Part II: Chapter 5, Family, Artisanry, and Craft Tradition: The Worlds of Tabitha Clark Smith and Rebecca Dickinson

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The entry in Elizabeth Porter’s memorandum book for 20 November 1768 reads: “tarried at home because of a heavy snow storm—sacrament day. Monday near night went into town and brought one Tabithy Clark to taylor for us—Wednesday night carried her home and went to Mr Porters tarried there til Friday night—helpt quilt upon a brown coat for Molly Dickinson all Thursday night. Fryday I helped Miss rebeckah Dickingson make a gown for me. Spent the Eve at Mr Hop, returned home. Satturday this day one and twenty years of age.”¹ Like most women during most weeks, on that day, Elizabeth Porter (later Phelps), Tabitha Clark (later Smith), and Rebecca Dickinson found themselves with needle in hand, performing familiar tasks. The quilting of petticoats for young women like Molly Dickinson regularly filled festive afternoons for young Elizabeth Porter, as they continued to do following her marriage to Charles Phelps, and would for her daughters, Elizabeth and Thankful, as well. Tabitha Clark, then on her first visit to the Porter farm, would become a regular presence at Forty Acres, as Elizabeth Porter Phelps engaged Clark’s services many more times over the next twenty years. Dickinson, a thirty-year-old unmarried woman already well known for her skillful gown making, also visited the farm often in the last decades of the eighteenth century as a respected artisan and as a welcome guest.

If their stitches now seem identical, the stitchers were not. Tabitha Clark’s needlework produced income for her family, while Elizabeth Porter’s needlework, often ornamental, usually signaled, as it did on this occasion, an opportunity to cultivate relationships with women of comparable social and economic status. Both women would eventually marry, and for Elizabeth Porter Phelps, time spent quilting elaborate petticoats gradually gave way to overseeing the needlework of others. Tabitha Clark Smith, in contrast, con-
continued throughout her life to work in the clothing trades, eventually replacing Rebecca Dickinson as the artisan most responsible for maintaining the Porter and Phelps women's wardrobes. Marriage for Clark meant less a change of duties than a change of venue, since she no longer journeyed out of her home with her needle. Dickinson, however, was more highly skilled than either Clark or Porter, at least in the winter of 1768; her apprenticeship in the complex physical and mental operations of cutting fabric rendered her services uncommon and valuable in Hampshire County. Because she was unmarried and self-supporting, her training proved especially important. As she recorded in the pages of her journal, "my daily bread depends upon my labor."  

Dickinson's and Smith's craft brought them into economic relationships with women like Phelps, to be sure, as well as with tailoresses like Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke, who often found employment in the construction of garments once the gown makers had finished their work. In small towns, craftswomen surely were familiar with the abilities of local needlewomen. But Dickinson and Smith occupied a space apart from Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke, and Elizabeth Phelps, too. They possessed craft skills that none of these other women had mastered, creating, altering, and maintaining gowns for Elizabeth Phelps, her mother, and her daughters, as well as other local families. Dickinson and Smith were members of communities defined by geography—Hatfield and Hadley, as well as the larger community of Hampshire County towns along the Connecticut River and in the surrounding hills. But they were also members of a community of artisanal women who inhabited the eighteenth-century Connecticut Valley. They knew of—and perhaps learned from and competed with—other gown-making women from those towns, including Catherine King Phelps, Sarah Clark, and Esther Wright in Northampton, Lucy Sheldon in Deerfield, and Mary and Jane Salmon in Hartford. They also learned from, and competed with, artisans from distant places—mantua makers in Boston and Hartford, even New York and London, who also attracted the patronage of their most privileged neighbors and between craft skill and family life, artisanal and family identity, and other features of potential clients.

Dickinson, Smith, and their craftworking colleagues provide points of entry into the worlds of clients and craftswomen that surrounded rural New England gown making, illuminating intersections of eighteenth-century community life. These women's lives shed light on the female and family economies of late eighteenth-century rural New England. Gown makers sustained economies in which clients and craftswomen together were con-
sumers and conveyors of fashion. At the same time, these craftswomen maintained households as well and saw their work as an important asset to the family livelihood.

**Gown Making as a Trade for Women in Eighteenth-Century New England**

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many craftswomen practiced millinery and mantua making together. Milliners made hats and headdresses, which demanded familiarity with a wide array of trimmings, from ribbons, tassels, and lace to flowers, feathers, and other kinds of ornament. For that reason, milliners generally carried these sorts of shop goods, as well as other small accessories, such as mitts, gloves, caps, sashes, scarves, shawls, aprons, handkerchiefs, hoops and panniers, cloaks and mantles, and canes, fans, umbrellas, and parasols. Milliners and gown makers shared a need to understand the modish application of trimmings—ruching, robings and ruffles, fringe, bows, paste ornaments, and other embellishments, to be applied, as fashion warranted, to sleeves, skirts, petticoats, and bodices. The two closely related occupations commanded the highest status, and the greatest income, not only in the women's clothing trades but in the female labor market more generally.

While milliners concentrated on creating stylish headwear and trimmings, gown makers or mantua makers mastered special skills related to the construction of fashionable women's garments. Through formal and informal apprenticeships, gown makers learned, for example, how to apply a flat, inert surface tautly yet malleably around the width and breadth of a living, moving form. Social skills, however, were equally important, and those appropriate to this line were underscored in period trade manuals. In 1747, for example, Robert Campbell counseled prospective artisans and their parents that the main requirement of the mantua maker was an ability to "flatter all complexions, praise all shapes" and be the "compleat Mistress of the Art of Dissimulation." Bound to discover her client's "deformities," she must have the prudence to keep silent about flaws in a given figure along with the ability to conceal—and transform—them. Those responsibilities drew craftswomen and clients into especially intimate relationships. To meet these highly personal demands, successful artisans cultivated discretion and diplomacy alongside their needle skills.

At the same time, they necessarily attended to changing fashions, keeping abreast of new developments throughout the Atlantic world while assessing which would gain favor among their local clientele. Much of a gown maker's
trade was shaped by her neighborhood, by the aspirations and preferences of the women around her, their financial resources, and their ability and desire to conform to prevailing fashion. Gown makers depended on a steady circle of patrons, who recommended their work to others in their social circle. The *Book of Trades* attests to the importance of word-of-mouth testimonials: “Young women ought, perhaps, rarely to be apprenticed to this trade unless their friends can, at the end of the term, place them in a reputable way of business, and can command such connections as shall, with industry, secure their success.” Happily for prospective artisans, however, the “business requires, in those who would excel in it, a considerable share of taste, but no great capital to set up in it.”

In short, trained gown makers offered their manual and conceptual expertise and their taste and time. In communities throughout New England, women could be found who had become the community’s local expert in the construction of fashionable, fitted clothing. A small number established shops, while others—a large majority of the gown or mantua makers in eighteenth-century rural New England—turned skill to profit among circles of neighbors. In Northampton, Catherine King Phelps and Sarah Root Clark supplied their neighbors with garments through most of the eighteenth century; in surviving accounts from the 1790s alone, Esther Wright cut, basted, made, and altered more than 180 gowns, cloaks, stays, and other garments for residents of that community.

Gown or mantua making lent itself well to the income-generating strategies long embraced by New Englanders. Like most rural artisans, including carpenters and housewrights, women who knew how to construct women’s more formal clothing paced that work amid the larger routines of the agricultural year, combining farm work with craftwork. Elizabeth Foote, for example, is known to historians of early New England and of early American needlework mainly as the maker of a spectacular bed rug, one of three extant rugs made by the Foote sisters of Colchester, Connecticut. But Foote’s extraordinary bed rug is not the only evidence that she knew her way with a needle; she also earned income as a gown maker. In March 1775, for example, Foote records that she made two gowns for the Welch family, earning seven shillings six pence. In two weeks one April she made two gowns for Amos Wells’s little daughters and cut out two loose gowns for them as well, “fixed and partly made” a gown for Lydia Wells, made at least two gowns and possibly more for Lieutenant Levy Wells’s wife, and made a gown for Nab Fox, who appears to have resided in the Wells household. The following months she records working on gowns for other neighbors as well—Bethiah Kellogg, Molly Caverly, an infant child in the Martin household, Noah Foot’s “girl,”
and Abner Hills’s family, where she “fix’d two gowns at 6 [pence] per gown,” later adding still three more gowns to the Hillses’ wardrobes. Foote also did a good bit of other textile-related work, spinning and weaving for households throughout her community and drawing the pattern for a quilt border for Mrs. Blush. Her journal suggests that she also made and sold cheese and did general housework for her neighbors. Thus, gown making was for Elizabeth Foote one source of income among many. At the same time, for the women of her neighborhood, paying Foote to help with clothing was one strategy by which to meet their own obligations. Foote may never have completed an apprenticeship in gown making; she did not work at the trade exclusively, nor did she maintain a dedicated site in which to practice her craft. By many definitions, she would not qualify as an artisan. But she clearly had skills that were valuable to Colchester families and membership in the community of practice that encompassed Colchester’s clothes makers. Like other rural women (and men) with some artisanal ability, she did not rely on a single occupation but instead found income and support through a variety of activities carried on simultaneously, seasonally, or from time to time.

