

## The Lowell Girls go on strike, Part 1



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**L**ast year, I wrote a series of articles about the Bread and Roses strike of 1912, a large, militant and at times violent strike of female textile workers in Lawrence, MA. This issue, I begin a two-part article about another female-led strike that occurred some 80 years prior in Lowell, just 10 miles west of Lawrence. Though a smaller and less combative strike than Lawrence, it is no less significant a milestone in the history of the American labor movement.

This story begins in 1813, when businessman Francis Lowell founded the Boston Manufacturing Company and built a textile mill next to the Charles River in Waltham, MA. Differing from earlier textile production systems, where some processes were done in a factory while the weaving was often put out to neighboring farms to be done by hand, the Waltham mill was the first integrated mill in the United States, transforming raw cotton into cotton cloth in one mill building.

**Lowell died of pneumonia a few years later, but his** business associates, looking to expand the Waltham textile operations, purchased land on the Merrimack River in East Chelmsford, which was incorporated as the Town of Lowell in 1826. By 1840, the Lowell textile mills employed more than 8,000 workers—mostly young women between the ages of 15 and 30, the daughters of propertied New England farmers. Although their wages were half of what men were paid, many of these young women were eager to establish a life free from the domination of their fathers and husbands and for the educational opportunities available in Lowell. While work in the mills was oppressive and dangerous, it enabled the “Lowell Girls,” as they came to be called, to challenge societal assumptions of female inferiority and dependence.

Most had already completed some measure of formal education and were resolutely bent on self-improvement. Upon their arrival, they found a vibrant, lively working-class intellectual culture: Workers read voraciously in Lowell’s city library and reading rooms and subscribed to the large, informal “circulating libraries” that trafficked in novels. Many even pursued literary composition. Defying factory rules, workers would affix verses to their spinning frames, “to train their memories,” and pin up mathematical problems in the rooms where they worked. In the evenings, many enrolled in courses offered by the mills and attended public lectures at the Lyceum, a theatre offering 25 lectures per season for 25 cents.

The factory owners built hundreds of boarding houses near the mills, where textile workers lived year-round. About 26 women lived in each boarding house, with up to six sharing a bedroom. One worker described her quarters

as “a small, comfortless, half-ventilated apartment containing some half a dozen occupants.”

Workers often recruited their friends or relatives to the factories, creating a familial atmosphere among many of the rank and file. The Lowell girls were expected to attend church and demonstrate morals befitting proper society. The 1848 *Handbook to Lowell* proclaimed that “The company will not employ anyone who is habitually absent from public worship on the Sabbath, or known to be guilty of immorality.”

**The mill owners happily publicized the efforts of** these “literary mill girls,” boasting that they were the “most superior class of factory operative,” which greatly impressed foreign visitors to Lowell. But this masked the bitter opposition of many workers to the 12 to 14 hours of monotonous, exhausting work, which they saw was corrosive to their desire to learn and educate themselves. A former Lowell operative, looking back on her experience in the mills, recalled: “After one has worked from ten to fourteen hours at manual labor, it is impossible to study History, Philosophy, or Science.”

Conditions in the Lowell mills were severe. Employees worked from 5 a.m. until 7 p.m. averaging 73 hours per week. Each room usually had 80 women working at machines, with two male overseers managing the operation. The noise of the machines was described by one worker as “something frightful and infernal,” and although the rooms were hot, windows were often kept closed during the summer so that conditions for thread work remained optimal. The air, meanwhile, was filled with particles of thread and cloth.

**The “City of Spindles,” as Lowell came to be known,** quickly became the center of the Industrial Revolution in America, which translated directly into large profits for the textile corporations. The initial effort of the investors and managers to recruit female textile workers brought generous wages for the time, but with the economic depression of the early 1830s, the board of directors proposed a reduction in wages and increases in rent.

This was more than the Lowell Girls could tolerate. You can read about their response next month in Part 2.



Above, left: The Lowell Girls who worked at the textile mills  
Above, right: Some of the Lowell Mill buildings