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# Cover, Contents, List of Illustrations, Acknowledgements, Introduction: Early American Artisanry: Why Gender Matters

Marla R. Miller

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# *The Needle's Eye*

Women and Work in the  
Age of Revolution



MARLA R. MILLER

*The Needle's Eye*

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# *The Needle's Eye*

Women and Work in the  
Age of Revolution

MARLA R. MILLER



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*Amherst and Boston*

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Looking over these acknowledgments I apprehend how much it is true that my professional colleagues are also my best friends, and my friends and family sources of scholarly insight and inspiration. What a lovely thing it is to realize that the people I so much admire for their historical acumen, inventive scholarship, and dedication to the life of the mind are the same people whom I treasure most for their good humor, personal warmth, and political companionship. My loved ones should recognize themselves in those lines as well. Since his own work involves unraveling the history of the universe, it's not surprising that Stephen K. Peck reminds me every day how important the world beyond the academy remains; though I can be a stubborn student, I so appreciate the many things he has taught me through the years. My brother, Todd M. Miller, shows me all the time the rewards of independent discovery, of embracing new subjects and pursuing them with vigor. My father, Roger Leslie Miller, first taught me to love learning itself; to this day we share the plain fun of puzzling things out. Finally, my mother, Phyllis Arneson Miller, first led me to love the places and people of the past; if someday I become half the historian she is, then I will have accomplished something. I fondly dedicate this work to them.



*The Needle's Eye*

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## INTRODUCTION

# *Early American Artisanry*

## Why Gender Matters

SELDOM DOES a historian find her scholarly interests reflected in the aisles of Toys-R-Us, even more rarely so those of us who study the eighteenth century. But the advent of Colonial Barbie provided me that rare instance. When I first spotted her, the historically garbed figure seemed out of place amid rows of Holiday Barbies, Dance-n-Twirl Barbies, and Gymnast Barbies. But as a women's historian studying early America I was drawn to her in both amazement and amusement. Dressed in red, white, and blue, her costume the familiar mantua, petticoat, and mob cap, she would more accurately have been named Revolutionary Barbie, I remember thinking. Most interesting to me, she held in her hand a piece of needlework. Barbie was working on a quilt square, it seemed, depicting an American eagle. Also enclosed in the box was a booklet recounting Barbie's participation in the American Revolution and explaining the small object she held in her hand. The title of the volume was "The Messenger Quilt." At first, I assumed that the usually adventuresome Barbie was involved in some sort of spy operation, cleverly inscribing and conveying military intelligence through a seemingly innocent quilt. I was disappointed to learn that the quilt simply, if enthusiastically, celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence with a large red, white, and blue design reading "Happy Birthday, America."

Barbie's quilt brought to mind another piece of red, white, and blue needlework announcing the founding of the new nation. Though thousands of girls have now encountered their colonial counterparts through Mattel's incarnation (as well as the American Girls popular doll "Felicity"), among the first early American women that most children meet is Betsy Ross, the alleged maker of the first United States flag. Ross has for generations been the only woman included alongside the founding fathers, her contribution to the fledgling nation her skill with a needle.<sup>1</sup> On any given day, close to three hundred titles concerning her crowd the nation's bookstore and library shelves, the vast majority aimed at the young adult market. She has been por-

trayed in films, and she has lent her name to lamps, cocktails, and sewing tables. She is one of only three historical figures immortalized as a Pez candy dispenser. Prompted first by the nation's centennial and enlarged by subsequent commemorations, the legend that surrounds Ross is both larger and smaller than the woman herself. While most popular accounts casually label her a seamstress, Elizabeth Griscom Ross Ashburn Claypoole actually worked



Colonial Barbie. Author's collection.

as an upholsterer, one of two hundred independent businesswomen in Philadelphia. Her shop thrived for several decades beyond 1776, employing over the years many young female apprentices and assistants.<sup>2</sup> What's more, as a resident of revolutionary and occupied Philadelphia, the nation's first capital, her association with the Independence effort—which she struggled to reconcile with her Quaker upbringing—far exceeded the making of a single flag. Betsy Ross could, and should, be remembered as representative of large numbers of female artisans and entrepreneurs in early America, but the skilled craftwork, business acumen, political conviction, and religious commitments that shaped her life are almost completely overshadowed by the aura of domesticity that has come to surround her.

When Ross's story emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it resonated with wistful colonial revival visions of early American women and their work. Needlework, at least among the white middle-class women who promoted the colonial revival, served an important purpose among Victorians coping with industrializing America. The embroidering of those tremendously popular mottoes—God Bless Our Home, Rock of Ages, No Cross No Crown—reconciled progress (in the mass-produced punch-cards through which these patterns were produced) with tradition (in the application of needlework and the selection of the messages inscribed).<sup>3</sup> New technologies gradually rendered decorative needlework, once the province of elite women educated in academies, the province of all. While images of Ross with the nation's first flag draped gracefully across her lap collapsed patriotism and domesticity into one compelling scene, women's personal experiences with needlework increasingly emphasized the ornamental over the prosaic.

Early American needlework has continued to be revered as evidence of the industry, taste, diligence, devotion, and resourcefulness of our colonial counterparts. These objects bring emotional comfort, too, as they harken back to a period, to families and communities, and to values that appear somehow simpler, sweeter. Since the nineteenth century, samplers, quilts, and embroidery of all kinds have enjoyed repeated revivals, each occurring amid familiar constellations of social tensions, while popular imagery associated with the Ross tale in its various incarnations, which generally supplant the upholsterer's work with that of a seamstress, has tacitly suggested that, in early America, needleworkers were ubiquitous, undifferentiated, and homogeneous. The association of femininity, needlework, and nostalgia is as compelling today as it ever was. In scenes repeated throughout museums and historic sites, docents use samplers to engage their female audience. Pointing to the small stitches and noting the youth of the stitcher, they ask women and girls to imagine performing such careful work at such a young age. The

appropriate response is all but scripted: wide eyes, shakes of heads, wonder, reverence. Because needlework has for so long been for most women largely a leisure activity, we have forgotten not only that sewing was skilled work—requiring skills that not every woman possessed—but also that it was difficult, mind-numbing, eye-straining, back-aching labor.

