

*Eliza R. Hemmingway and Sarah Bagley, Testimony on Working Conditions in Early Factories, 1845*

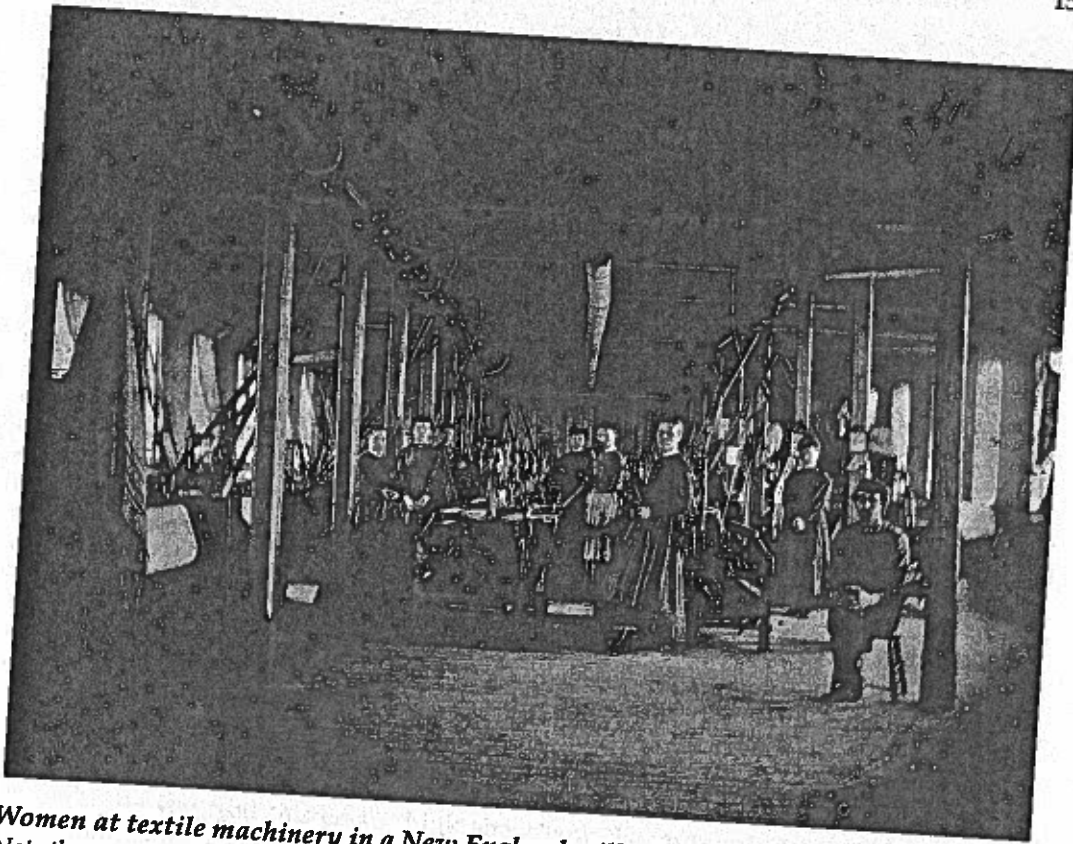
The textile factories of the first wave of industrialization might not have been built at all had their owners not believed they could count on a steady supply of cheap female labor. The history of industrialization as it affected both men and women needs to be understood in the context of the segmented labor market that women entered. Women were a major part of the first new workforce that was shaped into "modern" work patterns: long, uninterrupted hours of labor in a mechanized factory with little or no room for individual initiative.

One of the earliest mill towns was Lowell, Massachusetts, where factory owners began recruiting young, unmarried women to work in six textile mills in 1823. Rural young women already toiled at home at farm labor and also at "out-work," making goods that could be sold for cash. Compared to the work they had done at home, mill work at first seemed to pay well and to offer new opportunities. The Lowell mills developed a system of boardinghouses, which assured families that girls would live in wholesome surroundings. Letters sent home and fiction published by young women in the first wave of employment often testified to their pride in the financial independence that their new work brought.

Work in the mills was strictly segregated by sex: men were supervisors and skilled mechanics; women attended the spinning and weaving machinery. The daily earnings of almost all female workers depended on piece rates—the number of pieces or the output of the particular machine they tended. Their wages ranged from one-third to one-half that of men; the highest-paid woman generally earned less than the lowest-paid man. Employers responded to economic downturns in the 1830s either by lowering wages or by requiring more pieces per day. Mills established stricter discipline: workers who were insubordinate were fired; those who did not fulfill their yearlong contracts were blacklisted. But boardinghouse life meant that the factory women developed strong support networks; when their wages were cut and work hours lengthened in the 1830s, those who lived together came together in opposition to the owners and staged some of the earliest industrial strikes in American history. In 1836, 1,500 women walked out in protest, claiming their inheritance as "Daughters of the Revolution." One manifesto stated: "As our fathers resisted unto blood the lordly avarice of the British ministry, so we, their daughters, never will wear the yoke which has been prepared for us."\*

\*Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 98.

Excerpted from "The First Official Investigation of Labor Conditions in Massachusetts," in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, vol. 8, eds. John R. Commons, Ulrich B. Phillips, Eugene A. Gilmore, L. Sumner, and John B. Andrews (Cleveland, 1910), pp. 133-42.



