

The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835

“**T**hine in the bonds of womanhood” Sarah M. Grimké signed the letters to Mary Parker which she published in Boston in 1838 as *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*. Grimké had left behind the South Carolina plantation of her birth and become one of the first women to speak publicly against slavery. “Bonds” symbolized chattel slavery to her. She must have composed her phrase with care, endowing it intentionally with the double meaning that womanhood bound women together even as it bound them down.

It is a central purpose of mine to explain why an American feminist of the 1830s would have seen womanhood in that dual aspect. . . .

Recent historical research which has discovered shifts in family and sexual patterns in the late eighteenth century encouraged me to begin in that period. For the case of the United States—the period between 1780 and 1830 was a time of wide- and deep-ranging transformation, including the beginning of rapid intensive economic growth, especially in foreign commerce, agricultural productivity, and the fiscal and banking system; the start of sustained urbanization; demographic transition toward modern fertility patterns; marked change toward social stratification by wealth and growing inequality in the distribution of wealth; rapid pragmatic adaptation in the law; shifts from unitary to pluralistic networks in personal association; unprecedented expansion in primary education; democratization in the political process; invention of a new language of political and social thought; and—not least—with respect to family life, the appearance of “domesticity.” . . .

It is fitting to begin with the decade of the 1830s in view although it is the end point of this study, for it presents a paradox in the “progress” of women’s history in the United States. There surfaced publicly then an argument between two seemingly contradictory visions of women’s relation to society: the ideology of domesticity, which gave women a limited and sex-specific role to play, primarily in the home; and feminism, which attempted to remove sex-specific limits on women’s opportunities and capacities. Why that coincidence? Objectively, New England women in 1835 endured subordination to men in marriage and society,

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profound disadvantage in education and in the economy, denial of access to official power in the churches that they populated, and virtual impotence in politics. A married woman had no legal existence apart from her husband's: she could not sue, contract, or even execute a will on her own; her person, estate, and wages became her husband's when she took his name. Divorce was possible—and, in the New England states, available to wives on the same terms as husbands—but rare. Women's public life generally was so minimal that if one addressed a mixed audience she was greeted with shock and hostility. No women voted, although all were subject to the laws. Those (unmarried or widowed) who held property had to submit to taxation without representation.

This was no harsher subordination than women knew in 1770, but by 1835 it had other grievous aspects. When white manhood suffrage, stripped of property qualifications, became the rule, women's political incapacity appeared more conspicuous than it had in the colonial period. As occupations in trade, crafts, and services diversified the agricultural base of New England's economy, and wage earning encroached on family farm production, women's second-class position in the economy was thrown into relief. There was only a limited number of paid occupations generally open to women, in housework, handicrafts and industry, and schoolteaching. Their wages were one-fourth to one-half what men earned in comparable work. The legal handicaps imposed by the marriage contract prevented wives from engaging in business ventures on their own, and the professionalization of law and medicine by means of educational requirements, licensing, and professional societies severely excluded women from those avenues of distinction and earning power. Because colleges did not admit women, they could not enter any of the learned professions. For them, the Jacksonian rhetoric of opportunity had scant meaning.

The 1830s nonetheless became a turning point in women's economic participation, public activities, and social visibility. New textile factories recruited a primarily female labor force, and substantial numbers of young women left home to live and work with peers. In the mid-1830s occurred the first industrial strikes in the United States led and peopled by women. "One of the leaders mounted a pump," the *Boston Evening Transcript* reported during the first "turn-out" in Lowell, Massachusetts, to protest wage reductions, "and made a flaming Mary Woolstonecraft [sic] speech on the rights of women." Middle-class women took up their one political tool, the petition, to demand legislation enabling wives to retain rights to their property and earnings. So many women pursued the one profession open to them, primary-school teaching, that their entry began to look like a takeover, although (or, to be accurate, because) they consistently commanded much lower salaries than men. Secondary schools and academies which could prepare young women to teach multiplied. Women's growing literacy, owed in part to the employment of some as teachers of girls, swelled the audience for female journalists and fiction writers. While it had been unprecedented for Hannah Adams to support herself by her writing in the first decade of the nineteenth century, that possibility came within more women's reach. Several ladies' magazines began publication during the decade, thereby increasing the editorial and publication possibilities for women authors and causing a female audience to coalesce.

Women also entered a variety of reform movements, to pursue objects in their own self-interest as well as to improve their society. Health reformers spotlighted women's physical condition. "Moral reformers" attacked the double standard of sexual morality and the victimization of prostitutes. Mothers formed societies to consult together on the rearing of children. Even larger numbers of women joined Christian benevolent associations, to reform the world by the propagation of the faith. An insistent minority of women became active in the antislavery movement where they practiced tactics of recruitment, organization, fund raising, propagandizing, and petitioning—and initiated the women's rights movement in the United States, when some of them took to heart the principles of freedom and human rights. Although the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 usually marks the beginning of organized feminism in this country, there were clearly feminist voices in the antislavery movement by the late 1830s.

At the same time, an emphatic sentence of domesticity was pronounced for women. Both male and female authors (the former mostly ministers) created a new popular literature, consisting of advice books, sermons, novels, essays, stories, and poems, advocating and reiterating women's certain, limited role. That was to be wives and mothers, to nurture and maintain their families, to provide religious example and inspiration, and to affect the world around by exercising private moral influence. The literature of domesticity promulgated a Janus-faced conception of women's roles: it looked back, explicitly conservative in its attachment to a traditional understanding of woman's place; while it proposed transforming, even millennial results. One might assume that this pervasive formulation was simply a reaction to—a conservative defense against—expansion of women's nondomestic pursuits. But women's educational, reform, labor force, and political activities were just beginning to enlarge in the 1830s when the concept of domesticity crystallized. Several decades' shift in the allotment of powers and functions inside and outside the household had created the constellation of ideas regarding women's roles that we call domesticity. It was hardly a *deus ex machina*. The particularization and professionalization taking place in the occupational structure between 1780 and 1835 affected women's domestic occupation as well as any other; and concomitant subtle changes in women's view of their domestic role established a substructure for their nondomestic pursuits and self-assertion. The ideology of domesticity may seem to be contradicted functionally and abstractly by feminism, but historically—as they emerged in the United States—the latter depended on the former. . . .

