As factories and mills were established, the way people worked changed drastically. One dramatic change was the opportunity that factory work gave to young women. For young women in farm families, it was almost the only chance they had to earn their own money and a measure of independence.

**Mills Change Workers’ Lives**

Workers no longer needed the specific skills of craftspeople to run the machines of the new mills. The lives of workers changed along with their jobs. Resistance to these changes sometimes sparked protests.

- Many mill owners in the United States could not find enough people to work in factories because other jobs were available.
- At first, Samuel Slater and his two partners used *apprentices* – young men who worked for several years to learn the trade.
- However, they often were given only simple work. For example, their jobs might include feeding cotton into machines and cleaning the mill equipment.
- They grew tired of this work and frequently left.
- Eventually, Slater began to hire entire families who moved to Pawtucket to work in the mills.
  - This practice allowed Slater to fill his labor needs at a low cost.
  - Children as well as adults work in the mills.
  - On most farms children worked to help their families. Therefore, few people complained about the hiring of children to work in factories.
  - The machines in mills made many tasks simple enough for children to do.
- To attract families to his mill, Slater built housing for the workers. He also provided them with a company store where they could buy necessities.
  - In addition, he started the practice of paying workers with credit at the company store.
Instead of paying the full price of an item all at once, small payments could be made over a period time.

This practice allowed Slater to reinvest his money in his business.

Slater’s strategy of hiring families and dividing factory work into simple tasks became known as the Rhode Island System.

Mill owners throughout the Northeast copied Slater’s methods.

Owners advertised with “Men with growing families wanted.”

They also sent recruiters to poor communities to find new workers.

For many people, the chance to work in a factory was a welcomed opportunity to earn money and to learn a new skill.

One of the earliest of the mill towns, Slatersville, was named after Samuel Slater.

The town was built by Slater and his brother John.

It included two houses for workers and their families, the owner’s house, the company store, and the Slatersville Mill.

The mill was the largest and most modern industrial building of its time.

The mills employed not only the textile workers who operated the machinery but also machine part makers and dam builders.

Although the company store sold food and necessary items to workers, mill towns supported the same variety of businesses any other town needed to thrive. These included tailors and dressmakers, butchers, and other small workshops.

Samuel Slater
Father of the American Industrial Revolution
The Lowell System

Not all mill owners followed this system. **Francis Cabot Lowell**, a businessman from New England, developed a very different approach. His ideas completely changed the textile industry in the Northeast.

- The **Lowell System** was based on water-powered textile mills that employed young, unmarried women from local farms.
- The system included a look that could both spin thread and weave cloth in the same mill.
- Lowell looked at the opportunity costs of running a mill, and decided to construct boardinghouses, providing his workers with a room and meals.
- With financial support from investors of the Boston Manufacturing Company, Lowell’s first textile mill opened in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1814.
- In 1822, the company built a larger mill in a Massachusetts town later named Lowell. Visitors to Lowell were amazed by the clean factories and neatly kept boardinghouses as well as the new machinery.
- The young millworkers soon became known as Lowell girls.
  - The mills paid them between $2 and $4 each week.
  - The workers paid $1.25 for room and board.
  - These wages were much better than those women could earn in other jobs, such as domestic work (maid, cleaning lady).
  - Many young women came to Lowell from across New England. They wanted the chance to earn money instead of working on the family farm.
  - The typical Lowell girl worked at the mills for about four years.
  - Unlike other factory workers, the Lowell girls were encouraged to use their free time to take classes and form women’s clubs.
  - Mill life was hard, however. The workday was between 12 and 14 hours long, and daily life was carefully controlled. Ringing bells ordered workers to breakfast or lunch.
  - Cotton dust began to cause health problems, such as chronic cough.
Workers Organize

Factories continued to spread in the 1800s.

- Craftspeople, who made goods by hand, felt threatened. Factories quickly produced low-priced goods. To compete with factories, shop owners had to hire more workers and pay them less.

- Shoemaker William Frazier complained about the situation in the mid-1840s. “We have to sit on our seats from twelve to sixteen hours per day, to earn one dollar.”

- The wages of factory workers also went down as people competed for jobs.

- A wave of immigration in the 1840s brought people from other, poorer countries. They were willing to work for low pay.

- More immigrants came to the Northeast, where the mills were located, than to the South.
The Beginning of Trade Unions

Facing low wages and the fear of losing their jobs, skilled workers formed trade unions, groups that tried to improve pay and working condition.

- Most employers did not want to hire union workers. Employers believed that the higher cost of union employees prevented competition with other manufacturers.
- Sometimes labor unions staged protests called strikes.
  - Workers on strike refuse to work until employers meet their demands. Most early strikes were not successful, however.
  - Courts and police usually supported companies, not striking union members.

Labor Reform Efforts

A strong voice in the union movement was that of millworker Sarah G. Bagley.

- Bagley founded the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in 1844 and publicized the struggles of factory laborers.
  - The association's two main goals were to influence an investigation of working conditions by the Massachusetts state legislature and to obtain a 10-hour-workday.
- President Martin Van Buren had granted a 10-hours-workday in 1840 for many federal employees.
  - Bagley wanted this rule to apply to employees of private businesses. These men and women often worked 12 to 14 hours per day, six days per week.
  - Many working men and women supported the 10-hour-workday campaign, despite the opposition of business owners.
- In 1845 Sarah Bagley was elected vice president of the New England Working Men’s Association. She was the first woman to hold such a high-ranking position in the American labor movement.
- Over time, the unions achieved some concrete legal victories. Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and a few other states passed 10-hour-workday laws.
• For factory workers in other states, long hours remained common. One witness described how children were “summoned by the factory bell before daylight” and worked until eight o’clock at night “with nothing but [a] recess of forty-five minutes to get their dinner.”

• Union supporters continued to fight for work reforms such as an end to child labor in factories during the 1800s.