The Needle’s Eye
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The Needle's Eye
Women and Work in the Age of Revolution
Marla R. Miller
CONTENTS

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: Early American Artisanry Why Gender Matters 1

PART I

1 Clothing and Consumers in Rural New England, 1760–1810 25
2 Needle Trades in New England, 1760–1810 56

PART II

3 Needlework of the Rural Gentry The World of Elizabeth Porter Phelps 89
4 Family, Community, and Informal Work in the Needle Trades The Worlds of Easter Fairchild Newton and Tryphena Newton Cooke 114
5 Family, Artisanry, and Craft Tradition The Worlds of Tabitha Clark Smith and Rebecca Dickinson 134
6 Gender, Artisanry, and Craft Tradition The World of Catherine Phelps Parsons 163

PART III

7 Women's Artisanal Work in the Changing New England Marketplace 185
Conclusion The Romance of Old Clothes 211

Abbreviations 233
Notes 235
Index 289
This page intentionally left blank
## Illustrations

### Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colonial Barbie</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Augustus Andross advertisement, <em>Connecticut Courant</em>, 6 April 1819</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuban and Lydia Duncan Champion account book, 1753–1777</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map of the Connecticut River Valley</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White linen embroidered apron, 1780–1800</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue and white checked linen apron, 1800–1840</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire-style gown and detail of seam, 1800–1815</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ladies Dress Maker,” from <em>The Book of Trades</em> (1804)</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forty Acres, Hadley, Massachusetts</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embroidered coat of arms by Ann Grant and detail of stitching, c. 1768</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooke family home</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needlework by Tryphena Newton Cooke, 1790–1805</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double-breasted silk frock coat and details of front and back, 1790–1800</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Sargent Huntington in Elizabeth Pitkin Porter’s wedding gown, c. 1910</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Whiting’s drawing of Rebecca Dickinson’s needlework, c. 1905</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Color Plates (follow page 144)

1. Checked smock, late eighteenth century                                    |
2. Diadema Morgan’s blue wool gown, 1785                                     |
3. Mary Floyd Tallmadge, portrait by Ralph Earl, 1790                        |
4. *L’atelier de couture*, by Antoine Raspal, c. 1760                        |
5. Cotton muslin dress, 1805–1810                                            |
6. Quilted petticoat and detail, c. 1730–1740                                |
7. Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s heraldic needlework, 1760–1817                   |
8. Rebecca Dickinson, head cloth, 1765                                        |
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been something like fifteen years in the making start to finish, and so these acknowledgments are unabashedly long. It seems as though I’ve been telling friends and family for at least a third of that time that the book is “practically done,” and so it is with sincere pleasure that I at long last record my gratitude to the many people who have helped me, in ways great and small, along the way.

In these several years I have encountered a long line of librarians, curators, and administrators whose talent, dedication, genial encouragement, and general good cheer made the work I do both possible and pleasurable. During a fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society, the entire staff extended truly remarkable courtesy, but I am especially indebted to John Hench, Caroline Sloat, Georgia Barnhill, Joanne Chaison, and Laura Wasowicz for making me so comfortable there, and for pointing me toward materials I may well never have discovered on my own. At the Connecticut Historical Society, Susan Schoelwer has been especially enthusiastic about my project and its larger aims; she is one of those extraordinary object-people who make document-people like me feel as though we’re all in it together. At the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Suzanne Flynt has long been a fellow traveler in the effort to untangle the mystery that is Rebecca Dickinson, and to understand the artists and businesswomen who revisited her needlework a century later; I’ve enjoyed her scholarly camaraderie through the years. At the Forbes Library in Northampton, Elise Bernier Feeley is a sheer marvel of efficiency and hospitality; what’s more, it was she who first introduced me to the wealth and riches of the Sylvester Judd Manuscript. Kerry Buckley and Marie Panik at Historic Northampton have likewise been wonderfully alert to the documents and artifacts in their collection that bear on my work. Across the river, the staff at the Amherst College Library’s Special Collections and Archives capably oversee the Porter-Phelps-Huntington papers; I cannot guess the number of hours I’ve spent in that comfortable reading room but am grateful to Daria D’Arienzo and Mimi Dakin for their cheerful help through the years. At the Hadley Historical Society, I will always remember with admiration and affection the late Dorothy Russell, who
so cheerfully shared her own vast knowledge of local history as I undertook the research that launched this project.

