Part III, Chapter 7: Women's Artisanal Work in the Changing New England Marketplace

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In 1776, while a gathering of planters and businessmen in Philadelphia declared one revolution, Adam Smith launched another. His *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* would revolutionize economic thought and economic organization throughout the Atlantic world. At the outset of Smith’s revolution lay a small, simple tool: pins. Smith’s now-familiar exposition of efficiencies of labor, laid out in book 1, chapter 1 of his treatise, explicated the “trade of the pin-maker.” While a man working singly might produce fewer than twenty pins a day, Smith wrote, by dividing their labor into separate tasks, pin makers in shops could produce more than forty-eight thousand. Some fraction of those millions of well-produced pins made their way across the Atlantic, to western New England and into the hands of women like Rebecca Dickinson, Tryphena Cooke, and Catherine Phelps Parsons. Eventually Smith’s treatise, too, found its way to the pages of the *Hampshire Gazette* and perhaps caught these needlewomen’s notice—for pins lay at the center of their revolution as well.

The year 1776 found the Hatfield gown maker Rebecca Dickinson and the Northampton tailor Catherine Phelps Parsons at the height of their careers. Born in 1738, Dickinson would die in 1815, by then an elderly aunt boarding in the home of her nephew, his wife, and their children. Born in 1731, Parsons, who was forty-five when Independence was declared, would live nearly to the age of seventy, dying in 1798, just before the turn of the new century. In 1776 the Hadley tailoress Easter Newton was struggling alongside her husband to provide for their growing family; she would spend the last forty years of her life alone, finding a new career as an innkeeper in her widowhood. Her daughter Tryphena was born to a generation rising in the midst of political turmoil; she died in 1805, of cancer, while a young wife and mother. Elizabeth Phelps, who employed the labors of each of these women over the years, was born in 1747; her gown maker, Tabitha Smith, was born
about 1750; in their twenties when revolution broke out, both women lived
to see yet another war with Britain before their deaths in 1817.

Over the course of their lifetimes, these women witnessed vast changes—
the birth of a new nation, the advent of new styles, the evolution of new
manners, the development of new forms and patterns of commerce, the
emergence of a new economic culture. The world they left was vastly differ-
ent from the one they entered. One can only wonder what they made of it all.
At times the changes surely struck them as remarkable. During the spring of
1795, for example, Elizabeth and Charles Phelps, as well as their daughters,
Thankful and Betsy, made a series of trips to survey the wondrous locks and
canal under construction in South Hadley. A year later, Phelps and her chil-
dren amused themselves with rides to see a new woolen manufactory and to
view the goods offered for sale at a newly opened store. Meanwhile, the
family’s hired woman quit her job at Forty Acres to work instead at a spin-
ning mill. Did Phelps group these developments together in her mind, see-
ing them all as related manifestations of new economies taking root? Rebecca
Dickinson observed that same season the large number of migrants moving
round the countryside and paused to muse “how the inhabitence of the Earth
are a walking and a stalking up and down the Earth.” Both women were no-
ticing the coming of new social and economic orders that today we recognize
as industrial and consumer revolutions. In Connecticut, 1776 had seen a
young Polly L’Hommedieu flee with her family over the Long Island Sound
to escape the chaos of revolution. Later, L’Hommedieu surely perceived the
many ways in which the political upheaval had changed the course of her
family’s lives. But her own life would be just as keenly affected by the revolu-
tion of pins, the reorganization of the clothing trades in the early nineteenth
century. In 1800, Polly L’Hommedieu Lathrop was earning a living as an in-
dependent artisan, constructing gowns for women in her community as a
means by which to generate income; by the 1810s, she had abandoned the
women’s custom clothing trade to make men’s shirts, moving, with thou-
sands of other women across the Northeast, into the world of outwork.

The career of capitalism in the early modern and modern world—when
and how it arrived, what constitutes it, who embraced it, who eschewed it,
why, and when—has sparked a good deal of scholarly debate. While there is
still much to be discovered and understood, historians have forged some-
thing like a consensus around a pivotal phase in that transformation, the de-
cades immediately following 1776, when Americans brought forth their
Revolution and Smith his treatise. What once appeared to be competing
schools of thought, between historians who emphasize the quick growth of a
vigorous capitalistic economic culture and others who stress the longevity of
premodern value systems, have edged closer to reconciliation, producing a new narrative that describes the steady growth of capitalistic social relations that were planted and took root along with the colonies and thrived throughout the eighteenth century, blossoming in the nineteenth century.

Having looked closely at Hampshire County's clothing trades as they appeared during the lifetimes of six of its practitioners, we step back here to take a broader view of women's work in the clothing trades and to track larger changes the trades experienced between the mid eighteenth century and the early nineteenth centuries. During these decades, as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich points out, the "transition to factory production involved more than a move of young women from the household. It, potentially at least, disrupted a multitude of connections within the female economy." My aim here is to consider how such constellations of laborers may have weathered small and large transformations in community and regional economies. Putting these trades into motion, and contemplating how they may have intersected with larger developments across the Atlantic world, allows us to revisit the braided histories of women, work, and economic change with a fresh eye.

For eighteenth-century clothes makers in Hampshire County, the changing shape of their craft was closely tied to the region's almost constant state of war. The gown maker Catherine King Phelps, for example, grew up in the midst of Queen Anne's War; she was three years old when French, Mohawk, and other forces sacked Deerfield, some sixteen miles to the north, burning the village nearly to the ground in an effort to resist English encroachments in North America, and would turn twelve before she saw peace. By mid century, she had survived another war (King George's, in the 1740s), and two husbands as well. Her daughter, the tailor Catherine Phelps, reached her twenties as a more decisive conflict among European and native nations erupted and soon thereafter witnessed still another war as Britain's North American colonies sought their independence.

This constant state of conflict affected women's relationships to the larger economy, the general need for labor climbing as demands for large amounts of goods and services, generated by wartime exigencies, put more money in circulation. As prices for livestock, farm products, and crops soared, farm families positioned to do so shifted their energies to agricultural production and away from craft activities, turning more often to the hiring of others to accomplish those tasks. At the same time, rising wages drew growing numbers of women into clothing and textile occupations. Women had already begun moving into tailoring and weaving, but the labor shortages created by the mid-century imperial struggle boosted demand for their services. Be-
between the close of this conflict and the opening of the war for Independence, the number of girls and young unmarried women recorded as working for someone other than their parents nearly tripled. Both women's rising wages during these years and their larger numbers in the labor market marked an "important structural shift" in the region's economy. Women, like men, were pulled into the labor force. But women's points of entry into those markets were the comparatively poorly remunerated occupations, like needlework, increasingly abandoned by men.

