Part II: Chapter 6, Gender, Artisanry and Craft Tradition: The World of Catherine Phelps Parsons

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In the 30 January 1769 issue of the *Connecticut Courant*, Robert Robinson, a tailor in Hartford, gently mocks the gentlemen of the town for allowing their “cloathes” to be made by women. Asking readers to “count up the cost / and see how many pounds you’ve lost” by allowing women to cut their clothes, Robinson notes that any man of “wit . . . loves to see his coat cut fit.” The disgruntled craftsman would have been no happier upriver; in 1769, “nearly all the men’s clothing” in Northampton, Massachusetts, “was made up by women,” including Catherine Phelps Parsons, who, for more than forty years in the last half of the eighteenth century, enjoyed a thriving tailor’s trade in the growing commercial center. Born in 1731, she was the eldest daughter of Catherine King Phelps and Nathaniel Phelps. Her mother and her sister-in-law, Dorothy Root Phelps, were gown makers, and she passed her skills on to her daughter Experience, as well as dozens of other young women. The craftswoman was the sister of the Northampton bricklayer Nathaniel Phelps and the aunt of Elizabeth Phelps’s husband, Charles.

Parsons, according to Sylvester Judd, was for many years the only tailor, male or female, working in Northampton. She catered to a distinguished clientele, making the bulk of the vests and breeches worn on town streets in the years surrounding the American Revolution. The political, economic, and social leaders of the community and “a few others” had their finest apparel made in Boston but obtained their coats, vests, and breeches from Parsons. She also made and repaired clothing for Northampton residents at the other end of the spectrum; town accounts in the 1770s show debts to Parsons for her work clothing the town’s poor. This female maker of men’s clothing is never called a “tailoress” in early sources but is always referred to as a tailor (and her employees as the “tailor girls”). No records survive to document how Parsons received the training that allowed her to embark on a long career as one of Northampton’s most prominent artisans, but she was certainly notable for the training she gave others: she had so many apprentices that all of
Northampton’s needlewomen in the first part of the nineteenth century owed their training to her.⁶

Much of what we know about Parson’s work comes from partial transcriptions of the Parsons household account book and oral histories taken by Sylvester Judd. No surviving evidence suggests that Parsons kept a separate account of her labor; rather, she and her husband, Simeon Parsons, appear to have tracked this work alongside others performed for their household. When Catherine married Simeon, she underwent the transformation that all women of her generation experienced with marriage: the loss of her legal identity, now subsumed under that of farmer Simeon Parsons. Under the laws of coverture, married women like Catherine Phelps Parsons could not execute contracts, convey property either brought to marriage or acquired thereafter, or serve as executors of an estate. Their ability to control the use of real estate became circumscribed. She could not sue clients who had failed to pay her or be sued for debt. A woman working among men, Catherine Phelps Parsons proved no exception when it came to the law; she could not execute contracts or collect outstanding bills without the cooperation of her husband.⁷

Parson’s work, then, allows us to compare women who made clothes for women, and competed only with other women, with those who made clothes for men, and competed with men, revealing how shifting divisions of labor unfolding across the eighteenth-century Atlantic world looked as they emerged in rural Hampshire County.

Women tailors were not especially common across New England, though neither were they especially rare. They can be found in Northampton records at least as early as the 1710s and 1720s and continue to appear continuously thereafter; Hampshire County women who stated their occupation as tailor before the county’s Registrar of Deeds during the third quarter of the eighteenth century include Esther Graves in Greenfield, Martha Nash in Hatfield, Lydia Kellogg in Sunderland, Mary Smith in Granville, and Jemima Woolworth in Longmeadow.⁸ In Deerfield, Susanna Allen was recognized by the courts as a “single woman and taylor.”⁹ Moreover, husband-and-wife teams worked collaboratively in communities throughout the Connecticut Valley; John and Hannah Russell appear to have worked together in their Deerfield shop, Hannah taking over the shop’s affairs after Jonathan’s death, while, similarly, in Glastonbury, Connecticut, Annar Talcott assumed charge of the Talcott tailoring shop after the death of her husband, Asa. In Granville, John and Mary Smith were both working tailors in the 1770s.¹⁰ In 1772, Esther Harrison appealed to the Overseers of the Poor in Boston to ob-
tain the release of her children from the city's almshouse. She had found a good master to take in her son and needed her daughter at home to care for her other children, she asserted, so that she could work at her trade as a tailor. And Robert Robinson's 1769 complaint suggests that women were threatening his livelihood there.

