

January 2006

Part I: Chapter 2, Needle Trades in New England, 1760-1810

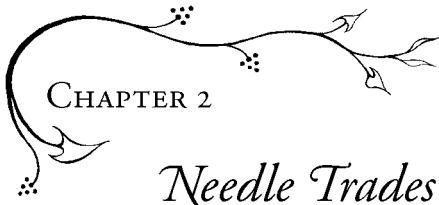
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CHAPTER 2

Needle Trades in New England, 1760–1810

IN FALL 1800, Frederick Wardner left the Windsor, Vermont, shop of Isaac Green with two and a quarter yards of coating for a surtout, having paid thirteen shillings six pence. Along with the cloth, Wardner had bought a dozen and half coat buttons, three skeins of thread, linen to line the sleeves and pocket, and a yard of flannel for the interlining. He took the cloth to Thomas Welch, a tailor who measured him and cut the pieces for the new overcoat, charging two shillings for his work. Wardner then carried the several pieces to Catherine Deane, a tailoress who made up the garment. She charged five shillings to assemble the coat, apply the buttons, and press the finished garment.¹

To attain the tasteful appearance he desired, Wardner drew on the expertise of at least three people in his community whose contribution to the production of the new coat lay within a complex economy of skill, time, and talent. Men like Thomas Welch performed the more technically demanding tasks of cutting and turning coats, jackets, and overalls.² As Isaac Green's account books reveal, several women in the town, like Catherine Deane, made and mended coats and overalls and performed plain sewing. Lovice Simmister, for example, sewed up fustian overalls for Wardner "after they was cut out," possibly also by Welch, and Oliver Barrett's wife offset her household's debts to Green by making shirts, at three shillings six pence. Phebe Hill's attempt to do the same was less successful; Green gave her the pieces of a pair of breeches already cut out and credited her three shillings for making them up, noting, however, that they were "very poorly" done. Thereafter, Hill was engaged to sew only "coarse" shirts.³ Polly Hastings, in contrast, performed a variety of jobs for Green, making and mending shirts, breeches, jackets, and overalls. Her ability to alter jackets, turn coats, and make surtouts allowed her to turn her sewing skills to steady advantage.

Deane, Simmister, Hastings, and Hill had counterparts throughout New England. To be sure, as daughters, wives, and mothers, women contributed

mightily to the construction and preservation of their family's apparel. Their work is not to be treated lightly: keeping a family clothed depended heavily on unpaid labor within the household, as women laundered, mended, altered, and constructed many of the garments that their families needed from day to day. Most women's "housewifery" required a basic familiarity with clothing production and maintenance. Short gowns are a good example of the sort of garments, including also shirts, skirts, and shifts, whose cut and construction were "universally understood." These common everyday women's shirts were made from a full width of material cut in one piece that stretched from the waist at the back, over the shoulder, to the waist in the front, thereby avoiding the need for shoulder seams. An opening was cut to create the neckline, and rectangular pieces of material were then attached on either side to create the sleeves. "Significantly," Claudia Kidwell points out, "this was a two-dimensional use of textiles. The final fit of the garment was not achieved principally through the cut of the material." Instead, a rough, loose fit was achieved through the addition of either pleats or casings with drawstrings. A whole genre of apparel—men's shirts, women's shifts, robes, banyans, and other similar garments—were conceived principally as combinations of rectangles. These were the garments that most women learned to make.⁴

Another genre of apparel, including men's coats and women's gowns and stays, involved a far more sophisticated understanding of clothing construction—knowledge of physiology and a feel for mathematics as well as materials and motion, that is, of the particularities of given fabrics as they assumed fluid three-dimensional forms. The skills that separated amateur from master carpenters mirror similar distinctions between amateurs and specialists in the clothing trades; needleworking artisans, like their woodworking counterparts, "worked with complex geometry and measurements"; clothing construction, like housebuilding, "was more than a matter of manual dexterity and knowledge of [materials]. It required advance thinking skills and an understanding of three-dimensional relationships."⁵

Legions of women took their skill with a needle and shears to the marketplace to meet the demand for clothing and to augment their household income. Some women worked as tailoresses, making and mending the household linens and everyday clothes whose maintenance consumed much of a woman's time in early America. Others cultivated special abilities and worked as gown makers, stay makers, and tailors, providing specialized skills to the men and women of their communities. A survey of the structure of the clothing trades in early New England suggests that clothes making involved divisions of labor along gender lines as well as economic and social opportu-

nity, age and marital status, and even race. The work engaged a variety of people—some with little skill, some with more, some professional artisans—who acquired and applied craft skills and knowledge and moved through their various communities as need, opportunity, and inclination dictated. Sorting through the various ways in which women and men participated in clothes-making occupations suggests a more nuanced understanding of craft skill than long-standing definitions of artisanry have so far encouraged, revealing multifaceted communities of practice that engaged laborers of greater and lesser skill in tasks and activities that turned on the gender of a given garment's maker as well as its eventual user. What's more, the gendered compositions of each of these trades were in flux throughout the eighteenth century—developments that engage our attention in subsequent discussions. But first it is important to sketch the general outlines of these occupations as they emerged in early modern Europe and unfolded across early American communities.

Gender and the Needle Trades in the Early Modern Atlantic World

In some ways, the participation of eighteenth-century New England's working women in cloth and clothing production comes as no surprise: women have long been associated with fiber arts.⁶ Reasons for the ancient association of women and needles are easy to find; the tedious processes involved in cloth as well as clothing production—often requiring relatively little attention but a good deal of time—were compatible with child care. Yet historians generally agree that women's significant presence in skilled clothing trades during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth was a relatively recent phenomenon in western European societies.

Though European women had traditionally sewn for their families, professionally made clothing for both sexes was largely the province of male artisans, especially in urban areas, from about the thirteenth century (when the cloth and clothing trades fell under the control of guilds) to the seventeenth century. At issue were methods of cut, construction, and closure. Women's garments were generally loosely shaped and fastened with drawstrings and pins, while men's garments required a closer fit and the more difficult production of buttons and buttonholes. Women's formal clothing, however, involved complicated architecture and required the special skills of a tailor. Long accustomed to this arrangement, tailors exerted great energies to protect their trade from independent female labor. Guilds defined apprenticeships, determined who could serve them, and set and enforced standards of quality. They also required that production occur in public workshops.



Empire-style gown and detail of seam, 1800–1815. Courtesy of Historic Northampton (photographs by Stan Sherer).

This gown from Hadley, Mass., illustrates both a desire to comply with prevailing fashion and the consequences of misjudgment managing one's materials. The garment's maker failed to bring her materials together effectively at the long center seam, creating an awkward pattern down the front of her gown. For comparison, see the well-executed seams of the tailor-made striped silk frock coat on page 173.

Because tailors jealously guarded the “mysteries” of clothing construction—that is, the technical and conceptual abilities to construct apparel—most women lacked the specialized knowledge needed to create garments that required attention to fit.

This division remained in place until the seventeenth century, when women asserted their right to participate more fully in the making of clothing. European women had long been active in needle trades, particularly as the wives and daughters of tailors routinely contributing their skills and labor to their family’s upkeep. But during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, they pressed for greater autonomy and independent artisanal status as well, gaining ground in the making of men’s clothing and largely capturing (except for the most formal apparel) the making of clothing for women and children. In the Netherlands, male tailors successfully protected the core features of guild status but could not prevent the steady growth of women working in clothing trades.⁷ In Brittany, the number of women tailors rose over the first half of the eighteenth century. The tailor’s guild in Nantes, France, reluctantly began admitting women in 1733, a change in policy that simply reflected the growing number of women who had entered the field without anyone’s permission; if the guild hoped to exert any control at all over these artisans, they had first to bring them under the umbrella of guild oversight.⁸

