



Lowell National Historical Park

The quarter depicted above was produced as part of the U.S. Mint's America the Beautiful Quarter Series. It displays the image of a mill girl, working at a power loom with its prominent circular bobbin battery. Behind her, a piece of the city's skyline, including a smoke stack and the iconic Boott Mill clock tower, can be seen through a window.

The Rise, Fall and (Possible) Resurrection of Lowell, Massachusetts

ROBERT FORRANT



Editor's Introduction: *In this 50th anniversary issue we have endeavored to offer some articles that highlight historic events and changes over the past fifty years, in addition to articles that offer reinterpretations of well-known topics or document lesser-known events. This article admirably fulfills all of these goals. In the opening one-third of his article, Dr. Forrant sketches a succinct overview of Lowell's history from 1820 to 1970, a period in which Lowell led the nation in both industrialization and then deindustrialization. Although popular and public memory often associates deindustrialization with the midwestern "Rust Belt" states of the 1970s and 1980s, Massachusetts was the real poster child for the demise of manufacturing in the U.S. Between 1920 and 1960, nearly all of the Commonwealth's textile mills and textile jobs were lost as mill owners relocated to the South and then abroad in pursuit of ever lower wages and higher profits.*

Dr. Forrant documents these forces and their impact on the city of Lowell, whose experience and fate were shared by other textile cities in the Commonwealth: Lawrence, New Bedford, Fall River and Holyoke. However, Lowell was unique in the 1970s in its ability to successfully navigate and create the foundations for a new economy. The remaining two-thirds of his article focuses on developments over the past fifty years. Anchored by the National Historical Park (NHP), established in 1978, a new economy based on historic preservation, tourism, and mill reuse emerged.

In the 1970s, the concept of a city being designated as a national park was novel and even confusing to many. As historian Cathy Stanton explains:

Unlike traditional national parks, it is not a neatly bounded by a piece of real estate owned outright by the National Park Service, but a series of open spaces and buildings within the downtown area and along a canal system that once powered the textile mills. This kind of decentralized park . . . has now become more common in the Park Service, but when Lowell NHP was being developed, it was an entirely new concept. Visitors—and even local residents—are often still confused about where the park actually is . . .¹

Park rangers often explain to disoriented tourists that, “The park is the city and the city is the park.”

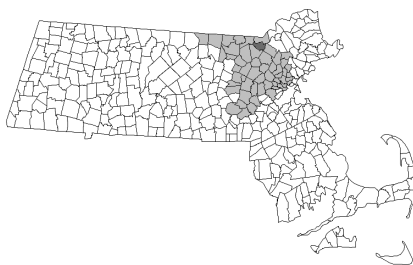
Lowell enjoyed several unique factors that contributed to the success of the NHP’s “culture-based approach to revitalization” and the city’s partial “renaissance.”² These included its proximity to Boston, a major public university and several colleges, and forward-looking preservationists and urban planners who learned from the mistakes of the 1950s-60s and seized on new federal and state funding opportunities.

However, Lowell’s “success” has been slow (over many decades), checkered and faltering at times. Not all have benefitted as gentrification increasingly threatens older communities. Despite much progress, Lowell remains deeply divided both economically and culturally. In 2018 over a fifth of residents (22.4%) lived in poverty and Lowell ranked 284 out of 299 Massachusetts communities in per capita income at \$23,136. For median household income, Lowell ranked 307th of 313 cities and towns in the Commonwealth.

Cultural differences and divisions have also stalled and stymied progress over the past fifty years. In 2020 the city’s racial and ethnic groups were: White—40.6%, Asian—22.1%, Latino—21.7%, African American—8.3%, and “other”—6.3%. In 2020 Lowell was home to the second-largest Cambodian American population in the U.S., with significant numbers of Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Burmese. The Latino population is equally varied and includes Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Colombians, Mexicans, Guatemalans, El Salvadorans, and Puerto Ricans. Dr. Forrant, a Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, is ideally situated to document the city’s rich and complex history.

L. Mara Dodge

New England is the birthplace of American industry, as the many mill buildings still dotting its landscape will attest. Sturdy affairs with high ceilings and enormous windows to let in natural light, Lowell residents often comment that such places have *good bones*. Osteology aside, from 1870 to 1900, Lowell's textile production increased,



Lowell & Middlesex County

but employment declined from 17,000 in 1895 to less than 14,000 by 1920. In the 1920s and 1930s, factory complexes across Lowell plunged into an eerie quiet. Until then, the city had “sustained a fairly stable economy based for over one hundred years on textile manufacturing powered by a complex canal system,” according to historian Mehmed Ali. However, competition from the South, coupled with a lack of investment, propelled Lowell into a downward spiral, “leaving the populace without a clear *raison d’être* for their city.”³

Throughout New England in the 1920s and 1930s, the story repeated as thousands of mill workers and their families contended with economic insecurity and stunted futures. At the same time, millions of square feet of prime real estate sat unused and highly visible. The empty or nearly empty spaces presented tremendous challenges to city officials intent on recharging their community's economic batteries. This article focuses on Lowell's history of decline and explores how it handled the dislocation as both jobs and the tax base disappeared. It asks many questions: Is Lowell's story representative or emblematic of how other Massachusetts cities dealt with a similar history? What unique factors provided Lowell with municipal advantages as it engaged in its protracted makeover? To what degree did Lowell succeed in creating a new economic foundation for its residents; a new civic and social foundation? We begin with a bit of history. What follows is the story of how Lowell—and by extension, other mill cities—reckoned with the devastating 1920s, the economic depression before the Great Depression, deindustrialization, and responses to sagging fortunes in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond.

LOWELL'S INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, 1820s-1920s

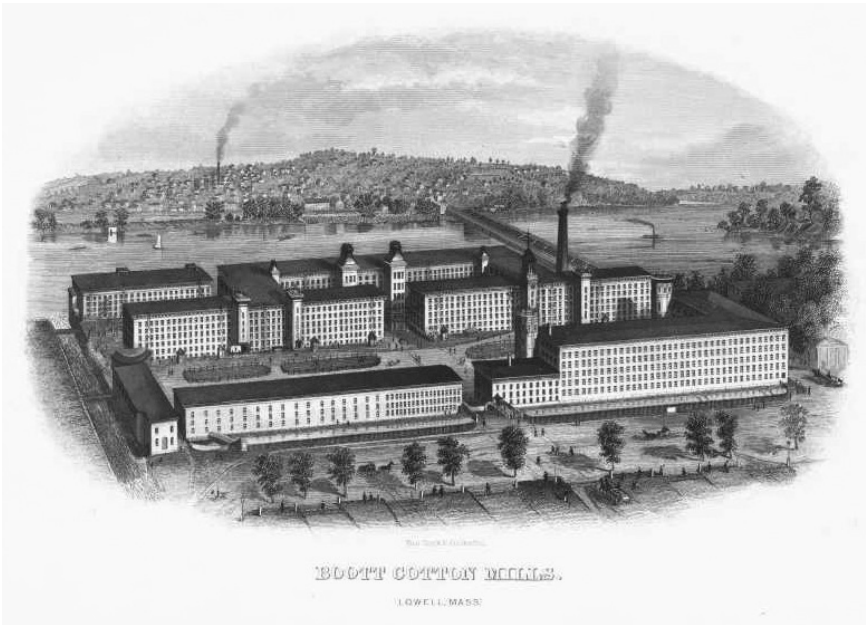
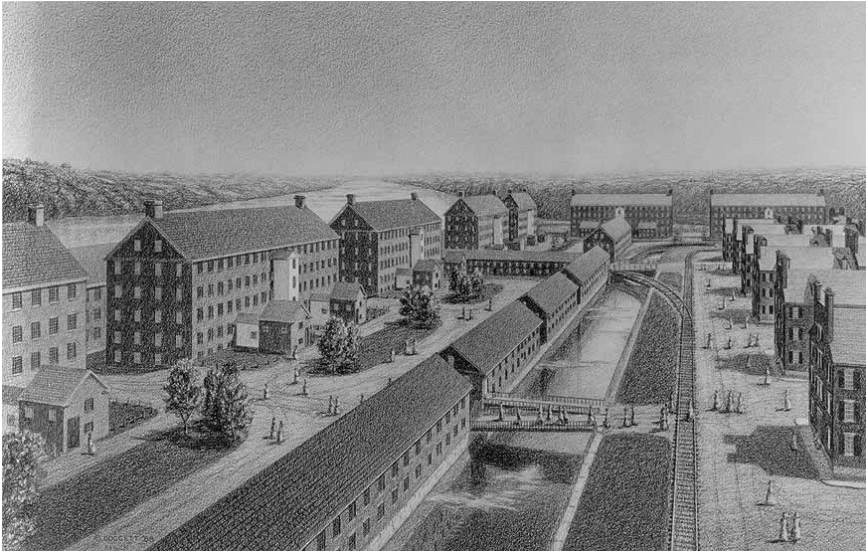
In Lowell, investors financed, and Irish immigrants built, the canals and waterpower infrastructure for the country's first large-scale textile district during the late 1820s and early 1830s. In the 1840s, they did something

similar in nearby Lawrence. They then harnessed the Connecticut River in Western Massachusetts, laying the foundation for industrial growth in Holyoke. In Lowell, new immigrants from Armenia, Canada, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, and other countries joined the industrial workforce or operated small businesses. What started with a handful of mills in the 1820s quickly became a textile empire. Textile investors controlled a fifth of the nation's spindles, a third of New England's railroad mileage, and two-fifths of Boston's banking capital. Steven Yafa, in *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber*, summarizes this history:

