

Recovering Voices from Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1830s: Women Workers' Strikes, Antislavery Petitions, and Anti-Abolition Mobs

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In the 1830s, women textile mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts (sometimes referred to as “mill girls” at the time) staged strikes to protest their declining working and living conditions and also submitted antislavery petitions with numerous signatures to Congress. This paper describes the social and political context of the women’s labor protests and antislavery activism to begin to recover the voices of the women textile workers. The paper also includes preliminary analysis of the 1837 antislavery petition Lowell women submitted to the US Senate. That analysis suggests that 27 to 28 percent of petition signers were mill workers.

The women’s labor protests and antislavery activism shared two common elements. First, mill workers’ protests, antislavery petition campaigns, and anti-abolitionist activities in Lowell overlapped timewise, and the positions the women factory workers and company executives took in the labor protests appeared to parallel those they took with respect to slavery. Second, all these movements embraced republican values in different ways with frequent references to slavery in their rhetoric.

Although the 1830s mill workers rarely used expressions such as “wage slavery” themselves, these terms derived from the mill workers’ rhetoric, and later factory workers used them to criticize degrading working conditions in the North as industrialization progressed. In addition, white Southerners to justify racial slavery sometimes argued that slaves lived better than Northern factory workers. For many 1830s woman factory workers in Lowell, the issue of slavery was both a political matter and an issue that reflected their own lives and struggles.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 1830s were a time of great turbulence in American society. The question of slavery and the impact of early industrialization on labor were two of the most explosive issues of the decade. My current research focuses on how women textile factory workers, often referred to as “mill girls” at the time engaged in activism on both these pressing issues in Lowell, Massachusetts during this period.¹ This paper sets forth the social and political context of the women’s labor protests and antislavery activism in the 1830s and provides an interim update on my research efforts to give voice to the mill girls as well as their opponents.

Issues pertaining to slavery were matters of intense disagreement and debates in the 1830s. Abolitionists flooded Congress with huge numbers of antislavery petitions containing thousands of signatures, most of which urged abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia, over which Congress had authority. The annexation of Texas also became an issue in Congress after Anglo-American Texans declared independence from Mexico in 1836. The massive number of these petitions led Congress to adopt gag rules that prohibited discussion of issues surrounding slavery both in the Senate and the House of Representatives, where Jacksonian Democrats were in the majority.² It was also the time of the emergence of the Whig Party, which was established in opposition to President Andrew Jackson, whom they dubbed “King Andrew.” On the local level, anti-abolitionists engaged in violence to disrupt antislavery organizing and advocacy.³

At the same time, early industrialization was having a profound impact on labor and family relations as the existing patriarchal household mode of production was transforming into a new mode of production based on capital-labor relations.⁴ The emergence of textile factories, many of which were located in the Northeast next to rivers and canals that were used to power the machinery, offered some farmers’ daughters the opportunity to gain economic independence outside of home. However, these factories deprived them of their traditional economic activities, such as spinning yarn and weaving cloth at home.

Lowell, Massachusetts, known as the “City of Spindles” was home to numerous cotton mills where more than five thousand women and one thousand men worked in 1836.⁵ Many of the young women had left their homes in the countryside to work in the factories and live in company boardinghouses. The factory proprietors were proud that their mills offered

their workers relatively better working and living conditions than their counterparts in Britain. As time passed, however, competition among manufacturers became fierce, and mill management reduced wages to lower production costs. In response to declining working and living conditions, Lowell female mill workers organized and participated in strikes, known at the time as “turn-outs,” in both 1834 and 1836.⁶

These turn-outs took place decades before large labor actions would occur in other industries elsewhere in the country and before women even had the right to vote. Their activism was not confined to labor issues; they also submitted antislavery petitions to Congress in the 1830s and 1840s.

The Lowell women workers’ turn-outs in the 1830s have been researched extensively since the early 20th century, from John R. Commons, et al., *History of Labour in the United States* (1918) to Thomas Dublin’s *Women at Work* (1979).⁷ Research on the antislavery movement has focused primarily on middle-class activists and less on working-class activists. Indeed, some historians have suggested that the antislavery and labor movements had a strained relationship partly because the prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who published the widely circulated antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*, had antipathy toward the labor movement. However, David R. Roediger, who has conducted in-depth research about the complexities of white working-class racism, identified a notable exception: Sarah G. Bagley, who organized the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in the 1840s and was also an antislavery activist.⁸

The relationship between the women factory workers’ protests and their antislavery activism in the 1830s has not yet been fully researched and analyzed by historians. Several factors account for this omission, most important of which is the scarcity of primary sources.⁹ With respect to labor organizing, considerable primary sources are available, to research, for example, the “Ten-Hour Movement,” the petition campaign for the enactment of a state law to reduce the work day to 10 hours in the 1840s; however, only a few sources regarding the earlier strikes of the 1830s exist.¹⁰ While Lowell mill girls in the 1840s wrote eloquently about their lives and struggles in publications, such as the *Lowell Offering* and the *Voice of Industry*, few of their counterparts in the 1830s left accounts for future historians. Only two women who worked at the Lowell mills in the 1830s published their reminiscences later in their lives.¹¹ Therefore, the only available primary sources of the 1830s strikes are local newspaper articles and company records.

