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Women's Rights in the Collar City

### **Women's Rights in the Collar City**

A pivotal period in American history occurred during the nineteenth century with the birth of industrialization. Troy, a small city located in Upstate New York on the Hudson River, developed a variety of industries that were operated by local water power during this fundamental period. The city was a lively commercial and industrial center dominated by a major industry, manufacturing detachable collars, which provided employment for thousands of women. The predominant employment of these females in the major industry of Troy led to the collective organization and action of Troy's laundresses in the first women's organized union known as The Collar Laundry Union. The creation of industry in Troy marked the beginning of change for women and for industry in the Hudson Valley region. It granted women the opportunity to work as well as allowed them to stand up for their rights, which eventually led to the woman's labor movement in the United States. Second, for the Hudson Valley, industry in Troy led this area to become a corridor for commerce.

According to Frank L. Walton, "textiles marked the opening of the factory age as the child of the Industrial Revolution. The production of textiles has paced the building of American industry."<sup>1</sup> The evolution of industrialization occurred in three phases: first, an era of small-scale, craft industries, being operated by human-powered machines; a transitional phase occurred that marked a switch to machine-powered industry, with

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<sup>1</sup> Walton, Frank L.. Tomahawks to Textiles, The Fabulous Story of Worth Street. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1953. Page 170.

workers being employed by the hundreds in small scale factories; and finally, a period of industry that was large-scale and that employed thousands of workers in several different industries<sup>2</sup>. Troy's significance to the industrial movement came about during the first two phases of the development of manufactured goods with the collar manufacturing industry. The region's early industrial development attracted the inventive genius that helped broaden, diversify and expand on Troy's local enterprises<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Henry Burden developed numerous industrial innovations that allowed for the creation of new industrial business to flourish in Troy; this includes his horseshoe manufacturing machine as well as the water wheel, which brought increased power and helped to increase the scale of the manufacturing process in this city. Another inventive genius, Alexander Holley, introduced the Bessemer steel conversion process to the United States and specifically to Troy<sup>2</sup>.

Industrial development was not the only pivotal change to the economy of Troy; the Civil War had an immense impact on this city as well. Troy helped the Union army throughout the war by having most of the horseshoes used by the cavalry of the Union army being provided by Henry Burden; the clothing for Union troops produced at the Harmony Mills; and the plates for the Monitor rolled at the Rensselaer Iron Works.”<sup>2</sup> At the end of the Civil War, the one large scale industry in Troy to survive the national economic depression from 1873 to 1877 was the collar making industry. This was accomplished by steadily and eventually including over twenty factories manufacturing collars, cuffs and shirts in Troy<sup>2</sup>. This proved especially beneficial for the Hudson River Valley region because the area became the corridor for commerce where goods where

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<sup>2</sup> Corsaro, James S. and Kathleen D. Roe. "Labor and Industry in Troy and Cohoes: A Brief History." January 2000 1-12. 09/12/2007 .

received and then shipped to major metropolitan areas. This allowed more goods to come through this region and created more employment for those who lived there.

The growth of the collar industry was central to Troy's economic, social and technological changes. Detachable collars were invented and became popular because of shifts in the ways that "prosperous people demonstrated respectability and affluence."<sup>3</sup> Collars had long been linked to high status; however, the first collar manufacturer found ready markets for detachable collars because of the number of men who wore formal dress daily in public was increasing<sup>4</sup>. Hannah Lord Montague invented the first detachable collar in 1827 in Troy when she solved a common household problem: "since men's collars inevitably soiled before the shirt, Ms. Montague had to launder the entire shirt when only the collar needed cleaning."<sup>4</sup> The idea of the detachable collar came to Ms. Montague suddenly one day: "by attaching a piece of white tape at either end and sewing the selvage, she made a collar that could be washed, starched and ironed separately from the shirt."<sup>5</sup>

Collar manufacturing began as a household industry. The first manufacturers of collars were local inhabitants for whom production of goods for sale was only one source of livelihood. At first, "collar makers," employed daughters and wives who were accustomed to contributing to their family's livelihood<sup>5</sup>. The first "collar maker" was Reverend Ebenezer Brown who in 1829 had his wife and daughter begin to cut collars that were sent out to be stitched<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Turbin, Carole. Collars and Consumers: Changing Images of American Manliness and Business. Old Westbury New York: 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Turbin, Carole. Working Women of Collar City: Gender, Class, and Community in Troy, New York, 1864-86.