Women artisans were less likely than their male counterparts to lease shop space, advertise in the local press or business directories, or assert their artisanal identity in legal documents after marriage, so it is impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy the numbers of New England women who worked in the clothing trades, steadily or intermittently, or practiced as skilled tradeswomen; the records are simply too scattered and too slight. Instead, it is more helpful to think in general terms of the characteristics of the trade and of the supply of, and demand for, artisanal skill in individual communities. To thrive, artisans such as silversmiths and cabinetmakers, whose goods and services were comparatively expensive and not essential, required large, prosperous populations, while makers of simpler, inexpensive, and more necessary products could be found in most towns. The demand for clothing was universal; most New Englanders, at one time or another, found occasion to purchase the services of a tailor or gown maker, either to secure new garments or to prolong the life of old ones, and the cost of these services was often small. That being so, nearly all communities in early New England had, by the middle years of the eighteenth century, and probably earlier, one or more practicing tailors and gown makers at any given time. Large towns might have more. Northampton toward the end of the eighteenth century, for example, with a population of just over sixteen hundred, had four or five working tailors and several gown makers. Gown makers were almost universally women, while tailors were more often men, though not exclusively.

Judd's claim that Parsons was her community's only tailor appears to have been somewhat exaggerated; other sources show clearly that Parsons faced several male competitors, some fairly transient, others less so. The pages of the *Hampshire Gazette*, as well as extant account books, reveal men and women working simultaneously in the needle trades. What varied, it seems, was the nature of their preparation for the trade, the physical setting in which they carried out their labors, the role craftwork played in their families' larger economic objectives, and the ways in which they were compensated for their skill and time. That Parsons is the only one to endure in the community memory probed and preserved by Sylvester Judd in the early nineteenth century, however, suggests something about her comparative significance among the town's post-Revolutionary tailors. When men and women recalled the means by which clothing was obtained in the late eighteenth century, most
remembered Parsons, a fact that casts a slanting light on the share of that market she once garnered.

Men and women gravitated to needle trades for similar reasons, but while tailoring offered men one comparatively accessible route to tradesman’s status, it was among the few avenues open to women. In other words, the same factor that made tailoring attractive to some men made it feasible for some women: it was among the least costly routes to an artisanal craft, requiring very little capital and equipment. The tools of the trade (mostly needles, thimbles, scissors, and pins, as well as an assortment of irons) were small, inexpensive, and easily acquired, and fees for apprenticeship were usually lower than in other more lucrative trades requiring more expensive tools and more elaborately fitted shops. A minimal initial investment equipped one to solicit clients. As an eighteenth-century London playwright put it, “The Tailor’s trade no ample fortune needs: / Soon as the suit’s bespoke, the cloth you buy / When made, deliver’d, and the cash is paid.” Most tailors did not maintain inventories of fabrics or finished goods. Instead, clients generally secured the materials, from cloth to trimmings, and sometimes even thread. The artisan supplied only his or her talent and labor, time, and a set of fairly inexpensive tools.

Moreover, to prosper, the successful tailor had to be “a nice cutter and finish his work with Elegancy.” An adept artisan also cultivated a keen eye and quick judgment about how a suit of clothes might cover flaws in a client’s form, posture, or movement and accentuate his or her finer qualities. “Any bungler,” Robert Campbell pointed out in his 1747 advice manual, “may cut out a shape where he has a pattern before him but a good workman takes it by his Eye in the passing of a chariot, or in the space between the Door and the Coach.” Moreover, he or she must be able not only “to cut out for the Handsome and well-shaped but to bestow a good shape where Nature has not designed it; the Wry shoulder must be buried in Flannel and Wadding; he must study not only the Shape but the Common Gait of the Subject.”

The means by which men and women acquired those skills differed. Young men apprenticed almost exclusively with other men, while young women who sought training in the tailoring trade routinely apprenticed with either men or women. Women who apprenticed with men are better documented than those who trained with women. Apprenticeships in the needle trades, as discussed earlier, like apprenticeships in general, fell into two categories: voluntary agreements arranged by parents or guardians, and involuntary agreements assigned by selectmen or Overseers of the Poor. Though young girls were often apprenticed to learn housewifery skills (which may or may not have included craft skills), others were bound to artisans and some-
times specifically to learn the trade of tailoring. Silas and Anna Graham of Wethersfield bound their daughter to the Glastonbury tailor Asa Talcott, while the parents of Clarinda Colton, of Springfield, bound her to the Deerfield tailor Ithamar Burt. In making these arrangements, the Grahams and the Coltons sought to provide their daughters with training in a craft that they hoped would afford an ongoing source of income for their present and future households.¹⁷

Catherine Phelps Parsons’s daughter recalled that her mother “commonly had three or four apprentices, and sometimes more.” ¹⁸ Early in Parsons’s career, one apprentice was Eleanor Strong, whose parents, Caleb Strong, a local tanner, and Phebe Lyman, were prominent citizens of Northampton. Martha Alvord, the eldest of the five children whose parents were Saul and Martha Alvord, also “learnt of her to make garments.” ¹⁹ Among Parsons’s last apprentices was the early nineteenth-century Northampton tailor Esther Pomeroy, only daughter of Heman Pomeroy and Esther Lyman Pomeroy. Alvord and Strong, fellow apprentices, were both born in 1747, fully thirty years before Pomeroy’s birth in 1777. Well over one hundred young women may have learned their trade from Parsons in the four decades that she was in business. Those who stayed at home (as Alvord and Strong surely did) worked one year, while those who lodged with Parsons worked eighteen months, providing her with additional, now-skilled labor to offset the expense of their room and board.²⁰

