

What's a Country Girl to Do?

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

INTRODUCTION:

“What’s a Country Girl to Do?” is adapted from a lesson plan developed for the Organization of American Historian’s *Magazine of History*. The complete lesson plan, posted online in the resources section of the ONMAP website, <http://www.etc.net/tah/>, uses primary sources to examine the personal dilemmas about where to live and work facing journeymen, mill workers, squatters, and slaveholders in the early nineteenth century when modern capitalism was in its formative stages. This adaptation asks students to imagine the types of risks, opportunities, and anxieties of an 18-year-old New Hampshire country girl. If students had lived in the early nineteenth century, would they have stayed in the countryside to help with the housework, raise their parents’ babies, and contributed to the dairy or would they have gone to Lowell to work in the mills?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early nineteenth century, population growth coupled with economic limits in rural New England restricted opportunities. With few prospects for marriage and property acquisition, many young women from the countryside were drawn to urban factories, such as the mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. There they could earn wages to supplement their family’s income and build dowries for themselves prior to marrying and settling down. The developers of Lowell’s factories promised young women (and their parents) that they would provide workers with safe dormitories, wholesome food, and sociable activities.

Economic changes, however, dashed the dreams of many a young mill girl. Innovations in machinery and the growth of large scale manufacturing of cotton and cloth in the U.S. and in England dramatically reduced the prices of cloth. By the mid-1830s, many of the conditions that Lowell’s manufacturers had originally promised no longer existed. Instead, in their efforts to remain competitive, manufacturers extended work hours, sped up production rates, and cut corners on workers’ room and board. Despite the mixed messages that young country girls heard about life in the mills, many continued to pursue factory work in an effort to improve their circumstances.

THEMES: wage labor, economic choice, and personal dilemmas

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will understand:

1. How to analyze a primary source
2. The risks, opportunities, and anxieties associated with the market revolution.
3. How people in the past made decisions about where to work and live.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

Standard 6.6.12 A (Social Studies)

2. Formulate questions and hypotheses from multiple perspectives, using multiple sources.
4. Examine source data within the historical, social, political, geographic, or economic context in which it was created, testing credibility and evaluating bias.

Standard 9 (Career Education and Consumer, Family and Life Skills)

A.1. Apply communications and data analysis to the problem-solving and decision making processes in a variety of life situations.

Materials:

- A chalkboard or bulletin to record responses.
- Photocopies of the following seven primary documents:

“Help Wanted!” in Gary Kulik, Roger Parks, and Theodore Z. Penn, eds., *The New England Mill Village, 1780-1860* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1982), 410.

“Factory Rules” from an unnamed mill, in the Zachariah Allen Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, reproduced in *The New England Mill Village*, ed. Kulick, Parks, and Penn, 464.

“Employment Agreement with rates of pay, board, and terms of payment” in Pomfret Manufacturing Company Records, Connecticut State Library, Harford, reproduced in *The New England Mill Village*, ed. Kulik, Park, and Penn, 449-50.

Sally Rice correspondence in *the New England Mill Village*, ed. Kulik, Parks, and Penn, 387-92. Includes: Letter #1: Sally Rice to her Mother and Father, Union Village, New York, 1839; Letter #2: Sally Rice to her Father, Masonville, CT, 1845; and Letter #3: Sally Rice to her Father, Mother, Brother and Sister, Millbury, MA, 1845.

“A Week in the Mill,” Anonymous, *Lowell Offering*, vol. V, 1845.

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY:

Part 1: Making Choices (10 mins.);

Ask the class what they plan to do when they finish high school. What are their options? How do they choose among them? What factors and individuals shape their choices? Record answers on the chalkboard.

Part 2: Putting Yourself in the Past: Group work (40 minutes)

Tell students that had they lived in the rural northeast in the beginning of the nineteenth century, their choices as an 18-year-old would be markedly different than those they face today. Give a brief background to the market revolution and its impact on rural young people. You might consult the Organization of American Historians’ *Magazine of History: Market Revolution* especially pages 26-39 to prepare this introduction.

Ask them to pretend that they are 18-year-old New Hampshire country girls living in the 1820s. They are one of six children, and their parents' farm will be divided among their two brothers. By the time their parents are through paying for their other three sisters' dowries, there will be nothing left for them. Tell the students that they want to go to Lowell, MA to work in the mills. Their mother wants them to stay to help with the housework and the dairy, but their dad likes the idea of having them earn an income – and send much of it home to support the family.

Break the class up into groups. Each group should have at least 1 document, although you might choose to cluster some of the documents together for a single group depending on how many students you have. There should be between 3 and 7 groups (7 groups if each one has a single document and 3 if you group the documents).

Ask each group to read its document considering who wrote it, for whom, and under what circumstances. Have students identify both the positive and the negative arguments regarding work in the mills at the time. How might they use this document to persuade their parents that they should go to Lowell? Have each group present its findings. Record on the chalk board the main arguments both for and against going to work in the mills.

Part 3: Concluding Discussion (10 mins.)

Based on their presentations, ask the students if they would have wanted to go to work in the mills? Why or why not? What would be the worst case scenario if you stayed on the farm, the best? What would be the worst case scenario if you went to work in Lowell, the best?

PRACTICE/REINFORCEMENT

Drawing on the arguments outlined in class and the primary sources reviewed, ask students to write a conversation between their parents and themselves in which they sought to persuade their parents to allow them to go work at Lowell.

REFERENCES and WEBSITES:

This lesson plan is adapted from “Lessons on Market Revolution: What’s a Body to Do? A Series of Personal Dilemmas,” *Magazine of History: Market Revolution*, vol. 19, no. 3, (May, 2005): 33-2.

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).