Within a decade of Lowell's founding, New England's textile aristocracy had gained so much wealth and political power that they had become uncrowned royalty. Their money paid for schools, hospitals, museums, churches, and parks in and around Boston. . . . These "Lords of the Loom" lived with their clans in an exclusive Boston enclave . . . When they traveled to Lowell . . . they soon departed. They were not about to make this mill community their home.⁴

In 1860, Lowell, the second-largest city in Massachusetts, had 36,000 residents, 14,000 of them employed in the city's textile mills. Each week, workers turned roughly 800,000 pounds of cotton into 2.4 million yards of cloth. As the nineteenth century progressed, immigrants poured into Lowell's factories and worked standing in front of textile machinery ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week. By the 1870s, they had become the region's primary workforce. According to George Kenngott's count in *The Record of a City* (1912), in the early 1900s, there were just 20,000 native-born residents of native-born parents in Lowell. In addition, there were 20,000 French-Canadians, 8,000 Greeks, 5,000 Portuguese, 2,500 Eastern Europeans, and smaller numbers of immigrants from Sweden, Germany, Armenia, Lithuania, and Syria. This history remains evident in neighborhood food stores, ethnic restaurants, social clubs, religious institutions, and summertime festivals and fairs.⁵

Manufacturing success was ephemeral; by the mid-1920s, Lowell's industrial base crumbled. Competitive advantages dissipated with the advent of steam engines, coal-fired furnaces, and electricity, reducing the importance of waterpower. Between 1910 and 1920, Merrimack Valley factories employed 150,000 people, a labor force not equaled before or since. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, Massachusetts lost 45% of its textile jobs. Lowell factories either closed entirely or laid off significant portions of their workforces. As the National Park Service summarized:

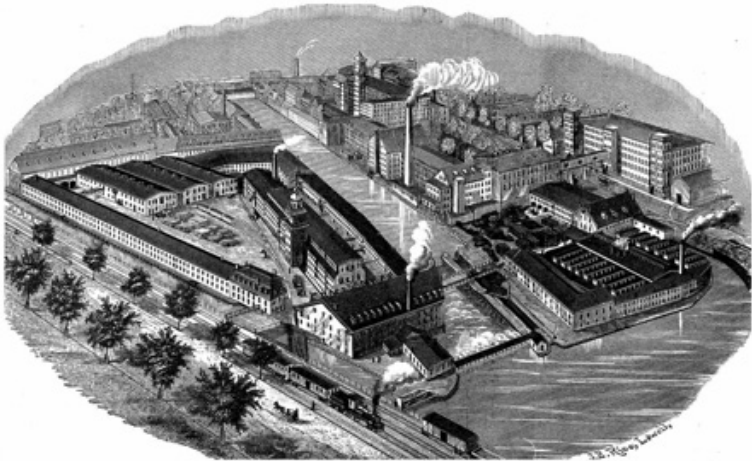


Lowell and Boott Cotton Mills, 1850s
(Top image from NPS, Kirk Doggett, Illustrator)



Lowell Machine Shop Before 1930s Demolition

Source: NY Public Library Digital Collections



Lowell Machine Shop Complex, c. 1882
Today the site of the Hamilton Innovation District

Lowell mill owners knew that their mills were aging as early as the 1890s, becoming increasingly noncompetitive. Yet, management chose not to modernize their Lowell operations. They either took their operations elsewhere or used the profits from their Lowell mills to finance modern textile plants in the South.⁶

The Bigelow Carpet Company, Bay State Woolen Mills, the Belvidere Woolen Company, and the Middlesex, Hamilton, Suffolk, Tremont, and Massachusetts mills stopped production. However, many reopened during the World War II only to close shortly after the war ended. Overall, manufacturing employment fell in Lowell from 40,000 jobs in 1920 to 15,500 in 1940. According to Parker, “The manufacture of cotton textiles ceased to be the city’s leading industry.” To put the decline in perspective, by 1936, just 8,000 people worked in Lowell’s cotton mills, roughly the same number as in 1836.⁷

The 1930s demolition of the “Lowell Machine Shop” (in reality, an enormous manufacturing complex) both marked and symbolized the death spiral for the city’s mills. An innovative builder of textile machinery for nearly one hundred years, once the industry downsized, what it did became irrelevant. The company built textile machinery and manufactured the waterwheels, turbines, and steam engines that provided the power, along with the shafts, gears, and pulleys that transferred power within the mill. One of the three largest textile machine manufacturers in the U.S., it also produced the locomotives that helped transform New England’s transportation system. Its influence extended far beyond Lowell, as it built machine tools and complete sets of machinery for textile mills throughout New England.⁸

Nearly three years into the Great Depression, journalist Louis Adamic received an assignment from *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* to examine the impact of the economic calamity on working people in several New England mill towns. On the train from Boston’s North Station to Lowell, Adamic sat beside a traveling salesman who offered this assessment of the city: “Things are pretty low in Lowell. That is a gag among us salesmen who cover this territory, but ‘low in Lowell’ is putting it mildly.” Adamic acknowledged that Lowell was once one of the nation’s most important cotton textile centers. He interviewed Charles M. Runels, executive secretary of the Lowell Chamber of Commerce, who candidly admitted, “He was spending sleepless nights trying to think of something—anything—that would put the city back on its feet industrially.”⁹



Merrimack Manufacturing Co., 1928



Textile Mill Workers, c. 1910s

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

Deindustrialization, defined as a process of social and economic change caused by removing or reducing industrial capacity in a region, is not a recent phenomenon. The word's origins date to World War II when Nazis stripped occupied areas of their industry. Deindustrialization commenced in Lowell before the precise academic language used to describe what occurred had been popularized. During the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, the term resurfaced in the work of growing numbers of economists, labor historians, and geographers as an explanation for economic change, particularly the sharp decline of basic industries.¹⁰

In *Lowell: A Study of Industrial Development*, Margaret Parker found that in 1930 miles of city streets were lined with “drab and cheerless tenements,” poor, crowded cottages, and once-good houses now “decaying and shabby.” According to Parker, “the poorer residence districts are massed near the mills, and the good residence districts are those far removed from the industrial areas.”¹¹ She offered this sanguine assessment of Lowell's future:

Thus, the city that a century ago represented a model manufacturing community and a daring experiment in industrial management, one that attracted the interest of persons throughout the United States and Europe, begins the second century of its life faced with grave problems. Solutions may require even more foresight, initiative, and energy than contributed to making Lowell America's first industrial city.¹²

Lowell's economic difficulties “left their scars upon the city” as the land occupied by factories became empty and unused. “Foundation walls or occasional heaps of discarded brick or stone show where some of the former buildings stood.” Parker noted that many such spaces existed in the heart of the city. Discussing Lowell's fortunes after World War II, Marc Miller concluded, “The war could not alter Lowell's position as a nineteenth-century anachronism in the twentieth century. On the contrary, it had postponed tackling necessary transformations of the city.”¹³

The Lowell National Historical Park's account of this period of the city's history summarized:

When the war ended in 1945, orders for munitions and textiles fell off, and the city lapsed into its old economic doldrums....The city's fortunes were at their lowest in the post-war years with the

closing of the Boott and Merrimack mills in the 1950s. The latter's mills and boardinghouses soon fell victim to the urban renewal programs of the 1960s, along with the tenement neighborhood of Little Canada. . . . The remaining mill buildings seemed to be bleak reminders of an era of hard work and meager reward. For many residents, remembering the past stirred up feelings of anger and abandonment.¹⁴

Laurence Gross, in his history of the closure of the Boott Mill Complex, concluded:

While Lowell had initially benefited from the available power, transportation, capital, soft water, and closeness to the financial center of Boston, by the twentieth century, all these factors either had been overcome by southern sites or had ceased to play a determinate role. By 1920, various parties indicated that the South held the advantage regarding proximity to cotton, cost of power, tax burden, and labor laws. One crucial point, in all analyses, came to be the cost of labor, clearly higher in the North than the South.¹⁵

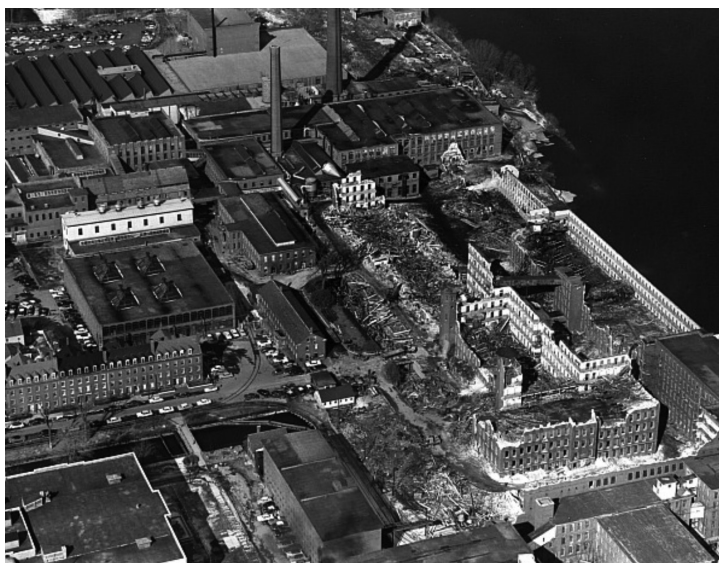
In 1951, President Harry Truman's Council of Economic Advisors highlighted New England's signs of decay. No longer did firms adapt to changing production technologies, nor were machinery builders sufficiently engaged in new product development. Firms de-emphasized skill and "turned their attention away from industrial progress and have shown, too often, a greater interest in the preservation of the status quo." The Council warned:

