

Methods of Reform – The Lowell Mill Girls

Author: Wendy Schanberger, Hereford Middle School, Baltimore County Public Schools

Grade Level: Middle

Duration of lesson: 2 periods

Overview:

The Lowell Mills in Lowell, Massachusetts was often held up as a model industrial workplace in early nineteenth-century America. The textile factory was staffed by young, female carders, spinners, and weavers, who earned a reputation for “Christian modesty” and diligence. Their wages helped to send their brothers to college and pay off family debts.

No workplace is without conflict, however, and in this lesson students will learn about the Mill girls’ complaints, and their methods of combating poor working conditions. By exploring the girls’ own journal of the period, the *Lowell Offering*, and other documents, students will see how group organization and advocacy would eventually lead to important social change. Unable to vote or even own property, the Lowell girls nevertheless helped to set the country on a path toward protecting child labor and improving working conditions for industrial workers. The Lowell girls’ activities also provide an example of the importance of women in American History.

Related [National History Standards:](#)

Content Standards:

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

Standard 2: The sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period.

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.

D. Consider multiple perspectives.

E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.

J. Hypothesize the influence of the past.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

A. Identify issues and problems in the past.

F. Evaluate the implementation of a decision.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will define reform.
- Students will identify different reform methods.
- Students will evaluate reform efforts inspired by the Lowell Mill girls.

Topic Background

What do Francis Cabot Lowell, young women and children, water, and a power loom all have in common? Together, they would start one of the most successful factory systems in the United States.ⁱ Lowell had visions of bringing all the textiles under one roof, carding, spinning, and weaving. To do this he needed a location, workers, and the technology to make the factory run. In 1812, Lowell found his prime real estate in Waltham, Massachusetts (later to be known as Lowell). By 1821, Lowell and his associates purchased the land rights to the Pawtucket Canal. This purchase allowed for the men to build several textile mills and enlarge the canal for water-power to the looms. Three of the four components were now in place. All that was missing was the workers. But who would work in the mills? “The United States, still overwhelmingly agrarian, needed all its farm labor.”ⁱⁱ The idea of having young women work the mills became very inviting. This was a resource that would not quickly run out. “The Boston Associates theorized that high wages, well-conducted boarding houses, and a strict system of moral guardianship would draw the girls from the New England countryside.”ⁱⁱⁱ The associates were right; girls flocked from all over the countryside making the transition from farms to factories.

In the mid-1840s, American women had limited choices in regards to their lives. Many women settled for being wives and mothers. They could not vote or own property and if they entered the work force (in jobs available to women), they made significantly less than their male counterparts. When the textile mills of New England began to open early in the 19th century, this was a ray of hope in the lives of many native born, white, New England women. It was a way to escape the domestic life. In the six textile mills located at Lowell, there were approximately 1200 people employed and over 90% of them were women.^{iv} Upon taking the job, women were required to sign a regulation paper, “...promising regular church attendance, strict moral behavior, and residence in a corporation boardinghouse.”^v Boarding houses were created to help support the women employed at the factory system. Thirty to forty women would live together in each boardinghouse. Here, the young women would be closely monitored by the house “mothers” who were required to report any wrongdoings of the girls to the management at the mills. The regulations were not only created to protect the moral qualities of the young women employed there, but to also maintain the productivity in the mills. “Good girls do good work” was the overall motto of the associates and with the regulations; they meant to keep it that way.

The boarding house regulations were strict. They ruled every aspect of the girls life; from how to enter the boarding house, how to eat at meals, times of the curfews, and information about visitors were detailed in every contract and in every house.^{vi} The strict nature of the rules paid off whenever visitors came to the mills. Manufacturing associates from London, visitors from local mills, and even Charles Dickens reported on the exceptional behavior of the women in Lowell. William Scoresby said, “...there was not the slightest appearance of boldness or vulgarity; on the contrary, a very becoming propriety and respectability of manner.”^{vii}