"A woman's work is never done," Martha Moore Ballard wrote in her journal one November midnight in 1795, having been busy preparing wool for spinning until that time, "and happy she whos[e] strength holds out to the end of the [sun's] rays." Ballard was sixty years old that year—a grandmother several times over—though she still had at home her youngest child of sixteen. Housekeeper and domestic manufacturer for a working farm where she baked and brewed, pickled and preserved, spun and sewed, made soap and dipped candles, she also was a trusted healer and midwife for the pioneer community of Augusta, Maine. During a quarter-century of practice continuing past her

seventieth year, she delivered more than a thousand babies. The very processes of her work engaged her in community social life. In her medical work she became acquainted with her neighbors as she provided services for them, and domestic crafts, such as quilting and spinning, also involved her in both cooperative and remunerative social relationships. The pattern of her life was not atypical for the matron of a farm household, particularly in a frontier community, in the late eighteenth century. . . .

The basic developments hastening economic productivity and rationalizing economic organization in New England between 1780 and 1835 were extension of the size of the market, increases in agricultural efficiency, reduction in transportation costs, and consequent specialization of economic function, division of labor, and concentration of industry. In late eighteenth-century towns, subsistence farming and household production for family use prevailed, supplemented by individual craftsmen (cobblers, coopers, blacksmiths, tailors, weavers, etc.) who were established or itinerant depending on density of population in their locale, and by small industrial establishments such as sawmills, gristmills, fulling mills, ironworks, and brickyards. The Revolutionary war stimulated some forms of household production (such as "homespun"), and so did the disruption of the international market during the Napoleonic wars, but more continuous lines of change moved the New England economy from its agricultural and household-production base and gave it a commercial and then industrial emphasis by 1835.

Merchant capitalism was a primary force in this transformation. Merchant capitalists took risks, supplied capital, searched out markets, and attempted to maximize profits by producing standardized goods at the least cost, thus organizing production on a larger scale than had previously been typical. Their actions commanded a shift away from home production for family use, and from local craftsmen's production of custom or "bespoke" work for known individuals, toward more standardized production for a wider market. Mercantile capitalism flourished during the enormous expansion of New England's carrying trade and re-export business that occurred from 1793 to 1807 because of the confusion of European shipping during the Napoleonic wars. This burst of shipping energy also caused subsidiary economic activities, such as shipbuilding, and complementary businesses, such as brokerage, marine insurance, warehousing, and banking, to grow. Under the brunt of the national embargo in 1807 and the subsequent war with England this blooming of the American carrying and re-export trade faded, but since much of the capital involved was transferred to manufacturing activity overall economic productivity did not diminish greatly.

The shift to market-oriented production under merchant capitalists prepared the way for the development of manufacturing and the factory system. Under the demand of the merchant capitalist for widely distributable goods, the craftsman's shop became a larger and more specialized unit, for production only rather than (as formerly) for production and retail sale. The master craftsman became the "boss" of a larger number of journeymen and apprentices. In New England another production system, limited mainly to shoes and textiles, also preceded and overlapped with industrial manufacture. This was the "putting-out" or "given-out" system, in which a merchant or master craftsman

distributed materials to individuals to work on in their homes at piece-work rates, and collected and sold the finished goods. As the given-out system developed, the individuals (often women) it employed at home performed more and more specialized and fragmentary handicrafts. Indeed, the hallmarks of economic development in this period were functional specialization and division of labor. Where there had been "jacks-of-all-trades" there came specialized laborers; where there had been eclectic merchants there came importers and exporters, wholesalers and jobbers and retailers. Farmers who had produced only for subsistence trained their eyes on, and diverted some of their energies to, the market for commercial produce. New specialists appeared in fields from insurance to banking to transportation, as incorporations of businesses multiplied and turnpikes and bridges replaced wooded paths. In order to understand shifts in women's work during these years, rapid changes of this type must be kept in mind. Whether a woman lived toward the beginning or toward the end of this half-century may have informed the character of her work as much as, or more than, her geographical location, wealth, or marital status, which were other significant factors. Comparison of the kinds of work recorded in women's diaries in the earlier and later years makes that clear.

During the late eighteenth century both unmarried and married women did their primary work in households, in families. Unmarried daughters might be called upon to help their fathers in a store or shop connected to the house: Sally Ripley, a tradesman's daughter in Greenfield, Massachusetts, more than once recorded in her diary, "This morning my Father departed for Boston, & I am again entrusted with the charge of the Store." But daughters' assistance in the housewife's realm of food preparation and preservation, dairying, gardening, cleaning, laundering, soap making, candle making, knitting, and textile and clothing manufacture was the more usual case. Mothers and daughters shared these labors. The continual and time-consuming work of spinning was the most readily delegated to the younger generation, it seems. Hannah Hickok Smith of Glastonbury, Connecticut, managed to avoid spinning, because she had five daughters at home. "The girls . . . have been very busy spinning this spring," she reported to their grandmother in 1800, "and have spun enough for about seventy yards besides almost enough for another carpet." Spinning must have taken precedence in the daughters' work, for when they had "no spinning to do of any consequence" then Mrs. Smith admitted that she "lived very easy, as the girls have done every thing." . . .

The first "manufactories" in the United States were places of business established in major cities in the 1760s to collect yarn spun and cloth woven by women in their homes by traditional hand methods. Some merchants soon put spinning wheels and looms on the premises of their manufactories, and hired women and children to work them there; but in general they employed a much larger proportion of women working in their own homes than on the manufactory premises. After Samuel Slater introduced industrial spinning machinery to New England in 1789, and other entrepreneurs established spinning mills, employing women to work the machinery, the proportions working at home and on the premises were reversed. The early mills (between 1790 and 1815) produced only yarn, which was distributed to domestic weavers like Samantha

Barrett to be made into cloth. The power loom did not appear in New England until 1814. That year the Boston Manufacturing Company introduced it at Waltham, Massachusetts, uniting under one factory roof all the operations necessary to turn raw fiber into finished cloth. Factories mass-producing cotton cloth multiplied during the 1820s.

