

The Value of a Dollar

GRADE LEVEL: 3-5

INTRODUCTION

“The Value of a Dollar” is adapted from a popular activity in the Tsongas Industrial History Center’s *Farm to Factory* curriculum guide. Farm to Factory, an in-school program especially suited to grades 3 - 5, focuses on the transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one as experienced by young New England women who left their farms to work in the Lowell mills. A full-text copy of the guide, including the original version of this activity and other activities, is available at http://www.uml.edu/tsongas/materials/curriculum_materials.htm.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The phrase “Lowell Mill Girls” was used to describe female textile workers in Lowell, Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century. At that time, farm girls and young women from throughout New England were recruited to work in textile factories like the one in Lowell, which employed a workforce which was about three quarters female; this characteristic—unique for its time—caused two social effects: a close examination of the women’s moral behavior, and a form of labor agitation.

Barilla Taylor was a real Lowell “mill girl” who left her farm in Roxbury, Maine, when she was 15 years old. She and her friends lived in Lowell in the early 1840s. Many of them earned \$3.25 each week, and paid \$1.25 for room and board. This activity asks students to consider some of the items workers might have purchased with the remaining \$2.00, as well as estimate what similar items would cost today.

THEMES: wage labor, income, cost of living, economic choice

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will understand:

1. Basic costs of living in the nineteenth century.
2. How to compare prices in the past with prices today.
3. How people in the past made decisions about how to spend earned wages.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.1 (Social Studies Skills) All students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving, and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography, and economics.

STANDARD 6.5 (Economics) All students will acquire an understanding of key economic principles.

MATERIALS

- Chart: “Prices: 1843 and Today” (printed and copied for each student)
- Chalkboard or bulletin board to record responses
- Calculator

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY

Part 1: Spending Money (15 min.):

Ask the class how many students receive weekly or monthly allowances, if they “work” to earn their money and, if so, what they do. Then ask them to think about how they choose to spend their “wages.” Do they buy toys, movie tickets, snacks, clothes, etc.? Are there any rules about how they can or cannot spend their money? Is it their responsibility to pay for their own necessities or only for luxuries? Be sure they know how to define each term. Record answers on the chalkboard.

Then, ask students to consider what other costs they have that their parents pay for, such as housing, food, doctor and dentist visits, furniture, electricity, television, etc. Which expenses cost more—those that students pay for or those their parents pay for? Would students be able to pay for all of their expenses if, for some reason, their parents were unable to?

Part 2: Applying the Lesson (35 min.)

Introduce the character of Barilla Taylor, a 15-year-old girl who went to Lowell, Massachusetts to work in a textile factory and did pay for all of her own expenses. Explain that she was part of a larger movement that brought many young people—even children—from homes to cities to work in factories.

Distribute the “Prices: 1843 and Today” chart. Explain that Barilla earned \$3.25 per week. From that, she paid \$1.25 per week for room and board (a place to live and basic food). From the remaining \$2.00, she had to decide what else she could afford.

First have students review the chart and divide what they see into two lists: necessities and luxuries. Spend a few minutes having them explain how they made those choices.

Then have students help fill in the rest of the chart. How much would each of the items (or their closet equivalent!) cost in dollars and cents today? This may take some time and creativity—a shawl, for example, might be replaced by a coat, six concerts for two people might become season passes to a game, and a daguerreotype in leather case compared to a digital camera.

NOTE: Rather than deciding all of “Today’s” prices in class, you might choose to send the worksheet home with students the night before and have them ask their parents help them fill in the “today” section, then compare answers during this part of the activity in class the next day.

Finally, ask students to spend five to ten minutes deciding, if they were Barilla, how they would spend their remaining \$2.00 a week. You may choose to have students work in small groups to develop their answers.

Part 3: Concluding Discussion (10 min.)

Discuss how students chose to spend Barilla's "discretionary" income (hopefully, they chose different ways to allow for some discussion about economic choices). It is also worth mentioning how many expenses do not appear on the "Prices: 1843 and Today" chart that Barilla might also have to take into account. What would happen in an emergency or if Barilla became sick, for example? What do students know about savings (do any have savings accounts)? Can Barilla save money given her budget? If a portion of her \$2.00 goes to the bank, what might she have to give up in exchange each week?

PRACTICE/REINFORCEMENT

To encourage students to think about how economic decisions affect their lives every day, have them create an account book to compare their expenses for a week. You might choose to have them focus only on the money they actually spend (i.e. for lunch, snacks, etc.), or have them work with parents to develop a more comprehensive budget for a week.

REFERENCES and WEBSITES:

This lesson plan is adapted from "The Value of a Dollar," part of the *Farm to Factory* curriculum guide of the Tsongas Industrial History Center (http://www.uml.edu/tsongas/materials/curriculum_materials.htm).

For more information about women's and children's labor and factory work see:

Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) and *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives and the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Kate Pfordresher, "Daughters of Free Men," video (Wycoff, NJ: American Social Film Library, 1987).

Prices: 1843 and Today

EXPENSE	Cost in 1843	Cost Today
<i>Rent, food, and laundry per week (1843)</i>		
<i>Women</i>	\$1.25	
<i>Men</i>	\$1.75	
<i>Gold watch</i>	\$20 to 25	
<i>Six concerts for two people</i>	\$1.00	
<i>Novel</i>	\$0.25	
<i>Young ladies' leather walking shoes</i>	\$0.75 to \$1.00	
<i>Boy's dancing shoes</i>	\$1.00 to \$1.75	
<i>Ladies' World of Fashion and Literature (monthly magazine; price per year)</i>	\$2.00	
<i>Postage</i>		
<i>For 2 pages or less sent between 30 and 80 miles</i>	\$0.20	
<i>For 3 pages or more sent between 80 and 150 miles</i>	\$0.25	
<i>Library membership (per year)</i>	\$0.50	
<i>Lowell to Boston train fare</i>	\$0.75	
<i>One pound of sugar</i>	\$0.10	
<i>Daguerrotype in leather case</i>	\$4.00	
<i>Shawl</i>	\$2.00	