

Artisans in the New Republic, 1787–1825

The Artisan Workplace

During the early the morning hours of July 4, 1788, Philadelphia's merchants and manufacturers, among other prominent citizens, marched in a "Grand Federal Procession" to commemorate the ratification of the Constitution. With only slight exaggeration, Dr. Benjamin Rush heralded the unity of the day: "Rank for a while forgot all its claims, and Agriculture, Commerce and Manufactures, together with the learned and mechanical Professions, seemed to acknowledge by their harmony and respect for each other, that they were all necessary to each other, and all useful in a cultivated society." Sixty crafts and trades in Philadelphia took part in the celebration, marching behind carriages that depicted the city's artisan workshops. Almost every other major city in the United States held similar processions to mark the occasion. The Revolutionary War era historian Alfred Young has characterized these civic festivals as "the first 'labor' parades in American history." On this day, few appeared to question that the United States would be a society of equal and productive free men.

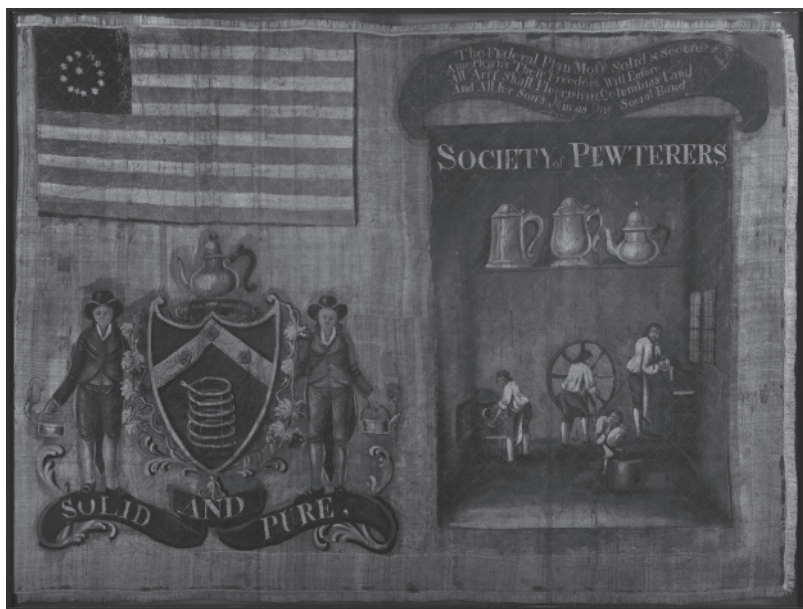


Figure 1.1 Banner of the Society of Pewterers carried during New York City's Federal Procession celebrating the ratification of the Constitution, July 23, 1788. Silk and paint; including frame, 92×120×2 3/4 in. (object #1903.12). Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.

By the time of the Constitution, artisans in the nation's port cities were fashioning a variety of consumer goods that were sold locally. An artisan or master was an individual trained in a craft such as tanning hides, barrel making (coopering), or printing. Artisans provided the skills required for the growth of cities. In Philadelphia, for example, artisans accounted for half of the city's workforce. Artisans also produced the tools used by farmers to work the land. A typical master owned his own shop, in which he worked with one or two journeymen, as well as with a number of apprentices aged between fourteen and twenty-one. But the master's role in the artisan system was based on his knowledge of the craft, not on his ownership of the means of production.

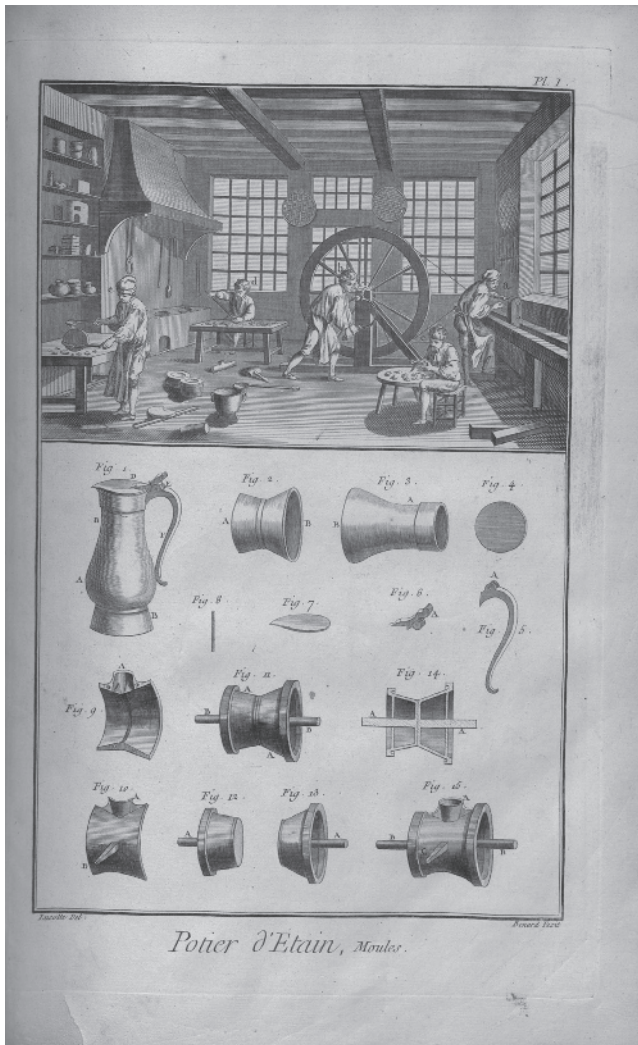


Figure 1.2 An eighteenth-century pewterer's shop. From Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–72). Courtesy of ARTFL.

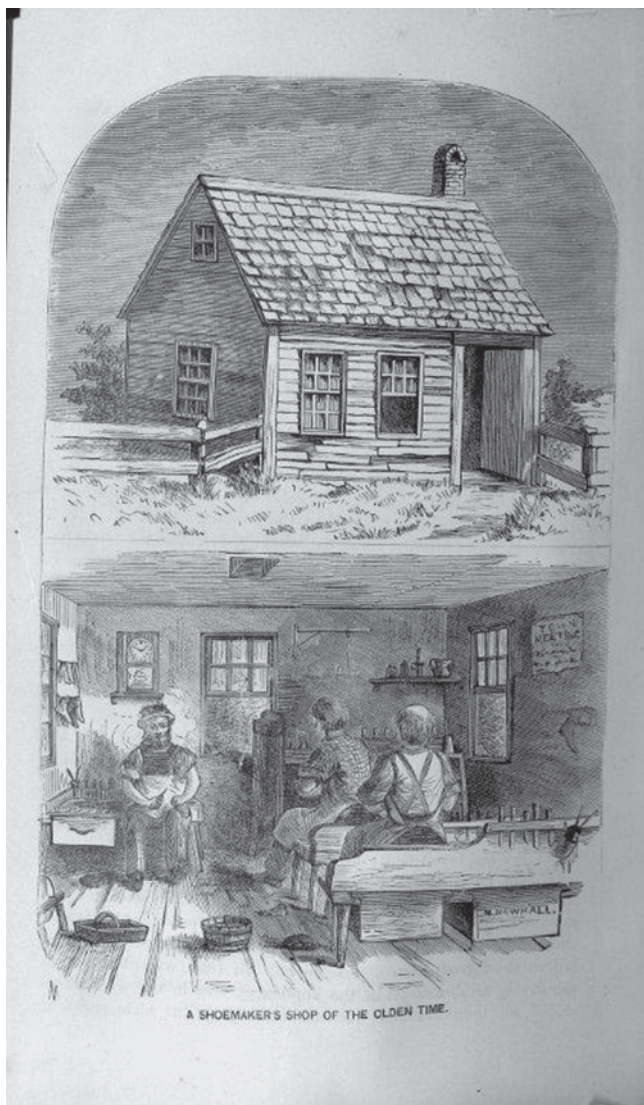


Figure 1.3 The interior and exterior of an eighteenth-century cordwainer's ten-footer shop. From Horace Greeley et al., *The Great Industries of the United States: Being an Historical Summary of the Origin, Growth, and Perfection of the Chief Industrial Arts of This Country* (Hartford, CT: J. B. Burr, 1872), p. 1254.

Producing custom-made goods that sold for high prices in what was called the “bespoke trade” enabled these craftsmen to secure a decent standard of living, or what was usually spoken of as a “competency” – the attainment of an independent estate of simple comforts. As Philadelphia’s skilled craftsmen put it in a petition, “[T]he far greater number of us have been contented to live decently,” knowing that “our professions rendered us useful and necessary members of the community, proud of that rank, we aspired no higher.” Work was essential to the artisan’s independence and to the general well-being of the community.

Yet, as the new century opened, expanding markets had a dramatic impact on the nature of workplace relations, especially in the nation’s industrial cities and towns. For example, John Bedford, Philadelphia’s largest shoemaker, facing economic ruin in 1800 as his local sales declined and his inventories built up, traveled south in search of new markets in which he could distribute large quantities of cheaply made shoes. In Charleston, South Carolina, Bedford contracted orders in excess of \$4,000 for his shoes. But, once back in Philadelphia, he was confronted by irate workmen who went out on strike after he refused their demands for an increase in their wages. As a result, Bedford was forced to default on some of the orders he had secured. By 1800 small-scale manufacturing had also become common in single-industry towns like Lynn, Massachusetts. Under the handicraft system of production, master craftsmen in and around Lynn had begun producing shoes for individual customers as early as the 1760s. Known as “ten footers,” Lynn’s more than sixty artisan shops were usually located either in a room at the back of the master’s house or in a small building attached to it.

