

## **Plantation Labor Outsourced: Rethinking New England Outwork and the National Economy of Slavery in Antebellum America**

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[**Note to Readers:** Thank you for taking the time to consider this *draft* chapter from a book provisionally entitled “Plantation Goods and the National Economy of Slavery in Antebellum America.” The book is essentially a commodity history of things made in the northern United States for use on southern slave plantations in the period between 1800 and 1860. The goal is to understand the simultaneous industrial development of New England and the expansion of the cotton frontier into what was then called “the southwest.” The book tries to devote significant attention to the materiality of the axes, hoes, shovels, shoes, and textiles that connected the lives of Americans living thousands of miles apart. The chapter structure is to move from the point of production to the point of consumption. The first two chapters focus on New England entrepreneurs who saw the chance to make fortunes on the plantation frontier by producing “Georgia axes,” “Kentucky jeans,” “negro cloth,” and other goods. Readers will become particularly acquainted with Rowland G. Hazard, Isaac P. Hazard, and Joseph P. Hazard, the Rhode Island textile manufacturers who did extensive plantation-to-plantation sales from South Carolina to Louisiana (names you will see again below). These first chapters also spend a good deal of time in North Brookfield, Massachusetts—and that community shows up periodically in the pages that follow. What you are about to read is Chapter 3, the first of two chapters looking at New England labor. Chapter 4 focuses on male factory labor making agricultural implements. Chapters 5 and 6 look at the middlemen who brokered interregional trade; 7 and 8 deal with slaveholders; and 9 and 10 trace enslaved people’s interactions with northern-made provision good.]

When Mary Rodman sat down to sew frocks in 1840, she consulted a curious “list of dimensions.” The first frock was for someone who stood 4’11” and measured 38” around the waist. The next frock would have to be longer, about fifty-six inches from collar to hem, in order to fit a woman 5’6” tall. As she worked her way down the list—NO. 4. HEIGHT 5 FT. 7 INCHES WAIST 3 FT. and so forth—Rodman might have contemplated the \$1 she earned for every six frocks. She had to remember to attach a tag with these dimensions “legibly inscribed” to each frock so that it would get to the intended recipient. At 5’11,” Number 3 on her list was tall for the times. Number 10 must have been a child at only 4’3”. The inhabitants of these measured bodies might not have

warranted a second thought for Rodman, who soon turned to another order involving not just frocks but also shifts, the cotton undergarment worn closest to a woman's skin. Likely wearing a near-identical garment under her own dress, the thirteen year-old Rodman perhaps did not pause to think much about Number 5, Number 6, or Number 7 on the list. But this kind of sewing was tedious, and why shouldn't Rodman's mind wander from South Kingstown, Rhode Island, to the wearers of her handiwork someplace far away?<sup>1</sup>

New England girls and women like Rodman had taken in sewing for generations, whether as part of the networks of neighborly exchange that structured rural communities or thanks to the more recent practice of merchant storekeepers and manufacturers to distribute cut cloth to local families to stitch in exchange for store credit. Outwork, as it was called, had proven a particularly effective means of mobilizing the labor of wives and daughters in the countryside and it contributed significantly to New England's "industrial" output. The proprietors of a local carding mill would have furnished Mary's grandmother with wool roving to spin into yarn on her own wheel; and once spinning mills began producing vast quantities of yarn, Mary's mother would have accepted warp and filling to weave on a family loom. And now that weaving had been mechanized, Mary received precut cloth to assemble into garments at home. Skeins of yarn, pieces of cloth, and stacks of trousers were returned to the hands of the merchant or manufacturer who had furnished the initial supplies. Outwork was typically paid in store credits, which gave poorer families indispensable access to subsistence goods like milk, salt, and pork,

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<sup>1</sup> Peace Dale Manufacturing Company, Record of Amount Produced, 1803–1849, vol. 123, PDMC; James A. Ventress to RGH, 30 August 1836, Box 11:9, PDMC.

while allowing other families to gain or maintain access to the teapots, ribbons, and other consumer goods that defined middle-class respectability in the New England countryside.<sup>2</sup>

The expansive trade networks of the early modern world had long embedded the local experience of work within global systems of supply and distribution. The nineteenth-century New England women who turned Argentine wool into textiles for Louisiana slaves followed in the footsteps of Gujarat weavers, Guangzhou porcelain decorators, and countless other pre-industrial workers who transformed raw materials they themselves did not produce into export commodities they themselves did not use. The entangled relationship of remote producers and consumers has been a defining characteristic of modern world history, as has the ease and speed with which these connections became routinized and, by extension, invisible. If a New Hampshire farm girl in the 1830s ever stopped in the middle of braiding Caribbean palm leaves into hats for enslaved Mississippi boatmen and thought to herself, “This is weird,” she left no record of such musings for posterity. More likely, her own experience as a consumer of

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<sup>2</sup> The mobilization of household labor in the service of industrial production has been a topic of sustained scholarly attention, especially as economic historians like Jan deVries have understood Western economic development through an “industrious revolution” in which small households chose to allocate more of their efforts towards market production in order to access newly-available consumables: Jan de Vries, “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution,” *Journal of Economic History* 54 (June 1994): 249–270. This consumption-driven model shifts chronological attention to the period before the factory, moves the focus away from cities, and recognizes patriarchal social relations as crucial to capitalist development. In this regard, it is consistent with the classic “transition to capitalism” social history research on New England such as Christopher Clark, “Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860,” *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979-80): 169-189, as well as the feminist labor history of Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). The most important studies of New England outwork are Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (January 1998): 3–38; Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Gail Fowler Mohanty, *Labor and Laborers of the Loom: Mechanization and Handloom Weavers, 1780–1840* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

buttons, raisins, and other commonplace imports had so naturalized commercial interconnections as to make them unworthy of comment. School texts reinforced the point, with Emma Willard's *Geography for Beginners* reminding her that the entire world could be found on the shelves of the country store where she earned credits for her braided hats.<sup>3</sup>



Lurking behind this “world of goods,” then as now, were the relations of power that structured work and the questions of who did it, on what terms, and to whose benefit. Equally in the shadows were the ideological, theological, and ethical commitments that made these patterns of production and exchange business-as-usual: the unarticulated, unquestioned assumptions that said it was perfectly appropriate for a thirteen year-old girl to sew frocks for money, or that might have prompted that girl, Mary Rodman, to think long and hard, or to think not at all, about the frocks she was sewing. Of course, various disruptions— the hurricane that destroyed a crop, the machine that made a traditional

<sup>3</sup> Emma Willard, *Geography for Beginners, or, the Instructor's [sic] Assistant in Giving First Lessons from Maps...* (Hartford, Ct.: O.D. Cooke, 1829). For the broader historiography of such entanglements, see Introduction.

form of labor redundant, the financial panic that obliterated commercial credit—could readily reconfigure patterns of global integration into locally-experienced forms of insecurity and bring people face-to-face with truths long unstated. Taxation and military occupation had forced colonists like Mary Rodman’s great-grandparents to confront their affections for imported tea and textiles, as well as to assess the value of their membership in a British empire that provided access to lucrative plantation markets in the Caribbean. Moral revolutions could also call the question, as when Quaker communities at the heart of transatlantic commerce began to testify against African slavery. By the end of the eighteenth century, a number of Anglo-American merchants and manufacturers had concluded that trading in human beings was illegitimate commerce and that producing shackles was an immoral use of an iron forge. Their compatriots insisted that consumers in England and North America grapple with the remote exploitation that sweetened their tea and cakes. The agitation leading to the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade is emblematic of how longstanding relationships of production and consumption can suddenly become a “problem,” and scholars have lavished attention on the reformulation of capitalism in this changed environment. It was here that political economists, moral reformers, and businessmen alike imagined a liberal economy predicated on the competitive strivings of the self-owned and self-made.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975); Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press/OIEAHC, 2006); Julie L. Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

Several decades on the other side of that reckoning, Mary Rodman was born into a Rhode Island where slave-grown cotton was the crucial ingredient in the state's economy and numerous families spun, wove, and sewed for plantation markets. However, this relationship would not attain the status of a problem for most New Englanders. Commercial entanglements garnered an occasional comment from organized abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s, but rarely prompted calls to close the textile mills on account of their complicity in slavery several states to the south. Nor could one hear public defamations of girls like Mary Rodman whose sewing was in the service of a Mississippi plantation fifteen hundred miles away. Although Rhode Island outworkers often assembled parcels of clothing in assorted sizes, Rodman was tasked with filling the specific order of James A. Ventress, the European-educated cotton planter who would soon serve as a founding trustee of the University of Mississippi. Harry Steadman's wife produced twenty-nine frocks for the enslaved women owned by the notorious slave-trader Isaac Franklin. Sally Gardner stitched fifty-two frocks and shifts for the women whom William Stamp held captive in Ft. Adams, Mississippi. These Rhode Island girls and women manufactured within in a system whose larger workings had once again retreated into the background, requiring no comment or second thought as they bound producers and consumers across space.