In the 1800s, many girls had completed their early schooling by the age of ten. Though most girls took up domestic duties at home, some families had a need for these young children to go to work to either help the financial situation of a family or to have the opportunity to earn their own money.^{viii} These young girls would start at the mills as “doffers” which were girls who were in charge of changing the bobbins on the spinning machines. These girls were paid slightly less than the girls running the looms, but their nimble movements and small frames allowed them to maneuver around the machines in ways others could not. Up until 1842, with the creation of the “ten hour law” these young girls were expected to work fourteen hour work days.^{ix} The young girls enjoyed working with the older girls in the mills. They looked to them in a caring way, having an overall good influence on them. The kindness of the older girls and the commonality to their lives at home kept the girls at the mills; piano playing, library readings, sewing circles, and letter writing were part of the cultural and domestic activities that reminded them of home.^x Many of those early doffers ended up staying at the mills, moving up through the ranks becoming carders, spinners, and weavers. These girls usually stayed at the mills until they were married, returned home, entered a trade or business, or even went to college.

Harriet Hanson Robinson, Lucy Larcom, and Sarah Bagley were just a few of the mill girls who documented the actual happenings from inside the factory. It was these women who contributed to the *Lowell Offering*, a journal documenting the feelings of the girls in the mills. “The factory bell begins to ring, and we must all obey, and to our old employment go, or else be turned away.”^{xi} Similar poems and writings were published to help explain that what the visitors saw was not a clear definition of what happened there. As the girls were working to put brothers back home through college, save family farms by paying off debts, or simply to take the financial burden of another child off of the family back home, many of them were falling ill from a variety of ailments. Several different types of lung problems were documented at the mills such as inflammation and croup. But, there were also cases of Cholera Infantum, scarlet fever, measles, dysentery, and inflammation of the brain.^{xii} In 1844, there were 362 deaths in the mills, 200 of which were children under the age of ten.^{xiii} The girls truly believed it was the mill work that was injuring their overall health of the young. The girls used the *Lowell Offering* as an outlet to the public to share their health concerns at the mills. In a unified force, the girls formed the Factory Girls’ Association and eventually, staged a “turn-out” or strike. Fifteen thousand girls walked out of the mills in Lowell. They held out for thirty days. Evicted from their boarding houses, and money running out, they had no choice but to return back to work. Later, the girls started the Female Labor Reform Association and people around the country finally started paying attention to the concerns about working conditions for the women there. Though not much was gained through their initial meetings and the staged strike, the women left a legacy in which the New England Labor Reform League was created where three of its eight board members were women.^{xiv}

By the 1860s, the era of the “mill girl” was over. Increasing European immigration became the sought after workers for the mills. Immigrants were

willing to work longer hours for less pay. The factories grew to be more Irish, Greek, Russian, and Polish and the native New England girls, with frustration over the regulations, abandoned the mills and went home.^{xv} Historians today still compare the mills of New England to that of Great Britain making references to the reasons women went to work, the health conditions in the mills, as well as the effects of the mills on the economy of the two countries.

Without the Lowell mill girls, many reforms in labor, especially in children's labor, may not have taken place so quickly. Just after the Lowell mill strike, other mills in New England went on strike, successfully cutting the hours in a workday, creating better working conditions, and increasing the hourly pay. These new hours, conditions, and pay were not necessarily the best, but it was an improvement. Had all the concerns at Lowell been addressed, history may not have had to endure other work place disasters such as the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in 1911. The one hundred forty-six people who perished from the flames in that fire may have been saved if someone had created a better work environment.

Historically, it is amazing that it was women who made these efforts in early labor reform. These were the same women who were not allowed to vote, own property, or make decisions about their lives. The women of Lowell were the ones who wrote and published their feelings, organized a labor union, and started a strike to alert people about the conditions at the mill. Introducing reform through the Lowell mill girls helps to include women in American history. The individual stories of the mill girls, their methods of reform, and the impact they made on our history helps to demonstrate that women have played a significant role in history.

Today's child labor laws reflect the early reform efforts made by the Lowell Mill girls. Shorter hours, time for education, work permits, minimum wage and safe working conditions exist today because of these girls. Today's children see the labor laws as restrictions and forget that they have freedoms and choices that did not exist in the mid-1800s. Learning the personal stories and situations that led up to the current labor laws may lend itself to help students better appreciate the working conditions and choices in the work place that exist for our children today. Through it all, one thing has remained. Many women who may have left home in need to help their own family ended up helping future generations of women gain their independence. The independence of these women led them to build up their dowries, save to buy their own clothing, and to save for a college education. As one mill worker, Sally Rice, realized, "I have but one life to live and I want to enjoy myself as well as I can while I live."^{xvi}

Annotated Bibliography:

Bender, Thomas. *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975.

