The City of Spindles Meets Its Match: How the Female Operatives in Lowell, MA Developed into Labor Advocates and Altered Women's History

By

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A Thesis

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Abstract of Thesis

The City of Spindles Meets Its Match:

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In an unassuming rural town in Massachusetts during the early 1800's a revolution in American economy and women's rights was born. Lowell, Massachusetts, on the Merrimack River, was the home of the textile industry in America. The Boston Associates, the brains and funds behind the textile mills, unwittingly set up a system, The Waltham-Lowell system, in order to maintain a paternalistic control over the female operatives at the Lowell textile mills. It was that very system which would unify the women of the mills towards creating the first permanent women's union, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. Under the direction of Sarah Bagley and through the women's labor literature of the time, the LFLRA, had an impact on the development of the women's rights movement later embarked upon by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

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Introduction

The United States in the early 1800's was on the cusp of a revolution that would change not only how America would do business, but how workers, more importantly women, would be viewed in the world. The women's rights movement as a study of focus in today's academic world often focuses on more modern protests and demonstrations. The suffrage movement of the early 1900's is a crowning moment in women's history, but there is an even earlier movement, prior to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, that should most surely be acknowledged as the predecessor to the women's rights movement and the early wave of feminism: the female mill operatives in the Lowell textile mills and the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. It is certainly no coincidence that the great women of the suffrage movement, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, would later go on to be the driving force of the women's rights movement as they were from the northeastern states which had seen a dramatic shift in the roles women played in the changing economic society. Before the Seneca Falls Convention was even in its planning stage, women across New England had already been fighting for rights they deemed were just and warranted to them.

Early 1800's New England was the birth place of the textile mills that revolutionized the industrial horizon in America. The textile mills transformed the financial and social options open for women, as well as brought economic prosperity to what would be called the industrial north. Prior to the opening of the cotton mills in New England, the choices women had to earn an income were delegated to teaching, sewing, and spinning, "For hitherto woman had always been a money-*saving*, rather than a money-earning member of the community and could command but small return."[1] Women were not viewed as instrumental in the way young sons were, and could often times be viewed as a strain on the economy of a small farm or household. It was through the opening of the cotton mills that young women were looked at as an asset to their families and a financial advantage that could lay the foundation for a revolutionary shift in the roles women played in society.

An analysis into the owners and mill agents of the Boott Textile Mills uncovers a very intentional process to attract women to the workplace and one that was utilized to market and retain a specific type of woman. This female- young, religious, and hard-working- was encouraged to come to these new bastions of commerce. It was important that

they all harbor a morality that was of the highest caliber and that set a standard of excellence which would encourage families far and wide to send their female family members. The likeliness of female operatives relocating to a strange place at such an important time in the history of industrial America lead to a new breed of woman en mass the likes of which the world had little experience with. In short time these women, who would find it important to rely on one another as an extended family, created a bond and sisterhood that helped them to achieve new feats in the eyes of a male-dominated world. It is through this new paradigm that women came together for the first time in the history of this young country and changed the way the world saw them, but more importantly how they saw themselves in the world.

The material and gendered revolution at Lowell not only transformed a sleepy farming town into an industrial center, it also transformed a group of women from rural areas all over New England into a unified and progressive whole. Women came to Lowell alone, but they would leave with a new family unified by experiences, desire, and a need to establish themselves as deserving and instrumental parts of the economic machine. The transformation that took place at this important moment in time and place was the crux of the

evolution of the modern woman in every sense of the word. It was a perfect storm of time, place, and technology in Lowell, Massachusetts that evolved the idea of woman as demure and romantic into one that could, and would, take care of themselves not only individually but as a collective whole.

Although the businessmen behind the machine that drove America into a new industrial revolution could not see it at the time, the requirements the mills placed on the young women to conform to a standard that was exemplary were also the very same conditions that encouraged these women to stand up for one another in attempt after attempt to gain the recognition and rewards that they were deserving of. It was this bond of women, the closeness and unity knitted together that created the second ever, and largest, female labor organization in the United States of America at the time, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association.

The rise of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, or LFLRA, was the outcome of years of labor unrest in the Lowell mills. The LFLRA was the product of a changing American economy and more importantly, a changing American demographic. As in all economic endeavors, the goal of a business is to obtain a return on investments and to

turn a profit. With the first major depression in the United States looming overhead in the middle 1830's, actions taken by the mills to ensure their continued success and growth were at odds with the people, mainly women, who staffed the cotton mills. The solidarity that the mill system had worked so hard to create as a way to ensure paternal control over the large numbers of women who came to work for them would, in the end, also be the driving force behind the backlash they faced.

Women who were the products of families which had fought and died for freedom during the American Revolution only fifty years earlier, were now encountering an ever increasing loss of independence at the hands of, in their eyes, greedy, paternalistic mill owners and agents. The Yankee women that the Lowell mills had worked so hard to recruit saw every decision by the mills to ensure profits as an attack on their self-sufficient and individualistic qualities they had come to identify with as wage-earners. Many female operatives took a series of stands against the changes imposed upon them as a direct threat to their unwritten social "contract" as equals to the agents and owners of the mills in this newly created world.[2] The first actions taken by the mill girls to restore a sense of

justice to be analyzed are strikes, or turn-outs, in the early to mid-1830's. These initial attempts, as will be shown, were unsuccessful in their primary targets, but laid a foundation for the creation ten years later in December of 1844 of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association.

Trying to revoke unjust mill policies, the LFLRA evolved beyond the mill workers' earlier turn-out attempts. If the turn-outs of the 1830's were adolescents, the LFLRA would be the head-strong young adult ready to tackle the issues most important in a mature, yet revolutionary method. Not only was Lowell, and the state of Massachusetts, to be faced with a well-organized female labor group, it also saw the rise of one of the first female labor reformer champions, Sarah George Bagley. Bagley was the driving force behind the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association and the heart of the 1845 political ten hour movement. Women, like Bagley, who saw the mills as symbols of their independence could no longer stand by as conditions in the mills, and their autonomy, deteriorated.

Sarah Bagley's position on the mills would be both exemplified in and a platform for two enormously influential works of literature during the time, the *Lowell Offering* and the *Voice of Industry*. These two papers stayed a friend *and*

beacon to the multitudes of women who worked in the mills and are a treasure trove of primary sources from which to understand the evolving nature of the struggle the mill operatives faced. *The Lowell Offering*, a paper by and for the mill workers yet under the supervision of the mills, provides a perfect analogy for how the women were once in a position of accord with their new life in the young town of Lowell, but would in time progress into one of distrust and unrest.

In contrast to the *Lowell Offering*, The *Voice of Industry* delivers a powerful prospective into the minds and hearts of mill girls as they transitioned into discord with the practices and policies of the mills. These policies were brought on by the ever increasing demand for the mills to stay competitive in the market. The *Voice of Industry*, which was originally published by the New England Workingman's Association in May of 1845, would, within a short period of time, become *the* voice of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. At the helm was Sarah Bagley. Through the comparison of these influential works, it will be seen that women were becoming empowered through ownership and voice. In addition, the publications had far-reaching implications on the advancements of social rights not only for women, but

for a multitude of the industrial societies facing ever increasing ills and conflicts. The women of Lowell embraced their new positions as writers and authors to advance a cause near to their New England morals, abolition. "Thousands of women were involved in the movement to abolish slavery. Women wrote articles for abolitionist papers, circulated abolitionist pamphlets, and circulated, signed, and delivered petitions to Congress calling for abolition."[3] As their contributions to the abolitionist movement and local publications grew, so to did the realization that they themselves were treated more as objects in their society and desire to be recognized as first-class citizens in their own country.

The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association had a lasting impact on labor reform. As the first permanent labor reform movement for women, the LFLRA proved to be a stepping stone from which multitudes of women, such as Sarah Bagley, could use on their path towards fighting for the equality of slaves, women, and those of workers in general. One of the most influential roles the LFLRA had was in changing the way workers addressed their demands once initial attempts and talks with corporations were unable to produce change. A close look into the LFLRA's petition to the Massachusetts

legislature in order to shorten the work day during the ten hour movement and the labor organizations conflict within the political realm will show how later labor organizations would follow suit. Patterns easily identified today that unions and labor organization go through in order to have their appeals met, and the extent to which political arenas will go to in order to disparage those organizations was first seen in American history with the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association.

