AP UNITED STATES HISTORY

Chapter 9 Materials

*The Market Revolution, 1800-1840*

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| The Market Revolution: *Terms* |
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**FROM RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “The American Scholar” (1837)**

*Ralph Waldo Emerson was perhaps the most prominent intellectual in mid-nineteenth century America. In this famous address, delivered at Harvard College, he insisted on the primacy of individual judgment over existing social traditions as the essence of freedom.*

***HIPP/NOTES:***

Perhaps the time is already come, when . . . the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. . . .

In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be,–free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom. . . . Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind. They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art. . . .

[A] sign of the times . . . is the new importance given to the single individual. Every thing that tends to insulate the individual,–to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state:–tends to true union as well as greatness. ‘I learned,’ said the melancholy Pestalozzi [a Swiss educator], “that no man in God’s wide earth is either willing or able to help any other man.” Help must come from his bosom alone. . . .

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. . . .The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. Young men . . . do not yet see, that if the single man [should] plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. . . .We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.

**QUESTION:**

1. How does Emerson define the freedom of what he calls “the single individual”?

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| **Historical Content & Context** |  |
| **Intended Audience** |  |
| **Point of View** |  |
| **Purpose** |  |

***FROM* “Factory Life as It Is, by an Operative” (1845)**

Beginning in the 1830s, young women who worked in the cotton textile factories in Lowell, Massachusetts, organized to demand shorter hours of work and better labor conditions. In this pamphlet from 1845, a factory worker details her grievances as well as those of female domestic workers, the largest group of women workers.

***HIPP/NOTES:***

Philanthropists of the nineteenth century!—shall not the operatives of our country be permitted to speak for themselves? Shall they be compelled to listen in silence to [those] who speak for gain, and are the mere echo of the will of the corporations? Shall the worthy laborer be awed into silence by wealth and power, and for fear of being deprived of the means of procuring his daily bread? Shall tyranny and cruel oppression be allowed to rivet the chains of physical and mental slavery on the millions of our country who are the real producers of all its improvements and wealth, and they fear to speak out in noble self-defense? Shall they fear to appeal to the sympathies of the people, or the justice of this far-famed republican nation? God forbid!

Much has been written and spoken in woman’s behalf, especially in America; and yet a large class of females are, and have been, destined to a state of servitude as degrading as unceasing toil can make it. I refer to the female operatives of New England—the free states of our union—the states where no colored slave can breathe the balmy air, and exist as such; but yet there are those, a host of them, too, who are in fact nothing more nor less than slaves in every sense of the word! Slaves to a system of labor which requires them to toil from five until seven o’clock, with one hour only to attend to the wants of nature, allowed—slaves to the will and requirements of the “powers that be,” however they may infringe on the rights or conflict with the feelings of the operative—slaves to ignorance—and how can it be otherwise? What time has the operative to bestow on moral, religious or intellectual culture? How can our country look for aught but ignorance and vice, under the existing state of things? When the whole system is exhausted by unremitting labor during twelve and thirteen hours per day, can any reasonable being expect that the mind will retain its vigor and energy? Impossible! Common sense will teach every one the utter impossibility of improving the mind under these circumstances, however great the desire may be for knowledge.

Again, we hear much said on the subject of benevolence among the wealthy and so called, Christian part of community. Have we not cause to question the sincerity of those who, while they talk benevolence in the parlor, compel their help to labor for a mean, paltry pittance in the kitchen? And while they manifest great concern for the souls of the heathen in distant lands, care nothing for the bodies and intellects of those within their own precincts? . . .

In the strength of our united influence we will soon show these drivelling cotton lords, this mushroom aristocracy of New England, who so arrogantly aspire to lord it over God’s heritage, that our rights cannot be trampled upon with impunity; that we WILL not longer submit to that arbitrary power which has for the last ten years been so abundantly exercised over us.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Why does the female factory worker compare her conditions with those of slaves?

2. What does the contrast between the previous two documents suggest about the impact of the market revolution on American thought?

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**From Catherine Beecher, “Peculiar Responsibilities of American Women,” (1852)**

It appears, then, that it is in America alone that women are raised to an equality with the other sex; and that, both in theory and practice, their interests are regarded as of equal value. They are made subordinate in station [inferior in status] only where a regard [concern] to their best interests demands it, while, as if in compensation for this, by custom and courtesy they are always treated as superiors. Universally in this country, through every class of society, precedence is given to woman in all the comforts, conveniences, and courtesies of life. In civil and political affairs, American women take no interest or concern, except so far as they sympathize with their family and personal friends; but, in all cases in which they do feel a concern, their opinions and feelings have a consideration equal or even superior to that of the other sex.

***HIPP/NOTES:***

In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergyman, in all benevolent enterprises [activities for the good of society], and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence. In such concerns, it would be impossible to carry a point contrary to their judgment and feelings, while an enterprise [undertaking] sustained by them will seldom fail of success.

If those who are bewailing themselves over the fancied [imagined] wrongs and injuries of woman in this Nation could only see things as they are, they would know that, whatever remnants of a barbarous or aristocratic age may remain in our civil [social-political] institutions in reference to the interests of women, it is only because they are ignorant of them or do not use their influence to have them rectified; for it is very certain that there is nothing reasonable which American women would unite in asking that would not readily be bestowed.

The preceding remarks, then, illustrate the position that the democratic institutions of this Country are in reality no other than the principles of Christianity carried into operation, and that they tend to place woman in her true position in society, as having equal rights with the other sex, and that, in fact, they have secured to American women a lofty and fortunate position which, as yet, has been attained by the women of no other nation.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. When Beecher speaks of women’s “best interests” and their “true position in society,” what does she mean?

2. According to Beecher, what trade-offs must American women make to obtain their “lofty and fortunate position” in society? In your view, is it a fair exchange?

3. According to Beecher, in what realms do women naturally and legitimately exercise power?

4. On what grounds does Beecher base her faith that American women can attain anything they “reasonably” ask, and how does she explain any “remnants” of bad treatment that might remain in the present?