The gown maker’s craft involved, as indentures of the day traditionally indicated, mastery of the “art and mystery” of clothing construction—skills that included the art of diplomacy as well as the mystery of clothing construction. A successful gown maker was able not only to produce and reproduce gowns in the latest fashions but also to fit and flatter all body types, from short, stout Elizabeth Porter Phelps and robust Experience Richardson, who weighed over two hundred pounds (“God enables me to cary about a Great heft,” the pious diarist noted, “but the heft of sin I beare is much heavier”) to the Davis sisters of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, wiry young women with figures like “button wood sticks.” The means by which gown makers acquired those skills varied widely, though, unlike apprentices in the making of men’s clothing, who might learn their craft from a man or a woman, aspiring gown makers in the eighteenth century learned their craft almost entirely from other women. Some young women learned under the tutelage of a mother already versed in the trade; others gained entry into the craft through formal or informal apprenticeships, some arranged by parents, others by local officials. In 1769, thirteen-year-old Ann Cromartie, bound to the mantua maker Ruth Decosta by the Boston Overseers of the Poor to learn the “Art, Trade or Mystery of a Mantua Maker,” served a term of nearly five years, until she reached the age of eighteen, while Ann Wilkinson, bound similarly to Martha Mellens, labored for three years before her release in December 1787. In 1788, Elizabeth Fisher of Middletown, Connecticut, entered into an agreement with Ephraim and Beulah Merriam of Wallingford,
binding her to the Merriams for seven years, during which she should “learn the trade of mantee making.”

The construction of clothing for women was carried out in a primarily female world of clients and craftswnomen, and laborers with a range of skills. Though traditionally women obtained outerwear (and fashions based on outerwear) from male artisans, most of their clothing acquisition was accomplished among other women. Surviving accounts associated with Catherine King Phelps, Sarah Clark, and Esther Wright list the female clienteles that they served. Catherine Phelps made gowns for Mary Phelps, Major Pomeroy’s daughter, Thankful Pomeroy, Roger Clapp’s daughter, Jonathan Strong’s wife, and women in Samuel Clapp’s family and Deacon John Clark’s family. More rarely did Phelps undertake assignments like the “suit of clothes” she produced for the tailor Samuel Pomeroy in 1731. Similarly, her successor, Sarah Clark, worked within a circle of Northampton neighbors, producing garments for a range of recipients from the infant Jared Clark to the elderly Abigail Baker. Clark sewed for more than fifty individuals in more than twenty families. Though she occasionally made clothing for men—supplying, for example, Thomas Starr with long breeches each year—she generally made and altered gowns and cloaks for the women of these households. Approximately 25 percent of her gown-making activity was intended for married women between the ages of eighteen and sixty, with a slightly larger percentage for unmarried women in that same age range. Another larger category of recipients, comprising more than a quarter of the total, were children under ten. About 10 percent of the gowns Clark made went to girls between the ages of ten and seventeen, with the remaining 5 percent to elderly women in her community, the small number probably reflecting the decreasing clothing acquisition of women in those years.

Records from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveal the variety of garments and tasks that gown makers undertook. Sarah Clark earned most of her gown-making income making and altering gowns of linen, but she also made riding hoods and cloaks, cut and made loose gowns and wrappers, made and altered stays, and, on at least one occasion, made a “shepherddee” for a member of the Alvord family. She could also produce men’s garments, including breeches, trousers and overalls, shirts and frocks. Esther Wright, working in the 1790s and beyond, also earned most of her income cutting, basting, and making and altering gowns, including gowns of comparatively costly fabrics like calico and silk, though she also cut, made, and altered stays; cut, basted, made, and made over frocks; made, altered, and made over long and short cloaks; and made and made over slips. While Wright occasionally made finer garments, like the silk gown and coat she
produced for a member of Samuel Clark’s family, often she remodeled garments brought to her by women anxious to prolong their use. Approximately one in five of the gowns Esther Wright treated were altered, made over, or simply had “work done,” which typically meant simple repairs. In November 1796, Samuel Clark’s wife engaged Wright to make a new gown, paying the going rate of two shillings six pence for the service. But while she was there, Clark also had her make over a cloak and two gowns, one of silk, paying her another five shillings for the additional work.\textsuperscript{15}

Few sources survive to suggest how many projects gown makers and tailoresses took on at one time. For Tabitha Smith of Hadley, two days seems a typical amount of time between clients’ visits. In August 1784, for example, Elizabeth Phelps went to Smith’s on a Wednesday “to get her to do some tailoring” and went “Fryday in the forenoon down for it.” On another occasion, in 1790, she and Betsy rode down “Tuesday . . . [to] Mrs Chileab Smiths to get her gown made. Thursday Betsy and I down again for it.”\textsuperscript{16} The number of hours spent on a project depended on its complexity and the gown maker’s skill and speed. Also important was the number of hands available to help, whether a gown maker worked alone or had the assistance of daughters or apprentices to help sew the long seams, and otherwise contribute to the process. In 1784 Smith’s daughters were not yet old enough to help. By 1790, however, Lucretia, who would years later become a gown maker herself, at nearly thirteen was surely an asset to Tabitha’s work.

Evidence from the accounts of Sarah Clark and Esther Wright afford some insight into the earnings of a skilled needlewomen. In the 1750s and 1760s, Sarah Clark charged between two shillings and two shillings four pence to make a gown for an adult woman. Some clients, like Marah Brown, a servant living in the home of Deacon Ebenezer Hunt, asked Clark to make her two gowns “in part.” Clark charged slightly over a shilling each for this service. Brown hired just enough skill to render the parts of the garment beyond her own capability, and by providing what skill she could—probably completing the long seams of the gowns skirts—she saved half the labor costs of the new garment. The charge for altering such a gown was generally a shilling or slightly more—about half the cost of construction—while the charge for merely cutting it was generally only six pence or about a quarter of the cost of construction. Simpler garments brought in even less; in 1766, for example, Clark cut three wrappers for only five pence. To make cloaks and riding hoods Clark sometimes charged a good deal more, from one shilling six pence to three shillings and more, perhaps reflecting the time involved in sewing long seams. On the one occasion that Clark was asked to produce a shephardee, she charged seven shillings six pence, the most charged for any
single article in her accounts. Making and altering gowns, cloaks, and hoods for adult women comprised almost half of Clark’s overall business. The remainder, about one-third of her overall activity, involved making gowns for girls seventeen years old and younger. Thirty years later, Esther Wright charged similarly. In the 1790s, she typically charged two shillings six pence to make a gown for an adult woman and roughly half that to alter one, though sometimes as little as six pence. Gowns of high-quality fabrics like silk or calico cost more—usually three shillings, or 20 percent more. Cutting alone was still far cheaper than sewing; Wright charged just six pence for her skill with the shears a shilling or a shilling two pence to cut and baste, or assemble, a new garment.

Women with the ability to make stays could earn considerably more for their construction. Trade books of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century suggest that stay making was a man’s craft, but New England women were making stays at least as early as 1730, when Catherine Phelps produced a pair for someone in the neighboring household of Roger Clapp for which she charged twelve shillings. A gown at that time might cost between four and seven shillings. Stays were worn by women of all ages; Sarah Clark’s accounts document her making stays for girls as young as twelve-year-old Anna Clark, though most recipients for this labor were women in their twenties and thirties. Sarah Clark charged ten shillings for a pair of stays. In the 1780s and 1790s Esther Wright charged six shillings for making stays, more than double her rate for making a gown. As preferences shifted from the highly structured bodices of the mid-eighteenth century (which could mean, for the artisan, producing and assembling ten to twelve panels, each consisting of multiple layers of lining, boning, and exterior fabric, tedious stitching of the many channels—sometimes more than one hundred—that held the stiffening material, creating two set of eyelets for the lacings, and binding the outside edges with leather) to the gentler silhouette of the neoclassical style, the structure of and demand for foundation garments like stays changed in ways that affected the income generated by their construction.