Another impact that will be analyzed is that of the LFLRA's ability to spread the movement beyond the borders of Lowell into other industrial areas in New England such as Manchester, New Hampshire. The Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, which was the largest textile mill in New England, also employed mostly women who found themselves with similar labor issues as the Lowell Cotton Mills south of them in Massachusetts. Branching out into other regions of early industrial centers, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association eventually renamed itself the Lowell Female Industrial Reform and Mutual Aid Society. In this new format the members could focus on various aspects of labor and social issues that would have a broader impact on the lives of those they served. One of the goals of this reincarnated

chapter was a benefit that many workers are entitled to today, sick leave.

An influential impact that must not be overlooked is the role the LFLRA had on bringing women into positions of authority within male-dominated organizations. The New England Workingmen's Association would not only become close partners with the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, but after Bagley left the LFLRA she became one of the first females to join the board of directors leading to an evolution of that labor organization as well. It must be not be looked over that the members and leaders of the LFLRA went on to change the face of labor organizations and infiltrate the arenas that were once only places for men.

The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association was the first spark in a long battle towards women's rights. It is important to understand that they laid the foundation for the women who came down the road later to fight the larger fight for women. Had those in the LFLRA and the female mill operatives not set the first brick in the wall, it is possible that the fight for female equality in America could have been stunted by at least another generation.

The organization that developed in response to a unique and planned way of life prescribed by men and companies that were capitalizing on the unused work force at the time revolutionized the world. Women who were initially pleased with a new life; earning income and experiencing a sense of freedom from normal conditions of women of the day, took the ideas and experiences obtained to form an expectation of how they should be treated by their employers. When the mill owners and agents began to change their practices and policies towards their large female workforce, the women united in a manner never before seen in American industry and economic realms. The outcome, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, would see its ups and downs in its attempts to equalize the playing field for the heart of the cotton mills. Through these attempts, the LFLRA changed the way women, and men, worked in this country and have a lasting impact on the history of women's rights, the labor movement, and social philosophies.

Chapter 1: A Planned Birth

In 1816, East Chelmsford, Massachusetts was a sleepy farming settlement along the Merrimack River about 30 miles North West of Boston. By all accounts, the area was perfect for farming and would have gone on remaining so had it not been for a very unique physical feature located on the river, the Pawtucket Falls. In the age prior to electricity when industrialization was in its infancy, machines had to be powered by water, and the more machines that were to be powered meant more water power was needed. The Boston Manufacturing Company, led by a group of men known as the Boston Associates, were scouting locations that provided the maximum amount of water power available for the site of their new industrial textile mill complex. Francis Cabot Lowell, Nathan Appleton, Amos Lawrence, and Abbott Lawrence, the Boston Associates, were a group of investors and wealthy men of the Boston area who were well acquainted and would go on to transform the textile industry in America.

The Boston Manufacturing Company already had a successful textile mill in Waltham, Ma along the Charles River. The mill had expanded again and again, as progress

and profits dictate, into a larger manufacturing company than the Charles River was capable of powering. In order to grow the corporation and produce larger quantities of cloth, the Boston Associates searched for a location with more water power. In 1821 Nathan Appleton settled on East Chelmsford, "as the site of their next major venture in textile manufacturing."[4] Located there was an existing canal system, the Middlesex Canal, that had originally been built in 1796 by one of the first corporations in America who along the Merrimack River in order to circumnavigate the Pawtucket Falls.[5]

The Falls had an impressive 32 foot drop and the amount of power produced, in conjunction with the existing Middlesex Canal system, was viewed as an ideal location for the new textile mill system the Boston Associates were looking to create. Kirk Boott, by this time a member of the Boston Associates, was sent to East Chelmsford to purchase land along the Merrimack River and, "represented to the farmers that he was going to raise fruit and wool, and they, knowing nothing of 'mill privileges,' believed him, and sold the greatest water-power in New England for almost nothing."[6] Once the truth was out, Boott was perceived as a deceiver and was, in fact, someone with no qualms about

angering the locals, and was feared by others. There was a song created about Boott's deception of the farmers:

> *There came a young man from the old countree,*
> *The Merrimack River he happened to see,*
> *What a capital place for mills, quoth he,*
> *Ri-toot, ri-noot, ri-toot, ri-noot, riumpty,*
> *ri-tooten-a.*
> *And then these farmers so cute,*
> *They gave all their land and timber to Boott,*
> *Ri-toot, ri-noot, etc.*[7]

The Boston Company hitherto became land speculators as well as a textile corporation and found it necessary to move forward in utmost secrecy in order to prevent the costs of land around the Merrimack River and Middlesex Canal from swelling.[8] Appleton himself wrote of this in his, *Introduction of the Power Loom, and Origin of Lowell*, "…it was necessary to confine all knowledge of the project to our own three bosoms."[9]

Once the location was purchased the Boston Company had to recruit workers for the mills. They decided to utilize a system that they had found worked well for them in Waltham and would later come to be known as the Waltham-Lowell System. In Waltham, the Associates had very

carefully come to a conclusion regarding the type of worker that should be recruited for their mills. The Associates were aware of the blight upon England's mill city of Manchester with its impoverished, destitute "frightening denizens,"[10] which flocked to the mills for employment. "The operatives in the manufacturing cities of Europe were notoriously of the lowest character, for intelligence and morals."[11]

The Boston Associates wanted their mills to be a shining example of the new American industrialism. They were motivated on how NOT to run their venture by looking at the English models and industrial cities, a model which there had lead to labor unrest and problems later on with growth. The complication was that with more Americans going west for better opportunities, the Boston Company had to offer wages that would entice skilled workers to stay in New England. Herein lays the problem. The owners of the mills wanted a quality work force, but those types of people also demanded higher wages. The poor, desperate people would work for much less, but in large number were prone to causing disruptions and "were sure to be inefficient and might fall prey to dangerously radical ideas."[12]

The Boston Associates had to find a delicate balance between workers that would demand high wages and the impoverished that could be a risk. "The overriding concern of management, then, was control-control the manufacturing process through the use of laborsaving machinery and control also of the work force through supervision and regulation."[13] The answer to the delicate balance they needed between quality and conformity came in the decision to employ an underutilized work force, local farm girls and women. These females would have been raised "morally" and could be assured of a paternal respect, while at the same time being paid less because they were women.

According to the Hamilton Company textile mill records from July 1936, the highest daily pay for female wage-workers was $0.78, while the lowest paid male employee was $1.10.[14] Up until that point, income options for women was limited to a rather short number of opportunities; teaching, domestic service, spinning, weaving, and sewing. These jobs had a major setback due to the fact that they were not consistent. "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."[15] According to Howard

Gitelman, "The wages offered males at the start of the Waltham system… reflected the going rate in New England for each trade or skill group. The rates offered females were not subject to this market constraint, since at the time there was no well-developed market for females…"[16]

Thomas Dublin's, *Women at Work*, analyzed the statistics from three New Hampshire towns to study the demographics of the type of women who left to work in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. The average age of most female operatives were 20 years old, yet children as young as 12 could be seen running between the aisles of machines as bobbin girls, bringing bobbins and spindles to the women and taking away used ones. "Although an image of young girls and children staffing the mills has prevailed throughout history, the actual age of workers under 15 was only 14.3%."[17]

The "girls," or young women, that the Associates enticed to their city on the hill were from local and distant farms, "We have no permanent factory population… Only a very few of our operatives have their homes in this city. The most of them come from the distant interior of the country…"[18] These Yankee farm girls were not driven to work due to necessity and, "did not come from families near

destitution."[19] A large portion of women from Dublin's study came from homes where the family owned land; however, "the typical millhand father was less wealthy than other tax payers around him."[20] That is not to say that there were not people who came to Lowell looking for work who were from poor families but, "The female millhand supporting her widowed mother is hardly as common in actuality as contemporary sources suggest."[21] The Boston Associates wanted to ensure that their female employees would be an example of morals and virtue that was on display for the whole world to see.

