

“I now take this opportunity to write a few lines ...”

With this general salutation, a young mill worker began her first letter home in the fall of 1838. Over the next eleven years, the letters of Rebecca and her sister Caroline Ford shed light on life as a female factory worker in the mid-nineteenth century. Leaving home, these young women and many others sought varying degrees of personal independence and financial self-sufficiency spinning the looms of a small textile factory in the rural town of Middlebury, Vermont. These self-described “factory girls” of the Davenport and Turner Company represent an important and unexamined portion of American labor history. The forty-seven known women working at the Davenport factory in the 1840s were mothers and daughters, young and old, from local Vermont and from distant continents. Their common experiences and different life choices shed light on the character of early industrial labor and also suggest that not all working women fit the model that historians have found at the famous mills of Lowell, MA.

A comparison of the wages, work force, character of labor, and general environment in the mills at Middlebury and Lowell shows that Middlebury’s mill employed a more diverse female workforce. In comparison to Lowell’s typical twenty-year old farm girl, Middlebury provided opportunities for women with a wide variety of motivations for seeking employment at the textile mill. Middlebury’s labor force included those both within and outside of the traditional female sphere, such as single mothers, working wives, and spinsters. Their diversity represents an important departure from earlier historical research that focused on the homogeneity of the Lowell female workforce and their temporary farm to factory migration. The unique life experiences that brought these women together as “factory girls” in Middlebury and the factory life

that they participated in presents an important and overlooked slice of nineteenth-century female labor history.

Historians of labor and of women's history have focused on Lowell, Massachusetts and other 19th-century factory towns such as Manchester, New Hampshire because they offered the first major opportunities for middle- and lower-middle class women in the early industrial era to gain employment outside of the home. Letters, factory records, company publications, and the published writings of mill workers have provided a rich variety of source materials regarding the lives of urban female factory workers and their cultural and social context in the nineteenth century. Thomas Dublin's research in this area has provided the most significant scholarship regarding the farm to factory migration of young women in the first half of the century. His research focuses on the farm girl who, as a result of industrialization, left home in her early twenties to work in a textile mill in a New England factory town. After a few years of labor, this factory girl, as studied by Dublin, returned home with her propriety intact, ready for marriage and family life.¹ This typical farm to factory migration represents the accepted historical perspective on female millwork in the early nineteenth-century.²

The shift occurring in the American economy from a subsistence agrarian economy to a newly industrialized nation facilitated the farm to factory migration of the farmers' daughters to Lowell, Massachusetts. The economy of the United States at its independence, especially that of New England, was based upon small family farms,

¹ Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Dublin also authored larger surveys of women's labor in the 19th century entitled, *Women at Work* and *Transforming Women's Work*.

² The character of Lowell's workforce changed dramatically in the mid-1840s, as immigrant women willing to work for lower wages replaced the typical farm girl. This examination focuses on the typical Lowell farm daughter in comparison to the Middlebury factory worker. The changes caused by immigration are too broad to be covered in this paper and the farm girl provides the most direct comparison for the Middlebury experience.

utilizing blood relations to run different aspects of largely self-sufficient farms. Goods imported from industrialized Great Britain compensated for American industrial deficiencies, a vestige of the colonial economy in practice for the previous two hundred years. In these family agricultural ventures, women cared for certain livestock and produced poultry, dairy, textiles and other products required for the support of the farm and suitable for outside sale. In this agrarian economy, women of all ages were crucial to the success and survival of the familial unit.³

President Thomas Jefferson's Embargo of 1808 forced America from dependence on European industry and catalyzed the development of the United States as an industrializing nation. While the profitability of smaller farms declined, farm owners found different ways of making profits, often by focusing on the production of one crop and looking to a market economy for the food and goods needed for the support of one's family. Technology allowed for faster communication and transportation on railroad and water passages, as well as the cheaper and more efficient mass production of goods within a factory, powered by coal, water and steam.⁴ The rise of factories brought people to cities and factory towns in large numbers, as struggling family farms no longer required a whole family's labor. Farm sons and daughters capable of supporting themselves left to find wage work unavailable in most small rural towns. This farm to factory migration characterized much of the commercial workforce of the early

³ Thomas Dublin, Farm to Factory, 15.

⁴ Dublin, Farm to Factory, 15 – 16.

nineteenth century, as this period saw a net population loss of 96, 780 Vermonters to other states as measured in 1850, often settling in New York and the Great Lakes region.⁵

Textile production was central to this economic change. Women once occupied with the production of “homespun” cloth could purchase higher quality materials in the developing commercial centers of New England. This left many daughters of farming families with little means of contributing to their family’s household production and also meant that they would not be missed as producers at home if they were to join the labor force for the textile mills of the burgeoning American industrial sector. Francis Cabot Lowell, using a British design for the Cartwright Power Loom, headed a group of Boston businessmen who saw Lowell as the perfect venue for textile production. The 1822 opening of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company would be the first of nineteen mills by this Boston group to dominate Lowell.⁶

A marked population shift of young people out of Vermont and other rural areas provided an ideal labor force for these new mills; in 1846, twelve-hundred young women from Vermont were employed in Lowell, prompting a local newspaper to comment in 1845, “The daughters of Vermont have passed by our doors by the score at a time, to be employed in factory work in another state.”⁷ In total, three-fourths of the Lowell workforce hailed from Northern New England, having completed the prototypical farm to factory migration.⁸ Lowell and other factory towns attracted farm girls by offering opportunities for a sheltered independence, financial autonomy, and active social

⁵ Lewis D. Stillwell, Migration from Vermont (Montpelier, Vermont: Vermont Historical Society and Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1948), 214. In perspective, only 232,091 native Vermonters lived within the borders of their home state

⁶ Benita Eisler, Lowell Offering: Writing by New England Mill Women “Introduction” (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 15.

⁷ Stillwell, 211.

⁸ Dublin Farm to Factory, 18.

environment. However, not all girls turned to Lowell work as a leisurely activity; many sent wages home to assist their struggling families, by funding a brother's education or helping a widowed parent.

