

# *Transforming Women's Work*

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New England Lives in  
the Industrial Revolution

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## I. *Introduction*

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The industrial revolution that transformed Western Europe and the United States during the course of the nineteenth century had its origins in the introduction of power-driven machinery in the English and Scottish textile industries in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is no exaggeration to claim, as E. J. Hobsbawm did, that "whoever says Industrial Revolution says cotton."<sup>1</sup> And yet far more than the cotton textile industry was transformed in the course of capitalist industrialization; the growth of canal and railroad networks, the tremendous increase in coal production, and the emergence of iron and steel all owe their development to the changes we call the industrial revolution. Moreover, the revolution was not narrowly "industrial" but entailed a huge growth in nonindustrial wage labor as well. The appearance of urban centers contributed to the skyrocketing growth of domestic service and unskilled laboring jobs in commercial cities. In farming areas the growth of outwork occupations and commercial agriculture transformed the rural labor market. Finally, these economic developments coincided with dramatic changes in family life, particularly declining family size and increasing life expectancy. We have to look at more than factories and machine production to understand the broader consequences of this great watershed in human history.

Central to the changes in work associated with the industrial revolution was the emergence of new social relations of production—what Marx and subsequent social theorists termed "class relations." The growth of a capitalist employing class and of a working class relying on the sale of its labor power to earn its subsistence had profound economic, cultural,

1. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: The Making of Modern English Society*, vol. 2, 1750 to the Present Day (New York: Pantheon, 1968), p. 40.

and political implications in both British and American societies. Following the lead of English Marxists, American labor historians in the past two decades have devoted considerable energy to exploring the social consequences of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution in the United States. Herbert Gutman, Bruce Laurie, Paul Faler, Alan Dawley, and David Montgomery—to name only a few of those who have contributed to the transformation of our understanding of this period—have explored in detail the impact of the industrial revolution on artisans and factory workers and on the native-born and immigrants. Their writings have enriched our appreciation of the revolutionary character of developments over the course of the nineteenth century and have clarified the specific story that emerged in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this outpouring of scholarship, one is left with a strong sense that the industrial revolution is primarily a men's story. The transformation of artisan crafts, the growth of railroads, the emergence of iron and steel and later of mass-production industries—these are developments that primarily affected men's work. Although women workers were drawn in large numbers into the first factories in the United States—into the textile mills and early shoe factories of New England, for instance—one finds their stories at the margins of many of the studies that examine the nineteenth-century industrial revolution in the United States. Thus Paul Faler's and Alan Dawley's accounts of Lynn shoemakers are, in fact, studies of male shoemakers. Bruce Laurie's

2. For the English historiography, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1966); Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*; Raphael Samuel, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop*, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 6–72; and Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society, and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980). On the American side, see Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); and David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For discussion of political and ideological developments that accompanied the early industrial revolution, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

*Working People of Philadelphia* begins with a disclaimer that the thinness of the historical record prevented him from systematically including accounts of women and African Americans in his story of that city's working people. The underlying conceptual framework of David Montgomery's fine study draws primarily on the shopfloor experiences of skilled male workers. Workingwomen find places in all these studies, but they are at the margins of the analysis.<sup>3</sup> Their experiences are apparently not central to an understanding of the industrial revolution in the United States; nor do we learn a great deal about women's experiences or attitudes in the course of these momentous changes.

We can move beyond these present limitations. This book is guided by a concern to understand how women's wage work and family lives in the United States were affected by the industrial revolution. Implicit in this focus is an expectation that gender influenced the ways that men and women experienced the changes it brought. Finally, this approach raises the question as to how our view of the industrial revolution is changed when we consciously introduce gender into the analysis. This work thus offers an opportunity both to illuminate important elements in women's lives—the growth of wage labor and changing family relations during the nineteenth century—and to rethink our basic understanding of the industrial revolution in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

3. Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, p. xiii. For a fine study that explicitly introduces women into the story of New England shoemaking, see Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the Nineteenth-Century New England Shoe Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). For a perceptive call for the integration of women into our understanding of labor history, see Sue Benson, "The 1920's through the Looking Glass of Gender: A Response to David Montgomery," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 32 (Fall 1987): 25–30.

4. Two essays whose arguments have influenced the approach I have taken are Gerda Lerner, "The Challenge of Women's History," in her *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 175–77, and Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 28–50. A collection of articles that demonstrates the distance scholarship on women's history has come in recent years to meet the challenges posed by Lerner and Scott is Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). See especially Baron's introduction.

### 3. *Lowell Millhands*

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The growth of industrial outwork in the New England countryside reflected the emergence of manufacturing and broader markets for consumer goods in the region. Such work offered farmers' daughters opportunities to contribute to their families, save for their marriages, and sample a widening range of purchases available in country stores. For many young women who enjoyed the economic benefits of outwork employment in the first third of the nineteenth century, still greater opportunities beckoned in New England's cities and mill towns. The rapid growth of textile manufacturing in the region meant there were commonly shortages of workers in the antebellum mills, and mill agents periodically hired recruiters to go into the countryside and bring newcomers to the mills.<sup>1</sup> Between 1830 and 1860, tens of thousands of these "daughters of freemen" answered the call of urban employment and made the journey from farm to factory.<sup>2</sup>

One of these young women was Mary Paul. At the age of fifteen, Mary Paul had already left home and was living with a farming family in Bridgewater, Vermont. The life of a farm servant did not agree with her, however, and she left to reside with relatives. From there she wrote home to her father in nearby Barnard: "I want you to consent to let me go to Lowell if you can. I think it would be much better for me than to stay about here. I could earn more to begin with than I can any where about here. I am in need of clothes which I cannot get if I stay about

1. For early correspondence between a Lowell mill agent and a labor recruiter, see John Clark to Jesse Huse, July 27, 1847, Lowell Historical Society Collection, Center for Lowell History.

2. The language quoted here is that of Lowell mill operatives during an early labor protest in February 1834. See Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 93.

# 75 Young Women

From 15 to 35 Years of Age,

WANTED TO WORK IN THE

## COTTON MILLS!

IN LOWELL AND CHICOPEE, MASS.

I am authorized by the Agents of said Mills to make the following proposition to persons suitable for their work, viz.—They will be paid \$1.00 per week, and board, for the first month. It is presumed they will then be able to go to work at job prices. They will be considered as engaged for one year, cases of sickness excepted. I will pay the expenses of those who have not the means to pay for themselves, and the girls will pay it to the Company by their first labor. All that remain in the employ of the Company eighteen months will have the amount of their expenses to the Mills refunded to them. They will be properly cared for in sickness. It is hoped that none will go except those whose circumstances will admit of their staying at least one year. None but active and healthy girls will be engaged for this work, as it would not be advisable for either the girls or the Company.