Speaking about Francis C. Lowell's desire to bring female employees, "…well educated in virtuous rural homes;"[22] to the mills, Nathan Appleton recalled that Lowell, "was especially devoted to arrangements for the moral character of the operatives employed."[23] Once these women arrived in Lowell, they would need structure and looking-after like they would have at home. This paternalistic desire was not merely out of the goodness of the corporations' heart, but as a form of control over their employees. In addition, it also made those leaving home feel safe and enticed more families to send their daughters. Most women who came to work in the mills did so

in yearly rotations, very few making mill life a permanent change, "…the female operatives in Lowell do not work, on an average, more than four and a half years in the factories. They then return to their homes, and their places are taken by their sisters, or by other female friends from their neighborhood."[24] There was much attention placed in the living conditions of the women who made Lowell their home while they were working for the textile corporations and this would come from the boardinghouse system.

The method that the corporations used in order to assure a tight rein on their operatives was through the use of boardinghouses. Early in Lowell's mill development, the number one rule female operatives had to follow was that they must live in the company boardinghouses while working in the mills. The only exception was when the girl had family living in Lowell and even then they had to obtain permission in order to do so. The girls that lived at home and not in the boardinghouses were not as closely watched as those who did and therefore were more undesirable. The boardinghouse was the "moral police of the corporations"[25] designed to keep the girls in check. Each boardinghouse was headed by female boardinghouse keepers who were "…regarded

as surrogate parents and operatives as minor children."[26] Although the boardinghouse was under the direct supervision of the keeper, the houses belonged to the corporations and there were rules handed down to the keeper that she would enforce.

The boardinghouse keepers had to enforce a strict 10:00PM curfew. This was set into place in order to allow the female operatives enough sleep to prepare them for the long, grueling days standing at the looms. Productivity was vital to the bottom line and if the girls were slow that cut into production, in-turn cutting into profit. Every detail came back to what was best for the company revenues, and even sleep had to have the stamp of the paternalistic corporations. Men were not allowed regularly into the boardinghouses, and when they were they could only be permitted in the parlor under the watchful eye of the fellow boarders or the keeper herself. This coincided with the "moral turpitude" clause the women accepted upon living in boardinghouses and working for the corporations. Most corporations also mandated that the women living in the boardinghouses be required to attend church service on Sundays. The first church built in Lowell, Ma was St.

Anne's, an Episcopal church. About its creation, Nathan Appleton wrote:

> In December, 1822, Messrs. Jackson and Boott were appointed a committee to build a suitable church; and in April 1824, it was voted that it should be built of stone, not to exceed a cost of nine thousand dollars. This was called St. Anne's church, in which Mr. Boott, being himself an Episcopalian, was desirous of trying the experiment whether that service could be sustained. It was dedicated by Bishop Griswold, but the Directors of the Merrimack Company never intended to divest themselves of the control of it. Liberal grants of land were made for other places of worship, and subscriptions freely made by the stockholders for different religious societies.[27]

The establishment of a church served a dual purpose. First, it ensured that the female operatives leaving their homes behind would still receive God's word and to ensure the women would get lessons on morality. Secondly, it was a further approach by the corporations to sustain the paternalistic control over the women. Later, churches of other denominations would be established in Lowell for the women to attend on Sundays, but almost all required pew fees that the women were required to pay out of their weekly wages. Writing about this in *Loom and Spindle*, Harriet H. Robinson said, "Every operative on the Merrimack corporation was obliged to pay thirty-seven and a half cents a month toward the support of this [St. Anne's]

church. This was considered unjust by the help, many of whom were 'dissenters,' and they complained so loudly at the extortion, which was not in the contract, that the tax was soon discontinued."[28]

If the operatives did not follow the corporation rules, it was the boardinghouse keeper that would report the young women to their overseers. As the "surrogate parents," the keepers wanted to ensure their boardinghouses meet the standards of the corporation so as not to be dismissed, but she also wanted to guarantee that she had a full house in order to increase her pay.

> The tenants [boardinghouse keeper] will consider themselves responsible for the order, punctuality of meals, cleanliness and general arrangements for rendering their houses comfortable, tranquil scenes of moral deportment, and mutual good will. They will report, if requested, the names and occupations of their boarder, also give timely warning to the unwary, and report all cases of intemperance, or of dissolute manners.[29]

More often than not, the policing of the young ladies was made by themselves as Thomas Dublin argued in, *Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills*. Dublin suggests that the boardinghouse was a converting and transforming establishment where the women used external pressure in order to adapt the newcomers and those that

might be being led astray into conforming to the rules and norms of the microcosm. "Upon entering the boardinghouse, the newcomer came under pressure to conform within the standards of the community of operatives."[30] Dublin shows that the corporations developed a 3 step process that established a community among the girls who were coming from far and wide in order to solidify their adherence to the corporation's expectations and control. It was this band-of-sisters that will be discussed in the next chapter which led to the very thing the corporations feared, unity in rebellion.

The first stage of the community indoctrination development was the reliance of the new female operatives on existing ones in the workplace. Through the pairing of novices with experienced and seasoned workers, the corporations emphasized women's reliance upon one another. "They were not expected to fit in immediately into the mill's regular work routine, but rather were assigned work as sparehands and earned daily wages… as a sparehand, the newcomer worked with an experienced operative who instructed her in the intricacies on the job."[31] Dublin goes on to state, "The mutual dependence among women in early Lowell was rooted in the structure of mill work itself.

Newcomers to the mills were particularly dependent on their fellow operatives, but even experienced hands relied on one another for considerable support."[32]

In the *Lowell Offering*, a publication for the female operatives "by" the female operative, a young woman speaks of her experience as a new girl being paired with a more experienced one through a series of fictional letters to a friend. She states,

> They set me to threading shuttles, and tying weaver's knots, and such things, and now I have improved so that I can take care of one loom. I could take care of two if I only had eyes in the back part of my head, but I have not got used to "looking two ways of a Sunday" yet.[33]

The reliance the women established upon one another was seen through their desire to help one another on the job if someone became sick or was absent for a short period of time. During times of illnesses, women on the floor would take on additional looms in order to keep production rolling for the female operative that was out. This action was sanctioned by the corporations because it ensured the company was still generating product and they would not have to put someone new and not yet ready on demanding machinery. According to Dublin,

> A woman would occasionally take off a half or full day from work either to enjoy a brief vacation or to recover from illness, and fellow operatives would each take an extra loom or side of spindles so that she might continue to earn wages during her absence… With friends helping out during her absence, making sure that her looms kept running, an operative could earn almost a full wage even though she was not physically present. Such informal work-sharing was another was in which mutual dependence developed among women operatives during their working hours.[34]

The second stage of the development of community, according to Dublin, came from the boardinghouses themselves. The female operators had only a few waking hours a day that they were not at the mills. The first morning bell rang as early as 4:30am. The workers would go straight to work, getting the great looms running, and after a few hours get their first break, or break-fast, at 6:00am. They had to be back to their station at 6:30am where they would work on their feet until the dinner, lunch, bell at noon and returning to work at 12:45pm. From that time the operatives worked non-stop until the last bell rang at 6:30pm. The boardinghouses were positioned on the corporation block so that the workers could attend to their meals and be back to work in a short period of time. With the last bell ringing at 6:30pm and supper, dinner, being over by 7:00pm, the female operatives only had three hours of personal time a night in which to accomplish any

tasks they might have or time to socialize. "The working-hours of the girls extended from five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one-half hour for breakfast and for dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day, and this was the greatest hardship in the lives of these children."[35]

This constraint on personal time meant that many of the workers had few outside their intimate circle to establish relationships with. With such a small amount of people in which the operatives had to socialize, their reliance upon one another and desire to fit in amongst those in their boardinghouse community was enough to pressure the new girls to adjust to Lowell norms and the corporation rules. "The community influenced newcomers to adopt its patterns of speech and dress… In addition, it enforced an unwritten code of moral conduct… The power of the peer group…"[36] It will be shown later how this power of conformity and peer pressure will help lead to the early labor strikes, but for now it is sufficient in understanding the power it had on influencing the conduct that was most desired by the corporation on the new young women in the Lowell cotton mills.