Collar making did not transform production as quickly or as dramatically as the early nineteenth century's better known textile mills. However, by the 1860s, collar industries dominated the region's economy. "In the 1860s, about three-thousand seven-hundred women worked in collar factories and shops and hundreds perhaps thousands, stitched collars in homes in Troy. By the 1880s, collar factories employed over eight-thousand operatives and thousands of home workers."<sup>5</sup>

Organized labor was an integral part of the development of the collar industry. Women played a substantial role in the history of work in the region. "This was the genius of mechanical industry; it opened wider fields of industry for men and for women also."<sup>5</sup> Female workers were full-time, permanent employees in the collar and textile industries in Troy, as well as housekeepers and part-time employees in the city's local industries. These women faced many disadvantages in industry. One worker recounts "the starching rooms were very hot and stuffy...and the work was hard on the hands and the working hours were about eight hour days."<sup>5</sup> Troy's laundresses had to work with boiling water, strong chemicals and hot irons. If a shirt was damaged in the process, a woman's pay would be reduced<sup>6</sup>. Not only were the working conditions horrendous, but these "factory girls were considered the lowest class among women."<sup>6</sup> Usually, women's work within industry was under compensated throughout the nation because females were considered money-savers for companies<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Women of Lowell. New York: Arno Press, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> "The Collar Laundry Union 1864 to 1870." Women's Labor Union. 15 Sep 2007  
<<http://www.connectedkids.info/CKArts/CKweb/TroyArtHistory/TroyInnovations>  
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Most nineteenth century Irish working women were on the poorest levels of the working class. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Troy had a large proportion of immigrants in its working-class population. “Located on a major waterway that offered convenient transportation from ports of arrival, including the Hudson River region, this city, after the 1840s attracted increasing numbers of immigrants from Ireland and small numbers of immigrants from Germany and French Canada.”<sup>5</sup> The Irish immigrants who came to America after 1845 faced an insurmountable number of disadvantages because they came to America in large numbers with “no urban skills at a time when opportunities for unskilled immigrants had narrowed and prejudice against Catholics in general and the Irish in particular were strong.”<sup>5</sup> More disadvantaged than most during this time were the working immigrant Irish women of Troy, who were the majority of employees of the collar industry<sup>2</sup>. These collar employees worked for the short-term goal of immediate economic necessity. The income of these women, from the poorest households helped to provide their families with food, shelter and other necessities<sup>5</sup>. These Irish working women played a predominant and disadvantaged role in the Troy collar industry.

Although these are just a few examples of the hardships women faced in industry throughout the nation, including in Troy, the collar industry also provided opportunities for these workers. For instance, only in the collar industry, “where women posed no threat to men,” did they achieve wages that approximated “male” pay rates<sup>2</sup>. This industry also guaranteed blue-collar employment for women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries<sup>2</sup>. These favorable working circumstances gave women the chance to strike and protest the many negative aspects of industry.

Women played a notable role in the uprising in Troy that eventually led to a national woman's labor movement. One of the first female-led labor strikes occurred in 1836 in the cotton-factory operatives in Lowell Massachusetts. One of the women involved in the strike recalls "A large number of girls marched that day to protest unfair wages. As I looked at all the girls in line with me, I was more proud than I have ever been at any success I may have achieved."<sup>6</sup> The strike of 1836 set the precedent for future working women strikes. The early 1860s marked an upsurge in labor organizing that was in large part due to the current economic and social conditions of the United States. "Workers faced inflation due to government issuance of currency in 1863 and anticipated competition from freed slaves and returning soldiers from war."<sup>5</sup> The collar laundry women in 1864 had created the first strong women's labor union in the United States. Esther Keegan and Kate Mullaney suggested the complex conditions and events that led to the collar laundresses' organization in 1864. "When the Civil War broke out the women's weeks' wages could only buy a pair of shoes; when they asked higher wages they were not listened to. But when the women organized into a union they got the advance they asked for."<sup>5</sup> The only way these collar laundresses were eventually heard was by forming into an organized union.

Kate Mullaney was the key figure in the establishment of this powerful woman's union. Mullaney was an Irish immigrant who moved to America with her family. She began working to support her mother and her three siblings after the untimely death of her father<sup>7</sup>. Mullaney knew

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"Kate Mullaney: A True Labor Pioneer." Kate Mullaney: A True Labor Pioneer. 15 Sep 2007 <<http://www.pef.org/katemullaney.htm>>.

“that over 3000 women, almost half of Troy’s female industrial workers were employed in the collar industry; organizing would be a monumental task though. These women all worked twelve to fourteen hour days and many of the girls also had their household responsibilities. There were no large meeting halls to get together and discuss the union and it was dangerous that so many were waiting to take their jobs. Yet she was determined and knew what she needed to do.”<sup>8</sup>

Kate Mullaney was a true labor pioneer and the union she formed was successful because she thought of herself and other working women as man’s equal; because of this belief Mullaney hoped that men would support women in their efforts to organize<sup>8</sup>. Shortly after forming the union with her co-worker Esther Keegan approximately three hundred women went on strike from the fourteen commercial laundry establishments. The union had the full support of the all-male Iron Moulders’ union and its president William Sylvis. By 1866, the union members’ earnings increased from eight dollars to fourteen dollars per week<sup>8</sup>. When the Collar laundry Union went on strike in 1869, the Iron Moulders declared “we will to a man support our fellow working women who are now struggling for their just dues and independence. Our hand is in theirs and the purse in it.”<sup>8</sup> As William Sylvis, National Labor Union president stated “the Troy girls worked hard, doing what they could in a practical way to work out their own salvation.”<sup>7</sup> The Collar Laundry Union lasted six years, longer than any other women’s union and indeed, longer than any men’s unions at the time. This union was dissolved in 1870 after a seven month strike in 1869 when three-thousand women were threatened to be put out of work because of introduction of paper collars to the collar manufacturing industry.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "United States." Organizing Informal Women Workers. 15 Sep 2007  
<<http://www.streetnet.org/za/english/GallinHornpaper.htm>>.

