

Marjorie Ruzich Abel, "Profiles of Nineteenth Century Working Women" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 14, No 1 (January 1986).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



# Profiles of Nineteenth Century Working Women\*

Marjorie Ruzich Abel

Social historians have provided us with rich detailed accounts of nineteenth century women's work in the eastern New England textile mills. The descriptive accounts of eastern "mill girls" have resulted in a conceptualization of nineteenth century working women as a homogeneous group. Although these accounts have contributed valuable, in-depth documentation of the circumstances and conditions of women's work in the textile cities of Lawrence and Lowell, there is a need for a fuller understanding of the variation in the types of work women were doing in other geographic regions.<sup>1</sup> Despite the significant amount of research on women in the industrialization process, the focus on single women in the formal economy has obscured the significant role of married women in both household and factory production. Further, research on industrialization in New England has tended to distinguish household production as a separate process from industrialization.

This paper will focus on the interrelationship between household and factory production and describe the economic role of women in the Connecticut River region of western Massachusetts. Against this background, the variation in women's work participation patterns will be examined in different localities and economic situations and the role of married women in the production process will be illuminated. Employment opportunities as well as the composition of the female work force varied by industry and geographic location in New England. Drawing from recent research by social historians on women's work lives in the United States and historical data from western Massachusetts, examples of alternative ways in which women were involved in the economic change and industrial development of nineteenth-century New England will be presented.

Historically, household production in New England was not transformed in a direct linear manner but in a process inter-connected to industrial expansion. The reorganization of production in the Connecticut River region involved both the development of factory production and the intensification of commodity production. Although household manufacture diminished considerably by the

---

\*This research was supported by a Lena Lake Forrest Fellowship from the Business and Professional Women's Foundation. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 1985 Historic Deerfield Colloquium on Women's Lives in the Connecticut Valley.

mid-nineteenth century, it persisted in a variety of forms across geographic regions in Massachusetts. In certain historical contexts where one type of household production was eliminated by factory manufacture another form often came into existence. In the Connecticut River region, the transfer removal of textile manufacture to the factory in the first part of the nineteenth century resulted in the reorganization of commodity production in which women produced shirt collars, cloth buttons, and palm leaf hats through the putting out system.

The detachable shirt collar was invented by Hannah Montague in Troy, New York in 1827.<sup>2</sup> Wagons known as the "collar express" carried materials to women in their homes in the outlying regions around Troy, where the materials were sewn into collars and laundered. The manufacture of shirt collars was not an extensively widespread home industry in the Connecticut River region and it seems to have been localized in the Ashfield and Conway area. According to the Massachusetts Census of 1845, 92,400 linen bosoms and collars (valued at \$12,000) were manufactured in Ashfield; the value of linen bosoms and collars produced in Conway was \$10,000. In Ashfield, the value of linen bosoms and collars manufactured exceeded the value of each of the other types of production in its economy. The quantity of women's production in the local economy becomes even more significant if one considers that Ashfield had a population of only 1,619 individuals in 1845.

Button manufacture was also a new form of regional household production by which women contributed to the nineteenth century market economy. The button industry in Easthampton, like the detachable collar manufacture, owes its inception to a woman. As the story goes, in 1822 Mrs. Graves of Williamsburg "snatched" a button from a visiting minister's coat; she copied the button and began sewing cloth covered buttons and selling them to local merchants.<sup>3</sup> The household manufacture of buttons was expanded by Emily Graves Williston, the wife of Samuel Williston, an Easthampton schoolteacher and farmer. Women were employed in the Williston home and in neighboring communities to make the cloth covered buttons. Initially, the buttons were transported for sale, on what was locally known as "button road," to Northampton merchants. By 1827, Emily Williston was operating a general store and keeping accounts of button production and sales. Samuel Williston gave up farming and began selling the home produced buttons in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.<sup>4</sup> The buttons were selling for an average of eighty-five cents a gross.<sup>5</sup> In 1837, the value of the buttons produced by Easthampton women constituted 71.6 percent of the total value of production in the local economy.<sup>6</sup> By 1865, button manufacture was a full fledged factory process in Easthampton. The Williston establishment was employing one hundred women; the value of the buttons manufactured was \$160,000.<sup>7</sup> Samuel Williston expanded his manufacturing interests to include elastic suspenders, thread, and cotton yarn. In 1875 women formed nearly sixty-two percent of the factory force in Easthampton manufacturing; although only four women are recorded as making buttons in their home, six hundred women were now making suspenders in home production.<sup>8</sup> The industrialization process in Easthampton involved shifts both in the organization of production and labor. Women responded to industrial change by entering factories and adopting other types of commodity production.



