

Changes in Working Life

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. The spread of mills in the Northeast changed workers' lives.
2. The Lowell System revolutionized the textile industry in the Northeast.
3. Workers organized to reform working conditions.

The Big Idea

The introduction of factories changed working life for many Americans.

Key Terms and People

Rhode Island system, *p. 391*
 Francis Cabot Lowell, *p. 392*
 Lowell system, *p. 392*
 trade unions, *p. 394*
 strikes, *p. 394*
 Sarah G. Bagley, *p. 395*

TAKING NOTES

As you read, take notes on how mills changed workers' lives, and how workers organized to fight many of these changes.

Changes to workers' lives

Workers' reaction

If YOU were there...

You live on a dairy farm in Massachusetts in about 1820. On the farm, you get up at dawn to milk the cows, and your work goes on until night. But now you have a chance at a different life. A nearby textile mill is hiring young people. You would leave the farm and live with other workers. You could go to classes. Most important, you could earn money of your own.

Would you go to work in the textile mill? Why?

BUILDING BACKGROUND As factories and mills were established, the way people worked changed drastically. One dramatic change was the opportunity that factory work gave to young women. For young women in farm families, it was almost the only chance they had to earn their own money and a measure of independence.

Mills Change Workers' Lives

Workers no longer needed the specific skills of craftspeople to run the machines of the new mills. The lives of workers changed along with their jobs. Resistance to these changes sometimes sparked protests.

Many mill owners in the United States could not find enough people to work in factories because other jobs were available. At first, Samuel Slater and his two partners used apprentices—young men who worked for several years to learn the trade. However, they often were given only simple work. For example, their jobs might include feeding cotton into the machines and cleaning the mill equipment. They grew tired of this work and frequently left. Apprentice James Horton, for example, ran away from Slater's mill. "Mr. Slater . . . keep me always at one thing . . .," Horton complained. "I might have stayed there until this time and never knew nothing."

Eventually, Slater began to hire entire families who moved to Pawtucket to work in the mills. This practice allowed Slater to fill his labor needs at a low cost. Children as well as adults worked in the mills.

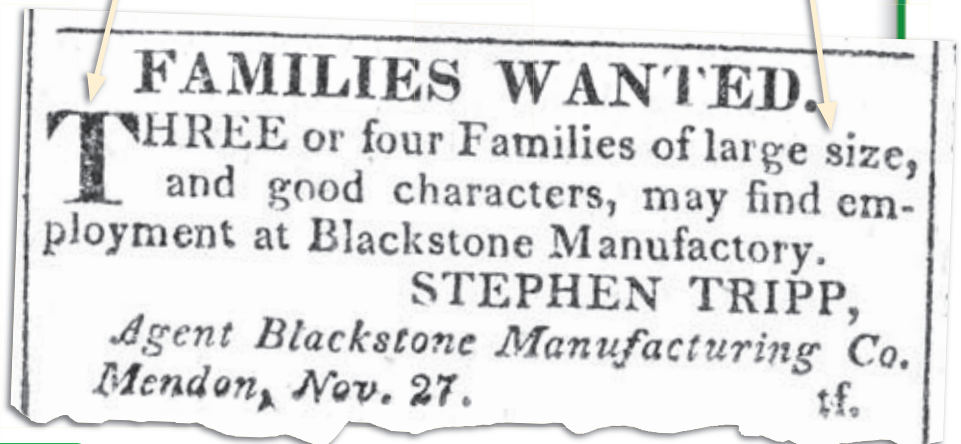
Primary Source

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT Family Wanted

This advertisement appeared in a Rhode Island newspaper in 1823. In it, a company requests that families come to work at a factory. The practice of hiring entire families was common at the time, especially in Britain. In America, it became known as the Rhode Island system.

The advertisement requests more than one family.

Why do you think Blackstone wants large families?



ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Drawing Conclusions Do you think advertisements like this one had the effect the companies wanted?

On most farms children worked to help their families. Therefore, few people complained about the hiring of children to work in factories. H. Humphrey, an author of books on raising children, told parents that children needed to be useful. Humphrey wrote, "If he [a child] will not study, put him on to a farm, or send him into the shop, or in some other way provide regular employment for him." The machines made many tasks in the mill simple enough for children to do. Mill owners profited because they paid children low wages. Adults usually earned as much in a day as most children did in a week.

To attract families to his mill, Slater built housing for the workers. He also provided them with a company store where they could buy necessities. In addition, he started the practice of paying workers with credit at the company store. Instead of paying the full price for an item all at once, small payments could be made over a period of time. This practice allowed Slater to reinvest his money in his business.