A circle of textile and clothing curators, museum professionals, and costume specialists gave gladly of their time and expertise and provided me with many hours of instruction and just plain fun. A day of hands-on tutoring was wonderfully offered by the staff of the mantua maker's house at Colonial Williamsburg; I am tremendously indebted to Janea Whitacre, Doris Warren, and Brooke Barrows for a delightful February day spent together making a 1770s gown from start to (almost) finish. I am also thankful to Beth Gilgun for lending me the period-appropriate clothing that made that trip possible—and for providing yet another tactile learning experience as she laced me into my oh-so-snug jacket. This project benefited significantly from the expertise and generosity of Henry M. Cooke IV, Ned Lazaro, AIMEE Newell, Pamela Parmel, and Nancy Rexford, each of whom came to my rescue at one time or another with just the right information, materials, or advice. And last, my gratitude to Lynne Zacek Bassett, for close readings of this book in various stages of development, for many hours of personal tutorial, and for her longtime support of my scholarship, is particularly profound.

Two museums have played especially pivotal roles in my development as a historian. Ever since a life-changing summer fellowship at Historic Deerfield in 1987, Norma Woods, Ken Hafertepe, Phil Zea, Joshua Lane, Amanda Lange, Edward Maeder, Jessica Neuwirth, and many others over the years have made that magical place an extraordinary scholarly resource, as well as a home away from home. Special thanks are due to Donald R. and Grace Friary for their ongoing interest in and support of my work. Most of all I would like to acknowledge a deep debt to Anne Digan Lanning, who has long shared my passion for the recovery of women's lives in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England; many thanks to her for almost twenty years of scholarly companionship. More material support was provided by the excellent staff of Deerfield's Memorial Libraries over the past years; David Proper, Shirley Majewski, David Bosse, Sharman Prouty, and Martha Noblick do everything excellent librarians do, and a good deal more. Of course, this project was first conceived on the porch of the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House in Hadley; I have spent untold hours in and around those rooms trying to conjure the spirits not just of Elizabeth Porter Phelps and Rebecca Dickinson but Tryphena Cooke, Peg, Phillis, and Roseanna, Persis Morse, and many other, unnamed, women who labored there. I will be forever grateful to Susan Lisk and Elizabeth Carlisle for assisting in those efforts with such enthusiasm, and for making that place so warm and welcoming through the years.

This project began as a dissertation at the University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill, though it has roots, too, in a senior thesis at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, where Charles L. Cohen and the late and remarkable Sargent Bush Jr. first captivated me with the mystery and wonders of early America. At UNC, Professors John Nelson and Jacqueline Dowd Hall proved instrumental in the development of that project, and in my own evolution as a scholar; they are thanked effusively in that earlier set of acknowledgments, but their advice and support has continued long beyond the receipt of the degree, itself now almost ten years past, and I continue to benefit from their wisdom and encouragement. Everyone who has been through graduate school knows how important your fellow students are as well, and my appreciation and affection for my classmates Anne Whisnant, Gretchen White, Tim Thurber, Laura Jane Moore, and Houston Roberson are deep and abiding.

