

Lowell Notes

Sarah Bagley

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Lowell National Historical Park



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“Let no one suppose the ‘factory girls’ are without guardian. We are placed in the care of overseers who feel under moral obligation to look after our interests.”

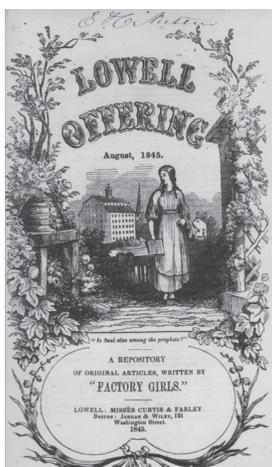
-Sarah Bagley, 1840
Lowell Offering

“I am sick at heart when I look into the social world and see woman so willingly made a dupe to the beastly selfishness of man.”

-Sarah Bagley, 1847
Letter to Angelique Martin

Between 1937 and 1848, Sarah Bagley’s view of the world around her changed radically. While much of her life remains surrounded by questions, the record of Bagley’s experiences as a worker and activist in Lowell, Massachusetts, reveals a remarkable spirit. Condemned by some as a rabble rouser and enemy of social order, many have celebrated her as a woman who fought against the confines of patriarchal industrial society on behalf of all her sisters in work and struggle.

LOWELL MILL GIRL



Sarah George Bagley was born April 19, 1806 to Nathan and Rhoda Witham Bagley. Raised in rural Candia, New Hampshire, she came to the booming industrial city of Lowell in 1837 at the age of 31, where she began work as a weaver at the Hamilton Manufacturing Company. Though older than many of the Yankee women who flocked to Lowell’s mills, Bagley shared with them the shift from rural family life to the urban industrial sphere.

While many found a sense of independence in coming to the city and earning a wage for the first time, the presence of paternalistic capitalism ensured that working women would never

be “without guardian;” or as Bagley would later assert, that factory women would never experience true freedom. Bagley was initially inclined to accept the prescribed order in the Spindle City—she became an excellent weaver and began to write for the *Lowell Offering*, a literary magazine written by mill workers but overseen and partly funded by the mill corporations. Bagley’s 1840 essay entitled “The Pleasures of Factory Work,” which argued that cotton mill labor was congenial to “pleasurable contemplation” and other noble pursuits, was representative of the positive, proper image of the mills presented in the pages of the *Offering*.

STIRRINGS OF CONFLICT

Was it deteriorating conditions in the cotton factories or some internal shift in Sarah Bagley’s worldview that precipitated her transformation from “mill girl” to ground-breaking labor activist in the span of only a few short years? By 1840 the exploitation of Lowell mill workers was becoming increasingly apparent: the frequent speedups and constant pressure to produce more cloth drove Bagley from the weave room into the cleaner, more relenting dressing room. Here she oversaw the starching (or “dressing”) of the warp threads that constitute the framework for woven cloth.

By 1842 the pressures that Bagley had experienced as a weaver began to erupt in the form

of labor conflict. In that year the Middlesex Manufacturing Company, one of Lowell’s textile giants, announced a speedup and subsequent 20% pay cut. In protest, seventy female workers walked out. All were fired and blacklisted. Lowell’s industrial capitalists made it very clear that they would not tolerate challenges to their authority, especially not by young female workers.

The walkout of 1842 did not instantly convert Sarah Bagley into a labor activist; several months after the unsuccessful strike by the Middlesex weavers, Bagley returned to weaving, this time as an employee of the Middlesex mills.

