

Workers on the Line: Teaching Industrial History at the Tsongas Industrial History Center and Lowell National Historical Park

S TRIKE. STRIKE! STRIKE!! The strident voices rebound and reverberate down the halls of the Tsongas Industrial History Center, disturbing the visiting teacher just emerging from the third floor elevator of the restored, five-story cotton mill, one of several restored historic structures at Lowell National Historical Park. What is happening? Are modern textile workers continuing their historic efforts for better working conditions and higher wages? Wait a minute—these strikers are 11 and 12 years old. What's going on?

The strikers are actually students from a local school participating in a tour and hands-on workshop at Lowell National Historical Park called "Workers on the Line," one of several educational programs on American industrial history offered for teachers and students through the Tsongas Industrial History Center. Students are issued aprons from the Mill City Print Works, punch in on a time clock, and are sent to work on one of five assembly lines. Their work is supervised by a stern overseer.

The products they produce are tea towels with a rose pattern. The "towels" are actually brown craft paper, and the rose patterns are stamped by the first workers on a moving roll of paper with rubber stamps: stem, leaves, petals. The next assembly line worker controls a device which yanks the roll of paper out of the other workers' work space, whether or not they are finished with their task. The "towel" is then cut, inspected for quality, and either rejected or given a literal stamp of approval. After performing the job, the workers are paid three wooden "Boott Bucks," representing the typical income of an

early nineteenth-century mill worker.

Students then visit the Bon Marche store, where they discover that one of their tokens is for housing, one for food, and one for everything else. They are shown pictures of housing and life-like models of food. The mansions and the steak and lobster are wildly beyond their means. Even the middle class housing and food are out of the question. "You mean I'm living in a tenement? And eating bread and vegetables? No way."

A sense of unfairness begins to spread. "By the way, who do you suppose does live in that mansion and eat that steak and lobster?" asks the workshop leader, pointing to a larger-than-life portrait of mill owner Kirk Boott. To make matters worse, the Mill Agent orders the overseers to speed up the line, new technology is introduced, and unnecessary workers are laid off. The workers begin to grumble and to weigh the risks and advantages of turning out—striking—in favor of a shorter work day and higher wages. Finally, they are locked out by management in response to rumors of union sympathy among workers (based on an actual incident in 1903). They must choose what to do. Will they vote to join a union? They need to consider the possible consequences if they make that choice. They negotiate with the program leader, a hard, but reasonable bargainer.

The program can culminate in various ways, depending on what students decide. They sometimes vote to unionize and join "The Teenage Workers of the World" and sometimes do not. Often they negotiate a deal where they will work at a slower pace, but produce

higher quality goods which can be sold at a higher price, hoping to satisfy their own needs as workers and the wishes of management.

The hands-on workshop leads into a tour of the weave room where students experience the noise and power of 88 power looms pounding out hundreds of yards of cotton cloth in order to imagine the work they would have done as mill workers in the nineteenth century. Through tours of the boarding house and an exhibit tracing the history of labor management interactions, students gain huge amounts of information and sensory impressions to draw out and enrich their later classroom studies. "Workers on the Line" concludes with a discussion of work in the past, in the present, and what it may be like when students are ready to enter the labor force. The necessity for collective action by workers in the past is stressed, but whether that necessity still exists or will exist in the future is left for students to decide.

"In 'Workers on the Line' we not only learned about the hardships the mill girls faced in the factory, but we experienced them ourselves," noted one twelve-year old participant. "We learned that we had to stick together if we were going to make Kirk Boott treat us better," said another. "This whole system is unfair!" offered a third sixth grader. "I know that I'd join a union if they treated me that way!"

In their classroom back at school, students divide into cooperative groups to use documents from "The World of Barilla Taylor" primary source kit rented from The Tsongas Industrial History Center. Using seventy primary source documents and study prints, students enter into the world of one of the thousands of young women who left their farms to work in Lowell's flourishing textile mills. Through reading the regulations of the Middlesex Company boarding houses, they learn about boarding house life (see sidebar 1). After reading 16-year old Barilla Taylor's

letter home, students are left to ponder the juxtaposition of mundane details of life with the frightening reality of the dangers of life in a textile mill (see sidebar 2).