To some extent manufacturing success in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century seems to have bred lethargy and complacency among New England industrialists, which handicapped the region in its competition with newer regions. The gap between ownership policies motivated by short-run financial considerations and the need for long-run modernization, research, and product development has also intensified manufacturing problems in New England.¹⁶

This description fits Lowell's mill owners. Textiles continued to falter, with the last major mills closing during the 1950s. "In 1951, 48% of the city's workers were employed in textiles, but within eight years, the percentage

had dropped to below 23 percent of Lowell's workforce."¹⁷ In *Where Is Our Responsibility?: Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960*, historian William Hartford describes how across New England, more than one out of every three remaining textile jobs disappeared during the 1950s and early 1960s. Workers who remained in textiles received just 72% of what other industrial workers made, even though their productivity was substantially higher.¹⁸ In her dissertation "Spindle City Blues," Maura Doherty noted that as the twentieth century progressed, the loss of traditional industries "was accompanied by the arrival of peripheral or secondary market jobs, with their low pay, lack of job security, low prospects for advancement, and high turnover rates."

Manufacturers employing fewer than 100 workers soon produced cheap shoes, art gum, paper tubes, lunch carts, sweaters, bathing suits, wood heels, mops, golf and sport hose, and cheap upholstered furniture on a mill floor or even a corner of a floor. With unemployment high, wages could be kept low and the empty mills offered bargain-basement rents. One enterprising person even tried running an indoor miniature golf operation. Bankers and elected officials desperately searched for any new economic engine. Initially, this led many of them to turn their collective backs on the city's industrial heritage.¹⁹ As one city councilor put it:



Aerial view of the demolition of the Merrimack Mills, 1960

And over there, the Mile of Mills has been decimated . . . only a few structures remain, and you say, Good Riddance! It's about time Lowell started a new life, with new industries, new leadership . . . The days of the Lords of the Loom are gone and along with them their way of thinking. No longer are they kicking people around. The people have come unto their own.²⁰

DEMOLITION AND URBAN “RENEWAL”: 1920s–1960s

When work disappeared, so too did workers' neighborhoods. Expendable, immigrant neighborhoods and industrial buildings nearly simultaneously fell to the wrecking ball in the 1960s and 1970s. According to most city leaders, the way forward necessitated a wrenching break with the past, a concept replicated throughout the industrial Northeast. It represented a belief that tearing down distressed areas would attract outside investment dollars. According to Ali, “Realizing that the city's fate could never solely depend on what few textile corporations remained, the local elite helped create two organizations, the New Industrial Plants Foundation (NIP) and the Lowell Development and Industrial Commission . . . to oversee the construction of a new industrial park.”²¹

However, the eagerly awaited jumpstart from years of demolishing immigrant neighborhoods never materialized. The Church Street urban renewal project tore down 68 properties and displaced 165 families. The area became a large parking lot, a Stop & Shop, and a Zayre's department store. Little Canada, a substantially larger project, encompassed 96 acres within a few blocks of the city's downtown. In the early 1960s, 325 buildings were destroyed, including 110 businesses; 2,500 people were permanently uprooted. Many late 19th and early 20th century French-Canadian immigrants settled in the neighborhood. By the late 1960s, the Lowell Technological Institute began growing into the newly cleared space when the hoped for high-tech renaissance failed to blossom. The third large-scale effort focused on the city's Hale-Howard neighborhood, 40 acres seen at the time as a gateway into the downtown. Once city planners determined that the area constituted “a serious menace to the safety, health, morals and welfare of the residents of the City of Lowell,” the 188 families, many of whom were African American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican, days in the neighborhood were numbered.²²

These same forces pummeled urban-industrial America as suburbanization ruled the day. The Housing Act of 1949 had kick-started the urban renewal that reshaped hundreds of cities across the Northeast. Federal funding provided cities with the wherewithal to acquire areas of cities characterized as

“blighted” and “slums.” The Housing Act of 1954 made projects even more enticing to developers by, among other things, providing Federal Housing Authority-backed mortgages for possible buyers of new homes. In 1956, the Federal Highway Act gave states and the federal government nearly complete control over highway construction and multilane roads were often routed right through working-class neighborhoods. From 1950 to the early 1970s, over two thousand projects (totaling nearly \$13 billion) around the U.S. focused on tearing apartment blocks and triple-deckers down.

Sites were acquired through eminent domain: the right of the government to take over privately owned real estate for public purposes in exchange for just compensation. Local governments then sold the land to private developers at below-market prices. Developers had no incentives to supply housing for the poor. Instead, they built civic centers, office buildings, shopping centers, stadiums, hotels, and housing for the middle and upper-middle class. In 1961, Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, one of the first—and most substantial—critiques of large-scale urban renewal.²³ As even the U.S. Office of Housing and Urban Development recognized:

Compounding the 1950s and 1960s changes, when America first rushed to the suburbs, the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s saw the dramatic deindustrialization of our economy. Jobs moved from the central cities to the suburbs. . . . Business capital also migrated overseas in search of lower labor and other costs.²⁴

However, it would take a few years before organized movements challenged the process. In Lowell, opposition materialized too late for the hundreds of commercial establishments owned and operated by immigrants and their children, which were destroyed when Greek, French-Canadian, Portuguese, Latino, and African American neighborhoods were “renewed away.” Along with these neighborhoods, empty mill buildings and worker row housing fell to the wrecking ball. Mills not torn down or burned down often in arson fires stood as out-sized reminders of a time when a seemingly endless supply of job possibilities existed.²⁵

For many business, civic, and political leaders, even this remaining link to the past needed to go. The end game was to attract those emerging companies that were part of the Commonwealth’s high technology sector to newly cleared land with rents and wages lower than in nearby Boston and Cambridge. Efforts in the mid-1960s to form a historic commission that might thwart the destruction and razing of blocks of row houses proved fruitless. Proposals to fill in the city’s canals to create more downtown real

estate were made. A city councilor who led the opposition to any type of preservation summed up this prevailing sentiment: “Lowell’s past greatness is best forgotten.”²⁶

PRESERVATION & REUSE OF HISTORIC SPACES, 1970-2020

The “Massachusetts Miracle” marked a period of stunning economic growth in Massachusetts during the late 1970s and the better part of the 1980s. Market-led, high-tech growth put historic preservation on the backburner. Leaders of deindustrialized cities in the Commonwealth, including Springfield, Worcester, and Lowell, hoped to lure computer hardware and software companies to their communities. Statewide, during the boom, the unemployment rate fell from over 12% in 1975 to less than 3% in the 1980s.

The financial services sector grew as well. Firms leading the way included Digital Equipment Corporation, Data General, Prime Computer, Lotus Development Corporation, Apollo Computer, and Wang Laboratories. Apollo and Wang had Merrimack Valley roots. Apollo was founded in Chelmsford in 1980 by William Poduska and Wang was begun by Dr. An Wang, who started in Cambridge and relocated to Lowell in 1975. Neither company fared well in the long run. Despite Lowell’s efforts to clear space in the heart of the city for industrial growth, the “Massachusetts miracle” bypassed it. Wang eventually failed and city officials then had two multi-story complexes to fill along with the remaining old mill buildings.²⁷

With urban renewal producing no lasting results other than human dislocation, city planners, education leaders, and community activists began to champion different growth approaches: they had begun to envision the city’s history as key to its revitalization. In the early 1970s, planning focused on preservation as a core element of the city’s revitalization strategy. A summary of these efforts are heralded on the city’s website. Despite the decades of demolition, an area of mill buildings and canals remained intact, along the Merrimack and Concord Rivers. Other than nearby Lawrence, few other former textile centers had such a rich, surviving architectural legacy. Nor had the canals been filled in. In 1971, the Lowell City Council authorized the creation of a historic district study commission that, two years later, resulted in the creation of the city’s first historic commission.²⁸