These developments in New England were embedded in a larger "industrious revolution" that was transforming the Atlantic world. Households that once expended considerable energy to produce goods for their own use chose to devote more energy to the production of goods for the market, altering "both the supply of marketed goods and labour and the demand for market-bought products." The ensuing withdrawal of some households from certain tasks created new opportunities for others. As Jan de Vries has written, this "industrious" revolution "placed [women] in a strategic position, located, as it were, at the intersection of the household's three functions: reproduction, production and consumption." Put another way, women, as wives and mothers, had long been making decisions about how best to spend money and time to provide for their families—what to make, what to buy, when and how. Thus, it was their changing assessments and preferences that transformed the early modern economy.

New England families participated in this larger sweep of economic change. Between about 1780 and 1820, the Connecticut River Valley, and the Northeast more generally, witnessed significant economic growth. Rural households anxious to participate in the burgeoning commercial opportunities "intensified" practices already in place. Farmers and farm wives stepped up their respective productive activities; commerce expanded, and new occupations opened up; farm households began accepting outwork; rural families acquired more and more goods produced well beyond their communities, and even outside their region. These changes affected rural men and women differently. Men developed strategies that allowed them to take greater advantage of the mixed-crop economy already in place. Especially in towns along the Connecticut River, farmers hustled to meet the expanding need for fattened beef cattle. They planted larger crops of hay and corn in the summers to provide winter feed, while pasturing their cattle during the growing season in the uplands flanking the river. Upland farmers meanwhile spent winters maintaining and expanding those pastures.

At the same time, farm wives enlarged some forms of production and initiated others. The nonimportation movements of the 1760s and 1770s had
encouraged women to amplify their roles in textile production. Some directed more effort to the making of butter and cheese for the market and also to the production of salted beef and pork. Elizabeth Porter Phelps devoted more and more time to her dairy, sending hundreds of pounds of cheese each year to market in Boston. She became so successful at her “making-cheese business” (as she called it) that her husband, Charles, wanted to expand the operation. Between 1777 and 1806, the number of cows grazing Forty Acres rose from eight to thirteen. In 1797, when Charles and Elizabeth built a large ell stretching south from their house, they added a dairy room lined with shelves enough to store as many as seventy cheeses. The room’s door retains its keyhole, evidence of the value of the contents stored therein. Other families were apparently as eager to reap the rewards of a productive dairy as were the Phelps; in the spring of 1807, Elizabeth recorded, “Mrs John Hibbard is here, she came last night and lodged here to see the whole process of cheese making, as they are setting out in the dairy line.”

This increased farm and household production was closely linked to the growing rural work force. Wage work expanded “as the number of people with insufficient resources to provide for themselves sought work with households keen to increase their own production.” Such aspirations brought Sarah Jackson, a free black woman living in the hill towns, to the Phelps farm. Born in 1761 in Colchester, Connecticut, Jackson was at least a second-generation African American. Her husband, Peter, was born in 1746 on a slave ship crossing from Africa to the Americas. He and his parents were purchased by planters in the southern colonies, and sometime, perhaps during the American Revolution, Peter escaped captivity. By 1800, he and Sarah Jackson were heads of a free black family in Shutesbury that included three children. Jackson worked from time to time in the Phelps dairy, just as Tryphena Cooke sewed from time to time for the Phelps household. As Phelps, Hibbard, and women like them stood over churns and cheese ladders, they turned to women like Jackson and Cooke for help. At the same time, women like Jackson and Cooke (unable to invest in the livestock necessary for dairying) sought out that work in an effort to improve their own fortunes—in Cooke’s case, to help the family afford the new home that would house her mother’s tavern.

How such transformations affected women’s lives depended on larger and more complex constellations of circumstances. Historians studying a number of occupations have observed a hardening over the course of the long eighteenth century as notions of what constituted appropriate women’s work narrowed. These ideas moved in concert with other phenomena likewise reshaping women’s relationships to the marketplace. Women’s work in various
clothing and textile trades, for example, expanded and deepened as the overall range of occupations available to them narrowed. During the eighteenth century, women’s work in agriculture was reshaped and redirected; brewing, once a craft dominated by women, became an occupation associated with men, and dairying would follow a similar trajectory a century later. The emergence of professionally trained physicians was steadily relegating women to the margins of the healing arts. Certain trades (such as furniture making, blacksmithing, and other metalworking occupations) had never admitted large numbers of women. Shoemaking would come to involve large numbers of both women and men, though stages in the production were segregated by gender. Other eighteenth-century occupations saw the steady infiltration of female practitioners. Cloth making, for example, underwent a complete transformation; Laurel Ulrich has tracked the “feminization of weaving” in northern rural economies as this craft, once a trade largely reserved for men who possessed special skill, became the “foundation of local patterns of barter and exchange” that comprised a “female economy.” Teaching, too, saw increasing numbers of female practitioners, particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.17

At the same time, as people increasingly found themselves in commercial, economic, and social relationships with others largely unknown to them, authority accrued to institutions and practices that helped structure formal dealings among strangers (such as courts, the press, long-distance commerce, and institutions of higher learning), and the informal, interpersonal practices that had shaped women’s exchanges lost ground. For example, men and women had once been visible as active participants on court days; by the end of the century, the flourishing “litigated economy” involved comparatively fewer women. Once, few men or women attained medical skills or credentials though formal educational channels; as physicians became more closely associated with professional training, women without access to that training could no longer attain the local prestige of their predecessors.18 In other words, as access to economic opportunity became enmeshed within less personal, more formal institutions, women had a tougher time finding it.

Scholarship on shifting gender divisions of labor in trades closely related to the making of clothing help us define more precisely the issues at play as these developments unfolded. Even in occupations that at first glance may seem closely related, the character of artisanal work evolved in very different ways and at very different times. For example, after about 1780, the expansion of the ready-made industry encouraged shoemakers to recruit female labor in their own households to sew uppers. Women shoe binders learned
only one part of the process and so were denied full craft status, preserving at least for a time the artisanal identities of their husbands and fathers. Reorganization of the craft encouraged larger numbers of women to participate in production but without gaining artisanal identity. Almost a century earlier, New England cloth production had also begun to engage larger numbers of women without necessarily conferring artisanal identity. Elsewhere, European divisions of labor among cloth producers persisted in the New World, male weavers preserving the artisanal nature of their craft and restricting women's participation in craft processes. In New England, however, weaving as an artisanal craft practiced by men "disappeared" into the household, and into the hands of women, as early as the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

For the makers of both cloth and shoes, expanding production engaged female labor but did not necessarily admit women as full-fledged practitioners. Women did not infiltrate crafts that men had dominated; rather, within a wholesale transformation of the work itself, women gained only the limited skills necessary to execute some tasks. While female participation among New England shoemakers remained limited, women's role in weaving varied by region and was shaped by such factors as immigration and regional culture and economies. Adrienne Hood has shown that, in southeastern Pennsylvania, a booming economy, encompassing mixed farming practices and seasonal variation in labor, drew steady English, Irish, and German migration and provided residents with sufficient income to buy, rather than make, cloth. These factors and others combined to sustain European craft practices and traditional gender divisions of labor far longer than they did elsewhere; through the eighteenth century, cloth making here remained an artisanal skill largely controlled by men. By contrast, among New England weavers, apprentice-trained specialists were supplanted by "dutiful daughters and industrious wives scattered among dozens of rural households" who inherited "some but not all the tools of their predecessors." By the turn of the nineteenth century, "cloth making was not only ubiquitous, it was the foundation of local patterns of barter and exchange" that comprised a "female economy." Young women like Betty Newton of Hadley, whom we observed weaving for the Phelps household while her sister and mother sewed, became familiar figures on the New England landscape. Sometime in the first half of the eighteenth century, the balance had tipped in favor of female practitioners, and "cloth-making lost its artisan identity;" by the middle of the eighteenth century, New England's male weavers had been squeezed out, caught between commercial producers across the Atlantic and women who
worked in the “anonymity of the household production system” across town.\textsuperscript{24} Weaving no longer required any sort of sustained apprenticeship, as neighbors exchanged skill, time, and materials within local economies.