The lack of attention to women's skilled work in clothes making stems partially from a longstanding inclination to equate skilled work within the needle trades with the everyday maintenance of a household's clothing performed by women for their husbands, parents, and children. Historians have effectively challenged myths of self-sufficiency and explored patterns of household and neighborhood production. Still, both popular and scholarly discussions of early American households too often assume that women were largely responsible for constructing their family's apparel, and textile production and clothing construction are routinely conflated in ways that seldom confuse, say, the milling of wood and the construction of furniture.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as Joy Parr has observed, when it comes to the subject of work, masculinity has been so thoroughly naturalized that qualities like pride, ambition, and competitiveness are treated as if they are more obviously associated with men than women; we know less than we should about how those qualities are culturally constructed and how those constructions have changed.<sup>5</sup>

Put another way, while mythologies surrounding women's work have made it difficult to imagine women as artisans, popular imagery surrounding early American crafts has made it difficult to see artisans as female. Longfellow's brawny vision of the village blacksmith, or Copley's elegant portrait of the silversmith Paul Revere, leave little imaginative space for village craftswomen. John Neagle's 1826 painting of the blacksmith Patrick Lyon captures the vision shared by many Americans, then and now: Neagle depicts the broad-shouldered craftsman, wrapped in a thick leather apron, standing before a flaming forge with one hand on his hip and the other on his anvil. In the nineteenth century, the image became an oft-reproduced "icon of artisanal republicanism," a "symbolic figure representing the virtues of all craftsmen."<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that such images appeared when they did. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, as capitalism transformed artisanal trades, threatening to seize control of both "products and profits," artisans became activists on their own behalf: artisanal consciousness "crystallized" just as the "material basis for artisan unity was crumbling."<sup>7</sup> The independent craftsman survived in cultural productions like these if, it might have seemed at the time, almost nowhere else.

In the absence of countervailing imagery, Neagle's rendering of the heroic

artisan as virtue and masculinity bodied forth has endured. Meanwhile, as the production of Americans' clothing moved increasingly from homes to factories (and eventually to factories abroad), the tasks involved in the construction of clothing faded from memory. And as dramatic shifts in the garment trades freed middle-class needles for less onerous duties, romantic images of colonial goodwives able to satisfy single-handedly their household's sartorial needs while also finding time for artistic expression thrived. In such a shadow, myths and misperceptions take easy hold and loom large, perpetuating a picture of women's needlework that distorts, even effaces, our understanding of women's artisanal work in early America. Mattel's Colonial Barbie, needlework in hand, is only one recent episode in this mythologizing. Betsy Ross's currency is undiminished as well: over a quarter of a million people seek out the Betsy Ross House every year, as curious as ever about the legendary figure they remember from grade-school pageants and sentimental prints.

Not far from the Ross house, on Elfreth's Alley, stands another historic site, a museum representing an eighteenth-century Philadelphia mantua maker's house. This site also interprets the history of Philadelphia's female



**AUGUSTUS ANDROSS,**  
**C**ONTINUES to carry on the Blacksmith's  
 business in all its branches, at his old stand,  
 a few rods west of the Court-House, and solicits  
 a continuance of the liberal patronage of his  
 friends, in the way of his profession.  
 N. B. Said Andross will forge Machinery  
 Work to any pattern—likewise Balustrade and  
 Iron Fences, &c. &c.  
 Hartford, March 29. 1819. tf 22

Augustus Andross advertisement, *Connecticut Courant*, 6 April 1819. Courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society Museum, Hartford.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, as large-scale economic reorganization seemed to threaten independent artisanry, assertions of masculinity became important to artisanal identity. The advertisement, while noting the blacksmith's ability to "forge Machinery Work to any pattern," emphasizes the human strength of the artisan's body, his bulging bicep exposed by the rolled-up sleeve, and hammer held upright by a muscular forearm.

artisans but enjoys just a fraction of the number of visits the Ross house receives. Each site interprets the history of the city's skilled craftswomen, but for both, the same popular historical imagination that brings visitors to the door can make the place of artisanal skill in these women's lives that much harder to see. My main purpose in this work is to re-imagine those early American craftswomen—to move Colonial Barbie aside, to help recapture the artisanal world of businesswomen like Ross, to lead readers to the homes and workplaces of early American mantua makers. I hope to restore to historical view the legions of early American women who found livings in the clothing trades and to overturn the prevailing sense—symbolized by Colonial Barbie and the mythologized Ross—that early American needlework was ubiquitous and undifferentiated and to examine instead the complexities of women's craft production on the eve of industrialization. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has observed, “as yet, few historians have given serious attention to the actual structure of women's domestic burdens in early America or attempted to discover the particular conditions that may have given rise to their complaints. Nor has anyone considered working relations among women in the preindustrial female economy.”<sup>8</sup> This study aims to help fill that gap.

Historians of women and work in the early modern Atlantic world have long been interested in tracking change and continuity within gender divisions of labor.<sup>9</sup> As part of a larger scholarly effort to understand, and remedy, “the persistence of women in the lowest paid, least stable and most unrewarding occupations,” historians have observed the waxing and waning of women's economic opportunities in a variety of arenas.<sup>10</sup> Among the key insights that have emerged from this work is the extraordinary tenacity, and elasticity, of cultural constructions surrounding women and work, which have responded to economic exigency as circumstances demanded. Eighteenth-century New England, as elsewhere in the Atlantic world, was a time and place of dynamic change.<sup>11</sup> Ongoing, substantive transformations both encompassed and encouraged the feminization of some tasks, skills, and occupations in New England and the masculinization of others. Healing and caregiving, agriculture (especially dairying), cloth making, shoemaking, and teaching, to name only a few occupations, saw particularly dramatic reconfigurations along gendered lines in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> The clothing trades—among the few artisanal arenas where both men and women participated in significant numbers—afford an unusually rich opportunity to explore how assumptions about gender and work evolved during a period of remarkable flux.

