Band of Sisters: Class and Gender in Industrial Lowell, 1820-1850

[The] transition from mother and daughter power to water and steam-power is a great one, greater by far than many have as yet begun to conceive – one that is to carry with it a complete revolution of domestic life and social manners.

-Horace Bushnell, 1851

On a late November afternoon in 1821, the land that a few years later was to become the industrial city of Lowell, Massachusetts, was pastoral and quiet. A light snow blanketed the landscape, interrupted only by the Merrimack and Concord Rivers, the cascading Pawtucket falls, and the dozen or so farmhouses dotting the countryside. On that day the soft rumbling from the falls where the two rivers meet mingled with the sound of conversation. Two wealthy industrialists from Boston, Nathan Appleton and Patrick Tracy Jackson, were selecting the site to place their next textile factory. With their breath hanging in the cold November air, they planned not only to locate a factory but to reshape the countryside and conjure a city. They speculated that their future city might one day house twenty-thousand residents. Indeed, within twenty years Lowell became the showcase industrial city of the North, known as “the city of spindles,” home to more than 20,000, and filled with the sound of textile factory machinery like “ten thousand windmills in a hurricane.” Women flooded into the city and others like it to take advantage of the high wages and advertised moral paternalism of the corporations. The city streets filled with the bustle of boutiques, book vendors and charlatans while the bells from factories and churches clanged the new rhythm of the city, compelling women into their factory slot or church pew. The once isolated rivers now powered the incessant and expanding machinery, run twelve to fourteen hours a day, forcing some to question the claims to paternalism made by the “soulless corporation.” The unprecedented expansion, urbanization and development was not to be an aberration but a harbinger of the fate of the rest of the nation. Lowell had become the first footprint of the industrial revolution in the United States.

As much as that revolution reshaped the landscape along the Merrimack, it similarly transformed the social fabric of New England. The rise of industrial capitalism in America

---


induced individuals to join wage labor employment, disrupted traditional gender roles, and accelerated class stratification. Women in particular negotiated these changes because they were, surprisingly, the first industrial labor force. The reliance of the textile corporations on female labor was a continuation of a traditional gender division of labor involving textile work; but it also broke new ground, employing women for the first time in work outside the home. At the same time that women’s social horizons were broadened through public industrial labor, cultural restraints were placed on women’s mobility, proscribing women’s proper and natural role as limited to the “domestic sphere.” The working women of Lowell consequently lived a contradiction and often fought to create an independent and socially respectable role for themselves. The “factory girls,” as they preferred to be called, fought against both gender oppression and labor exploitation and recognized the synthesis of the two in their overall subjugation.

Beginning with the first yards of cloth pulled from the line, working women challenged corporate control of production and defended their position as women to fight. Men like Appleton, Jackson, and Francis Cabot Lowell (for whom the city was named) devised the “Waltham system” of textile manufacture, vertically integrating each stage of production under one roof and enforcing corporate paternalism to protect and control their female workforce. From the 1820’s onward corporations gradually “sped up” and “stretched out” their workers, maximizing profit by cutting labor costs and increasing the exploitation of each laborer. Meanwhile women’s secondary social status constrained their response to corporate authority and presented an obstacle to achieving economic and political rights as workers. Unable to vote, and facing social ostracism and ridicule if they even spoke in public, working-class women recognized and challenged the dual nature of their oppression. As workers they levied radical critiques of the factory system, condemning wage labor as “wage slavery” and attempting to influence the production process through strikes and worker organization. Their efforts to increase worker participation in the workplace fundamentally threatened corporate authority and legitimacy. Their demands as feminists for equal social participation and women’s rights were just as radical. They attacked the chauvinism found in both company boardrooms and workingmen’s organizations, and they belittled and challenged patriarchal attitudes, arguing for women’s complete social equality. Their dual critique was synthesized in the defense of their identity, the factory girl, and summarized by one radical factory feminist: “I am heartily glad
when anything is done to elevate that class to which it is my lot to belong. We are a band of sisters – we must have sympathy with each other’s woes.” Linking class solidarity to feminist notions of “sisterhood,” this author suggested that for working women fighting for labor reform and women’s rights were one in the same. The women of Lowell made significant contributions to the nascent feminist and labor movements through recognizing the combined nature of their oppression and taking action to change it.

Despite the example provided by the women of Lowell, historians tend to dichotomize the emergence of the feminist and labor movements in the decades from 1800-1860. One rarely finds a text that meaningfully engages both class and feminist methods of analysis. Writings about Lowell itself often fall into one of these two categories, with the feminists and the Marxists competing to show the exclusivity and primacy of their ideological framework. The majority of feminist research on the early nineteenth-century explores the origins of the suffrage movement with particular emphasis placed on a few influential leaders. Defining events like the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and courageous individuals like Elizabeth Cady Stanton seemingly act as blinders; they draw most of the feminist historians’ attention and confine the scope of their analysis to middle-class suffragettes. Feminist writers exploring this formative period tend to exclude working women from their perspective and ignore the concomitant rise of industrialism in relation to the early formulation of the “cult of true womanhood.” This creates a myopic middle-class and elite conception women’s identity. It stigmatizes the working women of Lowell by placing them by definition outside the “cult of domesticity.” And it ignores working women’s justification for their public actions and their creation of self-identity even though their explanations were overtly feminist. Although admittedly focused on middle-class and elite women, much feminist scholarship on the period attempts to apply narrow class-based conclusions about gender to all women. Where feminist analysis does engage women’s labor, it is mostly that which was done in the home. Thus the significant contribution early industrial working women made to feminism is marginalized.

---

3 Voice of Industry, Jan. 8, 1847
With few exceptions Marxists attempt to graft women workers onto the workingmen’s movement of the time, ignoring the special cultural hurdles women workers faced and the hostility of workingmen’s groups in general to women’s participation in the workforce. Labor historians highlight the cooperation of women and workingmen’s groups, while downplaying the opposition workingmen’s newspapers raised to the inclusion of women in the labor movement. While there was some support for the Female Labor Reform Association of Lowell and the women-led strikes of the 1830s, more often workingmen’s groups attacked working women on the basis of their gender. When Marxists historians evaluate the special problems of women laborers it is usually limited to women’s domestic work and is quickly related to conflicting theories presented in Engels and Marx’s body of thought. Recent scholarship has, however, attempted a more holistic approach to the topic of women, work, and the transformation wrought by the rise of industrial capitalism. Thomas Dublin and Mary Blewett in particular, looking at transitions and continuity over time, have explored how a sexual division of labor existed in textile and shoe production before the capitalist industrial revolution changed these roles by taking production out of the home and into the sphere of the marketplace. The new trend of scholarship emphasizes the importance of a synthesis of interpretation between Marxist and feminist thought. This essay is an attempt to move in that direction.

One need look no further than the activities and writings of the Lowell women themselves for an affirmation of this approach. Their attempts to simultaneously assert worker control of production and women’s social equality radically challenged capitalist patriarchy – and offer a historical counterpoint to the monolithic traditions of Marxism and feminism. Individuals live through trials of freedom and equality, exploitation and oppression not as fractured categories but as forces unified in events and experience. The trials of the “factory girls” demand a synthesis of class and gender analysis that meaningfully explores the conditions

---


in which working women operated. In the mid nineteenth-century working women’s subjugation had its roots in the patriarchal traditions of colonial New England and the transformation of women’s work through the rise of industrial capitalism.

**Labor and the Cult of Domesticity**

In the colonial and revolutionary eras, a woman’s social status was tied to her labor. Independent family homesteads served as the basic unit of economic production and utilized the labor of male and female members. A gender division of labor developed that facilitated production and most easily accommodated the rigors of farm life. In the yeoman household, as Jeanne Boydston reminds us, “family survival required the wife’s work in the garden, the barnyard, and the larder as much as it required the husband’s work in the fields and meadows and barns.”

While men labored on the staples of family income – crops produced for home consumption and local markets – women managed and supplied the household, maintaining it as productive unit. In Sarah Smith’s home of Newbury, Massachusetts, for example, women cooked the meals, supervised children, and cleaned the house; they milked cows, made cheese and butter and sold it, tended the family garden of vegetables and fruit, and produced much of the family’s textiles and clothing.