Did it matter to Mary Rodman's work-life—the skill she brought to her sewing, the pride she took in her work, the social status or stigma such labor brought her, the subjectivity she developed as a worker—that she made frocks and shifts for enslaved women? At first glance, the answer is no. The basic contours were the same as for the vast majority of New England girls and women who navigated industrialization over the

first decades of the nineteenth century: outwork offered rural families the opportunity to deploy female labor more directly towards the acquisition of a higher material standard of living, while the concurrent rise of mechanization and factory wages tempered those opportunities by more explicitly transforming labor into a commodity and subjecting it to intensifying regimes of discipline. Mary Rodman saw this first-hand, moving from sewing at home to toiling in a textile factory within just a few years. Whether brooms for urban housekeepers, butter for city grocers, straw-bonnets for fashionable ladies, shoes for whalemens, or shifts for slaves, the story was largely the same.

And yet, it would be an error to presume that laboring New Englanders did not confront the distinct moral and political implications of their work on behalf of the slave system. By the 1830s, the public discussion of slavery and its abolition was already loud enough to require people to pick sides, make excuses, or engage in willful obliviousness. At the same time, a white supremacist popular culture provided New Englanders with a predictable store of stereotypes for degrading the black men and women who would wear the clothing they stitched or the hoes they forged. In other words, Mary Rodman did not sew in a vacuum, but rather did so in the midst of political and cultural contests over the boundaries of slavery and freedom. And in communities like hers of South Kingstown, the legacies of slaveholding, (gradual) emancipation, and colonialism further shaped the contours of earning one's living weaving "negro cloth" and pegging "slave brogans." If nothing else, it would require the New England makers of plantation goods to undertake additional work—social or spiritual—to contend that their labor had no further moral or political implications, that it bore no reflection of their own ethnical standing, that their handiwork carried no additional signification, that sometimes a shovel was just a shovel.

The risk was not merely the opprobrium of sanctimonious reformers; it could also be the ribbing one might get at the tavern for making a living at forging “nigger hoes.” At the same time, what were the possibilities that as Rhode Island’s Dorcas Babcock sewed clothing for Mississippi slaves, she envisioned herself in the guise of her biblical namesake toiling with devotion to cover the naked and comfort the suffering?

This chapter reconsiders New England workers’ experience of industrial transformation vis-a-vis the low-quality textiles and tools they produced for the most degraded consumers in American society. Familiar stories of deskilled trades and militant unionists, of mill girls and wage slaves, read differently in the context of communities making plantation goods. Unfortunately, historians are not blessed with new sources that reveal the inner thoughts of a Massachusetts weaver turning out yard after yard of Kentucky jeans. The traditional tools of social history— close attention to work routines, life course, and the texture of the everyday in small towns and villages— must suffice to recover the experiences of Mary Rodman and the other outsourced workers of the American plantation regime.

### **Household and Factory**

Before people came to the factory, the factory came to the people. The typical New England factory, as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has observed, “built on rather than competed with household manufacturing.” A manufacturing venture might spin yarn in a water-powered factory, but then rely on households to wind yarn into warps, the sequenced strands of yarn that run the length of woven cloth. These warps might be distributed to other households for weaving on family handlooms, or they might be

brought to a different factory for weaving, sometimes on mechanized looms and other times on handlooms tended by women and men alike under a single roof. Rowland G. and Isaac P. Hazard's Rhode Island textile enterprise configured factories and households in these ways simultaneously in the 1820s and 1830s. They centralized some operations and put out others. This was also the strategy of the central Massachusetts brogan manufacturers, who employed male leather cutters in a central workshop and relied on families to assemble the uppers and soles within the rhythms of an agricultural economy. These hybrid systems channeled the labor of men and women, children, teenagers and the elderly, into the production of plantation goods. Only agricultural implements like axes, shovels, and hoes were produced in discrete, gender-exclusive settings, but even here the household functioned to supplement men's factory wages with the unpaid domestic labor of wives and children. The factory of popular imagination—a fortress-like complex of mechanized production, with wage-earning operatives converting raw materials into market-ready commodities at rapid clip— was still exceptional.<sup>5</sup>

Because factories emerged hand-in-hand with accelerated household production, New England industrialization appeared to enrich, not immiserate, the countryside. In small communities of two or three thousand residents, manufacturing provided new opportunities to families whose livelihoods had already reached the limits of what the land could provide. The plantation goods labor force was not drawn from the landless and transient, but rather from smallholding families with local lineages several generations

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<sup>5</sup> Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms," 22. On women's unpaid labor as a wage subsidy, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Household, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1801–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

long. To be sure, high fertility rates and the practice of partible inheritance had left many rural families in peril by the beginning of the nineteenth century and prompted out-migration to urban seaports, newly-sprouted manufacturing villages like Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and eventually to mills in Lowell, Massachusetts. For the families that managed to hold on, however, outwork and local factory labor did not constitute the difference between subsistence and starvation, but rather the difference between a subsistence that contemporaries called “rude” or “rustic,” and subsistence characterized by greater refinement and material comfort.<sup>6</sup>

Recall North Brookfield minister Thomas Snell’s characterization of how life had changed in the community over the previous thirty years of slave shoe manufacturing: “buildings were repaired—children handsomely clothed—new habitations began to rise and multiply, till this flourishing village with a busy population stands before you as the result of diligence and reformation from some of our old and impoverishing habits.” The British ministers who visited the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations in New York City in 1853 explained further: “The “brogans,” or “negro shoes” are often made by small farmers, who fill up their leisure time with shoemaking, especially in the winter, when out door labour cannot be attended to. The ready money thus obtained contributes very materially to the comfort of this class of persons, and they pride themselves upon

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Larkin, “From ‘Country Mediocrity’ to ‘Rural Improvement’: Transforming the Slovenly Countryside in Central Massachusetts, 1775-1840,” in *Everyday Life in the Early Republic*, ed. Catherine E. Hutchins, (Winterthur, Del.: H.F. Du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1994), 175–200; David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), page; Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women’s Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 35–47; Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work*, 29–75. Need additional citation to Peter Coleman, *Transformation of Rhode Island*.

paying the State taxes when they are proprietors, and a portion if not the whole of their rent, when tenants, with the proceeds of handicraft.”<sup>7</sup>

Thomas R. Hazard told a more dramatic story for the communities in southern Rhode Island making textiles under the watchful eye of himself and his brothers. Before manufacturing began in earnest, “thousands of families... subsisted entirely on the cheapest food, knew but little of domestic comfort, and nothing of foreign ‘comforts’ except perhaps a little molasses occasionally.” Their women were “miserably clad” and hid themselves from the view of strangers as they “struggl[ed] in the bosom of hopeless poverty.” But no more, as rising wages and falling prices had transformed rural families into tasteful consumers who eagerly pursued “the articles most indispensable to their comfort” as well as “luxuries.”<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Hazard’s account was undoubtedly embellished (penned to sway voters in an upcoming presidential election), but a closer look at Mary Rodman’s community of South Kingstown substantiates the tight connection of negro cloth manufacturing and local families’ rising material standard of living. Rowland Hazard (the father of Thomas, Rowland G., Isaac, and Joseph) had been a pioneer of textile manufacturing, acquiring carding machinery to prepare wool for spinning shortly after 1804, then spinning machinery to make yarn, and by 1815, some of the first power looms for weaving in the United States. Advances in machinery, however, did not automatically render home

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<sup>7</sup> Snell, *Discourse*, 15-18; “New York Industrial Exhibition. Special report of Mr. George Wallis. Presented to the House of Commons by Command of Her Majesty, in Pursuance of Their Address of 6 February 1854,” reprinted in *The American System of Manufactures: The Report of the Committee on the Machinery of the United States 1855 and the Special Reports of George Wallis and Joseph Whitworth 1854*, ed. Nathan Rosenberg, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), page?