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**The Lords and the Mill Girls - Maury Klein**

Maury Klein, “The Lords and the Mill Girls,” from “Utopia to Mill Town” by Maury Klein in *American History Illustrated,* October and November 1981. Reprinted by permission of Cowles Magazines, publisher of *American History Illustrated.*

*During the Jacksonian era, a group of Massachusetts businessmen formed the Boston Associates, an organization of financiers who built a model mill town in Massachusetts called Lowell. The story of Lowell—America’s first planned industrial community— tells us a great deal about the dreams and realities of a nation already undergoing considerable industrial and urban growth. Maury Klein relates that story with a vivid pen— the landscaped town on the banks of the Concord and Merrimack Rivers that commanded worldwide attention, the healthy farm girls who worked its looms. In 1833, President Andrew Jackson and Vice President Martin Van Buren visited Lowell and watched transfixed as 2,500 mill girls, clad in blue sashes and white dresses, with parasols above their heads, marched by two abreast. “Very pretty women, by the Eternal!” exclaimed the president. Although they loathed Jackson, the members of the Boston Associates were pleased with his observation, for they were proud of their working girls— the showpieces of what they believed was the model of enlightened industrial management.* *To their delight, Lowell became a famous international attraction. English visitors were especially impressed, because female workers in England’s coal mines toiled in incredible misery: naked, covered with filth, they had to pull carts of coal on their hands and knees through dark, narrow tunnels. By contrast, as one historian has said, Lowell seemed a “female paradise.” Equally impressive was the remarkable productivity of Lowell’s “power-driven machinery.” Before long, Lowell became (in historian Linda Evans’s words) “the heart of the American textile industry and of the industrial revolution itself.”*

*Lowell’s relatively well-disciplined and well-treated workforce seemed to demonstrate that industrial capitalism need not be exploitive. Even so, the Lowell system was paternalistic and strict. Sensitive to criticism that it was immoral for women to work, the mill bosses maintained close supervision over their female operatives, imposing curfews and compulsory church attendance. Nevertheless, the mill girls, as they were called, were transformed by their work experience. As Linda Evans says, “Most of these workers saw their mill work as a way to reestablish their value to the family,” because they were no longer a burden to their parents (indeed, they could send money home now) and because they could save for their own dowries. “Soon,” writes Evans, “it was hard to separate their sense of duty from their sense of independence.” They felt a group solidarity, too, and in their boarding houses created “a working-class female culture.” They also became aware of themselves as a working class with special problems, for they were powerless and had few options. They could not find other jobs, as could their male counterparts, could not become sailors or dockhands or work on construction gangs. For most of the women, mill work was their only option. As others have said, their very powerlessness led to the eventual demise of the paternalistic factory system. As more and more textile firms moved to Lowell and other towns, the pressure of competition led to overproduction, to the same cycles of boom and bust that plagued the entire national economy. Thanks to overproduction, many mills fell into decline; wages dropped, and working conditions deteriorated. In a display of solidarity, the mill girls organized a union and went on strikes to protest wage cuts and rising rents. In 1844, organized as the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, they campaigned for a ten-hour workday and even took their grievances to the state legislature. As Maury Klein points out in the selection that follows, “their efforts were dogged, impressive, and ultimately futile” because they lacked political leverage. The union failed, and the textile bosses eventually replaced most of their once-prized mill girls with another labor force—desperate immigrants, most from Ireland, who worked for lower wages and were far less demanding. By 1860, Lowell had become another grim and crowded mill town, another “squalid slum.” As you ponder Lowell’s story, consider what it suggests about the nature of American industrialization and about the special problems of women and labor in an industrializing society. Do you agree with Klein, that what happened in Lowell reveals some harsh truths about the incompatibility of democratic ideals and the profit motive?*

GLOSSARY

APPLETON, NATHAN One of the largest stockholders in the Merrimack Manufacturing Company.

BAGLEY, SARAH One of several women leaders of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association and the ten-hour workday movement.

BOOTT, KIRK Planned and supervised the building of the Lowell mill village, which Klein calls “the nation’s first planned industrial community.”

BOSTON ASSOCIATES Founders of Lowell and the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, their textile empire eventually comprised eight major firms, twenty mills, and more than six thousand employees.

LOWELL, FRANCIS CABOT “Farsighted merchant” who formed the Boston Associates and pioneered a unique textile mill at Waltham; after his death, the associates established another mill village on the Merrimack River and named it Lowell.

LOWELL FEMALE LABOR REFORM ASSOCIATION Formed by the mill girls in 1844 to protest falling wages, this women’s labor union campaigned for a ten-hour workday and other reforms during its short existence.

*LOWELL OFFERING* Monthly magazine edited and published by the Lowell mill girls.

MERRIMACK MANUFACTURING COMPANY The new corporation that ran the Lowell mill and turned it into “the largest and most unique mill town in the nation.”

WALTHAM SYSTEM Unique production methods at Francis Lowell’s mill.

**Section I: THE ASSOCIATES**

They flocked to the village of Lowell, these visitors from abroad, as if it were a compulsory stop on the grand tour, eager to verify rumors of a utopian system of manufacturers. Their skepticism was natural, based as it was on the European experience where industry had degraded workers and blighted the landscape. In English manufacturing centers such as Manchester, observers had stared into the pits of hell and shrank in horror from the sight. Charles Dickens used this gloomy, putrid cesspool of misery as a model in *Hard Times,* while Alexis de Tocqueville wrinkled his nose at the “heaps of dung, rubble from buildings, putrid, stagnant pools” amid the “huge palaces of industry” that kept “air and light out of the human habitations which they dominate. . . . A sort of black smoke covers the city. . . . Under this half daylight 300,000 human beings are ceaselessly at work. A thousand noises disturb this damp, dark labyrinth, but they are not at all the ordinary sounds one hears in great cities.”

Was it possible that America could produce an alternative to this hideous scene? It seemed so to the visitors who gaped in wonderment at the village above the confluence of the Concord and Merrimack rivers. What they saw was a planned community with mills five to seven stories high flanked by dormitories for the workers, not jammed together but surrounded by open space filled with trees and flower gardens set against a backdrop of the river and hills beyond. Dwelling houses, shops, hotels, churches, banks, even a library lined the streets in orderly, uncrowded rows. Taken whole, the scene bore a flavor of meticulous composition, as if a painting had sprung to life.

The contrast between so pristine a vision and the nightmare of Manchester startled the most jaded of foreigners. “It was new and fresh, like a setting at the opera,” proclaimed Michel Chevalier, a Frenchman who visited Lowell in 1834. The Reverend William Scoresby, an Englishman, marveled at how the buildings seemed “as fresh-looking as if built within a year.” The indefatigable Harriet Martineau agreed, as did J. S. Buckingham, who pronounced Lowell to be “one of the most remarkable places under the sun.” Even Dickens, whose tour of America rendered him immune to most of its charms, was moved to lavish praise on the town. “One would swear,” he added “that every ‘Bakery,’ ‘Grocery’ and ‘Bookbindery’ and every other kind of store, took its shutters down for the first time, and started in business yesterday.”

If Lowell and its social engineering impressed visitors, the mill workers dazzled them. Here was nothing resembling Europe’s *Untermenschen,* that doomed proletariat whose brief, wretched lives were squeezed between child labor and a pauper’s grave. These were not men or children or even families as found in the Rhode Island mills. Instead Lowell employed young women, most of them fresh off New England farms, paid them higher wages than females earned anywhere else (but still only half of what men earned), and installed them in dormitories under strict supervision. They were young and industrious, intelligent, and entirely respectable. Like model citizens of a burgeoning republic they saved their money, went to church, and spent their leisure hours in self-improvement.

