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## From the Instructor

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Matt Lavallee is a student from Lowell, Massachusetts who participated in my WR 150 equivalent course “Anti-Immigration Sentiment in the United States” that also functioned as an American Studies 200-level course. Due to the shared listing, the course carried a heavier reading load. Matt demonstrated a thorough, thoughtful engagement with each reading. He seemed to particularly connect with the way nativist sentiments manifested in different ways depending upon a particular region or historical moment. Unsurprisingly, he chose to trace this theme in his third paper for the course.

The assignment asked the class to take up an interpretation of American identity and argue whether nativists portrayed the United States as inherently fragile or strong. Matt chose to delve into the history of his hometown to examine how the cry of nativists connected to various labor movements, defining American identity primarily through an economic lens. In earlier drafts, his authorial voice became lost between his sources and he struggle with an effective conclusion. In this published final draft, Matt made his own arguments with greater clarity of purpose. The conclusion also brings the movements of the past to the present day interactions between longtime residents and newer immigrants in this traditionally industrial city.

— Rachel Schneider

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## IMMIGRATION IN LOWELL: NEW WAVES OF NATIVISM

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America's engagement with industrial capitalism began in the early nineteenth century, as the convergence of capital, labor, waterpower, and innovative technology produced the great textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. In Lowell's early years, the mills largely depended on young women of English descent for labor. Lowell garnered a reputation for the high standard of living of its working class and was considered an "industrial utopia."<sup>1</sup> Some associated this high standard of living with an exclusively "American" standard of living, as working conditions and wages were poorer in Europe. However, rising competition to Lowell's textile corporations forced that high standard of living to decline. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, successive immigrant groups filled jobs, starting with the Irish in the 1840s and 1850s; French Canadians in the 1860s and 1870s; and Greek, Polish, Portuguese, Jews, and other nationalities in the 1890s and early 1900s. Each new ethnic group arriving in Lowell faced anti-immigrant sentiment and opposition as they were employed by the mills as strikebreakers. Frequently, an ethnic group employed as strikebreakers in one generation worked towards labor reform in subsequent generations, therefore becoming nativists themselves. According to nativist restrictionists who opposed the arrival of immigrants in Lowell, this high "American" standard of living was fragile and threatened by immigrants who would allegedly destroy the progress of labor reform movements as they were used by corporations as strikebreakers. However, the threat to a fragile and uniquely American way of life in Lowell came not from new immigrants, but from economic competition and the movement of capital to the South.

The mills at Lowell were created by the Boston Associates, a group of industrial manufacturers responsible for the early construction and financing of the mills. They did not want their project to be tainted by a newly created urban proletariat similar to that of the European mills. The degraded conditions and social unrest found in English mill towns made many Americans wary of industrial manufacturing.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as Benita Eisler writes in an introduction to a compilation of literature written by Lowell “mill girls” and published in *The Lowell Offering* in the early nineteenth century, “The Boston Associates resolved to create a labor force that would be a shining example of those ultimate Yankee ideals: profit and virtue, doing good and doing well.”<sup>3</sup> They accomplished this aim by attracting young women from the farms of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine, enticing them with the highest wages offered to female employees anywhere in the United States.

Women were additionally attracted to leave farms to work in mills as their position in farming families was undermined by the growth of the factory output of cotton and woolen textiles. In the introduction to *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830–1860*, historian Thomas Dublin, who has extensively documented Lowell's early history, writes, “Before 1820 spinning and weaving had been the primary domestic occupations of farmers' daughters. But with the expanded output of the new mills the home production of cloth became increasingly unprofitable.”<sup>4</sup> The employers boasted that they were the most superior class of factory operative to be found in any industrialized nation, causing Boston Associate Nathan Appleton to refer to them as “a fund of labor, well educated and virtuous.”<sup>5</sup> Early on, Lowell gained a reputation as an “industrial utopia” for the high standard of living of its factory operative and provided cultural and intellectual stimulating activities, such as a lecture series that attracted Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau.<sup>6</sup>