Home textile production required a high level of skill and was an essential task of women’s household duties. Before manufactured fabric and yarn produced for market were readily available to farmers, women labored in the home on every level of clothing production. Linens, wools, and cottons were spun into yarn, woven together to make fabric, and finally sewn into clothes. Each step was difficult and time consuming. Women’s work and the gender division of labor in general were vital for the survival of the home as an economic unit.

During this period women maintained a somewhat elevated social status derived from her importance at the center of household economic production. The gender division of labor created a mutual dependency between men and women as their complementary labor was necessary for survival. Although legally and financially dependent on men, in the words of Nancy Cott, “women’s economic dependency was one strand in a web of interdependence of men’s and women’s typical work.”

---

7 Boydston, “To Earn Her Daily Bread,” 82.
cooperation and trust which in turn created a socially respectable position for women and women’s work. Although still in a subordinate position, women, compared to the restrictiveness of later periods, were respected in their communities. There were, however, definitive limitations to the respectability of women’s social status – in general women were to be kept out of the business of society – women’s work was to remain in the home.11

Respectability did not change women’s second-class citizenship – a position that rested on her subsumed legal and financial status. Women fell under the rubric of “feme-covert,” restraining her independence in all public aspects of society. It meant that all women were legally covered by the rights of her husband, or whoever was the family patriarch: father, uncle or son. As a feme-covert, women could not make contracts, sue in court, own property, make a will, serve on juries, vote or run for office; “a woman had no recognized legal identity because the law assumed that her husband spoke and acted for her.”12 These legal restrictions had economic implications. A married woman’s wages, income and estate were the property of her husband. Divorce was a rarity and financial independence was possible only for the exceptional widow or single woman. The combination of women’s legal and financial second class citizenship meant that women faced “subordination to men in marriage and society, profound disadvantage in education and in the economy, denial of access to official power in the churches that they populated, and virtual impotence in politics . . . women’s public life generally was so minimal that if one addressed a mixed audience she was greeted with shock and hostility.”13 These conditions remained essentially unchanged from the eighteenth through the middle of the nineteenth centuries. In the 1830’s and 1840’s changes to the law were made mostly to benefit propertied men, who could transfer ownership to their wives and keep property away from those to whom they were indebted.14 But changes to women’s social status were developing in other ways.

Women’s evolution into the public sphere through the changing condition of their labor was a slow process intricately tied to the rise of industrial capitalism. Beginning toward the end of the eighteenth century and continuing through the middle of the nineteenth, commercial

11 Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood, 19, 21.
13 Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood, 5.
market expansion and proto-industrial production altered men’s and women’s relationship to the home and work. Households found it more economical to purchase mass produced cloth (primarily imported from England) than to make it at home. This freed up women’s labor to produce marketable commodities that contributed to household income. In the “putting-out” system, local merchant-artisans organized the distribution of unfinished goods to be worked on in individual homes, and returned for sale to markets. Even though the products were produced for someone else, most of this work was still completed in the home where women could meet their other responsibilities and control their labor. Women would collect the raw materials, mostly straw for hats, yarn for textiles, or leather for shoes, and take them to work on in their homes when convenient and at their own pace.\textsuperscript{15} Payment was in piece-rate wages and was low, but nonetheless it gave women income to contribute to family sustenance. This process, extending wage and market forces out into rural communities and homes, was increasingly widespread. Sarah Anne Emery, a young rural New Englander remembered, “almost every farmhouse in the country was furnished with a loom, and most of the adult females were skilled weavers. Mr. Batchelder [the mill agent] made contracts with many of them . . . to weave cloth for him, and often had in his employ more than a hundred weavers, some of whom came six or eight miles to receive the yarn and to return the woven cloth.”\textsuperscript{16} In later decades as outsourced weaving labor became scarce an agent would contract with families eighteen and twenty miles away.\textsuperscript{17} A single agent therefore had considerable influence, extending wage and market relations throughout the countryside and into many homes. Putting out work that drew women into wage and market relations was one step in women’s evolution to public participation and political activism.

In 1813, when Francis Cabot Lowell began textile production in Waltham, Massachusetts, the first fully integrated industrial production in the United States, he employed a female workforce. Women were used in part because of their historical role as textile laborers but also because they were a cheap and exploitable supply of labor. Lowell’s transformation placed women’s work firmly in what was essentially modern industrial production and wage


\textsuperscript{17} Caroline F. Ware, \textit{The Early New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings} (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), 53.
labor relations. The unheard of financial success of his operation led to its astronomical growth and to a mushrooming of similar projects adapting the use of the corporate hierarchy and vertical integration in other forms of manufacture and business. The change from independent producers to wage laborers ushered in the age of industrial capitalism and created the beginnings of a “permanent factory population” in America.\textsuperscript{18} That change disproportionately fell upon women. They were attracted to factory work by relatively high wages, a degree of social independence and the promised protection of corporate paternalism. However not everyone was enthusiastic. Concern was raised over the example of the abused and debased English working-class who lived in miserable conditions and on subsistence wages.\textsuperscript{19} Writers for the labor press and for middle-class proscriptive literature highlighted the danger this posed to women’s character. Many lamented the changes that the coming industrialism portended and fictionalized the role of women in recent history, valorizing women who labored solely in the home.

By the early nineteenth century women’s household labor was indeed becoming enshrined in a domestic role that was her “natural” and only social space. A body of literature in women’s magazines and proscriptive books that emerged “elevated women’s household occupations into a sexual vocation, making their typical work-role into their sex-role.”\textsuperscript{20} Known as the “cult of domesticity” or the “cult of true womanhood,” this literature reflected the separation of the household from paid labor and the world of markets and money. In it, the home and the work world were gendered realms, separate and opposite, one subordinate to the other. Women’s place was in the home and was the antithesis of the man’s turbulent and cutthroat world of business. Women were the fairer, moral sex whose natural role was to soothe and comfort man. In 1827, Charles Burroughs, a pastor in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, addressed the new role for women in relation to the expulsion of paid labor from the home:

> It is at home, where, man . . . seeks a refuge from the vexations and embarrassments of business, and enchanting repose from exertion, a relaxation from care by the interchange of affection: where some of his finest sympathies, tastes, and moral and religious feelings are formed and nourished; -- where is the treasury of pure disinterested love, such as is seldom found in the busy walks of a selfish and calculating world.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Ware, \textit{Industrial Worker}, 74; Ware \textit{Early New England Cotton}, 111-114. For more information on Francis Lowell see Jospheson, \textit{Golden Threads}, 11-21.
\textsuperscript{20} Cott, \textit{The Bonds of Womanhood}, 189.
\textsuperscript{21} Charles Burroughs, \textit{An Address on Female Education, delivered in Portsmouth, N.H., Oct. 26, 1827} quoted in Cott, \textit{Bonds of Womanhood}, 64.
Burroughs created an idyllic household of leisure and affection where women’s labor did not exist. Women, on the other hand, existed to serve their men, through nourishment, love and refined relaxation. This literature reflected an ideal developed as middle class women were isolated from paid work and their role became increasingly subordinate and supportive. Such a vision clearly contradicted the growing trend of women entering paid labor relations through industrial production and highlights the amplification of class divisions in society.

In fact the cult of domesticity was crafted and defined in contradistinction to the creation of a working-class in America. As Gerda Lerner points out, this literature emerged “precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women left their homes to become factory workers.”

She adds “as class distinctions sharpened, social attitudes toward women became polarized. The image of ‘the lady’ was elevated to the accepted ideal of femininity toward which all women would strive. In this formulation of values lower class women were simply ignored.” While working-class women’s realities and values were ignored in the cult of domesticity, they were still expected to conform to its doctrine. Much of the literature written by factory women, including the famous *Lowell Offering*, was in defense of women’s moral identity and social value, even though as paid workers they violated the basic premise of the social doctrine.

The cult of domesticity, although crafted and defined with middle-class values, still applied to all women. Working women felt they had to defend their femininity in reaction to their exclusion from the proscribed sphere of domesticity. Women factory workers therefore created the most radical feminist critique of the period, calling for equal rights for women’s participation in society and employment that recognized class-based gender oppression as well. Furthermore working women acted on their radical critique by becoming organizers around labor and women’s rights issues. Other groups remained hostile to women’s radical claims to equality. Working men put forward awkward and conflicted positions on women’s social roles. Some were opposed to women’s public work, others encouraged women’s political activism, but all framed their support or opposition in patriarchal attitudes. Corporations were similarly antagonistic to women’s public participation; yet as they redefined women’s labor they also had to redefine women’s social roles. Lowell and his fellow industrialists had to figure out how to

---

use women’s low cost labor and not violate social mores regarding women’s proper place. To do this they were forced to create a public space that was socially acceptable for women to work in, but limited other forms of civic participation. The corporate view of womanhood included public labor but emphasized employer oversight and control.

