

# Workshop 3

## The Lowell System: Women in a New Industrial Society

**I**n the earliest days of American industry, the Boston Manufacturing Company created an innovative, single-location manufacturing enterprise at Lowell, Massachusetts, that depended on the recruitment of women millworkers. Using primary source documents, you can examine the changing face of gender, class, and labor in the 1830s and 1840s through the lens of the Lowell System and determine if Lowell was a real opportunity for working women or a dead end.

- Was the Lowell experience of the 1830s and 1840s an opportunity for working women or a dead end?
- How does the Lowell experience set the stage for modern American industry?

Explore these and other questions by examining the original documents and images of the period.

### Objectives

- To gain a deeper understanding of historical content through reading and discussing primary source documents.
- To examine the motivation of the industrialists who created the Lowell manufacturing enterprise.
- To understand the daily lives of women in a typical mill town of the 1830s and 1840s, including work environment, boardinghouse living, paternalistic rules, moral codes, and social dynamics.
- To probe whether Lowell was an opportunity or a limiting experience for young women.
- To explore the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society and examine the roots of American capitalism.

# Before You Watch/ Homework Assignment

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Before viewing “The Lowell System: Women in a New Industrial Society,” you should have already read the following primary source documents, while considering the accompanying questions. These materials represent a selection made by the professor based on the readings available to the onscreen teachers. For additional primary source readings, go to Resources on page 45.

These materials can be found online at [www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/before.html](http://www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/before.html).

## For Lecture and Activity One: Primary Source Documents

### ● The Lowell Offering

The following three selections are from the *Lowell Offering*, a publication which grew out of the Lowell Experiment’s women’s literary clubs.

#### ● “A Week in the Mill,” Anonymous, *Lowell Offering*, Volume V, 1845

An anonymous writer describes a mill girl’s typical week as neither idyllic nor terrible.

#### Consider These Questions

1. Do you think that the author is giving an accurate portrayal of life in the mills? Do you think that she is exaggerating or softening the real situation in her description? Why?
2. Were you surprised by anything in her description? Do you think that non-millworkers of her time would have been surprised by anything she wrote?

#### ● “Editorial: Two Suicides,” Harriet Farley, *Lowell Offering*, Volume IV, 1844

This document responds to newspaper reports of two suicides committed by female millworkers.

#### Consider These Questions

1. Do you agree or disagree with the way the author has explained the suicides?
2. How do you think life in the factory system might lead to suicide?

#### ● “Letters From Susan,” Harriet Farley, *Lowell Offering*, Volume IV, 1844

These articles describe factory life in the form of fictitious letters from a new mill girl to a friend at home.

#### Consider These Questions

1. Why do you think Harriet Farley chose to write these pieces in this particular style?
2. Who do you think the intended audience is, and what are the underlying messages that Farley is communicating? Do you think her descriptions of factory life are honest and accurate?
3. What do these letters say about women’s transition from country life to factory life?

# Before You Watch/ Homework Assignment, cont'd.

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- **Mary Paul Letter, November 5, 1848**

Mary Paul, who works on and off in the Lowell factories, writes this letter to her father upon her return to Lowell after some time away.

**Consider These Questions**

1. How are Mary Paul's descriptions of factory life similar to and different from those in the *Lowell Offering*? How does her tone compare with those selections?
2. What does this letter say about some women's actual life experiences versus the idea of "woman's sphere of influence" being limited to the home? How might people who believed in the "cult of ideal womanhood" have reacted to Paul's words and tone?

- **Harriet H. Robinson, "Early Factory Labor in New England," 1883**

Harriet H. Robinson, a worker in the Lowell factories from age 10 to 23, describes the changes brought about by women's ability to earn a more substantial income and about the strike of 1836, which followed a decrease in wages.

**Consider These Questions**

1. How do you think "the possession of money" changed the lives of the mill girls? Do you think this had an impact on women in general?
2. What did Harriet Robinson think of the strike?
3. How do her descriptions compare with the others?

- **"Female Workers of Lowell," *The Harbinger*, November 14, 1836**

A magazine report investigates the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, and Manchester, New Hampshire.