By 1830, industrial manufacture had largely superseded home spinning and weaving in New England by producing cloth more cheaply. This changed women's work more than any other single factor, and likely had more emphatic impact on unmarried women than on mothers of families. Industrialization of textiles disrupted daughters' predictable role in the household first. Mothers' lives continued to be defined by household management and child rearing. Daughters, however, often had to earn wages to replace their contribution to family sustenance. Textile mill operatives, who were almost all between the ages of fifteen and thirty, were young women who followed their traditional occupation to a new location, the factory. New England textile factories from the start employed a vastly greater proportion of women than men.

The economic and social change of the period injected uncertainty, variety, and mobility into young women's lives—into none more dramatically than the early mill operatives'. Mary Hall began industrial employment after her academy schooling and experience in schoolteaching. In November 1830 she started folding books at a shop in Exeter, New Hampshire, not happy to be removed from her family. "Yes, I shall probably be obliged to call this, to me a land of strangers, home for the present," she wrote in her diary. "But home sweet home can never be transfer'd in the affections of Me. . . . How often this day amidst its cares and business have I been in imagination under the paternal roof seeing, hearing and conversing with its lov'd inhabitants." She was twenty-four years old. After seven months she returned home, because several family members were ill. In September 1831, she went to Lowell, Massachusetts, for employment as a cotton-mill operative. She worked in Lowell for the next five years, except for returns home to Concord for more than a year between 1832 and 1833, for the summer in 1834, for weeks in November and December 1834 (because of deaths in her family), and in November 1835 and June 1836. During her years in Lowell she worked for at least three different corporations.

Emily Chubbuck, whose family was probably poorer than Mary Hall's, had a more disjointed employment history. The fifth child in a New Hampshire family transplanted to upstate New York, she went to work in 1828, at the age of eleven, splicing rolls in a woolen factory. Her parents allowed her to keep her weekly wage of \$1.25. When the factory closed in January 1829 she began attending a district school, to supplement the education she had received from an older sister. Two months later the factory reopened and she resumed work there. During the next three years, as her family moved several times in attempts to make a living, she intermittently worked for a Scottish weaver twisting thread, attended an academy, washed and ironed for her family's boarders, sewed for a mantua-maker, and attended a district school. At fourteen, despite her mother's advice to apprentice herself to a milliner, she lied about her age to obtain a schoolteaching job. Her wages were only 75 cents a week plus board. She knew that she "could earn as much with the milliner,

and far more at twisting thread," but she hoped for a future in literary pursuits rather than manual employment.

There was a large class of young women who would have spun at home in early decades but whose families' incomes or priorities made factory work unlikely for them. Their work too became variable and sporadic, shifting among the options of schoolteaching, needlework, domestic work, and given-out industry. None of these was really a full-time, year-round occupation. Women tended to combine them. Rachel Stearns, under pressure of necessity, became willing to intersperse sewing in another household with her schoolteaching, although earlier she had "thought it quite too degrading to go to Uncle F's and sew." Nancy Flynt, a single woman of Connecticut, wrote to her married sister around 1810, "[I am] a tugging and a toiling day and night to get a maintenance, denying myself the pleasure of calling on my nearest neighbors. . . . I would tell you how much work I have dispatched since I saw you, I have a great deal of sewing on hand now." The twenty-five-year-old daughter of the minister in Hawley, Massachusetts, decided she should learn to support herself "by the needle" and therefore began to learn the milliner's trade, but her health failed, preventing her from continuing. "Perhaps [I] flattered myself too much with the idea of being able to bear my own expenses," she reflected somewhat bitterly.

Given-out industry, which constituted a significant stage in the industrial development of New England, enabled women to earn money while staying at home. Two kinds of production organized this way drew heavily on women's labor: the stitching and binding of boots and shoes (concentrated in eastern Massachusetts) and the braiding, or plaiting, of straw bonnets. The latter was a handicraft designed before 1800 by New England women who used native rye straw for the material. By 1830 thousands carried it on in the employ of entrepreneurs who imported palm leaves from Cuba and distributed them to farmhouses to be made up into hats. Eliza Chaplin and her sister Caroline of Salem, Massachusetts, made and sold bonnets during the 1820s, the same years that they taught school. Julia Pierce taught school in the summer and had "plenty of work" to do in the winter, she said: "I have braided more than 100 hats and the other girls as many more." The working life of Amanda Elliott of Guilford, Connecticut, exemplifies the variety of this transitional period. Within six months in 1816-17 she devoted considerable time to splitting straw and braiding hats; noted five new boarders; taught school; and mentioned binding shoes, in addition to usual domestic needlework, knitting, washing, and ironing. For some fortunate young women, of course, the diminution of household manufacture for the family meant greater leisure and opportunity for education. Hannah Hickok Smith's letters after 1800 revealed that spinning gradually dwindled in importance in her daughters' occupations. "As we have had much leisure time this winter," she wrote in 1816, "the girls have employed themselves chiefly in reading writing and studying French Latin and Greek."

While economic modernization changed young unmarried women's work more conspicuously than their mothers' at first, the disruption of the integral relation between the household and the business of society was bound

to redefine matrons' occupations too. Wife-and-motherhood in a rural household of the eighteenth century implied responsibility for the well-being of all the family. Upon marriage a woman took on "the Cares of the world," Elizabeth Bowen admitted as she recounted her past life, at mid-century. Fond as Esther Edwards Burr was of improving her mind, she declined an opportunity to take French lessons in the 1750s with the forceful comment, "The married woman has something else to care about besides lerning [*sic*] French!" Sarah Snell Bryant's daily diary reported in straightforward fashion her matronly duties in an educated, respectable, but impecunious farm family in western Massachusetts. During the 1790s and early 1800s she bore and nursed six children (usually returning to household cares within a few days after childbirth), and taught them all to read the Bible before sending them to school. Generally she occupied every day in making cloth and clothing—from the "hatcheling" of flax and "breaking" of wool to the sewing of shirts, gowns, and coats—knitting gloves and stockings, baking, brewing, preserving food, churning butter, gardening, nursing the sick, making candles or soap, washing, ironing, scouring, quilting with neighbors, and even entertaining visitors. During a summer when her husband was traveling, she also taught school. Contemporaries of Sarah Snell Bryant who lived in more densely populated and commercial locations might have less labor to perform, especially if their husbands' wealth allowed their families to purchase goods and services. Martha Church Challoner, who lived in Newport, a lively Rhode Island port, in the 1760s, was able to buy various fabrics, shoes, and some basic foods. She had two black women in her house as servants (or slaves, possibly), and hired others to do washing, mending, spinning, carding, sewing, and nursing. Still, she herself made candles, knit stockings, sold butter and eggs, and sewed household linens, while supervising the household. . . .