Two scholars have been especially important in guiding this project as well as its author. My gratitude to Laurel Ulrich is deep and wholehearted. Her reputation for intellectual generosity is legendary and well-earned; knowing what I now know about the life of a university professor, I cannot begin to imagine how she found time to read work from a student for whom she was in no way responsible—and not just once, but repeatedly, from the day that my first essay on Rebecca Dickinson arrived unannounced in her campus mailbox to drafts of this book. Through these years, her thoughtful comments and suggestions have meant as much to me as her warm personal encouragement. Kevin M. Sweeney was serving as Historic Deerfield's Director of Academic Programs that life-changing summer and had no small role in making it one. Words can hardly capture my gratitude to him for setting me on this intellectual course and for staying with me along the way. Finally, both Laurel and Kevin pointed out that the early material from which this project grew might support two books rather than one; they should rest assured that my thanks for that observation will be equally effusive in the future.

Several friends and colleagues also read large chunks of this book, and in many cases the whole thing. For their energy and support, I thank Sarah Leavitt, Valija Evalds, and again, Lynne Bassett. Pat Tracy and Christopher Clark each read the book as I was embarking on the process of revision; their perceptive comments and suggestions changed the way I thought about both the shape and the purpose of my work. Cathy Kelly gave this work a wonderfully close and insightful reading at a critical juncture in its development; her generosity, insight, and enthusiasm continue to astound me. I also managed to impose larger and smaller portions of my work on Howard Rock, Edward S. Cooke Jr., Seth Rockman, and Pamela Sharpe and am grateful to them for
their astute comments and advice. Several scholars have shared findings from their own archival forays with me, and for this I am indebted to Jacqueline Carr, Mary Beaudry, and (though this has now been so long ago that she has surely given up looking for any book) Beth Nichols. Less formal but also ongoing and valuable encouragement came from Bonnie Parsons, Sherrill Redmon, Joyce Follet, and Jim and Margaret Freeman as well as Martha Lyon and Lynda Faye, for which I am also grateful.

I also feel lucky to have become part of the intellectual community that Peter Benes has gathered around the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife; every summer—whatever the season’s topic—I am energized and inspired by the conference itself as well as the principles behind it. As for my university community, I so appreciate my colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Five Colleges, who never fail to support my work, especially Joyce Berkman, Alice Nash, Christine Cooper, Neal Salisbury, Bob Paynter, and the members of a departmental writing group: Brian Ogilvie, Carl Nightengale, Max Page, and Kate Weigand, cheerfully hosted by the much-missed Kevin Boyle and Vicky Getis. The material that became chapter 6 was presented to the Five College History Seminar and to the members of an ongoing Interdisciplinary Seminar in the Humanities and Fine Arts; my understanding of urban women was improved by conversation with members of the Economic History and Development Workshop. Special thanks are due to David Glassberg and Barry Levy for their constant engagement and encouragement over the past several years. Bruce Laurie had the fortune (I’ll let him supply his own adjective) to become my official faculty mentor on my appointment to UMass and quickly became among my most valued colleagues as well; words hardly suffice for all the advice, support, and intellectual camaraderie he has provided since my arrival on campus.

Students at the University of Massachusetts have also helped both directly and indirectly through the years, but I am especially grateful to the undergraduates in my 2003 seminar “Great History Books” (Kimberly Anderson, Jaclyn Chimeri, Nancy Edmonson, Natalie Kollman, Laura Leonard, Sarah Merva, Alannah Sharry, Max Solie, D. J. Thistle, and Gregg Ykasala) for talking over the course of a lively semester with me about things that make readers keep turning pages. Smith College student Jack Slowriver provided capable research assistance, as did Ned Lazarro while he himself was yet a master’s candidate. Finally, Kate Navarra Thibodeau and Jill Ogline, graduate assistants to the UMass Public History Program, helped immeasurably by keeping many other parts of my life sane so that I could bring this project to a successful and timely conclusion.
Of course, institutional support of many kinds is crucial to any project, and I take particular pleasure in acknowledging them here. The University of North Carolina supported early research on this project through fellowships supported by the History Department as well as the Graduate School; I am particularly honored to have been a member of the first class of the Carolina/Royster Society of Fellows, as the Henry H. Dearman Fellow. A Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities/Bay State Historical League Scholar-in-Residence Grant, Kate B. and Hall J. Peterson Fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society and Five College Women's Studies Research Center Research Associateship in 1994 all contributed to the completion of the research. More recently, a Ruth R. Miller Fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society allowed me to pursue related work on Boston artisans. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided crucial support, in both a summer research stipend and year-long fellowship during which I could write, as did a departmental Research and Curriculum Enhancement Leave awarded me by my colleagues at the University of Massachusetts. The University of Massachusetts Amherst Office of Research Services funded the creation of the Connecticut Valley Clothing File. I am especially grateful to Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts Lee Edwards for supporting this project in ways both tangible and intangible.