I shall be at the Howard Hotel, Burlington, on Monday, July 25th; at Farnham's, St Albans, Tuesday forenoon, 26th, at Keyse's, Swanton, in the afternoon; at the Massachusetts' House, Rouses Point, on Wednesday, the 27th, to engage girls,—such as would like a place in the Mills would do well to improve the present opportunity, as new hands will not be wanted late in the season. I shall start with my Company, for the Mills, on Friday morning, the 29th inst., from Rouses Point, at 6 o'clock. Such as do not have an opportunity to see me at the above places, can take the cars and go with me the same as though I had engaged them.

I will be responsible for the safety of all baggage that is marked in care of I. M. BOYNTON, and delivered to my charge.

**I. M. BOYNTON,**

Agent for Procuring Help for the Mills.

Figure 3.1. Broadside advertising for women operatives, 1859. Courtesy of Baker Library, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, Boston, Mass.

here and for that reason I want to go to Lowell or some other place.”<sup>3</sup> With these lines, one teenage New England daughter began a journey that took her from the farming country of the northern Connecticut River Valley to the burgeoning mill town on the Merrimack River.

3. Mary Paul to Bela Paul, September 13, 1845, Mary Paul Letters, VHS.

Paul's experience was much like that of other female operatives in the antebellum period. She arrived in Lowell in November 1845 and worked in the mills off and on for almost four years. Surviving letters to her father chronicle a series of subsequent moves and jobs until in 1857, at the age of 27, she married Isaac Guild, a marbleworker and son of her former boardinghouse keeper in Lowell. The couple moved to Lynn, Massachusetts, where over the next five years Mary Paul Guild gave birth to two sons. For this Vermonter, the mill experience marked a permanent shift from a rural childhood to an adult life within the expanding urban industrial world of Massachusetts. After Lowell, she lived briefly with her widowed father, but once married and settled in Lynn, she left her rural past behind. The cultural distance she traveled was reflected in an 1855 letter in which she described meeting acquaintances from her Vermont hometown whom she found “rather country-fied in their ideas.”<sup>4</sup>

Mary Paul's years in Lowell are more fully documented than those of the tens of thousands of other New England daughters who took similar stagecoach trips from their farming homes to work brief stints in the cotton textile mills of Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire and Maine. Still, we are not limited to surviving letters, diaries, and reminiscences in our efforts to reconstruct the mill experience of women in the antebellum decades. The early textile mills pioneered in the keeping of corporate records, and the register books of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company in Lowell, Massachusetts, permit a fuller and more representative view of women millworkers than do surviving writings.

When a newcomer appeared at the gates of the mill yard of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company in the mid-1830s, she was ushered first into the ground-floor counting room of the corporation. There the mill agent, clerk, and paymaster had their desks and saw to the smooth running of the record keeping associated with a large manufacturing establishment. The agent was in touch with overseers in the various mill departments and if he knew of an opening would see that the newcomer was properly placed. The clerk, in turn, would record in leather-bound

4. Mary Paul to Bela Paul, June 11, 1855, Mary Paul Letters, VHS. For the full text of this correspondence and an introduction to the letters, see Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 121-53.

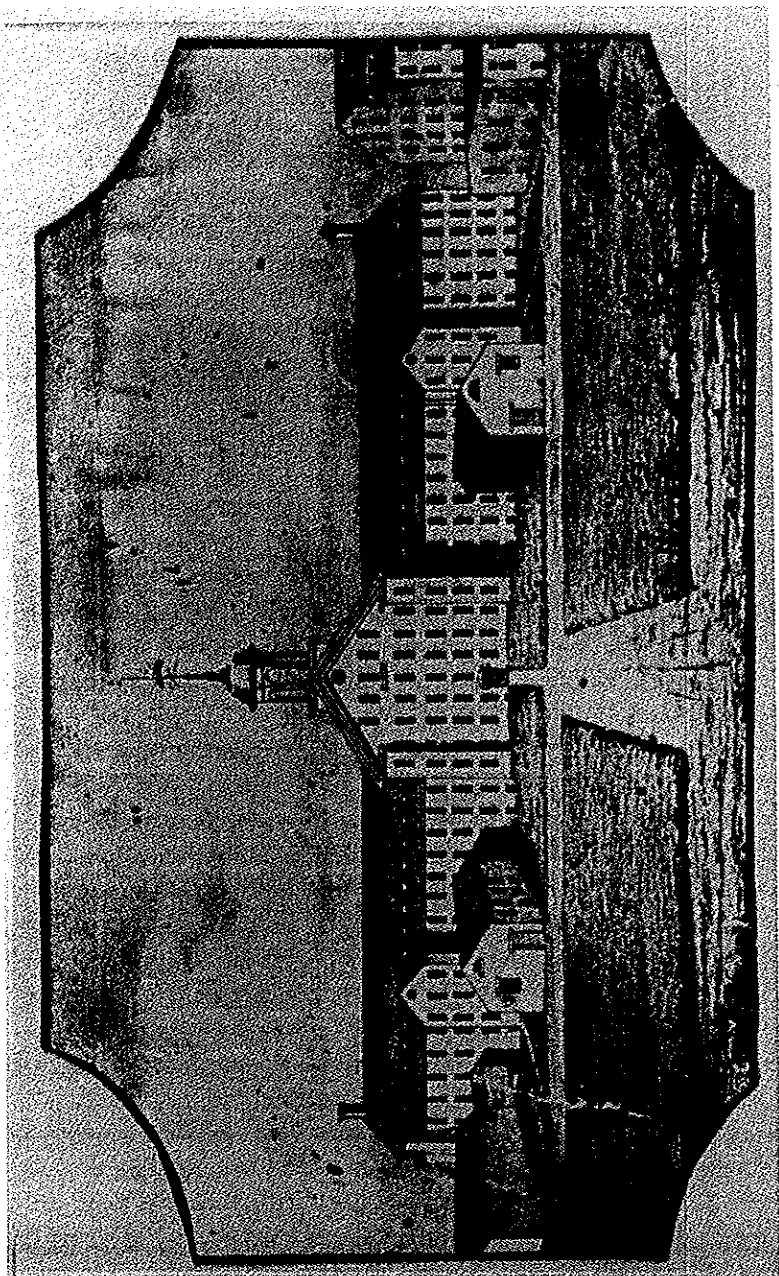


Figure 3.2. Hamilton Manufacturing Company, Lowell, Mass., c. 1850. Courtesy of Lowell Historical Society.

### Lowell Millhands

register books, in a neat, slanted hand, information summarizing the assignment. He noted in ruled rows and columns the name of each operative and her nativity, room assignment, residence in Lowell, and date of entry into the mill work force. A narrow blank column permitted the clerk to note the operative's subsequent date of departure and a wider column remained for lengthier comments. There the clerk might record information about the operative's previous work experience, such as "new," "never in Lowell," "old," "on Lawrence last," or "worked in Nashua." Conversely, on signing an operative out of the mill, the clerk might add a comment for future reference: "regular notice," "short notice," "willful," "does not answer the purpose," or "at liberty to work elsewhere."<sup>5</sup> Finally, if the millhand transferred from one room in the mill to another or moved from one boardinghouse to another, the clerk would record that change as well. Theoretically at least, at any given time, the clerk had a record of the room assignment and local address of all operatives in the company's employ.