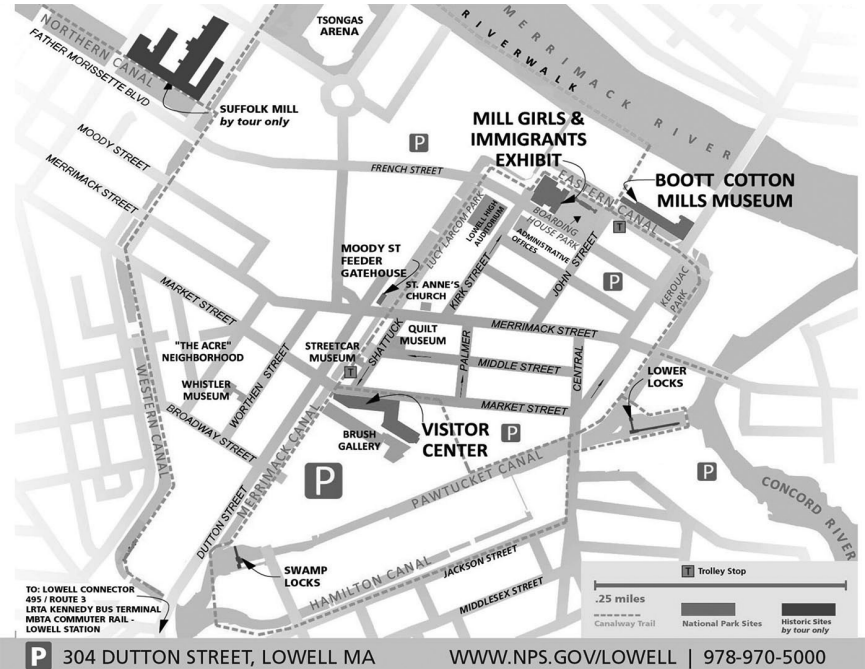
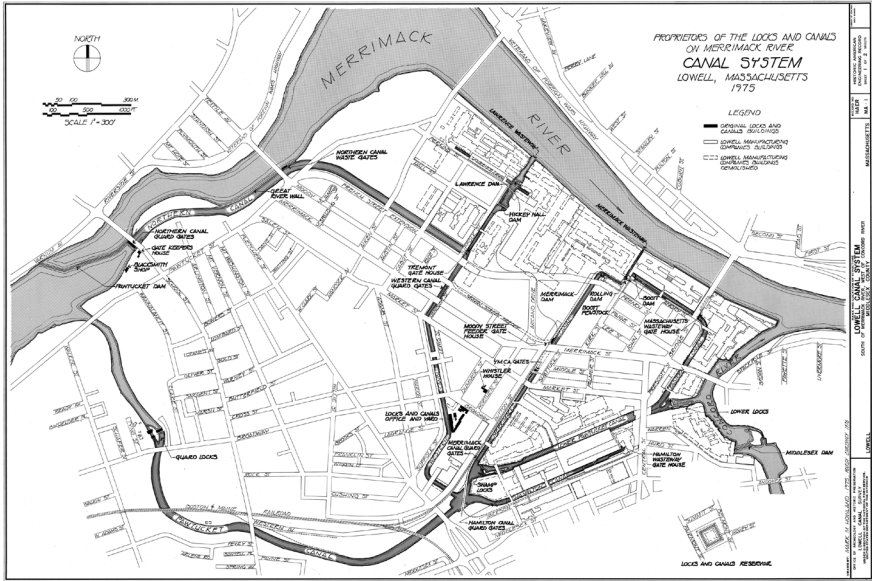
The Council also established and placed on the National Register of Historic Places the Locks and Canals Historic District (1976), which included the city’s 5.6-mile canal system and surviving mill yards. Meanwhile, in 1974 the Commonwealth established the Lowell Heritage State Park. In

1978, after much debate, the U.S. Congress agreed to federalize the project through the creation of the Lowell National Historical Park (LNHP) to be run by the National Park Service. This provided access to federal funds. The Lowell Historic Preservation Commission was established in the mid-1970s and in 1983, the Massachusetts legislature created the Lowell Historic Board and the Downtown Lowell Historic District by a special act.²⁹

In 2021 the city's website boasted that "today, preservation is the basis of much of Lowell's economic development, tourism, and marketing efforts. The community's revitalization is a tribute to the highly-successful public/private partnerships that have been a central ingredient in every project undertaken." It noted that since 1983 "nearly \$1 billion in development activity has taken place within the Downtown Lowell Historic District while nearly 98% of 5.2 million square feet of mill space has been rehabilitated." The city concluded that: "Lowell has succeeded in reclaiming the attributes that makes it a special place, using heritage as a very successful economic



Pres. Carter signs legislation creating the Lowell National Historical Park, June 7, 1978 with Sen. Ted Kennedy and Rep. Paul Tsongas



Lowell's Canal System, 1875 (above) & NPS Visitor's Map, 2022

development strategy. The city has set a standard and model for excellence that other communities have sought to follow.”³⁰

To summarize, instead of demolition and cement in the canals, Lowell’s history now mattered. As researcher Leary-Owhin put it, there was a swing from “historic destruction to adoration.” Jim Cook, former director of the Lowell Plan, one of the city’s catalytic development organizations, wryly noted, “So the buildings that previously people wanted to tear down: there was now money to fix them up and restore them.”³¹

CONTRADICTIONARY PROGRESS?

Initially, however, developments post-1978 were modest and assessments were contradictory. According to the National Park Service, the work benefited from a “new public appreciation for industrial architecture and a belated realization that preservation should embrace working-class history and culture.”³² Lowell became a place “visited by planners from other cities, and even from other countries, who want to follow Lowell’s example of using public-private partnerships to bring new life to their communities.”³³ In 2019 reporter Tom Condon’s assessment was more tempered. He perceptively noted that, “Lowell hasn’t spun dross into gold or been blessed by some other miracle. The city of 111,000 has most of the same issues that challenge other urban areas. But it has steadily moved ahead since the 1980s.” He concluded that the city was instructive for its “comeback from the loss of its principal industry” and what it was doing was instructive as part of “Massachusetts’ innovative effort to revive a whole class of . . . medium-sized former industrial cities that once anchored regional economies.”³⁴

In contrast, *Boston Globe* reporter Catie Edmondson offered a less rosy 2017 assessment:

The towering, red-bricked mills, the mural dedicated to textiles, the streetcar that still runs every day, the Merrimack River that once fueled it all—still form the foundation of the city’s downtown, giving visitors the [misleading] impression they’ve slipped into a bygone era. So it can be jarring when the reminders that Lowell is, in fact, a modern American city punch through: the women walking down the street in hijabs, the Spanish music blaring from the idling truck, the African clothing shop.³⁵

Edmondson reveals a critical tension. She noted that preservation had not served as an engine of economic development for all. The difference in the

median annual income of the poorest and richest neighborhoods in Lowell was about \$40,000. Many residents had not benefited. Instead, she concludes that “One of the leading visions among the politically powerful is some iteration of this: Lowell’s downtown industrial spaces will be developed into boutique apartments and shops to attract affluent residents who will move to Lowell and boost the city’s economy.”³⁶ The personification of gentrification, Lowell’s public and private sector developers, grappled with issues of housing affordability and too low wages for decades.

Despite progress, the lessons were mixed, at best, over the past four decades. A cursory review of wage and employment growth in the 1990s in several former Massachusetts manufacturing hubs confirms the unevenness of development following urban renewal. The *Boston Globe* reported that “in most of the state’s major cities, including New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester . . . median household income fell during the longest economic expansion in U.S. history.”³⁷ The federal office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) described these as “doubly burdened cities,” communities facing high unemployment and significant population loss or high poverty rates.

Despite the economic expansion of the 1990s and over twenty years of targeted public funding to improve life in these once-thriving older industrial cities, the gap between rich and poor only increased. Across the U.S., the bottom one-fifth of people—many residing in former steel mill cities, tire and rubber cities, and one-industry textile and apparel cities—saw their after-tax income slip 12% from 1977 to 1999. Over the same period, the after-tax income of the wealthiest one percent in the U.S. grew an astonishing 120%. In a 1999 report, HUD concluded that these “doubly burdened” cities continued to suffer many ills, including: “unacceptably high unemployment,” steady population loss, “persistently high poverty rates,” and “severe declines in the downtown retail and service sector.”³⁸

The visible resource that many older urban cores have is underutilized mill buildings. Thus, mill reuse represented one potential way to attack the issues associated with growth and social inequity documented by HUD.³⁹ Might abandoned mills become a part of a comprehensive approach to community development? Could new businesses be attracted to their cheaper-than-prevailing market-rate space? Could neighborhoods reinvigorate the spaces surrounding these abandoned complexes? And how might residents’ voices be heard in reuse planning decision-making? Mill conversions (reuse) began in earnest in the 1970s, integrating the goals of four crucial development activities—urban planning, brownfields clean-up, historic preservation, and land protection.⁴⁰

In its 2001 *Economic Development Strategy for the Merrimack Valley*, the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission pointed out that tenants of refurbished mills are very often “young companies in fast-growth sectors.” Renovated mill buildings provide “fashionable working environments.” They concluded that, “Keeping a good supply of competitively priced mill space available gives the region a distinct competitive advantage in attracting new investment and retaining expanding industries with a unique product that draws attention to the region’s industrial heritage.”⁴¹ There are additional arguments for reuse. In the *Journal of Property Management*, Kent Wadsworth suggested that: “Developers can save up to 40% on construction costs, preservationists want to see historic buildings skirt demolitions, and commercial tenants looking for large spaces in tight downtown markets have more options through reuse.”⁴²

In Lowell, the Boott Cotton Mills complex was the most intact surviving example of the earliest stages of Lowell’s mill construction. Rehabilitated starting in 1989 with generous state and federal assistance, the Boott’s renovation produced hundreds of apartments, with many of the units at below area market-rate rents. In 2022 it is home to a working textile history museum operated by the Lowell National Historical Park and an education center jointly operated by the Park and UMass Lowell. Every year, it is visited by a steady stream of tourists and by thousands of school children. There are also numerous small businesses in the complex. The Wannalancit Building, a third reclaimed mill space, utilized a unique university-private sector partnership to become home to high-tech startups and University of Massachusetts Lowell research centers and offices.⁴³

In 2004 the Urban Land Institute took stock of Lowell’s future and contended that the city was ready to begin yet another transformation, this time from a depressed Rust Belt mill town to a high-tech outpost. Its future was as an urban, commuter suburb of Boston with “a mix of housing types and incomes, a strong arts and cultural community, and a strong tourist base—and eventually as an incubator for small and medium-sized ‘creative’ companies.” Public and private investments in the repurposing of old mills for twenty-first-century business incubators, healthcare facilities, artist lofts and studios, spacious housing, and new retail shops have soared.⁴⁴ In 2020, housing and businesses occupied more than 90% of five million square feet of mill space.

