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Part II: Chapter 3, Needlework of the Rural Gentry: The World of Elizabeth Porter Phelps

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In the late summer of 1769, the young Hadley gentlewoman Elizabeth Porter rode from Forty Acres, her farm north of the village center, into town, to the home of her cousin Sarah Porter Hopkins. She came to assist in the quilting of Sarah’s new black calimanco petticoat. During the three days that she stayed with the Hopkins family, other young women came to help with the quilt. Doubtless tea and cakes were enjoyed, and pleasant conversation shared; meanwhile, the petticoat was completed. On Friday, Porter rode home, and on Sunday she recorded the gathering in the pages of her journal: “Wednesday went to quilt upon a black Calliminco coat for Mrs Hop [kins]— in the afternoon Miss Sally Woodbridge of Hatfield and Miss Betty Williams and others of our own people. Thursday in the afternoon Miss Betty and Miss Sophia Patrage from Hatfield—Fryday I returned.”

Elizabeth Porter’s entry tells us what she considered important to remember about the event: that she had been gone from her home from Wednesday to Friday and that during that time she had helped produce the new quilted petticoat of black calimanco that Sarah Hopkins would be wearing around town. She also thought it important to note the names of some of the other women who had participated—Sarah Woodbridge, Elizabeth Williams, and Betty and Sophia Partridge—and to mention unnamed others of her “own people,” the kinship, social, and economic communities to which she and her family belonged.

What Porter’s entry omitted is equally significant. Most important, she left out the work of other women not of her “own people” who also contributed to the quilting. In the days before the quilters arrived, for example, someone had readied the materials for the quilting. Three to four pounds of wool had been washed and scoured in soapy water, rinsed (several times), and laid outside on the ground to dry. Then it was carded and set aside for batting. Meanwhile, another series of jobs had produced the linen or wool fabric that would be used for the backing. If linen was used, then flax had
been soaked, scutched, heckled, carded, spun into thread, and woven on the loom; if wool was used, then the material was cleaned, carded, spun, and woven. When the quilting was at hand, the lining of the quilt was laid out and about a half-pound of wool for each square yard of lining spread carefully across, so that the batting would be even. The desired pattern was drawn on paper (a task requiring considerable expertise, especially if the pattern was elaborate), and then transferred to the quilt top. The three layers were basted together and put on the frame. At the same time, Hopkins and her help—perhaps Naomi, her “maid” around this time—cleaned the house and prepared beds and bedding for lodgers. They also readied the room where the quilting was to take place, bringing chairs in and moving chairs out and setting up the roughly ten-by-ten-foot quilting frame in the center of a well-lit room—perhaps the south parlor of her newly built home.

Sarah Hopkins made sure that her family and friends would be there to help. The names of the women recorded in Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s journal are those of the “River Gods” and other, lesser elites—the handful of families, like the Porters, who possessed the Connecticut Valley’s political, economic, social, religious, and cultural authority. These are the women of “our own people” that Porter recognized. Sarah Hopkins was the daughter of a select-
man and justice, Eleazer Porter, the sister of another selectman and justice, "Esquire" Eleazer Porter, and the wife of Hadley's minister, Samuel Hopkins. Her first husband was the town's previous clergyman, Chester Williams of the powerful, and power-brokering, Williams family. When Williams died, she married Hopkins, his successor as minister, and remained at the center of Hadley's ecclesiastical, cultural, and economic authority. Sally (Sarah) Woodbridge was the daughter of the Reverend Timothy Woodbridge. Betty Williams was the daughter of the economic and political powerhouse Israel Williams. Betty and Sophia Partridge, cousins of Betty Williams, belonged to yet another River God family, that of Oliver Partridge and his wife, Anna Williams Partridge, of Hatfield. Oliver Partridge was a colonel, high sheriff, and justice; Anna was the daughter of the Reverend William Williams of Weston and the granddaughter of the Reverend Solomon Stoddard of Northampton and the Reverend William Williams of Hatfield.

On the morning of the quilting, Elizabeth Porter made sure that her family's slaves and servants would keep the household running smoothly in her absence. Once satisfied, she changed out of her work clothes into something more appropriate for a few days of visiting and set out for town. Meanwhile, Sarah Hopkins, too, dressed to receive guests and made sure that the hired girl or girls had finished preparing hasty pudding, butter, molasses, breads, and cakes and pies and had readied the tea set. Porter arrived, as did others, and, after a flurry of welcomes, the quilting was under way. Later that day, Sally Woodbridge and Betty Williams ferried over from Hatfield to help with the project. Perhaps they, like Porter, stayed overnight. They quilted the following day, too, with the added assistance of the Partridge girls, who were perhaps encouraged by their Hatfield neighbors to join the gathering. As the quilting along the edges of the large frame was completed, the women rolled the materials under. Gradually the frame's parallel strips moved inward, and the chairs on which they rested moved nearer. After several such rolls, the women finished quilting. Porter remained another night and perhaps helped Hopkins restore order to her home. On Friday she returned to Forty Acres, anxious to see what had been accomplished in her absence. Back at the Hopkins house, the quilting was cut from the frame. More work remained before the garment was finished. A piece of unquilted material needed to be sewn to the top edge of the quilting to form the waistband. Pocket slits were cut into the quilting and then bound with silk tape. The rectangular piece had to be sewn together to form the shape of a skirt, and, finally, tapes to tie the petticoat closed had to be sewn into each side, and more tape sewn along the bottom hem. Only then would Sarah Hopkins be ready to display the new and beautiful product of those few days' labor (see plate 6).
In her single, brief entry, Elizabeth Porter hints at a world of activity linking households throughout her community that resulted in a single black petticoat. Many women contributed to the making of the garment—young and old, black and white, some working at leisure, some working for income, and some whose labor was controlled by others. But the diarist recorded only the activity of women like herself, whom she and they recognized as “our own people.” The elision reminds us how notoriously underdocumented the lives of working women in early America are and how our historical perspective is necessarily skewed by the records and perspectives of the comparatively privileged women who left behind documents for later generations to study. It helps explain why this study of working women in the clothing trades pauses first to consider the lives and needlework of genteel women. Because it is largely through their records, mainly the diaries, letters, and ledgers they left behind, that we can learn anything about the often nonliterate women they employed, it is almost impossible to tell the stories of early America’s working women without conveying something about these genteel women, who will come up again and again in the pages to follow.