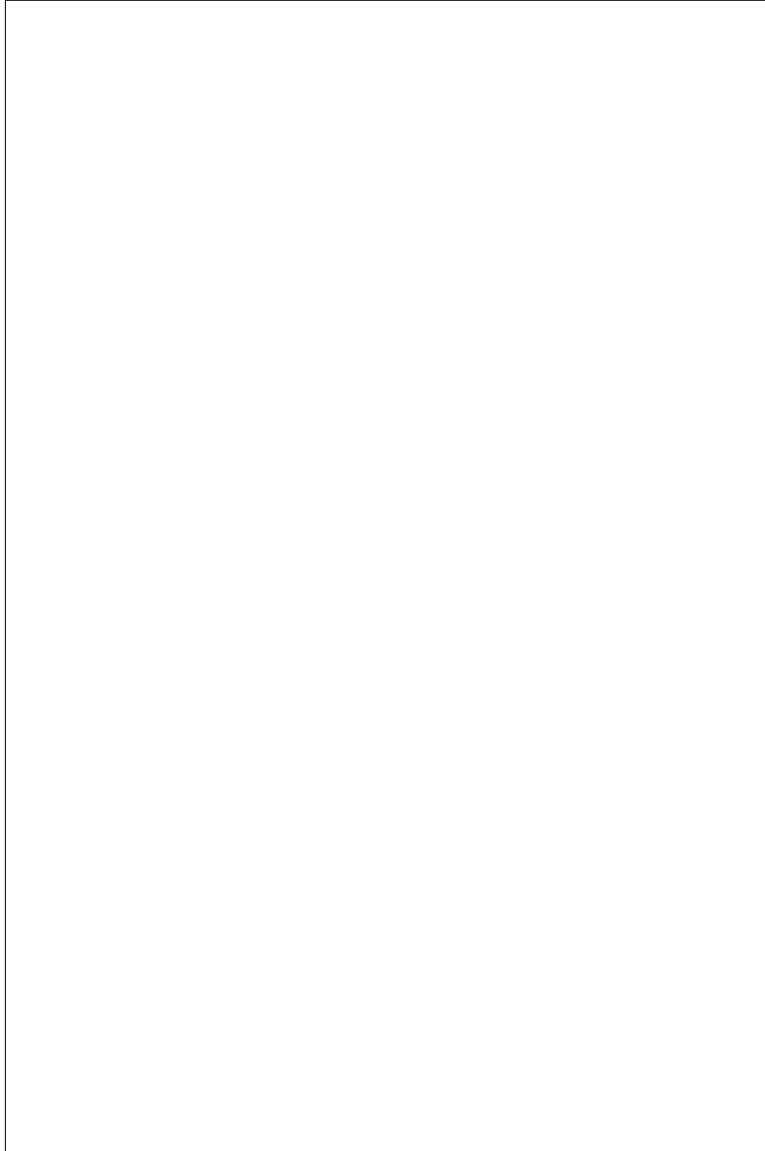
Bringing History to Life at The Tsongas Industrial History Center and Lowell National Historical Park

The experiences of students in the Tsongas Center and Lowell National Historical Park demonstrate how museums can help schools address disturbing issues facing history teachers. One report indicates that students consistently regard social studies as their least favorite subject (nearly 2/3 of students perceive social studies as "mostly memorizing") and of very little relevance (only 21% of students found social studies to be very useful in everyday life). Students found textbooks necessary to obtain facts, but boring and difficult to read. History texts explain little about the effects of national events on average people, or about the influence of average people on national events.

Lowell National Historical Park, America's first national industrial park—with its unique canal system, Boott Cotton Mill weave room and museum, Working People Exhibit, Suffolk Mill water turbine, and trolley system—provides a reality that students find so lacking in their textbooks. Park planners wanted to engage students actively in the use of the city and the park as a classroom to make the abstract concepts of industrialization physical, engaging, and meaningful to students.

To help carry out that vision, park administrators negotiated a unique cooperative agreement with the University of Massachusetts Lowell's College of Education to establish the Tsongas Industrial History Center, named after Senator Paul Tsongas who introduced federal legislation to establish Lowell National Historical Park. The Tsongas Center provides students a variety of intensive hands-on activities

