

## The Lowell Six

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Lowell, Massachusetts was a city at the heart of the American Industrial Revolution. The first large factory town in the country, Lowell attracted thousands of young workers from all walks of life. Lowell's factories employed many immigrants, rural Americans, and even women, all of whom have been extensively studied. Yet there is one demographic of Lowell factory workers that has not yet been researched. In 1855, under one roof, lived six deaf graduates of the American School for the Deaf.<sup>1</sup> All six were trained at the American School for the Deaf and employed as mechanics or spinners within Lowell's factories. They were also active participants in New England's deaf community. Ranging in age from twenty-two to fifty-two, almost none of them attended school together, and they likely met through the wider deaf community. What brought these six deaf men and women to work in the booming factory town of Lowell, Massachusetts?

Founded in 1817, the American School for the Deaf (ASD) was the first school for deaf students in the United States. A number of these six deaf Lowell residents were very early students of the ASD, including Charlotte Lovejoy (admitted 1822), Almeda Derby Ham (1825), and John Ham (1833). At this point, the students would have closely interacted with the school's founding teacher, Laurent Clerc. Charlotte was also one of the school's adult students, already twenty-four when she entered the ASD. In the school's early years, adults comprised nearly one-

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<sup>1</sup> "Massachusetts State Census, 1855," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MQW1-41Q> : 11 March 2018), John B Ham in household of David Norton, Lowell, Middlesex, Massachusetts, United States; State Archives, Boston; FHL microfilm 953,950.

third of its student body.<sup>2</sup> Though the school's administrators and teachers complained about the presence of adult students, who struggled to learn new skills such as sign language and written English at the same pace as the children, Charlotte overcame these challenges and supported herself as a spinner for most of her life. One of the school's primary focuses was practical job training for its students. Despite early administrators' reservations that training students in a trade would interfere with their intellectual studies, "...manual training proved an unqualified success at the American Asylum."<sup>3</sup> The school trained its students in a variety of disciplines such as cabinetry, sewing, and blacksmithing. Written next to John's name in the school's enrollment book were instructions to train him in, "Cabinet work at first, tailoring afterwards if he prefers it."<sup>4</sup> John, as well the three other men he lived with in Lowell, James Whittlesey (1840), Pelatiah Wright (1844), and Varnum B. Wright (1844), were all trained in the trades at the ASD. The training they received while attending the ASD was likely a direct contributor to their future careers in Lowell factories. All four men as well as Charlotte are all noted as being employed in Lowell factories in the ASD's Alumni records.<sup>5</sup>

The Lowell Six and many other graduates of the ASD remained in touch with the deaf community after graduation through attendance of ASD alumni reunions. The 1850 and 1854 ASD reunions particularly were attended by the majority of the Lowell Six. The 1850 reunion saw the attendance of John, Almeda, Charlotte, and James, while the 1854 reunion was attended

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Klein Valentine, "A Nineteenth-Century Experiment in Education of the Handicapped: The American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb," *The New England Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (1991): p. 355, <https://doi.org/10.2307/366347>, pp. 364.

<sup>3</sup> Valentine, "The American Asylum" pp. 368

<sup>4</sup> "ASD List of Admissions Vol 1," RIT Libraries (The American School for the Deaf, July 24, 2020), <https://infoguides.rit.edu/c.php?g=569825&p=3926960>.

<sup>5</sup> "ASD Alumni Book." Hartford, CT: The American School for the Deaf, June 1849. Initially commenced in 1849, transcribed and alphabetized in 2021.

by all six members of the group.<sup>6</sup> There is also evidence that the Lowell Six attended these reunions together. In 1850, John Ham and James Whittlesey signed the guest book directly next to each other. Almeda Ham accidentally signed the guest book twice, once on her own and once right next to Charlotte Lovejoy (subsequently crossed out for being a duplicate). These guest books also confirm all six of the group's residence in Lowell and their employment in various trades such as spinning, cabinetry, and machinery.