More than one visitor hurried home to announce the arrival of a new industrial order, one capable of producing goods in abundance without breaking its working class on the rack of poverty. Time proved them wrong, or at best premature. The Lowell experiment lasted barely a generation before sliding back into the grinding bleakness of a conventional mill town. It had survived long enough to tantalize admirers with its unfulfilled promise and to reveal some harsh truths about the incompatibility of certain democratic ideals and the profit motive.

The founding fathers of Lowell were a group known as the Boston Associates, all of whom belonged to that tight knit elite whose dominance of Boston society was exceeded only by their stranglehold on its financial institutions. The seed had been planted by Francis Cabot Lowell, a shrewd, far-sighted merchant who took up the manufacture of cotton cloth late in life. A trip abroad in 1810 introduced him to the cotton mills of Lancashire and to a fellow Boston merchant named Nathan Appleton. Blessed with a superb memory and trained in mathematics, Lowell packed his mind with details about the machinery shown him by unsuspecting mill owners. The Manchester owners jealously hoarded their secrets and patents, but none regarded the wealthy American living abroad for his health as a rival.

Once back in America, Lowell recruited a mechanical genius named Paul Moody to help replicate the machines he had seen in Manchester. After much tinkering they designed a power loom, cotton spinning frame, and some other machines that in fact improved upon the English versions. As a hedge against inexperience Lowell decided to produce only cheap, unbleached cotton sheeting. The choice also enabled him to use unskilled labor, but where was he to find even that? Manchester drew its workers from the poorhouses, a source lacking in America. Both the family system and use of apprentices had been tried in Rhode Island with little success. Most men preferred farming their own land to working in a factory for someone else.

But what about women? They were familiar with spinning and weaving, and would make obedient workers. Rural New England had a surplus of daughters who were considered little more than drains on the family larder. To obtain their services Lowell need only pay decent wages and overcome parental reservations about permitting girls to live away from home. This could be done by providing boarding houses where the girls would be subject to the strict supervision of older women acting as chaperones. There would be religious and moral instruction enough to satisfy the most scrupulous of parents. It was an ingenious concept, one that cloaked economic necessity in the appealing garb of republican ideals.

Lowell added yet another wrinkle. Instead of forming a partnership like most larger businesses, he obtained a charter for a corporation named the Boston Manufacturing Company. Capitalized at $300,000 the firm started with $100,000 subscribed by Lowell and a circle of his caste and kin: Patrick Tracy Jackson and his two brothers, Nathan Appleton, Israel Thorndike and his son, two brothers-in- law, and two other merchants. Jackson agreed to manage the new company, which chose a site at the falls on the Charles River at Waltham. By late 1814 the first large integrated cotton factory in America stood complete, along with its machine shop where Lowell and Moody reinvented the power loom and spinner.

Production began in 1815, just as the war with England drew to a close. The mill not only survived the return of British competition but prospered in spectacular fashion: during the years 1817–1824 dividends averaged more than nineteen percent. Moody’s fertile mind devised one new invention after another, including a warp-yarn dresser and double speeder. His innovations made the firm’s production methods so unique that they soon became known as the “Waltham system.” As Gilman Ostrander observed, “The Waltham method was characterized by an overriding emphasis upon standardization, integration, and mechanization.” The shop began to build machinery for sale to other mills. Even more, the company’s management techniques became the prototype on which virtually the entire textile industry of New England would later model itself.

Lowell did not live to witness this triumph. He died in 1817 at the age of forty-two, having provided his associates with the ingredients of success. During the next three years they showed their gratitude by constructing two more mills and a bleachery, which exhausted the available water power at Waltham. Eager to expand, the Associates scoured the rivers of New England for new sites. In 1821 Moody found a spot on the Merrimack River at East Chelmsford that seemed ideal. The river fell thirty- two feet in a series of rapids and there were two canals, one belonging to the Pawtucket Canal Company and another connecting to Boston. For about $70,000 the Associates purchased control of the Canal Company and much of the farmland along the banks.

From that transaction arose the largest and most unique mill town in the nation. In this novel enterprise the Associates seemed to depart from all precedent, but in reality they borrowed much from Waltham. A new corporation, the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, was formed with Nathan Appleton and Jackson as its largest stockholders. The circle of inventors was widened to include other members of the Boston elite such as Daniel Webster and the Boott brothers, Kirk and John. Moody took some shares but his ambitions went no further; he was content to remain a mechanic for the rest of his life. The memory of Francis Cabot Lowell was honored by giving the new village his name.

The task of planning and overseeing construction was entrusted to Kirk Boott. The son of a wealthy Boston Anglophile, Boott’s disposition and education straddled the Atlantic. He obtained a commission in the British army and fought under Wellington until the War of 1812 forced his resignation. For several years he studied engineering before returning home in 1817 to take up his father’s business. A brilliant, energetic, imperious martinet, Boott leaped at the opportunity to take charge of the new enterprise. As Hannah Josephson observed, he became “its town planner, its architect, its engineer, its agent in charge of production, and the leading citizen of the new community.”

The immensity of the challenge appealed to Boott’s ordered mind. He recruited an army of 500 Irish laborers, installed them in a tent city, and began transforming a pastoral landscape into a mill town. A dam was put across the river, the old canal was widened, new locks were added, and two more canals were started. The mills bordered the river but not with the monotony of a wall. Three buildings stood parallel to the water and three at right angles in a grouping that reminded some of Harvard College. Trees and shrubs filled the space between them. The boarding houses, semi-detached dwellings two-and- a-half stories high separated by strips of lawn, were set on nearby streets along with the superintendents’ houses and long brick tenements for male mechanics and their families. It was a standard of housing unknown to working people anywhere in the country or in Europe. For himself Boott designed a Georgian mansion ornamented with a formidable Ionic portico.

Lowell emerged as the nation’s first planned industrial community largely because of Boott’s care in realizing the overall concept. At Waltham the boarding houses had evolved piecemeal rather than as an integral part of the design. The Associates took care to avoid competition between the sites by confining Lowell’s production to printed calicoes for the higher priced market. While Waltham remained profitable, it quickly took a back seat to the new works. The machine shop provided a true barometer of change. It not only produced machinery and water wheels for Lowell but also oversaw the construction of mills and housing. Shortly before Lowell began production in 1823, the Associates, in Nathan Appleton’s words, “arranged to equalize the interest of all the stockholders in both companies” by formally purchasing Waltham’s patterns and patent rights and securing Moody’s transfer to Lowell. A year later the entire machine shop was moved to Lowell, leaving Waltham with only a maintenance facility.

