

Lowell Mill Girls

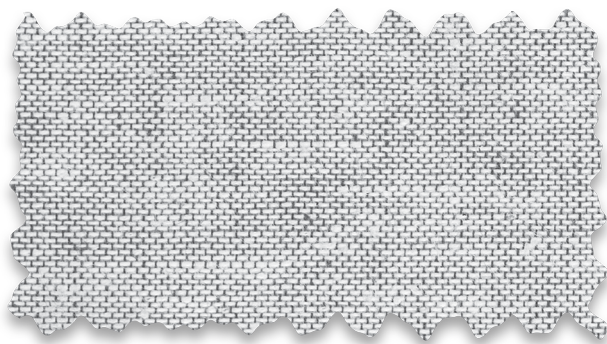
By Michèle Dufresne

- 1 For many years, cloth was made using simple tools in people's homes. But in the early 1800s, a man named Francis Cabot Lowell opened the first textile mills that brought together all the machines needed to turn raw cotton into cloth. The mills required a lot of workers to keep the machines running. But there were not enough boys and men available, so they recruited young women from farms in the area. These women soon became known as the Lowell mill girls.
- 2 The Lowell mill girls ran the looms and other machines in the factories. Even though they were paid only half of a man's salary, women flocked to these jobs. Some of them hoped to help their families back home financially. Others wanted the opportunity to live on their own.





- 3 They worked long hours under difficult conditions. There was little sunlight coming through the tiny windows. From 5:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., the machines churned out smoke and terrible noise. Even during the summer, the factory windows were kept closed to preserve the thread, and the women were surrounded by sweltering heat.
- 4 Most of the women lived year-round in boardinghouses near the mills. Twenty to thirty women would live together in one boardinghouse. Five or six women might be crammed together in one bedroom. The women had to follow strict rules and adhere to schedules of the house. No one was allowed out of the boardinghouse past 10:00 p.m. Men were not allowed inside. Everyone was required to attend a religious service each week.



- 5 Many of these girls had moved to the city of Lowell with hopes of studying and learning. They visited the city's library and reading rooms. Some of them pinned poems onto their spinning frames or worked on math problems in their free time. The mill company printed a magazine that published the workers' songs, stories, and poems. Some of the women enrolled in courses offered by the mills and attended public lectures. But many of them had a hard time staying awake for these activities after a 13-hour workday.
- 6 The textile mills were successful at first. But when sales started to decline, the company president reduced the women's salaries. The women went on strike, but they received limited support. The women later formed a plan to lower the number of work hours. They convinced the company to reduce their time by one hour per day. Although this seemed like a small victory, it paved the way for future victories for women and other factory workers.

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Test Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1) What is the main idea of the passage “Lowell Mill Girls”?

- a) Lowell mill girls agreed to live in boardinghouses and follow strict rules.
- b) Lowell mill girls went to work in textile mills in hopes of finding new opportunities.
- c) Lowell mill girls enjoyed studying and spent their free time attending public lectures.
- d) Lowell mill girls ran the machines in the factories and were paid less than men.

2) What does the word *preserve* mean as it is used in the paragraph below?

They worked long hours under difficult conditions. There was little sunlight coming through the tiny windows. From 5:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., the machines churned out smoke and terrible noise. Even during the summer, the factory windows were kept closed to **preserve** the thread, and the women were surrounded by sweltering heat.

- a) protect
- b) damage
- c) support
- d) disregard

3) What caused the Lowell mill girls to go on strike?

- a) They wanted better working conditions in the mills.
- b) They wanted more time to study and attend lectures.
- c) They wanted to change the rules in the boardinghouse.
- d) They wanted to be paid fairly for their work in the mills.

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Test Questions (continued)

4) **This is a two-part question. First answer Part A, then answer Part B.**

Part A: Which best describes the Lowell mill girls?

- a) helpful
- b) dedicated
- c) discouraged
- d) playful

Part B: Which statement provides the best evidence for your answer choice in Part A.

- a) The Lowell mill girls complained about working long hours in the heat.
- b) The Lowell mill girls were not as successful as men who worked in the factories.
- c) The Lowell mill girls worked long hours but attended classes to become educated.
- d) The Lowell mill girls did not like working on farms, so they left their homes.

5) **Which statement provides evidence that the Lowell mill girls changed after working in the factories.**

- a) The Lowell mill girls moved away from home because they wanted to live on their own.
- b) Lowell mill girls, who once flocked to low-paying jobs, began standing up for higher wages.
- c) The Lowell mill girls no longer minded being crammed in boardinghouses with other women.
- d) The Lowell mill girls worked for long hours in extreme heat.