

Lowell: The Continuing Revolution: Video Transcript

Source: National Park Service www.nps.gov/lowe/learn/photosmultimedia/multimedia.htm

Lowell, Massachusetts is a typical mid-sized American city: complex, vibrant, productive, and diverse. But this modern city tells a story not only of the present, but of the past. It tells of a revolution that created the way we live now – not a revolution made with cannons and muskets, but with factories, with work, and above all, with people.

Built at the confluence of the Merrimack and Concord Rivers, Lowell itself was a confluence where labor, money, natural resources, and daring innovation all came together to create a radical idea – one of the first planned industrial cities in America.

What Lowell began was a new kind of place, the factory city. A place that drew people from other countries, creating a diverse, ever-changing nation. A place where women worked for pay in unprecedented numbers, where the modern corporation was born, where technology changed and continued to evolve, where the natural environment was abused, where factories mushroomed, sank into decay, and were reborn transformed.

A visit to Lowell tells the story of a city that rose and fell and rose again always ahead of its time. It began as a visionary experiment then became a familiar model, for Lowell has shaped other factory cities in America, then and now.

England was the spark that lit the flame of American ingenuity. By the end of the 18th century the Industrial Revolution was booming in Britain. A dominant product of this new age was cotton cloth produced using technology that remained a closely guarded secret. In 1810, a Boston merchant named Francis Cabot Lowell traveled to Britain. Lowell visited the factories there and brilliantly memorized the complex workings of the power loom.

With the help of a skilled machinist, Paul Moody, he created the first successful American **power loom**. In 1814, Lowell and a group of wealthy merchants created a factory in Waltham, Massachusetts. It was unique in the entire world. For the first time, a single large plant housed all the processes of manufacturing cloth.

The investors soon looked to expand, but the only efficient way to drive machinery was **water** power, and Waltham had very little water power. In 1821, several merchants visited the small village of East Chelmsford, Massachusetts, a place where the abundant flow of the Merrimack River would allow significant expansion of their company. The small village would become a prototype for the reorganization of American life, and even for the global industrial economy of today. For the merchants had a powerful vision of the future: a whole city specifically created for the production of textiles.

Soon, their workers were damming the river, enlarging the existing Pawtucket Canal, creating power canals and building rows of mills along the water. For its time it was a massive enterprise. Eventually there would be 55 large mills and dozens of smaller ones. The town began to ship textiles around the world.

Francis Cabot Lowell died before the village of East Chelmsford was transformed. The merchants called the new city Lowell in memory of their friend. By 1836, Lowell was the second largest city in the state. The radical experiment called Lowell shaped the look of the 19th century factory and how cities were organized all over the country. Lowell was the first canal-based

American city with the most extensive system of canals in the nation. Francis Cabot Lowell's colleague Paul Moody designed many of the mechanical components including the belt and pulley systems that became the distinctive trait of US factories. In the 1840s a meticulous young engineer, an English immigrant named James B. Francis perfected the hydraulic turbine. Turbine technology would drive the industrial age in New England.

A key part of the Lowell experiment was a social revolution. The founders wanted to create a workplace that was not only profitable for them, but wholesome and culturally uplifting for their workers. It was a vision of an industrial utopia.

The Lowell Revolution included a revolutionary new form of industrial labor, women from New England farms. By 1837, over 6,000 women worked in the mills. In an age when American women seldom worked away from home and farm, women formed the majority of Lowell's factory workers. They were called the "**mill girls**". Lowell promised them an escape from the grim economics of farm life. A chance to be independent in an age when women were seldom financially independent by paying cash wages. Among the mill girls was Harriet Hanson.

"In the 1830s, it was a pleasant life. The girls were not driven in their work a day life was made easy. They were treated with consideration by their employers and there is a feeling of respectful equality between them."

The investors knew that public scrutiny surrounded the employment of women factory workers. In response they crafted a system of respectability, of company boarding houses and moral regulations for the mill girls. Lowell appeared a great Yankee innovation. The capitalists could make money while the women were looked after and happy to have paid work.

But the life of a mill girl was not easy. Harriet Hanson, like most, worked six days a week. The working hours of all the girls extended from five o'clock in the morning till seven o'clock in the evening, she recalled. The factories were noisy and unhealthy, the air swarmed with lint, leaving the workers susceptible to lung disease. The textile companies formed a solid employers' block. All agreed to pay their workers the same amount so there could be no wage wars.