Lowell expanded, becoming one of America's largest centers of industry. Correspondingly, conditions changed for the working women as well. Pressure of growing competition caused overproduction to become a problem, which in turn caused the prices of finished cloth to decrease. Dublin writes, “The high profits of the early years declined and so, too, did conditions for the mill operatives.”<sup>7</sup> Not all women workers agreed with the mill owners regarding the virtues of what they claimed was an “indus-

trial utopia.”<sup>8</sup> Women entered labor reform activism as their conditions worsened. Factories reduced wages, and the pace of work within the mills increased. Female workers did not accept these changes without protest: in 1834 and 1836 they went on strike to protest wage cuts, and between 1843 and 1848 they mounted petition campaigns aimed at reducing the hours of labor in the mills. However, while some responded by demanding reduced hours of labor, others left the mills in a growing migration from the region to the Midwest that left fewer native-born women to work on the factory floor. This forced mill owners to look elsewhere for labor, and they hired Irish immigrants, who began to take the Yankee women’s place in 1845.<sup>9</sup> Yankee mill girls also began to look to the arriving immigrants for the cause of the decline of the standard of living as not only wages decreased along with rising outside competition. Elements such as the educational seminars that distinguished Lowell’s factory operative from that of Europe’s proletariat disappeared as mill owners reinvested less in their mills in the face of growing competition. However, mill girls overlooked the consequences of growing competition and the instability attendant with the rapid growth of industrial capitalism, instead proposing that Irish immigrants threatened their fragile American way of life in Lowell.

Although immigrant workers were originally not employed inside the factories, they arrived in Lowell even before the Yankee women were recruited by manufacturers. In 1823, 30 Irish laborers who walked from Boston finished Lowell’s first canal. Dublin writes, “These first Irish made do in the roughest of conditions.”<sup>10</sup> They lived off wages of 75 cents a day and crowded into tents and shacks in “paddy camp lands.” The location of these “paddy camp lands” would eventually become the Acre, a gateway neighborhood where various following immigrant groups would settle. In Lowell’s early years amid soaring profits and the climax of the aforementioned “American” standard of living in Lowell, Lowell’s officials viewed the unskilled Irish laborers as impermanent residents during the construction of more mills and canals. The Yankee officials and mill owners’ belief that the Irish presence was impermanent is reflected by the development of a “leave them alone” policy towards the paddy camps where the Irish retained their native culture independent of the mill village.<sup>11</sup> There was little friction between Irish and Yankee groups when jobs were readily available for both groups as Lowell enjoyed little to no competition in

American textile manufacturing. While the mill girls enjoyed the high standard of living in the “industrial utopia,” an Irish middle class developed that also enjoyed opportunities for social mobility and maintained cordial relations with Yankee officials.

However, life for Lowell’s Irish soon changed as growing competition to the mills caused Lowell’s “American” standard of living to decline for the factory operative. In 1831, only about 500 Irish lived in Lowell, but this number rose dramatically in the 1840s and 1850s following potato famines in Ireland. In this period, the Yankee women expressed nativist sentiment and opposed Irish immigration. Dublin writes, “Yankee hostility toward the Irish was partly attributable to their effect on the relations between workers and owners.”<sup>12</sup> The great numbers of the Irish and their economic need undermined the labor protest of Yankee women. For example, a large number of Irish strikebreakers had allowed mill agents to disregard the campaign for the ten-hour workday in the 1840s and reduced pressure on mill agents to compete with improving wages in other occupations, which reduced wages in this period. By 1860, Lowell’s women workers earned less than they had in 1836, despite great increases in productivity.<sup>13</sup>

Dublin also notes that mill owners understood and actively encouraged the hostility between the two groups at their profit’s benefit: “Mill management purposely kept Yankees and immigrants apart, and in periods of labor unrest, they played the groups against one another.”<sup>14</sup> A number of confrontations highlight the nativist hostility towards the newly arrived labor force. In 1831, Yankee laborers attacked the construction site of St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in the Acre and were confronted with rock-heaving Irish.<sup>15</sup> These nativists also charged that the growing Catholic schools in Lowell were “un-American” in the 1850s. These charges reflected a broader fear common in America’s northeastern industrial cities at this time: Catholic voters would elect politicians with a subversive agenda that would lead to the tyrannical Papal hierarchy’s infiltration of the American political system, thus threatening America’s egalitarian institutions. Public officials and nativists alike considered public schools a significant source of patriotism and a way for immigrant children to learn civics and English as part of a Protestant, moral education. Nativists thus feared an absence of these features in parochial schools. Nativist fears of

Irish enfranchisement also led corporations to intimidate Irish voters. Although most of Lowell's Irish in the 1840s and 1850s were not naturalized citizens and could not vote, the Hamilton Company still warned that "whoever, employed by this corporation, votes the Ben Butler ten-hour ticket... will be discharged."<sup>16</sup> This attempt to dissuade the few Irish who could vote from supporting the ten-hour workday advocated by Civil War general and future presidential candidate Benjamin Butler's congressional platform further reflects that Lowell's capitalists actively used immigrants to impede the progress of labor reform. Nonetheless, Yankee nativists and mill girls proposed that Lowell's famed standard of living was not damaged by the rising competition that forced profits to decline, but by the influx of Irish immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s used as strikebreakers.