Similarly with respect to antislavery activism, extensive research has been devoted to prominent middle-class leaders and organizations involved in the antislavery movement, but only a few works have been published on so-called “rank and file” abolitionists, including working-class women.¹² Consequently, historians must search pertinent newspaper articles and engage in the cumbersome and time-consuming task of analyzing the antislavery petitions to Congress containing thousands of signatures. The late Edward Magdol conducted such a study of the 1836 Lowell petition to the House of Representatives calling for abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. However, his research on the Lowell petition is incomplete because of his untimely death as he was writing his book on the subject, and the book was only published posthumously by his wife and one of his colleagues based on his unfinished manuscripts.¹³

As a historian, I can attest personally to the difficulty in conducting research on the Lowell antislavery movement in the 1830s. For example, the Lowell National Historical Park website now has a section entitled “Anti-Slavery in Lowell,” updated in 2020–2022, but little detailed information was provided when I started the research in the early 2000s.¹⁴ While the 1843 formation of “the Lowell Woman’s Anti-Slavery Society” was mentioned in the 1993 legacy website of the Center for Lowell History at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell (hereafter, “CLH”), no direct evidence about the society is available, as reported to me by CLH then-director Martha Mayo. The CLH web contents that Mayo created were based only on articles from *The Liberator* and some abolitionists’ correspondence, archived at the Anti-Slavery Collection at the Boston Public Library.¹⁵ Beth Saleno, whose research recovered female antislavery organizations in the northern United States, noted that women in Lowell formed a female antislavery society shortly after English abolitionist George Thompson visited there in 1834. However, her finding was also based on the articles from *The Liberator*, and no other records of the organization appear to exist.¹⁶

In the summer of 2010, I discovered an undated manuscript in the Anti-Slavery Collection at the Boston Public Library that reports that some 1,400 women in Lowell signed an antislavery petition to Congress at one time around the 1840s.¹⁷ I subsequently uncovered at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington DC, a total of four antislavery petitions from Lowell. Two of them were submitted to Congress in the late 1830s with more than 1400 signatures, and another two were in the 1840s, one of which contains more than 2000 names.¹⁸

I am currently conducting research to try to find answers to important questions, such as how the 1830s antislavery petition campaigns in Lowell were organized and what relationship, if any, the labor and antislavery movements in Lowell had to each other. As part of that work, I am conducting a detailed analysis of an 1837 petition with over 1,400 signatures that Lowell women submitted to the US Senate opposing the annexation of Texas. I will provide an interim report on my initial analysis of the petition later in this paper.

2. THE LOWELL ANTISLAVERY SOCIETY AND ITS PROBABLE INFLUENCE ON MILL GIRLS

The Lowell Antislavery Society was established on February 5th, 1834, at a meeting held at the Meetinghouse of the Third Congregation Society. Most attendees were male congregational clergy, and they appointed the executive members of the society, with the Reverend Asa Rand chosen as President, and the Reverend William Twining as Secretary. Rev. Rand, a congregational minister, was also a bookseller and stationer, who published the *Lowell Observer* newspaper. Ordained in 1831, Rev. Twining was the pastor at the Second Congregational Church, which had been organized the year before. This church established eight benevolent and educational circles, including the Female Education Society, Female Charitable Society, and Female Benevolent Circle.¹⁹

As stated in the society's constitution, the goals of the society were to "collect and diffuse the information on the true character of slavery" and "to take all lawful, moral, religious means to effect a total abolition of slavery in the United States." They also aimed to "elevate the character and condition of the people of color, by encouraging their intellectual, moral, and religious improvement, by correcting the prejudice of public opinion, and by endeavoring to obtain for the colored fellow-citizens an equality of the whites."²⁰ As such, they clearly embraced Garrisonian abolitionism.

The textile manufacturing companies in Lowell forbade employing a person who was "habitually absent from public worship on the Sabbath."²¹ Accordingly, mill workers were obliged to attend church regularly, and most churches in Lowell, including the three congregational churches, operated multiple benevolent and educational circles as the Second Congregational Church did. Mill girls' enthusiasm for learning was well known. The *Lowell Offering*, an acclaimed literary magazine in the 1840s, whose editors and contributors were all mill girls, was originated from

such a church circle under the supervision of a clergyman.²² The clergymen involved in the Lowell Antislavery Society may have exerted influence through their sermons or church circles on the perspectives of mill girls.