The success of the Lowell plant prompted the Associates to unfold ambitious new plans. East Chelmsford offered abundant water power for an expanding industry; the sites were themselves a priceless asset. To use them profitably the Associates revived the old Canal Company under a new name, the Locks and Canals Company, and transferred to it all the land and water rights owned by the Merrimack Company. The latter then bought back its own mill sites and leased the water power it required. Thereafter the Locks and Canals Company sold land to other mill companies, leased water power to them at fixed rates per spindle, and built machinery, mills, and housing for them.

This organizational arrangement was as far advanced for the times as the rest of the Lowell concept. It brought the Associates handsome returns from the mills and enormous profits from the Locks and Canals Company, which averaged twenty-four percent in dividends between 1825 and 1845. As new companies like the Hamilton, Appleton, and Lowell corporations were formed, the Associates dispersed part of their stock among a widening network of fellow Brahmins. New partners entered their exclusive circle, including the Lawrence brothers, Abbott and Amos. Directories of the companies were so interlocked as to avoid any competition between them. In effect the Associates had created industrial harmony of the sort J. P. Morgan would later promote under the rubric “community of interest.”

By 1836 the Associates had invested $6.2 million in eight major firms controlling twenty five-story mills with more than 6,000 employees. Lowell had grown into a town of 18,000 and acquired a city charter. It boasted ten churches, several banks to accommodate the virtue of thrift on the part of the workers, long rows of shops, a brewery, taverns, schools, and other appurtenances of progress. Worldwide attention had transformed it into a showcase. Apart from the influx of foreigners and other dignitaries, it had already been visited by a president the Associates despised (Andrew Jackson), and by a man who would try three times to become president (Henry Clay).

The Associates basked in this attention because they viewed themselves as benevolent, far-seeing men whose sense of duty extended far beyond wealth. To be sure the life blood of the New England economy flowed through their counting houses from their domination of banks, insurance companies, railroads, shipping, and mills elsewhere in New England. Yet such were the rigors of their stern Puritan consciences that for them acquisition was all consuming without being all fulfilling. Duty taught that no fortune was so ample that more was not required. Economist Thorstein Veblen later marveled at the “steadfast cupidity” that drove these men “under pain of moral turpitude, to acquire a ‘competence,’ and then unremittingly to augment any competence acquired.”

Not content with being an economic and social aristocracy, the Associates extended their influence to politics, religion, education, and morality. Lowell fit their *raison d’être* so ideally because it filled their coffers while at the same time reflecting their notion of an orderly, paternal community imbued with the proper values. The operatives knew their place, deferred to the leadership of the Associates, shared their values. . . .

**Section II: THE MILL GIRLS**

In promoting their mills as an industrial utopia [the Associates] were quick to realize that the girls were the prime attraction, the trump card in their game of benevolent paternalism. As early as 1827 Captain Basil Hall, an Englishman, marveled at the girls on their way to work at six in the morning, “nicely dressed, and glittering with bright shawls and showy- colored gowns and gay bonnets . . . with an air of lightness, and an elasticity of step, implying an obvious desire to get to their work.”

Observers who went home to rhapsodize about Lowell and its operatives as a model for what the factory system should become trapped themselves in an unwitting irony. While there was much about the Lowell corporations that served later firms as model, the same did not hold true for their labor force. The young women who filled the mills, regarded by many as the heart of the Lowell system, were in fact its most unique element and ultimately its most transient feature. They were of the same stock and shared much the same culture as the men who employed them. This relative homogeneity gave them a kinship of values absent in later generations of workers. Benita Eisler has called them “the last WASP labor force in America.”

The women who flocked to Lowell’s mills came mostly from New England farms. Some came to augment the incomes of poor families, others to earn money for gowns and finery, to escape the bleak monotony of rural life, or sample the adventure of a fresh start in a new village. Although their motives were mixed, they chose the mills over such alternatives as teaching or domestic service because the pay was better and the work gave them a sense of independence. Lucy Larcom, one of the most talented and articulate of the mill girls, observed that:

Country girls were naturally independent, and the feeling that at this new work the few hours they had of everyday leisure were entirely their own was a satisfaction to them. They preferred it to going out as “hired help.” It was like a young man’s pleasure in entering upon business for himself.

Leisure hours were a scarce commodity. The mill tower bells tolled the girls to work before the light of day and released them at dusk six days a week, with the Sabbath reserved for solemn observance. The work day averaged twelve-and-a-half hours, depending on the season, and there were only three holidays a year, all unpaid: Fast Day, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving. Wages ranged between $2 and $4 a week, about half what men earned. Of this amount $1.25 was deducted for board, to which the company contributed another twenty-five cents. Meager as these sums appear, they exceeded the pay offered by most other mills.

The work rooms were clean and bright for a factory, the walls whitewashed and windows often garnished with potted flowers. But the air was clogged with lint and fumes from the whale-oil lamps hung above every loom. Since threads would snap unless the humidity was kept high, windows were nailed shut even in the summer’s heat, and the air was sprayed with water. Delicate lungs were vulnerable to the ravages of tuberculosis and other respiratory ailments. More than one critic attributed the high turnover rate to the number of girls “going home to die.”

The machines terrified newcomers with their thunderous clatter that shook the floor. Belts and wheels, pulleys and rollers, spindles and flyers, twisted and whirled, hissing and buzzing, always in motion, a cacophonous jungle alien to rural ears. At first the machines looked too formidable to master. One girl, in the story recalling her first days at Lowell, noted that:

*she felt afraid to touch the loom, and she was almost sure she could never learn to weave; the harness puzzled and the reed perplexed her; the shuttle flew out and made a new bump on her head; and the first time she tried to spring the lathe she broke a quarter of the threads. It seemed as if the girls all stared at her, and the overseers watched every motion, and the day appeared as long as a month had at home....At last it was night....There was a dull pain in her head, and a sharp pain in her ankles; every bone was aching, and there was in her ears a strange noise, as of crickets, frogs and jews-harps, all mingling together.*

Once the novelty wore off, the strangeness of it all gave way to a more serious menace: monotony.

The boarding houses provided welcome havens from such trials. These were dwellings of different sizes, leased to respectable high-toned widows who served as housemothers for fifteen to thirty girls. They kept the place clean and enforced the company rules, which were as strict as any parent might want. Among other things they regulated conduct, imposed a ten o’clock curfew, and required church attendance. The girls were packed six to a bedroom, with three beds. One visitor described the small rooms as “absolutely choked with beds, trunks, bandboxes, clothes, umbrellas and people,” with little space for other furniture. The dining room doubled as sitting room, but in early evening it was often besieged by peddlers of all sorts.

