

Class: History/Social Studies – 45 minutes **Unit:** “Mill Girls”

Grade Level: 8

Massachusetts History and Social Science Standards:

Learning Standard: USI.28 Explain the emergence and impact of the textile industry in New England and industrial growth generally throughout antebellum America.

D. the roles of women in New England textile factories

Statement of Purpose: To recognize the onset of the early industrial New England, its required labors of young women and how those labors lead to reforms.

Topic 1: New England Mill Towns and the female operators.

Learning Objective/s:

1. Students will acknowledge the industry changes that bring the onset of factories in New England.
2. Students study the letters of mill girls working in Lowell, Massachusetts, to learn how the mill girls perceived their experiences.
3. Students will develop an understanding of life in the mill towns of the 1800's.
4. Students will realize the incentive for mill owners seeking young women and girls from low to middle income families as operators.

Schedule: 2- 50 minute class periods

Building Background:

Review the development of mills in New England and the use of farm girls as a work force in growing industrial cities with students. Point out that farms girls who left home to work in a mill city, such as Lowell, Massachusetts, moved into a very different world. This world is reflected in the letters they wrote to family members. Tell students they will read some of these letters about the life and work of mill girls in industrial cities during the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Materials:

- Letters written by New England mill girls (Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1800-1860* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1981).
- materials and information about the New England mill girls (Modern History Sourcebook: Harriet Robinson: Lowell Mill Girls <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robinson-lowell.html>) and From Farm to Factory: New England's Industrial Revolution in Textiles by Jack Larkin (2003)
- "Living and Working in a Mill Town" Activity sheet
- *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840 – 1845*
- *Engines of Ingenuity* audio recordings, (<http://www.uh.edu/engines/engines.htm>)
- Mill town Graphic Organizer sheet, Mill girl Web sheet, Living and Working in a Mill Town Q&A sheet.

Day 1 - 50 minutes**Time**

20 minutes

Anticipatory Set

Play the audio presentation of the development of Lowell as a mill city. Hand out a printed copy of the audio presentation to students.

[audiooflowellMA.m3u](http://www.uh.edu/engines/engines.htm)

Today, we'll visit America's first industrial city. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

James Watt's colleague, Matthew Boulton, said to James Boswell, in the late 18th century, "I sell here, Sir, what all the world desires to have, power." Boulton's remark was a fine double entendre. England's political power was riding high, but it was being propelled by increased steam and water power. The English textile industry, in particular, was powered by these new engines.

We lagged England in making steam engines, but we had higher hills and more rivers -- we could do wonderful things with water power. So in 1810 the New England trader Francis Cabot Lowell decided to create an American textile industry. Historian Harry Lankton tells us how he went to England to spy on their equipment -- how he came back here to recreate the English textile technology on the Charles River in Waltham, Massachusetts.

The Waltham mills soon wanted more power than they could get from the Charles. So the mill owners moved north of Boston to the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River. There they cut a Martian landscape of canals and mill-races to supply the largest array of water-powered textile mills the world had ever seen. They built the new industrial city of Lowell, Massachusetts.

By 1836 twenty textile mills in Lowell were producing fifty million yards of cloth a year. They employed 8000 people. The mills were driven by huge batteries of water wheels. In the 1840s they began replacing these water wheels with the new Francis water turbines, and the factories kept on expanding. The site was soon generating nine thousand horsepower -- modest by today's standards, but a huge enterprise in those days.

The workers were largely poor young rural women. They lived in tightly controlled boarding houses -- no drinking or debauchery. The company regulated their lives. It ran churches and sponsored cultural events. It boasted that these were Utopian communities and compared them with English sweatshops. A totalitarian air hovered over their Utopia, of course; but what nineteenth-century factory was democratic? They called Lowell the "Venice of America."

As time passed, later generations of mill owners forgot about building workers' Utopias. By the late nineteenth century, Lowell had become just one more big, ugly industrial town.

Yet Lowell had been a first step toward American industrialization. Historical preservationists are now rebuilding the old mill-races and water-supply canals. Sunday visitors will be able to stroll through the old mill-works and experience something of the Venice of America. They'll be able to look, firsthand, at the ingenuity and foresight that got us started.

Engines of Ingenuity,
<http://www.uh.edu/engines/engines.htm>

Discuss why Lowell was a good place for an industrial site. Ask why students think the mills eventually shut down.

Time
30 minutes

Activity
Direct students to design a brochure or advertisement to entice young women to move to Lowell for work opportunities.

Assessment: Teacher observation, completed brochures per rubric.