Examining women in their variety of market roles in relation to one



another also underscores the degree to which the work that women did and the ways that they thought about themselves as workers were interdependent. The women who populate this study are mostly rural or small-town women who augmented their household income, to greater and lesser degrees, through craft skill; they were each enmeshed, though in very different ways, in the “interlocking yet distinguishable” economies that encompassed the farms and households of early America.<sup>13</sup> By looking closely at relationships among women in one early American region, and even a single community—women who at first glance may look quite similar—this study seeks to add nuance to ongoing discussions of differences among women as well as inequality in early America.

This book, then, examines the nexus of social and economic relationships that surrounded works of the needle, with the ultimate aim of understanding more fully the ways in which both female and male New Englanders experienced the economic, social, and cultural changes that accompanied the evolving market economy. Early American women, including those whose work can be called artisanal, conformed to gender expectations appropriate to their age, marital status, race, and class. Underscoring the different ways in which women worked in clothing trades thus complicates simple contrasts between male and female artisanry: craftwork in early America admitted both men and women, though gender, as well as race, class, and life-cycle issues, influenced the kind and extent of one’s participation in that work.

Understanding laboring women in the early New England clothing trades also contributes to the larger scholarly project of sorting out the ways in which women may have both experienced and provoked the much-discussed and so-called industrious, consumer, and industrial revolutions of the long eighteenth century. In many ways, this is a study of women and work in the Atlantic world. The scholarship of Judith Bennett, Maxine Berg, Katrina Honeyman, Margaret Hunt, Elizabeth Sanderson, Pamela Sharpe, Jan de Vries, and others has reconfigured the history of European women’s labor and its relationship to the various economic, social, industrial, and political revolutions of the early modern and modern era.<sup>14</sup> Research on European women’s work in the clothing trades, in particular, has flourished in recent years; among the most notable contributors are Judith Coffin, Beverly Lemire, and Clare Crowston.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, costume historians such as Linda Baumgarten, Claudia Kidwell, Nancy Rexford, and Aileen Ribiero have transformed the way scholars think about the production and consumption of clothing.<sup>16</sup> Women in Britain’s North American colonies and the nation that emerged from them moved in currents of much larger streams, indeed oceans of economic and cultural change in an age of revolution. New En-

gland women understood themselves to be connected in important ways to laboring women on distant shores, and we should, as well.

In sum, the study of early American women's work in the clothing trades enables us to see economic history, labor history, and women's history across British North America from a new vantage point. Although almost all women, to be sure, worked constantly to keep their family's clothes in good order, vast numbers of women sewed for families not their own, exchanging their time and skill for goods, services, and wages. Second only to domestic service, the clothing trades were the largest employer of women in early New England and perhaps throughout Britain's North American colonies. Some women earned income on a casual basis, taking in plainwork for neighbors when the opportunity presented itself. Some completed periods of training to acquire the special skills associated with tailors (who produced formal, fitted clothing for men) and mantua or gown makers (who produced formal, fitted clothing for women). Some of those highly skilled artisans worked out of their homes; more rarely, they set up shops. Some specialized in particular items, such as gloves or stockings. Some women sold, traded, or refurbished second-hand clothing, while others labored as laundresses. Constructing and maintaining apparel consumed enormous amounts of time and attention throughout New England in the last half of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth, drawing women into a complex economy in which they participated as (alternately and concurrently) producers and consumers, artisans and clients, employers and employees.

Women's skills with needles and shears gave them a particular place within their communities. Some became widely known makers of the region's most fashionable apparel; others took generally held skills into the homes of their neighbors. Still others served mainly as employers, and not providers, of this labor. My purpose is to plumb those hierarchies of power and skill to better understand the ways in which needlework shaped and reflected the circumstances of real women's lives, which varied significantly over time and space, by economic position and opportunity, by marital status and other life stages, by race, education, entrepreneurial talent, and technical ability; to restore skilled needlewomen to their artisanal status and to reconnect those artisans to the expanding commercial world of the eighteenth century; and to observe the century's economic transformations from the perspective of female needleworkers of varying levels of skill, experience, and independence. This, then, is a study of women, work, and the ways in which early American women's work and work identities turned on commonalities and differences that continue to challenge us today, unaided by the mythologies that elide them.

WORKING WOMEN'S lives are notoriously hard to document, all the more so as one moves backward in time. Rarely literate, early America's laboring women were unlikely to create texts that survive for contemporary historical inspection. Traces of their work instead scatter across the letters, ledgers, and daybooks of others. At the same time, the material world they inhabited—the spaces where they lived and worked; the pins, needles, and shears they possessed; and the products of their labor—endure so infrequently that it can be hard to extract from them sufficient clues to reconstruct whole worlds of activity.<sup>17</sup>

The Saybrook, Connecticut, gown maker Polly L'Hommedieu Lathrop is exceptional in that her accounts for a season's labor survive, and as striking as the existence of the accounts themselves is the pride she plainly took in keeping the record: "Polly Lathrop Act Book" is inscribed no fewer than three times inside the volume's cover.<sup>18</sup> Gloria Main has observed the absence of account books kept by women and suggests that "few women in rural New England engaged in business on a scale or of a nature that required them to record their transactions in a systematic way."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, too, women, whose educations did not typically include accounting, also found other, more idiosyncratic methods to track their debts and credits. Rhoda Childs, an eighteenth-century midwife in Deerfield, Massachusetts, for example, was remembered to have kept her accounts in chalk on the door leading to her cellar.<sup>20</sup> Women's uneven access to literacy and numeracy skills meant that they developed their own strategies for keeping accounts that, unfortunately, less regularly found their way into any archive.<sup>21</sup>

