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**Mill Work and Conditions:**

 **A Primary Source Archive**



Documents:

1. Letters of Mary Paul 1845-48
2. The Harbinger (an 1830’s newspaper)
3. Charles Dickens 1842 Account of Lowell
4. A Report from Manchester NH in 1840
5. Article from the magazine Lowell Offering



**DOCUMENT 1**

**The Letters of Mary Paul (Lowell Mill Girl)**

**1845-1848**

**Sept. 13th 1845 [Sent from Woodstock, VT]**

Dear Father

…I want you to consent to let me go to Lowell if you can. I think it would be much better for me than to stay about here. I could earn more to begin with than I can any where about here. I am in need of clothes which I cannot get if I stay about here and for that reason I want to go to Lowell or some other place.

**Nov 20th 1845**

…We found a place in a spinning room and the next morning I went to work. I like very well have 50 cts first payment increasing every payment as I get along in work have a first rate overseer and a very good boarding place. I work on the Lawrence Corporation. Mill is No 2 ***spinning*** room.

**Dec 21st 1845**

…My life and health are spared while others are cut off. Last Thursday one girl fell down and broke her neck which caused instant death. She was going in or coming out of the mill and slipped down it being very icy. The same day a man was killed by the [railroad] cars. Another had nearly all of his ribs broken. Another was nearly killed by falling down and having a bale of cotton fall on him.

Last Tuesday we were paid. In all I had six dollars and sixty cents [one month’s pay] paid $4.68 for board. With the rest I got me a pair of rubbers and a pair of 50.cts shoes. Next payment I am to have a dollar a week beside my board

… I think that the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell.

**Letter From Nov 5, 1848 on back… turn over🡪**

**November 5th 1848**

I presume you have heard before this that the wages are to be reduced on the 20th of this month. It is true and there seems to be a good deal of excitement on the subject but I can not tell what will be the consequence. The companies pretend they are losing immense sums [profits] every day and therefore they are obliged to lessen the wages, but this seems perfectly absurd to me for they are constantly making repairs and it seems to me that this would not be if there were really any danger of their being obliged to stop the mills.

I expect to be paid about two dollars a week but it will be dearly earned. I cannot tell how it is but never since I have worked in the mill have I been so very tired as I have for the last week

It is *very* hard indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life but perhaps I shall get used to it. I shall try hard to do so for there is no other work that I can do unless I spin and that I shall not undertake on any account.

DOCUMENT 2

**The Harbinger (an 1830’s newspaper)**

We have lately visited the cities of Lowell [Mass.] and Manchester [N.H.] and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the accounts which we had heard from persons engaged in the labor reform now beginning to agitate New England. We could scarcely credit the statements made in relation to the exhausting nature of the labor in the mills, and to the manner in which the young women- the operatives- lived in their boardinghouses, six sleeping in a room, poorly ventilated.

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

In Lowell live between seven and eight thousand young women, who are generally daughters of farmers of the different states of New England.

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

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

Thus thirteen hours per day of close attention and monotonous labor are extracted from the young women in these manufactories. . . . So fatigued [tired] -we should say, exhausted and worn out…. are the girls that they go to bed soon after their evening meal, and endeavor by a comparatively long sleep to resuscitate [revive] their weakened frames for the toil [work] of the coming day… When capital [the mill owners] has got thirteen hours of labor daily out of a being, it can get nothing more.

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

**CONTINUE ON BACK🡪**

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

to two looms is as much as should be demanded of an operative. This gives us some idea of the work and attention required during the thirteen hours of daily labor.

The atmosphere of such a room cannot of course be pure; on the contrary, it is charged with cotton filaments and dust, which, we are told, are very injurious [unhealthy] to the lungs.

On entering the room, although the day was warm, we remarked that the windows were down. We asked the reason, and a young woman answered … "when the wind blew, the threads did not work well." After we had been in the room for fifteen or twenty minutes, we found ourselves, as did the persons in quite a perspiration [sweating], produced by certain moisture which we observed in the air, as well as by the heat. . . .