As anti-Catholic mobs continued to attack St. Patrick's Church throughout the 1850s, French Canadians faced great economic difficulties in Québec. Following the Civil War, French Canadians fled economic turmoil and flocked to the mills with approximately 600,000 coming to New England between 1860 and 1900.<sup>17</sup> Their numbers grew steadily during these decades, and by 1905, they were the largest immigrant group in the city. As the Irish before them, French Canadians roused fear and resentment among Lowell's population. An 1881 report of the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor described French Canadians as "sordid and low" and referred to them as "the Chinese of the Eastern States," associating them with "coolie" labor on the West Coast. These Chinese laborers arrived in California around the same time as French Canadians in Lowell and were charged by nativists with taking jobs and lowering wages, who cited the immorality of the Chinese and physically attacked them. Great opposition towards the Chinese came from Irish laborers who had previously been opposed by nativists on the East Coast. In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, historian Matthew Frye Jacobson notes the irony of the "despised Celt in Boston . . . gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of 'Mongolians'" in San Francisco.<sup>18</sup> By the time the Chinese and French Canadians arrived in America, the Irish had established themselves in society, and these new immigrant groups gave them a target on which to take out their economic frustrations. The same charges brought against the Chinese on the West Coast were brought against the French Canadians in Lowell. Nativists and

laborers blamed them for lowering standards in the mills and in the city as a whole. Dublin notes that they were looked down upon by the earlier Irish arrivals and were barred from St. Patrick's, forcing them to found their own Catholic Church, St. Jean Baptiste in 1868, also in the Acre.<sup>19</sup>

In the aforementioned report of the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor, French Canadian immigrants were further labeled as "a horde of industrial invaders" and "a deceitful people who seek their amusements in drinking, smoking, and lounging."<sup>20</sup> This title of "invaders" implies that they are a group with a culture and way of life that is entirely "un-American" and that they have no intention to assimilate into "American" culture. The use of "un-American" further distinguishes Lowell's high standard of living from that elsewhere and implies these immigrants directly threaten this way of life. The report also notes that "they care nothing for our institutions, civil, political, or educational."<sup>21</sup> This echoes charges against the Irish immigrants who had arrived years before, who allegedly threatened to uproot fragile American institutions through radical and subversive voting and educational practices. Despite previously being the targets of anti-immigrant opposition, Irish nativists decried the arrival of French Canadian immigrants who would destroy the fragile "American" way of life and standard of living. Ironically, the Irish who had previously been subject to nativist hostility when used as strikebreakers during the Yankees' quest for labor reform in the 1840s had become nativists themselves with the arrival of the French Canadians. Thus, a pattern developed in industrial cities like Lowell where an ethnic group employed as strikebreakers in one generation often becomes a committed part of the labor movement in subsequent generations and, therefore, opposes the next group of immigrants that will be used by capitalists as strikebreakers.

At the time of the arrival of French Canadian immigrants to Lowell, the Irish had gained some political control and had become a part of the labor reform movement as the Yankee mill girls had done before them. However, like the first Irish who had arrived in Lowell forty years before, the French Canadians were looking for steady employment and were not eager to involve themselves in campaigns against low wages or poor working conditions. This led the Irish to resent the arrival of French Canadians because they could be used as strikebreakers and an impediment on a quest towards labor reform. Fortunately, a memoir written by a French Canadian

immigrant was found in a Lowell attic in the late twentieth century, providing insight into the views of immigrants on their participation in labor reform movements. Félix Albert first arrived in Lowell from Québec in 1881 in a quest for economic security. In his memoir, *Histoire d'un Enfant Pauvre*, he describes initial plans to go to Fall River, a Massachusetts industrial city close to the ocean that had entered into competition with Lowell following the advent of steam power. However, his brother convinces him to choose Lowell, arguing, "Lowell was preferable because... strikes were not frequent there, and that I could probably find work there for myself and some of my children."<sup>22</sup> Albert describes a desire to avoid labor reform and chose Lowell because of its alleged reputation for having few strikes. Early immigrants of an ethnic group first arriving in Lowell did not want to participate in strikes and unions; they just wanted to work and be paid. This won them the enmity of organized labor. In *Québec to 'Little Canada': The Coming of French Canadians to New England in the Nineteenth Century*, Iris Saunders Podea notes that their unwillingness to participate in strikes and unions and "the fact that they were frequently introduced into New England as strike breakers did not endear them to their coworkers."<sup>23</sup>

