Part III, Conclusion: The Romance of Old Clothes

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“OLD LETTERS and old garments bring us in close touch with the past; there is in them a lingering presence, a very essence of life.” These words introduce the final chapter of Alice Morse Earle’s 1903 publication *Two Centuries of Costume in America*, a survey of American clothing from 1620 to 1820.¹ To Earle’s readers—middle-class Victorians unnerved by their rapidly changing world—her vision of early American hearths and homes offered a comforting model of social and cultural change, grounding an unsettling present in a virtuous past.²

Earle titled her concluding essay “The Romance of Old Clothes,” and so do I. But while the “romance” of “old clothes” provided Earle and her readers with a tangible connection to their ancestry, for me, the romance assumes a fuller meaning. A century after Earle limned the clothing of distant generations, I wonder how our contemporary perceptions of early American women are to some degree still products of her historical creation, shaping subsequent history writing, and maybe history too. Given what we know about the character of needlework as a trade for women in early New England, it is worth considering why that history has become so difficult to see, how it was that early American needlework became so thoroughly suffused with romance. Tom Englehardt and Edward T. Linenthal have observed that our shared myths, our cultural fables, reveal what we as a nation “can and cannot bear to look at or consider at any moment, and why.”³ So what was it about early American women’s work that became, over the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth, sufficiently unbearable that romantic revisionings were embraced instead? What did Earle’s vision of an idealized past mean at the close of the nineteenth century, and why does it still resonate, if now more familiar in the forms of Betsy Ross and Colonial Barbie, at the turn of the twenty-first? What does it illuminate, and what does it obscure?

Scholars have written persuasively about the rise of artisan republicanism and the aggressively masculine cast to that culture, so strong that it “utterly obliterated the presence of women in commerce and the trades.”⁴ At the founding of the republic, men whose economic independence was jeopar-
dized by developments in commerce and industry successfully articulated a political vision grounded in male culture and male privilege, limiting women’s actual role in artisanal activities while reshaping in dramatic and enduring ways public understanding of what constitutes artisanal life. That story need not be retold here, but it provides critical context for another confluence of factors, specific to clothing and needlework, that clouded our historical view. Changes in the garment industry in the nineteenth century gradually took clothing production, first of men’s garments and later of women’s, out of homes and into factories, gradually removing working women from sight, consciousness, and imagination. Innovations in both home sewing and dressmaking during that same period—most notably, published drafting systems and the sewing machine—conflated the work of custom dressmakers and home sewing, blurring distinctions between professional and amateur sewing, and sewers. Finally, the colonial and craft revivals of the half-century following the 1876 Centennial, responding to those very changes along with others of industrializing America, selectively remembered and revived women’s earlier work, celebrated the ornamental aspects of needlework, romanticized the tedious, and effaced the remunerative.

As early as the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the notion that plain sewing was most appropriately performed by working-class women was firmly planted. Louisa Hall recalled that her aunt “kept a sempstress in the family, and a part of her duty was to make and mend my clothes.” Hall was so far removed from the process by which her wardrobe was constructed that when she entered her twenties (in 1822), she “had a fashionable contempt for plain sewing” and could not, she said, “conjecture how a single garment that I wore was cut or made.” Hall found such work beneath her; what’s more, her “contempt” for plain sewing was “fashionable.” In 1831, a young Rachel Stearns, under pressure of necessity, recorded her willingness to sew for another household, although she had earlier “thought it quite too degrading” to go out sewing. Art and literature echoed concerns voiced by economic and social reformers as they depicted the sewing women’s vulnerability to prostitution. In the nineteenth century, as greater amounts of sewing were relegated to waged laborers, clothing production became less a general category of work familiar to all women than an occupation associated with degradation, depravity, and chronic poverty.

While industrialization of the men’s garment industry widened real and symbolic gaps between the women who produced clothing and the families that consumed it, changes in the women’s garment industry muddied distinctions between producers and consumers. The creation of women’s cloth-
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ing, with its greater emphasis on tight fit, for most of the nineteenth century had proven nearly impossible to mechanize. While garments least dependent on a close fit (such as cloaks, petticoats, and chemises) shifted toward factory production by the 1860s and 1870s, blouses (known then as shirtwaists) and skirts did not follow until their more billowy silhouette came into vogue in the 1890s. Dresses were not mass produced until the 1910s. Small shops with female proprietors, then, survived far longer in the production of women’s apparel; nevertheless, the effects of industrialization on the garment industries as well as home-sewing were felt, and in ways that conflated the work of custom dressmakers and home sewers.

Events in the nineteenth-century history of cloth production had transformed relationships between materials and labor. In 1774, the fabric used in a medium-quality gown accounted for 90 percent of its cost. As cloth production industrialized, the price of materials dropped steadily, while the cost associated with labor grew in comparison. In revolutionary New England, hiring skilled artisans to insure successful outcomes was an obvious choice; as the cost of fabric plummeted, hiring well-trained craftspersons demanded the largest outlay, prompting larger numbers of individuals to try to master skills for themselves. Interest in acquiring such proficiencies helped drive the proliferation of drafting systems and other tools intended to facilitate home clothing production.

