RS#06: Urbanization: Examining Life in Lowell, MA and New York City, NY - Documents

Source A: Harriet H. Robinson, Lowell, MA

Harriet Hanson Robinson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1825. She wrote her account in 1883. She discussed her life as a young female factory worker at textile mill in Lowell, Massachusetts from 1834, when she was only 10 years old, until 1848 when she got married. Later, Robinson became involved in the woman suffrage movement.

At the time the Lowell cotton mills were started the caste of the factory girl was the lowest among the employments of women….She was represented as subjected to influences that must destroy her purity and self respect. In the eyes of her overseer she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched and pushed about. It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill girls,...

The early mill girls were of different ages. Some were not over ten years old; a few were in middle life, but the majority were between the ages of sixteen and twenty five. The very young girls were called "doffers." They "doffed," or took off, the full bobbins from the spinning frames, and replaced them with empty ones. These mites worked about fifteen minutes every hour and the rest of the time was their own. When the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or go outside the mill yard to play. They were paid two dollars a week. The working hours of all the girls extended from five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening, with one half hour each, for breakfast and dinner. Even the doffers were forced to be on duty nearly fourteen hours a day….Several years later a ten hour law was passed….

One of the first strikes that ever took place in this country was in Lowell in 1836. When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike or "turn out" en masse. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went from their several corporations in procession to the grove on Chapel Hill, and listened to incendiary speeches from some early labor reformers….

This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience.

It is hardly necessary to say that, so far as practical results are concerned, this strike did no good. The corporation would not come to terms. The girls were soon tired of holding out, and they went back to their work at the reduced rate of wages. The ill success of this early attempt at resistance on the part of the wage element seems to have made a precedent for the issue of many succeeding strikes.

Source: Excerpt from Harriet H. Robinson, *Early Factory Labor in New England*, in Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, *Fourteenth Annual Report* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1883), pp. 38082, 38788, 39192.
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robinson-lowell.asp

Source B: *An Idyl of Work*, Lucy Larcom, Lowell, MA

Lucy Larcom was born in Beverly, Massachusetts in 1824 and worked in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts from the ages of 11 to 21. She was a friend of Harriett Hanson Robinson. Larcom became a poet and writer. Her book length poem, *An Idyl of Work* was published in 1875.

"…Home-dreams,
As in all womanly souls, made undertone
To her life's music. But her hopes and plans
And fancies were a garden builded in
Behind great walls of duty. Her true work
She sought the clew of, here 'mid endless threads
Shaped from crude cotton into useful cloth.

Not always to be here among the looms,--
Scarcely a girl she knew expected that;
Means to one end their labor was, --to put
Gold nest-eggs in the bank, or to redeem
A mortgaged homestead, or to pay the way
Through classic years at some academy;
More commonly to lay a dowry by
For future housekeeping."

Source: Excerpt from Lucy Larcom's book-length narrative poem, *An Idyl of Work,* 1875, pg. 34.
http://archive.org/stream/anidylwork00larcgoog#page/n41/mode/2up

Source C: Excerpt from Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*

British author Charles Dickens traveled to the United States in 1842 as a critical observer of American society. He published a report on his trip after he returned to London. This excerpt is from Dickens' trip to New York City and his tour of the Five Points District, which was populated by mostly poor immigrants and African Americans. While in the United States, Dickens traveled from Boston as far south as Richmond, Virginia and as far west as St. Louis, Missouri. He also traveled to Montreal, Canada.

Let us go on again…plunge into the Five Points. But it is needful, first, that we take as our escort these two heads of the police, whom you would know for sharp and well-trained officers if you met them in the Great Desert….We have seen no beggars in the streets by night or day; but of other kinds of strollers, plenty. Poverty, wretchedness, and vice, are rife enough where we are going now.

This is the place: these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here, bear the same fruits here as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces at the doors, have counterparts at home, and all the wide world over. Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays. Many of those pigs live here. Do they ever wonder why their masters walk upright in lieu of going on all-fours? and why they talk instead of grunting?...

What place is this, to which the squalid street conducts us? A kind of square of leprous houses, some of which are attainable only by crazy wooden stairs without. What lies beyond this tottering flight of steps, that creak beneath our tread? — a miserable room, lighted by one dim candle, and destitute of all comfort, save that which may be hidden in a wretched bed. Beside it, sits a man: his elbows on his knees: his forehead hidden in his hands. "What ails that man?" asks the foremost officer. 'Fever,' he sullenly replies, without looking up. Conceive the fancies of a feverish brain, in such a place as this!

Source: *American Notes for General Circulation,* by Charles Dickens, 1850, pg. 91.
http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/dickens/AmericanNotes6x9.pdf

Source D: Excerpt from Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*

Charles Loring Brace is considered to be the father of the modern foster care movement. He was born in Connecticut in 1826 and after graduating from Yale, he moved to New York City in 1849. In 1853, he helped found the Children's Aid Society. Brace wanted to give children an alternative to begging in the street and living the slums of New York. This organization was the first of its kind devoted to helping poor children. In 1872, he wrote this book to discus what he believed to be the most dangerous class of people in large cities, which were poor and abandoned youth.

…[A]n immense proportion of our ignorant and criminal class are foreign-born; and of the dangerous classes here, a very large part, though native-born, are of foreign parentage. Thus, out of the whole number of foreigners in New York State, in 1860, 16.69 per cent. could not read or write; while of the native-born only 1.83 per cent. were illiterate.

Of the 49,423 prisoners in our city prisons, in prison for one year before January, 1870, 32,225 were of foreign birth, and, no doubt, a large proportion of the remainder of foreign parentage. Of the foreign-born, 21,887 were from Ireland; and yet at home the Irish are one of the most law-abiding and virtuous of populations—the proportion of criminals being smaller than in England or Scotland.

In the Eastern Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, according to Dr. Bittinger, from one-fourth to one-third of the inmates are foreigners; in Auburn, from a third to a half; in Clinton, one-half; in Sing Sing, between one-half and six-sevenths. In the Albany Penitentiary, the aggregate number of prisoners during the last twenty years was 18,390, of whom 10,770 were foreign-born. [Transact. of Nat. Cong., p. 282.]

It is another marked instance of the demoralizing influence of emigration, that so large a proportion of the female criminal class should be Irish-born, though the Irish female laboring class are well known to be at home one of the most virtuous in the world.

Source: *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*, by Charles Loring Brace, 1872, Chapter 5. http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/33431/pg33431.html