The Collar Maker

Linen collar and button manufacture were two types of household production in the Connecticut River region of Massachusetts. Another important household industry was palm leaf hat production. Unlike the more localized home industries of shirt collars and buttons, the manufacture of palm leaf hats was widespread throughout New England. However similar to collar and button production, it offered employment opportunities for both married and single women. Regional connections to wider trade networks introduced palm leaf hat production to this region. Around the mid-1820s Boston wholesale merchants were importing palm leaf from Cuba and the Virgin Islands and supplying it to storekeepers in rural areas. In 1837, approximately 40,000 women were making palm leaf hats in New England. In the same year, the value of palm leaf hats produced in Massachusetts was nearly \$650,000; in Franklin County 436,150 hats were produced, valued at \$78,026.<sup>9</sup> The value of palm leaf hats made by women in Franklin and Hampshire Counties was 22.9 percent of the total value of hats produced in Massachusetts.

The palm leaf was brought from Boston to Palmer, then to Amherst and distributed to merchants in outlying communities. The palm leaf was split by hand, braided, sewn, and formed into hats which were traded with local merchants in exchange for manufactured goods and supplies the household needed. Most often the account with the local merchant was listed in the name of the male head of household. However, preliminary examination of account books indicates that in some instances the account was listed in the individual woman's name and the earnings were used for personal purchases as well as household needs. Of the ninety-six entries of palm leaf accounts of a Prescott merchant between 1835 and 1838, thirty were listed under women's names. In a ten month period between 1835 and 1836, an account for "Cynthia Henry and girls" of Prescott indicates that seven females made 362 palm leaf hats and earned \$125.09, averaging about thirty-five cents per hat. The Prescott merchant was selling these hats for \$8.00 to \$11.25 a dozen.<sup>10</sup> The price of the hats was determined by the size and quality of finishing. It has been suggested that a woman could make a hat in approximately three-quarters of a day.<sup>11</sup> Albert Crafts, a general store keeper in Ashfield, was paying ten to thirty-three cents per hat in 1841. The account of Harriet Leonard of Ashfield for March 31, 1843, shows that she sold fifty hats at twenty-five cents and nine at ten cents; she received \$13.40 and was charged for six and three-quarter pounds of palm leaf at twenty-five cents a pound.<sup>12</sup> In 1845 the women of Ashfield manufactured 30,000 palm leaf hats through home production.<sup>13</sup> This is equivalent to approximately sixteen dollars a year per adult female between the ages of fifteen and sixty. It represents roughly sixty-two days of labor per female at twenty-five cents per day.

For comparative purposes, it is helpful to examine samples of women's wages in other occupations during this period. The average wage of women in textile factories between 1833 and 1850 was two dollars a week, or approximately ninety-six dollars per year.<sup>14</sup> Women employed in a Greenfield satinet factory in 1833 earned forty-five cents a day or about \$2.25 a week.<sup>15</sup> In New York in 1845 women were paid six cents each for making "common" white cotton shirts and twenty-five cents for "good" cotton shirts with linen bosoms.<sup>16</sup> Estimates suggest that a "good seamstress" could make one shirt a day.

Taking into consideration that palm leaf hat making was combined with other forms of household production and was not a full time occupation, it was a viable source of income for rural women. In 1845, close to three million palm leaf hats were produced in Massachusetts; nearly one-half of them were made in Hampshire and Franklin Counties.<sup>17</sup> Since the work was done in the home, hat production was an important source of income for married women in rural regions. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the manufacture of palm leaf hats began to change. First, portions of the production process began to be carried out in factories. The palm leaf was bleached, split, and dyed out at the factory, sent out to homes to be braided, and returned to the factory to be pressed, trimmed, and packed for the market. Eventually, regional factory production of palm leaf hats became centered in Amherst. In 1855, Amherst had two palm leaf hat factories employing 170 women.<sup>18</sup> By 1860, Amherst had the largest palm leaf hat factory in Massachusetts; the factory annually produced \$66,000 worth of hats.<sup>19</sup> Although home production of palm leaf hats provided an income source for married women, an examination of photographs from the Amherst hat factory suggests that it was employing primarily young women.