The introduction and adoption of the sewing machine had had surprisingly little effect on the actual work of home sewing, since the main problem for home sewers was never the stitching of seams but rather the cutting of a well-fitting garment. The special levels of skill in cutting—expertise that had provided Rebecca Dickinson, Tabitha Clark Smith, and Catherine Phelps Parsons with their incomes—still lay beyond the reach of many home sewers. In the nineteenth century, however, the development of drafting systems and the appearance of published graded patterns radically altered clothing production, both among professionals and among home sewers. Consumers were inundated with innovations that promised to replace the “art and mystery” of clothing production with reliable, easy-to-use tools.

The appeal of these products as well as the income they promised were linked in no small part to the dramatic growth, in Victorian America, in the numbers of unmarried women in search of some source of economic support. The demographic catastrophe of the Civil War and the lure of westward migration skewed sex ratios in communities throughout the eastern United States. In Massachusetts in 1875, the three counties (Hampshire, Hampden, and Franklin) that comprised the former Hampshire County contained some 5,000 more women than men. Ten years later, women outnumbered
men by more than 7,400. In 1891, observing the 2,000 “surplus” women in Northampton, a writer for the *Hampshire Gazette* wondered “what our excess of female population does for a living.” His investigation of life “among the dressmakers” estimated that “over 200 women . . . make a living by clothing and adorning the bodies of their sex and there must be many more.” Urban centers experienced the same phenomenon on a larger scale. In 1828, 15 Hartford, Connecticut, women had worked as mantua makers and dressmakers; by 1890, that number had grown to 278 (or one dressmaker for every 190 residents), and by 1900 to 329. Similarly, Boston’s 1875 city directory lists 270 dressmakers, with more in the neighboring towns of Charlestown and West Roxbury, serving a population of 250,000. Just five years later the number had nearly doubled, 456 dressmakers advertising in the directory’s columns. By 1905, the number had climbed to 688; by 1910, to 853. And by 1915, the peak of the industry in that city, 1,189 women were practicing dressmakers.

As home sewers with new tools and abilities encroached on territory once reserved for professional craftswomen, the work of artisans and amateurs edged closer. The “ideological conflation” of women’s appropriate work in the marketplace (in which needle trades played a large role) and women’s appropriate work in the home worked to the disadvantage of skilled needle workers. Tradeswomen lost work to customers who now fashioned their own clothes and faced growing competition from self-trained amateurs who marketed their own newly acquired skills. The means by which women’s work in early American needle trades have receded from view was along and complicated process, but certainly, as Wendy Gamber has observed, “by simultaneously recommending their systems ‘to dressmakers’ and ‘to ladies in private life,’ the makers of systems increasingly blurred the boundaries between home and workshop . . . . By identifying dress cutting with middle-class domesticity—by classifying it as a variant of the housewife’s labor that ‘all’ women performed—systematizers obscured the artisanal origins of the dressmaking trade.

Those changes in the garment and home sewing industries took place amid larger cultural dislocations that caused Americans to look longingly back to a preindustrial past that was just then slipping slightly beyond the reach of memory. Ornamental needlework, in its production and consumption, played a pivotal role in a culture discomfited by industrial capitalism. Throughout the nineteenth century, fancywork helped growing numbers of middle- and working-class women resist the encroachments of industrial capitalism, by allowing women to domesticate products of mass production as they selected and reworked them into artful reflections of a more personal aesthetic. The same developments in production, consumption, and distri-
bution that put more forms of needlework into the hands of larger numbers
of women would help create the gulf between experience and memory on
which all revivals rest. At the same time, the advent of ornamental needle-
work forms for the masses meant that, when the colonial and craft revivals
took hold, women for whom fancywork was an important part of the present
naturally took an interest in the fancywork of the past; that work, no longer
the province of comparatively privileged women like Elizabeth Porter Phelps,
was “revived” and remembered.

As a result of this confluence of forces, ever-larger numbers of women
during these decades embraced hobbies like Berlin work (a craft developed
for amateur stitchers involving embroidery patterns worked on canvas with
brightly colored German wools, enormously popular in the first half of the
nineteenth century) and those ubiquitous mottoes of the 1870s and 1880s
with which we are today so familiar. While well-wrought eighteenth-century
samplers and needlework pictures had required a good deal of talent, dedica-
tion, and training, the stitching of mottoes on preprinted perforated card-
board, products of another sort of deskilling elsewhere in industrializing
America, demanded comparatively minimal time and effort, little money,
and less expertise to complete.15 Pale shadows of the finer ornamental needle-
work produced by eighteenth-century elites, these projects gave the parlors
of the growing middle and even working classes a veneer of respectability by
gesturing toward work historically associated with genteel women.

