

Francis Cabot Lowell Biography

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Biography

The American merchant and manufacturer Francis Cabot Lowell (1775-1817) introduced the power loom and the integrated factory system to American cotton textile manufactures.

Francis Cabot Lowell was born in Newburyport, Mass., the son of John Lowell, a prominent lawyer, and Susanna Cabot, the daughter of a wealthy family of merchant shippers. Lowell earned a Harvard degree in 1793 and shortly afterward went to sea on family ships. His marriage in 1798 to Hannah Jackson joined him to two other substantial shipping families. By 1810 he was a major merchant in his own right; his trade encompassed Europe, Canada, India, and China.

In 1810 Lowell made an extended visit to England, where he was fascinated by the power loom, not yet available in America. Since it was illegal to export either models or designs, he studied the looms so thoroughly that with the help of a skilled mechanic, Paul Moody, he was able to have them reproduced from his memory and drawings on his return to Boston. The power loom was pivotal in the American attempt to compete in textile manufactures at a time when capital and technological superiority still belonged to the English.

The Boston Manufacturing Company was chartered in 1812 with an authorized capital of \$400,000. Lowell, five brothers-in-law, and others in the mercantile community provided the large sums of capital necessary for what quickly became a major enterprise. In 1814 a mill was in operation at Waltham, Mass., which not only exploited the power loom but also, and for the first time, contained all of the processes of spinning and weaving cotton cloth under one roof. The Waltham mill was the parent of the famous mills at Lowell, Mass. Lowell was one of the first American company towns, characterized by a paternalism that has been both praised and damned.

Lowell was an active lobbyist for the protective tariff and in 1816 was influential in achieving the first American tariff that acknowledged an "infant industries" principle and provided a substantial duty on foreign cotton goods. Lowell died at the early age of 42, leaving a daughter and three sons, one of whom, Francis Cabot Lowell II, was to inherit his father's managerial abilities and a leading position in the expanding textile industry. After Lowell's death in 1817, the interrelated family firms produced textile machinery too.