With the factory now being the site of palm leaf hat production, what alternative forms of income were available to rural women? An examination of production in the agricultural sector of the Connecticut River region suggests that butter and cheese production was particularly important to the economies of the hilltowns. Butter and cheese making was done by women both for direct use of the family and for household income. According to the account books of Albert Crafts, an Ashfield merchant, butter was a commodity consistently traded at his store between 1824 and 1879. The 1865 Massachusetts Census also illustrates the significance of household market production of dairy products. In 1865, Ashfield produced 24,138 pounds of butter and 1,800 pounds of cheese for sale, for a total value of \$8,346; in the same year, Buckland sold \$6,500 worth of butter, and Conway produced and sold 33,541 pounds valued at \$10,913. During this period, a household could expect a return of between thirty and sixty dollars a year per cow from the production of butter and cheese.<sup>20</sup> The household making, preparing, and keeping butter and cheese fresh was a complicated and skilled craft of New England farm women. Although the actual value of rural women's production is difficult to assess accurately, the quantity and dollar value of butter and cheese production suggests that they contributed substantially to the household economy.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Franklin County communities characterized the typical New England mill villages. Mills were located on small sources of water power and the capital investment and numbers of workers never attained the scale of the eastern mills. However, similar to large textile centers, women constituted a substantial proportion of the laborers in these mills. As early as 1833, the Ford satinnet factory in Cummington was producing \$35,000 worth of satinnet annually and employing twenty males at one dollar per day and sixteen females at thirty-three cents a day.<sup>21</sup> The census of 1855 reported that there were fifty-five men and eighty-five women employed in the two cotton mills in Colrain; in Conway, women constituted fifty-three of the eighty cotton mill employees; and, in Greenfield the woolen mill employed seventy males and fifty females.<sup>22</sup>

With the expansion of industrialization by the mid-nineteenth century, there was a rise in women's participation in the wage labor market. In 1850, thirty percent of the workforce in United States manufacturing were women; in Massachusetts, for the same year, thirty-nine percent were women.<sup>23</sup> The 1860 U.S. Census of Manufacturing shows that 28.4 percent of the manufacturing labor force in Franklin County, 38.6 percent in Hampshire County, and 53.1 percent in Hampden County was composed of women.

Industrial growth expanded and changed the types of occupations and working conditions of women. Numerous studies have focused on the employment of single women in the mechanized textile industry; however, data from the Connecticut River region indicates that women constituted substantial proportions of the labor force in many other industries. In Northampton in 1865, women were employed in bookbinderies, newspaper printing, and in the manufacture of cotton, woolen, hosiery, silk, hoopskirts, buttons, paper, and pocketbooks.<sup>24</sup> The manufacture of silk and paper had the highest proportion of female employees with 81 percent and 76 percent respectively. Fifty percent of the wage earners in brush manufacture in 1875 in Florence were women.<sup>25</sup> Variation in the kinds of industries in which women were employed existed between localities. In Easthampton in 1865, women formed the majority of the workforce in cotton, button, and rubber elastic goods manufacture. The United States Census for 1860 lists women as employed in seventeen types of industries in Franklin County, including the manufacture of pocketbooks in Deerfield and chairmaking in Orange.

Although women's factory employment increased during this period, household production coexisted with and adapted to industrialization. For instance, in 1865, Colrain had two cotton mills and was employing one hundred women in factory production. Simultaneously, rural women were contributing cheese, butter, eggs, dried apples, geese feathers, and flannel for the market economy. The organization of production in factories changed patterns of household production. Factory production affected women's income earning possibilities in Ashfield. In 1865, although women continued to produce flannel cloth and palm leaf hats for trade with the local merchant, they also manufactured \$2,000 worth of suspenders as out-work for the growing Easthampton elastic industry. Albert Crafts' Ashfield store account book shows credit given for rags which were in demand for the increasing factory production of paper. These examples suggest that the nineteenth century witnessed both an evolution of household production in a market economy and an increase in female labor force participation.