A gown maker’s potential earnings were at least in part determined by the community’s access to other comparably skilled women. One brief, dramatic battle between gown makers competing for customers erupted in Revolutionary-era Hartford when Mary Gabiel, a mantua maker from Paris, began advertising in the Connecticut Courant. In May 1775, she announced, “MARY GABIEL, Mantua-maker and milliner from Paris, informs the Ladies of this Town, and others, that she makes all kinds of Ladys gowns, Caps, Bonnets, &c, and dresses Lady’s heads in the neatest and newest French Fashions. . . . She also washes all kinds of fine linens, gauzes, laces, &c. She may be found at the
house of the Widow Patten in Hartford.” She repeated her advertisement the following week and again at the end of the month. In October, an even larger advertisement informed the public that “MARY GABIEL, Milliner from France” continues in her trade, while “Dr. Gabiel” also indicated that he would shortly be opening a French School.23

Two sisters who had been operating their own successful shop in Hartford, Mary and Jane Salmon, unmarried at ages thirty-two and twenty-nine, respectively, followed Gabiel’s second announcement with a notice of their own: “MARY AND JANE SALMON, from Boston, hereby inform the Ladies in this and the neighboring towns that they make the newest fashioned bonnets in the neatest manner and any sort of caps at the same reasonable prices they have been accustomed to in times past. They likewise make cloaks, &c.”24 Gabiel responded immediately: the 4 December edition of the Courant ran another advertisement, again reminding readers of her French origins. Perhaps the Salmons got wind of this notice, because they, too, reran their ad in this issue. But that, unfortunately, is the end of the story. After this episode, none of these women remained in Hartford. Perhaps Gabiel failed to find the success she sought in the valley’s largest port, since she does not seem to have remained and was apparently long gone by the time the women of Hartford, in 1786, declared their intent not to become “the slaves of milliners and mantua-makers in London or Paris.”25 The Salmon sisters, too, ultimately left Hartford and returned to Boston, where they purchased the front end of a brick mansion on Washington Street.26

Gabiel and the Salmon sisters were not the last Hartford gown makers to use their association with centers of fashion to draw clientele. At the turn of the century, “Mrs Mather” entered Hartford’s artisanal circle with a similar ploy. Following a “long residence in New York,” Mather informed readers, she had “an arrangement with some ladies for the receipt of the first fashions.” In later years, the Lincoln sisters and the Barnards vied for local patrons in Hartford. The Lincolns were on Pearl Street, near Burr and Company; the Barnards occupied the former stand of competitor Chloe Filley at the corner of Main and Theatre. Each partnership regularly posted notices of their skills and availability in the local advertising columns, sometimes within days of each other, suggesting that these women were well aware of their competitors’ actions and strove to match them.27

Family circumstances affected how women practiced their craft. The marital status of gown makers who were single, unlike that of married women, for example, permitted them to travel to obtain work. Though the geographic and economic scope of a gown maker’s trade is difficult to assess, the range of travel to clients by unmarried gown makers seems to have been
similar to that of rural New England tailors, or perhaps somewhat more narrow. Studies of other trades have suggested that rural artisans usually found the largest number of their clients in their own community but that they drew a significant proportion from surrounding communities as well and occasionally had transactions with more distant customers. The account book of the early nineteenth-century Whately cabinetmaker William Mather, for example, reveals that of the more than 230 clients Mather served, 35, or 15 percent, were from outside Whately, and only 7 were from towns that did not border Whately. Likewise, of the more than 310 clients the Deerfield tailor John Russell served, 53 percent came from Deerfield and 47 percent from the surrounding towns.28 From Hatfield, Rebecca Dickinson traveled to nearby towns such as Hadley, Conway, Amherst, and Northampton and occasionally farther, including one trip sixteen miles west to Williamsburg.29 She could visit several customers in one trip, as she recorded doing in October 1787, when she stopped at Mrs. Cleman’s house, Captain Chapin’s, Mrs. Wells’s, and Captain White’s.30 Business and pleasure no doubt mingled as Dickinson visited friends, family, and old and potential clients in her travels around the county.

Another point about family roles among gown makers is worth noting here. Although this observation is impressionistic, the number of needlewomen for whom birth order can be identified who were eldest daughters is striking. Both Patty Smith and her mentor, Rebecca Dickinson, were the first daughters in their families. The gown maker Lucretia Smith Gaylord was the first daughter born to Tabitha Clark Smith.31 Elizabeth Foote was the first child born to Israel and Elizabeth Kimberly Foote. In Bernardston, the mantua maker Anna Connable Wright was the eldest daughter of Samuel and Rebecca Ryther Connable. In Northampton, the mantua maker Sarah King was the eldest daughter of Daniel and Mary Miller King. In Granby, Lucy Nash, a “ tailor of men’s cloathes,” was the first daughter of Eleazer and Phebe Kellogg Nash. Eleanor Strong, apprentice to the Northampton tailor Catherine Phelps Parsons, was the oldest in a family of largely daughters, as was her co-apprentice, Martha Alvord. In Hartford, the mantua maker Chloe Filley was the first child of Mark and Eleanor Bissell Filley.

Perhaps the younger sisters of these women learned and practiced trades as well, but no evidence of their work survives in the historical record.32 But perhaps too there was some preference for equipping eldest daughters with some marketable skill beyond common housewifery. Initially, this theory may seem counterintuitive; surely the eldest daughter was the one most useful to her mother, assisting with household chores and minding younger siblings as the family continued to expand. Nevertheless, the num-
ber of female artisans in rural New England who were first daughters is striking.

Striking, too, is the number of businesses operated by sisters. In the 1770s, Mary and Jane Salmon opened their shop in Hartford. In 1809, Mariah and Ann Bennett, skilled in “Needlework, Millinery and Mantua-Making,” informed “the ladies” of Hartford that they would “make gowns, bonnets, caps,” and other items in the “newest fashions.” In 1812, “Mary Barnard and sisters” announced that they had “commenced the mantua-making and millinery business in all its branches.” They would supply the newest fashions at the shortest notice and take in plain sewing. In 1813, Mary and Betsy Lincoln opened a shop. These sisters may have been the daughters of the Mrs. Lincoln who in December 1811 announced in the pages of Hartford’s Courant that she has “resumed her business of mantua-making and millinery” at her home, “Ladies Pelices, Habits, etc. cut to order.” The following April, she repeated her notice, adding that “she will be particular in obtaining the latest fashions, and unremitting in her endeavors to please those who favour her with their orders.” Finally, she notes that she also offers “plain sewing done in the neatest manner”—this service quite possibly the work of young needlewomen-in-training Mary and Betsy.

The rearing of artisanal daughters raises important questions about craft lineage and its place in the female world of gown making. The family and descendants of Catherine King Phelps offer some answers. An active gown maker in at least the 1720s, 1730s, and 1740s, Catherine King was born in Northampton in 1701. When she was twenty-three years old, she married James Heacock, but he died only a few months later. In 1730, she married Nathaniel Phelps, a mason from Northampton and a widower with three young children. Their first child was a daughter, Catherine; later they had another daughter and a son, Charles. Charles Phelps was a highly successful artisan in Hampshire County (his grandson would marry Elizabeth Porter) whose clients included the area’s political, military, and social leaders. But Catherine King brought advantages of her own to the marriage, apart from her artisanal skill. She had inherited a good deal of wealth from her father, who died in 1720, from her late husband, and from his father, who died in the late 1720s, leaving his former daughter-in-law a generous bequest. When her brother John died in 1745, he too left her a significant bequest.

Catherine Phelps’s inheritances and the income she earned as a gown maker enabled her, as her granddaughter later recalled, to fulfill her “desire and ambition,” to “furnish her house as well as her sister Experience,” who had married the prosperous trader Timothy Dwight. Her comfortable do-

Smocks, used to protect one’s clothing while undertaking messy household chores, were damaged over time. This rare example of a woman’s everyday work clothes is made of the blue and white checked cloth that was also commonly employed for women’s aprons and men’s shirts. The several stains and patches suggest the hard use such garments saw; however, the seam under the bustline suggests that the garment was intended to conform to the silhouette popular toward the end of the eighteenth century, indicating that even work clothes responded in some ways to prevailing fashion.

Diadema Morgan (1764—88) wore this blue wool open robe when she married Northfield's Phineas Field in 1785. Gowns like this one represented the best apparel middling women and men acquired; after her wedding, Diadema (1764—88) would not fold the expensive garment away as a sentimental souvenir but would wear it to meeting on Sunday and for other special occasions as long as it remained stylish. Such garments were altered when necessary to accommodate changing fashions, changing bodies, or a new wearer. Note that the bodice is made so that the wearer pins it, edge-to-edge, at the center front. The close fit is achieved in part through the center back (in a style called en fourreau, or the English back), where the maker cut the pleats in one with the skirt, laid in place over a linen lining, and stitched down so that two box pleats release into the skirt just below the natural waistline. The maker used an underhanded hem stitch to attach the bodice to the lining, back stitching at the underarm attachment, and a running stitch of approximately eight stitches per inch on the seams. (See Baumgarten, Watson, and Carr, Costume Close-Up, 24—28, and Lazaro, “Construction in Context,” 16—19, cited in chapter 1.)

