The Boundaries of Youth: Labor, Maturity, and Coming of Age in Early Nineteenth-Century New England, 1790-1850

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The Boundaries of Youth: Labor, Maturity, and Coming of Age in Early Nineteenth-Century New England, 1790-1850

by

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A dissertation presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Introduction

In May 1805, sixteen-year-old David Damon left his father’s farm in East Sudbury, Massachusetts, and set out for Boston in search of employment. Needing money to fund his tuition at a local academy, Damon took “the principal care of a wharf & store.” Unfortunately, after a few months in the position, Damon and his employer clashed over wages and time off due to illness. Unable to secure satisfactory terms, Damon left the position rather than compromise. In his diary, he called the decision “one of the best & most prudent actions in my life.” He interpreted the outcome not as a consequence of young men’s insecurity in the commercial labor market, but as an expression of his maturity. As he approached “the age of man,” Damon wanted to exercise “some decision & independence, without which it is obvious no man can be of much consequence in society, or even to himself.”

In April 1839, Malenda Edwards informed her cousin that she had taken work in a textile mill. Although some women considered the labor “beneath [their] dignity,” Edwards remarked that “very many young Ladies…in the factories have given up” the more respectable female occupations of “millinery, dressmaking & school keeping.” She chose to ignore the potential degradation of industrial labor rather than confine herself to traditional female employments. Harriet Farley, another Lowell ‘mill girl,’ gained a public reputation when she defended factory work against the criticism of anti-capital labor activists. “The avails of factory labor,” she wrote as the editor of a literary magazine featuring the compositions of factory operatives, “are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers.” Young women entered the mills as a rational choice, “and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of

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the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much independence for that.”

During the early nineteenth century, young New Englanders like David Damon, Malenda Edwards, and Harriet Farley translated their anxieties about the commercial economy into an acceptance of the classical liberal maxim that maturity was the path to material prosperity and upward mobility. Saddled with the burden to display self-ownership in accordance with the gender-specific expectations of New England society, young men and women used their work experiences to signify their ability to make prudent and respectable choices. Recognition as competent, mature adults required young people to find and demonstrate independence through their work. But the early industrial economy prevented many young men and women from exercising choice in the labor market. As maturity was increasingly linked to privileged forms of work, the democratic ideal that anyone with talent and good character could achieve prosperity masked the emergence of class-based hierarchy in nineteenth-century America. The struggles of young New Englanders show the insidious promise of democratic capitalism that expanded economic and political equality, but made the individual responsible for proving his or her worth.

Damon, Edwards, and Farley’s reflections on the relationship between employment and independence expose the impact of economic change on the process of growing up. In colonial New England, production occurred within the household. A male patriarch owned land or the means of a trade and had legal claim to the labor of his household dependents: wife, children, servants, apprentices, slaves, and others. In return, he was responsible for their livelihood and their moral discipline. In this environment, young people worked because of their dependent

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status. Children were integrated into adult habits and responsibilities early in life: by age six or eight, they dressed in adult clothing, worked alongside their fathers or mothers, and attended strict religious services. During their early teens and twenties, young men and women assumed greater labor responsibilities and prepared to form a household of their own. Puritans took great interest in individuals’ progression through the “ages of man” on their path toward salvation, but accepted a social order that relegated individuals to particular ranks.⁵ Patronage, not individual striving, was “the basic means of social mobility.”⁶ Puritans called youth “a chusing time,”⁷ but in fact “there were few substantial choices to be made.” In the agrarian economy, work was a feature of dependence within the household and, as John Demos describes, “development toward full maturity could be accomplished in a gradual, piecemeal, and largely automatic fashion.”⁸

During the eighteenth century, many New England households gradually lost the combined features of economic production and domestic control that held young people in dependence. New England families took advantage of improved transportation networks, currency exchange, and urban demand by increasing their production for the regional market.⁹ Instead of an integrated operation where men and women, adults and children, masters and servants worked side by side, specialized production moved away from the domestic sphere.

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⁷ Benjamin Colman, quoted in Beales, “In Search of the Historical Child.”


