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Liberty is Exploitation: The Force of Tradition in Early Manufacturing

The industrial revolution represented a watershed in American history. The transition from agriculture to manufacturing was neither an even nor an easy process. The factory floor became a contested and negotiated place, in which the very shape of the workplace depended upon the outcome of struggles between management and labor and between the demands of the factory system and traditional values observed by families. Change occurred at a different pace in various industries as production moved from the household to the workshop and then to the factory. It was the factory system, however, that had the most dramatic impact on the production process and helped to change the economic and social direction of the new nation.

In the historiography of the early republic, the rise of the factory system has received considerable scholarly attention. Beginning in the 1970s, a plethora of monographs were published on the economic and social transformation of such industries as boots and shoes, textiles, paper, and armaments. The customary concerns of economic and business historians, however, did not dominate the discussion; instead, a “new labor history” emerged. These scholars emphasized the impact of the new industrial order on the people who worked in the shops and factories that appeared between 1790 and 1860 and followed them from their workplaces to their communities, homes, churches, and social activities. Issues of paternalism, class, and gender informed their works.

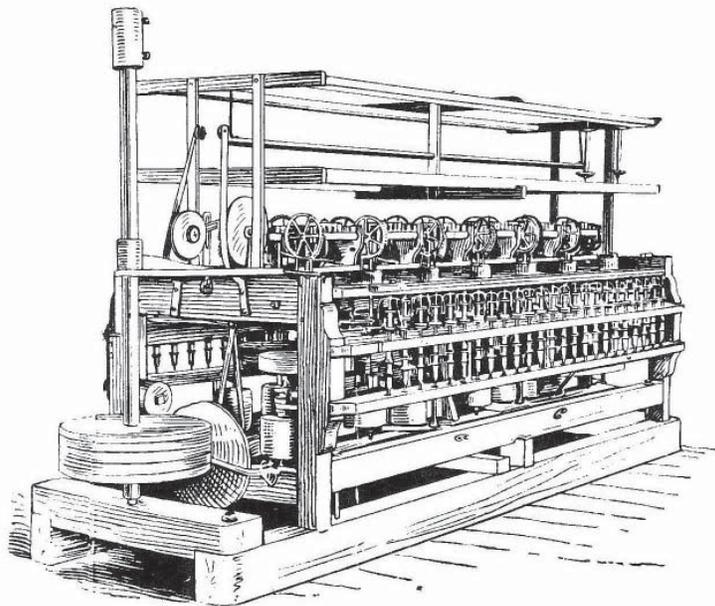
Alan Dawley and Paul Faler were among the most significant innova-

tors in this changing field. Their work on the boot and shoe industry of Lynn, Massachusetts, partly focused on the stress caused when laborers and shoe manufacturers ceased to share a common work space or ideology. This simple change in manufacturing relations profoundly affected the town of Lynn, its neighborhoods, churches, and political structure (1).

Other scholars turned to the textile industry, in particular Thomas

Dublin, who authored a work that challenged the romanticized view of the Lowell system. With eleven investors, Francis Cabot Lowell had formed the Boston Manufacturing Company in 1813. This was one of the most innovative companies organized during the early republic, a corporation characterized by professional management, large-scale production of yarn and cloth, and a unique labor force comprised of girls and women. Dublin challenged the sentimental view of labor-management relations advanced by others. He argued that the relationship between labor and management was an economic one and that the female workers recognized it as such. Whatever community of interests emerged in Waltham and later Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, was among the girls and women themselves and not between labor and management. “When women workers spoke of

independence,” Dublin writes, “they referred at once to independence from their families and from their employers” (2). While the Lowell system embraced a new production system, its development did not overspread the entire textile industry and remained largely confined



This illustration of a spinning mule shows the type of machine used to spin cotton in textile mills in the early nineteenth century. (Image courtesy of the Slater Mill Historic Site.)

to the regions north of Boston. Throughout most of the country, cloth continued to be produced in homes and shops on hand looms. And spinning mills, not integrated corporations, supplied workers with the necessary yarn. Many of these processes were patterned after the system introduced by Samuel Slater.