As costume historian Aileen Ribeiro has written, “The portrait of Mary Tallmadge is monumental in every way; the costume is almost regal in tone” (Kornhauser, Ralph Earl, 173, cited in chapter 1). The gown she wears displays the exceptional artistry of some unknown mantua maker; the open gown and matching petticoat of blue satin are ornamented with robings of gathered satin trimmed with matching cords and buttons. Two rows of gathered and pinked satin trimming embellish the petticoat’s hem as well, while the sleeves are accented at the elbow with additional satin trim.

This painting shows a shop interior in eighteenth-century France, but the details would be similar to such shops throughout the Atlantic world at that time. Shop employees range from mature women to young girls learning the trade. They work around a large table, suitable for cutting cloth, well-lighted by a large window. Work-in-progress hangs from pegs on the wall. Both the mistress of the shop and her young apprentice elevate their laps by resting their feet on footstools. Even the young women working at the table rest their feet on the basket beneath.

This hand-stitched cotton muslin is unlined. It was probably worn by Charlotte Perkins (1790–1873), daughter of Enoch and Anna Pitkin Perkins, when she attended the Hartford Dancing Assemblies in 1805. Very different in terms of both embellishment and construction from the fashions that preceded them, neoclassical gowns like this one represented a significant departure for women in the clothing trades, who cultivated new skills (and abandoned others) in order to meet consumer demand.

This yellow silk taffeta skirt, lined with plain woven blue wool, reveals the expertise and care of its quilters in the dense design of scrolls, medallions, and floral elements. Both quilting and seams contain nine to twelve stitches per inch. Gold silk braid was applied to the hem for added effect. A series of pleats was introduced to create particular fullness at the wearer’s hips, in accordance with prevailing fashion which encouraged some women to wear panniers. The skirt’s makers left the top of the garment unquilted, and folded the end of the fabric over before stitching.
Plate 7. Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s heraldic needlework, 1760–1817. PPHP. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

James Lincoln Huntington recalled that his ancestor was working on this in the twilight of her life in the early nineteenth century, but it is likely that she was then picking up a project laid down years earlier, when heraldic needleworks like this one were fashionable among young gentlewomen. The quality of the work and her lack of interest in completing the piece are evidence perhaps that Phelps had less enthusiasm than Ann Grant (see figures pages 99) for mastering the subtleties of embroidery.

This head cloth was completed in 1765 by Rebecca Dickinson, a twenty-seven-year-old gownmaker from Hatfield, Mass. Embroidered textiles like this one were enormously popular among eighteenth-century white women. Originally inspired by the vibrant fabrics that English traders brought back from the Far East, the cascading vines, flowers, leaves, birds, animals, and other motifs common in these works allowed a woman to display her technical skill and artistic sensibility as well as her ability to devote time to their completion. Women embroidered bed hangings such as this one, as well as pockets, petticoats, and chair seats. Although Rebecca Dickinson was a formally trained maker of women’s clothing, none of the garments she created are known to survive; instead, her family preserved several examples of her ornamental needlework, including a set of bed hangings, a coverlet, and a firescreen. Her diary survived by accident, discovered several decades after her death in the garret of her last home.
mestic environment included at least one slave. In 1747, she was widowed a second time when Nathaniel died after a lingering illness. She then married Gideon Lyman and lived with him for almost thirty years, until his death in 1775 left her a widow once more. Toward the end of her long and productive life she moved in with her daughter, the tailor Catherine Phelps Parsons. She died in 1791.39

Another member of Catherine King Phelps’s extended family also worked in the clothing trades. Esther Lyman Wright, born in 1725 to Gideon Lyman and Esther Strong Lyman, was twenty-two when her widowed father married Catherine Phelps. Though no confirming documentary evidence survives, it seems possible, even probable, that Esther Lyman learned the work of clothing construction from her stepmother, though she may of course have obtained her skills elsewhere as well. About 1747, Esther Lyman married Selah Wright, who died in 1786. Whether or not Esther practiced her craft during the years of her marriage is not known; no account book associated with Selah and Esther Lyman Wright has been found. However, after her husband died, Esther moved in with her son Solomon. The account book the mother and son kept together from the 1780s to the early 1800s shows her working vigorously at her trade.40

Artisanal skill in the Phelps family can be traced through the sons and grandsons of the Nathaniel Phelps who was among Northampton’s original settlers, migrating north from Windsor, Connecticut, in 1655. These sons and grandsons were for generations successful masons, stonecutters, and silversmiths.41 Phelps family masons built chimneys for some of the most powerful households in the county. At the same time, several women in the family were known for their mastery of needle skills. Abigail Lankton, sister of the Nathaniel Phelps who married Catherine in 1730, was a local shoe-maker. Catherine and Nathaniel secured training for their daughter Catherine Phelps Parsons in the tailoring trade. Their son, Charles, married a gown maker, Dorothy Root (and their son Charles wed Elizabeth Porter in 1770). It seems possible that Root obtained her training from Catherine King Phelps, bringing her into contact, and a romantic liaison, with Charles. When Root died in 1777, Charles Phelps proposed marriage to another gown maker, Rebecca Dickinson (who declined).42

The chain of skill that traces through the women of Catherine King Phelps’s extended family suggests that familial ties were important to women in the clothing trades.43 That dynasties appear to have occurred infrequently, or with less prominence, among needlewomen, however, than they appear to have among families like the four generations of Northampton blacksmiths
among the Pomeroy men may stem more from the character of the trade itself than from anything about female artisanry or economic culture. Tailoring, for example, with its minimal capital investment, was less likely than other crafts to see sons bound to a family trade. Furthermore, the lack of lineage among artisanal women may be present but difficult to see. Even though the daughters of craftswomen learned skills from their mothers that they would use to work at clothing production, just as the sons of craftsmen learned skills from their fathers, the consequences of marriage makes these women harder to trace. The familial line linking those masons who share the name Phelps and the lineage of blacksmiths in the Pomeroy family are easy to spot in the historical record, but the prosaic fact that women artisans changed their names upon marriage renders those relationships invisible. During her lifetime, Catherine King was a widely recognized gown maker in Northampton. She changed her name three times during her life, to Heacock, Phelps, and Lyman. Her daughter, Catherine Phelps, later Parsons, also took up a needle trade, which she then shared with her daughter Experience Graves. Although such genealogies can be difficult for contemporary historians to piece together, the shared familial identity of these mothers and daughters was readily apparent to their friends and neighbors. As Edward Cooke observes, for artisanal families, craft skills provided “both a livelihood and a legacy.” Knowledge and tools alike became assets “transmitted through the family network.” Just as artisan fathers bequeathed both skills and tools to succeeding generations, so too did artisan mothers.

**Artisanry, Marriage, and Family and the World of Tabitha Clark Smith**

Catherine King Phelps and Sarah King Root Clark were married women in the years they were actively pursuing their craft. Their accounts, intermingled with those of their husbands, suggest some of the ways in which artisanal women contributed to the needs of their families. Other sources clarify other aspects of the world of rural craftswomen in the last half of the eighteenth century. The memorandum book and correspondence of Elizabeth Porter Phelps, which offer glimpses into the world of Tabitha Clark Smith, for example, allow us to consider the artisanal relationship between craftswoman and client more deeply and also to contemplate more fully the world of married artisans, whose work was embedded in larger contexts of family and community.

