159 Emeline, “Shall We Know Each Other in Heaven?”, in “The Lowell Offering”, ed. Farley and Curtis, Issue 1, October 1, 1840, 9-10, accessed at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass..
themselves that *The Lowell Offering* provided directly challenged critics of the women workforce in Lowell.

Although *The Lowell Offering* mostly praised the factory system of Lowell, at times it espoused subtle criticisms. In particular, a vociferous critic of the Lowell mill system named Sarah Bagley attempted to critique life in the mills through *The Offering*. Despite her attempts, the editors Harriet Farley and Harriet Curtis rarely published her material because of its undermining of the positive image of textile mills.\(^{161}\) One of her articles, paradoxically titled “Pleasures of Factory Life”, made it into *The Lowell Offering*. While the article begins by wittily comparing “the pleasures of factory life [to]...’Angels visits, few and far between’”, the rest of it seems to expressed feigned and generic praise of factory work, ranging from plants in the mills to helping out relatives. Tellingly, the editors admit that they changed much of the article from its original form, hinting that Bagley actually despised the mills.\(^{162}\) Sarah Bagley’s severely edited and often unpublished criticisms of Lowell’s textile mills reveal a serious problem regarding *The Lowell Offering*. By focusing so much of the *achievements* of the women workers in Lowell’s factories, *The Offering* allowed no room for dissent or criticism of textile mills. In a sense, *The Offering* served as a propaganda tool in favor of textile mills with gendered workforces of women operatives subordinate to male overseers and factory owners. While the all-female writing, editing, and publishing of *The Lowell Offering* reveals the widespread acceptance of this system, it undoubtedly erases the real dissent that existed against textile mills in Lowell.


Building on this often-ignored discontent with conditions in textile mills, a prolonged labor movement formed from the isolated strikes of the 1830s. By the early 1840s, the economic depression beginning in 1837 had prompted factories to increase the workload of women without proportionally increasing pay. Whereas initially women worked with two looms, textile mills soon made women work with four. Although women workers first protested this increase in the intensity of work directly, they soon shifted their attention to the length of the work day.

Drawing on labor movements of mostly men in manual occupations from the 1820s, women began demanding a ten-hour work day. This became part of a larger labor movement called the Ten-Hour Movement, and the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, a women’s labor group led by agitator Sarah Bagley, worked tirelessly for a ten-hour work day.\textsuperscript{163}

The Female Labor Reform Association independently published “Factory Tracts” in which they offered uncensored critiques of Lowell’s textile mills. The Tracts immediately attacked the long 12 and 13-hour days in textile mills, refuting the common narrative of the moral, intellectual, and religious development of women workers. Instead, the Tract’s writers point out the hypocrisy of the wealthy male factory owners who encourage operatives to be Christian and who promote “benevolence” while simultaneously not improving working conditions. Julianna, a contributor to the piece, goes so far as to characterize “The Evils of Factory Life”, lamenting the crowded boarding houses and comparing the factories to prisons. She even evokes the chant “EQUAL RIGHTS, or death to the corporations”, showing the fever pitch that criticism of factory management by women workers hit by the mid-1840s. Perhaps most radically, one writer named Amelia directly compared the difficulty of leaving one

\textsuperscript{163} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 108-117.
corporation to slavery: when the Lawrence mill lowered wages, thus causing many workers to want to leave, the Lawrence Corporation’s insistence that they had to work for the full year led to the conclusion that it “reminds one of that which the dealers in human flesh at the South are wont to give and receive as the transfer of one piece of property from one owner to another”. Although dramatic, this comparison served a clear political purpose. The article calls for “united and immediate action” against unfavorable factory conditions, and offers the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association as the remedy.\(^{164}\) The entire tract reveals clear gender dynamics at play; while the operative of the factory is demonstrably female and thus enslaved, the overseer or factory owner who commands her is demonstrably male. This shows a gendered power dynamic in the factories. Statistically, the criticism of Lowell textile mills and the resultant push for a ten-hour day were predominantly female movements; in an 1845 petition signed by 1,150 workers for a ten-hour work day, women contributed about 75\% of signatures.\(^{165}\) When a labor movement agitating for a ten-hour workday in the Lowell textile mills emerged, almost exclusively women led this movement against the capitalist ambitions of men.