While industrialization altered the ways in which both practical and orna-
mental needlework was practiced, experienced, and remembered by both
leisured and working American women, the broader cultural response to in-
dustrialization was having yet another effect on the way women and men
imagined needlework in early America. As early as the second quarter of the
nineteenth century, a complex web of myth, nostalgia, and wonder had come
to surround preindustrial women’s labor, as the grandchildren of the revolu-
tionary generation looked back at hardy and persevering grandmothers and
suffered, they feared, by the comparison. By the 1860s, hosts of fund-raising
“Sanitary Fairs” celebrated the supposedly simple domesticity of the colonial
kitchen and New England farmhouse life, reenacting apple parings, wed-
dings, and bees. Women in mobcaps and long white aprons sat before spin-
ning wheels, worked some knitting in front of huge faux hearths, or gathered
around quilt frames. In an era of tension surrounding women’s political
rights, their access to education, and their roles in the workplace, coupled
with unease over rapid immigration and class anxiety, white middle-class
women created and then placed themselves within reassuring tableaux of fe-
male communality.16
While this sentimentalized domestic sphere—and the clothing and textiles produced there—became central to civic events, American public life gained a new feature in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the introduction of Betsy Ross, the so-called seamstress who was said to have sewed the nation’s first flag. The first printed reference to the Ross story appeared in the 15 March 1870 Philadelphia Press. The legend spread throughout the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, promoted vigorously among her descendants. Their interests are clear, but the story’s warm reception is perhaps explained by women’s struggle for suffrage, raging through those same years, since the Ross tale allowed Americans caught up in both Centennials and suffrage an opportunity to welcome a female character to the cast of the nation’s origin story without challenging women’s traditional relationship to the state. The Ross story suggested to Victorian Americans that knowledge of domestic skills answered an important need in Revolutionary America’s social and political order, and that female patriotism was most appropriately expressed through household labors. In an era of gendered political tumult, that message comforted millions. After C. H. Weisgerber’s popular painting “The Birth of Our Nation’s Flag” (depicting a solemn George Washington, George Ross, and Robert Morris gathered in Ross’s parlor, looking on as Betsy serenely stitches) was exhibited at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, interest in Ross revived, and a movement was launched to preserve the “American Flag House.”

Although Ross’s work as seamstress was a crucial component of her characterization (she was an upholsterer, but this occupation held less emotional appeal), clothing production was not a large part of the Colonial Revival, although clothing was. Revivalists enjoyed dressing up in colonial costume, or at least what someone imagined colonial costume to be. In Deerfield, the “Frary House,” an eighteenth-century house restored by the Cambridge historian C. Alice Baker, opened in 1892 with a “colonial” ball. Town residents dug through their trunks and attics to find, or to cobble together, clothing from the wardrobes of their ancestors. New England archives teem with photographs of women in real eighteenth-century garments or fantasies of colonial costume, for pageants, parades, and private events. Descendants of Elizabeth Porter Phelps, like many of their privileged peers across the region, had photographs and even portraits taken in the clothing of their ancestors.

But few women active in the colonial revival took an interest in the intricacies of early clothing construction (though they could have; re-enactors today display a passionate interest in the smallest details of early clothing construction and design). Instead, what captured their interest were the sam-
Catherine Sargent Huntington (1887—1987) donned Porter’s c. 1743 wedding gown for a Fourth of July costume party in the 1910s. In so doing, she joined other elite men and women who, at the turn of the century, found comfort and inspiration in the clothing of their ancestors as part of a larger sense of their role as descendents of the nation’s founders. Arrested in 1927 for demonstrating in support of Sacco and Vanzetti outside Boston’s State House, Huntington cited her ancient New England lineage in justification of her political activism: “When the liberties which my ancestors established are endangered... I consider it peculiarly my duty to protest.” For Huntington and her peers, dressing in colonial clothing was not simply naïve, romantic indulgence but rather one way to embody their particular notion of heritage.
pliers and crewelwork wrought by elite colonial women. In Boston, one of the first organized attempts to nurture and direct a general revival of early American crewelwork was the Needlework School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Similar efforts sprung up in New York and Chicago. Among the most widely acclaimed groups to revive early needlework was the Deerfield Society for Blue and White Needlework. Founded in 1896 by two New York art students, Ellen Miller and Margaret Whiting, the society had its start when the two women were perusing pieces of early needlework preserved in Deerfield's Memorial Hall, the museum founded in the 1870s by George Sheldon and the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association to preserve and exhibit local heirlooms. The women observed the deteriorating condition of some of the antique crewelwork and attempted replicas, but, influenced by John Ruskin, William Morris, and the principles of the Aesthetic Movement, they quickly recognized an opportunity to create from these early examples new designs that conveyed the best of the colonial with a twist of the modern. Their Society of Blue and White Needlework, they hoped, in the tradition of Ruskin, "would be profitable materially and morally." 

Drawing on extant eighteenth-century needlework for their models (including that of the Hatfield gown maker Rebecca Dickinson) Miller and Whiting began designing and producing linen coverlets, bureau covers, curtains, bed hangings, and tablecloths, ornamented with designs wrought largely in indigo and inspired by examples culled from local attics and collections. Their enterprise quickly grew from four women to more than a dozen, and soon between twenty and thirty were employed in the production of domestic decorations from small table services to bed furnishings, screens, and door hangings. A parlor in the Miller home was dedicated to display and sales space, and the society attracted a thriving mail-order business as well.

