



Interpretive Writing Anchor

Product # 230-60
Park: Lowell NHP

Interpreter: Tess Shatzer

What is an anchor product?

- *An example of one type of successful product*
- *A product that has met the certification standards*
- *product that may be used as an example to aid you in learning, coaching, or instructing others in pursuit of professional interpretive development in this competency area*

What an anchor product is not:

- *Perfect*
- *The only way a product should be delivered*
- *Reviewed for subject matter accuracy or appropriateness, or for delivery mechanics or style*

The certifiers have identified that this product successfully meets certification standards by demonstrating that it:

- **Creates "an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings/significance inherent in the resource"**
 - *Through skillful use of questioning, sensory images, and contrasting viewpoints this piece invites involvement on many different levels. A great deal of information is woven throughout the text, but is presented in an entirely interpretive genre that brings the information to life and allows the readers to place themselves in the scene and mindset of the mill girls. But the text goes beyond verbal "living history" to encourage readers to ponder the connections between then and now. The strongest example of this comes in the last paragraph where the modern reader is encouraged to relate intellectually and emotionally to the significance of the "choices and changes" that the mill girls and the cultural resources of Lowell represent.*
- **Provides "a clear focus for the audience's connection with the resource by demonstrating the cohesive development of a relevant idea or ideas, rather than relying primarily on a recital of a chronological narrative or a series of related facts"**
 - *The piece is cohesively structured around the relevant ideas of the "choices and changes" faced by the mill girls who came to work at Lowell, and how those universal ideas represented the larger choices and changes being faced by a nation undergoing great social and technological change. The cohesive structure of the text around this thematic focus creatively facilitates the opportunities provided for readers to discover the meanings/significance of the story that Lowell preserves through its cultural resources.*



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Intended Audience Statement:

The article will be used as text for a site bulletin that is being developed for Lowell National Historical Park focusing on the mill girls, Yankee women who worked in the factories of Lowell. The primary audience will be the adult visitor to Lowell, although it may be used as a "send-out" piece when we receive a request for information about the mill girls. The text will be complemented with graphics throughout. A reproduction of a recruitment poster, a photo of a restored boardinghouse, and a photo showing the weave room at the Boott Cotton Mills Museum will be included in the final product.

Choices & Changes

The United States of the 19th century was poised on a precipice of change. The nation was on the verge of a revolution - The Industrial Revolution. But not all citizens felt industry was the best choice. Many, like Thomas Jefferson, felt our future lay in the land - farms and cottage industries. Others, like Alexander Hamilton, believed that a strong nation meant a strong industry. As the country debated the merits of both options, so would Yankee women soon be asked to weigh the merits of Farm versus Factory. Here in Lowell, Massachusetts these choices were most acutely felt as agents from Boston and Newburyport began buying up farmland to establish a mill town along the banks of the Merrimack River.

In order to find labor for these mills, the merchants turned to the daughters of Yankee farmers. Agents would canvas the countryside in search of young women willing to come to Lowell for a chance to earn a wage in a factory. Posters like this one, asking for "young women between the ages of 15 and 30," represent the catalyst for a tremendous social change in 19th century New England. They could be seen in many small New England towns enticing women to make the choice to come to Lowell, and later Chicopee, Fall River, and New Bedford. Job options for a woman in the early 19th century were limited. She could work as a domestic servant, a teacher or become a wife and mother. Her choices were few. Thousands chose to make the journey. And for some it was a tremendous journey. From as far away as Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont - by horse, carriage, even by foot - women made the choice to leave a home, a family, a village for a chance at trying something new.

Most women came from small towns or villages. The largest building they had probably ever seen was the local church with its steeple, or maybe the family barn. Siblings would probably share a bed for warmth, with no fireplace in their room. The girls of the family would be responsible for helping with the cooking, the cleaning, tending the chickens and pigs, tending the household vegetable garden, and making the family's clothes. Some families would have even participated in producing the thread and cloth needed to make clothing. The life of a farm girl would be governed by nature, by the seasons. Her days would begin with the rooster crowing at dawn and end with the sunset. So, when a young woman chose to come to Lowell, her life would undergo a dramatic change.

Upon arriving in Lowell, a woman would first find a room in a boardinghouse. These large buildings, three floors high, were owned by the corporation and run by a female keeper. There were 8 units or apartments in the typical Boardinghouse, and each unit housed approximately 30 women. That would mean approximately 240 women in one house. The Boott Cotton Mills owned eight boardinghouses. That's almost 2,000 women living in the Boott Mill boardinghouses!

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Training Manager—Interpretation, Mather Training Center, PO Box 77, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-0077

Consider this scenario: A young woman arrives at a boardinghouse and is given a room. Almost immediately, she will experience many changes from what she knew on the farm. She will share a room with three other girls, and sleep two to a bed. There will likely be a fireplace in her room. Meals are provided as part of the room and board she pays to the keeper out of her weekly wages. Her clothes can be purchased from a shop downtown. But, the most dramatic change will be in the nature of her work. She will be roused from sleep every morning by the tolling of a bell - a bell that will govern her movements throughout the days. She will walk across the yard to the mill where she will enter the gates for the first time and gaze upon a sight for which nothing in her life could have prepared her.

Imagine a courtyard full of people all rushing to their machines, answering the call of the bell. The very size of the buildings, reaching one hundred feet into the sky, and the clock towering over the millyard with its clanging bell - imposing reminders of the drastic change from Farm to Factory. There is no longer a seasonal component to the work - it is governed by the clock.

What must it have been like to stand and gaze for the first time upon such buildings and marvel at their size? What might a young woman feel? Anxiety? Excitement? Fear? Little did she know that the biggest change she was yet to witness awaited her behind the doors of the mill.

The work for a woman on the weave room floor would have been different from weaving on the farm. At home the girl had choices - when to start work, when to stop. What color to dye the cloth. What pattern to make. The factory system changed that. In the mills, someone else made those choices. Here she would have tended mechanical power looms, or one side of a spinning frame. On the farm if they did weaving or spinning, it was on a hand-powered frame or wheel. In the mills, she tended at least two looms. On the farm, she worked one. On the farm, she would pass the shuttle back and forth between the warp threads, using foot pedals to control the harnesses and create a pattern, being careful not to break a thread. In the mill, the machine did all that for her. All she did was fill the shuttle with a fresh bobbin every five minutes and watch for broken threads. If anything broke on her machine she must call a mechanic to fix it, while on the farm she could often make the repairs herself. On the farm she could leave her loom, rest, and come back to it at a time of her choosing. In the factory, the pace is dictated by the overseer and the clock.

The changes faced by these mill girls were great - as was the choice faced by the country. Farm or Factory. Many women lamented the loss of freedom they felt in their work, as technological advancements changed the nature of their jobs - from active participant to passive observer. Yet at the same time they celebrated their new-found social freedom, as they began to enjoy leisure time to pursue their own interests, in many cases for the first time. This dilemma was eloquently expressed by Harriet Farley, a Lowell mill girl: "Each new invention was looked upon as a portent from the evil one for our destruction...yet think of the toil which would befall us were we to return to clothing the nations by hand."

Today, we face a change almost as dramatic as that faced by the mill girls of the 19th century. They stood on the edge of the Industrial Revolution. We face a new Revolution. A technological Revolution. Today's "help wanted" ads represent a dramatic social change as more and more of our lives are influenced by rapidly advancing computer technology. We may long for the "good old days" before computers, and lament the technology that makes our new machine obsolete even as we buy it, but would we return the tasks now delegated to computers to the human hands who once performed them? A question with no answer perhaps, but one worth considering.