Introduction

Lowell, Massachusetts, named in honor of Francis Cabot Lowell, was founded in the early 1820s as a planned town for the manufacture of textiles. It introduced a new system of integrated manufacturing to the United States and established new patterns of employment and urban development that were soon replicated around New England and elsewhere.

By 1840, the factories in Lowell employed at some estimates more than 8,000 textile workers, commonly known as mill girls or factory girls. These “operatives”—so-called because they operated the looms and other machinery—were primarily women and children from farming backgrounds.

The Lowell mills were the first hint of the industrial revolution to come in the United States, and with their success came two different views of the factories. For many of the mill girls, employment brought a sense of freedom. Unlike most young women of that era, they were free from parental authority, were able to earn their own money, and had broader educational opportunities. Many observers saw this challenge to the traditional roles of women as a threat to the American way of life. Others criticized the entire wage-labor factory system as a form of slavery and actively condemned and campaigned against the harsh working conditions and long hours and the increasing divisions between workers and factory owners.

The Transcendentalist reformer Orestes Brownson first published “The Laboring Classes” in his journal, the Boston Quarterly Review, in July 1840. It is an attack on the entire wage system but particularly focuses on how factory jobs affect the mill girls: “She has worked in a Factory,” Brownson argues, “is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.” In response, “A Factory Girl” published a defense of the mill girls in the December 1840 issue of the Lowell Offering, a journal of articles, fiction, and poetry written by and for the Lowell factory operatives. The author was probably Harriet Jane Farley, a mill girl who eventually became editor of the Lowell Offering.¹

Excerpts


The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture... There is a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence... the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than

when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. “She has worked in a Factory,” is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.


Whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? . . . girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England and the mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans. Think, for a moment, how many of the next generation are to spring from mothers doomed to infamy! . . . It has been asserted that to put ourselves under the influence and restraints of corporate bodies, is contrary to the spirit of our institutions, and to that love of independence which we ought to cherish. . . . We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. Neither have I ever discovered that any restraints were imposed upon us but those which were necessary for the peace and comfort of the whole, and for the promotion of the design for which we are collected, namely, to get money, as much of it and as fast as we can; and it is because our toil is so unremitting, that the wages of factory girls are higher than those of females engaged in most other occupations. It is these wages which, in spite of toil, restraint, discomfort, and prejudice, have drawn so many worthy, virtuous, intelligent, and well-educated girls to Lowell, and other factories; and it is the wages which are in great degree to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. . . . Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him God speed, if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls
have too much independence for that. . . . And now, if Mr. Brownson is a man, he will endeavor to retrieve the injury he has done; . . . though he will find error, ignorance, and folly among us, (and where would he find them not?) yet he would not see worthy and virtuous girls consigned to infamy, because they work in a factory.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the images of the two original documents, and read the edited excerpts. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Locate the following words and attempt to define them from context clues: slander, mortality, infamy, virtuous, folly. If necessary, employ a dictionary.

2. Describe the conditions in America around 1840 that encouraged young women to seek employment outside of their home.

3. List and explain three reasons Orestes Brownson used to oppose the employment of women as factory “operatives.”

4. Identify an argument from the “Lowell Offering” and explain how it countered the position of Orestes Brownson.

Extended Activity:

In 2013 the United States Postal Service issued a commemorative plate block of twelve first-class stamps titled “Made in America: Building a Nation.” Honoring workers of the 1930s, the photographic images on the stamps depicted three women—two identified as working in the textile and millinery trades and the third as a typist. (The men in the images are engaged in factory work, construction of skyscrapers, and working on the railroads.)

Using the Lowell and Brownson documents and the information from the stamps, develop an essay indicating the type of employment opportunities available to women in the 1840s and almost a century later in the 1930s.
republican. He shouts for liberty, stickles for equality, and is horrified at a Southern planter who keeps slaves.

One thing is certain; that of the amount actually produced by the operative, he retains a less proportion than it costs the master to feed, clothe, and lodge his slave. Wages is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, who would retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-holders.

Messrs. Thorne and Kimball, in their account of the emancipation of slavery in the West Indies, establish the fact that the employer may have the same amount of labor done 25 per ct. cheaper than the master. What does this fact prove, if not that wages is a more successful method of taxing labor than slavery? We really believe our Northern system of labor is more oppressive, and even more mischievous to morals, than the Southern. We, however, war against both. We have no toleration for either system. We would see a slave a man, but a free man, not a mere operative at wages. This he would not be were he now emancipated. Could the abolitionists effect all they propose, they would do the slave no service. Should emancipation work as well as they say, still it would do the slave no good. He would be a slave still, although with the title and cares of a freeman. If then we had no constitutional objections to abolitionism, we could not, for the reason here implied, be abolitionists.

The slave system, however, in name and form, is gradually disappearing from Christendom. It will not subsist much longer. But its place is taken by the system of labor at wages, and this system, we hold, is no improvement upon the one it supplants. Nevertheless the system of wages will triumph. It is the system which in name sounds honester than slavery, and in substance is more profitable to the master. It yields the wages of iniquity, without its opprobrium. It will therefore supplant slavery, and be sustained—for a time.