The pressure to admit women to the clothing trades emerged as female sewers came to dominate a new trade, mantua making, generated in part by the advent of a new fashion. When it emerged, the mantua (originally a sort of loose coat falling open to reveal a skirt, usually worn over a matching or contrasting petticoat) represented a “revolution in women’s apparel.”⁹ Formal attire for women previously involved a heavily whaleboned bodice and a long-trained skirt that was attached to the bodice with hooks or buttons. The mantua, a one-piece gown worn over a separate bodice, transformed both production and consumption. Support was no longer fixed in, and so required by, each particular garment but was supplied by a separate article, the stays. The new garment demanded comparatively less skill to make, required less fabric, and provided more comfort; it was therefore more accessible to larger numbers of consumers, who could now appropriate high fashion without so clearly transgressing prescription for their class or station. At the same time, because the new style evolved from loose, informal “gowns of undress” that had long been the province of seamstresses, the construction of this form, simply in new and richer materials, did not violate standing prescriptions regarding female participation in the clothing trades. The advent of this new fashion would transform the clothing trades. Needlewomen seized

the opportunities this development offered. The new style of gown was promoted vigorously by aspiring needlewomen who saw in the fashion a chance to garner a good deal more business, opening a channel through which they would ultimately gain control over the construction of nearly all women's garments.¹⁰ And as needlewomen tapped into a growing market, their customers, who included wealthy and powerful aristocratic women and others who aspired to look like them, acquired a "vested interest" in these craftswomen's "independence and success," a development that would affect the outcome of the challenges that ensued as men in the clothing trades struggled to maintain control of production.¹¹

The widespread popularity of the mantua significantly advanced the prospects of enterprising women across Europe, who assumed control of most semi-skilled needle work and gained nearly sole authority over the making of women's gowns as well. The *couturieres* guild in France acknowledged fifteen hundred *maitresses* in the capital city by 1745, a number that would double by the outbreak of revolution.¹² Tailors retained authority over the making of men's fitted clothing (including coats, suits, vests, and breeches), as well as women's riding habits, which resembled men's suits in appearance and construction, but women generally came to be the primary sewers of both men's and women's working clothing and of women's fitted clothing.¹³

Several social, economic, political, and cultural factors contributed to these transformations. Women's infiltration of clothes-making crafts resulted in part from larger constrictions of opportunity. As scholars studying women's occupational prospects in a variety of times and places have observed, women came to dominate needle trades only as they were squeezed out of a much broader range of occupations. Before the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries women could be found working (with varying degrees of autonomy) at a wide variety of tasks in a range of fields, apprenticed as blacksmiths and barbers, plumbers and joiners, fishmongers and upholsters. But, as early as the fifteenth century and accelerating into the eighteenth, massive economic reorganization caused the supply of laborers in all fields increasingly to exceed demand for their services.¹⁴ Craftsmen sought to protect their trades and launched efforts to reduce female competition. Apprenticeship and guild membership was increasingly limited, while restrictions were placed on women's independent production; the employment of female workers was discouraged, controlled, or simply prohibited. The result was that, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the range of possibility for female artisanal activity had sharply narrowed. But that same constriction of opportunity produced expanded roles in the trades that remained accessible.

Economic and cultural rationales worked together to effect these changes. The argument that clothes making was an appropriate occupation for women irked tailors, because casting sewing as appropriately feminine cast them as necessarily effeminate. Tailors found themselves on an uncomfortably ragged edge of the traditional sexual division of labor in which “women tend to process ‘soft’ materials (cloth, leather, reeds), while men process ‘hard’ materials such as metal, wood and stone.”¹⁵ Tailors did occasionally work with leather, the “hardest” material of which clothing (e.g., leather breeches) was constructed, which contributed to the division of labor between male and female clothing producers, but, to these men, the distinction was not clear enough for comfort. Moreover, because tailoring did not require a dedicated site or separate workshop and was associated closely with work performed in the home (which was already becoming defined in Europe as not-work), men in clothing production received very little respect for their skills. In the hierarchy of London trades, tailoring fell just above the work of common laborers, together with that of porters, coopers, bakers, butchers, weavers, sailors, gardeners, and masons. All “hard-working manual jobs, some were quite skilled but all low in status, the pay usually poor and irregular.”¹⁶ In his mid-century guide to trades, Robert Campbell rose to their defense, though weakly, insisting that the tailor is “not such a despicable animal as the world imagines; that he is really a useful member of society.”¹⁷ But the same qualities that defined needle trades as appropriate for eighteenth-century women made them emasculating for eighteenth-century men. That derogatory view of tailoring helped clear the way for greater female participation in the trade.

From the earliest days of New England’s colonization, then, the tailors, milliners, and mantua makers who came to Britain’s North American settlements brought with them expectations about men and women’s participation in the clothing trades. Very little is known about either tailors or mantua makers in early New England. Though women tailors do not appear in seventeenth-century sources, both men and women do appear as mantua makers. John Richards was a mantua maker in early eighteenth-century Hartford, while in the 1720s and 1730s, “Mrs E.A.” from London advertised in the Boston press that she “designs making Mantos and Riding Dresses” as well as “all sorts of Millinary work”; she also offered her skills as an instructor in the art of dressing heads and cutting hair.¹⁸ About the same time, Richard Bassett and his wife, from the “Court end of London,” also advertised their shared enterprise; in addition to mantuas, they offered “all sorts of gowns, petticoats, Spanish flies, mantels, velvet hoods and mantel hoods, high crowned hats and cloaks.”¹⁹

As the eighteenth century wore on, a thriving world of clothes-making

artisans hummed along throughout New England. Just as European gown making was transformed from a trade controlled by men to one dominated by women, in New England, men like Richards and Bassett were the exceptions; by 1789 (the first year that Boston published a city directory), all of the city's (advertising) mantua makers were women. And New England women, like their counterparts elsewhere, would press to expand their role in the skilled making of men's clothing, too. At the same time, other women, without specific training in any clothing trade, continued to ply their needles in less formal ways. The clothes-making trades in New England, then, reflected the larger sweep of change transforming practices across Europe but responded, too, to particular circumstances closer to home.

The Spectrum of Needleworkers in Rural New England

Men and women throughout New England seem almost perpetually engaged in the production and consumption of textiles and clothing, within their own households and in the households of others. The enormity of work involved in creating even a single garment is so staggering that it can be difficult for those of us accustomed to simply purchasing the finished product to take in.²⁰ A good sense of the process as it stood at the close of the eighteenth century can be gained from the diary of Elizabeth Fuller, a fifteen-year-old girl from Princeton, Massachusetts. In February 1791, Fuller spent three days (beginning on the ninth) picking wool that had already been designated for a coat for her father. She began to break the wool on the twenty-second, working through about four pounds a day for three days. On 1 March, her mother began to spin the wool for the coat, which occupied her for several days over the next three weeks, until she finally finished on the twenty-fifth. A woman arrived in April to warp the loom with the thread (which had been dyed blue, apparently by someone from outside the household), which Elizabeth finished drawing in the next day. She wove about two yards each day that she worked on it, and "got out the piece" on the morning of 14 April 1791. Her father then carried the wool fabric to "Mr. Deadman's," probably to be fullled. In June she records, "Ma cut out Pa's coat" and, later, that her mother was sewing it up. In July, Elizabeth began the process all over again, "picking blue wool for Pa's surtout," which too would be broken, spun, woven, cut, sewn and fullled during the next few months, until it was finished the following October.²¹

While Mrs. Fuller possessed sufficient skill to cut her husband's coat without resorting to the help of a tailor, the amount of clothing required by New England families was simply too great, and the range of garments too broad,

for the demand to be met solely by women working to supply their own households. Thousands of young women contributed to the work of textile production by hiring themselves out as spinners, while, by the close of the century, both women and men in New England worked at weaving. But clothing production (and maintenance) engaged another work force of tailors, tailoresses, gown makers, stay makers, milliners, and laundresses. Long before Catherine Deane picked up her needle, a dense network of artisans and laborers flourished across the region. Occupations within the clothing trades were not distinct. Though each trade required command of particular skills, some skills were shared across the clothing trades, and some practitioners might master skills associated with more than one trade. Rather than trying to identify specialized trades, or to create artificial categories within those trades, it is both more helpful and more accurate to think of a craft's practitioners as falling along a "range . . . based upon training, tools and task difficulty."²² Better still is to envision multidimensional communities of practice that engaged men and women of greater and lesser skill in a variety of associated occupations in ways that could change shape over the course of individual lives and circumstances. Put another way, clothes making encompassed a range of skills, some shared, others not, and most involving novices, amateurs, and specialists.

