“‘But Where Are the Factory Girls?’:
New England’s Textile Mill Women in Published Memoirs and Private Writings, 1830-1861

Ellen Watterson

Anya Jabour
HSTA 471: Writing Women’s Lives
May 9, 2018
Several decades after Lucy Larcom toiled in a New England textile mill, she imagined how the churchgoing folk of Lowell, Massachusetts must have thought of the mill workers in the midst of their congregation. In 1881, Larcom wrote of the “well dressed and decorous young women” that Lowell’s female mill workers resembled roughly forty years before.¹ Larcom mused that “strangers who had been sitting beside” the well-dressed mill women “were often heard to ask, on coming out [of a house of worship], ‘But where are the factory girls?’”² Because working women’s attire and behavior resembled that of Lowell’s proper ladies, Larcom suggested, their unique experiences were rendered invisible to casual observers.

Time has restricted access to the lives of the women who populated what was once the second largest city in the country,³ but we may still wonder where the factory girls are. We will not find them in Lowell’s churches, but these women continue to reveal their experiences in the writings they left behind. Their voices—found in unpublished letters and diaries—fill in gaps left by the late-nineteenth-century published memoirs of the former mill workers Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson. Unpublished writings expand upon memoirs’ descriptions of work life and family ties to reveal new insights.

The personal, unpublished writings of Lowell’s mill women generally affirm the picture of mill life depicted in the late-nineteenth-century published writings of Harriet Hanson Robinson and Lucy Larcom. However, the letters and a diary of these nineteenth-century mill women reveal a nuanced view of mill life that Robinson and Larcom do not: they expand upon the memoirs’ descriptions of work life and mill women’s family connections.

Lowell, Massachusetts was a rapidly developing industrial city when young women like Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson first entered its textile mills. As the historian Bernice Selden describes it, the 1830s New England Larcom and Robinson knew was made up of two distinct worlds: one was the world of rapidly growing industry. By 1845, Lowell “had a population of thirty thousand, working in thirty-three mills, with over five hundred boardinghouses. Women . . . outnumbered men three to one.” In contrast to this bustling new world was the agricultural and rural realm where families still met their needs by producing goods at home and relying on networks of neighbors.

Many of Lowell’s first generation of women textile workers hailed from this rural realm. Most workers were single, young women migrating from northern New England farms, numbering in the “tens of thousands” according to the historian Thomas Dublin. Typically, these women came from neither destitute nor wealthy rural families, but were somewhere in the middle. The wages they earned in the twelve- to fourteen-hour days they toiled lined their purses and, in some cases, supported their families.

Many female adolescents left the countryside for the mills to earn higher wages than other occupations, such as domestic service and farm labor, offered women in the nineteenth century. Their families allowed them to go to the city alone since mill work also meant their daughters would be living in supervised boardinghouses. Boardinghouses ensured unmarried

---

women would remain pious and virtuous away from home, and employment in the mills also offered educational opportunities in lectures, evening classes, libraries, and the like.  

Fortunately, Lowell’s textile mill women were not neglected by historians—many academics have delved into the lives and minds of these working women. Much secondary scholarship exists about New England mill women from the first decades of the nineteenth century until the Civil War. However, there appears to be no existing secondary literature comparing mill women’s published and unpublished voices. Existing literature focusing solely on mill women tends to be descriptive rather than analytical. When historians do make arguments about women textile factory workers, their analyses concern questions other than those which compare women’s public and private voices. This paper takes a different approach by placing women’s contrasting voices at the center of its analysis, which existing scholarly literature has yet to do.

First, the descriptive works about Lowell’s mill women in the antebellum period shed light on the daily lives of mill women. Mary H. Blewett’s introduction to the diary of Susan Brown, a Lowell operative from New Hampshire, describes Brown’s individual situation and explains how it compares to other mill women’s lives. Blewett’s introduction does not provide any in-depth analysis beyond placing Brown in the context of her time. However, her introduction demonstrates how Brown’s terse diary entries prove to be a valuable resource to the historian who wishes to understand the daily lives of typical mill women who migrated, in Thomas Dublin’s words, from the northern New England “farm to factory” as teenagers.

---

In a like manner, Hannah Josephson’s *The Golden Threads: New England’s Mill Girls and Magnates*, as well as William Moran’s *The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove* tell the story of Lowell’s mill women before the Civil War.¹⁵ These books provide much information on mill women’s daily lives in and beyond the factory, but they offer little analysis and include no overarching arguments about these women. *The Mill Girls: Lucy Larcom, Harriet Hanson Robinson, Sarah G. Bagley*, by Bernice Selden, is similar to Josephson and Moran’s works, only it focuses specifically on the biographies of Lucy Larcom, Harriet Hanson Robinson, and Sarah G. Bagley.¹⁶ Selden focuses on how Larcom and Robinson’s experiences in Lowell shaped them into writers later in life.¹⁷ She also illustrates Sarah Bagley’s active life as “organizer of the Female Labor Reform Association, one of the first woman labor editors and journalists, and, finally, the first woman telegraph operator in the country.”¹⁸ Josephson, Moran, and Selden’s books expertly draw from various types of primary sources to tell the stories of Lowell’s mill women, yet they offer little analytical insights. This paper intends to move beyond the story of the mill girls and instead asks how mill women’s memoirs and private writings compare.