More common than volumes like Lathrop's, and more tangible (for us today) than records like Childs's, are the many account books kept by men that were also the ledgers of women. When Solomon Wright, of Northampton, Massachusetts, inscribed his own name on the cover of his accounts, the gown maker Esther Wright likewise inscribed her own, to reflect that debts recorded therein were also hers.<sup>22</sup> Despite the boldness of her signature, Esther Wright's identity is unclear to us today: Solomon never married; Esther is either Solomon's widowed mother, Esther Lyman Wright (1725–1815), or his never-married sister (1763–1812), also named Esther Wright. Today the volume is catalogued as the Solomon Wright account book, but his notations concerning goods and services "we" received and debts due to "us" make plain that he saw the account book as a record of shared enterprise. Similarly, the ledger kept in the 1760s by Reuban Champion is catalogued as that of a Connecticut Valley physician; the presence of transactions related to needlework long went unnoted, yet more than a third of the individuals listed in the ledger's pages were indebted to the household for Lydia Duncan

6	Debtor to Noah Tucker for half a barrel of Cod fish come to	060000
	Cred. to half a barrel that had the fish	01260
00	Noah Tucker debtor for a pair of selow	
60	outlets that a goot for sea tuckers	0
60	Noah Tucker to making of John manueu this is mock	
60	debtor is one jacket and a pair of breeches come to	0960
00	debtor to one bushel of Endon Ann of me come to	0200
00	debtor to one pair of breeches for yourself come to	0300
30	Genevrey the 14 years then recken	
00	and setled all our books a county and	
00	there remained nothing one Reuben Champion	
00	mis Tucker debtor for doctoring	000400

Reuban and Lydia Duncan Champion account book, 1753–1777. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst (photograph by Thom Kendall).

Accounts in this ledger show debts due to the family for “doctoring,” for agricultural products, and for the making of jackets and breeches.

Champion’s work making and maintaining apparel. To the names of the men and women provided services by his household, Saybrook’s Reuban Champion, like Solomon Wright, sometimes appended “debtor to us,” signaling his own recognition that some of the income his family enjoyed was the result of his wife’s time over her needle.<sup>23</sup>

Additional examples are legion. The nineteenth-century Hampshire County historian Sylvester Judd could record that Sarah King Clark was a gown maker in Northampton from at least “1757 to the revolution” because her husband, William, “charged the work in his book.”<sup>24</sup> In the account book of the Northampton bricklayer Nathaniel Phelps, roughly one in every ten of the more than one hundred accounts for masonry work contain charges for work in clothing production by his wife, Catherine King Phelps. His account book was also in part hers, the value of her time and skill assessed and charged alongside and in the same manner as his.<sup>25</sup> In Williamsburg, Massachusetts, Submit Williams signed her name next to entries in her husband, Joseph’s account book, recording her work making clothing for her neighbors and their hired hands.<sup>26</sup> The ledger kept by the Hadley, Massachusetts, ferryman Solomon Cooke, which spans the years 1790 to 1814,

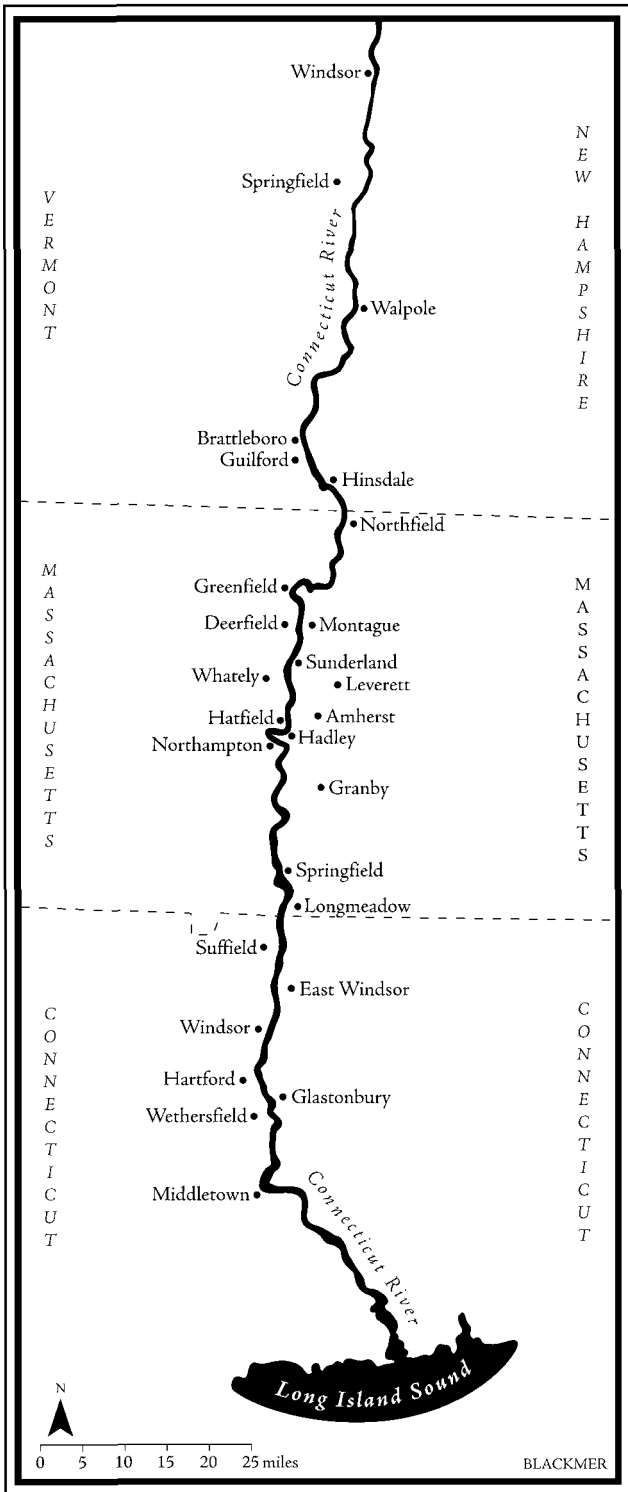
records goods and services offered by the Cooke household to households throughout Hadley, including agricultural products from cider to clover seed, time and energy spent carting goods, tending horses, and securing animal hides, and time and energy spent making and altering clothing. The volume records the contributions that both Solomon and his wife, Tryphena, made toward their household's maintenance, the needlework being hers. But some researchers have erroneously perceived Solomon Cooke to be a tailor on the basis of these entries—an all-too-common error, I suspect, that will persist until women's formal and informal work in the clothing trades is better understood.<sup>27</sup>