Miller and Whiting set out to produce nothing but high-quality craftwork. They adopted a logo—a spinning wheel marked in the center with a D—affixing this symbol to a finished product only after it had been examined to ensure that it met their high standard of workmanship. And the society did produce truly spectacular pieces of needlework, many of which are now preserved in Deerfield's Memorial Hall Museum. In its day, their work sold in a range of values; at the upper end lay a fourteen-hundred-dollar tablecloth—a goodly sum today, and a fortune in 1910. The artistic achievement of Miller and Whiting as designers and the craft skill of the women whose work they oversaw are certainly impressive, as surviving examples make plain. The Society of Blue and White Needlework was awarded "master" status by the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts; members exhibited their

This sketch was drawn by Margaret Whiting (1860–1946), co-founder of the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework. Society members both created original designs and adapted eighteenth- and nineteenth-century patterns. In this sketch, they adapted a new design from the wool-embroidered linen headcloth completed in 1765 by Hatfield, Mass., gownmaker Rebecca Dickinson (1738–1815). More than a century after Dickinson created the bed hangings on which this sketch is based (see plate 8), Whiting and co-founder Ellen Miller revived and reinterpreted her to appeal to turn-of-the-twentieth-century customers interested in the products of a thriving arts and crafts movement. The D in a flax wheel (at lower right corner and center) was the society's trademark.
work nationwide and earned medals for excellence at exhibitions like the 1915 International Panama-Pacific Exhibition and the Paris Exposition.22

Inspired by the past, Miller and Whiting were also instructed by the present. In the early years of the society, Whiting wrote to her friend Emily Green Balch, then professor of economics at Wellesley College: “The effort to establish an industry in Deerfield is leading Ellen Miller and myself a dog’s life but . . . it is having some success, and we have a hope or two for its future. . . . There are seven women in what Ellen calls our ‘Virtuous Sweatshop’ every day.”23 Miller and Whiting controlled all aspects of production: they designed the patterns, assigned labor, chose exhibitions, supervised distribution, and set pay rates, twenty cents an hour for skilled labor. They assigned work to those women best suited to carry out a certain task or design element, and most finished products reflected this careful division of labor. Miller and Whiting also conducted time studies to determine the length of time a given element ought to require, and hence what a worker could hope to earn from her work.24

Some of the needlewomen of late-nineteenth-century Deerfield’s revival were responding to a failing custom industry. The relationship between changes in the garment trades and the advent of the craft revivals was not merely reactive or symbolic. By the early twentieth century, custom shops had lost ground to vendors of ready-made clothes. Moreover, those not rendered jobless by the ready-made industry saw their daily wages drop precipitously. Dressmakers who in the 1850s had earned $1.33 a day by the 1860s earned just $.93. Over the next two decades that figure fell farther, bottoming out at just $.87. In the 1880s and 1890s the average daily wage climbed once more to over $1.00 a day, but it would never again reach its prewar level.25 In Deerfield, women whose livelihoods once depended on the custom market turned to the craft revival to replace lost income. The dressmaker M. Anna Childs, for example, in 1901 earned $45 from the Society of Blue and White Needlework, representing some 225 hours of labor, and the seamstress Maria Stebbins earned $139 in that same year—the highest amount paid a single worker.26 Since the society paid about $.22 an hour, Stebbins must have worked nearly seven hundred hours producing tablecloths and bed hangings for consumers of the craft revival. The revival of early American crewelwork helped Childs and Stebbins weather transformations in the garment industry that threatened the custom work that they practiced. The two women redirected their skills in clothes making to revival needlework, gladly embracing Miller and Whiting’s “virtuous sweatshop.”

The romantic revival of some forms of colonial needlework required that others, and especially the clothing-related chores that more accurately repre-
sent the work of eighteenth-century needles, be altered in collective historical imagination. As people gained other means by which to acquire clothing and perform needlework, they began to forget the huge amount of tedious sewing required to clothe entire households and the special skills required to create those suits, stays, and mantuas. In the age of “ready-to-wear,” it was easy to romanticize (and conflate) preindustrial patterns of both cloth and clothing production, “especially as industrial progress was increasingly perceived to be a negative force.” Women employed in the making of garments were pushed aside in favor of hardy housewives entirely capable of providing for all of the needs, practical and aesthetic, of themselves and their families. Museums acquired spectacular examples of ornamental needlework, while the everyday wardrobes that occupied a large share of needlewomen’s attention went largely unpreserved. As a result, Betty Foote’s remarkable bed rug survives; none of the garments whose manufacture helped support herself and her family does.

In these same years, and not coincidentally, the ways in which these women entered the historical record were clouded by the haze of the colonial revival. For example, readers of George Sheldon’s 1896 two-volume *History of Deerfield* found in it, among many other things, a brief panegyric to eighteenth-century goodwife Elizabeth Arms Field Wright. After the early death of her first husband, Ebenezer Field, Elizabeth Arms moved the few miles up to Northfield, where she earned her living by teaching children in her own home for twenty-two weeks a year, charging parents four pence each week. To supplement this income, Sheldon explains, Arms made “shirts for the Indians,” at eight pence each, and sewed breeches for her brother-in-law, earning one shilling six pence a pair. Sheldon’s account of Arms’s labors does more than reveal the means by which she earned and disposed of her income; it also illuminates a perception that by the close of the nineteenth century had taken firm root. After her marriage to Azariah Wright, “with eight children, the youngest but a year old,” Sheldon writes, Arms had “leisure to work at tailoring, as formerly; leisure to spin and weave tow cloth to be exchanged with the traders for crockery and a few luxuries,” as well as, he adds, cash. The pastoralization of housework that Jeanne Boydston has so deftly explained, already under way not long after Arms’s lifetime, permitted the late-nineteenth-century historian to perceive the eighteenth-century woman’s work in clothing and textile production as “leisure,” a perception that would endure among future generations of readers.