The Political Economy of Early America

In the early years of the new republic, few leading Americans disputed the need to develop domestic manufacturing as a means of reducing US economic dependence on Great Britain.

Nevertheless, debate raged over both the sites and the scale of the manufactures and over whose economic interests would prevail. For Tench Coxe, an enthusiastic promoter of early American industrial growth who served as assistant to the secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton, the endless potential of America's vast natural resources would remain forever untapped without manufacturing. Under Hamilton's guiding hand, Coxe's "Plan for a Manufacturing Society" led, in 1791, to the creation of the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures (SUM), a government-promoted attempt to harness private capital on behalf of developing a "National Manufactory," a model industrial town to be built in New Jersey.

Hamilton's and Coxe's ambitious plans to encourage manufacturing aroused intense opposition. One influential opponent, George Logan, a prominent Philadelphia Quaker physician and agrarian democrat, led the forces arrayed against the National Manufactory. In 1792, in the pages of the *American Museum*, Coxe and Logan squared off in a debate over the SUM. Logan attacked the National Manufactory as a "dangerous scheme" that threatened the nation's republican order. Fearful of any activity that would encourage citizen dependence on government or worker dependence on another individual for economic well-being, Logan supported decentralized, small-scale manufacturing, either in urban craft shops or in households scattered across the countryside. Logan and other critics of the SUM endorsed a small-producer tradition that encompassed a faith in the social utility of skilled labor, an expectation of moderate prosperity or competence for workers, and an intense commitment to equality and community.

Both Coxe and Logan understood that each member of society should also be a stakeholder in it. Both men regarded independence as the key, although they defined the concept differently. For Coxe, independence meant providing the United States with a balanced and interdependent economy that included

manufacturing. He believed that the social and moral dangers inherent in industrialism, especially the formation of a dependent wage-earning class, could be avoided through both the employment of immigrants, poor women, and children and the introduction of power-driven, labor-saving machinery. For Logan, only an agrarian-based economy that included small-scale household manufactures would preserve the dream of American exceptionalism.

Coxe was, of course, sensitive to agrarian objections to the growth of manufactures. He insisted that the introduction of manufacturing would not upset the natural balance of employment. The objection that manufacturing takes male farm laborers from agriculture was not “solid,” he declared, since “women, children, horses, water and fire” perform four-fifths of the labor in manufactories. As he repeatedly asserted, “our people must not be diverted from their farms.” More to the point, Coxe expressed an almost unlimited faith in the *labor-saving* capability of mechanization. The concern expressed about manufacturing being unhealthy was, he observed, “urged principally against carding, spinning and weaving, which *formerly* were entirely manual and sedentary occupations.” Instead, it is “our plan” that machines using “*the potent elements of fire and water*” become “*our daily labourers*.” In 1813, expanding on their labor-saving capabilities, Coxe wrote that “these wonderful machines, working as if they were animated beings ... may be justly considered as equivalent to an immense body of manufacturing recruits, enlisted in the service of the country.” Coxe anticipated that continued improvements in the “construction and application of machines” would mitigate the high cost of labor in America.

The labor force that Coxe foresaw working in the factories – women and children, the poor, and immigrants – would also mitigate another “principal objection” to manufacturing in America, the alleged scarcity of skilled labor in the United States. The model, according to Coxe, was England, where, with waterpower

and machines, “a few hundred women and children” performed the work of twelve hundred carders and spinners. “Justice, policy, and benevolence ought to excite us” to adopt a similar system in the United States. “Every city man is taught a trade or calling; every country man is taught the same or to plough, harrow, sow, and thresh. Every city and country woman should be taught to card, spin, weave, and dye.” A few years before the founding of the SUM, Coxe had encouraged the Pennsylvania Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and Useful Arts (PSEMUA) to open a mechanized spinning mill in Philadelphia that would provide employment for the poor while, coincidentally, demonstrating “the importance of cotton manufactures to this country ... as a source both of private and public wealth.” The labor force working in the PSEMUA’s textile mill was mostly female, and the mill’s network of spinners in the city and surrounding countryside was entirely so.

Yet, in contrast to Coxe’s rosy view, many Americans of the founding fathers’ generation expected the consequences of further manufacturing growth in the United States to reproduce the same malignant social and moral conditions, as symbolized by Manchester’s “dark Satanic Mills,” that they saw afflicting England. Thomas Jefferson declared that the present “manufactures of the great cities in the old country” produced “a depravity of morals, a dependence and corruption, which renders them an undesirable accession to a country whose morals are sound.” Large-scale manufacturing would produce an army of dependent workers that would be corrosive of republican virtue. Referring to manufacturing, Jefferson observed, “Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.” Jefferson’s own best hope for America rested instead on promoting a self-reliant and independent citizenry through husbandry.

In this respect sounding very much like Jefferson, Coxe too worried about the corrosive influence of dependence, but he saw

a solution in the expansion of employment through manufacturing. Coxe told those gathered to launch the PSEMUA that “extreme poverty and idleness in the citizens of a free government will ever produce vicious habits and disobedience to the laws, and must render the people fit instruments for the dangerous purposes of ambitious men. In this light the employment of our poor in manufactures, who cannot find other honest means of a subsistence, is of the utmost consequence.” Coxe counted the inculcation of proper habits in the poor as a primary benefit of manufacturing. An “idler” was “ever prone to wickedness,” whereas “habits of industry” filled the mind “with honest thoughts” by “requiring the time for better purposes.” Industriousness leaves little leisure “for meditating or executing mischief.” “All is the gift of industry,” Coxe wrote. “Among individuals it is the supreme virtue; and, when well ordered and duly regulated, it is the only criterion of a good and wise government.” In *The Mills of Manayunk: Industrialization and Social Conflict in the Philadelphia Region, 1787–1837*, Cynthia Shelton notes that, in employing the labor of the poor, the PSEMUA mill, much like other early textile manufactures in Philadelphia, was modeled on English and colonial workhouses. In this way, the PSEMUA functioned like a public agency, encouraging the development of industrious habits and self-discipline.

Coxe’s appointment in May 1790 as assistant secretary of the treasury was due in part to Alexander Hamilton’s desire to have on his staff someone with the ability to defend him in print against his detractors and in part to Hamilton’s willingness to respond to political pressure put on him by Coxe’s allies. Having been enjoined by Congress in January 1790 to produce a report on manufacturing, Hamilton turned over to Coxe responsibility for collecting the necessary data. Although Hamilton would eventually come to regret this appointment, his collaboration with Coxe reached a high point in 1791, the year that the *Hamilton Report on Manufactures* was issued and the SUM was founded.

Called “the most ambitious industrial experiment in early American history,” the SUM received a charter on November 22, 1791, from the New Jersey legislature. Overall direction of the society was entrusted to its board of directors, and the supervision of its operations to a governor, William Duer, a wealthy New York speculator. Besides being granted the usual powers of a manufacturing corporation, the SUM was given banking privileges, generous tax exemptions, and the corporate powers of a city. Within a month, shares in the society to the value of \$625,000 had been subscribed (although not fully paid in). In May 1792, after three society meetings and some wrangling, a site on the Great Falls of Passaic was chosen and named Paterson, in honor of the then governor of New Jersey.

Although the society had been chartered to make any commodity it wanted, at the May meeting the SUM’s manufacturing committee adopted a resolution “to erect a cotton-mill, also buildings for carrying on calico-printing, with requisite machinery, together with buildings to accommodate workmen.” Appropriations were made of \$20,000 for the construction of a canal, \$5,000 for the cotton factory and machinery, \$12,000 for the print works, and \$5,000 for the weave shop and equipment. The committee agreed, as well, on plans to complete the town, including a plan to construct fifty dwellings, on quarter-acre lots, for employees. Organizers anticipated little trouble finding an available workforce from among unemployed people, or rather, according to Peter Colt, second superintendent of the SUM, those “people who are not fully employed – and an abundance of women and children, who are without regular useful employment.”

The society proudly announced in June 1794 its completion of “a large mill for spinning cotton by water-power.” The celebrations in Paterson for the opening of the mill included a great parade and a ball given in the factory. Despite the high hopes aroused by these early efforts, the society was already in financial trouble. The SUM was never able to secure adequate capital, at least in part

because of a financial panic that, in the spring of 1792, landed Duer in debtors' prison. Nor were the problems only financial ones. The National Manufactory also suffered from poor management, labor shortages, and, at times, insufficient power from the Great Falls. In January 1796 the society's directors adopted a resolution suspending mill operations.