This book chronicles the history of the United States from “farms to factories.” Bender looks at the writings of the middle class and other urban reformers to determine what was the “urban vision” that brought about a new industrial way of life. He gives special attention to the residents of Lowell, Massachusetts, the first industrialized city in New England.

Colbert, David, ed. *Eyewitness to America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

This book is a collection of eyewitness accounts of various moments in history from 1492 to 1994. Colbert highlights different moments in our nation’s history and shares the moment from many different perspectives of many different people. Colbert lets each person’s bias of the event show through giving true meaning to “eyewitness.”

Jones, Constance. *1001 Things Everyone Should Know About Women’s History*. New York: Double Day, 1998,

Ms. Jones walks the reader through key moments in women’s history. Here analysis of the events and descriptions makes the reader aware that women have played an integral part in American History.

Lindenmeyer, Kriste, ed. *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2000.

This book is a collection of 17 short stories about the lives of regular women living in the United States. Although there is no story about women working in the mills, it reflects on the other opportunities women had during the antebellum period including women who defied the odds by going to school and creating a profession for herself.

Robinson, Harriet Hanson. *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*. Kailua, Hawaii: Press Pacifica, 1976.

This book documents life in the early mills from one who was actually there, Harriet Hanson Robinson. Harriet gives the background of how she interpreted mill life during her time there and the impact it made on her life. She also outlines the investigation into the overall practices at the mills.

Weiner, Lynn Y. *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

This book outlines women’s employment through time exploring the connections between women’s work and the ideologies of the time period. The book is broken into two parts, the first being that of the working “girls,” those who were single,

self-supporting members in society to the working “mothers,” who are married, key figures in the main stream labor force.

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer. *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

This book records the history of working women in America with emphasis on the struggles women have faced to gain equality in the work place. She gives credit to those women who have often been overlooked, slave women, colonial women, pioneer women, in other words, the women who helped settle and develop our country.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*. New York: HarperCollin, 1999,

Mr. Zinn addresses the extraordinary efforts of the American people trying to create change. He focuses on America's women and factory workers demonstrating how they created change and reflects on the repercussions of those changes.

Vocabulary

Reform: to form again; to change into an improved form or condition.

Overseer: a person who overlooks, inspects, or supervises

Boarding house: a house that provides meals and lodging

Teaching Procedures

1. As a motivational activity, display transparency of Resource Sheet #1, "Child Labor Laws of Maryland." Have students examine the laws and answer the questions at the bottom of the transparency.

Have students share their responses. List the methods that the students would use to have the current laws changed. **DO NOT DISCUSS THESE RESPONSES AT THIS TIME.**

2. Inform students that they will be discussing early reform efforts and the methods used to make the public aware of the need for reform. Using prior knowledge, have students define the word "reform." Use root word/prefix cues to help determine the class definition. Once students have determined that reform is defined as "to form again; to change into an improved form or condition," then have students predict possible reforms that may have been of public concern during the antebellum time period (Possible answers could include slavery, treatment of Native Americans, and immigration). Ask the students if they have ever heard of the Lowell Mills. Tell them that today, we are going to read about the Mill community to determine if a reform needs to be addressed.
3. Distribute Resource Sheet #2, "Prediction Guide: The Truth Behind the Lowell Mills." Students should read through the guide to determine what statements they believe to be true and what statements they believe to be false (students may complete this individually or as a whole class).
4. Have students read Resource Sheet #3, "Life at Lowell Mills." As a during reading strategy have students make corrections on their prediction guide, crossing out false statements and placing a star next to statements that are true.
5. As an after reading strategy have students complete Resource Sheet #2 by making a generalization about life in the Lowell Mills.
6. Conduct a brief discussion asking students if they would have wanted to live the same way as the Lowell Mill girls. Ask students:

What they would have wanted changed if they lived and worked in Lowell?