Textile production provides interesting points of comparison to changes in the clothing trades during those same decades. As Judith Coffin’s and Clare Crowston’s work on the clothing trades elsewhere in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world has shown, gender divisions of labor in the early modern clothing trades were “fluid and contentious.”\textsuperscript{25} Despite long-standing associations between women and the making of clothing, men had traditionally controlled the skilled labor essential to the construction of fitted apparel. When increasing numbers of women sought to enter these occupations in the seventeenth century, “no normative conceptions of femininity” had yet emerged to resolve disputes when aspiring female practitioners began to encroach on tailor’s traditional territory. Clothes making, like other crafts involving soft materials, also saw amplified female participation over the course of the eighteenth century, but its artisanal character persisted far longer. In part, this resilience reflects significant differences between the production of cloth, a two-dimensional product not necessarily associated with its eventual user, and the production of clothing, custom-made until the early nineteenth century, meaning that it had to be fitted to the body in question. Cloth was easily imported; clothing was not. The shape that gender divisions of labor took in shoemaking also moved in concert with the advent of large ready-made inventories. But there could be no anonymity in clothes-making crafts while the custom trade and the specialized skills it demanded thrived; comparable transformations did not come until the advent of ready-made clothing—at the turn of the nineteenth century for men’s clothing and, for women’s, almost a century later.

In the decades prior to the Revolution, New England women entered low-wage occupations like tailoring.\textsuperscript{26} By that time, men had—with both cultural and economic incentives—withdrawn from mantua making and millinery and had allowed women to participate in stay making (at least in the Connecticut Valley) without notable objection. By the early eighteenth century, the gown-making trade had taken on forms that would persist until the turn of the twentieth: small shops headed by female proprietors who worked alone or with a limited number of apprentices or assistants. Men’s clothing experienced more volatile change. By the mid-eighteenth century, more and more of this work went to women like Tryphena Cooke, who, as we have seen, seized opportunities to take in plainwork. In an expanding economy, women sharpened certain skills to advantage but did not master the full range of knowledge that sustained artisanal identity. For men like
Robert Robinson, however, competition from skilled craftswomen like Catherine Parsons (as well as Esther Graves, Martha Nash, Lydia Kellogg, Mary Smith, and Jemima Woolworth) clearly became problematic in the years leading up the American Revolution, prompting the anxious craftsman to attempt to cast doubt on the ability of women to master the tailor’s craft. Robinson’s claims came too late; they had already lost their purchase in a world that had accepted the success of Parsons and her counterparts. However, the advent of ready-made apparel for men and large systems of outwork would reduce opportunities for female entrepreneurs.

While attending to differences between women’s work in cloth and clothing production, one must also remember that, because of the significantly different construction techniques involved, women’s clothing and men’s clothing responded very differently to these developments, again in ways that correspond closely to the advent of large inventories for yet-unknown users. Here it might be helpful to compare each to other sorts of artisanal crafts that industrialized similarly. Men’s clothing production traced a path akin to that of furniture making. Anxious to even out the ebb and flow of demand in custom orders, furniture makers began devoting time, energy, and resources during slow seasons to the production of furniture for nonspecific consumers. Craftsmen were increasingly influenced by “scientific” principles of standardization and specialization that would alter the means and methods of production and acquisition. “Ready-made” products in woodworking trades appeared in the Connecticut Valley by the 1790s, only slightly predating that same development in the clothing trade. Some craftsmen—like the eleven windsor-chair makers thriving in Northampton between 1790 and 1820—embraced specialization, building and marketing a single furniture form. Others took specialization a step further and engaged other craftsmen to produce standardized furniture elements, like the chair seats purchased by Ansel Goodrich. Published pattern books enlarged access to technical skill and design while helping to homogenize the products of handiwork.

Each of these features—the advent of “scientific” principles to improve sizing patterns to fit all bodies, the use of down time to make garments for as-yet-unknown customers, the use of published sources of instruction and inspiration—also transformed the production of men’s clothing, as it had the production of furniture, toward the mass marketing of ready-made apparel. At the turn of the nineteenth century, several innovations altered traditional practice. Through the eighteenth century, tailors employed no standard unit of measurement to record customers’ dimensions; the introduction and acceptance of the tape measure replaced the “individualized intuitive art” of cutting with a standard means by which a man’s size could be
recorded and conveyed, heightening the importance of literacy and numeracy. Drafting systems proliferated in the early nineteenth century, inspired at least in part by Enlightenment faith in reason and a revived interest in classical theories of human proportion. Instruction manuals, supported by a booming publishing industry, transmitted craft knowledge from author to reader. And men’s shirts and other garments became the work of anonymous makers first with the appearance of large and thriving slop shops and later with the advent of vast outwork networks.

Women’s clothing production, in contrast, which continued to demand a custom fit to the body of the wearer, remained more akin to crafts like blacksmithing. Indeed, gown makers had more in common with Longfellow’s “Village Smithe” than we might suppose, since the trades of both lingered on the rural landscape well into the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, neither blacksmithing nor gown making could be profitably transformed into large-scale enterprises. Instead, blacksmiths and gown makers both continued to make and to mend products used locally and continued to operate on small scales, retaining the form and organization of local service occupations. The divergent paths of the two forms of clothing production affected the women who worked in each industry differently. The custom production of women’s clothing, on one hand, continued to encourage female enterprise into the twentieth century; the mass production of menswear, on the other hand, began to circumscribe opportunities for women workers almost a century earlier.