**The Waltham System**

Women’s social transformation through labor was of course dependent on the transformation of labor itself. The disruptions of the 1807 Embargo Act, and the 1812 war with Great Britain laid the foundations for the emergence of Lowell and lit the spark for the industrial revolution in the U.S. Boston merchant capitalists who had their European trading operations halted by the embargo began looking for other avenues to profitably spend their money. Francis Cabot Lowell, scion of some of Boston’s most influential families, placed his energy and money into developing a new type of textile manufacture. Inspired by a recent visit to the British industrial towns of Manchester and Lancashire, Lowell used stolen technology to reimagine the process of textile production. He worked with business partners and investors in Boston, collectively known as the “Boston Associates,” to organize a factory system whereby each facet of production was to be isolated yet fully integrated under one roof. The first trial was made in Waltham, Massachusetts, for which the system takes its name, but not without an initial series of setbacks. The problems of financing and organizing the enormous project were solved by the use of the newly developed legal entity of the corporation. Applied to commercial manufacture for the first time, Lowell raised the necessary capital and established the hierarchy of authority to delegate the complex management, supervision, and accounting of production. The remaining problem, that of labor, would prove the most difficult to solve. The general scarcity of labor and the stigma of factory work, well deserved based on the example of the English working-class, limited the available labor pool. The Associates turned to women’s labor, relying on the preestablished tradition of women’s textile work and exploiting their relative low cost. Companies erected boardinghouses to concentrate available workers and to assuage community concerns about independent, unsupervised women. But boardinghouses, along with the blacklist and other punitive measures, were used by corporations not only to establish the social acceptability of women in the workforce; they were also used to establish control.

---

The problems of scarce and reluctant labor were compounded by the demands of a large mill in which hundreds or even thousands of factory hands were needed. The concentration of production in one site, however, was essential from the point of view of the system organizers who sought control of production in order to solve the problems of the putting out system. In the old system, once the manufacturer’s agents sent the unfinished goods out into scattered households they were beyond the control of management. Women workers could finish the goods at their own pace, sometimes taking as much as six months to return finished products. In 1815, Stephen Trip of the Blackstone Manufacturing Company wrote to his agent expressing the frustration of those in his position:

I did not expect but that your weavers would take from you such yarn as you had to put out. You will on a little reflection see, that if the weavers are to weave just such kind of goods as they choose [sic] and those only, that we are in but a sorry way, what advantage shall we derive from putting out yarn in large quantities, if is to be selected by the weavers & that which they do not like is to be returned unwoven.26

With vertical integration managers could directly oversee each stage of production and control the rate and pace of production as well. Lowell’s inspiration for his system came not only from the exigencies of efficiency and the technological capability of unified production, but also from the need to better control workers.

In order to centralize labor and production Lowell and his Associates had to convince the New England population that factory work was suitable employment for women. The problems of a scarce labor pool, and restrictive gender mores that placed women in the domestic sphere were exacerbated by a general opposition to industrial labor. European style factory employment had a reputation for debasing and demoralizing working people. Nathan Appleton, Lowell’s early partner, noted that “the operatives in the manufacturing cities of Europe were notoriously of the lowest character for intelligence and morals” – a reputation that repulsed many from manufacturing work.27 In addition, factory labor was viewed by male mechanics as a loss of independence; they would rather eek out an existence working in small scale production than have their labor controlled at the behest of another.28 Expansion into the west further bled available workers from New England and drove up the cost of labor. The scarcity and expense

of workers drove capitalists “to devise schemes for securing their workers which would overcome the obstacles of scarcity and prejudice.” The industrialist looked to marginalized labor sources, like women, as “the only numerous group of workers who could be spared from the farms” to fill industrial demand.29

Women were indeed a logical choice. The tradition of female textile labor and the general availability of women’s labor, enhanced other benefits, like the low cost of women’s work. Corporate organizers recognized that female employees were far cheaper than hiring men. The previous prevailing occupations for women outside of the home were domestic service and school teaching, occupations that paid less than a dollar a week. Men on the other hand earned far more; the average mechanic earned between seventy-five cents and two dollars a day. An overseer in a Lowell factory, a position reserved for men, earned a little more than two dollars day. Employing women would provide a cheap labor source; there remained, however, the obstacle of women’s restriction to the domestic sphere to overcome. The owners of Lowell had to find a way to bring women into the workplace that overcame community discomfort with factory work, and women transcending the boundaries of the home.30

The partial solution was Lowell’s boardinghouse system of high wages and moral regulation. In 1836, a mill hand could earn, depending on her skill and placement in the mill, anywhere from fifty to seventy-five cents per day. After a week’s work women were taking home as much as two dollars after boarding costs were removed, well above other female occupations but also below that of average male mechanics.31 Harriet Hanson Robinson, an early mill hand, pointed out that:

At the time the Lowell cotton-mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women. In England, and in France particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character; she was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseer she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched, and pushed about. It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill-girls, in spite of the opprobrium that still clung to this “degrading occupation.”32

High wages and payment in cash, unheard of in the putting out system, were part of the Associates program of making factory labor socially acceptable work for women. But by paying

29 Ware, Early New England Cotton, 198.
31 Dublin, Women at Work, 66.
32 Harriet Hanson Robinson, Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls (Kailua: Press Pacifica, 1976), 37-38.
women less than men, the designers of the Waltham system were utilizing patriarchal traditions of subordinating female labor, even that done outside the home, to a male head of household. The rationale was that women workers were supplementing family income and wages paid to them need not fully sustain them.\textsuperscript{33} The high wages offered were part of corporate plans to overcome the dual social stigma of factory work and women’s public work, enough to entice women into the factory.

The other aspect of the corporations attempt to make women’s industrial work socially acceptable was corporate paternalism. Indeed, what the Waltham labor system became known for were moral regulations worked into employee company contracts through corporation operated boardinghouses. The boardinghouse system served two functions: it pooled the labor of women from isolated rural farms located all over New England, thereby overcoming labor scarcity, and it sought to reassure New England communities that women’s moral virtue would be safeguarded. The rules of the boarding house protected woman’s morality by locking the doors at ten p.m., forbidding visitors not approved by the company, enforcing church attendance, and banning any “improper conduct” on the part of the employees.\textsuperscript{34} If employees were found not to meet these terms they could be fired; the terms of the Appleton Company’s contract clearly stated that workers “are to board in one of the boarding houses belonging to the Company, and conform to the regulations of the house where they board.”\textsuperscript{35} Women in the boardinghouses were supervised and policed by house matrons who also cooked the boarders’ meals and cleaned the common space. The matrons were usually widows with children of their own, some of them employed in the mills, and were paid to regulate the women and maintain the moral standards of the company. Such safeguarding was needed because “It was a common assumption that girls and young women who were not incessantly occupied were subject to temptation and vicious habits.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus the boardinghouse system overcame two key problems faced by industrialists in terms of labor: scarcity and widespread public concern for the protection of women’s moral character.

But the dormitory system benefited employers in other ways. As noted earlier a key factor in the Waltham system, one consciously strived for by its designers, was employer control.

\textsuperscript{33} Cott, \textit{Bonds of Womanhood}, 21.
\textsuperscript{35} Regulations of the Appleton Company November, 1833, in Eisler, \textit{The Lowell Offering}, 25.
\textsuperscript{36} Josephson, \textit{Golden Threads}, 23.
of the workforce. Corporations worked into employee contracts conditions that defined the
terms of work. In most contracts women were required to work for a full year, and give
employers two weeks notice of termination (although employers could fire at whim). At some
corporations outside of Lowell, employees were required to pledge not to “combine” with other
workers, i.e. organize, as a condition of employment. The boardinghouses were a part of this
effort to enforce labor discipline. In a strike in 1836, one factory girl led her room of operatives
out into the street. The matron of her boardinghouse, who was also her biological mother, was
fired from her boardinghouse position for not having controlled one who was charged to her
care. The corporations expected the boardinghouse system to act as a check on any “improper”
behavior, especially that which sought to control or influence the production process. Corporate
control of contracts and dormitories extended employer control from the inside the mills into the
workers’ bedrooms, from sunup to lights out, in an attempt to “exercise complete control over
the girls.”