<sup>8</sup> Thomas R. Hazard, *Facts for the Laboring Man* (Newport, R.I.: James Atkinson, 1840), 22-30 (quote on 23).

production redundant. Early spinning mills could not always produce yarn strong enough for warp (which had to withstand the tension of the loom), and the first generations of power looms were incapable of producing twill weaves, plaids, and other marketable fabrics. Over 1819, 1820, and 1821, the Hazards paid approximately 90 local families to card, spin, and weave. Thomas Aaron's daughter received fifteen pounds of wool in September 1819 and returned thirty-five skeins of yarn two months later. For his daughter's spinning, Thomas Aaron received \$1.40 in credit at the Hazards' South Kingstown store, enough to purchase a set of cups and saucers, two bowls, and thirteen hanks of cotton warp yarn presumably to weave at home for their own use. The six hundred yards of cloth that Jonathan Carpenter's wife produced in 1820 gained the family access to calico cloth, shoes, plates, tea, oil, fish, and more yarn. These accounts often obscured women's labor under the practice of legal coverture that gave a man ownership of the wages earned by his wife and children; only one-third were kept in a woman's name. For some families, outwork provided a modest supplement to whatever income they derived from farming (and even a means to pay for having the wool shorn from their own sheep carded on the Hazards' machinery). But for other families, spinning and weaving at home provided a substantial boost to their resources. Benjamin and Ruth Northup had the last of their seven children in 1817, and the weaving that Ruth and her older daughters completed— 220 yards in 1819, 450 yards in 1820— bought the family utilitarian supplies like shoes and cloth, but also souchong tea. By virtue of owning a loom and the other equipment needed to weave at home, families like the Northups were not destitute. Outwork was not a testament to their desperation, but an advantageous use

of the “bits and pieces of time” belonging to a mother with small children underfoot and her older daughters still at home.<sup>9</sup>

Mobilizing the countryside in the production of negro cloth, the Hazards grasped a number of advantages of their own. First, they charged retail prices on the groceries, fabrics, and other goods at their store, guaranteeing a profit on the credits they issued for household manufacturing. Second, they could depend on economically vulnerable families to work when more prosperous ones would not. Henrietta and Abram Perry had been sued in 1816 for a \$4 debt, so spinning for the Hazards was likely an opportunity the couple could not afford to miss. Similarly for Elias Wilbur’s family, although they did so under an archaic legal vulnerability that prohibited them from receiving public poor relief on account of having been born in a different township. This suffocating localism, however, provided an additional benefit to the Hazards: most every family they provided with outwork was a known quantity, immersed in the social life of the community, whether as members of long-settled and intermarried clans, as participants in the judicial system as plaintiffs, defendants, and jurors, as fellow parishioners and co-religionists, and as local officials. Joshua B. Curtis, the constable who delivered the destitute Wilbur family to the town line when their need for public assistance triggered their forcible removal from the community, brought the Hazards’ carding and spinning home for his wife (Mary Rodman’s great aunt!) and daughters (Mary Rodman’s second cousins!). Although the Hazards would soon extend their geographical reach into Massachusetts and Connecticut, the first phase of their business leveraged communal ties to gain

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<sup>9</sup> Royal C. Taft, *Some Notes Upon the Introduction of the Woolen Manufacture into the United States* (Providence, R.I.: Sidney S. Rider, 1882), 39; Cash Book, 1819, vol. 55, PDMC-HBS; Miscellaneous Accounts within Letterbook, vol. 147, PDMC-HBS; Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms,” 6 (“bits and pieces”).

legitimacy for this hiring practice and perhaps to encourage better work and the timely return of finished goods. There were no “strangers” among the families toiling for the Hazards as their business found its footing.<sup>10</sup>

As the Hazards came to recognize the prospects of the southern market for heavy woollen fabrics in the early 1820s, they leveraged a distinctive feature of New England’s gender landscape: for more than a half-century, weaving had been understood as work suited to both men and women. This was different from England, France, and even the mid-Atlantic states like Pennsylvania, where weaving had belonged to “skilled” male craftsmen who were not keen to see women at the loom. The acceleration of textile production operated differently where weaving did not have to undergo a jarring re-definition (and inevitable devaluing) as labor both female and “unskilled.”<sup>11</sup> A labor supply thus enlarged, according to some scholars, kept the price of weaving low enough for New England manufacturers to compete against British imports. Manufacturers may have deferred investments in labor-saving factory technology so long as the countryside abounded in potential weavers. The characteristics of “negro cloth” also sustained handloom weaving. First, the Hazards’ twill-woven Double Kersey fabric, a favorite of wealthy South Carolina and Georgia planters, required an alternating raising and lowering of the loom harnesses that machines had yet to master; likewise, power looms

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<sup>10</sup> South Kingstown Town Clerks Office, Court Records, 1760s–1840s, unnumbered box. For warning out practices in Rhode Island, see Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> On the persistence of handloom weaving as male craft labor in the mid-Atlantic states, see Adrienne D. Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor in the Production of Textiles in Eighteenth-Century Rural Pennsylvania (Rethinking the New England Model),” *Journal of Social History* 27 (Spring 1994): 537–561. Of course the emergence of female handloom weaving in England in the nineteenth century generated both inter- and intraclass conflict in England. See Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

could not throw multiple shuttles to produce the plaids that other slaveholding customers sought. Simply put, human weavers on handlooms were necessary until the early 1830s to produce the goods that would sell in the South. Second, “negro cloth” was typically bought in narrower widths (between 26 and 36 inches) that could be accomplished by weavers with shorter arm-spans. American woolen manufacturers had initially thought the money would be in broadcloth (named such for its two-yard width on the loom), but its size required greater technology (the flying shuttle) for a single worker to complete the task of weaving. Twilled woolen fabrics in narrow widths were ideal for a handloom workforce that sat men, women, and even children on looms widely distributed among rural households.<sup>12</sup>

To weave Double Kersey on a four-post counterbalance handloom did not require the technical expertise necessary for the overshot coverlets and patterned carpets that furnished many New England homesteads. Although such simple twills sometimes appeared in draft books (weaving pattern books showing how to dress the loom, tie the harnesses, and alternate the treadles), a person who knew how to read the musical score-like notations would not have needed such instructions to make a simple four-harness twill. Additionally, if using warps that had been wound elsewhere, then someone else had already done much of the hard work involved in setting the fabric’s pattern. And for households that did their own warping, outwork orders came with instruction tickets for

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<sup>12</sup> On the contest between handloom and mechanized weaving in Rhode Island, see Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790–1860* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1963), page; Mohanty, *Labor and Laborers of the Loom*, page. Mohanty suggests that woolen manufacturers delayed expenditures in the 1820s by utilizing handloom weavers, saved their capital, and then invested in the improved power looms of the 1830s. Ironically, the Hazards determined that the burgeoning market for goods in Mississippi and Louisiana preferred plain-woven cloth to the twill-woven kerseys they produced in the 1820s. In this regard, it is possible that the initial preference for twill D.K. prolonged Rhode Island handloom weaving by a decade.

sequencing yarn of different colors on the loom in a repeating pattern and using the correct-sized reed to achieve the desired fineness of the fabric.<sup>13</sup> That said, substantial authority remained in the possession of the weaver, who had to make numerous on-the-fly decisions and adjustments in the course of making fabric. Was she swinging the beater bar with enough force to compact the weft filling so that the fabric would not appear “sleazy” (in the parlance of merchants who complained about weaving that was too loose)? Was it worth his time to repair a piece of broken warp, which required extricating oneself from the seat, walking to the backside of the loom to locate the culprit, tying on a replacement, and potentially correcting the error in the fabric if the broken yarn had gone unnoticed for awhile? There were trade-offs between speed and quality, and a weaver needed to learn what those were in order to make her time at the loom worthwhile. Manufacturers and merchants took deductions, sometimes as much as a third of the payment due, for work that was judged unsatisfactory. Weaving the most simple fabrics required tacit knowledge, perhaps acquired assisting a parent or sibling by winding more filling yarn on to spools (quills) for quick replacement when the shuttle ran out, or sweeping up the lint accumulating on the floor from the friction of the loom. How to dress a loom by pulling one thousand warp-ends through one thousand heddles could be taught, but it would take practice to get it right and make it go quickly. A weaver needed to be attentive to the tension of the warp and to sequencing her feet on the treadles, as she looked forward to the moment she could stand and stretch her legs, crank the front beam, and hear the satisfying *clink, clink, clink* of the metal gear as it advanced

