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Part I: Chapter 1, Clothing and Consumers in Rural New England, 1760-1810

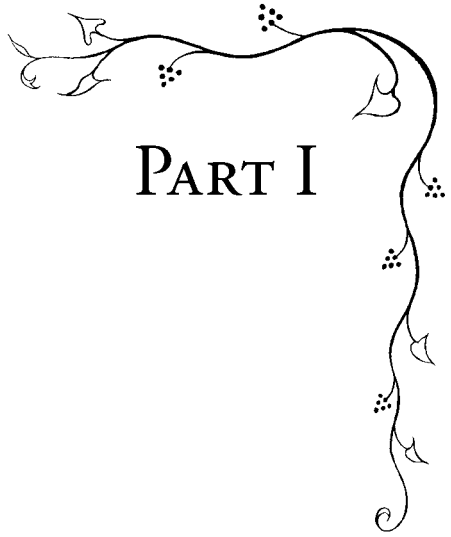
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PART I

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CHAPTER I

Clothing and Consumers in Rural New England, 1760–1810

WHITE APRONS. When Catherine Graves was asked to recall her eighteenth-century Northampton girlhood, what she remembered most vividly were white aprons. Interviewed by the local historian Sylvester Judd in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Graves noted that, in the 1760s and 1770s, only a handful of women had had white aprons to wear when they went out visiting; the rest wore the blue and white checked aprons ubiquitous in the Connecticut Valley. Sixty years removed, she was still able to list the families along South Street whose daughters wore white aprons.¹

Recollections like Graves's remind us of the importance of clothing in eighteenth-century America. The white aprons worn by Anna, Rachel, and Lucinda Barnard and other young women on South Street lingered in Graves's memory because, at the time, they were important markers by which men and women—and children, too—measured their position and the position of others. In the last half of the eighteenth century, white and checked aprons, together with patterned and plain fabrics, fitted coats, imported textiles, and other elements of early American wardrobes, helped people assert and assess their place in society.²

“Purse and Apparel”: Clothing and Its Meanings in Early New England

From the beginning of European settlement through the early national period, New England wardrobes, first, were assets. Josiah Pierce, a schoolteacher in Hadley, Massachusetts, for example, gave his hired woman, when she completed her term of service, £11 as well as “£12 O.T. [Old Tenor] in clothing, the whole of her wages being £23 O.T.”³ Clothing also could be converted to cash to pay a debt. At auction houses, taverns, and other public places, vendue sales regularly offered clothing along with other items being sold to raise funds. When Sophia Arms died in Suffield, Connecticut, her



White apron, 1780–1800. Courtesy of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Mass. (photograph by Amanda Merullo).

White aprons were intended to be decorative rather than functional in the eighteenth century. Earlier in the eighteenth century aprons were vehicles on which women could display their skills in embroidery, stitching colorful floral patterns across silk backgrounds; later in the century, however, preference shifted to linen aprons embroidered with white linen threads. White aprons remained in fashion until the turn of the nineteenth century, when the empire style eliminated the natural waistline, making the apron an awkward accessory. Their decline in fashionability may also reflect changing attitudes toward women's housework in this period, as middle-class white women were increasingly inclined to demonstrate their refinement rather than their industry.



Checked apron, 1800–1840. Courtesy of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Mass. (photograph by Amanda Merullo).

Blue and white checked linen like that used in this apron, spun and dyed by Judith Allen Bardwell (1777–1849) of Deerfield, was a common feature of everyday life in the eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley. Men's everyday shirts made from comparable material were so closely associated with the Connecticut Valley that observers could recognize a man from this New England region by the fabric. The highly serviceable checked cloth was also popular for boy's shirts, bed and window curtains, towels, and women's aprons.

worldly goods were auctioned to offset the cost of her illness and funeral; 114 items of clothing were distributed among more than thirty of her neighbors.⁴ When Elizabeth Porter Phelps of Hadley, Massachusetts, “Drank tea at Major Williamses,” she reported to her diary that he was “not well—has had all his Furniture and most of the family cloaths taken for Debt and sold at Vendue.”⁵ The prominent military and political leader had fallen on hard times; as a result, the rich garments that had once announced his family’s particular success were scattered among households throughout the county.

Vendue sales had distinct advantages for buyers, who were able to obtain high-quality clothing at prices more in keeping with their usual means. As a Middletown, Connecticut, seller whimsically noted regarding an upcoming sale, “Preserve then your cash if you’d live at your ease / at less than prime cost you may buy what you please. . . . To buy goods at half price at public Vendue / A fortune believe me will quickly ensue.”⁶ In the 1780s, the property of Philemon Stacey of Halifax, Vermont, was disposed of for 60 to 75 percent of its appraised value, a striped linen coat and jacket that assessors valued at £4 selling for £3, a gauze hood valued at 10 shillings selling for just 6 shillings.⁷ Residents of Guildhall, Vermont, who attended the 1805 sale of John Lamson’s goods watched as his “pair of new boots” appraised at \$4.00 sold for \$3.00, and a gingham coat assessed at \$1.25 sold for one-fifth the value.⁸ Vendue sales allowed sellers to raise funds quickly, while affording buyers the opportunity to obtain, ready-made, articles of apparel that might otherwise have been beyond their reach.

Bequests of apparel also demonstrate that clothing was among the valuable assets that women, in particular, could pass on. Eighteenth-century women’s wills are filled with references to “best,” “second-best,” and otherwise enumerated gowns passed to daughters and granddaughters, sisters, sisters-in-law, and nieces. Weeks, months, and even years before their deaths, women gave careful thought to the eventual distribution of their wardrobes, wishes that were later implemented by their female family members and friends. When Mary Sedgewick of Hartford wrote her will, she anticipated one of her daughter’s more immediate needs, bequeathing her own crape mourning frock, as well as a black quilted petticoat and a green riding hood. Her blue cloak went to another daughter, while her granddaughter received her “silk hood, and a paire of silk gloves.”⁹ In Hadley, Elizabeth Phelps routinely participated in the process of moving apparel from one generation to the next. She spent one Saturday afternoon in February 1791 “at the Generals with Mrs Hop and Judge Porters wife to help divide Mrs Porters cloathes.” The day after Abigail Porter’s funeral, the decedent’s closest friends and relatives—Susanna Porter, Phelps, and Margaret Hopkins—gathered to di-

vide her wardrobe among survivors. On another occasion, following the death of her sister-in-law Dolly Warner, Phelps once again, together with her friend and neighbor Esther Dickinson, "went up to divide her cloathes."¹⁰

Wills also contained many references to fine and everyday clothing that was passed from master or mistress to servants. Elizabeth Gunn of Montague, Massachusetts, for example, bequeathed her "every day cloths, linen and woolen" to her servants "Jana and Chloe." Rebeckah Ashley of Westfield, Massachusetts, willed her "Negro Zilpah" a feather bed and under bed, four bed blankets, all the linen and woolen sheets (except for one new woolen sheet), a silk crape gown, a black short cloak, and a "flesh-colour'd" camblet riding hood. In Wethersfield, Connecticut, when Katherine Russell willed her "Negro Woman" Chloe Prutt her freedom, she also gave her some household items "and my every Day wearing apperel and a Red Short Cloak."¹¹ While women like Zilpah, Jana, Chloe, and Chloe Prutt may have relished the opportunity to don the clothing of their "betters," much of this clothing may well have found its way to the second-hand trade, as the recipients converted their bequest to cash.¹²

Rewards commonly posted in the pages of a local press to retrieve lost articles of clothing also attest to the value of apparel, suggesting that it was worth both the price of the advertisement and the expense of a reward to avoid spending the time, labor, and money to replace lost items. When J. Halsey lost his brown camblet coat lined with green baize along the road between the Bolton Meetinghouse and Clark's tavern in Lebanon, he offered a reward for it in the pages of the *Connecticut Courant*.¹³ In January 1792, a traveler who had "lost . . . a light coloured calico GOWN, one lawn handkerchief, and Bosom piece all Women's wear, and all tied up in a red spotted handkerchief" promised that its return would be "handsomely rewarded."¹⁴

Second-hand clothing circulated through both legal and extralegal channels, the constant theft of clothing further attesting to its value. Calvin Tilden turned to the pages of the *Connecticut Courant* to recover two new pairs of leather breeches, as well as a pair of white cotton stockings, a linen vest, a checked linen shirt, and other articles stolen, he charged," by James Shephard.¹⁵ Jim, a twenty-seven-year-old African who escaped from the Westfield home of John Atwater, took so many articles that his probable appearance was hard to describe. "Tis uncertain what clothes he will wear," Atwater noted in an advertisement seeking his recovery, indicating that he "carried with him a loose coat of a butternut color with a little mixture of white, and a red plush cape, a dark brown broadcloth vest, a short blue broadcloth coat, a striped vest, a homemade butternut colored vest, a good pair of buckskin breeches, a pair of blue broadcloth breeches, a pair linen

breeches, a white Holland shirt, a homespun check shirt, a brown coat, a pair brown tow cloth trowsers," and other articles.¹⁶

IN AN ERA dominated by political, cultural, and social upheaval, clothing also served critical public purposes. Textile production, historians have long acknowledged, drew women into the revolutionary effort, but comparatively less attention has been paid to clothing production and consumption as the products of a politics of style.¹⁷ Among the most well-known examples is the suit of American-made wool that George Washington wore to his 1789 inauguration, produced by the newly established (and short-lived) Hartford Woolen Manufactory. Men and women throughout the new republic used clothing to assert their politics. Women of the Connecticut Valley participated fully in the boycotts organized during the imperial crisis, as well as the international political and economic maneuverings that attended independence.

