

# Harriet Hanson Robinson

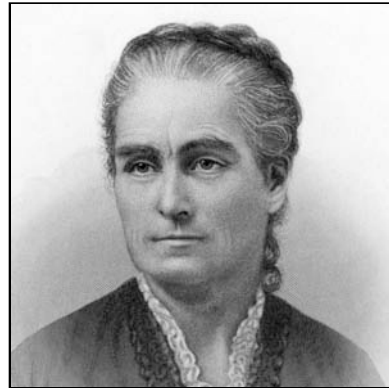
1825–1911



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** At the age of 10, Harriet Hanson Robinson joined striking cotton mill workers. She grew up to become a writer and an advocate for women's rights.



*As you read the biography below, consider why Harriet Hanson Robinson would choose to work in the mills as a child and as an adult. How did her work at the mill influence some of her future choices?*



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The growth of industry in the late 1800s spurred the need for a larger labor force. Factory owners hired immigrants and children to work long hours in poor conditions for low wages. At age 10, Harriet Robinson went to work in the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. When mill workers protested their working conditions, Robinson became one of the youngest strikers.

Harriet Robinson was born Harriet Hanson in 1825. Her father died when she was six years old. Robinson's mother moved the family to Lowell, where she ran one of the boardinghouses for women working at the cotton mills. Robinson left school when she began working in the mills at age 10. In her later writings, she said the decision to go to work was her own.

Robinson and other small children were first employed as bobbin doffers. They removed full bobbins, or large spools, from the factory's machines and replaced them with empty ones. Bobbin doffers were needed about once every hour for 15 minutes. However, the children had to be present for the entire 14-hour workday.

When mill owners said they were cutting salaries and would no longer help pay for workers' room and board, workers went on strike. The workers on Robinson's floor argued about whether to join the strike. Robinson announced that she was going on strike and didn't care what they did. She walked out, and all her co-workers followed.

Unfortunately for the workers, their strike had no effect except to shut the factory for a few days. Robinson later wrote, "The dissatisfaction of the operatives subsided, or burned itself out, and though the authorities did not accede to their demands, the majority returned to work, and the corporation went on cutting down the wages."

## The Second Industrial Revolution

## Biography

Robinson stayed in the mills of Lowell well into adulthood, moving to other types of work on the looms. Robinson also pursued her education. She went on to take high school classes. She used her salary to pay for private lessons in drawing, German, and dancing.

Robinson's work at the mill gave her one important advantage in life—a paycheck. A working woman did not have to be totally dependent on a husband. As a widow or single woman, she would not be at the mercy of family members who were better off.

In 1848 Robinson married William Robinson, a newspaper editor and political activist. Both she and her husband were active in the growing movement that had taken root in New England to abolish slavery. The couple had four children.

After William Robinson's death in 1876, Harriet Robinson began her own career as a writer. She published a collection of her husband's work, an account of women's efforts to gain the vote, and two plays on the subject of suffrage. An essay about life in the mills of Lowell grew into a book titled *Loom and Spindle*. In this book Harriet Robinson recounts the story of the strike. She states that nothing in her long life had made her more proud and happy, and that the only thing that would make her happier was voting rights for women.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What work did young girls do in the Lowell factories?

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2. **Infer** Why did Robinson work so many years at the mill in such poor conditions?

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### ACTIVITY

Harriet Hanson Robinson went on strike at the age of 10 for something she believed in. Think of a rule or law in your school or community that you think should be changed. What changes would you propose? Research the issue; then write a speech to convince your classmates to support the changes you propose. Deliver your speech to the class.