The third step in Dublin's indoctrination theory is the idea of homogeneity. "The work structure, the workers' housing, and workforce homogeneity were the major elements that contributed to the growth of community among Lowell's women operatives."[37] As discussed earlier in this chapter, the majority of the female workers came from rural, family farms. They were white, young, and from a line of independent and strong-willed early Americans, many of whom had fought or participated in some way in the American Revolution. When these women came to Lowell they had these underlying elements in common. When they entered the boardinghouses, there were commonalities that could quickly be drawn upon to create friendships with others like themselves. It was this close-knit community, this band-of-sisters that would also contribute to the rise of early female labor organizations in the Lowell cotton mills.

The saying, be careful what you wish for, is easily applicable to the scenario that played out in the Lowell textile corporations in the 1830's and 1840's. The very methods used by the corporations to establish control over the mill girls also led to the one thing they most hoped to avoid, labor protest. The bonds the women created in Lowell through their backgrounds, their work in the mills, and the

family-like atmosphere in the boardinghouses would, in the end, be the same bonds that motivated them to stick up for one another when the corporations pushed harder for more out of less. In the next chapter, the rise of these early labor strikes and the creation of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association will be analyzed.

Chapter 2: Learning to Find their Own Voice

King Cotton not only ruled the South, but it also fueled the North. It seeped into every facet of the American economy, culture, and society. If the Lowell girls were the heart of the textile mills, cotton was the blood that ran through it. When cotton went up and down, so did the mills and the people who worked in them. The South, plantations, slaves, cotton, Northern manufacturing, and Lowell, Massachusetts were entwined in a story that weaved its way through the fabric of America. It should have come as no surprise then that the first stirrings of labor unrest in Lowell mills coincided with a shift in the cotton industry.

In the American south, a location with a landscape and climate perfect for growing large quantities of cotton, in conjunction with improvements to Eli Whitney's cotton gin, cotton farming grew at unprecedented rates. Soon, cotton was being grown everywhere in the South and the influx of cotton on the market had a huge impact on the price of cotton on the market. Once tedious to grow, pick, and clean, technological innovations revolutionized the cotton farming industry. Cotton flooded the market and the costs

that at one period were associated with the time it took to pick and clean were a thing of the past. Not only were cotton farms expanding in the South, but in the North, the profits and dividends the Boston Associates were seeing from their Waltham/Lowell system encouraged newcomers into the textile business. This competition benefited consumers but would, in time, put a pinch in the profits of the Boston Associates. Although prices were low, competition was high, and the only way the Boston Associates could see as a way to compete was through increasing production and decreasing the wages of the mill workers. To the stockholders of the Boston Company high dividends were priority number one, regardless of a decline in profits due to the competition. According to Hannah Josephson, wages were, "the only item in the cost of manufacture that was flexible, all other factors, such as plant insurance, and raw materials being either rigid or beyond the power of the manufacturers to control."[1]

The paternalism and family environment that had been molded so carefully to create the highest standard of textile mills in New England would be jeopardized at the first sign of declining profits. "The corporations could only make up the loss by increasing production, and that

when the fall in prices was great enough to curtail dividends, stockholders put pressure on the agents or managers of the factories to cut wage costs."[2] In addition, the continuous wear and tear on the factory machines led to the inevitable, costly repairs and replacements, which also cut into the profits, "to the stockholders, there was no questions that dividends must be maintained, if (or until) the heavens should fall."[3]

The agents back in Lowell predicted that a decrease in wages would be cause for dissent and problems from the mill workers. The twenty-five percent pay reduction the Boston Associates recommended was so drastic that even the mill agents were taken aback. The workers knew that a reduction was bound to occur and quietly began planning to protest. Hitherto, there had been no work disruption in Lowell, Massachusetts as there had been in other mill towns. But with the threat of the first dock in pay, the mill workers began whispering, which soon turned to cries of indignation that the mills could disrespect them so easily. "The agents had good reason for concern about the reaction of women workers. Agitation in the mills began as soon as the broadsides appeared announcing the impending wage cuts. Even before agents fixed on the actual amount of the

reduction, petitions circulated among the women."[4] The mill agents held meetings and decided upon a more modest wage cut than was recommended by the Boston Company in order to halt the turmoil being created by their operatives. However, the damage had already been done and once the inevitability of lower wages was on the horizon the female mill workers would not stand idly by. One of the petitions that was disseminated among the women and which was signed by dozens stated:

> We the undersigned considering ourselves wronged and our privileges invaded by the unjust and unreasonable oblidgment [sic] of our wages, do hereby mutually and cheerfully engage not to enter the Factory on the first of March, nor after for the purpose of work, unless the paper which causes our dissatisfaction be removed and another signed… purport[in]g that our wages shall be after the same rate as previous to first of March.[5]

The very first Lowell turnout was a spontaneous event. Before, after, and during work hours, the women of the mills had been meeting and conversing. The mill agents recognized that there were leaders among the dissenters and on February 20th, 1834, a mill agent fired one of these leaders. The newspaper, The Boston Transcript, reported on the event:

> On Friday morning, the young woman referred to was dismissed, by the Agent… and on leaving the office…

> waved her calash in the air, as a signal to the others, who were watching from the windows, when they immediately "struck" and assembled about her in despite of the overseers. The number soon increased to nearly 800. A procession was formed, and they marched about the town, to the amusement of a mob of idlers and boys, and, we are sorry to add, not altogether to the credit of Yankee girls… We are told that one of the leaders mounted a stump and made a flaming Mary Wollstonecraft speech on the rights of women and the iniquities of the "*monied* aristocracy," which produced a powerful effect on her auditors, and they determined to "have their way if they died for it."[6]

Two days after the impromptu rally, the women of Lowell distributed a declaration of their object in the strike:

Union Is Power

> Our present object is to have union and exertion, and we remain in possession of our inalienable rights. We circulate this paper, wishing to obtain the names of all who imbibe the spirit of our patriotic ancestors, who preferred privation to bondage, and parted with all that renders life desirable—and even life itself- to procure independence for their children. The oppressing hand of avarice would enslave us; and to gain their object, they very gravely tell us of the pressure of the times; this we are already sensible of, and deplore it. If any are in want of assistance, the Ladies will be compassionate, and assist them; but we prefer to have the disposing of our charities in our own hands…
>
> All who patronize this effort, we wish to have discontinue their labors until terms of reconciliation are made.
>
> Resolved, That we will not go back into the mills to work until our wages are continued to us as they have been.
>
> Resolved, That none of us will go back unless they receive us all as one.

> Resolved, That is any have not money enough to carry them home, hat they shall be supplied.[7]

According to Thomas Dublin, the roots of this protest lay in the contradiction between the mill girls' perceived status and the reality of how they were being treated. Although the proclamation was an impassioned one, and the young women had every intention at the time it was written to follow through with their statements, by the Monday of the following week most of the ladies involved returned to their positions within the mills, the passions of the moment having passed. The wage reductions were installed and the first turn out became nothing more than an introduction to the spirit of the strike and a short education into the process of protest. It was their proclamation that had the most impact on the development of the mill girls union later, and an invaluable resource into the minds and hearts of what encouraged the women to risk being blacklisted by standing up for their beliefs.

It is interesting that the wage reductions were viewed by the female mill workers as an affront to their social contract they had with the mill agents and owners, while the turnout was viewed by the agents as a show of disregard to the relationship they had thought existed between the

two groups. It was as if this first event snipped the fragile threads that had connected the two sets, and once severed, could never be fully mended. The wage cut was, in the end, set at fifteen percent, a little more than half what the Boston Associates had hoped for. Economically, the turnout was, for the mills, only a slight nuisance, not causing a monetary impact. "Even had the mills been forced to reduce production, it is unlikely that the directors would have yielded to the operatives. Given the accumulation of finished cloth unsold, there were directors who felt that it would not hurt to have the mills shut down for a period. These were not good times in which to launch the first labor struggle in Lowell's brief history."[8] For the workers, the first turnout was the crack in the dike, and when another event arose that lead to less money in the mill girls' pockets, the girls remembered their first taste of protest, and decided to call on it again.

