The fight for equality between men and woman in the United States is an enduring struggle that dates back to colonial times. Abigail Adams was among the first feminists when she gently prodded her husband and soon-to-be President John Adams to, “Be sure to remember the ladies!” Although it took over two centuries to achieve considerable success, the same two women’s rights movements invariably receive the accolades for the entirety of progress made thus far: the Suffrage Movement of 1850-1920 and the Women’s Liberation movement of the 1960s-70s. Little recognition is given to the factory girls of the early industrial period (1820-1840) and World War II – women who instead of theorizing with their pens, risked their reputations by going against the socially accepted standards of the time set forth by the cult of domesticity. These women (who were beckoned onto the factory floor by economic and/or political realities) fought the prevailing moral attitude of the time head on and eventually helped pave the way for the gradual acceptance of women into the workplace.

The “cult of domesticity”, or the cult of “true womanhood” as it is often referred to, defined the woman as submissive, pious, pure, and domestic. She was placed in a separate sphere from that of a man’s world, for she was far too delicate, emotional and sensitive to handle the harsh realities of life outside of the home. Her single most important objective was to retain her virtuous character and purity – all of which would lead up to the most important event in her life – her wedding day. It was here that everything that a young woman worked towards culminated in one sacred event “when she bestowed her greatest treasure upon her husband, and from that time on was completely dependent upon him, an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own” (Walters, 1966).

This is the standard that Victorian women were held up to, so it should be of no surprise that working women shocked most Americans when she stepped out of her rightful place in the home and onto the factory floor during the early industrial period (1820–1840). Due to the revolution of the putting out system of textile manufacturing, all stages of textile production, from weaving to finishing, now took place under one roof – the factory. New England, and in particular Lowell, Massachusetts, quickly became the center of American textile production. Factory owners throughout New England began to employ large numbers of women not just for their dependability and strong work ethic, but also because of the commonly accepted notion of the day that textile production and clothes making were generally women’s work. These new working girls, dubbed “Lowell Mill Girls,” after the textile industry’s most famous city, were lured into the workplace by generally high wages, offered in order to offset the damage that may be done to her reputation upon choosing to work outside of the home. Harriet Hanson Robinson, a former mill girl who worked in Lowell from 1832 to 1848, explains in her autobiography:

“At the time the Lowell cotton mills were started, the caste of the factory girl was the lowest among the employment of women. In England and in France, particularly great injustice had been done to her real character. She was represented as subjected to influences that must destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseer, she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched and pushed about. It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages has been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill girls, in spite of the opprobrium that still clung on to this
Promises of economic independence prompted thousands of women to leave their hometowns for the possibility of a better life in the city - so much so that by the late 1800s, women held nearly two-thirds of all textile jobs in Lowell (National Parks Service). Women were beginning to enjoy the perks of economic independence for the first time in history, but this was short lived. Once factory owners had a loyal following of women, wages were systematically lowered throughout the industry by 15%. Disillusioned female workers went as far as to organize a strike in attempt to keep the salaries they were promised, but to no avail. Factory owners did not budge and the women went back to work, but this time for lower wages (National Parks Service). The economic boom brought on by the early industrial period and subsequent need for a cheap, yet reliable labor force made it possible for women to finally work outside of the home. Lowell Mill girls pushed the envelope of traditional gender roles during the early industrial period – and even though she made some headway towards equality, she was only able to push so far. The prevailing moral attitude of the day, dictated that should a woman have to work, she should do so only under the strictest of supervision.

Not surprisingly, Lowell’s powerful textile corporations had the power to regulate the job related aspects of its employees, including wages, maintaining work discipline and meeting production schedule. But company overseers also had the authority to monitor the social and moral conduct of their employees, in particular their female employees. Boardinghouse keepers enforced strict rules of conduct, as illustrated by the Regulations for the Boarding Houses of the Hamilton Manufacturing Company (1848) below:

*The tenants of the boarding-houses are not to board, or permit any part of their houses to be occupied by any person, except those in the employ of the company, without special permission.*

*They will be considered answerable for any improper conduct in their houses, and are not to permit their boarders to have company at unseasonable hours.*

*The doors must be closed at ten o’clock in the evening, and no person admitted after that time, without some reasonable excuse.*

*The keepers of the boarding-houses must give an account of the number, names and employment of their boarders, when required, and report the names of such as are guilty of any improper conduct, or are not in the as are guilty of any improper conduct, or are not in the regular habit of attending public worship.*

Factory owners put such measures in place in order to assure parents at home (and society in general) that these new working girls were behaving according to the Victorian standards of the time and not straying even further from their traditional female roles. The girls who had to adhere to these rules were working out of economic necessity - they were not trying to make a political statement. What they did not realize, however, was that while enduring the disapproving glances from ladies and gentleman who saw their “supervised” departure from the cult of domesticity as being completely unacceptable, Lowell Mill girls were actually paving the way for the acceptance of women in the workplace in the future.
Despite the general disapproval from Victorian society, women benefited in more ways than one from their work experience in the factories of New England. In her autobiography, Harriet Hanson Robinson explains the benefits that wage labor provided a woman’s self esteem:

“It is well to digress here a little, and speak of the influence the possession of money had on the characters of some of these women. We can hardly realize what a change the cotton factory made in the status of the working women. Hitherto woman had always been a money saving rather than a money earning, member of the community. Her labor could command but small return. If she worked out as servant, or "help," her wages were from 50 cents to $1.00 a week; or, if she went from house to house by the day to spin and weave, or do tailorless work, she could get but 75 cents a week and her meals. As teacher, her services were not in demand, and the arts, the professions, and even the trades and industries, were nearly all closed to her.”

