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## Part II: Chapter 4, Family, Community, and Informal Work in the Needle Trades: The Worlds of Easter Fairchild Newton and Tryphena Newton Cooke

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## CHAPTER 4

# *Family, Community, and Informal Work in the Needle Trades*

The Worlds of Easter Fairchild Newton  
and Tryphena Newton Cooke

THE INN at the south end of the Hadley common catered to polite travelers, men and women traveling to and from Boston by carriage or coach. The inn at the north end of the Hadley common tended to serve a rougher crowd, mainly ferrymen who worked on the river. Among other skills, Tryphena Newton Cooke, daughter of the innkeeper Elizabeth “Easter” Fairchild Newton, learned to manage the rowdy behavior of the raftsmen. According to family tradition in Hadley, tired of one man’s coarse and constant overtures, she finally took a swing at her tormenter, knocking him down. Startled, he rose to his feet, sputtering that “he would only submit to that because she was a woman.” Cooke allegedly retorted that she would not have stood as much as she had unless she *was* a woman.<sup>1</sup> While the story is surely at least partly apocryphal, there was something about the character of Tryphena Cooke that her descendants hoped to remember in its telling. She was, it seems, patient to a point, shrewd, strong of will and of shoulder. She was also acutely aware of some special burdens of womanhood. And she was plainly the sort of woman who knew what needed to be done, and did it.

The life stories of Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke—innkeepers and tailoresses both—provide an unusual opportunity to look closely at women’s informal work in the needle trades. When not taming rowdy raftsmen, Tryphena contributed to her family fortunes by the more sedate work of sewing. Easter, too, saw both tailoring and innkeeping as means to settle debts and generate income. Like thousands of other New England women, married and single, they took their skill with a needle into the marketplace to contribute to their family’s well-being. Easter Newton was tailoring in Hadley at least as early as 1771, when her family’s account with Josiah Pierce was



The Cooke family home. Courtesy of the Ashfield Historical Society.

The c. 1800 home as it appeared at the end of the nineteenth century.

credited for her “making a coat”; like Catherine Deane, Easter Newton here was likely assembling (“making”) a garment that had already been cut by a tailor.<sup>2</sup> In 1779, she made her first overnight visit to Phelps’s home, where she tailored for two November days.<sup>3</sup> Tryphena Newton enters Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s record in December 1786, when, at the age of twenty-two, she spent several days at the Phelps farm mending and sewing for the household. She left on Thursday, 21 December, and Phelps duly noted the visit in the pages of her memorandum book the following Sunday. Tryphena appears in Phelps’s notations again only a handful of times, the last on a Thursday in October 1791, when, now “Mr. Solomon Cooke’s wife,” she arrived to “fix Reuban” (one of Phelps’s hired hands) some clothes. Tryphena Newton Cooke would not be mentioned in those pages again until the summer of 1805, when Phelps recorded her death and funeral; Easter Newton continued to sew at Forty Acres as late as January 1812, when she came to “fix a short coat” for the gardener, John Morrison.<sup>4</sup>

Easter Newton, Tryphena Newton Cooke, and Elizabeth Porter Phelps are as entwined in the present as they were in the past. In eighteenth-century Hadley, such women knew each other well: Easter and Tryphena depended on Phelps for part of their families’ livelihood, while Phelps depended on both women to help her meet her obligations as the mistress of a large farm.

Today, it is only by considering these women and the documents they left behind together that we can derive a fair picture of any of them. That Tryphena Newton nearly disappeared from Phelps's accounting when she changed her name to Cooke is not unusual; the needlewomen, skilled and unskilled, mentioned in Phelps's voluminous record largely vanish from that text upon marriage, with Easter Newton among the few exceptions. After Tryphena married Solomon Cooke, a ferryman, Phelps rarely recorded her coming to sew for that household. Other sources tell us that Tryphena Cooke's family—together ran their family's inn, in a house that still stands on the banks of the Connecticut River.<sup>5</sup> From these facts and from Phelps's memorandum book, it would be easy to conclude that Tryphena engaged in tailoring as a young unmarried woman but generally dropped out of paid work once marriage provided new occupations and responsibilities. The Cooke account book, however, offers another view of her labors and makes plain that she sewed for the Phelps household at least as many times after her marriage as she did while single. Among other things, the account book enables us to compare Phelps's record of the semi-skilled needlework she hired with Tryphena Cooke's record. Perhaps more than anything else, these sources taken together remind us how easily the work of laboring women is elided. Though we have Phelps's memorandum book, an extensive and seemingly exhaustive record, the young needlewoman is omitted from Phelps's narrative accounting once marriage changed the circumstances of her labor; though we have an account book kept by Tryphena's husband, the needlework recorded therein has been both overlooked and misunderstood. If read with care and attention to evidence of both absence and presence, these documents illuminate intersections of household, community, and marketplace that shaped rural Massachusetts at the close of the eighteenth century.

Open almost any Connecticut Valley account book kept during the last half of the eighteenth century or the early decades of the nineteenth and you will find references to women sewing. Ledgers teem with examples of women who paid for groceries, labor, and services, as well as consumer goods, by mending, making, and altering simple and complex garments for others. At mid-century, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Elizabeth Corse earned income mending jackets and making breeches, coats, and "Indian Shirts" for Elijah Williams, in exchange for goods from his shop.<sup>6</sup> In the late 1780s and 1790s, in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, Lucinda Cooley earned a shilling a day tailoring for one and two weeks at a time.<sup>7</sup> In the 1790s, in Suffield, Connecticut, Mehitable Kellogg, a widow, offset her debts to the physician Apollon King by making and turning jackets, coats, and breeches.<sup>8</sup> In Saybrook, Con-

necicut, and West Springfield, Massachusetts, Lydia Duncan Champion worked alongside her husband, Reuban, a physician and merchant.<sup>9</sup> Like Catherine Deane, Lovice Simmister, Phebe Hill, and Polly Hastings, in Windsor, Vermont, who added to their household income by turning their needles to profit, she brought in her fair share of the household's income through her work cutting, making, altering, and mending garments. Of the one hundred accounts maintained in the Champions' ledger, Lydia's needlework appears in roughly one-third.