Bernice Selden’s *The Mill Girls* does make one mention of Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs that this paper expands upon. Selden observes that these women’s writings romanticized life and work in Lowell.¹⁹ Part of this paper is dedicated to expanding upon this thought of Selden’s; it examines how Larcom and Robinson remembered their work in comparison to women’s unpublished writings.

With regards to more analytical sources relating to mill women, the works of Joe Lockard, Julie Husband, and Thomas Dublin stand out. Historians and scholars of literature have analyzed mill women’s published writings, especially Lucy Larcom’s A New England Girlhood and her poetic work An Idyl of Work, among others. Perhaps most relevant to this study is Joe Lockard’s analysis of Larcom’s writings.

Lockard, an antebellum U.S. literature scholar, argues that Larcom’s writings—including parts of A New England Girlhood—subtly but partially drew attention to the social ill of child labor “during a period when U.S. law did not acknowledge children’s industrial [labor] as a social wrong.” One section of Lockard’s analysis proves helpful in showing how Larcom’s memoir drew attention to the damaging impact of child labor on educational opportunities, and how factory employment, for female workers, did not necessarily act as a stepping stone toward an individual’s social or economic advancement.

As this paper attempts to do, Lockard draws enlightening comparisons between Larcom’s writings and other writers (for example, Andrew Carnegie and Victor Hugo’s works which discussed child labor). However, this part of Lockard’s comparison relies solely on published writings of well-known women and men of varying time periods and locations. In contrast, this paper narrows its subject base solely to the voices of New England’s mill women in the


antebellum period while broadening its focus to include discussions of labor and factory
women’s families.

Second, Julie Husband’s short article “‘The White Slave of the North’: Lowell Mill
Women and the Reproduction of ‘Free’ Labor” contains solid insights into the views a select few
Lowell mill women held of themselves compared to reformer and 1840 presidential candidate,
Orestes Brownson.25 The main focus of Husband’s article rests on the public responses of Harriet
Farley, a mill worker and contributor to the Lowell Offering, to Brownson’s article called “The
Laboring Classes.”26 Husband’s source base draws from a number of pieces from the Lowell
Offering—a magazine of writings by Lowell’s mill women—by Harriet Farley and other mill
women published between 1840–1845 and uses these writings to show that Lowell mill women
defined concepts like independence, freedom, and individualism on their own terms separate
from a male definition, such as the one Orestes Brownson puts forth.27 Husband’s article
convincingly illustrates how some mill women thought of themselves, yet its argument is based
in the public responses of only a few select women.

While Husband’s article discusses how the published statements of mill women defined
certain concepts, this paper seeks to understand how mill women’s private writings defined
concepts like work and family in comparison to published works.

Like Husband, Thomas Dublin analyzes New England mill women’s lives, but from a
different perspective. Dublin’s findings in his introduction to Farm to Factory: Women’s Letters,
1830-1860, and his chapter on Lowell mill women in Transforming Women’s Work: New
England Lives in the Industrial Revolution concern the identities and motivations of Lowell’s

26 See Husband, “‘White Slave.’”
mill women. Dublin asks how forces that reshaped New England agriculture from 1790 to 1850 encouraged farmers’ children, especially daughters, to migrate and take up work in textile mills. He explores how the industrialization of textile production also influenced the movement of farmers’ daughters out of their northern New England homes; industrialization took away work that had been traditionally done by women in the home. Dublin’s findings about mill women go beyond their experiences as factory workers. He describes how mill women were “caught between two worlds” and often permanently changed by mill life both during and after their stints as operatives. Thus, a majority of these women did not return home to marry farmers or live out the rest of their lives as their mothers did.

In Dublin’s comprehensive, cradle-to-grave look at the lives of antebellum mill women, he explains how mill women, though living away from home, were still part of networks of kin which sometimes extended into the world of the mill town. While Dublin mentions this in passing, the subject of mill women and their families forms a substantial part of this paper. Unlike Dublin, this analysis of mill women focuses on how women’s published and private writings demonstrate how mill women’s relationships with their families functioned.

Secondary literature has done much excellent work interpreting aspects of mill women’s lives. From Larcom’s writings, to mill women’s public identities, and the influences which pushed women toward factory work, academics have addressed a number of important questions regarding mill women. Also, many other secondary works have preserved the story of these women’s daily lives. This study takes inspiration from existing secondary literature and fills in a

gap that has left mill women’s public and private writings unanalyzed together. This paper sets this published/private dichotomy as the central focus.