Lowell's ability to attract respectable farm girls depended upon the adherence to middle-class values regarding female propriety. As examined by Nancy Cott in her book *The Bonds of Womanhood*, women of the early to mid 1800s occupied a position economically subordinate to that of their male counterparts.⁹ This "cult of domesticity" confined women largely to the home, with work centered on the fulfillment of the needs of parents, siblings, husbands, and children.¹⁰ Lowell was designed as a regulated community according to the Waltham System, facilitating the employment of young women in accordance with the values of true womanhood popular at the time: domesticity, submissiveness, purity and piety. Employment, traditionally the domain of men, was not part of this ideal. To reconcile this contradiction and attract female workers, mill regulations assured the middle class propriety of women, often to ensure their ability to marry. Work in Lowell was not designed as a lifelong occupation, largely because societal norms made marriage the proper occupation for women. As stated in the Lowell Offering of 1840, the operatives of Lowell were "girls who generally come from quiet country homes ... under the worthy sons of the Pilgrims ... and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England, and the mother of quite a proportion of our future republicans."¹¹ Protecting these values of republican motherhood and true womanhood as part of a woman's proper place in society was

⁹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 21.

¹⁰ Cott, 2, 22.

¹¹ "Factory Girls" in Benita Eisler, ed. *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women 1840-1845*, 188.

crucial to the success of Lowell as a proper occupation of respectable girls from New England farm families.

The mills of Lowell and the young women who worked their looms represent a well-studied portion of American labor history. The smaller mills of New England, those without their own newspapers or rows of boardinghouses filled with hundreds of active young women, have received much less historical attention. Though the farm to factory migration that filled Lowell was an option for these women, workers in rural mills chose instead to remain nearer to their homes in smaller, economically diversified hill towns like Middlebury, Vermont.¹²

Little historical scholarship has examined these female rural mill workers and the factors that made the rural mill a more attractive work environment for some women. One of the few relevant studies of rural mills focused on the textile operations of Winooski Falls, also in Vermont, as an example of rural Vermont mill life. This study describes a fifteen to twenty five year old female workforce hailing from the small towns of the surrounding Vermont countryside and coming to Winooski to capitalize on wage earning opportunities unavailable in their rural hometowns, very similar to the environment of the Lowell mill.¹³

The women of rural mills left few traces of their time working in the small factories of New England, thus explaining the limited historical research completed on this facet of female labor before 1900. The best resource for understanding their

¹² The term “rural” is used in this essay to denote the mills found in rural areas such as Vermont. Despite Middlebury’s size and industrial nature, in contrast to the cities of Lowell and Manchester, Middlebury is considered here as a rural town.

¹³ Susan Oulette, “In the Shadow of the Factory: Worker Housing in Winooski” in The Mills at Winooski Falls: Winooski and Burlington, Vermont (Winooski, Vermont: Onion River Press, 2000), 64.

experiences, ideas, and environments come from their own words, in letters to family members concerned for their welfare and interested in their daily lives, and from the records of the factories that employed them. The letters of the Ford sisters of Granville, Vermont, published and examined first by David A. Zonderman, provide a glimpse into the lives of two women and their experiences working in the textile mills of the smaller town of Middlebury and the larger city of Lowell. The times books of Davenport and Turner's Mill shed light on the environment of the Ford sisters and their female coworkers. An exploration of the similarities and differences between the rural and urban mills and their female employees allows for a deeper understanding of rural industry and female employment in nineteenth-century New England. This exploration yields a portrait of Middlebury as a mill offering women of diverse social and economic situations the opportunity to earn a wage.

As the eldest daughters in a farming family, the Ford sisters shared many life experiences with the typical Lowell girl. Rebecca Ford was born in Granville in 1810, and her sister Caroline was born at the same locale in 1815.¹⁴ Census records from 1840 list the Ford family as containing six members, with three employed in agriculture.¹⁵ Family genealogical records describe the Fords as having seven children, five girls and two boys.¹⁶ A decade later, the census listed them as farmers, earning \$1300 per year.¹⁷ This income placed them approximately in the lower middle portion of the range of

¹⁴ David A. Zonderman, "From Mill Village to Industrial City: Letters from Vermont Factory Operatives," *Labor History* 27 (1986 Issue 2): 266.

¹⁵ United States Bureau of the Census, *Sixth Census of the United States*, Town of Granville, Addison County, Vermont, 1840.

¹⁶ Census of 1840, Granville, Vermont; Zonderman, 266.

¹⁷ United States Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States*. Town of Granville, Addison County, Vermont, 1850.

agricultural incomes.¹⁸ The decline in New England small farms likely affected families like the Fords, as the profitability of subsistence farming declined and the market economy of industrialization developed.

In the nineteenth century, Granville was a mountain town 15 miles east of Middlebury with a small-scale industrial and agricultural economy based on logging, woodworking and, most importantly, farming. Besides engaging in domestic service jobs or assisting on the family farm, young women like the Ford sisters had few opportunities for employment, especially those yielding financial and personal independence.¹⁹ As the two oldest daughters, Rebecca and Caroline would likely have filled the roles of mother's helper, holding domestic responsibilities in the family and caring for their five siblings throughout their late teens and twenties.²⁰ When this role was no longer necessary and the girls became a financial burden on their families, the Ford sisters opted to seek work outside the home. While little is known about the Ford sisters prior to their time in Middlebury, as women in their late-twenties, Rebecca and Caroline may have sought greater personal and financial independence outside of Granville. Thus, in 1838, twenty-eight year old Rebecca Ford left home, traveling over the pass west to Middlebury to find employment in one of the town's textile mills.²¹

The town Rebecca entered was a commercial center for rural Vermont. Chartered in 1761, Middlebury's settlement and industrial development truly began after the Revolutionary War. Gamaliel Painter's vision of Middlebury as "an industrial,

¹⁸ Census of 1850, Granville, Vermont. This observation is based not on empirical research but on a more informal survey of the incomes of Granville farmers during this period, which ranged from approximately \$900 - \$2000. Agricultural census information was not available at Middlebury College, but an examination of these records could provide a deeper understanding of the Ford family's situation.

¹⁹ Zonderman, 266.

²⁰ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, interview by author, 23 April 2002, Middlebury College.