To be sure, Arms did not confuse her labor with leisure; for Arms and women like her, the production of both clothing and textiles was serious business. The idea that respectable women should not perform artisanal
work had been cultivated in a specific historical context, as male artisans sought to protect their interests by creating and enforcing gender ideologies that overruled generations of practice. They reserved craft skill and its privileges for men, while normalizing associations between women and unskilled work—powerful ideas that persist today. The notion that such women did not perform artisanal work was cultivated in another, specific historical context, as Victorians constructed a colonial past in which women's work was shielded from market forces. Women who acquired no formal training in the needle trades but possessed enough knowledge to work at the less demanding tasks that the trade involved are indeed among those "least susceptible to historical analysis," though they were found throughout every New England community, exchanging their time and labor with a needle for income and credit. Those shirts Elizabeth Arms made "for the Indians" were not only trade goods on a tense international frontier; they were also early evidence of an industrious revolution, and those "few luxuries," heralds of revolutions in consumption to come.

What is added to our historical vision when we attempt to recover craft communities once familiar in early New England? A world of artisanal skill and pride, to be sure, along with a richer understanding of asymmetrical power relations, among women and between women and men, in early American households and communities, as well as new insight into early American labor and laborers more generally. To borrow an irresistible metaphor from Philip Zea, gender alone is not necessarily the best "seam to rip" when defining artisanal culture. Artisanry and masculinity are not synonymous; family and craft identities are not oppositional. Although distinctions grounded in gender are crucial to understanding the full scope of artisanal culture, equally compelling are delineations related to the specific features of urban and rural settings, the size and character of local markets, sources of training and materials, population density, and a host of other factors. Re-thinking the early American clothing trades in ways that encompass the larger scope of women's participation in them prompts us to reconsider how historical study might better accommodate the lives of everyday women in rural New England. Seeing artisanry as a relational quality that unfolds across communities of practice expands our view of early American craftwork in ways that include women as well as men, in rural as well as urban settings. At the same time, looking closely at women's work as it was embedded in the places they lived reminds us that communities in early America were as much about process as they were about place, that skill with a needle—like skills with a loom, wheel, or herb garden—both shaped and reflected relationships
among New England women and their families. Gender and class, marriage and family, age and skill, all inflected women’s work identities in complex and variable ways.

Women in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world had a variety of motives for seeking out wage-earning work, motives that need “wider historicisation”; while some historians have argued that women generally emphasized family responsibilities over economic opportunity, others have suggested that women sought to amplify their earnings to reach specific objectives, from household necessities to luxuries small and large.32 The women whose work is considered here suggest a comparable range of objectives. Some girls and women were thrown into tailoring at the death of a father or husband; they sewed to keep food reliably on the table. Others, like Elizabeth Wright, worked to insure their family’s access to everyday necessities as well as some occasional comforts. The tailoresses who worked toward their setting out were striving to acquire goods deemed necessary for their first home. And recall the gown maker Catherine King’s effort to match her sister’s refinement. Easter Newton and Tryphena Cooke sewed at least in part to help their families enlarge their own prospects as they built a home that would house a tavern. Other women obtained and deployed higher levels of skill to gain the whole of her livelihood. For Rebecca Dickinson, craftwork was her sole means of support and a resource that allowed her to make considered decisions about marriage and family. Tabitha Smith, Esther Wright, Catherine Phelps, and other married artisans contributed to their family’s upkeep; however, without other evidence, we cannot know what kind of authority they wielded over these earnings within the family circle. Finally, though her work was unpaid, the contribution Elizabeth Phelps made to the creation of quilted petticoats was essential to her family’s continuing prominence. All these aims and needs coexisted in the communities of early New England. Put another way, clothing production was a large arena in early America that witnessed a wide variety of objectives, opportunities, frustrations, and disappointments.

Any consideration of women and men in the marketplace requires an understanding of gender divisions of labor, among the most critical questions to confront historians of women, work, and labor in the past quarter-century. The men who worked as mantua makers in the first century of New England’s settlement vanished from this trade as it became the province of women. Over time, women made inroads in the production of menswear, though these weakened as the commercial economy expanded in the nineteenth century. But women did not simply infiltrate occupations formerly practiced by men; along the way, they transformed them. Artisanal identity among European men was grounded in their status as heads of households; artisanal
identity among women hinged on their sense of themselves as individuals in possession of craft skill. Men's artisanal culture flourished in the taverns frequented by tradesmen; Europe's craftswomen, Clare Crowston shows, saw piety and industry as central to their own, distinct culture.\(^{33}\)