Other physical confrontations erupted in the industrial communities of New England outside of Lowell. In West Rutland, Vermont, bloodshed resulted after French Canadians were imported into the marble quarries during a strike of Irish quarrymen in 1868.<sup>24</sup> During another strike in Fall River in 1879, employers had to build special houses in the mill yards to isolate French Canadian laborers out of fear that strikers would persuade them to leave town.<sup>25</sup> As Irish workers embarked on a campaign to improve wages and working conditions, their progress was met with French Canadian strikebreakers, whom they then often opposed with physical confrontations. However, the Irish presented these same challenges to Yankee labor reformers decades before, resulting in the same nativist opposition.

The hostility of the Irish towards both the Chinese in San Francisco and the French Canadians in Lowell reflects a broader trend: an ethnic group employed as strikebreakers in one generation often becomes a committed part of the labor movement in subsequent generations. Thomas Dublin writes, "Just as the Irish had entered the mills in large numbers



during the unsuccessful ten hour work day campaigns of the 1840s, so too French Canadians undermined renewed efforts to reduce the work day in the early 1870s. Greek and Polish millhands in the early 1900s helped to defuse labor unrest in that decade as well.”<sup>26</sup> The charges of each new wave of immigrants-turned-nativists reflect a view that their uniquely “American” way of life and high standard of living were at risk of destruction by an influx of new immigrants. However, these charges were echoed by groups who were once subjected to them, refuting claims that immigrants threatened America’s standard of living. The real threat to the “American” way of life and high standard of living came not from new immigrant groups, but from the movement of capital and jobs to the South.

Lowell, like other northeastern industrial cities rapidly declined into economic depression in the early twentieth century. However, the decline of Lowell was not caused by the influx of immigrants as nativists charged, but was a symptom of the capitalist system that propelled Lowell to notoriety in the first place. Mill owners knew as early as the 1890s that their mills were aging and becoming increasingly unable to effectively compete.<sup>27</sup> However, they chose not to modernize and reinvest in their Lowell mills and, instead, used Lowell profits to finance modern textile plants in the South. A confluence of advantages enticed capitalists to the South: abundant land, cheap labor, energy sources, lower taxes, and transportation.<sup>28</sup> Most importantly, the South was free of union influences that would fight for better conditions and wages for workers at the expense of capitalists’ profits and also lacked restrictive laws concerning the health and safety of industrial workers. Ethnic divisions among Lowell’s immigrant working class were overcome in the successful 1912 general strike when management offered a ten-percent wage increase.

Still, Lowell’s capitalists had the last laugh, disinvesting in the mills after the strike and leaving Lowell workers to face unemployment after the mill closings of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Dublin writes, “It is a story as old as capitalism—the movement of capital often leaves misery in its wake.”<sup>30</sup> The famously high standard of living among the faculty operative at Lowell was gone long before the mills could no longer compete with Southern textile manufacturers and closed their doors. According to the *Annual Statistics of Manufacturing in Lowell*, there were 120,737 spindles and looms in the city in 1835 handled by 6,563 workers.<sup>31</sup> By 1888,

960,739 spindles and looms were handled by 21,049 workers. Therefore, in 1835 when Lowell faced little outside competition in textiles, there were approximately 18 spindles and looms for every worker. However, in 1888 when Lowell was facing great external competition from the South and immediately surrounding area, there were approximately 45 spindles and looms per worker. This increased responsibility and productivity for fewer workers did not come with an increase in wages. Despite the evident turmoil caused by the movement of capital, new generations of immigrants turned nativists blamed new immigrants for their troubles.