In communities along the Connecticut River, a tailoress was akin to what we today might call a seamstress (a word that, along with its companion, "sempstress," appears infrequently in manuscript sources from the Connecticut River Valley). Semi-itinerant in that they traveled locally, lodging for several days at a time in the home of their neighbors and employers while they went about their business, these needlewomen took widely held but well-developed skills into the households of others. Their work required no particular training, unlike that of tailors and gown makers, but it did demand a good deal of practice, and it would be incorrect to categorize these women as "unskilled" workers. Clothing in early America, as we have seen, was a valuable asset, and great care was taken to prolong the lives of individual garments. Tailoresses generally performed tasks required to produce and maintain the most common garments for men and women (as well as children of either sex): shifts, shirts, skirts, frocks, jackets, trousers, and other garments constructed largely in two dimensions that required little attention to fit. Keeping these garments in good order was no small undertaking. Everyday life in early America was hard on clothing: cloth was regularly stained, soiled, and discolored, torn or worn through at the elbows and knees; seams split, hems frayed, and buttons went astray. Laundering could stress both materials and construction. At the same time, clothing had to change with the bod-

ies it covered; garments were enlarged and cut down, reshaped and resized, and sometimes converted altogether from one thing to another, men's coats cut down to clothe boys, quilts converted to skirts, skirts converted to quilts, and so forth. The best needlewomen could make alterations and repairs, and render them invisible, too.

Many New Englanders owned one or more garments of better quality. For women, these garments were gowns that fit snugly through the bodice, shoulders, and arms before cascading gracefully to the floor. The construction of gowns, unlike that of skirts and shifts and other two-dimensional garments, demanded special training and expertise. A gown maker had to be able to solve a series of challenging mathematical problems in order to persuade flat textiles to conform gracefully to curved surfaces, such as the negative curvature of the back.²³ Since many middling women owned only a single gown of good quality, or acquired such gowns infrequently, they were rightfully loath to risk cutting into expensive fabrics themselves. When Catherine Parsons—among the most active tailors in Northampton—needed new silk gowns for herself and her daughters, she purchased the skills and experience of the Northampton gown maker Esther Wright to make them up. She also employed the gown maker to cut the pieces for a pair of stays, though she did not ask her to assemble them.²⁴ Parsons's choice reminds us that occupations within the clothing trades, though related, were not interchangeable. Tailoresses, tailors, gown makers, milliners, and stay makers specialized in different aspects of clothing production and possessed specialized knowledge appropriate to those tasks.

The construction of so-called polite clothing required, in addition to an understanding of the human form, an understanding of and familiarity with many different fabrics that allowed the gown maker to turn the special properties exhibited by expensive materials—the gloss of calimanco, the weight of paduasoy, the luster of satin, the stoutness of ducape—to best advantage. As one skilled (though not necessarily specialized) needlewoman warned a younger novice at the work, “Did you consider that silk does not stick to you like cambric[?] it sets off and needs to be longer than anything else.”²⁵ The younger woman's inexperience nearly caused her to cut her pieces too short; were it not for this timely warning, yards of fabric would have been ruined. Technological advances in textile production raised challenges for eighteenth-century gown makers. When large-scaled patterns gained popularity, for example, special skill was required to ensure that repeating rhythms of vines and flowers were shown the advantage of both the fabric and its wearer as they stretched across a tightly fitted bodice and cascaded down the bell of the skirt. Cutting and positioning fabric in this way is a challenge, but

good gown makers could do it while also making the most of expensive materials.²⁶

Expense did not necessarily deter a person from hiring skilled help to complete an article of clothing; purchasing the labor of a practiced artisan typically represented just 5 to 15 percent of a garment's total cost. The nine yards of pink durant that the Hadley gentlewoman Elizabeth Porter Phelps acquired in 1788 cost eighteen shillings; at that time the cost of cutting and making a gown was normally about two and a half shillings, or just under 14 percent.²⁷ Catherine Phelps Parsons paid three shillings each for Esther Wright's time and talent in 1791; the price of silk that summer was typically between six and eight shillings a yard. The Greenfield tailor Silas Wells charged one shilling six pence to cut a coat, but ten shillings six pence to cut and sew the garment from start to finish.²⁸ Similarly, merely cutting out and not making up that same gown could cost as little as nine pence.²⁹ In these instances, the labor may not even have included basting (that is, using long, loose stitches to tack the cut pieces together in their proper relationships, in preparation for sewing), suggesting that little effort was put into fit. Reluctance to cut into the best materials one could secure—whether store-bought or homemade—when more experienced help was so affordable, was merely practical. One poorly planned cut could easily ruin yards of fabric.

Consumers who secured the services of skilled artisans also saved time. Clothing production was enormously time consuming, drawing even adept needlewomen away from other necessary chores. Women turned to gown makers when they needed to have a garment completed more quickly than their time permitted. Thus, when Sophronia Beebe of South Wilbraham needed a new gown, her sister Patience suggested she have it made by "Mrs Clark," who, she noted, "will I dare say make it fast enough for the cash."³⁰ Tailors, too, routinely emphasized the speed with which they worked, offering in their advertisements such standard assurances as "short notice" and "with dispatch." Burrage Dimock, a tailor in Connecticut, raised the bar for everyone when he guaranteed "coats made in 12 hours notice!"³¹

Finally, as Claudia Kidwell points out, "homemade clothing must have looked homemade"; that is, the garments produced when an untrained hand simply replicated the shapes and seams of some picked-apart garment answered the basic need to cover the body but probably little else.³² While certainly talented home sewers routinely produced serviceable, even stylish apparel for themselves and their families, slouching jackets, wrinkled shoulders, misapplied ornament, and uneven hems signaled the work of amateurs, whose training in clothing construction was limited to the copying of other garments that were professionally rendered, or, among less fortunate fami-

lies, from garments that were themselves only poorly made. The ability, or lack thereof, of some men and women to hire an experienced needleworker was readily apparent in the cut of their clothes, and so too was their ability to achieve some semblance of gentility on ready display.

For these reasons—to conserve the value of their material, to spare the time demanded by a host of other household chores, and to achieve an appearance reflecting some greater measure of refinement—many women turned to others for assistance in the construction of even everyday clothing.³³ Stylish clothing (which made up a very small part of a working woman's wardrobe, a larger part of a middling woman's, and a still larger part of the wardrobe of a woman of the rural gentry) required higher levels of skill that were beyond the fundamental skills most women mastered. Artisans who knew how to cut a well-fitting garment were essential not only in cities like Boston and Hartford but in the New England countryside as well. By the middle of the eighteenth century, most rural New England communities had access to one or more skilled tailors and one or two gown makers, plus dozens more who took in sewing as a means to contribute to their household income.³⁴

In addition to making and altering gowns, some needlewomen also constructed that essential women's undergarment, stays. Stay makers were important contributors to clothing and clothing construction, and their craft closely linked to gown making, since gowns required the structured foundation stays provided. Several layers of linen beneath a final, top fabric were stitched together to provide stiff support, the shape of the stays primarily provided by closely spaced channels filled with reed or baleen (whalebone). At the same time, stays, which pressed women's bodies into the shape and carriage of gentility, were essential instruments of genteel deportment. For most of the eighteenth century, the wooden busks inserted in pockets running the length of the stay's center contributed to an erect posture and also prevented women from bending at the waist; movement from the hips or knees was considered more elegant.³⁵ Since a good deal of force was required to push whalebone through the channels or to stitch through the leather with which the stays were bound, stay making was widely considered primarily a male trade. Campbell's *London Tradesman* asserted that "the Work is too hard for Women, it requires more Strength than they are capable of."³⁶ In rural New England, however, many craftswomen made stays in addition to gowns, including Catherine Phelps and Sarah Clark, who charged over three times more for stays than for a gown. Rebecca Dickinson, Anna Phelps, and others also made stays.³⁷