Families relied on cash received through the sale of goods or from the activities of members employed in the public sphere, aspiring to keep the home reserved for the nurture of children (particularly those younger than fourteen). Because sons and daughters held less economic value within the household, their path to adulthood required negotiating economic, educational, and civic opportunities beyond the home from their early teens until their late twenties. The early nineteenth century witnessed “the uprooting of young people from agriculture and their immigration to cities.”

In the new commercial economy, “parents could not keep their sons – or some even their daughters – at home.” These new opportunities redefined youth as a transitional stage of life during the early nineteenth century.

Changes to young people’s labor roles accompanied New England’s shift toward a capitalist economy, which began in the eighteenth century and continued in earnest following the Revolution. As an economic system defined by owners accumulating capital through expropriating surplus value from laborers, capitalism involved separating “home from work” and “productive” market labor from “unproductive” subsistence labor. With less production taking place in the home, young people left the bound relationships of the household to take “free” wage labor in the market. These labor contracts were characterized by impersonal relationships built on self-interested transactions. Wage labor was seen as an expression of democratic

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10 Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 5.
12 Early historians of family life and growing up in America often used the term ‘adolescence’ when discussing the intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. The term first emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, most notably in the work of psychologist G. Stanley Hall, to describe a psychological and physiological stage of life. Because ‘adolescence’ refers to a different aspect of development than the cultural focus of this project, and because it emerged within a historical context far removed from early nineteenth-century New England, I have opted to identify the changes in life-stage with the term ‘youth’ rather than ‘adolescence.’
equality and bound labor became a status appropriate only for children.\textsuperscript{15} Taking ownership of one’s own labor was essential for growing up. But with this maturity came responsibility for risk. Capitalism required workers to be – or become – “the master of [their] personal destiny [and adopt] a moral duty to attend to the future.”\textsuperscript{16} During the early nineteenth century, New Englanders infused the language of growing up with the language of striving in the capitalist environment.

Released from the bonds of the household and set adrift in the commercial economy, young men and women needed to invest in education and training away from their families to secure the foundation for adulthood. In a society based on consent and reason, adulthood was a privileged status recognized not simply by age but through the capacities that symbolized steadiness, competence, and autonomy. Young people took liminal positions in the economy as they struggled to overcome their financial disadvantages and the dependence associated with their work. The need to align their work with the traits of rationality and self-ownership is evident in David Damon’s interpretation of his decision to leave the wharf, in Edwards’s disparagement of traditional women’s work, and in Harriet Farley’s defense of female textile workers. By conceptualizing work as a product of choice, Americans attributed individuals’ positions to their capacity for maturity rather than their access to resources. By ignoring the role of material resources in entrenching manual laborers’ dependence and degradation, young men and women’s faith in choice and character disguised the escalating class divergence in this critical period of American history. During the early nineteenth-century, the emphasis on maturity justified self-ownership and respectability as the measures of adulthood while ignoring


the gender, class, and racial privileges that determined individual status.

Diaries and the Language of Maturity

The belief in merit as the key to success came from an anxiety about freedom in early nineteenth-century New England. Commercialization gave young people an unprecedented range of “occupational and intellectual choice.”¹⁷ They left the supervision of parents and had to make their own decisions about where to work and how to find stability for adulthood. Growing up meant avoiding the temptations that came from living away from home and choosing the path that would lead to prosperity. I call this ability to make good choices maturity. Through their development of “inner behavioral controls,” or character, young people provided a check on their own liberty.¹⁸ Their capacity for prudence, discretion, self-knowledge, resolution, and independence of mind helped young people choose long-term benefits over short-term gain. By prioritizing their “progress of character,” young people tried to harmonize social order and the promise of social mobility.

The power of maturity in early nineteenth-century New England is best displayed in the new genre of personal diaries written by young men and women – a key source base for this dissertation. Diaries not only illuminate the experiences of individual young people, but also reveal the complex expectations of maturity that guided the coming of age process. When compared to the personal writings of the colonial period, youth diaries in the early nineteenth century show the significance of young men and women taking responsibility for their character development alongside their control of labor. Responding to the economic conditions of early capitalism, young men and women practiced, and performed, reacting maturely and

¹⁷ Kett, Rites of Passage, 5.
appropriately to the challenges of showing themselves worthy of independence.