3. LOWELL LABOR PROTEST IN 1834

In mid-February 1834, some 800 to 2,000 mill girls walked out from their workplace in what was the first organized workers' protest in Lowell, Massachusetts. The main issue that precipitated the turn-out was the announcement of a 15 percent wage reduction to begin the next month. Management justified the pay cut on the basis of falling textile prices and increased foreign competition caused by lowered tariffs, in particular the Compromise Tariff of 1833, which resolved the so-called "nullification" crisis, the confrontation between the state of South Carolina and the federal government over the federal protective tariffs on foreign imports. Originally, company directors based in Boston proposed a 25 percent wage reduction, but local company agents responded that a 15 percent wage decrease was "as low as can be reduced at this time, without producing connection & exciting bad feelings."²³ Correspondence between a company treasurer based in Boston and a local agent of the Lawrence Manufacturing Company describes what happened both right before and after the 1834 turn-out.²⁴

After the announcement of the wage reduction on February 13, a company watchman at the factory reported to the local company agent:

a large num[ber] of girls were holding a caucus & passing resolutions in the spinning room of no.1 & it appeared that they had required him to leave the room on his going into [it] to examine it.²⁵

Upon receiving the report, the agent entered the room to find that the mill workers seemed to have already appointed a "dictatress" whose name was Julia Wilson. She declared that "there was no cause for any reduction whatever, that the causes assigned for it were without foundation in fact." After she spoke, the agent offered that if she left the mill voluntarily, she would be paid and honorably discharged, meaning she would not be blacklisted in the company records if she followed his advice. She, however, did not accept his offer, and he "ordered her discharged & to leave the mill, forthwith."

She declared that every girl in the room should leave with her, made a signal, & the bell ringing, it being half past 7 o'clock, they all marched out, & very few returned the ensuing morning who had been subject to her influences.²⁶

This incident occurred just before the daily bell ringing, which informed the workers that their long workday was finally over. Most significant was the fact that some 800 workers did not come back to work on Friday, the 14th.

On Monday the 17th, the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* newspaper reported the turn-out as an “extraordinary excitement [that] was occasioned at Lowell.” The newspaper went on to describe how “one of the leaders mounted a pump and made a flaming Mary Woolstoncroft [sic] speech on the rights of women and the inequities of ‘*monied aristocracy*,” referring to Mary Wollstonecraft, the British advocate of social equality for women who authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).²⁷ Based on the letter of the Lawrence Company agent to the company treasurer, the leader whom the newspaper article referred to appears to have been Julia Wilson, although she left no record herself that would verify that it was she.²⁸

On Tuesday the 18th, the newspaper reported that “the turn-out amongst the female operatives was far from being exaggerated,” and that the “disturbance continued through Saturday,” the 15th. It stated that during the turn-out, a “proclamation, declaration, manifesto, or whatever the reader pleases to call it” was circulated:

‘Union is Power.’

Our present object is to have union and exertion, and we remain in possession of our own unquestionable rights. We circulate this paper wishing to obtain the names of all who imbibe the spirit of our *Patriotic Ancestors*; who preferred privation to bondage, and parted with all that renders life desirable, and even life itself, to procure independence for their children. The oppressing hand of avarice would enslave us, and to gain their object, they very gravely tell us of the pressure of the times; this we are already sensible of, and deplore it. If any are in want of assistance, the Ladies will be compassionate and assist them; but we prefer to have the disposing of our charities in our own hands; and as we are free, we would remain in possession of what a kind Providence has bestowed upon us, and remain daughters of freemen still.

All who patronize this effort, we wish to have discontinue their

labor at once, until terms of reconciliation are made.²⁹

Dublin examined the factors that led the women mill workers to the large-scale protest even though they were relatively low skilled workers, who lacked a “craft tradition” and did not expect to be lifelong workers. He emphasized three factors. First, the workers had formed a close-knit community, which included a sense of sisterhood as mill girls that they nurtured both in the workplace and in their boardinghouses. Many workers had cousins or sisters who worked in the same mills, and they were supported by such kinship. Second, they shared an identity as “daughters of freemen” as articulated in the “Union is Power” declaration—in other words, heirs to the revolutionary republican tradition and inalienable rights of their ancestors. Third, turn-outs had already taken place in neighboring factory towns, and those protests inspired the Lowell mill workers.³⁰

4. REPUBLICAN VALUES, ANTISLAVERY ACTIVISM, AND ANTI-ABOLITIONISM IN 1830s LOWELL

While republican values might have been regarded as a given in American history, the late Alfred F. Young suggested that such values were rediscovered or reinvented around the fiftieth anniversary of the American Revolution. In the 1820s and 1830s, abolitionists, anti-abolitionists, labor activists, and many other reformers all used the discourse of the American Revolution to justify their own particular causes.³¹ Much of the rhetoric the women employed in their “Union is Power” declaration reflected this usage.

While the discourse of the American Revolution was key to the several social movements in the early nineteenth century, the discourse of slavery was also used in such movements. Female mill workers described factory management as “the oppressing hand of avarice [that] would enslave us.” Such reference to slavery also needs to be analyzed in the political context of the period. When the proslavery faction in Congress advocated for the introduction of the gag rules in the 1830s, they routinely referred to labor unrest and the degrading working conditions of workers in the North to defend slavery.³² The Lowell mill workers, who would later submit antislavery petitions with thousands of signatures to Congress, also compared management’s relationship to them as one of enslaver and enslaved. It is noteworthy that the Lowell Antislavery Society was established just a week before the 1834 turn-out. I seek to gain further insight into the women’s use of this phrase in combination with their

republican rhetoric through my further research on possible connections between their labor protests and antislavery activism.