*Women at textile machinery in a New England mill, photograph, ca. 1850.  
Note the poor lighting and the absence of anything to sit on during the long hours at the machines.  
(Courtesy of George Eastman House.)*

In January 1845, led by the indomitable worker Sarah Bagley, the Female Labor Reform Association organized a petition drive throughout the region, which forced the Massachusetts legislature to hold the first public hearings on industrial working conditions ever held in the United States. On February 13, 1845, Eliza Hemmingway and Sarah Bagley had their chance to testify. What did they think it was important for the legislators to know?

... The first petitioner who testified was Eliza R. Hemmingway. She had worked 2 years and 9 months in the Lowell Factories . . . Her employment is weaving—works by the piece . . . and attends one loom. Her wages average from \$16 to \$23 a month exclusive of board. She complained of the hours for labor being too many, and the time for meals too limited. In the summer season, the work is commenced at 5 o'clock, a.m., and continued till 7 o'clock, p.m., with half an hour for breakfast and three quarters of an hour for dinner. During eight months of the year, but half an hour is allowed for dinner. The air in the room

she considered not to be wholesome. There were 293 small [oil] lamps and 61 large lamps lighted in the room in which she worked, when evening work is required. These lamps are also lighted sometimes in the morning. About 130 females, 11 men, and 12 children (between the ages of 11 and 14) work in the room with her. . . . The children work but 9 months out of 12. The other 3 months they must attend school. Thinks that there is no day when there are less than six of the females out of the mill from sickness. Has known as many as thirty. She herself, is out quite often, on account of sickness. . . .

She thought there was a general desire among the females to work but ten hours, regardless of pay... She knew of one girl who last winter went into the mill at half past 4 o'clock, a.m. and worked till half past 7 o'clock, p.m. She did so to make more money. She earned from \$25 to \$30 per month. There is always a large number of girls at the gate wishing to get in before the bell rings... They do this to make more wages. A large number come to Lowell to make money to aid their parents who are poor. She knew of many cases where married women came to Lowell and worked in the mills to assist their husbands to pay for their farms...

Miss Sarah G. Bagley said she had worked in the Lowell Mills eight years and a half... She is a weaver, and works by the piece... She thinks the health of the operatives is not so good as the health of females who do housework or millinery business. The chief evil, so far as health is concerned, is the shortness of time allowed for meals. The next evil is the length of time employed—not giving them

time to cultivate their minds... She had presented a petition, same as the one before the Committee, to 132 girls, most of whom said that they would prefer to work but ten hours. In a pecuniary point of view, it would be better, as their health would be improved. They would have more time for sewing. Their intellectual, moral and religious habits would also be benefited by the change...

On Saturday the 1st of March, a portion of the Committee went to Lowell to examine the mills, and to observe the general appearance of the operatives... [The Committee concluded:] Not only is the interior of the mills kept in the best order, but great regard has been paid by many of the agents to the arrangement of the enclosed grounds. Grass plots have been laid out, trees have been planted... everything in and about the mills, and the boarding houses appeared, to have for its end, health and comfort... The average hours of work per day throughout the year was 11½; the workday was longest in April, when it reached 13½ hours].

*Maria Perkins Writes to Her Husband on the Eve of Being Sold, 1854*

Because masters understood the connection between literacy and rebelliousness, slaves were rarely taught to read and write. This anguished letter from Maria Perkins is unusual because it was written by an enslaved woman. We do not know whether Perkins's husband Richard managed to persuade his master to buy her and keep the family together. If a trader did buy Maria Perkins or her child, the likelihood of permanent separation was great. Scottsville, mentioned in the letter, is a small town near Charlottesville; Staunton is some forty miles away.

Charlottesville, Oct. 8th, 1852

Dear Husband I write you a letter to let you know my distress my master has sold albert to a trader on Monday court day and myself and other child is for sale also and I want you to let [me] hear from .....  
 asked me if I had got any person to buy me and I told them no they took me to the court house too they never put me up a man buy the name of brady bought albert and is on...

1. What is one of the earliest mill towns?
2. Boardinghouses assured families of what?
3. How did gender influence jobs in mills?
4. How did employers respond to the economy?
5. What was the discipline like?
6. Who is Sarah Bagley?
7. What were the hours for mill work?
8. How does mill work contribute to the health of the workers?
9. How does their health compare to the health of women who do other work?
10. What did the Committee that investigated Lowell find?

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NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ Section: \_\_\_\_\_

Lowell Mills Video Notes [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bF7\\_Z2eu-cY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bF7_Z2eu-cY)

1. List three inventions mentioned in the video that made American life easier
    - a.
    - b.
    - c.
  2. Catherine Beecher went undercover in the textile factories to find out what it was like. What did she discover about the lives of the girls working there? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  3. What kind of health hazards were experienced while working in the textile factories? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  4. Why were women and children more likely to work in textile factories than men? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  5. What was the main crop of the South? \_\_\_\_\_
  6. How are cotton farms in the South and the textile factories in the North connected? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  7. List three positive ways the Lowell mills impacted women.
    - a.
    - b.
    - c.
  8. List 3 negative ways the Lowell mills impacted women
    - a.
    - b.
    - c.
  9. Before the creation of textile factories, most clothing was made  
\_\_\_\_\_
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