In 1808 Samuel Curson, an aspiring merchant trying to make his way without a father, decided “to keep a journal of my employment, of my determination, & of my thoughts, when they are such as I dare to trust on paper.” This practice was common among middling and elite children, but Curson was specifically inspired to undertake the pursuit after reading an essay by John Foster, a popular British essayist and Baptist minister. In *Essays in a Series of Letters to a Friend*, published in 1807, Foster recommended young men keep a memoir of their lives as a “decision of character.” The purpose of a journal was “not so much to enumerate the mere facts and events of life, as to discriminate the successive states of mind, and the progress of character.”

During the early nineteenth century, diaries offered a means to contemplate the transition from childhood to adulthood as young men and women strived to develop a sense of self-ownership – control of one’s productive capacity and one’s moral character. Journals encouraged deliberate self-examination aimed at improving the author’s ability to make appropriate choices. To complete this task, Foster asked men to stop “carry[ing] their minds as they carry their watches, content to be ignorant of the mechanisms of their movements, and satisfied with attending to the little exterior circle of things.”

John Foster and other advice authors promoted a secular attitude toward the development of character that emerged out of the Puritan concern for inner grace. In colonial New England, character was treated as a probable sign of one’s salvation. By studying their attitudes, motives, and actions, anxious Puritans hoped that they could interpret God’s favor within them. When they strived for prosperity, they saw their material gain as an external display of their inner

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19 Samuel Curson Diary, 24 Jun 1808, Curson Family Papers (MS Am 1175.8), HL; John Foster, *Essays in a Series of Letters to a Friend* (Lincoln and Gleason, 1807), 2, 9.
sanctity. Puritans used diaries to chart their path to salvation. Most colonial narratives are what Steven Kagle calls “diaries of situation” – short-term writings “created to record a special event or to perform a limited role.” Because religious leadership was viewed as a male prerogative, it was typically educated, influential men who used diaries as “a companion in their spiritual isolation.” These personal records, often intended for the benefit of the community, detailed men’s struggles with sin and doubt and their attempts “to find a pattern which could reveal the truth of the past and plan the direction of the future.”

Puritan anxiety about salvation was a concern about preserving social order. While religious elites publicized their struggles with God’s grace, the family and society at large were designed to promote the acquisition of moral obedience among the population. All children were supposed to receive early instruction in piety, penance, and submission to authority. Puritan parents and ministers thought deeply about the problem of children's salvation and attempted to impart the knowledge of scripture that would bring them the “Understanding” through which “every Grace enters into the Soul.” They considered growing up an experience directed by adults; only under the supervision of members of the ‘covenant of grace’ would young people be prepared to carry on Puritan theology and practice. Children remained spiritually, as well as economically and legally, dependent upon their parents or guardians until they took control over their own families upon marriage.

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23 Ibid., 29.
In the late eighteenth century, young men and women exercised more control over their moral development. One method of scrutinizing this development was a new genre of reflective diaries, which gained “a more permanent and more general role in the lives of the diarists who produced them.” Compared to the predominately short-term accounts during the colonial period, nineteenth-century diaries covered multiple years or even decades of the author’s life and addressed a broad range of secular concerns. Although some colonial New Englanders produced what Kagle terms “life diaries,” the pattern of committing to “more regular and more extensive” journals marked a “relatively sudden shift” in the style of diary-writing in the early nineteenth century. Young New Englanders in the nineteenth century thus recognized diaries as tools for self-reflection and personal improvement, alongside continued interest in spiritual concerns. At age thirteen, Sally Ripley started “a diary in which I calculate to make such remarks as shall be of use to me [in my] future life.” On her fourteenth birthday, she remarked, “I am now enjoying what are called the juvenile years of life.” Ripley recognized that she had entered a new stage of life, during which she would be responsible for restraining her own immaturity. Juvenile was often used to emphasize the immaturity that remained as a young person grew up, while youth emphasized the maturity that was growing. George Silsbee Hale struggled with his goal of keeping a diary, despite being assured of its value. In 1842 he started a new volume by noting, “Once more for the twentieth time I have determined to keep a ‘Gurnal’. ” He intended not

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28 Ibid., 4.
29 Sarah “Sally” Ripley Diary, 15 Jul 1799, 26 Nov 1799, Schlesinger Library (hereafter SL).
30 Juvenile was the preferred term when referring to the destitute and delinquent children that social reformers needed to protect and control. See Joseph M. Hawes, *Children in Urban Society; Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
simply to record his “ignoble deeds, but to write my every day thoughts of my perished hours, that I may be able in life after...to recall as vividly as possible these fleeting entities which are in fact my life.”