Born in England and trained under the progressive factory master Jedediah Strutt, Samuel Slater brought the Arkwright system of yarn manufacturing to the United States. Around 1790 he formed a partnership with William Almy and Obadiah Brown to build a factory for the production of yarn. (Parenthetically, most accounts link Almy with Moses Brown, who placed the ad to which Slater responded. Actually, in this partnership Smith Brown, not Moses Brown, first entered the agreement and was later replaced by Obadiah Brown.) Under their arrangement, Slater built carding engines, water frames, and a carding and roving machine which he temporarily installed in a clothier's shop in nearby Pawtucket, Rhode Island, while Almy and Brown supplied the capital. Boys were hired to operate the equipment; within weeks, he doubled his labor force and eventually moved his operations to a specially built factory. Following a practice adopted in England, young children between seven and twelve years of age were employed to operate the new equipment. Initially they were drawn from local families, but as the need for workers increased, Slater turned to the apprentice system. In 1794 he advertised for "four or five active Lads, about 15 Years of Age to serve as Apprentices in the Cotton Factory" (3).

Local poor law officials answered Slater's advertisement and sent indigent boys to the mills. But apprentices proved problematic. Some resented Slater's control over them and his disciplinary style, while others were appalled by the demanding schedule that required them to work from twelve to sixteen hours a day, six days a week. They learned few skills, received room and board in lieu of wages, and were forced to attend Sunday Schools operated by Slater where they received educational training. Many ran away. By 1797 Slater noted that one Rehoboth boy ran away and another followed, and "again If it is suffered to pass, another will go tomorrow & so on until they are all gone" (4). Another form of labor had to be found.

Slater now turned to poor families throughout the area and invited them to send their children to the mill. This form of pauper labor also presented problems. Slater needed the children but not their parents, who resented Slater's control over their children and complained about the irregularity of wage payments and the lack of light and heat in the factories. Some threatened to keep their children home while others entered the factory and withdrew their children without notice, thereby stopping the machines. Slater was exasperated. He had little control over some of the complaints voiced by the parents. Almy and Brown were responsible for paying the families in cash or in kind, but often they were not able to keep their commitments. Slater protested: "You must not expect much yarn until I am better supplied with hands and money to pay them with several are out of corn and I have not a single dollar to buy any for them." The situation was not rectified and Slater again pleaded with Almy and Brown. Send "a little money if not I must unavoidably stop the mill after this week." He could not "bear to have people come round me daily if sometimes hourly and saying I have no wood nor corn nor have not had any several days. Can you expect my children to work if they have nothing to eat" (5)? In desperation, he threatened to close the mill and sell the machinery.

Pauper labor was not the answer, and Slater turned to the family system. In New England the family was the basic economic unit. The householder still dominated the family economy, and he retained considerable authority within it to discipline wife and children, protect kin, lead the family in prayer, and supervise the educational and moral training of sons and daughters. Men fought and children resisted attempts by Slater to encroach on these prerogatives. To recruit and re-

tain a labor force of children, Slater had to find common ground with householders. He had to effect some sort of compromise with parents whereby their customary values and their social and economic position within the family and the wider society would be safeguarded and respected. Slater sought to strengthen patriarchy, not challenge it. He recruited entire families to work for him, and a division of labor developed based on age and gender. Householders were brought under the control of the factory master, but they were not required to enter the factory and work alongside their children. Instead, Slater employed them in traditional jobs such as night watchman, painter, mason, and later farm hand. He strengthened their position within the family by having householders negotiate and sign contracts for the employment of their children and personally receive all wages earned by them.