Well into the middle decades of the nineteenth century married women's work remained centered on household management and family care, although the growing ramifications of the market economy diminished the importance of household manufacture and enlarged families' reliance on money to purchase basic commodities. Greater population density, commercial expansion, technological advances in transportation and communication, specialization in agriculture, and involvement of rural residents in given-out industry all contributed to the demise of the self-contained household economy. "There is no way of living in this town without cash," Abigail Lyman reported from Boston in 1797, and smaller towns rapidly manifested the same commercial spirit and need. Hannah Hickok Smith's account book for the years 1821–24 points out the extent to which a prosperous farm matron in an "urban"-sized commercial town—Glastonbury, Connecticut—was involved in commercial transaction. She recorded the purchase of edibles and baking supplies (spices, plums, currants, raisins, sugar, molasses, salt, wine, coffee, tea); of household items (teacups, platters, chest, jug, box, coffeepot, tinware, pins) and construction materials (pine boards, nails, steel); of writing accoutrements (paper, penknife, spelling book), nursing supplies (camphor, plaister) and soap, and some luxuries (snuff, tobacco, shell combs, parasol). Furthermore, she purchased at least eleven different kinds of fabric (such as dimity, brown holland, "factory

cloth"), four kinds of yarn and thread, leather, and buttons; bought silk shawls, bonnets, dresses, stockings, and kid gloves, and also paid for people's services in making clothing. The farm produced the marketable commodities of grain (oats, rye, corn) and timber, animals (calves, turkeys, fowl) and animal products (eggs, hens' feathers, quills, wool, pork), and other farm produce which required more human labor, such as butter, cider, lard, and tallow. . . .

The growing availability of goods and services for purchase might spare a married woman from considerable drudgery, if her husband's income sufficed for a comfortable living. It also heightened her role in "shopping," as Abigail Brackett Lyman spelled it (her consumer role), although that was subject to her husband's authority over financial resources. In colonial America husbands, as "providers," typically were responsible for purchasing goods—including household goods, furniture, and food staples, if they were to be bought—but in commercial towns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century wives more frequently became shoppers, especially for articles of dress and food. The increasing importance of monetary exchange bore hard on those who needed to replace their former economic contribution of household manufacture with income-producing employment, while meeting their domestic obligations. Taking in boarders was one alternative. Betsey Graves Johnson did that while she brought up the five children born to her between 1819 and 1830. Otherwise, married women had the same options for wage earning as single women who wished to stay at home: to take in sewing, or work in given-out industry. Schoolteaching, a slight possibility for wives, was a likelier one for widows whose children had reached school age. One widow's "cares," as described by her sister in 1841, were "enough to occupy all her time and thoughts almost. . . . [She] is teaching from 16 to 20 sholars [*sic*] boarding a young lady, and doing the housework, taking care of her children, &c."

These constants—"doing the housework, taking care of her children"—persisted in married women's lives. Child care required their presence at home. This responsibility revealed itself as the heart of women's domestic duties when household production declined. After four years of marriage Sarah Ripley Stearns regretfully attributed her neglect of church attendance and devotional reading not to household duties but to "the Care of my Babes, which takes up so large a portion of my time of my time [*sic*] attention." More than ever before in New England history, the care of children appeared to be mothers' sole work and the work of mothers alone. The expansion of nonagricultural occupations drew men and grown children away from the household, abbreviating their presence in the family and their roles in child rearing. Mothers and young children were left in the household together just when educational and religious dicta both newly emphasized the malleability of young minds. Enlightenment psychology drew tighter the connection between early influence on the child, and his or her eventual character, just as mothers' influence on young children appeared more salient. . . .

While changes in economy and society made young women's work more social, more various and mobile, the same developments reduced the social engagement, variety, and mobility in the work of wives and mothers. Housekeeping and child care continued to require married women's presence

at home, while the household diminished in population, kinds of business, and range of contacts. In an intriguing development in language usage in the early nineteenth century, "home" became synonymous with "retirement" or "retreat" from the world at large. Mary Tucker quoted approvingly in 1802 an author's assertion that "a woman's noblest station is retreat." On a cousin's approaching marriage she remarked, "Sally has passed her days in the shade of *retirement* but even there many virtues and graces have ripened to perfection, she has every quality necessary for a *good wife*." Salome Lincoln's marriage to a fellow preacher in 1835 virtually ended her extradomestic pursuits; she subsequently used her preaching talents only on occasional travels with her husband. The shifting emphasis among married women's occupations emerges clearly in the comparison of Lydia Hill Almy's occupations in 1797-99 with Mary Hurlbut's in the 1830s. The former not only kept house but let rooms, collected firewood, attended to livestock, and arranged to sell tanned skins; she considered her two children "grown out of the way" and "very little trouble [sic]" when the younger was not yet weaned. Mary Hurlbut, in contrast, appeared solely concerned with her children's lives and prospects.

Married women's work at home distinguished itself most visibly from men's work, especially as the latter began to depart from the household/farm/craftshop to separate shops, offices, and factories. The rhythms of adult men's and women's work diverged even as did their places of work. During the eighteenth century, in agricultural towns, men and women had largely shared similar work patterns; their work, tied to the land, was seasonal and discontinuous. It was conditioned by tradition, family position, and legal obligation as well as by economic incentive. E.P. Thompson has called the dominant characteristic of work in such an agricultural/artisanal economy its "task-orientation," in contrast to the "time-discipline" required under industrial capitalism. Task-orientation implies that the worker's own sense of customary need and order dictates the performance of work. Intensification or delay occurs as a response to perceived necessity: in farming, for instance, the former occurs in harvest time, or the latter during stormy weather. Irregular work patterns typically result. "Social intercourse and labour are intermingled," Thompson also has pointed out, "the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task—and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and 'passing the time of day.'" Persons accustomed to time-discipline, however, may consider task-oriented work patterns "wasteful and lacking in urgency." Thompson's analysis derived from his study of eighteenth-century English farmers, artisans, and laborers but can be applied to their contemporaries in New England. Even eighteenth-century colonial merchants, who, as risk-taking capitalists, might be expected to initiate disciplined work habits, structured their work lives in what Thompson would denote "preindustrial" ways, intermingling their work with recreation and with the conduct of their households. "The Founding Fathers, after all, lived in a preindustrial, not simply an 'agrarian' society," as Herbert Gutman has remarked, "and the prevalence of premodern work habits among their contemporaries was natural."