During the early nineteenth century, young people such as Sally Ripley and George Hale took greater responsibility for their development as youth by cultivating a set of “internalized character traits.” Recognizing the lack of external discipline in a society that embraced individualism and let young people seek education and employment on their own, parents and young people themselves looked for inner capacities that would help them make good choices. Their vision of “democratic order” was “to replace external controls over behavior with internal controls.” Through their letters and diaries, young people cultivated the qualities of discretion, ambition, self-reflection, industry, humility, independence of will, and similar traits that promised to secure them the positions in the commercial labor market that they thought they deserved. Viewing their maturity as the primary engine of their fate, young people saw their moral development as “an internal struggle, between the impulsiveness of youth and the wisdom of age.”

Middling boys and girls used personal narratives to cultivate their ability to make appropriate choices by documenting not only their daily activities, but also their struggles with self-improvement. Their diaries were a product of their provisional autonomy – still dependent on adults for economic support and employment, but responsible for charting their own path. The role model for this bourgeois self-making was Benjamin Franklin, who, after the posthumous publication of his *Autobiography* in 1794, became “the folksy embodiment of the self-made

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31 George Silsbee Hale Diary, 10 Sept 1842, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS).
34 Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale*, 32.
Franklin’s *Autobiography* presented self-reflection as a path to social mobility, when in fact leisure time used for personal writing was a luxury that was beginning to separate middle-class aspirants from the laboring classes. Young people used their private writings, as well as their correspondence with family and friends, to justify their position as a product of their character. Maturity was the process of proving oneself worthy of freedom and prosperity, thus fulfilling the promise of the Revolution. Within the boundaries of youth, from the early teens to the late twenties, young New Englanders displayed their character through their prudent economic choices in an effort to obtain the privileges and power of adulthood. By portraying young people’s character and labor position as the consequence of internal traits gained through the process of growing up, diaries supported the language of maturity and self-ownership that was becoming America’s ethos.

Reflective diaries helped young men and women guide their conduct as they passed through the life stage of youth. New Englanders who started diaries early in life often began them in conjunction with formal schooling. Ten-year-old Anna Cabot Lowell started a diary to help her be “most attentive in my lessons.” After sending his fourteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth to her uncle’s home in New York, John Pierce asked her to keep a journal of her experiences. Pierce kept an archive of his daughter’s “former writings of the kind, to remind us of the gradual progress you may make in observing and noting the events which take place.” John Pierce encouraged habits that “cannot fail to be useful to yourself as well as amusing to

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36 Diaries held a central place in the development of moral life for early nineteenth-century young people, particularly as writing literacy extended to a broader segment of the population. Through practices such as diary keeping, young men and women “sought to acquire the moral authority that they hoped would follow from a judicious accounting of their lives.” For an analysis of the connections between engaged literacy and character development in the democratic and commercial society, see Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale*. Quoted page 23.
37 Anna Cabot Lowell Diary, 28 Jun 1818, MHS.
your parents and friends.”

Young people often considered diaries an extension of their education. Sarah Ripley started her diary at age fourteen in order to record “some account of my lessons.” Hannah Alvard Bliss began a diary at age sixteen when she “commenced attending School.” These middle-class girls, verging on young womanhood, used diaries to perfect the lessons of gentility from their formal schooling. David Benedict, “from long reflection” and “after reading several recommendations of the practice” decided to keep a diary just as he “commenced...study at the Academy.” As middling children benefited from a greater investment in formal schooling, diary compositions served as a means to extend practice in this rudimentary skill and to encourage self-reflection on internal character traits.

