

Forging the National Economy, 1790–1860

Take not from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.

Thomas Jefferson, 1801

Prologue: The Industrial Revolution spawned the factory, and in turn the factory-magnet drew from the hallowed home countless men, women, and even tiny children. Alexander Hamilton himself had stressed the spiritual value of training “the little innocents” in honest habits of industry. But the exploitation of little innocents, as well as their elders, resulted in grave abuses. For more than a century, labor fought an uphill fight against employers for a gradual improvement of its lot. Meanwhile the spread of the factory was spurred by the canal network, by the river steamboat, and then by the railroad. The fast-growing states of the Ohio Valley and the Upper Mississippi Valley became less dependent on the mouth of the Mississippi as the outlet for their produce, because the new arteries of transportation carried their exports cheaply and swiftly to the cities of the eastern seaboard. The ties of the Union, conspicuously in an east-west direction, were thus greatly strengthened.

A. The Spread of the Factory

I. Wage Slavery in New England (1832)

Seth Luther, a poorly educated carpenter who helped construct New England textile factories, ranks as one of the most forceful of the early labor reformers. In numerous speeches and pamphlets he condemned such abuses as paternalistic control, “black-lists” of troublemakers, low wages, and overlong hours. He especially deplored the exploitation of children, who were sometimes dragged to “whipping rooms.” His deadly earnestness and biting sarcasm were partly responsible for the United States’ first law to control child labor, enacted by Massachusetts in 1842. It prohibited chil-

¹Seth Luther, *An Address to the Working-Men of New-England . . .*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1833), pp. 17–21.



Weaving Women, c. 1860

These four young textile-mill workers in Maine posed with their shuttles. (Museum of American Textile History)

dren under twelve from working more than ten hours a day. What were the most serious abuses that Luther here discusses? In what specific ways were they harmful?

A [Western] member of the United States Senate seems to be extremely pleased with cotton mills. He says in the Senate, "Who has not been delighted with the clockwork movements of a large cotton manufactory? He had visited them often, and always with increased delight." He says the women work in large airy apartments, well warmed. They are neatly dressed, with ruddy complexions, and happy countenances. They mend the broken threads and replace the exhausted balls or broaches, and at stated periods they go to and return from their meals with light and cheerful step. (While on a visit to that pink of perfection, Waltham [Massachusetts], I remarked

that the females moved with a very light step, and well they might, for the bell rang for them to return to the mill from their homes in nineteen minutes after it had rung for them to go to breakfast. Some of these females boarded the largest part of a half a mile from the mill.)

And the grand climax [says the western senator] is that at the end of the week, after working like slaves for thirteen or fourteen hours every day, "they enter the temples of God on the Sabbath, and thank him for all his benefits. . . ." We remark that whatever girls or others may do west of the Allegheny Mountains, we do not believe there can be a single person found east of those mountains who ever thanked God for permission to work in a cotton mill. . . .

We would respectfully advise the honorable Senator to travel incognito when he visits cotton mills. If he wishes to come at the truth, he must not be known. Let him put on a short jacket and trousers, and join the "lower orders" for a short time. . . . In that case we could show him, in some of the prisons in New England called cotton mills, instead of rosy cheeks, the pale, sickly, haggard countenance of the ragged child—haggard from the worse than slavish confinement in the cotton mill. He might see that child driven up to the "clockwork" by the cowskin [whip], in some cases. He might see, in some instances, the child taken from his bed at four in the morning, and plunged into cold water to drive away his slumbers and prepare him for the labors of the mill. After all this he might see that child robbed, yes, robbed of a part of his time allowed for meals by moving the hands of the clock backwards, or forwards, as would best accomplish that purpose. . . . He might see in some, and not infrequent, instances, the child, and the female child too, driven up to the "clockwork" with the cowhide, or well-seasoned strap of American manufacture.

We could show him many females who have had corporeal punishment inflicted upon them; one girl eleven years of age who had her leg broken with a billet of wood; another who had a board split over her head by a heartless monster in the shape of an overseer of a cotton mill "paradise."

We shall for want of time . . . omit entering more largely into detail for the present respecting the cruelties practiced in some of the American mills. Our wish is to show that education is neglected, . . . because if thirteen hours' actual labor is required each day, it is impossible to attend to education among children, or to improvement among adults.