After the war ended, women remained conscious of the political implications of their sartorial choices. In November 1786, more than one hundred women in Hartford, responding to the postwar economic depression and the tension swelling to the north as Massachusetts coped with Shays's Rebellion, expressed their patriotic zeal by forming an "Economical Association."¹⁸ "Taking into serious consideration the unhappy situation of their county, and being fully sensible that our calamities are in great measure occasioned by the luxury and extravagance of individuals," the founders expressed the hope that "those Ladies that used to excel in dress . . . will endeavor to set the best examples, by laying aside their richest silks and superfluous decorations, and as far as possible, distinguish themselves by their perfect indifference to those ornaments and superfluities which in happier times might become them." The resolutions reflected the signers' sense of themselves as participants in an international network of clothing makers and consumers. They observed that "the English and French fashions, which require the manufacture of an infinite variety of gewgaws and frippery, may be highly beneficial and even necessary in the countries where those articles are made; as they furnish employment and subsistence for poor people." But, though sympathetic these individuals, they also recognized larger and more sinister interests at work; "foreign nations," they stated, were anxious to "introduce their fashions into this country, as they thus make a market for their useless manufactures, and enrich themselves at our expense. . . . Our implicit submission to the fashions of other counties is highly derogatory to the reputation of Americans, as it renders us dependent on the interest, or caprice, of foreigners, both for taste and manners; it prevents the exercise of our own ingenuity,

and makes us the slaves of milliners and mantuamakers in London or Paris.” For the next seven months, the women said, they would refrain from purchasing “gauze, ribbons, flowers, feathers, lace and other trimmings and frippery, designed merely as ornaments.” They would reduce new purchases for weddings and mourning, eliminate purchases of new materials for routine visiting, and buy domestic rather than imported goods whenever possible. In sum, they vowed to dress simply, to limit occasions that called for fashionable excess, and to “use [their] influence to diffuse and attention to industry and frugality, and to render these virtues reputable and permanent.”¹⁹

The Hartford Association’s success is impossible to gauge—perhaps this was the year that one of the Trumbull girls famously wore the same, plain muslin dress all season long, to great local acclaim for her simplicity—and bravery.²⁰ Whether the signers abstained from unnecessary purchases is unknown, but their awareness of the political and economic impact of ephemeral style is striking. These women recognized the complex ways in which the lives and livelihoods of working women across the Atlantic were affected by sartorial choices exercised in western New England. On one hand, through the consumption of new goods, they furnished “employment and subsistence for poor people” in other parts of the Atlantic world; on the other hand, strict allegiance to international style made them “slaves of milliners and mantuamakers in London or Paris.” Americans had articulated their need to sever colonial ties in a similar vein, unwilling to submit to political “slavery”; now the wives and daughters of the very men who guided Connecticut’s role in that revolution chose parallel language to describe their own fears about the place they occupied in international economies of fashion. The Hartford declaration, which notes the ability of “foreign nations to introduce their fashions into this country . . . and enrich themselves at our expense,” also points up the signers’ cognizance of their own place in global economies of style, the importance of which cannot be underestimated, for the styles popular in revolutionary-era France and England came to revolutionize the clothing trades in the fledgling United States.

Refusing to capitulate to fashion’s demands could be as significant as meeting them. Ministers, for example, were often noted for their sartorial *retardataire*. A striking number of nineteenth-century reminiscences record that the town’s minister continued to wear breeches long after they had gone out of style, a conservatism befitting the gravity of the minister’s position. In Hadley, the Reverend Samuel Hopkins wore breeches until his death in 1809, while in Stoneham, Massachusetts, the Reverend John Stevens was still hiring the tailor Polly Wiley to make breeches into the late eighteen-teens, long after his neighbors had switched to pantaloons.²¹ Toward the close of the

eighteenth century, some members of the New England elite found advantage in distancing themselves from the latest fashions. In Middletown, Connecticut, for example, gentlewoman Hannah Gilbert Wright posed for her 1792 portrait in large-scale floral silk that was long out of fashion; viewers, however, certainly recognized the high-quality English silk as an expensive and desirable material and with it, Wright was able to assert the appropriate, conservative appearance for a woman of her age and station.²²

But members of the community without a comparable station to assert or protect remained anxious to maintain a fashionable appearance. In 1796, Thomas Dwight's letters home to Springfield from Boston suggest the imperative of acquiring the new styles.

Miss Gorham and Miss Parks were as I suppose dressed *a la mode*—no waists, for these are not fashionable—a proper display of the neck with some transparent coverings over the &c &c brings you fairly to the *apron string*—it is a lamentable consideration that the sex have lost so important a part of their bodies, but it cannot be helped for fashion like Robertspierre [*sic*] & Marat deals havoc & destruction without ever assigning a reason to any tribunal.²³

Dwight's letter captures the arrival of the so-called empire style to the Connecticut River Valley. A letter written by David Selden Jr. of Chatham, Connecticut, a few years later observes the subsequent entrance of the simple white fabrics that came to accompany the new style. Selden, visiting New York, had been asked to send home gingham but soon learned that gingham was "quite unfashionable"; he suggested that his female readers should avoid calico, too, "white muslin dresses" being "much more worn here than any other at present."²⁴ Thus the fad for white so closely associated with the early National period made its way from metropolitan centers to central Connecticut. Political events abroad had nurtured new styles that, when transplanted to the receptive American soil, created a transformation in fashion that would have groundbreaking implications for the needlewomen of Federal New England.

Although clothing carried critical political messages, it had more prosaic meanings as well, helping to situate men and women along social and economic continuums. The ways and degree to which that was possible were shifting toward the end of the eighteenth-century, as men and women of the new republic struggled to forge a new social order, some working to preserve long-standing class distinctions while others sought to subvert them. The circulation of clothing among slaves, servants, and members of the laboring and even middling classes complicated the legibility of a person's appearance, since people could readily acquire the visual trappings of a station to which

they did not belong. Whether or not Major Williams's family found it galling to encounter their "familys cloaths" on the backs of inferiors after their wardrobe was sold at vendue, many did object to sartorial chicanery. In an economic culture in which one's credit was assessed by reputation and appearance, the ability to gauge accurately the prosperity of others was critically important.²⁵ The quantity and the quality of a person's apparel communicated volumes to any and all observers: strangers and friends, superiors and subordinates, debtors and creditors.