Closely related to the production of clothing were laundresses, who con-

tributed to clothing maintenance. Though both white and black women worked as washerwomen in the eighteenth century, laundresses in Federal-era New England appear to have been drawn disproportionately from the population of freed slaves. Women of the rural gentry, in particular, often hired black women from the area to come in and do their washing. In Hadley, Elizabeth Phelps recorded that the former slave “Old Phillis” (whose name, coincidentally, is the same as that of the younger woman who belonged to Phelps’ household) washed for them, as did another, unnamed, black woman, while one Native American woman is recorded as having toiled especially diligently making soap. This Phillis was also hired to wash for the Porters in town. Betsy Phelps Huntington, too, while in Litchfield, Connecticut, specifically mentions hiring black women to wash. Peggy Browning, a former slave of Connecticut’s Wadsworth family, remained on the property after manumission, taking in laundry to support herself.³⁸ Even in Hadley, the heaviest, dirtiest labor—hefting multiple buckets of water, moving washtubs, carrying wood, building and maintaining fires, making soap, scrubbing clothes, heating and lifting cumbersome irons—seems to have been reserved (at least by women of the local gentry) for women of color.³⁹

Women regularly acquired and deployed a range of skills related to the overlapping occupations of the clothing trades. In every community on any day an observer could find women helping friends, neighbors, and relatives in informal exchanges, whether related to the clothing trades or to other work, that stood outside any real or metaphorical marketplace. But that exchanges such as these occurred within kin groups and between neighbors does not necessarily mean that they were only gestures of mutual aid among women. Within households and extended families, transactions regularly occurred “within the calculus of monetary exchange even when cash did not change hands”: sons kept accounts of their mother’s room and board, sisters on the work they performed for their brothers, nephews, and nieces. This was a “culture in which almost everything, including the mutual support offered kin, had a price, even if the bill was not immediately forthcoming.”⁴⁰ Diaries, correspondence, and interleaved almanacs are filled with notations in which women are recorded as having sewn garments for their cousins, brothers, uncles, aunts, nieces, and others, labor that was regularly figured within larger patterns of exchange and indebtedness among families and neighbors.

The Acquisition of Clothes-Making Skills

For most women and some men, transformation from novice to knowledgeable sewer began in childhood. When they were barely six or seven, girls and occasionally boys began to learn the fundamentals of sewing. They were tutored first in the simple care of their tools, in how to keep their sewing box or basket neat and orderly, and they were reminded of the importance of keeping a watchful eye on one's thimble and needle.⁴¹ Sewing samplers allowed girls to practice their cross and running stitches, before moving on to the whipstitch and back stitch. When ready, they were given easy projects of mending, darning, and sewing simple seams. As they grew older, they learned to handle a pair of scissors and were eventually allowed to cut textiles. Because cloth production required an enormous investment of time and resources and the constant care of cloth and clothing was imperative, the ability to prolong the life of a garment, to mend, alter, or remake worn or outdated clothing was among the earliest skills most women acquired.⁴²

Young women mastered progressively demanding tasks. The basic elements of clothing construction formed a part of every woman's education in domesticity, and most women were able to cut and construct many of the articles their families required. Elizabeth Fuller, growing up in central Massachusetts in the 1790s, records the cutting and sewing she and her sister Sally did for a variety of garments during one busy month: "made myself a shift"; "made myself a blue worsted [petti]coat"; "[helped Sally] make me a brown woolen gown"; "Sally cut out a striped lutestring gown for me"; "I cut out a striped linnen Gown"; "Ma cut out a Coatee for me."⁴³ The diary of Sarah Snell Bryant of Cummington, Massachusetts, which opens in 1794 when Bryant was a young wife and the mother of small children, records the vast amount of sewing required to keep a household's clothing and linens well supplied and in good repair. In the first decade of her journal, she produced hundreds of garments for herself, her husband and children, her parents and brothers, and many members of her community. For her family alone her output included more than a dozen shirts a year and a nearly equal number of trousers, as well as several pairs of breeches and overalls and, on average, seven men's and boy's jackets, three short gowns, three long gowns, a like number of skirts and petticoats, and a host of new aprons, stockings, gloves, drawers, and frocks every year. Roughly one day in every three saw her picking up her needle to attend to clothing needs; if one includes time spent producing and maintaining household linens, and also days devoted to textile production, then her responsibilities with regard to cloth and clothing re-

quired attention six days in seven for the whole of this decade, and likely the decades to follow were little different.⁴⁴

While the sheer quantity of Bryant's needlework reminds us of the enormous time and energy clothing production consumed, her diary indicates that her work was of high quality as well. She handled materials that ranged from those of her own spinning and weaving to Italian striped silks, stamped muslins, chintzes, satins, and velvets, and she could construct garments that ranged from women's waistcoats and petticoats to short gowns, loose gowns, and robes, to outerwear such as cloaks and surtouts. Men's garments at which she was equally adept included jackets, breeches and pantaloons, frocks, overalls, great coats, and spencers.⁴⁵ She also spent time altering and mending. On more than one occasion she "ripped a coat to pieces" to "turn" it, that is, to reverse and reconstruct the pieces to draw more wear from the materials. She put new seats in old breeches and once cut apart an outdated or perhaps damaged dimity gown to preserve from the remaining fabric a short gown and petticoat. When her father brought home an old coat "to make the boys some cloths," Bryant wrested from the material a pair of trousers and two jackets for her sons, Austin and Cullen.⁴⁶ In the hill town of Cumington, Sarah Bryant could well supply the needs of her own family and often those of her neighbors too.

Even the creation of the simplest clothing, however, demanded, or certainly benefited from, greater levels of skill if a woman wanted to cut lengths of valuable textiles as efficiently and effectively as possible. Anna Green Winslow of Boston recalled that, though she had either purchased or produced a piece of linen large enough to make a dozen shifts, her aunt "could cut no more than ten out of it."⁴⁷ A better needlewoman would have conceptualized the most efficient configuration of shapes before cutting. Even should the cutter plan more skillfully, just one mistake could ruin yards of fabric. As Huldah Sheldon wrote her daughter Lucy, "I shall send the muslin you mentioned next week by mail. You will see I cut William a shirt from one of the breadths, and fear I have spoiled it, but since I do not know what use you want to make of it, shall send as is."⁴⁸ Betsy Phelps happily reported to her brother that the piece of Holland that he had purchased "makes nine shirts—instead of six," suggesting that a skilled hand had cut the linen to better advantage than he had anticipated.⁴⁹ Skilled cutting meant knowing precisely how much fabric a given garment should require; overestimating meant overpricing, and artisans who suggested that clients acquire more fabric than was in the end required were open to accusations of incompetence if not fraud, suspected as they were of designing to keep scraps for

themselves. Underestimating, however, could be just as disastrous, if the cutting, once begun, could not be completed as planned.

Learning to cut and sew the fundamental pieces of a working wardrobe was part of most women's training in housewifery, but some women sought out special clothing-related skills through apprenticeship, allowing them to earn livings as artisans in the clothing trades. An essential feature of artisanal studies has centered on the acquisition of craft knowledge, generally through master-apprentice relationships in which novices are understood to obtain the skills necessary to succeed at a given craft under the tutelage of an accomplished practitioner.⁵⁰ But the traditional model may not reflect the way many artisans actually mastered a given craft. Rather than absorbing primarily the knowledge of one's employer, many aspiring artisans, male and female, acquired their skills through increasing engagement in communities of practice.⁵¹ Our search for and reading of these contracts themselves, which necessarily reflect contemporary emphasis on the teacher's effort to transfer his or her knowledge to the student, may reveal more about contemporary notions of skill and training than conventions in the early modern world. An alternative model views craft learners as members of artisanal communities. Aspiring craft practitioners began with little or no expertise in a given area and gradually, from their masters or mistresses as well as others more experienced than themselves (whether journeymen in the formal sense or simply others more practiced and adept), accumulated conceptual and manual skills that set them apart from the majority of their neighbors. They practiced those skills and acquired others. Eventually, they became known as specialists, in the neighborhood, in the community, and even perhaps the region, prompting others to seek out those special skills and exchange other goods or skills of value for them.