The Hamilton Company register books provide unique evidence on female workers in a firm typical of a large number of textile mills across northern New England in the antebellum years.<sup>6</sup> They contain information that permits one to explore labor discipline and turnover. Because they record nativity, they also permit exploration of the changing ethnic makeup of the mill work force.<sup>7</sup>

Entries in the register books provide the actual hometowns of New England operatives, allowing analysis of the geographical origins of the company's female work force. Over the antebellum decades, as the proportion of immigrant Irish working in the mills increased, the number of New England women entering the company's employment declined. Still, in the mid-1830s, the native-born made up more than 95 percent of the mill work force, and in the first six months of 1836, almost 600 women left 249 hometowns in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire,

5. Hamilton Manufacturing Company Records, vols. 481-505, BL. For an analysis of discipline problems evident in the register volumes, see Carl Gersuny, "'A Devil in Petticoats' and Just Cause: Patterns of Punishment in Two New England Factories," *Business History Review* 50 (Summer 1976): 131-52.

6. On the representativeness of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company, see Dublin, *Women at Work*, app. 5.

7. See Dublin, *Women at Work*, pp. 26, 139.

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and Vermont to work at the Hamilton Company. Over a similar six-month period in 1855, only 170 New England women from 111 different hometowns entered employment at the company.

Northern New England was a major supplier of new recruits to the female work force at the company. Initially, New Hampshire towns predominated among those communities sending young women to the Hamilton Company. That state accounted for 44 percent of hometowns represented and almost 55 percent of the women who entered the company's mills in the first half of 1836. By 1855, Maine had become the leading state, accounting for 37 percent of hometowns and 44 percent of women workers starting employment at the company.<sup>8</sup>

Mapping the hometowns of women workers recruited to the Hamilton Company in the first half of 1836 (see Figure 3.3) reveals them to have been widely dispersed across northern New England, with concentrations found in Massachusetts towns close to Lowell and New Hampshire towns in the Merrimack River Valley stretching north of Lowell. These were the areas first joined to Lowell by stagecoach, and once the first recruitment channels were established in the early years, additional newcomers followed a pattern of chain migration. Over time, though, as immigrants came to displace Yankee women in the mill work force, Yankee recruits came from a declining number of hometowns, which were increasingly located in more remote areas in New England. Thus, between the mid-1830s and the mid-1850s, the number of women millhands from Maine increased relative to those from Merrimack River Valley towns in New Hampshire.

Mapping the hometowns of women operatives at the Hamilton Company reveals much about changing recruitment patterns over time but is valuable for other reasons as well. Knowing the hometowns of Yankee women operatives permits one to examine changes in the countryside that contributed to the growth of mill employment among rural young women. Moreover, pinpointing workers from specific New England hometowns allows one to trace women millworkers back to their families of origin, follow their careers in mill employment, and examine

8. For parallel evidence on the shifting geographic origins of New England women workers at the Hamilton Company between 1830 and 1860, see Robert G. Layer, "Wages, Earnings, and Output of Four Cotton Textile Companies in New England, 1825-1860," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1952, pp. 184-89.

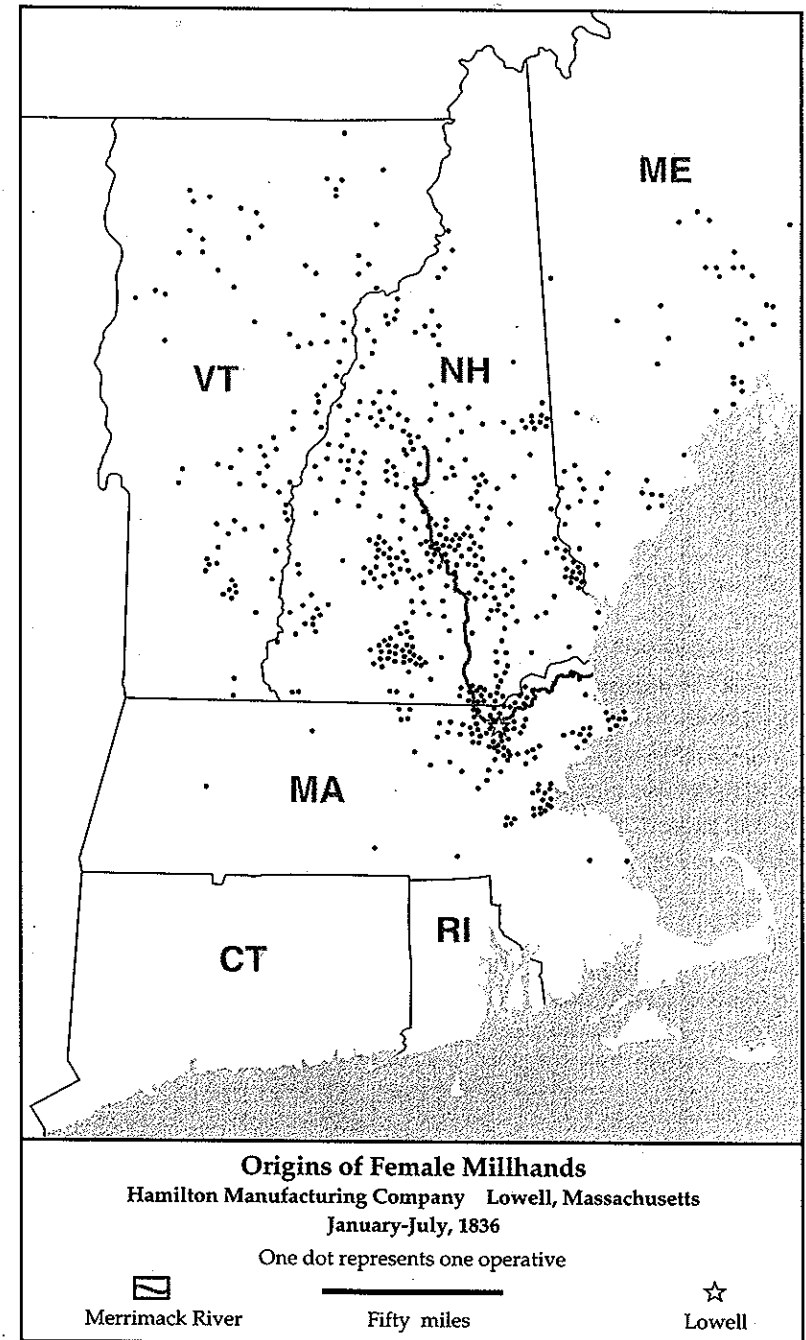


Figure 3.3. Origins of female millhands, Hamilton Manufacturing Company, Lowell, Mass., January-July 1836. Outline map courtesy of the National Survey, Chester, Vt.

their lives after they left the mills. A population of 410 millhands who entered employment at the Hamilton Company between 1830 and 1850 and who came from six New Hampshire towns—Boscawen, Canterbury, Lyndeborough, Northfield, Sanbornton, and Sutton—provides the focus for the following analysis of women operatives (see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1 for the locations of these communities).<sup>9</sup> Tracing the lives of these women mill operatives offers a broad view of the impact of mill employment on this first generation of factory workers.

