

Women in Labor Movements

in the Hudson River Valley

Ladies in Labor Movements?

- Labor movements have existed for centuries, but have not been gender equal movements
- Women were at a disadvantage in the movements, as they had a late start at becoming part of the labor force in general

Local Ladies' Labor

- The Hudson River Valley includes **Troy** and **New York City**
- Both areas are significant parts of women's involvement in labor movements



Troy, NY 1909

Background: Women in the Labor Force

- Any study of women's involvement must first consider their place in the labor force
- The key area for women workers was sweatshop labor



Sweatshop Labor

- Included a wide variety of jobs and specializations
- Did not necessarily require an education, could be learned through training or on the job
 - this was good for immigrant women and their daughters
- Disdained by other Americans
- Most common:
 - commercial laundries
 - collar-and-cuff-making factories

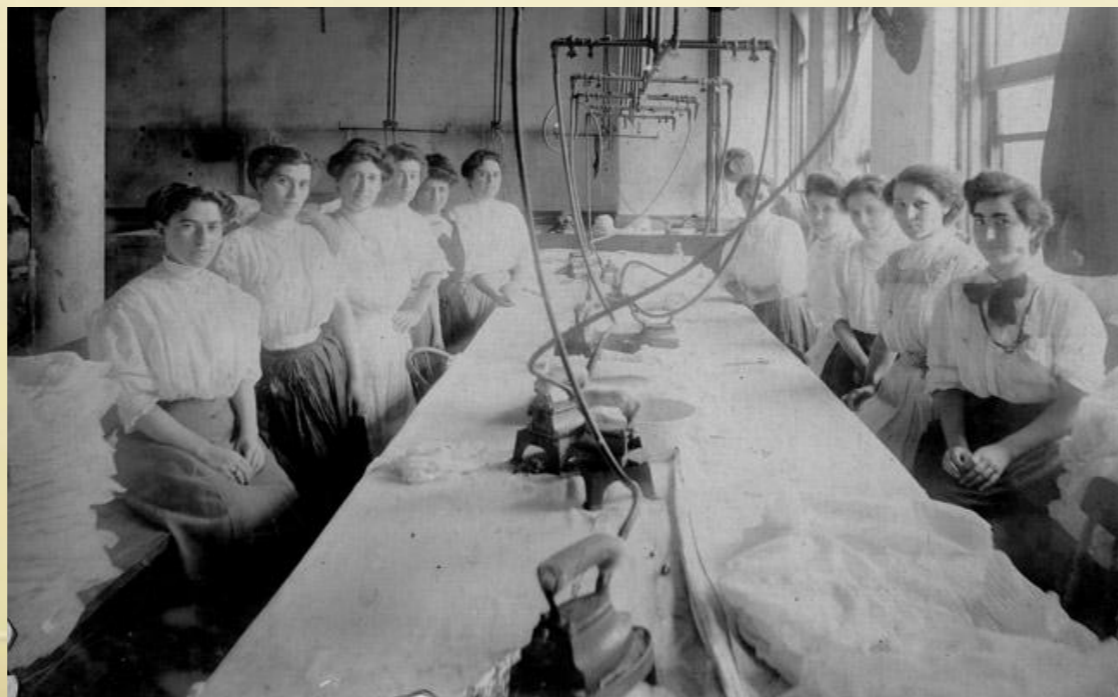


Ladies' Laundry Labor

- Changing attitudes towards personal cleanliness made laundries a viable sector
- Of domestic origins, so an apt sector for women
- Possible to do at home or for a company

Ladies' Laundry Labor

- Just because it was considered “**women’s work**” didn’t mean it was easy, especially when done at a company-size scale
- Included harmful substances at high temperatures, heavy things, long hours, and generally difficult conditions