The unconventional labor of nineteenth century women afforded a new sense of self-confidence and independence as a result of her courage to step outside of the parameters of the “true” woman. The textile industry’s enormous appetite for unskilled wage laborers and the economic necessities of the time made both men and women alike set aside their reservations regarding women taking on traditionally male-held jobs. However, once a massive wave of immigration from Europe helped to alleviate industry’s need for cheap, unskilled labor, women were quickly shown the door out of the factory and back into the home – where society preferred her to be.

During the second industrial revolution (1860-1920), immigrants became the dominant factory manufacturing labor force since they were just as cheap and did not require as much care and supervision as women (Goldin and Sokoloff (1982)). The Lowell Mill girls’ experience in industrial New England challenged the expected gender roles of the time as she filled positions that were previously considered to be men’s work. She broke new ground, gained some economic freedom, and endured criticism along the way. The influx of a cheap immigrant labor force, however, made her avant-garde position in the factories of New England obsolete.

Women quietly retreated from the textile factories - some went home, others went on to more female appropriate roles as typists, seamstresses, and domestic work. The cultural ideal of the “cult of true womanhood” dominated antebellum society, which may have limited women in most professions, but actually opened up new doors for her in the field of education. A woman’s moral superiority and ability to work well with children made her the ideal candidate to serve as a teacher. Despite her superior qualifications, however, she was nevertheless paid one third of what her male counterpart earned (Leighow & Sterner-Hine). Women’s piety, morality, and concern for their families also provided the motivation to serve in antebellum reform movements. Consequently, this reform activity would serve as a training ground for women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony, to seek their own political equality. The Suffrage Movement of the mid 1800s was pivotal in the fight for equality. With the climax of the movement at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 (where Stanton cleverly borrowed wording from the Declaration of Independence to make her point) women did in fact make great roads towards enfranchising women. However, the movement would soon be overshadowed by looming domestic problems including the slavery issue, questions over state versus federal power, and, consequently, the impeding Civil War. Women would not gain the franchise until after World War I - and we wouldn’t see a large number of women step back onto the factory floor until the country needed her to do so during World War II. During the 1940s, wartime working women followed in the footsteps of the Lowell Mill girls as they took on traditionally male dominated jobs and made the factory girl a common sight once more.
The woman’s role in the United States was even more drastically changed upon America’s entry into WWII. Previous to the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor, United States industry was profiting generously from war contracts that supplied the allies with the tools needed to fight fascism in Europe. Once the United States officially joined the war effort, the majority of men working the factory floors suddenly rushed off to fight abroad. Almost overnight, factories across the nation lost their manpower. With even bigger government contracts being issued on a daily basis, and immigration at a grinding halt due to the political instability abroad, factory owners needed to find a new labor force – and quickly. Inconvenient to the generally accepted gender roles of the time, there was only one other group that industry could turn to for help – women. As the demand for war supplies increased to unsurpassed levels, women suddenly found themselves being called out of the kitchen and into the workforce once again.

Most Americans, including women, were not comfortable with this solution. Consequently, it took a massive government propaganda campaign to sway society into accepting the notion of women as factory workers. A slew of posters depicting women in unconventional dress consisting of work overalls and hair bandanas gave birth to the now iconic Rosie the Riveter persona - who with her flexing biceps affirmed women everywhere that “We Can Do It!” Other posters depicting women performing what would normally be men’s work, such as operating heavy machinery, pointed out the harsh reality of the moment, “Women in the War. We Can’t Win Without Them.” Emotional appeals targeted at women who were uncomfortable stepping out of their separate sphere reminded women that "Longing Won’t Bring Him Back Sooner...Get a War Job!” The propaganda worked and by June of 1942, females held 55% of all manufacturing jobs. By the end of the war, women comprised one third of the workforce with over18 million women employed in various industries (National Parks Service). The iconic Rosie the Riveter did more than encourage women to get a job – she empowered working women with the skills and self-confidence necessary to be economically independent. An entire generation of both men and women would admire her strength and character for years to come.