By the summer of 1769 when Tabitha Clark entered the pages of Elizabeth Phelps’s memorandum book—“Thursday Tabitha Clark taylored here. Fry-
Tabitha Clark Smith and Rebecca Dickinson

47 Born in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, around 1750, she was the daughter of Robert and Ann Tefft Clark, who had moved to Massachusetts from Rhode Island shortly after their marriage in 1739. Tabitha was the fifth child of six, three sons followed by three daughters. How she came to be living in Hadley by the 1760s is unclear, but her move may have been associated with her father’s death in 1753; her mother, a forty-two-year-old widow with six children under fourteen, remarried quickly and followed her new husband to the Springfield area. By 1769 and over the next several years, Tabitha Clark journeyed about three times each year to the Phelps home to perform some service for that household, sometimes altering a gown, sometimes creating one, like the brown silk crape gown she made for Elizabeth’s mother in the spring of 1772.48

Marriage and motherhood affected but did not necessarily disrupt those patterns. In March 1775, when she was nearly twenty-five, Tabitha Clark married Chileab Smith, who was born in 1746, the eldest son of Windsor Smith. In April, she and Chileab stood in the broad aisle of the Hadley Congregational Church and “made their confession for the sin of fornication,” she being swelled to eight months’ pregnancy, though she and Chileab had been married only a few weeks.49 The Smith family was one of the largest in Hadley. Samuel Smith, a leading citizen in Wethersfield, Connecticut, had been among the original settlers when Hadley was founded in the 1660s. By the time Chileab married Tabitha, Smiths had been a regular presence on the select board for more than a century, deacons of the church, and leaders in the local militia. Windsor Smith was a local merchant of some standing; he and his eldest son, Chileab, operated two mercantile concerns, in Hadley and West Ashley, trading in English goods—mostly hardware, rum, and sugars—and livestock. Smith’s shop also imported through New York a variety of English fabrics, including kerseys, serges, flannels, broadcloths, calicoes, chintzes, and velvets. His inventory also included such fashionable accoutrements as muslin and silk shawls, silk gloves, and expensive trimmings for women’s gowns, like black and white laces and edgings, as well as crockery and glassware.50 The Smiths’ home lot was on the west side of the Hadley common, on the north end by the river. When Andrew Cooke purchased a lot on which to settle his son Solomon and Solomon’s wife, Tryphena, he purchased it from Windsor Smith’s family and built the house that would become the Cooke tavern just north of the Smiths’ home.51

In the summer of 1775 Phelps observed that Tabitha Smith was sewing up at the mills (a neighborhood today known as North Hadley). After her marriage, however, Smith does not reappear in Phelps’s records with any regular-
ity until 1783. Her work habits had changed; like Tryphena Cooke, she apparently no longer journeyed out of her home to sew, or at least she did not go again to the Phelps home. In August 1784, for example, when Elizabeth Phelps rode to Smith's on a Wednesday “to get her to do some tailoring” and went “Fryday in the forenoon down for it,” the gown maker had four children between the ages of nine and sixteen months, and was five months pregnant with a daughter, Joanna. When in the spring of 1790 Phelps and her daughter Betsy rode down “Tuesday . . . [to] Mrs Chileab Smiths to get her gown made,” the craftsman had six children.

Artisanal women moved in and out of their trade as necessity and opportunity dictated; marriage appears not to have signaled the same rupture of work cycle among these needleworkers that it would for their nineteenth-century counterparts. At the time of Tabitha Smith's marriage, for example, the peak of her craft activity still lay ahead. She worked most often at home, enabling her to see clients and care for her children at the same time. Furthermore, she sometimes turned clients away; Phelps was occasionally told that Smith simply “could not attend,” forcing her to return another day. Like other married gown makers in the rural Connecticut Valley, Tabitha Smith worked in the homes of other women before she married, and afterward brought other women into hers. Sarah King Clark appears to have worked steadily through two marriages. Born about 1728, she married Simeon Root some time before 1741. He died about a decade later, leaving King with a year-old son, Elihu. In December 1757 Sarah married William Clark. Their first child together, another Sarah, was born in the fall of the following year and would be followed by four more children; the last was born in July 1770. Clark farmed and drove fattened cattle to Boston, while Sarah continued to make clothing, perhaps in the shop (formerly that of a weaver) that stood on Clark's property, or perhaps in the family home. In 1768, the year of her greatest gown-making activity, Elihu was seventeen and her other children all between the ages of ten and four.

Of the twenty-one gowns Elizabeth Phelps refers to in her memorandum book, Tabitha Smith created or altered at least fourteen. In addition, she made or altered more than twenty gowns for Phelps's two daughters, as well as some for Phelps's mother, Elizabeth Pitkin Porter. From the 1760s to the turn of the century, Smith produced flattering garments in ducape, calico, lustrings, stuff, chintz, and figured Italian silk. Smith's familiarity with a wide range of fabrics was no doubt enhanced by her husband's trade. Her work complemented his. Chileab Smith carried in his shop a wide array of yard goods imported from London and New York, including superfine broadcloths and cashmeres, serges, kersies, shalloons, durants, striped and plain calimancoes, russels, vel-
vets, dimities, and velveteens. Consumers acquainted with Tabitha Smith may have found themselves directed to Chileab’s shop when in search of appropriate materials, while consumers acquainted with Chileab Smith & Co. may have learned of Tabitha when inquiring about a skilled woman who might fashion for them the desired garment. 

Almost ten years passed between Tabitha Clark Smith’s wedding and the date of her next appearance in Phelps’s journal; another seven years separate that reference from the next entry in which she appears. During those years she may or may not have been working for women other than Phelps. During the 1790s, however, she seems to have worked for the Phelps family with greater regularity, particularly producing and altering clothing for Phelps’s daughters, Betsy and Thankful. If the gown maker had withdrawn somewhat from trade, the reason for her return to her craft at this particular time is hard to tell. Though she had lost two sons in infancy in the years immediately preceding her return, she continued to bear children in the years to come and, at the same time, continued to pursue her needlework, now with five children, the youngest six months old.

Smith’s return to the pages of Phelps’s memorandum book may well reflect less the effects of continued child-bearing than the maturation of both women’s daughters. Betsy and Thankful Phelps were “entering society,” in quiltings, weddings, and social events around Boston, at their Amherst academy, in dancing school, and during visits to friends and family in Hartford and Boston. Their need for appropriate attire may have prompted Phelps to reacquaint herself with Tabitha Smith and her needle skills. At the same time, Smith began to draw on the skill and labor of her three daughters. Smith performed the greatest number of services for Elizabeth Phelps in 1792 and 1793; in 1792, her eldest daughter, Lucretia, was sixteen, Lucinda eleven, and Joanna nine. Lucretia was at the age of apprenticeship, and she apparently received her training under her mother’s tutelage. By 1798, Lucretia Smith Gaylord had become a gown maker to whom Hadley women turned, as her mother had been before her. It was she who had come to the Phelps home to inspect a gown Betsy had bought in Boston so she could make one like it for Charlotte Porter. But in 1792, the three girls could sit at their mother’s feet, sewing the long seams that brought together the pieces Smith had cut out, enabling her to increase the number of women to whom she could offer her skills. Far from a liability, Smith’s growing family was the asset she needed to expand her activities.

Lucretia Gaylord’s husband, Samuel, belonged to one of the country’s most influential artisanal families. Her father-in-law, Samuel Gaylord Jr., was a well-known woodworker in Hampshire County who built houses in the
summer and made and repaired furniture and farm implements in the winter.\textsuperscript{59} Conservative in his design, Gaylord served the needs of wealthy farmer-merchants with a preference for tradition. He was aided, no doubt, in securing that clientele by his fortunate marriage to Penelope Williams, an influential local gentlewoman who was among Elizabeth Porter Phelps's dearest friends; in fact, Gaylord completed several of the renovations to the Phelps home in the 1770s and 1780s. His son, Samuel III, contributed to his father's business until his untimely death fourteen months after his marriage to Lucretia prevented any extended legacy. Lucretia served the sartorial needs of those same farmer-merchant families, at the same time extending her mother's legacy, stepping into a circle of clients already in place. Lucretia's sister-in-law, Elizabeth, or Betsy, Gaylord, also gained skill in gown making. Nine years old when her brother married Lucretia, Betsy may well have enjoyed the tutelage of Lucretia or even of Tabitha. By 1809 Betsy Gaylord, at twenty-five, was also sewing for the Phelps family.\textsuperscript{60}

Although both Tabitha Smith and her daughter Lucretia found spouses whose businesses advanced their own, we cannot assume that such relationships were necessarily harmonious. How women's craft identity functioned alongside other identities grounded in marriage and motherhood is hard to tell. Did intrafamilial tensions affect the working relationships of couples like Catherine and Nathaniel Phelps, Tabitha and Chileab Smith, and Lucretia and Samuel Gaylord? Men's use of collective language—"our" or "us"—in the pages of their accounts suggest that they saw their family's debts and credits as shared resources and shared obligations, but it is impossible to generalize about the authority these women exercised over their income.