Labor contracts suggest the strength and influence householders exerted over manufacturers. At the Slater and Kimball factory, contracts usually were signed annually beginning April 1. Abel Dudley, for example, agreed to work in 1827, and he put five children in the mill: Sumner, Mary, Eliza, Abigail, and Caroline. He stipulated, however, that "Mary and Caroline have the privilege of going to school two months each one at a time and Amos is to work at 4/pr week when they are out" (6). Some contracts included other stipulations: a child was allowed to work with the mule spinner and taught his trade; either party had to give two weeks notice before quitting; householders were to receive extra pay for Sunday work. Thus, in order to recruit and retain a stable labor force, Samuel Slater struck a compromise with New England householders. If Slater respected their traditional prerogatives, they would provide him with a plentiful, tractable supply of workers. For those families who failed to adhere to this understanding, Slater had a solution. The case of Obadiah Greenhill was typical. On April 1, 1827, Greenhill placed five children from nine to seventeen years of age in Slater's factory. On October 6, the family was "Dismissed for manifesting a disposition to make disturbance in the mills amongst the help and for misconduct in general" (7).

The force of tradition that operated in the factories was extended to village, home, and church. The new factory villages Slater established reflected the needs of New England families. Slatersville was one of the first mill villages developed by Slater and served as a model for later manufacturers:

Like many of the towns of colonial New England, it was built around a broad road that traversed the town center. The smithy, the dry goods stores, the church, and the school were on this road. Predictably, the Congregational church stood in the geographic center of the village and was surrounded by a broad common. Toward the outskirts of the village lived more than six hundred textile workers, farm laborers, merchants, and mechanics. Their homes were one- and two-story detached and semi-detached dwellings that were built parallel to the main road and separated from one another by garden plots. Each dwelling was occupied by a single family. No house stood isolated from the central community. The mill and its outbuildings . . . did not disturb the traditional sense of community. They were built at a short distance from the village and were surrounded by fenced and tilled fields belonging to the company (8).

The family and the church were the predominant forces in the lives of many residents. Familial and religious doctrines and discipline served as the basis for a well-ordered society and also a well-run factory. Values taught in the home and the church served the needs of the factory masters.

In the nineteenth century, the home became a training ground for a generation of factory hands. The first law of childhood, the one

necessary for the proper maintenance of good family government and obviously the one necessary for the proper maintenance of good order within the factory, was unquestioning obedience. All commands had to be immediately and, in fact, cheerfully obeyed. If obedience was the first law of childhood, then deference was the second. According to nineteenth-century educator Heman Humphrey, “children must early be brought under absolute parental authority, and must submit to all the rules and regulations of the family during the whole period of their minority, and even longer, if they choose to remain at home” (9). These values were reinforced by the church.

Samuel Slater was one of the first manufacturers to establish schools for factory children. Called Sunday Schools, they later were brought under the supervision of local churches. In Webster, Massachusetts—a Slater company town—the Methodist Church played a leading role in the discipline of factory children. The written tracts, hymns, and sermons found in the church advanced a familiar message: obedience, deference, industry, punctuality, and temperance. Such lessons prepared the child and adolescent operatives for salvation and also trained them to be good, obedient factory hands. The Webster Sabbath School Constitution reinforced these notions. In part it read:

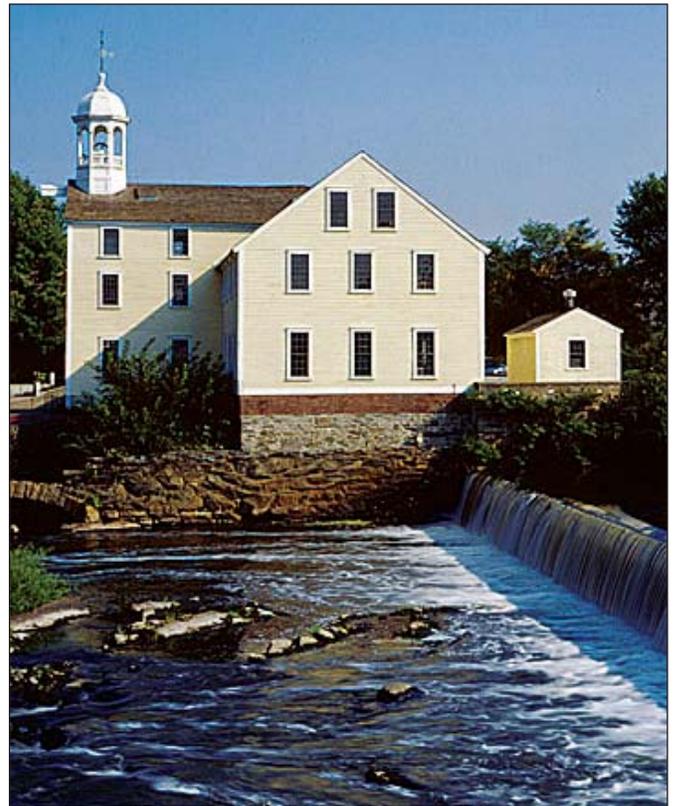
To be regular in attendance, and punctually present at the hour appointed to open school.