How these developments affected trades on this side of the Atlantic is less well understood. Not until the emergence of organized labor around the turn of the nineteenth century, and particularly of journeymen tailors objecting to the use of cheap female labor, do we have substantial bodies of evidence that articulate similar beliefs and values about women's appropriate role in the trades.\(^{34}\) During the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, European women on both sides of the Atlantic reconfigured economic and cultural constructions to create new places for themselves in the production of fitted apparel. As Europe's North American communities gained momentum, men and women in the colonial clothing trades participated in that long and complex renegotiation of gender roles that involved artisanal identities for women that both conformed to and departed from those of their husbands, fathers, and sons. By the middle decades of the eighteenth century, those patterns and beliefs had been transformed once more as the exigencies of colonial life inflected European practices in distinct ways. In the absence of guilds, New England clothes makers experienced these changes as individuals as well as members and heads of households, rather than as mediated by a corporate association that controlled access to skill. Particularly in rural areas, local markets in agricultural economies governed all artisanal identity; craftwork among both men and women was usually one of several strategies embraced by households also engaged in farming. Clothes makers, whether male or female, considered themselves and each other skilled artisans whose patterns of work, though responsive to changing assumptions about gender, were in many ways similar to those of rural cabinetmakers, blacksmiths, and other workers in occupations primarily practiced by men. Close investigation of female needleworkers challenges traditional depictions of early American artisanry as a male preserve, since these women recognized in their craft the same range of tasks, skills, and practitioners, from the unskilled to the specialist, found in more commonly studied trades.

Looking closely at craftwork in occupations predominantly practiced by women accomplishes more than merely including women in an arena that has often appeared to exclude them. It helps trouble the categories of artisanry more generally by calling into question the hallmarks traditionally associated with artisanal work. The concept of artisanry itself has become so loaded that it obscures as much as it reveals. Several recent works have sug-
gested that, to date, explorations of craftwork have been too narrowly construed. Christine Daniels and Wendy Gamber, for example, in very different studies, critique the “new labor history” for embracing tradition-bound definitions of artisanry.\(^\text{35}\) As Gamber suggests, “despite abundant evidence to the contrary, . . . scholars have generally assumed that all artisans were men”; the trouble, she suggests, is that historians have attached qualities to “artisanal” life that necessarily exclude women altogether. “Women had no place in the male artisanal world so skilfully reconstructed by practitioners of the ‘new’ labor history for as females they were excluded from this political and cultural milieu. As far as we can tell, craftswomen failed to attend (nor, one suspects, were they invited to) the dramatic parades, political debates, and rowdy entertainments that helped define that work, and their absence from those arenas has rendered them invisible to subsequent historians.” Daniels observes that the “outpouring of books and essays on craftsmen and their culture” reveals “gaps” and “untested assumptions” emphasizing the experience of urban craftsmen with the means to own their own shops and tools at the expense of a larger world of urban and rural artisans whose access to capital varied widely and whose work was affected by the size and sort of the markets they were able to serve. Explorations of artisanal lives that imagine mainly urban, politically active men necessarily overlook the broader contours of early American crafts, which involved men and women in a variety of economic, social, familial, geographic, and political settings.

Enlarging our understanding of artisanal practice also helps us rethink the multiple ways that skill could be acquired and defined in early America. Although hagiographical celebrations of individual craftsmen have largely been set aside, remnants of that approach persist in studies that emphasize linear relationships between masters and apprentices, when in fact most early American craft work was a necessarily collective enterprise carried out in communities of practice. Exchanging models of craft knowledge as specialized information transferred neatly from experts to novices for another in which aspiring artisans cultivate special abilities not widely shared in their communities, and so assume gradually larger roles in communities of practitioners, enables us to reconceptualize historical understanding of what constitutes artisanal labor.

A second set of questions shifts our attention from relations between men and women, within and across households and communities, to relations among different kinds of women in those communities. The pathbreaking work of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich on the “female economy” of early New England—in which women participated in economic networks that intersected with, though remained separate from, those of men—continues to
advance significantly our understanding of women and work, their roles in the preindustrial economy, the sexual division of labor, and the nature of men’s and women’s “spheres” in early America and has shown how women’s work for the market and the household was not necessarily markedly different. Yet while that scholarship has amplified and complicated our picture of eighteenth-century rural life, our understanding is not yet complete. Ulrich’s masterful explication of Martha Ballard’s diary, for example, suggests that networks of exchange in Hallowell, Maine, obscured differences among women. As Ulrich puts it, “there is a consistent leveling in Martha’s references to her female neighbors, a blurring of social rank, that contrasts with her usual manner of describing men.” Drawing out her metaphor of the loom’s web, she posits that while “economic and social differences might divide a community, the unseen acts of women wove it together.” New research continues to gauge how men and women throughout Britain’s North American colonies may have experienced the interlocking developments we now see in terms of consumer and industrial revolutions. Adrienne Hood in her study of artisanal weaving in southeastern Pennsylvania reminds us that the path by which cloth production industrialized in New England was by no means normative; at the same time, this study joins others that seek to show how, even within the region, the advance of the market affected different communities in very different ways. Needlework in the vibrant female economy of Hadley, Massachusetts—a century older than Hallowell’s by the Revolutionary era—highlights unequal relations among women, even as it brought them into sometimes close association. The production of clothing was complicated by differences in social rank, community cultures, and other sources of livelihood, cautioning us not to generalize too soon about the character of a “female economy.”