²¹ Zonderman, 266.

administrative and educational center” became reality in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the founding of Middlebury College and the development of no less than twelve industrial and commercial ventures at the turn of the century.²² Textile production was important to Middlebury’s early industrial economy, evidenced by the February 1797 construction of a cotton mill by John Warren.²³ A few cotton mills followed in the first half of the nineteenth century, reportedly employing “130 men, women and kids” by 1810 and utilizing the technological advancements in textile production that came with the Industrial Revolution.²⁴

Prior to 1830, Middlebury enjoyed a period of economic success and rapid development, both commercial and agricultural. In this year, Middlebury was Vermont’s second largest town, home to 3,468 people.²⁵ In the decades to follow, Middlebury’s growth and development slowed. The town’s labor force declined as a result of changing agricultural conditions and the departure of at least half of the artisans present in earlier decades. The Middlebury Manufacturing Company, one example of a factory suffering from the depression of the late 1830s, experienced financial problems leading to the company’s sale in 1840 to Jason Davenport. The 1830s saw little new industrial development in Middlebury, despite the growth occurring in other areas of the country. Population in Middlebury declined by three hundred in the 1830s, making Middlebury the fifth largest town in the state. From 1820 – 1840 the percentage of the workers not employed in agriculture increased from 46.4 to 55.1 percent.²⁶ Though the transition to

²² Nancy Rucker “Industry in Early Middlebury” in Newsletter of the Sheldon Museum. Photocopy included in Ford Family Papers, date of publication unknown.

²³ Richard C. Hubbard, “Industry around the Falls: A History of Middlebury and its Industries” (Middlebury, Vermont: 2000), 39.

²⁴ Rucker.

²⁵ *Census of 1850, Aggregate Census Information for Vermont*.

²⁶ P. Jeffery Potash. Vermont’s Burned Over District (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1991) 105.

industrialization was often a painful one, Middlebury's agricultural decline accompanied an increased dependence on industrial and commercial ventures, as former property owners were forced to either work for a wage or go elsewhere, often West to reap the fruits of the American frontier. This decrease in population may have created job openings for women like the Ford Sisters, as some laborers relocated to new industrial hotspots and factories sought a source of cheaper labor.

Industry in Middlebury did not improve in the 1840s, and the fundamental economic and social changes occurring in the region affected textile production. Tariff reduction in the middle of the decade and an increase in western sheep farming added new competition to New England wool manufacture, as prices plummeted and sheep farmers slaughtered portions of their livestock to increase their profits.²⁷ Improvements in technology also reduced the number of workers needed in various industries, including textile production. Despite cutbacks and industrial stagnancy, the census of 1840 reported that Middlebury contained six fulling mills, two woolen manufactures, and one cotton factory; textile production remained an important part of Middlebury's economy, even in the midst of hard times.²⁸

While the mills of small towns like Middlebury and urban factory towns like Lowell shared common manufacturing techniques and equipment, the nature of the mills, their employees, and the towns they were situated in differed. In 1840, Lowell mills employed more than 8,000 workers in eight woolen manufactures and twenty-six cotton

²⁷ Potash, 119.

²⁸ United States Bureau of the Census "1840 Aggregate Value and Produce and Number of People employed in Mines, Agriculture, Commerce, and Manufacture &c." District of Vermont, Middlebury.

factories.²⁹ This equaled thirty eight percent of Lowell's total population and forty eight percent of its female population.³⁰ In contrast, Middlebury's total population in 1850 was just 3,162, including forty three persons employed in the town's two woolen mills and 140 people working as many as 3680 spindles in Middlebury's cotton manufacture.³¹

Middlebury differed in character from the urban industrial centers and offered a different experience for the women who found work there. While Lowell was a city founded to house the textile mills and their employees, Middlebury was an intellectual, religious, and social center in its own right, especially as the home to Middlebury College. One scholar asserts that, "Middlebury boasted a diversity of occupations and establishments found nowhere else in the country."³² This diverse economy included a variety of agricultural products, sixteen retail stores, factories, mills, printing offices, two weekly newspapers, churches, taverns, a library, a female academy, a public school, and a fledging college for young men.³³ Middlebury census records indicate that 302 men were involved in manufactures, 311 in agriculture, 42 in commerce, and 38 in "learned professions and engineers," representing the relatively wide variety of employment opportunities for men in Middlebury.³⁴ Employment opportunities for women lacked this depth, with only limited opportunities for wage earning outside the home in factory work at the town's three textile mills, teaching positions, and domestic work. Women from

²⁹ United States Bureau of the Census "1840 Aggregate Value and Produce and Number of People employed in Mines, Agriculture, Commerce, and Manufacture &c." District of Massachusetts, Lowell.

³⁰ Thomas Dublin "Introduction" *Farm to Factory*, 5.

³¹ United States Bureau of the Census "1840 Aggregate Value and Produce and Number of People employed in Mines, Agriculture, Commerce, and Manufacture &c." These statistics, labeled "number of persons employed" likely included men and women, for other categories of employment specified "number of men employed".

³² Potash, 119.

³³ "1840 Aggregate Value ..." and "1850 Aggregate Statistics for Vermont".

³⁴ Census of 1850, Aggregate Statistics for Vermont. These employment figures include only male heads of household, though the population figures include all genders, ages, and races.

Middlebury and surrounding rural towns came to Davenport's factory because textile employment provided women with an opportunity to earn relatively high wages in decent conditions and a morally acceptable atmosphere, offering them more personal and financial independence than available in domestic work and school teaching.

Whether by across the state by stage or across town by foot, the paths young women took to their new places of employment and their reasons for the journey represented the first major stage in their transition to independent employment. Rebecca Ford did not describe her arrival in Middlebury directly in any of her letters, but evidence in future writings indicated that she and her family arranged for her accommodations before her arrival. In a letter from June of 1849, Rebecca reported to her sister, "Mr. Stows people send their love to you all."³⁵ This family friendship appeared to predate Rebecca's departure from Granville and provided her with a firm foundation in her new job. The Stows family may have even informed Rebecca as to employment opportunities in Middlebury; the US census of 1840 lists Mr. Stow as a miller of grain earning a modest five hundred dollars per year.³⁶ Their presence quieted the fears of her parents regarding her safety and welfare away from home. In the years to come, Rebecca assured her family of her well-being at the start of every letter, reporting on her health and work situation. Though Rebecca's departure was the first step toward economic and personal independence, she remained in many ways under the control of her family. Her decision to come to Middlebury, while not directly commented upon, would necessarily have depended on the approval of her parents, and her decision to stay near to her Granville

³⁵ Letter from Rebecca Ford to Sally K. Ford June 1, 1840. Ford Family Papers, Sheldon Museum.

³⁶ Census of 1840, Middlebury, Vermont.

home for the majority of her mill career demonstrates the powerful influence of family in Rebecca's life.