The next time the workers rose in protest against the mills came a short two years later in 1836. This time it was not a direct wage cut, but a more subtle threat. Boardinghouse keepers, who were also in the business of making money, were affected by the increase in cost of living and inflation of the era and their profits

decreased. Some of the boardinghouse keepers had to resort to sending their young daughters to work in the mills in order to help out the house. Such was the case of Harriet H. Robinson. "I had been to school constantly until I was about ten years of age, when my mother, feeling obliged to have help in her work besides what I could give, and also needing the money which I could earn, allowed me, at my urgent request… to go to work in the mill."[9] The female mill worker's earned on average, "…$3.25 for a 73-hour work week-a wage under five cents for hour… Room and board in company boardinghouses cost only $1.25 a week, leaving the women about $2.00 a week."[10] Any inflation in the weekly boardinghouse cost eroded worker's disposable income. In tandem, the Lowell mill companies decided that they should fix the situation in two ways. The first was to decrease the amount of money the companies charged the boardinghouse keepers for their weekly rent. The reduction averaged out to about 12.5 cents less a week each occupant. The second step was to raise the rent they charged the women. "Small as it seems now, the sum of 12.5 cents weekly amounted to a five percent wage-cut…"[11] The plan led to a sharp reaction from the working women, who, having tasted vocal freedom through protest once, were quick to fall back to it again. Harriet H. Robinson's memoirs record this incident,

although incorrectly, as the first of its kind. In her book, *Loom and Spindle*, she writes:

> My own recollection of this first strike (or "turn out" as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed; I had been an ardent listener to what was said against this attempt at "oppression" on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, "Would you?" or "Shall we turn out?" and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, "I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not;" and I marched out, and was followed by the others

Robinson also stated that, "They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs, a favorite (but rather inappropriate) one being a parody on 'I won't be a nun.'

> Oh! Isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I-
> Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?
> Oh! I cannot be a slave,
> I will not be a slave,
> For I'm so found of liberty
> That I cannot be a slave.[12]

The strike of 1836 differed fundamentally from the first strike of 1834 and had a much more profound impact on the mills in Lowell, as well as leaving a legacy of unionization by women. The first key difference was in the numbers of women who participated and the time frame in which it lasted. Whereas the turnout of 1834 was less than one thousand, the 1836 strike included over fifteen hundred females, almost double the first attempt. The greater number of participants was most likely due to the feeling helplessness and exasperation towards their bosses, people who could impact their sense of independence so soon after the first wage reduction. In addition, the separation between the owners/agents and the emerging working class began to reshape how the two groups felt about one another. In the beginning, the female operatives felt as if they were a vital part of the mill corporation and that they were treated as equals in the common goal of American industrialism. Slowly, however, the change in interactions and the wage reductions opened their consciousness to a stratification they had not before perceived.

The 1836 strike occurred for several months, which was remarkable, and created great hardship on the mill companies. According to Dublin, "…the economic settings in

February 1834 and October 1836 contrasted sharply. At the earlier date, textile sales were sluggish and a number of directors even welcomed the possibility of halting production; in 1836 sales were booming, and the mill could not recruit enough workers to meet demand."[13] The ability of the women to have a more substantial impact with their numbers, and the length they were able to hold out was a tremendous advantage to the female workers. They had the upper hand this time, and the mill owners and agents were aware of it.

The most powerful asset the turnout had, which laid the foundation for the future, was the establishment of the Factory Girls' Association. The first national union for men had only begun in 1834 with membership numbers reaching upwards of three-hundred thousand, until that time all unions had been localized and segmented according to profession or trade. Reserved for men, the unions demanded better wages, hours, and working conditions. But until the Factory Girls' Association began in 1836, there had been no formal union, local or national, for women to express their concerns over wages and working conditions. Although the Factory Girls' Association did not outlive the 1836 strike, it was successful in producing union representatives at

other union meetings that could speak for the large numbers of females. This act helped women devise tactics that aided them in crippling the mills and assisting women who could not afford the cut in wages.

Utilizing their sheer force of numbers and strategies designed to have the most impact, the females were able to cripple the mills in no time and bring the historical pace of the mill operations to a halt. Their small measure of success then should hardly be surprising. "Several sources indicate that the striking women achieved a measure of success. According to one observer the companies rescinded the increases in the price of the room and board for operatives paid on a daily basis."[14]

As empowering as the strikes of 1834 and 1836 were to the women, and despite the urging of the National Trades Union to create a permanent union, the mill girls of Lowell did not embrace the Factory Girls' Association as an enduring entity. It had existed for the sole purpose of the event in which it was formed, and once the turnout was complete, the "union" was dissolved. It would be some time before the female workers in Lowell reunited in defense of their own interests. America's economy was entering into a period of shadow, a depression. The Panic of 1837 halted

any progress the girls made in 1836 and placed a leash on many worker organizations in the country. In 1837 the prospects for cotton sales appeared bright in the United States but the market prices quickly dropped:

> In the midst of a shortage of specie in the money centers, news of a fall in the British price for U.S. cotton appeared in the New Orleans newspapers on 22 March. This confirmed earlier reports of reductions in foreign demand. The 17 percent drop in price that ensued between then and the end of April, or from 13.8 cents to 11.5 cents per pound, appears to have been a result of overproduction in the United States and heightened competition in the British market from India, whose cotton exports underwent a rapid expansion at precisely this time… The Panic of 1837 merged with that of 1839 into a prolonged period of hard times that, in severity and duration, was exceeded only by the great depression that began ninety years later, in 1929.[15]

Lowell workers felt the pinch of the difficult economic times. Among city workers, there was widespread distress caused by wage-cuts and unemployment while at the same time the cost of living rose… If men in better-organized trades were unable to maintain their standards, it is not to be wondered at that the unorganized textile operatives put up no resistance to wage reductions and the speed-up during those lean years.[16]

During the lean years of 1837 to 1840, the mills extracted as much time and work from the women as possible.

The mills participated in the "speed-up" process in which the paces of the factory machines were increased for greater production. As working conditions eroded, so too did the quality of life for workers in Lowell. By 1840 it had become the quintessential boom-town, rife with all the complications that come with rapid growth. The city became more crowded with Irish immigrants and people from all walks of like looking for work. Stephen A. Mrozowski, Grace Ziesing, and Mary Beaudry conducted an archaeology did in Lowell in 1986 to understand what the daily life was like for mill workers and how their city took shape throughout the years. *Living on the Boot*, describes this shift in Lowell, "After 1840, the composition of the work force shifted as the New England farm girls abandoned the mills and were replaced by the immigrant labor. The 'moral' control exercised by the corporations seemed to wane at this time."[17] The archaeologists concentrated on the story told by the refuse left behind in the boardinghouse back lots. It is one thing to read the stories the girls wrote themselves, slightly rose colored for posterity, but the archaeological evidence is vital to the entire story. Through their research, what the archaeologists uncovered was that, "As living and working conditions continued to deteriorate, worker unrest grew. Workers' calls for

improved wages, job security, and better working conditions went unheeded, leading to strikes and the formation of labor unions by the early decades of the twentieth century."[18]

By the beginning of the 1840's, when the economy began to rebound and unemployment was not a daily threat, Lowell's female workers organized a potent labor organization, establishing a true union with real leadership. The strikes and dissatisfaction of 1834 and 1836 provided training to answer what had become an incessant discontent in Lowell. The answer was the first permanent women's labor organization in America, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, LFLRA.

Chapter 3: Revolution to Evolution

Conditions in the City of Spindles began to shift dramatically in the years after the 1830's turnouts. The national economy declined further with the Panic of 1837 and with the threat of unemployment at the front of people's minds the fire of change the women in Lowell were coming off of with the 1836 turnout waned to little less than a flicker. "The downward trend of wages in the corporation mills, begun in 1834, a boom year, went on relentlessly after the panic, even though the New England textile industry suffered less than other enterprises from its effects."[1] During this lean period, the female textile workers understood the position that they could have easily found themselves in had they created a scene and strategically decided to lay low. "Since labor organizations do not as a rule flourish in hard times, the promising trade union movement of the early thirties received a blow from which it did not recover until the middle of the next decade. If men in better-organized trades were unable to maintain their standards, it is not to be wondered at that the unorganized textile operatives put up no resistance to wage reductions and the speed-up during those lean years."[2] During this time, the women found

means to release frustrations and expand their minds through attending the Lowell Lyceum where the women were introduced to new age thinking by men such as Ralf Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists, as well as Utopian philosophers of the day. These lectures, along with a very prosperous book trading/renting program within Lowell, allowed access to and encouraged women to think in ways they had not done so before. It also motivated them to use their voice to help them find their own identities. It was through this arena that one of the founders of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, Sarah Bagley, emerged as a voice among the women.