This chapter, then, surveys women's work as tailoresses in rural New England. We begin by looking more closely at the work of tailoresses surveyed in Chapter 2 and then return to the story of Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke and the ways in which needlework contributed to their households' concerns while embedding them in their community's economic and social networks. Easter's work at both sewing and innkeeping suggests how needlework could be one of several means of support for New England families. Tryphena's work, and Solomon's accounting of it, were also common features of New England life at the turn of the nineteenth century. Together, the two women's lives illuminate the contours of semi-skilled needlework—labor that was at times impromptu and informal but also accomplished and purposeful—as an occupation for eighteenth-century rural New England women.

### *Plainwork*

Much of the clothing made and repaired in early America in some way involved the remunerated labor of semi-skilled needlewomen. More women may have worked in the clothing trades than in any other occupation except, perhaps, domestic service. Tailoresses generally stitched articles of clothing for men, women, and children that did not involve the complicated cutting or fitting that more skilled artisans (tailors, gown makers, and stay makers) were trained to do. They might cut out and construct simple garments, mend and alter garments, or assemble garments already cut out by more skilled artisans, conserving the time of others better allocated to other tasks. When, for example, Betty Potter, a hired woman in the Hollister household in Glastonbury, Connecticut, needed a new gown in the spring of 1793, neither she nor her mistress spent time bent over a needle; instead, a local needlewoman, Esther Smith, was employed to make it up, charging two shillings six pence for her work.<sup>10</sup>

The most challenging alteration projects tailoresses undertook involved cutting down men's coats and breeches to clothe the "rising generation" or

remaking their shabby or outdated garments to give to hired men. Alterations also helped prolong the life of more costly garments; for example, the strength of eighteenth-century silks, the ample materials with which these garments were made, and the large, loose stitches with which some parts were assembled meant that gowns of this expensive fabric could be made and remade to adapt to changing fashion, or changing figures. Tailoresses participated in the production of new clothing as well, cutting and sewing shirts and shifts, for example, or assembling garments already cut by a professional, as Catherine Dean and Lovice Simmister did for the men of Windsor. Having “your work cut out for you” was no mere metaphor: tailoresses were often called upon to sew together pieces of a new garment only basted together by tailors or gown makers, whose special skills were unnecessary for this more routine labor. Although stitching did not require the cultivated expertise that cutting did, producing the hard-wearing seams demanded by clothing intended to withstand years of steady use did require skill. Men’s shirts and women’s shifts, for example, were worn through the workday and as night-clothes and so required firm stitches and strong, well-finished seams.<sup>11</sup> The work of tailoresses may not have been especially arduous, but it was tedious and time consuming and did demand some skill and ingenuity. One shirt or shift took several hours to sew by hand, from the cutting of the individual pieces to the stitching of long side seams to the addition of gussets and sleeves to the finishing of hems, with decorative flourishes, such as ruffles, sometimes adding to the task at hand.

The work of tailoresses was closely linked to that of other laborers. Early American households turned on three general categories of work: textile production and maintenance, food preparation and preservation, and cleaning and general upkeep. Women hired and performed (both intermittently and for long terms of service) many different kinds of help. Spinners and weavers helped produce household textiles. Some hired women contributed to the ongoing production of dairy and poultry products for the market and for use at home. Others assisted with day-to-day chores around the home. In the hill town of Cummington, Massachusetts, for example, Sarah Bryant’s hired women washed and ironed, scoured pots and floors, spun wicks and made candles, and hatched and spun flax for linen, which they also bleached.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Phelps set her hired women to work washing woodwork, cleaning out the buttery, scouring floors, feeding farm laborers, and butchering hogs. They performed much of the daily work to put food on the table and the larger efforts of food preparation and preservation, especially around harvest time, when dozens of hired men needed to be fed. They knitted, spun,

washed, and made soap and probably assisted with mending and sewing chores as well.<sup>13</sup>

In their efforts to accomplish all of this necessary work, housewives balanced their resources accordingly, constantly weighing inclination and ability against availability and expense. When Phelps lost her hired woman Zerviah, she thought she could “get along pretty well if there wasn’t any sewing to do.”<sup>14</sup> In the summer of 1800, Hannah Smith of Glastonbury wrote her mother, Abigail, that she had engaged a girl for a year, and so she did “not mean to do any hard work,” although she had “had eno to do for Zephina to get her ready to go out of town to school and I have had Patience Munn here to help me sew for her.”<sup>15</sup> Though domestic servants contributed to the completion of sewing chores, many employees had their own sewing to worry about: as Betsy Huntington wrote home to her mother, the hired woman Polly “helps a great deal,” but she “must keep her sewing—she has brought enough of her own to last till spring. . . . [N]ext week I intend to get somebody to come and make Mr H’s shirts and my shifts.”<sup>16</sup> In Hatfield, Mary Graves Miller recalled that when she was a young wife in the early nineteenth century she had “fourteen in family, six of whom were apprentices, and my hands were full. I could not bear hired help; they were mostly poor stick, down at the heel, with heads like an oven broom. So I put out my sewing, and got black Cynthy for washing and great day’s work.”<sup>17</sup>

Miller’s reluctance to keep hired girls reflects specific changes in domestic service that had taken place in the decades following the American Revolution, but her strategy in balancing the sets of chores revolving around sewing, laundry, and the other work of the household was an old one. Women throughout New England had long employed different strategies to accomplish these tasks and allocated their resources, financial and physical, appropriately. To be sure, these various sorts of work and workers were very different, but women assessed their need to employ needlewomen and domestic servants in tandem, weighing the services that each performed and the wages that each commanded. For their part, working women, too, chose which sources of income they preferred, also to suit their own abilities and needs, though circumstances of class and race might circumscribe their options. What emerges is an image of the wide variety of ways in which New England women acted as employers and employees, products of their differing positions within the local economy. As that local economy changed, so too did women’s opportunities, constraints, and relationships to one another.

