

Letters from a Factory Girl

Background: *Barilla Taylor was one of twelve children in the family of Stephen and Melinda Taylor. She was born on June 29, 1828. In October of 1843, she left her home in Roxbury, Maine, to work as a weaver in the mills in Lowell, Massachusetts. She was fifteen years old.*

By the 1840s many factory towns no longer resembled model communities. Working conditions were often dangerous and factory owners tended to view their workers more as machines and less as individuals. Read the letters below and answer the questions that follow.

Barilla to Her Parents* Sunday, July 14, 1844

It is with pleasure that I seat myself this morning to write you to let you know of my health which is very good at present . . . I like in the mill, but my overseer is not the best, or—I might say, the cleverest. I do not make much. I only made six dollars & a quarter last month [once I paid for my room]. I pay five dollars for my board a month . . . I have changed my boarding place again . . . The first place I went to was on the Corporation. It was a very good place indeed. They kept about thirty boarders all the time . . . six in one room. Else had some trouble with the girls she roomed with & she would not stay. We went to the second place. Our boarding woman . . . was cross, lazy and nasty . . . In the morning she would get up, build up a fire & go to bed again. We would get up, get our breakfast & go into the mill . . . When we came out for dinner we would have what coffee was left from the morning for dinner. We would have a little dry bread, a cracker or two a piece & that was our dinner. We would have a piece of pie once a week & that was our living for about three months. I was sick there & I don't wonder, do you? I left there in about a week after I got able to work. I now board with Mr. & Mrs. Elston on Central Street. They are first rate folks . . . I have as much as I want and just when I want it . . . Ann Graham, if you know her, has got her hand tore off, It was done in the card room. I heard she has got to have it taken off above her elbow. We don't know if she will lose her life by it . . . If I stay till spring—I think it a doubt you will ever see me again if my health is as good as it is now for I think of . . . going to the west next spring . . . I bid you all farewell as I don't know as I shall ever see any of you again . . .

Mrs. Taylor to Barilla* August 1st, 1844

. . . We heard you was in Boston the fourth of July and told Freeman Smith you was coming home in the fall We shall look for you at the time you promised to come home when you went away. Florena wants you should come home and help her for she has got a great deal to do . . . come home and go to school . . .

Florena Austin to Barilla Taylor* January 27, 1845

. . . Mother says you did not come home last fall as you agreed and you must be sure to come next spring and stay with her next summer and make some woolen clothes, get rested and go again if you want next fall. I think one year is long enough to stay at a time. I do not approve of girls staying in the factory till they get all run down and good for nothing . . .

Mr. Taylor to Joseph C. Taylor* August 25, 1845

. . . we was glad to hear that Barilla was alive though the next news may be her death news but we hope not. We all hope that she will get well and come home and see the folks . . .

Pliny Tidd to Mr. Taylor* March 5, 1846

. . . I have had Barilla moved to the cemetery at Lowell on the 14th of November 1845. Also the stones put up . . . they are good strate stones and engraved in good taste . . .

Questions:

1. How did Barilla describe her life at Lowell? Include detail from the text to give a thorough description of her life.
2. What happens to Barilla's friend, Ann Graham? What can we conclude about working conditions at Lowell?
3. How did her family feel about Barilla working in the mills? Support your answer with a quote.
4. Florena Austin writes, "I think one year is long enough to stay at a time. I do not approve of girls staying in the factory till they get all run down and good for nothing . . ." According to this quote, how are factory girls viewed by the world?
5. Given the dangers of the factory and the fact that her family wants her to come home, why would they have allowed her to leave in the first place? Hypothesize possible reasons below.
6. What happened to Barilla and what can we conclude about conditions at the factory?