At the outset it should be noted that there was considerable variety in terms of the kinds of towns from which women millworkers came. Boscawen, Canterbury, Northfield, and Sanbornton, for instance, were river valley towns with level bottomlands periodically enriched by soil deposited by the flooding of the Merrimack River. Sutton and Lyndeborough, in contrast, were hill-country towns where sheep grazing predominated and less farm produce was shipped to markets beyond the towns' boundaries (see Figure 3.4). Still, population pressure on limited farm acreage led sons and daughters in both valley and hill-country towns to look for opportunities in New England's expanding urban centers in the decades before the Civil War. These six towns had a combined population in 1830 of 10,362, a figure that fell by 3 percent over the course of the next two decades.<sup>10</sup> Excellent stagecoach and then railroad service linked these rural communities to Lowell and other mill towns and made it relatively easy for young women, even from hill-country towns

9. I began mapping the hometowns of mill operatives by drawing populations of 587 women workers who entered the Hamilton Company between January and June 1836, another 297 for six months in 1845, and another 171 for 1855. The final selection of hometowns was a two-step process, as I first selected for tracing the towns of Boscawen, Canterbury, and Sutton with 175 millhands. I reported findings for that population in *Women at Work*, chap. 3 and app. 2. Subsequently, I selected another three towns—Lyndeborough, Northfield, and Sanbornton—to raise the size of the millhand population to 410, a number I felt would provide more reliable results. I continued to trace millhands from the first three towns, so the findings reported here reflect new evidence on that group as well. For a discussion of the drawing of the mill population, see Appendix 2 below. For information on the methods employed in record linkage, see Appendix 3.

10. "Aggregate Amount of Each Description of Persons," *Fifth Census; or, Enumeration of the Inhabitants of the United States, as Corrected at the Department of State, 1830* (Washington: Duff Green, 1832), p. 11; and J. D. B. DeBow, *Statistical View of the United States . . . Being a Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington: Beverly Tucker, 1854), pp. 338–93.

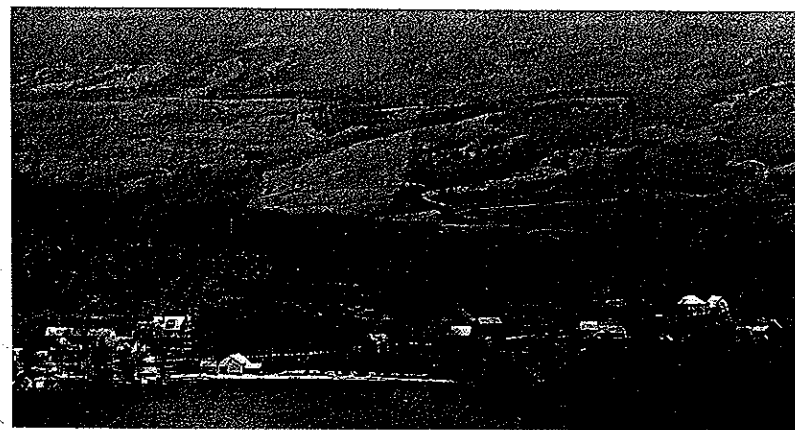


Figure 3.4. Keyser Lake and the hill farms of Sutton, N.H., hometown for forty-eight women operatives employed at the Hamilton Company in Lowell between 1830 and 1850. Courtesy of Robert Bristol.

such as Sutton, to travel between their farm homes and urban locations (see Figure 3.5).

To anticipate how these broader pressures were felt in the lives of rural women who became millworkers, we can outline the experiences of four New Hampshire sisters who worked at the Hamilton Company in the 1830s and 1840s. No single biographical sketch—not even a composite based on four sisters—can entirely capture broader social patterns, but the family of Samuel and Eunice Fowler of Boscawen, New Hampshire, will serve us well, and the survival of extensive evidence on numerous family members makes the resulting portrait far richer than is possible for most families of millhands in the antebellum decades.

In 1830 we find the family of Samuel and Eunice Fowler residing on Corser Hill overlooking the Blackwater River in the western part of Boscawen, just north of Concord.<sup>11</sup> As spring turned to summer, Samuel

11. The following sketch is based on a variety of sources: Hamilton Manufacturing Company Records, vols. 481–505; Charles Carleton Coffin, *The History of Boscawen and Webster, from 1733 to 1878* (Concord, N.H.: Republican Press Association, 1878), p. 531; Federal Manuscript Census of Population, Boscawen, M19, roll 76, 1850 M432, roll 436, families 13 and 47 and 1860, M653, roll 676, families 759 and 917; Federal Manuscript Census of Agriculture, 1850, Boscawen, New Hampshire Division of Records Management and Archives, Concord;



Figure 3.5. North Sutton store and stagecoach, before 1910. Regular stagecoach service made it relatively simple for young women from New Hampshire to go to and from Lowell and other mill towns. Courtesy of Robert Bristol.

and Eunice, both 49, found themselves directing the three children still living at home in the tasks that were needed to make their farm productive.<sup>12</sup> One son, Stanton, 19 years old that summer, undoubtedly helped his father with the work in the fields. A younger son, Nathaniel, had died in 1825 at age 6. Two older sons, Rufus and Cephas, lived elsewhere,

Lowell, Mass., city directories; *Vital Records of Lowell, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849*, 4 vols. (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1930); N.H. Dept. of Vital Statistics, indexes of births, marriages, and deaths; Boscawen and Webster, N.H., town vital records; "Deaths in Boscawen," NHHS; Merrimack County Registry of Probate, Concord; and Boscawen tax inventories, 1830. I especially thank Dorothy Sanborn and David Ruell for assistance with this sketch.

12. A fourth youngster, a boy between 5 and 9 years of age, also resided in the household according to census enumerators, but his age does not agree with surviving genealogical evidence, so he cannot be identified with any of the known Fowler children. The uncertainty of the language here stems from the fact that the 1830 census records only the names of heads of households. All other household members are recorded by sex within age categories, which then requires inferences to specify which family members lived at home at this date.

although Rufus later returned to work the family homestead. Of the five Fowler daughters, only two, probably Harriet, 13, and Elizabeth, 6, were enumerated as living at home in the census. Three other daughters, probably Mary, Eunice, and Sarah, ranging in age from 24 to 16, were not living with their parents at this date. Several may have been working in Lowell, although surviving mill records only confirm their employment at slightly later dates. We see as early as 1830 that the Fowler family was already beginning to disperse from the family homestead, even before any of the children married.