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<sup>13</sup> Diane Fagan Affleck kindly shared the draft for “Blue Niger” appearing in the 1860s draft book of Charles Noska, a Manayunk, Pennsylvania, weaver (formerly in the collection of the now-disbanded American Textile History Museum). Rabbit Goody generously provided with me the order tickets that North Stonington, Connecticut, merchant Dudley Wheeler distributed to his outworkers.

another several feet of her accumulating tally of cloth. A weaver in her rhythm, especially if assisted in keeping her shuttle supplied with yarn, working on a narrow warp, and relatively indifferent to whatever imperfections might result, could make it appear effortless; a novice less so.<sup>14</sup>

Home weavers, like all outworkers, had substantial control over their labor. They could work on their own schedules, integrating outwork into the routines of childrearing or farming, and laboring with whatever urgency they chose. Outworking families could subdivide jobs within the household, or even take turns on the loom. They were encouraged to return their finished products in a timely fashion, but not usually under a hard deadline or contractual penalty. And they exercised the basic responsibility of quality control, if only because manufacturers were unlikely to notice every snag in an eighty yard piece of woven cloth or every missed stitch and badly-hammered nail in a sack of fifty pairs of brogans. If manufacturers were to be believed, outworkers also had substantial expertise appropriating some of the supplied materials for themselves: a skein of yarn here, some extra leather there. The balance scale organized the transactions of outwork weaving, with yarn distributed by precise weight and returned cloth weighed to ensure nothing had been pilfered.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the tacit knowledge of weaving, see Mohanty, *Labor and Laborers of the Loom*, 32–33; Adrienne D. Hood, *The Weaver's Craft: Cloth, Commerce, and Industry in Early Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 88–97, 194 fn. 21. On deductions for bad work, Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> On outworkers' appropriation of leather, see Jens Christiansen and Peter Philips, "The Transition from Outwork to Factory Production in the Boot and Shoe Industry, 1830–1880," in *Masters to Managers: Historical and Comparative Perspectives on American Employers*, edited by Sanford M. Jacoby, (New York: Columbia University Press, 19xx), 21–42; see also, Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 36. On the multiple possibilities for organizing an outwork system, see John Styles, "Spinners and the Law: Regulating Yarn Standards in the English Worsted Industries, 1550–1800," *Textile History* 44 (November 2013): 145–170.

There is no direct evidence that rural New England families believed producing goods for slaves gave them license to cut corners— or at least no more corners than if they were sewing pants for New Bedford whalers or making boots for the U.S. Army. Considering the constant communication between southern slaveholders, New Orleans, Charleston, and New York merchants and factors, and New England manufacturers, assessments migrated from plantations to communities like South Kingstown. The daily mail brought the Hazards an endless stream of complaints regarding fabrics lacking “compactness in the weaving,” “so tender that they tear like wet paper,” or woven so unevenly a piece that began 32 inches wide might be only 24 inches wide by the end. On his initial trip to Charleston in 1824, Isaac P. Hazard heard how poorly South Kingstown weaving had fared over the previous year of plantation use and warned his brother Rowland at home that quality had to improve. However, it is impossible to know whether such information was conveyed to weaving families. Elsewhere in their business, the Hazards contested the notion that goods produced for slaves should be indifferently made. For example, they chided a wool dealer who sold them ten bales so “full of dirt and very rotten, short-curved and notty” that it was unspinnable for “negro cloth warps.” They accused the merchant of mistakenly thinking “that any thing would answer for negro clothing.” Likewise, the Hazards could implore their Massachusetts brogan supplier to “keep up the quality” in response to complaints coming from disgruntled slaveholders. But while they might implore their weavers to be more speedy, they did not do so—at least not in the written record—by invoking the image of a shivering slave waiting for his winter wear to arrive.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> J. Hamilton Couper to IPH & RGH, 12 November 1823, Box 1:10, IPH-RIHS (“compactness”); Ripley & Waldo to RGH & Co., 5 January 1828, Box 1:5, RGH-RISH (“paper,” narrowness); IPH to RGH, 21

Once the Hazards signed contracts to deliver thousands of yards of cloth to New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston by a given date, a larger problem with outwork weaving became apparent: families were under no obligation to produce at the necessary speed. One solution was to enlarge the geographical scope of distribution, and indeed, outwork networks across New England became more extensive to compensate for difficulties in making production more intensive. The Hazards cultivated weavers across the Connecticut border in North Stonington, as well as northward and westward into other parts of Rhode Island. The other response was to consolidate labor under the roof of a factory where the pace and quality of work could be directly supervised. The Hazards brought fourteen weavers into their Peace Dale factory in 1822, some working on rudimentary water-powered looms and others on handlooms as they would have done at home. Fifteen year-old Penelope Rodman earned \$1.50 per week, assisted by her seven year-old sister Hannah (who was paid 50¢ per week). George Allen also worked with a younger sibling at his side, but his \$1 weekly wage suggested he was not so nearly a competent weaver as Penelope Rodman. The first formal contracts the Hazards signed with workers were in 1824 and came in the midst of extreme pressure to deliver cloth to New York in time for the fall selling season. As Isaac Hazard explained to his anxious merchants, “a violent fever” had broken out in Peace Dale and laid low a family of four workers, killing two of the daughters. As other workers got sick, “the idea prevailed that the disease was contagious and it has been with great difficulty that we could procure hands to keep our factory running.” As a result, the Hazards were “now employing men

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February 1824, Box 1:2, RGH-RIHS; IPH to A. Sibley, 8 February 1838, Box 2:18, IPH-RIHS; Joseph P. Hazard to IPH, 21 March 1842, LLMVC-LSU.

when girls would answer could we obtain them.” Jedediah D. Briggs, for example, signed a five-month contract at \$15 per month (\$10 in cash and \$5 in store goods “at a fair price”). Eighteen year-old John Pain Dyer Jr., whose father was a longtime South Kingstown resident, agreed to work for a weekly wage of \$7 in cash and \$4 in store credit. The factory ran into November with a roster of young men from established South Kingstown families: Steadman, Northup, Hiscox, Gardner, Carpenter, Eldred, and, of course, Rodman.<sup>17</sup>

The Hazards returned to hiring young women the following spring, switching over to the remuneration system that had prevailed under the outwork regime: measuring work by the yard and paying for it primarily in store credits. Nonetheless, the ten young women who began weaving at the Hazard’s Peace Dale factory in 1825 signed a contract that attested to the greater quality control of centralized production: “The cloth is all to be well and evenly woven free from knots, skip work, or doubled filling and thin places made by letting down too far or other causes, and no improper waste of stock is to be made.” They were also obliged “to employ their time steadily during the hours which the factory usually runs,” and threatened with reduction in pay “for such time as they lose.” By virtue of committing to the factory for a nine-month season, the employees were guaranteed payment of 75¢ a week if the Hazards ran out of yarn, as early weaving factories often did. Otherwise, they would earn 3¢ a yard for making kersey, with no more than one-sixth of their earnings payable in cash at the end of the season. The bulk of their pay could be redeemed in goods at the Hazards’ store, although a \$1 weekly

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<sup>17</sup> Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work*, 36; “Price of Wages 2 Mo. 1822,” Box 10:3, PDMC-HBS; IPH to Ketchum & Ripley, 10 September 1824, Box 1:1, PDMC-RISH; “Account of Work Done for IP and RG Hazard, 1824,” within v.55, PDMC-HBS.