**Consider These Questions**

1. How does this account differ from the others?
2. Why do you think it is the first article that mentions the sounds of the machines?
3. What does this article assume about the women's working capabilities? What does it assume about workers' rights? If the workers were men, do you think the article would have drawn the same conclusions about the working conditions?

- **Charles Dickens, "General Appearance of Mill Workers," From *American Notes*, 1842**

In the following selection, Charles Dickens describes his visit to Lowell, which was part of his four-month-long tour of America in 1842.

**Consider These Questions**

1. How did contemporary assumptions about women shape the way that Dickens described the workers?
2. How does Dickens address assumptions about class status?
3. Do you think he would have described the situation differently if he had been American rather than British?

# Before You Watch/ Homework Assignment, cont'd.

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- **Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 1889**

Lucy Larcom, a millworker and contributor to the *Lowell Offering*, describes some of her observations about the mills and the mill girls' lives.

### **Consider These Questions**

1. How does Lucy Larcom think that the mill experience influenced the girls? How do you think it impacted her life and identity?
2. What does this selection say about the factory rules and the extent to which they could be bent? How does it affect your ideas about the mill girls?

## **Optional: Video Program From *A Biography of America***

The video programs from *A Biography of America* will provide you with context and detail for thinking about and using the *Primary Sources* videos and associated materials.

- **Program 7. The Rise of Capitalism (approximately 27 minutes in length)**

Individual enterprise merges with technological innovation to launch the Commercial Revolution—the seedbed of American industry. The program features the ideas of Adam Smith, the efforts of entrepreneurs in New England and Chicago, the Lowell Mills Experiment, and the engineering feats involved in Chicago's early transformation from marsh to metropolis.

Visit [Learner.org](http://Learner.org), the Annenberg/CPB Web site, for more information on *A Biography of America* at [www.learner.org/go2bio](http://www.learner.org/go2bio).

# On-Site Activities and Timeline

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The video program “The Lowell System” includes two lectures and one onscreen teacher activity. This guide provides activities and reflection on these components. Follow the series and the approximate timelines on the following pages, depending on the length of your workshop session and whether you are watching a real-time broadcast or videotape.

## Two-Hour Workshop Sessions (Real-Time Broadcast or Videotape)

You can receive graduate credit *only* if you take all eight workshops in two-hour sessions. Visit [Learner.org](http://Learner.org) (go to [www.learner.org/4gradcredit](http://www.learner.org/4gradcredit)) for details.

Choose the series of activities below based on whether you are viewing a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel or a videotape.

|                                                              | Viewing Real-Time Broadcast                                   | Viewing Videotapes                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                              | Watch the full program, then do each of the activities below. | Watch each video segment listed below, pausing after each one to do the related activity. |
| Watch Full Program                                           | 57 minutes                                                    | —                                                                                         |
| Watch Lecture One:<br>The Lowell Experiment                  | —                                                             | 22 minutes                                                                                |
| Do Activity One:<br>Was Lowell an Opportunity or a Dead End? | 35 minutes                                                    | 35 minutes                                                                                |
| Watch Onscreen Activity One:<br>The Lowell Experiment        | —                                                             | 20 minutes                                                                                |
| Reflect on Onscreen Activity One:<br>The Lowell Experiment   | 13 minutes                                                    | 16 minutes                                                                                |
| Watch Lecture Two:<br>The Legacy of Lowell                   | —                                                             | 9 minutes                                                                                 |
| Do Activity Two:<br>What Is Your Final Opinion?              | 15 minutes                                                    | 18 minutes                                                                                |

All times are approximate.

Note: Reading of homework assignments and viewing of *A Biography of America* programs are not included here. These should be completed prior to attending the workshop session. See Before You Watch/Homework Assignment beginning on page 36 for more information.