As Eleanor Strong’s training suggests, some young women who completed some formal apprenticeship to a needle trade brought an inherent advantage to the marketplace, in that they were often the daughters of middling and more prosperous artisanal and professional households. That a family’s social and economic position shaped a child’s social and economic opportunities is unsurprising, and consistent with long-standing practices across the Atlantic. European families of higher economic status tended to apprentice daughters to mantua makers, while families of average or below average means trained daughters in plain sewing, a less prestigious trade.²¹ For aspiring middle-class parents, skilled trades offered some prospect of social advancement.²² Information on the families of many Hampshire County needlewomen is too scant to analyze systematically, but women of special ability in clothing construction often came from families of comparative means. Strong, for example, was the first in a family of many daughters. When her brother, Caleb Junior, was born, the family threw its resources into his preparation for a profession. His Harvard education and legal and political training eventually won him the governorship of Massachusetts. With the bar and the route to the governor’s office closed to her, Eleanor received training, too, in the tai-
loring trade. The wealthy Strong family, for example, owned ten slaves; Caleb and Phebe Strong could afford to do without their daughter's labor for the duration of her apprenticeship. The parents of young apprentices apparently did not require that their daughters find some form of employment that generated more immediate rewards. A girl's apprenticeship in the needle trades was both proof and product of her family's success.

Upon arrival, female trainees usually possessed rudimentary needle skills, learned from their mothers at home. Some young women who hoped to master the tailor's trade had to struggle before gaining sufficient skill to practice their craft independently. Tailors sometimes tried to keep apprentices, whether male or female, insufficiently skilled to become competitors, assigning them routine chores or otherwise limiting their artisanal education. "Not one in ten" of the journeymen tailors in mid-eighteenth-century London, according to the London Tradesman, had learned how to cut a pair of breeches. That trick was even more readily played on young women, since long-standing cultural prescription meant that they were more easily asked to perform household duties than were their male counterparts. Letters between an early nineteenth-century tailor's apprentice in New Hampshire and her sister reveal the latter's concern that her sibling was being cheated out of crucial information: "You have given him already 14 months time which is more than would be asked for larning to sew and put garments together a year being the usual time—I suppose you have only learned how to make vests pantaloons and coat trimmings & if he learns you to cut it will be nothing more than he ought to for the time you have staid with him." This young woman constantly struggled "to learn . . . the whole of the trade."

Hampshire County tailors were no more generous. A 1791 lawsuit between Ithamar Burt and the angry parents of Clarinda Colton reveals something of apprenticeship practices and pitfalls. In May 1788, Andrew Colton of Springfield (thirty-five miles south of Deerfield) had contracted with Burt to place his twenty-four-year-old daughter Clarinda with the craftsman, "to be his apprentice, to learn the art of a tailor . . . and to serve him the said Ithamar, after the manner of an apprentice, the full term of one year." Colton paid half of the fee, thirty-six shillings, to the tailor, with the expectation that he would pay the remaining half upon completion of her service and training. But when Clarinda returned to Springfield at the end of her year-long term, she had apparently learned almost nothing of cutting clothing. In a scenario repeated in communities throughout New England, she had been more often used as a domestic servant to Burt's wife than an apprentice in Burt's shop.

As Clarinda testified before the courts: "I used generally to take work for
the Wife of the said Ithamar and if she had none for me I used to take work out of the Shop but for the most part she found me with work.” What’s more, Colton added, her master “never in any instance taught or gave me any instruction, either how to measure any person or to Cut out any garment.” That final phrase is important; those two skills—the measure and the cut—were the essence of the craft, and Clarinda had not learned them. Diamond Colton, who later hired Clarinda to work in his Springfield tailor shop, testified before the court that he had found her wholly unable to complete even the simplest assignments: “I asked her to measure some Customer that came to the Shop and she told me that she could not do it for she knew nothing about it.” Colton made a second attempt, and asked her once again “to measure some person that came to have a garment made and to cut her notches on the measure, which she did and after she had done it she did not understand the notches she had made in the measure.” Clarinda apparently had observed Burt often enough to mimic his actions, stretching her parchment along the client’s sleeve, and notching the paper to note the lengths between shoulder and elbow, elbow and wrist, and so forth; but once she removed her tape, she was utterly at a loss about what that information represented, or how it might be applied. Diamond Colton felt justified in cutting her wages to below those “Common to give Girls who had been properly instructed in the Art of Cutting.” Fortunately, however, before she began her training, Diamond added, she was already “a very good Symstress,” and after he had provided some remedial instruction, she was finally able to go “out to work at the tailoring business and Cuts the garments mostly that she makes.” Her year of service at Burt’s had done nothing to advance her training. When her father refused to pay the remainder of Burt’s fee, Burt sued to recover what he believed to be a just debt.