In this case, Tabitha's relationship with a client is easier to track. Evidence from Elizabeth Phelps indicates that her association with Tabitha Smith encompassed more than just business, that they nurtured a long relationship and that an intimacy developed between Phelps's daughters and "Mrs Tabitha." In places like eighteenth-century Hampshire County, the social distance between clients and craftswomen was often slight. The two families did business together; Chileab Smith traded with fellow merchants Eleazer and William Porter, carting their freight with his from Hartford and Middletown to Hadley and trading salt, sugar, rum, iron, corn, flax seed, textiles, trimmings, and other goods.\textsuperscript{61} The Smiths were among the few Hadley families who approached the Phelps in terms of sheer material wealth. In 1799, for example, Chileab Smith and his son paid $199 in taxes. Only five households paid more, and Charles Phelps Jr. and his son had the largest bill due at $535.\textsuperscript{62} Born in 1747 and (about) 1750, respectively, Elizabeth and Tabitha were also roughly contemporary; Elizabeth married five years earlier than
Tabitha Clark Smith and Rebecca Dickinson

Tabitha but both women had their first child in the 1770s. The Phelps girls began accompanying their mother on errands to the Smith home as early as 1788, when Betsy was nine and Thankful eleven. Smith watched them grow into young women—and watched them carefully, since their changing figures required additions and alterations to their wardrobes. The girls regularly “tarried” at Smith’s house and occasionally helped her quilt. They attended the wedding when Lucretia married Samuel Gaylord and came to the funeral when Chileab died, leaving Tabitha a widow. Betsy Phelps seems to have been especially fond of the gown maker; some suggestion of her continued affection might be read in a letter in which Elizabeth told her daughter the happy news that “Mrs Tabitha,” then a widow, might “be invited to change Smith for Ward.”

The Smiths were intimately connected with other households as well. When Judge Porter asked Chileab Smith to assist with the settlement of Francis Newton’s estate, for example, he may have been acknowledging a particular familiarity between the Smith and Newton households. The two families lived in the same neighborhood on the north end of the town center, and Tabitha Smith and Easter Newton both worked in the clothing trades. In April 1786, Chileab Smith purchased the two-thirds of the Newton house and about half an acre of land that were put up for auction, for £8 10s. Just over a year later, Chileab sold the half-acre of land back to Easter for £9. Without more information it is hard to know what to make of these transactions, but it seems possible that the Smiths, in purchasing part of Newton’s home, were trying to help her remain there as she entered widowhood.

For Tabitha Smith, Lucretia Gaylord, and other women like them, artisanal work was generally compatible with their work as wives and mothers; marriage did not transform their labor patterns in the same ways that it did or could for other working women. And the work complemented, even advanced, their social position among other leading artisan and merchant households, as well as the rural gentry. For these women, skills in cutting, fitting, and sewing were assets that could be picked up and laid down as circumstances warranted. For women who never married, however, who never gained the assistance of partners or children, artisanal skill offered other advantages, including possibly the opportunity to remain single.

Artisanry, Singlehood, and the World of Rebecca Dickinson

Unmarried at fifty-one, Rebecca Dickinson believed that her “story frights half the women of the town.” Whether or not her story actually frightened her neighbors, it is today both moving and instructive. As a craftswoman,
Dickinson was not so different from Tabitha Clark Smith or Catherine Phelps Parsons; her work with pins, needles, shears, and irons was identical, and many of the same themes that trace through their lives in the trade trace through hers. What divides Dickinson’s life from those of other women is not skill level or social class: it is that she, unlike the large majority of her neighbors, never married. Her journals preserve the toilsome “journey of life” of a woman struggling to “act her part alone,” without benefit of male resources. “I am apt to be greatly Puzled to find me Self here alone,” she wrote one summer evening, “but i know the matter is a Secret to me.”

Unraveling that “secret” consumed the better part of the nearly five hundred entries in her journals. More than any other single factor, Dickinson’s “failure” to marry governed her experience as a woman and as an artisan in colonial New England in ways both great and small. A “fish out of water,” a “sparrow alone on a rooftop,” she was aware of nothing so much as her own aberration. “How oft they have hissed and wagged the head at me,” she wrote, “by reason of my Solotary life.” Dickinson’s unmarried state was without doubt a source of unending pain, but it was also a source of opportunity and satisfaction.

For some women in early New England, singlehood and artisanry went hand in hand. The popular image of the spinster seamstress is grounded in both myth and reality. Throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the needle trades were especially attractive to unmarried women. Anecdotal references to elderly unmarried needlewomen are commonplace in eighteenth-century manuscripts. For example, Abby Wright of South Hadley recorded an encounter with “Old Miss Susan” of Wethersfield, Connecticut: “She came in to see me a few minutes while her goose was heating. She plies her needle with as much assiduity as ever.” Women like Old Miss Susan could be found in every community. Without husbands, unmarried women often found themselves dependent on the continued generosity of aged parents or married siblings—a situation many found at best precarious, at worst humiliating. A trade mitigated financial dependence, as well as feelings of vulnerability, depression, and loneliness. Dickinson had counterparts in every town in the county, unmarried women who supported themselves with needlework. Among them were Esther Wright in Northampton, Elizabeth Macomber and Mary Lee in Amherst, Kate Catlin in Deerfield, and Polly Lathrop in Saybrook. Moving through her life without the usual cycles of marriage, child-rearing, and widowhood, Dickinson felt herself superfluous in a world of pairs, as the pages of her own journal testify. For women alone, gown making could provide relief from days of isolation, a sense of produc-
activity, a source of self-esteem, and an outlet for creative sensibilities. What’s more, for Dickinson, her trade was her sole means of support.

The eldest daughter of Moses Dickinson, a farmer and dairyman, and Anna Smith Dickinson, Rebecca was born 25 July 1738 in Hatfield. As the eldest child, she surely helped raise her younger sisters and brothers; by Rebecca’s eighteenth birthday, she had five siblings: Samuel, Martha, Miriam, Anna, and Irene. During her youth, Rebecca learned the trade of gown making. As time went on, each of her sisters married. Martha moved seventy miles north, to Bennington, Vermont. Anna left for Pittsfield, almost seventy miles west, while Irene moved to nearby Williamsburg. Samuel and his wife, Mary, established their home just over the Hatfield line in Whately and continued in the dairy business. Only Miriam stayed close by, moving a few doors south to the tavern owned by her husband, Silas Billings. Meanwhile, Dickinson remained in the house in which she had been born. She worked at her trade, helped with the growing family, and remained active in the “busy scenes of life”—all the while moving beyond the usual age of marriage. Then when it seemed that she should have a chance finally to “change her name,” she felt the “bitter blow” that “robbed her hopes” for marriage, a family, and a home of her own. Whether marriage rejected Dickinson or Dickinson rejected marriage is impossible to tell, and not relevant here; for the moment, it is important simply to place Dickinson in the context of her community, a woman living on her own in early rural New England.

Dickinson was an active artisan in the Hatfield area by the late 1750s and continued to work regularly at her trade through at least the 1780s. In her diary she frequently mentions “invitations” to work in surrounding Hampshire County towns, including Hadley, Conway, Amherst, and Northampton, suggesting that she had no need to solicit clients. That she was selected to create the gown of dark brown ducape in which Elizabeth Porter married Charles Phelps indicates Dickinson’s gown-making skill; despite Porter’s access to port towns from Hartford to Boston, she chose to have this important gown created by a local woman whose skills were known and respected throughout the county.69

By the time that she fashioned Phelps’s wedding gown, Dickinson was thirty-two years old. It had been nearly two decades since she and “Catte Graves” had embarked on apprenticeships in the gown-making trade that, Dickinson wrote, had been “of unspeakable advanta[g]le” to her but of “no Servis” to Graves, who had since married and raised a large family.70 That Dickinson continued to practice her trade while her co-apprentice abandoned this work is suggestive. Graves may have worked at her craft in the
years prior to her marriage. Her skill with a needle may have helped her to find a suitable mate, since parents apprenticed daughters with some hope that a trade might render them more productive, and hence more desirable, as wives. Eighteenth-century English parents recognized the advantage of training daughters in prestigious trades like mantua making and millinery work, and it is likely that this strategy influenced their counterparts in the colonies as well. But for Dickinson, apprenticeship did not attract a marriage partner.

Rebecca Dickinson lived in Hatfield and worked regularly in the bordering communities of Hadley and Whately but recorded in her journal occasional trips slightly further afield, too, east as far as Amherst and west to Williamsburg. Other patterns widened the artisan’s range of influence without requiring that she travel. She often met potential clients, for example, when she worked at Forty Acres. On one such occasion Elizabeth Porter Phelps recorded that “in the Eve Miss Rebeckah Dickinson came here to make a pair of stays for my mother and alter a gown. Tuesday Mrs Crouch and Moses Kellogg’s wife came here—jest at night Polly came to do some business with Miss Rebeckah . . . I went [into town] returned that night found Rebeckah gone home. Fryday she came over again—in the afternoon called upon us Esq. Porter with his wife soon left us—Gideon Warner’s wife came for a visit. Just at night came up Mrs Porter and Mrs Colt, Polly and Nabby all for Huckleberrying—presently up come Miss Pen to see Miss Rebeckah—this day Miss Pen set out for home for Pomfret. Sat Miss Rebeckah went home soon after dinner.” Some women clearly made it a point to come up to the Phelps house while Dickinson was there, as did Polly Porter and Penelope Williams. But it is also possible that Mrs. Crouch, Mary Sheldon Kellogg, and Mary Parsons Warner as well as Mrs. Porter and Mrs. Colt consulted with Dickinson while visiting; they may at least have seized the opportunity to secure a place on Dickinson’s schedule. Penelope Williams then carried the fruits of Dickinson’s labors back to Pomfret, Connecticut; “Mrs Colt,” probably a member of the Porter family from Springfield, may have done likewise.