Mary Miller managed her household responsibilities by employing nearby women to take in her sewing and laundry, freeing her own hands for other

labors on the family farm. Hiring this sort of help, as Faye Dudden has pointed out, “was not a carefree undertaking, but it probably involved less friction” than engaging domestic servants to perform what she calls “non-market women’s work.”<sup>18</sup> Hiring women to spin, weave, or launder or employing tailoresses to sew involved less subjective measures of the amount of work or its quality than general household chores. What’s more, it did not require forging and maintaining ongoing day-to-day relationships: when the tailoress completed her work, she moved on, to be asked again or not depending on the needs and satisfaction of the mistress of the house. Hired women, by contrast, had to be instructed, nurtured, corrected, and praised. As Elizabeth Phelps advised her daughter, managing hired women was a chore—and skill—that required “a great deal of flattering and scolding,” which, she added, “you know I could administer very handily.”<sup>19</sup>

Thousands of stitches were required to keep a household’s clothing and textiles in good order. “I have made since you left here twelve shirts & [shifts],” Phelps wrote to her daughter in the spring of 1803, and “knit almost three pairs of cotton stockings besides the socks and mittens and all the other mending which has never been properly clear’d off, since I came [home], till very lately the shirts that you work’d some upon are recon’d in. [N]ow there remains about 6 or 8 frocks & trowsers to make and repair which as soon as my thumb is well, will be attended too.”<sup>20</sup> To survive from season to season, breeches, shirts, and stockings required not only “prudent management” but also frequent darning, patching, and underlaying.<sup>21</sup> On top of this came the construction and maintenance of many household textiles, including curtains, sheets, pillowcases, and other household linens. Elizabeth Porter Phelps found such work mind-numbing. In a letter to her daughter, she reported that she regularly dozed off while trying to keep up with her plainwork: “I’ve been trying to get my mending and work so forward, as I dare take time to write . . . I have been knitting on a mittin and churning alternately till at the last calculation I’ve had more than thirty naps and now I shall try writing and churning.”<sup>22</sup> Six months later, she wrote, “tis now a little past 3 & I’ve been mending stockings near two hours, & am so sleepy, must try whether this business will keep me awake.”<sup>23</sup>

Phelps apparently had little patience or stamina for the monotony of stitches required to keep a household clothed, and perhaps little talent for it as well. While her daughter Betsy was at home, it appears that the younger woman, who preferred the more sedate work of sewing to the more vigorous work of the kitchen, assumed many of these chores. “I feel as I could go along considerable well, if there was no making or mending,” Elizabeth told Betsy. “When you come, you can sew, & I can do the work.”<sup>24</sup> While she was still



living at home, young Betsy Phelps had helped clothe the Phelps men: her correspondence with her brother teems with references to her work supplying and maintaining his wardrobe, including making and mending five and six shirts at a time.<sup>25</sup> Typical is the July 1796 letter that Betsy sent her older brother Charles, away at Harvard. “Mr. Hopkins is so obliging as to take charge of two shirts, your finest,” she wrote, but “they are not wash’d for we had to finish making them this morning.” She apologized for not having completed his “others” but assured him that they “shall soon and send them by the first safe opportunity.” The next April, they were at work once more making shirts for Charles: “As to your shirts, you shall have them as soon as possible—we shall go to work immediately upon them.” When the shirts finally left Hadley, on 30 May, she enclosed with them a note boasting that she had made his shirts “with my own hand.”<sup>26</sup>

Betsy’s boast suggests that Charles would easily conclude otherwise, that is, that not all of the sewing she sent him was of her doing. Elsewhere she wrote, “your piece of holland makes nine shirts—instead of six.”<sup>27</sup> A skillful cutter had wrested more shirts from the materials than either of them had anticipated. Was that hand eighteen-year-old Betsy’s, or one of the many experienced needlewomen that the family employed? Or had the length of Holland gone to a local tailor to cut? And who provided the labor required to sew up these several garments?

There was no difficulty in finding local women to take on this work. In towns throughout New England, families traded goods and services, their exchanges tracked in accounts often extending over several years, and only intermittently reckoned. As families acquired the goods they needed and desired, they indebted themselves to kin and neighbors; in return, they exchanged products of their own labor and skill. Clothing production and maintenance generated demand and involved skills that many women could supply. Most of those employed at the Phelps house are traceable to a dense network of Anglo-American laborers from local families, mostly young women, mostly unmarried. Unlike Phelps’s domestic servants, without exception drawn from hilltowns or communities that lay along the highway between Hadley and Boston, her needlewomen hailed from their immediate community. Of the twenty-five tailoresses named in Phelps’s diary whose hometowns can be identified, twenty-one were from Hadley and Hatfield, with the remainder from the bordering or nearby communities of Granby, Amherst, Belchertown, and Northampton. Not coincidentally, all of these women were enmeshed in the local credit economy.<sup>28</sup>