# On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

## One-and-a-Half-Hour Workshop Sessions (Videotape Only)

Select *either* Workshop A or Workshop B. Each is one-and-a-half hours long. In Workshop A, you will watch lectures and do the related activities. In Workshop B, you will watch lectures and do the related activities, as well as watch onscreen activities and reflect on them.

|                                                              | Workshop A                                                                                | Workshop B |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
|                                                              | Watch the video segments listed below, pausing after each one to do the related activity. |            |
| Watch Lecture One: The Lowell Experiment                     | 22 minutes                                                                                | 22 minutes |
| Do Activity One:<br>Was Lowell an Opportunity or a Dead End? | 40 minutes                                                                                | 29 minutes |
| Watch Onscreen Activity One:<br>The Lowell Experiment        | —                                                                                         | 20 minutes |
| Reflect on Onscreen Activity One:<br>The Lowell Experiment   | —                                                                                         | 10 minutes |
| Watch Lecture Two: The Legacy of Lowell                      | 9 minutes                                                                                 | 9 minutes  |
| Do Activity Two: What Is Your Final Opinion?                 | 19 minutes                                                                                | —          |

## Forty-Five-Minute Workshop Sessions (Videotape Only)

If you can only meet for 45 minutes, you can take this workshop as two consecutive 45-minute sessions. Take Workshop A before Workshop B.

|                                                              | Workshop A                                                          | Workshop B                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|                                                              | Watch the video segment listed below, then do the related activity. |                                    |
|                                                              |                                                                     | Do this workshop after Workshop A. |
| Watch Lecture One: The Lowell Experiment                     | 22 minutes                                                          | —                                  |
| Do Activity One:<br>Was Lowell an Opportunity or a Dead End? | 23 minutes                                                          | —                                  |
| Watch Lecture Two: The Legacy of Lowell                      | —                                                                   | 9 minutes                          |
| Do Activity Two: What Is Your Final Opinion?                 | —                                                                   | 36 minutes                         |

All times are approximate.

Note: Reading of homework assignments and viewing of *A Biography of America* programs are not included here. These should be completed prior to attending the workshop session. See Before You Watch/Homework Assignment beginning on page 36 for more information.

# On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

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## Lecture One: The Lowell Experiment

Lecturer: Professor Louis Masur

View this portion of the video program. The transcript of this lecture can be found online at [www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/transcript01.html](http://www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/transcript01.html).

## Activity One: Was Lowell an Opportunity or a Dead End?

Analyze the documents and argue the case that Lowell was an exploitative situation and mostly a dead end for working women. Write down each argument, point by point. Use the questions to guide your analysis.

Now take the other side of the argument. Make the case that young women were liberated by the opportunity at Lowell. Argue each point on the list you wrote against the Lowell experience.

Note: This activity has two sets of questions: those that relate to specific documents and appear on each document page and the Before You Watch/Home-work Assignment pages, and the more general, "big picture" questions listed below. You may begin with general or specific questions depending upon your preference.

### Consider These Questions

1. For what variety of reasons did women come to Lowell to work?
2. What does the evidence suggest about their experience at Lowell?
3. How did outsiders view the Lowell Mills?
4. What was the nature of paternalism at Lowell?
5. What were the grievances of the workers against the factories?

**Facilitators:** Divide participants into two groups. Assign one group to argue that Lowell was an opportunity for young women and the other to argue that it was exploitative and a dead end. Each group should review the primary source documents and consider the questions while preparing for the debate. Allow sufficient time for preparation. (Recommended: 30 minutes)

For the debate, have each team choose four people to argue the question for their team. Other team members will act as advisors to the debaters. The following is the debate procedure:

1. The first speaker for each team presents his/her position. (3 minutes each)
2. The second speaker for each team attacks the case of the opposing team. (2 minutes each)
3. The third speaker for each team offers a rebuttal to the second speaker. (2 minutes each)
4. The fourth speaker closes his/her team's case. (2 minutes each)

Note: Allow up to 5 minutes between speakers to give teams an opportunity to revise their arguments.

*"Now, this experiment in manufacturing on a grand scale, the transition to industrial capitalism in America, did not come without its anxieties, did not come smoothly and easily. It wasn't celebrated by everyone. And it's important to keep that in mind...because it will also help us understand better exactly the nature of Lowell as an experience for these women, with its boardinghouses, with its paternalistic structure."*

—Louis Masur

# On-Site Activities and Timeline, cont'd.

## Onscreen Activity One: The Lowell Experiment

View this portion of the video program.

## Reflection One: The Lowell Experiment

Look at the evidence the teachers use to build their cases as to whether Lowell was an exploitative or liberating experience for women. What other evidence might be cited for each position?