Slater's strategy of hiring families and dividing factory work into simple tasks became known as the **Rhode Island system**. Mill

owners throughout the Northeast copied Slater's methods. Owners advertised with "Men with growing families wanted." They also sent recruiters to poor communities to find new workers. For many people, the chance to work in a factory was a welcome opportunity to earn money and to learn a new skill.

One of the earliest of the mill towns, Slatersville, was named after Samuel Slater. The town was built by Slater and his brother John. It included two houses for workers and their families, the owner's house, the company store, and the Slatersville Mill. The mill was the largest and most modern industrial building of its time.

The mills employed not only the textile workers who operated the machinery but also machine part makers and dam builders. Although the company store sold food and necessary items to workers, mill towns supported the same variety of businesses any other town needed to thrive. These included tailors and dressmakers, butchers, and other small workshops.

READING CHECK Summarizing What problem did Slater have in his mills, and how did he solve it?

The Lowell System

Not all mill owners followed this system. **Francis Cabot Lowell**, a businessman from New England, developed a very different approach. His ideas completely changed the textile industry in the Northeast.

The **Lowell system** was based on water-powered textile mills that employed young, unmarried women from local farms. The system included a loom that could both spin thread and weave cloth in the same mill. Lowell constructed boardinghouses for the women. Boardinghouse residents were given a room and meals along with their jobs.

With financial support from investors of the Boston Manufacturing Company, Lowell's first textile mill opened in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1814. "From the first starting of the first power loom there was not . . . doubt about the success," wrote one investor. In 1822, the company built a larger mill in a Massachusetts town later named Lowell. Visitors to Lowell were amazed by the clean factories and neatly kept boardinghouses as well as the new machinery.

The young millworkers soon became known as Lowell girls. The mills paid them between \$2 and \$4 each week. The workers paid \$1.25 for room and board. These wages were much better than those women could earn per week in other available jobs, such as domestic work.

Many young women came to Lowell from across New England. They wanted the chance to earn money instead of working on the family farm. "I must of course have something of my own before many more years have passed over my head," wrote one young woman. The typical Lowell girl worked at the mills for about four years.

Unlike other factory workers, the Lowell girls were encouraged to use their free time to take classes and form women's clubs. They even wrote their own magazine, the *Lowell Offering*. Lucy Larcom, who started working at Lowell at age 11, later praised her fellow workers.



No record exists today of the name of this girl, who worked in a mill around 1850. Judging from the photograph, if she were in school today, she would probably be in the seventh or eighth grade. Although hard to see in this photograph, her hands and arms are scratched and swollen—telltale signs of the hard labor required of young girls who worked up to 14 hours per day.

TIME TABLE OF THE LOWELL MILLS

Morning Bells

First bell 4:30 AM

Second bell 5:30 AM

Third bell 6:20 AM

Dinner (Lunch) Bells

Ring out 12:00 PM

Ring in 12:35 PM

Evening Bells

Ring out 6:30 PM

Except on Saturday Evenings

—*The Table of the Lowell Mills, October 21, 1851*

History Close-up

Life of a Mill Girl

Girls had to keep their hair pulled back so it did not get caught in the machines, resulting in serious injury—or death.

Windows were rarely opened, to prevent air from blowing the threads. The result is a hot, stuffy room.

This girl is straightening threads as they enter the power loom, a job that cut her hands.

The air is dirty and causes breathing problems. One visitor remarked, “The atmosphere . . . is charged with cotton filaments and dust, which . . . are very injurious to the lungs.”

Girls must shout to be heard above the noise of the power looms. Visitors to the mill routinely referred to the sound of the machines as “deafening.”

ANALYSIS SKILL ANALYZING VISUALS

Judging from the photograph on page 392, what might be the condition of the girl's hands in this illustration? Why?

Primary Source

MAGAZINE ARTICLE

Sarah G. Bagley and Workers' Rights

Lowell girl Sarah G. Bagley wrote magazine articles and made speeches about working in the mills. She organized workers to help change conditions.

Bagley says that mill girls work to help their family members.

Bagley believes that most mill girls would leave their jobs if they could.

“Is anyone such a fool as to suppose that out of six thousand factory girls in Lowell, sixty would be there if they could help it? Whenever I raise the point that it is immoral to shut us up in a close room twelve hours a day in the most monotonous and tedious of employment I am told that we have come to the mills voluntarily and we can leave when we will. Voluntarily! . . . the whip which brings us to Lowell is necessity. We must have money; a father's debts are to be paid, an aged mother to be supported, a brother's ambition to be aided and so the factories are supplied. Is this to act from free will? . . . Is this freedom? To my mind it is slavery.”

—Sarah G. Bagley, quoted in *The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove*, by William Moran

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

How did Bagley view the idea that workers must endure poor conditions?