The ambitious plans to build a National Manufactory in Paterson intensified the deep suspicions that had already been aroused by Hamilton's economic program. Among the most outspoken critics was the Quaker physician George Logan, a committed physiocrat (follower of the eighteenth-century French economists who asserted that land was the true source of all wealth), who after Jefferson's presidential victory in 1800 would be elected to office and, ironically, become one of Coxe's closest political allies in Pennsylvania. In a series of "Five letters addressed to the yeomanry of the United States," published in the *American Museum*, Logan issued a philippic against the "dangerous scheme" of Hamilton, Coxe, and the other leaders of the SUM. These letters summarize the fears Logan shared with others who were opposed to the founding with government support of a manufacturing town in New Jersey.

In the opinion of "A Farmer," as Logan pseudonymously signed himself, the SUM was an agency of special privilege and corruption, antithetical to the "general interests" of the community. Like Jefferson, Logan assumed that the Paterson site had been chosen mainly because of its proximity to New York and the city's "junto of monied men," a suspicion confirmed in the critic's mind by Hamilton's support for Duer's election as SUM governor. Often taking Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as his text, Logan insisted that "we ought not to desire the establishment of any kind of manufacture in our country, which cannot support itself, without government granting to its agents bounties, premiums, and a variety of exclusive privileges." The equation was simple for Logan: when the few gained special privileges, the general interests suffered.

Citing examples from the ancient world as well as the more contemporary experiences of France and England, Logan condemned government interference and protection in what should be private matters. Less a *laissez-faire* censure of government action, Logan's critique expressed greater concern that "all partial regulations" tended to create "separate interests in society." Logan feared that economic differences in the distribution of property would harden into a fixed class order. Could it be doubted, he asked rhetorically, that "the nature" of the SUM was such that the society subverted the "spirit of all just laws" and thereby established "a class of citizens with distinct interests from their fellow citizens? Will it not by fostering an inequality of fortune, prove the destruction of the equality of rights, and tend strongly to aristocracy?" The result, Logan had no doubt, would be the division of society into "two-parties," one enjoying "the comforts of life, without labour – the other languishing in penury."

The greatest danger, in Logan's view, was that the SUM would transport the social structure of the manufacturing towns of England to the American countryside. Likely with the SUM's projected workforce in mind, he decried "the combination of the wealthy" in the English towns who kept the poor "employed by them in a state of daily dependence and servitude." To symbolize what should be the natural relations in a just society, Logan employed the analogy of a chain, which "does not derive its strength and utility from being composed of a few heavy links, and the remainder weak." Every link must be, as much as possible, of equal power. The combination of power under government patronage that was being accumulated in Paterson appeared to Logan to be no less than a conspiracy against the social compact.

Government that is run on behalf of the privileged few erodes the opportunity that each individual should have to freely express his talents. "The wealth of private citizens at their own free command, and employed by themselves," he insisted, "will ever be the greatest advantage to their country." And in civil society,

Logan asserted, “a state is rendered more respectable and powerful by the prosperity of all its citizens.” Rather than doom the many to “mere animal existence,” each member of society was owed the promise of achieving a moderate well-being or competency. For democracy to prevail required that every manufactory provide an equivalent to labor that would enable a worker to live in simple comfort, to educate his children, and to provide for the support of his family after his passing. Competency promised a degree of comfortable independence.

Many of the other republican opponents of the SUM sounded themes similar to the ideas Logan presented in his five letters. “Anti-Monopolist” bemoaned “the present propensity for corporations and exclusive privileges, a system of politics well calculated to aggrandize and increase the influence of the few at the expense of the many.” Another critic blasted the “Jersey Manufacturing Company,” calling it “an institution ... opposed to the principles of a republican government.” According to “A Mechanic,” in supporting the SUM Congress was “granting to some exclusive privileges, premiums, and exemptions from the common burthen.” Building large manufactories at government expense was “*in effect, planting a Birmingham and Manchester, amongst us.*” As did Logan, these protagonists considered the SUM to be a dangerous assault by a privileged few against the common weal.

By invoking the dangers inherent in the English textile centers of Manchester and Birmingham, critics of the SUM, in common with Logan, expressed widely held fears that a concentration of wealth and power represented a threat to the political as well as to the economic system of the United States. Such concerns, however, did not make either Logan or the other agrarians blindly anti-manufacturing. Jefferson loved experimenting with labor-saving gadgets; as one biographer says of Monticello in the years after Jefferson returned home, “Here was no pastoral Eden but belching smoke and clanging hammers.” In 1800 Logan helped found

the Lancaster County Society for Promoting of Agriculture, Manufactures, and the Useful Arts. In the preamble to its constitution, which he is credited with writing, Logan makes the surprising observation that “Independent Communities do not owe their characters to the Soil which they occupy; but to their Progress in the useful Arts.” Yet, as he makes clear, the Lancaster County Society had no “desire to make this, in the common acceptation of the Word, a Manufacturing Country.” Even less did the society desire to introduce into this “happy Country, that baneful system of European Management which dooms the human Faculties to be smothered, and Man to be converted into a Machine. We want not that unfeeling plan of Manufacturing Policy, which has debilitated the Bodies, and debased the Minds, of so large a Class of People as the Manufacturers of Europe.” Logan, like Jefferson, assumed that large-scale enterprise would produce an army of dependent workers, “a degeneracy ... a canker which soon eats to the heart” of a republic’s laws and constitution, in the words of the Virginian. In place of the intensive mill community planned by the SUM, Logan proposed extensive, decentralized household production as the basis for developing “virtuous” manufactures in the United States.

Along with Logan’s letters, the *American Museum* printed a response from Coxe, who was identified as “A Freeman.” Coxe rejected the notion that the SUM was a “dangerous scheme.” In his view, rather than serving special interests, government encouragement of manufacturing furthered the general welfare. “Measures intended for the public good, and really calculated to produce that desirable end,” Coxe wrote, “have been [either] honestly misunderstood, or wilfully misrepresented.” Yet Coxe’s views on the appropriate realm of government action did differ fundamentally from the ideas expressed by Logan. For Logan the lessons of history taught that there could be no interference by government in “the occupations of citizens” that would not result in “injury.” America and Americans would be independent only to

the degree that they had “the liberty to manage their own affairs.” Coxe, in contrast, believed that national self-sufficiency required an active state that vigorously promoted economic growth.

Coxe regarded a diversified economy that included manufacturing as an antidote to dependence. The demand for raw materials required by manufacturing, Coxe had written, would enable “the planter and the farmer to vary their articles of produce exceedingly, which will prevent that reduction of prices which must follow the cultivation of a small number of articles.” So too would economic diversity benefit the farmers of the Middle States. Without manufactures, Coxe insisted, “the progress of agriculture would be arrested” on Pennsylvania’s frontier. Similarly, without an expanding rural population, manufactures would languish. A broadly based and interdependent national economy, Coxe had concluded, would be a source of independence for the individual and for the nation both.

Despite their serious differences, Coxe and Logan are not simply the opposite poles on some late eighteenth-century political or economic scale. In fact, Coxe had himself, in the 1780s, excoriated the directors of the Bank of North America for creating an exclusive monopoly, “not only a monopoly, but an aristocracy, formed of a most formidable kind, a monopoly which, by acquisition of the function of government, will be capable of absorbing all the wealth of the United States. And as wealth creates influence, it is impossible to tell how far their influence may extend.” During the 1790s, Coxe expressed similar misgivings about Hamilton’s economic program. In *Liberty and Property: Political Economy and Policy Making in the New Nation*, John R. Nelson, Jr., catalogues numerous differences between Coxe’s proposals and Hamilton’s fiscal program. For example, whereas Hamilton’s *Report on Manufactures* mentioned funding the SUM solely through government bounties as a means of stabilizing the financial market, the draft prospectus that Coxe had prepared for the treasury secretary concentrated on stabilizing credit to stimulate investment in manufactures. In fact, as Cathy Matson

and Peter Onuf, in *A Union of Interests: Political and Economic Thought in Revolutionary America*, have noted, Coxe became suspicious of the people that Hamilton had recruited for the SUM. He worried about “the close ties between this ‘monied interest’ and British merchants and creditors.” Unlike Hamilton, whose economic program aimed mainly to bind (and benefit) the interests of a wealthy elite to the new government, Coxe believed in popular participation in politics and in the need to sustain economic opportunity. By the end of the decade, Coxe had joined the Republican Party, having formally broken with Hamilton and the Federalist Party in 1794 over Jay’s Treaty, an agreement with Great Britain that did not contain any English concessions on impressment or the rights of American shipping.

The Early Transformation of the Workplace

Shortly after George Washington visited Lynn during a tour of New England in 1789, the demand for shoes increased beyond the boundaries of the local market. To meet the needs of the growing market, shoe manufacturers introduced the domestic, or “putting-out,” system. Lynn merchant-manufacturers like Ebenezer Breed sought to simplify and speed production. They worked through local agents, contracting with skilled journeymen to cut the shoe leather and then distributing the leather pieces to “shoe binders,” women who lived in the farm households surrounding Lynn and who stitched together the upper parts of shoes. Female shoe binders adapted their traditional needle skills rather than learn the entire trade as apprentices. During these years, wives and daughters were recruited to the task of shoe binding as unpaid labor by the male head of the household. Like their domestic duties, shoe binding became another way in which women contributed to the family economy.