Young men who pursued mechanical or mercantile occupations often started diaries in their late teens or early twenties, associated with their maturation during their vocational training. As they entered what Thomas Augst called an “alien terrain of independence” with less guidance from traditional moral institutions, they “used their diaries to give their movements in market culture moral shape and direction.” Twenty-three-year-old Stephen Peabody was starting a mercantile business with his cousin when he “commenc[ed] journal keeping.” Three months before he left school to find work in Boston, fifteen year old David Damon “concluded to keep a journal.” Bradley Newcomb Cumings started as an apprentice at a dry goods store in Boston at age thirteen. “After due consideration,” he “thought it would be a good plan to keep a

38 John Pierce to Elizabeth Pierce, 28 Sep 1818, SL.
39 Sarah “Sally” Ripley Diary, 16 Jul 1799, American Antiquarian Society, (hereafter AAS).
40 Hannah Alvard Bliss Clarke Diary, 16 Dec 1816, Warren-Clarke Papers, MHS.
41 David Benedict Diary, 4 Sep 1802, Rhode Island Historical Society (hereafter RIHS).
42 During the eighteenth century, writing became a more regular component of children’s, especially girls’, literacy instruction. See E. Jennifer Monaghan, Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
43 Augst, The Clerk’s Tale, 21.
44 Stephen Peabody Diary, 1 Sept 1796, AAS.
45 David Damon, “Extracts from David Damon’s Journal, 1803-1810,” 1 Jan 1803, Damon Family Papers, HL.
journal” when he was sixteen.\textsuperscript{46} Edward Jenner Carpenter's father advised him to start a diary when he began his apprenticeship with a cabinetmaker in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Although he “long neglected” the task, he started to “write down every night what has occurred during the day worth of note” when he was eighteen.\textsuperscript{47} James Lawrence Whittier started an apprenticeship at a bank in Boston when he was twelve years old. Two years later he decided “to keep a diary or Journal of the principle events which may fall under my observation.” Whittier used his age to excuse any perceived immaturity in his writing. He included a disclaimer in his diary warning that “any one [who] sees this...must not expect to find anything more than common for the one who keeps it is young, and not much used to writing composition.” But as a record of his development, Whittier “hop[ed] that there may be some things recorded that will bear perusal.”\textsuperscript{48}

By tracking their thoughts and activities in relation to chronological time, diarists frequently noted annual milestones that reminded them of their progressing age. As Anna Cabot Lowell wrote, “the close of every year, of every month, & even of every day” provided an opportunity to “reflect upon the manner in which I have spent my time.” The beginning of a new year provided young people with reminders of the passage of time, their increasing age, and the expectations that came along with both. In January of 1809 Margaret Searle found “something...always pleasant in the idea that a year is past, that I have never again to take its chance of happiness or misery.” She thought of “the rapid flight of time” that made “youth, & its pleasures” quickly disappear, making her aware of “the importance of time as the preparative for eternity.” However, she took a more optimistic view of her chronological progress, noting, “[As] I grow older perhaps I may find that my feelings on this subject & on many others will

\textsuperscript{46} Bradley N. Cumings Journal, 1 Jan 1828, MHS.
\textsuperscript{47} Edward Jenner Carpenter Diary, 1 May 1844, AAS.
\textsuperscript{48} James Whittier Diary, 3 Aug 1830, AAS.
George Silsbee Hale recorded New Year’s Day of 1843 with some regret. He asked his diary, “Shall I continue as of old to regret the past & resolve for the future?” He shamed himself for his poor performance of character: “Talents wasted, time misspent, disgraceful yieldings to vile temptations.” But despite these failings, he looked on his positive progress in maturity, confident that “with all humility...I am...a better man than I was a year ago, but only it may be because I am wise enough to see the folly of wickedness.”

Birthdays also offered young people a yearly reminder of their moral and intellectual progress. Sally Ripley noted her nineteenth birthday in 1804 and used the occasion to record her gratitude to “the Almighty for the many mercies I have rec[eive]d since my last natal day & also thro[ugh] the whole course of my life.” The next year, she repeated her desire to improve her character by keeping “a strict watch over my temper & conduct, & be guided by the rules of right reason & religion.” She hoped to gain maturity over the coming year through her desire to “govern my passions with absolute sway, and grow wiser and better as life wears away.”