It is also likely that this connection to the broader deaf community explains how the Lowell Six first met each other. Very few of them attended the ASD at the same time, as they vary in age by almost thirty years. Charlotte, Almeda, and the Wrights all came from large deaf families however, spanning decades of attendance at the ASD. Notably, all six members of the group were also the first in their families to attend the ASD.<sup>7</sup> These similar circumstances may have led to cross-family introductions being made as each member of the six searched for work. This is consistent with trends among all workers at Lowell, which saw a proportionally higher number of first children employed in its factories.<sup>8</sup> Given her age, Charlotte was likely the first of the six to work in Lowell, and could have helped the others find work and settle in Lowell. All six members of the group would also marry other members of the deaf community.<sup>9,10</sup> At the time that the group lived together in Lowell, John and Almeda were the only two already married, both already living in Lowell at the time of their marriage in 1845.<sup>11</sup> The rest of the

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<sup>6</sup> "Gatherings of Deaf Mutes 1850, 1854, 1860, 1866," RIT Libraries (The American School for the Deaf, July 24, 2020), <https://infoguides.rit.edu/c.php?g=569825&p=3926989>.

<sup>7</sup> "ASD Student List 1817-1877." Hartford, CT: The American School for the Deaf, n.d.

<sup>8</sup> "Lowell Millhands," in *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution*, Thomas Dublin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) pp. 103-104.

<sup>9</sup> "ASD Alumni Book." The American School for the Deaf, 2021

<sup>10</sup> "ASD Student List 1817-1877." The American School for the Deaf, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> "Massachusetts Marriages, 1695-1910, 1921-1924", database, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FCCC-NLK> : 28 July 2021), Almada Derby in entry for John B. Ham, 1845.

group would marry after the Lowell Six had gone their separate ways, largely to other graduates of the American School for the Deaf. This is also consistent with trends among Lowell workers, who often worked in Lowell for only a few years before getting married and finding employment elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

A key component of this deaf community was the New England Gallaudet Association. In 1854 in Henniker, New Hampshire many ASD alumni led by Thomas Brown founded the New England Gallaudet Association (NEGA) with the purpose to “...promote the intellectual, social, moral, temporal, and spiritual welfare of our Mute community...”<sup>13</sup> In short, the NEGA strived to promote deaf improvement, via meetings, newspapers, and other periodicals. Membership was open to all members of the deaf community for a relatively cheap fee of one dollar for men and fifty cents for women. Many of the Lowell Six were either directly or indirectly involved with the Association’s founding and early membership. John Ham, Charlotte Lovejoy, and Varnum B. Wright were all members of NEGA by 1857, as well as Almeda’s relatives, Harriet B. Derby and Wilson Derby, and Varnum and Pelatiah’s relative Lusetta Wright.<sup>14</sup> In fact, much of the ASD’s information in the alumni records about Varnum and Pelatiah’s time in Lowell comes from a letter sent to the school by Lusetta Wright.<sup>15</sup> The Lowell Six were clearly maintaining close connections with the wider New England deaf community during their time in Lowell, as well as helping to support the continued growth of the deaf community via participation in NEGA.

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<sup>12</sup> “Lowell Millhands,” Dublin T., pp. 89.

<sup>13</sup> “Constitution,” N. E. Gallaudet Association of Deaf Mutes, January 4, 1854, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> “List of Members,” Proceedings of the Convention of the New England Gallaudet Association of Dead-Mutes, 1857, pp. 82-87.

<sup>15</sup> “ASD Alumni Book.” The American School for the Deaf, 2021

In addition to the deaf community, it is also important to analyze how the Lowell Six fit into the Lowell factory community. Starting in the 1830's, Lowell, Massachusetts found itself as the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. All along the Merrimack River, factories popped up, utilizing water-power and later steam-power power to drive industrial machinery.<sup>16</sup> Lowell also saw the creation of a new philosophy of work, in which many of the factories' employees lived in factory housing and independently from their families. Lowell factories also targeted new demographics to build their workforces. Early in the Industrial Revolution, young single women came to Lowell in droves to work in its factories. Largely drawn from rural America, these women typically worked only a few years in Lowell before returning home and getting married.<sup>17</sup> Later in the 19th century, European immigrants would become the primary demographic employed in Lowell's factories.