The social transformation from 1780 to 1835 signalled a transition from preindustrial to modern industrial work patterns. The replacement of family

production for direct use with wage earning, the institution of time-discipline and machine regularity in place of natural rhythms, the separation of workplaces from the home, and the division of "work" from "life" were overlapping layers of the same phenomenon. . . .

Despite the changes in its social context adult women's work, for the most part, kept the traditional mode and location which both sexes had earlier shared. Men who had to accept time-discipline and specialized occupations may have begun to observe differences between their own work and that of their wives. Perhaps they focused on the remaining "premodern" aspects of women's household work: it was reassuringly comprehensible, because it responded to immediate needs; it represented not strictly "work" but "life," a way of being; and it also looked unsystematized, inefficient, nonurgent. Increasingly men did distinguish women's work from their own, in the early nineteenth century, by calling it women's "sphere," a "separate" sphere.

Women's sphere was "separate" not only because it was at home but also because it seemed to elude rationalization and the cash nexus, and to integrate labor with life. The home and occupations in it represented an alternative to the emerging pace and division of labor. Symbol and remnant of preindustrial work, perhaps the home commanded men's deepest loyalties, but these were loyalties that conflicted with "modern" forms of employment. To be idealized, yet rejected by men—the object of yearning, and yet of scorn—was the fate of the home-as-workplace. Women's work (indeed women's very character, viewed as essentially conditioned by the home) shared in that simultaneous glorification and devaluation.

The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson

The period 1800–1840 is one in which decisive changes occurred in the status of American women. It has remained surprisingly unexplored. With the exception of a recent, unpublished dissertation by Keith Melder and the distinctive work of Elisabeth Dexter, there is a dearth of descriptive material and an almost total absence of interpretation. Yet the period offers essential clues to an understanding of later institutional developments, particularly the shape and nature of the woman's rights movement. This analysis will consider the economic, political, and social status of women and examine the changes in each area. It will also attempt an interpretation of the ideological shifts which occurred in American society concerning the "proper" role for women.

Periodization always offers difficulties. It seemed useful here, for purposes of comparison, to group women's status before 1800 roughly under the "colonial" heading and ignore the transitional and possibly atypical shifts which occurred during the American Revolution and the early period of nationhood. Also, regional differences were largely ignored. The South was left out of consideration entirely because its industrial development occurred later.

The status of colonial women has been well studied and described and can briefly be summarized for comparison with the later period. Throughout the colonial period there was a marked shortage of women, which varied with the regions and always was greatest in the frontier areas. This (from the point of view of women) favorable sex ratio enhanced their status and position. The Puritan world view regarded idleness as sin; life in an underdeveloped country made it absolutely necessary that each member of the community perform an economic function. Thus work for women, married or single, was not only approved, it was regarded as a civic duty. Puritan town councils expected single girls, widows, and unattached women to be self-supporting and for a long time provided needy spinsters with parcels of land. There was no social sanction against married women working; on the contrary, wives were expected to help their husbands in their trade and won social approval for doing extra work in or out of the home. Needy children, girls as well as boys, were indentured or apprenticed and were expected to work for their keep.

The vast majority of women worked within their homes, where their labor produced most articles needed for the family. The entire colonial production of cloth and clothing and in part that of shoes was in the hands of women. In addition to these occupations, women were found in many different kinds of employment. They were butchers, silversmiths, gunsmiths, upholsterers. They ran mills, plantations, tan yards, shipyards, and every kind of shop, tavern and boarding house. They were gate keepers, jail keepers, sextons, journalists, printers, "doctoresses," apothecaries, midwives, nurses, and teachers. Women acquired their skills the same way as did the men, through apprenticeship training, frequently within their own families.

Absence of a dowry, ease of marriage and remarriage, and a more lenient attitude of the law with regard to women's property rights were manifestations of the improved position of wives in the colonies. Under British common law, marriage destroyed a woman's contractual capacity; she could not sign a contract even with the consent of her husband. But colonial authorities were more lenient toward the wife's property rights by protecting her dower rights in her husband's property, granting her personal clothing, and upholding prenuptial contracts between husband and wife. In the absence of the husband, colonial courts granted women "femme sole" rights, which enabled them to conduct their husband's business, sign contracts, and sue. The relative social freedom of women and the esteem in which they were held was commented upon by most early foreign travelers in America.

But economic, legal, and social status tells only part of the story. Colonial society as a whole was hierarchical, and rank and standing in society depended on the position of the men. Women did not play a determining role in the ranking pattern; they took their position in society through the men of their own family or the men they married. In other words, they participated in the hierarchy only as daughters and wives, not as individuals. Similarly, their occupations were, by and large, merely auxiliary, designed to contribute to family income, enhance their husbands' business or continue it in case of widowhood. The self-supporting spinsters were certainly the exception. The underlying assumption of colonial society was that women ought to occupy an inferior and subordinate position. The settlers had brought this assumption with them from Europe; it was reflected in their legal concepts, their willingness to exclude women from political life, their discriminatory educational practices. What is remarkable is the extent to which this felt inferiority of women was constantly challenged and modified under the impact of environment, frontier conditions, and a favorable sex ratio.