Examples like these abound, but historians have not yet fully grasped the shared nature of such accounts. Interestingly, Solomon Cooke has also been called an innkeeper based on the presence of an inn at his home on the north bend of the Connecticut River, when closer examination makes plain that the inn was kept by Cooke's mother-in-law, Elizabeth "Easter" Newton.<sup>28</sup> In other words, historians, distracted by artifacts of male prerogative in colonial society and influenced themselves by the (nineteenth—and twentieth-century) notion of men's role as "breadwinners," have assumed that the account book kept by Cooke reflects primarily his labor, and that the inn in which he lived must have been under his supervision as well; the documentary evidence recording the work of Lydia Champion, Tryphena Newton Cooke, and Elizabeth Fairchild Newton has been there all along but has been difficult to uncover in records attributed to their husbands, and, when found, has been overlooked, misunderstood, and misinterpreted amid tenacious mythologies that even scholars have had trouble casting aside. The novelist Toni Morrison, writing through fiction the histories of other communities even more silent in traditional historical sources, has called her work "literary archaeology," a phrase that has seemed to me resonant with this project as well, since I, as she, have looked to "sites of memory" in order "to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the images that these remains imply."<sup>29</sup> In account books like those of the Champions and Cookes, in letters describing the newest fashions, in journals recording work hired or completed, in workspaces that still dot the New England landscape, and in surviving garments made by women with a range of abilities are shards of evidence of early America's clothes makers waiting to be recognized, analyzed, and interpreted.

The sites of memory to which we travel largely lie in western New England, alongside the Connecticut River as it makes its 440-mile trip from the Canadian border to the Long Island Sound. Though we occasionally look in on men and women elsewhere in New England, our main concern is the

Connecticut River Valley, a geographical and cultural world of its own in western New England, possibly the wealthiest gathering of communities in the region, with its own distinctive patterns of trade, settlement, social intercourse, and cultural practice. Evidence of this distinction, particularly in the context of the region's visual culture, comes down to us in reminiscences and observations of the eighteenth century. The middling and laboring men of the Connecticut Valley, we learn, were identified by the blue-and white-checked everyday shirts that they most commonly wore. When Benjamin Tappan of Boston first attended Sunday meeting in Northampton, he was surprised to find that nearly every man in the room, with five or six exceptions, had one on. "The people of Worcester County wore white shirts," Sylvester Judd further observed, "and they said they could tell a Connecticut River Valley man by his checkered shirt."<sup>30</sup>

The eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley that produced these distinctive wardrobes encompassed more than seventy towns between Hanover, New Hampshire, and Saybrook, Connecticut. Though the Connecticut River flows from north to south, the families streaming into the valley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generally flowed south to north, as men and women made their way from coastal Connecticut upriver to Wethersfield, Hartford, and Windsor, Connecticut, to Springfield, Northampton, and Hadley, Massachusetts, and finally up to Hinsdale, New Hampshire, Brattleboro, Vermont, and points north. River communities in Connecticut were gathered together into two counties: Hartford and Middlesex, constituted in 1666 and 1785, respectively. Settled by Europeans in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, the Connecticut River Valley communities had been thriving for well over a century before revolutionary discontent began to swirl; by 1790, enumerators of the first federal census counted fifty-eight thousand inhabitants living in those two counties. To the north, Massachusetts valley towns by the end of the eighteenth century were themselves well populated, with complex economies and political networks that remained all the while connected to their neighbors to the south. When incorporated in 1662, Hampshire County took in the whole of the Massachusetts portion of the river valley (including the present-day Hampden and Franklin Counties, which hived off in 1812 and 1811), as well as the Berkshires to the west, and encompassed three towns: Springfield, Northampton, and Hadley. In 1790, Hampshire County contained sixty thousand residents in two dozen thriving towns. In the still-more-northerly reaches of the valley, the "great river" formed the border between New Hampshire and Vermont. Settled in the eighteenth century as warfare among European and Native nations subsided, Vermont's river towns, too, drew men and women from settlements to



Map of the Connecticut River Valley. Kate Blackmer.

the south. Almost no European settlement had pushed beyond the Massachusetts border at the mid-eighteenth century, but following the conclusion of the French and Indian or Seven Years' War in 1763, European settlement boomed; by 1771 nearly two-thirds of the seventy-six hundred Vermonters, or about forty-seven hundred men and women, lived in the eastern half of the state, in settlements near or alongside the Connecticut, and most of those—almost four thousand—lived in river towns in the southeast corner of the state.<sup>31</sup>

Farming communities dominated the Connecticut Valley, thriving for centuries on the rich alluvial soil left behind as glacial meltwaters receded, leaving the fertile, easily tilled terraces that attracted early migrants.<sup>32</sup> As agriculture prospered, commerce flourished. Hartford and Middletown became large trading centers with an urban feel. In the 1760s, Joseph Haynes, visiting Hartford from Haverhill, Massachusetts, was greatly impressed by the “metropolous of Connecticut”; his view was shared by men and women from across the colony who looked to the capital as its most cosmopolitan community.<sup>33</sup> By 1770, fifteen schooners docked at Middletown; not twenty years later, George Washington would observe that Middletown, Hartford, and Wethersfield each had twenty ships at port.<sup>34</sup> In 1784, the Connecticut legislature granted city charters to Hartford and Middletown, together with New Haven, New London, and Norwich.<sup>35</sup> In 1790, forty-two Hartford stores offered a vast array of goods.<sup>36</sup>