Exploring the lives of genteel women and the needlework they produced also reveals how ornamental needlework sustained an elite culture that preserved and advanced the authority of the region’s wealthiest families and how those families were inseparably bound to communities of working women whose labors made elite culture possible. The quilting of these fashionable petticoats was both functional and ornamental; while the making of these skirts involved tasks common to the making of other simple garments, the application of decorative quilt patterns engaged specific manual skills as well as fashion knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities. In other words, this was work that was simultaneously practical and ornamental. To consider the ways in which quilting illuminates differences among women is to turn mythologies of the craft inside out, since quilting has long been associated with democratizing forces in American women’s lives, more often a metaphor for connection than for difference. From the nascency of feminist scholarship, images of needlework and textile production, with references to “weaving” together “threads” of experience or “piecing together” “the patchwork of women’s lives,” have remained enormously popular among scholars interested in women’s experiences. The compositional look of quilts, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, became commonplace in women’s history publications; photographs of bed quilts and quilt squares, as well as graphics inspired by the design vocabulary of quilting, graced the covers of dozens of early women’s history journals and monographs. Such allusions proved compel-
ling and appropriate feminist symbols because they celebrate, redefine, and reclaim a task traditionally performed by women. They prompt connections between traditional women's crafts and the "craft" of contemporary women historians and honor the creativity, artistic expression, and resourcefulness women have demonstrated in a variety of places and circumstances.5

Myths surrounding needlework have carried and created special burdens in American women's history. Quiltings, for example, have been depicted as wombs of women's culture, sites of female unity through which intergenerational wisdom is passed.6 As Elaine Hedges explains, the pieced quilts made in the nineteenth century and celebrated in the twentieth "validated the dailiness of women's lives, and their unappreciated household labor; their scrap content was seen as analogous to the often fragmented, interrupted nature of those lives; the quilt's nonlinear, nonhierarchical design structure of repeated blocks, as well as the cooperative work methods of the quilting bee, were seen as attesting to feminist ideals of equality, and of mutuality and cooperation among women." Furthermore, Hedges points out, the warmth quilts provide cued associations with 1970s feminist "ethics of nurturance and caring," while "the very process of making a quilt—combining separate, disparate pieces of cloth into a new, unified whole—powerfully served as symbol for the new wholeness and unity, both individual and collective, and the political solidarity that was, of course, the goal of the feminist movement."7 Quilting has also served more conservative needs in American culture, helping capture and express some wistful longing for a less complicated, less divisive past. Since the first "New England Kitchen" appeared in the mid-nineteenth-century, quilting bees have been staples of historic tableaux.8 As the author of one essay exclaims, "no other craft or art form is more closely identified with the values that define this country: . . . freedom, democracy, equality, home, community, and individual expression."9

But the quilting of popular historical imagination does not usually capture the whole history of the work. As Sally Garoutte has observed, many quilts dating from this period were not unusually warm, "containing as they do only the minimum amount of filling to show off the quilting."10 Quilts were not regarded as necessary to equip warm and comfortable Hampshire County beds; in the last half of the eighteenth century, bed quilts were acquired only after blankets and other bedding had been obtained. In the eighty-two probate inventories taken in the Hampshire County towns of Hadley, Hatfield, Amherst, and South Hadley between 1770 and 1800 that enumerate bedding, half contain no quilts at all, and only nine list more than one, suggesting that quilts were reserved for the "best bed" in a house, while sheets, coverlets, blankets, and bed rugs warmed the rest.11 The most basic
bedding seems to have been sheets and blankets; if any additional textile was present, it was most popularly a coverlet. These eighty-two inventories contain 181 blankets, 127 coverlets, 50 quilts, and 42 bed rugs. Forty-one inventories contain no quilts at all. What’s more, when quilts did appear in early New England homes, they were—at least in the eighteenth century—not typically the pieced variety so often imagined but rather “whole cloth” quilts, where the ornamented expanse of sheen and color was itself an artifact of the household’s relative success. When worn as a petticoat, the quilt took on still other meanings involving the wearer’s class, her cultural sophistication, and her place in social orders large and small.

There is much to be gained by dismantling the romance that surrounds the American quilt—beguiling as it may be—and mythologies that both evince and elide women who worked to complete them. The bee itself and other reciprocal exchanges of work have in recent years come under closer historical scrutiny, revealing the significant role such events played in forging and sustaining cognitive and structural order, how the exchanges therein—products of far more subtle and sophisticated motives than mere neighborliness—were key mechanisms through which a person’s sense of his or her relationship to the community was defined and clarified. The perceived ubiquity of needlework, too, has obscured important, asymmetrical relationships among women, and quilting, perhaps the most familiar form of women’s needlework, has been among the main culprits in that obfuscation. Recognizing that quilts were not as widely possessed in colonial rural America as has generally been believed makes it harder to see them as emblems of classlessness; that they were rarely pieced but more often topped with costly stretches of imported fabrics dispels the aura of frugality while throwing light on the close relationship between quilting and commerce. If quilting is to continue to provide a useful metaphor for women’s lives, we must expand its utility and see it also as evidence of privilege, denoting differences in women’s access to certain symbols of affluence and femininity. Enlarging our view of quilting to encompass laboring women employed in eighteenth-century London quilt warehouses, consumers of quilts who lived on the western fringe of the British empire, women who quilted beautiful and elaborate petticoats for themselves, and women whose labor in other rooms within and beyond the house made that quilting possible, helps us to see quilts and quilted petticoats as the products of intersecting revolutions in manufacturing, in commerce and consumption, and in social and labor relations. Quilting can certainly continue to be an effective metaphor for interconnectedness among women, if we can overcome the implication that that interconnectedness comes on even footing.
The production of quilted petticoats was one means by which women contributed to the distinctive quality of their own wardrobes; they undertook other sorts of ornamental needlework as well: embroidered scenes and family coats of arms, completed at female academies throughout New England, were brought home, mounted in costly gilded frames, and displayed prominently in the parlors of the region’s most powerful households, announcing to all visitors that this was a family of distinction. For centuries, young women of Europe’s upper classes had practiced tatting, tambour work, lace making, and embroidery to ornament garments and household furnishings. These “accomplishments,” together with the tools employed to produce them, helped communicate, and create, their elite status. But the needleworks of young privileged women are perhaps more interesting for their significance within elite culture. As we examine this work, we catch glimpses of the women who helped make that possible, especially the hired girls and enslaved black women who labored in the households of these elite women. Together, these objects suggest the broad range of needleworks, from the spectacular to the mundane, that were present in eighteenth-century New England, and so also suggest the broad range of needleworkers enmeshed in their production.