These tailoresses illustrate the interpersonal character of New England’s female clothing trades. Since women seeking help with sewing could not, in

most instances, turn to the local press to find the names of dependable women available for hire, they turned instead to friends, relatives, and other needleworkers for suggestions. Some young women, like Betty and Tryphena Newton, came to perform needlework through the work of a parent. Betty Newton accompanied her mother to Forty Acres nine of the twenty-two times that Easter came to work at Forty Acres, and she came on her own, as did Tryphena, to sew and occasionally to weave. While family ties brought new generations of women into the clothing trades, they also brought together craftswomen and clients. Members of Phelps's social and family circles introduced one another to the needleworkers they had engaged, as on the August afternoon that Phelps's daughter Betsy brought her friend Fanny Lyman to Hadley "to get some taylouring done at Mrs. Smiths."<sup>29</sup> In the spring of 1778 Phelps's sister-in-law, while staying with the Phelps family, "sent and brought up Molly Marsh to taylor," after which Molly and her sister Mabel began sewing regularly for the Phelps household.

Within communities of working women in early America, the type of work a woman was likely to do and the conditions under which she labored were shaped by race, class, and geography. Tailoresses, for example, were drawn primarily from a given community's white population.<sup>30</sup> In Connecticut Valley account books kept in the last half of the eighteenth century and first years of the nineteenth, references to women of color working in needle trades are rare. Instead, enslaved women worked as domestic help, while free women of color usually worked as laundresses, not needlewomen.

Anglo-American women in need of an income had a wide range of occupational choices, though as we have seen, the women who worked and lived as Hadley's domestic servants were drawn from a different geographic and economic pool than were Hadley's needlewomen. At the same time, however, the employment of tailoresses and the hiring of household help were linked in part because tailoresses' labors helped remunerate those hired men and women. Labor contracts stipulated that laborers receive, at the end of their tenure, two suits of apparel, one appropriate for church and another for everyday use. Fulfilling their end of those bargains often meant, for the wives of employers, hiring yet another, more temporary laborer to help with the sewing. In the fall of 1803, Prince Cooley carried a note from Charles Phelps into the Porter shop asking that the bearer be allowed "cloth for a coat, waistcoat and pantaloons, and shirt, with the necessary trimmings—also a hat and one pr stockings" and that the expense be charged to Phelps's account.<sup>31</sup> Cooley had completed his term of service and would return to Forty Acres with the materials from which one of his suits would be made; he would soon find himself clothed from head to heel. But before these lengths of cloth

could be called a suit, the pieces would have to be cut out and sewn up—tasks that likely brought to the Phelps home at least one, and maybe more, local women. Similarly, Simon Baker of Walpole, New Hampshire, was just ten years old when he was bound to Charles Phelps for a term of almost eleven years, to expire when he turned twenty-one. Baker's contract required that he at that time be provided with "two decent suits of apparel, one for Sabbath and one for work." Baker fulfilled his obligation, and, in turn, Elizabeth Phelps fulfilled hers: when, on 19 March 1777, Baker signed off that he had received two sets of breeches, shirts, jackets, and stockings, his legal relationship with the Phelps household ended.<sup>32</sup>

Such obligations as providing clothes for laborers required Phelps to engage local tailoresses. A year after Baker left, for example, she asked the local tailoress Lydia Smith to show her how to make a pair of breeches for a workman.<sup>33</sup> Maintaining clothing for hired men and women consumed a significant amount of an employer's attention. Tryphena Cooke charged Charles and Elizabeth Phelps for making coats for their "boy," Reuban (an orphan brought to the farm at the age of five), as well as the hired men Whitney and Gastens.<sup>34</sup>

Making clothing was more lucrative than cutting or altering, because it took more time and energy. In one year, for example, Lydia Champion earned £12 13s. making three pairs of breeches, two jackets, two coats, and a pair of trousers, and just over £2 for cutting out three great coats, six pairs of breeches, five jackets, two vests, a coat, and "cloes" [clothes]. Champion was prepared to cut breeches of leather and deerskin when called upon but more commonly cut clothes out of various linens and woollens. Her repertoire in terms of making up garments was similar: largely coats, breeches, vests, and jackets, as well as great coats. The tasks she performed, and the income they generated, varied widely, from 2 and 3 pence for cutting out vests and breeches to sums as high as £3 10s. for making up a jacket and breeches from start to finish. Champion's annual earnings varied widely: they sometimes totaled more than £14, though her average annual earnings for the decade following her marriage were closer to about £4.<sup>35</sup>

What prompted women to begin sewing for households not their own? For most tailoresses, sewing helped offset the ordinary debts of everyday life. In Hadley, for example, Moses Gunn's household settled a debt to Josiah Pierce for legal work "by his wife making a coat for Jonah, by ditto for Samuel and Jacket for Samuel, By making a jacket for Jonah, by making breeches for Jonah and Samuel, [and] by making a jacket for myself," earning on the whole 12 shillings 6 pence.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in Windsor, Connecticut, Anna Cook, a widow, offset her debts to the tanner Jerijah Barber (for shoes, as

well as molasses, rice, and sugar) “by work done tailoring.”<sup>37</sup> Silence Bartlett was eighteen when she began tailoring for Daniel Worthington. Her father, Caleb Bartlett, who owned little real estate, swept the floors of the Hadley meetinghouse for additional income. In 1770, during the time Silence was tailoring for Worthington, her father’s estate was assessed at £52, the town’s median in that year.<sup>38</sup> Tailoring for Daniel Worthington allowed Silence to contribute to the Bartlett family fortunes. For both employees and their employers, the ongoing need to secure goods and services from the community prompted and sustained relationships.