It is significant Lowell’s first generation of factory workers left behind a wealth of writings, both published and unpublished, to show what life was like in this industrial world. While the history of textile manufacturing tends to focus on exceptional figures—the mill owners and men who dominated the industry—it is essential to move beyond this superficial/male-centric view of history to hear the women’s voices. Thus, Thomas Dublin observes, we see mill women as active participants rather than “passive elements in the historical process.” But not just one or two voices will do. Larcom and Robinson’s published memoirs provide one view of mill life. In order to understand the full range of mill women’s experiences, we must hear less prominent women’s voices excluded by the memoirs. The historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg also reminds us to pay attention to the audience to whom the women’s voices are speaking. Therefore, this analysis of mill women’s writings places a central focus on the public or private nature of women’s words, and when the thoughts were composed.

This exploration of mill women’s voices focuses on two categories of writings: published memoirs and private writings, which include letters and a diary. With regards to published works, this paper focuses on Lucy Larcom’s A New England Girlhood, published in 1889, and Harriet Hanson Robinson’s Loom and Spindle, published in 1898. Aside from both memoirs being composed around the same time, these two memoirs are especially appropriate to analyze

---

34 Dublin, “Introduction,” 2.
37 In this paper, women’s private writings (letters and a diary) are also referred to as unpublished writings. While today these private writings can be accessed in published form, they will also be referred to as unpublished writings, since I assume they were not originally intended to be shared with the public.
together seeing that both Larcom and Robinson came from similar backgrounds. Both women grew up in eastern Massachusetts, and their mothers were widowed, which led them to begin the same job in the Lowell mills around very similar ages and time periods. Also, both women lived with their families in the boardinghouses their widowed mothers kept in Lowell. These shared characteristics of Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs make them ideal to interpret together.

Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs are not without their limitations, however. These women published their writings roughly sixty years after they worked in the mills, and they focus mainly on their experiences in the mills when they were ten to twelve years old. As a consequence, their accounts of mill labor reflect their work as doffers. Unpublished mill women’s writings composed in the time that Larcom and Robinson worked, which discuss negative aspects of factory work, suggest the memoirists either forgot the more negative aspects of factory life or consciously chose to leave such details out of their recollections. Also, Larcom and Robinson wrote of their working days as children in the mid-1830s, before working conditions in factories shifted in the late 1830s and into the 1840s. In this time, mill agents initiated the speedup—the speed of machinery in the mills increased—and stretch-out, which required factory workers to tend more machines than before. The speedup and stretch-out “transformed the leisurely atmosphere of the early mills.” Therefore, Larcom and Robinson likely had a different experience as child doffers in the mid-1830s, compared to the unpublished writers in this study who worked as adults in the 1840s.

One additional limitation of Larcom and Robinson’s accounts of work in the mills is that they were not separated from their families but came from eastern Massachusetts and lived in their mothers’ boardinghouses. This experience of Lowell and its mills contrasts to the more typical experience of the unpublished letter and diary writers in this study; these women left northern New England communities to live and work away from home at an older age than Larcom and Robinson.

Larcom and Robinson’s writings suggest that they were aware of the differences between their experience and the experiences of mill workers who migrated to Lowell from rural backgrounds. Both authors distance themselves from their former identity as mill girls; in several instances they appear to take on an objective voice to speak about the mill girls without claiming that identity for themselves. Both women also set themselves apart from the rural identities of the mill women who migrated to Lowell from elsewhere; they cast themselves as decidedly urban, eastern Massachusetts women whose identities were only loosely and temporarily grounded in factory work.

One other bias of Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs is their tendency to romanticize the life of the mill worker. The historian Bernice Selden’s observation that the memoirs depict “Lowell through the mists of time, with many of the rough edges rubbed smooth,” holds true when these memoirs’ observations of work are compared to other primary sources and secondary historical analyses of New England mill women’s lives.

---

45 See Larcom, New England Girlhood, Ch. 7; Robinson, Loom and Spindle, Chap. 2.
47 See Larcom, New England Girlhood, Chap. 7; Robinson, Loom and Spindle, Chaps. 4 and 5.
48 See Larcom, New England Girlhood, Chap. 7.
49 Selden, Mill Girls, 88.
This paper cannot offset all the limitations and biases of Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs, but it does attempt to address those that can be. The memoirs mainly center on Larcom and Robinson’s experience as child workers in Lowell’s mills, but the private writings I compare them to were written by older mill workers. Though it was not possible for me to find private writings by younger adolescent workers, I did attempt to align my private writings with the years Larcom and Robinson worked in Lowell’s mills. Judging by their memoirs, these two women began around 1835 and worked different jobs in the mills into at least the mid-1840s (we can estimate Larcom worked until at least 1845, and Robinson until her marriage in 1848). This means I compared Larcom and Robinson’s recollections of the mid-1830s and 1840s to the private writings of mill women composed approximately in this same time period. Nonetheless, we must remember, when discussing mill women’s work lives, that Larcom and Robinson focused on their childhood jobs in the mid-1830s. By the 1840s, the speedup and stretch-out altered working conditions in the mills. The women whose private writings I compare Larcom and Robinson to composed their thoughts in 1843, 1845, and 1848, after workloads and the pace of work increased.