Parts of some chapters have appeared in differing forms in the William and Mary Quarterly, the New England Quarterly, Dress, and proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife. I cheerfully thank those journals for permission to reprint that material here. Perhaps more important, I am deeply indebted to Chris Grasso, Ann Gross, Lynn Rhoads, Peter Benes, and Linda Welter for their support and suggestions as I polished the argument and prose of those various pieces. Ann is to be doubly thanked because she also helped prepare the entire manuscript for publication at the University of Massachusetts Press, as did Deborah Smith, to whom I am also sincerely grateful; I would never have discovered my affinity for reflexive pronouns and inadvertent puns without their extraordinary attention. Kate Blackmer and Stan Sherer provided exceptional artwork, and a generous grant from the Coby Foundation funded the color illustrations that help tell the book's story. Finally, at the Press, Paul Wright, Clark Dougan, Bruce Wilcox, and Carol Betsch each helped guide this inexperienced first-time author through the publication process; I hope we get to do it again sometime. On this note about the mentoring of new writers, I would be remiss not to add here my deep gratitude to Peter Agree, who was associated with the College of Humanities and Fine Arts of the University of Massachusetts Amherst at just the right moment for me, for his sage advice and unfailing support.
Looking over these acknowledgments I apprehend how much it is true that my professional colleagues are also my best friends, and my friends and family sources of scholarly insight and inspiration. What a lovely thing it is to realize that the people I so much admire for their historical acumen, inventive scholarship, and dedication to the life of the mind are the same people whom I treasure most for their good humor, personal warmth, and political companionship. My loved ones should recognize themselves in those lines as well. Since his own work involves unraveling the history of the universe, it’s not surprising that Stephen K. Peck reminds me every day how important the world beyond the academy remains; though I can be a stubborn student, I so appreciate the many things he has taught me through the years. My brother, Todd M. Miller, shows me all the time the rewards of independent discovery, of embracing new subjects and pursuing them with vigor. My father, Roger Leslie Miller, first taught me to love learning itself; to this day we share the plain fun of puzzling things out. Finally, my mother, Phyllis Arneson Miller, first led me to love the places and people of the past; if someday I become half the historian she is, then I will have accomplished something. I fondly dedicate this work to them.
The Needle’s Eye
Seldom does a historian find her scholarly interests reflected in the aisles of Toys-R-Us, even more rarely so those of us who study the eighteenth century. But the advent of Colonial Barbie provided me that rare instance. When I first spotted her, the historically garbed figure seemed out of place amid rows of Holiday Barbies, Dance-n-Twirl Barbies, and Gymnast Barbies. But as a women’s historian studying early America I was drawn to her in both amazement and amusement. Dressed in red, white, and blue, her costume the familiar mantua, petticoat, and mob cap, she would more accurately have been named Revolutionary Barbie, I remember thinking. Most interesting to me, she held in her hand a piece of needlework. Barbie was working on a quilt square, it seemed, depicting an American eagle. Also enclosed in the box was a booklet recounting Barbie’s participation in the American Revolution and explaining the small object she held in her hand. The title of the volume was “The Messenger Quilt.” At first, I assumed that the usually adventurous Barbie was involved in some sort of spy operation, cleverly inscribing and conveying military intelligence through a seemingly innocent quilt. I was disappointed to learn that the quilt simply, if enthusiastically, celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence with a large red, white, and blue design reading “Happy Birthday, America.”