The Colton-Burt entanglement tells us much about tailoring as a trade for young women in rural Massachusetts. A one-year term of service seems to have been as typical in the Connecticut River Valley as in New Hampshire, and girls who had been “properly instructed” in the art of cutting were commonly employed in the shops of male tailors. The responsibilities of these young women apparently extended to the measuring of clients (suggesting perhaps surprisingly intimate physical contact between girls and men) and, once working, these young artisans, still under the employ of masters like Colton, generally made up a client’s garments from start to finish. Finally, Diamond Colton was apparently familiar with Clarinda’s skills before she embarked on her Deerfield apprenticeship but for some reason did not choose to supervise her formal apprenticeship.

Several women in Catherine Phelps Parsons family, as we have seen, were
noted local clothes makers. Her mother, Catherine King Phelps, was a widely recognized gown maker in Northampton and, during a subsequent marriage, shared her own particular skills with step-daughter Esther Lyman Wright, who became a busy gown maker herself at the close of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{31} Meanwhile, one of Catherine Phelps Parsons's six daughters (if not more) took up her mother's trade: Experience could be found making surtouts and performing other sewing in local households before her 1805 marriage to Perez Graves and possibly after.\textsuperscript{32} Toward the end of her long and productive life, Catherine King Phelps, a gown maker, moved in with her daughter Catherine Phelps Parsons, a tailor, and her granddaughter Experience Parsons, also a tailor, bringing three generations of clothes makers under one roof.\textsuperscript{33}

To better understand Catherine Phelps Parsons's experience as a woman in a trade dominated by men, it is helpful to examine aspects of the work itself—shops and seasons, products and profits, access to hired help, and circles of clients—in the light of those competitors. John Russell, working just sixteen miles north, in Deerfield, provides a useful point of comparison. Closely related to the formation and persistence of artisanal identity as it is usually discussed is a dedicated worksite, that is, a shop space clearly separate from domestic spaces.\textsuperscript{34} But dedicated sites were less necessary for artisans in the clothing trades; both men and women regularly practiced their craft in the homes of employers, their tools were small and portable, and their ongoing projects and materials could easily be folded away. Although early maps of western Massachusetts towns routinely mark the sites of shops occupied by hatters and cabinetmakers, tailor shops appear more rarely, because tailors usually appropriated spaces in and around homes. Some tailors rented shops in commercial buildings; others erected small structures on their home lots or installed shops in ells attached to their houses. Such shops generally meant a well-lit room lined with broad tables on which to cut fabric. John Russell and his wife, Hannah Sheldon Russell, worked out of the ell of her parents' house for six years before they purchased a lot down the street and built a home with a shop space on the ground floor.\textsuperscript{35}

Whether Catherine Phelps Parsons maintained a traditional tailoring shop is unclear. Sylvester Judd refers to Parsons's having “opened her shop,” but no record of a shop structure on the house lot of Catherine and Simeon Parsons survives, nor do any deeds associated with Catherine Phelps Parsons. The 1798 Direct Tax indicates that Catherine and Simeon's wooden house was two stories high, with 1,340 square feet, and was lit by seventeen windows, suggesting that it may have been a two-over-two-room house with a
lean-to addition, the New England “saltbox” typical of the period. No outbuildings are noted on the property. Where Parsons and her “tailor girls” sewed from day to day remains unknown, but wherever they worked, Parsons certainly benefited from the location of her home, one door east of Northampton’s Tontine building, a center of artisanal life in that community before the building burned—taking the Parsons house with it—in 1816.

Parsons’s work brought her into close physical contact with the town’s male civic and commercial leaders, whom she measured and clothed. The height, weight, and shape of each one provided particular challenges for the tailor. Years later, her daughter Catherine Parsons Graves, who as a girl had helped make garments for these men, recalled, along with the personalities of her mother’s clients and the houses they lived in, their body shapes. She remembered that Ebenezer Alvord was a “very corpulent” man with a “large belly,” that Ephraim Wright was tall and broad shouldered but also “fat bellied,” and that Noah Wright was merely “portly” and otherwise “good-looking.” The meaning that physical intimacies like these held for both client and craftswoman is almost certainly unknowable but certainly distinguished Parsons from her gown-making counterparts.

Working largely out of their homes enabled Parsons and John and Hannah Russell to blend family and artisanal life. Catherine Phelps Parsons sewed through ten pregnancies, bearing children every two or three years, between 1753 and 1778. Her seven daughters surely contributed to the success of her business, by either sewing or doing the household chores while their mother worked at her trade. The Russells had five children between 1761 and 1769. When John died in 1775, Hannah’s children were all still at home; the eldest daughter, also Hannah, now fourteen, surely stepped in to care for the four boys, who were between six and thirteen years old. Hannah Russell continued to serve the shop’s clientele for another eighteen years, until the 1790s. By that time, she may have had the help of her daughter-in-law. The records do not show whether Orra Harvey worked as a tailor before she married Elijah Russell, but she did after her marriage and for many years was well known for her craft in Deerfield.

