

# Sarah Bagley

1806–1847



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Sarah Bagley was an important leader in the early women's rights movement. Her experience as a cotton mill worker led to the formation of an organization to protect the women who toiled away in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, during the mid-1800s.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Sarah Bagley's determination led her to become a powerful leader for women's rights.*



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Women played a large role in manufacturing in the 1800s. The town of Lowell, Massachusetts, was thought to be a model factory town. The cotton mills employed many women. The women mostly came from small farms and villages in the North. The mills provided a source of income at a time when it was most needed. In 1836 Sarah Bagley came to work at a cotton mill in Lowell.

Bagley and the other women endured long hours and hard work. They stayed in boardinghouses when they were not at work. The mill owners enforced strict rules on the women, including **curfews** and codes of conduct. The rooms were cramped, with four women sharing one room. Many boardinghouses consisted of four units, with 20 to 40 women per unit.

Despite the cramped living conditions, the women continued to work hard in the mills. They usually worked for 12 to 14 hours per day during the week, and then half a day on Saturdays.

In the 1840s the conditions in the factories became even worse. Wages were cut, even though the women were expected to increase production.

Bagley had grown tired of the conditions at work

## VOCABULARY

**curfew** requirement to be in a certain place at a certain time

so she organized the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in 1844. As president of the organization, Bagley led many of the mill workers to fight for improved working conditions. They also wanted working hours to be cut to 10 hours per day.

For more than a year, the group published pamphlets and gathered petitions in the hope of helping to spark an investigation into working conditions by the Massachusetts legislature. While no legal action was taken, the mills agreed to reduce the workday to 11 hours per day.

Bagley left the mill in 1845 and organized other branches of her labor reform association. Later that same year, she was appointed corresponding secretary of the New England Working Men's Association.

In 1846, Bagley became the superintendent of the Lowell telegraph office. She is believed to have become the first female telegraph operator in the United States.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Draw Conclusions** Why do you think Bagley believed she had to organize a labor reform union rather than just asking the mill owners to make changes?

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- 2. Evaluate** What do you think the women from small farms thought when they saw the large mills in Lowell? What kind of effect do you think these large buildings and faster pace of life had on the women?

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### ACTIVITY

- 3.** Imagine that you are a worker at a mill in Lowell during the 1800s. Write a diary entry describing a typical day. Be sure to describe your working and living conditions.