After 1810 the female shoe binder, although still working in her home, was hired and supervised by a merchant-manufacturer and performed a job that was paid for in wages or in store

goods. The partially made shoes would then be finished (or “bottomed” – the fastening together of the sole, heel, and upper parts of the shoe) by the skilled journeymen before Breed and his fellow shoe merchants in Lynn could ship the final product to Philadelphia, New York, and other seaport cities for sale in “slop shops” or to the South and the West Indies, where they were purchased for slaves to wear.

Beginning in the 1820s, however, local shoe bosses collected the skilled journeymen who cut the leather and bottomed the shoes into central shops, generally two-story wooden buildings located in Lynn, in which all the steps (other than binding) in producing shoes and selling them could take place. Micajah C. Pratt, the son of a shoe manufacturer, was born in Lynn in 1788 and entered the shoe business in 1812. The following year, he built a small shop that would serve as his manufactory until 1850. By 1832, Pratt was employing some 200 men and women to produce “cheap, strong, and durable shoe[s]” that he distributed to customers in the South and West. Pratt, Breed, and other local entrepreneurs had by then raised the annual output of shoes in Lynn to nearly a million pairs.

In the leading port cities of Philadelphia and New York and in the countryside around them, as well as in one-industry towns like Lynn, markets expanded as the eighteenth century drew to a close, giving rise to a concentration of production in consumer goods trades such as shoemaking and clothing manufacture. As a result, the work process was divided and transformed. As the number of goods produced increased, master craftsmen were displaced by merchant-manufacturers who did not themselves make anything but instead purchased and distributed the raw materials, owned the workplace and supervised those working there, and collected and sold the final product. Under these conditions, artisans could no longer confidently look forward to owning their own shops. More and more, they faced a work life bound by wage labor. By 1820 some 12 percent of the US labor force worked for wages,

and by 1860 the proportion reached roughly 40 percent, with most of these wage earners residing in the North.

Yet even as the manufacturing entrepreneurs attempted to obtain the greatest output of goods at the cheapest cost, journeymen fought back, looking to uphold the traditions of the “Trade” and to secure a “just price” for their labor. As early as the mid-1790s, both manufacturers and journeymen began to organize separate associations to promote their increasingly competing interests. Merchant-manufacturers founded general societies as semipolitical umbrella organizations to help them oversee the trades and to secure favorable legislation, especially higher protective tariffs, from the national and local governments. They also relied on these societies in their efforts to reshape mechanics’ morality and work habits to fit the demands of the more competitive workshops.

Although workplace relations were still largely harmonious, the reorganization of production in the 1790s resulted in journeymen organizing among themselves. In Philadelphia, for example, the city’s shoemakers, viewing themselves as victims of the new workshop order, first briefly in 1792 and then more permanently in 1794, founded the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers. By the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, printers, carpenters, cordwainers (shoemakers), tailors, cabinet and chair makers, and other journeymen in the seaport cities had organized collectively and formed labor unions. Thus, long before the mechanized factory became the typical workplace in America, standardization of product, specialization of labor, and contested relations between employer and employed already characterized what became known as the “American system of manufactures.”

Rural Manufactures

Despite a doubling of the population over the last third of the eighteenth century to reach a total of some five million, the United States in 1800 remained overwhelmingly rural. Roughly

80 percent of Americans worked on farms, and many others depended on the products of the farm economy for their living. By contrast, only one in ten Americans worked primarily in manufacturing. In 1820, according to the census, fewer than one in ten Americans lived in urban places (communities with 2,500 or more people). Of these urban residents, more than half could be found in just six seaport cities: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Charleston. Almost nine-tenths of American agriculture and manufactures was concentrated along a strip only 100 miles inland from the Atlantic.

In the early republic, Americans produced for themselves most of the basic necessities that they required. The family remained the primary economic unit. Roughly two-thirds of the clothing that farm families wore between 1810 and 1820 was homemade. From December to May of each year, many farm households concentrated on indoor activities such as spinning and weaving. Spinning, the twisting of short woolen fibers into continuous threads on a simple spindle, was women's work. Weaving could be done on looms by either men or women. Some looms were small enough to be placed on a person's lap, and some were so large that they filled an entire room. Writing in her diary in the 1790s, a teenage Elizabeth Fuller records having spun and then woven some 176 yards of cloth. When she finished on June 1, she rejoiced, "Welcome sweet Liberty." But her sense of freedom must have been fleeting. Although the cloth Elizabeth produced most likely filled her family's needs for that year, the sewing of the shirts, petticoats, and breeches that they wore still had to be done.

The pattern of rural life does not quite conform to the Jeffersonian image of the independent, self-sufficient *yeoman* as the backbone of America. First, the output of wives and daughters who labored alongside husbands and sons was essential to the farm family's material prosperity. Even though particular activities would be distinguished as "men's tasks" and "women's tasks,"



Figure 1.4 An example of a family employed to produce cloth in their home during the “putting-out” period in the early textile industry. From Edward Hazen, *The Panorama of Professions and Trades; or Every Man’s Book* (1836). Courtesy of American Textile History Museum, Lowell, MA.

the work of the rural household required the mutual cooperation of every member of the family. Second, like the farm family, farm communities were of necessity mutually interdependent. Farm families frequently assisted one another, sharing tools and lending a hand when a task such as harvesting or barn raising required extra help. In her diary, Martha Ballard notes that she and her daughters produced cloth, raised garden produce, preserved vegetables, and did the household chores even while she performed the duties of a midwife for local families.

Although rural folk are justifiably famous for their versatility, no farm family could alone accomplish all the tasks – the sewing,

knitting, baking, gardening, brewing, dairying, candle making, stone masonry, butchery, wood chopping, blacksmithing, leatherworking, carpentry, reaping, plowing, and so on – that sustained any farm. Only plantations or the wealthiest farmsteads could afford to have their own gristmills or sawmills. They would either hire the services of a miller or have these tasks performed by slaves or indentured servants. Much more often, gristmills and sawmills in the early nineteenth century were operated as neighborhood industries in which millers turned the farmers' wheat into flour and sawyers turned trees into lumber for local use. The mill operators might receive cash in return, but frequently their payment was in the form of produce, homemade goods, or labor. Other small neighborhood industries – ironworks, paper mills, wool carding and fulling mills, tanneries, brickyards, and the like – were also common in the early nineteenth century, particularly in older, more settled communities.

One prototypical mill town was Rochester, New York. Before the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, four- and five-story stone flour mills dominated the city's center and its economy. Boats would pull up alongside the mills, located near waterfalls on the Genesee River, and workmen would shovel the grain from the vessels into buckets on the water-powered vertical conveyors that carried the grain to a mill's top floor. Based on plans developed by the American inventor Oliver Evans in the 1790s, machinery then cleaned the grain and ground it into flour, which was packed into barrels for distribution. Paid in cash for their wheat, the Genesee Valley farmers bought the guns and nails, shoes, hats, wagons, farm tools, and other manufactured necessities, as well as the luxuries like jewelry and mirrors, that were produced by local skilled artisans who made up more than half of the adult men in Rochester.

The rural artisan, required to be a jack-of-all-trades to earn his living, usually practiced more than one craft. One enterprising Long Island artisan "advertised himself as a clockmaker, carpenter,

cabinetmaker, toolmaker, and a repairer of spinning and weaving equipment as well as guns – all while collecting fees for the pasturing of other people’s cows.” Especially in the more populous East, but to a certain extent in small frontier communities as well, a considerable number of craftsmen traveled from farmhouse to farmhouse to ply their trades. These cobblers, blacksmiths, curriers, coopers, hatters, tailors, weavers, and shoemakers lived with the family and utilized the raw materials of the farm. Most rural areas included a few itinerant artisans, such as carpenters and blacksmiths, who often worked at their trades only part-time. Weavers and shoemakers traveled from house to house doing custom work, or “whipping the cat,” as it was known. William Bolton, a farmer living in Northampton, Massachusetts, hired two local women to come to his house to spin and weave cloth for his family. Not surprisingly, he ceased hiring women outside his family in 1803 when his daughter became old enough to do some of this work herself.

In 1791 the US treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, observed that the countryside was a “vast scene of household manufacturing,” where rural folk produced clothing, shoes, and other necessities, “in many instances, to an extent not only sufficient for the supply of the families in which they are made, but for sale, and even in some cases, for exportation.” Twenty years later, his counterpart in the James Madison administration, Albert Gallatin, found that the average farmer’s house in New Hampshire had at least one spinning wheel and that every second house contained a loom on which 100 to 600 yards of saleable cloth could be woven annually. The household production of goods made primarily for family use peaked around 1815. A marked decline in household production took place thereafter, first in the East and then, between 1830 and 1860, in most parts of the country.