Most of the women who came to Lowell to work in the textile mills were young, but when Sarah Bagley arrived in Lowell in 1837 she was already 31. She took a job at the Hamilton Manufacturing Company where she was a weaver. While employed in Lowell early on, Bagley became affiliated with the literary magazine, the *Lowell Offering*. The *Offering* was first published in October of 1840 as a sporadically published magazine by the Reverend Abel C. Thomas. "In 1841, the *Offering* was seeking subscriptions as a monthly periodical, thirty pages long, priced at six and one-quarter cents an issue. Its cover bore the banner line

that would inspire adulation abroad and pride at home, 'A repository of Original Articles, Written Exclusively by Females Actively Employed in the Mills."[3] The literary exceptionalism of Lowell gave the female minds a way of thinking about themselves and their lives. According to Benita Eisler, "From October 1840 to March 1841, it consisted of articles that emerged from many of the improvement circles or literary societies. Later, it then became broader in its scope and received more spontaneous contributions."[4] Bagley was such a contributor in December of 1840 when one of her essays, *Pleasures of Factory Life*, first appeared in volume II of series I. In this essay she espouses the life of a factory girl in Lowell and defends it from those who thought ill of women industrial workers.

> Pleasures, do you say? What! Pleasures in factory life? From many scenes with which I have become acquainted, I should judge that the pleasures of factory life were like 'Angles visits, few and far between'- said a lady whom fortune had placed above labor… But stop, friend, we have some few things to offer here, and we are quite sure our views of the matter are just, - having been engaged as an operative the last four years. Pleasures there are, even in factory life; we have many, known only to those of like employment… where can you find a more pleasurable place for contemplation... A large and beautiful variety of plants is placed around the walls of the rooms, giving them more the appearance of a flower garden than a workshop. It is there to inhale the sweet perfume… Another great source of pleasure is, that by becoming operatives, we are often enabled to assist aged parents who have become too infirm to

> provide for themselves; or perhaps to educate some orphan brother or sister… Another source is found in the fact of our being acquainted with some person or persons that reside in almost every part of the country…[5]

From this glowing review, one would hardly envision a life less fulfilling than working in the mills. Bagley went on to add to the *Offering* in several more editions until her views on management in the mills began to slowly shift, as did her position within the Hamilton Manufacturing Company. Bagley's dissociation with the *Offering* is likely to have had much to do with the fact that the *Offering* was seen, and in some instances, used by the corporation as propaganda for the Lowell life and how privileged the Lowell females were to live and work in the city of spindles. "In the last years of its existence the Offering was more and more frequently charged with 'todaying to the corporations.' The owners, of course, were aware of the publicity value of the magazine, just as they were aware of the publicity value of the girls themselves."[6] In the book, *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840-1845)*, Editor Benita Eisler stated the, "The issue of editorial independence is still cloudy. With the assumption of editorial duties in 1842, Harriet Farley moved with her coeditor from a corporation boardinghouse to a 'rose-

covered cottage' on the edge of town. Evidence also suggests that her straitened family received occasional, if discreet, assistance from one of the mill owners, Abbot Lawrence."[7] Throughout the 1840's, with the growing descent among the female operatives and the *Offering's* slight of publishing any contributions of criticism, the magazine slowly isolated itself from their target audience. It is possible that Bagley parted ways with the publication because the editor refused to publish her articles that criticized the conditions within the mills. This parting of ways between Bagley and the *Offering* was made a public display in the town of Lowell when Harriet Farley and Sarah Bagley penned open letters back and forth to one another. By this time, Bagley had made the full transition from a model mill girl to what the owner and agents would call a radical. By 1840, Lowell, the founding of which the epitome of a textile town was designed specifically to contrast against the slums in England, had begun to succumb to the economic competition of times. Policies in the mills, such as the speedup and stretch-out and the premium system, caused a decline in mill work satisfaction on a level not before seen in Lowell. In December of 1844, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association was created, and none other

than Sarah Bagley became a founding member and the organizations president.

The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, or LFLRA, in Thomas Dublin's view, "represented a quantum leap beyond that of the preceding decade."[8] The LFLRA was the first permanent female labor organization in America and at the "forefront of the labor movement in New England."[9] The holy grail of the Lowell Labor Reform Association was achieving a ten-hour work day. "Unable to halt what they perceived as the degradation of work, operatives sought at least to mitigate its ill effects by limiting the hours of labor."[10] It was a part of a larger reform movement throughout New England and worked in conjunction with the New England Workingmen's Association and the New England Labor Reform League. Both of which were more established and had a broader influence in the labor reform movement. The group grew in leaps and bounds and within several short months the number of women who had joined the LFLRA went from Bagley and the other four founding members who met in the reading rooms of Lowell, to over three hundred. Within a year there were over six hundred members.

One of the central methods the women utilized to reach their audience was through the publications in Lowell.

Bagley, who had experience at the *Offering*, knew the importance of the press and the LFLRA worked closely with *The Voice of Industry*, and *Factory Tracts* to get out the word of the ten-hour movement. *The Voice of Industry*, a weekly newspaper devoted to labor issues and reform, had a major impact on the power of the labor reform movement. In its prospectus, *The Voice of Industry* stated that its goal was, "Devoted to the abolition of mental, moral, and physical servitude, in all their complicated forms and interests of the Industrial Classes."[11] The *Voice* was the "most eloquent the most professional, and the most widely read of all the labor papers of the forties…"[12] It was the combination of two previously separate papers that had originally been the endorsed publication of the New England Workingmen's Association. It was relocated from its original publishing location in Fitchburg, Massachusetts to Lowell where Bagley became part of the small publication office. Within a year, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association took over *The Voice of Industry*, and it became the official word of the LFLRA. It was used as a political platform and to disseminate club business and meetings. It was the go-to publication to air publicly the grievance male and female labor forces all over New England had with corporations and government inaction. "The *Voice* had a

separate 'Female Department' with articles by and about women workers. The stance of this department, shaped by its editor, Sarah Bagley, was strongly feminist…"[13]

Aside from the ten-hour movement, one of the goals of the LFLRA was to help women organize local LFLRA chapters in other mill towns. After the Manchester, New Hampshire LFLRA chapter began, the Lowell women continued to help them and wrote:

> Operatives of Manchester, you have begun well, may GOD grant that you persevere united, faithfully, triumphantly! You have now and Association organized and consisting of a goodly number already, and hundreds more are ready to join your ranks… We shall be extremely happy to correspond with you and meet with you… as often as possible. Let us seek to encourage and strengthen each other in every good word and work.[14]

But getting local chapters up, running, and working smoothly was only a means to an end, the end being the then-hour movement. The ten-hour movement was, in the early years of the LFLRA the number one goal of the organization. Their target was not the corporations, as had been the earlier turn-outs of the 1830's, but rather the political machine which could have a larger impact on all operatives. As Hannah Josephson wrote in *The Golden Threads*:

> In the Female Labor Reform Associations… the textile operatives for the first time had the equivalent of a union; in the Voice of Industry they had their own newspaper; in the Utopians they had allies among the intellectuals, and in the ten-hour movement they had a specific objective… Reforms would not be long coming, they felt, not in the form of a boon granted by their merciful employers, but as a right, after full and open discussion in the factories, in the press, and in the Legislatures.[15]

The turn to government in an attempt to limit the number of work hours was based on the precedent that had been set in 1840 by President Martin Van Buren when he signed an Executive order mandating the legal length of the work day for government employees to be no more than ten hours a day.