In addition to the boardinghouse system as means of control, employers utilized a
blacklist of undesirable employees. Any worker who ended work for any reason had to receive
an “honorable discharge” from their employer if they hoped to work in the industry ever again. If
an employee was fired, they would not receive the discharge papers. Company agents shared the
names of persons not to be hired and worked together to set industry wide standards for wage
rates and working conditions. This was done through the Associates interlocking directorates
which insured collusion between each of the Lowell companies, although nominally they were
independent businesses. Therefore an employee who found her working conditions disagreeable
at one mill would find the same conditions at all. And if she agitated for change she would be
blacklisted, unable to work anywhere.

The Hamilton factory discharge records show employer attempts to arbitrarily control
workers. Production began at the Hamilton Company in May of 1826, and by March of 1827,
there had already been 119 severances of employment, even though at the time the company had
only 190 employees. Only thirty-five percent (42 of 119) gave “regular notice” of intent to

---

37 Often employees worked less than a full year; depending on the labor market corporations granted early
discharges.
38 Ware, Early New England Cotton, 265.
39 Josephson, Golden Threads, 239.
40 Foner, Labor vol. 1, pg. 100.
41 Dublin, Women at Work, 59,79.
leave. The rest gave improper or no notice or were fired. The reasons given for the loss of an employee were recorded by the overseer and reprinted in the company’s end of term payroll account. The reasons and the number of each category of employee dismissals are given:

- 12 left without leave or notice
- 13 left sick
- 3 left because some member of their family was sick
- 4 left to get married
- 3 left to go to school
- 6 were discharged for misconduct
- 5 were discharged for mutiny
- 3 were discharged for disobedience to orders
- 1 for impudence to overseer
- 1 gave notice and was immediately discharged for levity
- 1 gave notice and was discharged immediately
- 1 was fired because the overseer did not like him
- 1 was dissatisfied with her wages
- 1 would not do her duty
- 6 went because their work was bad
- 5 were discharged for lying, misrepresentation, or circulation false stories
- 1 was discharged for captiousness
- 1 ran away
- 2 were laid off for want of employment
- 1 was hurt in the machinery
- 1 was hysterical and the overseer was fearful she would get caught in the gearing
- 1 went because her husband came for her
- 1 went to work at the agent’s house
- 1 was discharged because her daughter was uneasy in the card room and made much trouble
- 1 had written after her name emphatically, “regularly discharged forever”

Only six of the discharges were because of work related performance and twelve were for family related issues; the rest of the firings were for challenges to employer authority and control. Most of the discharges “seemed directed toward curbing defiance and encouraging deference toward authority in the mill.” And such records indicate “a strong preoccupation [by employers] with the validation of newly-claimed authority through punitive controls.” The Waltham system’s transformation of work sought to gain employer control of production through the leverage of controlling who works and under what conditions.

**Industrial Women**

The attempts to establish corporate control of production did not go unmet by working women. The period of factory women’s most visible resistance to corporate control came in the

---

43 Ware, *Early New England Cotton*, 266.
1830’s and 1840’s when women’s labor protests engaged in explicitly public action. Two major strikes in the 1830’s met with varying success and paved the way for more accomplished forms of organization. In the 1840’s the working women of Lowell organized the Female Labor Reform Association as a quasi-trade union and political advocate. Through this organization Lowell women wrote for and edited a newspaper, organized numerous petition drives, and spread their organization to other textile factory towns in New England. The increasing intensity and pitch of women’s public protest was in response to corporate control and cutbacks in pay, but they were also to counter company propaganda levied by the owners to espouse their beneficent paternalism. Women who worked as much as fourteen hours a day in unhealthy and uncomfortable conditions were tired of praise raining in from all parts of the globe for the system they felt was disempowering them. But for women to enter the public arena they had to overcome staunch opposition. Women’s resistance began in the 1820’s and at first took the form of private, individual actions.

The Hamilton dismissal records discussed above show more than company attempts to exert control; they show women’s attempts to resist, albeit on an individual level. At least sixteen of the discharges are for reasons having to do with challenging corporate authority: mutiny, disobedience, captiousness, dissatisfaction with wages, etc. Other examples are more ambiguous but indicate individual workers trying to assert control over their labor and workplace. The two cases where employees were fired immediately after giving notice show corporations engaged in a contentious battle with employees over the basic terms of employment – whether an individual works or not. Seen in this light those who left with no notice or “ran away” could have done so in reaction to arbitrary company control and to reassert their power over their own labor. For the employee, the stakes of the battle for control of the terms of employment were high; if fired a worker was placed on the blacklist, thereby “regularly discharged forever.” Occasionally in the 1820’s individual acts found collective outlet. One of the five cases of mutiny noted above was for a work stoppage in the carding department of Hamilton. Caroline Damon tried to get the women in her room to join her in protesting low wages. She was targeted as the leader and fired, a tactic used again and again by the corporations. In March of 1830 Dorothy Wyman was discharged for having “combined to raise wages.” Women were fired for having a “bad character,” being “not respectable” or a “devil in

45 Voice of Industry, May 15, 1845.
petticoats.” The actions that stand behind these descriptions can only be guessed at. But they illustrate that corporate ideas of women’s proper character and respectability included unquestioning acquiescence to company power and control. When women transcended corporate social mores regarding women’s respectability and proper place they were retaliated against by the company.

Although corporations saw enormous profits in the first decade of their production, over the course of several decades they saw slowly diminishing returns. In order to continue to maximize profit they sought to increase the exploitation of their workers, by making them more productive, or cutting their wages, or both. In the 1830’s women began to organize to assert collective power through work stoppages and register very public protest of their conditions. In 1834 women workers faced a wage cut of nineteen percent. The women in some of the mills began organizing when the corporations preemptively discharged one of the leaders. Upon being lead out of the company grounds she signaled the women still working in the top floors of the mills and they began to turnout. The Boston *Evening Transcript* put the number of strikers at 800 and derisively described an address to fellow workers given by a female operative as a “flaming Mary Woolstonecroft [sic] speech” that covered “the rights of women and the iniquities of the ‘monied aristocracy.’” While the momentary decision to walk out may have been spontaneous the organization of operatives was not. John Aiken, the agent for the Tremont-Suffolk mill, wrote to his company treasurer that “a good deal of excitement exists in all the mills, not excepting ours, in relation to the proposed reduction,” an indication that women were at least discussing the issue with each other. The mills’ attempt to target a leader of the agitation also attests to the level of organization among the strikers. The women used their limited organization to the best of their ability. On the first day of the strike they tried to rouse as many working women in Lowell as possible. On the second a petition circulated that declared “union is power,” and was signed by 1,200 workers who pledged to not go back until their wages were restored. The strike was, however, unsuccessful. Only one sixth of the laborers of Lowell turned out and the effect on production was minimal. Furthermore the women who walked out

---

47 Ware, *Early New England Cotton Manufacture*, 112-114.
rather than attempting to disrupt production to the full extent of their abilities, the strikers relied on their moral persuasiveness and the symbolic weight of their absence.

The 1836 strike was similar to that of two years earlier. This time however operatives had a higher degree of organization and their effect on the corporations was greater. The impetus was the corporations attempt to raise the cost of the boardinghouses, the result being a twelve and a half percent wage cut. At least 1,500 workers streamed out of the factories.\(^{51}\)

Harriet Hanson Robinson worked in one section of the mills and remembered eavesdropping on her coworkers’ pre-strike discussions. When the strike got underway, the incorrigible eleven year old, seeing the indecision on the faces of her coworkers declared, “I don’t care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether any one else does or not” and she left. When she looked behind her she was delighted to see the entire room following.\(^{52}\) More women in fact turned out this time compared to the 1834 strike; somewhere between one-fourth and one-third (1,500-2,500) of all operatives left the mills. The workers attempted to stop the operation of the mills by targeting strategic points of production and getting all workers at those jobs to walk out. They were successful; the main phase of the strike lasted weeks with production hindered for months. The women also formed a temporary union. The Factory Girls Association had 2,500 members but died after the end of the strike. Even though many of the women again returned home, the strike was successful, and some of the corporations rescinded the fee increase.\(^{53}\)

In these decades the organizing activity of the mill hands was similar to that of the labor movement in general. The strikes of the 1830’s gave way to political organization of the 1840’s. For Lowell this meant the creation of the Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA) that under the dynamic leadership of the indefatigable Sarah G. Bagley edited a newspaper, directed petition drives aimed at getting the state legislature to shorten the work day to ten hours, and spread their organization to other parts of New England. The LFLRA linked with other labor groups by joining the New England Workingmen’s Association (NEWA), an umbrella organization of mechanics’ leagues and labor reformers that provided mutual support and assistance. The Lowell group quickly became the most powerful workers organization in the NEWA, and Sarah Bagley, its president, also became editor of the NEWA organ, the *Voice of*


\(^{52}\) Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 52.