Many women found their way to mill employment with the help of a relative or friend already employed there. For instance, in the Hamilton Company of Lowell from 1830 to 1850, up to two-thirds of the women employed had relatives employed by the same company.³⁷ Similarly, Rebecca Ford's presence in the factory and town community aided Caroline Ford's arrival in Middlebury. In a letter from June of 1840, Rebecca detailed to her sister the arrangements she made in response to Caroline's request to join her in Middlebury. These arrangements included employment, accommodations, and church membership.³⁸ The Ford sisters were not a unique case; numerous sets of siblings were employed at the Davenport and Turner Mill.³⁹ The presence of a sibling, relative, or friend at a mill often encouraged other women to follow, because the connection promised an easier transition and good company.

Life in Middlebury offered varying degrees of independence to mill women, depending upon their social, economic, and living situation, as well as on their motivations for leaving home and earning a wage. A substantial portion of Davenport's female workforce was local to Middlebury, living with their nuclear family (who was often also employed by Davenport) and working for a wage that either assisted the family income or gave young women some independent spending money. Those from outside of Middlebury's borders lived as renters in Middlebury homes, usually as one of a few

³⁷ Thomas Dublin *Farm to Factory* "Introduction" , 26.

³⁸ Letter from Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Sally K. Ford Granville, VT, 1 June 1840. Ford Family Papers, Sheldon Museum.

³⁹ Davenport and Nash Papers, "Time Book of Hands in Middlebury Manufacturing Company Factory," September 1848 – February 1851, Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.

male and female boarders in a local household, often under a head of household also working at the mill.

Women living with their parents and siblings likely enjoyed the least independence, adhering to factory rules during the day and family rules at night, charged with the completion of family chores in addition to their wage work. Similarly, women with children and/or husbands, while having some control over their own affairs, earned a wage for the support of their household and spent much of their time working for the maintenance of this family, giving married women and mothers limited freedom.

Unmarried women likely enjoyed the most autonomy, choosing a family to board with and retaining the ability to return home if necessary. However, boarding life in Middlebury was subject to the moral regulation characteristic of larger Lowell boardinghouses, as companies and families employing and housing young women were responsible for the defense of their female propriety. Rebecca Ford ended one of her later letters home with a mention of the regulation of her Middlebury guardians, lamenting, “Mr. Stows ringing the bell for nine and must close my letter now.”⁴⁰ In contrast, Caroline Ford demonstrated the autonomy of the single female factory worker; in response to the overcrowding and moral regulation of Mr. Stows’ household, she found a room in the house of Martin Dorrance, a factory worker at Davenport’s Mill. She commented in a letter home that in her new home, “they don’t jam their boarders in all of the time I suppose you will think strange I left there but I would not go back there in gochen(?) to tell the truth.”⁴¹ Later in the same letter, Caroline admitted that she doubted

⁴⁰ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to William R. Ford Orwell, VT, 8 August 1845. Ford Family Papers, Sheldon Museum.

⁴¹ Caroline Ford Middlebury, VT to Sally K. Ford, 26 February 1844. Ford Family Papers, Sheldon Museum.

Mr. Stows believed her to be of strong moral character and that she enjoyed her new home more. Although boarding life in Middlebury was regulated, women possessed choice regarding living situations, with individual families offering different situations and degrees of freedom uncommon in the large, company-run boardinghouses of Lowell.

While living situation was a crucial component of the daily lives of Middlebury's female mill workers, the actual factory work occupied most of an operative's time. Arriving in the late 1830s and early 1840s, Rebecca and Caroline found employment as weavers in Davenport and Turner's Wool Factory, the largest textile mill in Middlebury at the time.⁴² In 1840 Jason Davenport leased the building and purchased a portion of the machinery from the Middlebury Manufacturing Company to establish a factory for the production of woolen cloth. His partner, Mr. Turner, was responsible for the sale of the cloth in New York and other urban centers.⁴³ Records of Davenport's companies indicate that the company's ownership was almost entirely male, as were the companies of Lowell and larger industrial centers. Of the 142 names listed as the creditors of Davenport's 1862 venture, at most five investors were female.⁴⁴

Unlike the mills of Lowell, Middlebury's female operatives were a minority in the factory workforce. Over the course of 1850, Davenport and Nash employed twenty-four women and sixty-six men, with females comprising twenty-eight percent of the

⁴² Zonderman, 267.

⁴³ Rucker. Note: While Davenport retained ownership of more than one textile mill throughout the period examined here, his partners changed. Thus, at different points the company was named Davenport and Turner, Davenport and Nash, and Davenport and Clay. Davenport also owned a mill referred to in documents as the Spaulding Mill. For the purposes of this examination, Davenport's mills are being considered collectively (for no significant differences can be found between them) and the ownership of the factories is not specified.

⁴⁴ "Memorandum of Agreement: Creditors of Davenport and Clay", Davenport Papers, 1862.

company's workforce.⁴⁵ The total number of employees varied with season and prosperity; typically the factory employed between twenty and forty workers, always more men than women.⁴⁶ In contrast, women dominated the much larger Lowell factories with approximately 250 women employed in each of twelve major mills. Men were employed mainly in management positions.⁴⁷ No major differences between the work patterns of women and men are evident from the Middlebury records; however, men generally remained employed at the mill for longer stretches of time than women, and were less likely to leave for long periods of time.⁴⁸

Factories of the nineteenth century were often designed to separate male and female labor as a defense of female propriety. As described by an 1843 Insurance Survey, Davenport's factory was four stories tall, with each having a different purpose in textile manufacture. Cloth was scoured on the first floor; sorted, dyed and carded on the second; warped and weaved on the third, and carded, spun, and dried on the fourth.⁴⁹ The factory's machinery consisted of "380 spindles, 6 carding machines, one double sett for custom work, two setts of Spinning Jacks, one grinding frame, one warping machine, five looms for plain and cashmeres, two sett of shears, one brush machine and one press, one rolling cloth and two pickers."⁵⁰

This factory layout effectively separated female and male labor. Men were listed in census records as dyers, weavers, fullers, and carders specifically, or more generally as

⁴⁵ Davenport and Nash Papers, Time Books 1850. Sheldon Museum Middlebury, Vermont.

⁴⁶ Davenport and Nash Papers, Time Books 1850. Sheldon Museum Middlebury, Vermont.

⁴⁷ Dublin "Introduction" Farm to Factory, 6.

