



Wendy Ketchum: Prints & Mixed Media



# MILL GIRLS

**A New Series of  
Prints and Mixed Media  
by Wendy Ketchum**

Cover Image: *Mill*, 12x12," woodcut monoprint, 2021







# The Mill Girls

In the years between 1820 and 1850 tens of thousands of young single women between the ages of 15 and 25 left their families and the hill farms of northern New England to seek employment in the new urban textile mills. These young women would become the first generation of the industrial working class.

America at the time was largely an agricultural society, but times were often hard on hilltop farms with rocky soils and short growing seasons. Many farmers were already leaving for better agricultural prospects in the west. There were few opportunities for young single women except for domestic service or teaching.

In the early 19th century at the dawn of the industrial age in America, a wealthy Bostonian businessman named Francis Cabot Lowell envisioned a radically new system of textile production. Every step of the manufacturing process would be done under one roof and the work performed by young women instead of children or young men.

He formed a paternalistic corporation that built an entire planned community where his “operatives”, as they were referred to, would operate the new machinery in the mill and would be housed and fed by the company.

They were only expected to remain employed for a few years – to avoid the creation of a permanent underclass of laborers like what he had witnessed on his tours of England's dark and depressing textile mills.

In order to find these workers he turned to the single, educated, and hard working daughters of northern New England farmers.

Lowell's reasoning was that the mill machinery would greatly reduce the need for excessive human strength, so he wouldn't necessarily need workers who were physically strong but instead, needed workers that could be hired cheaply. Single women could be paid less than men and could be more easily "controlled" according to Lowell's thinking.

Since they were already skilled in the home industries of spinning and weaving, it would be fairly easy for these young women to adapt to the new machines.

Recruiters from mill companies were sent out to the countryside in baggage wagons advertising the benefits of working in the new textile mills.

The "mill girls," as they were known, were drawn to the new factories primarily by the highest wages paid to women anywhere in America. The cash money they earned they could keep or spend as they wished.

They liked the idea of social and economic independence from their families back home on the farms.

*The Flying Shuttle, 12 x 12," mixed media on board, 2022*



The shuttle now is swiftly thrown,  
It flies from end to end;  
And they stand ready all the while  
Each broken thread to mend.

The weavers do not  
they hither go  
They are better than  
work in rooms be

But why should we be  
grieved, when cheer-fully we  
have been weaving. And soon the bells will ring.





In the early years the work was not oppressive, and though the hours were long they had the opportunity to rest from time to time.

The working rooms were clean and bright with white washed walls. Some girls kept houseplants and flowers on south facing windowsills behind them to make their work rooms feel more like a garden than a workshop. One worker, in her memoir, said that the smell of the flowers made them forget the oil smell of the machinery.

Some women practiced what they called “mind among the spindles,” where they would use the time to expand their minds while working. They would recite poetry in their heads, or tack math problems or torn out Bible pages on their spinning frames.

The overseers did not drive the women hard early on, since most became skilled quickly, had good work ethics from working on the farm, and because the girls were often better educated than their supervisors.

Still, the working hours were long. The mill girls worked among deafening, dangerous machinery, and windows were shut to keep in humidity from spraying steam that prevented cotton threads from breaking. They had to avoid mechanical injuries from the large, heavy belts, whirling gears, and the missile like flight of the weaving shuttles.

Respiratory issues were common, due to the closed environment and inhalation of cotton dust for 12 to 14 hours a day. As women, they were also vulnerable to sexual harassment.

The ringing of the factory bell dictated every aspect of their lives. This was a dramatic shift of their concept of time, from agricultural – relying on the sun and seasons – to the highly regimented tyranny of the clock.



# FACTORY SONG

Come all ye ladies of Lowell,  
I'd have you to understand,  
We are going to leave the factory,  
And away to our native land.

When in the sable shades of night,  
The curtains round our head;  
The watchmen calls, the lamp is brought,  
To light us from our bed.

When we arise and all prepare  
To receive corporeal food;  
Some complain, while others say  
That theirs is rich and good.

Its carried from the carding room,  
And on their spindles caught.

Come listen friends and you I'll tell,  
What spinners they can do;  
The roping they will quick convert  
To warp and filling too.

Another sight I now behold,  
It is a pleasing scene;  
The warp is taken soon as spun,  
And wound around the beam.