Long-standing conceptions of apprenticeship may limit full understanding of the acquisition and dissemination of early American craft skill in other ways as well. For example, by far the largest number of surviving indentures for young women, in Europe or America, indicate that the young girls in question were to learn "housewifery." This stipulation, however, can be misleading; housewifery could mean craft involvement along with general household labor. Eighteenth-century households did not draw distinctions between domestic and craft labor as sharply as we do today; the general upbringing of children inevitably meant some exposure to the artisan skills in the family.⁵² Thus, by emphasizing one model of instruction, we may well be missing the whole picture of craft training.

Artisans, then, were not just individuals who had completed the terms of

an apprenticeship contract. Any man or woman who knew how to make objects that others judged to be “aesthetically, functionally, and economically acceptable” was an artisan.⁵³ Thus, if we expand the definition of craft skill beyond the mere mastery of a specific set of manual operations and concepts transferred whole from expert to novice to include the acquisition of special abilities not widely shared in a given community that allows one gradually to assume a larger role in a community of practitioners, we can enlarge our understanding of skill as well as what constitutes artisanal labor.⁵⁴ We can also move beyond static and hierarchical dichotomies that too often separate domestic and artisanal work, recognize formal as well as informal learning, and envision a more complex enterprise involving larger worlds of family and community relations. This broader and more flexible conception is especially useful in rural settings where agricultural work remained central to most families’ economic activity and artisans’ opportunity to specialize was constrained by the comparatively limited nature of local markets.

This expanded definition of craft skill also conforms more closely to the acquisition and application of skill among women in the Connecticut Valley. Scattered references throughout account books, daybooks, and diaries indicate that rural women took on trainees whom they considered apprentices. The Hatfield gown maker Rebecca Dickinson, for example, recorded the visit of her “former ‘printis,” Patty Smith, in the pages of her diary and recalls going herself to “learn the trade of gownmaking.”⁵⁵ The accounts of Sarah Clark of Northampton contain her credit for having made a gown for “Eben Clark’s wife’s apprentice.”⁵⁶ Catherine Phelps Parsons’s daughter described her mother’s several assistants as her “apprentices.”⁵⁷ In none of these cases do documents survive that affirm a legally binding relationship of the kind traditionally understood as an apprenticeship. But recognizing only those bound by a specific legal instrument (in which they typically agreed to serve an employer in the exercise of some handicraft, art, trade, or profession, for a certain number of years, with a view to learn its details and duties, and in which the employer is reciprocally bound to provide instruction) may arbitrarily exclude most young women, and perhaps some young men, not because their status as learners of a craft was not recognized in their day but because the legal instruments were reserved for young men whose economic, civic, and political identities required it. Unknown numbers of young women, then, completed periods of training in the clothing trades that, while acknowledged as apprenticeships by participants and observers alike, left no paper trail. Among the women of the Connecticut Valley, however, even when no written agreement was drafted, the apprenticeship relationship was recognized by the artisan, the novice, and the community at large.

Girls and young women also did complete more formal apprenticeships. These periods of training were established by written agreement, some of them voluntary and arranged by parents and others involuntary and assigned by selectmen or overseers of the poor.⁵⁸ In rural areas, voluntary apprenticeships seem to have lasted for about a year. When Silas and Anna Graham of Wethersfield, Connecticut, bound their daughter Anna to the Glastonbury tailor Asa Talcott, like the parents of Clarinda Colton of Springfield who bound her to the Deerfield tailor Ithamar Burt, they sought to provide their child with training in a craft that they hoped would afford an ongoing source of income.⁵⁹ Most surviving indentures, however, document compulsory apprenticeships that generally bound the apprentice until he or she reached the age of majority. Seven-year-old Rebeccah Baxter of Middletown, Connecticut, the daughter of Hannah Barstow, was bound to an apprenticeship in the tailoring trade with Elijah Treadway and was obliged to remain in Treadway's household for eleven years, until she reached the age of eighteen.⁶⁰ In Connecticut in 1788, the Middlesex County court suggested that Middletown's board of selectmen "put and bind Elizabeth Fisher, daughter of Christopher Fisher late of said Middletown deceased who is one of the town poor" as an apprentice to Ephraim and Beulah Merriam of Wallingford. The Merriams agreed to provide Elizabeth with training in the "art of mantee making in all the parts thereof" as well as the "art of good housewifery with some instructions in reading & writing." In 1804, Middletown selectmen bound an impoverished thirteen-year-old, Lucinda Cone, to the widow Clarissa Redfield, who promised to "give said Apprentice a Bible, and to Board her whilst learning a Trade (Mantu-Maker or Taylor)."⁶¹ But such agreements between local overseers or selectmen and mantua makers or gown makers were unusual. Among the eleven hundred boys and girls bound out by Boston's overseers of the poor between 1734 and 1805, only two of the girls had contracts that specifically indicate they were to be taught this trade: Ann Crowmartie was bound to the mantua maker Ruth Decosta in 1769, and Ann Wilkinson was bound to the mantua maker Martha Mellens in 1784.⁶² Many of the girls whose contracts noted only household chores may have been exposed to aspects of trades practiced within their new households, but most apprenticeships in which young women were explicitly bound to mantua makers or gown makers appear to have been voluntary arrangements sought by parents anxious to provide their daughters with marketable skills.

Although the Hatfield gown maker Rebecca Dickinson records having "gone" somewhere to learn the trade of gown making, she recorded neither the duration of her own apprenticeship nor the durations of the apprenticeships she directed. But there seems to have been a wide range in the recorded

duration of apprenticeships, probably reflecting a wide variety in the rigor and extent of the training offered. As a feature of a compulsory arrangement, Elizabeth Fisher's term of seven years "to learn the trade of mantee making" was probably a function of her age more than the time required to master her craft.⁶³ It seems more likely that the young Hampshire County women who aspired to the trade completed a period of training more like that supervised by the tailor Catherine Phelps Parsons, that is, between one and two years.⁶⁴ Between 1800 and 1810 Margaret Booth of Longmeadow kept a constant stream of young women on hand, for about a year at a time, usually beginning in December or April. Polly Chaffee, Sarah Kilbie, Mary Bliss, and Mercy Cooley—these young women and others may have spent that year helping Booth with her work and learning something of the needle trades themselves.⁶⁵

Like tailors' apprentices, the aspiring gown or mantua maker absorbed much of her training through observation. Although in general, an apprentice initially spent her time running errands and doing odd jobs around the workplace—tending hearths, cleaning the shop, sorting and organizing threads, buttons, fabrics, and measurements, and keeping tools in good repair, all the while gaining exposure to the routines of the trade—she might soon begin to accompany her mistress to the homes of clients, observing as she measured bodies, cut materials, and constructed garments. As time went on, the apprentice would learn how to measure clients, noting lengths on strips of parchment that would determine the shapes and sizes of the garment's pieces. She might begin her sewing by helping to stitch long seams. Perhaps the application of trimming would follow and then some of the discrete tasks of assembly, such as attaching sleeves to the bodice of a garment or sewing a surtout's long seams. Finally, she would assist in the crucial work of fitting garments. Rebecca Dickinson's apprentice, Patty Smith of Hadley, underwent just such training. Patty was the daughter of Warham and Martha Smith; her father, a merchant, was among Hadley's wealthiest men.⁶⁶ In November 1785, when Patty was seventeen, she accompanied Dickinson to the Phelps home to watch her go about her work there. By July 1787, she was entrusted with the making of a mourning gown for the elderly Elizabeth Pitkin Porter. Eventually, like her mentor, she obtained continuing employment in the Phelps household at Forty Acres. Perhaps she was hired at the suggestion of Dickinson herself, in the hope that Smith could replace her work for the family in her old age. If Dickinson did recommend Smith for hire at Forty Acres, the referral would be consistent with the familial network through which many women entered the Phelps home as needleworkers. And other Dickinson protégés may eventually have found work at Forty

Acres as well, thanks to craft or kin connections. Rebecca's sister Anne Dickinson Ballard placed her daughter Rebecca with the gown maker so the young woman might learn to cut garments. Apparently the younger Rebecca took to the trade, for almost twelve years later she went to Forty Acres to work for the Phelps household.⁶⁷