Outwork and the Making of Clothing for Men

Ample opportunities for outwork in a variety of industries became available to women in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and with the advent of the new century, those opportunities expanded and flourished. Throughout the eighteenth century, the increasing surplus of women workers in the needle trades on both sides of the Atlantic had facilitated the exploitation of cheap female labor. Slop shops and quilt warehouses, in particular, had taken advantage of the abundance of unskilled and semi-skilled laborers. Spurred by tremendous military expansion around the globe, the production of ready-made apparel became a “discernable and increasingly important part” of clothing production in England. As tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors departed for ports of call from the Caribbean to Canada to Calcutta, the need for shirts, stockings, and other articles accelerated. The English clothes dealer Charles James, for example, sold more than half a million shirts, trousers, frocks, and drawers to the British Navy in the 1760s alone.
Charitable institutions, orphanages, and hospitals also began to desire ready-made clothing for their residents, while the Hudson Bay Company and other firms shipped bales of finished clothing to British outposts around the world. And it was not just men's clothing that left London warehouses by the cartload: women's quilted petticoats, which bore only a slight relationship to the shapes of the bodies they eventually clothed, lent themselves particularly well to anonymous production systems. However, unlike the production of shirts, waistcoats, and other men's garments, easily carried out in garrets or other domestic spaces, quilting—which required long frames and lengths of fabrics—was more typically organized in large-scale workshops where quilters, seated along an assemblage of frames, could work under the supervision of others. But, this quilting aside, English manufacturers looked not to factories but to expanded systems of household production. Fabric was cut into pieces in shop or factory settings and then shipped out to women working in their homes to assemble. Huge systems of outwork developed that engaged thousands of women. One slop maker guessed that his firm employed twelve hundred women each week but confessed that he “could not state the number within five hundred.”

As similar phenomena found their way to rural New England, the landscape of labor was likewise transformed. In the 1780s, Levi Shephard built a factory in Northampton for the manufacture of canvas cloth. Weaving was carried on in one part of the building and spinning in another, though most of the flax continued to be spun “in families.” In the 1790s William Porter distributed raw cotton to Hadley women who then spun it into yarn for his store, while Northampton merchants handed out knitting. In the nineteenth century, women in Ashfield and Conway, Massachusetts, began manufacturing shirt collars and linen bosoms. In Amherst, Massachusetts, the palm-leaf hat business, which employed women as braiders, grew into one of the region’s most successful commercial enterprises, while button manufacturing grew into another important industry, especially in the western towns of Hampshire County. Elizabeth Porter Phelps’s hired woman Persis Leonard quit domestic work to “go to the mills to spin,” while Polly Randall, despite her “very great wages,” “could not support a family . . . and half-cloth herself,” as Phelps’s domestic servant, so she returned home to Pelham and began braiding straw hats. Both women embraced new economic opportunities that did not require them to be subaltern members of other people’s households. Even women with greater technical skill and training found outwork appealing: in the summer of 1835, Esther Goodell of Amherst went to Boston and “learned the dressmaker’s trade,” but by fall she had taken a job in a bonnet factory and by the winter she had returned home al-
together and with her two sisters began braiding palm leaf. Thousands of other New England women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also embraced forms of outwork that enabled them to balance certain objectives, be it gaining greater autonomy or a steadier income, retaining familial privacy, or simply staying home.

Women in the southernmost communities of the Connecticut Valley, those who lived near coastal ports, and those within the orbit of America’s fastest-growing metropolis, New York City, were likeliest to participate in the manufacturing of men’s shirts. Sylvester Judd in the second quarter of the nineteenth century recorded that “farmer’s wives and daughters in the vicinity of New York who have good homes, in order to get a little money,” made four or more plain shirts a day, at a rate of six cents a shirt. Women picked up the garments “all cut out and ready” stitched them up “for 6d ea New York currency,” and retailed for about 62 cents. “Wives and daughters of farmers and mechanics with homes and property,” Judd further observed, “will work cheaper to get a little money or some good garments than those can afford to work, who depend wholly on their labor, and have no income of their own.”

Few careers illustrate these developments as clearly as that of the Connecticut needlewoman Polly L’Hommedieu Lathrop. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Lathrop had been earning a living making and altering gowns, a typical craftswoman in the custom clothing trade. By 1810, however, something had changed. Lathrop was shifting occupations to enter the outwork system, an act symbolized at least in part by her flipping over her account book and beginning again from the opposite end. In that year, Lathrop records, “Rec’d the 8 day of Nov 25 twenty-five shirts.” A week later, she received fifteen more, and on the twenty-first, another fifteen. Another set of entries from 1813 suggests the pace of the work. On 8 November, Lathrop received from Reynolds twenty-five shirts. On the sixteenth, she delivered twenty-one shirts—at 13.5 cents per shirt—and received fifteen more. On the twenty-first, she delivered seven shirts, and received fifteen. In early December she received sixteen more, and during the month delivered thirty-six shirts. On the twenty-third, she received another twenty-five; for whatever reason Lathrop made a big push with these, delivering them just over a week later. Between mid November 1813 and early January 1814, Polly Lathrop produced eighty-nine shirts. Elsewhere, the accounts suggest that shirts comprised only part of Lathrop’s output; in a list that appears to be an end-of-season inventory, Lathrop wrote “Began the 8th day of November 1813. Made 50 shirts, 17 frocks, 15 shirt, 1 pair corsets, 1 ruffle, 10 shirts, 9 frocks, 14 shirts.” The year 1814 would bring more of the same; Lathrop opened the
year with the notation: “rec’d the 26 day of January 100 frocks.” Making custom dresses was no longer as attractive as churning out garments by the dozen.

Lathrop appears to have received the batches of sewing she completed through her sister-in-law, Sally Reynolds. When Lathrop opened her record, Reynolds had just passed her fiftieth birthday and was living in her family homestead with her widowed mother and a sister who, like she, had never married. Reynolds’s position in the process represented yet another means by which women contributed to their household’s upkeep; as a broker, she might have been responsible for monitoring the work of the women to whom she distributed materials, determining whether or not the work returned met her supplier’s standards, and so whether or not the workers merited full compensation. Sea captain Giles L’Hommedieu was absent for long periods in an uncertain occupation. Outwork provided a steady income for the Reynolds, Lathrop, and the L’Hommedieu women. The advent of outwork in Norwich coincided with the expansion of the practice throughout the Northeast. The embargo and nonintercourse acts that preceded the War of 1812, together with the war itself and its outcomes, spurred innovation in manufacturing in the New England clothing trades as well as an array of other industries. Shut out from Caribbean ports, northeastern traders turned to the southeastern United States. Thousands of New England shirts made their way to New York City and then to southern plantations. Fine linen shirts intended for wealthy men in the South shipped alongside far larger numbers of coarser counterparts intended for the enslaved work force there.