Collared and Cuffed

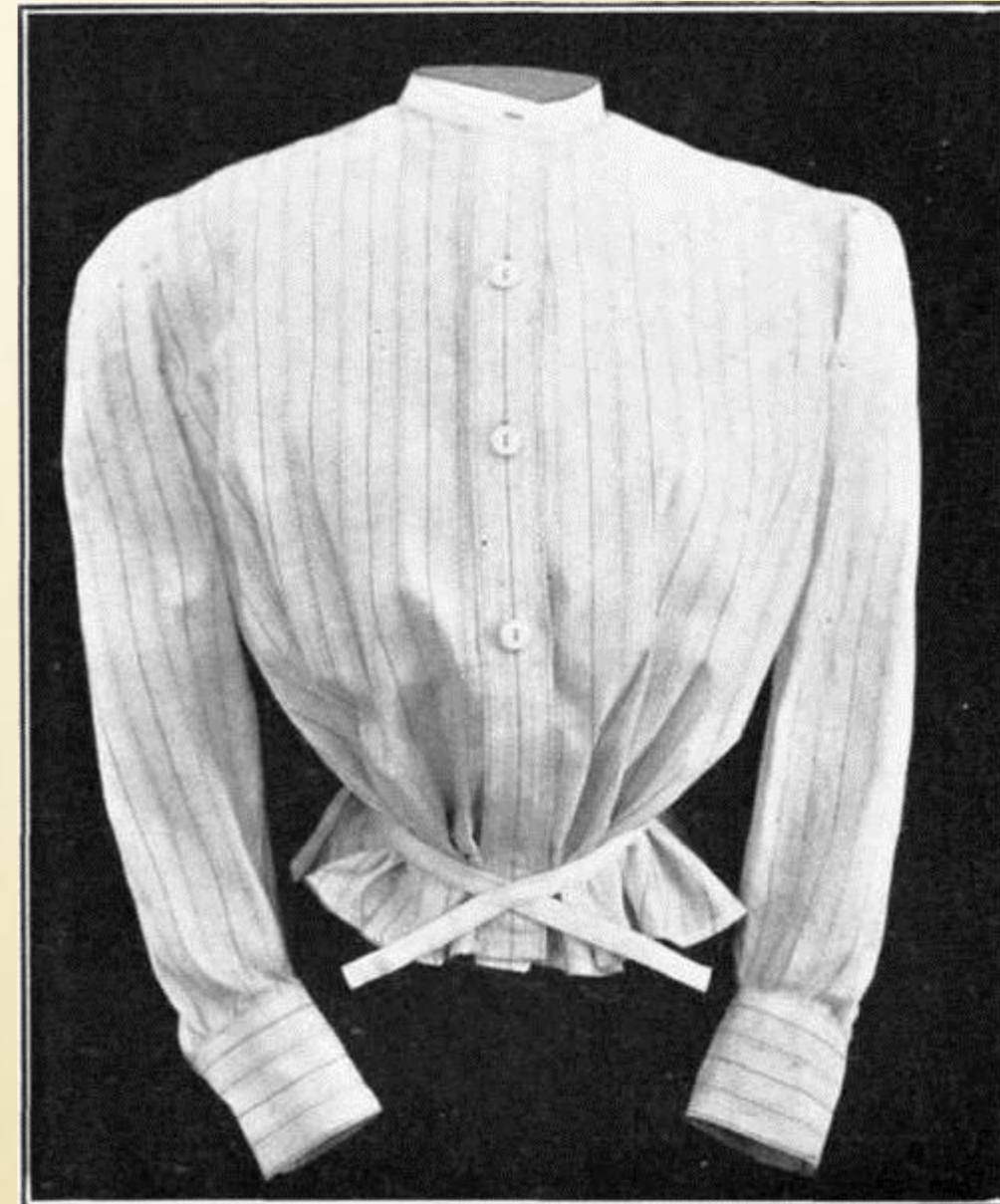
- Working at a collar-and-cuff factory was one of the few available, and reasonably well-paid, jobs for women
- It included positions for sewers, laundresses, starchers, and ironers

Collared and Cuffed: Sewers

- Worked on actually stitching together the collars and cuffs, or parts of them
- Much of this process was simplified and stream-lined so each person only did a small part