Born in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1786, Caleb Jackson, Jr., grew up on a fifty-acre farm in nearby Rowley. Because Caleb

decided at the age of fifteen to keep a journal, a record exists, brought to light by the historian Daniel Vickers, of how and why an otherwise unexceptional farm family came to participate in household production in early nineteenth-century America. Even though the family farm was well located near the active commercial centers of Salem and Newburyport, Massachusetts, the Jackson acres barely provided enough to keep family members employed. Seeking to preserve its independence, the Jackson family began to make apple cider not only for their own use but also for those neighbors who brought their apples to be pressed in the Jackson cider mill. The Jacksons also hired out the labor of male members of the household as shoemakers. Beginning in 1803, during the winter months Caleb, Sr., bought cut leather from the local agents of wealthy merchants in Newburyport and Lynn for his sons to stitch and make into shoes. Never commanding the dignity of independent farming, shoemaking appears to have been viewed by Caleb as an “unpleasant obligation,” something “we have got to [do]” in order to achieve a satisfactory way of life. The Jacksons put a high premium on comfort and improvements to property. Caleb’s diary notes that the family used the proceeds from their outwork production to build a new end to their barn and a bigger cider mill, as well as to remodel the shop and construct a new house with six fireplaces, nine rooms, and twenty-seven windows. In his diary, Caleb never refers to individual advance but rather to that of “we,” meaning his collective family. Outwork became for the rural Jackson family, as it had been for many of their urban artisan contemporaries, a means by which they could achieve a comfortable independence.

In an excellent overview of the transformation of women’s work in the Industrial Revolution, the historian Thomas Dublin observes that during the early decades of the nineteenth century “the handweaving of machine-spun cotton yarn into cloth and the braiding of split palm leaf into men’s and children’s hats” became important industries for farm women in New England. As their

farm chores diminished during the winter and early spring months, unmarried teenage daughters took to weaving yarn from the local spinning mills or braiding palm leaf hats for the local storekeeper to sell. Middlemen supplied or “put out” the necessary materials, collected the completed work, and attempted, with minimal success, to impose some measure of discipline over their labor force.

Using the surviving account records in the 1820s of one such middleman, Silas Jillson of Richmond, New Hampshire, Dublin looked to learn more about the place of outwork in the lives of rural residents. Widespread in Richmond, outwork weaving appears to have provided rural families with a modest supplement to their agricultural production. The output of a typical weaver was only four yards per day. Even in the winter and spring months, weaving probably took up only three days of a weaver’s week. Both male and female household members were account holders with Jillson, but the records do not indicate who did the actual weaving. Nevertheless, Dublin concludes that the data suggest that a family’s unmarried daughters did most of the outwork weaving, under either their own account or that of their parents. Unmarried daughters made up almost two-thirds of women with accounts, and their earnings from weaving were comparable to those of the male household heads.

In the rural countryside, the clothing trades were not simply extensions of women’s household labor. Women and men worked together to support their families. According to the historian Marla R. Miller, rural clothing production is best understood as “an artisanal craft ... in which both men and women participated vigorously, though in different ways that responded very differently to changing circumstances.” For example, in tailoring, a distinction has to be made between the cutting and the sewing of a garment and whether the article of clothing was being made for a male or a female client. Miller cites as one example of these distinctions the purchase by Frederick Wardner in the fall of 1800

of two and a quarter yards of coating from the shop of the Windsor, Vermont, merchant Isaac Green. Wardner brought the material to a tailor who measured him and cut the pieces for a new overcoat. He then took these pieces to a Windsor “tailoress,” Catherine Deane, who made the garment. Thus a sort of division of labor, or what Miller refers to as “hierarchies of skill and status,” existed “that turned on the gender of both a garment’s maker and its user.” A “tailoress” was likely a woman who sewed but did not possess specialized skills in cutting, whereas a “tailor” could be either a man or a woman who possessed the skill to both cut and sew men’s apparel.

Outwork families tended to be larger than other rural families and to have more teenage children (especially daughters, whose work shifted back and forth from agricultural tasks to weaving). Also, because weaving required the expense of either building or purchasing a loom, as well as enough space in a house to use it, outwork families were usually somewhat better off than their poorer neighbors. With the rise of the power loom in the 1820s, handloom weaving, which at its peak employed 12,000 outworkers across rural New England, declined precipitously. By 1829, the year that Jillson closed his accounts, outwork weavers were experiencing severe cuts in the prices paid per yard for their output. However, a new form of outwork, the braiding of children’s and men’s palm leaf hats, was expanding, becoming by 1837 an industry valued at \$1.9 million and employing more than 51,000 women and children across rural New England.

The growth of palm leaf hat making in the 1820s and 1830s resulted more from the spread of the industry over a larger area than it did from mechanization or a more intense work process. Storekeepers distributed to local farm families the palm leaf used in making the hats, which they bought wholesale from Boston merchants who imported it from the West Indies. Looking at account books of a Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, store owner and middleman, Dexter Whittemore, Dublin found that, like handloom



Figure 1.5 “Scenes and Occupations Characteristic of New England Life.” From *Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, June 16, 1855. Courtesy of B. Davis Schwartz Memorial Library, Post Campus of Long Island University.

weaving, hat making was a major source of income for farm families in the area. Outwork was taken up by farm families less because of desperate need than because it provided a supplementary source of income that fitted well with the rhythms and demands of the other activities of a farm household. Like the

handloom weaver families, palm hat maker families tended to be larger than their neighbors, usually due to differences in the number of daughters. However, the families that made palm hats were often poorer than handloom textile families. As one Vermont braider in the 1830s explained, "Money is so scarce and we must have some." Even though younger girls, married women, and widows also braided palm leaf hats, most palm leaf hat makers were teenagers.

In the main, outwork supplemented the income of the fathers' farms. In 1830 Whittemore employed more than 250 individuals who in that year produced 23,000 hats. Increasingly, his outworkers lived on farms located farther and farther from his store. Farm families braided hats, a seasonal activity, for about 78 full days a year. Even though they earned on average only \$20.68 in credits at Whittemore's store, for some outworkers, such as widows, hat making became a steady, if modest, source of income. The income from palm leaf hat making was often used by the children of farmers to help them prepare for their futures. Dublin found that farm daughters spent about two-thirds of their store credits on sewing supplies, while their brothers used their credits to purchase household furnishings and agricultural implements. Thus the farmers' daughters appear to be purchasing the goods they needed to make clothing and linen for their future households, and the sons the goods they would need on the farms that they expected to establish.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, outwork had a significant impact in rural communities in the Northeast. Farm families were able to supplement their income from agriculture and to sustain themselves in the face of greater competition from more productive farms in the Midwest. Outwork provided an alternative to factory employment for farm women. Working at home and entirely unsupervised, they could help maintain the family's income. Yet, because of the central role played by the store owner and the middleman, outworkers were

not self-employed producers. They experienced an early form of wage labor, earning not cash but store credits. From the start, merchants installed small workshops in which the finishing process for the palm leaf hats was carried out. These shops were enlarged during the 1840s and 1850s, and women were hired to work in them. Finally, by the 1850s, production was consolidated in factories and only braiding was left in the hands of male and female outworkers. Rural outwork is best understood, Dublin concludes, as a transitional phase of industrial labor, one that merged earlier labor practices with new ones.

By the 1820s, local traders and urban merchants such as Bedford, Breed, and Pratt had already begun to create a dynamic intraregional market in farm produce and household-manufactured goods. Their entrepreneurship enabled towns like Lynn to take full advantage of the emergent interregional trade that resulted from a revolution in the nation's system of transportation. By the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, improvements in roads, bridges, turnpikes, and inland canals, often financed at least in part by the national and state governments, had created an infrastructure that made commerce and travel infinitely easier. These improved means for moving goods and people resulted in enlarged markets and helped foster an industrial revolution in the United States.

The Economy of Seaport Cities

Prior to 1820, the seaport cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Charleston had become depots for transoceanic shipping. Even though in the early 1800s most manufacturing took place in the countryside, the concentration of population in these six centers of maritime commerce created an expanding market for locally made as well as imported goods. Carpenters, coopers, rope makers, caulkers, sailmakers, bricklayers, distillers, printers, tanners, and other artisans produced the

commodities that met the everyday needs of the city dwellers for goods and services as well as provided the more expensive clothing, household furnishings, and other luxury items desired by well-to-do urban merchants and professionals.

Seaport cities also required the services of many unskilled casual or day laborers to load and unload ships, cart merchandise to and from the docks, and perform a great many heavy manual jobs. The laborers, stevedores, seamstresses, and other casual workers constituted about 40 percent of the urban working class. They were paid about \$1 or less per day in 1800, and the evidence from Philadelphia and other seaport cities indicates that their wages improved little over the next three decades. Their living standards were deplorable. In the 1790s, according to one New York physician, many families among the laboring poor lived in “decayed wooden huts” surrounded by muddy alleys and permeated by the stench of “putrefying excrement.” These workers, usually employed only irregularly, were a highly transient group whose circumstances made organized resistance highly unlikely.

An artisan system of production flourished in Philadelphia and the other American seaport cities at the turn of the century. No single trade dominated Philadelphia’s manufactures. Even the shipyards, perhaps the city’s largest employer, would have hired no more than two dozen men each. The pace of work in artisan production was at best casual. The master and his journeymen and apprentices worked by hand to fill orders or to build up a small inventory of goods for sale from the shop. As independent producers, the city’s mechanics owned their tools and lived either in the workshop or within walking distance of it. Performing their jobs in ways that would have been familiar to their fathers, the city’s masters and journeymen derived great pleasure from their work. The master, as Karl Marx observed, owed his role in production more to his knowledge of the craft than to his ownership of the means of production. Each mechanic

who began as an apprentice assumed that he would one day be a master himself. The transition of the young apprentice to journeyman and then master appeared to be part of the natural cycle of a workingman's life.