2. *The Abuse of Female Workers (1836)*

The factory girls of Lowell, Massachusetts, were a showpiece for visitors, notably Charles Dickens in 1842. Having seen the miserable working conditions in England, he wrote almost ecstatically of the fresh air in the Lowell mills, and of the cheerful faces and blooming health of the "Lowell girls." He also took favorable note of the girls' cleanliness, clothes, thrift, morals, and educational and recreational facilities. Perhaps he was unduly impressed by the contrast with English factories; certainly he did not investigate as carefully the less savory mills. Six years earlier, a reformist

²*The Harbinger*, November 14, 1836, in H. R. Warfel et al., eds., *The American Mind* (New York and Cincinnati: The American Book Company, 1937), pp. 390–391. In 1847 this journal became the official organ of the Brook Farm colony.

writer in a contemporary American journal presented a strikingly different view. How, in the following account, does this writer evaluate the early factory system?

We have lately visited the cities of Lowell [Massachusetts] and Manchester [New Hampshire] and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the accounts which we had heard from persons engaged in the labor reform now beginning to agitate New England. We could scarcely credit the statements made in relation to the exhausting nature of the labor in the mills, and to the manner in which the young women—the operatives—lived in their boardinghouses, six sleeping in a room, poorly ventilated.

We went through many of the mills, talked particularly to a large number of the operatives, and ate at their boardinghouses, on purpose to ascertain by personal inspection the facts of the case. We assure our readers that very little information is possessed, and no correct judgments formed, by the public at large, of our factory system, which is the first germ of the industrial or commercial feudalism that is to spread over our land. . . .

In Lowell live between seven and eight thousand young women, who are generally daughters of farmers of the different states of New England. Some of them are members of families that were rich in the generation before. . . .

The operatives work thirteen hours a day in the summer time, and from daylight to dark in the winter. At half past four in the morning the factory bell rings, and at five the girls must be in the mills. A clerk, placed as a watch, observes those who are a few minutes behind the time, and effectual means are taken to stimulate to punctuality. This is the morning commencement of the industrial discipline (should we not rather say industrial tyranny?) which is established in these associations of this moral and Christian community.

At seven the girls are allowed thirty minutes for breakfast, and at noon thirty minutes more for dinner, except during the first quarter of the year, when the time is extended to forty-five minutes. But within this time they must hurry to their boardinghouses and return to the factory, and that through the hot sun or the rain or the cold. A meal eaten under such circumstances must be quite unfavorable to digestion and health, as any medical man will inform us. At seven o'clock in the evening the factory bell sounds the close of the day's work.

Thus thirteen hours per day of close attention and monotonous labor are exacted from the young women in these manufactories. . . . So fatigued—we should say, exhausted and worn out, but we wish to speak of the system in the simplest language—are numbers of girls that they go to bed soon after their evening meal, and endeavor by a comparatively long sleep to resuscitate their weakened frames for the toil of the coming day.

When capital has got thirteen hours of labor daily out of a being, it can get nothing more. It would be a poor speculation in an industrial point of view to own the operative; for the trouble and expense of providing for times of sickness and old age would more than counterbalance the difference between the price of wages and the expense of board and clothing. The far greater number of fortunes accumulated by the North in comparison with the South shows that hiring labor is more profitable for capital than slave labor.

Now let us examine the nature of the labor itself, and the conditions under which

it is performed. Enter with us into the large rooms, when the looms are at work. The largest that we saw is in the Amoskeag Mills at Manchester. . . . The din and clatter of these five hundred looms, under full operation, struck us on first entering as something frightful and infernal, for it seemed such an atrocious violation of one of the faculties of the human soul, the sense of hearing. After a while we became somewhat inured to it, and by speaking quite close to the ear of an operative and quite loud, we could hold a conversation and make the inquiries we wished.

The girls attend upon an average three looms; many attend four, but this requires a very active person, and the most unremitting care. However, a great many do it. Attention to two is as much as should be demanded of an operative. This gives us some idea of the application required during the thirteen hours of daily labor. The atmosphere of such a room cannot of course be pure; on the contrary, it is charged with cotton filaments and dust, which, we are told, are very injurious to the lungs.

On entering the room, although the day was warm, we remarked that the windows were down. We asked the reason, and a young woman answered very naïvely, and without seeming to be in the least aware that this privation of fresh air was anything else than perfectly natural, that "when the wind blew, the threads did not work well." After we had been in the room for fifteen or twenty minutes, we found ourselves, as did the persons who accompanied us, in quite a perspiration, produced by a certain moisture which we observed in the air, as well as by the heat. . . .

