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.

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.

Choices and Changes
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.
corporation-owned buildings were lived in boardinghouses. These large, The majority of mill girls in Lowell

Lives in a Boardinghouse

for nine to ten months of Sundays. Typically, mill girls were Sundays; the mills were closed on

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.

Life in a Boardinghouse

The majority of mill girls in Lowell lived in boardinghouses. These large, corporation-owned buildings were often run by a female keeper, or a husband and wife. A typical boardinghouse consisted of eight units, with 20 to 40 women living in each unit.

For most young women, life in the boardinghouse was dramatically different from life on the farm. Usually they shared a room with three other

Many newcomers to Lowell had never seen a structure larger than a barn or church steeple. What must it have been like to stand and gaze for the first time upon Lowell's massive factory buildings and marvel at their size? What might a young woman have felt? Excitement? Anxiety? Fear? How did mill girls cope with their new surroundings?

One of Lowell's early leading labor reformers was a mill girl named Sarah Bagley. Born on a New Hampshire farm in 1806, Bagley arrived in Lowell in 1836 and worked in a number of mills. She became a powerful speaker on behalf of male and female workers, promoted the 10-hour workday, and edited the labor newspaper The Voice of Industry.

In a letter to a friend in 1846, Bagley promoted the labor-reform publication Factory Tracts as representing the interests of those "who are not willing to see our sex made into living machines to do the bidding of the incorporated aristocrats and reduced to a sum for their bodily services hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together." Although the struggles of Bagley and other mill girls to achieve legislation for a 10-hour day failed, Lowell's textile corporations did reduce the workday to 11 hours.

Voices of Protest

Lowell's textile corporations paid higher wages than those in other textile cities, but work was arduous and conditions were frequently unhealthy. Although the city's corporations threatened labor reformers with firing or blacklisting, many mill girls protested wage cuts and working conditions. Female workers struck twice in the 1830s. In the 1840s, female labor reformers banded together to promote the ten-hour day, in the face of strong corporate opposition. Few strikes succeeded, however, and Lowell's workforce remained largely unorganized.

Adding to the difficulties of organizing Lowell's operatives was the changing ethnic composition of the workforce. The number of Irish employed in Lowell's mills rose dramatically in the 1840s, as Irish men and women fled their famine-stricken land. Thousands of immigrants from many other countries settled in Lowell in the decades after the Civil War, yet women remained a major part of the Lowell's textile workforce. In large strikes against the textile manufacturers in 1903 and 1912, women workers played prominent roles.

Pamphlet of Bagley's work

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