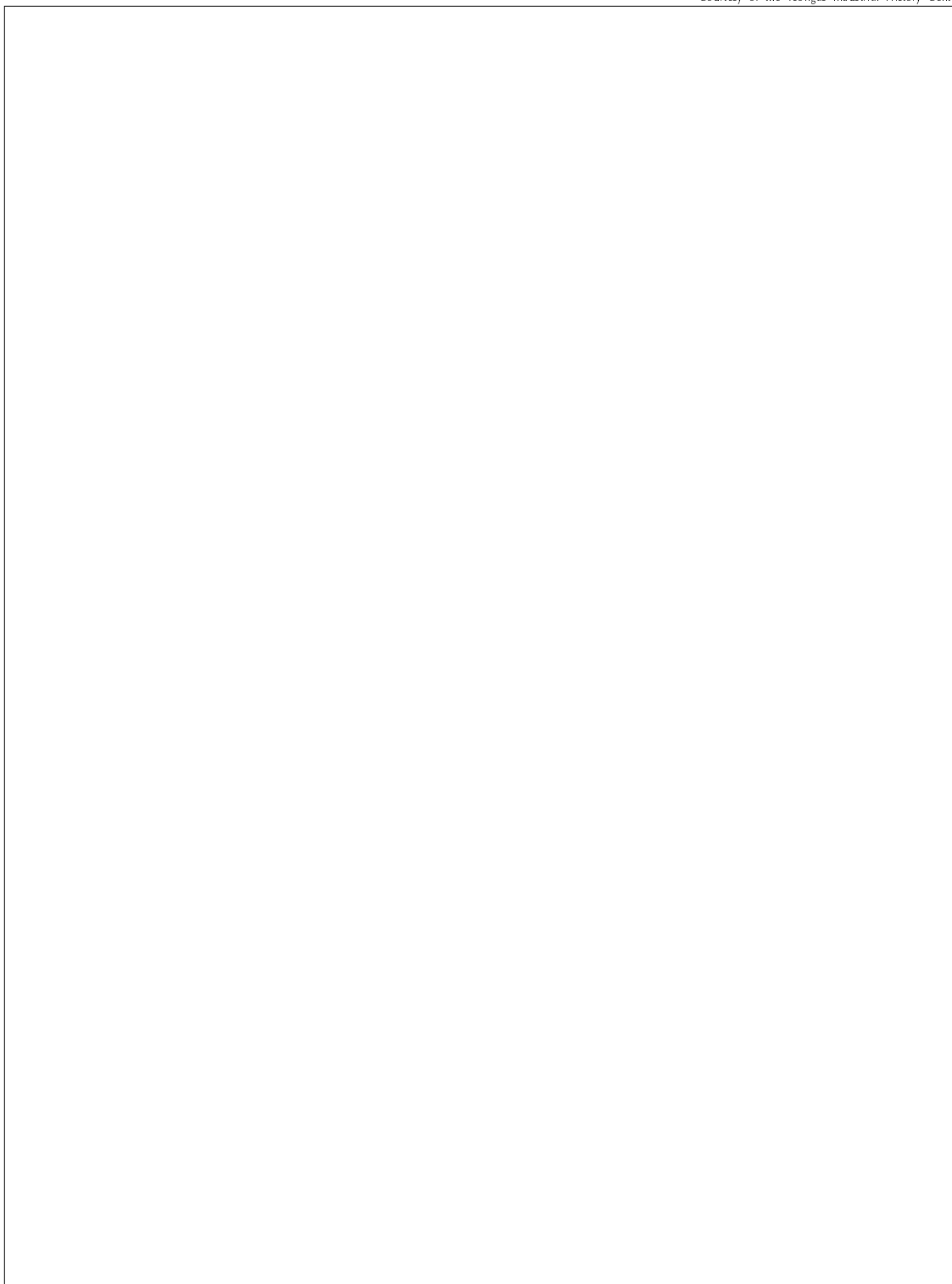
Courtesy of the Tsongas Industrial History Center



Student "workers" deciding whether or not to strike at the Tsongas Industrial History Center.

Sidebar 1: Regulations

Courtesy of the Tsongas Industrial History Center



The document reproduced above is one of seventy included in “The World of Barilla Taylor.” The kit includes booklets that explain the documents and challenge students to delve into them and interpret their meaning. This document is accompanied with the following text: “Every mill company in Lowell had boarding houses to provide food and lodging for its workers.” Potential boarders were required to read the company’s regulations before boarding. Carefully read the boarding house regulations for the Middlesex Company. Why do you think the mills had regulations for living at company boarding houses? What are three rules listed in the regulations? What do you suppose Barilla was thinking as she read the Hamilton boarding house regulations?

Sidebar 2: Excerpt from Barilla Taylor's letter to her parents

Lowell,
Mass.
Sunday, 14
July 1844

Distant Parents,

It is with pleasure that I seat myself this morning to write to you to let you know of my health which is very good at present.

I like it in the mill, but my overseer is not the best, or I might say, the cleverest. I do not make much. I did not make only six dollars and a quarter last month beside my board. I pay five dollars for my board a month. I don't know but you will think strange that I have changed my boarding place again. . . . Our boarding woman . . . if I may say it, she was cross, lazy and nasty. She would build up the fire just before she went to bed, put on her coffee and let it steep all night. In the morning, she would get up, build up a fire and go to bed again. We would get up, get our breakfast and go into the mill. When we came out for dinner we would have what coffee was left from the

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carefully linked through guided tours to the Park's historic sites to engage students in distinct, but complementary, investigations of technological change, immigration, and the growth of an industrial city.

