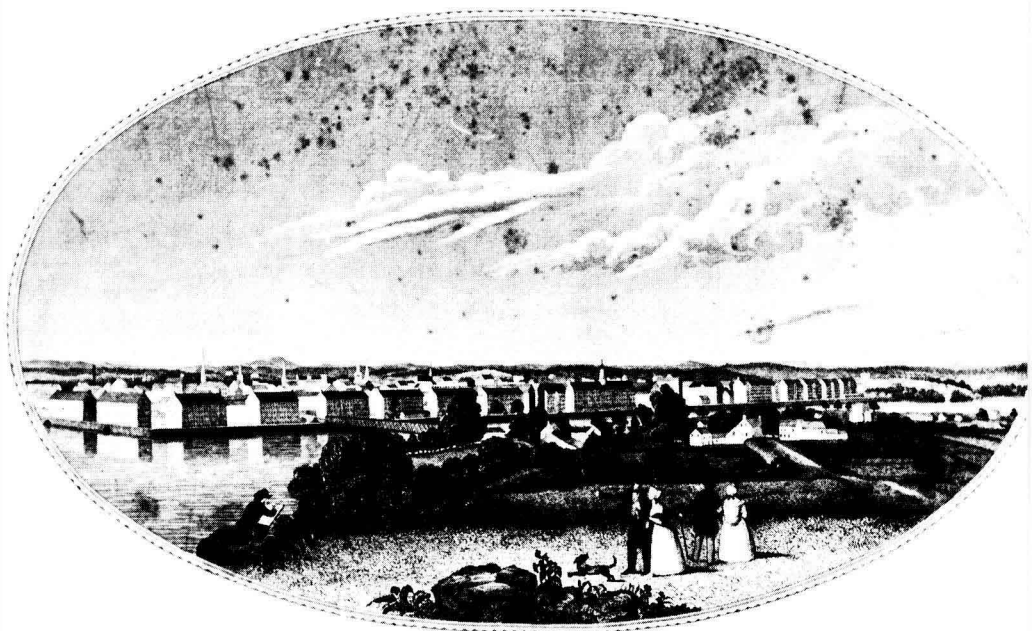


WOMEN AT WORK

Thomas Dublin

WOMEN



View of Lowell, c.1850. From a lithograph on a cloth sampler of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company in Lowell.

COURTESY OF THE MERRIMACK VALLEY TEXTILE MUSEUM.

AT WORK

*The Transformation of Work and Community
in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*

Thomas Dublin

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Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860*

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A Note on Quotations

TO CONVEY a sense of what early women workers were like, I have avoided modernizing or correcting their spelling or grammar in quotations. The only changes I have made are ending sentences with a period and beginning them with capitals. Otherwise, any additions are noted within brackets. I have avoided use of the admonitory [*sic*] except in quoting published sources or in cases of particularly literate writers where errors stand out.

Contents

ONE	Women Workers and Early Industrialization	1
TWO	The Early Textile Industry and the Rise of Lowell	14
THREE	The Lowell Work Force, 1836, and the Social Origins of Women Workers	23
FOUR	The Social Relations of Production in the Early Mills	58
FIVE	The Boardinghouse	75
SIX	The Early Strikes: The 1830s	86
SEVEN	The Ten Hour Movement: The 1840s	108
EIGHT	The Transformation of Lowell, 1836-1850, and the New Mill Work Force	132
NINE	Immigrants in the Mills, 1850-1860	145
TEN	Housing and Families of Women Operatives	165
ELEVEN	Careers of Operatives, 1836-1860	183
TWELVE	The Operatives' Response, 1850-1860	198

APPENDIXES

1. Preparation of the Hamilton Company Payroll,
1836 209
2. The Social Origins Study 219
3. The Hamilton Company Work Force, August 1850
and June 1860 224
4. The 1860 Millhand Sample 230
5. Sources of Bias and Considerations of
Representativeness 239

<i>ABBREVIATIONS</i>	251
<i>NOTES</i>	253
<i>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</i>	293
<i>INDEX</i>	309