Once established, tailors earned most of their income from simple alterations and mending. In this, they conform to other artisans of eighteenth-century rural New England, who derived much of their income from farm labor, not craft work, and whose artisanal skills were harnessed toward everyday maintenance more often than the production of masterworks. Jane Nylander, in her analysis of the accounts of Asa Talcott, found that less than half of his work comprised the making of new garments. Instead, he spent most of his time “cutting and fitting garments that were then sewn and fin-
ished in owner’s homes, and in cutting apart, turning over the fabric, and re-
sewing or resizing old clothing to extend its period of usefulness." Judd’s 
assertion that the leading men of Northampton had their coats made by tai-
lores in Boston but their vests and breeches by Parsons suggests that the bulk 
of her business came from the more mundane work of clothing production 
and maintenance. Parsons also, for example, regularly “turned” coats, ex-
tending the life of older garments by reversing the pieces for several addi-
tional years’ wear. The Russell accounts indicate that most days his work 
involved making and repairing men’s work clothes: leather and buckram 
breeches, vests, and coats. This is not evidence of any lack of skill or training 
on the part of these artisans; Russell, for example, was on occasion employed 
to create silk suits. Rather, it seems that the gentlemen of means who could 
afford these articles preferred to have them made by urban tradesmen in 
Hartford or Boston.

Tailoring was subject to seasonal variation. As Campbell warned in the 
London Tradesman, most tailors “are out of Business about three or four 
Months of the Year” (adding, with disdain, “and generally are as poor as 
rats”). The long respites may have been both welcome and worrisome to 
craftswomen, though they may have coped with them differently than their 
male counterparts. In Stoneham, Massachusetts, Polly Wiley cut, basted, 
made, and altered a variety of garments, including coats, pants, waistcoats 
and jackets, great coats, pelisses and spencers, slips and gowns, and even, oc-
casionally, bonnets. Her accounts, like John Russell’s, suggest that she re-
ceived most of her tailoring income in the winter; she might work on as 
many as forty-five garments in a busy January and lay her needle aside almost 
entirely in July, August, and September, when harvest time meant additional 
hired men had to be fed. February, March, and April—often devoted to 
making soap from the ashes, tallow, and grease accumulated over the winter, 
while calving cows launched the beginning of the dairy season—were also 
months in which Wiley spent little time sewing for others. Catherine Phelps 
Parsons may have appreciated such periods of ebbed demand, since she, too, 
had farm duties to attend to.

Earnings in tailoring varied with the season, the type of garment, and the 
skill of the artisan; gender played a role as well. For plain sewing, generally 
paid by the day, women fared poorly in comparison to their male competi-
tors. One means by which to compare the compensation available to men 
and to women in the clothing trades, and to situate that income among other 
forms of labor, is the series of price controls established by the Massachusetts 
legislature and adopted by towns throughout the soon-to-be state to combat 
price gouging during the Revolutionary crisis. According to these standards,

The tailor who made this double-breasted silk coat displayed considerable skill in manipulating the striped silk, which meets flawlessly at the seams. The height of fashion in its day, the high turned-down collar is expertly cut to enhance the draping. The construction of the coat's shoulders helped the wearer achieve the period's preferred posture. Eight self-covered wooden buttons close the coat before it cuts away into the skirt, where matching buttons ornament decorative vents.
mowers and reapers, for example, could charge no more than three shillings a day, while masons could charge four shillings a day, and joiners (“in summer”) three. Spinners could demand three shillings for a week’s work. Three categories of clothing producers were also included in these price lists. Male tailors could ask two shillings eight pence for a day’s labors, women tailors one shilling two pence a day, and women whose work was making women’s clothes could ask just a shilling a day. 

Thus, women working on men’s apparel could earn just under half the men’s rate, while women working on apparel for other women earned still less. These disparities are even greater than that between male and female farm laborers, in which the “weekly rates for ‘maid’s work’ equaled the maximum daily rate received by farm laborers,” or, approximately 40 to 42 percent of men’s wages, once the additional value of room and board is factored in. The list of price caps set by the town of South Hadley during the Revolution also supports these figures; in the comparative values assigned to men’s and women’s needlework, male tailors could command two shillings eight pence for a day’s work, while women performing the same labor could receive one shilling two pence—again, less than half the men’s rate. Writing in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Sylvester Judd also observed that Hampshire County “women formerly had for a week’s work, but little more than a man had in a day, or variously from 1/5 to 1/3 as much as a man [though] sometimes near half as much.”

Such gaps close somewhat when we look at rates paid by the task. In the 1760s and 1770s, Catherine Phelps Parsons charged between six and ten shillings to make a coat, between four and six for breeches, and about four for vests. In the 1760s, John Russell charged about five or six shillings for breeches, two to three for a vest, two to thirteen for a coat, and from seventeen to twenty-two shillings for a “suite of clothes.” Mending breeches might cost one shilling six pence; altering a coat, two shillings eight pence; turning a coat, fourteen shillings; seating breeches, one shilling. Russell charged ten shillings for a completed riding habit and just over three if he cut it out but did not make it up. Task for task, Parsons’s and Russell’s rates are comparable. The evidence available suggests that men like Russell did not necessarily earn more for the same work as women like Parsons; rather, they were more likely to perform a wider variety of services with a wider variety of materials and so could command a wider variety of fees.