The Collar Laundry Union led to the creation of a national woman's labor movement. Kate Mullaney recognized "the ability of her members and realized that they were just as competent as gentlemen. She also realized that the same level of competence did not exist with other women's groups and she offered to send her members to help women organize."<sup>8</sup> Women not only organized their own respective unions, but were allowed membership into unions that only supported men before 1864.

"The Cigar-makers' Union admitted women into membership in 1867; a Women's Typographical Union grew out of Susan Anthony's Working Women's Association by 1869; the Knights of Labor organized in 1869, began admitting women in 1881; finally, a broader based development with a more lasting impact was the formation of the National Women's Trade Union League."<sup>9</sup>

This was inspired by the example of the Women's Trade Union League in Britain founded by Emma Patterson who had herself been inspired by the example of the American women workers' unions she saw<sup>9</sup>. This growing woman's labor movement affected the Hudson Valley region as well in 1922 when Eleanor Roosevelt became an active member in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). The WTUL was founded in 1903 by Jane Addams, Mary Anderson and other trade unionists and established better working conditions for women and encouraged women to join the labor movement<sup>9</sup>. When Eleanor Roosevelt became an active participant in the WTUL, this union emerged as "the central meeting place for reform-minded women interested in labor issues."<sup>(10)</sup> This granted more women rights in the workplace. One way the Hudson Valley region is protecting women in the workforce is by having organizations readily available with resources and assistance to "further the protection and enfranchisement of working

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<sup>9</sup> "Women's Trade Union League." Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site. 6 Oct 2007 <<http://www.nps.gov/archive/elro/glossary/womens-trade-union-league.htm>>.



women in the Hudson Valley.”<sup>10</sup> These organizations of today are similar to the Collar Laundry Union in representing working women.

However, the mid-twentieth century saw a decline in many of the industrial towns in the Hudson Valley region. Over the past forty to fifty years, parts of the Hudson Valley have seen economic decline and unemployment to a greater degree due to a decrease in industry in New York State<sup>11</sup>. In this region to this day, there are abandoned factories and old buildings which are remnants of a once thriving area<sup>3</sup>.

Although the women’s labor movement was beneficial for many women, in today’s society there still exists flagrant inequalities for women in the workplace. In most areas of employment, women’s presence is felt and their voices are heard. Despite the progress that has been made over the years in comprehending the value of women’s contribution to the workplace, major problems still exist. For instance, unequal pay as well as the proportion of women in top jobs is miniscule in comparison to the entire women’s task force<sup>12</sup>.

During the nineteenth century, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others from the suffrage movement attempted to enlist working women to their cause. Kate Mullaney “viewed herself like many women in the working class as men’s equals as workers and trade unionists, but not as men’s political equals”<sup>8</sup>. Mullaney and Anthony, along with the other suffragists, formed a working friendship and collaborated together

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<sup>10</sup> Hudson Valley Area Labor Federation. 6 Oct 2007 <<http://www.hvalf.org/>>.

<sup>11</sup> "Hudson Valley." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 6 Oct 2007 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson\\_Valley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson_Valley)>.

<sup>12</sup> "Changing Role of Women in Employment." Women's Employment. 6 Oct 2007 <<http://amrrhm.supanet.com/employment.html>>.

on some business matters. Suffragists believed that “working women could only escape their difficulties by obtaining the ballot.”<sup>5</sup> In a variety of situations, some women unionists engaged in debates concerning suffrage for women. Kate Mullaney and Esther Keegan had contact with Anthony and occasionally sought the assistance of the suffrage movement, however, the voices of the leaders of the Collar Laundry Union were absent from debates concerning women’s rights to vote<sup>5</sup>. The collar laundresses were focused on their cause which allowed for a woman’s labor movement to ensue. However, had this powerful women’s union aligned itself with the suffragists could the ballot for women been obtained sooner?

The city of Troy is a historical Mecca filled with great history from the Industrial Revolution. Troy was the place where the detachable collar was invented and first manufactured, it was also the birth place of the first all-female labor union that gave women around the rest of the country the courage to strike. This meant a great deal of change was coming to the Hudson River Valley region and the nation in the form of industry and women’s rights. This change revolutionized the rights of women and has impacted the rights of women workers to this day.

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