Bradley Cumings, an apprentice at a dry goods store in Boston, also commented on his birthday every year. As he entered his twentieth year, recognizing that his emancipation would come shortly, Cumings recorded in his diary, “What will be my fate, should I live to see another birth day, is uncertain. Doubtless many changes will take place in that time, and we must make up our minds to be content in any station.” When his journal ran out of pages on his twenty-first birthday, he thought it “a good time to begin a new book.” In the beginning of the next volume, he reminisced about his time writing the journal and recorded resolutions for the coming years that would prepare him for adult responsibilities. The chronological structure of diaries

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49 Margaret Searle Journal, 25 Jan 1809, HL.
50 Anna Cabot Lowell Diary, 6 March 1825, MHS; Margaret Searle Diary, 25 Jan 1809, Curson Family Papers, HL; George Silsbee Hale Diary, 1 Jan 1843, MHS.
51 Sarah “Sally” Ripley Diary, 26 [Nov] 1804, SL; Sarah “Sally” Ripley Diary, 26 Nov 1805, AAS.
52 Bradley N. Cumings Journal, 4 Nov 1828, 4 Nov 1829, 4 Nov 1831, 3 Nov 1832, MHS.
encouraged young writers to view their moral, intellectual, and vocational development as the natural product of their advancing age.

Young men and women shared a language of maturity in their diaries, but each travelled a different path to adulthood based on their gender. Masculinity and femininity defined what qualified as a good decision in the commercial environment. To exhibit their maturity, they needed to play the part that society prescribed based on prevailing attitudes about respectability in early commercial society. Respectability was a code of behaviors used to separate middle-class individuals and families from the degraded members of the population by signifying those who were able to make prudent choices from those who were subject to ignorance, indolence, or greed.  

For men, this was the ability to make choices that would lead to success in the market as a breadwinner. The ideal of “self-made manhood” emphasized a man’s ambition, economic power, and management of risk. As a young man sought employment in the commercial economy, he “took his identity and his social status from his own achievements, not from the accident of his birth.” Managers, capitalists, and professionals whose activities represented individuality and the fulfillment of a “calling” or “vocation” claimed authority over boys beginning their careers in subordinate positions, men and women relegated to menial employment, and women confined to the domestic sphere. Self-ownership in the commercial market was the foundation for men’s political, economic, and familial power: Through their access to privileged employment, men asserted the dominance of masculinity.

For women, maturity was the ability to make choices that would lead to a proper

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domestic role as a wife or dutiful elder daughter or sister. Women expressed respectability by avoiding paid labor and devoting themselves to the sanctity of the home. When they did pursue economic activity, the expectations of femininity required that they portray it as a temporary vocation before marriage or as a dutiful sacrifice. With the decline of household production, women expressed their gender identity through their reproductive and nurturing function as wife and mother. They aspired to positions of “mere equality” with men through the “cult of domesticity,” which exalted women’s moral authority both within the home and in society. Women took charge of moral reform movements such as temperance, anti-prostitution, and child welfare. Assumptions about women’s virtue allowed them to act as vehicles for God’s will through preaching and other religious activities. Yet this intellectual shift that privileged middle-class constructions of femininity emerged “at least in part as a hardening of the attitudes of certain groups against specific actual practices of gender...deemed particularly threatening during the political and economic revolutions.” Domestic femininity allowed middle-class wives to claim higher status over children, spinsters, and poor women who worked outside of the home. Nineteenth-century women recognized the apotheosis of their maturity in the selection of a husband who could provide economic security that allowed them to forsake paid employment.

Young men’s and women’s struggles with maturity in the early commercial economy helped define the meaning of masculinity and femininity in nineteenth-century New England.

