The Biography of Francis Cabot Lowell

Francis Cabot Lowell (April 7, 1775 - August 10, 1817) was the American businessman for whom the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, United States is named, and who was instrumental in bringing the Industrial Revolution to the United States. Even though Samuel Slater is considered the Father of the American Industrial Revolution, it was Lowell who developed a massive textile process that was copied all over America. Slater was an earlier contemporary of Lowell and had been born in England n 1768. Slater worked in the first industrialized cotton mills and understood the machines of his day. Believing that textile industry in England had reached its peak, Slater immigrated secretly to America in 1789. Slater, with funding from Providence investors and assistance from skilled local artisans, built the first successful water powered textile mill in Pawtucket in 1793.

Francis Cabot Lowell was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, the son of John Lowell (1743-1802) and Susanna Cabot (1754-1777), and a member of the prominent Boston Lowell family, which included statesman John Lowell, Harvard University president Abbott Lawrence Lowell, civil war general Charles Russell Lowell, astronomer Percival Lowell, and poets James Russell Lowell, Robert Lowell and Amy Lowell.

Lowell attended the Roxbury Latin School in Roxbury, MA and later graduated from Harvard College in 1793, and on November 2, 1798 married Hannah Jackson in Boston, Massachusetts, daughter of Jonathan Jackson and Hannah Tracy, with whom he had four children; three sons and one daughter.

On a visit to England in 1810 at age 36, Lowell carefully studied the textile industries of Lancashire. He was not able to buy drawings or a model of a power loom; however, he memorized the workings of British power looms.

Upon Lowell's return to Boston in 1813, he joined his brother-in-law, Patrick Tracy Jackson, and Nathan Appleton and established at Waltham the Boston Manufacturing Company, the first textile mill in America where all operations for converting raw cotton into finished cloth could be performed in one mill building. With Paul Moody he devised an efficient spinning apparatus and a power loom, based on the British models but with technological improvements.

To raise capital for their mills, Lowell and partners pioneered a basic tool of modern corporate finance by selling $1000 shares of stock to the public. This form of Shareholder Corporation quickly became the method of choice for structuring new American businesses, and endures to this day in the well-known form of public stock offerings.

In 1814, the Boston Manufacturing Company built its first mill beside the Charles River in Waltham, housing an integrated set of technologies that converted raw cotton all the way to finished cloth. This Waltham mill was thus the forerunner of the 19th century American factory. Lowell also pioneered the employment of women, from the age of 15-35 from New England farming families, as textile workers, in what became known as the Lowell system. He paid these "mill girls"(also known as 'lowell girls') lower wages than men, but offered attractive benefits including well-run company boardinghouses with chaperones, cash wages, and benevolent religious and educational activities. He lobbied heavily for a protective tariff on cotton products; they were included in the Tariff of 1816.

Although he died early at age 42, only 3 years after building his first mill, Lowell left his Boston Manufacturing Company in superb financial health. In 1821, dividends were paid out at an astounding 27.5% to shareholders. In 1822, Lowell's partners named their new mill town at the Pawtucket Falls on the Merrimack River "Lowell," after their visionary leader. One of his sons, Francis Cabot Lowell Jr., continued to work in his father's footsteps.

Mr. Lowell was inducted into the Junior Achievement U.S. Business Hall of Fame in 1978.

References:

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