Economic crisis—most commonly the death of a male provider—also drew women into tailoring. Lucy Nash of Granby, Massachusetts, was hired “to taylor men’s clothes” in the same year that her father, Eleazer Nash, died insolvent. Her mother, Phebe Nash, being “greatly straightened,” appealed to the probate court judge to permit her to keep “some part of the movables as the law in such cases directs.”<sup>39</sup> He allowed her their pewter, a table and three chairs, cookware, three beds and bed linens, and a chest of drawers to store them in. As an afterthought, he added above his signature a spinning wheel and reel—probably in acknowledgment of her need of those tools to contribute to her family’s support. Meanwhile, her eldest daughter, Lucy, went to work at tailoring. Robert Blair St. George has suggested that local elites’ use of local craftsmen to produce “public artifacts . . . fulfilled a moral responsibility to lend public support to their neighbors.”<sup>40</sup> William Hosley suggests further that, “in addition to providing a means to work off debts, the community elite . . . were anxious to promote harmony by keeping the home team at work and on the field of play.”<sup>41</sup> It seems likely that tailoresses were hired for similar reasons. Family crises like those experienced by the Nashes brought women into new economic relationships; Phelps’s decisions about which needlewomen to hire when were surely in part guided by her knowledge of the needs of women and families throughout her community.

Happier occasions also drew women into clothing production. A noticeable number of sewers were working on the eve of their weddings, suggesting that New England tailoresses channeled particular energy into earning extra income in the months prior to marriage.<sup>42</sup> Molly Marsh of Hadley tailored regularly for the Phelps family into the fall of 1781, when she declared her intention to marry Joseph Field; Betty Newton lodged twice to tailor in January, again in April, and twice more in May before she married Moses Kellogg in October.<sup>43</sup> In anticipation of establishing a new household, prospective brides acquired kitchen equipment, crockery, glassware, and linens, and other goods. Their work could offset the household’s additional debts with local artisans and shopkeepers as the family prepared for the upcoming event.

The range of goods needed is captured in careful inventories fathers kept of objects purchased for their daughters. The record made by Preserved Wright of Northampton when his daughter Sarah married Asahel Clapp suggests how these purchases were distributed across local and distant sources. The long list included a feather bed, bolster, and pillows; yards of ticking, sheets, and pillowcases, along with thirty-five pounds of feathers; towels, table cloths, and napkins; a brass kettle, a pot, a disk kettle, a frying pan, and a warming pan; basins and other earthenware; a quart pot; a candlestick; two knives; six spoons; three bowls and six trenchers; six London plates with six matching platters; three pint basins; a brass skillet; a pair of box and heaters; a pair of hand irons; shears; two trammels; two porringers; a slicer and a pair of tongs; a chamber pot; a bailing pot, kettle, and skillet; a tankard; a flesh fork and skimmer; a chopping knife; and a looking glass. All of those things were purchased in Boston. From local sources came a wool wheel, a flax wheel and reel, a chest with two drawers, two chaff beds, pails and tubs for butter, cheese, and bread-making, six black and white chairs, five hundred pins, a barrel, a broom, and a bible. Fabric purchased locally included yards of taffeta and damask, as well as drugget quilt for a pillion; fabric from Boston included, along with the ticking, several yards of calico (an extremely fashionable fabric in this period that may have been for her gown), and fifteen yards of some print along with rings, tape, and binding for bed curtains. About two-thirds of the expense for Sarah's "setting out," then, went to Boston merchants and artisans, with the remaining third spent locally, incurring debts that could be offset by the labor of any family member, including the soon-to-be bride.<sup>44</sup>

*Household, Community, and the  
Needlework of Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke*

Looking closely at the sewing performed by Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke helps place this aspect of the clothing trades in the context of community. Tryphena was born in 1764, the third of Francis and Easter Newton's five children. Francis and Easter named their daughter after a woman praised in the New Testament (Romans 16) as among those who "work hard in the Lord," and there is little doubt that Tryphena worked hard in both her spiritual and her secular realms. She had two older sisters, Betty and Eleanor, a younger sister, Sally, and a younger brother, Francis Junior. The Newtons were among those families who migrated westward with each generation, ever in search of new opportunities. Francis's parents were born in Marlboro, Massachusetts, but moved to Leicester, where Francis was born. When he

married Easter Fairchild in 1753, the two were in Belchertown. They lived for a time in Granby and around 1770 moved to the north end of Hadley's West Street, where the Connecticut River swings into the broad arc that encircled the eighteenth-century village.<sup>45</sup>

Housewright, wheelwright, and farmer Francis Newton appears never to have found the success he was seeking. In 1770, as he approached his fortieth birthday, his estate was valued under £30, notably less than the town median of £52.<sup>46</sup> The family's circumstances over the next several years are difficult to puzzle out, but by the end of the decade, Francis and Easter Newton were searching for ways to augment their meager income. At this point the four girls were able to contribute to the household income, but little Francis, born in 1774, was still too small, and with neither the means to purchase acreage nor the familial labor to farm it, the Newtons looked to other occupations. In 1779, they began tavern keeping, and around the same time, Easter Newton became a regular presence at Forty Acres. When they were old enough, Easter's daughters Betty and Tryphena accompanied her. Betty had been weaving there from the time she was fifteen, and later, especially in the early 1780s as she was nearing twenty, she and her mother sewed regularly for the Phelps family. After Betty married, her younger sister Tryphena assumed Betty's place at Forty Acres until her own marriage in 1790.