This cramped arrangement suited the Associates nicely because it was economical and reinforced a sense of group standards and conformity. Lack of privacy was old hat to most rural girls, though a few complained. Most housemothers set a good table and did not cater to dainty appetites. One girl reported dinner as consisting of “meat and potatoes, with vegetables, tomatoes and pickles, pudding or pie, with bread, butter, coffee or tea.” English novelist Anthony Trollope was both impressed and repulsed by the discovery that meat was served twice a day, declaring that for Americans “to live a day without meat would be as great a privation as to pass a night without a bed.”

The corporations usually painted each house once a year, an act attributed by some to benevolence and others to a shrewd eye for public relations and property values. Their zeal for cleanliness did not extend to bathing facilities, which were minimal at best. More than one visitor spread tales of dirt and vermin in the boarding houses, but these too were no strangers to rural homes. Like the mills, later boarding houses were built as long dormitory rows unleavened by strips of lawn or shrubbery, but the earlier versions retained a quaint charm for visitors and inhabitants.

Above all the boarding houses were, as Hannah Josephson stressed, “a woman’s world.” In these cluttered cloisters the operatives chatted, read, sewed, wrote letters, or dreamed about the day when marriage or some better opportunity would take them from the mills. They stayed in Lowell about four years on the average, and most married after leaving. The mill experience was, in Thomas Dublin’s phrase, simply “a stage in a woman’s life cycle before marriage.” For many girls the strangeness of it all was mitigated by the presence of sisters, cousins, or friends who had undertaken the same adventure.

Outside the boarding house the girls strolled and picnicked in the nearby countryside, attended church socials, paid calls, and shopped for the things they had never had. Dozens of shops vied with the savings banks for their hard-earned dollars and won more than their share of them. Those eager to improve their minds, and there were many, patronized the library and the Lyceum, which for fifty cents offered a season ticket for twenty-five lectures by such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Mann, John Quincy Adams, Horace Greeley, Robert Owen, and Edward Everett. Some were ambitious enough to attend evening classes or form study groups of their own in everything from art to German.

Above all the girls read. Their appetite for literature was voracious and often indiscriminate. So strong was this ardor that many slipped their books into the mills, where such distractions were strictly forbidden. It must have pained overseers to confiscate even Bibles from transgressors, but the large number that filled their drawers revealed clearly the Associates’ determination to preserve the sharp distinction between the Lord’s business and their own.

No one knows how many of the girls were avid readers, but the number probably exceeded the norm for any comparable group. Where so many read, it was inevitable that some would try their hand at writing. By the early 1840s Lowell boasted seven Mutual Self-Improvement Clubs. These were the first women’s literary clubs in America, and the members consisted entirely of operatives. From two of these groups emerged a monthly magazine known as the *Lowell Offering* which in its brief lifespan (1841–1845) achieved a notoriety and reputation far in excess of its literary merits. The banner on its cover described the contents as *A Repository of Original Articles, Written Exclusively by Females Actively Employed in the Mills.*

No other aspect of Lowell rivaled the *Offering* as a symbol for the heights to which an industrial utopia might aspire. Observers at home and abroad were astounded at the spectacle of factory workers—women no less—capable of producing a literary magazine. Even Charles Dickens, that harsh critic of both English industrialism and American foibles, hurried this revelation to his readers:

I am now going to state three facts, which will startle a large class of readers on this side of the Atlantic very much. First, there is a joint-stock piano in a great many of the boarding-houses. Secondly, nearly all these young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries. Thirdly, they have got up among themselves a periodical . . . which is duly printed, published, and sold; and whereof I brought away from Lowell four hundred good solid pages, which I have read from beginning to end.

As the *Offering*’s fame grew, the Associates were not slow to appreciate its value. Nothing did more to elevate their esteem on both sides of the Atlantic. Contrary to the belief of some, the magazine never became a house organ. Both editors, Harriet Farley and Harriott Curtis, were veterans of the mills who opened their columns to critics and reformers while keeping their own editorial views within more discreet and refined bounds. For their part the Associates were too shrewd not to recognize that the *Offering*’s appeal, its effectiveness as a symbol of republican virtues, lay in its independence. To serve them best it must not smack of self-serving, and it did not.

Although the magazine’s prose and poetry seldom rose above mediocre, the material offered revealing insights into every aspect of factory life. Inevitably it attracted authors eager to voice grievances or promote remedies. The editors trod a difficult path between the genteel pretensions of a literary organ and a growing militancy among operatives concerned with gut issues. Few of the girls subscribed to the *Offering* anyway; most of the copies went to patrons in other states or overseas. Small wonder that critics charged the magazine had lost touch with actual conditions in the mills or the real concerns of their operatives.

The *Offering* folded in part because it reflected a system hurrying toward extinction. By the 1840s, when Lowell’s reputation as an industrial utopia was still at its peak, significant changes had already taken place. Hard times and swollen ranks of stockholders clamoring for dividends had dulled the Associates’ interest in benevolent paternalism. It had always been less a goal than a by-product and not likely to survive a direct conflict with the profit motive. The result was a period of several years during which Lowell coasted on its earlier image while the Associates dismantled utopia in favor of a more cost-efficient system.

The self-esteem of the Associates did not permit them to view their actions in this light, but the operatives felt the change in obvious ways. Their work week increased to seventy-five hours with four annual holidays compared to sixty-nine hours and six holidays for the much maligned British textile workers. To reduce unit costs, girls tended faster machines and were paid lower wages for piecework. That was called speedup; in another practice known as stretch-out, girls were given three or four looms where earlier they had tended one or two. Overseers and second hands were offered bonuses for wringing more productivity out of the workers.

At heart the utopian image of Lowell, indeed the system itself, rested on the assumption that grateful, obedient workers would not bite the hand of their masters. When operatives declined to accept this role, factory agents countered with dismissals and blacklists. The result was a growing sense of militancy among the girls and the first stirrings of a labor movement. In 1834 and 1836 there occurred spontaneous “turnouts” or strikes in Lowell, the first protesting wage cuts and the second an increase in the board charge. Neither achieved much, although a large number of girls (800 and 2,500) took part. The Associates showed their mettle in one instance by turning a widow with four children out of her boarding house because her eleven-year-old daughter, a bobbin girl, had followed the others out. “Mrs. Hanson, you could not prevent the older girls from turning out,” the corporate agent explained sternly, “but your daughter is a child, and her you could control.”

Between 1837 and 1842 a national depression drove wages down and quieted labor unrest at Lowell. When conditions improved and wages still fell, the disturbances began anew. In December 1844 five mill girls met to form the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association; within a year the organization had grown to 600 members in Lowell and had branches elsewhere in New England. Since unions had no legal status or power to bargain directly, LFLRA could only appeal to public opinion and petition the General Court (state legislature) for redress.