boarding charge would be deducted first. Depending on how quickly the weaving went—and this could depend on whether the factory was adequately stocked with yarn, whether the air was unusually humid, or whether a person had morning sickness—the fixed charge for food and shelter consumed between one-third and one-half of a week's work. During a week in which her ninety-six yards of weaving earned her \$2.89, Neppy Rodman, as Penelope was known, watched the first \$1 cover her board but could devote the remainder to a 20¢ milk pan and several yards of cloth. Rodman toiled for twelve consecutive such weeks again in spring 1826, producing more than one thousand yards of woolens destined for enslaved wearers. After a summer spent elsewhere, she returned to Peace Dale in the fall and toiled through the first months of 1827. Indeed, Rodman would spend her March birthday—this one her twentieth, but no different than her fifteenth—making negro cloth.<sup>18</sup>

As their business accelerated in the second half of the 1820s, the Hazards continued to combine factory and outwork weaving to meet demand for their Double Kersey. Women in their twenties typically came into the factory, even those like Patty Tourgee Sweet who were married. Her sister Mary Tourgee Gavet also wove at Peace Dale, but so too did their unmarried sister, the twenty-four year-old Susan. In contrast, women with children and widows wove from home. Consider Patty Tourgee Sweet's mother-in law, Sarah Sweet, born in 1765 and widowed in 1820. She had woven for the Hazards previous to her husband's death and would continue to do so afterwards, although now the credits would accrue to Widow Sweet or Sarah Sweet rather than to her

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<sup>18</sup> Wage Book, 1826–1827, vol. 101, PDMC-HBS; “Agreement between I.P. & R.G. Hazard on the one part and Mary Targee on the other...,” 1 March 1825, Box 9:11, PDMC-HBS; “Price of Wages 2 Mo. 1822,” Box 10:3, PDMC-HBS.

husband Jonathan. The seventy yards she completed in March 1821 had been among the first the Hazards sent to Philadelphia in hopes of securing the patronage of the city's southern merchants. A few years later, in the years surrounding her sixtieth birthday, Sweet wove over twenty-two hundred yards of kerseys.<sup>19</sup> The Hazards, like most Rhode Island manufacturers, also turned to children to tend the spindles of their yarn factories. These families were also paid in store goods, and often used children's earnings to pay house rent to the Hazards. When William Taylor sent his ten year-old daughter, Almira, to the Silver Spring yarn factory in 1827, he accrued a 75¢ store credit for each six-day week she worked. Over four months, the family spent her earnings on flour, tobacco, pork, tea, and occasionally cloth (calico, something nicer than what she herself was making in the factory). The week that the Taylors left the store with 12 ½ lbs. of flour and a gallon of molasses, they overspent Almira's earnings by 50 percent and assured she would be working the next week to cover the debt. The three Himes children had started working for the Hazards a year earlier, and if the family had better options, they did not pursue them. Staying in the factory from March through December, they collectively earned \$101. Of this sum, \$12 returned to the Hazards in the form of rent for a nearby house; the remainder was devoted to clothing and such food provisions as pork, flour, corn, sugar, ginger, pepper, tea, and tobacco. Nancy Reed's son William had worked for the Hazards in 1826, but daughter Eliza took his place the following year. Some weeks, Nancy supplemented her children's earnings by "sorting waste" in the factory. They

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<sup>19</sup> Cash Book, 1819, vol. 55, PDMC-HBS; "Weaving and Carding Accounts, 31 March 1821, Box 5:9, IPH-RIHS; Factory Ledger, 1826, Vol. 1 (oversized), Thomas R. Hazard Papers, ms. 483, sg. 14, RIHS; "Agreement between I.P. & R.G. Hazard on the one part and Mary Targee on the other...", 1 March 1825, Box 9:11, PDMC-HBS. On life stage and outwork, see Mohanty, *Labor and Laborers of the Loom*, 109–111.

family paid rent out of their earnings, purchased textiles to clothe themselves, and often ran a debt from one week to the next. The Hazards did not obtain seeds or farming tools from the Hazards' store, either a testament to what it stocked or to the ways in which these families were not incorporating household manufacturing into a traditional system of agricultural tenancy, as might be found in places like Pennsylvania.<sup>20</sup>

The production of textiles for slaves continued to rely on a combination of household and factory labor. The Hazards brought larger number of Rhode Island families into factory labor by the end of the 1820s, with a shortage of yarn in the summer of 1828 leaving over sixty operative "all out of employ" at Peace Dale. They also contracted weaving out to the proprietors of other water-powered factories. In Jewett City, Connecticut, Christopher Lippitt had a hard time meeting the Hazards' demand for cotton sheetings because no nearby families had labor to spare. "I have rode in all directions in order to find help, but I find it impossible to obtain it, other factories are in the same situation more or less," he reported in the fall of 1828. Lippitt soon managed to get the factory going, although the sickness and death of four of his workers (all of the same family) caused him to lament, "It seams that if ther [sic] is any bad luck it falls on me." Lippitt continued in a self-pitying mode when all his weavers quit in January 1829 owing to his insistence that the fabric "be maid finer." Regardless, he "again got the looms agoing," and his factory produced the thousands of yards that the Hazards had promised a New York wholesaler. But it was just as possible to fill orders in communities like North Stonington, Connecticut, where the exchange of household weaving for store

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<sup>20</sup> North Kingston Children's Labor Payrolls, 1826–1827, Box 5: 18, 20, and 21, IPH-RIHS. Surveying fifteen textile mills in Washington County, Rhode Island, the 1820 U.S. Manufacturing Census counted employees: 37 men, 27 women, 93 boys and girls.

credit sustained the local economy. Thomas R. Hazard urged Russell Wheeler to mobilize his “fastest and best weavers” for an order due in New York. “I hope you are urging out the weaving as fast as possible and that you do not depend altogether upon the weavers calling for it but send it to them,” Hazard advised. “By so doing they are then aware of the urgency of the business,” he concluded. Fifteen years later, North Stonington’s economy was still organized around outwork weaving for plantation markets. Over a twenty-four month period in the mid-1840s, North Stonington weavers turned out 100,000 yards of fabric, all in exchange for store credit. Their labor was coordinated by Col. Dudley Wheeler, who brought yarn in from Rhode Island and carted plaids and stripes back across the state line for shipment south.<sup>21</sup>

## **Families**

Let us return to Mary Rodman and the frocks she stitched for Mississippi slaves. The symbiotic relationship of the household and factory was revitalized when the Hazards began producing slave clothing in 1836 and mobilized another generation of South Kingstown families in the service of the plantation. As discussed in the previous chapter, their bold gamble on frontier markets made American slaves among the first to wear ready-made jackets, pants, and frocks. Payroll records are indistinguishable from those of a decade earlier: Joseph Sherman’s daughter credited with six suits, Daniel Sherman’s wife credited with six suits, Hannah Bradford credited with six suits, with

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<sup>21</sup> Samuel Rodman to RGH, 11 July 1828, Box 1:7, RGH-RIHS; Christopher Lippitt to RGH, 12 September, 7 October 1828, 12 January 1829, Box 1:7–12, RGH-RIHS; Thomas R. Hazard to Russell Wheeler, 16 August, 30 August 1831, Box 1:2, Thomas R. Hazard Papers, ms 483 sg 14, RIHS; Dudley R. Wheeler Daybook, Misc. Vol. 184, Manuscripts Collection, G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc. Courtesy of Rabbit Goody.

some paid in cash and others in store credits. Coverture still masked the labor of wives and daughters, and although a larger percentage of women held accounts in their own names, a more pronounced gender division of labor reserved the job of cutting cloth to men and the job of sewing it to women. Some of these women had woven for the Hazards in the 1820s, but for others this was their first experience exchanging their time for income. Mary Rodman fell into this category, but there was surely something familiar: Rodmans were everywhere, including in charge.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the Rodman family offers a particular opportunity to consider the range of possibilities the textile industry brought to the inhabitants of the New England countryside. Their progenitor was a Quaker migrant who arrived in New England from Barbados in 1675. His son, Thomas (1683–1775), was born in Newport but moved to South Kingstown to practice medicine at the start of the eighteenth century; Thomas's nine children and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren intermarried with virtually every other substantial family in southern Rhode Island, creating a dense genealogical web of Rodmans, Clarkes, Gavits, Gardiners, Curtises, Knowles, Babcocks, Carpenters—names that would adorn numerous nineteenth-century textile mills *and* populate their payrolls. Thomas's fifth son Samuel (1716–1776) remained in South Kingstown, as did his son, Robert (1745–1806). Robert married Mary Carpenter in 1768 and they proceeded to have fourteen children and more than fifty grandchildren, most of whom remained in Washington County. Those fifty grandchildren, born between the 1790s and the 1820s,