The Fowlers worked a farm that was typical for Boscawen in this period. Their tax placed them at the sixty-eighth percentile among taxpayers in 1830, paying more taxes than about two-thirds of Boscawen's residents at this date. The farm included an acre of orchard, an acre of tillage, five acres of mowing, and another twelve of pasture. Unimproved land and buildings were valued at \$150, but we do not know precisely how many additional acres were available to expand the improved portions of the farm. A horse, two asses, and six cows constituted their livestock. It was actually a rather small operation. Although six people lived there in June 1830, the Fowlers probably would have been hard-pressed to house and support ten family members had all been living at home that summer. Moreover, it would have been a tight fit to squeeze the entire family into the farmhouse, a two-story Georgian colonial that still stands today.<sup>13</sup>

Crowding at home and the need to save something in the way of marriage portions probably motivated the daughters' decisions to work in the cotton mills of the Hamilton Company. Sarah worked off and on for four years beginning in 1831, and her sister Harriet worked for six years. She was joined at the mill in 1836 by her older sister Mary. Finally, the youngest of the Fowler sisters, Elizabeth, left home in February 1841 at 16 and spent just over a year as a weaver in the Hamilton mills.

Four of the five Fowler daughters worked in Lowell in their teens and through their midtwenties. The work enabled them to see more of the world, to earn something in anticipation of marriage, and to ease crowding within the Fowler home. All five of the daughters married,

13. See Webster History Committee, *Webster, New Hampshire, 1933-1983: History* (Webster: Webster Publishing Committee, 1984), pp. 206-7.

two settling in Boscawen, two in or adjacent to Lowell, and the other marrying a man from Boston. Only one of the five appears to have become a farmer's wife like her mother.

We know less about the sons, though two did settle in Boscawen and become farmers. Stanton married and operated a farm in 1850 with seventy-five improved and ten unimproved acres. His older brother Rufus remained unmarried in 1850, living with his parents on the family homestead. Together, son and father (now 72 and probably no longer the chief worker on the farm) cultivated one hundred acres, harvesting 80 bushels of Indian corn, 35 bushels of oats, 14 bushels of rye, 30 tons of hay, and 250 pounds of potatoes. The women in the household kept busy as well, producing 100 pounds of butter and 200 pounds of cheese.

Samuel Fowler probably counted himself a lucky man. In 1860, though widowed at the death of his wife, Eunice, three years earlier, Fowler was a ripe 82, residing with his son Rufus, with another son and two married daughters living nearby. From the smallish farm of seventeen improved acres that he had cultivated in 1830, Fowler had lived to see four of his nine children settled in Boscawen. And the mill employment of his daughters had contributed to the social reproduction of his family over time. In a world marked by dramatic economic change and significant migration out of rural New England in these decades, Samuel Fowler had seen his children well off into their lives as adults. He and his oldest son, Rufus, died within six months of each other in the first half of 1867.

The Fowler story contains virtually all the elements that emerge in an analysis of the 410 women operatives who came from six New Hampshire towns to work at the Hamilton Company between 1830 and 1850. The four daughters came from a large farming family of above average wealth. They worked in Lowell for brief stretches and then married. Two returned to their hometown upon marriage; two settled in Massachusetts. Within a single family they encompass the range of experiences shared by mill women in these decades. Let us turn now to that broader story.

The New Hampshire millhands were representative of native-born women employed at the Hamilton Company before 1850. About 73 percent began work before 1840. About half worked in the weaving department, with spinning and carding accounting for the next largest groups

of women. Like most workers in this period, the millhands had short careers at Hamilton. Almost half worked less than a year at the company, a quarter worked one to three years, and the final quarter worked three or more years in the factory. If we take into account previous and subsequent work stints (as best one can determine from Hamilton and census records), the women averaged 2.7 years of mill employment, a figure that undoubtedly understates reality.

Judging from this population, we find that mill employment attracted young single women who came to Lowell on their own. Almost half of the millhands were between 15 and 19 years of age at entrance, with the mean age being just under 20. On average, the women were only 22 when they left the company. Altogether, only 5 percent of millhands were employed at Hamilton while married or widowed. Furthermore, less than 7 percent of the women lived at home with family in Lowell while employed at the company.<sup>14</sup> More than two-thirds lived in company boardinghouses, the remainder residing with private families or in boardinghouses in the city. All the evidence for the population confirms the contemporary generalization that the mills attracted young single women from rural families for a brief period of years before marriage.<sup>15</sup>

The process of tracing women back to their hometowns and to their families of origin, however, permits us to go beyond contemporary remarks and analyze the backgrounds of this group of mill operatives in greater depth. We know, for instance, the occupations in 1850 of the fathers of somewhat more than a fourth of the millhands. Farmers accounted for more than 76 percent of this group; professionals, in contrast, made up less than 3 percent of fathers with known occupations. The distribution of occupations among fathers of millhands was comparable with that for all male household heads of similar ages in their hometowns (see Table 3.1). Fathers of millhands were slightly more likely to be farmers than were all male household heads of roughly the same age. The property holdings of millhand fathers and of other male household heads were roughly comparable, with medians for real property in 1850

14. Altogether, twenty-eight millhands were recorded in Hamilton register volumes as living with family, but only eleven of these women resided with parents. Millhands who lived "off the corporation" were about as likely to reside with married sisters, aunts, and uncles as with parents.

15. Henry A. Miles, *Lowell as It Was and as It Is* (Lowell, Mass.: Powers and Bagley, 1845), pp. 162-94.

Table 3.1. Occupations of fathers of New Hampshire millhands, 1850, compared with male household heads, ages 60-69, N.H. towns

Occupational group	Millhand fathers	Household heads
Farmers	76.4%	69.2%
Skilled	13.2	13.2
Laborers, semiskilled	7.5	11.2
Professionals, proprietors	2.8	6.4
Totals	106	250

Sources: 1850 Federal manuscript census of population; and linkage of fathers of Hamilton millhands in hometown censuses.

Note: Columns may not add up to 100.0% because of rounding.

being \$1,000 for each group. The mean for all household heads was slightly higher than for millhand fathers—\$1,410 compared with \$1,266—but the difference can be explained primarily by the absence of the very wealthy or the very poor among millhand fathers. On the whole, one can conclude that millhand daughters came from families fairly representative of their rural communities.

Local tax records in 1830 confirm the census findings: millhand fathers were slightly less wealthy than their neighbors. On average, such fathers linked in local tax inventories owned \$736 worth of property compared with a mean of \$791 for all male household heads in the six towns. Millhand fathers were concentrated in the middle ranges of property owners. Among male household heads unrelated to Hamilton millhands, fully 5.8 percent were recorded in tax inventories as propertyless. Among fathers of millhands, the comparable proportion was only 2.5 percent. Similarly, millhand fathers were considerably underrepresented among the very richest members of these communities. Only 5.6 percent of millhand fathers had real and personal property totaling \$2,000 or more, compared with 9.7 percent among other male household heads in the six towns.<sup>16</sup>

16. There were 2,174 taxpayers recorded in inventories for the six towns, 123 of whom were fathers of Hamilton millhands.