⁴⁸ Davenport and Nash Papers, Time Books 1850. Sheldon Museum Middlebury, Vermont.

⁴⁹ "Insurance Survey 1843 of Woolen Factory" Elisha Brewster Papers, Sheldon Museum. Note, it is unclear exactly which factory this describes; however, it was representative of textile operations during the period.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

laborers, putting them on the first three floors of the factory.⁵¹ While women's employments were not specifically listed in the census, the operative Olivia Comstock's work records included the notation "spinner" and Rebecca wrote to Caroline (now in Lowell), "I work in Debenports and Turners Factory work up in the corner on Elen Pike loom have quite good time tending one loom".⁵² Later in the same letter, she remarked to her sister that "Hoton works there (Spauding's Factory) on the warper Providence so order it that I don't have to work with secretary or his mate, I am very glad of it to."⁵³ The mention of the male factory operative "Hotton" and Rebecca's relief at not having to work with him indicated that men were a part of the female work experience in Middlebury at least to some limited extent. However, the Ford's work experience was defined by female interactions, likely a result of the separation of occupation by sex facilitated by the factory layout. The sisters' letters spoke fondly of a number of female coworkers, including those located with census records such as Fanny Fuller, Julia Fuller, Mary Ann Garner, and Harriet Hill. The omission of much mention of male employees beyond this desire to avoid them illustrated that Middlebury's work experience was likely divided along gender lines.

While men were not foremost on Rebecca's mind, her financial situation certainly was, demonstrating her degree of economic independence from her family and control over her personal affairs. Financial independence was a key part of women's experiences working away from home, allowing them to support themselves and use their remaining

⁵¹ Betsy Bryan "Female Millworkers in Davenport and Nash Mills in Middlebury, Vermont, 1850" (Unpublished Essay, Middlebury College, 1979). MS Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont. Bryan listed the occupations of these men, however, all analysis and application of the factory setting was done personally. Bryan's transcription of factory records and collection of census records was invaluable to the analyses of this paper and provided a jumping off point for my research.

⁵² Davenport and Nash Factory Records; Letter from Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Caroline Ford Lowell, MA. 10 July 1843, Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.

⁵³ Letter from Rebecca Ford to Caroline Ford 10 July 1843.

income as consumers or contributors to the family income. The generally positive tones of the sisters' letters indicate a fair and respectful working environment with fair compensation rates, in contrast to the protests and labor disputes of Lowell discussed earlier. The sisters reported earning from \$8.40 to \$14.00 per month after board, with income dependent on their efficiency and the wage rate⁵⁴. This wage equaled a weekly rate ranging from \$1.96 to \$3.25. Middlebury's wage rates for female workers were comparable to those paid in Lowell; in 1830, a female worker in Lowell received approximately \$3.25 per week, with \$1.25 per week paying for room and board and \$2.00 to for their discretionary use.⁵⁵

Such wages exceeded those earned by other workingwomen, specifically teachers and domestic servants.⁵⁶ Domestic service often only earned credit with a local businessman or room and board with the employing family. For instance, twelve-year old Susan Stowell left her family in Middlebury to live with the Cozzens family of Boston, Massachusetts in 1835. She boarded with them on and off throughout her teenage years as an apprentice and domestic helper, but foremost Susan was considered a member of the family, receiving education and care but no wage. In contrast, Susan's sister Hannah worked as a domestic servant in a less paternal situation in Ripton, Vermont in 1842 and earned fifty cents a week, likely also receiving free room and board.⁵⁷ Teaching was also considered a proper occupation for women of the nineteenth-century, compatible with the female values of domesticity and republican motherhood.

⁵⁴ Deborah Clifford "The Ford Mill Papers" Sheldon Museum Newsletter, included in the Ford Family Papers.

⁵⁵ Clifford.

⁵⁶ Thomas Dublin, "Introduction" *Farm to Factory*, 12.

⁵⁷ Megan Foley Kvasnak. "Middlebury 1830 – 1850 A Transitional Stage" (Senior Thesis, Middlebury College, 1985), 50.

However, during this period men still enjoyed preference as educators, with women filling in summer sessions and vacancies. Wages of teachers in Vermont averaged \$1.85 per week, including board, considerably less than the wages earned by female textile operatives during the period. Lucy Larcom, a Lowell operative and famous commentator on her work experience, expressed what she viewed as a widespread preference for the higher wages of textile employment and the free time it allowed.⁵⁸

Nineteenth-century gender expectations dictated that in every type of occupation, men earned more than women, regardless of task, location, and ability. Not only did men have more employment opportunities than those available to women, but they also earned considerably more for work within the same factory, both in Middlebury and Lowell. In the 1843 time books of Davenport's Spaulding Mill, women received approximately \$2.25 per week, while men received around \$3.50.⁵⁹ Men in Lowell earned wages approximately double those earned by female workers, a discrepancy significantly greater than the wage gap found in Middlebury.⁶⁰ Men in Lowell mills, however, usually filled management and overseers positions, while men in Middlebury worked both as factory operatives and in management positions; this difference likely accounted for the dissimilar male wage rates.

The male character of management represented a similarity between rural and urban mills. In her letters home, Rebecca mentioned her interactions with Mr. Flowers, presumably the factory's overseer. Regarding Caroline's plans, she wrote, "I spoke to Mr. Flower about it he said might write to have her come as soon as I was amineto."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Cott, 34; Kvasnak, 50.

⁵⁹ Davenport Papers "Spaulding Mill Time Book", 1843 Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.

⁶⁰ Benita Eisler "Introduction" *The Lowell Offering*, 16.

⁶¹ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, Vermont to Sally K. Ford Granville, Vermont, 1 June 1840, Ford Papers.

As previously discussed, there is little evidence of interaction between the male and female employees of Davenport and Turner's Factory. However, the dealings of mill girls and their male bosses represent an important exception. While the male managers were clearly the superiors of their female employees, the Ford letters indicated no significant tensions between management and workers; when faced with questions of work, these men seemed accessible to the female operatives. Caroline Ford wrote home to her brother that she, "called on Mr. Davenport and hesays heshould like to have Rebecca come some time next week if she can."⁶² This personal interaction with the factory's owner illustrated an open nature of factory employer-employee relations.