To pay a strict and respectful attention to whatever the teacher or Superintendent shall say or request.

To avoid whispering, laughing and any other improper conduct (10).

Manufacturers throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic states adopted many of the features developed by Slater. Philadelphia, for example, became a center for hand-loom weaving. This occurred even after power looms had been installed in Waltham and Lowell. In the Kensington section of Philadelphia, weavers “turned out cotton cloth on hand frames in tiny red-brick cottages lined up in monotonous rows on grid-like streets.” A local resident of the area observed that the “sound of these looms may be heard at all hours in garrets, cellars, and out-houses, as well as in the weavers’ apartments” (11). Among these weavers a distinct culture emerged. Workers generally owned their own looms, regulated their own time, and observed traditional feasts and holidays. They were a group of especially independent and proud men. Their craft world was “a man’s dominion, the weaver’s prowess an element in the constitution of patriarchal family relations” (12). But by the 1840s the industry began to change. Adjacent to their dwellings, some men constructed wooden buildings or sheds, either purchased looms outright and hired weavers to operate them, or opened their sheds to weavers who brought their own equipment with them. By the Civil War, a weaver earned from \$3.00 to \$4.50 per week, a wage insufficient to support a family (13). Their children often had to work in the spinning mills. Slater’s efforts to preserve the patriarchy of the fathers in effect reduced their offspring to permanent children—as opposed to the apprenticeship model that implied growth and eventual maturity.

While the spinning mills that supplied yarn to the weavers of Kensington were patterned after those started by Slater, there were differences. This was especially true for the treatment of labor. In Philadelphia, where hand loom weaving persisted well into the mid-century, the treatment of young child operatives in textile mills caused a public scandal. In 1837 a Select Committee was formed by the Pennsylvania Senate to investigate conditions of labor, especially the employment of children under twelve in the state’s textile mills. One adult worker, William Shaw, commented extensively on the work and treatment of children. Most of the youngest children were employed at carding



The wooden Slater Mill was built in 1793 along the Blackstone River in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Today it is part of a living history museum. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division.)

and spinning and worked from twelve to fourteen hours per day. Shaw commented further: “I have known children of nine years of age to be employed at spinning[;] at carding, as young as ten years. Punishment, by whipping, is frequent; they are sometimes sent home and docked for not attending punctually.” Another witness, Joseph Dean, offered similar testimony. At his factory one-third to one-half of the operatives were under the age of twelve. He described the attitudes toward the children: “The children were occasionally punished by a blow from the hand; does not know that the strap was used. . . . Males and females were provided with separate water closets, when provided at all; no pains taken on the subject; sometimes none were provided.” Another witness, Robert Craig, described some of the working conditions experienced by the young workers:

“the children must stand all the time at their work, walking backwards and forwards; the children often complain of fatigue; witness has been many of them neglect their work, from exhaustion, and seek repose in sleep; for this, they are generally punished. . . . The greatest evil, in my mind, is that the children, from nine to eleven years old, are required to carry up from one to four stories, a box of bobbins; these boxes weight about sixteen pounds; they are carried on the head” (14).