Rosie’s admirable characteristics were a result of extraordinary times. Women stepped up to the plate to fill job vacancies that were completely out her realm not solely for a paycheck, but also out of patriotism. And although both economic and political realities made it acceptable for women to shed their traditional gender roles and return to the factories, this change was only temporary. In her book Mobilizing Women for War; Leila Rupp suggests that using propaganda that stressed the temporary nature of the situation "allowed the public to accept the participation of women in unusual jobs without challenging the basic belief about women's roles." Once the war was concluded and soldiers began to come home, women were not only encouraged, but also expected to, hand their jobs over to their rightful owners. Images that once depicted strong, almost masculine women (such as Rockwell’s famous Saturday Evening Post cover), were replaced with Rosie-like women dressed in overalls and bandana applying lipstick – hinting at the fact that women industrial workers may in fact look a little ridiculous after all. Husbands
were encouraged to reel their women back into the home with slogans such as “Do You Want Your Wife to Work After the War?” Women were also targeted and made to feel guilty for keeping their war time job since it meant that she was taking a returning soldier’ livelihood once he was back home. Regrettably, the progress made by working women seemed to come at the rate of two steps forward, one step back.

As if to make up for the loss of the traditional female roles that occurred during WWII, the cult of domesticity came back full force post war and into the 1950s and early 1960s. Suburbia became the American Dream, paid for by the labor of men and cared for the labor of women. Men continued to do their time honored position of bringing home the bacon as suburban housewives reverted to their traditional role of managing the household and caring for the children. Additionally, women hosted parties, participated in school events, and even took on hobbies such as making ceramics or exercising on a trampoline (Woloch, 2002). The ideal woman was well educated (but not employed), beautiful and trim, but most importantly, took pride in her domestic responsibilities. Entire magazines were dedicated to help women become better housewives, such as Good Housekeeping and Housekeeping Monthly. She could be seen in countless TV shows (Leave it to Beaver, I Love Lucy, etc.) tending after the home, the children, and always referring to her husband for any real decision that had to be made - all of which helped reaffirm the idea of the female back in the cult of domesticity. Helen Andelin, author of Fascinating Womanhood, summed up the mood of the era best with her Do’s and Don’t list, published in 1963 and which provided women the following suggestions as a guide for a happy marriage:

Do’s: Recognize his superior strength and ability. Be a Domestic Goddess. Revere your husband and honor his right to rule you and your children. Admire the manly things about him.

Don’ts: Don’t try to change him. Don't show indifference, contempt, or ridicule towards his masculine abilities, achievements or ideas. Don't let the outside world crowd you for time to do your homemaking tasks well. Don't stand in the way of his decisions, or his law.

Andelin’s last piece of advice may have inspired the Betty Freidan’s of the world to start the Women’s Liberation Movement: “Don’t have a lot of preconceived ideas of what you want out of life.” What followed next was an uneasy decade full of protests, rebellion, and extremist on both ends fighting over, once again, what the role of the woman should be.

Events taking place over the last two decades seem to have finally put the issue of women in the workplace to rest. Today women account for nearly 50% of the labor force and only 19% of Americans view this as being negative. Seventy-one percent of men say they are more comfortable than their fathers with women working outside of the home. The tables have even seemed to turn. Over 40% of women are the primary source of income for their households - and it is expected that by the end of next year, the majority of workers in the U.S. will be women (Gibbs, 2009). The fight to get women accepted into the workforce was a long struggle that lasted over 220 years – and one that owes much of its success to a lesser-known heroine of the woman’s rights movement: the factory girl.
The Suffrage Movement (1850-1920) and the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s did in fact contribute greatly to the fight towards equality, but they are not solely responsible for the shift of women’s role from that of house maker to worker in the United States. In fact, it was new economic opportunities of the early industrial period (1820-1840) and WWII that helped women break out of traditional roles as prescribed by the cult of domesticity. Women suddenly found themselves in an unconventional venue (the factory floor) breaking stereotypes of what a woman could and could not do. And despite the periods of regression that followed periods of progress, women prospered nevertheless as these new role-breaking jobs eased the way towards equality in the workforce. Today, most Americans would agree that equality is a lot closer to being achieved and that women can do any job a man can. Whether she should, however, is an issue that continues to be contested and, perhaps, may never be fully resolved.
Works Cited


Leighow, Susan & Sterner-Hine, Rita; The Antebellum Women’s Movement 1820-1860; The Organization of American Historians and National Center for History in the Schools, Women in American History Series, UCLA


National Park Service (NPS); Rosie the Riveter: Women Working During World War II, online at http://www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/home.htm


WWII Posters cited:
“We Can Do It!” by J. Howard Mille ; Produced by Westinghouse for the War Production Co-Ordinating Committee, NARA Still Picture Branch, (NWDNS-179-WP-1563).

“Women in the War : We Can't Win Without Them.”; War Manpower Commission (1942), "Keep 'Em Shooting" series "0-477830", call number: POS - WWII - J71. F34

“Longing Won’t Bring Him Back Sooner...Get a War Job!” by Lawrence Wilbur, 1944. Printed by the Government Printing Office for the War, Manpower Commission, NARA Still Picture Branch, (NWDNS-44-PA-389).