The young women sleep upon an average six in a room, three beds to a room. There is no privacy, no retirement, here. It is almost impossible to read or write alone, as the parlor is full and so many sleep in the same chamber. A young woman remarked to us that if she had a letter to write, she did it on the head of a bandbox, sitting on a trunk, as there was no space for a table.

So live and toil the young women of our country in the boardinghouses and manufactories which the rich and influential of our land have built for them.

5. From Slavery to Freedom (1835)

African-born James L. Bradley was one of many slaves who purchased their freedom out of their own hard-gained, meager earnings. Bradley eventually made his way to the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, a hotbed of abolitionist sentiment presided over by Lyman Beecher, father of the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe. There he wrote the following short account of his life. What did he see as the worst aspects of slavery? What did his ability to purchase his freedom imply about the character of the slave system? What was his attitude toward Christianity?

I will try to write a short account of my life, as nearly as I can remember; though it makes me sorrowful to think of my past days; for they have been very dark and full of tears. I always longed and prayed for liberty, and had at times hopes that I should obtain it. I would pray, and try to study out some way to earn money enough to buy myself, by working in the night-time. But then something would happen to disappoint my hopes, and it seemed as though I must live and die a slave, with none to pity me.

I will begin as far back as I can remember. I think I was between two and three years old when the soul-destroyers tore me from my mother's arms, somewhere in Africa, far back from the sea. They carried me a long distance to a ship; all the way I looked back, and cried. The ship was full of men and women loaded with chains; but I was so small, they let me run about on deck.

After many long days, they brought us into Charleston, South Carolina. A slaveholder bought me, and took me up into Pendleton County. I suppose that I staid with him about six months. He sold me to a Mr. Bradley, by whose name I have ever since been called. This man was considered a wonderfully kind master; and it is true that I was treated better than most of the slaves I knew. I never suffered for food, and never was flogged with the whip; but oh, my soul! I was tormented with kicks and knocks more than I can tell. My master often knocked me down, when I was young. Once, when I was a boy, about nine years old, he struck me so hard that I fell down and lost my senses. I remained thus some time, and when I came to myself, he told me he thought he had killed me. At another time, he struck me with a currycomb, and sunk the knob into my head. I have said that I had food enough; I wish I could say as much concerning my clothing. But I let that subject alone, because I cannot think of any suitable words to use in telling you.

I used to work very hard. I was always obliged to be in the field by sunrise, and I labored till dark, stopping only at noon long enough to eat dinner. When I was about fifteen years old, I took what was called the cold plague, in consequence of being over-worked, and I was sick a long time. My master came to me one day, and hearing me groan with pain, he said, "This fellow will never be of any more use to

⁵*Fourth Annual Report of the Trustees of the Cincinnati Lane Seminary*, Lane Seminary, Ohio (1834), p. 27.

me—I would as soon knock him in the head, as if he were an opossum.” His children sometimes came in, and shook axes and knives at me, as if they were about to knock me on the head. But I have said enough of this. The Lord at length raised me up from the bed of sickness, but I entirely lost the use of one of my ankles. Not long after this, my master moved to Arkansas Territory, and died. Then the family let me out; but after [line illegible] the plantation, saying she could not do with me. My master had kept me ignorant of everything he could. I was never told anything about God, or my own soul. Yet from the time I was fourteen years old, I used to think a great deal about freedom. It was my heart’s desire; I could not keep it out of my mind. Many a sleepless night I have spent in tears, because I was a slave. I looked back on all I had suffered—and when I looked ahead, all was dark and hopeless bondage. My heart ached to feel within me the life of liberty. After the death of my master, I began to contrive how I might buy myself. After toiling all day for my mistress, I used to sleep three or four hours, and then get up and work for myself the remainder of the night. I made collars for horses, out of plaited husks. I could weave one in about eight hours; and I generally took time enough from my sleep to make two collars in the course of a week. I sold them for fifty cents each. One summer, I tried to take two or three hours from my sleep every night; but I found that I grew weak, and I was obliged to sleep more. With my first money I bought a pig. The next year I earned for myself about thirteen dollars; and the next about thirty. There was a good deal of wild land in the neighborhood that belonged to Congress. I used to go out with my hoe, and dig up little patches, which I planted with corn, and got up in the night to tend it. My hogs were fattened with this corn, and I used to sell a number every day. Besides this, I used to raise small patches of tobacco, and sell it to buy more corn for my pigs. In this way I worked for five years, at the end of which time, after taking out my losses, I found that I had earned one hundred and sixty dollars. With this money I hired my own time for two years. During this period, I worked almost all the time night and day. The hope of liberty strung my nerves, and braced up my soul so much, that I could do with very little sleep or rest. I could do a great deal more work than I was ever able to do before. At the end of the two years, I had earned three hundred dollars, besides feeding and clothing myself. I now bought my time for eighteen months longer, and went two hundred and fifty miles west, nearly into Texas, where I could make more money. Here I earned enough to buy myself; which I did in 1833, about one year ago. I paid for myself, including what I gave for my time, about seven hundred dollars.