Ample evidence reveals how articles of clothing indicated membership in various social or economic groups. Men in shapeless shirts or loose frocks were instantly identified as tradesmen or laborers, for example, while a ruffle at the sleeve indicated the relative leisure of a gentleman.²⁶ Clothing provided identifying features just as did less ephemeral qualities of height, build, and complexion. When Dick, a "Negro Man," ran away from Abel Tillotson, Tillotson placed an advertisement seeking his apprehension and return. Describing the runaway, Tillotson reported only that he was about five feet tall; the remainder of the notice lists what he was wearing: a frock (a loose-fitting, long, shirt-like garment suitable for work), an old brown coat, an old felt hat with a leather strap around the crown, a pair of towcloth trousers, and some double-soled shoes. For observers who might help identify him, apparel was more important than physiology.²⁷

Clothing, then, was among the most important means by which men and women in early New England understood how to interact with the people they encountered every day on city streets and country lanes. Reminiscing about early Northampton, Lewis Tappan recounted a handful of anecdotes that his father, Benjamin Tappan, had been fond of telling; interestingly, the subject of several of these is the different ways in which appearance could create, or counterfeit, identity. When Tappan, a young goldsmith, first moved from Boston to Northampton, he carried a letter of introduction to one of the community's leading citizens, Major Joseph Hawley. Tappan arrived at the Hawley home and raised "the ponderous iron knocker." "The door was soon opened by a man in a checked shirt and wearing a leather apron. . . . 'Is Major Hawley at home?' asked the young goldsmith. 'Yes, I am called Major Hawley,' the esteemed politician replied." Hawley was not recognized because he failed to appear in the garb of a gentleman.²⁸

The startled Tappan regained his composure and proceeded with his business, but he had learned an important lesson about local culture and about the role of clothing in it. Despite Hawley's eminence as a Harvard-educated attorney, officer, and political figure, he nevertheless recognized the value of restraint. He did not flaunt his status in the cuffs and ruffles of, say, the

Boston silversmith Paul Revere; his wardrobe permitted him to signal, when necessary and appropriate, commonalities with his Northampton neighbors (in this case, the checked shirts associated with men of the Connecticut Valley), and, when necessary and appropriate, the distinctions from them that merited his authority. In Boston, Tappan too had worn “white shirts of course.” But in eighteenth-century Hampshire County, he soon learned, “there were five or six men in Northampton who wore white shirts,” and “they were persons who had been educated at some college.” Lacking such an education, Tappan was reluctant to violate local convention. Upon “learning the custom” of his new community, and “thinking it wrong for a mechanic to ape the aristocracy of the place, [he] procured checked shirts.”²⁹ Joseph Hawley might wear the blue-and-white-checked shirt common throughout the Connecticut Valley as he went about his daily business, but his Harvard education meant that on Sunday morning he was surely among those five or six men in white shirts. For Tappan, his own white shirts would have to lie waiting in a chest for return trips to Boston.³⁰

Pressure to comply with the dictates of fashion became increasingly intense in the decades following the American Revolution. As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, consumers found themselves succumbing to fashion’s demands. In 1799, one of the Heath sisters of Brookline, Massachusetts, confessed in a letter to her mother that she had, in the heat of the moment, mistakenly purchased a trendy van dyke, adding “I don’t like it very well, have been almost sorry I bought it since, because I could have done without it, but I thought I must get something to make me look smart.”³¹ But even twenty years earlier, the pressure had begun to mount for some members of society. Young Anna Green (later Winslow), visiting Boston in the 1770s with a limited, and as it turned out, at times inappropriate wardrobe, also knew the power of clothing to communicate identity. Writing to her mother in Maine, Green expressed her horror at the prospect of having to wear her “black hatt with the red Dominie” (a hooded loose coat), for, she exclaimed, “the people will ask me what I have got to sell as I go along the street if I do, or how the folks at New guinie do?”³² The young woman believed (or hoped her mother would believe) that the combination would have caused Bostonians to mistake her for an East Indian huckster; the embarrassment would have been overwhelming. Green’s ensuing and urgent entreaty—“Dear mamma, you don’t know the fation here—I beg to look like other folks. You don’t know what a stir would be made in sudbury street, were I to make my appearance there in my Dominie and black hatt”—conveys the crucial role these sartorial signifiers (and goods more generally) had assumed by the end of the eighteenth century. Her mother’s

ignorance, due to geographical or generational distance, of “the fation” among Green’s Boston peers; her daughter’s “begging” to “look like other folks,” to comply with fashion’s dictates for her class, her race, and her sex; the certain “stir” on Sudbury Street—all of these things marked the advent of dramatic new relationships between people and material goods and the exigencies associated with them, and the centrality of appearance as a means and an end in that effort.

Wealth and Wardrobe in the Eighteenth-Century Connecticut Valley

Considering the many opportunities to transgress social codes through inappropriate apparel, it is easy to imagine a motley parade of rustics traipsing along the footpaths of western New England. But eighteenth-century wardrobes were less idiosyncratic than we might imagine. The elements comprising an ordinary outfit—breeches, shirts, vests, and jackets or coats for men; short gowns and skirts, shifts, petticoats, and long gowns for women—appeared in almost every wardrobe. All fabrics were derived from four natural fibers: wool, linen, cotton, and silk. A fifth category of materials was the leather derived from animal hides. Garments can be grouped into five broad categories: stylish, professionally rendered garments; out-of-date “finery,” passed secondhand; unfashionable apparel of middling fabrics and amateur construction; worn, ill-fitting, secondhand garments; and the simply “functional” garments of laborers. Most wardrobes included examples from several categories; a person’s position determined the proportion of each in his or her wardrobe.³³ Wardrobes of privilege contained the widest array of forms and materials, allowing the wearer to be appropriately prepared for every occasion. Most wardrobes were heavily dependent on imported fabrics; the few notations of “homemade” or “homespun” garments on period probate inventories suggest that garments made of textiles woven at home were the exception for many families of the Connecticut Valley.³⁴

In addition to social or economic status, the nature of one’s clothing was also closely associated with moments in the life cycle. The passage from childhood wardrobes to adult apparel was a moment that many families and individuals noted and recalled fondly. For young boys, it was often the transition from the gowns worn by all children to a young boys’ pants that signaled a new stage of life. In his memoirs, George Howard of Windsor, Connecticut, easily summoned up the moment when boys of his generation cast off the typical “red flannel petticoat, green baize loose gown bare feet and legs [and] three-cornered straw hat,” and “assumed a more significant and important bearing, jumped into Fustian breeches, mounted a round jacket,

stepped into cowhide shoes, pulled a buff cap over our ears and slid proudly upon the Pond of Life.”³⁵ The sartorial transition from childhood to womanhood was less dramatic; while boys exchanged gowns for trousers at about the age of five, girls remained in gowns throughout their lives. The style of those garments, however, did change as girls advanced in maturity, becoming longer, closer fitting through the bodice, and, before the advent of the neoclassical gown at the end of the century, more fitted through the shoulders and sleeves to direct or restrict the genteel woman’s movement. Changes in adolescent apparel were not merely symbolic, however. When Elizabeth Phelps took her daughter Thankful to the local gown maker “for her to make some gowns longer,” she was meeting a demand familiar to all parents of growing children.³⁶

Weddings often prompted the acquisition (and creation) of clothing for the bride and groom, though the apparel worn for these occasions in the eighteenth century was not the specialized garments that emerged later. Nor were they boxed up after the wedding as souvenirs of the day. Rather, wedding finery became the couple’s best garments for other occasions, from simply Sunday church services to later landmark events. Some wedding garments were so fine that they were refurbished and reused by later generations. When John Worthington married Hannah Hopkins in Springfield, Massachusetts, for example, he wore a luxurious salmon-colored silk waistcoat, its metallic silver embroidery shimmering in the candlelight. She wore a gown of English silk brocade, a rainbow of colors tracing through the weave, over a Marseilles petticoat—a petticoat quilted in the loom—both garments clearly the product of specialized workshops from across the Atlantic. Hopkins’s spectacular 1759 gown was so striking that it would be worn a second time by her own daughter in 1791 and again by her granddaughter in 1824.³⁷

Pregnancy marked a time when women needed new gowns to accommodate their changing shapes. A dress once owned by Betsey Barker that is housed today among the collections of Old Sturbridge Village seems to represent an alteration driven by pregnancy. Originally constructed in the last quarter, perhaps the closing decade, of the eighteenth century, the gown was later remade to accommodate the wearer’s swelling figure, including a drawstring neck and open bodice that would have made nursing convenient as well.³⁸ As an expectant Betsy Phelps Huntington wrote her mother, “[I have] not begun to alter my blue gown into a loose dress, for I find such the most comfortable and decent for me.” She continued on to say that, should she survive delivery, she might indulge and have a “handsome gown made.”³⁹

Mourning also prompted the acquisition of special clothing. John Ellery, planning for the mourning that would accompany his own death, bequeathed

£100 to his mother-in-law, Mary Austin, to pay for the “suit of mourning” she would require when the sad event came.⁴⁰ When Elizabeth Pitkin Porter’s sister died, Patty Smith was engaged to produce a dress of black silk for the grieving sibling.⁴¹ While the bereaved fitted themselves out with apparel appropriate to their grief, many, perhaps most, corpses in early America were dressed in “winding sheets.” But some were laid out in specialized garments. Shroud making was an occupation available to both men and women in eighteenth-century England. Its history in New England is almost entirely unknown, but women like Frances Wells Miles of Greenfield, Massachusetts, who in the first half of the nineteenth century earned part of her living making shrouds, carried on a practice that was required of generations of needlewomen before her.⁴²

The rate of acquisition of clothing often slowed with a person’s advancing age. When Martha Newton of Wethersfield, Vermont, died in 1799, for example, much of her wardrobe was described by appraisers as “old,” including seven of her ten gowns, one camblet, two checked linen, and four others of crape, calico, or calimanco. She also had a blue petticoat, a black silk bonnet, a woolen skirt, a striped petticoat, a camblet riding hood, a red cloak, a green calimanco skirt, a black quilted petticoat, a lambkin cloak, and linen short gown that were also described as old, as well as an assortment of aprons and smocks, some items valued at as little as eight cents.⁴³ Apparently Newton had stopped acquiring new garments some time before her final illness. Gowns described as old were likely to be in poorer condition and out of style. In Springfield, Miriam Warner was under the care of her son John for the last ten years of her life. His expenses for her maintenance, submitted to her estate after her death, show the regular acquisition of stays, shirts, aprons, gowns, stockings, and petticoats between 1762 and 1767, and then nothing at all from 1768 to 1772.⁴⁴ In her final years, Miriam made do with the things she already had.