Commercial sheen as well as geographical imperatives may in part account for subtle differences that separated the valley-dwellers of Massachusetts from their Connecticut counterparts. To be sure, inhabitants of Massachusetts and Connecticut up and down the river were linked by the easy geography of the river; they married one another, traded together, and shared slaves and servants, forging a larger, regional community bound together by kin and commerce. But residents of the southern state looked southward to New York for cultural inspiration, while their counterparts in Massachusetts (and to some degree Vermont as well, though Vermonters had other loyalties, too) felt the pull of Boston's commerce and culture. The gravitational force of those urban centers affected the aesthetic atmosphere of valley towns. With their state government in Hartford, men and women of Connecticut's river valley were closely attuned to the social world that swirled around centers of political power; the influence of election balls and society life reached much more deeply into the populace than it did in rural western Massachusetts—a good two days' ride from Boston—where other sources of authority proved more enduring and persuasive. As a result, Connecticut's citizens sometimes perceived themselves as more cosmopolitan than their neighbors to the north;



after a visit to Hadley, Sarah Pitkin of East Hartford grumbled about “passing so much time with Massachusetts ministers and their ministerial families” and was relieved to return home for a festive season around the capital.<sup>37</sup>

The chronological focus of this study is the period between the Seven Years’ War and Thomas Jefferson’s embargo, decades that witnessed extraordinary changes in New England’s society and economy. The naturalist Stephen Jay Gould writes elegantly about cultural preoccupations with points of origin, our abiding preference for revolution over evolution.<sup>38</sup> We want to identify unambiguous beginnings, Gould suggests, and we want to so badly that we will do so in the face of overwhelming evidence of steady change, and great continuities. Historical scholarship is not immune from similar preoccupations: we talk about industrial, industrious, political, consumer, and market “revolutions” reshaping the eighteenth-century Atlantic world when the phenomena described unfolded over generations, if not centuries, and are riddled with ambiguities. The pace of change in every case was uneven, accelerating and retreating, advancing in fits and starts, reaching different segments of the population at different times and in different places. Indeed, it is difficult to retain these metaphors of revolution at all when continuing study has so thoroughly qualified any meaningful points of demarcation.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, I have called this book *Women and Work in the Age of Revolution*, for the women and men whose lives are traced in these pages indeed witnessed extraordinary changes over the course of their lives, changes in their society, economy, government, and culture that they themselves perceived as dramatic, remarkable, revolutionary. The period of study chosen here encompasses change between two moments that saw acceleration and retreat in the clothing trades, from the expansion of women’s participation in clothing production that attended the Seven Years’ War and its aftermath to the pause in fashion during the early nineteenth century when the embargo acts squelched significant change in stylish apparel for nearly a decade. The war that followed would reconfigure American commerce and, along the way, prove an enormous catalyst for the development of ready-made clothing in the United States.

To explore the world of female artisanry before industrialization, this study examines the clothing trades as a source of employment for early American women. In undertaking such an exploration, it is important to remember that occupational titles are inexact and not entirely helpful, given the fluidities of skill that enabled women to practice a variety of tasks, movement in and out of wage work, and intraregional variation. But, generally speaking, what we understand today to be the work of a “seamstress”

(the production and maintenance of comparatively simple garments) in the eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley was performed by women most often called “tailoresses.” Tailors (that is, artisans who had the particular skills necessary to produce formal, fitted clothing primarily for men) were generally men, though women of equivalent skill were likewise called “tailors”; the feminine suffix, in the eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley, appears to have signaled a level of skill rather than the gender of the artisan. The period term for artisans who constructed gowns for women was generally “mantua maker,” which referred to a particular style of garment once closely associated with silk from the Italian city of Mantua, though women in New England’s rural communities seemed to prefer the more general term “gown maker.” The work of milliners and mantua makers has always been closely connected, and women highly skilled in needlework regularly moved between the two occupations. This study is interested in women’s work constructing clothing, and so observes women at work in that craft, but milliners, whose efforts were more closely concentrated on trimmings and accoutrements, were certainly important contributors to that process, especially in those years when trim and accessories were particularly crucial to a smart appearance.<sup>40</sup>

The book is arranged in three parts. Part I surveys the separate but intertwining worlds of clothing consumption and production in New England from the mid-eighteenth century to the eve of industrialization in the garment trades. Chapter One examines the Connecticut Valley wardrobes, their role in constructing identities, and the ways in which fashion operated to constrict and facilitate men and women’s abilities to create public personas. Chapter Two then turns to the organization of the clothing trades themselves, the acquisition of skill, rhythms of work, construction methods, and other technical aspects of clothing construction. Here I show how clothing production, whether practiced by men or by women, compares to other artisanal crafts, in order to begin to sketch out the ways in which women’s participation in this work both conformed to and departed from patterns observed among artisans more generally. This discussion raises questions about the way historians have thought about early American artisanry and suggests some alternative approaches that may better accommodate the full range of early American crafts.

Part II investigates more closely the array of occupations within the needle trades, from plain sewing to tailoring to gown making, and looks also at the ornamental needlework elite women, as members of the region’s gentry, were obliged to complete. Because the social relations of women’s work are best explored at the local level, each chapter here brings into focus the life of par-

ticular needlewomen who worked in and around a single community in the heart of the Connecticut Valley: Hadley, Massachusetts, a thriving agricultural village nestled in a bend in the river about halfway between the Connecticut and Vermont borders. The principal focus here is on six women, all of European descent, members of the Congregational Church, and more or less of a shared generation, who sustained a particular set of relationships surrounding the production and consumption of clothing. Rural women like these have hitherto been largely perceived as a fairly uniform population, their lives far more alike than they were different. But a truly attentive examination of their distinct yet overlapping worlds reveals how remarkably diverse, complex, and riddled with power relationships those communities were, how much access to skill, relative economic advantage, marriage and family, and other aspects of everyday life positioned women in relationship to one another, enlarging and limiting opportunities, shaping the trajectories of days, years, and lifetimes in ways both large and small. At the same time, each woman opens a window onto larger transformations in the economy and society, allowing us to consider the nature of the expanding market for needle skills, the family economy, and shifting gender divisions of labor at both close and wide range.