Collared and Cuffed: Laundresses

- Cleaned the product, bleached it, and then washed it again
- This included the aforementioned conditions of laundry-workers, and was generally difficult



The Shirtwaist an item manufactured and worn by most women in the garment industry

Collared and Cuffed: Starchers

- Applied the right amount of starch to the product, which took time to learn and was not very easy
- Many suffered damage to their hands from the constant exposure to hot water and starch, among other debilitating conditions

Collared and Cuffed: Ironers

- The last step was for workers to use hot and heavy irons to smooth the final product
- This required strength and delicacy, as the women had to be able to lift and use the irons, as well as know how much pressure to apply to get a firmly pressed collar without burning the fabric

Collared and Cuffed: Collective Labor

- Each worker relied on the one before her to do her job properly so that she, in turn, could do hers
- If, for example, the starcher did not do her job properly, the ironing would not take, and the product would have to be re-laundered, re-starched, and re-ironed
- Even though the groups of female laborers in this sector were divided by task, they were connected to one another, relied on one another, and supported each other in the labor movements

Contributing to the Movement

- Once women were a part of the labor force, they were able to begin to contribute to the labor movement
- In early labor times, like the 1860s, fewer women were organized and so the accomplishments of the few female labor unions were more remarkable and important
- By the 1880s, more women were involved in labor and labor movements, so it was less unusual to have a high number of women in a labor union

Collar Laundry Union

- Founded in Troy, NY, in 1864 by **Kate Mullany**, an ironer, and a few of her fellow workers
- The union was composed primarily of ironers, but included other collar-workers as well
- Important because of its success and because of how early it was



Collar Laundry Union

- They protested low wages and bad working conditions
 - They were able to successfully strike for increased wages and better conditions multiple times
- However, striking could be difficult for a union like the Collar Laundry Union because smaller sweatshops had a harder time gathering sufficient numbers and support.
 - So they had a harder time getting the leverage to bargain for what they wanted

Lady-Knights of Labor



Great Seal of
the Knights of Labor

- **The Knights of Labor** was a nation-wide union with a significant presence in the Hudson River Valley, as it included the industrial epicenters of Troy and New York City
- Women were allowed in the KOL because of how women figured into the Knights' views

Lady-Knights of Labor

- The KOL wanted to return to the day when women were not required to work outside of the home to support their families
- However, they understood why women participated in the labor force and accepted it

Lady-Knights of Labor

- The Knights also wanted women to get equal wages with men because that would hopefully decrease sex competition
- If the sexes got the same wages, employers would not be able to undercut men by hiring women, or cheat women out of the wages they deserved

Lady-Knights of Labor

- However, the women's involvement with the KOL was not without its problems
- Many women were involved in the **Joan of Arc Assembly**, which was a sub-branch of the KOL under its control.
 - When the KOL decided the women of the Assembly were to end a strike, they had to, whether they wanted to or not

Lady-Knights of Labor

- When the KOL bargained with employers for benefits or to end a strike, the representative Knights were often men from other labor sectors who did not know the concerns of female workers, workers in the collar industry, or both
- Men were better at advocating for men, so women were often without influence in the bargaining process of the KOL, and lost key benefits that they wanted to gain from their employers
- Even though women who worked in the collar business were typically able to have more bargaining power than other laborers (they were more skilled and less replaceable, if employers were to maintain their standards of production), they still often lacked sufficient leverage to achieve all of their goals

Conclusions

- The labor sectors that women worked in were often the less skilled, more menial jobs
- They were also often related to domestic activities in some ways, which meant that the women (theoretically) needed less training, and would be able to transition better from the home to the workplace if their tasks were the same or very similar

Conclusions

- Women wanted better working conditions and hours, but getting better pay was the most important cause
- Women were primarily involved in labor movements that covered the sectors they worked in
- Because those were often made up almost entirely of women, women felt compared to form their own labor movements
- If, instead, they chose to join a pre-existing group, women would often create (or were segregated to) their own branch, as could be seen with their participation in the Knights of Labor