The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution had its beginnings in England in the late 18th century. In America, Samuel Slater built his spinning mill in Pawtucket, RI in 1793. After Francis Cabot Lowell, from a family of merchants, visited England he returned to the U.S. to build a textile mill in Waltham, MA in 1814. Perhaps best known of the New England mill towns is Lowell, MA built in 1820 by the investors of the Boston Associates.

Two things were important, that served as “models” for other communities:
1. there was no one single investor, but what was the beginnings of “corporate” structure and
2. the production involved all the processes from raw cotton to finished cloth.

New England soon became the hub of the Industrial Revolution, and it is no surprise that Lewiston-Auburn with its location along the Androscoggin River had an important role to play. The city can trace its history back to much earlier times when there was a Native American presence here, but for our purposes our story begins in 1850 with the advent of the modern industrial mills.

The very things that made this location attractive to Native Americans made it suitable for mills: the power that could be harnessed through the river and the falls. Before the advent of electricity, it was water that powered the machinery.

There had been some small, locally organized manufacturing processes in the Lewiston-Auburn area. In 1819, Michael Little had a carding and fulling mill alongside the Androscoggin River, and in 1845 the Lewiston Falls Cotton Mill was established, but it was almost immediately—before it was even constructed—sold to the Lewiston Water Power Company. This company sold stock to Boston investors, one of whom was Benjamin Bates who visited Lewiston in 1847. It was he who truly recognized the area’s potential and this led to the opening of two mills in 1850: The Hill Mill and the Bates Mill. In 1857, Lewiston Water Power Co. re-organized as Franklin Water company.

Before that time, the area was chiefly agrarian. The earliest mill workers, like the mill girls in Lowell, were women from the neighboring farms. They were young—often just teenagers.

In many ways, though, it was the immigrant labor force that built and sustained the success of the mills. First, the Irish came as a result of the Potato Famine, and they were hired to construct the canals. There are two main canals—upper and lower, with smaller canals intersecting or joining them. But, soon the mill operators began actively recruiting Franco Americans to come and work in the mills. To many, this was an attractive
opportunity as they, too, as farmers had suffered the failure of many crops. At one point, as many as 100 to 150 immigrants a day were arriving, coming in at the Grand Trunk Depot, at Lincoln St. Many businesses grew to serve this increased population which soon settled in what became known as “Little Canada.” Representatives from Marcotte furniture greeted the families, offering to help outfit them with furnishings.

While the population of Lewiston was not quite 5,000 in 1850, by 1900 it had reached nearly 24,000. In addition to Franco Americans, Italians, Greeks, Lithuanians and people of Jewish heritage came. By 1900, the immigrant population represented 40 percent of the city’s people. Around the year 2000, the Franco-American descendants represent around 70 percent or more of the population.

There were a total of seven textile mills in town at one time: Androscoggin, Bates, Cowan, Camden Yarn, Continental, Hill, Libbey and several other large concerns such as the Lewiston Bleachery which opened in 1860.

Each immigrant group brought its own culture. The workers were a community not only within the mills, but outside as well. Throughout their heyday in the 20th century, mills and shoe shops sponsored company outings, company sports teams, and more. Mill workers enjoyed picnics. It is worth noting that the Bates Hockey Team played at Madison Square Garden and went to Europe.

For those of you familiar with Lewiston’s popular Balloon Festival, held each year in August, you might be interested to know that the very first hot air balloon fest was held in 1870.