The women's labor and antislavery activism also demonstrates that not having the right to vote did not mean that women had no interest in politics during the antebellum period. As Rosemarie Zagarri, Ronald J. Zboray, and Mary Saracino Zboray have documented, women were active in politics during the early national and antebellum periods.³³ Indeed, circulating antislavery petitions may not have seemed difficult for the mill workers because they had already engaged in collective action during the February 1834 turn-out.

Another important factor in anti-slavery activism at that time was English abolitionist George Thompson's trip to the United States in the fall and winter of 1834 to give antislavery lectures. His speeches inspired many people across the country but also provoked violence from anti-abolitionists. While his lectures impressed many Northerners and led them to establish anti-slavery societies, Thompson and his lectures became a target of anti-abolition mobs. Thompson's experience in Lowell was no exception.³⁴ On his second visit to Lowell, Thompson gave three lectures. His first lecture on November 30th was given without interruption, "except the throwing of a large stone at a window, which was arrested by the sash and fell harmless on the outside."³⁵

During his second lecture, a mob stormed the Town Hall, where he was speaking. Rev. Rand, president of the Lowell Antislavery Society and likely Thompson's host in Lowell, reported this incident to *The Liberator* as follows:

In the early part of the lecture, a small company of low fellows disturbed the assembly just without the door, in the entry at the head of the stairs, by loud stamping, vociferation and hisses. This was continued at intervals for near half an hour, when peace-officers, who had been sent for, arrived, and immediately the disturbers were quiet as lambs, and continued so till the close. Same time after, three missiles were thrown at the building behind the speaker. The third or last, a large brickbat, came through the window, passed near the speaker's head and fell harmless before the audience in front of the rostrum.... A slight change of its direction could have silenced the eloquence of our friend forever, except that the barbarity of the deed would have given what he had already said on behalf of the oppressed more glorious immortality.³⁶

Rev. Rand further reported that after a subsequent lecture by Thompson in Lowell on December 2nd, the anti-abolitionists held a gathering of their own at the same venue. Rev. Rand recounted:

The mal-contented were not satisfied to retire home after our adjournment last evening. They re-opened the Hall, and held a sort of mobocratic caucus, though remarkably still and orderly for one of that kind....³⁷

According to the handbills circulated at that time, the anti-abolitionists objected to the meetings at which Thompson spoke both because as an Englishman he was a foreigner who they claimed was trying to disturb “the peace and harmony of our country,” and because the citizens of Lowell themselves had no right to interfere with what the anti-abolitionists viewed as the rights of their “Southern brethren.”³⁸ In other words, they argued that slaveholding was a property right secured by the U.S. Constitution, and as a British subject, Thompson had no business inserting himself into the slavery question, which was the province of the American South. Although most participants in anti-abolition riots might have been regarded as Democrats, conservative Whigs, who would dominate Massachusetts politics in the 1830s,³⁹ were also anti-abolitionists, as discussed below.

Despite the mob violence against the abolitionists, women attendees of Thompson’s lectures went on to organize anti-slavery societies in Lowell as well as in other towns in Massachusetts.⁴⁰ It is not actually clear when and how the female antislavery society was established in Lowell because no records containing this type of specific information were left.

By contrast, there is hard evidence that a significant number of textile company executives both in Lowell and Boston were anti-abolitionists. While neither the title, the date, nor the note keeper’s name was recorded, a small handwritten note in pencil that I discovered in the CLH collection provides a record of an anti-abolition meeting that company executives organized and led in Lowell on Saturday, August 22, 1835.⁴¹

Soon after a call for a public meeting was issued, signed by Kirk Boott and more than fifty other citizens, of which the following is a copy:--
The undersigned inhabitants of Lowell are impressed with a belief that the rash doings of those who advocate the immediate abolition of slavery result in much mischief to our common country....⁴²

Kirk Boott was the agent of the Merrimac Manufacturing Company, the first cotton textile factory established in Lowell, as well as of the Locks and Canal Company. He also represented Lowell in the Massachusetts legislature and was one of the town's most eminent citizens. The meeting selected William Austin, the agent of the Lawrence Manufacturing Company as Chairman, and John Aikin, the agent of the Tremont Manufacturing Company as Clerk. John Avery, superintendent of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company and several lawyers were also executive members.⁴³

The day before the Lowell public meeting, a large-scale anti-abolition meeting took place in Boston. Boston Mayor Theodore Lyman, Jr. presided, and prominent city residents attended, such as Abbott Lawrence, one of the proprietors of Suffolk, Tremont, and Lawrence Mills, and a member of the US House of Representatives, elected as an Anti-Jacksonian to the 24th Congress and as a Whig to the 26th Congress. Northern textile manufacturers relied on cotton grown in Southern slave states as raw material for their factories. These business connections between the Northern textile industrialists and the Southern cotton planters explain why textile industrialists led anti-abolition efforts in Lowell. Their positions resulted in them later being labeled "Cotton Whigs."⁴⁴