The mill companies cut wages and then hiked boardinghouse rents. "What is it going to take for us to make a stand, to stand up for us?"

"It was decided to **strike** on mass. I marched out and was followed by the others. As I look back at the long line that followed me I was more proud than I shall ever be again."

Years before there was a women's movement, when a woman speaking in public was a rarity some of the first strikes in Lowell were organized and led by women.

Competition mounted in New England's textile industry and drove down profits. Mills increasingly found people who, by necessity, would work for less. Immigrants and in this too Lowell took on the shape of the future America. The first to come were the **Irish**. In the 1840s, famine drove millions from Ireland to America in the first massive wave of emigration. One destination was Lowell.

"It is a place," one Irishman said, "where the stranger finds a home, the mechanic employment, and the laborer a living."

The Irish neighborhood in Lowell went by different names – New Dublin or the Acre. By any name the neighborhood was and still is a place immigrants call home. There were still Yankee women in the factories but immigrant workers became the majority.

The United States was becoming known as a melting pot. Lowell was an early example. The Irish were followed by French-Canadian immigrants, then by Poles, Greeks, Portuguese, Russian Jews, Swedes, and many more.

Spiro Los arrived from Greece in 1919. “America was the promised land. We thought we would be rich. Matter of fact when I came here I found a dime on the street. ‘I just come in and I begin to get rich now,’ I says. But the first years was hard to everybody, so I went to the mill, Appleton Mill on Jackson Street.”

The Greek community in Lowell became one of the largest in America. Each group faced discrimination, but each group slowly became part of the culture of the United States. Immigration never ended, then or now.

Every new arrival changes the city. In the late 19th century, immigrant communities continued growing, but over the next three decades, the mills began to close. One of the technologies that changed things in Lowell was **steam engines**. Water power was no longer paramount. Towns without waterfalls could now house factories.

Lowell had created a model that would cause its own demise. Dozens of other cities were patterned after Lowell. These cities turned to newer technology, and then turned into competition for Lowell. The radical prototype itself became obsolete. Profits slipped away, wages and working conditions deteriorated, large-scale strikes frequently occurred. To remain profitable, the Lowell corporations moved their corporations to the **South** where land was cheap, taxes lower, and wages even less.

As Lowell’s textile industry suffered, its impact on the environment continued. The string of factories crowded along the river dumped bleach, dye, and other toxins. Over decades the water became foul. Life within the river disappeared, as it would in countless American rivers and lakes for centuries to come.

As the 20th century dawned, Lowell changed, as so many other American cities eventually would. The decline lasted for decades. By the late 1950s, all of the original companies had left Lowell forever.

But this was not the end of the story. Even in challenging times, people lived, worked, and believed in Lowell. In the 1960s and 1970s yet another innovation breathed new life into the city. A group of Lowell citizens led by Senator Paul Tsongas recognized Lowell’s revolutionary place in American history. They envisioned economic redevelopment and what was then an entirely new kind of national park. The new Lowell would discover the old, the new park would be based not on natural wonders, but on powerful stories of innovation, people, and place.

“You as a young girl coming to the city, this was your first stop, the boarding house. If you knew anybody in the city, this is where you would meet them.”

The park would not be neatly defined by a boarder, it would be spread throughout downtown Lowell. Many of the early historic buildings on the edge of destruction would be restored and reused. This new Lowell would celebrate not only the past but the present. The ethnic cultures

that made Lowell what it was and what it is. In 1978, Congress created Lowell National Historical Park. The past was saved.

Lowell looked to its future growth and development. Lowell is a complex, layered, and vital community, a gateway city for new Americans. Lowell is marked by diversity of all kinds. Immigrants still come in search of opportunity and freedom. And this part of Lowell's story, like the city's first chapters, is the continuing story of America. A country of countries, a culture of cultures. Lowell is an emblem for the country it helped create. It started with a radical idea, then came to typify the nation. It lived through boom and bust and renewal.

Today the city's uniqueness remains embedded in its constructed landscape, in its canals and gatehouses, its mills and boarding houses. For Lowell say hard times and found a way to survive them. For this is a place that lives in the present and tells of the past.