

WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

A STUDY IN AMERICAN ECONOMIC HISTORY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE work of women for wages under a competitive organization of industry presents a problem of compelling interest. Women have, of course, always worked. The invention of the processes essential to orderly and secure group life was the contribution of primitive women.¹ Under the organization of labor developed by the Greeks and Romans;² in the workshops of the monasteries and convents of the Middle Ages;³ as members of the crafts in which they took an honorable position,⁴ governed by the regulations

¹ Bucher, "Industrial Evolution," Chaps. I, II; Thomas, "Sex and Society," p. 126; Pearson, "Chances of Death," ii, 49. "The civilization of woman handed down a mass of useful custom and knowledge; it was for after generations to accept that and eradicate the rest. When I watch to-day the peasant women of Southern Germany and of Norway toiling in the house and field, while the male looks on, I do not think the one a downtrodden slave of the other. She appears to me the bearer of a civilization to which he has not yet attained. She may be the fossil of the mother age, but he is a fossil of a still lower stratum—barbarism pure and simple."

² Leroy-Beaulieu, "Le travail des femmes au dix-neuvième siècle," p. 5.

³ Eckenstein, "Woman Under Monasticism," Chap. VII.

⁴ For example, in Paris, see Dixon, "Craftswomen in the Livre des Métiers," *Economic Journal*, v, 209.

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as to hours, wages, fines, apprentices, and promotion, identical with those under which men worked; in the English "factories" of the fourteenth century;¹ in the domestic or cottage system of industry which prevailed largely in England prior to the industrial revolution;² in the work of household production in America during the colonial and early republican period; under every industrial system, women have had a recognized position.

The dignity and honor of their relation to their work have varied with the dignity and honor with which they have been generally regarded. When they were slaves their occupation assumed a servile character; and it may be that the dishonor often apparently attaching to labor grows out of the fact that production was first exclusively in the hands of women.³ On the other hand, under some systems the position of women in relation to their work has been one of real power. In such a system as characterized American life during the earliest period described in the following study, when goods were made in and for the household from raw materials furnished by the household, the woman determined what should be made and how the product should be distributed. In fact the extent to which the spending function is conceded her by the family group to-day when the family has

¹ Taylor, "The Modern Factory System," p. 53.

² Taylor, pp. 57, 58; Toynbee, "Industrial Revolution," p. 53.

³ Veblen, "Barbarian Status of Women," *American Journal of Sociology*, iv, 501.

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become simply a center of consumption, is a survival of the control which was hers when the family was still a producing unit.

Women have not, however, always worked for wages. Without dwelling upon the fact that, under simple forms of organization, the return for labor is often combined with payment for the use of tools and for materials, it might be noted that in the period just preceding the introduction of the factory system both in England and America, production was often so carried on as to allow the return for the labor of the entire family to be collected by the head of the family who had the legal right to the time and earnings both of his wife and of his minor children.¹

The family wage was common then, and it was determined in part by the standard of the group, and in part by the bargaining power of the man who collected it. To-day there is a group wage in so far as various classes are paid "supplementary wages," but these are determined not by the bargaining power of the man, but often by the helplessness of the woman and of the minor children who have become the apparent collectors of their own wages.

Objections are, therefore, raised and difficulties encountered, due not to any novel industrial activity on the part of women, but to the disturbance created by

¹ See in a later discussion, for illustrations of the way in which the man collected the wage for the group well into the nineteenth century and even after the members of the group had followed their work to the factory.

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for all members of the community. The following study is, therefore, offered in the belief that it has real significance for those concerned with the problem of wage-earning women.

It has, however, a wider interest than this. A field in American economic history hitherto substantially untouched is here disclosed. Moreover, with the history of the growth of our great manufacturing industries for the most part still unwritten, the difficulties in the way of such an inquiry as the present are very great. But there is for the same reason greater value in the contribution which is made by this study to our knowledge of early economic conditions and relationships, of the technical development of the industries discussed, of early governmental policy relating to industry, as well as to our correct understanding of the industrial opportunity of the working woman of an earlier time and the progress which she has made up to the present day.

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PREFACE

THE following investigation was begun in 1905 when I published jointly with Dr. S. P. Breckinridge, of the University of Chicago, with whom I was then studying, an analysis of recent census statistics dealing with the employment of women. The result of our statistical inquiry was to show that, while the present tendency was toward an increase in gainful employment among women, that increase had been only normal, considering the rate of increase in the population, in the group of industrial occupations designated in the census as "manufacturing and mechanical pursuits" while there had been a disproportionately large increase only in the occupational group "trade and transportation." With nearly a million and a half women in our manufacturing industries and no recent influx into the occupations in this group, it was evident that the presence of women in our mills and factories was not a new phenomenon; and it became a matter of interest to discover just how long and how far women had been an industrial factor of importance.

