Lowell Textile Mills and the Lowell Girls

The first textile mills were set up in America before there was electricity. Rivers were the only sources to provide enough consistent and continuous power to operate a mill. Mills were originally placed along fast-moving rivers to take advantage of the enormous kinetic energy they provided.

Geography

The first textile mills were in the northern part of America known as New England. While there were several reasons for this, geography played the greatest roll. The geography of New England is covered with mountains and hills and New England gets large amounts of rain and snow. These two factors give New England many fast moving rivers that consistently have enough water to power factories.

In the early 1800’s a man named Cabot Lowell chose a site on the Merrimack River in Massachusetts to build a brand new factory town. The Merrimack had all the kinetic energy needed to power mills.

Locate the Merrimack River on the map to the left.

The Lowell Mills

Lowell designed textile mills that used water wheels connected to large leather belts and gears to transfer power to the machines in the factory. One water wheel could produce the equivalent of a 60 horsepower engine, or enough energy to power over 3,500 spindle machines.

Working Conditions

While factories were marvelous, state of the art facilities for mass producing products they were not pleasant places to work. They were loud, often hot and very dangerous, due to all the moving gears and belts that ran throughout the factory. In addition laborers were forced to work 14 hours or more each day. Yet, many were willing to work in these conditions because outside of the very difficult work of farming there were not many jobs available for unskilled laborer. Factories could hire workers who were unskilled because much of the work was now done by machines rather than high-paid craftsmen and women.
The Lowell Women

Many of the workers who came to work in the Lowell Mills were young women or girls between the ages of 13 to 30. Young women were chosen to work in the factories for a number of reasons including, having more experience with textiles than most men and being an available source of labor. But the main reason was that while men had an average wages of $.85 to $2.09 a day in the early 1800’s, women’s average wages were $.52 to $.78 a day. Yet, while women got paid less than men, the factories did pay women more than they would get most anywhere else. The factories, also provided these young women with housing, food and most important an education. Young women who worked in the factories were typically from poor family who could not afford to educate them, but in the factories many women were taught to read and write for the first time. Later, it would be some of these ladies who began pushing for additional women’s rights, such as the right to vote.

Labor Union and Strike

As factories grew many people moved to the town of Lowell to take advantage of the job opportunities in the city. Lowell quickly became the second largest city in Massachusetts. More factories and competition made it harder for the factories to make a money. In response factory owners increased the workload of workers and at the same time reduced wages. In response to difficult working conditions and lowered wages the Lowell Girls began the first labor unions in America and were the first to strike (stop working) to protest these unfair practices.