Here is a summary of the teachers' arguments to get you started:

| Pro                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Con                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lowell led to women's economic gain, intellectual improvement, community building, and independence.</li><li>• Women earned money to help their families.</li><li>• It gave women choices.</li><li>• Women became active members of society.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lowell's paternalistic system exploited women economically.</li><li>• Women's health suffered under poor working conditions.</li><li>• Working in factories ruined women's reputations.</li><li>• Women's choices were limited, from use of time to choice of husband.</li></ul> |

## Lecture Two: The Legacy of Lowell

Lecturer: Professor Louis Masur

View this portion of the video program. The transcript of this lecture can be found online at [www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/transcript2\\_01.html](http://www.learner.org/primarysources/lowell/transcript2_01.html).

## Activity Two: What Is Your Final Opinion?

Consider the primary source documents, Professor Masur's lectures, the onscreen group debates, and your own findings from Activity One. What are your final thoughts on the experiment at Lowell? Use the questions to guide your reflection.

### Consider These Questions

1. Now that you have argued each side and seen others debate the issue, which argument do you think makes the strongest case: Was Lowell an opportunity for working women or a dead end? Why?
2. What are your thoughts about the Lowell System?

**Facilitators:** Discuss the questions in a large group.

*"I think that word 'experiment' is important because... it's the first thing. It's a transitional stage, a transition to clear-cut capitalism. All that paternalism, the boardinghouses, the concern for the other elements of the workers' lives, well, in time, that fades away. Indeed, Lowell itself transforms when the labor force of young women from New England gives way to a largely immigrant workforce."*

—Louis Masur

# Homework Assignment

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Before the next workshop, “Concerning Emancipation: Who Freed the Slaves?,” read and view the primary source documents and images listed beginning on page 48, and consider the accompanying questions. These materials can be found online at [www.learner.org/primarysources/emancipation/before.html](http://www.learner.org/primarysources/emancipation/before.html).

## Classroom Applications

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Reflect on how you teach the Lowell system in your classroom. How would you teach it differently using primary sources?

Now consider these lesson ideas contributed by *Primary Sources* teachers.

### Debate the Lowell Experience

**Contributed by Larry David**

This lesson is similar to the *Primary Sources* workshop debate about the positive and negative aspects of the Lowell experience on young women. It was conducted over two days and augmented with a trip to the Lowell Mills.

The students first examined several readings for homework, including:

- “The Spirit of Discontent”
- Selection from *A New England Girlhood*
- “A Week in the Mill”
- “Editorial: Two Suicides”
- Selections from the *Lowell Offering*
- Selections from Dorothy Read
- “Letters From Susan”
- Other selected letters

I divided the students into two groups, each one with a different position. One group represented the viewpoint that Lowell was beneficial to the young women who worked there. The other group represented the viewpoint that Lowell was a paternalistic, limiting experience for young women.

Each group spent a half hour writing its opening speech. A speaker selected from each group then presented the speech to the whole class. After the first speeches, the students went back into their original groups and wrote a rebuttal to the other group’s first statement. Both groups then had a speaker present their rebuttals. The groups then reconvened for the final time and wrote their final statements. A representative from each group presented its conclusions to the whole class.

# Classroom Applications, cont'd.

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At the end of the debate, students who were not selected to be speakers had to give their opinions. Rather than following the viewpoint assigned to their group, they considered the following questions:

1. What was your opinion at the beginning of class?
2. How has your opinion changed?
3. Were there any arguments that you thought of that you did not hear during the debate? If so, what were they?

## Discuss the Lowell Union Movement

**Contributed by Sandra Stuppard**

This lesson focuses on the different perspectives of the women working in Lowell and how these perspectives changed over time.

First, I wanted the students to see how the mills in Lowell were initially very liberating for the women who worked in them. The students discussed the gender gap between men and women of this time period and how the financial independence of working at the mills affected the women. The discussion dealt with how the women used the income, how the money affected their families, and how this work affected the women's public image.

The next discussion revolved around the more negative aspects of the mills in Lowell and explored the union movement. Students looked at why the women organized; i.e., the conditions under which they worked, the amount of time they worked, and the compensation they received. They took the perspective of both the mill owners (those trying to make money) as well as the women who worked the mills in an attempt to understand each side and the complex power struggle that ensued.