Proximity to Boston, as well as educational infrastructure, were vital ingredients in the city’s economic revitalization. In 1975 two local colleges, the Lowell State Teachers College and Lowell Technological Institute merged to become the University of Lowell. In 1991, it became the University of

Massachusetts Lowell, a 20,000-student research university, the second largest in the UMass system. In addition, a campus of Middlesex Community College sits in the heart of the city and educates 11,000 people, 40% of whom are first-generation college students.

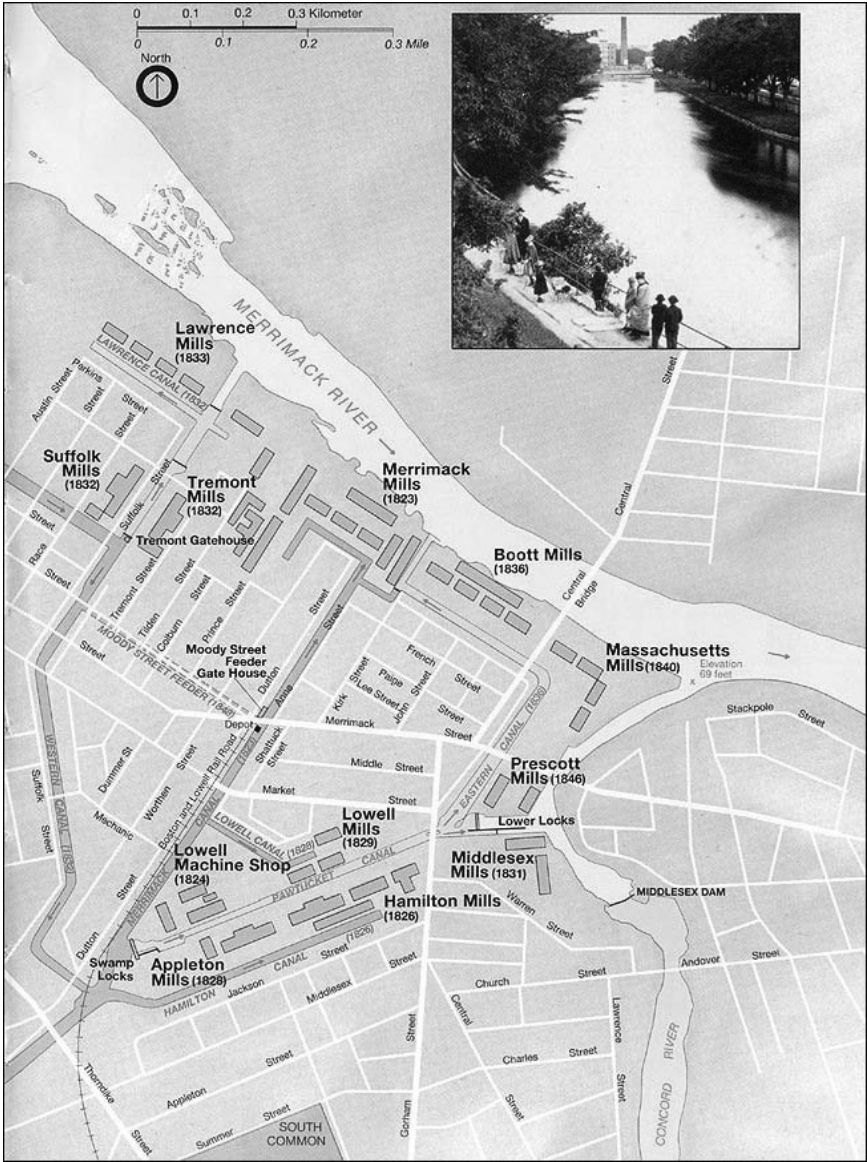
NEW IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES – OLD POVERTY RATES

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished country-based immigration quotas, also helped breathe further life into Lowell. As a renewed stream of global migrants entered the U.S., many settled in Lowell. Post-1965 immigration and refugee arrivals from several strife-torn countries in Africa and Southeast Asia transformed the city. They rescued it from further decline at a time when the white population fell dramatically. In 1920, Lowell had had a population of 112,759. With deindustrialization and the loss of thousands of jobs, this figure plummeted to 97,249 in 1950 and 92,107 in 1960. However, population growth has been slow but steady over several decades, reaching 106,519 in 2010 and 115,554 in 2020. This occurred even though the white share of the population dropped below 50%, with 10,000 fewer white residents in 2020 than there were in 2010. These post-1970 newcomers altered the cityscape just as their counterparts had done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

History still maintains a tight grip on Lowell. In 1978 *Boston Globe* reporter John Powers had identified Lowell's unique assets as its National Park, the city's designation as a federal enterprise community, and the presence of a campus of the UMass system.

Powers optimistically concluded, "Since the 1970s, Lowell has largely been on the upswing, rebuilding its economy and remaking its downtown." Yet, in 1997, Lowell still ranked in the bottom 10% among Massachusetts cities and towns in per capita income, with a fifth of the population living in poverty.⁴⁵ In 2000, Latinos comprised 6.8% of the population and Asians 3.8%. Like earlier generations, new residents were shaping and energizing the city.

Establishing businesses and enhancing the regional labor force, they also created new cultural, social, and community organizations and institutions. However, poverty remained a distinct challenge. In 2019 the Massachusetts poverty rate was 11.1%. For Middlesex County, where Lowell is located, it stood at 8.2%; Lowell's 2019 rate of 22.4% was the county's highest. In 2018, Lowell ranked 284 out of 299 Massachusetts communities in per capita income at \$23,136. Below it were Lynn, \$22,982; Fall River, \$21,257; Holyoke, \$19,968; and Springfield, \$18,133. Lawrence ranked 298 at



Lowell National Historic Park

Lowell's surviving mill complexes and canal system are marked on this NPS visitor's map.

\$16,987. For median household income of 313 cities and towns, Lawrence ranked 307, with \$39,627; Lowell at 298, with \$48,58. Preliminary 2020 census reports indicate that nearly 20% of Lowell residents lived in poverty whereas the overall state poverty rate was 8.2%.⁴⁶

LOWELL'S SUCCESS STORIES

The post-WWII growth of the Commonwealth's high-tech industry and of non-manufacturing sectors such as finance and health care did not offset the losses caused by the deindustrialization of Lowell's traditional industries.⁴⁷ However, the adaptive reuse of historic spaces breathed new life into *parts* of the city. For Mehmed Ali, once in place, "The National Park and historic preservation became fulcrums for promoting a new economic structure in the city. Once the preservation funding began flowing it wasn't long before there were advertisements asking: "Why look for an office park when you can put your office in a National Park? The Grand Canyon . . . Yosemite . . . The Everglades . . . Acadia . . . Blue Ridge Parkway . . . Mount Rushmore . . . The Boott Mills . . . We're on the List."⁴⁸

Starting in the early 2000s, one of the former Appleton Mills buildings came back to life as "Mill No. 5," a destination for dining, shopping, and entertainment on Jackson Street. The adaptive reuse project turned the empty upper floors into retail space, including a movie theater, record store, coffee shop, farmer's market, and yoga studios. The Lowell Community Charter Public School inhabits the former mill's lower floors. Across the street in a \$64 million historic restoration sits a complex of 130 artists' live and work spaces that opened in 2010. The housing is geared to individuals earning no more than 60% of the area's median income, with some units reserved for people earning as low as 30%.