Many women appear, like Betty and Tryphena Newton, to have undertaken this type of sewing while unmarried. Betty and Tryphena Newton, Molly and Mabel Marsh, Patty Smith, and others largely cease to appear in Phelps's journal (as needlewomen, at least) once they were married. Of the twenty-six women mentioned as tailoring at Forty Acres, twenty-one were unmarried at that time (another three cannot be identified). In part, being single allowed women the flexibility to spend several days in the homes of their employers. The image of the itinerant artisan is of course familiar and extends accurately to needlemen, who as tailors and journeymen traveled from town to town to obtain work, but it is not appropriate among rural New England's needlewomen, at least if by itinerant we mean an occupation that involved both travel and some speculative risk.<sup>47</sup> Tailoresses often remained a day or two in the homes of their employers, but their itinerary was hardly uncertain. Rather, they sustained their craft among a local and established clientele not from one dedicated site but from a chain of local sites only temporarily dedicated to the work. Some sense of this movement can be seen in the diary of Josiah Pierce. Pierce's niece Esther came to live with him in May 1764. On 7 September of that year, he records that she "begins my great coat." On the fourteenth, she finished it, and the next day, began another. She finished that one on the seventeenth, and the following day trav-

eled across town to Ebenezer Marsh's, where she sewed for four days. Between 22 September and 10 October, Pierce records that she returned home, left for Deacon Smith's (across the green from Marsh), returned home, left for Jon Cooke's home on the "middle highway" that ran through the center of town, returned home, and then went again to Cooke's. In the spring, Pierce notes other similar series of brief visits by his niece to households around the town common: four days at the Kellogg house, another four at Oliver Warner's, and then three at Enos Cooke's.<sup>48</sup> Young women, likewise, lodged in the Phelps home for several of days at a time, normally spending two nights in the home of their employer. Typical were weeks when, as Elizabeth Phelps recorded in October 1816, "monday tuesday daughter Hun[tington]: had a girl here 2 days to taylor."<sup>49</sup>

While at first glance, however, Phelps's memoranda may appear to show that most women who sewed for income were single, Phelps's book together with records from the Newton and Cooke families tell us not that sewing was the particular province of unmarried women but that unmarried women were more likely to work in the homes of their employers, and married women were more likely to work in their own homes. Easter Newton is one of the few women found sewing in the home of her employer with any regularity after her marriage, journeying often to Forty Acres. Much of that work, however, was accomplished during her widowhood. Consistent with Phelps's records, which mention only a visit from Tryphena after her marriage, the Cooke family ledger indicates that after her marriage Tryphena continued to take in making and mending and even increased her attention to this work, once she began raising her own family.

When fifty-year-old Francis Newton, like Eleazer Nash, died insolvent, Easter, struggling to settle the debt-ridden estate, petitioned the courts for permission to sell some real estate to raise funds.<sup>50</sup> Judge Eleazer Porter directed Newton's neighbors Enos Nash and Warham and Chileab Smith to assign Easter's dower rights, preserving for her use one-third of the family home: "the south lower room of the great house, and the whole of the kitchen & south half of the cellar, and the whole of the barn." As the estate made its way through probate, Easter petitioned to retain some of her household goods. Like Phebe Nash, she was allowed beds, linens, a chest of drawers, and the minimum kitchen equipment, as well as a foot wheel and a great wheel to enable her to continue spinning flax and wool.

Though Easter had begun to sew for the Phelps family as early as 1779 (and was sewing for other neighbors as early as 1771, when Josiah Pierce acknowledged her four shillings six pence credit for making a coat), her work at tailoring increased its pace in the early 1780s as she adjusted to widowhood.

In 1781, she traveled regularly to Forty Acres to help the Phelps household prepare for the coming winter, and she returned twice in January as well. The following year, too, saw a series of summer and fall visits, and the spring of 1783 was an especially busy season. Elizabeth Phelps was planning a trip to Boston, while her daughters, Betsy and Thankful, were preparing to attend school in Amherst, events that could account for the extra attention to their apparel. The spring work of the farm together with the declining health of her slave girl Phillis also demanded her attention. In early April, the household began to make soap; the following week Lucy Marshall arrived to begin weaving while Phelps sent for Phillis's grandmother, Peg, to help care for the weakening child. The same weeks that saw repeated visits of the Newtons found Elizabeth Phelps anxiously attending to the young girl. Phillis died on the last day of April 1783 and was laid to rest at a funeral at Colonel Porter's house on the town common. Easter and Betty arrived once more to tailor the next day.<sup>51</sup>

The years to come gave Easter Newton both pleasure and pain. In November 1783, her eldest daughter, Betty, married Moses Kellogg Jr., whose father was a former selectman and among the town's wealthier residents. That same year, Eleanor married Jonathan Cook Jr., an apparently well-educated man who in time became a physician. But neither of Easter's elder daughters would live to raise their families; Eleanor died after less than a year of marriage, and Elizabeth died in the winter of 1790. For whatever reason, Easter did not continue to work under the Phelps family roof during these years; in fact, she did not travel to Forty Acres again until November 1807, when Elizabeth wrote her daughter Betsy that "our friend Mrs Newton" had come to "fix Robert" (one of their hired boys). Elizabeth added that she had "been able to work with her" for a bit, after which Charles took her home. She returned to sew twice more, on both occasions to alter coats for the Phelps' hired men.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, Easter Newton had become more than an occasional employee for Charles and Elizabeth Phelps; she had become a "friend." Elizabeth had attended the funerals of Betty Kellogg and Eleanor Cook, and later she would care for Tryphena in a time of need. In the small community of Hadley, the distance between families like the Newtons and the Phelpses was not always great, as relationships extended over generations. When Tryphena became a wife and mother with a family of her own to support, Charles and Elizabeth concerned themselves with the new household as well. Solomon and Tryphena regularly found themselves financially obligated to Charles and Elizabeth, and so Elizabeth hired Tryphena to help her repay her debt and provide her with the additional income she needed to keep her family afloat, and in



doing so helped to maintain between the two households a harmonious and ongoing relationship.

