



The Female Operatives and the Derby Strike: Their Story

by

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On the morning of June 4, 1852, operative Jane Story was not at her machine in the Salisbury Manufacturing textile mill in Amesbury and Salisbury Village (now Amesbury). Instead, she stood before a meeting of her fellow female operatives in Washington Hall, which occupied what is now the parking lot on Market Street between the Baptist Church and BankProv Bank. Jane Story had been born in Carlisle in the north of England and came to the United States when she was six with her father Robert, who was a weaver. Now thirty seven, she had been chosen this morning to chair the meeting called in response to what had happened in the Mills Village two days before.

On June 1, 1852, the 100 men who operated the textile machinery at the Salisbury Manufacturing mills had taken their usual fifteen-minute morning break and were returning to their machines to continue work. However, the previous day, John P. Derby, the new Agent in charge of the mills, had posted a notice setting out new rules for all the operatives, one of which was the abolition of “the lunch privilege,” which had likely been the practice in the mills since even before the Salisbury mill had been built. It allowed operatives to leave their positions and the company property for two fifteen-minute or so periods in the morning and the afternoon to run errands or get food. But on June 1, the returning operatives were met at the gates by the overseers, their supervisors, who told them they were fired and would receive their final checks at the end of the quarter.



Washington Hall. from the Warren Lodge A.F. & A.M. Century Celebration pamphlet (1925).

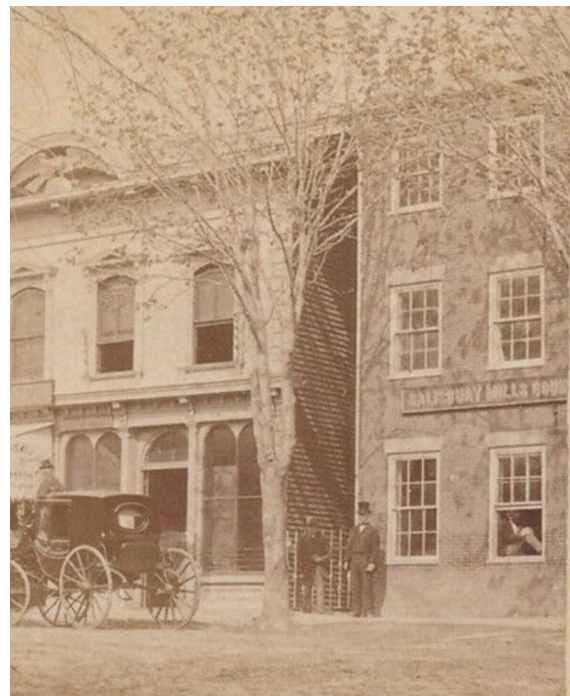
So began an early example of events that would lead to the development of the labor movement in the U.S. One notable outcome of that day and the events that followed is the career of George McNeill, who at that time was a fourteen-year-old mill worker. McNeill went on to become an important figure in the labor movement, first in Massachusetts and then nationally in the Knights of Labor and the A. F. of L.

But in addition to the 100 men, 225 women worked in the Salisbury Manufacturing operation. While the men were fired because they left, no women and children (children as young as eight years old would work in the mills) were fired, because they did not have a lunch privilege. The working conditions for the female operatives did not change as a result of Derby's rules. In 1852, pay and working conditions were heavily based on gender. The 1850 US Non-Population Census reported the monthly labor cost of Salisbury Manufacturing then: the monthly average for males was \$30; for females, \$13.33. Such glaring gender inequality permeated nineteenth-century American life, and we still live in its long shadow.

Jane Story gave what the *Villager* newspaper characterized as an “eloquent and spirited address” to the operatives “assembled in large numbers” in the hall. There is indication at least until June 3, that female operatives were reporting to work, though on that day they were released early. At the June 4 meeting, the female operatives were to decide the proper response to the situation, “especially to decide whether it is our duty to leave our employment.” They drew up a set of resolutions, which included a statement that the dismissal of the men was unjust. They also appointed a committee of five women to meet with Derby to verify the message they had been given that the agent was willing to grant equivalencies for the lost privileges. Expressing the hope that all parties could be reconciled, the operatives adopted the resolutions unanimously, and the meeting adjourned.¹

The next day the committee met with Derby in the Counting Room and presented him with the resolutions. The meeting was a polite one, but Derby was adamant about his actions. He felt he had only two alternatives: either stay the course or resign. In a meeting of the reassembled operatives that night, the committee reported on Derby's response and recommending that “each and every female operative decide for herself what course is best to pursue.”

The recommendations emphasized the individuality of the decision, noting that, “We are not to be considered as an organized combination” acting as a body of operatives.² During the first part of the nineteenth century, when workers organized into a “combination” to obtain some benefit, it was usually considered a criminal conspiracy. In 1842, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in *Commonwealth v. Hunt* determined that workers



Stereoscope of Counting Room on Market Square, Amesbury and Salisbury Mills Village taken sometime after 1857.

could legally organize for legal purposes.³ After that decision, the law began to shift, but the female operatives, whose primary goal was “conciliation and peace,” clearly wanted to make sure their actions were not viewed as aggressive. Ultimately, 125 of the female operatives agreed that they could not “*consistently* with our views of justice” return to work under the current conditions.

In a future article, we will follow the male operatives through the negotiations. They take a different tack from the female operatives, but there seems to be some coordination, each exploring a different channel to reach a resolution.