For three years the organization dispatched petitions and testified before legislative commissions on behalf of one issue in particular; the ten-hour workday. Led by Sarah Bagley and other women of remarkable energy and intelligence, LFLRA joined hands with workingmen’s groups in the push for shorter hours. Their efforts were dogged, impressive, and ultimately futile. As their ranks swelled, they suffered the usual problems of divided aims and disagreement over tactics. More than that, the LFLRA failed in the end simply because it had determination but no leverage. Legislators and other officials did not take them seriously because they were women who had no business being involved in such matters and could not vote anyway. By 1847 LFLRA was little more than a memory. The ten-hour movement lived on, but did not succeed until 1874.

During its brief life LFLRA did much to shatter the image of Lowell as an industrial utopia. The Associates held aloof from controversy and allowed editors, ministers, and distinguished visitors to make their case. There were those who preserved Lowell as a symbol because they wanted to believe, needed to believe in what it represented. After several years of constant labor strife, however, few could overlook the problems pointed up by LFLRA: more work for less pay, deteriorating conditions in the mills and boarding houses, blacklists, and more repressive regulations. Lowell had lost much of what had made it special and was on the verge of becoming another bleak and stifling mill town.

Gradually the river and countryside disappeared behind unbroken walls of factory or dormitory. Nature approached extinction in Lowell, and so did the girls who had always been the core of its system. In 1845 about ninety percent of the operatives were native Americans, mostly farm girls; by 1850 half the mill workers were Irish, part of the flood that migrated after the famine years of 1845–46. The Irish girls were illiterate, docile, and desperate enough to work for low wages. They preferred tenements with their friends and family to boarding houses, which relieved the Associates of that burden. It did not take the Associates long to appreciate the virtues of so helpless and undemanding a work force. In these immigrants they saw great promise for cheap labor comparable to that found in English mill towns like Manchester.

The Associates had lost their bloom as models of propriety and benevolence. Some called them “lords of the loom” and consigned them to the same terrace of Inferno as the South’s “lords of the lash.” How ironic it was for Nathan Appleton, the most beloved of souls with an unmatched reputation for philanthropy and civic virtue, that his mills were the first to be called “soulless corporations.”

So it was that Lowell’s utopian vision ended where industrialism began. In time the Irish would rise up in protest as their predecessors had done, but behind them came waves of Dutch, Greek, and French Canadian immigrants to take their places in the mills. The native New England girls continued to flee the mills or shy away from them in droves, until by 1860 they were but a small minority. Their departure marked the emergence of Lowell as a mill town no different than any other mill town. One of the girls, peering from her boarding house window, watched the growing stories of a new mill snuff out her view of the scenery beyond and caught the significance of her loss. In her lament could be found an epitaph for Lowell itself:

*Then I began to measure . . . and to calculate how long I would retain this or that beauty. I hoped that the brow of the hill would remain when the structure was complete. But no! I had not calculated wisely. It began to recede from me . . . for the building rose still higher and higher. One hope after another is gone . . . one image after another, that has been beautiful to our eye, and dear to our heart has forever disappeared. How has the scene changed! How is our window darkened!*

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Thomas Jefferson, an agrarian idealist, hated the idea of America’s becoming an industrial nation, basing his feelings on the evils of European cities. How did the city of Lowell, at least in its early years, escape the evils Jefferson believed inherent in urban industrial life?

2. Klein says that what happened at Lowell reveals that the profit motive and certain democratic ideals are incompatible. Do you agree? Was the Lowell experiment doomed from its inception because of conflicting goals?

3. Why did the Boston Associates choose young women from rural parts of New England to be operatives in their Lowell textile mills? What were the advantages of a female labor force?

4. Examine boarding-house life at Lowell from the perspective of the female mill workers. What were the advantages and drawbacks to living in the boarding houses? In what way, if any, was boarding-house life conducive to the development of a positive female subculture?

5. By the 1840s, changes taking place in the Lowell boarding house and in the factories indicated the breakdown of that model factory town. Describe these changes and the reasons for growing labor militancy among the once “docile” female work force.

**Transcendentalism and Social Reform**

*Those Americans who have heard of American Transcendentalism associate it with the writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and his friend Henry David Thoreau. Asked to name things about the group they remember, most mention Emerson’s ringing declaration of cultural independence in his “American Scholar” address at Harvard’s commencement in 1837 and his famous lecture “Self-Reliance,” in which he declared that “to be great is to be misunderstood”; Thoreau’s two-year experiment in self-sufficiency at Walden Pond and his advice to “Simplify! Simplify!”; and the minister Theodore Parker’s close association with the radical abolitionist John Brown. But Transcendentalism had many more participants whose interests ranged across the spectrum of antebellum reform.**[[1]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn1" \o ")*

To understand it fully, however, one must consider its origins. Transcendentalism’s roots were in American Christianity. In the 1830s young men training for the liberal Christian (Unitarian) ministry chafed at their spiritual teachers’ belief in Christ’s miracles, claiming instead that his moral teachings alone were sufficient to make him an inspired prophet.[[2]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn2" \o ") Similarly, they rejected the widely accepted notion that man’s knowledge came primarily through the senses. To the contrary, they believed in internal, spiritual principles as the basis for man’s comprehension of the world. These formed the basis of the “conscience” or “intuition” that made it possible for each person to connect with the spiritual world. When man thus moved above or beyond—“transcended”—the cares and concerns of the mundane, lower sphere, he was in touch with and lived through this spiritual principle, what Ralph Waldo Emerson termed the “Oversoul.”[[3]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn3" \o ")

At its core, Transcendentalism celebrated the divine equality of each soul. There was no arbitrary division between saved and damned, for anyone could have a transcendent experience and thereafter live his life connected to the spiritual world. Transcendentalism thus seemed the ideal philosophy for a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and have the same inalienable rights. In this, the movement began to overlap with antebellum efforts toward social reform, for if all men and women were spiritually equal from birth, they all deserved to be treated with social and political equality as well.

Because of this basic belief, many Transcendentalists became involved in efforts to reverse conditions that prevented individuals from realizing their full potential. For example, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott’s father, began the Temple School, an educational experiment for elementary-age children that stressed their innate divinity and encouraged its early discovery and cultivation. He had to close the school after parents objected to how Alcott taught the Gospels. Alcott’s assistant there, Elizabeth Peabody, went on to pioneer the kindergarten movement in the United States. Orestes Brownson, son of Vermont farmers and one of the few Transcendentalists not college-educated, remained loyal to his roots and dedicated his life to improving the conditions of the working class; his statements on the likelihood of class warfare between laborer and owner anticipated those of Karl Marx.