However, there is little prior study about the deaf community's presence in Industrial Revolution Lowell, making the Lowell Six an interesting case study. The group lived in a rented house as opposed to company dormitories. The four men in the group worked as mechanics in Lowell, putting their ASD training to good use in Lowell's factories.<sup>18</sup> Like many other single women of her time, Charlotte Lovejoy found work as a spinner in Lowell's factories. Notably, Charlotte was much older than the average female Lowell worker, though this may be due to the fact that she did not marry until much later in life, an occasion which frequently signaled the end of a Lowell woman's career. Unlike Charlotte, Almeda had already married John Ham before moving to Lowell, and did not work in the factories like the rest of the group. Almeda lists her

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<sup>16</sup> "Building America's Industrial Revolution: The Boott Cotton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts," National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/building-america-s-industrial-revolution-the-boott-cotton-mills-of-lowell-massachusetts-teaching-with-historic-places.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> "Lowell Millhands," Dublin T., pp. 77.

<sup>18</sup> "Gatherings of Deaf Mutes 1850, 1854, 1860, 1866," RIT Libraries, July 24, 2020

role as “keeping house” in ASD alumni reunion guest books. Almeda likely performed domestic duties, taking care of the group’s house while the rest were off at work. The Lowell Six lived in this arrangement for approximately six years from around 1850-1856.

After living and working in Lowell for a number of years, John and Almeda Ham left New England for Illinois in 1857. The reason for this move is not entirely clear, though it may have been due to Almeda’s poor health, noted in the ASD alumni records.<sup>19</sup> The Ham’s moved first to Waukegan then to Chicago in 1862. John worked in a planing mill in Illinois, likely similar to his job in Lowell. One of Charlotte’s nieces and her niece’s husband, both deaf, moved to Illinois around this time as well,<sup>20</sup> implying a possible trend of New England deaf people heading west. At least in 1857, John maintained membership in NEGA despite the move to Illinois. John and Almeda would die less than a year apart in 1868 and 1869, respectively, in Farmington, Illinois where they are buried.<sup>21</sup> The rest of the Lowell Six would remain in New England for the remainder of their lives. James Whittlesey and the Wrights would remain in Lowell, Massachusetts for at least another ten years, each marrying other graduates of the American School for the Deaf. Charlotte would eventually get married to a deaf man as well, at the late age of at least fifty-nine before passing away in 1875.<sup>22</sup>

For a brief six years, these six deaf graduates of the American School for Deaf living and working in the booming industrial city of Lowell demonstrated the strong connections formed within the New England deaf community and the effectiveness of the ASD’s educational

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<sup>19</sup> “ASD Alumni Book.” The American School for the Deaf, 2021

<sup>20</sup> Harlan L. Lane, Richard C. Pillard, and Ulf Hedberg, *The People of the Eye: Deaf Ethnicity and Ancestry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 136.

<sup>21</sup> “Find A Grave Index,” database, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QVL5-8C5H> : 6 July 2020), Almeda Derby Ham, 1868; Burial, , ; citing record ID , Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com>.

<sup>22</sup> “ASD Alumni Book.” The American School for the Deaf, 2021

programs. Using the vocational training they received while attending the ASD, the Lowell Six integrated into a hearing workforce and took part in a major American movement not typically associated with the deaf community. Despite this integration with hearing society, these Lowell workers still maintained close connections to the deaf community through NEGA, ASD reunions, and personal relationships. For the Lowell Six, the American School for the Deaf succeeded greatly in its aim to build a connected deaf community while preparing its graduates to thrive in a hearing world.