Next door to the housing is the Lowell Community Health Center (LCHC). The organization purchased its Jackson St. home, the former Hamilton Mill #6 building, in 2009. The 200,000-square-foot building enabled the center to house all its services under one roof, including comprehensive primary and pediatric care services, a pharmacy, and dental, eye, and behavioral health services. The first 100,000 square feet was renovated and opened in December 2012, followed by another 65,000 square feet in 2017. Nearly 60% of Lowell residents receive their health care at the facility. With these three projects, several million square feet of empty mill space have been put back in use in an area the city calls the Hamilton Canal Innovation District.⁴⁹

HUD suggested over two decades ago that a challenge older, once-industrial cities faced was to “adapt their economic base, mobilizing new skills in the workforce, retaining or recruiting new forms of manufacturing, and building clusters around information and services.”⁵⁰ The University’s Massachusetts Medical Device Development Center (M2D2) and Bio-Tech Incubator, established in 2007, are in a former mill building in the Hamilton Canal Innovation District at 110 Canal Street and are getting on with what HUD urged. M2D2 provides help for the state’s smaller medical device companies, offering inventors and executives access to world-class researchers and resources. The Massachusetts medical device industry has maintained its position as the nation’s second largest, behind California. Between 2007 and 2014, M2D2 worked with more than 100 companies, which in turn secured more than \$40 million in external funding for their ventures. Companies served are not typically tied to University of Massachusetts inventions but are “attracted to Lowell from other cities and states to leverage resources offered by participation in M2D2.” In 2021 the Commonwealth’s annual medical devices exports approached \$10 billion, and the number of medical device companies grew. UMass Lowell’s *Fabric Discovery Center* and *New England Robotics Validation and Experimentation Center* also share the building. The Robotics Center is a national leader in developing robotic systems for academia, industry, and government agencies. To date, about 60 startups have operated out of the building.⁵¹

Meanwhile, the city’s educational institutions provide accessible and affordable higher education opportunities for local young people, many the children of immigrants. Second and third-generation immigrant entrepreneurship was also being purposefully nurtured. New civic leadership and community organizations emerged. Second-generation Cambodian, Vietnamese, Dominican, Colombia, Ghanaian, and Kenyan immigrants have energized the downtown and neighborhood retail and food sectors, just as earlier generations of French Canadian, Greek, Portuguese, Armenian, and Polish immigrants did. As UMass Lowell professor Dr. George Chigas noted:

Second- and third-generation immigrants are taking on leadership roles. They’re staying in Lowell and building careers and families and they believe in the city and their place there. In some ways, it’s not so different than the waves of immigrants from Ireland, Quebec, and various parts of Europe who flowed in to fill Lowell’s mills through the 1800s.⁵²

LOWELL'S CAMBODIAN COMMUNITY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In 2019 the Cambodian community, an estimated 13.5% of Lowell's population, was unique in that the first generation had arrived as refugees. Both Governor Michael Dukakis (1975-79 and 1983-91) and his wife Kitty were keenly interested in human rights issues. Inspired by her personal experiences visiting refugee camps, Kitty served as the first chair of the Governor's Advisory Council for Refugees. In this role she "successfully worked with the state government to organize support agencies, provide public assistance programs, and create an environment friendly to Cambodian refugees in Massachusetts."⁵³

In the 1980s Lowell offered both extremely cheap housing and low-skill, entry-level manufacturing jobs. After the first 160 families arrived in 1979, many Cambodian refugees who had been settled in much larger cities chose to relocate to Lowell. Some moved to reunite with family and friends. Others were attracted by the possibility of creating a Cambodian community in a much smaller locale and in a state that offered jobs and provided significant social services for refugees. As Paul J. Fisher explains in "Cambodia in the Mill City," after their initial settlement in sites scattered throughout the U.S., their "need for Khmer specific community support, especially in light of having endured the horrors of the genocide, and the desire to preserve Khmer culture and traditions led to widespread secondary internal migration" [from other U.S. cities to Lowell].⁵⁴ In a small city these predominantly rural refugees could more easily create a thriving community. As one interviewee explained:

The reason everyone wanted to come to Lowell was to be around other Khmer people. You could meet people in the street from the same country, the same culture, speaking the same language. We could go to the shops and buy our food. We were rebuilding a little of what we lost.⁵⁵

This pattern was similar to that of previous generations of immigrants. Slowly, Cambodian-owned grocery stores, restaurants, auto repair shops, a temple, and community organizations were created, attracting even more secondary migrants.

-L. Mara Dodge

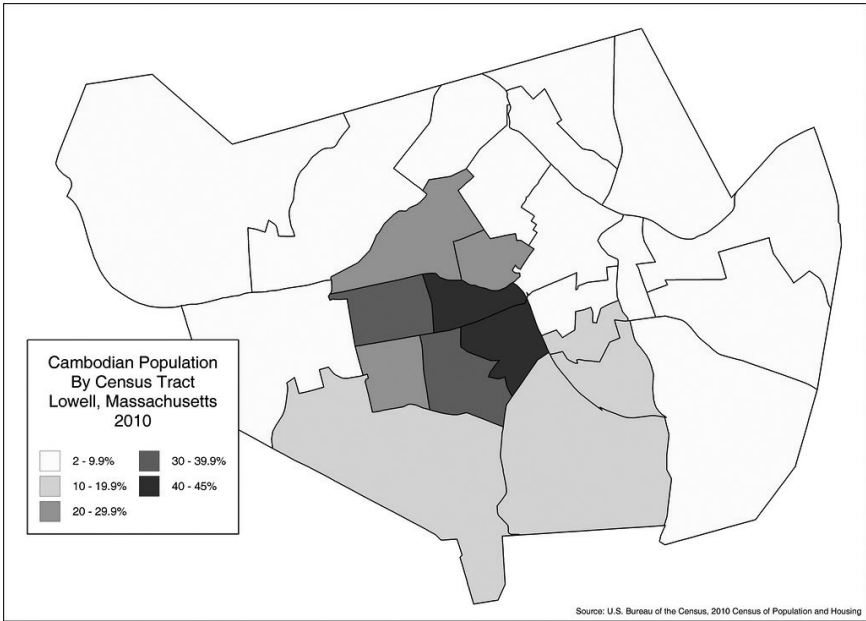
Lowell residents have significantly benefitted from the uniquely affordable educational and career development opportunities provided by the city's public higher education institutions, an advantage that few other former mill cities enjoy. These institutions also provide a major source of jobs. In 2011 UMass Lowell was the city's second largest employer (1,400+ employees) and Middlesex Community College its fifth (500+ employees). In 2021 UMass Lowell is still the second largest employer (2,260) while Middlesex Community College has dropped to ten (380). Few comparable "rustbelt" cities have two major public colleges or universities.

Healthcare, however, provided the most jobs. In 2011 Lowell General Hospital was the city's largest employer (2,000+ employees) and Saints Memorial Hospital its third (1,200+ employees). Since then, Lowell General and Saints Memorial have merged and together they are the city's top employer (3,720). The Lowell Community Health Center employed 300 workers in 2011 and 364 in 2021. The largest non-healthcare or education employer in 2021 is software and cloud solutions firm Kronos (1,671). Historic preservation may have brought new life to the city, but mill reuse never generated anywhere near the tens of thousands of jobs the mills had previously employed.⁵⁶

The city's total population over the past fifty years was: 1970—94,239; 1980—92,418; 1990—103,439; 2000—105,167; 2010—106,519; and 2020—115,554. For some perspective, at the high tide of Lowell's mill economy, in 1920 total population was 112,759. The most recent census numbers figure breaks down as follows.

	2010	2020	% 2020
TOTAL	106,519	115,554	+8.5%
WHITE	56,280	46,908	40.6%
ASIAN	21,337	25,548	22.1%
LATINO	18,396	25,051	21.7%
BLACK	6,367	9,570	8.3%
Multiracial	2,414	5,816	5.0%

Lowell is home to the second-largest Cambodian-American population in the U.S., with significant numbers of Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and more recent Burmese refugees of varying ethnicities. South Asian Americans



Cambodian Population by Census Tract, 2010



Cambodian Refugee Children, 1970s

Source: Southeast Asian Digital Archive, UMass Lowell

and Filipino Americans also live in the city. The Latino immigrant category includes Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Colombians, Mexicans, Guatemalans, and El Salvadorans. There is also a Puerto Rican presence in the city. The 2020 census marked the first time in the city's history that the white population found itself in the minority.⁵⁷

21ST CENTURY: CONTRADICTIONARY ASSESSMENTS & CONCERNS

Boston Globe reporters Janelle Nanos and Tim Logan reminded readers in 2021 that “the former industrial city’s revival efforts have stalled in the past.” As reporter John Powers had pointed out in 1997, they noted that the city remains a place of potential:

Its canal-carved downtown and classic architecture form the bones of a great city. The brick mills that once made Lowell an industrial powerhouse have gradually been redeveloped into apartments, bringing more residents to the city’s core. A bustling university sits on the edge of downtown by the Merrimack River.⁵⁸

University of Massachusetts Lowell professor Chigas told the reporters, “We’re seeing a major influx of transplants from Cambridge and Boston living in Lowell for greater affordability.” For Chigas, “Lowell is poised to go through a renaissance it probably hasn’t seen since the late 1970s when the downtown was created into Lowell National Historic Park.”⁵⁹

As we have seen, however, many other journalists have offered critiques of Lowell's efforts at vitalization over the years. Two of them, Andrew

In 2018 UMass Lowell Launched the Southeast Asian Digital Archive

The archive originated in diverse efforts by community groups, UMass Lowell professors and university librarians to preserve and share the histories of the Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian and Hmong refugees who fled the war in Vietnam or the Cambodian genocide. The archive also includes materials from the newer Burmese refugee community. It was funded, in part, by a National Endowment for the Humanities. The grant paid for a professional archivist who—with help from students, library staff, a community advisory board and Southeast Asian and refugee organizations—digitized and organized thousands of documents, videos, newspapers, posters and photos so that they are searchable online and free to the public. The archive also includes oral histories from Lowell residents. See the UMass Lowell website at www.uml.edu/research/sea-digital-archive/