Tables

TABLE 3.1	Ethnic Makeup of the Hamilton Company Work Force, July 1836	26
TABLE 3.2	First Entrances of New Hampshire Women at Hamilton, 1827-1850	29
TABLE 3.3	Room Distribution of New Hampshire Women at First Entrance at Hamilton, Compared to Overall Female Work Force, July 1836	30
TABLE 3.4	Age Distribution of New Hampshire Women at First Entrance at Hamilton	31
TABLE 3.5	Assessed Property Valuations of Fathers of Hamilton Operatives, Compared to Male Household Heads, Boscawen, Canterbury, and Sutton, 1830	34
TABLE 3.6	Median Property Holdings of Linked Millhand Fathers, 1830-1860, Compared to Male Household Heads of Similar Ages	35
TABLE 3.7	Rank Birth Order of New Hampshire Women Employed at the Hamilton Company, 1830-1850	41
TABLE 3.8	Initial Room Assignment of New Hampshire Women at the Hamilton Company	49
TABLE 3.9	Occupations of Husbands of Former Hamilton Operatives in New Hampshire Sample	51
TABLE 3.10	Age at First Marriage of Millhands and Husbands	52
TABLE 4.1	Mean Daily Pay of Men and Women at the Hamilton Company, July 1836, Broken Down by Major Jobs	66

- TABLE 8.1 Growth of Textile Manufactures in Lowell, 1836-1850 133
- TABLE 8.2 Ethnic Makeup of the Hamilton Company Work Force, August 1850 and June 1860 139
- TABLE 8.3 Age Distribution of the Census-Linked Group of Hamilton Operatives, August 1850, Broken Down by Sex 141
- TABLE 8.4 Residence of the Hamilton Company Work Force, July 1836, August 1850, and June 1860 144
- TABLE 9.1 Mean Daily Pay of Hamilton Workers, August 1850, Broken Down by Nativity and Sex 148
- TABLE 9.2 Distribution of Native-born and Immigrant Women in the Major Departments of the Hamilton Company, August 1850 148
- TABLE 9.3 Mean Daily Pay of Female Piece Workers at Hamilton, August 1850, Broken Down by Job and Literacy 150
- TABLE 9.4 Room Placement of Native- and Foreign-born Females at the Hamilton Company, August 1850, Broken Down by Experience 152
- TABLE 9.5 Proportions of Literate Female Operatives Employed in the Major Departments of the Hamilton Company, August 1850, Broken Down by Nativity and Experience 154
- TABLE 9.6 Proportions of Immigrants Among Women Workers in the Major Departments at Hamilton, 1845-1850 155
- TABLE 9.7 Mean Daily Pay of Native- and Foreign-born Females at the Hamilton Company, August 1850 and June 1860 158
- TABLE 9.8 Mean Daily Pay of Female Operatives at the Hamilton Company, August 1850 and June 1860, Broken Down by Department 159

TABLE 9.9	Mean Daily Pay of Female Operatives at the Hamilton Company, 1836-1860	161
TABLE 9.10	Mean Daily Pay of Major Female Jobs at the Hamilton Company, August 1850 and June 1860	162
TABLE 9.11	Proportions of Foreign-born Among All Females in the Major Departments of the Hamilton Company, August 1850 and June 1860	163
TABLE 10.1	Residence Patterns of 1860 Female Millhands Broken down by Ethnicity	167
TABLE 10.2	Relationships of 1860 Female Millhands Living at Home to Household Head, Broken Down by Ethnicity	168
TABLE 10.3	Nativity of 1860 Female Millhands Living at Home with Parents and of the Parent Household Heads	170
TABLE 10.4	Statistics on Families and Households of 1860 Female Millhands Living with Parents in Private Tenements	172
TABLE 10.5	Children's School and Employment Patterns and Ages in Families of 1860 Millhand Daughters	173
TABLE 10.6	School Attendance and Employment Patterns of Male Children in the Families of Female Millhands, 1860	178
TABLE 10.7	School Attendance and Employment Patterns of Female Children in the Families of Female Millhands, 1860	179
TABLE 10.8	Proportions of Males and Females Among Children in the Families of 1860 Female Millhands, Broken Down by Age	180
TABLE 11.1	Previous Work Experience of Hamilton Mill A Sample, July 1836	184