The survival of two extraordinary sources, together with unusually well preserved documentary and artifactual records in local historical societies and archives, permits such an investigation. Most important may be the memorandum book of the Hadley gentlewoman Elizabeth Porter Phelps.<sup>41</sup> Each week, from the year she turned sixteen until she died in 1817 at the age of seventy, Phelps sat down to record activities carried out on her large farm. She reported the numbers of hired men fed and the weight of candles dipped; she recorded the names of the women for whom she had quilted, and the names of those who had quilted for her. She noted the comings and goings of hired women who came for the week or the month or for years, as well of the arrivals and departures of needlewomen, whose tenures, generally two or three days, were shorter. Phelps also maintained through many of those same years a steady correspondence with her husband, her son, and her daughters, much of which is extant. Nearly three hundred references to needlework are found in Phelps's diary and letters, recording the services of some thirty needlewomen.

The notebooks of Sylvester Judd, the editor of the *Hampshire Gazette* and an avid local historian in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, provide the second important source. Fifty-six volumes filled with Judd's research—sometimes three and four hundred pages thickly filled with crabbed handwriting—on everyday life in colonial Massachusetts and Con-

necticut can be found at the Forbes Library in Northampton. While the histories that Judd wrote as a result of his researches are certainly colored by the preoccupations of his time, his transcriptions from early Northampton documents, including several account books, some of which are no longer extant, have preserved a significant body of evidence concerning trade practices in his community. Moreover, Judd's interviews with local men and women capture invaluable perceptions of post-revolutionary western Massachusetts. Though the recollections recorded in these interviews must be approached with the same cautions one would bring to oral histories taken in any era, they are nevertheless precious avenues of insight into beliefs, values, and behaviors of the day.<sup>42</sup>

Women in Hadley, as in other towns throughout New England, recognized certain tasks as the province of their gender, but the means by which they accomplished them varied widely and brought very different kinds of women into relationships that reflected and perpetuated those differences even as it drew them together into close, even intimate, social and economic relationships. Relative degrees of wealth as well as preference and inclination governed which labors women themselves performed and which they hired out to others. Elizabeth Porter Phelps, for example, preferred her dairy over her workbasket, employing local women to do the household's sewing and mending or saving something for her visiting daughter to complete. Her daughter preferred to do her own sewing and to hire women to perform other household chores. Though Phelps remained responsible for the cooking, cleaning, and clothing in her household, she did not herself perform all, or even most, of this labor all of the time. Like other female members of the county's leading families, she "used sometimes to work in the forenoon and dress up in the afternoon."<sup>43</sup>

To "dress up in the afternoon" invoked the labors of a whole range of women, from the hired help who made leisured afternoons possible to the skilled local women who cut and constructed those garments that were themselves signs of wealth, leisure, and privilege. Examining the different ways women worked (what they made, what skills and practices they used, who they worked for, and how that work was organized) allows us to explore hierarchy and power amid collaboration and cooperation within rural families as well as the communities they inhabited. Neighborhoods like those shared by the women of Hadley tend to be "treated peripherally in relation to such categories as class, ethnicity, and gender," if not "ignored entirely."<sup>44</sup> But neighborhoods in early America were not simply collections of people who lived near one another; they were the basis for economic and social exchange, the vehicle though which one's day-to-day life was organized, and a

means by which men and women came to understand their place in larger social, economic, and political orders. As such, neighborhoods and the communities they sustained are best understood not simply as places but as a dynamic process through which values, perceptions, and relationships were continually maintained, reinvented, and transformed.<sup>45</sup>

Hadley, like most rural towns of the eighteenth century, was a constellation of neighborhoods. The 110 families (roughly 600 residents) who comprised the community in 1770 thought of themselves in terms of the neighborhood they lived in, from the mills to the north of the village center to Hartsbrook and Hockanum to the south.<sup>46</sup> The women who populate the pages that follow by and large circulated within two of Hadley's neighborhoods—the town center and the northern mill village—with the Phelps household, located about halfway between those two centers of gravity, moving within the orbit of each. Thinking of neighborhoods as process rather than place suits the ways that the families within them understood their relationships to one another and complements another historian's suggestion that we think of cross-class exchanges in early America, too, as processes—as moments in an ongoing negotiation over power, “a seemingly incessant, if often implicit, effort to redefine the conditions of their lives.”<sup>47</sup> The women of Hadley worked every day alongside other women whose lives, choices, and opportunities shaped or were shaped by their own. At times their interests converged, and at times they conflicted. Clothing production and consumption brought women together in exchanges that could be mutually beneficial or asymmetrically advantageous. Sometimes the nature of the exchange is apparent, and sometimes it is obscure, traced in hidden transcripts perceived but unrecorded as participants assigned their own meanings to the exchange.<sup>48</sup> But those moments of intersection reveal how gender, class, skill, and life cycle influenced relationships among early American women.

The women we meet here—Elizabeth Porter Phelps, Easter Fairchild Newton and Tryphena Newton Cooke, Catherine Phelps Parsons, Rebecca Dickinson, and Tabitha Clark Smith—belonged to the same neighborhoods. They were in many ways alike: all fourth—or fifth-generation New Englanders, white, of English descent, and members of the Congregational Church. Their lives overlapped with and intersected one another. They took tea together and joined one another's families in times of both sorrow and celebration. They shopped at the same stores. They knew the same people. Newton, Cooke, Parsons, Dickinson, and Smith recognized one another as fellow practitioners within a common craft community. Parsons was Phelps's aunt by marriage, while the Newtons, Cookes, and Smiths were longtime neighbors at the north end of the Hadley Common. But, at the same time, their lives were very differ-

ent. At times, the things that divided them were subtle: some were well acquainted with distant horizons, and others were not; some sported the newest calicos, others did not. Deeper divisions separated them as well. These women stood in dramatically different positions, for example, to the local and regional economies. They recognized wide gaps in education. They had mastered different skills and had obtained the same skills to varying degrees. Marriage and family, too, brought very divergent experiences.