Unfortunately for these women activists, their efforts did not lead to a passage of a Ten-Hour bill in Massachusetts.\(^{166}\) Ironically enough, the political support for such a law became increasingly male, even if such laws were targeted at women workers. For example, in 1853, William Hoppin implored the Rhode Island State senate to adopt a ten-hour law for women and children.\(^{167}\) Hoppin’s political power represents how gender clearly affected power dynamics in


\(^{165}\) Dublin, Women at Work, 114.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 200-202.

textile mills. While women like Harriet Curtis, Harriet Farley, and Sarah Bagley had to fight for their ability to publish written materials regarding their employment, men such as Hoppins had the legislative power to dictate when and how women worked. This created a disjuncture; men did not work in the mills as frequently as women, yet had the legislative power to alter working conditions that would affect mostly women.

After the passionate efforts at labor reform in the 1840s, women became secondary to the push for a ten-hour law. Campaigns for a ten-hour work day became increasingly tied to politics, a sphere from which women were excluded. By the early 1850s, men predominated in ten-hour law rallies. Additionally, when male overseers changed their previous distance from protests to stage their own ten-hour demands after highly-paid, exclusively male machinists went on strike, the factory owners at Lowell began to concede, offering an eleven-hour day. Whereas women operatives seemed to not threaten factory owners, male overseers and machinists did. As it turned out, it took Massachusetts until 1874 to pass a ten-hour working law. In the time before that however, the gendered nature of mill work that characterized textile mills since Francis Cabot Lowell first opened the Boston Manufacturing Company mill in Waltham would collapse.

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Chapter 6: The Erosion of a Gendered Workplace, c. 1845-1855

When Harriet Robinson reminisced on what Lowell was like before 1840, she mentioned briefly that immigrants were almost unheard of in Lowell’s textile mills. She describes how a few Irish women came to work cleaning waste in the mills, and how at times they spoke their native language. Robinson defends them as temperate, not impoverished, and adapted to life in Lowell.\textsuperscript{169} In the early years of Lowell, Irish immigrants remained a very small minority and perhaps a curiosity to the nearly all-female, all native-born workforce of Lowell’s textile mills. However, by the 1850s, the predominantly-female and native-born population in Lowell’s mills declined rapidly. By 1850, a majority of people working in the carding and spinning departments were immigrants, and by 1860 this majority had reached approximately 80 percent.\textsuperscript{170}

Furthermore, tied intricately to this increase in immigrants in the mills came the disruption of predominantly-female workspaces. Although the proportion of men working at the Hamilton Company, for example, only rose to 30 percent, this dwarfed earlier figures. Because Irish immigrants would work for low wages just as women would, the ideal of creating a “moral”, protected, exclusively-female work force for operative jobs disappeared. For the first time, women \textit{and} men worked in near-equal numbers as operatives.\textsuperscript{171}

Despite the profusion of Irish workers in Lowell’s textile mills in the 1840s and 1850s, a small Irish-American community lived in Lowell since its founding. The first Irish workers were

\textsuperscript{169} Robinson, \textit{Loom and Spindle}, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{170} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 26, 163.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 141-143.
men who performed manual labor. Led by foreman Hugh Cummiskey, thirty men performed maintenance on the crucial Pawtucket power canal for industrialist Kirk Boott in 1822. During these early years, almost exclusively men emigrated from Ireland into the United States, often through Canada. Once they reached Canada, they would venture south to look for work, and Lowell became one of their destinations.\textsuperscript{172}