To supplement the uneven income that tailoring by its seasonal nature typically afforded, many tailors, like other rural artisans, did other work, sometimes related to their needle skills, sometimes not. In Deerfield, John Russell, for example, in addition to tailoring, sold imported foods, including rum, coffee, chocolate, sugar, salt, and molasses, earthenware and glassware,
and shoe buckles and snuff, as well as scissors, pins, and needles. The probate inventory for Simeon Wells, also in Deerfield, reveals that assessors found his “tailor’s tools” alongside a set of “woodworking tools” and some “saddlers tools.” In Hadley, Nathaniel Seymour also imported and sold (“cheap for cash or grain”) rum, brandy, molasses, lump and brown sugar, and glassware and crockery; he also exchanged rum and salt for shipping horses, and salt for flax seed. Almost all rural tailors maintained sidelines that for some eventually became primary sources of income. After Levi Dickinson, in Hadley, began to plant broom corn seed in 1797, he turned his attention full-time to the more lucrative production of brooms, which eventually became a major local industry.

Tailors in commercial centers like Northampton also sought to supplement their income, often through retailing. Heman Pomeroy, in his shop opposite the Hampshire County courthouse, carried a small assortment of English goods, goods from Boston, and an ever-widening variety of fine fabrics. After two years of tailoring in Northampton, Sylvester Lyman too began to advertise various goods; his first shipment was a “quantity of Spanish brandy”—an inauspicious beginning, since alcoholism would eventually rob him of his own estate. Lyman soon operated as a “merchant tailor,” offering “articles selected with great care, from the latest importations, and equal in goodness to any in the country.” Cephas Clapp, in his “work shop,” took orders for “fine suits or single garments executed on the shortest notice, and in the best and most fashionable manner,” while he displayed a wide assortment of fine cloths and fashionable trimmings.

Hampshire County women did not, it appears, pursue a similar route to financial security until the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when commercial opportunities for women expanded. In the 1810s, “A. Howard” opened up a shop in Sylvester Lyman’s former tailoring stand, followed by “Miss Sprague’s” “Fancy Goods and Milliner’s Shop” in the same place. Sprague also offered “pelices, gowns, coats, spencers and bonnets made in the newest fashion—All kinds of millinery made and plain sewing attended to.” In August 1816, a young Northampton mantua maker, milliner, and shopkeeper named Sarah Williams placed her first advertisement in the pages of the Hampshire Gazette, announcing that she had “received from Boston, and is now opening, a large assortment of fancy goods, among which: muslins, silks, gassimere and flannel shawls, bombazettes, Scotch plaid, and a great variety of pelisse habits and bonnet trimmings. Also crockery, glassware, etc. offered at reduced price for Cash or most kinds of produce, as butter, cheese, grain, etc. Millinery and Mantua-making, in all their various branches, in latest Boston fashions.”
Both men and women artisans employed help during periods of peak demand, though their access to skilled help differed. In Deerfield, John Russell's relatively small operation required an occasional temporary employee who worked for several weeks at a time. On the first page of an account book, he records that in early 1768, “Bolton worked for me for 24 days... James Shennan began to work for me Oct 8, 1758.” Shennan stayed for just five days and was quickly replaced by Patrick Grimes, who worked for six weeks, settled his accounts, and then worked another few weeks before he left Deerfield in December of that year. Russell never hired more than one journeyman at a time, probably because demand did not justify it. In all, seven men’s names appear as having been at one time or another short-term employees in Russell’s shop.

Likewise, Russell’s competitors were in regular, if not constant, need of short-term, seasonal help. In the fall of nearly every year, advertisements seeking “good journeymen tailors” appeared in the pages of the Hampshire Gazette. In November 1795, Aaron Wright, a tailor in Northampton, sought two or three journeymen tailors that he hoped to engage for a period of “two or three months,” that is, to help see him through the winter’s work. In November 1799, Sylvester Lyman advertised for one or two journeymen, “to whom good encouragement will be given.” Lyman occasionally needed more than one man at once, and in the fall of 1815, required six. As his business expanded, he added more workmen to his seasonal staff; in November he regularly sought journeyman tailors who could find employment “for a few months, by applying immediately, to Sylvester Lyman.” Lyman probably recognized the financial burden these men’s wages would pose, for he sometimes followed this notice with another demanding immediate payment for services rendered, along with a warning that, “gentlemen are assured that no further notice will be given them except from the attorney.”