Industry. The Lowell women eventually purchased the Voice: and LFLRA members worked on the editorial board, sold subscriptions, and wrote for its columns until the paper ceased publication in 1848. The LFLRA under Bagley gained a reputation for the being the most successful and the most radical workers organization in New England. Membership grew into the hundreds in the first years of its existence, demonstrating its strength despite employer attacks on women for joining. When one worker was threatened with termination “for employing her leisure hours in assisting in the organization of our ‘Labor Reform Association,” Bagley used the paper to threaten the overseer. In a scathing editorial she wrote:

What! Deprive us after working thirteen hours, the poor privilege of finding fault – of saying our lot is a hard one. Intentionally turn away a girl unjustly – persecute her as men have been persecuted, to our knowledge, for free expression of honest political opinions! We will make the name of him who dares the act, stink with every wind, from all points of the compass. His name shall be a by-word among all laboring men, and he shall be hissed in the streets, and in all the cities in this widespread republic; for our name is legion though our oppression be great . . . We war with oppression in every form – with rank, save that which merit gives.

Indeed, Bagley demonstrated the ability of the paper and LFLRA to retaliate against its adversaries in 1845 when it campaigned to end the career of a corporate affiliated Massachusetts legislator.

In 1845 the LFLRA led a statewide campaign to petition the Massachusetts legislature to limit the working day to ten hours. They asked that state charters of incorporation for textile manufactures be limited to give workers basic protections on the length of the work day. In their first petition drive they gathered 1,151 signatures in Lowell with a total of 2,139 names for the state. The legislature responded by forming a committee to investigate working conditions and the formation of the petition. Selected to head the House committee was William Schouler, representative from Lowell. Before becoming a public servant Schouler published several pro-corporation newspapers in Lowell, notably the Whig Lowell Courier and the “operatives’ magazine,” the Lowell Offering. The committee heard testimony from operatives including Sarah G. Bagley and visited the factories in Lowell where Schouler noted the pleasantness of the potted flowers in the workrooms. In his report back to House, Schouler deemed regulation problematic and unnecessary. He also misrepresented the testimony of the operatives to the

54 Voice of Industry, Nov. 7, 1845; Jan. 23, 1846; and March 31, 1848.
55 Voice of Industry, May 15, 1846.
point that “not one original sentence given by those who appeared before the Committee” was included in the report. Bagley attacked Schouler, calling him “a corporation machine, or tool” and vowing to prevent his reelection. In November the Lowell Association was successful and Schouler was voted out of office. In their paper the LFLRA thanked the voters of Lowell for “consigning [him] to the obscurity he so justly deserves.” – given the inability of women to vote, this was a considerable accomplishment. The following year the LFLRA lived up to their motto of “try again” by waging another petition drive. This time 4,000 signatures came from Lowell and 10,000 from all over the state. The results were much the same; the legislature took no action.

As Thomas Dublin points out, the issue behind the strikes and political actions was not a wage reduction or a pecuniary demand, but the issue of status and control. The Lowell women and the labor movement in general relied on an intellectual tradition of independence and revolt dating back at least to the Revolution if not before. For the women, the writings of Locke, Wollstonecraft, and Jefferson influenced their thinking and behavior. The Lowell Offering published stories of factory girls set around their families’ firesides listening to their grandmothers’ stories about the Revolution. When on strike, women defended their position as “daughters of freemen” directly referencing their revolutionary heritage: “As our fathers resisted unto blood the lordly avarice of the British ministry, so we, their daughters, never will wear the yoke which has been prepared for us . . . [or] yield to the wicked oppressions attempted to be imposed upon us.” Their defense of their actions was not related to standards of living and economy but to maintaining the dignity and independence of their labor against corporate encroachment. One petition read as follows:

The effects of this regulation [corporate control over terms of employment] are becoming every day more grievous, giving to the manufacturer great power over the operative, and leading to monopoly and wrong. Your memorialists [petitioners] firmly believe that this combination is entered into to destroy the independence of the operatives, and place their labor within the control of the manufacturers

57 Voice of Industry, Jan. 9, 1846. emphasis in original
58 Voice of Industry, Nov. 28, 1845.
59 Dublin, Women at Work, 113.
60 Dublin, Women at Work, 92-95.
62 Foner, Women and Labor, 35.
Factory work done for wages, at someone else’s control and for someone else’s profit was regarded as wage slavery. Working-class Lowell women compared their condition to slavery because of the loss of control of their labor and for more superficial resemblances. Lowell women noted the “long black wagons,” sent out by corporations to collect fresh factory hands had more than a passing resemblance to interstate slave traders. After all, what could one call an individual who was “called and . . . dismissed by the ringing of a bell,” and who did not control their own labor or derive the full profit from it, but a kind of slave? Most important to worker concerns was the corporate hierarchy which was condemned for its tyranny and its contradiction of the country’s libertarian and democratic principles.

Corporations fundamentally changed the relationship of the individual to her labor, slowly extracting control of conditions, pace, and profits. Women workers organized and fought their loss of control with individual acts, industrial actions and strikes, and political organization and activities. To do this they relied on an intellectual tradition of independence and revolt, however, they met enormous opposition and resistance to their organizing efforts. Beside corporate attacks and general public hostility to politically active women, the Lowell women had to fight misogynist and chauvinist attitudes in workingmen’s groups as well.

**Workingwomen and Workingmen**

The establishment of a low wage alternative to mechanics labor clearly threatened workingmen’s livelihoods. However, workingmen framed their attacks not against the corporations for seeking cheap and exploitable labor, but against working women, arguing that women’s public labor eroded their moral and virtuous character. There was some support for working women’s organizations that came from the male dominated labor movement, but it usually only came when women were willing to tolerate a condescending paternalist attitude. In the 1840’s, when women’s labor organizations like the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association became the heart of the labor movement in New England, women were only accepted in the broader workingmen’s movement on a supportive basis.

Much of the press, and the labor press in particular, either criticized women’s work or ridiculed women’s public actions. In non labor sources like the *Farmers’ Monthly Visitor* an editor wrote “The ambition of woman should be to beautify and adorn the domestic circle . . . yet

---

64 *Lowell Offering*, July 1844; *Voice of Industry*, Jan. 8, 1847.
how often do we see them declining to labor in a family, and preferring the quasi-slavery of a cotton factory, the last place in the world, a fashionable female academy excepted, to fit a woman for domestic society and usefulness.”65 During the 1834 strike when one agitator made a daring address linking women’s rights and class struggle it was decried in the press as a “Mary Wollstonecraft speech.”66 Covered in the male press the text of her speech was not published, and the snide commentary indicates that if women levied any criticism of patriarchy they were discredited by association with the radical fringe of the nascent feminist movement. In that same strike, The Man, a workers paper praised the women’s actions but emphasized women’s need to be protected; “The conduct of the factory girls of this town is a noble example to those of other places and an imperishable honor to themselves. They need now the encouragement and assistance of the stronger sex, and they will assuredly receive it.”67 In the rest of the labor press similar claims to protect women’s proper sphere and women’s morality were heard. Orestes A. Brownson, editor of the popular workers magazine the Boston Quarterly Review, charged that most female factory hands left work with a diminished social standing. His article condemned the factory system and argued for worker control of production. Included in his attack on the factory system, was its degradation of women workers: he pontificated that not very many women “return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. ‘She has worked in a factory.’ is sufficient to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.”68 Brownson clearly implies that women’s public industrial work was by its nature unvirtuous. In a letter to an Exeter, New Hampshire, newspaper called the “ Beauties of Factory Life,” an anonymous author wrote that factory work was the stepping stone to prostitution. The author explains that this fate is too common for factory women, and implores “girls [to] leave not your homes in the country. It will be better for you to stay at home on your fathers farms than to run the risk of being ruined in a manufacturing village.”69 In an attempt to keep working women on the farm, workingmen attacked mill girls on the basis of their gender. Gender based attacks on working women from workingmen, a group that could have been workingwomen’s ally based on shared class interests,

65 Farmers Monthly Visitor, Vol. 2 (1840), 167, quoted in Ware, Early New England Cotton, 216.
66 Boston Evening Transcript, Feb. 13, 1834, quoted in Dublin, Women at Work, 90.
67 The Man, March 8, 1834, quoted in Ware, Early New England Cotton, 277.
68 Orestes Brownson quoted in Josephson, Golden Threads, 192.
illustrates the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and the depth of the acceptance of the cult of domesticity.