Barbie’s quilt brought to mind another piece of red, white, and blue needlework announcing the founding of the new nation. Though thousands of girls have now encountered their colonial counterparts through Mattel’s incarnation (as well as the American Girls popular doll “Felicity”), among the first early American women that most children meet is Betsy Ross, the alleged maker of the first United States flag. Ross has for generations been the only woman included alongside the founding fathers, her contribution to the fledgling nation her skill with a needle.¹ On any given day, close to three hundred titles concerning her crowd the nation’s bookstore and library shelves, the vast majority aimed at the young adult market. She has been por-
trayed in films, and she has lent her name to lamps, cocktails, and sewing tables. She is one of only three historical figures immortalized as a Pez candy dispenser. Prompted first by the nation’s centennial and enlarged by subsequent commemorations, the legend that surrounds Ross is both larger and smaller than the woman herself. While most popular accounts casually label her a seamstress, Elizabeth Griscom Ross Ashburn Claypoole actually worked

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, as large-scale economic reorganization seemed to threaten independent artisanry, assertions of masculinity became important to artisanal identity. The advertisement, while noting the blacksmith's ability to "forge Machinery Work to any pattern," emphasizes the human strength of the artisan's body, his bulging bicep exposed by the rolled-up sleeve, and hammer held upright by a muscular forearm.
artisans but enjoys just a fraction of the number of visits the Ross house receives. Each site interprets the history of the city’s skilled craftswomen, but for both, the same popular historical imagination that brings visitors to the door can make the place of artisanal skill in these women’s lives that much harder to see. My main purpose in this work is to re-imagine those early American craftswomen—to move Colonial Barbie aside, to help recapture the artisanal world of businesswomen like Ross, to lead readers to the homes and workplaces of early American mantua makers. I hope to restore to historical view the legions of early American women who found livings in the clothing trades and to overturn the prevailing sense—symbolized by Colonial Barbie and the mythologized Ross—that early American needlework was ubiquitous and undifferentiated and to examine instead the complexities of women’s craft production on the eve of industrialization. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has observed, “as yet, few historians have given serious attention to the actual structure of women’s domestic burdens in early America or attempted to discover the particular conditions that may have given rise to their complaints. Nor has anyone considered working relations among women in the preindustrial female economy.” This study aims to help fill that gap.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Women’s skills with needles and shears gave them a particular place within their communities. Some became widely known makers of the region’s most fashionable apparel; others took generally held skills into the homes of their neighbors. Still others served mainly as employers, and not providers, of this labor. My purpose is to plumb those hierarchies of power and skill to better understand the ways in which needlework shaped and reflected the circumstances of real women’s lives, which varied significantly over time and space, by economic position and opportunity, by marital status and other life stages, by race, education, entrepreneurial talent, and technical ability; to restore skilled needlewomen to their artisanal status and to reconnect those artisans to the expanding commercial world of the eighteenth century; and to observe the century’s economic transformations from the perspective of female needleworkers of varying levels of skill, experience, and independence. This, then, is a study of women, work, and the ways in which early American women’s work and work identities turned on commonalities and differences that continue to challenge us today, unaided by the mythologies that elide them.
WORKING WOMEN'S lives are notoriously hard to document, all the more so as one moves backward in time. Rarely literate, early America's laboring women were unlikely to create texts that survive for contemporary historical inspection. Traces of their work instead scatter across the letters, ledgers, and daybooks of others. At the same time, the material world they inhabited—the spaces where they lived and worked; the pins, needles, and shears they possessed; and the products of their labor—endure so infrequently that it can be hard to extract from them sufficient clues to reconstruct whole worlds of activity.