Analysis of the tax inventories was aided considerably by linkage in the Federal Manuscript Census of Population, 1830, which permitted identification of taxed individuals as household

A closer examination of the kinds of property owned by millhand fathers and other household heads is revealing. In Lyndeborough, for instance, millhand fathers owned improved acreage valued at \$255 on average, compared with only \$176 for other male household heads in 1830. Similarly, millhand fathers in Northfield were taxed for 15.3 improved acres, whereas all other male household heads owned only 12.7 acres on average. Unfortunately, such detailed breakdowns on land ownership were not recorded for the other four towns. The evidence here suggests that millhand fathers operated farms that were slightly larger than those of their neighbors. Livestock was an important element in New Hampshire farming in this period, and millhand fathers were taxed for livestock valued at \$151 on average, almost identical to the \$153 figure for all other male household heads. The families of millhands were not so much poorer than their farming neighbors as they were more likely to be solely engaged in farming than were their neighbors. Census and tax records confirm this pattern.

heads. To facilitate such record linkage, I recorded the 1830 tax inventory for each town. In the case of Sanbornton, however, the closest surviving inventory covered 1836, so I used that record. Although the difference in dates for census and tax records for Sanbornton reduced the rate of linkage between the two documents, it did not materially affect the overall analysis.

Tax records for Boscawen, Canterbury, Lyndeborough, and Sutton are found in town offices and were provided through the assistance of town officials. Northfield and Sanbornton inventories survive in the collections of the New Hampshire State Archives, Concord.

17. Augusta Harvey Worthen, comp., *The History of Sutton, New Hampshire*, vol. 1 (Concord, N.H.: Republican Press Association, 1890), p. 41. Biographical sketches of the four sons of Matthew Harvey are offered in vol. 1, pp. 42-46, with genealogical information on the families given in vol. 2, pp. 748-56.

Neither Jonathan nor John Harvey was typical of the fathers of millhands generally, but their circumstances give a sense of the upper and lower bounds as far as the economic fortunes of the families of millhands are concerned. Overall, absolute economic need does not appear to have been the primary determinant that led rural women to Lowell and mill employment. Had that been common, one would expect a larger proportion of women to have come from the poorest of rural families, which was not the case. Neither did large numbers of rural families move to Lowell with their children to send daughters into the mills. Still, we may reasonably ask: Did these daughters feel an obligation to contribute to their families back home? Did their parents demand that they contribute toward family support? In other words, did the family economy perspective argued by Tilly and Scott in the European context hold for early millhands in New England?<sup>19</sup>

On an ideological level, the belief that single daughters "should" contribute to help support their families was widespread in New England in this period. In stories appearing in the *Lowell Offering*, for instance, millhand authors invariably noted the selfless motives that led women to enter mill employment. Several stories showed that mill wages permitted orphaned daughters to contribute to the support of younger siblings; in another, two sisters contributed to pay off the mortgage on the family farm; and in yet another tale, a widow worked in the mills to support her children.<sup>20</sup> Still, we should be skeptical of these stories as representative of actual behavior. Writers in the *Lowell Offering* marshaled evidence against contemporary critics who complained about the new freedoms and independence that mill employment allowed women. Whether always self-consciously or not, these millhand authors were making their best case that mill employment, after all, was compatible with traditional values, such as the subordination of daughters within the patriarchal family economy.<sup>21</sup>

19. Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), p. 109, as discussed above in Chapter 1.

20. *Lowell Offering*, vol. 1, pp. 161-71, 263-66, and vol. 2, pp. 145-55, 246-50.

21. For an exchange along these lines where the contemporary debate is explicit, see *Lowell Offering*, February 1841, p. 45.

For a more believable and more complex view of women's motivations and women's place in the rural family economy, the surviving correspondence of millhands for these years is particularly useful. There the picture that emerges is a more mixed one than is evident in the pages of the *Lowell Offering*.

Some women did send money back to their families in the countryside. Jane Tolford Stevens, a 42-year-old widow, left her 14-year-old daughter with an aunt when she first entered employment in Lowell. After working for a period, she encouraged her aunt to send her daughter Sophie to Lowell and mailed five dollars to help pay for stage fare and cloth for a new dress. She added, however, that if Sophie already had the dress, her aunt should keep the extra money for her own use.<sup>22</sup>

Where mill operatives sent money home, one can almost always find specific family difficulties that made such aid necessary. Between 1850 and 1855, Anna Mason worked in the mills of the Amoskeag Corporation in Manchester, New Hampshire. Her Vermont family had recently suffered economic misfortune, and she expressed satisfaction in her newfound independence: "I am not living upon my friends or doing housework for my board but am a factory girl."<sup>23</sup> Her parents had evidently been forced to give up the family homestead, and Anna Mason sent store goods and money to help them improve their situation. She sent ten dollars in September 1851 and another thirty dollars in March 1853. She may well have sent money on other occasions, because in two other letters she asked her parents if she should send them something.<sup>24</sup>

The letters are also interesting because of the relationship they reveal between Anna Mason and her parents. Anna did not have to work in the mills; she had attended the Thetford Academy and had experience as a teacher.<sup>25</sup> Several times in her correspondence she mentioned opportunities to teach, but it does not appear that she accepted the

22. Jane Stevens to Jane Patten, Lowell, March 22, 1835, Tolford-Patten Collection, box 6, New Hampshire State Library, Concord.

23. Anna Mason to her parents, Manchester, N.H., n.d., Anna Mason Letters, Bronson Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

24. Anna Mason to her father, Manchester, September 25, 1851, March 28, 1853, and Anna Mason to her mother, Manchester, October 14, 1853, Jan. 13, [1856], Bronson Collection.

25. In the period before high schools were common in rural communities and before normal schools developed a monopoly on teacher training, it was common for young women to attend a private academy for a number of years to prepare themselves for teaching. There was

offers.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, she repeatedly indicated her love for her parents and her desire to spend more time with them. Still, she noted frequently the good wages she was earning in the mills and her need to remain in Manchester. In a typical comment she wrote, "I want to see you all very much but I am making good wages now and if I go home I see no way of earning anything through the spring."<sup>27</sup> Her parents occasionally asked her to return home, but Anna Mason exercised her own judgment in deciding how long to remain in Manchester. As she wrote her mother: "I did not mind you when you wished me to leave the mill. We were making such good pay that I wanted to work a little longer." Two months later, Anna reported her earnings at more than four dollars per week, an excellent wage for a workingwoman at this date.<sup>28</sup> Although Anna Mason felt responsible to assist her parents, she evidently had a major voice in determining how she provided that assistance, when she returned home, and how long she continued to work in the mills.