After the vote, the female operatives continued to meet, and on Monday, June 7, they voted to send another committee to meet with Derby. So early the next day, a three-member committee met with Derby in the Counting Room and proposed that the lunch breaks could be done away with, and that in exchange, the workday would end at 4:30 PM on Saturday for everyone and employees would be paid monthly rather than quarterly. In a written response, Derby dismissed the suggestion that he should do anything but fire the men who defied his authority and told the female operatives that they can improve the situation only by coming to work, which he invited them to do. At 10:00AM that same morning the female operatives met and received the report from the committee. The operatives considered Derby’s response an insult and voted to publish in the newspaper both their request and Derby’s response.⁴ What is notable about this attempt is that the female operatives broadened the discussion so that the conflict might be resolved in a way that would benefit all the mill workers, not just the men. Later that night, in Washington Hall, during a public meeting that involved both operatives and citizens of the Mills Village, the lawyer Jonathan Nayson, who had been working with the females operatives, reported their effort and Derby’s refusal.

After this rebuff, the female operatives seem to fold their energy into the larger effort involving both the male operatives and the citizens of Amesbury and Salisbury. However, a significant undertaking in that regard is a fundraising and spirit-raising social levee sponsored by the “Committee of the late female Operatives of the Salisbury Manufacturing Company” held at Washington Hall on July 8, 1852. A “levee” was originally a reception where a king or noble or, in the U.S., a president received guests.⁵ This levee began with the acceptance of a president, the Reverend William P. Merrill, and four vice presidents. The hall decorations featured the banner that had been unfurled at the gate on June 3, “Come and we will do thee good.” The fourteen toasts (non-alcoholic, since Massachusetts passed a prohibition law in 1852)

LABORERS LEVEE. We learn that the ladies who have recently left the employ of the Salisbury Man. Co., intend holding a levee, on Thursday next, the proceeds of which will be appropriated for the good of their cause, and to help the injured and defrauded laborer who has dared to speak and maintain the right. It will, no doubt, be a grand affair, and every one, far and near is invited to give not only their aid, but presence also. Will our neighbors in other towns represent themselves, by either sending or bringing “material aid?” The proceedings are not yet fully determined on. When they are it will be duly announced.

Article from the Villager (July 1, 1852) announcing the Social Levee held at Washington Hall on July 8, 1852.

included one saluting the banner, and one to corporations, which are “tolerable” until they exceed their “proper sphere” when they become “engines of tyranny and oppression.” The levee was well attended and drew supporting letters from John Greenleaf Whittier and others.⁶

The female operatives’ leaders appear in the public eye at least one more time on July 22, 1852, in a fiery letter, reprinted in the *Villager*, responding to an article in the *Boston Times* that stated, “. . . the strike in Amesbury is all over, and the operatives have all gone quietly to work under the arbitrary and oppressive rules of the agent.” Signing themselves on behalf of the late operatives of the Salisbury Manufacturing Company, they point out that they are still all “late operatives,” and intend to remain so unless conditions change. “We came out of the mills to evince our hatred of oppression and vindicate a principle which, in our judgement is worthy to be defended before the world.” The letter confronts the paradoxical position women occupy at this point in American industrial history. They refer to “the repugnance which everywhere obtains to any intermeddling, by females, in matters foreign to their proper sphere,” but then go on to contradict not that statement, but its applicability, “we yet feel that in the magnitude of the questions at issue on the present occasion, and their application to thousands situated like ourselves, we may step aside from the usual routine of female associations and make an appeal to a just and generous public.”⁷

We have not yet been able to determine when the strike “ended,” when the operatives had been replaced and the efforts to restore the fired operatives were abandoned. McNeill asserts that the strike lasted six months.⁸ The *Boston Times* article implies that the Salisbury Manufacturing Company is up and running, with at least some newly hired operatives, in late July of 1852. We also know that at their August annual meeting, the company did not declare its usual dividend and that in 1853, the Salisbury Manufacturing Co. bought the Amesbury Manufacturing Co. facilities and equipment, and that, finally, in 1857, the assets of the Salisbury Manufacturing Co. are put up for sale. This sale happened before the Panic of 1857, and the *Villager* attributed the company’s failure to Derby’s draconian treatment of the operatives.⁹

The 1855 Massachusetts State Census shows Jane Story living in Groveland, MA with a large number of unrelated females. Though (as usual) no professions are listed for the females, the men who live there are listed as either “overseer” or “factory hand.” But the 1860 U.S. census shows Jane Story is back in Salisbury, employed as a mill operative, most likely in the reconstituted Salisbury Mills Co. In 1900, Story, who never married, was still living in her family home at 87 Market Street, just a few blocks north of Washington Hall. She died at 92 on the town farm; her cause of death, exhaustion contributed to by pneumonia.

Notes

- 1 “Villager Extra,” *Amesbury Villager*, June 5, 1852, Extra edition.
- 2 “Meeting of the Female Operatives,” *Villager*, June 10, 1852, 4.
- 3 “Commonwealth v. Hunt,” in Wikipedia, September 28, 2020.
- 4 “Meeting of the Female Operatives.” *op.cit*
- 5 “Levee (Ceremony),” in *Wikipedia*, August 4, 2021.
- 6 “Social Levee,” *Villager*, July 15, 1852, 2.
- 7 Jane Story et al, “The Troubles in Amesbury: A Card,” *Villager*, July 22, 1852.
- 8 George Edwin McNeill, Terence Vincent Powderly, and Edmund J. James, *The Labor Movement: The Problem of to-Day* (New York, The M. W. Hazen co., 1891), 118, <<http://archive.org/details/aeb4570.0001.001.umich.edu>>
- 9 “Great Sale of Property in This Village,” *Villager*, April 23, 1857, 2.

Note: The *Villager* newspaper issues referenced in this article are available online through the Amesbury Public Library at <<http://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/>>