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<sup>22</sup> "Payments for Clothing Manufactured," Box 6:14, IPH-RIHS.

comprise a remarkable cohort for evaluating the multiple outcomes of Washington County's textile economy.<sup>23</sup>

Consider one set of siblings: the ten children of Robert Rodman and Elizabeth Hazard Rodman. They had been born into modest circumstances, but the family's situation became dire when Robert and Elizabeth were forced to sell their house and 100-acres of farmland to a neighbor for a pittance of its value in 1810. In the transaction, Elizabeth had to sign a separate contract surrendering her dower rights and "widow's third" in the property in exchange for a measly \$1. They also had to give up their pair of oxen. The family's debts continued to grow, and Robert's creditors decided to take dramatic action in 1814: they had him incarcerated in debtor's prison for five months. Petitioning for release, Robert told his tale in moving terms:

"by various misfortunes he is reduced to a state of Poverty and distress that by the act of God he in the sickness of himself and family has been obliged to expend large sums of money that he has endeavored by his Labour and industry to support himself and family without impinging on his little patrimony but unforeseen misfortunes has blasted his expectations and desires that all the fruits of his industry and the little he inherited from his father is gone and he confined in gaol separate and apart from a wife and eight infant children who are daily depending on your petitioner for bread to feed their hungry mouths and altho your petitioner has made every offer & overture to his creditors yet they Lost to all principles of humanity still confine me in Prison..."

The court took an inventory of the family's possessions in case there was property that could be sold to pay off the debt. An "old bed," an "old desk, three chairs, one table, three chairs, one iron tea kettle, an iron pot with a "spider" to suspend it over the fire, and "some Small Quantity of Earthenware" would not make a dent in the \$272 the Rodmans

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Henry Jones, *Genealogy of the Rodman Family, 1620–1886* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane, & Scott, 1886). I can include a note on methodology.

owed to their neighbors. The court also took testimony from neighbors about the family's circumstances. "[I]t appears to me that his house is very indifferently furnished," reported Rowland Hazard, the father of Rowland Gibson Hazard and Isaac Peace Hazard. "There is two poor beds and a few chairs, a Table or two, and some other things, and it looks furnished like a poor man's house." Another neighbor confirmed this observation, having "been frequently at his house since and consider the furniture to be very poor for a labouring Man." "I should not think that he is worth any property more than what he earns from day to day." A third neighbor vouched for Robert as an "honest, punctual, and naturally an industrious Man" who had the misfortune of being struck with typhus. He was sick for nearly two years, as were many of his children; one died and Robert's survival was in question. The family relied on the charity of neighbors during a lengthy convalesce. The Hazards employed "Betsy" Rodman for most of 1815 in exchange for room and board, while hiring Robert for various manual labor tasks on a dam, in a swamp, or at the flax oil mill. Once the family could board itself at the end of 1815, Betsy earned \$1.50 per week from the Hazards for unspecified labor, while daughter Abby (age 10) and son Samuel (age 15) would earn income for the family at 25¢ and 50¢ per day respectively. Robert would be cleared of his debts in 1816, but the family had lost a great deal over the previous decade.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the saddest detail to emerge from the debt suit was this: when a new school was opening in the neighborhood, the teacher's father came by the house. "As Robert had a number of Children," the man explained, "I considered it would be very

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Rodman Insolvency Case, 19 February 1814, Petitions Received 1725–1890, Vol, 44, folders 77 and 82, RISA; Betsy Hazard entry, 1815, Carding Account Book, Box 4:2-3, IPH-RIHS.

convenient for him to have his children school[ed] accordingly.” The man even promised to “make the pay easy,” but Robert refused. “He replied, that he was not able to clothe them fit to be seen and could not sent them on that account.” One wonders how a childhood spent in rags would shape the adolescences of Robert’s children, most of whom found their futures making textiles for Americans presumably even less well off.

The eldest, Samuel Rodman (1800–1888) would prove himself as an “honest, industrious young man” as a teenager working in the Hazards’ carding mill, and would then master weaving under their watchful eyes in the early 1820s, come to rent one of their factories by the end of the decade, and purchase an adjacent factory outright in 1835 to become one of the state’s most renowned manufacturers. The production of ready-made clothing ran through his shop in 1836 and 1837, while the Hazards vended “S.R.” cloth to their southern customers who still primarily wanted cloth by the roll.<sup>25</sup> His sisters, Abby (1804–1829) and Penelope (1807–1856) also wove for the Hazards in the 1820s; they did not become captains of industry, although they married relatively prosperous men. That “Neppy” did not have her first child she was thirty-five, far later than many of her siblings, suggests both a late marriage and a longer period of earning income as part of her parents’ household. Two other siblings, Sarah (1805–1845) and Amos (1806–18xx) did not appear to weave or sew for the Hazards, but *their* children did— as factory operatives in the 1840s! By that time, to send one’s children to labor in a mechanized textile factory was neither a testament to prosperity nor an avenue to upward mobility.

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel Rodman letter of recommendation, c. 1815, in Carding Account Book, Box 4:3, IPH-RIHS.

Consider another set of Rodman siblings, the ten children of Clarke Rodman and Mary A. Gardiner Rodman: Daniel Rodman (1805–1880) and Robert Rodman (1818–18xx) also became proprietors of some of the region’s most successful mills; there are numerous hagiographical accounts of their lives. Daniel would travel to South Carolina in 1830 in order to assist a local manufacturer establish a factory for making plantation blankets. Things were clearly more difficult for the eldest son, Christopher (1801–18xx): his children would find themselves laboring in the textile mills rather than owning them. His daughter Mary Rodman, as we know, stitched slave frocks. By the 1840s, Mary, along with her younger siblings Peleg, Hannah, and Daniel, were operatives at Peace Dale. It is unclear if Mary considered weaving on a power loom an improvement from sewing at home.

The 1840s factory payrolls tell similar stories of frozen or downward mobility. It is possible to track other workers who first appeared in the 1820s as children and teenagers, now toiling as factory operatives. Likewise, a number of young women who wove for the Hazards in the 1820s ended up marrying factory operatives in the 1840s. But some marriages were remarkable strokes of good fortune: Almira Taylor, the ten-year old girl who worked at the Silver Spring factory in 1826 would grow up to marry Robert Rodman who would own the factory by the 1840s. Almira Taylor Rodman was now Mary Rodman’s aunt, suggesting an ever-deepening set of kin relations among New Englanders in the plantation provisioning business.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Wage Book, 1846–1848, vol. 102, PDMC.

### **Abolition, Anti-Abolition, and Racial Knowledge**

Addressing themselves to “those in Rhode-Island who love liberty,” the women of Providence’s abolitionist movement planned for their 1847 annual fair. They solicited donations and sought support from various corners of the state. “Will not our Factory Girls send us ample testimonials that while their fingers have been busy with its products, their minds have been in the cotton field— heard and felt its horrors?” This was a remarkable request. And a tantalizing one, as we know very little about what someone like Mary Rodman, then aged twenty, thought about slavery, even as we know that her teenaged years were spent sewing frocks and shifts for slaves. Now at work in the Peace Dale factory, might she have followed the war news from Mexico and considered the prospect of slavery’s expansion into new western territories? Might she have hummed a minstrel tune while throwing the shuttle across the loom? It would not have been possible to live in New England’s plantation belt and remain unaware of slavery as the great controversy of the age. Nor would have it been possible to remain un-versed in the racial discourses of an American society structured on white citizenship and black abjection. The politics of slavery and the culture of white supremacy offer a context for the production of plantation provisions in the New England countryside, even if they cannot bring us into someone like Mary Rodman’s mind.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Circular. To Those in Rhode-Island Who Love Liberty. Providence, June 8, 1847,” Slavery in the United States Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.; see also Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 173-197. Scholarship on working-class antislavery is sporadic, but start with Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991). For female operatives in Lowell, Massachusetts, and Nashua, New Hampshire comparing themselves to slaves (and occasionally making antislavery claims), see Philip S. Foner, *The Factory Girls* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