Other Transcendentalists moved directly toward what we would recognize today as socialism. Brownson’s close friend George Ripley resigned from his Unitarian pulpit near the Boston waterfront and started the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education. Through this utopian experiment in communal living he tried to break down the barriers between intellectuals and laborers, and divided the community’s profits according to socialist principles. At Brook Farm members rotated through different forms of work, the most educated having their turn at farming, husbandry, and crafts, and common laborers given the opportunity to engage in art, music, drama, and other activities to which they had been little exposed.[[4]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn4" \o ") Alcott, seeking a new project after the failure of the Temple School, began the quixotic Fruitlands experiment in Harvard, Massachusetts, where he and a handful of other idealists sought to live as vegetarians, giving up even shoe leather and beasts of burden in their respect for all life. The “community” did not last through its first autumn.[[5]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn5" \o ")

In another arena, Margaret Fuller, influenced by Emerson’s doctrine of self-reliance, became the foremost advocate of women’s rights in her day. Her pioneering *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), in which she argued, on Transcendentalist principles, the economic and psychological equality of the sexes, influenced many Transcendentalists and others. Not afraid to put her principles into operation, she later traveled to Europe to report on the political and social revolutions of 1848 for Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*; she and her husband, an Italian count, died in a shipwreck sailing from Europe to the United States in 1850.

For some, such reform activities were the natural outgrowth of Transcendentalist thought, and they made social reform virtually the entire focus of their Transcendentalism. Until the 1840s Emerson was not the de facto leader of the group. Rather, the most visible members of the loosely associated group were Ripley and Brownson, both of whom stressed social engagement in their Unitarian ministries in Boston.

The impoverished, the mentally and physically challenged, the imprisoned and those otherwise institutionalized, and the enslaved: Transcendentalists recognized these members of society as their equals in spirituality, and America’s promise would not be fulfilled until the benefits of its citizenship were available to all. Ripley’s Brook Farm was the most dramatic attempt to resolve the inequities in the mundane world. He abandoned his ministry among middle-class Bostonians in large measure because his congregation was content in their comfort and felt no compulsion to extend understanding and charity in the way their minister wished. Similarly, Brownson, appalled at what he saw as the rapidly deteriorating social condition of the working class, first started his own reformist periodical, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, and then embraced Roman Catholicism, whose ethic of brotherhood he believed better served the impoverished and oppressed.

Ripley’s and Brownson’s centrality began to fade when Emerson emerged as a major Transcendentalist spokesperson in the wake of the furor over his “Divinity School Address” (1838), when he insulted the Harvard theological faculty by claiming that their preaching was uninspired, and the publication of his first book of essays three years later. In these and other works he provided Transcendentalists another way to define and act on their beliefs, one that revolved around his glorification of the individual rather than active engagement in social reform. Emerson, for example, never joined Brook Farm, although his close friend and cousin Ripley implored him to do so, aware that Emerson’s participation would bring the experiment even more attention. He wrote Ripley a blunt refusal, explaining that he still had far to travel on his own personal, spiritual journey before he could get so directly involved with other the reformation of others’ lives. Allied with Emerson in this belief that self-reform trumped social engagement was his disciple Henry Thoreau and, for a while, Margaret Fuller. Both stressed the importance of individual responsibility and attention to one’s own conscience rather than amelioration of others’ conditions, potentially a distraction from self-improvement.

This split among Transcendentalists did not go unremarked. Peabody, for example, wondered if Emerson’s stress on self-reliance and individual fulfillment might not lead to what she termed “ego-theism,” his setting up himself, or comparably inspired individuals, as somehow gods themselves. She concluded that when one held such self-centered views as Emerson did, “faith commit[ed] suicide” when an individual failed to realize that “man proves but a melancholy God” in comparison to the divine being whom she still worshipped.[[6]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn6" \o ") Similarly, after reading Emerson’s *Essays: First Series*, one of Fuller’s protégés, Caroline Healey (Dall) thought that what he had to say about self-reliance was “extravagant and unsafe.”[[7]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn7" \o ") Another of Emerson’s friends, Henry James Sr., echoed this criticism. “The curse of our present times, which eliminates all their poetry,” he observed of his contemporaries’ resistance to socialism, is the “selfhood imposed on us by the evil world.”[[8]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn8" \o ")

Emerson himself recognized the conflict. Asked to speak at a memorial for the great reformer Theodore Parker, who had died on the threshold of the Civil War, he demurred, remarking how different they were in their approaches to the problems of the age. “Our differences of method and working,” he wrote to the organizing committee of the memorial, were “such as really required and honored all [Parker’s] Catholicism and magnanimity to forgive in me.” In the privacy of his journal, he was even more candid. “I can well praise him [but only] at a spectator’s distance, for our minds & methods were unlike—few people more unlike.”[[9]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn9" \o ")

Through the 1840s this division persisted among Transcendentalists and associated groups, but in the next decade it gradually ceased to be of great significance. After the signal year 1850, in which Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, all parties pulled away from internecine squabbling as the sectional crisis challenged all Americans to confront the immense problem of chattel slavery. Transcendentalists who had advanced social reforms that included efforts to increase rights for women, labor, and the indigent redirected their energies toward extinguishing the institution of slavery.

Theodore Parker was the leader in this fight, but he was a special case, for even as he vociferously condemned the Southern slaveholders and the politicians they elected (and any northerners complicit with them), he continued to preach about the great inequities of wealth in cities like Boston. He understood the connections between northern businessmen and southern slaveholders, and declared worship of Mammon—or wealth—the evil. In one sermon he told his audience that he was speaking in a city “whose most popular idol is mammon, the God of God; whose Trinity is a Trinity of Coin!” “The Eyes of the North are full of cotton,” he continued. “They see nothing else, for a web is before them; their ears are full of cotton, and they hear nothing but the buzz of their mills; their mouth is full of cotton, and they can speak audibly but two words—Tariff, Tariff, Dividends, Dividends.”[[10]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn10" \o ") He genuinely worried that liberty might fail. If men continued to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law, he said, he did not know when the struggle would end but did not care if the Union went to pieces.

Other Transcendentalists were similarly swept up in this fervor, believing slavery the great evil to be extinguished before all others. Many women who hitherto had devoted themselves to women’s rights were swayed by such arguments and believed that their turn for equality would come after the African Americans’. Unfortunately, in this they were disappointed. Speaking of the Transcendentalists’ commitment to abolition in the 1850s, the Unitarian clergyman Octavius Brooks Frothingham explained in 1876 why they and others were so quick to put aside other pressing issues. He recalled that in the 1850s the “agitation against slavery had taken hold of the whole country; it was in politics, in journalism, in literature, in the public hall and parlor.”[[11]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn11" \o ")

When the Civil War was over, what became of the movement? Some of its leaders did not even live to see the end of the war, most notably Parker, Thoreau, and Fuller. Others moved on to new causes. After the failure of Brook Farm in the late 1840s, Ripley moved to New York City, replacing Fuller as book reviewer at Greeley’s *Tribune*. Brownson became an apologist and proselytizer for Roman Catholicism. Peabody embraced the kindergarten movement and, later, Native American rights. That left Emerson as the public face of Transcendentalism.