A further example of working men’s and women’s community of interest being hindered by gender discrimination and prejudice comes from Huldah J. Stone. As secretary of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, Stone was responsible for selling subscriptions to their organ, the *Voice of Industry*. While “on the road for the *Voice*” in Lawrence, New Hampshire she encountered a workingman who, while sympathetic to the objectives of the *Voice* would not take a subscription from Stone. He claimed that “females were out of *their place* while soliciting names to a working man’s paper.” Stone was generally received well in factory towns. At least in her letters back to the LFLRA, she reported selling hundreds of newspapers and subscriptions in each town to both men and women.\(^70\) However, this individual’s attitudes were broadly a reflection of workingmen’s attitudes expressed in the labor press. His actions indicate how misogynistic attitudes could harm class solidarity.

When working women did win the support of workingmen it came with condescending and paternalistic attitudes that limited women’s participation. The relationship of the LFLRA and the NEWA highlights the importance of the Lowell group and the paternalism they encountered in the labor movement. The LFLRA owned the most important labor paper, the *Voice*, they had a growing membership which already numbered in the hundreds, and they spread quickly organizing other textile workers into the Manchester Female Labor Reform Association, the Nashua Female Labor Reform Association and others. They directed the movement’s most important activity during those years, the ten hour petition drives and created the “Female Department” in the *Voice* to address issues of women’s rights. The leadership of the LFLRA was even adopted wholesale into the leadership of NEWA, Huldah Stone and Methibel Eastman both taking positions as secretaries, Sarah Bagley as vice president.\(^71\) The important difference of course is that Bagley was not the full president; a workingmen’s organization still needed a male head, at least in name.

Throughout the middle of the 1840s, the period of the LFLRA’s most important activism, women remained subjugated within the New England Workingmen’s Association. The LFLRA was admitted to the NEWA as an auxiliary only, and the Lowell women were careful how they presented themselves within the men’s Association. In Sarah G. Bagley’s inaugural address as

---

\(^70\) *Voice of Industry*, July 13, 1847. emphasis in original

president of the LFLRA to the NEWA, she asked if the girls could help out the workingmen in their arduous battles. After beginning with a bold declaration on women’s oppression and refusing to apologize for being a women and addressing the mostly male audience, she went on to say:

we do not expect to enter the field as soldiers in this great warfare: but we would, like the heroines of the Revolution, be permitted to furnish the soldiers with a blanket or replenish their knapsacks from our pantries. We claim no exalted place in your deliberations, nor do we expect to be instrumental of any great revolutions, yet we would not sit idly down and fold our hands and refuse to do the little that we may and ought to. We expect to see the revolution commenced, recorded among the revolutions of the past.\(^2\)

Despite the revolutionary diction, Bagley politely couched women’s involvement in the labor movement in patriarchal language. Such a position is remarkable coming from the radical Bagley, who in her editorship of the *Voice* and in public statements on women’s rights never pulled any punches. In fact while the NEWA struggled with gaining traction because of an internal debate between mechanics with immediate reform goals, and “utopian socialists” who saw ultimate harmony between worker and capitalist, the LFLRA and Sarah Bagley continued to spearhead the labor movement.\(^3\) But here at least, it seems the needs of labor support superceded her radical feminist ideals; did the other members of the LFLRA ask her to tone down the women’s rights rhetoric to gain acceptance in the NEWA? This would be an indication of the future course of the subsequent workers and feminist movements. Working women were often forced to choose between class solidarity and their allegiance to womanhood.\(^4\)

**Corporate Femininity**

While workingmen’s groups were hostile to women’s full participation in political movements, corporations were opposed to it all together. In public pronouncements that today would be called a public relations campaign, and in private dealings with female employees, corporations were careful to limit women’s public participation to work and not politics. Because it was the only way to exploit women’s cheap labor, corporations constructed a public space for women’s work that was socially acceptable by guaranteeing to exert a “paternal

---

\(^2\) *Voice of Industry*, June 5 1845.

\(^3\) *Voice of Industry*, June 12, 1845; Early, “A Reappraisal,” 43.

influence over the lives of their operatives.”

They erected a highly publicized structure of moral police to insure that through corporate paternalism woman’s virtuous moral character would not be harmed, and to place women inside the “cult of true womanhood.” Additionally corporations paid women a relatively high wage and provided a place for women to be free of immediate family obligations. These gave women a degree of independence many of them had never experienced before and placed them firmly outside of women’s domestic sphere. Women workers exploited this contradiction, taking the independence gained from public work and pushing for further gains in social equality and political participation. From the corporate perspective the specifics of feminine morality and women’s role in society were not important so long as women remained a docile, controllable workforce.

The corporate definition of womanhood attempted to fit working women into the emerging middle-class cult of true womanhood, by emphasizing women’s moral and virtuous character. They stressed that corporations employed only an “industrious, sober, orderly, and moral class of operative” and “that an apprenticeship in a factory entailed no degradation of character, and was no impediment to a reputable connection in marriage.”

The companies helped to publish a magazine, the Lowell Offering, that was entirely written by operatives employed in the mills, and in its waning years edited by two former factory hands, Harriet Farley and Harriot F. Curtis. The magazine compiled various pieces of literature akin to the popular middle-class ladies magazines like Godey’s Lady’s Book, Sarah Hale’s Lady’s Magazine, and others. The Offering’s main difference was that it sought to “remove aught of stigma attached to the name of factory-girl,” and “to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills” by demonstrating working women’s ability to conform to middle-class ideals and proving there was indeed “mind among the spindles.”

The operatives’ magazine occasionally forayed into contentious political issues, such as Harriet Farley’s defense of the factory girls’ reputation from the slander of Orestes Brownson and the labor press. Mostly it stuck to fiction. In one story a factory operative turned the derogatory term factory girl into a point of pride: “I am here . . . a factory girl – yes a factory

---

75 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 4.
76 Henry A. Miles, Lowell as it was and as it is (Lowell: Powers and Bagley, 1845), 128.
79 Lowell Offering, Sep. 1843; Oct. 1840; Josephson, Golden Threads, 185.

25
girl; that name which is thought so degrading by many, though, in truth, I neither see nor feel its degradation."\textsuperscript{80} Through corporate literature like the Offering, companies took the greatest care to assure their investors, the people of Merrimack county and the families of new England who were to supply their daughters, sisters, nieces and friends as laborers, that Lowell was not to be Manchester, and that the working women were not be debased like the English working class. They reassured reticent Yankee farmers that the mills hands would retain their moral character, and that the “mill girl” fit into the proscribed place for women, even though outside of the domestic sphere.

The contradiction in corporate ideas of femininity, that a woman could work in public industrial labor and not violate the restrictions of the domestic sphere, were solved, at least for its defenders, in the broader notions of employer control. As discussed earlier the maxim of corporate ideology was corporate control, and this remained true even for its definitions of femininity. Women maintained their virtuous character only through corporate vigilance against potential indiscretion. The boardinghouse system and company firing practices are two examples of corporate control, and demonstrate company oversight of feminine morality. The Associates intentionally promulgated this role for themselves in company propaganda. In Lowell as it was and as it is, published in 1845, the Rev. Henry A. Miles included a chapter dedicated to the “Moral Police” of the corporations. He emphasized employer vigilance and control of women for their own protection, and claimed that for the companies “it is necessary to secure the moral protection of their characters.” According to Miles this was in the interest of the company bottom-line, and clearly was something that could not be accomplished by independent, unsupervised women.\textsuperscript{81} Miles’ book, and others like it, left out the specifics of the corporate definition of female moral character. But specifics were irrelevant; so long as women were in the control of corporate paternalism, and remained an orderly and docile workforce, they could not be other than moral.