Another bias this paper cannot offset is the memoirs’ tendency to romanticize mill workers’ lives and work. However, this paper will attempt to use this as an advantage. Larcom and Robinson’s rosy recollections of their times as textile factory workers will be used as a point of comparison to women’s private writings.

In order to conduct this comparison, one must also know the private writings used in this analysis. This paper draws on Susan Brown’s diary (1843), as well as the letters of Sarah

---

50 Lockard, “Lucy Larcom,” 142; Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 73.
51 Dublin, Women at Work, 109.
Hodgdon (1830 and 1840), Mary Paul (1845 and 1848), and Delia Page (1859-1860).\textsuperscript{52} While it is unclear what Hodgdon and Page’s specific duties were in the factory, Brown worked as a weaver, and Paul mentions working as a spinner and preparing warp threads for weaving.\textsuperscript{53} These writings are relevant to this study because their writers represent a more typical experience of mill women: they left their homes to work in textile factories, whereas Larcom and Robinson did not experience leaving their families to begin work.\textsuperscript{54} Also, these women worked the more monotonous and demanding adult jobs of spinning, weaving, warping, and drawing-in, unlike Larcom and Robinson’s childhood jobs as doffers, which included long periods of rest.\textsuperscript{55} These private writings shed light on the experiences of more average figures, in contrast to the public voices Larcom and Robinson became in publishing their memoirs among other achievements. This paper sees this difference between the published memoirists’ views versus private writings not as a limitation but a point of analysis.

However useful these unpublished writings may be, they do have limitations. One limiting factor of private writings is the limited amount of context provided in a diary, and the absence of both sides of correspondence in a collection of letters. Delia Page’s collection of letters, for instance, does not include any of Page’s own voice, but parts of her experience as a factory worker can be gleaned from the letters that do make up the collection: these letters were sent to Page from her foster family at home. Historians must do their best to deal with these limitations by making educated assumptions about their subjects based on the information available.

\textsuperscript{52} See Blewett, “Introduction”; Dublin, ed., \textit{Farm to Factory}, Chaps. 1, 4, 5.

\textsuperscript{53} Blewett, “Introduction,” 8; Dublin, ed., \textit{Farm to Factory}, 125-132.

\textsuperscript{54} See Dublin, “Introduction,” 3.

\textsuperscript{55} For descriptions of the types of work adults and children performed in the mills, see Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 67-69.
Additionally, unlike Larcom and Robinson, who were public figures, we know less about the lives of these unpublished writers. This drawback was offset by using collections of letters from the book *Farm to Factory*, edited by Thomas Dublin, and Mary H. Blewett’s edition of Susan Brown’s diary. Dublin and Blewett provide context and background information on these lesser known women’s lives.\(^{56}\)

Lastly, the collection of Delia Page’s letters in particular presents a few challenges to this analysis of mill women’s writings. Page’s background differs from the other letter writers in that her collection is made up of correspondence to Page from her foster family. As previously explained, Page’s own voice does not exist but the collection preserves her foster family’s letters to her. Page’s family situation was unique in that she lived with her father and stepmother as well as another family, Luther and Eliza Trussell’s, from time to time before becoming a mill worker.\(^{57}\) Lastly, the time period and location of these letters goes beyond Larcom and Robinson’s experiences in Lowell in the 1830s and 1840s. Page relocated from her New Hampshire home to work in the Manchester, New Hampshire mills from 1859 to at least 1862.\(^{58}\)

Considering these points, it is still relevant to compare Page’s letters to Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs. With regards to her family situation, these letters demonstrate two elements of factory workers’ lives that are not limited to Larcom and Robinson’s Lowell of the 1830s and 1840s. First, Page’s emotional ties to the Trussells, her foster family, are still relevant to this study even though Page lived and worked in New Hampshire in a later time period. Page and the Trussells apparently shared a loving, emotional relationship as evidenced by Page’s life

\(^{56}\) See Dublin’s “Introduction,” and Blewett’s “Introduction.” The Center for Lowell History at the University of Massachusetts Lowell Libraries provides a number of nineteenth-century mill women’s letters online, but little background information can be gleaned from their website about the lives of the letters’ authors.

\(^{57}\) Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory*, 155-56.

\(^{58}\) Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory*, 155-57.
and letters she received from the Trussells.\textsuperscript{59} Time, location, and the status of Page’s family as birth or foster does not render her ties to her family irrelevant to this paper. Moreover, in her study of stepfamilies in early America, Lisa Wilson shows that there was no one type of “‘traditional’ American family . . . [s]tepfamilies were also ‘traditional.’”\textsuperscript{60}

Lastly, the collection of letters Page received is used in this analysis to draw attention to the potential dangers and industrial disasters that Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs ignore. Larcom and Robinson are limited to Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1830s to 1840s. But Page’s 1859-1860s New Hampshire letters seem appropriate to compare to the memoirs in this aspect. Regardless of whether it is in the nineteenth century or our own twenty-first century, industrial accidents, large and small, have always occurred or had the potential to occur. However, I have yet to understand if these industrial disasters were more common in Page’s time, or if such dangers were as present in Larcom and Robinson’s time, and the memoirists were ignorant of them or decided to overlook them.

