



# The Changing Workplace

## MAIN IDEA

A growing industrial work force faced problems arising from manufacturing under the factory system.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The National Trades' Union was the forerunner of America's labor unions today.

## Terms & Names

- cottage industry
- apprentice
- master
- strike
- journeyman
- National Trades' Union

## One American's Story

In 1841 a brief narrative appeared in the *Lowell Offering*, the first journal written by and for female mill workers. A young girl who toiled in the mill—identified only by the initials F.G.A.—wrote about the decision of “Susan Miller” to save her family’s farm by working in the Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills.

At first, Susan found the factory work dispiriting, but she made friends, and was proud of the wages she sent home.

### A PERSONAL VOICE F.G.A.

“Every morning the bells pealed forth the same clangor, and every night brought the same feeling of fatigue. But Susan felt . . . that she could bear it for a while. There are few who look upon factory labor as a pursuit for life. It is but a temporary vocation; and most of the girls resolve to quit the Mill when some favorite design is accomplished. Money is their object—not for itself, but for what it can perform.”

—*Lowell Offering*, 1841

Just a few decades earlier, work outside the home might not have been an option for girls like Susan. At the same time that women’s roles began to expand, changes occurred in the way goods were manufactured.



▲ A young worker from the mills in Waltham, or Lowell, 1850.

## Industry Changes Work

Before “Susan” and other girls began to leave the farms for New England’s textile mills, women had spun and sewn most of their families’ clothing from raw fibers. In fact, in the early 19th century almost all clothing manufacturing was produced at home. Moving production from the home to the factory split families, created new communities, and transformed traditional relationships between employers and employees. The textile industry pioneered the new manufacturing techniques that would affect rules and behavior required of most American workers.



## RURAL MANUFACTURING

Until the 1820s, only the first step in the manufacture of clothing—the spinning of cotton into thread—had been mechanized widely in America. People then finished the work in a **cottage industry** system in which manufacturers provided the materials for goods to be produced at home. Though women did most of this work, men and children sometimes helped too. The participants in this cottage industry brought the finished

articles to the manufacturer, who paid them by the piece and gave them new materials for the next batch of work.

When entrepreneurs like Patrick Jackson, Nathan Appleton, and Francis Cabot Lowell opened their weaving factories in Waltham and later Lowell, Massachusetts (see Chapter 7, page 213), their power looms replaced the cottage industries. Mechanizing the entire process and housing the tools in the same place slashed the production time, as well as the cost, of textile manufacture. By the 1830s, the company that Lowell and his partners had formed owned eight factories in Massachusetts with over 6,000 employees, at an investment of over \$6 million.

**EARLY FACTORIES** Textiles led the way, but other areas of manufacture also shifted from homes to factories. In the early 19th century, skilled artisans had typically produced items that a family could not make for itself—furniture and tools, for example. As in cottage industries, the artisans usually worked in shops attached to their own homes. The most experienced artisans had titles: a **master** might be assisted by a **journeyman**, a skilled worker employed by a master, and assisted by an **apprentice**, a young worker learning a craft. Master artisans and their assistants traditionally handcrafted their products until the 1820s, when manufacturers began using production processes that depended on the use of interchangeable parts.

The rapid spread of factory production revolutionized industry. The cost of making household items and clothing dramatically dropped. In addition, new machines allowed unskilled workers to perform tasks that once had employed trained artisans. Unskilled artisans shifted from farm work to boring and repetitive factory work and to the tight restrictions imposed by factory managers. Nowhere were these restrictions more rigid than in the factory town of Lowell, Massachusetts. **A**

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Effects

**A** How did factory production change American manufacturing?

▲ Families used spinning wheels to spin yarn, which they wove into cloth on home looms. They sold their cloth to local merchants.

## Farm Worker to Factory Worker

Under the strict control of female supervisors, a work force—consisting almost entirely of unmarried farm girls—clustered in Lowell and the other mill towns that soon dotted New England. At their boarding houses, the “mill girls” lived under strict curfews. The girls’ behavior and church attendance was closely monitored, but despite this scrutiny, most mill girls found time to enjoy the company of their coworkers. By 1828 women made up nine-tenths of the work force in the New England mills, and four out of five of the women were not yet 30 years old.

# Northern Cities and Industry, 1830–1850



This depiction of Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1834 shows the factories along the river banks.

**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER**

- Region** In areas where the textile industry was strong, what other industry was also prominent?
- Place** How did the sites of New York City, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati encourage their growth as industrial towns?





### FROM THE ASHES

Malden Mills, the largest employer in Lawrence, Massachusetts (near Lowell) was devastated by fire in December 1995, as shown above.

The mills' owner, septuagenarian Aaron Feuerstein, not only announced that he intended to rebuild but pledged to keep his employees on the payroll during reconstruction.