> The President of the United States, finding that different rules prevail at different places as well in respect to the hours of labor by persons employed on the public works under the immediate authority of himself and the Departments as also in relation to the different classes of workmen, and believing that much inconvenience and dissatisfaction would be removed by adopting a uniform course, hereby directs that all such persons, whether laborers or mechanics, be required to work only the number of hours prescribed by the ten-hour system.
>
> M. VAN BUREN[16]

This monumental win by those who worked for the government was the aspiration for the thousands left toiling away for twelve and fourteen hour days. The LFLRA was hopeful that with the standard set forth by Van Buren, and, "Since the legislators had granted charters of incorporation to the

textile firms in the first place, it seemed logical enough to address them for further regulation."[17] Their course of action began by sending petitions to the state legislatures of Massachusetts. The first petition, although not sent from either the LFLRA or by workers in Lowell, was signed by over 1,000 employees from operatives in Fall River in 1842, of which nothing came of. In 1843, a second petition, which had the same outcome as the first, was sent to the legislature stating that a law for a ten-hour work day, "...was needed to safeguard the operatives' health, to give them time for 'mental and moral cultivation' as well as opportunity to attend to their personal affairs."[18] It was not until a third petition was sent to the legislature that a committee was assigned to look into the matter. The decision to do so was the first time in the history of American government that labor conditions were scrutinized by the government. This had a huge impact on the operators of the Lowell mills, and other mill towns, who took this step as a call to arms for a renewed sense of invigoration and action. Additional petitions were sent to add to the one in 1844. The petition stated:

> We the undersigned peaceable, industrious and hardworking men and women of Lowell, in view of our condition-the evils already come upon us, by toiling from 13 to 14 hours per day, confined in unhealthy

> apartments, exposed to the poisonous contagion of air, vegetable, animal and mineral properties, debarred from proper Physical Exercise, Mental discipline, and Mastication cruelly limited, and thereby hastening us on through pain, disease and privation, down to a premature grave…[19]

The committee that was assigned to investigate the matter was headed by William Schouler, a pro corporation newspaper editor in Lowell, a matter that in current times would be vehemently criticized as unjust and a conflict of interest. Schouler stated to the petitioners, headed by Bagley, "I would inform you, that as the greater part of the petitioners are female; it will be necessary for them to make the defense, or we shall be under the necessity of laying it aside."[20] This attempt at intimidation was not effective upon the ten-hour movement, to the credit of the women. Sarah Bagley and two Lowell operatives were interviewed by the committee, Bagley being put under the greatest amount of pressure. "Realizing that Sarah Bagley was the leader of the malcontents, the committee members plied her with questions intended to embarrass her. If the girls were not obliged to work such long hours, what would they do with their leisure…"[21] Bagley and the other witnesses incorporated the argument that other places in the world, such as England, had already adopted a shorter working day for their mill employees. Surely Lowell, the

one place that was supposed to be superior to the wretched mill towns of England and designed to be to epitome of what a mill town could be, was not to be outdone.

After touring the mills in Lowell, the committee published its report that a bill to limit the working hours was unnecessary and, since it would have to apply to all business within the state, place business within the state in an unfair competition with other companies throughout New England. In their opinion, the matter of hours and wages were best left up to the corporations themselves, and were not a legislative issue. In response to the petitioner's argument that England provided better protections for workers than England, the committee responded, "Here labor is on an equality with capital, and indeed controls it, and so it ever will be while free education and free constitution exist."[22]

Replying to the committee's conclusion, the LFLRA criticized Schouler of being a tool to the corporations. They sought revenge for his role in undermining the legislation and worked to have him defeated when he ran for reelection. Not to be discouraged, the Lowell Labor Reform Association issued another petition to the legislature in 1846, this time containing over 4,000 signatures. This too,

would come to naught, and would show to all those involved, that capitalism was in charge and that popular sovereignty was a façade. With discouragement at every door, the ten-hour movement slowly began to wane, and there would be no more petitions sent to the Massachusetts legislature matching anywhere near the numbers previously achieved.

In response, the LFLRA gradually began turning their attention towards more broad social changes than just working for the ten-hour movement as well as playing a more active role the New England Workingmen's Association. When the NEWA revised its constitution in March of 1846 and became the New England Reform League, members of the LFLRA assisted in that process and even held leadership positions within the organization. Taking a note from their brotherly counterpart, the LFLRA also amended their constitution and reemerged as the Lowell Female Industrial Reform and Mutual Aid Society. With its new name they worked to help women in matters beyond that of immediate work conditions within the mills. In the preamble and article II, the tone of the organization with its new name was made clear:

> We deem it a privilege and also a duty we owe to ourselves and our race, to lend a helping hand, feeble though it may be, to assist in carrying forward the great "Industrial Reform" already commenced, and which is progressing with such unlooked for success, in the Old and New World. To assist in scattering light and

> knowledge among the people-to encourage in every good word and work, those who are devoting themselves, and all that they have, to the cause of human elevation and human happiness…
>
> The objects of this Society shall be the diffusion of correct principles and useful practical knowledge among its members-the rendering of Industry honorable and attractive- the relieving and aiding of all who may be sick, or in want of the comforts and necessaries of life, or standing in need of the counsels and sympathies of true and benevolent hearts. Also to encourage and assist each other in self-culture, intellectual and moral, that we may be fitted for and occupy that station in society, which the truly good and useful ever should. That we may know and respect our own individual rights and privileges as females, and be prepared, understandingly, to maintain and enjoy them, irrespective of concentrated wealth or aristocratic usages of an anti-republican state of society.[23]

Through offering sick pay and personal assistance to women who joined the Lowell Mutual Aid Society, the organization was able to increase its numbers and have a broader appeal to women than just labor reform.

The changing demographic of Lowell and the operatives in mills in the late 1840's and early 1850's would spell the beginning of the end for the Lowell Mutual Aid Society. As the 1840's ended and new mills were built, the careful planning of Lowell was a luxury the corporations did not care to maintain. The city that was built to attract the daughters of freemen in the surrounding countryside began to resemble the English mill town slums. No longer did

Lowell look like a planned city with wide corridors for outdoor leisure. As the number of mills grew and competition became fiercer the desire to attract a specific quality of worker also decreased. With the decision by the committee looking into the ten-hour movement, the mills had essentially been given cart-blanche and the conditions within the mills deteriorated. The speedup, stretch-out, and premium system were all continued at a feverous pace. Soon, Lowell was not the only place young women from decent families could obtain employment and the mills began to exploit the large numbers of emigrants that were flooding into America at that time, specifically the Irish. Dublin stated that there were three main reasons why there was a decline in "…Yankee women in these years. First, there was a decline in the number of young, single women living in the rural communities… Second, and more importantly, increasing opportunities in alternative occupations gave rural young women a greater variety of wage options… Finally, the cumulative impact of the speedup, stretch-out, and wage cuts undoubtedly led many rural Yankee women to view mill employment as less desirable…"[24] Soon, Irish mill workers represented more than half of the workers within Lowell. The number of workers outstripped the demand and the mills were at their leisure to treat their employees in

any way they saw fit. If the operative did not like the conditions she could quit or if she caused problems she could be dismissed, there were dozens waiting for her place. As this new workforce evolved and the immigrants jockeyed for jobs, the role of the labor organizations in Lowell diminished and the fight for the daughters of free men faded like the dying burn of a match.

Chapter 4: The Origin of Species

The colonists in America were angry that they were paying a heavy price for the wars of the British Empire, specifically the French and Indian War. When the time came to make the Americans accountable for their own protection they protested that they had no representation in Parliament and as members of the British government they should have representation. This crisis led to the first successful revolt of a colony against their Monarch, the founding of the United States of America, and the birth of American Exceptionalism. The people that populated the country afterward had a unique relationship to their government that influenced individuals to stand up for their unalienable rights. As daughters of free men, the women who moved to Lowell to work in the textile mills were ingrained with a sense of exceptionalism and righteousness that they understood to be a gift from God and an essential part of their character. In the 1840's the women of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association experienced an injustice based on their sex that reawoke the fighting spirit their ancestors had bestowed upon them.

Many people involved in the ten-hour movement saw that the legislative committees created to look into the calls

for a ten-hour work day were insincere. Because the majority of the petitioners were female they felt that the committee was a farce, a play to try to pacify their cries. This inaction was a wake-up call to women that if they wanted their voices heard they needed to be able to hold representatives accountable; the cries of their fathers were now their cries. It was those unjust experiences of the female Lowell operatives and their counterparts that jumpstarted the women's rights movement in America.