During the class discussion about the formation of unions in Lowell, I found that most of my students had a negative view of unions, taking the side that unions allowed people to do less work for the money they were paid. I took this opportunity to compare the formation of unions in Lowell to current union issues, illustrating how unions worked to support the workers in Lowell and how they can do the same thing today.

*"When [you] teach history, especially a survey course in U.S. [history], and you're trying to cover a lot of material, you tend to look at everything as a piece in history. You know, this happened, and Lowell led to the women's movement. And you see the 100-year, 200-year span.... What happened for me this morning is [realizing] that women who were involved in [Lowell] weren't thinking of the historical span; they were thinking of their lives."*

—Andrew Sullivan

# Resources

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## Print Resources

Dublin, Thomas. *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.

Eisler, Benita. *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840-1845)*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977.

Martineau, Harriet. *Society in America*. London, Saunders and Otley, 1837. New York: AMS Press, 1966.

Selections from this book were read by the onscreen participants in *Primary Sources*, but were not included in the online workshop. They include:

- "Manufacturing Labour"
- "Manufactures"

Prude, Jonathan. *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Wheeler, William Bruce and Susan D. Becker. *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, Fourth Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998.

Selections from this book were read by the onscreen participants in *Primary Sources*, but were not included in the online workshop. They include:

- "Slave Labor Versus Free Labor," Orestes A. Brownson, *Boston Quarterly Review* 3
- "A Lowell Boardinghouse," Reverend Henry A. Mills, *Lowell, As It Was, and As It Is*

## Web Resources

### Lowell National Historic Park

<http://www.nps.gov/lowe/millgirls.htm>

This site gives historical background on the Mill Girls—who they were and where they came from. It also contains links to historical information and classroom activities on early manufacturing and industrialization in Lowell.

### "Recording a Hard Life With Gentle Words," by Dorothy Read

<http://www.bennington.edu/users/students/dotread/millgirls.html>

This document was read by the onscreen participants in *Primary Sources*, but was not included in the online workshop.

### Women in the Workplace: Labor Unions

[http://www.historynet.com/WomensHistory/articles/19967\\_cover.htm](http://www.historynet.com/WomensHistory/articles/19967_cover.htm)

This article describes the labor movement in Lowell in the context of the larger women's movement, as well as in the context of the labor and organization movements.

# Resources, cont'd.

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## **A Curriculum of United States Labor History for Teachers: Sponsored by the Illinois Labor History Society**

<http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/lowell.html>

This site contains four primary source documents detailing the conditions in the Lowell Mills. Documents include a handbook of factory rules, a Massachusetts investigation into the labor conditions in the mills, a description of factory life, and a listing of boardinghouse rules.

## **Reading Habits of the Nineteenth-Century New England Mill Girls**

<http://www.tetranet.net/users/stolbert/research/millgirl.html>

This essay describes what the young female workers read, why they read, and how they acquired reading materials. Citing both primary and secondary sources, the essay explores the literary aspect of the women's and girls' lives.

## **Curriculum Resources**

### **Modernizing Cotton in New England**

[http://www.historynet.com/NationalHistoryDay/03\\_educators/teach99/lesson1/lesson1\\_pt1.htm](http://www.historynet.com/NationalHistoryDay/03_educators/teach99/lesson1/lesson1_pt1.htm)

This lesson plan includes an oral history document from one of the Lowell millworkers which details her feelings and experiences. The activity allows students to see one person's experience in the context of the larger historical time period; i.e. the use of greater technology in manufacturing.

### **Liberty Rhetoric Among Lowell Mill Girls**

<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/lowell.html>

This site describes how the women of Lowell used writing and literature to portray a more positive view of their lives and conditions. It contains both primary source documents (the writings of the Mill Girls) and questions designed for teachers to use as discussion starters.

### **Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills**

[http://www.si.edu/lemelson/centerpieces/whole\\_cloth/u2ei/u2materials/act11main.html](http://www.si.edu/lemelson/centerpieces/whole_cloth/u2ei/u2materials/act11main.html)

This lesson allows teachers and students to explore a contemporary scholarly journal article regarding the Lowell Mills. The activity focuses on discussions of the lives of the women who worked in the mills, as well as their efforts to organize into labor unions.