To much acclaim for his generosity, Mr. Feuerstein said:

"Everything I did after the fire was in keeping with the ethical standards I've tried to maintain my entire life. . . . Whether I deserve it or not, I guess I became a symbol of what the average worker would like corporate America to be in a time when the American dream has been pretty badly injured."

After it was rebuilt, production of Malden Mills' popular synthetic product—Polartec—doubled.

**THE LOWELL MILL** Mill owners hired females because they could pay them lower wages than men who did similar jobs. To the girls in the mills, though, textile work offered better pay than their only alternatives: teaching, sewing, and domestic work. In an 1846 letter to her father in New Hampshire, 16-year-old Mary Paul expressed her satisfaction with her situation at Lowell.

### A PERSONAL VOICE MARY PAUL

"I am at work in a spinning room tending four sides of warp which is one girl's work. The overseer tells me that he never had a girl get along better than I do. . . . I have a very good boarding place, have enough to eat. . . . The girls are all kind and obliging. . . . I think that the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment, I advise them to come to Lowell."

—quoted in *Women and the American Experience*

Like Mary Paul, who eventually left factory work to pursue other work, most female workers stayed at Lowell for only a few years. Harriet Hanson Robinson, a mill girl who later became involved in the abolition and women's rights movements, applauded the mill girls' influence in carrying "new fashions, new books, new ideas" back to their homes.

**CONDITIONS AT LOWELL** The workday at Lowell began at 5 A.M., Mary Paul wrote her father, with a bell ringing "for the folks to get up. At seven they are called to the mill. At half past twelve we have dinner, are called back again at one and stay until half past seven."

These hours probably didn't seem long to farm girls, but heat, darkness, and poor ventilation in the factories contributed to discomfort and illness. Overseers would nail windows shut to seal in the humidity they thought prevented the threads from breaking, so that in the summer the weaving rooms felt like ovens. In the winter, pungent smoke from whale-oil lamps blended with the cotton dust to make breathing difficult.

Mill conditions continued to deteriorate in the 1830s. Managers forced workers to increase their pace. Between 1836 and 1850, Lowell owners tripled the number of spin-

dles and looms but hired only 50 percent more workers to operate them. Factory rules tightened too. After gulping a noon meal, workers now had to rush back to the weaving rooms to avoid fines for lateness. Mill workers began to organize. In 1834, the Lowell mills announced a 15 percent wage cut. Eight hundred mill girls conducted a **strike**, a work stoppage in order to force an employer to respond to demands. **B**

**STRIKES AT LOWELL** Under the heading "UNION IS POWER," the Lowell Mills strikers of 1834 issued a proclamation declaring that they would not return to work "unless our wages are continued to us as they have been." For its part, the company threatened to recruit local women to fill the strikers' jobs. Criticized by the Lowell press and clergy, most of the strikers agreed to return to work at reduced wages. The mill owners fired the strike leaders.

In 1836, Lowell mill workers struck again, this time over an increase in their board charges that was equivalent to a 12.5 percent pay cut. Twice as many

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

**B** What factors contributed to the worsening conditions workers endured at Lowell beginning in the 1830s?



women participated as had two years earlier. Only 11 years old at the time of the strike, Harriet Hanson later recalled the protest.

#### **A PERSONAL VOICE** HARRIET HANSON

“As I looked back at the long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since at any success I may have achieved, and more proud than I shall ever be again until my own beloved State gives to its women citizens the right of suffrage [voting].”

—quoted in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*

▲ Lowell mill workers often lived in company-owned boarding houses.

#### **MAIN IDEA**

#### **Evaluating Decisions**

**C** Based on the results, do you think the decision to strike at Lowell was a good one? Explain.

Again, the company prevailed. It fired the strike leaders and dismissed Harriet Hanson’s widowed mother, a boarding-house supervisor. Most of the strikers returned to their spindles and looms.

In the 1840s, the mill girls took their concerns to the political arena. In 1845, Sarah Bagley founded the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association to petition the Massachusetts state legislature for a ten-hour workday. The proposed legislation failed, but the Lowell Association was able to help defeat a local legislator who opposed the bill. **C**

## **Workers Seek Better Conditions**

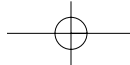
Conditions for all workers deteriorated during the 1830s. Skilled artisans, who had originally formed unions to preserve their own interests, began to ally themselves with unskilled laborers. When Philadelphia coal workers struck for a 10-hour day and a wage increase in 1835, for example, carpenters, printers, and other artisans joined them in what became the first general strike in the United States.