Tryphena Cooke's skills appear to have been fairly broad. She earned most of her income for "making" breeches, trousers, and overalls, as well as shirts, jackets, waistcoats, coats, great coats, and surtouts. She occasionally performed alterations, "letting out" and "turning" coats, mostly for growing boys, though she occasionally produced clothing of better quality, such as the waistcoat she completed for the college-bound Pierrepont Porter, the sixteen-year-old son of Eleazer Porter. She also continued to sew for the Phelpses' hired hands. Though Phelps last noted Cooke's arrival to sew in October 1791, when she came to "fix" that coat for Reuban, her own family's accounts show that in 1792 and 1793, for example, she made two coats, a waistcoat, and a pair of trousers for hired men at Forty Acres. By and large, the garments that passed through Cooke's hands were everyday clothing whose usefulness was extended by alterations or repair. Only very rarely does the Cooke ledger note her work cutting garments; the two jackets and coat she cut in the spring of 1791 for John Montague's three-year-old child, Zebina, are almost the only references to cutting in the entire volume, and then for a toddler's garments. Cooke may well have lacked skill in this area; for example, she made two shirts, a pair of trousers, a jacket, overalls, a fine Holland shirt, and a coat for Solomon Parker but does not debit Parker for the cutting of any of those garments. Her earnings for making garments like these hovered around two and three shillings. On two occasions garments brought as much as six shillings: a jacket for Elisha Smith in 1796, and a "sterat boddey coat" (straight-bodied coat) for Levi Gale in 1793.<sup>53</sup>

The work Tryphena Cooke did bound her family's livelihood with that of others. Sometimes families intermingled accounts at the local merchant's shop; Enos Smith, for example, for whom Cooke had apparently done nine shillings' worth of sewing work, gave her a note for William Porter, asking him "please to let the bearer Mrs Cooke have 9/ [goods valued up to nine shillings, charged to Smith's account] out of your store."<sup>54</sup> Running accounts between households like this and others captured in the Cooke account book also illuminate the ways in which community members relied on one another for the goods and services they needed to sustain themselves and their families. Cooke's tailoring was one means by which she and her husband settled accounts with family and neighbors. Solomon Cooke's brother Andrew, for example, supplied the household with rye and corn by the bushel; in return, Tryphena kept his wardrobe in good order, making him trousers, waistcoats, overalls, and great coats. In all, more than 120 men and women, ranging in wealth and status from Eleazer Porter to the freed slave

Joshua Boston, exchanged goods and services with Solomon and Tryphena Cooke during the twenty years of accounts that appear in their surviving ledger.

This record, though fragmentary, of Solomon and Tryphena Cooke's exchanges with Charles and Elizabeth Phelps reveals that their relationship was ongoing.<sup>55</sup> Around the same time, for example, that Tryphena made the two coats, a waistcoat, and trousers for the Phelps's hired men, Solomon sold the household three animal hides. When the two families reckoned accounts in January 1794, the Cookes still owed the Phelps a balance of 15 shillings 5 pence. Over the next year, Solomon earned 1 shilling leading a horse to or from the ferry. He also carried two more hides to Forty Acres, one weighing fifty-nine pounds, worth nearly the whole 15 shillings, and another smaller hide worth 10 shillings. Still, by January 1795, the Cooke family—now enlarged to include a toddler, Elizabeth, and an infant, Tryphena—was yet deeper in debt to Charles and Elizabeth Phelps, owing them 3 shillings 9 pence. In November and December, as they and Charles Phelps prepared to reckon accounts, Tryphena labored diligently to work off the balance. She made a great coat, a waistcoat, a pair of trousers, and two coats for hired men, earning altogether £1 toward relieving the debt. When Solomon contributed a calf skin, the Cookes finally “ballanced all accounts” with Charles Phelps on 15 January 1795, a month before Tryphena delivered her fourth child. Further transactions with Phelps brought in a few shillings now and then; Tryphena made a coat and other clothes for the hired man Whitney in 1797, and again for Reuban in 1798. The families balanced accounts again in February 1801. These last accounts were less systematically settled, perhaps suggesting that the two families' later dealings required less rigorous and regular scrutiny.

Indeed, relationships between families constantly fluctuated in response to changing circumstances. For example, just as marriage altered the physical circumstances of Tryphena Cooke's sewing, changes in her family's needs altered the quantity of work she took on. She was married in January 1790, and her first child, a son, was born the following November. Six more children would follow. Before her children were born, Tryphena Cooke sewed very little—only one or two entries each year record this work, and her earnings were slim. Perhaps in these years she was making cider, helping around the inn and tavern, and performing some of the other work for which Solomon charged in his book. But as her family grew, Tryphena sewed heavily, earning an average of nearly £2 a year. In 1793, with an infant and a toddler and another child on the way, she reached a peak earnings of 69 shillings, or more than £3. Interestingly, these are the same years that the couple seems to have been making some improvements to their home. In March 1792, the

household accounts contain debts associated with the framing of a barn. In August 1794, Solomon's brother Elihu Cooke was credited for three weeks' work at Solomon's house "soring a winder hole in a garret," and in December, he was paid for painting.