Of the many and various early American wardrobes, the apparel of working people is hardest to reconstruct (see plate 1). Few inventories enumerate the garments of the laboring poor, and few of these objects have survived into the twentieth century. But some of the clothing worn by laboring men and women were pieces that had formerly served the middling and wealthier families who were often their employers. One might assume that the ability to purchase the services of a gown maker or tailor varied in direct proportion to a person’s income, but it was not necessarily true that poorer families assumed more of their own clothing-related chores than their more privileged counterparts. Slaves and servants received cast-off clothing from their employers as well as clothing procured for them as recompense for their labor.

Like Zilpah, the enslaved woman who inherited her mistress's silk crape gown, camblet hood, and short cloak, they might acquire both fine and working clothing from their employers, which they could then choose to sell or to keep for themselves. In revolutionary Belchertown, Massachusetts, the Reverend Justus Forward billed the town for clothing he provided to a prisoner assigned to work in his household by the local Committee of Safety. Forward passed along to the prisoner two pairs of secondhand stockings for which he billed the town three shillings six pence, a pair of secondhand leather breeches for six shillings, and some "secondhand woolen mittens, half worn." He also debited his hired man, John Burt, twelve shillings for a secondhand coat that was no longer needed.⁴⁵ Elizabeth Phelps hired a tailor to ride up and "fix an old great coat" for "Robert Fraiser a black boy [who] came to live here."⁴⁶

Laboring men and women, whether bound or free, acquired wardrobes that were functional but not elaborate. Many advertisements seeking information about runaways include descriptions of clothing that help sketch a picture of these wardrobes: a fifteen-year-old apprentice, for example, left his Northampton master wearing a checked shirt, a striped frock, trousers, and a brown jacket. Another young apprentice, Henry Thomas, "wore away a butternut colored coat, black breeches, [and] checked linen shirt" and took with him a great coat for good measure.⁴⁷ John Barber possessed a wardrobe appropriate to a farm laborer in pre-revolutionary Springfield, comprising leather breeches, a woolen shirt and two linen shirts, a strait-bodied coat and vest, another coat, and two pairs of hose. He had a beaver hat and a larger coat—possibly a great coat—for outerwear, as well as a pair of mittens.⁴⁸ A thirty-year-old "maid servant" absconding from her duties wore a dark short gown and brown petticoat and carried with her a dark gown; a nineteen-year-old apprentice girl ran away one fall wearing a red stuff damask gown, green stuff quilted coat, a long brown cloak, and a black bonnet.⁴⁹

The apparel of black men and women was not necessarily different from that of white men and women without resources. When Thankful Williams of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, rented the labors of Phillis from her Hatfield owner, Elijah Williams, she agreed that Phillis would be returned four years hence "in all respects as well clothed and furnished as she was at the commencement" of their agreement; pinned to their contract is a list of apparel that describes Phillis's wardrobe: a quilt (that is, a quilted skirt), a long gown, five short gowns (the eighteenth-century equivalent of a work or everyday shirt, typically falling to the hips), six aprons, a short cloak, a pair of half sleeves, two jackets, a pair of buckles, five ribbons, five handkerchiefs, and a shoulder blanket.⁵⁰ An advertisement for two slaves posted in the *Middlesex*

Gazette gives a sense of men's everyday apparel: "Run away from the Subscriber . . . two Negro men, one aged 25 years, good looking, common stature, hair combs back, had on and took with him a felt hat, high crown, bound with ferret, snuff-coloured homespun coat with light brown lining, two black jackets, pair fustian breeches, two pairs overalls, copper Shoe and knee buckles, pair worsted stockings, and pr [ditto] linen. The other aged 22 years, about such a size and such a hat as the former, pale blue woolen coat, a striped jacket, fustian breeches, 1 pair deep woolen stockings and pair do dark worsted, wide square brass shoe buckles, hair turned back and striped trousers."⁵¹

The hundreds of labor contracts that survive from this period remind us that working men and women, at the close of their terms of service, acquired two suits of apparel, one fit for the workday and one of better quality, "abel for Sunday," or "suitable for Holy Days."⁵² Workday apparel was generally "substantial in texture and uncouth in shape," simply cut trousers, frocks, shifts, skirts, and shirts made of leather, wool, or linen.⁵³ Clothing suitable for Sunday could include gowns of silk or other imported fabrics but be limited in ways deemed appropriate to the laborer's status. Typical was Fanny Gill's indenture to Adoniram and Miriam Bartlett, who agreed to provide, at the end of Gill's tenure, "clothing of all sort suitable to her Quality, fit for her to go to future Servis as an apprentice til of age."⁵⁴ The indenture of Esther Cotes to Amasa and Sarah Nims of Deerfield specifies that at close of service Esther would receive one suit of clothes for work and two for Sunday, an unusually generous arrangement, "but it is to be understood that in the latter case, the suits shall contain but one pair of stays and one quilt, and no cloak."⁵⁵

Perhaps the most notable object associated with the wardrobes of working men in the Connecticut Valley were those ubiquitous checked shirts, like the one the eminent Major Hawley wore that startled Benjamin Tappan. Checked shirts were the single most common garment chosen to clothe men's upper bodies every day. One in three of the Connecticut Valley men's inventories surveyed for this study contain checked shirts: 21 percent are identified as linen, 2 percent Holland, a finer quality of linen, and 3 percent woolen; the fabric of the remainder was not noted by assessors.⁵⁶ For women, the equivalent of the men's checked work shirts was the checked apron, recalled by Catherine Graves as being commonplace among women of Hampshire County, and in contrast to the memorable white aprons worn by women of privilege. Women often owned several: the seven checked linen and wool aprons found in the wardrobe of Hannah Miller of Northampton were not unusual.⁵⁷

In addition to aprons, working women's wardrobes included short gowns and skirts, more appropriate than long gowns for working in the house and fields.⁵⁸ When sixteen-year-old Polly Hall ran away from her Bernardston employers, for example, she had on a "dark brown petticoat and a short green gown."⁵⁹ Short gowns—that is, women's shirts appropriate for everyday work—were considered appropriate working apparel for women of all classes, though women of comparative privilege changed out of their "morning," or working, clothes in the afternoon, when friends and neighbors, or more formal company, might come visiting. When the Windsor gentlewoman Lydia Ellsworth died, she had a dark short gown "new, not made up" awaiting the attention of a needlewoman.⁶⁰ Short gowns in the Connecticut Valley were generally made of linen (24 percent), often striped, or wool (9 percent), though short gowns of baize, cotton, and calimanco, in red, brown, and green, were also seen.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, dark patterns were favored over light for these garments usually intended for the kitchen rather than the parlor. By 1781, however, women had begun to wear short gowns of calico, a desirable cotton import; nearly one in four of the total number of short gowns listed in inventories between 1760 and 1808 were made of calico, though here, too, dark patterns were much preferred to light.⁶²

Women throughout society—workers as well as their employers—sought to acquire the cottons increasingly available from India.⁶³ English social commentary was greatly preoccupied with the ability of hired women to replicate the appearance of their superiors; theaters routinely seized on the phenomenon—or the fear of it—in comic scenes involving mistaken identities. But emulation worked both ways, as fashions moved from the elite classes to the working classes and from the working classes to the elites.⁶⁴ The caraco, for example, a jacket worn by genteel women, evolved from a garment common to working-class wardrobes, while the raised skirts of polonaise gowns alluded to laboring women's tendency to hike up their skirts to keep them clean and dry. Laboring men's garments influenced the development of the frock coat popular among genteel men by the end of the eighteenth century. And Thomas Dwight, living in Boston, described another such instance in mail sent home to Springfield in the 1790s: "late letters from England say that the gentlemen of that country all wear check'd shirts, in honor of the navy who have performed such prodigies—those who do not wear whole shirts of that kind have a bosom of chex—you may not perhaps see the foundation of this compliment unless previously informed that both officers and soldiers from the admiral to the private wear check'd shirts when at sea—as indeed do all the other seamen."⁶⁵