For both tailors and gown makers, as for other craft practitioners, continuing experience—their ongoing participation in communities of practice—“supplemented the basic technical foundation acquired” during apprenticeship.⁶⁸ As we have seen, some craftswomen did travel to new places, bringing new fashions along with them. But whereas men in the clothing trades (as in woodworking trades) expanded their knowledge and improved their skills by tramping, moving from place to place, serving as journeymen to established tailors around the region, women more typically learned from clothing that had done the traveling. When in the summer of 1798, twenty-one-year-old Lucretia Smith Gaylord accompanied her client, Charlotte Porter, to the home of Elizabeth Phelps “to fix a gown for Mrs Porter by one of Betsy’s,” she studied the work of her counterpart in Boston and then approximated the new style to the best of her abilities. In the process, she acquired new knowledge and skills that she could then offer to other women in western Massachusetts.⁶⁹

Rhythms of Work

Although the means by which men and women attained artisanal status differed, once established they operated in much the same way, combining their skilled work with their household and farm chores. In rural New England, few could afford to specialize in just one product; the market was just too small. Rural artisans “mustered a livelihood from several activities within a local agricultural economy.” William Mather of Whately, Massachusetts, for example, worked as a cabinetmaker, housewright, brickmaker, mason, glazier, wheelwright, and farmer, as well as filling a number of town offices.⁷⁰ In a similar fashion women blended skilled sewing with other income-generating activities, as well as their regular household chores. Working as a tailoress or gown maker provided a way for young single women and wives to contribute to their family's income, and for never-married women and widows to earn modest livings.

Artisanal activity fluctuated over the course of the agricultural year. Cabinetmakers, who often had their own fields to tend, produced less furniture for their local clients during the late spring, summer, and fall, the peak seasons of the agricultural year.⁷¹ Among specialists in the clothing trades, the

pronounced variation of demand typically produced months of unemployment broken by times of overwork. Clothing needs were necessarily attended to when time and income permitted. In weeks devoted to planting and harvest, people's minds were in the fields; tattered breeches or worn vests would have to wait. For the Deerfield tailor John Russell, the spring planting seasons and the months of harvest were the least active periods for his shop; Russell produced the bulk of the year's clothing during the late summer, fall, and winter.⁷² Entries in the diary of Josiah Pierce of Hadley—which contains references to Pierce's clothing consumption, as well as to the work of his niece Esther, a tailoress—suggest that peak months of clothing production were November and January, when the harvest was in and spring planting had not yet begun.⁷³ Beginning in July, cresting in November, and continuing on through February, tailors attended to the many clothing needs of their communities. For the more socially attuned, these were also seasons during which more formal attire was in greater demand.

The same rhythms of the agricultural year consumed the attentions of gown makers and their clients, but women may have focused on their clothing needs at other moments than did men. Tabitha Smith's work for Elizabeth Phelps suggests that rural women turned their attention to their wardrobes most often during the summer months once the fields were sown and the gardens planted, but before the late summer and fall harvests would set them to other tasks. While some activity occurred in every month, most of Phelps's gown acquisition and alteration took place in June and July, with somewhat less activity in May and August. The accounts of the gown maker Esther Wright suggest that women purchased much of their clothing in the late spring and early summer. In 1790 Wright made more gowns in May, June, and July than she did in the rest of the year combined; the following year, she made almost half of the year's total in those months.⁷⁴ Although gown making (and alteration) was the principal activity of the summer, in the winter, the demand changed. Those summers that saw Esther Wright busily producing gowns for her community were not interrupted by the making of heavier articles; not a single frock appears in her accounts for the summer of 1790, and only one appears in the summer of 1791. Conversely, in the winter months outer garments were attended to. She made four frocks in January 1791 alone. Dickinson also noted on more than one occasion that the week before Thanksgiving was an especially busy time and November in general a hurried season, a rhythm confirmed by the accounts of Esther Wright.⁷⁵ On 15 November 1790, Wright's accounts debit Joseph Hutchens for the making of a gown and two frocks. On the nineteenth, Joel Wright engaged her to cut a frock, and on the twentieth, she made two gowns for the family of Eben

Wright. That same day, Simeon Bartlett also hired Wright to make a gown. Wright may have felt she had her hands full when Supply Clark arrived four days later with material for his wife's riding hood.⁷⁶ At times gown makers found themselves simply too busy to take on additional work and so faced what must have been the painful prospect of turning away work that they could only wish would come in at a more even pace: Ruth Pease of Blandford, Massachusetts, writing during a visit to Hartford in the winter of 1812, on more than one occasion recorded having been, as on this February afternoon, "unsuccessful in my applications to mantua makers." The following day Pease revisited the mantua maker, and "after some delay . . . found that it was in vain to think of getting a gown cut and basted. The one on whom I depended was ill. The others were engaged."⁷⁷

Though less remunerative than the creation of new garments, alterations were common and necessary, and often sustained artisans throughout the year. Of the twenty-one gowns Elizabeth Phelps makes reference to in her diary, the gown maker Tabitha Smith created or altered fourteen of them, producing gowns of calico, lustring, stuff, and chintz. In addition, she made or altered more than twenty gowns for Phelps's two daughters, sometimes converting a garment of the mother's to a gown for a daughter.⁷⁸ Often, this work was required in order to adapt clothes to the changing bodies of growing girls ("Tuesday Thankful and I at Mrs Smiths for her to make some gowns longer for Thankful"), pregnant women (an expectant Elizabeth Whiting Phelps Huntington wrote home that she had "not begun to alter my blue gown into a loose dress, for I find such the most comfortable and decent for me"), aging women, and so on.⁷⁹ Changes in women's bodies, whether for growing girls, pregnancy, or aging, were, as we have already seen, perhaps the most common and compelling reasons to extend the life of a garment. But shifting fashions also accounted for many alterations. Toward the end of the century, for example, America's interest in the French Revolution produced a corresponding revolution in silhouette. And when European fashion—inspired by democratizing political impulses and an international fascination with all things Greek and Roman sparked by the unearthing of Pompeii—urged women to don revealing sheer white gowns that suggested columnar marble statues brought to life, a major overhaul of American women's wardrobes became necessary.

Seeking this slimmer form, Elizabeth Phelps engaged a young woman to "make [her] lutestring gown plumb," that is, to reduce the bell shape of the skirts, formerly popular because they emphasized horizontal lines, in favor of a narrower garment that emphasized the vertical.⁸⁰ That the gown was then about twelve years old suggests the degree to which alterations could extend

the life of expensive garments; indeed, Phelps's wedding gown was made and remade three times in forty-two years. Created in 1770, it was altered eighteen years later, in 1788, and again in 1812, for the now-elderly Phelps, or perhaps it was too "made plumb" to suit her then-thirty-three year-old daughter Betsy Whiting Phelps Huntington. In all, three needlewomen (that we know of) collaborated on the gown over its lifetime: Rebecca Dickinson created a garment that lasted some eighteen years, Molly Wright of Northampton extended its life for another twenty-four, and Hannah Stockwell of Hadley further prolonged the life of the garment, though we do not know for how long, in 1812, four decades after its original construction.⁸¹

Alterations also became particularly important during periods of political and economic upheaval. At the onset of the Seven Years' War, Esther Edwards Burr wrote, "Rain all day, and so dark that we could hardly see to work, and *propor for the times*, I have my old raggs about me, trying to make one new gound out of two old ones" (emphasis added).⁸² A month after Esther Burr found herself trying to splice together a new gown, she wrote Sarah Prince with an apology for slighting her correspondence: "so busy about some tayloring that I must beg to be excused. You must know that I am the Taylor. I'm altering old cloths which is very hard work."⁸³ During the Revolution, when the interruption of trade with Britain meant a shortage of imported textiles, old dresses were again pressed into additional service, and women with the skill to extend the lives of garments were in high demand. Elizabeth Phelps turned over a spate of alterations to Tabitha Smith in the 1780s, perhaps reflecting some difficulty in acquiring new textiles.