By 1840 all of American society had changed. The Revolution had substituted an egalitarian ideology for the hierarchical concepts of colonial life. Privilege based on ability rather than inherited status, upward mobility for all groups of society, and unlimited opportunities for individual self-fulfillment had become ideological goals, if not always realities. For men, that is; women were, by tacit consensus, excluded from the new democracy. Indeed their actual situation had in many respects deteriorated. While, as wives, they had benefited from increasing wealth, urbanization, and industrialization, their role as economic producers and as political members of society differed sharply from

that of men. Women's work outside of the home no longer met with social approval; on the contrary, with two notable exceptions, it was condemned. Many business and professional occupations formerly open to women were now closed, many others restricted as to training and advancement. The entry of large numbers of women into low status, low pay, and low skill industrial work had fixed such work by definition as "woman's work." Women's political status, while legally unchanged, had deteriorated relative to the advances made by men. At the same time the genteel lady of fashion had become a model of American femininity, and the definition of "woman's proper sphere" seemed narrower and more confined than ever.

Within the scope of this essay only a few of these changes can be more fully explained. The professionalization of medicine and its impact on women may serve as a typical example of what occurred in all the professions.

In colonial America there were no medical schools, no medical journals, few hospitals, and few laws pertaining to the practice of the healing arts. Clergymen and governors, barbers, quacks, apprentices, and women practiced medicine. Most practitioners acquired their credentials by reading Paracelsus and Galen and serving an apprenticeship with an established practitioner. Among the semi-trained "physics," surgeons, and healers the occasional "doctress" was fully accepted and frequently well rewarded. County records of all the colonies contain references to the work of the female physicians. There was even a female Army surgeon, a Mrs Allyn, who served during King Philip's war. Plantation records mention by name several slave women who were granted special privileges because of their useful service as midwives and "doctoresses."

The period of the professionalization of American medicine dates from 1765, when Dr. William Shippen began his lectures on midwifery in Philadelphia. The founding of medical faculties in several colleges, the standardization of training requirements, and the proliferation of medical societies intensified during the last quarter of the 18th century. The American Revolution dramatized the need for trained medical personnel, afforded first-hand battlefield experience to a number of surgeons and brought increasing numbers of semi-trained practitioners in contact with the handful of European-trained surgeons working in the military hospitals. This was an experience from which women were excluded. The resulting interest in improved medical training, the gradual appearance of graduates of medical colleges, and the efforts of medical societies led to licensing legislation. In 1801 Maryland required all medical practitioners to be licensed; in 1806 New York enacted a similar law, followed by all but three states. This trend was reversed in the 1830s and 40s when most states repealed their licensure requirements. This was due to pressure from eclectic, homeopathic practitioners, the public's dissatisfaction with the "heroic medicine" then practiced by licensed physicians, and to the distrust of state regulation, which was widespread during the Age of Jackson. Licensure as prime proof of qualification for the practice of medicine was reinstated in the 1870s.

In the middle of the 19th century it was not so much a license or an M.D. which marked the professional physician as it was graduation from an

approved medical college, admission to hospital practice and to a network of referrals through other physicians. In 1800 there were four medical schools, in 1850, forty-two. Almost all of them excluded women from admission. Not surprisingly, women turned to eclectic schools for training. Harriot Hunt, a Boston physician, was trained by apprenticeship with a husband and wife team of homeopathic physicians. After more than twenty years of practice she attempted to enter Harvard Medical School and was repeatedly rebuffed. Elizabeth Blackwell received her M.D. from Geneva (New York) Medical College, an eclectic school. Sarah Adamson found all regular medical schools closed against her and earned an M.D. in 1851 from Central College at Syracuse, an eclectic institution. Clemence Lozier graduated from the same school two years later and went on to found the New York Medical College and Hospital for women in 1863, a homeopathic institution which was later absorbed into the Flower-Fifth Avenue Hospital.

Another way in which professionalization worked to the detriment of women can be seen in the cases of Drs. Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, Marie Zakrzewska, and Ann Preston, who despite their M.D.s and excellent training were denied access to hospitals, were refused recognition by county medical societies, and were denied customary referrals by male colleagues. Their experiences were similar to those of most of the pioneer women physicians. Such discrimination caused the formation of alternate institutions for the training of women physicians and for hospitals in which they might treat their patients. The point here is not so much that any one aspect of the process of professionalization excluded women but that the process, which took place over the span of almost a century, proceeded in such a way as to institutionalize an exclusion of women, which had earlier been accomplished irregularly, inconsistently, and mostly by means of social pressure. The end result was an *absolute* lowering of status for all women in the medical profession and a *relative* loss. As the professional status of all physicians advanced, the status differential between male and female practitioners was more obviously disadvantageous and underscored women's marginality. Their virtual exclusion from the most prestigious and lucrative branches of the profession and their concentration in specializations relating to women and children made such disadvantaging more obvious by the end of the 19th century.

This process of pre-emption of knowledge, of institutionalization of the profession, and of legitimation of its claims by law and public acceptance is standard for the professionalization of the sciences, as George Daniels has pointed out. It inevitably results in the elimination of fringe elements from the profession. It is interesting to note that women had been pushed out of the medical profession in 16th-century Europe by a similar process. Once the public had come to accept licensing and college training as guarantees of up-to-date practice, the outsider, no matter how well qualified by years of experience, stood no chance in the competition. Women were the casualties of medical professionalization.

In the field of midwifery the results were similar, but the process was more complicated. Women had held a virtual monopoly in the profession in colonial America. In 1646 a man was prosecuted in Maine for practicing as a

midwife. There are many records of well-trained midwives with diplomas from European institutions working in the colonies. In most of the colonies midwives were licensed, registered, and required to pass an examination before a board. When Dr. Shippen announced his pioneering lectures on midwifery, he did it to "combat the widespread popular prejudice against the man-midwife" and because he considered most midwives ignorant and improperly trained.

Yet he invited "those women who love virtue enough, to own their Ignorance, and apply for instruction" to attend his lectures, offering as an inducement the assurance that female pupils would be taught privately. It is not known if any midwives availed themselves of the opportunity.

