The Lowell Mill Girls

Vertical Integration and Social Experimentation · 1820–1845

GUIDING QUESTION

Was the Lowell mill system an opportunity for young women or a new form of exploitation?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1814 to 1845, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 2 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Operative, Turn-out, Piece rate, Boardinghouse, Ten-hour movement.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 4 (1800–1848), Period 5 (1844–1877)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

Day 2 (50 minutes)
5 min · Key terms matching

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (2 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms
Operative: D · Turn-out: C · Piece rate: E · Boardinghouse: B · Ten-hour movement: A

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

Francis Cabot Lowell and his partners built the first American mill to integrate power spinning and power weaving under one roof. They recruited young women from New England farms with the promise of cash wages and respectability—and built the country's first large industrial workforce.

After studying British power looms on a visit in 1810–1812, Lowell returned to Massachusetts and, with the mechanic Paul Moody, reconstructed a working loom from what he had observed. He and the investors later called the Boston Associates incorporated the Boston Manufacturing Company in 1813; its Waltham mill, running by 1814, carried cotton from bale to finished cloth under one roof. After Lowell's death in 1817, his partners scaled the model dramatically: the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, incorporated in 1822, began building at East Chelmsford, which was incorporated as the town of Lowell in 1826. Young women,

most between fifteen and twenty-five, were recruited from New England farms, housed in company boarding houses, and given access to lectures, libraries, and their own literary magazines. Most stayed only a few years. By the 1830s, as competition intensified, the bargain soured: wages were cut, machines were sped up, and the 'mill girls' turned out in some of the earliest strikes by women factory workers in the United States.



A young woman winding shuttle bobbins in a New England weave room. After Winslow Homer, "The Bobbin Girl," wood engraving, c. 1871. National Park Service (NPGallery). Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1814 **The Waltham Mill**
The Boston Manufacturing Company's Waltham mill becomes the first in America to combine power spinning and power weaving under one roof.

1823 **Lowell Begins**
The Merrimack Manufacturing Company's first mill rises at East Chelmsford, incorporated in 1826 as Lowell—America's first large planned industrial city.

1834 **The First Lowell Turn-Out**
About eight hundred women walk out over a wage cut (reported as twelve and a half to fifteen percent); their leader is fired and the strike fails.

1836 **The Factory Girls' Association**
Between 1,500 and 2,000 women strike against higher boarding charges and form the Factory Girls' Association.

1845 **The Ten-Hour Petitions**
The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, led by Sarah Bagley, helps send ten-hour petitions to the legislature; Bagley and other operatives testify before a legislative committee, which declines to act.

PART 4

Key terms

Operative (answer D)
A nineteenth-century word for a factory worker who ran machines.

Turn-out (answer C)
The term mill workers in the 1830s used for a strike or walkout.

Piece rate (answer E)
Pay based on how much a worker produces rather than how many hours she works.

Boardinghouse (answer B)
Company-owned housing where Lowell's young women lived under rules and curfews set by the corporation.

Ten-hour movement (answer A)
A campaign by workers in the 1840s and 1850s to limit the factory workday to ten hours by law.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Testimony of Sarah G. Bagley, Massachusetts House Document No. 50

Massachusetts House of Representatives, Special Committee on Hours of Labor, 1845

> Miss Sarah G. Bagley said she had worked in the Lowell Mills eight years and a half, six years and a half on the Hamilton Corporation, and two years on the Middlesex. She is a weaver, and works by the piece. She worked in the mills three years before her health began to fail. ... The chief evil, so far as health is concerned, is the shortness of time allowed for meals. The next evil is the length of time employed—not giving them time to cultivate their minds. She spoke of the high moral and intellectual character of the girls.

Context: Bagley, founder of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, testified after workers petitioned the legislature for a ten-hour day. The committee heard the women but declined to recommend a law, saying the matter belonged to employers and workers.

Source: Massachusetts House Document No. 50 (1845): Testimony on Hours of Labor. University of Massachusetts Lowell Library. 1845. https://libguides.uml.edu/c.php?g=529205&p=3619736

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Loom and Spindle; or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls

Harriet H. Robinson, 1898

> When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, "Would you?" or "Shall we turn out?" and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, "I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether any one else does or not;" and I marched out, and was followed by the others.

Context: Robinson began work in Lowell as a ten-year-old bobbin doffer and here recalls the 1836 turn-out against higher boardinghouse charges. She wrote decades later as a women's suffrage activist, which shaped how she framed the mill girls' story.

Source: Harriet H. Robinson. Loom and Spindle; or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls. Thomas Y. Crowell (via Project Gutenberg). 1898. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/72757

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Corroborate
Compare "Testimony of Sarah G. Bagley, Massachusetts House Document No. 50" (Massachusetts House of Representatives, Special Committee on Hours of Labor, 1845) with "Loom and Spindle; or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls" (Harriet H. Robinson, 1898). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. What two "evils" did Sarah Bagley identify, and why did she rank them in that order?
2. Bagley's words survive only as a legislative committee's summary, while Robinson wrote her memoir more than fifty years after the events. How does each format affect how far we can trust the details?
3. Robinson remembered the 1836 walkout as a lesson in independence. Why might mill work have pushed women toward political activism in the 1830s and 1840s?
4. Compare the Lowell workers' demands, more time for meals and time to "cultivate their minds," to debates today about the four-day week or "right to disconnect" laws. Has the core argument changed? Explain.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

MATERIAL CULTURE

Boarding House Life

Corporate supervision of the worker's whole life.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/boarding-house-life

MATERIAL CULTURE

The Lowell Offering

A literary magazine written by mill workers.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/lowell-offering

BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Bagley: A Labor Voice in Print

A weaver who became the public voice of industrial reform.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/sarah-bagley

Places: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine

SOURCES AND CREDITS

The Mill Girls of Lowell. National Park Service, Lowell National Historical Park-. https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/historyculture/the-mill-girls-of-lowell.htm

Early Strikes. National Park Service, Lowell National Historical Park-. https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/historyculture/earlystrikes.htm

Thomas Dublin. Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860. Columbia University Press. 1979

Image: After Winslow Homer, "The Bobbin Girl," wood engraving, c. 1871. National Park Service (NPGallery). Public domain.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/lowell-girls. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.