North Brookfield, the slave shoe capital of Massachusetts, confronted slavery as a moral problem through its Congregational church. Longtime minister Thomas Snell spent equal time denouncing slavery (“one of the foulest blots on our national character,” he called it in an 1824 sermon) and the abolitionists who were organizing to end it. Snell criticized the Mexican War as slaveholders’ land grab, but his antislavery manifest in his support for colonization, the compulsory exile of black Americans to Liberia. And even as he and his congregation passed non-binding resolutions in 1849 that declared their “unqualified disapprobation of slavery both in theory and practice, and our firm belief it is diametrically opposed to Christianity, and a burning curse both to the oppressor and the oppressed,” they did not attempt to dislodge brogan manufacturer Tyler Batcheller as deacon of their church. There certainly were men far more sympathetic to abolition in North Brookfield. Ultimately, communities like North Brookfield were neither radicalized in the pursuit of abolition, nor particularly invested—theologically or politically—in the perpetuation of slavery as a desirable program for enduring American greatness. Residents may have been wholly indifferent to the moral claims of antislavery, but they were not unaware that such claims had been staked.<sup>28</sup>

Organized antislavery had come to South Kingstown in the early 1830s, but its controversies were engaged less from the pulpit than in the public sphere. The southern

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Snell, *A Discourse, containing an Historical Sketch of the Town of North Brookfield* (West Brookfield, Mass.: O.S. Cooke and Co., 1854), 15-16. For Snell, see Lyman Whiting, *A Discourse at the Funeral of the Rev. Thomas Snell, D.D., of North Brookfield, Mass.... May 7, 1862* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1862); Jeffrey H. Fiske, *History of the North Brookfield Congregational Church: Serving Christ for 250 Years* (North Brookfield, Mass.: North Brookfield Congregational Church, 2005), 77-99. North Brookfield was the site of an earlier abolitionist controversy: the Congregational General Association of Massachusetts met there in 1837, where Rev. Nehemiah Adams—who would later publish the notorious proslavery account, *South-Side View of Slavery* in 1854—read a letter denouncing women’s participation in abolition. Garrison denounced the “Brookfield Bull,” and the letter prompted Sarah Grimke’s *Letter on the Equality of the Sexes*. A North Brookfield schoolteacher named Lucy Stone was sitting in the balcony during the 1837 meeting, and clearly took its message as a personal provocation.

part of Rhode Island, where Mary Rodman lived, was a tough nut for the radical abolitionists to crack as they launched a campaign to convince northerners of the urgency of slave emancipation and black civic equality. In the eighteenth century, Washington County— informally called South County, and often referenced by the name of its indigenous inhabitants, the Narragansett— had a higher concentration of enslaved residents than other portions of colonial New England (above 10 percent) and devoted its energies to producing foodstuffs for provisioning Caribbean plantations and African slaving voyages. Proximity to Newport connected large landholders, the so-called Narragansett Planters, to the mercantile networks of the infamous triangle trade whereby Rhode Island ships carried African captives to Caribbean sugar plantations in exchange for molasses to make the rum necessary for the next slaving voyage. Gradual emancipation for the state’s slaves (legislated in 1784) and the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 offered an opportunity to reorient the economy away from the plantation complex and coincided with the development of a textile industry that merely reconfigured the region’s connection to slavery. The halting process of emancipation, placing the children of slaves into custodial relationship with their parents’ owners until reaching the age of majority, blurred the boundaries of slavery and freedom over the first decades of the nineteenth century. The boundaries of race were further confounded by the pattern of intermarriage between slaves, former slaves, and Narragansett Indians who held on to interspersed pockets of land and confounded white fantasies of a “vanished” people. There were Hazards who were legally classified as (or who lived as) black and

Hazards who were legally classified as (or who lived as) white; likewise, Rodmans, Potters, and Northups (Solomon's kinfolk).<sup>29</sup>

As the New England Anti-Slavery Society and then American Anti-Slavery Society sent speakers into Rhode Island beginning in 1832, they focused their attention on portions of the state that promised better returns. Arthur Buffum found little hospitality among his Quaker co-religionists, but his successor, the famed orator Henry B. Stanton did well enough on an 1835 speaking tour that stopped in South Kingstown to send the state's business elite into a panic. *Anti*-abolition emerged as a social movement in its own right, with public meetings and a petition campaign culminating in proposed "gag" legislation to silence abolition organizing in the state. The problem with abolition, it was argued, was its threat to the stability of the union and the commercial ties that promoted northern prosperity. These were arguments that the state's manufacturers and merchants had rehearsed only a few years earlier in defense of a protective tariff that (in their opinion) joined the North and South in a mutually-beneficial economic union. A meeting held in Providence declared abolitionist societies "dangerous to the existing relations of friendship and of business between different sections of our country." They condemned antislavery agitation as counterproductive, serving "to create feverish discontent among the slaves" and necessitating intensified domination to preclude insurrection. In South Kingstown, Joseph P. Hazard (then in the process of forging axes

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<sup>29</sup> Robert K. Fitts, *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth-Century Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); Daniel R. Mandell, "Shifting Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity: Indian-Black Intermarriage in Southern New England, 1760–1880," *Journal of American History* 85 (September 1998): 466–501; Christian M. McBurney, "Cato Pearce's Memoir: A Rhode Island Slave Narrative," *Rhode Island History* 67 (Winter/Spring 2009): 3–26.

for plantation markets) and cousin Jonathan N. Hazard (then a leading supplier of warp to Double Kersey weavers) took a leading role in anti-abolition. As Isaac Hazard reported, the two were “very actively engaged in obtaining signatures to a memorial or address counter to the Anti-Slavery Society who have been lecturing in this neighbourhood and got more signatures in this than any other Town in the State.” In the very first months that the Hazards were paying local women to stitch ready-made slave clothing, petitions circulated in South Kingstown that evoked agitated slaves and interracial violence.<sup>30</sup>

Abolition had indeed made inroads in Washington County, but its adherents were few in number and drawn from a small coterie of families. A local society had formed in April 1835, albeit several years after similar auxiliary organizations had formed in Providence, Pawtucket, and Lowell, Massachusetts. When a new statewide society formed in February 1836, South Kingstown’s John G. Clarke presided over the inaugural meeting.<sup>31</sup> The following summer, he and nearly fifty others chartered a new South Kingstown Anti-slavery Society. The preamble to their constitution was typical for 1830s radical abolitionism and bears reproducing in its entirety:

“Whereas we believe that slavery is contrary to the precepts of Christianity, dangerous to the liberties of the country, and ought immediately be abolished, and whereas we believe that citizens of New England not only have the right to protest against it, but are under the highest obligation to seek its removal by a moral influence; and whereas we believe that the free people of color are unrighteously oppressed, and stand in need of our sympathy and benevolent cooperation; therefore recognizing the inspired declaration that God 'hath made of one blood

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<sup>30</sup> *Constitution of the New-England Anti-Slavery Society: With an Address to the Public* (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832); John L. Myers, “Antislavery Agencies in Rhode Island, 1832-1835,” *Rhode Island History* 29 (Summer-Fall 1970): 82-93; Myers, “Antislavery Agents in Rhode Island, 1835-1837,” *Rhode Island History* 30 (February 1971): 21-31; John S. Gilkeson, Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 36-52; Van Broekhoven, *Devotion of These Women*; “Anti-Abolition Meeting,” *Providence Daily Journal*, 4 November 1835; IPH to RGH, 20 January 1836, Box 2:21, RGH-RIHS. [Check RISA for signatories of this petition].

<sup>31</sup> *Proceedings of the Rhode-Island anti-slavery convention, held in Providence, on the 2d, 3d, and 4th of February, 1836* (Providence: H.H. Brown, 1836);

all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth,' and in obedience to our Savior's golden rule, 'all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.'"<sup>32</sup>

Such language is important not because it conveys the beliefs of many South Kingstown residents, but because it conveys what was possible to believe or what might be heard in the course of walking into town to pick up another stack of sewing. That said, those who sewed slave clothing or who wove “negro cloth” were not to be found within organized antislavery. With only one exception, these appear to be separate constituencies within a very small corner of Rhode Island. Only one month after signing his name to a radical declaration of social transformation, Job W. Watson made (or received credit for) thirty-one slave suits and for cutting and assembling fifty-one dresses. Perhaps the twenty-four year-old Watson was persuaded to join the antislavery society by his younger brother, Elisha Freeland Watson, then en route to study at Brown University before becoming a notable abolitionist minister. Perhaps Job Watson made slaves suits as he wished suits to be made for himself. Regardless, none of the other original members of the South Kingstown Anti-Slavery Society, nor any of the fifty local women who signed an earlier petition to Congress against slavery in Washington D.C., could be found on the Hazards’ payroll.<sup>33</sup>

As a broader cultural phenomenon, abolitionism imbued the material lives of the enslaved with moral significance, and freighted clothing and shoes—or their absence—with additional meaning. The shoeless slave’s barefooted existence, for example, was a

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<sup>32</sup> South Kingstown Anti-Slavery Society Minute Book, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, ms. 20, Box 15:146, University of Rhode Island Special Collections.