Positive relations between ownership and employee contributed to the generally decent work environment found at Davenport's Factory. Conditions were generally good, with precautions taken to prevent fire and injury and regulations instituted against drinking and smoking.⁶³ The sisters wrote enthusiastically of the high wages they received; Caroline even complained that her wages the following week would decline because she had to "give up one of my loom for Delia to weave."⁶⁴ Letters indicated on a number of occasions that the Fords' goals of financial gain encouraged them to work harder for periods of their employment.

Although they repeatedly reported "our work goe very well at present," the sisters were not without criticisms for the company. These criticisms were clearly not sufficient to cause them to leave Middlebury permanently, but some dissatisfaction may explain Rebecca and Caroline's departures for year stints in Lowell. Rebecca complained of her sister's long hours; and both women remarked that work prevented them from visiting

⁶² Caroline Ford Middlebury, VT to William Ford Granville, VT 11 November 1848, Ford Papers.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Caroline Ford Middlebury, VT to William Ford Granville, VT 15 September 1845, Ford Papers.

their family and caused them great fatigue.⁶⁵ While they made frequent general complaints of the duress caused by the labor, the sisters complained more specifically about stoppages in work. Rebecca reported to her brother in 1843,

the factory business is rather dull now the snow is melting off from the mountain the water is so high we have not worked any since a week ago last Saturday I don't know how soon we shall go to work. I hope we shall be fore long for I have got most tired of doing nothing and paying my board in the bargain.⁶⁶

Factory records verify frequent stoppages of work; days and weeks passed when the logs of the payroll were empty. For instance, from October 21st to November 14th 1848 only one woman and six men worked occasionally.⁶⁷ At other times, only the men of the factory were paid. As financially independent women with room and board to pay, work stoppages were at best an annoyance and at worst dangerous to continued self-sufficiency. While Rebecca's stint in Lowell came prior to the mentioned work stoppages, Caroline's departure from Middlebury to a larger urban factory resulted directly from the inconsistent employment of the spring of 1843.⁶⁸ Rebecca documented her sister's decision in her April letter, "she (Caroline) talks about going of to some other factory she shall want to write before she goes."⁶⁹ Soon after, Caroline departed Middlebury to find more stable work and higher wages in Lowell, demonstrating the autonomy of her personal decisions.

Lowell has received a great deal of historical attention not only for its successes as a groundbreaking employment opportunity for young women, but also as a forum for

⁶⁵ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to William Ford Granville, VT 8 August 1845; Letter from Caroline Ford Middlebury, Vermont to William Ford 15 September 1845, Ford Papers.

⁶⁶ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Asa Ford Granville, VT 24 April 1843.

⁶⁷ Davenport and Nash Time Books Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.

⁶⁸ Zonderman, 269.

⁶⁹ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Asa Ford Granville, VT 24 April 1843, Ford Papers.

those women to express grievances regarding work conditions. The strikes of the mid to late 1830s drove more than two thousand women out of Lowell and the protests of the 1840s demanded a ten hour workday for Lowell employees.⁷⁰ Lowell's large female workforce's sense of collectivity, in contrast to the small, diverse labor force of the Middlebury mill, likely contributed to labor movements there. Thus, while hours of work and factory conditions were similar in Lowell and Middlebury, Middlebury largely avoided the labor unrest that plagued Lowell, evidenced by the Ford sisters' general satisfaction with their time in this rural mill. Though Rebecca and Caroline both left Middlebury for a year, their prompt return was a significant indication of their preference for the small factories, rural life, and proximity to home that Middlebury provided. Only one major labor dispute has been reported in Middlebury, at the Spaulding Cotton mill in 1843 in regards to low wages.⁷¹ Little research has focused on this uprising, and such an examination could provide an interesting perspective on Middlebury's labor relations.

Though not without some exception, conditions in the Middlebury mill must have been satisfactory enough to cause both Ford sisters to return after just one year away. In Davenport and Turner's Mill, operatives were expected to work from 7am to 7pm, with hours varying slightly according to season and volume of production.⁷² The factory was open every day but Sundays, some holidays, and days when work was impossible due to weather conditions or equipment malfunctions. Frequent absences and partial days fill the time books of these factories; the company apparently required little consistent commitment of their employees, with workers repeatedly missing weeks at a time for

⁷⁰ Thomas Dublin. "Women Workers and the Study of Social Mobility" Journal of Interdisciplinary History, vol IX, (Spring 1979), 658.

⁷¹ Kvasnak, 60

⁷² "Insurance Survey 1843 of Woolen Factory" Elisha Brewster Papers, Sheldon Museum.

illness or family obligation.⁷³ This lack of commitment allowed women to work on their own terms and to balance different aspects of their lives according to their personal desires. Rebecca, for example, wrote “my work goes very well but I have got most tired of working all the time ... I have made up my mind to come over [home to Granville] next week.”⁷⁴ Priscilla Howe, an in-law of the Ford sisters employed in Lowell, reported to her sister, “I think if the work is too hard or won’t agree with me I will leave.”⁷⁵ Based on these sources, factory employment attracted a portion of its female labor force from economically secure families because of the casual nature of the work and the lack of commitment required. For women who were not financially bound to employment for their daily sustenance, work was a personal choice that they balanced with demands of family, religion, and leisure.

Even women charged with their own support or the support of a family enjoyed some autonomy regarding the length (or brevity) of their work hours. For instance, a young single mother of three, Melinda Huntington, worked sporadically throughout 1850, likely returning to the factory when the demands of her children allowed or when financially necessity dictated. In contrast, Jane McMillan, a single mother of two teenagers, worked consistently throughout 1850 to support her independent household.⁷⁶ Thus, no true generalizations can be made regarding the consistency of female employment, for it was largely dependent upon personal circumstance. However, the considerable degree of latitude in scheduling and work commitment available to Middlebury’s female factory operatives allowed for an important level of autonomy that

⁷³ Davenport and Nash Time Books, 1850, Davenport Papers.

⁷⁴ Rebecca Ford to Asa Ford Jr. January the ... (between 1848 and 1851), Ford Papers.

⁷⁵ Priscilla Howe Lowell, MA to Laura Howe Ford Granville, VT. 5 October 1851, Ford Papers.

⁷⁶ Davenport and Nash Time Books, 1850, Davenport Papers.

likely enriched the work experience, especially for those outside of the traditional female sphere with family commitments and women supporting themselves financially.