Throughout Lowell's history, various immigrant groups have faced opposition when coming to the city. Nativists placed the blame for Lowell's economic difficulties on these new immigrants. Ironically, when immigrants in Lowell once subject to nativist opposition became established in the new society, they often opposed new immigrants arriving later. This pattern is seen in other northeastern industrial cities. The competition inherent in industrial capitalism ultimately left Lowell's workers unemployed and impoverished. Frustrations were nonetheless taken out on immigrant groups that workers blamed for Lowell's economic collapse. The aforementioned pre-competition cordial relationship in the 1820s and 1830s between Lowell's first Irish immigrants and Yankees raises the question: If external mills from communities in the South and elsewhere had not competed with Lowell's mills, driven profits down, and therefore degraded wages and working conditions in the "industrial utopia," would conflict between the two groups have arisen? Only after conditions worsened for the mill girls, correspondent with growing competition, did Irish-Yankee relations become strained. Would the Irish have opposed the French Canadians if their working conditions and wages were the same as the original mill girls? Would these conflicts have existed if Lowell's capitalists had not exploited immigrant groups at the expense of labor reform movements to preserve their profits? Would Lowell's mills have remained competitive if mill owners had reinvested in new technologies instead of fleeing to the non-unionized South?

It is arguable that opposition to different immigrants stemmed more from social or religious reasons, as Lowell's Protestants feared the arrival of Irish Catholics. Yet Lowell's Protestant leaders actively encouraged Catholic priests to visit the early paddy camps. Conflict between immi-

grant groups was economically rooted, stemming from the constant quest for profit by Lowell's capitalists. Workers striving for labor reform disliked new immigrant groups for their use as strikebreakers, but the need for strikes stems from poor working conditions and wages brought on by economic pressure under capitalism. Understanding the reasons behind early anti-immigrant sentiment is beneficial in understanding nativism in modern Lowell. Still in search of its post-industrial identity and with a population still struggling with unemployment, Lowell has received new groups of immigrants from Southeast Asia and South America. In a 2011 opinion piece published in *The Lowell Sun*, Lowell's daily newspaper, an anonymous Lowell resident wrote, "It's sad when you have to leave the city you were born and raised in because it has become a foreign country. All American ideals, heritage and morality has [sic] gone. It's time for me to go."<sup>32</sup> Over 150 years later, these charges of not sharing supposedly "American" ideals and being immoral echo the same charges nativists brought against the Irish in similar times of economic struggle amid competition for jobs.

## NOTES

1. Benita Eisler, *Introduction: The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840–1845)*. (New York: Norton, 1998), 16.
2. Thomas Dublin, *Lowell: the Story of an Industrial City: a Guide to Lowell National Historical Park and Lowell Heritage State Park, Lowell, Massachusetts*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1992), 23.
3. Eisler, 15.
4. Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830–1860*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1981), 16.
5. Eisler, 16.
6. Brian C. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell 1821–61*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 11.
7. Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 16.
8. Ibid.
9. Dublin, *Lowell*, 56.
10. Ibid., 33.
11. Mitchell, 22.
12. Dublin, *Lowell*, 66.
13. Ibid., 66.
14. Ibid., 66.
15. Mitchell, 32.
16. Ibid., 49.

17. Ibid., 67.
18. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.
19. Dublin, *Lowell*, 68.
20. Carroll D. Wright, *Uniform Hours of Labor* (Boston: Rand, Avery, & Co., 1881), 470.
21. Ibid., 469.
22. Félix Albert, *Immigrant Odyssey: A French–Canadian Habitant in New England*. (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1991), 68.
23. Iris Saunders Podea, “Québec to ‘Little Canada’: The Coming of French Canadians to New England in the Nineteenth Century,” *New England Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1950): 373.
24. Ibid., 373.
25. Ibid., 373.
26. Dublin, *Lowell*, 75.
27. Ibid., 82.
28. Ibid., 82.
29. Ibid., 76.
30. Ibid., 76.
31. “Appendix B” in *Cotton Was King*, ed. Arthur L. Eno, Jr. (Lowell: Lowell Historical Society, 1976), 256. Eno uses *Annual Statistics of Manufacturing in Lowell; Statistics of Lowell Manufacturers*.
32. “Backtalk.” (*The Lowell Sun*, 26 April 2011).

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MATTHEW LAVALLEE is majoring in American & New England Studies and completed his first year in the College of Arts & Sciences in 2011. Born in Lowell, MA and raised in the neighboring town of Chelmsford, Matt spends his summers working at Lowell National Historical Park. Matt also enjoys playing piano. This essay was written for Rachel Schneider’s course, AM 250: Policing the Boundaries of American Identity: Anti-Immigration Movements in U.S. History to 1930.