The wardrobe of middling households elaborated on the basic wardrobe

of laboring people, similar forms rendered in somewhat larger numbers and better fabrics and generally maintained in better condition.⁶⁶ A man might possess two or three pairs of breeches (often one of leather), a frock, two or three shirts (at least one but probably more checked, for everyday use, and another of better quality, perhaps Holland, for Sunday), one or two waistcoats, two or more coats (of lesser and greater quality, sometimes with matching vest or breeches or both), and some heavier outer garment, such as a great coat. Finally, a hat, usually beaver, was essential to most men's wardrobes. In Vermont, Matthew Patrick had two suits, each apparently worn as a complete ensemble assessors of his 1789 estate found a "best suit, coat, waistcoat, breeches and shirt," and a "second best suit, coat, waistcoat, breeches and shirt." Patrick had four pair of stockings, one thread (that is, cotton) and three yarn (probably wool). For special occasions, there was a waistcoat with silver buttons, but for workdays, he likely turned to his old jacket and breeches. Patrick also had two hats, one white and one black, a pair of shoes, and an old pair of boots.⁶⁷ Charles Evans of Brattleboro, Vermont, had two brown close-bodied coats. He had two vests, one striped and one black, and a pair of black breeches. Three old pairs of breeches and an old undervest also lay in his trunk, as did three pair of old trousers, suitable for work days, together with a pair of woolen overalls. A new pair of drawers had recently been acquired, supplanting an old pair. Two cotton shirts probably served him for most days, though a finer, Holland shirt was probably reserved for Sundays. Three old shirts could be paired with the worn trousers when he needed to be in the field. Finally, for outerwear he had an old gray surtout and a newer blue great coat. As was true of most men's wardrobes, his great coat was by far the most valuable item, worth more than £2 at the time of his death, more than twice that of the old surtout.⁶⁸

A typical middling woman's wardrobe contained three to six shifts, two or three petticoats, three underpetticoats or skirts, perhaps quilted of silk or wool fabrics or of linen and wool blends, such as striped linsey-woolsey, several short gowns, a cloak or cloaks, and assorted caps, kerchiefs, and aprons.⁶⁹ The wardrobe of Rachel Parmenter of Hinsdale, Vermont, suggests what such constellations of clothing might look like. Parmenter owned three short gowns, one each of wool, linen, and calico, that she might wear with either her red or her yellow skirt. A woolen apron protected her clothing from dirt, soils and stains.⁷⁰ She had one long gown, worth more than ten times any of her short gowns, suggesting it was very fine, or very new, or both. When it was chilly, she wrapped herself in a shawl. Two yards of chintz in her possession suggest that she was contemplating an alteration or addition to her wardrobe. But Parmenter, like the majority of working women, spent most

of her days in a skirt, short gown, and apron. Abigail Wells of Northampton owned two woolen gowns as well as two calico gowns, beneath which she might add either of two quilts, or two petticoats. She also had seven shifts, a pair of stays, five aprons suitable for work days, a Holland apron that she might pair with her finer gowns, and a silk hood and apron for special occasions. She also had a camblet riding hood, seven caps, and an assortment of handkerchiefs.⁷¹ A step better was the wardrobe assembled by Elizabeth Lyman of Hadley. At the time of her death Lyman possessed two silk gowns and a silk cloak, three calico gowns, and gowns of chintz, bombazeen, silver-ett, and camblet. A scarlet cloak was available for traveling abroad, as well as a second, less valuable cloak and a riding hood. She also had two quilts and two shirts, as well as five aprons, for everyday wear, and a silk apron for better occasions (see plate 2).⁷²

The wardrobes of the “better” classes were, not surprisingly, even larger (see plate 3). People of means had could acquire and maintain a larger number and greater variety of garments from which to choose, and found it markedly easier to keep up with new fashions. Women like Lois Morton of Hatfield, who had a dozen gowns and another half-dozen petticoats, were more able to respond to shifts in fashion, to have garments in the colors most favored from season to season, to alter sleeve lengths, widths, and shape to comply with current trends, to add and subtract the appropriate trimmings; men with a dozen or more shirts could always appear with their clothing neat, clean, and in good repair.⁷³ They too could keep up with developments in the cut of cuffs and ruffles and could more easily afford to acquire coats and waistcoats in the fabrics favored each season, as well as the services of a tailor who could render the subtleties of the preferred cut of the moment.

The wardrobes of the gentry, however, were not simply larger than those of their neighbors. They also were distinguished by their quality. The dress of the region’s best families—most familiar to us today in the portraits by artists such as John Singleton Copley and Ralph Earl—included a higher proportion of garments that were made professionally, as signaled by their texture, color, and fit.⁷⁴ The higher the quality, the greater the likelihood that a garment had been produced in a commercial establishment of high repute. Apart from the degree of luxury signaled by the fiber (the quality of woolen and linen fabrics ranged widely, while silk and cotton were imported from Asia), the smooth, uniform feel of some fabrics indicated that the carding, weaving, and fulling required to create them was accomplished outside of the home, and probably across the Atlantic. Particularly complex weaves and finishes also indicated European production.

Color too was crucial to codes of appearance. Those in Northampton's meetinghouse who were not garbed in check distinguished themselves with yards of fine white linen: "the genteel image required [that] fine white fabric met suit or dress, revealing that the immaculate body was covered by a film of white cloth."⁷⁵ Elite women distinguished themselves with white, too, at the neckline and in the sleeves—evidence of their ability to acquire fine linen fabrics and their ability to keep them clean, both by refraining from soiling them and by having access to help in laundering them. Those glimpses of white were set off by the smooth textures and rich colors of imported satins and brocades. Color was not the object here—both men and women recognized the value of restraint, of choosing subdued, restrained hues—but when color was employed, its tones were deeper, richer, and truer in the garments of the gentry.⁷⁶

In the eighteenth-century "theater of artifice," equal emphasis was placed on theater and artifice; that is, the eighteenth-century European worldview valued artificiality as evidence of humanity's ingenious manipulation of the natural world.⁷⁷ The muted, earthy tones of much everyday clothing, reflecting that world, were the products of local vegetable dyes. Another grade of fabric was colored with dyes that were objects of long-distance trade. More important than color, however, was pattern. While local dyers with access to imported dyestuffs, including cochineal, logwood, and indigo, could produce varied and vivid hues, they could not replicate printed cottons like chintz and calico, the woven patterns of brocades, damasks, and paduasoy, or the embossed patterns of moirés, all popular fabrics among the late eighteenth-century rural gentry. Technological innovation had made possible these textiles and the designs they carried. The result was a new wealth of bright fabrics bearing intense patterns that were naturalistic (in that they most commonly carried designs comprising vines, leaves, and flowers) but emphatically not natural. Copley's portrait of Dorothy Skinner, for example, depicts the large-scale floral silks, of sprightly colors on a light ground, that were popular in the middle decades of the century, while Hannah Wright's lush golden-colored silk damask, captured by Ralph Earl, suggests how the fabric's visual richness and weight could affirm a family's wealth and position.⁷⁸

Still more than materials, style, cut, and fit became of acute concern. As the eighteenth century progressed, elite men and women began to look for ways to subvert the attempts of aspiring neighbors to emulate their style.⁷⁹ Sumptuary legislation had failed to regulate the appearance of masters and servants; the prohibited goods were too alluring, and too readily available, to be kept away from the middling classes. At the end of the eighteenth century

and beginning of the nineteenth, war, embargoes, and blockades disrupted trade enough that the substance of garments became politically charged. Those desiring expensive fabrics occasionally found them to be inappropriate, or simply inaccessible, and so increasing significance accrued to style. The gentry developed new codes of conduct and dress that hinged not merely on the acquisition of goods but also on special knowledge about how to use them. The result, in men's clothing, would be an aesthetic of restraint that gave elites an opportunity to demonstrate republican virtue, escape some of the pressures of consumer culture, and at the same time assert their social superiority.

The images and descriptions of elite men and women that survive from the period preceding this sartorial republicanism convey the full effect of elite wardrobes, providing glimpses into the appearance of the gentry at its height and the impression those ensembles made on less privileged observers. When Roger Wolcott of Windsor went riding, for example, which he did several times a week in the mid-eighteenth century, he "never appeared abroad but in full dress," including a scarlet broadcloth suit, a long coat with wide skirts, "trimmed down the whole length in front with gilt buttons, and broad gilt vellum button holes, two to three inches in length." The cuffs, too, were wide and ornamented with matching gilt buttons, while the waistcoat's skirts were richly embroidered. Ruffles at his neck and lace over his hands completed the outfit.⁸⁰ Wolcott's appearance reflected the central traits of elite wardrobes. The scarlet fabric, ample materials, gilding, ruffles, lace, and embroidering all signaled Wolcott's secure position at the peak of local and regional networks of authority.