There was some progress in the area of women’s rights, with Caroline Healey Dall assuming Fuller’s place as one of the intellectual leaders of the women’s movement, and Brook Farm alumna Almira Barlow providing it new guidance. Ministers like John Weiss (Parker’s disciple), David Wasson, and Samuel Johnson, however, defended Transcendentalism against the rise of the scientific method that placed most value on material facts rather than spiritual ideals. Few Transcendentalists, however, were involved in the growing disputes between labor and capital, the reformation of asylums and penitentiaries, or other matters on a reformist agenda.

By the 1870s, the uneasy balance between the self and society that had characterized the antebellum phase of the Transcendental movement tipped irrevocably in the direction of the self. The intellectual power of Transcendentalists was directed toward individual rights and, implicitly, market capitalism, not humanitarian reform. Emerson’s admittedly demanding philosophy of self-reliance, an artifact of the early 1840s, was simplified and adopted as a chief principle. More and more, people identified Transcendentalism with the idea of individualism alone, rather than with the ethic of brotherhood that was supposed to accompany it, a process that only accelerated after Emerson’s death in 1882. It was left to others to promulgate a religion, the Social Gospel, that reached out to the poor and forgotten.

The New York Unitarian clergyman and erstwhile Transcendentalist Samuel Osgood summed this up well. Reacting to a suggestion that in the 1870s Transcendentalism had lost its relevance, he argued that the group’s very success in spreading its ideas had made their philosophy less visible. “The sect of Transcendentalists has disappeared,” he wrote, “because their light has gone everywhere.”[[12]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftn12" \o ") He meant that American culture had absorbed Emerson’s most distinctive thought, the deification of the individual. With more hindsight, however, one might argue differently. Emerson’s fame presaged, ironically, the death knell of the higher principle of universal brotherhood for which Transcendentalism, more than any other American philosophy, might have provided the foundation.

[[1]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5#_ftnref1) Philip F. Gura, in *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007) offers a thorough brief overview of the subject.

[[2]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref2" \o ") William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendental Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), is still the best source for the religious roots of the controversy between younger and older Unitarians.

[[3]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref3" \o ") Emerson makes the distinction between the Reason and Understanding in his “Divinity School Address” of 1838. He speaks of the Oversoul in 1841 in the essay by that name.

[[4]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref4" \o ") See Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[[5]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref5" \o ") See Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[[6]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref6" \o ") Elizabeth Peabody, “Egotheism, the Atheism of Today” (1858), reprinted in *idem*., *Last Evening with Allston and Other Papers* (Boston: D. Lathrop, 1886), 3.

[[7]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref7" \o ") Helen R. Deese, ed., Selected Journals of Carline Healey Dall, in Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections* 90 (2006), 81.

[[8]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref8" \o ") Henry James, *Moralism and Christianity; or, Man’s Experience and Destiny* (New York: Redfield, 1850), 84.

[[9]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref9" \o ") Ralph Waldo Emerson to Moncure Daniel Conway, June 6, 1860, in Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–1995), 5: 221; and Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gilman, et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960–1982), 14: 352–353.

[[10]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref10" \o ") Theodore Parker, *A Sermon of War* (1846) in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, ed. Frances Power Cobbe, 12 vols. (London: Trüber, 1863–1865), 4: 5–6, 25.

[[11]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref11" \o ") Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (New York: Putnam, 1876), 331.

[[12]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/first-age-reform/essays/transcendentalism-and-social-reform?period=5" \l "_ftnref12" \o ") Samuel Osgood, “Transcendentalists in New England,” *International Review* 3 (1876), 761.

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**Discussion Questions:**

*Answer the following questions after reading the article.*

1. Explain Emerson’s meaning of the “Oversoul”.

2. Why was transcendentalism seemingly the ideal philosophy for Americans?

3. Give 3 examples of how transcendentalism became a catalyst for social reform.

4, How did Emerson reconcile self-reform vs. social engagement?

5. What happened to transcendentalism after the Civil War?

**The Market Revolution: Political Cartoons**

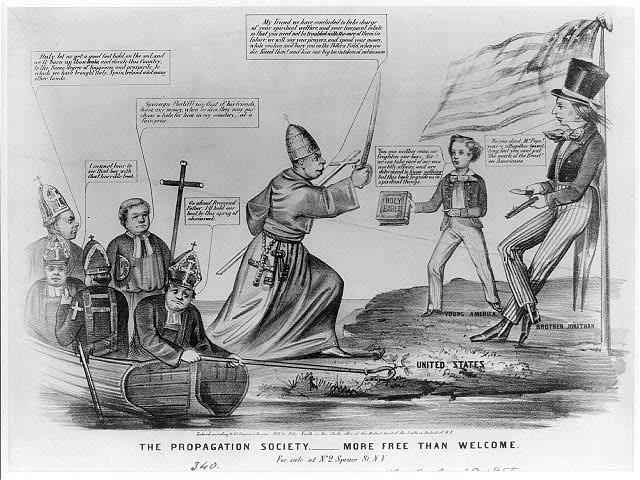
**Analyze the cartoon and answer the questions.**

1. What are the characters and symbols in the cartoon, and what does each one represent?

2. How do the words help you identify the cartoonist’s intention?

3. What action is taking place in the cartoon?

4. What opinion is the cartoonist expressing?

**Analyze the cartoon and answer the questions.**

1. What are the characters and symbols in the cartoon, and what does each one represent?

2. How do the words help you identify the cartoonist’s intention?

3. What action is taking place in the cartoon?

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**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

**1.** Identify the major transportation improvements in this period and explain how they influenced the market economy.

**2.** How did state and local governments promote the national economy in this period?

**3.** How did the market economy increase the nation’s sectional differences?

**4.** Explain how the market economy promoted the growth of cities in the East and along the frontier.

**5.** What role did immigrants play in the new market society?

**6.** What were the main changes in American law during this period?

**7.** As it democratized American Christianity, the Second Great Awakening both took advantage of the market revolution and criticized its excesses. Explain.

**8.** What was the “cult of domesticity” and how was it a result of the market revolution?

**FREEDOM QUESTIONS**

**1.** Explain how the growth of the Cotton Kingdom benefited planters and other slaveowners, but reduced the liberties of poorer southern farmers and African-Americans.

**2.** How did the growth of the factory system limit the traditional freedoms of American artisans, and how did they respond?

**3.** The market revolution added new terminology to the American lexicon. Explain how each of the following concepts is related to a change in individual freedom: wages, clock time, self-made man, privacy, and middle class.

**4.** The 1828 edition of Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary* defined freedom as “a state of exemption from the power and control of another. “Using this definition, assess the impact of the market revolution on the freedoms of white women, African-Americans, immigrants, and wage workers.

**5.** Explain how the market revolution changed the meanings of American freedom, both by reinforcing older ideas and creating new ones.