These are the primary sources used in this comparison of mill women’s private and published writings. Larcom and Robinson’s published memoirs are best read in conjunction with the unpublished writings of other mill women who wrote their reflections of daily life as they occurred. These collections of letters and a diary expand upon published depictions of mill life. While much has been written about Lowell’s mill women, scholarly literature has yet to execute and in-depth analysis of mill women’s words based on their status as published or personal writings.

\textsuperscript{59} Page’s life and the few surviving letters she composed, as well as the Trussell’s letters to her, indicate that she wished to live with the Trussells and shared perhaps a deeper connection with them than with her birth family (Page did not have a sound relationship with her stepmother). See Dublin, ed., \textit{Farm to Factory}, 155-207 (especially 155-36).

\textsuperscript{60} Lisa Wilson, \textit{A History of Stepfamilies in Early America} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 4.
On the subject of work, mill women’s unpublished letters reveal the exhausting and dangerous aspects of mill life that Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs do not. Additionally, memoirs and unpublished writings illustrate the essential role of family in women’s lives. Unpublished letters serve to fill the gaps where memoirs cannot accurately portray the homesickness many women felt, and how family ties functioned between Lowell and a woman’s home. This analysis begins with women’s work, and how unpublished writings fill in gaps left by Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs.

Work

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the world of Lowell’s mill women is their work. Often one must read between the lines or follow the tone of the writing to understand how these mill women thought of work. Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs romanticized mill work and briefly addressed its drawbacks. Unpublished letters and a diary show more negative opinions of work and a more realistic view of the quality of work life. Also, they reveal the dangers of mill life that Larcom and Robinson ignore.

In looking back on their days as mill workers, Larcom and Robinson described work fondly. Lucy Larcom began working in a Lowell textile mill in the mid-1830s to help support her widowed mother. For twelve year old Larcom, work, “with half a dozen other little girls who were doing the same thing,” was “‘just like play.’” Her first job was to “change the bobbins on the spinning-frames every three quarters of an hour,” which she initially thought of as “‘nothing but fun.’” Unoccupied periods of Larcom’s work days consisted of “frolicking around among the spinning-frames, teasing and talking to the older girls, or entertaining ourselves with games.

---

63 Larcom, New England Girlhood, 153-54.
. . . or exploring” other rooms of the factory. Larcom’s assessment of mill work was overall positive. She only criticized mill work when it conflicted with her desire to be in school, or when it involved working with temperamental machinery as Larcom grew up and took on other jobs in the factory. Even so, Larcom overcame the frustration of complex machinery with the help of Emilie, Larcom’s sister and workmate.

Harriet Hanson Robinson’s assessment of mill life echoed Larcom’s positive sentiments. Robinson began work around the age of ten to help her widowed mother in the 1830s. Like Larcom, she worked as a “doffer,” and had the job of “the very youngest girls, whose work was to doff, or take off, the full bobbins, and replace them with the empty ones.” Robinson also recalled this work included periods of play, reading, knitting, embroidering, and even going home when not doffing. However, Robinson did describe the difficulty of a workday that stretched from five in the morning to seven at night. Robinson remarked:

I do not recall any particular hardship connected with this life, except getting up so early in the morning . . . . But in every other respect it was a pleasant life. We were not hurried any more than was for our good, and no more work was required of us than we were able easily to do.

Where Robinson could have delved deeper into this particular hardship or other hardships, she chose to acknowledge this downside of mill work and cast it as the one singular drawback. For Robinson and Larcom, mill work may have conflicted with desires to enjoy a full night’s sleep or attend school. Still, work did not seem so difficult to these women: the workload was easy to manage, work was just like play, and any bothersome machinery was tamed by a sister’s

64 Larcom, New England Girlhood, 154.
67 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 30.
68 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 30.
69 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 30.
70 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 31-32.
presence. Both women softened the reality of mill work by focusing on the positive aspects of their childhood work as doffers. Thomas Dublin notes that doffers were required to work “under intense pressure for short periods,” but “[t]heir schedule of intermittent hard effort and relaxation enabled them to ‘get away’ from their work, a privilege not shared by adults in the mills.”

In contrast to Robinson and Larcom’s assessments of work as children, two adult workers, Susan Brown and Mary Paul, provided a different look at the work lives of mill women. It is important to note again that Brown and Paul worked in Lowell’s mills as young adults (Brown began work at eighteen years old and Paul began at fifteen), and held different jobs than Larcom and Robinson—Brown was a weaver, and Paul was a spinner and also prepared yarn for weaving. With this in mind, we may still see how Susan Brown bluntly gave a negative view of how mill women felt about work, and Mary Paul elaborated on how exhausting it could be compared to the two memoirs.