After 1797, Tryphena's charges in Solomon's accounts dropped off sharply, though it is hard to say why. By the end of that year she had four small children, but before long she would have three more, and her children had not previously prevented her from taking in sewing. Perhaps the work of the inn replaced her sewing.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the sewing needs within her own household were increasing. For example, Tryphena Cooke provided clothing and maintenance for her own family's hired help, Solomon Parker and Jemima Boynton. When "Sol" needed a new pair of trousers, unlike Elizabeth Phelps, who hired local women to maintain her help's clothing, Tryphena provided the labor to accomplish the task, while her husband charged the work against the servant's accounts in his book.<sup>57</sup>

Family fortunes for Tryphena Cooke also meant shifting skills and experiences, turning to both needlework and tavernkeeping as circumstances allowed or demanded. As we have seen, her life at the inn taught her how to keep the peace, an important skill when town selectmen could deny licenses to anyone whom they believed incapable of maintaining an orderly house.<sup>58</sup> Here, as she had when she began her needle work, Tryphena worked alongside her mother. Easter Newton first worked at tavernkeeping with her husband, Francis, in 1779 and 1780. In 1781, after his death, she obtained a tavern license in her own name and continued to receive licenses for nearly twenty years, until 1810.<sup>59</sup> Though the house was long been remembered as Cooke's inn, it seems unlikely that Solomon Cooke and his mother-in-law were competing for customers; instead, the structure that housed Easter Newton's business was likely Tryphena and Solomon's home. Solomon's father, Andrew, had purchased this, the last house lot along the river, in 1795, and the new house was built not long after, and perhaps almost immediately, since in 1796 Widow Newton sought to expand her clientele by purchasing advertising space in the columns of the *Hampshire Gazette*, promoting auctions at her public house.<sup>60</sup> The two-story, five-by-four bay Federal-style house on the banks of the Connecticut River was a convenient stopping place for men and women traveling by ferry over the river, often guided by Solomon.<sup>61</sup> No account book detailing life at the tavern is known to survive, but Easter Newton's series of licenses together with oral tradition that remembers Tryphena in the barroom suggest that mother and daughter played central roles in the daily operation of the tavern, while the ferryman Solomon Cooke seems to have spent his time on outdoor jobs.

In 1805, at age forty, Tryphena Cooke died after an extended battle with breast cancer. In the final months of her life, the family inn became a site of religious and social gatherings: in April 1804, Elizabeth Phelps attended a religious meeting and found “more than a hundred people there, notwithstanding there are almost every night meetings . . . twice every week—all sorts attend.”<sup>62</sup> Later that month the Phelpses attended a singing meeting there.<sup>63</sup> Ailing by December 1804, Cooke suffered with the disease through the spring and into the summer, when Charles Phelps visited and prayed with her. The first Sunday in June Charles and Elizabeth stopped in after services to pray with her once more. Nine days later, they attended her funeral. The minister, who acknowledged Cooke’s long illness, took as his text Philemon 1:23: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.”<sup>64</sup> Solomon, left with a houseful of children between the ages of fifteen and two, soon remarried. His son Solomon eventually took over management of the business, and, when he died, his wife, Clarissa, continued on, the third in three generations of women to run the inn at the north end of the Hadley common.<sup>65</sup>

Tryphena Cooke’s needlework exists for us today in the breach between two very different sources, both of which capture more shadow than substance. Only two pieces by her hand are known to survive: a shirt and a bonnet she made for her son Samuel.<sup>66</sup> From the memorandum book of Elizabeth Phelps we catch a glimpse of a young unmarried needlewoman journeying up to Forty Acres to tailor. But Phelps’s text misleads us. Tryphena Cooke is one of many women whose needlework vanishes from Phelps’s memorandums, although Phelps continued to employ her skills. What changed was neither the amount of work nor the nature of it but rather its location, as we learn from Tryphena and Solomon Cooke’s record, which places Tryphena’s skills within the context of her larger community. From this record we learn that women worked at tailoring throughout their lives.

In part then, both Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke offer examples of the growing numbers of women moving into the clothing trades during the eighteenth century. Account books like Tryphena and Solomon Cooke’s remind us to be more attentive to the legions of references to sewing that fill eighteenth-century ledgers. As Gloria Main points out, “when nominally feminine tasks became important to household income, men undertook a share of the responsibility, even if only to keep track of the profits.”<sup>67</sup> Tryphena’s entries provide evidence not only of her own patterns of work but also of its significance within the Cooke family economy.

In Tryphena Cooke’s accounts we also see a reflection of the rising numbers of New England women who were earning livings from clothing



Needlework by Tryphena Newton Cooke, 1790–1805. Photograph courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum Archives (Great River Archives), Hartford, Conn.

A child's bonnet and jacket are all that appears to have survived to the present from the needle of Tryphena Newton Cooke. This photograph was taken in the 1980s during fieldwork for an exhibition; the location of these garments is no longer known.

production in the eighteenth century. Reconfigurations of household and community labor drew some women's energies away from the tasks surrounding clothing production and maintenance, creating opportunities seized by others. At the same time, a plentiful labor force, for the most part female, was progressively linked to burgeoning demand. As more people demanded new garments in new forms and new fabrics, more hands were required to produce them. The blossoming consumer revolution, then, also helps explain women's entry into the paid labor force, though women like Cooke were of course consumers as well as producers. To purchase the new luxuries making their way up the Connecticut River, women looked for opportunities to earn cash or to gain credit at local shops. When Easter Newton settled a debt to Josiah Pierce by making a coat, or Tryphena Cooke exchanged her skill with a needle for goods out of William Porter's shop, she rehearsed a scene that would be repeated, on ever-larger scales, throughout the town, county, and region.