Now, what is the prospect of those who fall under the operation of this system? We ask, is there a reasonable chance that any considerable portion of the present generation of laborers, shall ever become owners of a sufficient portion of the funds of production, to be able to sustain themselves by laboring on their own capital, that is, as independent laborers? We need not ask this question, for everybody knows there is not. Well, is the condition of a laborer at wages the best that the great mass of the working people ought to be able to aspire to? Is it a condition,—may it be made a condition,—with which a man should be satisfied; in which he should be contented to live and die?

In our own country this condition has existed under its most favorable aspects, and has been made as good as it can be. It has reached all the excellence of which it is susceptible. It is now not improving but growing worse. The actual condition of the working-man to-day, viewed in all its bearings, is not so good as it was fifty years ago. If we have not been altogether misinformed, fifty years ago, health and industrious habits, constituted no mean stock in trade, and with them almost any man might aspire to competence and independence. But it is so no longer. The wilderness has receded, and already the new lands are beyond the reach of the mere laborer, and the employer has him at his mercy. If the present relation subsist, we see nothing better for him in reserve than what he now possesses, but something altogether worse.

We are not ignorant of the fact that men born poor become wealthy, and that men born to wealth become poor; but this fact does not necessarily

to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. It was observed (I have been told) by one of the Lowell overseers to his superintend-ent, that he could get girls enough who would work for one dollar per week. I very much doubt whether it would be possible; but supposing it true, they would not be such girls as will come and work for two, three and four dollars per week. Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him God speed; if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employ-ments should be rejected because it is toil-some, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much inde-pendence for that.

But it may be remarked, “You certainly cannot mean to intimate, that all factory girls are virtuous, intelligent,” &c. No, I do not; and Lowell would be a stranger place than it has ever been represented, if among eight thousand girls there were none of the ignorant and depraved. Calumniators have asserted, that all were vile, because they knew some to be so; and the sins of a few have been visited upon the many. While the mass of the worthy and virtuous have been unnoticed, in the even tenor of their way, the evil deeds of a few individuals have been trumpeted abroad, and they have been regarded as specimens of factory girls. It has been said, that factory girls are not thought of as much of any where else as they are in Lowell. If this be true, I am very glad of it; it is quite to our credit to be most respected where we are best known. Still, I presume, there are girls here who are a disgrace to the city, to their sex, and to humanity. But they do not fix the tone of public sentiment, and their morals are not the standard. There is an old adage, that “Birds of a feather flock together;” and a Captian Marryatt could probably find many females here who do not appear like “woman as she should be”—but men of a better sort have found females here of whom they have made companions, not for an evening or a day, but for life. The erroneous idea, wherever it exists, must be done away, that there is in factories but one sort of girls, and that the base and degraded sort. There are among us all sorts of girls. I believe that there are few occupations which can exhibit so many gradations of piety and intelligence; but the majority may at least lay claim to as much of the former as females in other stations of life. The more intelligent among them would scorn to sit night after night to view the gestures of a Fanny Elssler. The Improvement Circles,* the Lyceum and Institute, the religious meetings, the Circulating and other libraries, can bear testimony that the little time they have is spent in a better manner. Our well filled churches and lecture halls, and the high character of our clergymen and lecturers, will testify that the state of morals and intelligence is not low.

Mr. Brownson, I suppose, would not judge of our moral characters by our church-going tendencies; but as many do, a word on this subject may not be amiss. That there are many in Lowell who do not regularly attend any meeting, is as true as the correspondent of the Boston Times once represented it; but for this there are various reasons. There are many who come here for but a short time, and who are willing for a while to forego every usual privilege, that they may carry back to their homes the greatest possible sum they can save. There are widows earning money for the maintenance and education of their children; there are daughters providing for their aged and destitute parents; and there are widows, single women, and girls, endeavoring to obtain the wherewithal to furnish some other home than a factory boarding-house. Few rent, and the dress which custom has wrongly rendered essential, are expenses which they cannot afford, and they spend their Sab- baths in rest, reading, and meditation. There may also be many other motives to prevent a regular attendance at church, besides a disinclination to gratify and cultivate the moral sentiments.

There have also been nice calculations made, as to the small proportion which the amount of money deposited in the Savings Bank bears to that earned in the city; but this is not all that is saved. Some is deposited in Banks at other places, and some is put into the hands of personal friends. Still, much that is earned is immediately, though not foolishly, spent. Much that none but the parties concerned will ever know of, goes to procure comforts and necessities for some lowly home, and a great deal is spent for public benevolent purposes. The fifteen hun- dred dollars which were collected in one day for Missionary purposes by a single denomination in our city, though it may speak of what Mrs. Gilman calls the “too great tendency to over-flow in female benevolence,” certainly does not tell of hearts sullied by vice, or souls steeped in infamy. And it is pleasing to view the interest which so many of the factory girls take in the social and religious institutions of this place.