The Larcom sisters in Lowell in the early 1840s helped support their widowed mother back in Beverly, Massachusetts. Theirs is an unusual case, for the family moved to Lowell from Beverly in 1835 after the death of their father. Lois Larcom took charge of a company boarding-house, and her daughters worked at the Lawrence Manufacturing Company.<sup>29</sup> At least two, and sometimes four, daughters worked at any one time, earning a total of almost eleven hundred dollars in the years between 1836 and 1839.<sup>30</sup> Their combined mill income was undoubtedly

such a school in Thetford, Vermont, which Anna Mason attended before working in the Manchester mills.

26. Anna Mason to her parents, Manchester, February 12, 1853, and March 18, 1853, Bronson Collection.

27. Anna Mason to parents, Manchester, February 12, 1853, Bronson Collection.

28. Anna Mason to her mother, Boscawen, March 18, 1853, and Anna Mason to her mother, Manchester, May 16, 1853, Bronson Collection. Typical women's mill wages at this date were around \$3.50 a week; see Dublin, *Women at Work*, pp. 66, 159, 197.

29. Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood: Outlined from Memory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986; originally published in 1889), chap. 7; and Shirley Marchalonis, *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom, 1824-1893* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), especially chap. 2.

30. The earnings of the Larcom sisters at the Lawrence Manufacturing Company have been determined by tracing their employment in the mills of that company between 1835 and 1846. Volumes in ser. GA, GB, GD, GE, and GF, Lawrence Manufacturing Company Records, BL.

greater than that of their mother in these years. The next year, their mother returned to Beverly, but the sisters continued to work in the mills until at least 1845.<sup>31</sup> Emeline, the oldest of the Larcom sisters in Lowell, took charge of the others and kept up a regular correspondence with her mother. On ten occasions between May 1841 and May 1842, Emeline sent her mother small sums, which together totaled more than fifty dollars. She typically wrote once a month, just after payday, and commonly enclosed five or six dollars with each letter. This total is probably an underestimate of the daughters' contributions, as there are gaps in the correspondence, months when Emeline (or another daughter) may have sent money home but for which letters have not survived. Moreover, the daughters visited Beverly regularly, occasions when they also may have brought money home.

Emeline Larcom's letters are revealing about the circumstances that influenced the amount she and her sisters were able to send their mother. In August 1841, Emeline noted that she would have sent more, "but as Lucy is coming to B[everly] we have not quite so much as usual." In February 1842, she explained why the sum she was sending was a dollar short: "Lucy found it necessary to spend more for herself than usual this month." In January 1841, Emeline expressed her disappointment at not being able to send as much as she would have liked. Future prospects, however, were good: "After this month Octavia will be in the mill, and then I shall not have her board to pay and she will be earning, then we shall be able to send more." The letters indicate that the Larcom sisters met their own immediate needs first and then cooperatively sent money through Emeline to support their mother.<sup>32</sup>

Whether or not daughters actually contributed directly to their families back home, their departures from the rural home relieved their parents

31. Lowell city directories show Lois Larcom residing in the city between 1835 and 1839 and then again in 1844. The Lawrence Company payrolls are the only way to trace the whereabouts of her daughters.

32. Emeline Larcom to Lois Larcom, August 18, 1841, Larcom Collection, Marion B. Gebbie Archives and Special Collections, Wheaton College, Norton, Mass.; Emeline Larcom to Lois Larcom, February 5, 1842, January [15], 1841, Larcom Family Collection, Emeline Larcom Letters, EI. For a fuller discussion of these letters and transcriptions of the set, see Thomas Dublin, "The Mill Letters of Emeline Larcom, 1840-1842," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 127 (July 1991): 211-39. The letters are also reprinted in Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 2d ed., 1993, pp. 97-119.

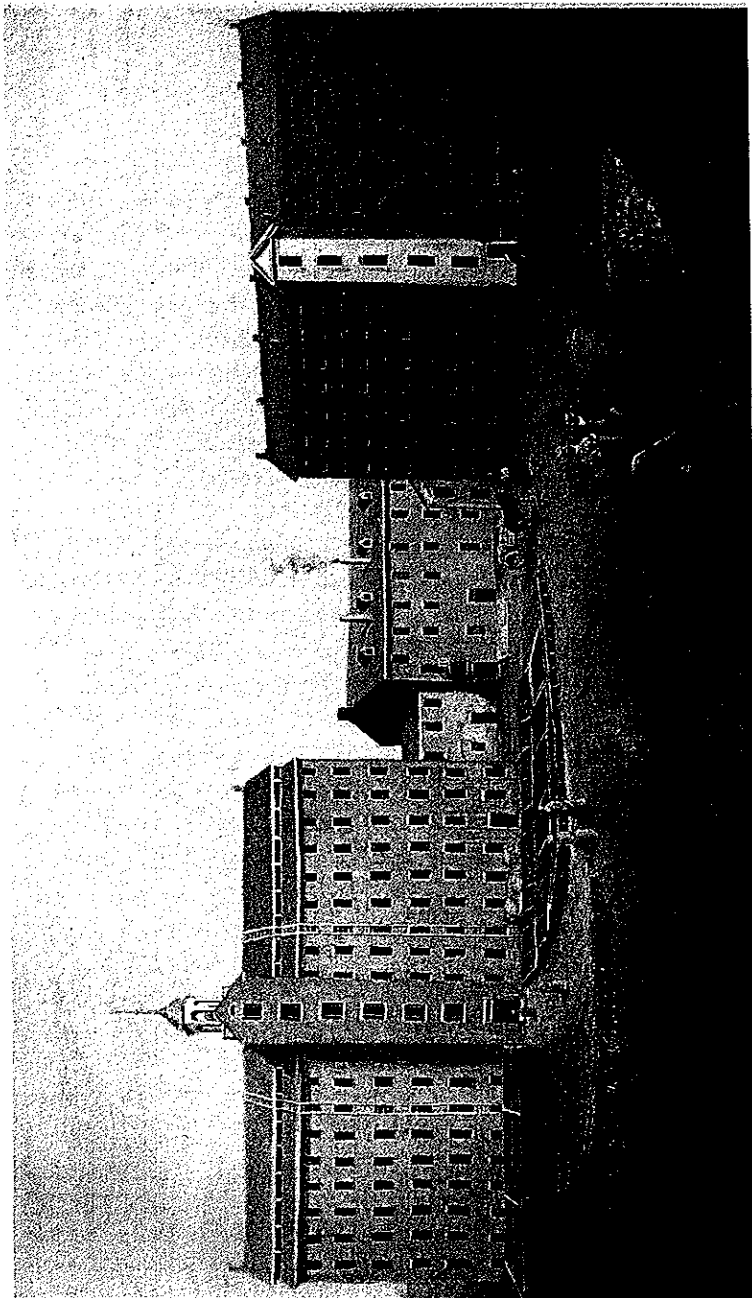


Figure 3.8. Middlesex Manufacturing Company, Lowell, Mass., c. 1840, where Susan Brown worked. Courtesy of the Museum of American Textile History.