These soon is carried out of sight

YARD GATES will be opened at the first stroke of the bells for entering or leaving the Mills.

wak



Dear Brother  
I say a word to you if  
in good health except  
this spring but am  
troubled the time complete  
due to our moving  
how of them and then

In order to assure concerns of fathers about the corrupting influence of city life on their daughters, older women, mostly widows, were hired to run the company owned boardinghouses.

These “matrons,” as they were called, enforced strict moral codes, and the girls were expected to attend church weekly as well as pursue educational opportunities.

Away from home for the first time, the boardinghouses became the social centers for the young women.

Many pairs of sisters or cousins came to work at the mills. Since most of the women were in their teens when they left the farms, the support from family in the city was a comfort to both the operatives and their parents. They recruited one another into the mills, secured jobs for each other, and helped newcomers make adjustments to the new setting.

Outside of the structured nature of factory work the girls had a few hours of relative freedom before curfew. Free time was taken up by sewing, reading, music lessons, evening classes, writing letters to family and friends, going on walks, shopping or pursuing creative projects.



They would also participate in “improvement circles,” where they would discuss books, share poetry they’d written, and debate social issues such as slavery and women’s rights.

Many mill girls took pleasure in attending lectures at the factory owned lyceum, where they could listen to luminaries like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allen Poe.

Despite the comradery afforded the young women in their residences, there were still strict rules like the 10:00 nightly curfew and mandatory weekly church services. Matrons were to report any violators to mill management.

As many mill girls had literary and journalistic ambitions, some started their own magazines, including the longest running and most successful of them, *The Lowell Offering*. Articles in the *Offering* included original poetry, songs, essays about life in the mill, as well as whimsical tales and fantasies to escape the daily grind.

Two popular songs in the magazine were: "The Song of the Weavers" and "The Song of the Spinners," which some of the women would sing to themselves as they worked.

*Song of the Weavers*, 12 x 12," woodcut monoprint with collage, 2022

# SONG OF THE WEAVERS.



Our thoughts a blessing bring; We yield not to re - pin - i



, And soon the bells will ring; But why should we be griev - i



lancholy O'er us its shadows fling? To sigh is surely folly, When ch









As technology increased the pace of production and there was increased competition from new mills, the quality of life in textile factories began to deteriorate.

In order to reduce labor costs while still making profits, mill owners would speed up the machines and assign more of them to each girl without raising wages.

In addition, a new system was implemented called the "premium system." It granted bonuses to overseers who could get more work out of the operatives than they were accustomed to. This completely altered the relationship between overseer and operative, which had formerly been easy and often friendly.

Living conditions in the boardinghouses began to degrade in favor of the bottom line.

New management created more stringent rules and firing offenses for drinking, swearing, staying out after curfew and failure to attend church.

By the mid-1840's the women were working more hours, tending more looms, and weaving more cloth than they ever had before but their monthly pay had shrunk.

*Union is Power*, 12 x 12," woodcut monoprint with collage, 2022

A new period of activism emerged at this time of deteriorating conditions at work. The mill girls had had enough; they organized and fought back.

The improvement circles that met after dinner in the boardinghouse parlors evolved into some of the nation's first labor organizations and women's rights groups.

In 1834, after the announcement of a 15% pay cut, they walked off the job in what was then termed a "turn-out."

Managers and owners had the power and resources to crush the strike, and the women were not well organized, so they were forced to return to work within a week.

Two years later in 1836 the mill owners proposed further cuts in pay and an increase in their room and board. The women chose to walk out again and launched the nation's first labor union, The Factory Girls' Association, boasting nearly 2500 female members. Insults were hurled at striking workers as they paraded in the streets, including the term "Amazonians."





# TEN HOURS, TEN HOURS!!

We have forwarded to some of our friends in  
different towns in Massachusetts, petitions  
asking the Legislature to prohibit  
in any company for employing one set  
that ten hours per day. We  
s will be in circulating  
the signatures have them all  
ret is off the stated period  
wh stat ext.



The strike failed again and the union was short lived but the mill girls refused to give up.

In 1845 the mill girls formed a more permanent labor union, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, which pressed for reducing the workday to ten hours. Even though they couldn't vote, that didn't stop them.

They organized huge petition campaigns with other local labor unions, asking the Massachusetts legislature to cap the work day at ten hours. At the same time they created their own publishing outlet called the *Voice of Industry*, which was instrumental in getting the word out for people to sign the 1845 petition for the 10 hour movement.