Indeed, Abbott Lawrence's Congressional voting record regarding the gag rule in 1836 reflected the political attitudes of Massachusetts anti-abolitionists in the 1830s. While supporters of the 1836 gag rule in the Twenty-Fourth Congress were mostly Democrats, a House resolution affirming that Congress possessed "no constitutional authority to interfere, in any way, with slavery in any of the States of this confederacy" was passed on a nonpartisan basis with 182 votes in favor, including Abbott Lawrence and the other eight Massachusetts Representatives. Only nine Representatives opposed, including John Quincy Adams and two other Representatives from the Commonwealth. By contrast, the resolution that "Congress ought not to interfere, in any way, with slavery in the District of Columbia," which passed, was not supported by any congressmen from Massachusetts, including Lawrence.⁴⁵

While these company executives to serve their business interests opposed the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery in the Southern states, they were not, however, affirmatively pro-slavery. The 1835 Lowell meeting passed the following resolution:

Resolved, That we deplore the existence of slavery in any part of our

common country; our feelings, habits, principles and laws, equally forbid it among ourselves; yet we deem it our bounden duty, on principles of moral right, national law, and sacred compact, to leave the evil with its remedies, where the constitution leaves it, in the hands of the several states.⁴⁶

In further research, I will investigate and explain more thoroughly how Lowell citizens, from mill workers to company executives to other ordinary residents, viewed the issue of the expansion of slavery to new states in the U.S. territories, such as Texas. Indeed, the Lowell company executives, who would become known as “Cotton Whigs,” did not support the expansion of slavery to new states in the U.S. territories. When the annexation of Texas became a political issue, Abbott Lawrence warned in 1837 that it created the most significant crisis for the Union since its founding.⁴⁷ Many mill workers as part of their overall antislavery activism showed their opposition to the expansion of slavery in new states through their 1837 petition to the U.S. Senate against the annexation of Texas, as discussed below. Some ordinary Lowell citizens who belonged to neither of these groups may have followed the company executives’ lead and opposed expansion of slavery to new states but not favored immediate abolition in the South.

When company executives reduced factory workers’ wages in February 1834 and the workers staged the turn-out to protest, the ostensibly benign paternalistic relationship of management to labor in the early Lowell mills was lost and replaced by an oppositional and antagonistic one. Similarly, when local citizens established the Lowell Antislavery Society that embraced Garrisonian abolitionism one week before the women workers’ turn-out in 1834 and Thompson visited Lowell later in the year, company executives reacted by opposing immediate and unconditional abolition, as evidenced by their August 1835 organizing meeting.

Then in the fall of 1836, the companies increased workers’ room and board charges for the boardinghouses, and the women workers organized and participated in another massive turn-out. According to Harriet Hanson Robinson, then an eleven-year-old bobbin doffer who participated in the turn-out, the protesters as part of their action walked down the streets of Lowell, singing a parody of the popular song “I Won’t Be a Nun.”

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.⁴⁸

Here again as in 1834, the strikers employed the metaphor of slavery as part of their protest rhetoric. Even though their employers were not aggressively pro-slavery, they had taken positions against complete abolition. Whether or not the workers' use of the slavery metaphor was mere coincidence is an important and intriguing issue for further research.

In 1836 and the years following, thousands of Lowell women signed antislavery petitions to Congress. In addition to the 1836 petition researched by Magdol, Lowell women submitted a petition to the Senate opposing the annexation of Texas in 1837 and a petition to the House of Representatives in favor of the abolition of both slavery in the District of Columbia and the slave trade in the United States in 1838. The 1838 House petition was so massive that it could not be stored in the same size box that other petitions were and required an oversize box.⁴⁹

Preliminary detailed analysis of the beginning pages of the 1837 Senate petition reveals that although 36 of the first 180 signatures were those of married women who presumably were not mill workers, approximately 28 percent of the signatures appear to belong to mill workers who lived in company boardinghouses.⁵⁰ Fully understanding the demographic characteristics of the 1830s Lowell petitioners will require much more time and research. It is interesting to note, however, that the preliminary analysis of mill worker representation in the 1837 Senate petition corresponds roughly with Magdol's findings in his study on the 1836 House petition with 1409 signatures. Among Magdol's sample of 894 women petitioners, he found that 229 signatories were linked to jobs in Lowell mills and that nine lived in company boardinghouses. Roughly 27 percent of the Magdol's sample were mill workers.⁵¹

5. CONCLUSION

At present, I have found no direct evidence that indicates that any of the antislavery petitioners in Lowell participated in the labor protests in the 1830s. However, preliminary analysis suggests that from 27 to 28 percent of women antislavery petitioners were mill workers. My future research will investigate what the historical record further reveals about women mill workers' involvement in both types of activism.