Predictably, once their employees turned to strikes, protests, and petitions, the corporations began attacking their workers on the grounds that they were violating their social role as women. In addition to levying punitive measures against individual strikers and any employee not in her place, corporations publicly and privately attacked politically active women. Like the gender based attacks in the press mentioned earlier, corporations also directly attacked

\textsuperscript{80} Lowell Offering vol. V 1845, 140. emphasis in original
\textsuperscript{81} Miles, Lowell, 131. emphasis in original
striking women’s womanhood. William Austin, agent of the Lawrence corporation, wrote that the 1834 strikers’ march was an “amizonian [sic] display.” In another letter, he again called striking women amazons: “This afternoon we have paid off several of these Amazons & presume that they will leave town on Monday.” In a hostile exchange of published letters between the editor of the *Lowell Offering*, Harriet Farley, and Sarah G. Bagley, Farley attacked Bagley’s femininity because Bagley was politically active. The *Offering* had been discredited by Bagley as a mouthpiece of the corporations because Farley, as editor, was careful not to print anything condemning the companies. Farley attributed Bagley’s public denouncements of corporate control and injustice in speeches and writings “to an unwomanly love of notoriety.” Once Bagley transcended the acceptable corporate female realm of hard silent work, her feminine identity was called into question.

The corporate view of femininity harmonized with the broader corporate ideology of control and was used to include working women in the middle-class cult of domesticity. It was up to the corporations, and no one else, to see “whether we [the companies] can preserve here a pure and virtuous population.” Corporation efforts at control and their attempts to create “a fund of labor” to feed their factories, however, belie their pronunciations of paternalism; as Harriet Hanson Robinson rightly points out, “Help was too valuable to be illtreated.” Many working women recognized the self interest behind the company façade, and condemned corporate paternalism. One woman wrote in the *Voice*:

> Bad as is the condition of so many women, it would be much worse if they had nothing but your boasted protection to rely upon; but they have at last learnt the lesson, which a bitter experience teaches, that not to those who style themselves their “natural protectors,” are they to look for the needful help, but to the strong and resolute of their own sex.

Because of “the strongly held belief that idle young women were particularly prone to depravity,” corporations accepted that women’s “employment itself [was] a contribution to public morality.” Therefore employing women in exhausting twelve to fourteen hour days was

---

83 The bulk of the exchange is reprinted in Foner, *Factory Girls*, 60-68.
86 Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 44. emphasis in original
87 *Voice of Industry* March 13, 1846.
a moral act for which companies should be praised and not condemned. It was no wonder that working women challenged the benevolence of corporate paternalism.

The Factory Girl

The recognition that gender and class oppression reinforced one another contributed to the rebelliousness of working women’s chosen identity, the “factory girl.” In numerous letters published in New England newspapers signed by “A Factory Girl,” writers defended both workers and women’s rights. The working women of Lowell used the identity of “factory girl,” an identity created for them by in part by corporations eager to use their labor, in their own interests. This identity relied on the collective work habits of factory life and dormitory living, the shared female identity of “sisterhood” that extended through New England social and familial networks, and an independence that stemmed from being “daughters of freeman” – a combination of women’s independent “yeoman” status and a new found female independence earned through public wage labor.

The structure of the Waltham system had a lot to do with working women’s creation of a cohesive, rebellious identity. The boardinghouses in particular fostered close identification between coworkers. Articles in the Lowell Offering, show how close boarding women were. With six to fifteen in a room and two to three in bed, boarders either got along with each other or left. Night time letters home, written or read aloud, revealed personal information and hardships that endeared the borders to one another. Within the mills the structure of work also created camaraderie between women. The machinery required familiarity and skills that were not granted the moment one entered the factory; newcomers, therefore, were trained by more experienced hands. As much as forty percent of the workforce was working in pairs. When a worker became sick or had to leave one of her looms, her coworkers shared the extra burden. Such close personal and working relationships led to an affinity and collective action.89

Also women developed networks of “sisterhood,” based on extended kin and social relations. The Hodgdon family letters reveal a female community of extended kin stretching throughout New England. Women were the primary authors of the letters and their connections, even among distant relatives and friends, constituted a “sisterhood” of mutual concern and support. Women’s friendships with each other often were the strongest and most important

89 Lowell Offering, vol. 2, 1842, 73-4; Dublin, Women at Work, 70-72.
bonds formed in an individual’s lifetime.\textsuperscript{90} The importance of friendship in relationships strengthened collective action and marked a change in women’s relationships in general: “female friendships assumed a new value in women’s lives in this era because relations between equals – “peer relationships” – were superseding \textit{hierarchical} relationships as the desired norms of human interaction.”\textsuperscript{91} In this sisterhood, recognition of a shared plight was instrumental in forming feminist ideas and practice. Women brought this identity with them into the factories.

The “factory girl” identity, therefore, was a synthesis of nascent feminist identity formed of sympathies in a shared sisterhood, and worker collectivity imbued from the cooperative nature of the Waltham system. The constitution of the Factory Girls Association, written during the strike of 1836, provides a good example of what the “factory girl” identity meant, and how it was used. It said in part that working women were:

conscious that our cause is a common one, and our conditions similar, we feel it our imperative duty to stand by each other through weal and woe; to administer to each others wants, to prevent each others back-sliding--to comfort each other in sickness, and advise each other in health, to incite each other to the love and attainment of those excellences, which can alone constitute the perfection of the female character.

It went on to say that the strikers were “convinced that ‘union is power,’ and that . . . 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 [the corporations] equally base and iniquitous aggression.”\textsuperscript{92} Their “weaker” status, a combination of being women and workers, prompted their action and their own empowerment – the resolution was, after all, written by women on strike. A decade later a letter from the Manchester, New Hampshire, Female Labor Reform Association to the Workingmen’s Association of New England exemplified the continuing usefulness of the identity: “we Factory Girls must be vigilant, we must act for ourselves and push these matters [the ten hour working day] along.”\textsuperscript{93} In 1834 when female shoe binders in Lynn, Massachusetts were hesitant about an impending strike Mary Russell, a leading agitator implored them to strive for the “liberty which other females have,” in taking public concerted action. She was referencing the striking women of Lowell, who, had for her, earned their liberty as women.


\textsuperscript{91} Cott, \textit{The Bonds of Womanhood}, 187. emphasis in original


\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Voice of Industry}, July 30, 1847.
by taking political action to gain industrial rights. The collective aspects of “woman” and “worker” synthesized in the “factory girl” to create an identity of solidarity and support.

Independence and education also contributed to women workers’ political actions. As factory girls, women gained a level of independence unknown to them before. The mills used mostly young unmarried women, established them away from their families, and paid them comparatively well. Writing to her sister back home a Lowell operative wrote “another pay day has come around. I earned 14 dollars and a half, nine and a half dollars beside my board . . . I like it well as ever and Sarah don’t I feel independent of everyone!” High wages and distance from families gave women a sense of independence from traditional bonds of familial and economic obligations. But women were also independent of the corporations because they were not solely reliant on the companies for their survival. Many women returned to their family homesteads after a term of work, and during the summer months mill operatives vacationed at their family’s homes. In the 1834 strike women returned home (the strikers offered to pay the way home of coworkers who did not have the money), relying on family and social networks of support to facilitate their independence from the corporations.

Lucy Larcom, employed in the mills from the time she was a child, and later a famous poet, described the intellectual environment the working women managed to maintain that further contributed to working class and feminist radicalism. She remembers women sneaking single pages of books into the mills, to read and commit to memory, to circumvent the ban on books inside the factory. Lending libraries sprung up around the mills, and were very popular with the working women. At lectures held at the industrial Lyceum, the then president of Harvard College commented that the working women were more assiduous note-takers than the students at his venerated institution. Working women also formed various “improvement circles” which served as salons and literary clubs. In these circles, and in their dorm rooms, the women began to question their role in supporting slavery, religious and moral concerns, and their own slave-like working conditions. One improvement circle gave rise to the women who would create and write for the Lowell Offering.