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

More common than volumes like Lathrop's, and more tangible (for us today) than records like Childs's, are the many account books kept by men that were also the ledgers of women. When Solomon Wright, of Northampton, Massachusetts, inscribed his own name on the cover of his accounts, the gown maker Esther Wright likewise inscribed her own, to reflect that debts recorded therein were also hers. Despite the boldness of her signature, Esther Wright's identity is unclear to us today: Solomon never married; Esther is either Solomon's widowed mother, Esther Lyman Wright (1725–1815), or his never-married sister (1763–1812), also named Esther Wright. Today the volume is catalogued as the Solomon Wright account book, but his notations concerning goods and services “we” received and debts due to “us” make plain that he saw the account book as a record of shared enterprise. Similarly, the ledger kept in the 1760s by Reuban Champion is catalogued as that of a Connecticut Valley physician; the presence of transactions related to needlework long went unnoted, yet more than a third of the individuals listed in the ledger’s pages were indebted to the household for Lydia Duncan...
Champion’s work making and maintaining apparel. To the names of the men and women provided services by his household, Saybrook’s Reuban Champion, like Solomon Wright, sometimes appended “debtor to us,” signaling his own recognition that some of the income his family enjoyed was the result of his wife’s time over her needle.\textsuperscript{23}

Additional examples are legion. The nineteenth-century Hampshire County historian Sylvester Judd could record that Sarah King Clark was a gown maker in Northampton from at least “1757 to the revolution” because her husband, William, “charged the work in his book.”\textsuperscript{24} In the account book of the Northampton bricklayer Nathaniel Phelps, roughly one in every ten of the more than one hundred accounts for masonry work contain charges for work in clothing production by his wife, Catherine King Phelps. His account book was also in part hers, the value of her time and skill assessed and charged alongside and in the same manner as his.\textsuperscript{25} In Williamsburg, Massachusetts, Submit Williams signed her name next to entries in her husband, Joseph’s account book, recording her work making clothing for her neighbors and their hired hands.\textsuperscript{26} The ledger kept by the Hadley, Massachusetts, ferryman Solomon Cooke, which spans the years 1790 to 1814,
records goods and services offered by the Cooke household to households throughout Hadley, including agricultural products from cider to clover seed, time and energy spent carting goods, tending horses, and securing animal hides, and time and energy spent making and altering clothing. The volume records the contributions that both Solomon and his wife, Tryphena, made toward their household’s maintenance, the needlework being hers. But some researchers have erroneously perceived Solomon Cooke to be a tailor on the basis of these entries—an all-too-common error, I suspect, that will persist until women’s formal and informal work in the clothing trades is better understood.  

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

The sites of memory to which we travel largely lie in western New England, alongside the Connecticut River as it makes its 440-mile trip from the Canadian border to the Long Island Sound. Though we occasionally look in on men and women elsewhere in New England, our main concern is the
Connecticut River Valley, a geographical and cultural world of its own in western New England, possibly the wealthiest gathering of communities in the region, with its own distinctive patterns of trade, settlement, social intercourse, and cultural practice. Evidence of this distinction, particularly in the context of the region’s visual culture, comes down to us in reminiscences and observations of the eighteenth century. The middling and laboring men of the Connecticut Valley, we learn, were identified by the blue-and-white-checked everyday shirts that they most commonly wore. When Benjamin Tappan of Boston first attended Sunday meeting in Northampton, he was surprised to find that nearly every man in the room, with five or six exceptions, had one on. “The people of Worcester County wore white shirts,” Sylvester Judd further observed, “and they said they could tell a Connecticut River Valley man by his checkered shirt.”

The eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley that produced these distinctive wardrobes encompassed more than seventy towns between Hanover, New Hampshire, and Saybrook, Connecticut. Though the Connecticut River flows from north to south, the families streaming into the valley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generally flowed south to north, as men and women made their way from coastal Connecticut upriver to Wethersfield, Hartford, and Windsor, Connecticut, to Springfield, Northampton, and Hadley, Massachusetts, and finally up to Hinsdale, New Hampshire, Brattleboro, Vermont, and points north. River communities in Connecticut were gathered together into two counties: Hartford and Middlesex, constituted in 1666 and 1785, respectively. Settled by Europeans in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, the Connecticut River Valley communities had been thriving for well over a century before revolutionary discontent began to swirl; by 1790, enumerators of the first federal census counted fifty-eight thousand inhabitants living in those two counties. To the north, Massachusetts valley towns by the end of the eighteenth century were themselves well populated, with complex economies and political networks that remained all the while connected to their neighbors to the south. When incorporated in 1662, Hampshire County took in the whole of the Massachusetts portion of the river valley (including the present-day Hampden and Franklin Counties, which hived off in 1812 and 1811), as well as the Berkshires to the west, and encompassed three towns: Springfield, Northampton, and Hadley. In 1790, Hampshire County contained sixty thousand residents in two dozen thriving towns. In the still-more-northerly reaches of the valley, the “great river” formed the border between New Hampshire and Vermont. Settled in the eighteenth century as warfare among European and Native nations subsided, Vermont’s river towns, too, drew men and women from settlements to
Map of the Connecticut River Valley. Kate Blackmer.
the south. Almost no European settlement had pushed beyond the Massachusetts border at the mid-eighteenth century, but following the conclusion of the French and Indian or Seven Years' War in 1763, European settlement boomed; by 1771 nearly two-thirds of the seventy-six hundred Vermonters, or about forty-seven hundred men and women, lived in the eastern half of the state, in settlements near or alongside the Connecticut, and most of those—almost four thousand—lived in river towns in the southeast corner of the state.31

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

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

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

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

To explore the world of female artisanry before industrialization, this study examines the clothing trades as a source of employment for early American women. In undertaking such an exploration, it is important to remember that occupational titles are inexact and not entirely helpful, given the fluidities of skill that enabled women to practice a variety of tasks, movement in and out of wage work, and intraregional variation. But, generally speaking, what we understand today to be the work of a “seamstress”
(the production and maintenance of comparatively simple garments) in the
eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley was performed by women most often
called “tailoresses.” Tailors (that is, artisans who had the particular skills nec-
essary to produce formal, fitted clothing primarily for men) were generally
men, though women of equivalent skill were likewise called “tailors”; the
feminine suffix, in the eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley, appears to
have signaled a level of skill rather than the gender of the artisan. The period
term for artisans who constructed gowns for women was generally “mantua
maker,” which referred to a particular style of garment once closely associ-
ated with silk from the Italian city of Mantua, though women in New
England’s rural communities seemed to prefer the more general term “gown
maker.” The work of milliners and mantua makers has always been closely
connected, and women highly skilled in needlework regularly moved be-
tween the two occupations. This study is interested in women’s work con-
structing clothing, and so observes women at work in that craft, but milliners,
whose efforts were more closely concentrated on trimmings and accoutre-
ments, were certainly important contributors to that process, especially in
those years when trim and accessories were particularly crucial to a smart
appearance.40

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

Part II investigates more closely the array of occupations within the needle
trades, from plain sewing to tailoring to gown making, and looks also at the
ornamental needlework elite women, as members of the region’s gentry, were
obliged to complete. Because the social relations of women’s work are best
explored at the local level, each chapter here brings into focus the life of par-
ticular needlewomen who worked in and around a single community in the heart of the Connecticut Valley: Hadley, Massachusetts, a thriving agricultural village nestled in a bend in the river about halfway between the Connecticut and Vermont borders. The principal focus here is on six women, all of European descent, members of the Congregational Church, and more or less of a shared generation, who sustained a particular set of relationships surrounding the production and consumption of clothing. Rural women like these have hitherto been largely perceived as a fairly uniform population, their lives far more alike than they were different. But a truly attentive examination of their distinct yet overlapping worlds reveals how remarkably diverse, complex, and riddled with power relationships those communities were, how much access to skill, relative economic advantage, marriage and family, and other aspects of everyday life positioned women in relationship to one another, enlarging and limiting opportunities, shaping the trajectories of days, years, and lifetimes in ways both large and small. At the same time, each woman opens a window onto larger transformations in the economy and society, allowing us to consider the nature of the expanding market for needle skills, the family economy, and shifting gender divisions of labor at both close and wide range.