### Lowell Millhands

of the necessity of supporting them. Eben Jennison of Charleston, Maine, wrote to his daughter in Lowell in 1849 in words that reflect this aspect of the difficulties facing rural families: "The season with us has been verry Dry and the Drough[t] verry severe. The crops are very light indeed and business verry Dull. If you should be blessed with your health and are contented I think you will do better where you are than you could do here." By 1858, two of Jennison's daughters were working in Lowell, apparently sending money occasionally to help him out. In one of his letters, Jennison acknowledged receipt of five dollars and expressed the hope that "some day or other" he would be able to repay them with interest. It is clear that Jennison supported his daughters' decisions to go to Lowell, but not because he expected them to contribute to his subsistence as a matter of course. Their contributions were freely offered.<sup>33</sup>

Not all millhands, of course, were able to save from their earnings to help out their parents back home. Mary Paul, for one, felt bad that she was unable to help her aged father: "I hope sometime to be able to do something for you and sometimes feel ashamed that I have not before this." She noted, in a letter in 1853, the obstacles that prevented her: "I am not one of the *smart* kind, and never had a passion for laying up money, probably never shall have, can find enough ways to spend it though. . . . Putting all these things together I think explains the reason that I do not 'lay up' anything."<sup>34</sup>

Susan Brown of Epsom, New Hampshire, worked for eight months as a weaver at the Middlesex Company in Lowell in 1843 (see Figure 3.8). While working she kept a diary that indicates the range of purchases that might have kept a mill operative from saving very much out of her earnings. During the eight-month period, Susan Brown earned just over \$86, which probably left her about \$42 after paying for room and board. In her diary, she recorded purchases that totaled almost \$19 plus a number of additional items without prices noted. Add to these expenditures the costs of at least fifteen plays, concerts, and lectures she attended and a two-day excursion to Boston, and it is unlikely that Susan

33. Eben Jennison to Elizabeth Jennison, Charleston, Maine, September 2, 1849, and Eben Jennison to Elizabeth and Amelia Jennison, July 13, 1858, Jennison Letters, in possession of Mary A. Dinmore, Cheshire, Conn.

34. Mary Paul to Bela Paul, November 27, 1853, and December 18, 1853, Mary Paul Letters, VHS.

Brown had much money jingling in her pockets after paying the stage-coach fare that brought her back home in late September. Susan Brown's diary does not explicitly indicate why she worked in Lowell, but the extent of her evening activities, purchases, and social life suggests distinctly personal motivations.<sup>35</sup>

Susan Brown's motivations remained unstated, but others went to the mills quite consciously to meet purely personal goals. At times, millhands viewed their personal desires as clearly at odds with parental or family needs. Sally Rice left her home in Somerset, Vermont, in 1838. Her work and travels took her first to a farm in Union Village, New York, and then to a textile mill in Thompson, Connecticut. That she rejected life back on the family farm is clear from an 1839 letter: "I never can be happy there in among so many mountains. I feel as tho I have worn out shoes and strength enough riding and walking over the mountains. I think it would be more consistent to save my strength to raise my boys. . . . I shall need all I have got and as for marrying and settling in that wilderness I wont. And if a person ever expects to take comfort it is while they are young I feel so."<sup>36</sup> Sally Rice was only eighteen and single when she penned these lines. Still, she had a sense of what her future would bring and how she would shape that future. Working a hard-scrabble farm in northern Vermont was evidently not in her plans.<sup>37</sup>

Another millhand who had personal goals was one Lucy Ann working in Clinton, Massachusetts, in 1851. She had her sights set on

35. Susan E. P. Brown Forbes Diary, January–September 1843, AAS. See also Mary H. Blewett, ed., *Caught between Two Worlds: The Diary of a Lowell Mill Girl, Susan Brown of Epson, New Hampshire* (Lowell, Mass.: Lowell Museum, 1984). My thanks to Mary Blewett for bringing this material to my attention.

36. Sally Rice to her father and mother, Union Village, New York, 1839 (date unknown), Hazelton Rice Papers, VHS. My thanks to Michael Folsom for making photocopies of the original letters available to me. For published versions of the letters, see Gary Kulik, Roger Parks, and Theodore Z. Penn, eds., *The New England Mill Village, 1790–1860* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 385–92; and Nell Kull, ed., "I Can Never Be Happy There in among So Many Mountains"—The Letters of Sally Rice," *Vermont History* 38 (1970): 52.

37. Lest the reader feel that only young workingwomen could resist the pressures of the rural family economy, similar expressions of independence are evident in the writings of young men as well: James Metcalf left Lowell during one period of unemployment and took a tour of

attending Oberlin College and wrote a bit defensively in a letter to a cousin, "I have earned enough to school me awhile, & have not I a right to do so, or must I go home, like a dutiful girl, place the money in father's hands, & then there goes all my hard earnings." Lucy Ann summed up her thinking: "I merely wish to go [to Oberlin] because I think it the best way of spending the money I have worked so hard to earn." Clearly, some mill women felt their earnings were their own, to dispose of as they wished.<sup>38</sup> As did Sally Rice, Lucy Ann evidently felt some pressure to be a "dutiful girl" and contribute her earnings to the family till. Still, she resisted this pressure and followed her own inclinations.

Although some millhands may have been able to express these independent sentiments only beyond the bounds of their families, in other cases family members obviously supported daughters' decisions as to how to spend their hard-won earnings. In 1840, Elizabeth Hodgdon of Rochester, New Hampshire, wrote to her sister, Sarah, who worked in the nearby mills of Great Falls: "You say you want to come home when we all think you have staid long enough, but we do not know better than you or so well either when you have earned as much as you will want to spend. Yet it is Mothers opinion & mine that you have already as much as you will probably want to spend if you lay it out to good advantage which we doubt not but you will."<sup>39</sup> One does not sense from this letter (or from others in the series) that the Hodgdon parents were counting on using their children's earnings for some familial purpose.

a number of industrial towns in New England. His purpose, however, was not to find work. As he wrote to his mother, "I have but one life to live and while I live I has as good enjoy my money so hardly earned, in innocent pleasures, you may say it is foolish, it may be." James Metcalf to Chloe Adams Metcalf, Lowell, July 19, 1846, Adams-Metcalf Letters, MATH.

38. Loriman Brigham, ed., "An Independent Voice: A Mill Girl from Vermont Speaks Her Mind," *Vermont History* 41 (1973): 142–46, quotation, p. 144.

39. Elizabeth H. Hodgdon to Sarah D. Hodgdon, Rochester, N.H., March 29, 1840, Hodgdon Letters, NHHS. These letters are also reprinted in Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 2d ed., pp. 39–57.