[In their boardinghouses] The young women sleep upon an average six in a room, three beds to a room. There is no privacy, no retirement, here. It is almost impossible to read or write alone, as the parlor is full and so many sleep in the same chamber. A young woman remarked to us that if she had a letter to write, she did it on the head of a bandbox, sitting on a trunk, as there was no space for a table.

So live and toil the young women of our country in the boardinghouses and factories which the rich and influential of our land have built for them.

From *The Harbinger*, Nov. 14, 1836.

**DOCUMENT 3**

Charles Dickens account of a visit to Lowell 1842

The famous English writer Charles Dickens visited Francis the mills of Lowell mill in the winter of 1842 and recorded his impressions of what he saw. Dickens had witnessed the terrible conditions of factory life in England and was eager to see how the conditions in Lowell compared with the factories of his homeland.

**Charles Dickens on Mill Life:**

There are several factories in Lowell, each of which belongs to what we should term a Company of Proprietors [owners/investors], but what they call in America a Corporation.

I happened to arrive at the first factory just as the dinner hour was over, and the girls were returning to their work; indeed the stairs of the mill were thronged[filled] with them as I ascended [climbed up]. They [the girls] were all well dressed, but not to my thinking above their condition; for I like to see the [poorer] humbler classes of society careful of their dress and appearance…

These girls, as I have said, were all well dressed: and that phrase necessarily includes extreme cleanliness. They had serviceable bonnets, good warm cloaks, and shawls…

…They were healthy in appearance, many of them remarkably so, and had the manners and deportment of young women: not of degraded brutes of burden.

In the windows of some [of the mills], there were green plants, which were trained to shade the glass; in all, there was as much fresh air, cleanliness, and comfort, as the nature of the occupation would possibly admit of. Out of so large a number of females, many of whom were only then just verging upon womanhood, it may be reasonably supposed that some were delicate and fragile in appearance: no doubt there were. But I solemnly declare, that from all the crowd I saw in the different factories that day, I cannot recall or separate one young face that gave me a painful impression; not one young girl whom… I would have removed from those works if I had had the power.

CONTINUE ON BACK …

They [the mill girls] reside [live] in various boarding-houses near at hand. The owners of the mills are particularly careful to allow no persons to enter upon the possession of these houses, whose characters have not undergone the most scorching and thorough inquiry. Any complaint that is made against them, by the boarders, or by any one else, is fully investigated; and if good ground of complaint be shown to exist against them, they are removed, and their occupation is handed over to some more deserving person.

…[In Lowell] there are churches and chapels of various persuasions [types of religious denominations], in which the young women may observe that form of worship in which they have been educated.

I am now going to state three facts… firstly, there is a joint-stock piano in a great many of the boarding-houses. Secondly, nearly all these young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries. Thirdly, they have got up among themselves a periodical [magazine] called THE LOWELL OFFERING, "A repository of original articles, written exclusively by females actively employed in the mills.”

It is their station to work. And they do work. They labour in these mills, upon an average, twelve hours a day, which is unquestionably pretty hard work too.

In this brief account of Lowell… I have carefully abstained from drawing a comparison between these factories and those of our own land [England]. Many of the circumstances whose strong influence has been at work for years in our manufacturing towns have not arisen here; and there is no manufacturing population in Lowell, so to speak: for these girls (often the daughters of small farmers) come from other States, remain a few years in the mills, and then go home for good.

**DOCUMENT 4**

**A REPORT FROM MANCHESTER NH IN 1840**

Newspaper: *The Amoskeag Representative*, July 24, 1840

On our way to Concord, we visited this young manufacturing village [Manchester]. The place is entirely new, and consists of factories and machine shops; and as fine a set of girls as a man could desire to put his eyes upon, are gathered together there from the farms of… New Hampshire.

