In the first half of the 1800s, factory work gave girls and young women a taste of city life. Many of these young women came from farms to work in New England’s textile mills. They wanted to earn money. They also wanted to find adventure in the cities that were growing up around the factories.

One Lowell mill girl explained why young women responded to recruiting posters: “Girls come here from the country of their own free will, because they can earn more money, and because they wish to see and know more of the world.”

Row after row of looms line the huge wooden floor of a red-brick factory building. Long pulleys connect the looms to the ceiling and their power source. During a workday, hundreds of machines are running at one time. The racket is deafening. Clouds of cotton dust foul the air. The factory has huge glass windows, but they are kept closed so the air stays humid. That keeps the threads from breaking as machines turn them into cloth.

It is 1850. Over a mile of five- and six-story red-brick buildings line the banks of the Merrimack River in Lowell, Massachusetts. Six miles of canals run waterwheels for the 40 mill buildings. In the buildings, the waterwheels power 10,000 looms and 320,000 spindles. More than 10,000 people work in the factories of the young city. Every week, Lowell’s mills produce nearly a million yards—or 568 miles—of cloth.
The cloth is made of cotton. The cotton has traveled hundreds of miles by ship or rail from the South. Northern textile manufacturers, including those who own the factories in Lowell, get virtually all their cotton from the South, where African American slaves have planted, tended, harvested, and cleaned it.

On the factory floor, workers dart quickly back and forth between machines, so they can tend more than one at a time. Most of the workers are girls and women. Many have left family farms across New England to make a new life in Lowell and other cities that had sprouted up along New England’s rivers.

Factory work was difficult, but great rewards waited for the women who worked in the mills. Money, culture, and independence changed the lives of countless farm girls who, for a while at least, became factory workers.

The Mill-Girl Workforce

In big, bold letters, the recruiting notice announced jobs for 75 young women in the cotton mills in Lowell and Chicopee, Massachusetts. The women would commit to work for a year. In exchange, they would earn a dollar a week, paid in cash every month.

Today, the promise of a factory job might not seem so inviting, but it was quite appealing in the 1830s. The factories had an almost magnetic pull for many young women, especially those who had been raised on New England farms. If they stayed on the farms, most of them could count on marrying, having children, and working on the farm their whole lives. And farming in New England challenged even the hardest workers. The population was growing, making land scarce. The soil was rocky, and the growing season was short. More and more people were looking elsewhere for work—to crafts, to the West, or to the cities.

Answering the call of the factory recruiter promised something new, different, and profitable. One young woman, Sally Rice, left her family in Vermont, eventually to work in a factory in Connecticut. In a letter written in 1839, she explained her reasons for leaving home.

_I can never be happy there in among so many mountains . . . I am [al]most 19 years old. I must of course have something of my own before many years have passed over my head. And where is that something coming from if I go home and earn nothing . . . You may think me unkind but how can you blame me for wanting to stay here. I have but one life to live and I want to enjoy myself as well as I can while I live._

Many other women shared Sally Rice’s feelings, and like her, they went to work in the factories.

While most of the women who first staffed the factories came from farms, some girls came for other reasons. Harriet Hanson’s mother moved to Lowell from Boston with her four small children after her husband died. Harriet started working at the mills when she was ten years old. After Lucy Larcom’s mother was widowed, she moved the family to Lowell from a nearby town. Lucy started working in a factory when she was 11.

At the very least, life in the mills offered girls and women survival. At the most, it promised a chance to have something of their own, including adventure, before they settled down and married.

A Mill Girl’s Life

In the 1830s, it would not have been considered proper for a young woman to move to a city alone, without an adult chaperone. The mill owners had to find a way to make the move to factory life feel safe for their workers and to reassure the workers’ parents. They also wanted to make sure the workers were well disciplined so that they would be efficient.

For those reasons, the manufacturing companies built boarding houses. The young women lived there under the protective watch of an older woman. They ate their meals at the boarding house, slept there, and often became friends with other boarders. One Lowell mill worker wrote to her father in New Hampshire that “I have a very good boarding place . . . The girls are all kind and obliging. The girls that I room with are all from Vermont and good girls too.”

The mill girls had opportunities in Lowell that they would never have had on the farm. They could attend lectures and plays, and join literary discussion groups and libraries. And their wages allowed them to shop. One woman whose sister worked in Lowell described how the women who went to the factories came home changed: “They went in their plain, country-made clothes, and after working
several months, would come home for a visit, or perhaps to be married, in their tasteful city dresses and with more money in their pockets than they had ever owned before.”

Young women in Lowell even started their own magazine, *The Lowell Offering*. From 1840 to 1845, the girls wrote essays, stories, and poems. Some of their writing told about how much they liked their lives in Lowell. Other pieces told stories about women coming to work in the mills so they could help their families out of financial problems. But when historians looked at other sources—like bank accounts they discovered that most of the mill girls were not helping their families at all. Instead, they were saving money to use later for school, clothes, or a dowry (money they would bring to a marriage).

Shown here is a work schedule from 1853. The mill girls sang a song to protest pay cuts and long hours: “Oh! Isn’t it a pity, such a pretty girl as I / Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die? / Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave / For I’m so fond of liberty / That I cannot be a slave.”

**Hard Work at the Mills**

The mill girls enjoyed the opportunities they had in Lowell and other mill towns. But they had to work very hard in the factories to support themselves.

Workdays were long and ruled by the bell. In the summer, the wake-up bell rang at 4:30 A.M. Twenty minutes later, the girls reported to work. They had a half-hour break for breakfast and another for dinner. (Dinner was the afternoon meal). They did not finish their workday until 7 P.M.

Not only were the workdays long, but the work was hard. Harriet Hanson described her work as a doffer. Doffers were the youngest girls. Their job was to take bobbins that had filled with yarn off the machines and replace them with empty ones. She remembered her job many years later:
I can see myself now, racing down the alley, between the spinning-frames, carrying in front of me a bobbin-box bigger than I was. [Doffers] had to be very swift in their movements, so as not to keep the spinning-frames stopped long.

—Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom & Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, 1898

Lucy Larcom described being overwhelmed by a machine she was supposed to tend: “It had to be watched in a dozen directions every minute,” she wrote. “I felt as if the half-live creature with its great, groaning joints, and whizzing fan, was aware of my incapacity to manage it.”

The mill work got more demanding for women over time. Company owners wanted to make more money, so they increased the amount of work the women had to do and lowered their wages.

The mill girls did not simply accept such changes. Several times, they went out on strike to protest pay cuts and increases in the fees they paid to live in the boarding houses. The women described themselves as “daughters of freemen.” Their ancestors had fought to be free from English rule, they said. They believed that the factory owners’ actions interfered with their freedom, and so they rebelled.

Over time, mill girls began to leave the factories, finding better opportunities elsewhere. By the 1850s, as immigrants began filling the mill jobs, the era of the mill girls was coming to a close.