As women with a fair amount of choice regarding the frequency and duration of their work, the Ford sisters' extended employment in Middlebury was a significant indication of their preference for the work environment of Davenport's factory. Caroline Ford worked from 1841 to 1849, from ages twenty-six to thirty-four; Rebecca worked from 1838 until 1851, from ages twenty-eight to forty-one.⁷⁷ In contrast, women worked in Lowell for an average of 2.3 years at an average age of twenty years.⁷⁸ Agreeable working conditions, proximity to family and friends, good wages, community standing, and a lack of other options made Middlebury a home for the sisters rather than just a temporary stop. Due to their advanced ages and independent living situations, the Ford sisters did not embrace mill work only as an activity of leisure, though they retained a fair amount of personal choice regarding the times and conditions of their employment.⁷⁹

Life in Middlebury, while dominated by long hours of work, was not exclusively devoted to wage earning. Religion, friendships, hobbies, and, of course, correspondence filled the free time of mill workers without additional family obligations after the final factory bells rang for the day. Knitting, reading, writing, and socializing were among the favorite pastimes of the Ford Sisters, occupying them at night after work. Shopping was also an occasional indulgence; as a commercial center for Addison County, Middlebury offered a relatively wide variety of merchandise for purchase with those wages not devoted to board.

⁷⁷ Zonderman, 266.

⁷⁸ Dublin Transforming Women's Work, 89.

While nights were occupied by leisurely pursuits, Sunday found most mill girls in church. The Second Great Awakening recognized the increasing prominence of women as church members. Mill women were part of the “feminization of Christianity” occurring nationwide during this period. In Lowell, religious life was central to the protection of the virtue of piety found in those espousing the ideals of true womanhood. Some Lowell company regulations required that factory girls attend church services weekly, though religious fervor among female operatives was generally strong regardless of requirements. Factory workers were known to express religious beliefs in their publication, The Lowell Offering and in small prayer groups held during factory break times. Parish membership in the denomination of one’s childhood provided a link for young women from their hometown to their new factory life.⁸⁰

Rebecca and Caroline Ford found community and sought salvation in the evangelical, revivalist campmeetings spurred by the Great Awakening of personal American religion. Rebecca joined this Adventist evangelical group early in her stay, writing home by the summer of 1839 hoping that her family will soon join the saved.⁸¹ Rebecca wrote enthusiastically in almost every letter about her fervent religious belief, expressing the most joy when, “the Lord has graciously converted and made happy in a savior love sister Caroline is one of the number.”⁸² Middlebury’s parish gave the sisters, and likely many of their peers within and outside of the mill, a sense of belonging in a community through campmeetings, Sabbath schools, services, and prayer meetings.

⁸⁰ Jama Lazerow, “Religion and the New England Mill Girl: A New Perspective on an Old Theme” New England Quarterly 60, (1987 issue 3), 430, 446, 438, 439.

⁸¹ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Sally K. Ford Granville, VT. 6 August 1839, Ford Papers.

⁸² Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Asa Ford Jr. Granville VT, 24 April 1843, Ford Papers.

Both the quality of life outside the mill and the available autonomy within it helped attract women of different economic and personal situations to Middlebury's textile factories, contributing to the overall diversity of experience that set Davenport's mill apart. In contrast to Nancy F. Cott's assertion that female textile mill workers were, "almost all between fifteen and thirty years old", Middlebury's workers represent a variety of ages and life circumstances.⁸³ Available census records indicate that the average age of female factory workers in Middlebury during the period from 1840 to 1850 was thirty years old.⁸⁴ For example, fifteen-year-old Martha Ford worked alongside fifty-eight year old Mary Ann Garner in a factory employing women with a wide variety of family situations, living arrangements, and motivations for working at Davenport's Factory. Of the forty-seven women whose names are listed in the logs of Davenport's company, all but sixteen have been located in the census of 1850. Of this group of thirty-one, fourteen women were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Six women were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. The final eleven women were all at least thirty-six years old. Rebecca and Caroline Ford belonged to these older groups, choosing work in Middlebury as a means of achieving financial independence, not just as a temporary, transitory occupation.

Census records indicate two major demographic groups worked in the ranks of Middlebury's female employees. A significant group (thirteen) of the known Davenport employees were young women under twenty-five, mostly living with their families in Middlebury. Prutia Thomas, a young woman growing up in Middlebury, was representative of this group. Twenty-one years old in 1850, Prutia began working for

⁸³ Nancy Cott, 37.

⁸⁴ Davenport and Nash Factory Records, Davenport Papers; Census of 1850, Vermont. This average was compiled from the ages of known factory workers from 1840 – 1850; ages are as of the 1850 census.

Davenport no later than 1848 and had ceased working by 1850.⁸⁵ She likely came to employment at Davenport's Factory because her father, Enos Thomas, was a dyer employed at the factory, as was her younger sister Fidelia and her brother Truman. The family's younger siblings were noted as having received schooling in the past year, indicating that Prutia also was literate and had obtained at least a basic education.⁸⁶ While no record exists of Prutia from 1850 – 1853, she may have returned to domestic occupations or found employment elsewhere. On June 26, 1853, she married Philetus Coveny in Middlebury.⁸⁷ Prutia's life was not remarkable for her time or social class; rather she represents a very typical experience of young women working in this Middlebury factory and New England factories in general.

Bearing many similarities to their peers in Lowell, the youngest women of Davenport's factory (specifically those around or under twenty-five years of age) often lived at home, working for a few years before marrying. While not every woman followed the pattern of Prutia Thomas, her experience illustrated one side of the Middlebury factory experience, in which the fundamental motivations for and character of work bore important similarities to the "typical" mill experience of Lowell. Ten women working in Middlebury married in the early 1850s, soon after the end of their documented employment at the mill.⁸⁸ Millwork was an appropriate and industrious occupation for a young woman in the transitioning years from home life to married life,

⁸⁵ Davenport and Nash Time Book, Davenport Papers. Note: Prutia may have worked after 1850, but no factory records are available from that period.

⁸⁶ Davenport and Nash Time Book, Davenport Papers; Census of 1850, Middlebury Vermont.

⁸⁷ Marriage Records from Middlebury Newspapers 1800-1870, compiled by the Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.

⁸⁸ Marriage Records, Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, VT.

and this strand of female employment fit neatly within society's conventions regarding propriety so evident in Lowell's mills.

