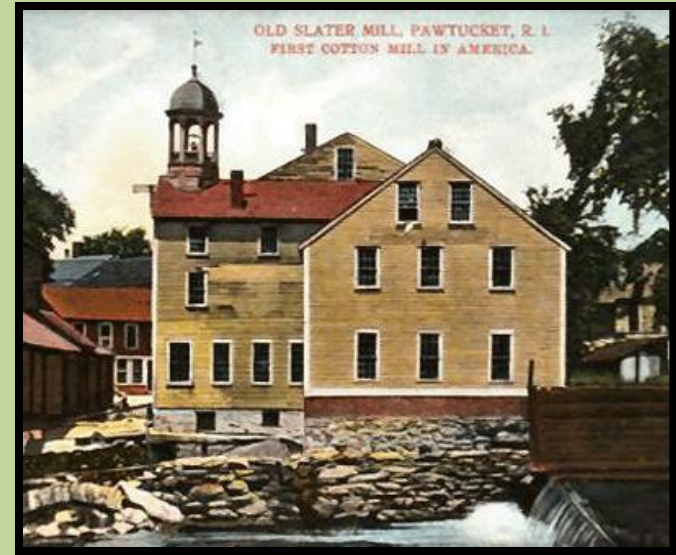


An Industrial Spy & Lowell “Girls”

Samuel Slater clandestinely left his native England to build textile mills with stolen British technology. His mills helped build an early industrial America, as well as changed the way Americans worked...especially the way women worked. Despite British laws prohibiting textile workers from coming to America, Slater came in 1789 and by 1793 got funding for his first Rhode Island mill. Since factory work of any kind was new to America; Slater and others decided to recruit young unmarried women—promising their families the “girls”, as they were known, would be well cared for.



This is an online image showing a postcard with the image of the Pawtucket Mill circa 1910. Rhode Island Postal History Collection. 2008. May 2010. Online image.
<<http://thesaltsailor.com/rhodeisland-philatelic/rhodeisland/postcard29.htm>>

The Labor Force

When the nation took its first Census as required under the Constitution, we found that 90 percent of Americans lived and worked on farms. So Slater had cause to worry about collecting a large work force in one location. The construction was also difficult and expensive—sometimes using extensive gears driven by water which in turn rotated shafts that moved the looms full of thread back and forth.

Many came seeking jobs

The young women were recruited—prized for their “work” with textiles in the home

They were housed in dormitories

Strict rules were enforced, including chaperones, curfews, and required Sunday school

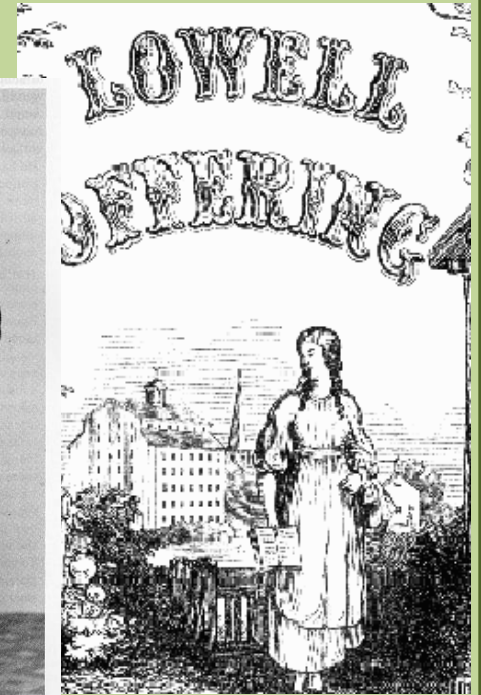


Mill Plan for gears. Woonsocket.Org. 1999. May 2010. Online image
<<http://www.woonsocket.org/waterpower.html>>



Why so many rules?

The “girls” were “Not to permit company.” “Doors must be closed at ten o’clock.” Chaperones were to “Give an account of (those) not in regular public worship.” The “girls” had “Necessary repairs ...charged to the occupant.” And...“The sidewalks kept free of snow.” Fearing parental wrath, owners sought to reassure the public.



The Mills, like businesses today, put their spin on by publishing poetry from the young women in the “Lowell Offering”. Lavender, Cathleen. “Liberty, Rhetoric and Nineteenth Century women.” The College of Staten Island, CUNY. 1998. May 2010. <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies.html>>



Strikes...?

Following competition, reduced sales, and immigrants willing to work for less than the “girls”; the Lowell mills cut wages in 1834, and again in 1836 only to face two large strikes.

One female worker published this poem in 1836

Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?
Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave,
For I'm so fond of liberty,
That I cannot be a slave.

Lavender, Cathleen. “Liberty, Rhetoric and Nineteenth Century women.” Online image. The College of Staten Island, CUNY. 1998. May 2010.
<<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/lowetext.html#transcript>>



But the Mills Continue to Grow...

The New England area textile mills employed over 8,000 people by the 1840s. Long hours, and pay continued to be a struggle. The female workers continued to out-number men, except bosses, known as “agents” were men. In the late 1840s and early 1850s the women tried to join the “ten hour movement” to reduce work hours from twelve to ten hours per day. Hew Hampshire was the first state to make ten hour days the law. Massachusetts held the first ever labor hearings on the matter; but the Massachusetts General Court decided it was not their responsibility to regulate work hours. The pressure continued in Massachusetts, and the mills gradually lowered hours by 30 minutes, and in 1853 set an 11 hour day. As slave labor produced more cotton, and markets for cloth increased, the mills continued to expand in the era leading up to the American Civil War



What do we make of this?

Samuel Slater, the spy, became a wealthy man owning thirteen mills at his death in 1835. His moniker of “Father of the American Industrial Revolution” is perhaps overdone, but the changes brought to gender roles, wages, and how and where people work were forever changed in the young republic. Here are a few of the changes brought about by Slater and his “girls”—you can see the list is long—and the themes are still with us today:

—wealthy investors were needed for modern technology to serve business—huge tracts of land, resources, and buildings were also needed—a large workforce was needed—managers (agents) were needed to control, train, & pay workers—laborers worked at the whims of the markets and profits—strikes for better conditions were mostly unsuccessful—women became a small, but stereotyped, part of the labor force—laborers worked for a wage which went into a bank (instead of working to grow subsistence goods on a farm)—