Finally, there was the work of simple maintenance. Such work proved the mainstay of rural artisans. Needleworkers spent a good deal of their time maintaining garments, with tasks that included simple repairs to damaged apparel and alterations to extend the fashionability of a garment, to modify it to fit the changed body of its owner, to adapt it for another wearer, or simply to squeeze a few more seasons' life from it, "turning" the pieces of coat to conceal worn fabric and expose fresher material. In Glastonbury, most of Asa Talcott's income was derived from his work restoring and altering clothing.⁸⁴ Indeed, like woodworkers, blacksmiths, and other artisans, tailoring and gown-making artisans depended on repairs for a large share of their work.

The spaces in which this work was performed varied widely. Unlike furniture makers and silversmiths, who relied on sizable tools and machinery, from lathes to forges, artisans in clothing production could carry out their work, which was ad hoc and versatile, in a wider array of spaces. To be sure, tailors' shops were present on the New England landscape. Eighteenth-century tailors rented shops in commercial buildings, erected small structures

on their home lot, installed shops in ells attached to their houses, or simply dedicated a corner of their living spaces to their craft work. In Hartford and Boston, tailor's shops could be found throughout the commercial district. While acquisition of a dedicated site surely reflected some measure of artisanal achievement, most tailors, male and female, appropriated spaces in and around their homes, either in addition to or in lieu of formal shop space, or worked in the homes of clients. By the close of the eighteenth century, the celebrated 1648 brick Pyncheon mansion in Springfield had come to house the tailor shop of Jeremiah Snow.⁸⁵ Few such shops remain intact in the communities along the Connecticut River, but some evidence survives to hint at what they looked like. In Granby, Massachusetts, for instance, Homer White's shop occupied an ell attached to his home; he later moved to a dedicated shop space (see plate 4).⁸⁶

In 1772, one Boston "tailor and habit maker" alerted potential customers that he would travel to "gentlemen's houses" to secure their patronage. And in rural western Massachusetts, Sylvester Judd notes, "some tailors formerly went from house to house, making garments," adding, "it was so in my younger days," about 1800.⁸⁷ Needlewomen, however, were, on the whole, less likely than men to work in shop settings. If a large table could not be dedicated to the work, planks on trestles provided table space, while work-in-progress could be hung on pegs around the craftswoman's home.⁸⁸

A clothes maker's needs were simple: a well-lit space with broad tables on which to cut and sew fabric, irons and access to a fire on which to heat them, and shears, needles, and pins were the essentials. The senior artisan principally required shears with which to cut fabric; assistants responsible for the assembly of garments used shears, scissors, thimbles (generally of steel and open at both ends, as opposed to the closed thimbles of brass, silver, and occasionally gold used by domestic needlewomen), and large and small needles. Pins came in many sizes and served many purposes. (While they were certainly tools associated with sewing, they were also an essential part of a woman's wardrobe; often pins were a garment's primary method of closure and fastened handkerchiefs and other modesty pieces in place as well.) Long slips of parchment were required to record measurements, though some tailors simply found paper where available, tearing up strips of the local newspaper or using other discarded pieces. An assortment of irons was necessary to press finished fabrics and to press down seams; press boards on which the ironing was done could be as simple as boards laid on trestles. A clothes frame might be employed to store finished garments and a stiff clothes brush to free clothes from dirt and dust.

Inventories of several eighteenth-century tailors in the Connecticut Val-

ley reveal that such tools required little in the way of capital. In the 1770s, Robert Corsill of Springfield owned a tailor's goose, a pair of shears, a pair of hand irons, and a box and heaters, valued together at £2 6s. 6d. Tables on which he laid out yardage for cutting, shop boards on which to sit while sewing, a clothes frame, and other related equipment were appraised at £1 7s. 8d.⁸⁹ George Herbert of Deerfield owned tools appraised in 1786 at a mere 12s., roughly the same value as just two of the six chairs scattered around his home. His shop tables, clothes frame, and other shop furniture was valued at another £1 7s. 6d., for a total of just under £2.⁹⁰ In 1787, Joseph Slack of Windsor, Vermont, owned equipment that was similarly valued at 12s. 8d.; his iron goose, shears, bits and bodkins, chisel, brush, and press boards were equivalent in value to his saddlebags and bridle.⁹¹ The Hartford shop of Thomas Gross contained a "shop table" valued at 1s. 6d., and a small assortment of irons (one goose worth 6 s., and another worth 2s. 6d.) and shears.⁹² In 1812, Jonathan Root's shop contained one small table, as well as a single pair of shears, a goose, and a clothes horse.⁹³ Nehemiah Street's 1791 probate inventory gives a larger sense of the goods as well as the tools that the Farmington artisan kept on hand: one large shears, one goose, two gross of sleeve buttons, fourteen stock buckles, a hundred yards of shoe binding, nearly five dozen vest buttons, two and a half dozen coat buttons, four dozen yellow buttons, and thirteen bags of death—head buttons valued at £1. Fabrics in the shop included scarlet broadcloth, black velvet, green Persian, white sarcenet, a small assortment of calicoes and callimancoes, and plain and figured gauze.⁹⁴

Among Connecticut Valley artisans, the outlay required for tailoring tools was comparable to that required for saddlers and shoemakers; in the 1760s, generally between £2 and £3 or less would allow an aspiring needleworker to acquire the necessary equipment.⁹⁵ By comparison, the Springfield blacksmith John Day owned an anvil worth £5 13s. 4d., and another, smaller one worth £1 13s. 4d. His tools were valued at another £8 18s. 6d., and his shop building itself still more. At the same time, his competitor James Warner owned a shop and tools worth over £30.⁹⁶ But that the cost of tailoring tools was small does not mean that they were widely owned. Of some three hundred inventories taken in seven Hampshire County towns during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and first decade of the nineteenth, only one contains a pair of tailor's shears. Just twelve, or 4 percent, contain a tailor's goose, a long, thin iron used to press seams; by contrast, box irons appeared in nearly 1 in 5 household inventories, while flat or sad irons turn up in equal numbers. No more than 15 percent contained shears of any kind, and two-thirds of these were valued at less than 1 shillings.⁹⁷ Almost half were worth 6

pence or less, suggesting that the shears most households owned were of comparatively poor quality; tailor's shears were typically worth about 2 shillings, and sometimes 5 shillings or more.⁹⁸

Construction Methods and Other Technical Aspects of Clothing Production

Constructing a garment in early America, as now, began with lengths of two-dimensional fabric that needed to be cut into specific shapes and assembled before they could be transformed into three-dimensional garments.⁹⁹ Following the steps associated with the making of a gown from start to finish conveys the various skills required by successful artisans. The gown maker first considered the fabrics at hand and assessed their properties with respect to the garment to be constructed and the size and shape of the person who was to wear it. Do patterns need to be accommodated among the various pieces? How might the weight and drape of the selected fabric affect the finished garment? How might the finished garment conceal flaws in the wearer's body or enhance attributes? Having considered these and other questions, the artisan was ready to start fitting the garment to the wearer, a process that began with the draping of the lining material on the intended wearer's body.

For most women's gowns, the bodice lining was cut first, forming a foundation on which the bodice would then be draped and sewn.¹⁰⁰ These linings, generally of muslin or linen fabrics, were most often cut directly on the body of the garment's intended wearer, to insure the closest possible fit.¹⁰¹ Next, the gown maker had to make some choices about the finished garment—the silhouette it would have, the location and methods of closure, and so forth. A gown might float freely from the shoulders to the floor, or it might conform closely to the body. It might close entirely in the front, or it might remain open to reveal a stomach. The English gown, in which a series of pleats were stitched down across the back, allowing the material to hug the trunk of the body before releasing into the folds of the skirt, was popular in the second half of the eighteenth century. Pleats were important tools because their method of construction, folding the material accordion-style and then stitching the folded fabric in place, allowed the gown maker to preserve without cutting as much as possible of the original textile, a practice that also preserved the client's ability to remake the garment in the largest range of future alterations.¹⁰²

"Patterns" of the eighteenth-century were not the paper models familiar today. Instead, gown makers based new garments on past experience. A strip of paper or parchment provided a means by which to note and track lengths,



Ladies Dress Maker.

London Publish'd by Tabart & C^o. Oct. 23. 1804

"Ladies Dress Maker," from *The Book of Trades* (1804), 30–31.