Susan Brown’s feelings about work contrasted sharply to Larcom and Robinson’s. First, Brown found it noteworthy to record in her diary when she did not work. In February 1843, Brown noted she “came out of the mill for the day.” She notes periods of illness in early March: on the second, she “came out sick at noon.” And the next day, Brown “did not go into the mills.” On May 1st, she elaborated: “Sick. Did not go into the mill. I thought of going away.” That Brown did not mention anything in her 1843 diary about work—except for the days she did not work—demonstrates her unfavorable view of mill life.

---

71 Dublin, Women at Work, 69.
72 See Blewett, “Introduction,” 7; Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 121.
74 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 27.
75 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 27.
76 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 38.
In addition, Brown made it plainly known she wished be in other places than at work. On May 8th, she exclaimed, “sixteen weeks today! But it will not be sixteen weeks longer here.”77 Three days later, she stated her desire to be in her home state of New Hampshire: “In the mill as usual. Wish I was at Epsom . . . or Pembroke.”78 Indeed, Brown’s only commentaries on work that are not negative are neutral. To echo her comments in May, Brown wrote on July 6th and 8th, “in the mill as usual.”79 These are the types of remarks she makes regarding her work days, and they reveal an apathetic attitude.

Susan Brown also did not shy from blunt statements about her feelings of mill work. Most telling is another of her May entries, where she called the factory a detestable place: “Still immured within the massy brick walls of a hateful factory.”80 To comment that she felt like she was swallowed against her will in a factory reveals a very different idea of work from the “pleasant life” Robinson celebrated, and fun and play Larcom recalled.

Another unpublished writer, Mary Paul, delved into the exhausting quality of adult work not addressed in memoirs. Like Brown, she did not shy away from honest thoughts about the quality of work life in her letters to her father.

For comparison to Mary Paul, first consider Robinson’s assessment of an adult mill woman’s quality of work life. Robinson described factory life in almost utopian terms:

Though the hours of labor were long, they were not over-worked; they were obliged to tend no more looms and frames than they could easily take care of, and they had plenty of time to sit and rest. I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty minutes at a time. They were not driven, and their . . . life was made easy . . . . Their life in the factory was made pleasant to them.81

---

77 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 39.
78 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 40.
79 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 50.
80 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 42.
81 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 71.
Again, Robinson described work as easy and pleasant.

Yet Paul acknowledged in greater depth how exhausting mill work could be. Compare Robinson’s pleasant work environment to Paul’s words to her father in an 1848 letter.\(^{33}\) Paul affirmed her work of preparing warp yarn for weaving was “very hard indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life. . . . Never since I have worked in the mill have I been so very tired as I have for the last week.”\(^{34}\) Where Robinson mentioned that the only real trouble of factory life was rising early and enduring long work hours, Paul provided a glimpse of the exhausting nature of mill work itself.

Indeed, it seems as though Larcom and Robinson worked in an entirely different world than that of Lowell’s unpublished writers. Larcom and Robinson remained silent on the subject of workplace dangers and deadly accidents. But Mary Paul’s letters described the gruesome underside of industrial work. In December 1845, she detailed to her father a number of fatal accidents in the mill:

> One girl fell down and broke her neck which caused instant death. She was going in or coming out of the mill and slipped down it being very icy. The same day a man was killed by the [railroad] cars. Another had nearly all of his ribs broken. Another was nearly killed by falling down and having a bale of cotton fall on him.\(^{34}\)

This portrait of factory work seems shockingly incompatible with Larcom and Robinson’s memories of factory life where children played in the mills. Larcom and Robinson were likely still working in Lowell in 1845 when Mary Paul wrote of these fatal accidents, so Paul’s letter suggests these workplace dangers were present at least toward the end of Larcom and Robinson’s time in the mills (Larcom worked until approximately 1845, and Robinson until 1848).

---

\(^{33}\) Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory*, 129.

\(^{34}\) Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory*, 130-30.

\(^{34}\) Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory*, 126.
Additionally, other collections of mill women’s letters prove how dangerous mill work could be. We do not have Delia Page’s own thoughts on the collapse of a Lawrence, Massachusetts mill in 1860, but Page’s foster family highlighted another deadly side of mill work.⁸⁵ Four days after the mill collapse, Delia Page’s foster mother wrote her, “[w]hen we heard of the Lawrence catastrophe, we immediately thought of you. How dreadful! . . . We should live prepared to meet death at any moment!”⁸⁶ Eighty-eight people were killed and over one hundred severely injured in the collapse and fire of the Lawrence mill.⁸⁷

The dangers Paul and Page’s letters highlight were a very real part of life for mill women in Lowell and beyond. Yet Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs do not shed light on the undeniably real failures of the industrial world: the accidents, deaths, and mill collapses. Unpublished accounts draw attention to these dangers while the only criticisms of mill life in published works concern a conflict with attending school, temperamental machinery, or getting a full night’s sleep. These private writings also allow us to see how adult work differed from Larcom and Robinson’s childhood work as doffers, and perhaps a firsthand account of how mill work could have been impacted by the speedup and stretch-out.