The women workers' labor protests, their antislavery petition campaigns, and company executives' anti-abolitionism in Lowell largely overlapped timewise. Examining the social and political context of the labor protests and antislavery activism of the women workers illuminates two common factors in their activities. First, the positions of the women workers and company executives vis-à-vis the two issues were parallel with each other. The women workers tried to maintain their present working conditions and worked for abolition of slavery. The company executives opposed both the workers' demands and immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery. While mill girls sang "I cannot be a slave," factory agents and proprietors attended anti-abolition meetings and maintained that their Southern business partners had the constitutional right to keep slavery secure.

Second, all these antebellum movements claimed to embrace republican values of individual liberty and inalienable rights, albeit in very different ways. The mill workers frequently referred to slavery in their discourse on both labor and antislavery issues.

Although the terms "wage slavery" and "white slavery" were used infrequently in the 1830s by the mill workers themselves, the usage of these terms rose as industrialization progressed. Northern labor advocates used them to criticize the declining working conditions in factories while white Southerners sometimes used them to justify racial slavery, insisting that slaves' living and working conditions were better than those of the Northern factory workers. For many Lowell mill girls, the issue of slavery was both a political matter as well as an issue that reflected their own lives and struggles in the turbulent decade of the 1830s.

NOTE

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¹ The term "mill girls" was used in the former factory workers' reminiscences. Lucy Larcom, "Among Lowell Mill-Girls: A Reminiscence," *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 1881); Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle, or, Life among the Early Mill Girls* (New York: T. Y. Cromwell, 1898). The age distribution of the sampled female workforce in the Lowell mills was: 14.3% under 15; 46.2% between 15 and 19; 25.2% between 20 and 24; 9.2% between 25 and 29; 5.0% between 30 and over. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 31. Under current standards, referring to women age 15 and over as "girls" seems inappropriate, but the word "mill girls" represented their identity at that time and was the term they called themselves. In this paper,

I periodically use the term with quotations.

² William Lee Miller, *Arguing about Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Peter Charles Hoffer, *John Quincy Adams and the Gag Rule, 1835–1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); David Waldstreicher and Matthew Mason, *John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery: Selections from the Diary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Yukako Hisada, “How the Anti-Slavery Gag Rule Was Established by the US House of Representative,” and “The Anti-Slavery Gag Rule and the Censure of John Quincy Adams,” *The Journal of the Faculty of Foreign Studies Aichi Prefectural University (Area Studies and International Relations)* 51(2019) and 53(2021) (both in Japanese).

³ Leonard L. Richards, “Gentlemen of Property and Standing”: *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828–1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Yoshio Higomoto, “Anti-Abolition Riots and the ‘Communications Revolution’ in Jacksonian America,” *American History/Amerikashi-Kenkyu* 36(2013): 24–42 (in Japanese).

⁴ For case studies of the labor and family relations, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁵ Statistics of Lowell Manufacture, January 1, 1836, Compiled from Authentic Sources, Harvard University, Baker Library.

⁶ Dublin, *Women at Work*; Lowell Trades and Labor Council, *Lowell: A City of Spindles* (Lowell, MA: Lawler & Company, 1900); Nathan Appleton, *Introduction of the Power Loom and Origin of Lowell* (Lowell, MA: B. H. Penhallow, 1858).

⁷ Edward B. Mittelman, “Trade Unionism,” in John R. Commons, et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, Vol. I, Part 3 ([1918], New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1966); Dublin, *Women at Work*; Teresa Anne Murphy, *Ten Hours’ Labor: Religion, Reform, and Gender in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁸ Douglas B. A. Ansdell, “William Lloyd Garrison’s Ambivalent Approach to Labour Reform,” *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 3 (1990): 402–407; Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 71–73; Eric Foner, “Abolitionism and the Labor Movement in Ante-bellum America,” *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 57–76; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, New Edition* ([1991], London: Verso, 2007). For a recent overview of Antislavery and social reform movements in the 19th century, see Faye E. Dudden, “Women’s Rights, Abolitionism, and Reform in Antebellum and Gilded Age America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 5 April 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-20> (Accessed September 13, 2023).

⁹ Thomas Dublin referred to the antislavery petitions in the 1830s and 1840s and the significance of analyzing the petitions in his letter to his colleague. At some point, he seemed to intend to publish his work on the antislavery movement in Lowell, but he did not. A copy of letter dated June 2, 1991, in Thomas Dublin Collection, Box 4, Folder 1: Antislavery Materials, The Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts, Lowell (CLH).

¹⁰ Teresa Anne Murphy’s argument about labor reform in the 1830s depended mostly on

male artisans' writings. Murphy, *Ten Hours' Labor*.

¹¹ Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*; Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood, Outlined from Memory* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1889).

¹² Edward Magdol, *The Antislavery Rank and File: A Social Profile of the Abolitionists' Consistency* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Beth A. Saleno, *Sister Societies: Women's Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

¹³ Magdol, *The Antislavery Rank and File*, 35–41, 70–73. Because I conducted my archival work before reading Magdol's book, I have not yet located the 1836 petition in the National Archives.