Dublin states that, "The basic similarity of language and sensibility of moral reformers and labor reformers suggests a broader, distinctly female culture in this period uniting women reformers of varying interests."[1] Women were pressing against the boundaries of what was expected of them Barbara Welter states that, "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."[2] The very fact the women operatives were rebelling against this culture that shaped their identity proves that a revolution was taking shape. It was driven by economic reasons, a matter of financial stability on the farms of Yankee founders that drove these

women to push the boundaries that identified them in their culture. They had a taste of that which could not be forgotten, they had opened Pandora's Box. Welter suggests that:

> ...even while the women's magazines and related literature encouraged this ideal of the perfect woman, forces were at work in the nineteenth century which impelled woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society. The movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, the Civil War—all called forth responses from woman which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree.[3]

It is no coincidence that major strides in women's rights began in the late 1840's, a short time after the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. As women were arriving in Lowell and participating in the lyceum lectures and had access to books and literature the yearning for education and mental development blossomed. Women began leaving the mills to attend schools and in 1841 at Oberlin College in Ohio three women earned their bachelors, the first in the United States. Although that was a milestone, it was a meeting in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York that would be remembered for setting the ball in motion for women's suffrage and equality. The first convention held by women and for women, the Seneca Falls Convention was led by

Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Both women were active members in the abolitionist movement of the period and had met at in London at an abolitionist convention. Because of their gender they were unable to speak in public and cast aside. That experience created a bond between the two women who developed a friendship and dedication to fighting for women's rights. The abolitionist movement had a unique role in the development of the women's rights movement. The abolitionist movement, as a parallel movement to the Lowell labor movement, created a perfect storm to push change further along than had the labor movement happened by itself.

Both Mott and Stanton had grown up in New England, Mott in Massachusetts. Although Mott was older than Stanton, they both would have known about the Lowell textile mills as an option for women of their time to go to for employment. In the 1830's, during the first round of turn-outs in Lowell, Mott was in her early forties, but very much an advocate for women already. Stanton on the other hand, was only 21 and at an impressionable time in her life. For both of these women, reading about the conditions the women in Lowell faced, as well as their struggle for labor rights would have had a major influence

on their view of injustice based on gender. The National Park Service's Women's Rights Museum suggests, "The women's rights movement was the offspring of abolition. Many people actively supported both reforms. Several participants in the 1848 First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls had already labored in the anti-slavery movement. The organizers and their families - the Motts, Wrights, Stantons, M'Clintocks and Hunts - were active abolitionists to a greater or lesser degree."[4] For 2 days in late July, 1848, women and men came together in an effort to bring to light the disadvantages a woman was subjected to at the time. In the *Declaration of Sentiments*, the document drawn up for the convention, the inability of women to be in control of their professional life and economy was addressed, as well as the issue of suffrage. Mott and Cady were aware of the fact that government would never take a woman seriously in representation if they were not able to have a voice in elections, as had the committee in the ten-hour movement. "Sarah and Angelina Grimke and Abby Kelly, in advocating liberty for the black race, were early compelled to defend the right of free speech for themselves."[5] In the *Declaration of Sentiments* they stated:

> ...The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward

> woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.
>
> ...He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.
>
> ...He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
>
> ...Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides.
>
> ...He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns.
>
> ...He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.[6]

These declarations are all the outcome of the experiences women in America found themselves subjected to as workers and advocates for better working conditions. According to Katherine T. Bartlett, "[I]n the hands of Stanton, Anthony, and other early feminists, the equal rights principle compelled not only women's suffrage, but also women's rights to own property, make contracts, serve on juries, testify in court, receive an education, and achieve legal equality with husbands in marriage." Had the Lowell women not had their labor movement in the 1830's and 1840's the women's rights movement of the late 1840's would have been stunted, perhaps slowed down by an entire generation. The

women of Lowell, Sarah Bagley, and the LFLRA were all an early voice in the women's rights movement and played an essential role in sparking the historical actions of women and men who followed in their footsteps.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, the Boston Associates dreamed of creating an industrial complex and a monopoly in the textile manufacture business by building a city to be envious of and a exploiting the abundance of an untapped work force, local Yankee farm girls who knew what hard work meant. Their desire to make Lowell the epitome of a first class manufacturing town drove them to require the utmost in standards and a level of control and paternalism that dominated daily Lowell life in every waking minute. Aware of labor disputes in England among the textile workers, the Boston Associates and the agents in charge of the textile mills ruled with an iron fist. The women were expected to be of high moral character, live in the company boarding houses, attend church services regularly, and conform to the rules and regulations of the textile company they were working for.

The women, who came from near and far, almost all young daughters of free farmers in New England, were subjected to a rigid life in Lowell and the quote "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" was the motto of the Boston Manufacturing Company. The desire to assure the families supplying the female workers that their daughters would not

be corrupted was essential and ensuring that the women would not have the time or the inclination to get into trouble dictated all aspects of mill life. The tight control meant that operatives had very little free time in which they could better themselves or make new acquaintances outside of the company or the boardinghouse. Once a utopia to be immortalized in poems and literature, the long hours, short meal times, and increased pressure to produce more for less led the operatives to begin to quietly voice concerns and dissatisfaction. The iron fist the agents wielded left little imagination however, to the outcome of employees who openly criticized the conditions; the blacklist was universal in Lowell.

The step by step indoctrination process Dublin conveyed did much early on to squash discontent and prevent those who were unsatisfied with life in Lowell from recruiting others to join her in causing problems. It was this mutual dependence, the mandatory boardinghouse residences and rules, and the workforce homogeneity that ultimately led to the growth of a community of women. The one thing that frightened the corporations, unity in rebellion, was created by their own hands. When times were lean due to over expansion, competition, and a national

depression required the corporations to change their demands on the operatives. The women's perceived status in comparisons with the reality of how they were being treated led to the first uprisings in the 1830's. These early turn outs were loosely organized and rather impromptu, with both the 1834 and 1836 strikes having little success in affecting change. It was the actuality of the events themselves that played such an important role in women's history. But with a declining American economy and jobs few and far between, the momentum of these early strikes were quelled until the 1840's. Renewed by the speedup and stretch-out and the premium system, the first permanent female labor group, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, was founded.

The LFLRA, led by Sarah Bagley, and with the support of the New England Workingmen's Association, spearheaded the ten-hour movement to improve the working conditions of the operatives in the textile mills. Their repeated petitions to the Massachusetts legislature resulted in a half-hearted committee headed by a lackey for the mill corporations. In the end, the ten-hour movement was only successful in showing that women could be effective organizers of a spirited movement and leaders in their own

rights. With little effect towards getting a law passed to limit the working day to ten hours in the mills, the LFLRA broadened their sphere to help women in other aspects of their lives and rebranded themselves as the Lowell Female Industrial Reform and Mutual Aid Society. As the makeup of the Lowell operative changed from the Yankee farm girls to Irish immigrants and the supply of those in need of a job outstripped that which was available, the necessity of a labor organization waned.

Although the LFLRA was short lived in the grand scheme of things, it had a lasting impact on American exceptionalism and the history of the women's rights movement. Both Sarah Bagley and the spirit behind the labor movement inspired other women around New England to fight for the rights of women in America. The disadvantages the women in Lowell faced when they went up against the males of the government committee proved that as long as women were disenfranchised they would never truly have a voice in their own country. This acknowledgement carried over into the first convention for women's rights, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Spearheaded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, the meeting was a beacon for women all

over America to recognize the need to stand up for their place in their own country.

The importance of the role that female textile mill operatives in Lowell, Ma played in changing the course of women's history cannot be underestimated. The path to female equality in the United States began in the carefully planned manufacturing town on the banks of the Merrimack River in the birth place of American rebellion and democracy.

Chapter One Notes

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[22] Miles, 130.
[23] Appleton, 15.
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[28] Robinson, 21.
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[35] Robinson, 31.
[36] Dublin, *Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills*, 99-116.
[37] Ibid.

Chapter Two Notes

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[5] Ibid., 91
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Chapter Three Notes

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