As the nineteenth century wore on, shirt manufactories flourished. In Fairfield County, Connecticut, the Ridgefield Shirt Company produced thousands of shirts each year, largely destined for New York City, with the labor of hundreds of local women. The firm was organized by George Hunt, whose father had launched the first stage line linking Ridgefield, a town in Connecticut’s interior, with the Long Island Sound. Hunt began driving a stage for his father’s company sometime in the late 1830s or early 1840s. While waiting to begin his return trip north, he sometimes took a steamer into Manhattan. On one such trip, Hunt was approached by someone in New York’s garment industry, who suggested that he might be able to earn some extra income taking shirts to Connecticut women. Hunt embraced the idea, using his stage route to deliver materials and retrieve finished goods. As he traveled through Ridgefield, Redding, Danbury, Bethel, and other towns as far north as Putnam County, Hunt invited women along his route to participate in the outwork system. At each stop, the women met the stage to hand over completed shirts and pick up fresh materials. By the Civil
War, his firm employed a thousand women.\footnote{Sometimes entire families embraced the work; husbands, wives, sons, and daughters are listed together as delivering finished goods. More often, several women from a single family appear: of the hundreds of women workers listed in Hunt's accounts, just over half worked alongside women who shared the same surname. In 1846, the first year that records of the company's work force are available, 350 women and a handful of men delivered finished articles of clothing. Of these, three-quarters appear at least twice in the ledgers. During the nine-month period recorded, most women returned work three or four times, participating fairly casually in the outwork system, but some women exchanged materials as often as twenty-five times, that is, almost weekly. Several women of the Keeler family of Ridgefield, for example—whose tavern was a natural stopping place for Hunt's stage—appear regularly in the accounts, Susan and Catherine returning shirts eight and nine times, respectively, while Esther, Hannah, and Mary completed between a dozen and sixteen batches of shirts during those months. Rachel Burt delivered eighteen batches, Fanny Dauchy seventeen, and Mary Gilbert more than two dozen. The number of exchanges alone, however, does not necessarily convey the number of shirts sewn; while the typical batch usually contained six shirts, some women picked up as many as twenty or thirty shirts at a time. Elizabeth Haines, for example, appears only a few times in the 1846 accounts, but on one occasion she delivered thirty shirts. Perhaps Haines lived at a distance from the stage route and so preferred to take away enough work to last her several weeks. Or perhaps she and the other women who delivered large batches like this took away shirts that they redistributed to women of their own families or neighborhoods. Thus, the two dozen shirts that Haines and others returned might have been made up by another circle of sewers for whom these women acted as agents, or brokers. Steamers and stages are often cited as evidence of a thickening of commercial relations in the first decades of the nineteenth century, alongside the growth of industrial systems like rural outwork. For the women of Litchfield County, steamers and stages made it possible for them to participate in New York's garment industry, producing shirts that made their way across even greater distances.\footnote{Taking in shirts to sew was especially appealing to economically marginal families, for it provided an additional source of income and allowed them to participate in the acquisition of a tantalizing array of consumer goods. Outwork enabled the children of rural New England families to remain in their homes and communities, rather than migrating to factory towns. And though rural outworkers became enmeshed in ongoing credit relationships with merchant middlemen, outwork, at least as it initially appeared in rural...}
New England, was not necessarily onerous compared with the factory work of women in the urban clothing industry who faced miserable working conditions and poor compensation.49

While rural outwork produced record numbers of ready-made garments and provided occupations for thousands of women whose skills and aims were limited, other developments affected the custom trade in ways that benefited women who were looking for more advanced skills and sources of self-employment. Women of Catherine Phelps Parsons’s generation had had to secure training—sometimes with difficulty—from a practicing tailor, but women of her daughters’ generation saw their access to craft knowledge expanding at the same time that their ability to compete with male artisans was contracting. The nineteenth century, for example, saw an explosion of published instructions, allowing anyone reasonably adept with a pair of shears and “acquainted with figures” to enter the tailor’s trade.50 One of the earliest to appear in the United States was James Queen and William Lapsley’s *The tailors’ instructor*, published in Philadelphia in 1809.51 A decade later, such treatises were being produced and published throughout the United States, in small towns as well as urban centers, as authors recycled old material, adding their own innovations. Amanda Jones of Vermont, for example, published *The tailor’s assistant* in 1822 and again in 1823. In 1823, Erastus and Joseph Wrightman published *The tailor’s assistant: being a new and complete system of cutting men’s garments*, David Watson published Fielder Clark’s *Easy and Correct Method of Cutting Men’s Garments by Geometrical Rules*, in Woodstock, Vermont, and E. Eaton published John Moxley’s *Every One His Own Tailor: The Improved Compass Rule, Now Called By The Third, to Cut Garments* in Danville, Vermont. By the end of the decade, Otis Madison and John B. Pendleton’s *New System of Delineating, founded on True Principles*, had appeared from printers in both Boston and Worcester.52 When William Sumner’s edition of Jones’s *The Tailor’s Assistant* became available, promising that “in a few hours, a person may acquire such a knowledge of the art, as will enable him to cut all sizes and fashions, with the greatest accuracy,” Julia Goodenough purchased her copy and proudly inscribed on its cover “Miss Julia Eliza Goodenough, tailoress,” while Abigail Sheldon, another aspiring tailoress, purchased *A Guide to Cutting Men’s Clothes by the Square Rule*.53

The availability of published guides gave aspiring needleworkers access to information they might not otherwise have had. For women who could not secure any sort of apprenticeship or whose apprenticeships, like Clarissa Burr’s, were inadequate, guides created possibilities where they might not otherwise have existed, though the purchase of a book could not supplant careful training under a practiced artisan. In these same years, however, men
with skills in clothing production expanded their businesses to include the sale of materials and sometimes finished apparel. Like house carpenters who in the early nineteenth century redirected their energies to general contracting, some tailors became less artisans than businessmen, opening stores with large inventories of ready-made garments. As increasing numbers of men like Sylvester Lyman formed aesthetic and commercial ties with their urban counterparts, the generation of female artisans that followed Catherine Phelps Parsons may have found themselves unable to compete. By the second quarter of the century, then, many New England communities included a “village tailoress” who filled the role once supplied by tailors—women like those who, by the end of the century, had become stock figures in town histories such as that by Northampton’s Jonathan Trumbull. Their abilities may have been uneven, but many such women found opportunities filling gaps left behind by the men who entered the world of ready-made apparel.

**Fit, Fashion, and the Making of Clothing for Women**

While men’s clothing production became associated in the first half of the nineteenth century with rural tailoresses who entered the trade with the help of tape measures and trade manuals, as well as other needlewomen who entered it through systems of outwork, the production of women’s clothing followed a very different trajectory. The highest echelon of women’s work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was and would remain gown making—or, as it gradually became known, dressmaking—and millinery work. The major technological changes that would transform the women’s garment industry (sewing machines, sizing systems, and published patterns) were all phenomena of the mid-nineteenth century. But no ready-made or wholesale trade developed in women’s apparel until the turn of the twentieth century. The generations of gown makers who followed Rebecca Dickinson and Tabitha Smith would have found much that was familiar in the work of their predecessors.

In the women’s clothing industry as in men’s, style shaped production. Throughout much of the eighteenth century, women’s and men’s fashions developed in tandem, “evolving toward a closer and closer fit.” Had such preferences endured, mantua makers, like tailors, would have been pressed earlier on to develop proportional drafting systems. But the appearance of the so-called empire or neoclassical style, with its high-waisted, fluid gowns, required different construction methods, pin-to-the-form techniques that persisted as long as the empire style in women’s fashions endured.
knowledge and skills were demanded, but the organization of the trade was not significantly altered.