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

The notebooks of Sylvester Judd, the editor of the *Hampshire Gazette* and an avid local historian in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, provide the second important source. Fifty-six volumes filled with Judd's research—sometimes three and four hundred pages thickly filled with crabbed handwriting—on everyday life in colonial Massachusetts and Con-
Connecticut can be found at the Forbes Library in Northampton. While the histories that Judd wrote as a result of his researches are certainly colored by the preoccupations of his time, his transcriptions from early Northampton documents, including several account books, some of which are no longer extant, have preserved a significant body of evidence concerning trade practices in his community. Moreover, Judd’s interviews with local men and women capture invaluable perceptions of post-revolutionary western Massachusetts. Though the recollections recorded in these interviews must be approached with the same cautions one would bring to oral histories taken in any era, they are nevertheless precious avenues of insight into beliefs, values, and behaviors of the day.42

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

To “dress up in the afternoon” invoked the labors of a whole range of women, from the hired help who made leisurely afternoons possible to the skilled local women who cut and constructed those garments that were themselves signs of wealth, leisure, and privilege. Examining the different ways women worked (what they made, what skills and practices they used, who they worked for, and how that work was organized) allows us to explore hierarchy and power amid collaboration and cooperation within rural families as well as the communities they inhabited. Neighborhoods like those shared by the women of Hadley tend to be “treated peripherally in relation to such categories as class, ethnicity, and gender,” if not “ignored entirely.”44 But neighborhoods in early America were not simply collections of people who lived near one another; they were the basis for economic and social exchange, the vehicle though which one’s day-to-day life was organized, and a
means by which men and women came to understand their place in larger social, economic, and political orders. As such, neighborhoods and the communities they sustained are best understood not simply as places but as a dynamic process through which values, perceptions, and relationships were continually maintained, reinvented, and transformed.45

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

The women we meet here—Elizabeth Porter Phelps, Easter Fairchild Newton and Tryphena Newton Cooke, Catherine Phelps Parsons, Rebecca Dickinson, and Tabitha Clark Smith—belonged to the same neighborhoods. They were in many ways alike: all fourth—or fifth-generation New Englanders, white, of English descent, and members of the Congregational Church. Their lives overlapped with and intersected one another. They took tea together and joined one another's families in times of both sorrow and celebration. They shopped at the same stores. They knew the same people. Newton, Cooke, Parsons, Dickinson, and Smith recognized one another as fellow practitioners within a common craft community. Parsons was Phelps's aunt by marriage, while the Newtons, Cookes, and Smiths were longtime neighbors at the north end of the Hadley Common. But, at the same time, their lives were very differ-
ent. At times, the things that divided them were subtle: some were well ac-
quainted with distant horizons, and others were not; some sported the newest
calicos, others did not. Deeper divisions separated them as well. These women
stood in dramatically different positions, for example, to the local and regional
economies. They recognized wide gaps in education. They had mastered dif-
ferent skills and had obtained the same skills to varying degrees. Marriage and
family, too, brought very divergent experiences.

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

Chapter Three introduces Elizabeth Porter Phelps and the ways in which
needlework and needlewomen helped define relationships within her com-
munity. A farmwife and gentlewoman who tackled the everyday mending her
household required while completing ornamental projects as well, Phelps was
more often the employer and coordinator of the work of others, from her
mother and daughters to servants in the household to local women hired to
sew to skilled artisans engaged to complete more complex tasks. Phelps’s farm
provides an ideal environment in which to explore complex and overlapping
categories of work, and complex and overlapping social and economic rela-
relationships among women. This chapter looks at ornamental needlework and a
form of clothing production closely associated with the rural gentry: the creation of elaborately quilted petticoats. Here, the laborers in question are Phelps and her elite peers whose refined needlework helped sustain networks of political, social, and economic leadership among the gentry class and shape relationships between these gentlewomen and other women around them whose lives looked very different.

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

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

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

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

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

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