Kopkind in 1992 and Alan Wirzbicki in 2007, challenged how inclusive and effective the efforts were. In a diverse city, this matters.⁶⁰ In *The Nation*, Kopkind dismissed the idea of a “miracle on the Merrimack.” He criticized efforts of redevelopment in the city because the “poor, the working class, the unemployed, the unions” were not included at all, were missing from the table while the recovery plan emerged. He concludes that:

Money was cadged from Washington to restore the drab old buildings, repaint the crumbling brick, and install ersatz gaslights along the narrow streets . . . Shops that sold staple goods at a discount to the poor, the elderly, and the unsophisticated were rather rudely forced out of business . . . In all, a deliberate attempt was made to turn plain old Lowell into one of those new yuppie quarters.⁶¹

Alan Wirzbicki’s *Boston Globe* article, “What Renaissance?” (2007) challenged the prevailing wisdom that Lowell had turned its economic fortunes around and represented a worthwhile model to study and imitate. He pointed out that, “On key economic indicators like income growth and job creation, the city differs little from other ex-industrial cities in Massachusetts . . . Poverty in Lowell has gone up substantially since 1980.” The poverty rate increased 41.6% between 1980 and 2000, compared with 14.4% in Brockton and Fall River and 33.4% in Worcester over the same period. Wirzbicki discussed Lowell’s history with Joel Kotkin, author of *The City: A Global History*. Kotkin concluded, “If I was writing a book 20 years ago, I would hold Lowell up as a great success story. I don’t think that’s the case anymore.”⁶²

Can the deeply entrenched poverty and inequality in Lowell and other former mill cities with similar histories be reduced? Are the policies employed over the past fifty years adequate to the challenges faced by these urban spaces? I would argue that there has been real progress in Lowell, but much remains undone. The Lowell Community Health Center functions in a now beautifully restored mill building; in 2002, one of my students described it as akin to “a bombed-out building in World War II London.” UMass Lowell’s medical devices and biomedical research centers occupy factory space that once produced the fabric for automobile seats in the same neighborhood.⁶³ Mixed-income rental housing and condominiums exist in once empty mill buildings.

Despite this demonstrable progress, in 2018 poverty stood at 21.5%, slightly above where it was in 1997 at 20%. As mentioned previously, in 2018,

after four decades of historic preservation efforts, Lowell ranked 298 out of 313 Massachusetts communities in per capita income at \$23,136. Below it were Lynn, North Adams, Fall River, Holyoke, Springfield, and Lawrence. Unquestionably, these cities share similar histories of deindustrialization, urban renewal, and numerous efforts to jumpstart stalled growth. In Massachusetts, the second wealthiest state in the United States with a median per capita income of \$41,794 and median household income of \$77,378. Lowell's median household income was \$48,581.

In 2013 the city released a comprehensive, "smart growth" development plan, "Sustainable Lowell 2025." The result of a three-year public process, it was adopted by the Lowell Planning Board and endorsed by the City Council in March of 2013. It provided a shared vision for the development of Lowell. Over 1,000 community members over the Spring and Summer of 2011 offered input on the plan. It declares that:

Lowell has the potential to continue serving as a desirable place to live and work for years to come. It is therefore incumbent upon Lowell to make choices that will enhance its unique assets and appeal particularly to retiring baby boomers, young members of the Millennial Generation, and immigrants moving to and within the country, as these three population cohorts have demonstrated a preference for living in urban as opposed to suburban settings and will be responsible for nearly all projected growth and migration shifts in America over the coming decade.⁶⁴

However, missing from the 175-page plan was an in-depth treatment of inequality and how sustainable and smart growth will tackle the issue. In his detailed dissertation, "To Save a City: From Urban Renewal to Historic Preservation in Lowell," Mehmed Ali suggests that:

The economics of historic preservation in many regards were similar to the monolithic model of urban renewal. The outcome was perhaps gentler for most but it still represented a single source agenda where buildings and the built environment often took precedence over people.⁶⁵

"Smart Growth" without people at its center will, most likely, be the same old wine in a new bottle.

A cursory review of wage and employment growth in five Commonwealth cities confirms the unevenness of the development that is taking place. Even

with Lowell's rich array of assets absent in other communities—the Lowell National Historic Park, the University of Massachusetts Lowell, major healthcare institutions, and proximity to Boston—it has proven difficult to overcome decades of decline and neighborhood poverty. To do this, Lowell's elected leaders, private sector development organizations, UMass Lowell, and community members must move beyond tradition and what have been limited measures of development success on the people side. City leaders, public and private, clearly know how to restore rundown mill properties. However, with changes in city demography, purposeful inclusion is vital if the seemingly intractable problems associated with income inequality are to be challenged.

Alan Berube and Nicole Bateman in a recent Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program Report caution that:

The last couple of decades, however, have brought increasing awareness that growth is not sufficient to counteract a long-run decline in economic opportunity for large segments of the population, particularly historically marginalized communities. Instead, while growth can set the necessary conditions for greater inclusion, inclusion does not necessarily follow. Instead, intentional efforts to counteract historically rooted and persistent inequalities are needed to ensure the benefits of growth are shared widely by all.⁶⁶

Wrestling with itself over the past fifty years, the record indicates that much of what Lowell did was necessary but insufficient to tackle the structural problems existing deep in the marrow of Lowell's and by analogy, the rest of the Commonwealth's former industrial powerhouses' bones. As Andrew Kopkind contended in 1992, the city's early economic development efforts "ignored the working-class neighborhoods, the poor, the immigrants, and the aging ethnic populations that make up the bulk of the city."⁶⁷ They could not be urban-renewed away. Berube and Cecile Murray suggest a way forward:

To start, leaders in older industrial cities must embrace the goal of inclusive economic growth as a shared responsibility... It requires a shared commitment from leaders in economic development, education and workforce development, and land use and infrastructure planning to step out of their silos and jointly

increase the participation of more firms, people, and places in economic success to sustain growth.⁶⁸

AHEAD AND BACKWARD: EDUCATION, REPRESENTATION, AND GENTRIFICATION

Lowell faced two highly contentious issues as its economy and population changed, each one amplified by a federal lawsuit. From the 1980s through 2020, a majority of the city's white elected leaders stood in the schoolhouse and city hall doorways blocking equality and opportunity until forced to do otherwise. This history demonstrates the powerful grip that the white status quo maintained and offers a cautionary lens through which to judge the city's progress.

Starting in the 1980s, as Southeast Asian refugee numbers grew, schools struggled to accommodate the increased numbers of non-English speakers. The School Committee refused to accommodate parents when they requested translators so that they could advocate for their children at meetings. On May 6, 1987, one hundred Latino and Southeast Asian parents came to a meeting to advocate for their children and requested assistance from translators who had accompanied them. George Kouloheras, committee chair, "declared that they were in an English-only meeting in an English-only town in an English-only America" and left the meeting. Only a 1988 federal lawsuit filed by Southeast Asian and Latino parents forced the city to revamp education delivery.⁶⁹

Similarly, even as Lowell became a non-white majority city, the faces of the City Council and School Committee remained much the same as in 1970. The nine-member city council and five-member school committee were elected citywide, whereas most non-white voters lived primarily in two or three neighborhoods. As a result, it was nearly impossible for non-white voters to break the stranglehold that the city's white voters had on election outcomes.

City councilors consistently resisted efforts to find a workable solution. In 2017, a federal lawsuit on behalf of a diverse group of Lowell residents was filed "alleging that the city's form of government and electoral system discriminates against Asians and Latinos." According to Oren M. Sellstrom, litigation director for the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice, which filed the federal lawsuit, "Everyone's vote is not equal in a place like Lowell. Communities of color do not have equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice, and that is what is fundamentally wrong."

With the lawsuit moving through the courts, a consent decree requiring a combination of neighborhood and at-large voting for councilors and school committee members went into effect in 2021. Three Cambodian-American city councilors and the city's first biracial councilor were elected and seated in January 2022. In addition, Stacey Thompson became the first African American woman elected to the School Committee in the city's history.⁷⁰ In 2022 the Lowell City Council unanimously elected city councilor Sokhary Chau, a Cambodian refugee who had survived the Khmer Rouge's genocide, mayor, making him the first Cambodian-American mayor in the U.S.

A particularly important issue is the continued expansion of UMass Lowell into the former Little Canada neighborhood and into the Acre. First home to generations of immigrants and refugees, students are increasingly living off-campus, pushing families out of these spaces. Meanwhile, the university has aggressively taken housing stock off the market through the destruction of properties and the purchase of existing housing for student residences. In 2019, the Massachusetts Historical Commission reached an agreement with UMass Lowell to allow it to demolish two triple-decker buildings located at 193 and 199 Pawtucket Street, purchased in 2015. The reason given was to make a heavily traveled corner safer for students and other pedestrians.