A method of analyzing women's labor force participation is to examine the sociodemographic characteristics of the labor force. Although female labor force participation in the nineteenth century was highest for females between 15 and 24 years of age, the participation rate pattern varied between localities and industries according to ethnicity, marital status, and age; and, the employment of married women was not necessarily a rare occurrence. A recent study of the Berkshire County paper industry found that the proportion of older, married, and widowed women in the workforce was greater than is usually described for the textile industry. Women employed in the paper industry varied in age and

marital status and continued to work during various stages of their lives. Between 1850 and 1876 in the paper mills, married women accounted for half the female employees and 59.7 percent of the female workforce was over twenty years of age.<sup>26</sup> In Berkshire County paper production the female labor force was characteristically native-born American women who were primarily employed in the rag room, as sorters, and in the finishing room in cutting and counting paper. Their pace of work was not dominated by mechanized technology; they usually worked in groups and were paid on the piece rate. The Berkshire County study shows that in periods of crisis, women were able to schedule their time to leave work early in the day or for short time periods because of family illness or childcare.

Research in Montague indicates that in 1880, women formed 48.7 percent of the labor force in the paper industry<sup>27</sup> Of the 161 women employed in paper production, 62 or 38.5 percent were married; the mean age of these women was thirty-five.<sup>28</sup> An important characteristic of the married women is that a high proportion (74.2 percent) were foreign born. Nearly 36 percent of them had children under ten years of age; a number of the women had large families and a few kept boarders as well as working in the paper factory. These observations suggest that married women's nineteenth century labor force participation rates differed among nativity groups and may have been higher than has previously been enumerated.

Factors which also may influence female labor force participation are familial attitudes and social networks. Carol Turbin's research on the Troy, New York, collar making and laundry industry shows that women worked during various stages of their life cycle. Although the largest group were single women, seventeen percent were widows with small children.<sup>29</sup> Between 1867 and 1870, eighty percent of the women employed in the commercial laundries of Troy were Irish born or children of Irish immigrants. Turbin found that women identified in their work lives through familial, neighborhood, and ethnic ties. In some cases, a female employee might have had her mother and grandmother working with her. Labor force participation of both single and married women was related to economic, social, cultural, and familial variables.

An examination of a sample of letters from the agent for the Lyman Mills in Holyoke to the mill treasurer in Boston requesting annuities for women workers provides further insight into the variability of women's work lives. A letter dated October 17, 1924, reads:

Dear Sir: Mrs. Mary Miller entered the employ of the Lyman Mills in May, 1888, and since that time has been employed as a weaver or room-girl up to three months ago. She is 63 years old, and married but has no children. Her husband has been an invalid for eight or nine years and during that time has been dependent upon her for support . . . . She has applied for a place on our stipend list. She has been a steady and faithful worker, and we recommend that she be given an allowance of \$6.00 per week.<sup>30</sup>

The letter indicates that Mrs. Miller began to work at the Lyman Mills at the



age of twenty-seven and continued work for thirty-six years. Another letter from the Lyman agent reads:

Kate Murdock has applied for a place on our stipend list. She entered the employ of the Lyman Mills on March 4, 1893, and worked as a weaver in No. 3 Lower Weave Room from that time until March 9, 1914, when she was transferred to the Cloth Room, her sight having failed so that she was no longer able to work as a weaver . . . She is a native of Scotland, 65 years of age, unmarried, lives alone in one of our tenements.<sup>31</sup>

Kate Murdock began work at the Lyman Mills at the age of thirty-six and worked for twenty-nine years. Other letters from this series describe both married and unmarried women, some who had worked in the Lyman Cotton Mills for as many as fifty years. Others had left the mills for short intervals and returned.

Having discussed household production, the sale of agricultural products, and factory work as three alternative ways in which women earned income in the nineteenth century, one further example will be presented. Keeping boarders was an important source of income for nineteenth century married women. Estimates suggest that between twenty to fifty percent of turn-of-the-century households were keeping boarders.<sup>32</sup> The number of married women who kept boarders in Montague, in 1880, represents 17.9 percent of all married women. Recently, researchers have suggested that a more comprehensive understanding of married women's labor force participation can be obtained by the inclusion of keeping boarders in occupational classifications.<sup>33</sup> Using data from the 1880 United States Census and including the keeping of boarders with occupational titles, the labor force participation rate for Montague's married women was 26.1 percent.

