

The fact is that the Lowell System was ripe for abuse.

“Look, then, at the unnatural composition of such a society. On one hand a large mass of females, a large portion of whom do not expect to get married; and on the other, a considerable number of single men, engaged in the factories, or dwelling in the surrounding village, too often without principle, and eager to gratify their baser appetites.”¹⁸ —*Boston Daily Times*, 1839.

The mill directors insisted such gratification wasn’t happening, and if it was, the men involved were doing the honorable thing.

“There have never been more than three cases of illicit relations in our establishment, and, in the three cases, the parties were immediately married, many months before the birth of the infant; thus we do not count any births which are positively illegitimate.”¹⁹ —Quoted in 1834.

This, of course, omits all the girls who left before they were found out, or who avoided pregnancy, or who chose abortion or death over disgrace.

My husband spent the first twenty-some years of adulthood as a bachelor before he was smitten enough to take the plunge. In all those years attending singles events, he says he never found a more fruitful opening line than “Would you like to dance?”
—Author



Lowell’s famous canals did more than just power the mills; they also hosted a number of suicides.

While there were certainly many factors that might bring a mill girl to ruin, the dance world had a uniquely tempting blend of men, women, movement, and music. Yet, it still had plenty of defenders. Allen Dodworth, a New York City dancing master, best summed up the “pro” side of the argument late in the century:

“Dancing in well-ventilated rooms, under proper regulation, is an excellent and healthful physical exercise, from which the most feeble may receive benefit. Physiologists inform us that exercise is doubly beneficial when accompanied by exhilaration of mind. This being true, where can the two be so happily united as in dancing to good music amid pleasant associations?”²⁰

In a western Massachusetts textile town, out near the state line, a pair of poems was written in 1861 protesting society’s hypocritical demonization of dancing.²¹ It is easy to hear the voices of exasperated young women from all across Massachusetts in the words. One of these poems appears at right in its entirety. The page following *Moral* offers a guide to its many nineteenth-century social references—along with some supporting excerpts from the second poem, *The Donation* (see the Appendix for a complete recitation of *The Donation*).

Left: 1910 postcard image.