Mill life in Lowell centered on young women transitioning from family life to married life. Boardinghouses and community organizations fostered the formation of female friendships; mill regulations and religious organizations took responsibility for the formation of proper female character according to the republican virtues and Christian morality. Women stayed at Lowell to achieve a moderate degree of personal independence while lightening the financial burden on their families. It was not a place for lifelong employment, but a temporary stop en route to proper married life. Eighty-five percent of Lowell operatives married, a statistic comparable to national marriage rates of the period.⁸⁹

While national marriage rates hovered in the eighty to ninety percent range, female factory workers in Middlebury were less likely to marry than their peers in Lowell and across the nation. At least nine female employees of Davenport were known to be unmarried until 1860 or 1870; with ages ranging from late thirties to mid-seventies, these women were unlikely ever to marry.⁹⁰ A number of them worked at the Davenport Mill until their mid-fifties, demonstrating that Middlebury's mill offered women who fell outside of the traditional societal patterns of marriage and childrearing a way to achieve independence and secure their financial livelihood.

The values of true womanhood encouraging traditional married life were not confined to urban areas; small towns like Middlebury also prescribed to these beliefs regarding a woman's sphere. Rural marriage was no less common than urban marriage;

⁸⁹ Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 112.

⁹⁰ Census of 1860 and 1870, Middlebury, Vermont.

it was unlikely that the women highlighted here chose this life of spinsterhood and millwork over married life. However, millwork did provide a means of financial independence to those women who, for lack of opportunity, desire, or family situation, did not have the male financial support customary in nineteenth-century America.

Rebecca Ford fit into this category of older women who needed an economic alternative to married life. She made no mention of finding love or marriage in any of her letters, alluding only to the romantic involvements of her fellow boarder Elizabeth, and remarking almost wistfully that she watched the couple go out every night but, “I have not award to say I stand still and see the fun go on.”⁹¹ While societal conventions made it unlikely for Rebecca to find a spouse in her early thirties, these words indicate that at least part of her yearned for romantic attachment. Rebecca did not find marriage in her years of factory work, perhaps contributing to the extended length of her stay in Middlebury. Census records from 1860 noted Rebecca as living with her aging father, Asa, in Granville; ten years later, she was her living alone (or with no obvious attachments) in Granville, employed with “keeping house” and having real estate valued at \$250 and personal assets of \$150.⁹²

Millwork was not just the occupation of women waiting to wed and spinsters waiting to die; married women and mothers also found employment at Davenport’s Mill. At least three married women living with their husbands at the time worked in the mill. These women provided supplementary income to their laboring husbands in the years before the couple began a family. Time book records from 1844 note that Esther Murray’s consistent work pattern was disrupted by a week of absences, because, the

⁹¹ Rebecca Ford Middlebury, VT to Sally K. Ford Granville, VT 6 August 1839, Ford Papers.

⁹² Census of 1860 and 1870, Granville, Vermont.

bookkeeper wrote, “gone to get married” on January 19th. By the 27th of the same month, Esther Murray Nichols returned to consistent employment for at least the next few months; the bookkeeper amended his ledger to state the young woman’s married name next to her crossed out maiden name.⁹³ Esther’s husband, Draper G. Nichols, was a Middlebury native; the couple reported in the 1860 census property valuing \$200, with Draper employed as a machinist and the couple having three kids. As in Esther’s case, married women working at the mill most likely did so out of economic necessity until childrearing began; often their husbands worked for Davenport as well, or in another local laboring job.

Economic necessity also led women like Jane McMillan to work at Davenport’s mill. This Scottish native ran her own household in town without the assistance of her husband or family and worked at the mill to support and educate her two children, Juliana, age fourteen, and William, age twelve. Jane was one of three single mothers at the mill. Mrs. Betsy Huntington, specifically recorded with her married title, raised her three children alone, all under age eight, while boarding in the household of Elisha Turner, a Middlebury shoemaker. Lastly, the Taylor family included an elderly couple, thirty six year old factory operative Emeline, and three year old Helen.⁹⁴ It is possible, if not probable, that Helen was Emeline’s illegitimate daughter. Neither Emeline, Jane, nor Betsy conformed to the traditional societal pattern of marriage and childrearing, whether by choice or by circumstance. Like the older spinsters of Middlebury’s mill, these young mothers found mill employment as a necessary means of support for their families as they struggled to serve as both head of household and sole wage earner.

⁹³ Elizabeth H. Dow, Treasures Gathered Here (Middlebury: Sheldon Museum, 1991), 2.

⁹⁴ Census of 1850, Middlebury, Vermont.

Middlebury's mill women cannot be easily pigeon holed into the image of the traditional mill girl of Lowell. While this rural mill included some young women on their way to marriage and childrearing, those women outside of society's traditional female sphere held more historical significance as a contrast to assumptions about female millwork. The working wives, widows, mothers, and spinsters of Middlebury's mill demonstrated an important departure from the regular course of female life. The efforts of these women to achieve an economic livelihood as wage earners united them in their labors at Davenport's Mill and present this rural mill as an opportunity for women of many economic and personal situations to find independent employment for longer periods of time and different fundamental motivations.

As a rural mill, Middlebury offered an attractive alternative to the regimented, urban mill life of Lowell. Further studies of rural mills are needed to assess larger differences between these mills and their urban counterparts, however, this examination of Middlebury illustrates that exceptions to the accepted historical notions of female employment do exist, and that Lowell was not the only option for mill workers. As a mill closer to the families and communities of Middlebury's female operatives, a variety of women found this rural mill as a more attractive option for employment and lifestyle. The difference between the half-day's journey from Granville to Middlebury and the much longer trek to Lowell, Massachusetts definitely played an important part in Rebecca and Caroline Ford's choice to remain in Middlebury for an extended period of time. Middlebury offered a more cosmopolitan experience close to home, providing mill workers with social and religious opportunities less available in their small hometowns. In addition, as a smaller mill with a more open atmosphere less dominated by the typical

twenty-year old farm girl, Middlebury offered women in a variety of life situations the ability to work as necessary for their economic livelihood, in living situations that met their personal needs as mothers, wives, and single women.

Situated in a large town close to home, Davenport's factory offered flexible hours and competitive wages to attract women to Middlebury's mill. These factors brought women of different situations, economic and personal, to its looms, representing an important departure from traditional historical assumptions of mill life. Middlebury's textile factory employed women whose ages spanned half a century, married and unmarried, mothers and daughters, immigrant and local. Though different in their life circumstances, each of these "factory girls" chose to labor in Middlebury for the financial and personal independence yielded by a weekly wage.