Technological advances, as well as scientific, worked against the interests of female midwives. In 16th-century Europe the invention and use of obstetrical forceps had for three generations been the well-kept secret of the Chamberlen family and had greatly enhanced their medical practice. Hugh Chamberlen was forced by circumstances to sell the secret to the Medical College in Amsterdam, which in turn transmitted the precious knowledge to licensed physicians only. By the time the use of the instrument became widespread it had become associated with male physicians and male midwives. Similarly in America, introduction of the obstetrical forceps was associated with the practice of male midwives and served to their advantage. By the end of the 18th century a number of male physicians advertised their practice of midwifery. Shortly thereafter female midwives also resorted to advertising, probably in an effort to meet the competition. By the early 19th century male physicians had virtually monopolized the practice of midwifery on the Eastern seaboard. True to the generally delayed economic development in the Western frontier regions, female midwives continued to work on the frontier until a much later period. It is interesting to note that the concepts of "propriety" shifted with the prevalent practice. In 17th-century Maine the attempt of a man to act as a midwife was considered outrageous and illegal; in mid-19th-century America the suggestion that women should train as midwives and physicians was considered equally outrageous and improper.

Professionalization, similar to that in medicine with the elimination of women from the upgraded profession, occurred in the field of law. Before 1750, when law suits were commonly brought to the courts by the plaintiffs themselves or by deputies without specialized legal training, women as well as men could and did act as "attorneys-in-fact." When the law became a paid profession and trained lawyers took over litigation, women disappeared from the court scene for over a century.

A similar process of shrinking opportunities for women developed in business and in the retail trades. There were fewer female storekeepers and business women in the 1830s than there had been in colonial days. There was also a noticeable shift in the kind of merchandise handled by them. Where previously women could be found running almost every kind of retail shop, after 1830 they were mostly found in businesses which served women only.

The only fields in which professionalization did not result in the elimination of women from the upgraded profession were nursing and teaching. Both were characterized by a severe shortage of labor. Nursing lies outside the

field of this inquiry since it did not become an organized profession until after the Civil War. Before then it was regarded peculiarly as a woman's occupation, although some of the hospitals and the Army during wars employed male nurses. These bore the stigma of low skill, low status, and low pay. Generally, nursing was regarded as simply an extension of the unpaid services performed by the housewife—a characteristic attitude that haunts the profession to this day.

Education seems, at first glance, to offer an entirely opposite pattern from that of the other professions. In colonial days women had taught "Dame schools" and grade schools during summer sessions. Gradually, as educational opportunities for girls expanded, they advanced just a step ahead of their students. Professionalization of teaching occurred between 1820 and 1860, a period marked by a sharp increase in the number of women teachers. The spread of female seminaries, academies, and normal schools provided new opportunities for the training and employment of female teachers.

This trend, which runs counter to that found in the other professions, can be accounted for by the fact that women filled a desperate need created by the challenge of the common schools, the ever-increasing size of the student body, and the westward growth of the nation. America was committed to educating its children in public schools, but it was insistent on doing so as cheaply as possible. Women were available in great numbers, and they were willing to work cheaply. The result was another ideological adaptation: in the very period when the gospel of the home as woman's only proper sphere was preached most loudly, it was discovered that women were the natural teachers of youth, could do the job better than men, and were to be preferred for such employment. This was always provided, of course, that they would work at the proper wage differential—30 to 50 per cent of the wages paid male teachers was considered appropriate. The result was that in 1888 in the country as a whole 63 per cent of all teachers were women, while the figure for the cities only was 90.04 per cent.

It appeared in the teaching field, as it would in industry, that role expectations were adaptable provided the inferior status group filled a social need. The inconsistent and peculiar patterns of employment of black labor in the present-day market bear out the validity of this generalization.

There was another field in which the labor of women was appreciated and which they were urged to enter—industry. From Alexander Hamilton to Matthew Carey and Tench Coxe, advocates of industrialization sang the praises of the working girl and advanced arguments in favor of her employment. The social benefits of female labor particularly stressed were those bestowed upon her family, who now no longer had to support her. Working girls were "thus happily preserved from idleness and its attendant vices and crimes," and the whole community benefitted from their increased purchasing power.

American industrialization, which occurred in an underdeveloped economy with a shortage of labor, depended on the labor of women and children. Men were occupied with agricultural work and were not available or were unwilling to enter the factories. This accounts for the special features of the early development of the New England textile industry: the relatively high wages, the respectability of the job and relatively high status of the mill

girls, the patriarchal character of the model factory towns, and the temporary mobility of women workers from farm to factory and back again to farm. All this was characteristic only of a limited area and of a period of about two decades. By the late 1830s the romance had worn off: immigration had supplied a strongly competitive, permanent work force willing to work for subsistence wages; early efforts at trade union organization had been shattered, and mechanization had turned semi-skilled factory labor into unskilled labor. The process led to the replacement of the New England-born farm girls by immigrants in the mills and was accompanied by a loss of status and respectability for female workers.

The lack of organized social services during periods of depression drove ever greater numbers of women into the labor market. At first, inside the factories distinctions between men's and women's jobs were blurred. Men and women were assigned to machinery on the basis of local need. But as more women entered industry the limited number of occupations open to them tended to increase competition among them, thus lowering pay standards. Generally, women regarded their work as temporary and hesitated to invest in apprenticeship training, because they expected to marry and raise families. Thus they remained untrained, casual labor and were soon, by custom, relegated to the lowest paid, least skilled jobs. Long hours, overwork, and poor working conditions would characterize women's work in industry for almost a century.

Another result of industrialization was in increasing differences in life styles between women of different classes. When female occupations, such as carding, spinning, and weaving, were transferred from home to factory, the poorer women followed their traditional work and became industrial workers. The women of the middle and upper classes could use their newly gained time for leisure pursuits: they became ladies. And a small but significant group among them chose to prepare themselves for professional careers by advanced education. This group would prove to be the most vocal and troublesome in the near future.

As class distinctions sharpened, social attitudes toward women became polarized. The image of "the lady" was elevated to the accepted ideal of femininity toward which all women would strive. In this formulation of values lower-class women were simply ignored. The actual lady was, of course, nothing new on the American scene; she had been present ever since colonial days. What was new in the 1830s was the cult of the lady, her elevation to a status symbol. The advancing prosperity of the early 19th century made it possible for middle-class women to aspire to the status formerly reserved for upper-class women. The "cult of true womanhood" of the 1830s became a vehicle for such aspirations. Mass circulation newspapers and magazines made it possible to teach every woman how to elevate the status of her family by setting "proper" standards of behavior, dress, and literary tastes. *Godey's Lady's Book* and innumerable gift books and tracts of the period all preach the same gospel of "true womanhood"—piety, purity, domesticity. Those unable to reach the goal of becoming ladies were to be satisfied with the lesser goal—acceptance of their "proper place" in the home.