As soon as I was free, I started for a free State. When I arrived in Cincinnati, I heard of Lane Seminary, about two miles out of the city. I had for years been praying to God that my dark mind might see the light of knowledge. I asked for admission into the Seminary. They pitied me, and granted my request, though I knew nothing of the studies which were required for admission. I am so ignorant, that I suppose it will take me two years to get up with the lowest class in the institution. But in all respects I am treated just as kindly, and as much like a brother by the students, as if my skin were as white, and my education as good as their own. Thanks to the Lord, prejudice against colour does not exist in Lane Seminary! If my life is spared, I shall probably spend several years here, and prepare to preach the gospel.

I will now mention a few things, that I could not conveniently bring in, as I was going along with my story.

In the year 1828, I saw some Christians, who talked with me concerning my soul, and the sinfulness of my nature. They told me I must repent, and live to do good. This led me to the cross of Christ;—and then, oh, how I longed to be able to read the Bible! I made out to get an old spelling-book, which I carried in my hat for many months, until I could spell pretty well, and read easy words. When I got up in the night to work, I used to read a few minutes, if I could manage to get a light. Indeed, every chance I could find, I worked away at my spelling-book. After I had learned to read a little, I wanted very much to learn to write; and I persuaded one of my young masters to teach me. But the second night, my mistress came in, bustled about, scolded her son, and called him out. I overheard her say to him, “You fool! what are you doing? If you teach him to write, he will write himself a pass and run away.” That was the end of my instruction in writing; but I persevered, and made marks of all sorts and shapes I could think of. By turning every way, I was, after a long time, able to write tolerably plain.

I have said a good deal about my desire for freedom. How strange it is that anybody should believe any human being *could* be a slave, and yet be contented! I do not believe there ever was a slave, who did not long for liberty. I know very well that slave-owners take a great deal of pains to make the people in the free States believe that the slaves are happy; but I know, likewise, that I was never acquainted with a slave, however well he was treated, who did not long to be free. There is one thing about this, that people in the free States do not understand. When they ask slaves whether they wish for their liberty, they answer, “No;” and very likely they will go so far as to say they would not leave their masters for the world. But at the same time, they desire liberty more than anything else, and have, perhaps, all along been laying plans to get free. The truth is, if a slave shows any discontent, he is sure to be treated worse, and worked the harder for it; and every slave knows this. This is why they are careful not to show any uneasiness when white men ask them about freedom. When they are alone by themselves, all their talk is about liberty—liberty! It is the great thought and feeling that fills the mind full all the time.

6. A Slave Woman's Tale

Though the slave system was cruel and oppressive, the African-American bonds-men and -women could sometimes succeed in asserting their dignity, and could find the means to wed and to worship, to love and to laugh. In the following interview, conducted in the 1930s, ex-slave Annie Coley tells her life story. What areas of freedom, however limited, does she identify within the slave system? How does she describe the situation of women in slavery? What does her account imply about the relationship between masters and slaves? What differences did she see between slavery and freedom?

My mammy told me I was a slave going on five years. I don't remember myself, I have to go by what my mammy and pappy say. I was born twenty miles above

⁶George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), Supplement, Series 1, vol. 7, Mississippi Narratives, Part 2, pp. 438–446. (The interview, originally recorded in dialect, is here rendered in standard English.)

Camden, South Carolina. My pappy was Ben Jones, but after Big Boss Truesler bought him, he was called Ben Truesler. Rhody was my mammy's name.

All of us colored folks lived in loghouses in the quarters then. We didn't have any beds and mattresses like we have now. There were just bunks built in the wall with sacks filled with hay to lay on. All of us children slept on the floor.

Boss lived in a big white house, two story, with big white posts in front. He could look out from the upstairs windows and see what all the niggers were doing in the fields.

We worked in the fields in the cotton and the corn, from early morning till sundown. Saturdays, all day, just the same. Sundays we could rest. Big Boss gave each colored man a piece of ground to make a crop of corn and cotton for himself. Sundays each nigger worked out his own crop.