---

97 Lucy Larcom, “Among Lowell Mill Girls,” *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1881), 602-3, 606-7; Eisler, *The Lowell Offering*, 32. Larcom does not mention why the corporations had to ban books, but presumably it is because enough of the operatives were reading while on the job that it was interfering with their labor and untended threads were breaking.
While the bold action of women in the 1820’s and 1830’s show women transcending the restrictions of the domestic sphere, their voices are filtered through the reports of men. The “Mary Wollstonecraft speech” delivered during the 1834 strike defended both women’s and workers rights and is evidence of women at an early stage linking gender oppression and labor exploitation in their struggle. But their words and ideas come to us through newspapers and agents’ reports that were invariably hostile to women in the workplace, on the political stage, or both. It was not until the women of the Lowell mills could contribute to an organ of their own that their explanations for their actions could be fully heard. The Offering was a step in that direction. It was entirely written and edited by current or former factory women. But its heavy funding from agents limited its function to serve as a corporate mouthpiece; it defended women’s place to labor in the mills, but not to challenge their situation.98

For a few years in the middle of the 1840’s, the Voice of Industry became a sounding-board for working women. Female contributors levied critiques against both the working situations in the mills, and women’s social oppression outside. One letter directly attacked the ideology of separate spheres:

Woman is never thought to be out of her sphere, at home; in the nursery, in the kitchen, over a hot stove cooking from morning till evening – over a wash-tub, or toiling in a cotton factory 14 hours per day. But let her for once step out, plead the cause of right and humanity, plead the wrongs of her slave sister of the South or of the operative of the North, or even attempt to teach the science of Physiology, and a cry is raised against her, “of out of her sphere.”99

Interestingly the author includes factory work in woman’s proper sphere, but her critique challenges the whole notion of separate spheres for women. She indicates that the ideology was used not to value women’s labor and women’s social role, but to limit women’s social action and public participation.

In a piece called “Female Labor,” another author pointed to the wage discrepancy between men’s and women’s work as evidence of the symbiosis of gender and labor oppression. She(?) said “The labor of one person ought to command the same price as the labor of another person, provided it be done as well and in the same time, whether the laborer be man or woman.” She asked if woman’s place was to be forever relegated to “the kitchen, or the factory? Can her hand wield no implement but the needle and the dishcloth? . . . Was her tongue given her only to

98 Josephson, Golden Threads, 202-3.
99 Voice of Industry, April 16, 1847. emphasis in original
sing or scold babes?” and finished with a radical expression of equal rights: “The fit place and the proper employment, for male and female, are that employment and that place for which they are best fitted by bodily powers, character, intellect, and education.”

In the growing labor press directed by, and for female operatives, and in particular in the pages of the Voice, one found both a radical feminist and workers critique of society, which provided an important antecedent to the boom of the feminist movement of a few years later.

Not only in their writings but also in their actions women sought to establish equal rights. Public protests, speeches, leading strikes and organizations all challenged capitalist patriarchal society. One of the main arguments raised against the establishment of the ten hour day was that women would not use their extra time in a virtuous and moral manner. To contradict such claims women had to defend both their feminine respectability, and their right to control their own labor. Other attempts were made to use gender to prevent women from gaining labor legislation. When William Schouler was appointed chairman of the House committee to investigate the ten hour petitions in 1845, he sent a letter to Miss Bagley and the petitioners. It dared the women to testify, saying: “that as the greater part of the petitioners are females, it will be necessary for them to make the defence [sic] (appear before the committee), or we shall be under the necessity of laying it aside.” Bagley and five others showed up to condemn the factory system and assert the veracity of the petition. Their mere presence defended their right as women to address a public political body.

Women’s early industrial actions, like the strikes of the 1830’s, presented a challenge to both patriarchy and capitalism. Although their motivations are obscured by press coverage that was antagonistic to their concerns, striking women’s actions speak for themselves; they simultaneously challenged corporate control of industry and women’s exclusion from political activity. In the 1840’s working women’s political activism continued to challenge capitalist patriarchy, but once working women controlled the Voice they were able to put forward a more fully articulated working class feminism. Through their writings, actions, and the creation of their identity, working women understood the necessity, in the words of Sarah Bagley, to “war with oppression in every form.”


102 *Voice of Industry*, Feb. 12, 1845.
Conclusion: Working-Class Feminism

The transformation of women’s labor and women’s social status in the early nineteenth-century were inextricably linked to the rise of industrial capitalism. As corporations brought women’s work into the public sphere they had to create a socially acceptable public work role for women. To do this they utilized preexisting traditions of patriarchal control of women that corresponded to a broader corporate ideology and praxis of control over workers and production. Corporate attempts to include working women in the cult of domesticity, however, created a contradiction in the corporate ideology of femininity. Working women recognized this contradiction and exploited it for their own interests. Factory women created a working-class feminism that synthesized opposition to gender oppression and labor exploitation. They organized and led dramatic public actions like strikes, petition drives, and marches that simultaneously challenged authoritarian employers and restrictive patriarchal social mores regarding women’s political participation. The embodiment of their combined critique of capitalist patriarchy was in the working-class feminist identity of the factory girl. In their words and actions, working women defended the independence and respectability of the factory girl, in an attempt to gain social equality as workers and as women.

Furthermore, the radical feminism of the Lowell women provided a direct antecedent to the women’s rights movement of the second half of the nineteenth-century. At the same time that the Grimke sisters were delivering church sermons on the evils of slavery and abolitionist women were struggling for inclusion in the anti-slavery cause, working women were organizing and leading strikes and publicly pronouncing women’s social equality. Working women’s contributions to the feminist movement, however, were not limited to textile workers or to Lowell women. Women shoe binders in Lynn, Massachusetts identified as “lady stitchers,” and used their identity in similar ways to that of the factory girl. In 1860, the largest antebellum strike occurred in Lynn, involving more than 20,000 shoe workers. The strike was made up of men and women, and again young single women placed themselves at the radical fore of the labor and feminist movements. Striking women wrestled for control of the strike and attempted to spread their work stoppage to all positions in shoe production.\(^{103}\) As Gerda Lerner points out; “the strike experience of seamstresses and mill girls of that period illustrate [that] group

awareness and feminist consciousness could also be gained in trade union struggle." Working-class feminist consciousness was increasingly a widespread phenomenon; by 1837 Massachusetts had 105,000 wage earning women, a number that would continue to grow in the subsequent decades.

Unfortunately the 1840’s was the peak of working women’s political activism in Lowell. Changing working conditions were again responsible for this transformation. In the 1850’s individual’s productive output doubled, leaving working women exhausted at the end of the day. Additionally, factory girl solidarity diminished as corporations stopped using the boardinghouse system. The rapid urbanization of Lowell provided an available and cheap workforce that did not need promises of corporate paternalism in order to work. Corporations abandoned their boardinghouses, instead preferring to allow the urban proletariat to provide their own housing. Many of those who lived outside of the boardinghouses were Irish immigrants, adding the complications of ethnic heterogeneity to class solidarity. Just at the time when women’s ability to challenge corporate authority was hindered by workers’ dependence on company wages, working women’s political movement became fractured. The labor movement’s longstanding chauvinism had not diminished overnight. And in the 1850’s labor struggles were increasingly waged around the ballot box rather than the factory floor.

Of course throughout this period women could not vote, which meant that as labor struggles became electoral struggles, some of the movement’s most dedicated and effective contributors were sidelined. Furthermore, after 1848, feminist objectives became the domain of middle-class reformers. The Seneca Falls convention held in 1848 had no representatives from women’s labor organizations, yet it set the tone of the feminist movement for the rest of the century. Identifiable feminist demands became equal access to the franchise and property rights – not equal pay for equal work. In light of the feminist activities of working women in the 1830’s and 1840’s, however, Seneca Falls should be seen more as a shift in feminist politics of the nineteenth century, rather than its birth. This combination of factors, the increased exploitation and degradation of workers and the class and gender divisions within the movements, led to the decline of working women’s activism in the 1850’s.

104 Gerda Lerner, review of The Bonds of Womanhood: ‘Woman’s Sphere’ in New England, 1780-1835, by Nancy F. Cott, Sings, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring 1979), 573.
105 Dublin, Transforming Women’s Work, 20. The majority of these were employed in the putting out system, but modern capitalist wage relations were increasingly important.
106 Dublin, Women at Work, 137; Bender, Toward an Urban Vision, 104-105:
The considerable accomplishments of the first generations of Lowell women are highlighted by this decline. The egalitarian principles that underline the actions of the factory girls fundamentally challenged corporate authoritarian control and patriarchal attitudes that defined women as inferior. In their words and actions working women emphasized the synthesis of class and gender in their overall subjugation. Against substantial obstacles they struggled for social equality and a labor system comprised of independent producers engaged in collective organization. Given the hostility working women faced, their contributions to the labor and feminist movements are significant, and provide a positive example for those of us today who are interested in freedom and equality.