

Mill Fever

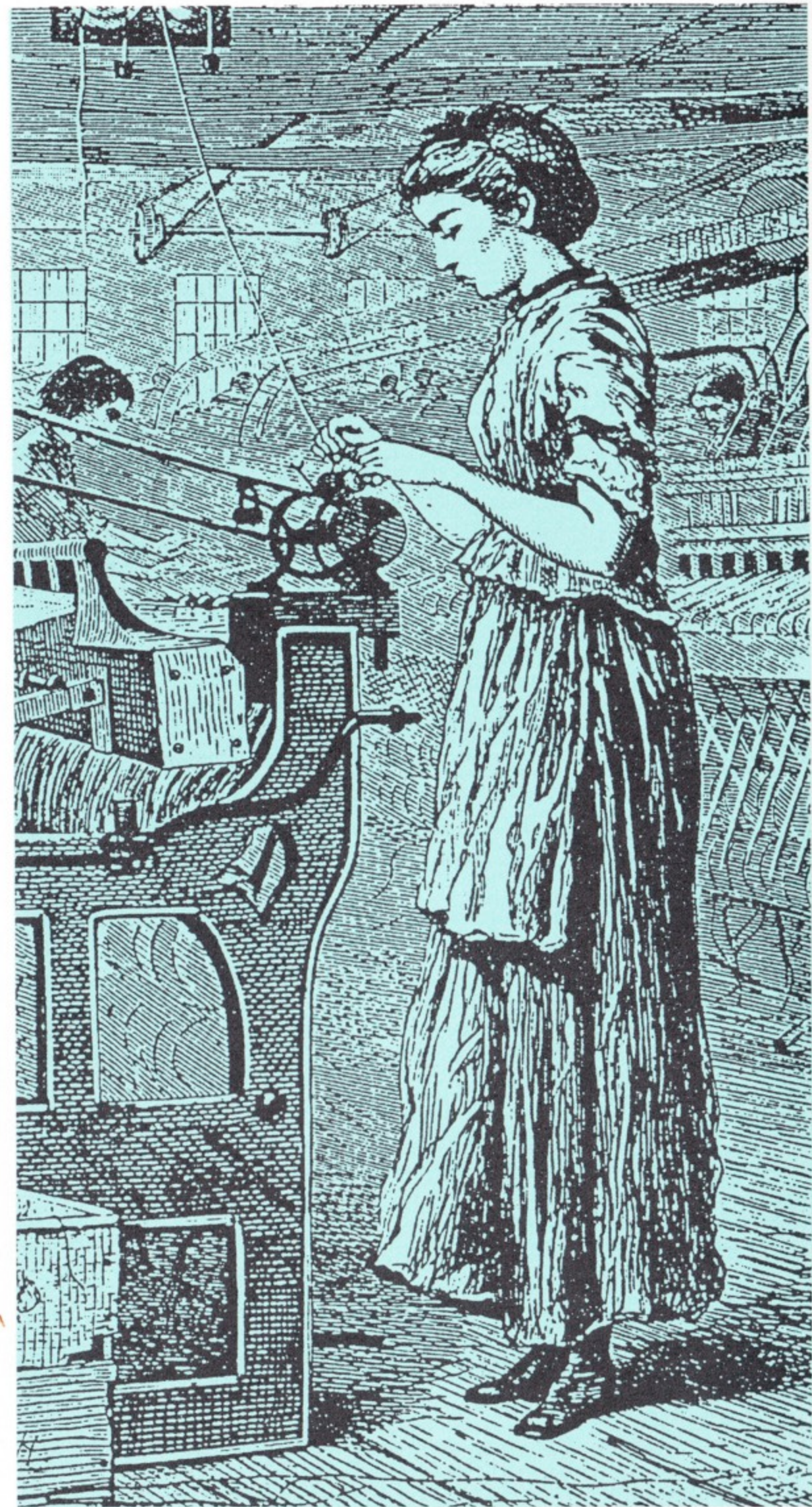
A fever spread rapidly across Vermont and the states nearby in the years between 1820 and 1850. People called it “mill fever,” but it was not an illness. It was a wave of excitement brought on by advertisements for “active and healthy girls” to work in the cotton mills of southern New England. Hundreds of young women left their families and farms to seek their fortunes in milltowns like Lowell and Chicopee, Massachusetts.

The mills used waterpowered looms to weave cotton into cloth. They needed workers to run the looms. At that time, most young women worked at home and on the farm. They were not paid for their labor. Many were eager to earn their own living.

Hiring women as mill workers was a new idea in the United States. The mill owners wanted to save money. They could pay women less than men to do the same job. They built boardinghouses for their female workers.

This system of employing young women and housing them close by the mills was first used in Waltham, Massachusetts. Known as the “Waltham system,” it spread to Lowell and other milltowns. Soon women from Vermont were headed south by stagecoach and freight wagon.

They were called factory girls. They were as young as fifteen and as old as thirty-five. They had names like Eliza, Hepsy, Almaretta, Hannah, or Sophie. They left towns like Irasburg, Barnet, Bridgewater, and Stratton for the mills. On the following pages you can read about the life they found there.



A young woman winding shuttle bobbins, one step in weaving cotton fiber into cloth. Courtesy of the Museum of American Textile History.