After the crop was laid by, we went with Big Boss to his church and sat in the back seats. We couldn't any of us read the Bible, so that was why Boss made us go to church, so that we could hear it read.

One Sunday, there was a mighty good preacher, and one old religious-hearted colored man got happy and rose up and shouted till he disturbed the preacher. At dinner Boss said, "Uncle, you must sit still this evening and not do no shoutin'! If you sit still, I will buy you a brand new pair of boots."

That evening the old man sat still as long as he could. But when the preacher began to tell about heaven and farewell to this world, the old colored man went wild. He rose up in his seat and yelled, "Boss, boots or no boots, I'm going to shout."

We bought Sunday clothes with our cotton money. Boss gave us plenty good work clothes. We got to rest three days at Christmas. We had a big dinner, but Boss gave us that out of his smokehouse. . . .

My mammy had a heap of children in slavery time, one every other year. She had them so fast that they took her out of the field and put her to weaving cloth, ten yards a day. She kept on having them until she had twelve head, and then she never did have any more. She had a heap of them before me, I was the seventh child.

My Boss's overseer was a poor white man, but he was good to us colored folks. Once some nigger women got to fighting in the cotton field. Boss brought them all to the gallery of the big house, and gave them all a lick or two with a whip, then sent them back to the field and told them to behave themselves.

But old Boss Jones had a mean overseer who took advantage of the women in the fields. One time he slammed a nigger woman down that was heavy, and caused her to have her baby—dead. The nigger women in the quarters jumped on him and said they were going to take him to a brushpile and burn him up. But their men hollered for them to turn him loose. Then Big Boss Jones came and made the women go back to the quarters. He said, "I ain't whipped these wretches for a long time, and I aim to whip them this evening." But all the women hid in the woods that evening, and Boss never said any more about it. He sent the overseer away and never did have any more overseers. He and his little boys looked over the work in the fields.

Yes, I saw a nigger in chains once. He was my mammy's brother. He stole the house girl and ran off with her to Camden. Big Boss brought him back, whipped him, and kept him chained in the kitchen for two weeks. Every morning Boss would go in the kitchen and whip him again.

His daddy, old Mike, who was my grandpa, was a wagon and buggy maker. He



The Cruelty of Slavery

This slave, photographed in 1863, had been viciously bull-whipped. (Library Company of Philadelphia)

stayed in the shop all the time, and never did work in the fields. He made wagons and buggies for the white folks, and made big money for Boss, over a hundred dollars a month. Old Mike kept getting madder and madder about the way Boss treated his boy. He went plum crazy, and ran after Boss in the big house, yelling "This day, my Boss and I are both going to die." Boss, he ran upstairs, and old Missus locked him in a closet and then locked herself in the room.

Then old Mike ran to the kitchen and turned his boy loose. They both went back to the quarters, and Mike went on awhile for two or three days. Then he went back to the shop and went to work. But Boss was afraid of him and never did talk to him no more. Old Missus tended to the business in the shop and collected the money. The white men told Boss, "You should have whipped that nigger and sent him back to the field. Now you have driven your best nigger crazy. . . ."

There weren't any schools for the niggers in slavery days. After freedom, I went to night school in Camden and learned out of the old Blue Back Speller. The teacher was a white lady—there weren't any colored folks then who could teach us.

I never joined church until I was grown and married; let me see, I was twenty-two. I don't want to live no other life but a Christian life, so I'll be saved and go home to rest, for the Bible says the wicked will be left here and burned up. . . .

We didn't have any weddings on our plantation in those days. Boss just gave us a script saying we were man and wife. If a man wanted a girl from another plantation, Boss bought her or traded for her. . . .

My mammy told me when a slave was sick, the Boss man dosed her with medicine. If she didn't get any better, he had a doctor come. If a slave died, he was laid out, locked up in the house, and all the other niggers had to go back to the field. Slaves weren't allowed any time off for burials, so the colored folks had to bury their dead at night.

Yes, we sang at the burials, and at church, and while we were at work. Those old black folks just studied up their songs in their heads. How did we do it? I heard a Bishop say that God gave the black folks wisdom to study out those songs. . . .

Let me say one word about slavery. When we were under the white folks, there was none of this killing and murdering like there is now. There weren't any hangings because there wasn't anybody to hang.

I asked my ma, after freedom, were there the same laws in slavery time as there are now. And she said, "Yes, honey, we had the same laws, but there wasn't anybody to use them on in those days."