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, the clothing trades, like woodworking trades and indeed the entire world of artisans whose work produced the objects now called the “decorative arts,” witnessed a dramatic shift, a moving away from the effusive ornamentation of the rococo style and a growing preference for the neat, clean lines of the neoclassical. Reasons behind this development are multiple. In part, it was simply the familiar swing of the pendulum, the exuberance of the rococo popular in the middle decades of the century necessarily answered by new preferences for visual simplicity. Prevailing philosophical winds contributed as well, particularly Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s emphasis on simplicity and closeness to nature, which encouraged elites to adopt plainer preferences. The excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii earlier in the century fed fascination with classical antiquity and the visual culture associated with it. That America was in these same years at work forging a new government based on principles of republicanism and democracy made these new opportunities in design seem all the more appropriate; cultivating a neoclassical style was the perfect enterprise for a new nation eager to make its own claim as the inheritor of the legacies of Greece and Rome.

Men and women throughout New England embraced the new fashions with enthusiasm, creating particular challenges for artisans in the clothing trades. The large number of alterations undertaken during the 1790s and early 1800s to comply with changing tastes certainly generated activity for gown makers; in fall 1801, for example, Elizabeth Phelps hired Fanny Allen to make her lutestring gown “plumb”—that is, to revamp the gown to conform with the slimmer silhouette of the neoclassical style—an act that was repeated time and again in households throughout New England as extant wardrobes were brought into harmony with prevailing fashion. The new aesthetic required alterations that were nothing short of architectural. As the advent of the mantua itself had done over a century earlier, the new style had the power to transform the clothing trades themselves. In the same way that the mantua, far simpler to create than the styles that preceded it, had enabled larger numbers of women to embrace prevailing fashion, creating opportunity for aspiring mantua makers, the neoclassical gown, simpler still and demanding less investment in both fabric and trimming, enabled yet larger numbers of women to participate in the new mode of dress. New skills in terms of construction would play a central role as well. We have already seen how shifting fashions may have affected the demand for stays and the skills
required for their construction; in the same way, the construction of gowns changed dramatically in these years. In fact, just as housewrights and furniture makers cultivated new skills to form their traditional materials into the lighter, airier structures of the neoclassical style, so too did gown makers develop new methods by which to achieve the effect desired by growing numbers of consumers. Not only did construction change as the round fullness of the Georgian era was supplanted by the slender silhouettes of the neoclassical style, but the materials in which garments was rendered changed, too, the heavy silks of the mid-eighteenth century giving way by the turn of the nineteenth to light, sheer cottons.

The tasks involved in mastering the new fabrics and fashions were neither simple nor apparent, even to specialists in the clothing trades, much less the women across New England who sought out a fashionable appearance. As David Lazaro observes, “when introduced in the 1790s, rising waistlines challenged everyone in the clothing trades.” Consumers’ desire for garments with waistlines just under the arms forced artisans—sometimes reluctantly—to devise and cultivate new abilities. The Taylor’s Complete Guide, published in 1796, captured their complaint: in the early 1790s, tailors were accustomed to cutting waists nine inches long, close to the natural form, but by 1796, since the “quick transition of fashion,” they were “obliged to cut them but three inches in the same place for the length, to figures of the same height and stature.” “Stripped” of “every guide that nature pointed out as a direction for fitting the body,” tailors and gown makers scrambled to devise new ways to meet demand while maintaining the same levels of craftsmanship.

For gown-making artisans, this radical shift in silhouette was a mixed blessing. On one hand, the simpler architecture of the neoclassical style meant that the steps required to create a fashionable garment were significantly reduced. Mid-century gowns had typically involved running stitches, backstitches, whip, and hemming stitches; fit might demand arrangements of pleats, gathers, and darts, and embellishments could include everything from robings, ruching, and fringe to multiple layers of ruffles that required additional effort, such as pinking or the application of trim. By contrast, neoclassical gowns were commonly constructed to accentuate the long, columnar drape of the skirt, meaning simple shaping at the bustline and small cap sleeves. The preference for simplicity reduced the need for elaborate trimmings. The gowns’ fabrics were sometimes shockingly sheer, worn over pale slips to all but reveal the wearer’s body.

Once mastered, the new style may have proved something of a boon to busy craftswomen. As one observer remarked, “the ‘slips’ worn at the Hart-
ford assemblies” were so simple that “a dressmaker could cut and baste three in a day.” However, the long side seams, which once required only loose stitching to assemble, now demanded significantly greater attention; while just six or eight stitches per inch had sufficed for the heavier fabrics popular in previous years, the sheer, light-weight materials favored at the turn of the century required more like ten or twelve stitches per inch to be fastened securely, almost doubling a needlewoman’s effort to assemble a gown’s skirts.

In part, and not surprisingly, gown makers striving to adapt to a new aesthetic atmosphere relied on tradition. For example, gowns in the neoclassical style no longer needed a neckpiece to secure the pleating that enabled the garment to hug the wearer’s back. But gown makers, at least early on, continued to employ this element of the construction techniques they had long practiced, even when they ceased to be important to the garment’s architecture. Pleats, once the means by which gown makers produced a close fit, now created unsightly bulk that worked against the most desirable properties of the lighter fabrics, and so craftswomen adopted a different technique in which shoulder seams, dropped to the back, intersected with angled side and back seams; the resulting diamond-shaped panel could cling snugly to the wearer’s back, achieving fit in a new way that was consistent with neoclassical styles and materials. Most important to the gown-making trades, however, was the introduction of techniques borrowed, for the first time, from their counterparts in the tailoring trades. Not before the advent of the neoclassical style at the turn of the nineteenth century did women’s garments, apart from riding habits, employ seams rather than gathering techniques to achieve fit. Some gown makers, aware of the advent of seams among more skilled practitioners but unable to grasp altogether the techniques involved, developed strategies that used the traditional, and more time-consuming, method of achieving fit with stitched-down pleats to create the appearance of seams where none existed. This use of pleats suggests something interesting about the creators of these garments, that merely achieving a particular fit was not the entire goal: the garment’s wearer may not have had a strong opinion about the method by which fit was achieved, as long as the proper silhouette resulted, but the makers wanted the finished object to reflect at least their awareness of the preference for seams, if not their ability to deploy them.

