CHAPTER 9

The Market Revolution, 1800–1840

54. Sarah Bagley, Freedom and Necessity at Lowell (1845)

Source: **Voice of Industry,** ***September 18, 1845.***

The early industrial revolution centered on factories producing cotton textiles with water-powered spinning and weaving machinery. In the 1820s, a group of merchants created an entirely new factory town near Boston, incorporated as the city of Lowell in 1836. Here they built a group of modern textile factories that brought together all phases of production from the spinning of thread to the weaving and finishing of cloth. By 1850, Lowell's fifty-two mills employed more than 10,000 workers.

Closely supervised work tending a machine seemed to violate the independence Americans considered an essential element of freedom. As a result, few native-born men could be attracted to work in the early factories. At Lowell, young unmarried women from Yankee farm families dominated the workforce that tended spinning machines. The women typically remained in the factories for only a few years, after which they returned home, married, or moved west.

Born to a New Hampshire farm family in 1806, Sarah Bagley came to Lowell in 1837 after her father suffered financial reverses. She soon became one of the most outspoken leaders of the labor movement among the city's "mill girls." In 1845 she became the editor of the *Voice of Industry*,

which spoke for the male and female labor movement of New England. Her critique of the northern labor system was similar to arguments advanced by proslavery thinkers such as George Fitzhugh (see his document in Chapter 11).

WHENEVER I RAISE the point that it is immoral to shut us up in a close room twelve hours a day in the most monotonous and tedious of employment, I am told that we have come to the mills voluntarily and we can leave when we will. Voluntary! Let us look a little at this remarkable form of human freedom. Do we from mere choice leave our fathers' dwellings, the firesides where all of our friends, where too our earliest and fondest recollections cluster, for the factory and the corporation's boarding house? . . . A slave too goes voluntarily to his task, but his will is in some manner quickened by the whip of the overseer.

The whip which brings us to Lowell is NECESSITY. We must have money; a father's debts are to be paid, an aged mother to be supported, a brother's ambition to be aided, and so the factories are supplied. Is this to act from free will? . . . Is any one such a fool as to suppose that out of six thousand factory girls of Lowell, sixty would be there if they could help it? Everybody knows that it is necessity alone, in some form or other, that takes us to Lowell and keeps us there. Is this freedom? To my mind it is slavery quite as really as any in Turkey or Carolina. It matters little as to the fact of slavery, whether the slave be compelled to his task by the whip of the overseer or the wages of the Lowell Corporation. In either case it is not free will, leading the laborer to work, but an outward necessity that puts free will out of the question. . . .

We are engaged in a movement, the aim of which is the elevation of the whole human race into a social condition of complete and universal justice. While thus seeking the good of all men, of all orders and conditions, we cannot be blind to the fact that the laboring classes are everywhere greater sufferers than any others. In barbarian society,

the slaves of arbitrary power and of brute force. In Civilized society, the slaves of money and their physical necessities, they are universally oppressed, degraded, and regarded as an inferior order of beings. But they are beginning to understand that they have all the attributes of men, and will soon demand their rights.

Questions

1. Why does Bagley compare the situation of female factory workers with slavery?

2. Why does she question the idea that the "mill girls" have freely chosen factory work?