As the published caption for the image reads, "The plate is a representation of a mantua-maker taking the pattern off from a lady by means of a piece of paper, or cloth. The pattern, if taken in cloth, becomes afterwards the lining of the dress."

measurements in inches being largely unknown before the early nineteenth century. In June 1789, when Tabitha Smith “took measure” for Elizabeth Phelps’s daughters’ new gowns, she was replacing old lengths with new ones.¹⁰³ Betsy and Thankful had had new gowns from Smith the previous May, but they were growing girls (ten and thirteen years old, respectively) and those old measures would no longer do.¹⁰⁴ The measurements helped Smith determine how much fabric she should cut for the new gowns. She relied on no published pattern for the gowns’ form; instead, she based these garments on other ones she had made, taking into account any new requests from Phelps. Using the measures as her guide, Smith pinned, cut, and stitched her way to the finished garment. For the bodices, she draped and fastened some thin, malleable material—usually paper or a filmy fabric like muslin—over her clients’ shifts and stays. This step generated information from which to cut the gowns’ fabric, and, if cloth, provided the eventual garments’ lining.¹⁰⁵ Such “patterns” could be basted together for one, and perhaps several, fittings before the scissors were picked up and the intended cloth cut up. A “pattern” for a gown might also be created from an old garment left by the client, or from paper or cloth patterns retained from an earlier garment. The gown maker then assessed how to cut her pieces to make the best use of (that is, use the least amount of) her client’s expensive fabrics. The client and craftswoman might have a several fittings in which the size and location of the pleats, the angle and shape of sleeves, and other features would be determined and sewn in. The client might contribute to the assembly process, particularly in the comparatively less skilled stitching of long seams. All in all, it was a time-consuming process that meant much shared time and space between client and craftswoman.

Having determined the style desired and cut her fabric appropriately, the gown maker was then presented with the task of assembling her pieces. Eighteenth-century clothing was constructed with only a few different types of seam stitches, but which stitch to use at any moment was determined by the seam’s role in the overall architecture of the garment in question, and particularly how much stress the joint was likely to receive. The choice of stitch also depended on whether or how often the garment was likely to be laundered and whether the garment was likely to be taken apart for later alterations. As Linda Baumgarten and John Watson explain, “shirts and shifts were sewn with fine backstitches and then felled to enclose all raw edges. Linen selvages were joined by butting and whipstitching them closely. This process not only saved expensive fabric but also resulted in sturdy garments that could withstand washing. Men’s fitted coats, waistcoats, and breeches were sewn with sturdy backstitches that withstood the strain of movement. The

lining and fashion fabrics were also joined together with attention to an economy of motion on the part of the maker. As Baumgarten and Watson also point out, “separate facings were seldom used two hundred years ago. Rather, linings extended out to the edges of the garment, where they were turned under and stitched to the fashion fabric. This process was often done with a stitch that resembles slanted hemming stitch on the lining side but forms running topstitching on the fashion fabric side. This stitching method sews the top parts together and top stitches in one operation.”¹⁰⁶

The cutting of a garment and its assembly were two separate processes, not always performed by the same hand. On many occasions, rural gown makers simply basted the garment together, leaving the more tedious stitching of seams to the client, who performed this labor herself, assigned it to a daughter or a servant in her household, or hired out this task too, to a local seamstress or tailoress. Ruth Pease of Blandford, Massachusetts, hoped while visiting Hartford to get a gown “cut and basted”; but she was unsuccessful in finding a craftswoman who was not already oversubscribed.¹⁰⁷ On another day, she had more luck, as she “rode into Springfield to get a gown basted &c” and was home before tea.¹⁰⁸ In 1776 Wethersfield, Connecticut, the tailor Oliver Talcott charged Elizur Burnham’s household two shillings six pence for “part making a gown and cloak” while in 1783, Ephraim Baker paid a shilling “to cutting and basting a gown.”¹⁰⁹ In Northampton, the gown maker Sarah Clark’s activities in the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s included “cutting out,” “making,” “making over,” and “altering.” Clark also charged for gowns made “in part,” suggesting that some women elected to do as much of their own sewing as their time and talent allowed.¹¹⁰ In 1807, Elizabeth Phelps hired Olive Dickinson “to cut and baste a callico gown.”¹¹¹ Elizabeth Huntington occasionally cut her own gowns but then employed other women to sew them up: “last thursday Chloe came and made my gown, & I like it much.”¹¹²

Once the basic garment had been constructed, additional time and skill was necessary to apply the appropriate trimmings. Since cut varied little across garments, fashionability through most of the eighteenth century was largely derived from the choice of fabric and the application of trimmings. Common forms of embellishment in the 1760s and 1770s included robing, ruching, ruffles, fringe, and flounces. In the 1780s, when style was largely determined by an abundance of trimmings, milliners, whose skill in the ornamentation of hats and other sorts of headwear gave them additional experience in this area, became especially important. The production of the trim itself involved special skills. Robing, for example, was created with long strips of fabric that had been “pinked” on either side to form a decorative profile.

To create these strips, the artisan used a small pinking tool, a metal instrument molded on one end with the pattern to be cut. The fabric to be pinked was folded and placed on a surface that could bear repeated hits (like a leather pad on a hard surface); the artisan began striking the pinking tool with a mallet, creating with each blow a small segment of patterned ribbon. The amount of trim applied to a gown varied widely, depending on the current fashion and the financial resources of the client, from simple embellishment at the sleeves or neckline, requiring about four feet of robing, to long serpentine strips twice that long applied to the length of the bodice.

As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, and the rococo styles of the Georgian era were supplanted by neoclassical simplicity; in gowns, the significance of trimmings receded as preference shifted to sparer forms. The radical change in silhouette that occurred beginning in the 1790s presented a serious technical challenge, as clothing producers contended with a gradual shortening of the waistline. By 1800, gowns were gathered just below the bust, which, together with the increasing preference for plain white fabrics, created a columnar appearance meant to allude to ancient Greek statuary (see plate 5). The new fashion was strictly adhered to; one Massachusetts correspondent described three sisters who were almost in uniform in their muslins: “the three miss Davises looked as if they were born at a birth, they looked of an age, and dress’d exactly alike, [with h]andsome mouse-colour’d hats, & veils, mouse colour’d ribbands round their little, slender waists. . . . [T]heir bows were tied exactly alike [and] didn’t vary half quarter of an inch.”¹¹³ Needleworkers, asked both to create new garments and to alter old ones to conform to prevailing fashion, struggled to master this new cut, a chore that for some artisans generated a good deal of business.

David Lazaro has traced the ways in which artisans struggled to adapt to the challenges that accompanied the shift to the neoclassical style, developing new technical skills along the way. As he observes, “mantua-makers chose many different ways to fit 1790s gowns. Some modified the earlier use of stitched-down vertical pleats, continuing the custom for fitting gowns that was established at the end of the seventeenth century. Others employed seams, which began to appear only at the end of the decade, and would become universal by the first few years of the nineteenth century, when tailoring women’s garments gradually became more accepted.” The unidentified maker of a gown in the collections of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association struggled to bend her skills to the new fashions, accomplishing fit through the use of forty-six pleats stitched down the back of the bodice when seams would have been “easier and faster” and would have produced a “cleaner, slimmer line” as well.¹¹⁴

By the turn of the nineteenth century, these lightweight gowns were the order of the day and presented little mystery to their makers. The impact of this dramatic change in silhouette on the artisans who produced it is explored in a later chapter; for now, it is important simply to note that the introduction of these new styles required the mastery of new skills. Clothing construction was by no means self-evident in early America; different sorts of garments demanded different sorts of skills. Even individual elements of construction, from buttonholes to seams and pleats, demanded specific conceptual knowledge and technical abilities. The creation of the region's wardrobes depended on an array of laborers, men and women whose skills were simultaneously distinct and overlapping. For women who worked before, beyond, and in the absence of marriage as tailoresses; for tailors, gown makers, and stay makers who secured training in the "art and mystery" of skilled needle trades; for women obliged to provide clothing for their families, apprentices, and farm laborers; for others whose obligations extended to more ornamental stitching; and for the recipients of all of this labor, making clothing was indeed a business never done.