Family

Mill women’s published and unpublished writings display strong ties between mill women and their families, whether those women lived with their families or away from home while working in the mills. Since Larcom and Robinson both earned wages to assist their widowed mothers, they focused on this aspect of their lives in how they portrayed their personal ties to their families. Robinson explained that at “ten years of age . . . my mother, feeling obliged to have help in her work . . . and also needing the money which I could earn, allowed me, at my

⁸⁵ Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 169.
⁸⁶ Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 169.
⁸⁷ Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 169.
urgent request (for I wanted to earn money like the other little girls), to go work in the mill.”

Similarly, Larcom’s reason for taking on mill work as a child stemmed from her mother’s growing economic burdens. Larcom “thought it would be a pleasure to feel that I was not a . . . burden . . . to anybody. So I went to my first day’s work in the mill with a light heart.” Not all mill women needed to go to work to support their families, but Larcom and Robinson’s accounts illustrate this aspect of some of Lowell’s mill workers’ lives.

Beyond economic ties, Robinson shows how deep the bonds within families living together in mill towns could be. She related the story of one young girl and her mother, who was dying of tuberculosis. The girl “went out of the mill almost every forenoon, to buy and cook oysters” for her ill mother. So great was the girl’s grief when her mother died that the girl died soon after. Robinson recalled, “[m]any pathetic stories might be told of these little fatherless mill-children, who worked near their mothers, and who went hand in hand with them to and from the mill.” Robinson’s tale of the girl who cooked oysters for her mother reveals the importance of family relationships for Lowell’s female workers.

Furthermore, another anecdote in Robinson’s memoir shows how mill women felt a sense of commitment and responsibility to their families. When Robinson and her fellow young doffers had slow periods in their work day, they told each other stories and fantasized about the future. One girl “discussed seriously . . . running away . . . and joining the circus. Fortunately, there was a grain of good sense lurking in the mind of this gay little lassie, with the thought of the mother

at home, and the scheme was not carried out.”

Even when dreaming and fantasizing, the girls Larcom and Robinson worked alongside respected and understood the importance of their places in their families.

These memoirists capably show certain aspects of mill women’s family lives. Yet Robinson and Larcom were unable to fully address another major aspect of family life for many women. Many of Lowell’s female mill workers migrated from northern New England farms and left their homes behind for a time. Larcom and Robinson could not address firsthand how women experienced homesickness and family connections across significant distances. Larcom does not attempt to illustrate how mill women experienced homesickness at all. And Robinson's memoir makes only one attempt: she explains that exotic country girls, “dressed in various and outlandish fashions,” with “old-fashioned New England name[s] . . . . were homesick even before they landed at the doors of their boarding-houses.” Robinson not only makes these country women sound like strange others—almost “like a different race of beings” as Larcom says of the mill women from New Hampshire and Vermont—but also presents mill women’s homesickness from an outsider’s perspective. Additionally, the memoirists do not show how women stayed connected to their home families and communities across great distances from Lowell to their homes.

To understand how homesickness and family ties across distance operated in individuals’ lives, mill women's letters and Susan Brown’s diary fill in the gap left by the two memoirs. Indeed, the historian Thomas Dublin recognizes how mill women’s letters show tight bonds with

---

96 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 33.
98 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 63.
99 Robinson, Loom and Spindle, 64.
100 Larcom, New England Girlhood, 152.
their families, and homesickness. These women may have been far from home, but they managed to remain close to their home communities.

First, Susan Brown’s diary shows how keenly she felt homesickness when she was away from her home in Epsom, New Hampshire. Brown counted to the day the time she had been from home. On August 16th, she noted that it had been “[s]even months today since I left the north road!” And two days later she exclaimed, “[s]even months since I first entered the Middlesex [mill] Since I saw home! Alone & among strangers! Oh, when shall I return?” Similar to Susan Brown’s expressions were those of Sarah Hodgdon, who left her home in New Hampshire at age sixteen to work in Lowell. She included a poem in a letter to her father, mother, sister, “and all the rest” back home. While it likely was not Hodgdon’s own original composition, the lines resonated enough with her to dedicate them to her family. The poem declared:

I want to see you more I think
Than I can write with pen and ink
But when I shall I cannot [sic] tell . . .
if you die there and I die here
before one God we shall appear [sic].

The power of Hodgdon’s feelings for her family is apparent in this poem, as it suggests the extent of her homesickness could not be fully captured in writing. The physical divide between Hodgdon and her family back home is intensified by the speaker of the poem’s mention of another type of separation: death.