This study has illustrated alternative ways in which women historically participated in economic change in the Connecticut River region. The methodology employed in this paper with its emphasis on the relationship between household and factory production, provides an approach to understanding the dynamics of historical change and the significance of the economic role of women. Moreover, the history of women's industrial work experience in New England has emphasized the role of single women. The variation in women's economic roles has been obscured. Further, it appears that the labor force participation of married women has been underestimated. This paper also points to the importance of a comparative approach to variation between regions and industries. A reason for focusing on the issue of variability is to raise new questions concerning the conceptualization of nineteenth century women's work, specifically the work of rural and married women, and to suggest areas for further research.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (New York, 1979).
2. Carol Turbin, "Woman's Work and Woman's Rights: A Comparative Study of the Woman's Trade Union Movement and the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Mid-Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, New School for Social Research, 1978).
3. Agnes Hannay, *A Chronicle of Industry on the Mill River* (Northampton, 1935/1936), p. 43.
4. W. S. Tyler, *A Discourse Commemorative of Hon. Samuel Williston* (Springfield, 1874), p. 36.
5. The Williston Papers (Easthampton).
6. John P. Bigelow, *Statistical Tables Exhibiting the Condition and Products of Certain Branches of Industry in Massachusetts* (Boston, 1838), pp. 75-76.
7. Oliver Warner, *Statistical Information Relating to Certain Branches of Industry* (Boston, 1866), p. 289.
8. Carroll D. Wright, *Manufacturers and Occupations*, Vol. II (Boston, 1877), pp. 343, 827.
9. Bigelow, *Statistical Tables*, p. 181.
10. Samuel Henry, Account Books: 1835-1838 (University of Massachusetts Library Archives).
11. Thomas Dublin, "Women's Work and the Family Economy: Textiles and Palm Leaf Hatmaking in New England, 1830-1850," *The Tocqueville Review*, V (1983), p. 305.
12. Albert Crafts, *Account Books: 1824-1879* (Boston, Baker Library Manuscripts and Archives Department).
13. John G. Palfrey, *Statistics of the Condition and Products of Certain Branches of Industry* (Boston, 1846), p. 189.
14. Helen Sumner, *Woman and Child Wage Earners: History of Women in Industry in the United States, Volume 9* (Washington, D.C., 1910), p. 77.
15. Louis McLane, *Documents Relative to the Statistics of Manufacturers in the U.S.* (Washington, D.C., 1833), p. 278.
16. Sumner, pp. 134-135.
17. Palfrey, p. 356.
18. Francis Dewitt, *Information Relating to Certain Branches of Industry* (Boston, 1856), p. 172.

19. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Manuscripts of the United States, 1860* (Washington, D.C., 1865), p. xci.
20. Harold F. Wilson, "The Rise and Decline of the Sheep Industry in Northern New England," *Agricultural History*, IX (1935).
21. McLane, p. 296.
22. Dewitt, pp. 178-179, 185.
23. Claudia Goldin and Kenneth Sokoloff, "Women, Children, and Industrialization in the Early Republic: Evidence from the Manufacturing Censuses," *Journal of Economic History*, XLII (1982), pp. 748-751.
24. Warner, pp. 301-305.
25. Hannay, p. 93.
26. Judith A. McGaw, "A Good Place to Work. Industrial Workers and Occupational Choice: The Case of Berkshire Women," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, X (1979), p. 238.
27. U.S. Census of Manufacturers (1880).
28. U.S. Population Census (1880).
29. Turbin, p. 191.
30. Correspondence between J. Burke and H. L. Sigourney, Lyman Papers (Boston, Baker Library Manuscripts and Archives).
31. Ibid.
32. Martha N. Fraundorf, "The Labor Force Participation of Turn-of-the-Century Married Women," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXIX (1979), pp. 402-403.
33. Fraundorf, p. 403; Penelope Ciancanelli, "Women's Transition to Wage Labor" (Ph.D. dissertation, New School for Social Research, 1983).