¹⁴ "Anti-Slavery in Lowell," Lowell National Historical Park, <https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/historyculture/anti-slavery-in-lowell.htm> (Accessed September 10, 2023)

¹⁵ Martha Mayo, "Profiles in Courage: African Americans in Lowell," An Exhibit in 1993 (Legacy Website) <https://web.archive.org/web/20160414044343/http://library.uml.edu/clh/Prof/Pro1.html> (Accessed September 10, 2023).

In 2009, I asked the CLH director if there were any materials on the "Lowell Woman's Anti-Slavery Society," and the director replied that no direct evidence on the society was available except *The Liberator* and some abolitionists' correspondence. Martha Mayo, Email message to Yukako Hisada, June 23, 2009.

¹⁶ Saleno, *Sister Societies*, 29, 44.

¹⁷ Letter from Maria Weston Chapman to William Lloyd Garrison, n.d. [1844?] (A Copy of a carefully made list of the petitions which had passed through the Hand of the Committee of the Boston Female Antislavery Society) (Manuscript), Anti-Slavery Collection, Boston Public Library (BPL).

¹⁸ Remonstrance of H. Huntington and 1400 Others, Women of Lowell, Mass. against the Annexation of Texas to the United States as a Slave-Holding Territory, October 12, 1837, Laid on the Table, Senate, Mr [Daniel] Webster, Records of the Senate, SEN25A. H1, Box123, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (NARA); Petition of Harriet S. Gridley and 1400 Others, Women of Lowell, Mass. for the Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia, January 3, 1838, Mr [William] Parmenter, House, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, HR25A. H.1.8 (in an oversized box), NARA; Remonstrance of Elizabeth M. Simonds and 2046 Others, Women of Lowell, Middlesex Co., Mass. against the Admission of Texas to the United States as a Slave-Holding State into the United States, December 11, 1845, Laid upon the Table, Records of U.S. House of Representatives, HR29A. H.1.1, NARA; Anti-Mexican War Petition, Sarah G. Bagley and Others, February 19, 1846, Committee of Foreign Affairs HR29A. G.5.2, NARA.

¹⁹ *The Lowell Anti-Slavery Society* (Lowell, Mass.: The Observer Press, 1834), 3–6, the Rare Books and Manuscript Department, Boston Public Library; Benjamin Floyd, *The Lowell Directory Containing Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupation, Places of Business and Dwelling Houses* (Lowell: The Observer Press, 1834), 98, 144–147; "Asa Rand," James Strong and John McClintock, *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 8 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880), 905.

²⁰ *The Lowell Anti-Slavery Society*, 5–6.

²¹ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 78; *The Regulations to Be Observed by All Persons Employed by the Lawrence Manufacturing Company*, [n.d.], The Making of the Modern World, link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0106153886/MOME?u=camb55135&sid=bookmark-MOME&pg=1. (Accessed 19 September 2023); *The Lowell Directory* of 1834, 144–147.

²² Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 45–46; Larcom, "Among Lowell Mill-Girls," 599; Charles Dickens, *American Notes* ([1842], Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1961),

86; B. M. Sterns, "Factory Magazine in New England," *Journal of Economic and Business History* (Aug. 1930): 688.

²³ Henry Hall to Robert Mean, February 13, 1834, Vol. FB-1: Treasurer to Miscellany, Letter Book, Suffolk, 1832–1838, Tremont and Suffolk Mills Records, 1831–1936, Baker Library, Special Collections, Harvard University Business School (BL); Dublin, *Women at Work*, 90.

²⁴ William Austin to Henry Hall, February 15, 1834, Lawrence Manufacturing Company Records, BL. The original letters have been missing in the Harvard Baker Library, but Thomas Dublin possessed those photocopies. Based on his photocopies, one of the letters was transcribed and published by Millie Allen Beik. Millie Allen Beik, *Labor Relations* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2005), 32–33; Thomas Dublin Collection, Box 5, Folder 2: Lowell-Strikes 1836, 1837[sic.], CLH.

²⁵ William Austin to Henry Hall, February 15, 1834, in Beik, *Labor Relations*, 32–33; Dublin Collection, Box 5, Folder 2, CLH.

²⁶ *Ibid.* As for a signal to start the strike, the Lowell National Historical Park website indicated that it was to wave a calash [a kind of headdress or bonnet] in the air, while Beik suggested it was to throw a scarf in the air. Beik, *Labor Relations*, 33; the Lowell National Historical Park, "Labor Reform: Early Strikes," <https://www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/historyculture/earlystrikes.htm> (Accessed October 8, 2021). The article in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* reported the signal was to wave a calash. "Turn-Out at Lowell," *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, February 17, 1834; Dublin, *Women at Work*, 97.

²⁷ "Turn-Out at Lowell," *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, February 17, 1834; Dublin, *Women at Work*, 89–91.

²⁸ William Austin to Henry Hall, February 15, 1834.