The wardrobe of Wolcott's Windsor neighbor Elizabeth Newberry suggests the female equivalent. When she went out, Newberry might choose from among her blue broadcloth "cloak and head," another "homemade" blue cloak, a silk cloak, a red cloak, a riding coat, a red camblet short cloak, or either of two short calico cloaks. For her head, she might select one of two silk bonnets, a silk hood, or choose among more than a dozen caps. She owned several gowns, including one of black taffeta and others of russell, calico, silk crape, and chintz. Her everyday apparel included a brown gown, a long loose gown, and others described as "homemade striped" and "old calico." Her petticoats were crimson-colored, scarlet, white, striped, red, and plain. For work days, she had a calimanco or linen short gown. Like many other women, she had an assortment of aprons, some for work and some for show: on the finer end was a short silk apron and another of laced lawn. If the day's events called for her better apparel, she might put on one of four Holland aprons; if it was a day for working around the house, any of the six

checked, coarse or plain aprons would do. Beneath her garments, depending on the weather, she could choose any one of her two woolen shifts, two cotton shifts, or six linen shifts; rarely, one suspects, did she resort to one of the old or plain shifts folded in a drawer. One of seven pairs of stockings covered her legs.⁸¹ The 1784 inventory of “Madam” Sarah Porter of Hartford and Hadley includes a cloak and two gowns of calico; it also reveals that she at one time owned at least two gowns of Alapeen—a rare and costly fabric that appears in the estate of only one other Hampshire County woman. Other expensive garments in Porter’s wardrobe include and a quilted silk petticoat assessed at thirty shillings and a gown of black paduasoy assessed at £4.⁸²

While probate inventories can capture a picture of wardrobes as they lay in drawers, trunks, and chests, no longer to be opened by their owners, a nice sense of such wardrobes in action can be gleaned from contemporary correspondence, such as that of the prosperous Heath family of Brookline and Portsmouth. In the fall of 1786, for example, one of the daughters wrote to her sister that she had gone visiting “to Mrs Sherburne’s Thursday.”

[I] did not think of seeing any body there [she continued], wore striped calico round gown, black gauze handkerchief, beaver hat, Mrs Goddard wore calico gown and coat, black hat and muslin handkerchief. . . . [Friday] we spent the afternoon at Mrs Palmers, Mrs Goddard drest her[self] as she did the day before, I wore calico gown & coat, muslin handkerchief, lawn apron & beaver hat. . . . Phoebe Sherburne came in here the day before yesterday to look of my Hat to see how the crown was [reas’d] in she & Sally have new white Hats to day, have been to meeting, wore muslin gown & pink coat, & black vandyke. The other evening . . . Fete Meseroy came in with a loose gown on, said she had been ironing all the afternoon.⁸³

Other young women were equally watchful of their wardrobe’s reception. Young Anna Green Winslow, who had traveled to Boston in 1772 to attend school, subsequently recorded her sartorial triumph.

I was dress’d in my yellow coat, my black bib & apron, my pompedore shoes, the cap my Aunt Storer sometime since presented me with (blue ribbons in it) &c. & a very handsome locket in the shape of a hart she gave me—the past pin my Hond Papa presented me with in my cap, My new cloak and bonnet on, my pompedore gloves, &c, &c. And I would tell you that for the first time, they all lik’d my dress very much. My cloak and bonnet are really very handsome, & so they had need be. For they cost an amasing sight of money, not quite £45, tho’ Aunt Suky said, that she suppos’d Aunt Deming would be frightened out of her wits at the money it cost.⁸⁴

Fashion Information and the Eighteenth-Century Consumer

Increasingly important in achieving gentility, along with the sometimes “frightening” amount of capital, was the acquisition and allocation of cultural capital, that is, an informed eye that could recognize and replicate prevailing taste and style in the selection of fabrics and the cut in which the ensuing garments were rendered. As greater numbers of people gained access to the fabrics, colors, and styles of the gentry, the gentry sought additional means by which to identify themselves and to deny others access to their circle. Creating this new genre of knowledge and then restricting access to it was “the great trick of the elite,” who had the time and resources to devote to acquiring this information for themselves.⁸⁵ The production of gentility depended on access to special forms of information, by both producer and consumer.

In part, deploying one’s understanding of fashion encouraged some self-policing. While members of the rural gentry expressed their access and entitlement to authority through the acquisition of material goods, any hint of excess risked quick and certain censure.⁸⁶ This was something Elizabeth Phelps knew, or at least of which she was reminded: “Monday Mr Phelps carried me to see Mrs Colt—settled I hope more firmly a friendship begun before—heard from her the vanity of great appearances—may it be a warning from her never to value myself for grandeur.”⁸⁷ “A few cursory remarks made accidentally by a friend” furnished Abigail Lyman with much food for thought when her “attachment to worldly goods” was pointed out to her: “I thought I was long since convinced ‘that our life consisteth not in the abundance we possess’ yet I find I have been desirous of accumulating this superfluous fullness—and have freely gratified my taste in dress perhaps beyond the dictates of prudence and without conforming to my husband’s purse.”⁸⁸ Perhaps Lyman’s acquaintance and Phelps’s neighbor were simply making general observations, or perhaps both young women appeared in need of words of caution. Lyman, tellingly, recognized a “prudence” apart from the strictly financial consideration of her husband’s purse, and certainly, since their neighbors’ daily attire was largely composed of wool, linen, and leather, the colorful imported silks and cottons these more prosperous women donned must have drawn notice. Both women, however, found the warning apt. Lyman resolved to “be more guarded in the future.”

Choosing wisely for Phelps, Lyman, and other women like them meant negotiating the dazzling array of goods that flooded Connecticut Valley shops. For their clothing, men and women of the Connecticut Valley were eager to purchase the wares of local shopkeepers, some produced locally or regionally, and others the stuff of global commerce. The advertisements

published by local merchants alerting residents to goods “lately arrived” suggest that these shops offered dozens of different fabrics in a wide range of quality, pattern, and color. More than a hundred different fabrics appear in Connecticut Valley inventories from the last half of the eighteenth century and first decade of the nineteenth.⁸⁹ Of gowns whose materials are identified by court-appointed assessors, the largest proportion by far (19 percent) were made of some variety of silk—including lustrings, taffetas, satins, and, more than any other, silk crape (11 percent).⁹⁰ Two dozen types of linen were available to the colonial consumer. A glimpse into the contents of one eighteenth-century shop conveys the extent of the choices available to the discerning shopper. By the 1760s Elisha Pomeroy’s Northampton shelves groaned with the weight of about twenty-five hundred yards of fabric, including broadcloths, serges, kerseys, shaloons, tammys, durants, fustians, camblets, cambleteens, calimanco, calico, satin, and dozens of other varieties of textile, in colors from black, blue, and brown to pink, yellow, and crimson, in patterns from striped to spotted, and in qualities from coarse to fine.⁹¹ This selection was not unusual and only continued to expand: at the turn of the century, Nathan Bolles’s Hartford shop likewise offered broadcloth in blue, buff, drab and scarlet; flannels; baizes; black, pink, and green moreens; camblets; russells; shalloons; and buckrums.⁹² He carried tammy in pink, blue, green, black, and mulberry, and durant in black, blue, pink, green, and red-brown. Customers could choose blue velvet or black calimanco, as well as an assortment of crapes and sarcenets. For customers in search of pattern, he offered a dark chintz as well as olive, red spotted, and lite -sprigged, as well as spotted and sprigged calicos and stamped cambric.