How they could make the public aware of the reforms that needed to take place in the Mills?

Refer back to the original list of reform methods that the students created about the current child labor laws. Add to the list where appropriate. Explain

to the students that these are methods of reform meant to bring problems to public attention in order to bring about change. Examples of some methods of reform include, but are not limited to, the following: protest, editorials, books, articles in magazines, political cartoons, photographs, speeches, writing to politicians, legislation, amendment to the Constitution, strike, boycott, marches, poems, and song lyrics.

7. Have students review the list of possible reform methods. Pose the question:

What methods could the Lowell Mill girls have used in the 1840's to make the public aware of their problem?

Make a notation on the student generated list to indicate possible choices the Lowell Mill girls would have had in this time period.

8. Distribute Resource Sheet #4, "Lowell Reform: What's the Best Strategy?" Have students examine the methods of reform used by the Lowell Mill girls and rate them on their effectiveness to make the public aware of the problem. Students should view each reform method and complete the chart titled.

9. Discuss each of the methods of reform used in Lowell. Explain that these early methods eventually culminated in a reform movement that led to the current labor laws. Use the following questions to guide the discussion:

How successful was the method of reform? Explain.

What may have made the method more successful?

10. Refer back to Resource Sheet #1 displayed at the beginning of class. Have students complete Resource Sheet #5, "Child Labor Laws: Lowell vs. Today." The chart offers some information; students must fill in the missing information. The information leads students to think about how the problems in the Lowell Mills created safer work environments for children today.

11. To assess student understanding, distribute Resource Sheet #6, "Lowell Reform: Other Possibilities." Students should recreate this reform method using information from the readings. Have students explain why their method is effective.

12. Possible extension activities include:

Students could research Mill workers such as Harriet Hanson Robinson or Lucy Larcom. Have students determine what role these women played in the Mill reform efforts.

From the book titled, *The Human Side of American History* edited by Richard Brown, have students reflect on the excerpt by Charles Dickens. Have students determine if the article is biased or unbiased. Use details from the text and to support their choice.

Have students research a 20th century reform movement. Have them evaluate the methods of reform used during this movement for their effectiveness.

Primary Source Annotation:

Child Labor Laws

Information concerning current child labor laws can be found at www.dllr.state.md.us/labor/empm.html for the state of Maryland or at www.dol.gov/elaws for other state jurisdictions. Students will examine current state laws about child labor to determine what parts of our current laws may have been written as a result from the Lowell Mill experience.

Readings about the Lowell Mills Girls

“Factory Rules from the Handbook to Lowell, 1848.”

“Massachusetts Investigation into Labor Conditions”

“A Description of Factory life by an Associationist in 1846”

“Boarding House Rules from the Handbook to Lowell, 1848”

Students will read each of these articles to make generalizations about life in the Lowell Mills. All articles can be found at www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/lowell.html. For differentiation or to use technology, students could complete this part of the assignment in a computer lab.

Reform methods used by the Lowell Mill Girls

This is found under “Questions for Pondering – About the Lowell Mill Girls” at, www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/queslowe.html. This site offers sources dated from 1840-1860. It includes photographs, a printed timetable in the Lowell Offering magazine, a song, a poem, and a news article on a strike. Questions and other information are given at this site.

ⁱ Adapted from Wertheheimer, Barbara M. *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977. p. 56.

ⁱⁱ Wertheheimer, p. 56

ⁱⁱⁱ Bender, Thomas. *Toward Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975. p. 35.

^{iv} Adapted from Wertheheimer, p. 62.

^v Weiner, Lynn Y. *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1985. p. 16.

^{vi} Adapted from Weiner, p. 17.

^{vii} Weiner, p. 17.

^{viii} Adapted from Robinson, Harriet Hanson. *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*. Kailua, Hawaii: Press Pacifica,

p.19

^{ix} Adapted from Robinson, p.19

^x Adapted from Weiner, p. 17

^{xi} Wertheheimer, p. 65

^{xii} Adapted from Robinson, p. 143.

^{xiii} Adapted from Robinson, p. 143

^{xiv} Adapted from Wertheheimer, p. 76.

^{xv} Adapted from Weiner, p. 17.

^{xvi} Weiner, p. 18.