Clearly remodeling existing gowns to conform to new fashions generated income, but was constructing new gowns in this style as lucrative? Without more systematic evidence it is difficult to determine whether the greater simplicity of neoclassical garments meant reduced wages for skilled gown makers, who no longer devoted hours to careful cutting, fitting, and assembly,
much less to the design and application of ornamentation like ruffles and lace, or whether it meant that more garments could be produced in less time, like the “three in a day” slips that supposedly could be cut and basted in Federal Hartford. Apparently some women decided not to make the change; in the same years that the neoclassical style reached Northampton, Sarah Clark, for example, quit making gowns and redirected her energies to making bonnets and hats. Mary Dwight, a mantua maker in Hartford, did what any entrepreneur might do: she diversified. In addition to “the business of mantua making in its various branches,” Dwight wished potential clients to know that she “also makes curtains for high post and field beds”; several years later she again announced to readers of the local newspaper that she “also makes bed and window curtains and coverings for sofas and chairs.”64 Other craftswomen began maintaining inventories of shop goods, largely pertaining to millinery, in an effort to generate incomes beyond the sale of their particular skills.65

The same years that witnessed this radical reshaping of women’s fashion saw a radical reshaping of the American economy. These transformations in society and commerce meant shifting fortunes for the Hartford mantua maker Chloe Filley. Filley had first opened a gown-making shop in the spring of 1809, in partnership with Mercy Tabor.66 The two women carried on the “millinery and mantua-making business” on Burr Street, informing readers that they offered “the most modern and best approved fashions” and “as liberal terms as can be purchased in this city.” They also invited the custom of women from the outlying towns, assuring them that “orders from a distance will be carefully and punctually attended to.” A subsequent advertisement in the fall of the year elaborated on the sewing services provided, indicating that “they make habits, pelices, and all other kinds of mantua-making . . . at short notice.”67

In May, Chloe Filley advertised herself as a “Milliner and Mantua-Maker” with a shop opposite William Imlay’s store on Main Street, just south of the state house.68 A notice placed in November informed readers that “the co-partnership between Chloe Filley and Mercy Tabor . . . dissolved 15 April last.”69 Just beneath this announcement was a larger notice for Filley’s new shop, informing customers that an assortment of millinery goods had arrived, including lace veils and handkerchiefs, straw and winter bonnets, figured lustrine, lace armlets, white and colored kid gloves, and an “elegant assortment of ribbons.” She also reminded women in need of new clothing that the “newest styles, according to the most fashionable patterns from Boston and New York,” would be “executed with taste and dispatch.”

The following fall, anxious to secure customers, Filley placed an an-
nouncement hoping to attract clients in need of outerwear for the coming winter; the timing was fortunate, since Filley was about to endure a spate of competitors. A month later “Mrs Lincoln” purchased space to inform her “friends and public” that she has “resumed her business of mantua-making and millinery”; “Ladies Pelices, Habits, etc.” would be “cut to order.” In January of the following year, Filley tried to improve her fortunes by moving to a new stand at the corner of Main and Theatre Streets. Her old spot was quickly taken by Catherine Seymour, “where she plans to carry on the business of mantua-making and millinery.” Like Lincoln, Seymour seems to have been reentering a field previously abandoned; “her former success in pleasing her customers induces her to solicit a renewal of their favors.” In October 1812, Filley was on the move once more, relocating to a brick storefront just south of the Brick Meeting House. By February 1813, Catherine Seymour had given up her business and moved in with Filley, where she took in plain sewing.

Filley’s story reflects both change and continuity in the work of New England gown makers. In her day, much like Rebecca Dickinson’s decades earlier, artisanal women continued to weigh marriage and family against the demands of their crafts and would continue to operate within a largely female economy; these things changed little as the trade moved from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The organization of production also changed little. Small shops, headed by female proprietors, usually employed a small number of apprentices and assistants, as they would through most of the nineteenth century. These shops were in many ways similar to their predecessors’ home-based workshops. However, Filley also witnessed the erosion of relationships based on reciprocity in favor of others grounded in impersonal market forces. The lively exchange that pitted the Salmon sisters against Mary Gabiel was rare among craftswomen in the Courant’s advertising columns of 1776; after the turn of the century, such notices became commonplace. Though they continued to seek out a female clientele, those customers were no longer identified by word of mouth alone. At the same time, for some women, these changes moved them out of family circles and into communities of other working women. Chloe Filley, for example, lived not with her parents or a family at all but with a houseful of other single women on their own in early nineteenth-century Hartford. In the decades to come, larger numbers of women would live and labor alongside other working women.

Also new for women of Filley’s generation was the commercial context of the enterprise. In cities like Hartford and Boston, small shops were known throughout the eighteenth century but grew markedly in number in the early
years of the nineteenth. The Boston city directory for 1789 lists only ten mantua makers, but by 1805, that number rose to thirty-four and by 1820, forty-two.\(^76\) The pages of the *Connecticut Courant* capture part of that story as well: before 1805, only a handful of women, perhaps fewer than half a dozen, had ever advertised their skills in the local press; thereafter, new names entered their notices almost every year. In 1807, “M. Hinsdale” advertised that she “wishes to inform her friends” that she has opened a millinery and mantua-making shop opposite the printing office.\(^77\) In 1808, H. Marsh and Co. announced its opening. A year later, as we have seen, Chloe Filley and Mercy Tabor opened a shop, and in 1811 Mrs. Lincoln also opened one.\(^78\) Catherine Seymour tried her hand at the business the following year, but later, perhaps recognizing an insufficiency of skill or training in the art of fitting, she retreated to the Filley shop, where she took in plain sewing; she later opened a small boardinghouse.\(^79\) In the fall of 1812, Mary Barnard and her sisters rented the house at the corner of Theatre and Main formerly occupied by Chloe Filley and “commenced the mantua-making and millinery business in all its branches.”\(^80\) “Mrs MacDonald” did the same in October 1815, a few doors from City Hall, and two months later “E. Howe” opened her own shop near Filley’s old stand.\(^81\) In March 1817, three more women—Philenda Skinner, Mary Spencer, and “Mrs Mather”—opened shops, and less than six months later, Sarah Merrill joined them in competition.\(^82\) Dela Clark announced her ability to offer the latest fashions from New York in the spring of 1819, and by the fall of the following year she, too, had competition from the aspiring milliner and mantua maker Elizabeth Brace.\(^83\) In the hurly-burly of the bustling county, women pursued commercial lives based in public shops, not private homes. Reputation and word of mouth were no longer sufficient. Women entrepreneurs adopted the practices of their male counterparts in an effort to secure the custom in and beyond their community. For women positioned to do so, opening a shop, and offering goods along with services, could be the first step to real economic advancement.

Between 1810 and 1820, women in smaller New England towns also began to open shops, both in their homes and in their communities’ commercial districts, and to advertise those enterprises in the local press. Among the first of these in Hampshire County was a young Northampton mantua-maker, milliner, and shopkeeper named Sarah Williams.\(^84\) In August 1816, Williams placed her first advertisement in the pages of the *Hampshire Gazette*: “Miss Williams has 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. Soon after, other businesswomen purchased space in the Hampshire Gazette and Public Advertiser (tellingly renamed so in 1815), their increasing presence in the paper’s advertising columns reflecting their increasing presence among Shop Row’s proprietors. Mary W. Lee, another Northampton mantua maker, was advertising in the Hampshire Gazette in 1818 and 1819, while milliner Nancy Best announced that she “has taken the shop formerly occupied by Coll’ Breck,” in which she carried fashionable accessories like bonnets, caps, ruffs, vandykes, and even ostrich feathers that she shipped in from New York. In the emergent economy of the 1810s, reputation and word of mouth were no longer sufficient. Women entrepreneurs embraced the practices of their male counterparts in an effort to secure the custom in and beyond their community.