Almost thirty years ago, Nancy Cott suggested that “the characteristic ‘work’ of unmarried women of the elite consisted in maintaining social contacts,” but surprisingly little scholarship has examined closely the ways in which that work was carried out. Needlework—in young women’s academies, in genteel parlors and on genteel bodies—was an important part of that process. Female members of the New England gentry assumed responsibility for the same needle chores carried out in households throughout their communities, though the means by which they accomplished these chores differed, in ways that were closely related to the special duties associated with female gentility, particularly surrounding the production of ornamental needlework. Although the general categories of work required to run a household varied little whether the work was at the top or near the bottom of the local order, that position helped to determine the manner by which the family’s women accomplished those tasks. The genteel circle who labored over Hopkins’s petticoat helped produce the privilege the minister’s wife enjoyed. If such women did not, typically, construct their own “best” gowns, they did, as we see in a later discussion, enrich them with ornamental embroidery, drawing on skills cultivated in the elite academies. But quilting petticoats also provided a vehicle for other kinds of important work planting and cultivating lines of association among influential families. Quilted petticoats, then, provide an unusual opportunity to explore the collaborative
needlework of local gentlewomen and its role in the assertion and maintenance of their family's status.

Needle Work, Needle Art, and Women of the New England Gentry

While quilting, especially of bedding, has clearly captured an important corner of American historical imagination, other forms of early American needlework are probably more familiar to contemporary museum goers, and it is worth pausing briefly to consider them as artifacts of genteel womanhood and objects of genteel labor. Ask someone to imagine a piece of colonial needlework, and she will surely envision some form of sampler or perhaps a piece of crewelwork or embroidery, a bed hanging teeming with cascading vines and flowers, or a worked scene of idyllic rural life. Such extraordinary displays of needle skill were no less impressive in the eighteenth century than they are today: the artistry and intricacy of these objects of display were intended to impress observers, and they succeeded.

The skills associated with these more ornamental forms of needlework are not necessarily separate from the work of clothing production. Consider, for example, the spectacular floral and pictorial designs Abigail Wadsworth and Mary Wright Alsop, two Connecticut gentlewomen, embroidered on linen gowns. These elite women, and others like them, employed skills acquired in female academies to embellish their apparel, displaying simultaneously their skill, wealth, and leisure. Those crewelwork pieces are important artifacts of other aspects of the clothing trades, too, since they emerge from elite women's ability to hire the labors of others to complete the more practical kinds of needlework necessary to maintain their households. Crewelwork in particular allowed its practitioners to transform needlework from a tedious chore to an art form; the extraordinary undertakings that survive in contemporary museum collections must have been enormously satisfying to their creators, marks of aesthetic achievement and evidence of remarkable endurance and commitment as well as a noteworthy allocation of time and energy unavailable to many neighbors.

The acquisition of the special skills required by ornamental works like these was part of genteel women's general education. Girls might work one or two samplers between the ages of five and nine, polishing literacy skills at the same time they mastered an array of practical and decorative stitches. They might then progress to fancy embroidery. Even girls who attended academies only briefly often returned home with an example of ornamental needlework. In Hartford, the school of the Patten sisters—Ruth, Sarah, and Mary—attracted young women from across New England. Their pupils'
days were “divided between study, painting, embroidery, and some needlework. Each young lady had a handsome framed piece” to present to her parents when she returned home, since embroidery was considered an “indispensable accomplishment.” Surviving needlework from schools around New England attest to the importance accorded needlework in young women’s educations, their meticulous stitching and artful composition evidence of the dedication and training that young women poured into these objects. Most familiar among works of schoolgirl art are pictorial embroideries on silk, many of which illustrate biblical passages or convey scenes of rural simplicity. These beautiful objects have prompted a good deal of scholarly inquiry that need not be summarized here. It is sufficient to note that many such works were completed by Connecticut Valley girls while attending school in Boston, Hartford, Litchfield, Norwich, Deerfield, South Hadley, and elsewhere.

One project that was particularly popular among young women of wealthy New England families finishing their education was the embroidering of a family coat of arms. These heraldic needleworks, generally worked in gold, silver, and colored silk threads on a black, diamond-shaped ground, are among the most impressive examples of needle art. Expensively framed and displayed in a home’s most public spaces, they signaled the owner’s wealth, education, leisure, and privilege, communicating a family’s ability to do without a daughter’s labor while she attended school and to select and enroll her in a school filled with well-heeled students. The working of the piece conveyed a family’s membership among the leaders of society, while the heraldic imagery signaled the supposed duration of that membership. At the same time, the products of these young women’s labor allowed select citizens of the colony and then early republic to assert their English heritage. As Betty Ring has observed, “undeterred by either republicanism or nationalism,” these objects represented a desire, among New England’s elite, “for purely English emblems of family pride and prestige.”

Connecticut Valley women embraced this work alongside their counterparts elsewhere in New England. A truly spectacular embroidered coat of arms is among the exceptional needlework completed by the Northampton gentlewoman Esther Stoddard. Anne Grant of Windsor, Connecticut, too, produced a remarkable heraldry. Grant attended the Boston school of Janette Day with the daughters of John Hancock and other notables; having purchased more than 110 skeins of silk and 80 yards of silver and gold thread, Grant finished her heraldry during a three-month stay in the city in 1769. Jerusha Mather Williams executed a coat of arms while a student at the Patten sisters’ school; perhaps she later conveyed these skills to her own students.
at Deerfield Academy. In the 1770s, Mary Porter, who was shipping goods down river from Hadley in preparation for setting up housekeeping in New Haven, wrote to her fiancé to alert him to the arrival of two bureaus, one of which contained an important addition to their new home: “I would remind you (for fear the wagonner will forget it) that my coat of arms is done up, in one of these cases.” Twenty years later, when Mary’s daughter married James Hoyt, she too was concerned about the safety of her own needlework. Writing to her parents from Rocky Hill, Connecticut, she asked them to send along her bed, bedstead, and tester frame, her chest and trunk of clothing, and her eight cherry chairs, adding “My Coat of Arms had better not be left at [New Haven].” She suggests that “perhaps it can go in a box with your picture,” hinting that needlework from both the mother and daughter traveled together from one home to the next.