Tailors also sought the less experienced but often cheaper aid of apprentices. Notices seeking “likely,” “active” boys about the age of fourteen, though sometimes as young as twelve or as old as sixteen, were common; occasionally an artisan sought two boys, one fourteen or fifteen and another slightly older. Although male tailors also accepted young girls of about the same age as apprentices, their advertisements always specified boys. Unlike journeymen, who were almost always hired for the busy fall season, or occasionally in February to help with the winter’s work, apprentices were sought throughout the year. The majority of advertisements seeking apprentices appeared, however, between July and November, maybe because tailors recognized the need to give boys as much training as possible before the seasonal demand for their services rose. Journeymen could be taken on as needed, but novices would need more time to learn their work.
While men like Lyman and Pomeroy employed journeymen as circumstances demanded, there is no evidence in the pages of the local paper that Catherine Phelps Parsons ever sought to hire journeymen, or young boys as apprentices, and no evidence in other records that she ever employed such help. But apparently she did keep a constant stream of female apprentices, or “tailor girls,” moving through her shop—three or four, as we have seen, at a time. The two facts may be related: some inability to hire itinerant male artisans of advanced skill may have encouraged Parsons to keep a larger and steadier force of less experienced female apprentices on hand to help her meet her demand. While women were willing and allowed to work with and train under men without comment, men seemed less keen to take positions subordinate to female artisans like Parsons. Also significant here is the role of tramping in artisanal preparation. Moving from place to place was an essential means by which male journeymen in a variety of trades augmented their training, gaining exposure to new styles and techniques. Such travel, however, was not encouraged among young single women, limiting the supply of additional needlewomen with comparable levels of experience.

Before the 1786 founding of the *Hampshire Gazette*, artisans in Hampshire County secured clients by referral alone. Most tailors’ clients there were drawn from the same community as the artisan, known to one another through networks of neighbors and kin. Among John Russell’s more than three hundred clients, for example, ten extended families comprise most of the accounts. After the *Gazette’s* appearance, male tailors regularly advertised in its columns for clients and in doing so increased the chances that client and craftsperson were initially unknown to each other.

As the demand for fashionable tailoring grew in the new republic, competition between tailors also grew. In Hampshire County, such rivalry led Aaron Wright Jr. in the spring of 1798 to publish a sarcastic rebuttal to a competitor’s claims in the *Hampshire Gazette*. And when Sylvester Lyman returned to town after having spent some years in New York and Philadelphia sharpening his skills, he flaunted his connections in the pages of the local press. Offering to “all gentlemen who wish” the “most fashionable work,” he asserted his “superior advantages, [gained from his] working in the cities of Philadelphia and New York with the most approved workmen in the United States.” His work, he said, was “equal to the best custom work in any seaport in America,” and, further, he had “formed a correspondence with the principal [sic] tailors in Philadelphia and New York, to receive the fashions as they arrive from London.”

Wright responded forcefully to Lyman’s claim. He was, he said, “returning thanks to his friends and old customers, who have resumed the patronage
of his business.” And he “assures them that, although he does not pretend to boast of any extraordinary advantages from working in the cities of Philadelphia and New York and forming correspondence with the principal tailors there . . . he flatters himself he shall always be able to gratify his customers with the newest, and will strive to make his work speak its own eulogy.”

Lyman’s boast and Wright’s tart reply afford a glimpse into the tensions sparked as craftsmen both embraced and resisted forces that were altering their relationships to larger economic and cultural currents. For his part, the Hadley tailor Nathan Seymour stressed his ability to supply metropolitan style by informing “his customers and others” that he still carried on “the Tailoring business at his shop near the [Hadley] meeting house . . . [where he offered] cloathes made in the newest fashion, from Boston or New York, on the most reasonable terms.” At the turn of the nineteenth century, Lyman’s hubris challenged and annoyed his colleagues. But some “eulogy” was in order, for Wright’s world of reputation, personal connection, and local patronage was fading fast. Lyman was responding to phenomena that were reverberating throughout the United States and across the transatlantic world.

The same forces that transformed the economic environment of these Hampshire County tailors would eventually mean enlarged opportunities, too, for a small number of female entrepreneurs (like mantua maker and milliner Sarah Williams of Northampton), who used advertising in the local press in the nineteenth century to improve the prospects of their modest shops. In the Connecticut Valley, notices like those exchanged between Lyman and Wright and between Mary Gabiel and the Salmon sisters in the Connecticut Courant in 1775, while motivated by similar tensions, were rare among eighteenth-century craftswomen but became increasingly common among eighteenth-century craftsmen. For the first thirty years of its existence, no skilled needlewomen advertised in the pages of the Hampshire Gazette. Catherine Phelps Parsons was a notable member of Northampton’s craft community, but not once did she turn to the pages of a local press to attract business. It may be that the founding of the county paper in 1786, when Parsons was in her fifties, simply came too late to be of any advantage to the well-established craftswoman. Perhaps also Parsons was not among the rising numbers of New England women to master literacy skills. But another possibility is that the advent of the press, and of local advertising, reflected one expansion of commerce in the community and the region in which women did not easily participate. Hampshire County’s female artisans continued to draw clients by word-of-mouth alone for a further thirty years.
The career of Catherine Phelps Parsons reminds us that tailoring could prove a worthwhile occupation for those women able to gain the training and means to practice the craft. Women's artisanal work in this aspect of clothes making was in many ways similar to men's: both men and women served apprenticeships through which they learned the "art and mystery" of the craft, both acted as masters who imparted skills to aspiring needleworkers, both recognized and asserted an artisanal identity in a variety of arenas, from (most narrowly) the courts to (most broadly) the community. But men's and women's experiences also diverged, largely in ways that reflect women's relatively restricted access to the skills of literacy and numeracy (which hampered some women's ability to manage a business) and capital (which inhibited women's ability to establish multiservice shops). Prevailing gender divisions of household labor may have brought female apprentices to their trades with greater preparation than men but may also have caused them to face greater obstacles in obtaining from masters the whole of their training, though some form of apprenticeship (formal, informal, or something in-between) was a critical component of female artisanal identity. Both men and women at some point pursued multiple income-earning strategies, supplementing artisanal work with other activities, though men had greater access to market alternatives for their labors, as well as greater access to commercial spaces and practices and more flexibility in the hiring of additional laborers. Evidence regarding the comparative income available to men and women is mixed but suggests that skilled needlework offered women one occupation in which they could compete, task for task, fairly well with their male counterparts, while the daily wages assigned to semi-skilled labor (the work of tailoresses like Easter Fairchild Newton and Tryphena Newton Cooke) disadvantaged women workers, indicating that the acquisition of special skills was critical if a woman hoped even to approach a living wage.