Perhaps it was her ability to flatter the short, plump figure of Elizabeth Porter Phelps that rendered Rebecca Dickinson a favorite tradeswoman at Forty Acres. Dickinson often produced apparel for special occasions, such as the August afternoon she “was at Sister bilings to fix Patte Church and Bets Huntinton for the we[dding reception] of oliver hastings.” The frequency with which weddings follow Dickinson’s visits suggests that for these occasions, too, Dickinson prepared gowns for Phelps. On one occasion, after a visit from Dickinson, Phelps wrote: “in the afternoon Mr. Phelps and I went
to Mr. Chester Williams weding to Loice Dickinson of Hatfield. Thursday miss Pen was married to Sam'll gaylord, Timothy Eastman to Anna Smith, Eaneas Smith to Mary Dickinson, Hannah Montague to one Isaiah Carrier of Belchertown—so much for one day at Hadley.”  

On another occasion, Dickinson labored at the Phelps home for the better part of a week prior to Elizabeth and Charles Phelps’s departure for Boston during spring elections, suggesting that she was engaged to help Phelps prepare to socialize in elite Boston circles as well.  

Unlike her counterpart Tabitha Clark Smith, Dickinson had no husband with whom to negotiate household expenditures; she controlled the income that she earned, though that income is difficult to ascertain, since no ledgers from the family are known to survive. She does, however, appear in the account book of the Hatfield merchant Oliver Smith. The purchases she made—seven yards of callimanco and half a yard of cambleteen, amounting to ten shillings seven pence—were debited to Dickinson’s account and credited by Mary Smith, for whom Dickinson had performed some service, recorded elsewhere.  

Some sense of the income she may have earned can be gleaned from the account book of another gown maker, Polly L’Hommedieu Lathrop.  

Accounts from 1803 and 1804, when Polly Lathrop was living in Saybrook, capture a year in her life; that “Polly Lathrop Ac⁴ book” is inscribed three times on the cover hints that this was perhaps the first such volume she opened. A small pocket is carefully stitched inside the first page to hold loose items. Her tally for those years lists thirty-two gowns, two cloaks, five frocks, two bonnets, eighteen shirts, four pairs of trousers, and two full suits of clothes for thirty-four women and seven men. She earned 3 shillings for each gown—4 shillings if the gown was made of silk. Alterations brought the same 3 shillings. For a short gown, Lathrop charged slightly less, 2 shillings 6 pence. Frocks also ran slightly less than gowns. Men’s shirts, like women’s gowns, brought in 3 shillings each, and trousers from 1 shilling 6 pence to 2 shillings 4 pence. The total amount earned for 1803–4 was £5 14s. At that time she was
living as a boarder, with a woman she refers to as Mrs. Latimer, in a house where her brother Ezra occasionally boarded as well. Entries for the next decade are less systematic but show Lathrop at work altering and making gowns, frocks, waistcoats, petticoats, and jackets, mostly, these records suggest, as part of her payment for room and board.

While gown making may have been among the better prospects for women who had to earn a living, the income it provided was highly unreliable. The uncertainty plagued Rebecca Dickinson, who bemoaned the threat that slack periods and the irregularity of employment posed to her security. “How times vary with me,” she noted one November afternoon, lamenting “how hurried” she was “formerly at this Season of the year.”

Aging and illness affected her income, as well as her peace of mind. Even when in relative good health, more and more often she found herself unequal to the demands of her craft. Dickinson recalled wistfully those years when she had been “hardly too scared to walk too miles afoot,” but now, she fretted, “old age has Crept up,” the number of potential clients necessarily declining as her geographical range narrowed.

As she aged, she grew increasingly concerned over recurrent bouts with the “Collick.” During the winter of 1787, illness and “Physick overdoing” caused her to faint. Alone in the house, she took to her bed, but this only created anxiety over her financial affairs: “have had an invitation to goe to Hadley to work but no Strength to move and must be Content with what is ready earnt by me since my health and my Strength is gon i would beg of god that my Estate may be a comfort to me now in the time of old age.”

Whether or not Dickinson’s “estate” adequately supported her, the apprehension she experienced in regard to the sources of her continued support is undeniable. As she prepared to receive her mother one winter, she anticipated her arrival with some hesitation, remarking “how we are to live i cant see.” On another occasion, she was “awaked by a dream i thought that i had Stole from mrs hurberd but knew my Self to be innocent but my Credit was a going,” suggesting that anxiety over financial security ruled her consciousness both day and night. Another journal entry from those months captures vividly the specter of unemployment and the tremendous relief of steady income: “god has in great mercy this Summer back given me work he heard my Cry and has sent imploy for my hands the god who heard my Cry has given me work.”

Her “Cry” is understandable: she well knew the precarious economic situation other unmarried women endured. A few days later she observed: “this week died at Hadley . . . a girl of about thirty years of age well and dead in a
week She had no home but was Driven from one brother to another and lived with her Sisters Some of the time.” On another occasion she noted: “this Day have heered of the Death of Patty Lymen above thirty years of age . . . a Disconsolate girl . . . when i Compare my life with many of my acquaintences i am Content and well i may be there is no unmaried woman who has a hous to Shelter my goods in when others run from Place to Place not knowing where to goe nor what to Do.”

The parents of unmarried women often made provision for them in their wills, generally a room reserved for them in the home of a sibling or some form of financial or in-kind support. At the time of his death, Moses Dickinson, however, had provided for each of his daughters equally, suggesting that Rebecca was then able to generate sufficient income to support herself; Anna Smith Dickinson, too, distributed her “wearing apparel and household furniture” equally among her four daughters. Furthermore, Rebecca may never have received her father’s legacy: while Moses had specified that his son, Samuel, would receive and distribute the funds from the estate, Rebecca was her brother’s second-largest creditor at the time of his death—he owed her more than ninety-seven dollars. At some point, Moses Dickinson did give his daughter a parcel of land in Williamsburg, perhaps with the idea that she could rent it or convert it to cash. But Rebecca was still in possession of this property at the time of her death, having never been in straits so dire, it would seem, that she was forced to sell it. Despite the constant lamentations in her journal, Dickinson was clearly not poor by any definition of the word; what is striking, then, is the acute sense of vulnerability that she could not shake, the fear that she could at any moment be reduced to utter dependency.

Singlehood and artisanry had psychic as well as economic costs and benefits. Slack periods meant not simply a loss of income but a loss of companionship: on one Friday afternoon in November 1787 Dickinson wrote, “this Day I am out of imploy the week before Thanksgiving . . . how like a being forsaken i live here alone nothing to do but sit and mope the time away.” Though work distracted Dickinson from her chronic loneliness, outings into her community sometimes grieved her. “It is not worth my while to go from the hous [she regularly observed] it is So lonesome to return here again.” Weddings were a prime source of employment and an equally sure source of pain. Of one upcoming celebration, she wrote, “fifty Copples are to be there this evening how gay the assembly will look but I have no Part no Portien there.” The extraordinary pain such events produced is captured in another entry, written after the wedding of yet another neighbor:
About Dusk or the Edge of the evening Set out to Come home to this lonely hous where i have lived forty nine years lonesome as Death . . . to ruminate the Strange thoughts and Schemes with which this mind of mine has Surmised to think on the many wais Contrived by me for a Portion in the world and with the world and like the world but after all here alone as lonely as tho i was Cast out from all the rest of the Peopel and was a gasing Stock for the old and young to gaze at . . . Came home Crept into my window and fastened up my rome reeled Down by my bed and after a Poor manner Commited my Self to god . . . [o] my Poverty as to the things of time when other Peopel are a Seeing there Children rejoicing with one another im all alone in the hous and all alone in the world.”