An unfinished piece of heraldic needlework begun by Jerusha Pitkin in the 1750s suggests that some women’s desire to complete these symbols of affluence was not sufficiently strong to carry them through. Her needle, still threaded, rests in the black satin ground, and never-opened skeins of silk remain wrapped in their London labels. Once married in 1760, Pitkin apparently found other uses for her time. A similarly unfinished work by Pitkin’s cousin Elizabeth Porter Phelps, who was ten years younger, suggests that she too lost interest before the work was completed (see plate 7). Family lore holds that Phelps took up this work again at the end of her life, and that her death in November 1817, shortly before her seventieth birthday, interrupted its progress. Since heraldries were long out of fashion by this time, it seems plausible that this by-all-accounts industrious woman, who had married Charles Phelps in 1770 and in the decades following had run a large and productive household, was, though increasingly confined to bed, striving to remain productive by picking up work laid down many years earlier, when she, like Jerusha Pitkin, was a young gentlewoman cultivating the accomplishments of her station.

Such elaborate needleworks were time-consuming and signaled periods of relative leisure among the women who completed them. When Abby Wright “called in Springfield to see a piece of needlework lately executed at a celebrated school in Boston,” she learned that “the expense of the limner in drawing and painting was $8 and six months were spent in Boston working on it.” Even the small workbag that Abigail Lyman of Northampton embroidered as a gift to her friend Rebecca Salisbury consumed the better part of four days. Such objects also marked young women as well-traveled, known and knowledgeable beyond the boundaries of their home towns. Like quilting, they implied a certain mobility but a still broader one. The desire to
acquire training in the ornamental art of embroidery brought together young women from throughout the region, forging ties among them no less significant than those their husbands and brothers forged in the halls of Harvard and Yale. As members of a larger community of elite women extending from New Jersey to Vermont, they made contacts throughout the region that would eventually draw together men from throughout the region as well.

Ann Grant, coat of arms, c. 1768, and detail of stitching. Courtesy of Historic Deerfield, Inc., 1391 (photograph by Penny Leveritt).

This coat of arms was embroidered by Ann Grant (1748–1838) of East Windsor, Conn., while she was attending Ann and Elizabeth Cumming’s school in Boston. Genteel families across New England embraced these allusions to English aristocracy in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The gold and silver threads together with the expert selection and execution of stitches conveyed to viewers the maker’s taste, education, and privilege.
Acquiring the skill and talent to produce ornamental needlework could prove crucial to building these alliances. When Abigail Brackett of Boston married Erastus Lyman and moved to Northampton, embroidered needlework provided her entry into local society. In the months following her arrival, the young bride felt unable to penetrate Northampton’s social circles, particularly since her husband was eighteen years older than she, and his peers more like her parents’ than her own. She eventually found a solution in the working of two embroidered landscapes with Sarah Hunt, one of the set of young Northampton gentlewomen “whose Mothers [she] more commonly visited. “My motive for first having them drawn was to gratify Mrs. S. & I have thought till now that would be the only end they would answer—but as [Sarah Hunt] has one to finish, and having nothing more important to demand my leisure at present, we have agreed to work together.” Initially she proposed to undertake a project that would “gratify Mrs S.” (possibly Deborah Snow, who taught embroidery in Boston from the 1780s through about 1803), but Lyman soon realized other advantages from her needlework. She and Sarah Hunt, the daughter of Ebenezer Hunt, an influential apothecary and physician in the town, worked together almost every day, and soon Lyman recorded in the pages of her journal, “It is not long since I mention’d . . . that I had no particular friendship or intimacy with any—this can no longer be affirmed with truth.” Indeed when she finished the first pattern, “The Shepherd,” she wrote that she would much regret the completion of it, had she not another left to work. While working her embroideries, Lyman forged the first of several important friendships with other prominent Northampton families.

This effort to create and maintain social ties should not be taken lightly. In part, the importance of these activities within communities of elite women can be seen in the way they encouraged each other across generations and within peer groups. Elizabeth Porter to be sure, was urged by members of her family to attend the neighborhood quiltings, and a cousin, Sarah Porter Hillhouse, encouraged her granddaughter by praising her for undertaking a new needlework project: “I am glad to hear you have begun another piece of work and approve of the object.” These words must have carried weight with the little girl, who was so enamored of her grandmother that she begged her mother to make her matched clothing and liked to amuse her parents by pretending to be Grandmother Porter climbing into bed. While women in the Porter family transmitted among themselves an appreciation for the importance of needlework, Abigail Lyman grasped its importance in forging social relationships: Lyman noted that she hoped to “profit” by her conversations with Sarah Hunt, and though she meant that she wished to gain from
Hunt’s “entertaining and instructive conversation,” there were other profits to consider as well. Families like the Hunts were important connections for the Lyman family business. They were people Abigail could not afford to slight.

The elaborate ornamental needlework produced by women of the New England gentry that attests to ties among these women of privilege are closely associated, too, with women whose lives were far different but inseparable: the enslaved women who made this ornamental work possible. Among the most notable producers of crewelwork in early New England was Mary Wright Alsop, who was born in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1740, the only child of Joseph Wright, a prosperous farmer and brickyard owner, and Hannah Gilbert Wright. At fourteen, she was sent to Rhode Island for an education, probably attending Sarah Osborn’s school there in Newport. In 1754, she produced a pastoral canvas based on the shepherdess motif popular among eighteenth-century gentlewomen and later, an extraordinary series depicting the four seasons. In the late 1750s, she also completed a slip seat for a roundabout chair, as well as several pocketbooks for her father and others. After her wedding in 1760 to Richard Alsop, a highly successful merchant and importer of West Indian goods, several of these important pictures ornamented the couple’s north parlor. More than fifty years after Richard’s death in 1776, the pictures continued to decorate the walls of Mary’s home. Mary Alsop raised ten children in the 1760s and 1770s, yet she continued to produce a prodigious amount of needlework. Richard Alsop’s 1776 inventory includes eight mahogany chairs with worked seats, as well as two worked fire screens. That steady production of sophisticated ornamental work is inseparable from the family’s access to slave labor. Before Richard’s death, the Alsop household included at least two enslaved men, Acra and Quash, and a woman, Catherine Barrett. By 1790, five slaves helped care for Mary’s large family. Catherine Barrett would be freed in 1794, while Mary’s 1795 will instructed her children to continue to provide for an “aged Negro” named Jenny. A notable number of these spectacular pieces of needle art were products of slaveholding families: the Porters and Pitkins, Wolcotts and Williams—the same families who secured elite educations for their daughters, and the metallic threads and gold frames those educations required, also embraced forms of labor that were both signs and means of privilege.