Lowell’s Irish community did not grow very much all the way through much of the 1830s; outside of construction work performed by men, most Irish did not work for textile mills. After the panic of 1837 however, mills began to hire more Irish workers because of increased production. Simultaneously, the reform efforts of women such as Sarah Bagley, which were meant to improve the conditions of native-born women in Lowell’s mills, ironically helped Irish workers gain a foothold in Lowell because of the instability this caused. Even before the potato famine of 1845-46, Irish immigrants began coming to Lowell in large numbers in 1842.\textsuperscript{173}

Although Irish immigration partially explains how the gendered work space of Lowell eroded, it does not provide a complete explanation. During the 1840s, native-born young women from rural New England began to leave Lowell’s textile mills en masse. Thomas Dublin identifies three factors for this out-migration: movement west, growth of other occupations for women such as teaching, and the declining economic appeal of textile work. Meanwhile, as the mills expanded capacity, the Irish came to the mills out of economic need, thus reducing the possibility of protest.\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 78-85.
\textsuperscript{174} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 138-140.
Whereas the 1842 increase in migration made Irish immigrants more common in Lowell, by 1850 the effects of the potato famine made Irish immigrants the dominant ethnic group in Lowell. With this new hegemony came changed patterns in housing, gender ideology, and family. In contrast to native-born women who often lived in boarding houses with siblings, strangers, and most definitely away from their parents, the vast majority of Irish workers in Lowell lived with their entire families in private homes. Instead of the individual economic benefits accrued to the daughters of rural New England farmers, Irish parents pooled the mill wages of their children into the family’s finances, thus eroding the economic independence of young Irish mill workers.  

By 1850, Irish immigrants began to work in large numbers in the Lowell mills. An anonymous writer in the *Vox Populi* who went by the unequivocal pseudonym “Americano” described how the entrance of Irish workers into Lowell’s mills changed the city. The writer expresses fear for the workers of Lowell as the cost of living grew while wages did not, blaming Irish living conditions for this wage stagnation: “There are Irish in our mills, filling the places which Americans have been obliged to vacate, who were paupers in their own country, and who can well afford to work for pay on which American laborers could not subsist”.  

In his view, an Irish labor influx caused the corporations to stagnate wages, which forced Americans to leave the mills.

Simultaneously, native New England women started to find mill employment less appealing because of lower wages, job growth in other sectors like teaching, and more intense working hours. Faced with an abundant supply of Irish laborers and a decreasing supply of rural

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New England women, the gender lines of occupations blurred. Since mill owners could pay Irish men the same wages that they paid New England women, significant numbers of men began to perform spinning, carding, and weaving jobs for the first time. In other words, mills could pay Irish men low wages, and thus the factories of Lowell became less female.\textsuperscript{177} It was with this entry of men into occupations previously gendered towards women that the phenomenon of an almost-exclusively female workforce in New England textile mills ended.

\textsuperscript{177} Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 138-144.
Conclusion

This thesis explores the creation of a gendered workspace in New England textile mills in the first half of the 19th century. While before 1790 women worked mostly on family farms, by the 1830s many women worked as operatives in textile mills. Furthermore, textile mills by this time became almost exclusively-female spaces; only overseers and factory owners were men. This novel social phenomenon of women working outside of their homes for cash wages challenged the social expectation of domesticity that grew contemporaneously to industrialization. Despite critiques of women’s employment in textile mills, New England women forged a space for themselves where they could express their thoughts in print, gain the company of other young women, and most importantly, earn money for their livelihoods. Although this almost exclusively female occupation grew into the 1840s, it became less rigidly-gendered by the end of that decade with the entrance of Irish men into textile mills. By the mid-1850s, the strict gendering of New England textile mill work had ended.

In the last decades of the 18th century, New England remained a predominantly agricultural region. Family farms provided subsistence crops and domestically-produced goods, forming centers of both production and consumption. In this system, gender separated tasks; while men plowed fields and performed other hard labor, women produced butter, milk, and most importantly, textiles. As men left farms for other work, the home became associated with womanhood, thus creating a cultural ideal that women’s mill employment would break. In
addition to farming, a few wealthy men made fortunes as merchants. Women were excluded from this occupation, meaning that men could accumulate capital while women could not. Before industrialization, the burden of hand-driven manufacturing often fell on the young and impoverished, regardless of gender. Even after Samuel Slater opened up his textile mill in Pawtucket, girls and boys produced textiles as pauper apprentices. But by and large, the preindustrial economy of New England revolved around family farms in which women made goods, men produced crops, and a few male merchants gained wealth.