Evidence within those same pages of proposals of marriage declined to suggest that Dickinson was not so anxious to marry that she would accept any suitor who came her way. Nor did those “dark hours” come every day. Her spirits seemed to rise and fall with her employment, probably because work allayed her fears about the future and kept her busy in the present. When her work was plentiful, she remarked “how my time flies.” Gown making provided much of Dickinson’s social life and created a role for her in the community that in part filled the place of familial roles. For women like Dickinson, singlehood and the trade of gown making, which lent itself easily to an intimacy between craftswomen and their clients and community that could result in an honorary or symbolic familial status. Like Tabitha Smith, Dickinson found friendship in her client Elizabeth Phelps. The Phelps papers record a growing familiarity between the two women. References to “Miss Rebecca Dickinson” give way to “Rebecca Dickinson,” “Rebecca,” “Becca,” and by 1808, “Aunt Beck,” an appellation embraced throughout the community of Hatfield. Indeed, as an artisan with access to homes throughout the area, Dickinson may well have been an unusually important disseminator of public opinion in Hatfield. Her trade gave her access to the interior, even intimate spaces, of the community’s most respected families. Eighteenth-century communities recognized the potential risk of gossiping employees; apprenticeship contracts regularly stipulated that an apprentice agree to serve a master “well and faithfully, and not reveal his secrets.” While the reference usually signals tricks of the trade, secrets were easily had. Catherine Parsons Graves, for example, daughter of Catherine Phelps Parsons, remembered a customer who was “a great news gatherer,” who “used to sit with the tailor girls for news.” Needlewomen who traveled from house to house penetrated the façades their social superiors presented to the larger community and thus became ideal channels through which information and opinion flowed. Gossip “consti-
tuted the mainstay of community discourse in antebellum New England,” providing a means by which to establish and enforce codes of behavior. Whether Dickinson persuaded or influenced others, she most certainly gossiped. When Asa Wells married Bets Smith in Hatfield, Dickinson recorded both local gossip and her own role the multiple conversations that disseminated it when she wrote, “it is agreed by all Peopel there never was a Copel married with So Poor a Prospect of gaining livelihood.” In his 1910 history of Hatfield, Daniel Wells records that “as she traveled from house to house about her work, she acquired a fund of information concerning her neightbors that was unequalled by any other person. A gift of making pithy, epigrammatic remarks caused her to be regarded as something of an ‘oracle.’”

Samuel D. Partridge, a life-long resident of Hatfield, remembered Dickinson as a “very intelligent woman” whose sayings “were frequently repeated” by townspople. The flow of information between clients and craftswomen did not imply an equal relationship; needlewomen may well have chafed at this aspect of their work, which required them to listen deferentially to their client’s conversation whether or not they found it interesting. Yet access to elite conversation could also supply the artisan with useful information on a host of subjects from what is considered stylish in the world of consumer goods to more personal details about the financial circumstances or romantic prospects of clients and neighbors. Potentially, Dickinson could define public opinion as she commented on the lives of the families whose houses she entered.

Whether the information gleaned empowered women like Rebecca Dickinson, the conversations that unfolded over long afternoons of stitching and fitting certainly comforted Dickinson, who wrote, “How the person lives who lives alone god only knows there is no one in the world loves Company more than me but it is gods will or im quite undon Surely it is more than i can Doe to Submit to it.” Excursions to Jesse Billings’s blacksmith shop “to have some work done by him mending my tools and tools to use this day” enabled her to stop at the Billings tavern and visit with others in town that morning as she made her way to her client’s home.

At age fifty-six, Dickinson once again “resigned” herself to her singlehood, sighing, “i have this Day Concluded that i must finish my Dais with the title of old maid an uninvied title but Surely there is no hope for me.” Over time she had become increasingly reconciled to her unmarried state: “My bou[g]hs have been trimmed of[f] but the tree is not hurt . . . tho i Stand in the forrest with my branches of[f] and look not like the rest of the trees yet my mounten Stands Strong.” Her lack of children notwithstanding, she “stood strong,” confident that through her singlehood God would “Surely bring [her] feet to
the gate of heaven.” “There is a great many family blessings i know nothing of,” she wrote, “but the gifts of time alwais bring Sorrow along with them a numurous family and a great Estate bring a great Consern upon the minds of the owners more than a ballence for all the Comfort that tha bring.” Throughout her life, Dickinson struggled to cling to that insight, to look at a neighbor and conclude that “she has her fortun i mine very different and both right.”

Artisanry played no small role in that unfolding of events and the formulation of that conclusion. Dickinson’s career had enabled her to fend off the poverty so often associated with singlehood, to withstand the loneliness and sense of purposelessness that she battled daily. It may well have been her artisanal skill that permitted, or even encouraged, her to resist offers of marriage and to find a more favorable position in her community than the “uninvied,” “formidable” title of “old maid” invited. “To old people who remember her,” the Hatfield historian Margaret Miller wrote in 1892, “or knew her by hearsay, she was a ‘Saint on Earth,” a ‘marvel of piety.’” Others remembered her as the “most industrious woman that ever lived.” And industrious she must have been, and imaginative as well: surviving examples of Dickinson’s careful and inventive needlework hint at both a commitment to craftsmanship and expression of creativity that rendered her trade a source of pride and an outlet for artistic sensibilities (see plate 8). Her craftwork and artisanal identity provided the main means by which she formulated a place in her community, her public identity, and perhaps a good deal of her private one as well. Her artisanal skill contributed to her ability to make a considered decision; the income it produced provided financial independence, while the social interaction helped to alleviate her often intense loneliness, mitigating her discontent and allowing her to refuse marriage proposals when a woman in more serious financial or emotional straits might have accepted out of sheer desperation.

There is little evidence about when Dickinson retired from her trade, though an entry in Elizabeth Phelps’s journal suggests that she may have continued to influence clothing production in at least the Phelps home even after she stopped sewing. In July 1787, Phelps wrote: “Thursday the Widow Hubbard, the Widow Ellis and Becca Dickinson all here from Hatfield. Becca stayed—the rest went home. Fryday she and I went into town at many places.” The following week Phelps and her husband rode into Northampton to “get a black gown” for Phelps’s mother, whose sister Bidwell had died. Perhaps Dickinson helped Phelps select the appropriate fabric and trimming for this mourning garment while the two women were shopping. That Dickinson’s apprentice, Patty Smith, arrived Saturday to sew the gown
suggests the extent to which Dickinson continued to participate in gown making at Forty Acres, this time in an advisory role. Dickinson’s journal makes no reference to her craft after 1790, and entries in the Phelps diary after this point do not specifically mention gown making. Though she would live for many more years, Dickinson was by this time in her early fifties and perhaps found the strain of close needlework increasingly difficult. An entry describing how Dickinson’s mother, Anna, in a “puzzling fit” had broken Dickinson’s spectacles suggests that her work had taken its toll on her eyesight.

“My days glide quietly along,” Dickinson wrote in the summer of 1794. “Found in the spirit of thy holy day,” one Sunday afternoon, she rededicated herself “to live in the light of Spirituall life hoping waiting doing gods will to the end of my mortal life is the Desire of rebeccas Dickinson.” In March 1815, she fell and injured—perhaps broke—her hip; by then her perambulations had been largely confined to the home of her nephew and his family, who had taken her in. At the end of the year, on New Year’s Eve, Rebecca Dickinson “finished her course with joy” and was laid to rest among her family in the Hatfield burying ground.

The acquisition of special skills afforded gown-making women particular places in their families and communities, bringing them into intimate relationships with households throughout their neighborhoods, towns, and regions. Like “Aunt Beck” Dickinson, some artisans formed close connections with leading households. Clients became friends, and a world of female clients and craftswomen a source of artisanal pride, craft expression, and economic advantage. Marriage and family shaped those activities, allowing women like Dickinson to remain unmarried while proving an additional asset to already prosperous households like that of Tabitha Clark Smith. Smith, Catherine King Phelps, Sarah King Clark, and Esther Lyman Wright each drew on craft skills to enhance their contribution to their household’s well-being. In some cases, craft identity was more stable than marriage, as women like Catherine King Phelps practiced her trade through partnerships with three successive spouses.

Craftswomen whose conceptual and manual clothes-making abilities exceeded those of clients like Elizabeth Phelps or tailoresses like Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke nevertheless shared tasks, knowledge, and work spaces with a range of other local needleworkers, creating a community of sewing women whose daily work brought them into close connection. In other ways, however, gown makers’ heightened skill level gave them more in common with other artisans, including women who successfully established them-
selves as tailors, or skilled makers of men's clothing. Both gown makers and tailors acquired and cultivated the ability to create fitted and more fashionable apparel; Tabitha Smith and Rebecca Dickinson found counterparts in tailors like Catherine Phelps Parsons, who primarily constructed clothing for men and who grappled with comparable challenges in terms of materials and construction. In a world of male masters, clients and competitors, however, they also faced challenges of their own.