Collections of mill women’s letters further reveal another side of homesickness, and how it was experienced by family members back home. For instance, Delia Page’s foster father,

---

101 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 40.
102 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 40.
103 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 56.
104 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 56.
105 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 39.
106 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 45.
107 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 45.
Luther M. Trussell, confessed to Page: “I think of you every morning when I come down & see the clock often an hour after you have been at work.” Trussell’s letter exhibits how emotional ties were sustained across distances between families and their absent daughters. Although they were physically separated, mill women remained connected to their families. Families provided their absent mill girls advice, support, news from the home community, and material goods.

Sarah Hodgdon’s letters, for instance, demonstrate how mill women desired to be kept up to date with family and community happenings back home. In a June 1830 letter to her mother, she demanded, “I want that you should write to me as soon as you can and when you [do] . . . I want . . . the particulars about sister and Aunt Betsy. Dont [sic] fail writing.” Hodgdon so desired news from her family that she also wrote her father that same month requesting when he “write again I want you to write a whole letter.” Additionally, Hodgdon wished to learn not only family news but news from the community as well. She directed her father: “If you cant [sic] find words enough to fill a sheet of paper[,] get some of your neighbors to healp [sic] you.”

Mill women’s families did keep them connected to what went on in their home communities. Two letters from Sarah Hodgdon’s siblings, John and Elizabeth, include news about a fellow community member in ill health. John informed Sarah how the feverish and sick Mr. Hays was close to death, while Elizabeth painted a picture of the situation in detail: “It is really a distressed house & an affecting scene to see relatives weeping over him.”

---

109 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 42.
110 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 44.
111 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 44.
112 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 49-50.
113 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 49.
114 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 50.
Additionally, family served as a source of advice and support even when mill women were away from home. Sarah Hodgdon’s letters again illustrate this concept. After Hodgdon was coldly received by at least one member of a Freewill Baptist Church in Lowell, she wrote to her mother, asking “wether [sic] it is best to go to the babtist [sic] or to the methodist [sic].”115 For Hodgdon, this was no small question, but rather a stressful one that caused her “many gloomy hours.”116 Mill women valued family support, advice, and community news highly with matters large and small, even when far from home.

Lastly, women remained tied to their families by receiving material goods from home. Susan Brown wrote in one May 1843 diary entry how her friend George went to the stagecoach office to pick up her ring for her.117 Brown “brought my ring home,” which had apparently been sent to her in Lowell from her family back in New Hampshire.118 It seems the ring was of great enough importance to Brown, and her family understood her love for it, since they sent it to her. Along with her ring, Brown mentioned in another diary entry she “[r]eceived the basket from home.”119 It is unclear what sort of basket she alluded to, and what its contents and specifics may have been. But from Brown’s diary we understand how mill women’s ties to their families could have included receiving material goods from home.

From Hodgdon’s spiritual predicament to Brown’s cherished ring, mill women and their families remained essential figures in each other’s lives. Families and their absent daughters exchanged news of the family and wider community, and parents assisted daughters with their troubles. Mill women’s unpublished writings allow us to understand how women experienced homesickness on an individual level. And Larcom and Robinson’s memoirs show the dedication

115 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 44-45.
116 Dublin, ed., Farm to Factory, 44.
117 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 41.
118 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 41.
119 Blewett, ed., Caught Between Two Worlds, 43.
of mill women to their families who had the privilege of living with their daughters in Lowell. These memoirs and personal writings both agree that family and home were essential to mill women. When analyzed together, published and unpublished sources provide different but complementary views of the family lives of mill women.

**Conclusion**

The private writings of Lowell’s mill women echo the themes of published writings by Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson. Yet these unpublished writings also reveal a nuanced view of mill life by highlighting aspects of mill life that the two memoirs do not. To understand the full range of mill women’s experiences, we must read these women’s published and private writings. Larcom and Robinson provide a positive view of the textile mill workplace while private writings offer a more realistic assessment of the exhausting aspects of mill work. Mill women’s letters additionally highlight how dangerous—even life-threatening—nineteenth-century textile mills could be. With regards to mill women and their families, Larcom and Robinson illustrate how family ties played out among these women when they lived with their families in Lowell. However, to understand how homesickness affected women who migrated from other locations to work in Lowell—how these women sustained family and community ties—one must turn to the unpublished writings of mill women. These writings express acute homesickness, and show that women remained tied to their homes through exchanges of advice and information, as well as receiving material goods. Mill women’s unpublished writings expand upon published memoirs’ descriptions of work life and mill women’s family connections.

Today, we may wonder, as Lucy Larcom’s churchgoing peers did, “where are the factory girls?” What were their lives like, according to them? We may find young girls like Lucy Larcom romped about the mills between periods of work. Robinson illustrates how families
in Lowell shared close bonds. But that is only part of the story of the textile mill. Other mill girls received news of a factory collapse in another town, or heard of deaths and accidents in their own factory. Some lamented of homesickness in a letter home after a long week of work. And yet other women, like Susan Brown, toiled another day “in the mill as usual.”

Bibliography

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