In return, the university agreed to develop Overlook Park on the site, something insisted upon by the Historical Commission because the buildings were "contributing structures to a historic district." Preservation took a back-seat and in 2020 the housing disappeared. While the take-down was being planned, and with no warning to the city, the university in 2016 purchased for \$61.5 million Perkins Lofts, a former mill building already converted to high-end condominiums and family housing in 2009 and 2010. With the purchase, the approximately 200 families living in the complex were eventually forced to move. The combined purchases took roughly \$500,000 annually off the tax rolls.⁷¹

One thing is certain: more of the same will not get it done. COVID-19 relief measures are suggestive of what could work. According to the Census Bureau, the stimulus payments that were part of the federal government's 2020 response to the pandemic helped to move 11.7 million people out of poverty across the country, at least temporarily. Two rounds of direct cash payments went out to households in 2020, together averaging \$2,400 for the 20% families with the lowest incomes and \$2,890 for middle-income families. Why not a pilot program in Massachusetts focused on its older industrial cities to see how such a program might work on the state level?

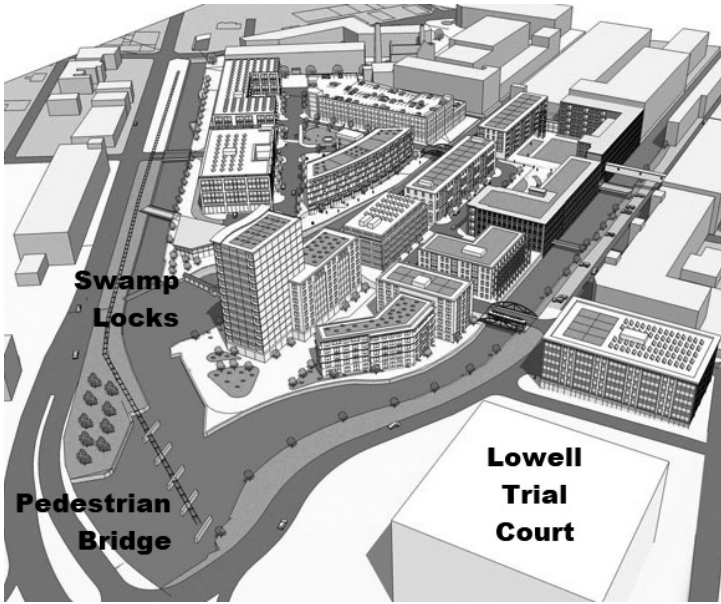
With its ever-expanding footprint, UMass Lowell could experiment with offering free tuition to every young adult living in the city's poorest

neighborhoods. Northern Essex Community College, Middlesex Community College, and UMass Lowell could establish a robust program educating students in various healthcare fields. A nascent version of this already exists: invest in it, publicize it, and help to rebuild the Commonwealth's public health infrastructure. This program could stretch to Worcester and the University's medical center. A vigorous effort to educate area young people for a host of science and technology-based green jobs could begin, perhaps with a proviso that tuition would be covered so long as they spent some specified time after graduation doing work on a host of climate change or health care related issues.

Many similar programs sprang up during the Great Depression through what President Franklin Roosevelt called "bold, persistent experimentation." In 2022 the so-called "Great Divergence" persists and both income and racial inequalities deepen; nothing short of bold experimentation will do. In 1932 Pres. Roosevelt declared in a commencement speech at Oglethorpe University:

I believe that we are at the threshold of a fundamental change in our popular economic thought, that in the future, we are going to think less about the producer and more about the consumer. Do what we may have to do to inject life into our ailing economic order, we cannot make it endure for long unless we can bring about a wiser, more equitable distribution of the national income.⁷²

President Roosevelt finished his address with this challenge. "We need enthusiasm, imagination, and the ability to face facts, even unpleasant ones, bravely. We need to correct, by drastic means, if necessary, the faults in our economic system from which we now suffer." Wise words moving forward.



Hamilton Canal District Overview
(Redevelopment Plan 2020)



Artist's Depiction of the New Lowell Judicial Center
(www.mass.gov)

FROM THE NPS WALKING TOUR: “LOWELL WATERWAYS REDEVELOPMENT”

All of the empty spaces you see around you are part of the Hamilton Canal District, a 15 acre, \$800 million development project that will transform this part of the city into a dynamic and vibrant mixed-use neighborhood. Construction in the district will include commercial, retail, and residential uses, all tied together with pedestrian-friendly walkways, public art, and landscaped recreational spaces. The district will provide a signature gateway for visitors coming to the city by car, bus, or train, and will connect the Gallagher terminal to the downtown. The district will be serviced by the future trolley expansion project, which will extend trolley service across the Pawtucket canal, through the heart of the district, and over to the train station at the Gallagher train & bus terminal.

One of the highlights of the district will be the 7-story \$175 Million trial court building. The courthouse will be built on the empty parcel directly ahead of the end of the pedestrian bridge. The building will include 16 courtrooms, state-of-the-art security, a garden court multi-floor atrium, a roof garden, and underground parking. The building will be energy efficient (LEED platinum certified) and will use renewable solar technology as well as a heating plant with the future capacity to burn biofuel.

Source: www.nps.gov/lowe/planyourvisit/redevelopment-rove.htm
accessed 1-15-2022

From Mass.gov Website: The new Lowell Judicial Center and Trial Court will be an energy efficient courthouse overlooking the historic Hamilton Canal. The cutting-edge facility will be constructed for the Superior, District, Probate & Family, Juvenile, and Housing Courts of Middlesex County. A Law Library/Court Service Center and an office space for the District Attorney and Registry of Deeds will also be provided. The new building will replace a leased facility and two outdated state-owned courthouses.

Source: www.mass.gov/info-details/courthouse-building-project-new-lowell-judicial-center

Notes

1. Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 3.
2. Stanton uses the phrase “culture-based revitalization” and economic development strategy.
3. Mehmed Ali, “To Save a City: From Urban Renewal to Historic Preservation in Lowell, Massachusetts: 1920 to 1978” (Ph.D. diss, University of Connecticut, 2006). An interactive timeline developed by the Lowell Historical Society can be found here. The timeline begins in 1600, 226 years before Lowell is incorporated.
4. Stephen Yafa, *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 112–113. For more on Lowell’s early history, and the role of Boston’s elites in building the city, see Robert Dalzell Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993); Ronald Story, *Harvard and the Boston Upper Class: The Forging of an Aristocracy, 1800–1870* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1980); Robert Weible, Ed., *The Continuing Revolution: A History of Lowell, Massachusetts* (Lowell, Massachusetts Lowell Historical Society, 1991).
5. George Kenngott, *The Record of a City: A Social Survey of Lowell Massachusetts* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1912). For the early labor history, Caroline F. Ware, *Early New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966). For a history of women mill workers in Lowell, see Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975). For the city’s immigration and refugee history, see Robert Forrant and Christoph Strobel, *Ethnicity in Lowell: Ethnographic Overview and Assessment* (Boston, MA: Northeast Region Ethnography Program National Park Service, 2011).
6. Lowell National Historical Park, “Lowell, Story of an Industrial City: Decline and Recovery,” found in *Lowell: Story of an Industrial City: A Guide to Lowell National Historical Park and Lowell Heritage State Park* (Washington, DC: Division of Publications, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1992). By the mid-1930s, of Lowell’s first large mills, only the Merrimack, Lawrence, and Boott were still in operation.
7. Margaret Terrell Parker, *Lowell: A Study of Industrial Development* (New York: MacMillan, 1940), 4–5. Several books cover Lowell and the region’s industrial history from the early 1800s through the 1960s. These include David Meyer, *The Roots of American Industrialization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), esp. ch. 6, “Industrial Capitalism Takes Wing,” 136–174. See also Maura Doherty, “Spindle City Blues: The Impact of the Maturing Industrial Economy on the City of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1947–1978” (Ph.D. diss, New York University, 1998).
8. George S. Gibb, *The Saco-Lowell Shops: Textile Machinery Building in New England 1813–1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); for or a detailed discussion

of Lowell's industrial prowess, see Orra Stone, *A History of Massachusetts Industries: Their Inception, Growth, and Success*, Volume 1, 729-772 (Boston: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1930). Stone notes that by 1926 just one-third of Lowell's payroll came from cotton mills, whereas this figure stood at one-half in 1915, 772.

9. Louis Adamic, "Tragic Towns of New England," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 162, May 1931, 748-760, 749, 750, 751.

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12. Parker, 6; Mary Blewett, *The Last Generation: Work and Life in the Textile Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1910-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

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14. Lowell National Historical Park, "Lowell, Story of an Industrial City."

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16. Council of Economic Advisers, *The New England Economy: A Report to the President* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1951), 26.

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18. William Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 151.

19. Doherty, "Spindle City Blues."

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21. Ali, "To Save a City," 13. See also Michael Edema Leary-Owhin, *Exploring the Production of Urban Space: Differential Space in Three Post-Industrial Cities* (Chicago: Policy Press, 2016), 143. Lowell is one of the three cities profiled in the book, along with Vancouver, British Columbia, and Manchester, England.

22. The Hale-Howard quote is in Ali, "To Save a City," 237. Chapters 6 and 7 in Ali's "To Save a City" thoroughly examine the ethnic politics behind the decisions made to tear down particular city neighborhoods. There is also a critical examination of urban renewal and its impact on immigrant neighborhoods in Forrant and Strobel, *Ethnicity in Lowell*, ch 7, "Work and Neighborhoods Disappear."

- 23 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961). Jacobs had great disdain for the leading planners of the 1950s and 1960s.
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25. Farrant and Strobel, *Ethnicity in Lowell*.
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