



The Mill Girls



"Power Looms, One Girls Works Four," ca. 1867. Collection of Lowell National Historical Park.

Who were the "mill girls"?

Who were the "mill girls"? The term "mill girls" was occasionally used in antebellum newspapers and periodicals to describe the young Yankee women, generally 15 - 30 years old, who worked in the large cotton factories. They were also called "female operatives." Female textile workers often described themselves as mill girls, while affirming the virtue of their class and the dignity of their labor. During early labor protests, they asserted that they were "the daughters of freemen" whose rights could not be "trampled upon with impunity." Despite the hardship of mill work, women remained an important part of the textile workforce for many years. In the late 19th century, women held nearly two-thirds of all textile jobs in Lowell, with many immigrant women joining Yankee mill girls in the textile industry.

Choices and Change

To find workers for their mills in early Lowell, the textile corporations recruited women from New England farms and villages. These "daughters of Yankee farmers" had few economic opportunities, and many were enticed by the prospect of monthly cash wages and room and board in a comfortable boardinghouse. Beginning in 1823, with the opening of Lowell's first factory, large numbers of young women moved to the growing city. In the mills,

female workers faced long hours of toil and often grueling working conditions. Yet many female textile workers saved money and gained a measure of economic independence. In addition, the city's shops and religious institutions, along with its educational and recreational activities, offered an exciting social life that most women from small villages had never experienced.

Leaving Home

Most of the women who came to Lowell were from farms and small villages. Some had labored in small textile mills. Others had produced cotton or woolen goods or shoes for merchants who employed men and women in their homes and paid them by the pieces they produced.

On many farms the father was the property owner and head of household. Family members shared

daily and seasonal tasks. In addition to strenuous chores outdoors, mothers and daughters toiled in the home, cooking, cleaning, and making clothes. This hardscrabble life proved increasingly difficult for young women, and by the early 1800s a growing number of Yankee farm families faced severe economic difficulties. For many young, rural women, the decision to leave home for a city like Lowell was often born of necessity.

A New Way To Live And Work



For most young women, Lowell's social and economic opportunities existed within the limits imposed by the powerful textile corporations. Most pronounced was the control corporations exerted over the lives of their workers. The men who ran the corporations and managed the mills sought to regulate the moral conduct and social behavior of their workforce. Within the factory, overseers were responsible for maintaining work discipline and meeting production schedules. In the boardinghouses, the keepers enforced curfews and strict codes of conduct. Male and female workers were expected to observe the Sabbath, and temperance was strongly encouraged.

The clanging factory bell summoned operatives to and from the mill, constantly reminding them that their days were structured around work. Most textile workers toiled for 12 to 14 hours a day and half a day on Saturdays; the mills were closed on Sundays. Typically, mill girls were employed for nine to ten months of the year, and many left the factories during part of the summer to visit back home.



Emily Nutter's Workday on the Farm and in the Mill

<u>Time</u>	<u>Emily on the Farm</u>	<u>Emily in the Mill</u>	<u>Your Day</u>
4:00 am		Get up and dressed.	
5:00 am	Get up and dressed. Milk the cows in the barn.	Mill opens; work begins. Work at spinning frame.	
6:00 am			
7:00 am	Eat breakfast with family. Feed the chickens.	To boardinghouse for breakfast.	
8:00 am		Back to the mill. Machines are started.	
9:00 am	Help mother make cheese from milk.	Work at spinning frame.	
10:00am	Make bread. While dough rises, spin yarn. Keep an eye on baby brother.		
11:00 am			
12:00 pm	Help mother prepare dinner. Eat dinner and feed baby.	To boardinghouse with other mill girls for dinner.	
12:30 pm			
1:00 pm	Work in the garden. Gather vegetables.	Back to the mill. Machines are started.	
2:00 pm		Work at spinning frame.	
3:00 pm	Neighbor visits to trade wool for eggs. Spin while neighbor visits with mother.		
4:00 pm			
5:00 pm	Make stew from garden vegetables.		
6:00 pm	Milk cows again. Eat supper.		
7:00 pm	Wash dishes.	Work ends. Mill closes. Go to boardinghouse.	
7:30 pm	Sew new dress while father reads the Bible to the family.	Eat supper.	
8:00 pm		Free time (attend a lecture, read, sew, peddlers bring wares, young men visit, etc.)	
9:00 pm	Go to bed.		
10:00 pm		Lights out. Go to bed.	