Whereas the fabrics available to rural women were mediated through the selections of shopkeepers, the styles in which they were rendered were not. Shifts in fashion generally reached New Englanders by one of four sources: written information, such as instructions supplied in correspondence, and, eventually, in the press; the gowns in up-to-date urban fashions worn and carried in trunks by women traveling from the cities to the countryside; merchants or artisans whose work brought them into contact with prevailing styles in other communities, regions, and countries, which they then carried along with them; and word of mouth. In an era before the advent of patterns as we know them today, style and literacy went hand in hand; fashionable women needed to be able to read the descriptions of costume creeping into the pages of the local press and to write descriptions of the styles they had seen and have those descriptions read by others.⁹³ Such correspondence was enhanced by travel. Men and women who had the privilege of travel conveyed information to others whose horizons were more narrow, providing

them with an opportunity to observe even as they themselves were observing. The cumulative effect of these encounters was ultimately to transmit dispatches both verbal and visual between metropolitan Europe and its colonial hinterlands.⁹⁴

Word of mouth was the most prevalent means by which women received and disseminated information. In contrast to men, who gathered information from conversation, but also correspondence, newspapers, pamphlets, and other published sources, women's information networks were firmly grounded in face-to-face encounters.⁹⁵ Gown making multiplied the opportunity for these exchanges; rural artisans were important links in the chain of communication from style centers. But word of mouth is also the least reliable means by which to convey information, an especially salient point when it comes to fashion. Misinterpretations inevitably occurred along the route, as women of varying levels of skill essayed to approximate urban style. As stylish garments were in turn approximated by others and so on, rural facsimiles—modified and inflected by the overt preferences of rural men and women—became gradually removed from their originals.

In larger cities, merchants and mantua makers played a large role in the dissemination of trends. Some women “lately arrived” from European centers of fashion were more aware of emerging styles; others advertised their close connection with European fashion through the receipt and display of dolls clothed in styles currently popular abroad.⁹⁶ But more often, fashion news traveled by less direct routes, entering from abroad through port cities and making its way to the countryside on the lips of traveling men and women and in the letters and goods they mailed home. Thomas Dwight, for example, while serving as a legislator in Boston, undertook a good bit of shopping on behalf of his family, as well as their circle of friends, at home in western Massachusetts. A memorandum written on the eve of his departure for the capital set the tone for the remainder of his tenure: “Get for Miss Buckminster and send by the first stage 2 yds scarlet satin or 12.5 yd Scarlet lustring. 1 pr riding gloves (short, not pink) fashionable.”⁹⁷ Sometimes, goods traveled both directions, as when Hannah Dwight sent her bonnet back to the city with her husband, where the keeper of his boardinghouse had agreed to “undertake to transmute or transform your bonnet in the shape a la mode if the silk will admit of it.”⁹⁸ In 1799, “a vessel which lately arrived from England with a number of passengers” brought “a cargo of new fashions—the brim of a gentleman’s hat is not wider than a common hair ribbon—helmet cap or horseman’s caps are all the rage for the ladies—black stocks (stuffed with larger puddings) are coming fast into vogue with the gentlemen—ladies wear the same when in mourning and some of them

when not—as gentlemens fashions I am pleased with it—black suits my delicate complexion, and saves a deal of hard labor to the laundress.”⁹⁹ Dwight’s own source was often “late letters from England,” which kept him and other New Englanders apprised of current fashion before it even arrived on the city’s docks.

In rural communities, gown makers were mediators of innovations introduced by others; they were not the arbiters of fashion that their nineteenth-century counterparts would become. Urban traders, though, familiar with the trends popular among their customers and the tradespeople who served them, regularly communicated that information to their more rural clientele, and so influenced the purchases that they carried home. When Esther Williams of Deerfield asked her husband to send an order to the Boston merchant Samuel Eliot for satin, bombazeen, and appropriate trimmings for a cloak, Eliot replied that he was unable to find any of the latter fabric: “Bombazeen being an article formerly used for mourning and mourning being proscribed, there is none to be had.”¹⁰⁰ Eliot reported that he had sought the “advice of Mrs Eliot and two milliners with regard to quantity and quality,” and that the three women suggested that persian would be at the time “more fashionable.” At the urging of the milliners, Eliot added their recommendation that the “head of the cloak, if made fashionable, must be large.”¹⁰¹ Abigail Lyman also received instruction by proxy, from both a Boston craftswoman and her friend and peer Rebecca Salisbury. Lyman wrote her husband, “If you find it convenient & get me a Cloak—let it be a long cardinal—& get me a pattern & directions how to make it of a Milliner according to the latest fashion which Rebecca will inform you—& also what trimming will be best.”¹⁰² In Northampton, either Abigail herself made up her new garment or else she relayed the instructions she received to another, more local craftswoman.

Correspondence among fashionable women regularly conveyed specific instructions that could be implemented by local artisans. “If you know of any new way to make gowns,” Betsy Phelps Huntington asked her sister-in-law Sarah Phelps, then living in Boston, “be so kind as to describe it to me.”¹⁰³ Sometimes that reporting even arrived third-hand. Visiting New London, Connecticut, in spring 1804, Patience Langdon wrote her sister in South Wilbraham, Massachusetts, “*I am told that* the latest fashion for making gowns is for the trail to drag as long as the gown is from your shoulder to the floor and be entirely square[.] Short sleeves are most worn here in white gowns” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁴ It would be left to her sister Sophronia to try to interpret and implement this information correctly. In 1798, young Elizabeth Southgate Browne sent “gown patterns” to her mother, together with detailed directions toward the successful reproduction of the garment in

question: “the one with a fan back is meant to meet just before and pin the Robings, no string belt or anything.”¹⁰⁵ In another letter, she explained that “long sleeves are very much worn, made like mitts; crosswise, only one seam and that in the back of the arm, and a half drawn sleeve over and a close, very short one up high, drawn up with a cord.”¹⁰⁶

While the vast majority of written descriptions of clothing were contained in private or semi-private correspondence, a nascent fashion press did play some role in apprising rural women of urban style. Though female literacy was not widespread until the end of the eighteenth century, those Connecticut Valley women who had enjoyed access to education did watch the Boston and Hartford papers carefully, and when possible, used these bulletins to guide their own purchases.¹⁰⁷ Abigail Lyman combed the pages of the *Columbian Centinel* before writing to her husband, frequently in Boston on business, advising him of her needs. In one letter she wrote, “You will find Black Bo[rnast] for Mamas gown at Ann Bents, No. 50 Marlboro Street . . . as I observe she publishes it.”¹⁰⁸ In another, she asked her husband to procure a pair of slippers, “pritty good ones,” because she could not “get any in this town worth buying.” This letter, dated 29 May 1797, was written a mere five days after the *Centinel* was published in Boston; Lyman had clearly turned to its advertising pages as soon as it arrived, read the notices with care, and dashed a letter off to her husband immediately, hoping to reach him in time to secure the wanted articles.¹⁰⁹ With luck, she would have her new slippers—nicer than any available locally—in a matter of days.

Craftswomen, too, carried fashion as they traveled from place to place, encountering new styles that they then incorporated into their own repertoires. Sometimes this travel was international; in revolutionary-era Hartford, for example, Mary Gabel stressed her Parisian origins to draw business away from Mary and Jane Salmon, whose Boston training must have (for Connecticut consumers, at least) paled in comparison.¹¹⁰ In Boston another Parisian emigrant noted that she could provide “all that concerns ladies dress” in fashions popular in France.¹¹¹ J. Ritchie Garrison has observed the importance of “tramping” among men learning the carpentering trades, suggesting that the time they spent working in the shops of other builders provided more than simply opportunities to find more work and income; the exposure to new techniques and trends also provided a substantial portion of their education and training.¹¹² Young female apprentices moved less often between craftswomen, but craftswomen, too, moved between communities, and in so doing widened their range of experience. Use of the popular phrase “lately arrived” appealed to the urban mantua makers, who drafted advertise-

ments to the local press as much as it did other artisans, as it signaled their recent familiarity with prevailing fashions in their country or city of origin. Among women in the clothing trades, the quality of having been “lately arrived” could prove to be their strongest selling point, even as they worked to establish themselves among a new and, they hoped, long-standing clientele.

Forays from rural and small-town communities to city centers provided amply opportunity to glean news of styles. “Formerly there was a fashion of wearing masks made of silk velvet and made stiff with paper,” one resident of eighteenth-century Northampton recalled. “There was a hole for breathing and places for the eyes—a few had them in Northampton—some of Mr. Edwards’ daughters, it is said, and Ebenezer Phelps’ wife used to wear a mask [when] she rode out.” This woman remembered, “Mrs. Edwards used to go to Boston (so said) once a year, and bring home the fashions!”¹¹³ As a young woman, Elizabeth Porter traveled with cousins to see the spring elections in Boston and to visit family and friends in Hartford and Middletown. As the fashion of wearing masks suggests, trips like these served as reconnaissance missions, after which gentlewomen communicated to their home communities the latest developments in urban style through their personal appearance and their correspondence.