Although the society and economy of the Connecticut Valley underwent substantive transformations between the mid eighteenth century and the opening of the nineteenth, the gap between gown makers like Rebecca Dickinson, who learned her craft in the 1750s, and Chloe Filley, who came of age five decades later, was in other ways not especially large. The essential tasks of fitting, cutting, and stitching had, compared with changes in the men’s clothing industry, changed comparatively little. Most scholars note that mistresses and masters in the early nineteenth-century assumed less of the burden of their apprentices’ upkeep. Whereas Catherine Phelps Parsons had once boarded several of her apprentices, requiring of them slightly longer terms of service in exchange for their room and board, her latter-day counterparts expected parents to provide those needs. On the surface, Filley’s trade appears to have been less itinerant than Dickinson’s. She enjoyed the stability of a dedicated site and the respectability that such a site conferred. That difference, however, had wider repercussions too. Her inventory of goods, and the diversification of her income-generating activities, meant that she was integrated more thoroughly into a commercialized, market-oriented economy than her earlier counterparts had been. Although the skills of gown making—or, now, dressmaking—had changed little, the world in which those skills were acquired and marketed had changed a good deal.

Given the demise of the local aristocracy’s influence amid the rise of a commercial economy, craftswomen like Rebecca Dickinson, whose reputation and clientele depended on close personal associations with the women of the county gentry, may also have found themselves particularly disadvantaged by the redistribution of economic and political power and cultural authority. Their young apprentices, however, took advantage of these shifts
in the commercial landscape to establish in the growing market centers small businesses more akin to those of their male counterparts.  

Transformations in the eighteenth-century economy were prompted by women expanding their work in the clothing trades, and affected them as well, though just how depended on which skills they had mastered, whose clothing they made, where they lived, and a number of other factors. All of the women who grace these pages—Elizabeth Phelps, Easter Newton, Tryphena Cooke, Rebecca Dickinson and Tabitha Smith, Catherine Phelps Parsons, and many others—helped effect some reconfigurations and responded to others. When Elizabeth Phelps allocated energy to the dairy rather than the workbasket, she helped create the expansion of opportunity embraced by women like Tryphena Cooke, eager to add to her household’s resources. Tabitha Smith mastered a skill that would nicely complement her husband’s separate work as a merchant. The never-married gown maker Rebecca Dickinson saw craft skill as a means to preserve her independence; a generation later, Polly Lathrop may have, too, but ultimately exchanged self-employment for the more certain income of outwork.

For some New England women, their relationships to that expanding economy became attenuated. When Parsons sought training in the making of men’s clothes, for example, she embraced and advanced new understandings about appropriate work for women; but when her male competitors turned to a nascent press to expand their business, she did not join them. Other women, of a later generation, embraced the advantages offered by advertising columns. Here we may recall the notices placed by the Hartford gown maker Mrs. Mather. Like Sylvester Lyman, who boasted of “superior advantages,” having worked in the “cities of Philadelphia and New York with the most approved workmen,” Mather, too, assured readers that she had cultivated her skills among the nation’s best practitioners; just as Lyman sought to attract business having “formed a correspondence with the principle tailors in Philadelphia and New York, to receive the fashions as they arrive from London,” so Mather emphasized her continuing connections to the capital city to suggest quicker access to rapidly changing fashion.

But businesswomen like these were the exceptions in the early national Connecticut Valley. For many women, craft skill did not mean commercial opportunity. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, for instance, women in Connecticut who continued to be active in their local economies were increasingly distanced from new credit relations of an expanding economy. Women still participated in a vigorous female economy grounded in personal relationships, but the gap between the informal economies of women
and the formal economies that engaged their fathers, husbands, and sons grew wider. As Cornelia Dayton writes, while women's contributions to their households and neighborhoods remained “crucial,” “the worlds of commerce and credit in which their menfolk partook were increasingly unknown and alien to them.” For women and the evolution of the clothing trades, such developments meant that far fewer women, despite their enlarging numbers in an evolving industry, were likely to have the means to seize the reins of those transformations, to direct their course or to profit from them.

As the production of both men's and women's apparel changed shape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, male artisanal culture acquired a distinctly political cast. During the American Revolution, political mobilization drew men in skilled trades together in actions that helped form and then reflected a shared craft consciousness. In the years to follow, artisanal men continued to cultivate a sense of themselves based on their political and artisanal identities. Craft associations, too, began to emerge that crystallized a distinct artisanal identity among men. In 1792, for example, Connecticut artisans joined together to protest the state's tax system, the first political action undertaken specifically by craftsmen. Although short-lived, the action was not isolated. As artisanal men gathered together in formal organizations with political and economic aims, an activity not comparably open to artisanal women, one gap between male and female artisanal experience widened.

The changes in male artisanal culture were not duplicated in female artisanal culture, which continued to embrace long-shared craft values that persisted amid industrial, commercial, and political transformations whose consequences were multiple, varied, and contradictory. Put another way, the changes these women experienced were not part of any single “revolution” in commerce or industry; they emerged from complex and closely intertwined processes that came to each woman differently, depending on where she was already standing. The men's clothing industry succumbed early on to the control of wholesale manufacturers, drawing women into systems of outwork that ranged in circumstances and conditions from harshly exploitative to benign to advantageous. The women's clothing industry resisted such encroachments much longer, but transformed, too, in ways that benefited women with access to education and capital. A certain bifurcation occurred during this period as some craftspersons succeeded in adapting their businesses to changing circumstances while others did not. The historian Paul Gilje writes that those artisans who continued in craft production “occupied an ambiguous class location” somewhere between mechanics who seemed increasingly trapped on the lowest rungs of the industrial ladder, and men
who had enough capital to establish themselves as proprietors. Likewise, gown and dressmakers with position and luck found themselves able to convert craft skill to social and economic success, while others joined the swelling ranks of failed entrepreneurs and became workwomen in the shops of others.

Throughout the Atlantic world, as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, the clothing trades had become associated with its female practitioners. A century earlier, women had pressed their way into the guilds of England and France, demanding the right to make clothing for women and appropriating the right to make clothing for men. A craft once regarded as a male preserve had become the “natural” province of women. Those developments, however, would color the way later generations viewed their eighteenth-century ancestors. When James Russell Trumbull in 1902 concluded that “apparently everyone” in the eighteenth-century town “was her own dressmaker” because he found no flourishing “dressmaking establishments,” he was responding to his own late Victorian conception of what dressmaking as a trade for women looked like. And likewise, when he conceded that some women may well have “made themselves useful” by sewing, he was responding to and helping to perpetuate a vision in which women’s participation in the clothing trades was seen not as an exchange of skill but rather as a neighborly sharing of inherent abilities held among women. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such descriptions had a ring of easy familiarity that ushered readers away from the complex systems of production, consumption, and exchange that characterized early American women’s economic culture and toward illusions of housewifery that would gain mythic proportions.