For example, students can become workers in the Tsongas Center by weaving their own cloth on one of sixteen hand looms. Students experience the satisfaction and pride of creating something of their own. The cloth is later mailed to them, giving them a sense of ownership. Students also learn about changes over time within the factory. Using floor plans of the weave room from different eras and information on the latest technology in each period, students see how a new invention automatically replaces the bobbin without stopping the loom. A weaver can now tend three times as many looms! They see clearly how technology replaces workers over time. One teacher noted "Each activity seemed to be just the right amount of time to keep the kids involved . . . my class was totally focused on the weaving . . . wish I could keep them that focused in my classroom!" Many teachers use works of historical fiction such as *Lyddie* to provide a narrative context to the students' visit to Lowell and follow-up with classroom writing assignments.

Students also explore the experience of immigrants who came and continue to arrive in the Spindle City seeking work and a better life. Students cast off their own identities for ninety minutes and take on carefully researched new identities as immigrants from Ireland, French Canada, Portugal, Greece, Columbia, or Cambodia. As they enter the Tsongas Center workshop, a stern immigration inspector hands each student a new identity card, stamped "Destination: Lowell."

After spending a few minutes reading the information on their cards to learn about their families, homeland, and why they left, students excitedly open the luggage they brought on their trip to America. The pieces include things which people needed and wanted to bring—food, clothing, cooking utensils and passports, photos, religious objects, toys, and musical instruments. Each object lends itself to stories—the French Canadian Croix de temperance to protect the household from the evils of alcohol, a Greek brass coffee pot to make thick, rich, Greek coffee and to tell one's fortune in the coffee grounds left at the bottom of the cup, a citizenship booklet printed in Spanish designed to help prepare a Colombian immigrant for the citizenship test, or a Cambodian ceremonial food carrier in which each layer contains a different dish or soup. Each student in an ethnic group explains or acts out who they are, why they came, what they brought, how old they are, to whom they are related, what happened after their arrival in Lowell, or anything else which they find interesting about their country of origin. Even the youngest students come to realize that there are a great many similarities in the

experiences of these diverse groups. "My class not only learned much about history," said one teacher, "but they learned about other cultures and tolerance as well. There is so much they can apply to their own lives."

Teachers and students have responded immediately and positively to the opportunity to teach and learn history in an interdisciplinary, participatory way in a restored mill community. After only five years of existence, the Tsongas Industrial History Center staff now provides tours, hands-on activities, and in-class presentations for nearly 50,000 students each year.

The Tsongas Center as a Curriculum Resource for Teachers

A good museum field study depends on good classroom preparation and follow-up; classroom teachers and museum teachers must complement one another. Staff at the Tsongas Industrial History Center offer pre- and post-field curriculum packages and a wide range of teacher workshops to foster curriculum collaborations with teachers and schools. Teachers receive a study guide linked to each of the program themes described above about a month before their scheduled field study of Lowell. Each study guide includes a historical overview, excerpts from primary sources, three study prints, definitions of terms, and suggested pre- and post-visit activities. These materials are free to teachers whose classes participate in Tsongas Center programs; other teachers may purchase the materials at cost.

New curriculum kits focusing on the transition from farm to factory, immigration, the changing relationship between mill and plantation economics, and the effects of industrialization on the Merrimack River are also in development. The Tsongas Center sponsors a wide variety of workshops and conferences for teachers. Recent offerings have included the Lowell Industrial History conference on the connections between northern textile interests and southern slave owners; an annual Women's History Conference; workshops on immigration history; and visits to nearby industrial history sites such as Harrisville, New Hampshire, or Slater Mill, Rhode Island. "This was truly the best workshop I have taken as a teacher," said one recent workshop participant. "It ties in with our curriculum and truly makes learning about our past a 'living history experience.'" Teachers may also register for a ten-day international trip to England to study the English origins of the American Industrial Revolution.

The staff of the Tsongas Industrial History Center welcome inquiries from teachers interested in obtaining classroom materials, organizing an in-service workshop, planning an interdisciplinary curriculum development institute, or visiting Lowell National Historical Park. For a complete listing of educational kits, audio visuals, and other educational materials, please write to the Tsongas Center, Boott Cotton Mill, 400 foot of John Street, Lowell, Mass. 01582; or via e-mail at Tsongasc@Idea.Uml.Edu. □

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