When Betsy Phelps went from Hadley to visit her brother Charles at college in Cambridge, her mother, Elizabeth, asked her to “take a little notice how such things are made if you can.”¹¹⁴ Later, while living in Litchfield, Connecticut, Betsy wrote to her mother, “if Sally [Charles’s wife] can send me a fashion, or a gown to look at by you, I will send it home by my father and be very much obliged to her.”¹¹⁵ The clothing of these gentlewomen often served as patterns, or models, for others.¹¹⁶ One summer afternoon in July 1798, Phelps noted in her memorandum book that “Dr. Porter’s wife and young widow Gaylord” [a local gown maker] had come by “to fix a gown for Mrs Porter by one of Betsys.”¹¹⁷ While in Boston the previous fall, young Betsy Phelps had patronized one of the roughly one dozen mantua makers then working in Boston; six months later, Lucretia Gaylord would try to duplicate the work of that Boston mantua maker in a gown for Charlotte Porter.¹¹⁸

It is difficult to know whether these rural women successfully imitated urban fashions, or even in what manner they attempted to. European style migrated quickly and easily to colonial urban centers and surely took no longer to find its way to the countryside. But the degree to which it was transformed along the way remains murky. For example, the estate inventory of the Hatfield gentlewoman Lois Morton indicates that she owned a gown made of cheney, a worsted fabric more often used in urban settings for

furnishings, and especially bed curtains.¹¹⁹ Morton had an extensive wardrobe at the time of her death, comprising more than one hundred articles of clothing, and eighteen gowns, of lustring, chintz, calico, calimanco, russell, crape, cambleteen, wildbore, and cotton. What prompted her to select cheney on one occasion for her new garment? Was this fabric perhaps considered more versatile by women on the periphery of urban fashion? Several passages in the correspondence of Betsy Phelps Huntington suggest that there was at least a perceived gulf between the city and the countryside. When a friend of the Phelps family staying in Boston wrote home to his wife in Hadley that he had asked Betsy to help him purchase the fabric for a broadcloth cloak that she had requested, the woman worried that he had mistakenly suggested that superfine broadcloth was wanted, when only a "good fine wool, not the first quality" would suffice. She promptly made a point of speaking to Betsy's mother, Elizabeth Phelps, who then conveyed the correction to her daughter, hoping that she had intervened in time.¹²⁰ Similarly, when writing to her brother in Boston to request the purchase of a beaver hat, Betsy suggested that he need not overspend, as "a cheaper one would answer as well as any here in the country."¹²¹ Conversely, in December 1797, upon returning to Hadley after a visit to Boston, she laughingly reported to Charles their mother's fear that one new fashion that she had brought home from the city "should frighten some out of the house of worship."¹²² Twenty years later, when Charles Porter Phelps brought home his second wife, Charlotte Parsons, from Boston and Newburyport, her first appearance at the Hadley church was similarly memorable, certainly to Phelps's nephew Theodore Huntington, who later recalled that "she was very much dressed, indeed her costume was so altogether beyond that of our people, that to my youthful eyes it was very near the ridiculous."¹²³

Such observations remind us that the Congregational meetinghouse was among the most important stage sets in a community's "theater," that Sunday services were sartorial as well as spiritual events. According to oral tradition, when, in about the 1770s, Madame Wyllys appeared at Hartford's North Meeting House in a calico apron, the garment was "then so new and stylish" that the women around her "could not fix their minds on the sermon."¹²⁴ This tale may well seem to be nothing more than the sort of charming anecdote that appealed to nineteenth-century local historians, but evidence suggests that some parishioners were sufficiently distracted by the clothing around them that they remembered it many years later. An elderly Solomon Clarke never forgot the Sabbath Day impression made by Asahel Pomeroy, keeper of Northampton's principal public house: "I remember well his stately form, standing in his pew, facing the choir, back to the pulpit,

his ponderous watch seals hanging from his vest.”¹²⁵ When Lucy Watson gave her “recollections and notices of Dress” from her Walpole, New Hampshire, childhood, she remembered that “the most dressy lady at church was Mrs Levitt, the Minister’s Wife.” Levitt “alone went to church without a bonnet, and holding a fan before her face, as was then the fashion of the Seaboard.” Watson summoned memories of “Col. Bellows’ daughter and her two half sisters,” who “wore black silk bonnets in much of the plainness of the present Quaker bonnets, but having a bow in front.” “The gayest ladies then wore black silk hats with flat crowns and large brims—Set so much on the front of the head, and rising behind, as to leave the back of the cap, Expos’d. White, or colored bonnets, were not seen. All the rest of the dress was very very gay.”¹²⁶ Sixty miles south, the minister’s wife was more reluctant to stand out from her community. When Sabra Cobb Emerson left Boston to join her husband, John, in the wilderness settlement of Conway, Massachusetts, she brought with her a silk umbrella, but when she noticed that no other Conway families possessed such an accessory, she put it away, never to be carried again. She later used the silk to make bonnets. The women of Conway, however, worked a little harder to make a good Sunday show: oral tradition preserved there records that women would travel to church in their everyday clothes, and then, before entering the meetinghouse, change into their finer apparel “under the sheltering branches of the Chestnut tree at the foot of Rice Hill.”¹²⁷

While the meetinghouse may have been the high court of fashion in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, high style in eighteenth-century Connecticut was more closely associated with politics, with election balls and the Hartford Assemblies possibly the most fashion-forward events in the whole of the Connecticut River Valley during the Revolutionary and Federal eras. In 1790, one prominent Hartford observer boasted, “Our assemblies are most brilliant, and . . . at the last there were forty Ladies in most superb attire.”¹²⁸ Though women and men from rural Massachusetts traveled to Boston for annual elections and fitted themselves out for the occasion, for the genteel residents of the Connecticut Valley, Connecticut’s Election Day, held annually on the second Thursday in May, was an important social event. A ball was held on the evening following the election, and another the following Monday, the latter being “more select.”¹²⁹ When Hannah Smith of Glastonbury described her early efforts to prepare for a ball, she reported, “We are very busy preparing for the election having five girls to fix out, some of them old enough to think their clothes must be made in the very newest fashion and their bonnets made at Hartford, so we have been obliged to get them”¹³⁰ In western Massachusetts, where, as we have seen, Sarah Pitkin

grew bored spending time with ministers and their ministerial families, there seems to have been nothing comparable to the Election Ball and similarly festive events.¹³¹ The Hartford Election Balls and associated assemblies were the pinnacles of fashion in the Connecticut Valley of the Federal era, the place that style was set and set in motion.

THE FASHIONS introduced in the Hadley meetinghouse struck some observers as frightening, ridiculous, or overly pious; indeed Betsy Phelps's mother teased that the gowns her daughter returned with from Boston might cause a riot. Instead, however, Charlotte Porter affirmed Betsy's taste by acquiring a similar gown for herself. Now at least two Hadley women sported the new style, helping to popularize it in the area. At the same time, the woman who copied the gown, Lucretia Gaylord, learned the fashion, thus further facilitating its adoption into the local lexicon of design. Meantime, in Connecticut, the local assemblies proved critical venues at which new fashions were introduced and observed, to be replicated time and again in households up and down the Connecticut River. Transmitting information in this way, through a series of face-to-face exchanges, was in keeping with long-standing custom that regularly engaged women in local information networks. The spread of female literacy would soon provide greater numbers of women with direct access to more cosmopolitan vistas through newspapers, magazines, and books, but for now, a series of mediations like this one most often conveyed the fashions of Paris, London, New York, and Boston to the New England countryside.¹³²

The process by which women and men constructed their wardrobes, and their identities, was complex. People needed tools to accomplish their goals. Consumers gathered fashion information through their correspondence and the press, but perhaps the most important tool was the looking glass. Elisha Pomeroy anticipated this need as early as the winter of 1761, when he stocked his Northampton shop with thirty "pocket looking glasses"; men and women, no longer tethered to any particular spot on the landscape, required portable means by which to inspect their appearance, to make sure that the image projected outward matched their interior sense of themselves.¹³³ At the end of the century, the desire to scrutinize one's appearance had by no means abated. In the fall of 1797, eighteen-year-old Betsy Phelps visited her brother at Harvard and acquired fashions that were still unknown, but would become known, in her native Hadley. The young gentlewoman from the countryside spent a good deal of time that season observing, noting what kind of stockings were worn, what cut of sleeves were preferred, which style of hat was most genteel, and which merely serviceable. Two years later she would return

to outfit herself for marriage and housewifery; by then she would be well familiar with the goods carried in the Boston shops. But on this early foray, she was still something of a novice. And when she arrived in the city, late in the month of August, she realized that she had forgotten something essential to her sojourn there. She quickly wrote home to her mother, requesting that she promptly send the “little looking glass that stands on my dressing table.”¹³⁴ The emerging gentlewoman was monitoring the process of her own self-fashioning and would need it.¹³⁵