TABLE 11.2	Mean Daily Pay of Hamilton Mill A Sample, July 1836, Broken Down by Sex and by Previous Work	185
TABLE 11.3	Major Jobs of Females in the Hamilton Mill A Sample, July 1836, Broken Down by Previous Work	186
TABLE 11.4	Job Mobility of Persistent Men at Hamilton, 1836-1850	187
TABLE 11.5	Job Mobility of Persistent Women at Hamilton, 1836-1850	187
TABLE 11.6	Experience of Hamilton Operatives, 1836 and 1860, Broken Down by Sex	189
TABLE 11.7	Mean Daily Pay of the Hamilton Mill AB Sample, June 1860, Broken Down by Sex and by Previous Work	190
TABLE 11.8	Comparison of 1850-1860 Persistent Workers to 1850 Hamilton Company Work Force	193
TABLE 11.9	Job Mobility of Persistent Men at Hamilton, 1850-1860	194
TABLE 11.10	Job Mobility of Persistent Women at Hamilton, 1850-1860	194
TABLE 11.11	Difference in Mean Daily Pay of Persistent Operatives at Hamilton, 1850-1860, Broken Down by Sex and Ethnicity	195
TABLE 11.12	Mean Daily Pay of Persistent Females and All Women Workers at Hamilton, 1850-1860, Broken Down by Ethnicity	197
TABLE A.1	Comparison of Residence Patterns of Hamilton Work Force, July 1836, Before and After Directory Linkage	214
TABLE A.2	Family Residence of Female Operatives in the Hamilton Company, July 1836	217

TABLE A.3	Housing of Female Operatives in the Hamilton Company, July 1836	217
TABLE A.4	Quarterly Output of Selected Waltham-Lowell Firms, 1836, 1850, 1860	240
TABLE A.5	Comparison of the 1850 Census-Linked Group and the Hamilton 1850 Work Force	244
TABLE A.6	Corrected Age Distribution of the Hamilton 1850 Work Force	245
TABLE A.7	Comparison of the 1860 Hamilton Work Force and the 1860 Millhand Sample	246
TABLE A.8	Summary of Census and Register Nativity of Hamilton Operatives in Mills A and B, June 1860	248
TABLE N.1	Estimate of Age Distribution of Female Operatives at the Hamilton Company, 1830 and 1840	258
TABLE N.2	Marriage Residence Patterns of New Hampshire Women Workers	264
TABLE N.3	Contributions of Employed Children, Broken Down By Age of Oldest Child	282
TABLE N.4	Comparison of the 1836 Mill A Sample to the Work Force as a Whole	288

Illustrations

- FRONTISPIECE View of Lowell, c. 1850 ii
(Figures after page 62)
- FIGURE 1 A Plan of Sundry Farms &c. of Patucket in
 the Town of Chelmsford, 1821
- FIGURE 2 Plan of the City of Lowell, 1845
- FIGURE 3 Middlesex Manufacturing Company, Lowell,
 c. 1840
- FIGURE 4 Lowell Carding Machine
- FIGURE 5 Warp Spinning Throstle, c. 1830
- FIGURE 6 Drawing In
- FIGURE 7 Lowell Power Loom, c. 1848
- FIGURE 8 Women Weavers, c. 1860
- GRAPH 1 Mean Daily Pay by Experience, 1836 and 1860,
 for Women Workers at the
 Hamilton Company 191

CHAPTER ONE

Women Workers and Early Industrialization

WOMEN have always worked, but until the past century their work has been confined almost entirely to the domestic setting, and it has been for the most part unpaid labor. Women's work was an element in the larger family economy that predominated in preindustrial society. Although this work proved crucial to family subsistence, it also constituted the basis for women's subordinate position in patriarchal society. In the American colonies, for instance, women made substantial contributions to both agricultural production and domestic manufacture; still, married women could not own property, nor could they make contracts on their own.¹ This legal framework reinforced the economic subordination of colonial women; without means for self-support, women's place was clearly in the home.

The nineteenth century saw crucial changes in this dominant pattern. With the rise of the cotton textile industry in New England in the years between 1820 and 1860, large numbers of young, single women left their parental homes to work in the expanding mill towns. Employment in the mills enabled women to enjoy social and economic independence unknown to their mothers' generation. At the same time it created new pressures—in both the economic and cultural spheres—to which Yankee women had to respond. In responding to the novel demands of industrial capitalism, women workers relied upon familiar cultural traditions and