Although each apprentice and journeyman could reasonably expect to have an "equal chance for his share of business in his neighborhood," the goal of these mechanics was a competency rather than great wealth. A competency was more than simply an economic reward. The craft shop was structured like a family, and the intimate ties of the masters, journeymen, and apprentices encouraged the subordination of self-interest in favor of a commitment to the collective well-being. Well into the nineteenth century, competency remained the expectation of every working person and underlay an implicit understanding between workers and their communities.

Drawing on the traditions of the American Revolution, artisans commemorated their contributions as the producers of society's wealth. The membership certificate of the New York Mechanics Society in 1791 depicted at its center the muscular arm of a workman holding a hammer above which is written the society's motto, "By Hammer & Hand all Arts do stand." The certificate included images of a turner and his assistant working on a piece of furniture at a lathe, a blacksmith at his forge, and a farmer plowing his land. Another image celebrated the members' mutual obligation to care for one another by showing a representative of the society bringing aid to the widow and children of a deceased member. As mechanics, they took pride in the contribution that their labor made to the general well-being of society.

At Fourth of July and other annual celebrations, mechanics assembled and marched in procession through the streets of their communities, proclaiming their allegiance to the principles of artisan republicanism. Reflecting this attitude, an orator speaking to a group of artisans in New York at an Independence Day

celebration in 1810 extolled the virtues of “republican simplicity” and the “genius of America,” which were predicated on “just notions of Liberty” and “founded upon the RIGHTS OF MAN.” The mechanics took pride in their crafts and celebrated the political, social, and economic independence to which they were entitled as productive citizens. Wary of unrestrained competition and unlimited accumulation, artisans advocated a republican order based on equal rights, the social value of labor, competency, and their understanding of community as an association of individuals who labored for the benefit of all.

Manual Labor In and Out of the City

Prior to the beginning of construction of the Erie Canal in 1817, only 100 miles of canals had been completed in the United States. The phenomenal success of the Erie stimulated a canal-building boom that resulted in the construction of some 3,326 miles of canals by 1840. Yet, the panic of 1837 and the economic depression that followed, as well as the tremendous expansion of railroad building, would bring the canal era to a close by the end of the 1850s. In terms of its management structure, technology, and system of labor, canal building in the United States was, from the first, a mix of the old and the new.

Speculative commercial enterprises, canal-building projects were organized as joint-stock companies chartered by the state. Canals were expensive endeavors, and they had to be fully built before tolls could be collected and they could become profitable businesses. Those at the top of the canal management structure – the proprietors, the president and board of directors, engineers, and overseers – increasingly relied on contractors or independent builders to construct these artificial waterways. The canal companies mobilized an unusually large labor force. Unlike other contemporary workplaces such as the small artisan shops, the emerging urban manufactories, and outwork, the larger canals

required from 500 to 1,000 workers. Even in the early years, by one estimate more than 3,000 men were engaged in canal construction.

The hard and often dangerous work these “canallers” performed did not change much throughout the history of canal building in the United States. Most canal jobs were simple and familiar; the work was accomplished mainly by pick, shovel, auger, wheelbarrow, and cart and was powered by gunpowder, oxen, horses, and humans. Only a few jobs, such as constructing the locks, which involved stonecutting and masonry, required workers who were more skilled. Although the wages paid to canal workers were comparatively high, the irregularity of the work resulted in low overall earnings. Canal workers, who were mostly casual laborers, that is, hired by the job and constantly on the



Figure 1.6 Workers on the Erie Canal in the early 1830s. Aquatint. From the John Hill Print Collection (image #46562). Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.

move, were paid only for the number of days they worked, and interruptions due to weather, injury, illness, or company financial problems were common. Even those who found more regular work averaged only seventeen and a half days per month. Working from dawn to dusk, usually twelve to fourteen hours in the summer and around ten in the winter, canal workers were expected to be punctual and diligent or they would see their pay docked.

In the early phase of canal development, prior to 1816, canal companies utilized all forms of labor. Canal workers included slaves (mainly in the South), who were either hired or purchased; indentured servants, who were bought directly off the ships in the harbors along the Atlantic coast; and free workers (mainly in the North), who were contracted by the year, month, or day. In 1826 a visitor to the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal found some “2500 men constantly at work, Irish, Dutch, Welsh, French, Swiss, and Negroes.” As a result, the canal workforce was diverse – African American slaves; English, Dutch, and German free workers who were already living in the United States; and newly arrived Irish immigrants.

Canal laborers lived in “Corktowns” or “Slabtowns,” family shanties or all-male barracks located near the worksite or in a nearby town. Stigmatized because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as their rough work and living conditions, canal laborers, until the 1830s, tended more to fight among themselves over issues such as the limited number of jobs available than to join together in opposition to their employers. As a visitor to the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal noted, “The Irish and Negroes kept separate from each other, for fear of serious consequences.” More often, conflict arose from the canallers’ resentment of their marginal existence than from any sense of solidarity with their fellow workers.

Not surprisingly, the life of a slave laborer on the canals was different from that of a free worker. Slaves were usually hired for the year or half-year but sometimes for shorter periods, especially

as management's desire for a more flexible labor force developed. The fee was paid to the master, and it depended not only on the labor supply but also on the dangers that the work posed for such a valuable property as a slave. Nevertheless, about half the cost to the canal companies of employing slaves, like that for free laborers, derived from the need to supply food, shelter, and clothing for these workers. Such costs, of course, were not a factor in the casual labor market in the nation's cities.

In 1800 Baltimore surpassed Boston to become the third largest city in the nation. The Maryland city's shipyards, small workshops, and early manufactories attracted a skilled workforce that supplied Baltimore's residents with furniture, shoes, barrels, jewelry, and many other goods as well as built the ships that sustained the city's commercial progress. Yet many of Baltimore's workers labored outside the craft workshops, in the streets as casual labor. "Scrapers" removed the manure, and stevedores and carters loaded and unloaded ships. Casual laborers also carted grain into Baltimore from the Maryland and Pennsylvania countrysides or worked as millhands who ground the wheat that arrived into flour. White women stitched shirts by candlelight in their apartments or "hawked" candles, cheeses, and vegetables in Baltimore's neighborhoods. Many African American women labored as laundresses. Both free and enslaved African American men and women worked as domestic servants in the city's public accommodations and wealthier households. As the historian Seth Rockman has noted, "Whether male or female, native born or immigrant, Euro-American or African American, enslaved or free, these working people struggled to scrape by."

To dredge the Inner Harbor, Baltimore, for thirty years beginning in 1790, funded the operation of a "mudmachine." The Irish immigrant Michael Gorman, arriving in Baltimore in 1793 having fled from his master in Philadelphia, became a mudmachine worker twenty years later. Like Gorman, hundreds of mudmachinists maneuvered scoops of muck, emptied them into waiting

scows, and delivered the dirt as landfill for waterfront properties. Although the mudmachinists earned slightly higher wages (a little more than \$1.10 a day) and worked more steadily than the city's other common laborers, they still lived a marginal economic existence. Typical of unskilled laborers in Baltimore and elsewhere, they owned no tools and the casual nature of their work denied them job security. Unlike Gorman, few mudmachinists were able to establish their own households. For mudmachinists, unlike the city's artisan workforce, the "grueling and filthy" work that they performed was not a stage in a life that would eventually lead them to economic independence, but an occupation that offered them little or no chance of advancement.

Engaged mainly in unpaid – what is often referred to as "invisible" – labor that ensured the well-being of the family and the household, women had few occupational choices in Baltimore or elsewhere in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Yet, as the port city's economy expanded, jobs that had been performed at home by mothers and daughters, such as washing, feeding, and sheltering, were becoming part of the city's service economy, that is, work done for pay. Free African American women worked as laundresses. Slaves and indentured servants worked in Baltimore's taverns and inns. Free black, immigrant, and native-born women were employed as domestics, supplying household help for the city's middle-class families. Although now paid, few such forms of labor available to women in Baltimore could provide them with a reliable subsistence.

However, as Rockman has observed, "[T]he commercialization of women's traditional household labor" did have "one key group of beneficiaries: free African American laundresses who could now support themselves on the labor that had previously been coerced within slavery." In 1817 Baltimore, 77 percent of the city's laundresses were African American women. Free women were able to do the washing at home, independent of direct supervision by their employers. For the African American women

who came to dominate the laundry business, such work represented an opportunity for a better life.

In 1816 four women hucksters protested a fine of several dollars levied against each of them for violating a new city ordinance that prohibited selling outside the confines of Baltimore's covered marketplaces. "Poor, necessitous, and indigent," and having "no mechanical trade, no manufacturing faculty, no stock," the women could obtain no other employment "whereby they cou'd obtain a scanty subsistence for themselves and [their] families." Mostly poor, white, and widowed, female hucksters would, a decade later, oppose a new state licensing law that they insisted would deny them their "humble but lawful Traffic." In a plaintive appeal to the community's self-interest, they claimed that "by this oppressive law" they will be compelled "in all probability ... [to] be thrown upon the charity of your city and [be] forced to become the unfortunate Tenants of your Alms House." Despite their pleas, the selling of goods on the streets proved untenable.

