

Letters From Lowell: A Factory Girl Writes Home

“I think that the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell.” Thus Mary Paul, a fifteen-year-old mill worker wrote home to her father in Barnard, Vermont, on December 21, 1845. Mary was one of many young women who caught “mill fever” and went to work in Lowell.

We know a good deal about Mary Paul and her life in the mills because her family saved the letters she wrote them. Mary was a lot like many of the young women in the mills. She went because there was little **opportunity** for her at home. Also, going to Lowell meant going out into the world. She would meet new people. She would see places she had only heard about.

In printing these letters, we have kept them the way Mary wrote them. Her punctuation and spelling are not always correct, but we wanted you to hear from Mary in her own words.

Lowell Nov 20th 1845

Dear Father

. . . We found a place in a spinning room and the next morning I went to work. I like [it] very well have 50 cts first payment increasing every payment as I get along in work have a first rate overseer and a very good boarding place. I work on the Lawrence Corporation. Mill is No 2 spinning room. . . . It cost me \$3.25 to come. Stage fare was \$3.00 and lodging at Windsor, 25 cts. Had 2.50 left with which I got a bonnet and some other small articles . . . You must write as soon as you receive this.

excuse bad writing and mistakes

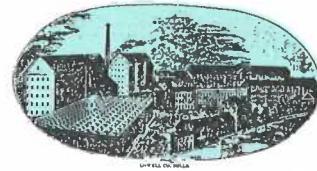
This from your own daughter

Mary

Dear Father

I received your letter on Thursday the 14th with much pleasure. I am well which is one comfort. My life and health are spared while others are cut off. Last Thursday 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 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. Last Tuesday we were paid. In all I had six dollars and sixty cents paid \$4.68 for board. With the rest I got me a pair of rubbers and a pair of 50 cts shoes. Next payment I am to have a dollar a week beside my board. . . . I get along very well with my work. I can doff as fast as any girl in our room. I think I shall have frames before long . . . I think the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment I advise them to come to Lowell . . .

This from Mary S. Paul



Lowell April 12th 1846

Dear Father

You wanted to know what I am doing. I am at work in a spinning room and tending four sides of warp which is one girls work. The overseer tells me that he never had a girl get along better than I do and that he will do the best he can by me . . . though we have been out considerable for backwater which will take off a good deal . . . I have a very good boarding place have enough to eat and that which is good enough. The girls are all kind and obliging. The girls that I room with are all from Vermont and good girls too. Now I will tell you about our rules . . . At half past 4 in the morning the bell rings for us to get up and at five for us to go into the mill. At seven we are called out to breakfast are allowed half an hour between bells and the same at noon . . . We have dinner at half past 12 and supper at seven.

Yours affectionately

Mary S Paul

Lowell Nov 5th 1848

Dear Father

Doubtless you have looked for a letter from me all the week past. I would have written you sooner but wished to find whether I should be able to stand it—to do the work I am now doing It is very hard work indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life but perhaps I shall get used to it. I shall try hard for there is no other work that I can do unless I spin and that I shall not undertake on any account. I presume you have heard before this that the wages are to be reduced on the 20th of this month. It is true and there seems to be a good deal of excitement on the subject but I cannot tell what will be the **consequence**. The companies pretend they are losing immense sums every day and therefore they are obliged to lessen wages, but this seems perfectly absurd to me for they are constantly making repairs and it seems to me that this would not be if there was were really any danger of their being obliged to stop the mills

Write soon. Yours affectionately
Mary S Paul

The cuts in wages Mary writes of probably convinced her to quit the mills. She may also have gotten sick and left. Factory workers were not paid if they could not work. And Mary was concerned with improving her life. She was not afraid to try new things. In 1853, she went with friends from Lowell to New Jersey. There, she joined an **experimental** community. Its members were **utopian reformers**, who believed in living and working together. Mary was impressed because they paid both men and women the same wages.

In 1855, neighbors from her hometown of Barnard came to see her. Mary wrote of their visit, “They are real nice folks but seem rather countryfied in their ideas.” Mary’s experience as a factory girl led her to new ways of seeing life.



A shuttle carried yarn back and forth on a loom.



VOCABULARY

opportunity - the chance to improve

consequence - outcome

to experiment - to try something new

utopian reformer - person who tries to change society