

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 1837 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.

From March 26th to September 26th, inclusive.		From September 26th to March 26th, inclusive.	
Monday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Monday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.
Tuesday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Tuesday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.
Wednesday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Wednesday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.
Thursday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Thursday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.
Friday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Friday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.
Saturday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Saturday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.
Sunday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.	Sunday 5:30 A.M.	12:00 P.M.



A radical change in Sarah’s own views of the world around her, however, was not far off. How exactly she became involved with the labor movement is uncertain. In 1844, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA) was founded, becoming one of the earliest successful organizations of working women in the United States, with Sarah Bagley as its president. Working in cooperation with the New England Workingmen’s Association (NEWA) and spurred by a recent extension of work hours, the organizations submitted petitions totaling 2,139 names to the Massachusetts state legislature in 1845. These petitions demanded the reduction of the workday to ten hours on behalf workers’ health as well as their “intellectual, moral and religious habits.” In response, the legislature called a hearing and asked Bagley, among eight others, to testify. Despite the efforts of Bagley and her colleagues, the legislators ultimately refused to act against the powerful mills.

While advocating for the ten hour workday and against corporate abuses remained the cornerstones of the LFLRA’s activism under Bagley’s presidency, women’s rights issues quickly assumed a prominent role as well. Speaking at the first New England Workingmen’s Association convention at a time when public speaking represented a radical departure from acceptable feminine behavior, Bagley called on male workers to exercise their right to vote on behalf of female workers who lacked political representation.

The year 1845 also saw Sarah taking on new responsibilities as a writer and editor for the *Voice of Industry*, founded in 1844 by the New England Workingmen’s Association. In a July Fourth speech, Bagley—just named one of the NEWA’s five new vice presidents—condemned the *Lowell Offering* and its editor Harriet Farley as “a mouthpiece of the corporations,” voicing

a deep transformation of her own views. The ensuing public feud belied Bagley’s own praise of the mill companies published in the *Offering* only five years prior.

1846 was a busy year for Bagley and the Female Labor Reform Association, as she and several associates traveled throughout New England recruiting workers and organizing chapters of the FLRA and the NEWA. She also served as a delegate to numerous labor conventions and associated with a wide variety of progressives beyond the immediate labor movement, from abolitionists to prison reformers. Having left mill work in early 1846, Bagley now considered labor reform her primary calling. 1846 also saw an increase in the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association’s activities, mounting a campaign against yet another speedup and piece rate reduction, establishing a lecture series for workers, and penning pamphlets exposing the contradictions of mill owner paternalism and decrying the “ignorance, misery, and premature decay of both *body* and *intellect*” caused by mill work.

These achievements, however, were tempered by continued frustration on the ten-hour front. A second petition, this time numbering 4,500 signatures, was submitted to the legislature and rejected. Perhaps in part owing to the lack of success in attaining this goal, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association began to shift its focus away from the militant labor activism espoused by Sarah Bagley. Around this time Bagley also came into conflict with the *Voice of Industry*’s new editor, John Allen, over the role of women in the newspaper’s production. In October of 1846 Bagley published her last piece in the *Voice of Industry*; in early 1847 she left the Female Labor Reform and Mutual Aid Society (formerly LFLRA) after three brief but influential years of radical activism.

“CAN A WOMAN KEEP A SECRET?”



Telegraph operator Helen Campbell, 1917. Library of Congress.

Sarah Bagley once again defied expectations and gendered boundaries in the latter half of 1846 when she took a job as the nation’s first female telegraph operator, first in Lowell and then in Springfield, Massachusetts. Local newspapers were skeptical of both this new technology and of the ability of a woman to fill the position of telegraph depot superintendent—one paper mused, “Can a woman keep a secret?” However, Bagley proved well-suited to this work and through her example opened the new occupational field of telegraphy to women around the country.

Bagley remained employed at the telegraph depot until 1848, when Hamilton mill records show her mysteriously returning to work in the

weave room for five months. Bagley had been out of the mills for two years; it must have been a melancholy return for the woman who had risen to fame as an activist against the corporations that she now for whatever reason had to rely upon once again. In September of 1848 she left Lowell to care for her sick father and never returned. At this point Bagley’s life lapses again into partial obscurity—some report that she moved to Philadelphia and worked as a social reformer before marrying and moving to upstate New York to practice homeopathic medicine. While there is some evidence to support this story, others have asserted that she in fact dropped completely from the historical record after 1848. Her date of death is unknown.

A LEGACY OF CHANGE

Most of the insight into Sarah Bagley’s life available to us today stems from her eleven-year period of residence in Lowell, Massachusetts. The lingering obscurity that surrounds her life before 1837 and after 1848 suggests the story of an ordinary woman who, through changes both societal and personal, found herself doing extraordinary work. In Lowell, Bagley came to the forefront of progressive movements that would gather national momentum only later in the

century. The ten-hour workday was signed into law in 1874; only in 1920 did women gain a legal voice in national politics. Yet in her own transformation from rural daughter and dutiful mill worker to labor crusader and breaker of social barriers, Sarah Bagley began a personal fight for social change that would ultimately be left up to others to fulfill.