Some labor leaders and educators—Seth Luther, Horace Mann, and Henry Barnard, among others—called for an end to child labor. While legislation was passed, it failed to solve the problem. In 1842 Massachusetts declared that children under twelve could not work more than ten hours per day. Six years later Pennsylvania passed laws stating that minors could not work over ten hours a day or sixty hours per week.

But by special contract, boys and girls over fourteen could work longer (15). And then, of course, enforcement of these laws became problematic. Who was to enforce the laws and who was to be the final arbiter in determining the age of the children?

By the time child labor laws were passed, conditions within the industry had begun to change. The industry experienced several economic downturns, especially in 1829 and chronically from 1836 to 1844. Companies took the opportunity to reorganize, and Samuel Slater was no exception. In 1829 Slater feared insolvency. He had endorsed notes and was not able to pay them without first liquidating and reorganizing his holdings. He relinquished partial control of his business to his three sons and formed Samuel Slater and Sons. Other changes included the introduction of cost accounting, the employment of paid professional managers, and incorporation. The labor force was not exempt. Family labor and many of the traditional prerogatives associated with it ended. Each hand was hired, paid, assigned jobs, and disciplined by the factory manager. Young people now could contract for themselves, and this had an important impact on the family. Economically independent now, adolescents could negotiate with parents over the price of room and board, education, discipline, dress, marriage partners, and life style. Some left home and moved into boarding houses or traveled to other mill towns looking for work. If men wanted to remain with the company, they now had to enter the mills and labor alongside their women and children, suffering an implicit loss of status. This trend spread throughout the textile industry. The paternalism that once served the needs of labor and management was discarded by manufacturers; increasingly, the Slater system came to resemble Lowell.

Less expensive hands could be found, and by the 1840s French Canadian and Irish immigrants replaced many Yankee families in the mills. Factory owners no longer felt compelled to accommodate adults. Next to their factories they erected multi-family tenements and boarding houses. Built side by side along a roadway, the small wooden tenements housed from three to four families plus their boarders. Rooms were small, windows were few, storage space was limited, and garden plots were eliminated altogether. Physically the tenements, boarding houses, and factory now formed a distinct unit; the factory dominated work and home life. Overcrowding occurred, health deteriorated, and mortality rates increased. Deaths from dysentery, convulsions, lung fever, delirium tremors, dropsy, erysipelas, typhus, and of course consumption or tuberculosis were recorded. In the 1840s typhus reached epidemic proportions, striking Webster, Massachusetts, first in 1843, then again in 1844 and 1846. Consumption was endemic, and children often were its victims. Indeed, child mortality rates were high, and young children even succumbed to convulsions and “teething” (16). Several possibilities could account for such infant deaths. To quiet a crying child, parents might give him or her a drug such as laudanum; some of these children could have overdosed on opiates. Or vitamin and mineral deficiencies, including a lack of calcium, magnesium, and vitamin D, might have caused convulsions and resulted in death. As two historians suggest, however, “teething is suspect because nineteenth century physicians observed that the convulsions which ravaged babies often occurred during the teething process and concluded that the sprouting of teeth was somehow responsible—hence ‘teething’ as a cause of death.” It has been argued that the primary source of calcium for children came from mother’s milk; during teething, some women ceased to breast feed children and turned to bovine milk. This abrupt shift sometimes triggered convulsions, but people mistakenly blamed the child’s death on teething (17).

By the 1850s manufacturers with clear economic interests and goals considered labor just another cost of production. Paternalism and the

force of traditional social relations gave way under changing conditions. Individual hands replaced family units in the mills; manufacturers enlarged their mills and increased their labor supply. Little attention was given to the quality of life in the factory towns. Overcrowding, disease, high mortality rates, frequent labor turnover, crime, and illiteracy came to characterize life in these communities. The factories and villages of 1850 bore scant resemblance to traditional rural manufacturing communities of 1800. In the end, neither innovators such as Lowell nor conservative paternalists such as Slater had been able to prevent the transformation of factory labor into a commodity with a price—the living wage—to be set by supply and demand. □

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