The employment of women, therefore, became a

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problem in economic history, and although we realized that, at a time when so many questions concerning the working woman were pressing for immediate solution, it might well seem academic and impractical to deal only with her past, we believed that a truthful account of that past might throw some light on present-day problems.

This volume is, therefore, an attempt to carry on the investigation from the point at which it was left four years ago. The continuation of the study was made possible in the first instance through the assistance of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and to the late Carroll D. Wright, then at the head of the Department of Economics and Sociology, grateful acknowledgment must be made.

I have already said that Dr. Breckinridge and I began this study as a joint investigation, and although my absence from Chicago for three years made it impossible for us to continue the work together, I have throughout that time worked under her general direction and I have had always the benefit of her generous and sympathetic counsel. It has been my privilege during the past year to be again closely associated with her, so that in the work of revision and in preparation for the press, these chapters have been constantly submitted to her for criticism. It is not possible for me to say just what or how much the book owes to her, but without her assistance it would never have been written.

It is a pleasure also to acknowledge the debt which

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I owe to two other friends, to Miss Clara E. Collet, M.A., Honorary Fellow of University College, London, and senior investigator of women's industries in the Board of Trade (Labour Department), and to Dr. Frances Gardiner Davenport of the Department of Historical Research in the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

To Miss Collet I am indebted, not for direct help in connection with the preparation of these chapters, but, in common with all students of the history and statistics of women's employment, for the invaluable work which she has done in this field. Four years ago, in our first published study, Dr. Breckinridge and I made public acknowledgment of the stimulus and help we had received from a study of Miss Collet's reports to the Board of Trade on the "Employment of Women and Girls." Not only for these but for her reports on the same subject prepared for the Royal Commission on Labour as well as for her earlier investigations in connection with the preparation of Booth's "Life and Labour of the People," and for her other brilliant and suggestive studies of women's work, all later students of the subject are under obligation to her.

The debt to Miss Davenport is of quite another sort, for her own studies have been in a more remote field of history. But it has been my privilege, at different times, to submit several of these chapters to her for criticism, and the book does, therefore, embody some of her suggestions. It has, moreover, been a

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constant source of reassurance, during the four years in which this volume has been in preparation to know that she believed the subject worthy of investigation as a neglected chapter in our economic history.

A large part of the material presented in this book has appeared from time to time since 1906 in the form of a series of articles in the *Journal of Political Economy*, and acknowledgment should be made to the editors for their courtesy in placing this material again at my disposal. While it has been in large part revised and rewritten, chapters VII and VIII are reprinted substantially as they appeared. I have also to thank the editors of the *American Journal of Sociology* and of the *Publications of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae* for kindly allowing me to use again some of the material published in their magazines.

E. A.

HULL HOUSE, CHICAGO,
October 1, 1909.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC opinion in this country has been recently concerned with the increase in gainful employment among women, and misapprehension has arisen from a failure to understand the complexity of the problem; for the employment of women presents not one question but many questions. There is, for example, the familiar problem of domestic service which is, numerically, the most important women's occupation. Quite different problems appear in connection with agriculture and the other extractive occupations such as mining and smelting. In the professions there are still to face the old questions of restriction of opportunity, of equal work for unequal pay, as well as the new and larger question of the way in which new power acquired by women through the removal of educational and social barriers may be most easily turned to social ends.

In the group of occupations, including stenography, typewriting, bookkeeping, and salesmanship, which are connected not with the industrial but with the business organization of the day, there is a long series

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of problems of which perhaps the most pressing is the effect of the pin-money worker who makes of her occupation a "parasitic trade." And finally, there is the question of the employment of women in industrial occupations, about which there is some prejudice and a good deal of misunderstanding.