These differences have themselves determined the very ways in which we can know about them at all. Elizabeth Porter Phelps left a sixty-year log of her household activities as well as a vast correspondence, preserved by descendants whose sense of family heritage was so strong that they would eventually found a historic house museum. Rebecca Dickinson can be known only through the pages of a long, painful, and pensive journal, preserved not with purpose but by chance, discovered nearly a century after her death, tucked away in an attic. Both women leave small samples of their needlework as well, but only their ornamental work was deemed worthy of historical interest: of the many gowns Dickinson made during her lifetime, not one is known to survive, but several examples of crewelwork designed to ornament her home do. Tryphena Newton Cooke appears never to have learned to write. She is known almost entirely through notations left by others—Elizabeth Porter Phelps, in her memorandum book, and Solomon Cooke, in the family's accounts—though two works of her own hand, objects lovingly made for her own children, were preserved by her family, along with stories about her passed down through generations. Easter Fairchild Newton's work is recorded mostly in Phelps's papers as well as public documents, such as the annual tavern licenses granted by selectmen. Catherine Phelps Parsons is still more elusive, known only through transcriptions of her family's accounts made in the early nineteenth century and interviews then taken with family and neighbors. Tabitha Clark Smith is the most obscure, captured largely in Phelps's record and a handful of scattered records.

Chapter Three introduces Elizabeth Porter Phelps and the ways in which needlework and needlewomen helped define relationships within her community. A farmwife and gentlewoman who tackled the everyday mending her household required while completing ornamental projects as well, Phelps was more often the employer and coordinator of the work of others, from her mother and daughters to servants in the household to local women hired to sew to skilled artisans engaged to complete more complex tasks. Phelps's farm provides an ideal environment in which to explore complex and overlapping categories of work, and complex and overlapping social and economic relationships among women. This chapter looks at ornamental needlework and a

form of clothing production closely associated with the rural gentry: the creation of elaborately quilted petticoats. Here, the laborers in question are Phelps and her elite peers whose refined needlework helped sustain networks of political, social, and economic leadership among the gentry class and shape relationships between these gentlewomen and other women around them whose lives looked very different.

Chapter Four explores the ways women participated informally in the clothing trades through the work of the Hadley tailoresses Easter Fairchild Newton and her daughter Tryphena Newton Cooke, who sewed and repaired everyday clothing for families throughout their community. Their work sheds light on the opportunities women with skill, but not necessarily formal training, might find in clothing repair, construction, and maintenance and how that work bound families across economies based on the exchange of goods and skills. Such women created the expansion of household production observed by historians of eighteenth-century economies on both sides of the Atlantic.

Chapter Five turns to the production of clothing by women for women, and relationships between family life and craftwork. Surviving accounts from three generations of craftswomen in Northampton, Massachusetts, working between about 1730 and 1805—Catherine King Phelps, Sarah King Clark, and Esther Wright—illuminate a wholly female world of clients and consumers, while at the same time providing insight into the family economy as it functioned in eighteenth-century western Massachusetts. Here we examine also some of the ways in which craft skill intersected with marriage and family, through the lives of two craftswomen, Rebecca Dickinson and Tabitha Clark Smith. Smith successfully combined skilled artisanal needlework with the raising of a family, while for Dickinson, the acquisition of craft skill enabled her to remain single.

Next we consider Catherine Phelps Parsons, a skilled tailor who, with the help of a constant staff of several female assistants, made, repaired, and altered both everyday and formal clothing for men in eighteenth-century Hadley and Northampton. She was the daughter of Catherine King Phelps, a gown maker, and Nathaniel Phelps, a bricklayer—and the aunt of Charles Phelps, Elizabeth's husband. Her career in the creation of men's clothing facilitates a side-by-side comparison of women's and men's experiences in artisanal clothing production. Examining the making of men's apparel from her perspective helps place female artisans within larger spheres of craft activity in eighteenth-century New England.

Part III suggests some larger contexts of these activities, what they might tell us about the history of the consumer and industrial revolutions on this

side of the Atlantic, and perhaps most important, what they might suggest about the way we think about needlework and needlewomen today. Chapter Seven charts the social and economic changes that rocked New England in the decades following the American Revolution. Here, we revisit these women and others like them and examine their lives from a different perspective, exploring how they fared as regional labor and capital markets emerged and flourished in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Massachusetts.

The conclusion brings this consideration through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, surveying changes in the clothing trades as well as colonial revivals in an effort to understand how the largest occupation open to women in early America has so receded from our collective view. The careers of various mythologies of early American housewifery would make for a very good book in and of itself, since the project of venerating colonial womanhood began almost as the imperial ties were thrown off. As early as the 1820s, nostalgia for the heroism of the revolutionary generation prompted Sylvester Judd to launch his researches; his feeling that the present generation of women paled in comparison to their forebears raised questions for him about the women of colonial and revolutionary Massachusetts. I choose to emphasize the parts of the story that unfolded in the last half of the nineteenth century not because they were necessarily most important in its trajectory but because those decades, particularly following the Centennial, witnessed especially vigorous efforts to remember early American women and their needlework in particular ways. Contemplating that era, if briefly, is important, because it helps us understand how such a thriving world of enterprise became so thoroughly lost to historical vision, and because it reminds us of the consequences such elisions have for contemporary American life.

Taken as a whole, this book argues that New England women in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries participated in craftwork in ways that both mirrored and departed from the artisanal culture of their husbands and sons, revealing how the concept of artisanry as it is frequently employed often conceals more than it reveals. Along the way, this discussion also adds to a growing body of literature that suggests ways in which clothing production was already changing long before the technological and organizational developments associated with industrialization appeared on anyone's horizon, prompting and responding to larger developments in the always-shifting constructions of gendered divisions of labor. These pages also seek to probe the complex landscapes of skill and power that shaped the social relations of early American women's work, to calibrate more carefully relationships that both brought women together, and set them apart.