Commonly referred to by historians as unskilled, the laborers who dug the canals through the countryside or dredged the harbors or sold goods on the streets of America's cities did the necessary work that advanced the economy of early America. A much more diverse group than those who labored in the nation's artisan shops, casual workers would come to protest their working conditions only later, in the 1830s. Unlike the craftsmen of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whose protests were triggered by changes in the nature of skill and the control of production, unskilled workers were largely demonstrating against their declining material conditions.

Economic Change and the Demise of the Artisan Order

In the late eighteenth century, masters and journeymen began forming joint self-help associations such as the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen (1785) in New York City, the

Association of Mechanics and Manufactures (1789) in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Franklin Typographical Society (1793) in Philadelphia. These mutual benefit societies were mainly concerned with helping unemployed members and with providing health, widows', and burial benefits. Yet, despite the harmony of the artisan workshop attested to by these societies and celebrated in the many Grand Federal Processions of 1788, the bonds formed in the craft shop were starting to fray by the century's close.

Beginning in the 1790s, economic change transformed the artisan system of production in the workshops of the nation's seaport cities. For example, in Philadelphia, instead of fashioning a pair of custom-made shoes for every shop patron, Bedford and other up-and-coming merchant entrepreneurs began to produce shoes in greater volume, offering them ready-made for sale in local retail markets or in new markets in the West Indies and in southern cities such as Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. To increase output and reduce the cost of labor, the merchant entrepreneurs reorganized their shops: instead of having a journeyman make the whole shoe himself, the work was divided into discrete tasks, each performed by a different worker. Shoe manufacture in Philadelphia took on the essential features of a market society in which a worker's labor was viewed as a commodity – valued in terms of cash and subject to the supposedly impersonal laws of the free market.

The rise of the merchant entrepreneur undermined the mutualistic social relations that had been customary in the craft shops. In place of the mutual benefit societies they had organized with their masters, journeymen began in the late 1780s to form nascent trade unions. Most of the new unions were local and brought together journeymen from a single craft. The unions charged their members a small initiation fee and set dues at six to ten cents per month. As journeymen lost faith in the old dream of becoming masters and accepted the likelihood that they would remain

journeymen for their entire working lives, they saw unions as agencies for self-defense against their increasingly organized employers.

In 1786 twenty-six journeymen printers in Philadelphia organized a union, the Typographical Society, to protest a reduction in their wages. The society called the city's first labor strike, which was settled on the workers' terms. But the interests of the employing masters and their wage-earning journeymen continued to diverge. As their working conditions deteriorated, journeymen articulated their sense of the chasm opening between themselves and their masters. By 1817 the New York Society of Printers had come to understand that "the interest of journeymen [is] separate and in some respects opposite to that of employers." Some two dozen strikes in New York between 1795 and 1825 reflected the growing unity among urban workers as the gap between them and their employers widened.

Taking a practical approach to the changing structure of work, these early labor organizations developed practices that would later be associated with the term "business unionism." As the labor historian Melvyn Dubofsky has pointed out, the first unions looked "to protect members against the dilution of craft standards, increase their income, shorten hours, and improve working conditions through agreements with their employers." They enforced strict rules that compelled members to abide by wage and work standards. Seeking job security for workers at a time of growing insecurity, they also demanded that members and employers accept what was the equivalent of a "closed shop," that is, a shop in which only union members could be hired or retained. Those workers who refused to join the union or to abide by its rules were condemned as "scabs," reviled by one Philadelphia cordwainer as "a shelter for lice."

One major issue that the skilled journeymen confronted was that of "run-away" apprentices, or competition from the growing number of not fully trained workers that employers hired to cut

costs. The traditional apprentice being initiated into “the art and mysteries” of the trade was usually a boy (but could also be a girl), aged fifteen to sixteen or even younger and often the son (or daughter) of a relative or close friend of the master. Throughout the colonial period, apprentices helped meet what would otherwise have been a labor shortage. Records show that 1,075 youths were apprenticed in Philadelphia over the two years between October 1771 and October 1773. Formal apprenticeship required a contract between the youth’s parents and the master that set out the articles of indenture. The new unions sought to enforce strict rules limiting the number of apprentices to be employed in a shop. Thus the Philadelphia Typographical Society, which excluded from membership anyone “who shall not have served an apprenticeship satisfactory” to the union, demanded that all printing positions in the city be reserved for its members.

Facing an assault on traditional practices from their employers, journeymen attempted to establish what they considered to be fair working conditions. The workday in most urban workshops paralleled that on the farm, from sunup to sundown throughout the year. In 1791, in the first recorded “turnout,” or strike, in the building trades, the Journeymen Carpenters of the City and Liberties of Philadelphia sought, in addition to increased wages, overtime pay and a reduction in their work hours. The journeymen complained that they had “heretofore been obliged to toil through the course of the longest summer’s day” and declared that in the future “a day’s work amongst us shall be deemed to commence at 6:00 in the morning and terminate at 6 in the evening of each day.” Although the masters scoffed at the journeymen’s claim that “*self-preservation ... has induced us to enter into indissoluble union with each other*” and rejected the workers’ attempt to set their conditions of labor, the “contagion” that the employers feared led to more strikes.

The strike by the Philadelphia Journeymen Carpenters in 1791 was conducted in much the same way as many of the

early turnouts. Unions did not negotiate across a table with their employers as they do today; instead, they drew up a list of demands, which a delegation presented to the employer or which the union publicly posted, and then waited to see if their employers accepted or rejected their conditions. Rather than specifying an “increase in wages,” journeymen in these years usually called for a “just price” for their labor. What precipitated the conflict is unknown, but in 1794 a journeymen’s association, the Federal Society of Chair Makers in Philadelphia, submitted its own book of prices to the clerk of the district of Pennsylvania. When, the following year, the association again tried to set the price for its members’ labor, the city’s masters replied that they “would not employ any journeymen cabinet-makers as society men, but [only] as individuals.” Nevertheless, evidence suggests that in 1796 both parties agreed to a price book that included a cost-of-living clause for the workers that allowed the “prices” they were paid to respond to increases in the cost of the “necessaries of life, house-rents, &c.”

Just as they did when they tried to set the hours of their work-day, journeymen distinguished between the boss’s assertion of his right as owner of the business to set wage levels and their right as producers to set the price on the value of their labor. For the journeyman the price of his labor should be determined by what he needed to maintain a respectable household rather than on what the product would sell for in the market. As one journeyman tailor claimed in 1819, “[T]he Journeyman is better able to decide upon the merit of his labor than the employer is for him.” Viewing themselves as the producers of all wealth, the journeymen rebelled against the notion that their labor was a commodity to be purchased by employers at the lowest possible price.

Cordwainers, or shoemakers, were among the most militant journeymen at the turn of the century. In 1794, in Baltimore, the United Journeymen Cordwainers went out on strike against the master shoemakers over alleged abuses of the apprentice system.

The masters, the journeymen complained, failed to properly train the eight to ten apprentices who served in each shop. The United Journeymen demanded that in the future only two apprentices be instructed and that the journeymen rather than the masters take charge of their training. The employers refused to change the apprentice system. In another example of the journeymen shoemakers' propensity to engage in "collective bargaining by fiat," in 1799 at least 100 cordwainers in Philadelphia walked out following the master shoemakers' flat rejection of wage demands presented to them by a workers' deputation. In this instance, however, both sides appear to have ultimately agreed to "split the difference."

Six years later, journeymen cordwainers in Philadelphia again demanded wage increases and were again immediately turned down by their masters. A bitter strike ensued that lasted six to seven weeks. According to the strikers, the shoe merchant entrepreneurs were no longer producers; instead, they had become "mere retailers" of the cordwainers' labor, living in luxury off the workers' output. The strike proved disastrous for the journeymen. Not only were they forced to return to work at the old rates but some forty members quit the society. Of greater consequence, the masters, embittered by more than fifteen years of constant labor strife, decided to challenge the journeymen's association in the courts. In November 1805 eight members of the Journeymen Boot & Shoemakers of Philadelphia were arrested and charged with forming an illegal "combination and conspiracy" to raise their wages and with restraint of trade. The indictment claimed that the defendants had attempted to exact "great sums of money" from their employers by refusing to work "at the usual prices and rates," by forming themselves into "a club" and making "unlawful and arbitrary by-laws," and by using threats and other unlawful means to prevent their fellow craftsmen from working. Their trial, *Commonwealth v. Pullis* (1806), was the first of a dozen conspiracy cases that over the next two decades

would undermine not only the cordwainers' union but also the entire early labor movement.