²⁹ "The Turn-Out at Lowell," *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834; "Union Is Power," Broadside, 1834, American Antiquarian Society; Dublin, *Women at Work*, 93.

³⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 103–107.

³¹ Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), Chapters 5–6. While it sounds contradictory, Larry E. Tise argued that the notion of "proslavery republicanism" was introduced in proslavery ideology in the 1830s. Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 347–362.

³² "Slavery in District of Columbia: Speech of Hon. J. H. Hammond, of South Carolina, in the House of Representatives, February 1, 1836," *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, the 24th Congress, 1st Session, February 1, 1836, pp. 611–616; John C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions, February 1837," *Speeches of John C. Calhoun* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843).

³³ Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Ronald J. Zboray, and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices Without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010).

³⁴ Yukako Hisada, "George Thompson and Anti-Abolitionism in Lowell, Massachusetts," *The Journal of the Faculty of Foreign Studies (Area Studies and International Relations)* 46(2014): 215–227.

³⁵ A. Rand, "Mr. Thompson at Lowell," *The Liberator*, December 6, 1834.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ "Cowardice and Ruffianism," *The Liberator*, December 6, 1834.

³⁹ All but two of the Representatives from Massachusetts to the Twenty-Fourth Congress (December 7, 1835 – March 3, 1837) were elected either as Anti-Jacksonians or Whigs. The

other two were an Anti-Mason, and a Jacksonian, who later became a Whig. *Bibliographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <https://bioguide.congress.gov> (accessed April 30, 2024).

⁴⁰ Cowardice and Ruffianism,” *The Liberator*, December 6, 1834; Salerno, *Sister Societies*, 29, 44.

⁴¹ While conducting research on anti-abolitionism at the CLH in 2012–2013 as a visiting scholar in the History Department at Harvard University, I found a small hand-written note in pencil in a folder classified as “abolitionists” as well as an Anti-Thompson Handbill Circulated in Lowell, December 2, 1834, and “Public [Anti-Abolition] Meeting” Broadside, August 21, 1835. These printed ephemera were reprinted as Documents 7 and 8 in *Cotton, Cloth and Conflict: The Meaning of Slavery in a Northern Textile City* (Lowell, MA: Tsongas Industrial History Center, n.d.).

⁴² Hand-written notes, n.d., Folder: Abolitionists, CLH.

⁴³ *Ibid.*; Benjamin Floyd, *The Lowell Directory: Containing Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupation, Places of Business and Dwelling Houses* (Lowell: The Patriot Press, 1835); Hisada, “George Thompson and Anti-Abolitionism in Lowell,” 223–224.

⁴⁴ Thomas H. O’Connor, *Lords of the Loom: The Cotton Whigs and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 52, 65–66; Kinley J. Brauer, *Cotton versus Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southern Expansion, 1843–1848* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 8–29; United States Congress, “Lawrence, Abbott,” <https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/L000130> (accessed November 3, 2023); Hisada, “George Thompson and Anti-Abolitionism in Lowell,” 224.

⁴⁵ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, the 24th Congress, April 25–26, 1836, pp. 876–885.

⁴⁶ Hand-written notes, n.d., Folder: Abolitionists, CLH.

⁴⁷ O’Connor, *Lords of the Loom*, 58–60.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 51. The original song was as follows: “Now is it not a pity such a pretty girl as I, Should be sent to a Nunnery to pity away and die; But I won’t be a Nun, No, I won’t be a Nun[,] I’m so fond of pleasure that I cannot be a Nun.” It was published as a score for medium voice and piano in the 1820s. *I Won’t Be a Nun* (New York: E. Riley, [between 1823 and 1824]), Library of Congress, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2015562063> (accessed April 30, 2024).

⁴⁹ Remonstrance of H. Huntington and 1400 Others, Women of Lowell, Mass. against the Annexation of Texas, October 12, 1837, SEN25A.H1, Box123, NARA; Petition of Harriet S. Gridley and 1400 Others, Women of Lowell, Mass. for the Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia, January 3, 1838, HR25A. H.1.8, NARA.

⁵⁰ Originally, Thomas Dublin suggested to me to compare the 1837 petition signers to the Hamilton Manufacturing Company data of 1836 that he collected for *Women at Work*, and which are now a part of the CLH collection. Looking at the first 180 signatures of the 1837 petition with Dublin, who offered to help me looking at the first 84 names, the linkage did not seem to work, especially because many of the names on the first sheet were preceded by “Mrs.” According to Dublin, 27 of the first 84 signers were married women. I then examined the sample up to the 180th signer to determine how many of the names matched with the city directory supplement of 1836, which listed all female mill workers. Thomas Dublin and Yukako Hisada, Email correspondence, September 19–30, 2023. Remonstrance of Women of Lowell against the Annexation of Texas (1837); Benjamin Floyd, *Supplement to the Lowell Directory: Containing Names of the Female Employed and Places of Employment in the Various Manufacturing Establishments* (Lowell: Leonard Huntress, 1836).

⁵¹ Magdol, *The Antislavery Rank and File*, 59, 70–72.