The Collaborative Work of Quilted Petticoats

As the wife of the Hadley lawyer, selectman, justice, representative, and deacon Charles Phelps, Elizabeth Porter Phelps had a social position to maintain
as a leading member of the Hampshire County gentry. One important expression of that status was gathering with other women of similar status to collaborate on the ornamentation of quilted petticoats. The costly materials of which these objects were made, the special skills and knowledge of prevailing fashion required to produce them, and the time involved to complete them—each forms of luxury and privilege—demonstrated to the community one’s superior social position. At the same time, the gatherings that produced them strengthened the kinship and cultural ties that bound together the political, social, economic, and cultural elite. This work did produce items of practical value yet also signaled and perpetuated their participants’ status as members of the local gentry.

Ala mode in the Connecticut River Valley since the second quarter of the eighteenth century, quilted petticoats were visible in the opening at the front of a woman’s gown and beneath the folds of the skirt when pinned up to accentuate the hips. Occasionally worn over hoops, panniers, or some other means of broadening that horizontal line, quilted petticoats helped women achieve a refined silhouette: broad through the shoulders, narrow at the waist, and widest in the full and circular drape of the skirt. The design of petticoats varied, but generally they carried an elaborate border around the hemline, the most visible part of the garment and hence the portion executed with greatest attention to display. The most complex ornamentation usually occupied the front of the garment, filling the space revealed by the open gown. Large, normally concealed areas were filled in with a pattern less complicated than that of the borders, such as rows of shells, squares, diamonds, or ovals.

The material of which the petticoat was constructed contributed to its cachet. Silks have always been expensive, luxury materials, valued for their sheen. Their luster was replicated in cotton chintz by glazing and in worsteds (including the highly popular calimanco) by pressing. Silks also permitted greater indulgence in color. Petticoats in eighteen-century Hampshire County were generally of darker hues—more than two-thirds of the quilted petticoats listed in inventories between 1760 and 1820 were practical (and restrained) colors, such as black, brown, or blue—but occasionally they appeared in greens, reds, yellows, and pinks. In Hartford County, Connecticut, petticoats were distributed more evenly across the color spectrum, blues, browns, and blacks competing for attention with reds, yellows, greens, purples, and whites. In Connecticut, striped petticoats were by far the most prevalent, though women also wore them with flowered, sprigged, and other patterns.

Quilted petticoats, like the bed quilts with which they are so closely asso-
associated, served multiple functions, from the utilitarian to the symbolic, and providing warmth was not their primary function. Tellingly, these decorative skirts were usually worn above garments more appropriately designed to keep the wearer warm: linen or wool shifts, plain cloth petticoats, and at times utilitarian quilted underpetticoats. Though these fine quilted petticoats did provide some additional comfort, they were more important as objects of fashion and as objects produced by gatherings of the local elite.

Some of the quilted petticoats that graced Connecticut Valley laps were imported, the product of female quilters laboring in large workshops in London, where they were seated around frames, earning a shilling a day to produce garments sold at retail or wholesale in London shops or exported to the colonies. Beginning in the late 1600s, manufacturers had discovered that quilted petticoats were “ideal commodities”: these drawstring skirts were unusual in that they could fit a variety of figures, and so were among the few garments that could be made for sale to distant and unknown consumers. At the same time, while the petticoat, a staple component of women’s costume, was unlikely to go out of fashion as a form, the quilting patterns and materials were wholly responsive to changing preferences in color, fabric, and pattern.

Quilted petticoats of tammy, horsehair, calimanco, and silk from London and Bristol arrived in Boston and New York shops from at least the late seventeenth century. Cost varied widely depending on the materials. The Boston trader Hannah Boydel sold quilted persian gowns and green camblet quilted petticoats for as much as five pounds. Merchants also sold quilted petticoats by the yard, enabling a woman to purchase the quilted materials and sew up the finished petticoat more quickly. The quality of these garments could be quite high; costume historians have observed the “superb craftsmanship” associated with quilted clothing that came out of sophisticated London workshops in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. As evidence that “only craftspeople with considerable experience could create” some of the complex quiltings that survive in collections in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, Kay Staniland points to the “fineness and regularity” of the stitching, which in some cases used twenty-two running stitches per inch on corded quilting, when a more usual number for wadded quilting was nine stitches per inch. Clearly, some quilted garments produced in metropolitan workshops were aimed at a luxury market, but they represented only the high end of a vast world of professional, wage-earning quilters.

Drawing the patterns for this elaborate needlework also provided some women with comfortable livings. Robert Campbell’s 1747 The London Trades-
man suggests that women able to “draw shapes and figures upon men’s waistcoats to be embroidered, upon women’s petticoats, and other wearing apparel” could charge “large prices”—as much as thirty shillings a week at a time when domestic servants generally earned just three or four. The workwomen who executed these designs, however, earned considerably less: Campbell also indicates that quilted petticoats in that city “are made mostly by women, and some men, who are employed by the shops.” These laborers “earn little,” Campbell observes; the work is “nothing to get rich by, unless they are able to purchase the materials and sell them finished to the shops which few of them do.” “They rarely take on apprentices,” he continues, “and the women they employ to help them, earn three to four shillings per week and their diet.”

On this side of the Atlantic, women also offered quilting skills to neighbors. When Elizabeth Foote of Colchester, Connecticut, drew a quilt pattern for her neighbor Mrs Blush (for either a skirt or a bed quilt), she was repeating a scene played out time and again in New England communities as women skilled at this task shared their abilities with others. New England women could also earn a little income doing the actual quilting for neighbors; Jonathan Judd, a bachelor in South Hadley, for example, hired Eunice Lyman to quilt for him (presumably on a bed quilt), in return for which she took goods out of his shop.

In the eighteenth century, then, women on either side of the Atlantic could purchase ready-made quilts produced by quilters in metropolitan workshops or purchase the skill and time of neighbors to draw the design or execute all or part of the quilting. But many women, too, chose to quilt for themselves at home. Perhaps their most important tool was the quilt frame. The frames themselves were fairly straightforward affairs: generally four strips of wood about one inch thick, two to four inches wide, and nine to twelve feet long, with a one-inch width of heavy cloth securely fastened along the edges. To these, the edge of quilt was either pinned or basted. The four corners of the frame were held together with pegs through holes, bound together with ties (or, later, with iron clamps), and then the whole supported on the rails of four low-backed chairs. These simple devices—strips of wood with fragments of fabric still attached—rarely found their way into probate inventories. In 1760 Hartford, Connecticut, the Porter family’s quilt frame was worth just 1 shilling 6 pence (equal to the value of a cradle or a cheese tub; slightly less than that of their four milk tubs), while upriver in Northampton, Elisha and Esther Pomeroy possessed a quilt frame valued at 4 shillings when Elisha died in the spring of 1762. Esther Williams of Deerfield had a quilting frame when she died worth $1.75 (by comparison, her pine kitchen table was worth $1.00, and her dressing table $3.00). In her will,
Williams indicated that her household furniture was to be divided between her daughters. Polly (Mary Williams Ashley) took home her mother's quilting frame, to be put to use in her own busy household. It is nearly impossible, however, to determine from probate inventories the number of New England households that possessed quilt frames, since daughters like Polly often retrieved their mothers' quilt frames long before any court-ordered assessors found reason to knock at the door.