A host of other factors influenced women’s participation in local, regional, and national economies, patterns of women’s work encompassing a wide variety of relationships and responding to a host of variables. Acknowledging women’s work in clothing production necessitates a reevaluation of traditional interpretations of an important sector of a colonial economy that comprised both male and female artisans. Recognizing needlework as a female-dominated craft raises critical questions about women’s place in the much-discussed expanding marketplace of eighteenth-century New England. We know, for example, that in the systems of local interdependence that sustained rural communities, men engaged in cooperative work with relatives, friends, and neighbors to accomplish tasks and to obtain goods, though at the same time they embraced a variety of market alternatives with which to obtain needed goods and labor. When examining early American
women’s work, historians have focused on the similarly communal aspects of that labor but have largely overlooked the market alternatives that women likewise used.

While women’s work in the production and maintenance of clothing did require a great deal of collaboration and cooperation, it also required elaborate hierarchies, grounded in economic and social status to be sure, as well as skill, age, and, even in rural western New England, race. To borrow a notion from Evelyn Glenn, viewing any form of labor only in terms of gender extracts gender from its context, obscuring other “interacting systems of power.” Glenn is writing here specifically about race, although her admonition holds more broadly, too. Despite the relative homogeneity of the New England countryside, the need to produce, acquire, and maintain clothing created opportunities for women to interact as artisans, as consumers, as employers, and as employees, at different ages, skill levels, and points in their lives. The very appearance of homogeneity points up the real complexity of these relationships, in that it masked, and continues to mask, intricate and asymmetrical power relations among women. Examinations of differences among women, as part of a larger effort to deepen understanding of our multicultural past, has been an important project in recent years. Still, we cannot overlook, or underestimate, the complex power relationships that also exist among women who at first glance look very similar, and the multiple ways in which class and culture have intersected to shape women’s working lives, sometimes in unexpected places.

Various forms of needlework continue to bring women together and set them apart. A kit from which women can reproduce the very piece of schoolgirl embroidery—the “Reclining Shepardess”—wrought by the eighteenth-century gentlewoman Esther Stoddard, is commercially available. The complete kit costs no less than two hundred dollars; the worked piece, when framed and displayed, continues to be, as it once was for the Stoddards, a sign of economic privilege and leisure. Home sewing, too, has become largely the province of privileged consumers. The core audience for home-sewing equipment and periodicals are “well-educated working women aged 25 to 44 who enjoy making high-quality fashionable clothes in their limited leisure time”; as one study reported, “the more highly educated the woman, the more likely she is to sew: Now that the American homemake has gone to work, the only people who sew are those who like to.”

Of course, the vast majority of women who are sewing on any given day in the United States, or for Americans, are not “those who like to” but women crowded into sweatshops both here and abroad. Since the 1960s, globalizing markets have brought massive reorganization to the garment industry. Early
Conclusion

in the twentieth century, manufacturers moved production first out of the Northeast and into the South, and then out of the South and abroad, outsourcing production to subcontractors in Central American nations such as Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, and to Asian competitors in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Singapore. Americans consume billions of dollars' worth of apparel each year from manufacturers in China, Hong Kong, and Mexico, and millions of dollars' worth from India, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Costa Rica, and Haiti. In recent years hourly wages in those nations have ranged from $4.51 in Hong Kong to $.62 in the Philippines. The exploitative conditions under which so many laborers work have been of increasing concern to consumers worldwide, as images of women and children bent over machines in crowded, unsafe workplaces producing high-profile consumer goods have drawn media attention and prompted boycotts.

Sweatshops also continue to flourish in the United States. When inspectors of the California Department of Industrial Relations and the U.S. Department of Labor in August 1995 raided an apartment complex in El Monte, California, and discovered there seventy-two illegal Thai immigrants, mostly women, captive and sewing under appalling conditions, they drew the attention of a shocked American public to the persistence of exploitative labor practices in the domestic clothing industry. In the decade that has followed, various celebrities—most famously Kathie Lee Gifford—were accused of endorsing clothing lines made with sweated labor, heightening public and corporate consciousness on these issues, while a number of U.S. cities and states passed legislation aimed at eliminating sweated labor. California, Maine, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania have established no-sweat standards for the procurement of state clothing (such as uniforms), while the municipalities of San Francisco and Los Angeles in California; Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin; Newark, New Jersey; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, have pledged not to purchased products of sweated labor. Nevertheless, to cite just one example, the Union of Needle Trades and Industrial Textile Employees found that 75 percent of all apparel manufacturing firms in New York City—the center of the U.S. apparel industry, encompassing thousands of workers—met the definition of sweatshops.

That certain kinds of needlework are associated in popular imagination with advantaged white women, while other kinds lie outside public definitions of sewing, raises important questions about how we understand needlework, and needleworkers, in the present and in the past. Myths, the novelist Jeanette Winterson writes, “explain the universe while allowing the universe to go on being unexplained.” Much more has been written about “reshap-
Most important for my purposes is that, to thrive, myths must affirm ideas that are of continuing value to society. Images of early American women gathered around a quilt frame, or nestled by the hearth, constructing clothing for loved ones, reaffirm notions of women’s role in creating the home as haven, no small thing when women’s roles in the workplace have been the source of so much political, cultural, economic, and international tension.