The 10 hour workday law finally passed in 1847, with New Hampshire being the first state to pass it. By this time, however, the Yankee mill girls had mostly left the factories and moved on.

One of the most interesting historical facts concerning mill girls of this period was the direct link to slavery in the south.

The northern textile industry was wholly dependent on the institution of slavery, because they depended on the cotton that was grown on southern plantations.

This raw cotton that fed the mills was not only grown and processed by slaves in the American South, but a portion of it was woven by mill girls into coarse cloth to clothe those very slaves -- creating a closed circle of labor.

The fabric was known as “Negro cloth” or “slave cloth.” It was cheap and coarse and tore easily. It was meant to publicly identify and demean the wearer.

Some of the slaves referred to it as “Lowell cloth,” which indicated that they knew where it came from.

Clothing the enormous population of southern slaves was an industry in itself and the Lowell Company made great profits selling negro cloth, further tying northern businessmen to southern slave owners.

Many of the mill girls became ardent abolitionists. In 1834 women mill workers joined forces with others to form the Lowell Anti-Slavery Society.

*Ties to Cotton*, 12 x 12," woodcut monoprint with collage, 2021







# THE LITTLE FACTORY GIRL'S COMPLAINT.

TO AN UNFORTUNATE PLAYMATE.

I once we used  
to play,  
And breathe the air  
glad and gay;  
We were like butter-cups,  
The butterfly—  
The light breeze lift  
us out by.

Those bright fields?  
Are they still there?  
Where I live now,  
No more.  
I must turn  
the wheel;  
I am sad and tired  
of the wheel.

I must watch the meal  
supply,  
And to the task—  
I try.  
He kisses me,  
He combs my hair,  
In my little bed,  
He stays there.

Factory,  
Must wait—  
Whether if

I have not waited too late?  
And once I hear my father say,  
"Oh, better were a grave,  
Than such a home as this for thee,  
Thou little factory slave!"

I wonder if I shall  
remain a home slave,  
Or if I do, I'll go to you,  
And spend my days in play!  
And when I'll bring some flowers home,  
You will give me some,  
And I'll think of them,  
And home to come.



As the early mill girls left the factories, many sought other employment opportunities in the cities as teachers, librarians, social workers, writers or journalists. Many would marry, and a few returned to their family farms. A diaspora of Yankee mill girls moved west with the growing migration from New England to fill the rising need for schoolteachers there. Some of the women entered female seminaries, which were the forerunners of late 19th century women's colleges.

Just as they were leaving, an unexpected labor supply flowed in to take their places. The potato famine was driving many thousands of destitute Irish families to America. Irish mill workers, many of whom were illiterate, were willing to work longer hours for cheaper wages. Some of the women had large families and often put their children to work alongside them.

By mid-century, company owned boardinghouses were disappearing and replaced by tenements.

Soon after, in the 1860's, Lowell and other textile cities throughout New England became home to thousands of poor French Canadians from failing farms, many of whom had been recruited by the same mill agents who had recruited the mill girls earlier in the century.

*The Little Factory Girl's Complaint*, 12 x 12," woodcut monoprint with collage, 2022



For many mill girls the most life changing aspect of their jobs was simply living and working closely with so many other independent young women, with whom they forged enduring bonds.

Despite the yoke of corporate paternalism, millwork put a new kind of power into women's hands both economically and socially. With their smarts, spirit and grit, they became the forerunners of women activists still working for women's equality today.

*Merrimack Prints, 12 x 12," mixed media on board, 2022*



The *Mill Girls* series of woodcut monoprints and mixed media pieces was inspired by my enduring interest in the 19th century women textile workers of New England. As a resident of New Hampshire, I will often find myself driving through prominent mill cities with their ghostly rows of long brick buildings along the Merrimack River. I like to think about the individual women who worked there and what inspired them to be the first labor reform activists.

The work is derived from vintage photos of mill workers, various related textual ephemera, and the patterns of the fabric that was produced in the mills. In the spirit of these women, I like to think that I "wove" these images together to create appealing prints and mixed media.

The woodcut monoprints were created by layering multiple hand carved wood blocks, often adding collage elements to enhance the images. The mixed media pieces were created by an under-layer painting of acrylic, to which were added layers of collaged pieces on top.

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My work is represented by Zea Mays Printmaking in Northampton, MA and the Patricia Ladd Carega Gallery in Sandwich, NH.