In eighteenth-century New England, quiltings allowed women to gather together to work and socialize. Indeed, Elizabeth Porter Phelps in her youth was regularly “called to quilting”—the only kind of needlework she performed that required her to travel, sometimes reluctantly, out of her home and into the homes of others. In the years before her marriage, she performed 92 percent of her quilting activity in the homes of others; twenty years later, she performed most of her quilting in her own home, while during these years her daughters, Betsy and Thankful were, as Elizabeth Phelps had been, “called to quilting.”

When the quilting was nearby, women could conveniently walk from house to house, while access to sleighs, carriages, and other means of transportation allowed some women to travel farther with ease and to avoid arriving in bedraggled skirts and dust-covered shoes. The use of carriages to cover spatial distances, however, also reflected and created social ones. Though walking between households was certainly feasible for these women, most of whom lived within two or three miles of one another, riding in carriages enhanced their status and prestige. A striking correlation exists between the quilters recorded at the Phelps house and the owners of carriages listed in Hadley’s tax valuations. Sylvester Judd notes that, at mid-century, the only carriages in Hampshire County were those owned by Moses Porter of Hadley (Elizabeth’s father) and another by Israel Williams of Hatfield (that “monarch” of Hampshire whose daughters quilted with Elizabeth. If Elizabeth Porter enjoyed one of the few such comfortable conveyances in her childhood, she was equally well provided as a young wife: Charles Phelps purchased a new carriage in Boston the week that he and Elizabeth Porter published their marriage banns. By 1791, the family had also acquired a stand-top chaise, which after 1795 was housed in a structure built to shelter their several vehicles. Other members of Elizabeth Phelps’s quilting circle, the majority of whom came from the Warner, Hopkins, Shipman, and Porter families, also enjoyed this amenity. Elisha Porter’s family owned a riding chair at least by 1763, the Kelloggs in 1768. By at least 1785, the Reverend Hopkins had a chaise, as did Eleazer and Susanna Edwards Porter and Jonathan and Mary Graves Warner, whose son Lemuel married Dorothy Phelps,
Elizabeth Porter’s sister-in-law. William Shipman had a riding chair.\(^{57}\) Sylvester Judd lamented in the second quarter of the nineteenth century that the women he remembered from his childhood could be seen on horseback “every hour of they day”; they “mounted and dismounted” horses “without aid” and “had not the helpless appearance” of privileged women of his day.\(^{58}\) Phelps and her peers had been among the first to embrace those new forms of conveyance, as well as the definitions of genteel womanhood that arrived with them.

Women of the rural gentry certainly could afford to purchase the stylish, imported quilted petticoats made in London workshops; they could also have purchased the materials and labor required to complete them. So why, we might ask, did they devote so much time and energy to the production of fine quilted petticoats? Quality, in part, provides an answer, since even the most attractive mass-produced quilted petticoats often lacked the tell-tale detail of home-sewn garments.\(^{59}\) Beautiful, richly detailed petticoats represented local design and local labor, conveying crucial information about the wearer, her financial resources, and the ways she could choose to allocate her time. But also worth noting is the degree to which collaborative quilting itself was valued by women of the rural gentry. The work of this sort of quilting was almost always bound up with social activity. Betsy Phelps Huntington confirmed what a “dull business” quilting by herself could be, while less than 5 percent of Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s references to quilting refer to what appears to have been her quilting alone. One study of New England quilters found only 6 percent of diary entries recording quilting indicate that the diarist was working alone.\(^{60}\)

Because of the larger purposes of collectivequiltings, however, it seems likely that these events made their way into women’s various forms of records and memoranda for their social aspect. Records like Ruth Henshaw Bascom’s diary, which records when groups of fourteen to twenty-one Leicester women came to “assist . . . with quilting,” may tell us as much about how women thought about collective quilting as they do about the role such gatherings played in production.\(^{61}\) Thequilting of elaborate petticoats made of costly materials certainly expressed the same “kinship, group cohesion and cultural leadership” as the stately mansion houses in which they were produced—and, as material products and symbols of the female members of the rural gentry gathered together, in ways perhaps much more literal than a common affinity for gambrel roofs or pedimented doorways.\(^{62}\)

The collaborative work of quilting and other such gatherings began long before the participants arrived. Susanna Edwards Porter’s sister, Esther Edwards Burr, a native of Northampton, found herself “extremely engaged”
preparing for a spinning frolick. She begged her friend Sarah Prince to forgive her for slighting their correspondence, explaining that she had been busy “making cake for spinning frolick today” that “is to be attended tomorrow and several days after I suppose.” Putting on the frolic had Burr “almost wore up to the hub.” Quiltings were little different: the materials for the work had to be gathered and prepared, the house had to be cleaned and readied for visitors and overnight guests, refreshments had to be made, and the several components of the quilt had to be assembled and then put on the frame.

In part, a woman’s ability to devote an afternoon or more to quilting and other kinds of ornamental needlework depended on her household’s access to other labor. As one Northampton quilter recalled, “plain or straight work”—that is, quilting in its most basic form, along parallel lines—could be finished in a day, but such speed was rare when the highly decorative patterns that ornamented finer garments were involved. Since hospitality of high quality was an integral part of reciprocal work bees like quiltings, feeding and entertaining participants appropriately (and cleaning up afterward) became essential to any gathering’s success. Such imperatives invoked other series of tasks in the household hosting the event; at the same time, attendees had to make sure more routine labors around their own homes continued. Among the eighteenth-century New England gentry, such labor was supplied by enslaved and hired laborers. When Elizabeth Porter Phelps attended quiltings in Hadley, her slave Peg remained at Forty Acres to see to ongoing chores at home. Peg, along with her two daughters, Phillis and Roseanna, had worked for the Porter household for nearly her entire life. Of the five young women who attended Sarah Hopkins’s quilting on that August afternoon in 1769—Sally Woodbridge, Betty Williams, Betty and Sophia Partridge, and Elizabeth Porter—each, as well as the hostess, lived in homes with black slaves. Sarah Hopkins had received her first husband’s slave woman, Phillis, as part of his bequest; after Sarah married her husband’s successor in the pulpit, he moved into the house that Sarah and Phillis kept. Oliver and Anna Williams Partridge had an enslaved husband and wife in their household, and Israel and Sarah Chester Williams during their marriage owned several men and women, including Kate, and at about the time of this quilting, Blossom.

