

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On Southern and Northern Women

Regional differences affected the type of work women performed in the North and South. As you read the following passages, try to identify these differences. Then answer the questions that follow.

ON SOUTHERN WOMEN

Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, published in 1856

No white man would ever do certain kinds of work, such as taking care of cattle, or getting water or wood to be used in the house. If asked he would get mad and tell you he wasn't a slave. Poor white girls never hired out to do servants' work, but they would come and help another white woman with her sewing or quilting, and take wages for it.

I have been once or twice told that the poor white people, meaning those who bring nothing to market to exchange for money but their labor, are worse off in almost all respects than the slaves. That their condition is not as unfortunate by any means as that of Negroes, however, is most obvious, since among them, people may sometimes elevate themselves to positions and habits of usefulness and respectability.

ON SOUTHERN WOMEN

Frances Anne Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–39

Among our visitors from St. Simons today was Hannah's mother (it seems to me that there is not a girl of sixteen on the plantations, but has children, nor a woman of thirty but has grandchildren). Old House Molly, as she is called, from the circumstance of her having been one of the slaves employed in domestic offices during Major [Butler]'s residence on the island, is one of the oldest and most respected slaves on the estate, and was introduced to me by Mr. [Butler] with especial marks of attention and regard; she absolutely embraced him, and seemed unable sufficiently to express her ecstasy at seeing him again. Her dress, like that of her daughter, and all the servants who have at any time been employed

about the family, bore witness to a far more improved taste than the half-savage adornment of the other poor blacks, and upon my observing to her how agreeable her neat and cleanly appearance was to me, she replied that her old master was extremely particular in this respect, and that in his time all the house servants were obliged to be very nice and careful about their persons.

ON NORTHERN WOMEN

Report on a visit to the Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills published in The Harbinger, Lowell, 1846

Between seven and eight thousand young women live in Lowell. They are generally daughters of farmers of the different states of New England. . . .

[T]hirteen hours per day of monotonous labor are exacted from these young women. So fatigued are the girls that they go to bed soon after their evening meal. It would be a poor bargain from the industrial point of view to own these workers. . . . The greater number of fortunes accumulated by people in the North in comparison with the South shows that hired labor is more profitable than slave labor.

The largest factory we saw was the Amoskeag Mills. Upon entering the work room, the noise of the five hundred looms under full operation struck us as frightful. It seemed a great violation to the sense of hearing.

Each girl usually attends three looms. Doing so requires constant attention. The atmosphere of the room is full of cotton filaments and dust, which we were told are very harmful to the lungs. . . .

Upon visiting the boardinghouses we discovered that . . . there is no privacy, no solitude here. It is almost impossible to read or write a letter undisturbed. In this way the young women of our country live and work in the boardinghouses and factories, which the rich and influential of our land have built for them.

*(continued)***COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES****ON NORTHERN WOMEN***George T. Strong, prominent New York lawyer, diary entry of January 11, 1860*

News today of a fearful tragedy at Lawrence, Massachusetts, one of the wholesale murders commonly known in newspaper literature as accident or catastrophe. A huge factory, long notoriously insecure and ill-built, requiring to be patched and bandaged up with iron plates and braces to stand the introduction of its machinery, suddenly collapsed into a heap of ruins yesterday afternoon without the smallest provocation. Some five or six hundred operatives went down with it—young girls and women mostly. An hour or two later, while people were working frantically to dig out some two hundred still under the ruins, many of them alive and calling for help, some quite unhurt, fire caught in the great pile of debris, and these prisoners were roasted. It is too atrocious and horrible to think of. . . .

No doubt the legal representatives of those who have perished will be duly paid the fractional part of their week's wages up to the date when they became incapacitated by crushing or combustion, as the case may be, from rendering further service. Very probably the wealthy and liberal proprietor will add (in deserving cases) a gratuity to defray funeral charges. It becomes us to prate about the horrors of slavery! What Southern capitalist trifles with the lives of his operatives as do our philanthropes of the North?

ON AMERICAN WOMEN IN GENERAL*Harriet Martineau, a British writer who visited the United States in 1834*

One consequence, mournful and injurious, of the "chivalrous" taste and temper of a country with regard to its women is that it is difficult, where it is not impossible, for women to earn their bread. Where it is a boast that women do not labour, the encouragement and rewards of labour are not provided. It is so in America. In some parts, there are now so many women dependent on their own exertions for a maintenance, that the evil will give way before the force of circumstances. In the meantime, the lot of poor women is sad.

Before the opening of the factories, there were but three resources: teaching, needlework, and keeping boardinghouses or hotels. Now, there are the mills; and women are employed in printing-offices; as compositors, as well as folders and stitchers.

The progression or emancipation of any class usually, if not always, takes place through the efforts of individuals of that class: and so it must be here. All women must inform themselves of the condition of their sex, and of their own position. . . . In the meantime, is it to be understood that the principles of the Declaration of Independence bear no relation to half of the human race? If so, what is the ground of the limitation? If not so, how is the restricted and dependent state of women to be reconciled with the proclamation that "all are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?

Questions to Think About

1. What cultural beliefs prevented poor southern women from doing certain kinds of work, even for money?
2. What evidence from Frances Kemble's journal indicates that enslaved females who performed domestic duties were better off than enslaved field hands?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** What conclusions can you draw from these excerpts about conditions for working women in America during the mid-1800s?