“I regard it as one of the privileges [advantages] of my youth that I . . . [grew] up among those active, interesting girls, whose lives . . . had principle [ideals] and purpose distinctly their own.”

—Lucy Larcom, from *A New England Girlhood*

Mill life was hard, however. The workday was between 12 and 14 hours long, and daily life was carefully controlled. Ringing bells ordered workers to breakfast or lunch. Employees had to work harder and faster to keep up with new equipment. Cotton dust also began to cause health problems, such as chronic cough, for workers.

THE IMPACT TODAY

In the 1950s, labor union membership reached its peak; about 40 percent of the workforce belonged to unions. Today only about 14 percent of the working population belongs to a labor union.

READING CHECK **Contrasting** How was the Lowell system different from the Rhode Island system?

Workers Organize

Factories continued to spread in the 1800s. Craftspeople, who made goods by hand, felt threatened. Factories quickly produced low-priced goods. To compete with factories, shop owners had to hire more workers and pay them less. Shoemaker William Frazier complained about the situation in the mid-1840s. “We have to sit on our seats from twelve to sixteen hours per day, to earn one dollar.”

The wages of factory workers also went down as people competed for jobs. A wave of immigration in the 1840s brought people from other, poorer countries. They were willing to work for low pay. More immigrants came to the Northeast, where the mills were located, than to the South. Competition for jobs also came from people unemployed during the financial Panic of 1837. For example, about 50,000 workers in New York City alone lost their jobs.

The Beginning of Trade Unions

Facing low wages and the fear of losing their jobs, skilled workers formed **trade unions**, groups that tried to improve pay and working conditions. Eventually, unskilled factory workers also formed trade unions. Most employers did not want to hire union workers. Employers believed that the higher cost of union employees prevented competition with other manufacturers.

Sometimes labor unions staged protests called **strikes**. Workers on strike refuse to work until employers meet their demands. Most early strikes were not successful, however. Courts and police usually supported companies, not striking union members.

Labor Reform Efforts

A strong voice in the union movement was that of millworker **Sarah G. Bagley**. She founded the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in 1844 and publicized the struggles of factory laborers. The association's two main goals were to influence an investigation of working conditions by the Massachusetts state legislature and to obtain a 10-hour workday. Members of the association passed out pamphlets and circulated petitions.

President Martin Van Buren had granted a 10-hour workday in 1840 for many federal employees. Bagley wanted this rule to apply to employees of private businesses. These men and women often worked 12 to 14 hours per day, six days per week.

Many working men and women supported the 10-hour-workday campaign, despite the opposition of business owners. In 1845 Sarah Bagley was elected vice president of the New England Working Men's Association. She was the first woman to hold such a high-ranking position in the American labor movement.

Over time, the unions achieved some **concrete** legal victories. Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and a few other states passed 10-hour-workday laws.

For factory workers in other states, long hours remained common. One witness described how children were “summoned by the factory bell before daylight” and worked until eight o'clock at night “with nothing but [a] recess of forty-five minutes to get their dinner.” Union supporters continued to fight for work reforms such as an end to child labor in factories during the 1800s.

READING CHECK Finding Main Ideas

Why did workers form unions, and what were the main goals of union reformers?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW With the growth of factories, workers faced new opportunities and challenges. In the next section you will learn about how the Transportation Revolution brought changes to commerce and the daily lives of Americans.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

concrete
specific, real

Section 2 Assessment

go.hrw.com
Online Quiz

KEYWORD: SC7 HP12

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Identify** What problems did many mill owners have in finding workers?

b. Analyze How did Samuel Slater's **Rhode Island system** change employment practices in mills?
- a. Describe** What was life like for mill workers in the **Lowell system**?

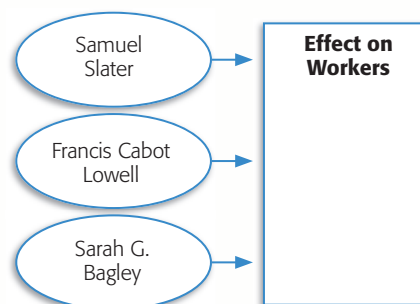
b. Make Inferences Why would young women have wanted to go to work in the Lowell mills?
- a. Recall** Why did workers form **trade unions**?

b. Predict What are some possible problems that might arise between factory owners and trade unions?

Critical Thinking

- 4. Drawing Conclusions** Review your notes on mills and workers' reactions to them. Then copy the graphic organizer to the right and use it to show

how Slater, Lowell, and Sarah G. Bagley affected workers' lives.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- 5. Examining Working Conditions** This section tells about mill life and conditions for workers. In the chart you started for the first section, list the two labor systems used by mills, the person who developed each, and the benefits of each system.