It is no accident that the slogan "woman's place is in the home" took on a certain aggressiveness and shrillness precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women *left* their homes to become factory workers. Working women were not a fit subject for the concern of publishers and mass media writers. Idleness, once a disgrace in the eyes of society, had become a status symbol. Thorstein Veblen, one of the earliest and sharpest commentators on the subject, observed that it had become almost the sole social function of the lady "to put in evidence her economic unit's ability to pay." She was "a means of conspicuously unproductive expenditure," devoted to displaying her husband's wealth. Just as the cult of white womanhood in the South served to preserve a labor and social system based on race distinctions, so did the cult of the lady in an egalitarian society serve as a means of preserving class distinctions. Where class distinctions were not so great, as on the frontier, the position of women was closer to what it had been in colonial days; their economic contribution was more highly valued, their opportunities were less restricted, and their positive participation in community life was taken for granted.

In the urbanized and industrialized Northeast the life experience of middle-class women was different in almost every respect from that of the lower-class women. But there was one thing the society lady and the mill girl had in common—they were equally disfranchised and isolated from the vital centers of power. Yet the political status of women had not actually deteriorated. With very few exceptions women had neither voted nor stood for office during the colonial period. Yet the spread of the franchise to ever wider groups of white males during the Jacksonian age, the removal of property restrictions, the increasing numbers of immigrants who acquired access to the franchise, made the gap between these new enfranchised voters and the disfranchised women more obvious. Quite naturally, educated and propertied women felt this deprivation more keenly. Their own career expectations had been encouraged by widening educational opportunities; their consciousness of their own abilities and of their potential for power had been enhanced by their activities in the reform movements of the 1830s; the general spirit of upward mobility and venturesome entrepreneurship that pervaded the Jacksonian era was infectious. But in the late 1840s a sense of acute frustration enveloped these educated and highly spirited women. Their rising expectations had met with frustration, their hopes had been shattered; they were bitterly conscious of a relative lowering of status and a loss of position. This sense of frustration led them to action; it was one of the main factors in the rise of the woman's rights movement.

The women, who at the first woman's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 declared boldly and with considerable exaggeration that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her," did not speak for the truly exploited and abused working woman. As a matter of fact, they were largely ignorant of her condition and, with the notable exception of Susan B. Anthony, indifferent to her fate. But they judged from the realities of their own life experience. Like most revolutionaries, they were not the most downtrodden but rather

the most status-deprived group. Their frustrations and traditional isolation from political power funneled their discontent into fairly utopian declarations and immature organizational means. They would learn better in the long, hard decades of practical struggle. Yet it is their initial emphasis on the legal and political "disabilities" of women which has provided the framework for most of the historical work on women.¹ For almost a hundred years sympathetic historians have told the story of women in America by deriving from the position of middle-class women a generalization concerning all American women. To avoid distortion, any valid generalization concerning American women after the 1830s should reflect a recognition of class stratification.

For lower-class women the changes brought by industrialization were actually advantageous, offering income and advancement opportunities, however limited, and a chance for participation in the ranks of organized labor.² They, by and large, tended to join men in their struggle for economic advancement and became increasingly concerned with economic gains and protective labor legislation. Middle- and upper-class women, on the other hand, reacted to actual and fancied status deprivation by increasing militancy and the formation of organizations for woman's rights, by which they meant especially legal and property rights.

The four decades preceding the Seneca Falls Convention were decisive in the history of American women. They brought an actual deterioration in the economic opportunities open to women, a relative deterioration in their political status, and a rising level of expectation and subsequent frustration in a privileged elite group of educated women. It was in these decades that the values and beliefs that clustered around the assertion "Woman's place is in the home" changed from being descriptive of an existing reality to becoming an ideology. "The cult of true womanhood" extolled woman's predominance in the domestic sphere, while it tried to justify women's exclusion from the public domain, from equal education and from participation in the political process by claims to tradition, universality, and a history dating back to antiquity, or at least to the *Mayflower*. In a century of modernization and industrialization women alone were to remain unchanging, embodying in their behavior and attitudes the longing of men and women caught in rapid social change for a mythical archaic past of agrarian family self-sufficiency. In pre-industrial America the home was indeed the workplace for both men and women, although the self-sufficiency of the American yeoman, whose economic well-being depended on a network of international trade and mercantilism, was even then more apparent than real. In the 19th and 20th centuries the home was turned into the realm of woman, while the workplace became the public domain of men. The ideology of "woman's sphere" sought to upgrade women's domestic function by elaborating the role of mother, turning the domestic drudge into a "homemaker" and charging her with elevating her family's status by her exercise of consumer functions and by her display of her own and her family's social graces. These prescribed roles never *were* a reality. In the 1950s Betty Friedan would describe this ideology and rename it "the feminine mystique," but it was no other than the myth of "woman's proper sphere" created in the 1840s and updated by consumerism and the misunderstood dicta of Freudian psychology.

The decades 1800–1840 also provide the clues to an understanding of the institutional shape of the later women's organizations. These would be led by middle-class women whose self-image, life experience, and ideology had largely been fashioned and influenced by these early, transitional years. The concerns of middle-class women—property rights, the franchise, and moral uplift—would dominate the woman's rights movement. But side by side with it, and at times cooperating with it, would grow a number of organizations serving the needs of working women.

American women were the largest disfranchised group in the nation's history, and they retained this position longer than any other group. Although they found ways of making their influence felt continuously, not only as individuals but as organized groups, power eluded them. The mill girl and the lady, both born in the age of Jackson, would not gain access to power until they learned to cooperate, each for her own separate interests. It would take almost six decades before they would find common ground. The issue around which they finally would unite and push their movement to victory was the "impractical and utopian" demand raised at Seneca Falls—the means to power in American society—female suffrage.

Notes

1. To the date of the first printing of this article (1969).
2. In 1979, I would not agree with this optimistic generalization.