In fact, though less than one-tenth of the New England labor force was enslaved, most of the River Gods and their families had slaves, generally an adult man and woman. Throughout Hadley, Hatfield, Deerfield, Northampton, and Amherst, a handful of black men and women lived and worked in the households of a handful of wealthy English families. Each of Hadley’s first three ministers owned slaves. Of these, Isaac Chauncey owned Arthur
Prutt, his wife, Joan, and their seven children, who would eventually be sold into neighboring households, including that of Moses and Elizabeth Porter.\textsuperscript{68} The Reverend Jonathan Ashley of Deerfield and his wife, Dorothy Williams Ashley, at one time or another owned at least three slaves: Jenny, her son Cato, and another man, Titus.\textsuperscript{69} Fully half of the men in the powerful Williams clan were slave owners.\textsuperscript{70}

Many of the women with whom Elizabeth Phelps quilted through the years came from slave-owning families. Betty Chauncey joined Phelps’s quilting from time to time; her father, Josiah, owned at least one enslaved woman by the 1740s.\textsuperscript{71} The household of Phelps’s friends Penelope and Patty Williams by the 1740s and 1750s included at least one enslaved woman and one enslaved girl, while Sally Goodrich appears regularly among Phelps’s fellow quilters; her father, Aaron, was also among Hadley’s slaveholders.\textsuperscript{72} Even after the demise of slavery in Massachusetts, these families continued to draw on the labor of black women, and in ways closely related to quilting: “Yesterday,” Phelps wrote in the fall of 1802, “mrs lawyer [Abigail Phillips Porter, the wife of the attorney Elisha Porter] sent her black girl up here on foot to invite me to help her quilt—& I went.”\textsuperscript{73}

The care with which Phelps recorded this and other visits in the pages of her diary suggests that these visitings must be located within general patterns of visiting in early America, an activity that, as Karen V. Hansen has suggested, bridged and blurred what we have come to call the “private” and the “public,” creating an intermediate, and intermediary, sphere that she terms the “social.” Visits were fundamentally public encounters that occurred in traditionally private spaces.\textsuperscript{74} The flow of traffic between influential households was one significant means by which the social, economic, and political networks that comprised Hadley’s public arena were created and sustained, a fact of which these women were ever aware. One study of work and society in rural Massachusetts, attempting to distinguish these “frolics” from other sorts of market transaction, points out that these events never appear in the columns of account books and suggests that people simply kept a “mental tally” of their neighbors’ participation.\textsuperscript{75} But the tally might not have been mental at all: women may not have kept account books recording the exchange of goods, cash, or services, but their diary narratives recording the arrivals and departures of friends, family, and strangers are account books of another sort, in which reciprocal obligations were tracked and remembered. Diaries retained an accounting of social obligations, as well as the work that was accomplished within them. Certainly both visits and the recording of them was serious business. “Madam” Sarah Porter kept in the pages of her almanacs a careful record of visits to and from her home on the Hadley com-
mon, while Northampton’s Abigail Lyman’s first journal registered “the people I had visited & who had visited me,” which invitations she had accepted, and which she had declined.\textsuperscript{76} Phelps’s desire to track the quilting she and her daughters contributed to their community is evidence of the special significance of this labor and suggests another reason that women’s diaries are more likely to contain references to collective than solitary quilting; it affirms Catharine Anne Wilson’s insight that “reciprocal work operated much like a bank, in which all made their deposits and were then entitled to make their withdrawals or acquire small loans.”\textsuperscript{77}

Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s memorandum book, too, preserves the steady stream of company that flowed from Hadley center to Forty Acres and back again. Once married, Elizabeth and her husband, Charles, remained in the home of Elizabeth’s birth, enabling the bride to continue patterns of hospitality familiar from girlhood; in any given year, two hundred visitors might cross their threshold.\textsuperscript{78} That socializing was an important obligation among women of the rural gentry, and that it could prove hard work, is captured in Betsy Phelps Huntington’s concern that her husband’s Connecticut parishioners might fault her for failing to endure the “drudgery” of visiting.\textsuperscript{79} Elizabeth Phelps, too, wrote her daughter late one August that there had “not been any women to see her” in some time; she was a little surprised and embarrassed by the lack of company (“don’t tell of it,” she asked her daughter), but confessed that her husband, Charles, saw one “good reason why”: “I owe visits to all.”\textsuperscript{80} Phelps’s neighbors had surely been noting those reciprocal obligations as carefully as she and found Phelps overdrawn on her account. Visits carried an exchange value less tangible than that of goods or labor but no less significant. Through the daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms of visits, “people . . . publicly exchanged the goods of the world at large”—tea and cakes to be sure but also the use of a shared yet select world of material goods. Visits provided an opportunity to view, handle, and enjoy one another’s imported “set of China dishes—best sort,” to demonstrate and acquire knowledge of the current fashions and forms in tea equipage and to demonstrate and acquire knowledge of the rules for proper tea-drinking etiquette: where, how, and with whom you should sit, what subjects you should and should not discuss, how you should handle a teacup properly, and how you should indicate that you have finished.\textsuperscript{81} The table on which the tea was served provided a focal point for these various kinds of exchange, the effort and expenditure to acquire stylish, specialized tea tables and stands indicating that Connecticut Valley elites “took these events, which both defined and maintained social boundaries, very seriously.”\textsuperscript{82} To use one another’s carved, upholstered, and matched sets of furniture, the travel to and from
one another’s homes in expensive carriages—the material appointments of visits enabled members of the rural gentry to share the accoutrements of gentility, to enhance their sense of commonality, and to distinguish themselves from neighbors who were unable to acquire these goods and were unfamiliar with the rituals associated with their proper use. For most of the community, who had little access to these houses’ formal spaces, the sheer scale and elaboration of the façade told them everything they needed to know; visitors of comparable station, however, “would have found the specialized goods and luxury items more important to their estimation of [a family’s] refinement and gentility, and to their comparison to their own social positions.”