Although only 1 or 2 percent of U.S. workers were organized, the 1830s and 1840s saw dozens of strikes—many for higher wages, but some for a shorter workday. Employers won most of these strikes because they could easily replace unskilled workers with strikebreakers who would toil long hours for low wages. Many strikebreakers were immigrants who had fled even worse poverty in Europe.

“I regard my work people just as I regard my machinery.”

TEXTILE MILL MANAGER, 1840s

**IMMIGRATION INCREASES** European immigration rose dramatically in the United States between 1830 and 1860. In the decade 1845–1854 alone nearly



## ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

### IRISH IMMIGRANTS STRIKE

Smarting from the hostility around them, Irish immigrants soon began to view unions as an opportunity to advance their prospects. In fact, Irish dock workers organized New York City's most famous strike of the 1840s.

When Irish women tailors organized the Ladies Industrial Association in New York City in 1845, their leader, Elizabeth Gray, denounced "tyrant employers."

Though employers retained great power through the 1840s, unions did manage to win a few victories.

3 million immigrants were added to the U.S. population that had numbered just over 20 million. The majority of the immigrants were German or Irish.

Most immigrants avoided the South because slavery limited their economic opportunity. What's more, Southerners were generally hostile to European, particularly Catholic, immigrants. German immigrants clustered in the upper Mississippi Valley and in the Ohio Valley. Most German immigrants had been farmers in Europe, but some became professionals, artisans, and shopkeepers in the United States.

**A SECOND WAVE** Irish immigrants settled in the large cities of the East. Nearly a million Irish immigrants had settled in America between 1815 and 1844. Between 1845 and 1854 Irish immigration soared after a blight destroyed the peasants' staple crop, potatoes, which led to a famine in Ireland. The Great Potato Famine killed as many as 1 million of the Irish people and drove over 1 million more to new homes in America.

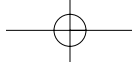
Irish immigrants faced bitter prejudice, both because they were Roman Catholic and because they were poor. Frightened by allegations of a Catholic conspiracy to take over the country, Protestant mobs in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston rampaged through Irish neighborhoods.

Native-born artisans, whose wages had fallen because of competition from unskilled laborers and factory production, considered Irish immigrants the most unfair competition of all. Their willingness to work for low wages under terrible conditions made the desperate Irish newcomers easy prey for employers who sought to break strikes with cheap labor.

**NATIONAL TRADES' UNION** In their earliest attempts to organize, journeymen formed trade unions specific to each trade. For example, journeymen shoemakers

**This 1848 engraving shows immigrants arriving in New York City from Europe.**





organized one of the nation's earliest strikes in 1806. During the 1830s, the trade unions in different towns began to join together to establish unions for such trades as carpentry, shoemaking, weaving, printing, and comb making. By means of these unions, the workers sought to standardize wages and conditions throughout each industry.

In a few cities the trade unions united to form federations. In 1834, for example, journeymen's organizations from six industries formed the largest of these unions, the **National Trades' Union**, which lasted until 1837. The trade-union movement faced fierce opposition from bankers and owners, who threatened the unions by forming associations of their own. In addition, workers' efforts to organize were at first hampered by court decisions declaring strikes illegal.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Evaluating**

**D** Why was the national trade union movement important?

**COURT BACKS STRIKERS** In 1842, however, the Massachusetts Supreme Court supported workers' right to strike in the case of *Commonwealth v. Hunt*. In this case, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw declared that Boston's journeymen bootmakers could act "in such a manner as best to subserve their own interests." A prominent American court finally had upheld the rights of labor. Although by 1860 barely 5,000 workers were members of what would now be called labor unions, far larger numbers of workers, 20,000 or more, participated in strikes for improved working conditions and wages.

The religious and social reform movements in the nation in the mid-19th century went hand in hand with economic changes that set in place the foundation for the modern American economy. While some Americans poured their efforts into reforming society, others sought new opportunities for economic growth and expansion. As the nation adjusted to the newly emerging market economy, migration west became a popular option.



**▲** This trade union banner was made for the glass cutters organization around 1840.

**4 ASSESSMENT**

**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- cottage industry
- journeyman
- strike
- master
- apprentice
- National Trades' Union

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

In a chart like the one shown, name things that contributed to the changing workplace in the first half of the 19th century.



Which of these are still part of the workplace today?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. ANALYZING ISSUES**

Do you think the positive effects of mechanizing the manufacturing process outweighed the negative effects? Why or why not?

**Think About:**

- changes in job opportunities for artisans, women, and unskilled male laborers
- changes in employer-employee relationships
- working conditions in factories
- the cost of manufactured goods

**4. EVALUATING DECISIONS**

If you were working in a factory during the mid-1800s, would you be a striker or a strikebreaker? Support your choice with details from the text.

**5. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS**

How did the influx of new immigrants from Germany and Ireland affect circumstances in the American workplace?