An increase, therefore, in gainful employment among women becomes a distinct question for each of these several groups. While it is true that the public mind does, unconsciously perhaps, differentiate them, this is done for the most part illogically and unscientifically. With regard to the number of women entering two of the five occupational groups, agriculture, in which the women employed are chiefly the negro women of the South, and domestic service, public opinion has little concern. There is no fear of a disproportionate increase in either of them. But it is, on the other hand, generally assumed that the number of gainfully employed women has increased alike in the professions, in "trade and transportation," and in manufacturing industries. The professional woman and the woman commercially employed are, however, almost exclusively characteristic of the present day, while the woman in industry is older than the factory system itself. In the first half of the nineteenth century, at a time when educated and uneducated women alike worked in mills and factories, the employment of women in the professions or in clerical positions was comparatively rare. As late as 1855, for example, the employment of women

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as clerks was unusual. An article in Hunt's *Merchant's Magazine* for that year called attention to the "employment of ladies as clerks in stores" as an item of special interest, and a contemporary newspaper commented as follows: "The *New York Times* is earnestly advocating the employment of females as clerks in stores—particularly all retail dry goods stores. It is an employment for which they are well fitted, and would properly enlarge their sphere of action and occupation and it is a business that they can do better than men. . . . It would give employment to a great many young ladies, and would be degrading no one willing to earn a living."

Between the year 1870, when the census first presented statistical data on the subject, and the year 1900, the percentage which women formed of the total number of persons employed in "professional service" had increased from 1.6 per cent to 10.5 per cent, in "trade and transportation" from 24.8 per cent to 43.2 per cent, in the manufactures group from 13 per cent to 19 per cent.¹ Census statistics for the last decade of the nineteenth century make more clear, perhaps, the fact that in recent years the increase in gainful employment among women has not

¹ This is the increase according to the Census of Occupations. According to the Census of Manufactures it would be from 16 per cent to 19 per cent. The former percentages are used here for the sake of uniformity since those for the other occupational groups can be obtained only from Census of Occupations. But those from the Census of Manufactures are believed to be more reliable. On this point, however, see Appendix B.

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been in the industrial group. A study of the table given below will make this point more clear. This table shows the number of women and the number of men employed in the five large occupational groups of the census classification in 1890 and in 1900. The table also makes possible a comparison not of absolute numbers and percentages alone, but of the number of persons in each ten thousand of the total number of persons over ten years of age who were employed in these different groups of occupations in 1900 and 1890, and the resulting increases or decreases.

From this table it appears,¹ (1) that the most striking increases both for men and women are in the group "trade and transportation," (2) that for women three of the other groups—"professional service," "manufacturing and mechanical pursuits," "domestic and personal service"—show fairly equal gains and the group "agriculture" is not far behind; (3) that the increase in the number of men who are going into "manufacturing and mechanical pursuits" is greater than the increase in the number of women entering the same group; that is, 19 more women and 34 more men out of every ten thousand of each sex in the population went into the manufacturing group in 1900 than had entered in 1890. It should be pointed out that the percentage increase would be

¹ For a more elaborate discussion of this table, see an article on the "Employment of Women," Twelfth Census Statistics, by Sophonisba P. Breckinridge and Edith Abbott in the *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. xiv, pp. 14-41.

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slightly larger for women than men, 27.7 against 24.1, but such percentages cannot, of course, be properly compared, for a comparatively small increase in a

CLASSES OF OCCUPATIONS.	WOMEN.		MEN.	
	1900.	1890.	1900.	1890.
Agriculture.....	977,336	769,845	9,404,429	8,378,603
Professional service.....	430,597	311,687	827,941	632,646
Domestic and personal service.....	2,095,449	1,667,651	3,485,298	2,553,161
Trade and transportation.....	503,347	228,421	4,263,617	3,097,701
Manufacturing and mechanical pursuits.....	1,312,668	1,027,928	5,772,641	4,650,540
All occupations.....	5,319,397	4,005,532	23,753,836	19,312,651
Population over ten years.....	28,246,384	23,060,900	29,703,440	24,352,659

CLASSES OF OCCUPATIONS.	NUMBER OF WOMEN EMPLOYED PER 10,000 WOMEN OF AND ABOVE 10 YEARS OF AGE.			NUMBER OF MEN EMPLOYED PER 10,000 MEN OF AND ABOVE 10 YEARS OF AGE.			
	1900.	1890.	Increase.	1900.	1890.	Increase.	Decrease.
Agriculture.....	346.0	333.8	12.2	3166.1	3440.5	.....	274.4
Professional service.....	152.4	135.1	17.3	278.7	259.7	.....	19.0
Domestic and personal service.....	741.8	723.1	18.7	1173.3	1048.4	.....	124.9
Trade and transportation.....	178.1	99.0	79.1	1435.3	1272.0	.....	163.3
Manufacturing and mechanical pursuits.....	464.7	445.7	19.0	1943.4	1909.6	.....	33.8
All occupations.....	1883.2	1736.9	146.3	7997.0	7930.3	.....	66.7

small number will show a larger percentage of increase than a much larger increase in a large number.