Considering Catherine Phelps Parsons together with other women skilled in the making of fitted clothing, gown makers like Rebecca Dickinson and Tabitha Clark Smith, also reminds us that the gender of the client matters as much as that of the craftsperson. Gown makers labored among a predominantly female clientele and work force. Tailors like Parsons competed in a world of male clients and craftsmen. In the physically intimate world of clothing construction, the gender of one's client determined not only the specific skills the artisan needed to master but also could influence elements from the site of the craft activity (for example, whether the client was measured in public or private) to the forms of payment and accounting that would document the exchange.

Catherine Phelps Parsons's career, beginning in the middle decades of the
eighteenth century, was in some ways a harbinger. It is possible that she—
along with Esther Graves, Martha Nash, and other female tailors in the Con-
necticut Valley—was among those women who Gloria Main has argued
entered expanding trades in the middle decades of the century. At present
the evidence is more suggestive than conclusive, but the presence of women
tailors like Catherine Phelps Parsons affords an opportunity to reflect on how
they, as well as Robert Robinson, the Hartford tailor whose complaints open
this chapter, might fit into the larger picture of occupational regendering in
the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Tracking the tensions that accompa-
nied the creation of the first guilds for French craftswomen, Clare Crowston
has remarked that the protracted disputes over who would be allowed to
make what, in which women asserted their sexual identity to claim new rights
and privileges, not only drew on gendered understandings of appropriate
male and female labor but, moreover, “helped to propagate the notion of
gender itself.” When conflict erupted in the pages of the 1769 Connecticut
Courant, it reflected the arrival of a vastly larger renegotiation of gender roles
and expectations long under way when Robinson fired this salvo, and one
that would still be ongoing long beyond the end of his career. The belea-
guered tailor had hoped to convince readers that women were ill-equipped
to make fine apparel for men, but it was too late. In the United States, as in
Europe, the making of clothing was increasingly associated with women, and
gender divisions of labor in those trades substantially transformed. In time,
needlework would be hailed not only as an “appropriate female trade” but as
a “biologically innate female skill.”

But the story does not end there. In 1789, Abigail Woodman, a “man tai-
lor” working on Boston’s Creek Lane, appears to have produced clothing for
a primarily male clientele, though she was the only woman among the eleven
tailors listed in that year’s city directory. Of thirty-one women listed as tailors
in 1796, again just one, Martha Bowens on Sheaf Street, called herself a “man
tailor,” while none listed herself as such in 1798. Women had become in-
volved in other aspects of the making of clothing for men—many listed “tai-
loress” as their occupation, and others noted their employment in the “slop
shops” along Fish Street (shops in which rough, ill-fitting, ready-made cloth-
ing was produced for the sailors coming in and out of the city through the
nearby wharves)—and by the turn of the nineteenth century there were no
Boston women who identified themselves as “man tailors.” The women
who gained a foothold in the tailoring trades in the last half of the eighteenth
century would see their purchase collapse as the production of men’s cloth-
ing was transformed in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Parsons lived until 1798, the same year that tensions erupted among the
town’s male tailors, each anxious to secure his claim to the most fashionable cuts. An alternative reading of those events might suggest that the men were vying for the patronage of Parsons’s clientele as the aging craftswoman withdrew from active trade. By the time Sylvester Judd interviewed Parsons’s daughter in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, times had greatly changed, but Parsons’s influence persisted: “most of the older female tailors in town are Mrs Parsons apprentices, or those who learned the trade of them.” In the 1830s, the multigenerational legacy of the tailor’s skill was still recognizable. At the same time, however, Parsons’s daughters had witnessed the transformation of their mother’s trade, as thousands of New England women were drawn into outwork systems, while others learned to make men’s clothing through the profusion of trade manuals published in the 1820s and 1830s. Vast impersonal systems were replacing the world of custom production, prompting the antiquarian Sylvester Judd to undertake his researches in an effort to capture a world that seemed to be vanishing before his very eyes.
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