This system of production with the gendered division of tasks began to change after Samuel Slater, a British immigrant, opened up the first mechanized textile mill in America in Rhode Island in 1790. Using illegally imported British designs, Slater used water power to card and rove cotton, while leaving the more intricate process of weaving to women who worked in their homes. At first, Slater’s mill mirrored the age and gender dynamics of pre-industrial manufacturing: mostly young, poor children worked inside his mill while women worked at home and men worked on farms and in construction. Notably, Slater attempted to preserve pre-industrial customs in his “factory villages” despite the new technology of water-powered textile manufacturing. However, social changes did occur. The mothers of the children who worked in his mill began to work in mills themselves, thus making Slater’s mills more gendered towards women. Since men refused to work in textile mills except as overseers, Slater began the process of creating a female-gendered work space in textile mills that Francis Cabot Lowell would augment.

Francis Cabot Lowell made the gendering of textile work spaces more pronounced than Samuel Slater by choosing to hire exclusively young women from rural New England towns.
rather than relying on child labor. Additionally, the gigantic scope of Lowell’s textile factories made the task of working as an “operative” in a textile mill almost exclusively a woman’s activity. When Lowell and his “Boston Associates”, including Nathan Appleton and Patrick T. Jackson, opened the Boston Manufacturing Company on the Charles River in Waltham in 1814, this venture greatly overshadowed what Samuel Slater had done. Also, Lowell increased employment opportunities for women by mechanizing all steps of textile production, including weaving, by using British-style power looms.

According to Nathan Appleton, the choice to employ women workers arose simply out of the economic concern of supply coupled with the “virtuous” assumed nature of women. However, this simple explanation ignores other reasons. Since society limited the employment opportunities of women, Lowell’s mills could pay women significantly less than men for the same work, thus maximizing company profits. Additionally, the male factory owners could regulate single women’s lives in ways impossible for men or families. Beginning in Waltham, large groups of young women from the New England countryside lived in company-owned boarding houses while working in textile mills.

If Waltham represented the beginning of this trend of working women and textile corporations controlled by men, the creation of the town of Lowell in the 1820s accelerated this phenomenon tremendously. By the end of the 1830s, several new mills had taken advantage of the strong waterpower of Lowell’s Pawtucket Canal, and thus hundreds more women went to work there. With such a large population of women working in textile factories, the city of Lowell became a cultural center of both industrialization and women’s employment in the

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179 Dalzell, Enterprising Elite, 47-51.
United States. The Lowell of the late 1830s represented the height of the social phenomenon explored in this thesis, the gendered nature of work spaces in New England textile mills. By this time, a highly-homogenous group of women worked in Lowell’s textile mills: nearly all of them were native-born, from a rural northern New England town, and between the ages of 15 and 30.

Interestingly, many women enjoyed the conditions under which they worked. Magazines such as *The Lowell Offering* praised factory life in Lowell while highlighting the intellectual and moral prowess of the women who worked there. Despite this widespread support, some women opposed the conditions in Lowell. Strikes in 1834 and 1836 turned into a prolonged labor movement for a ten-hour work day in the 1840s which ultimately failed. By the late 1840s, the once sought-after occupation of factory operative became less appealing to New England women as wages stagnated and other occupations opened up to them.

At the same time, immigrants from Ireland began working in Lowell’s textile mills en masse. Since factory owners could pay Irish *men* low wages, the factories of Lowell began to become less and less female. By the end of the 1850s, significant numbers of men worked as operatives in Lowell’s factories, thus ending the gendering of textile mill work that occurred earlier in the century. Despite this eventual unravelling, gender played a crucial role in the creation of New England textile mills in the first half of the 19th century.
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