…As a husband, father, and brother, we could scarcely refrain from weeping to see their fairest of nature’s hand work [girls and young women], drawn from their quite homes, to be imprisoned in a factory – tied to the bell-rope – put under overseers- compelled [made] to inhale the … atmosphere- compelled thus to waste fourteen hours of each day, with only a few moments allowed them to eat their humble fare [meals]…

…These innocent creatures have not yet been corrupted by the moral pestilence [immorality] that lurks in many of our manufacturing villages….. how cruel to keep these young creatures so many hours shut up in an unwholesome atmosphere, so exhausting to fragile constitutions [physical make-up], so destructive to the glow of youth and beauty…

We have before repeatedly given our reasons, wherefore mechanics and laborers should never be required to work more than ten hours per day. There are more reasons why delicate females and small children should not be confined … the unhealthiness of the atmosphere they inhale, with the inability of the gentler sex and children, to endure as much as the hardy male laborer and mechanic.

…But the manufacturer seems to [think of] little else than his interest and his purse [wallet]… and these delicate females and children are dragged out of their beds at the ringing of the bell, before five in the morning, allowed some thirty minutes each for a lunch, called breakfast and dinner, morn and noon, and not permitted to leave at night until seven o’clock, when they get their tea… These plain, unvarnished facts we ask the honest farmer to read, before he sends his daughter to the factory- which should only be done in case of extreme poverty.

**DOCUMENT 5**

**Article from the magazine *Lowell Offering*.**

By Mill Girl Harriet Farley

***Background:*** *In this letter published in the* ***Lowell Offering****, mill girl Harriet Farley describes factory life to a friend at home.*

Dear Mary: You complain that I do not keep my promise of being a good correspondent…

…Well; I go to work every day--not earlier than I should at home, nor do I work later, but I mind the confinement more than I should in a more unpleasant season of the year. I have extra work now--I take care of three looms; and when I wrote you before I could not well take care of two. But help is very scarce now, and they let us do as much work as we please: and I am highly complimented upon my "powers of execution." [my skills on the looms]…

…these mills are not such dreadful places as you imagine them to be. You think them dark damp holes… it is no such thing. They are high spacious well-built edifices [buildings], with neat paths around them, and beautiful plots of greensward [grass lawns]. These are kept fresh by the "force-pumps" belonging to every corporation. And some of the corporations have beautiful flower gardens connected with the factories. One of the overseers, with whom I am acquainted, gave me a beautiful bouquet [of flowers] the other morning, which was radiant with all the colors of the rainbow, and fragrant with the sweet perfume of many kinds of mints and roses….

 But I have said enough of the outside of our mills--now for the inside. The rooms are high, very light, kept nicely whitewashed [painted], and extremely neat; with many plants in the window seats, and white cotton curtains to the windows. The machinery is very handsomely made and painted, and is placed in regular rows; thus, in a large mill, presenting a beautiful and uniform appearance. I have sometimes stood at one end of a row of green looms, when the girls were gone from between them, and seen the lathes moving back and forth, the harnesses up and down, the white cloth winding over the rollers, through the long perspective; and I have thought it beautiful.

Then the girls dress so neatly, and are so pretty. The mill girls are the prettiest in the city. You wonder how they can keep neat. Why not? There are no restrictions as to the number of pieces to be washed in the boarding-house. And, as there is plenty of water in the mill, the girls can wash their laces and muslins and other nice things them-selves, and no boarding woman ever refuses the conveniences for starching and ironing. You say too that you do not see how we can have so many conveniences and comforts at the price we pay for board. You must remember that the boarding-houses belong to the companies, and are let to the tenants far below the usual city rent--sometimes the rent is remitted. … So you see there are many ways by which we get along so well.

**CONTINUE ON BACK🡪**

You ask me how the girls behave in the mill, and what the punishments are. They behave very well while about their work, and I have never heard of punishments, or scoldings, or anything of that sort….

…Sometimes an overseer finds fault, and sometimes offends a girl by refusing to let her stay out of the mill, or some deprivation like that; and then, perhaps, there are tears and pouts on her part, but, in general, the tone of [interaction] between the girls and overseers is very good--pleasant, yet respectful.

The only punishment among the girls is dismission from their places [being fired]. They do not, as many think, withhold their wages; and as for corporal punishment [physical punishment]--mercy on me! To strike a female would cost any overseer his place [job].