The importance of quilting in that effort is made clear by the attention paid to it by Elizabeth Porter’s female relatives. After the death of her father, and given the often fragile health of her mother, her extended family assumed much responsibility for her upbringing. They saw to it that she traveled with her cousins to meet family, friends, and associates in Boston and Hartford, and they attended to her formal and practical education, tutoring her in the finer points of polite behavior. Particularly anxious that young Elizabeth attend to her quilting responsibilities was her father’s sister, Phebe Porter Marsh. Phebe’s husband, Samuel, had assumed some legal liability for young Elizabeth when in the months following her father’s death he co-signed her guardianship papers, but Phebe Marsh made sure that her niece was learning her familial roles and obligations. On more than one occasion, Elizabeth recorded that her “Aunt Marsh came up here and would have me go quilt.” Marsh hoped to instruct Elizabeth in the importance of demonstrating her family’s commitment to and respect for these ongoing working relationships; the rising gentlewoman’s presence was necessary to affirm her own household’s status in the community. Other relatives, too, made sure that Elizabeth attended these gatherings, as when “Aunt Porter came here to stay to have me go to quilting for Miss Patty upon a crimson duerant.” Her Aunt Porter rode up to Forty Acres and spent the day caring for Elizabeth’s ailing mother so that the younger woman could be present at what she perceived to be an important gathering, but from which “Aunt Porter” herself could be absent.

In the years just before and just after her marriage, Elizabeth Phelps quilted for both her immediate and her extended family. Gradually, however, she devoted less and less time to projects not intended for her own household, and apparently less energy to the production of petticoats. Almost 40 percent of her references to quilting are clustered in the four years prior to her marriage. After the birth of her first child, references to quiltings in which Phelps herself participated decline by about 75 percent, and after
Elizabeth Porter Phelps

the birth of her second there is no reference to her quilting for seven years.\textsuperscript{88} She continued to quilt on occasion, but these projects tended to be both with and for members of her immediate family: her sister-in-law, her mother, and her children. When Elizabeth attended Sarah Hopkins’s quilting in 1769, she and Sally Woodbridge were the oldest, at twenty-two and twenty-three. Betty and Sophia Partridge were thirteen and fifteen years old, respectively, and Betty Williams was sixteen.\textsuperscript{89} As these women aged, their daughters assumed their places around the quilt frames of Hampshire County. Beginning about 1793, when her daughters were twelve and sixteen, most entries in Phelps’s diary noting quiltings recorded the activity of these young women: “Girls at brother’s to quilt,” “girls quilting at Esq. Porters with many others,” “girls quilting at Judge Porters.”\textsuperscript{90}

To be sure, quilting could be a time-consuming, monotonous chore best tackled by groups of women working together. But collective effort was not necessary to complete the task, suggesting that quiltings served purposes beyond the strictly functional. Cooperative sewing brought together families with shared, and sometimes divergent, and even divisive, interests. When women of the Porter, Phelps, Williams, and other elite families gathered around the quilt frame, longstanding associations were affirmed, and new ones begun.\textsuperscript{91} New arrivals to the community and new generations of participants were incorporated into the group, perpetuating enduring values and codes of behavior. Tensions may well have simmered beneath the surface, but attendance at the quilting itself continued to assert group identity and belonging.

Mothers and daughters of the rural gentry may have had other reasons to take an interest in quiltings. One Hampshire County quilter recalled that often, when a quilting lasted for more than one day, “married elderly women” would gather for one, and “younger ladies” another, suggesting some planning and intention associated with the separate gatherings.\textsuperscript{92} And of course the teas and dancing that often followed the close of the workday were opportunities for young men and women to meet one another and to cultivate romantic relationships. Historians have made much of the politically astute alliances formed between powerful Connecticut Valley families but give surprisingly short shrift to the agency of the young women participating in this process. Atquiltings young women were able to meet the young men who were the brothers, cousins, and friends of their fellow quilters and to assess their prospects.

As much as anyone, then, young women performed the work of establishing, maintaining, and extending family position. By the time Elizabeth
Porter had changed her name to Phelps and had become the mother of her own girls, little about these quiltings had changed. New generations of young women gathered together in the homes of their mothers, aunts, and neighbors and under their guidance, learned to quilt, to visit, to take tea, to flirt, and to marry wisely. Seated around the quilt frame, these women drew closer and closer together, the circle drawing tighter and tighter, as the quilt neared completion; ten feet shrank to eight and then to six and four. At the center of the circle lay the object that would be the enduring symbol of that collaborative work to present and future communities. Quilting drew together the circle of Hampshire County gentlewomen—“others of our own people”—in a shared work that helped insure the continued prosperity and influence of their families. The petticoat that was finally cut from the frame was but one of the products of this important collaboration. In the same way, the elaborate pictorial needlework completed by young women of elite families and displayed proudly in those families’ parlors performed cultural work of their own, forging ties that bound together the region’s most influential families.

While these young, well-off girls in the Connecticut Valley quilted and embroidered, their black and Native American counterparts—who themselves sometimes appear in these embroidered pictures, tending to their mistresses—executed the heavier labor required to run the household. Elite needlework engaged the labors of white women, too, domestic servants whose efforts in other rooms of the house made more leisurely projects possible. At the same time another work force of needlewomen contributed to the production and maintenance of elite households’ wardrobes, to enable other women to “dress up in the afternoon.” White servants and hired needlewomen, black slaves and laundresses, Native American workers: all of these women’s labors contributed to the production of the ornamental needlework that reflected and perpetuated elite culture in early America. Though their work is unattributed, they are present in these objects.

The unique needlework completed by women of the rural gentry, made possible in part by their ability to purchase the labor and skill of other sorts of needlewomen, has something important to teach us about the clothing trades in early America, and the way needlework figured into the lives of very different sorts of women. Women of the rural gentry were responsible, as mistresses of households, for clothing acquisition and maintenance, and they employed a wide variety of strategies to meet that obligation. But they had other duties as well that were important in larger constellations of skill, status, and clothing in early New England. The production of elegant quilted petticoats was one way that women of privilege acquired a wardrobe that distinguished them from others in their community. In this regard, they were clothing pro-
ducers of special skill who obtained their training not through apprentice-
ships and labor contracts but within the tutelage of elite communities, among
their “own people.” At the same time, these quilted petticoats, and the pro-
cess of their production, proved an essential means by which elite families
sustained authority. As such, they are evidence of unpaid, but nevertheless
essential, work performed by local gentlewomen toward their family’s
prosperity.