The conspiracy trial began in Philadelphia in March 1806. Prominent lawyer-politicians from Philadelphia's contending political parties represented the two sides in the dispute. Jared Ingersoll and Joseph Hopkinson, both ardent Federalists, served for the prosecution, while Walter Franklin and Caesar Rodney, staunch Jeffersonians, argued for the defense. Hopkinson's opening remarks made clear to the jury that the journeymen "are not indicted for regulating their own individual wages, but for undertaking by combination to regulate the price of labour of others as well as their own." This he branded coercion. The first witness, the shoe worker Job Harrison, testified that a journeyman's failure to join the workingmen's association and to abide by its rules would lead to his being "scabb'd": the other workers "would not work in the same shop, nor board or lodge in the same house, nor would they work at all for the same employer." Hopkinson condemned such rules as acts of a "secret society" that were clearly "injurious to the general welfare."

The prosecution quickly pointed out where it believed the community's general interest lay. Hopkinson appealed to the jury – which included two innkeepers, a merchant, two grocers, a tobacconist, a watchmaker, and a master tailor – to remember that Philadelphia "is a large, encreasing, manufacturing city." A vast quantity of manufactured goods was exported to the West Indies and the southern states. "It is then proper," he called on the jury, "to support this manufacture. Will you permit men to destroy it, who have no permanent stake in the city?" In the view of the prosecution, right-thinking members of the community – those with a stake in its continued well-being – needed to come together to end this threat to the city's economic prosperity and to punish the conspirators. Hopkinson even suggested that in acting to hold down wages the city's merchant-manufacturers were serving the good of the community because they were thereby keeping the

price of goods low. For the prosecution, only the needs of the employer, as the property owner, and not those of the laborer who actually produced the material objects, were worthy of consideration.

The defense, of course, had a different view of where the community's welfare rested. By seeking to determine the rate "at which the journeymen should work" without consulting "the wishes of the workmen," the "*would-be masters* had united against them," according to defense counsel Franklin. The journeymen had freely united to resist "this state of slavish subordination." In a public address during the strike, the journeymen had pointed out that they had assembled for the last fifteen years "in a peaceable manner for our common good." By such acts as assisting "those that age may [have] rendered incapable of labor," the cordwainers' association helped "to promote the happiness of the individuals of which our little community is composed." No person, the defense claimed, had been compelled to join the society. Rather, the journeymen had joined together as free agents on behalf of their collective self-interest.

Rodney challenged Hopkinson's characterization of the journeymen cordwainers as mere "birds of passage" who had no stake in society. He called on the members of the community represented by the jury to recognize that labor, too, had social value. It was labor, he insisted, that constituted "the real wealth of the country." All that the journeymen had done by submitting a list of wages that they believed they should be paid was commit "the unpardonable sin of setting and ascertaining the price of their own worth." To "establish the principle, that laborers or journeymen, in every trade, are to submit to the prices which their employers, in the plentitude of their power choose to give them" would be "to destroy the free agency of this meritorious part of the community."

Rodney's point about who should set the price of labor was made even more bluntly in Philadelphia's *Aurora* by the

newspaper's radical democratic editor, William Duane, who charged the employers with attempting to reduce the city's laboring men to a "breed of *white slaves*" forced to live in "a condition still more despicable and abject." The best method for advancing Philadelphia's manufactures, Rodney assured the jurors, would be "to secure to workmen the inestimable privilege of fixing the price of their labour." It was as producers that they voiced their collective best interests, and it was on this assumption that the defendants rested their claim to consideration by the community.

The conspiracy trial ended in 1806 in a defeat for the eight journeymen shoe workers. On the morning of March 28, the clerk read the jury's verdict: "We find the defendants guilty of a combination to raise their wages." The actual punishment meted out by the jury – the Philadelphia cordwainers were fined \$8 each and the costs of the suit – was relatively mild. Nevertheless, the guilty verdict meant that, although the workers could join together to provide benefits for each other, they could not legally attempt either to set the price of their labor or to determine who would be able to work in a specific trade.

Having failed to free themselves from dependence on their "so-called masters," the journeymen looked to produce shoes on their own. A month after the trial ended, the Journeymen Cordwainers announced that they had opened a warehouse where they intended to carry on a boot and shoe business, both wholesale and retail. The shoe workers had determined, they told the public, that they could either go into business for themselves or submit to employers "who could take away or lessen their wages whenever their caprice or avarice might prompt them." Despite the cordwainers' high hopes for their cooperative, as far as is known the venture was not a success.

Workers' efforts to gain control over their labor persisted long after the end of the cordwainers' strike of 1805 and the conspiracy trial that followed. Beginning with the formation of the first

unions and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, a culture of opposition arose that sought to rally the “producing classes” against what they would, starting in the 1820s, condemn as “wage slavery,” or the fear that wage labor was becoming a permanent and deteriorating condition in the United States. Like the cordwainers, most workers in America understood that each individual craftsman had property rights in the goods produced by the labor of his hands. A moral vision of a producers’ republic encompassed an alternative understanding of labor and property under capitalism, one that went beyond an expectation of decency and fair play in the relations of production to envision a system of capital ownership in the United States in which there was “no hire at all.”

Celebrating the New Era

On November 4, 1825, New Yorkers throughout the state held a day of carnival, parade, and general jubilation to mark the official opening of the completed Erie Canal. The New York City celebration was the climax of ten days of noisy festivities known as the Wedding of the Waters because Governor DeWitt Clinton deposited in the Atlantic Ocean bottles of water that he had filled earlier from Lake Erie.

Towns along the canal route had boomed with the start of construction in 1817. When the canal reached Rochester in 1821, the village’s population, which a decade earlier had been “without a house or an inhabitant,” had reached 1,500. In 1825 Buffalo, which had been a sleepy village of some “thirty to forty houses” in 1810, was a community of some 2,660 inhabitants. The canal would be completed in four sections, and at the peak of its construction the 363-mile-long waterway required the services of some 4,000 canal workers.

Much as the Grand Federal Procession marking the ratification of the Constitution had done nearly forty years earlier, the canal

celebrations in New York City and elsewhere brought together all members of the community. In New York City the colorful parade wended its way from Greenwich Street through the streets of Lower Manhattan to end at City Hall. Grouped by occupation and affiliation, leading clergymen, members of the local medical society, Freemasons, and city officials marched behind representatives of Clinton's alma mater, Columbia University, and associations of coopers, bakers, tailors, potters, sailors, and teachers. Most of the craft associations carried large banners, and some rode on elaborate wagons that demonstrated the operations of their trades.

The journeymen, marching together with their masters in craftsmen associations but also separately as members of their newly formed societies, honored the long traditions and ancient symbols of their crafts and celebrated the canal's completion as a modern example of American technological achievement, progress, and prosperity. Held aloft, the grand standard of the Chair-Makers' Society, an artisanal association, depicted a female figure with a cornucopia, a common symbol of peace and plenty. Her left hand rested on an ornate chair, and in the background was a chair manufactory. The society's motto proclaimed, "By Industry We Thrive." On the reverse of the standard was the chair makers' coat of arms, adorned with two chairs and a carpenter's tool on the crest. The master craftsmen marched behind the grand standard and were followed by eight boys who held aloft a large gilt eagle grasping a miniature chair in its beak. Members of the Journeymen Chair Makers Society came next, another eagle, and finally the apprentices, who held a banner emblazoned with the words "Peace and Liberty."

Like the chair makers, the city's other trades paid tribute to the worthiness of industry and to their trades' contribution to the peace and prosperity of the community. Journeymen tailors carried a banner that depicted a "Native" receiving a cloak over which was their motto, "Naked Was I and Ye Clothed Me."

Carrying the same banner that they had in 1788, the coopers erected a platform on which two men and a boy (a symbolic master, journeyman, and apprentice) built a large cask. And on their float, the printers worked presses that turned out odes in honor of the day. Many of the banners and insignias contained patriotic symbols and republican images.

In addresses delivered throughout the day, masters and political leaders, as they had during the earlier Grand Procession, extolled the virtues of united effort. Celebrating the harmony of the occasion, they observed that such achievements were made possible by “the common bond and mutual sympathy,” and the “ties and attachments ... interwoven with the strongest feelings of the heart,” that they believed governed the building of the canal. The celebrants invoked the Erie Canal as a symbol of what would later become known as the free labor system, an affirmation of the nation’s dynamic economy and of the opportunity and dignity presumably offered to all members of the community. In the official outdoor celebrations throughout the day, homage was paid to the unity of all members of the community. Nevertheless, the commercial and middle-class New Yorkers who attended elite gatherings in the evening chose to honor only the work of the canal’s commissioners, as well as the foresight of the politicians and of the citizens who had elected them. As Carol Sheriff, a leading historian of the Erie Canal, notes, the evening’s speakers celebrated how such “virtuous citizens would protect the common good.” Sheriff also points out the noticeable absence of the canal’s common labor force from the day’s festivities, “They did not sing public odes, march in parades, or offer toasts.” In their idealization of the mutuality of the artisan system, the celebrants ignored the friction then disturbing harmonious relations in their workshops. A growing discontent had led the journeymen to express their sense of solidarity with each other by marching together in their own, separate associations. Yet, even as they affirmed their independence through these associations, many of

the journeymen also believed that they came together not out of self-interest but on behalf of the common good. In the decades that followed the opening of the Erie Canal, workers expressed through their unions and strikes their hopes that the promise of a more equitable and cooperative industrial order for all Americans would be fulfilled.