Our contemporary dependence on distant laborers for the construction of our clothing today is very different from the relationships observed in the 1780s by the members of the Hartford Ladies Association, but their understanding of themselves as intimately tied to laborers across town and around the globe is as appropriate today as it was then. The world of needleworkers captured within the account books, letters, and journals of Connecticut Valley families is characterized by a strong sense of interconnectedness alongside asymmetry. The lives and fortunes of women, whatever their economic and social position, were bound up with those of their neighbors, attached by enduring ties of neighborhood and kinship. New relationships sprang from the old and persisted over generations. Consumers contemplated the effect of specific acts of clothing acquisition on producers, whether they were the daughters of indebted families across town or the makers of "gewgaws and frippery" abroad. Craftswomen and clients, employers and employees, consumers and producers recognized the uneven scaffolds on which their relationships rested, sustaining a "precarious interlocking equilibrium." In the give and take of rural exchange, New England needleworkers, as much as cabinetmakers, housewrights, and headstone carvers, created and sustained communities of commerce imperative to the continued health of that equilibrium, to systems as important to continuity and change in the social, economic, and cultural order as that which existed in the larger commercial world.

Alice Morse Earle recalled lovingly the lives of some of those early American women and the evidence they have left behind:

Old letters and old garments bring us in close touch with the past; there is in them a lingering presence, a very essence of life. Here the hand pressed that held the pen; here it lingered in dainty stitches. . . . There still clings to the firm all-wool stuff, unfaded hand-stamped calico, the lustrous homespun linen, something of the vitality of the enduring women who raised the wool, the cotton, the flax, even the silk; who prepared each for the wheel by many exhausting labors; who spun the yarn and thread, and wove the warp and woof; who bleached and dyed; who cut and sewed these ancient garments. All these honest stuffs, with their quaint fashionings, render them a true expres-
sion of old-time life; and their impalpable and finer beauty through sentiment
puts me truly in touch with the life of my forbears.\textsuperscript{52}

What Earle missed here is that the hand that composed those letters was
not necessarily the one that created those garments. To be sure, there is in
both a “lingering presence,” although old letters and old garments are two
very different sorts of sources, and they help us remember different sorts of
women. Ever since Anne Dudley Bradstreet in 1650 dismissed “each carping
tongue / who says my hand a needle better fits,” we have naturally linked
pens and needles, and rightly so; the two instruments were clearly linked in
the minds of educated women. As Elizabeth Porter’s cousin Sarah Hillhouse
wrote her daughter, “Could you see or know the quantity of work before me
you would be astonish’d that I should leave it for the pen, [nevertheless] for a
few hours I lay by the needle for the quill.”\textsuperscript{53} However, some care must also
be taken to recognize those women who had less need for pens, and whose
livelihood depended on their needles. Cracks in the unified icon of the good-
wife of popular historical imagination have begun to appear, and scholars of
women’s history, labor history, and early America have nearly dismantled
her altogether, but more work is required before we can finally discard that
picture in favor of another more encompassing one. Extending our view of
quilting, for example, to laboring women employed in eighteenth-century
London warehouses as well as their consumers on the western fringe of the
British empire, rural women who quilted for themselves, and the women
whose labor in other rooms within and beyond the house made quilting pos-
sible helps us to see quilts as the products of intersecting revolutions in man-
facturing, in consumption, and in social and labor relations. Quilting can
remain an effective metaphor for interconnectedness among women, if we
can overcome the implication that that it comes on even footing.\textsuperscript{54} Radka
Donnell is persuasive when she observes that metaphors of the seam most
appropriately signify connections grounded in tension.\textsuperscript{55} Every stitch reflects
tensions—between producers and consumers, employers and employees,
men and women, clients and craftswomen.

In 1949, Elizabeth Phelps’s descendant James Lincoln Huntington, like
Alice Morse Earle, sensed ghosts of the colonial past. Huntington recorded
that, every once in a while, the faint sound of a spinning wheel had been
heard coming from the house’s attic. But the soft hum of an ethereal wheel is
not necessary to help us remember the dozens of working women who passed
through the halls of Forty Acres.\textsuperscript{56} The halls themselves remind us, as do the
shears, needles, and thimbles, the old letters and old garments they left be-
hind. Through them we remember the past and present tensions that to-
gether shape our communities. We are reminded of the full interconnectedness of our lives, how we too are closely involved with our neighbors’ lives and fortunes, even when those neighbors are a continent away. Women’s economic culture has long encompassed relationships both personal and commercial, social and professional. Over the last half of the eighteenth century the shapes that those relationships assumed, and the degree to which they intertwined, supported, competed with, undercut, or became disentangled from one another, shifted along with the changing economic, social, and cultural landscapes. In the end, new systems took root that altered permanently the ways in which rural New England women encountered one another, in a marketplace that had redefined the work they did in their own homes and reorganized the work that they did in and for the homes of others. Sewing lay at the center of these reconfigurations. Close examination of early American women’s needlework—part, rightly said, of nearly every woman’s life—reveals how these women thought about their work and how they thought about their world.
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