<sup>33</sup> Receipt to Job W. Watson, Box 7:2, IPH-RIHS; “Memorial of a number of Women of Rhode Island, praying the abolition of slavery within the District of Columbia,” 6 February 1837, Select Committee on Slavery in the District of Columbia (HR24A-G22.4), RG 233, Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

testament to slavery's inhumanity. Visual representations of slaves frequently lacked shoes, and abolitionists drew attention to unprotected feet that had been frostbitten or scarred doing fieldwork. "I have known slaves who went without shoes all winter, perfectly barefoot," reported one correspondent to the *Anti-Slavery Examiner*. "The feet of many of them are frozen." Frederick Douglass recalled that his "feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes." The theme of "nakedness" figured even more prominently. [There is a great deal more to say about this trope]. Such discourses had the potential to transform mindless piecework into an act of Christian charity, an undertaking that improved rather than worsened material conditions on remote plantations.<sup>34</sup>

Northern popular culture simultaneously functioned to generate indifference to and scorn for black Americans. Black bodies in outlandish garb were foundational to American humor. Consider momentarily—in a purely speculative mode—what North Brookfield shoemakers thought about when they thought about enslaved people and their feet. The absence of "women's brogans" must have raised numerous questions about black femininity; that enslaved women should wear men's shoes could convey their fundamental degradation, reinforce stereotypes about the grace, poise, and carriage that black women purportedly lacked, and suggest insurmountable obstacles to assimilation into dominant norms of respectable womanhood. Racist forms of entertainment like the minstrel stage would have prepared the ground, as male performers caricatured black women for "manly" traits including the kind of indelicate gait necessitated by stiff-soled,

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<sup>34</sup> "Privations of the Slaves." *Anti-Slavery Examiner*, January 1, 1839; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1960), 52. On the theme as it extended past the Civil War, see Henry L. Swint, "Northern Interest in the Shoeless Southerner," *Journal of Southern History* 16 (November 1950): 457–471.

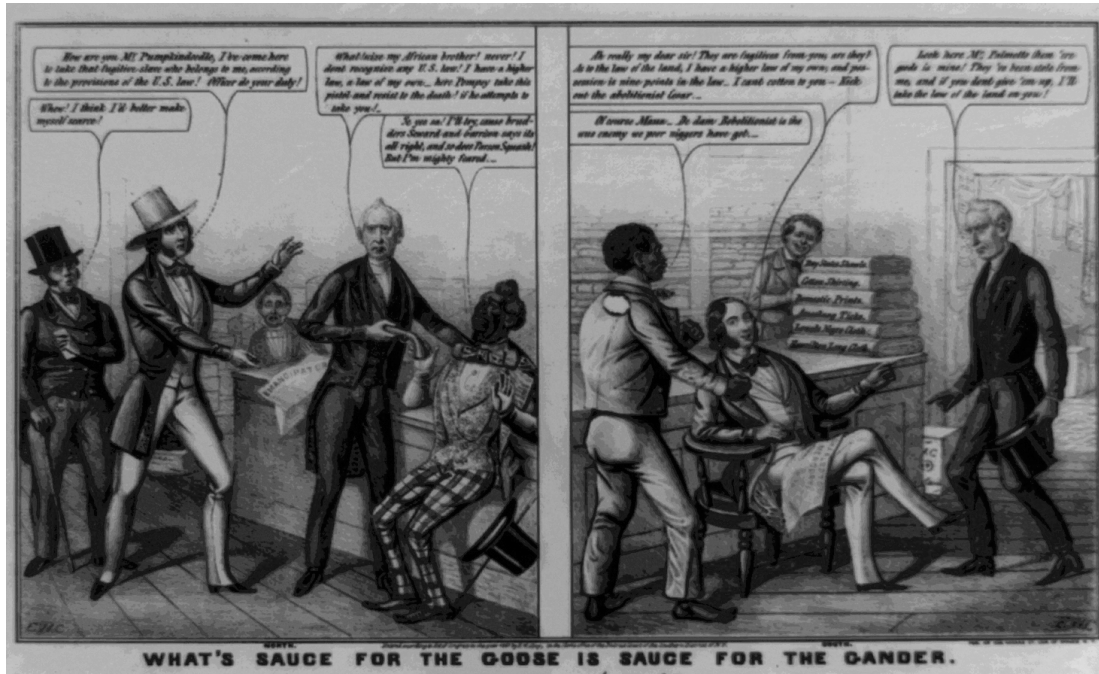
rectangular shoes. In its proliferating “blackface songsters,” northern popular culture had no lack of stock references to black feet that were too big to be contained in shoes or that were enveloped in shoes outlandishly large. Jokes circulated in texts like Henry C. Knight’s travelogue *Letters from the South and West*, published in Boston in 1824. Slaves’ “winter shoes are made so huge and stout,” jested Knight, “that a pigmy might attempt to cross a creek in one.” The Ethiopian Serenaders played Worcester’s Brinley Hall in 1848, but they were unlikely the first troupe to present racist songs to paying audiences in the area. Versions of the song “Run, Nigger, Run” (which featured in the 2013 film, *Twelve Years a Slave*) contain references to a “lost brogan” or a “big ol’ shoe”— making the slave shoe something possibly less abstract for those making them. As historians of American minstrelsy, music, and performance have noted, the racial stereotyping of black bodies was central to northern popular culture and equally appealing to working-class and middle-class audiences and consumers.<sup>35</sup>

A very similar analysis could be brought to bear on clothing as a racial signifier. An 1851 political cartoon, for example, relies on stock figures: “Pompey” (left), the runaway slave harbored by an abolitionist and dressed as a dandy in clashing plaid pants

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<sup>35</sup> H. C. Knight, *Letters from the South and West* (Boston, Richardson and Lord, 1824), 74; Foster, *New Raiment*, 237, 244. On the broader themes of minstrelsy and racial caricature, see Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Melinda Lawson, “Imagining Slavery: Representations of the Peculiar Institution on the Northern Stage, 1776-1860,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1 (2011): 25-55; Brian Roberts, *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Heather S. Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861: Lifting the Veil of Black* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Northern satirists also targeted the feet of free people of color, as in “The New Shoes,” a caricature that appeared in William Summers’ 1833 *Life in Philadelphia Series*; see Brian P. Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 65. For minstrelsy in Worcester, see *At Brinley Hall! On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings, March 23, 24, and 25, 1848. The celebrated Ethiopian Serenaders!* (Worcester, Mass.: Henry J. Howland, 1848).

and a patterned jacket, as well as a top-hat; and “Caesar”(right), the loyal slave in a jacket ripping at the shoulder, well-worn pants, and shoeless. Both panels take place in the shop



of a textile dealer, but the scene on the right features stacked parcels of “Amoskeag Ticks,” “Bay State Shawls,” and “Lowels Negro Cloth” as to highlight New England’s role in producing the fabrics to outfit southern slaves.<sup>36</sup> [There are innumerable offensive images that would make the same point and I’ll have to decide what I want to show here. I do not have images of agricultural tools, but the presumed weight and inelegance of plantation implements justified a good deal of commentary in the northern press].

<sup>36</sup> Edward W. Clay, *What’s Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander* (New York: n.p., 1851). For a higher quality image, see <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661533/>

**Conclusion**

I am still in search of a proper way to bring the story back to Mary Rodman (with whom it began). So, alas, this chapter is currently without a conclusion. But ideally there is enough on the table to sustain a conversation. I will be grateful for your feedback and suggestions for how to make these multiple stories into something more coherent.