For women, then, trade and transportation alone shows a disproportionate increase; it is into this group

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household tended to make her skillful in spinning and probably in weaving as well, so that she received preparation for the two most important occupations of that time without any specialized training or the serving of a formal apprenticeship.

In concluding this discussion of the employment of women during the colonial period, some reference must be made to the attitude of the public opinion of that day toward their work. The early court orders providing for the employment of women and children were not prompted solely by a desire to promote the manufacture of cloth. There was, in the spirit of them, the Puritan belief in the virtue of industry and the sin of idleness. Industry by compulsion, if not by faith, was the gospel of the seventeenth century and not only court orders but Puritan ministers warned the women of that day of the dangers of idle living.¹ Summary measures were sometimes taken to punish those who were idle. Thus the "Salem Town Records" show (December 5, 1643) "It is ordered that Margaret Page shall [be sent] to Boston Goale as a lazy, idle, loytering person where she may be sett to work for her liveinge." In 1645 and 1646 different persons were paid "for Margaret Page to keep her at worke." Among the charges against Mary Boutwell in the "Essex Records," 1640, is one "for her exorbitancy not working but liveinge idly."

¹ See Winthrop's reference to the sermon of a Boston minister in 1636 in "History of New England," i, 186.

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Perhaps the best expression of the prevailing attitude toward the employment of women at that time is to be found in one of the Province Laws of Massachusetts Bay for the session of 1692-93. The law ordered that every single person under twenty-one must live "under some orderly family government," but added the proviso that "this act shall not be construed to extend to hinder any single woman of good repute from the exercise of any lawful trade or employment for a livelihood, whereunto she shall have the allowance and approbation of the selectmen . . . any law, usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding."

It is not, therefore, surprising to find that, in 1695, an act was passed which required single women who were self-supporting to pay a polltax as well as men.¹ That this attitude was preserved during the eighteenth century, the establishment of the spinning schools bears witness. There was, however, the further point that providing employment for poor women and children lessened the poor rates, and the first factories were welcomed because they offered a means of support to the women and children who might otherwise be "useless, if not burdensome, to society."

¹ "Province Laws," i, 213: "All single women that live at their own hand, at two shillings each, except such as through age, or extream poverty . . . are unable to contribute towards the publick charge." Men, however, of sixteen years or upwards were rated "at four shillings per poll."

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into common use long before this time.¹ The improvements in spinning which greatly increased the supply of yarn, created a new demand for weaving and as a result of the fact that this had become an occupation requiring less physical strength than formerly, women were more and more frequently employed as weavers. In 1814, the year in which the power loom was introduced, Trench Coxe, called attention to this fact in his "Digest of Manufactures." "Women," he said, "relieved in a considerable degree from their former employments as carders, spinners, and feeders by hand, occasionally turn to the occupation of the weaver with improved machinery and instruments, while the male weavers employ themselves in superintendence, instruction, superior or other operations and promote their health by occasional attentions to gardening, agriculture and the clearing and improvements of their farms."

An incident which occurred in the town of Leicester, Massachusetts, in the same year, is of interest as an illustration of the extent to which weaving was then considered "women's work." One of the early clothiers of the town enlarged his business in 1814 and began to manufacture woolen cloth. The weaving was done by men in his shop, on hand looms, but "the employment of men in what had been before regarded as within the peculiar province of females"

¹ Bishop, i, 333, 401, 410; for the use of the flying shuttle in England, see Cunningham, "History of English Industry and Commerce" (1903), ii, 502, 503.

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created an unusual degree of comment and these men weavers were said to be regarded in much the same light as were the first men milliners and dressmakers of a later day.

The history of the employment of women in the cotton mills of this country will be traced in some detail in a later chapter and a more extended account will be given of the relative numbers of men and women employed in weaving and in other departments. In conclusion, however, it should be emphasized that the earliest factories did not open any new occupations to women. So long as they were only "spinning-mills" there was merely a transferring of women's work from the home to the factory, and by the time that the establishment of the power loom had made weaving also a profitable factory operation, women had become so largely employed as weavers that they were only following this occupation, too, as it left the home. It may, in brief, be said that the result of the introduction of the factory system in the textile industries was that the work which women had been doing in the home could be done more efficiently outside of the home, but women were carrying on the same processes in the making of yarn or cloth. The place and conditions of labor had been changed, but women's work continued to be an important factor in the industry.