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Both of these gender identities contained an implicit expectation of maturity. As Gail Bederman articulates, “gender – whether manhood or womanhood – is a historical, ideological process” through which “individuals are positioned and position themselves as men and women.” The process of gender identification and the construction of gendered hierarchy occurred as part of growing up. Young men had the expectation (if not always the opportunity) to continue their progress of independence, often sacrificing immediate liberties for the promise of autonomy and security. They could gain more wealth, more security, more prestige, and more political power. Young women could gain self-ownership and autonomy, but it was directed toward the goals of making a good marriage choice and settling in a male-headed family. Women’s public authority came after they demonstrated the ultimate mature decision to give up autonomy for the security of a breadwinner. As wives and mothers in a middle-class family, their authority could be reborn in a restricted form as they embarked on public charitable work that matched their domestic roles. Critical to understanding nineteenth-century American ideals of gender and class is recognizing the social constructions of age that distinguished men from boys and women from girls, and the struggles of young people to obtain the privileges afforded to adults.

Historiography

Despite minors’ subordinate position in early American society, young people’s actions (as well as adult perceptions of youth as a social category) have shaped the meaning of independence, autonomy, and citizenship. However, young people are often left at the periphery

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of historical study because they lacked economic, social, political, and legal claims to full participation in early American society. Young people were a demographic majority from the colonial period until the early twentieth century, with half of the US population under the age of sixteen in 1800, making their experiences central, rather than peripheral, to our understanding of life in early America. Bringing youth to the center of early nineteenth-century history helps explain how New England society reconciled social mobility with social order in the midst of economic upheaval.

Research into the history of childhood and youth emerged as an identifiable field in the 1960s, against the backdrop of influential youth protest movements in the United States and around the world. The first wave of American scholars critiqued Philippe Aries’ provocative assertion that preindustrial societies had no conception of childhood. Motivated by the question of whether life stages had a history, they used social history to understand the changes in family structure. Philip Greven used demographic data on the age of marriage and land ownership to understand the passage to adulthood in colonial Andover. John Demos connected Puritans’ obsession with childhood obedience to their fear of aggression as a threat to family order. Scholars of childhood and family life in colonial New England continued Aries’ investigation into the contingency of childhood (while also disputing his conclusions) by examining the changing role of children in the patriarchal household. These first forays into the history of childhood in colonial America helped scholars understand the structures of authority and labor responsibilities that upheld the patriarchal economic and political structure.63

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These early pursuits in the history of the family convinced many historians that childhood was a socially-constructed experience. The scholars who built on this work have pushed the history of childhood further into the mainstream of American scholarship. The past four decades have witnessed the gradual expansion of children and childhood as academic subjects. The scholarship generally follows two paths. One line of inquiry pursues the historical conception of childhood from the perspective of adults. The other line of inquiry examines the lived experience of children. Despite their differing approaches, both pursue broad questions about social power and legitimate forms of hierarchy in the past. Their work compels scholars to see the study of children and childhood as central to the discipline of history.

The history of childhood gained legitimacy by examining adults’ changing attitudes and practices toward their children. This approach follows shifts in the ideology of child-rearing in early America and the parallel educators saw between child development and the republican experiment. Historians place these changing attitudes toward children within a broader ‘revolution against patriarchal authority’ that brought notions of consent to the center of family, church, and government. Bernard Wishy explores the changing messages on raising children in prescriptive literature in the early American republic. Jay Fliegelman shows how Americans’ attitudes toward their children shifted from authoritarian patriarchalism to affectionate paternalism in response to Enlightenment philosophy and republican theories. Holly Brewer demonstrates the significance of limiting consent to individuals defined as adults for the creation of republican political structures. The United States emerged out of an ideology that revolutionized conceptions of reason and authority, which opened a new place for children and youth in American culture, politics and economic life.64

Historians continue to pursue the connection between the ideology of childhood and cultural beliefs in consent and authority in the early nineteenth century. Recent volumes by Steven Mintz and James Marten explore how developing conceptions of the American nation coalesced around new expectations for child-rearing. Americans believed that a functioning republic required rational, morally-independent citizens, and they modeled the nation’s youth to fit this vision. Jacqueline Reinier analyzes how arguments about “proper” child development shifted from an emphasis on virtue to an emphasis on character. Rodney Hessinger shows how self-appointed reformers, witnessing the dangers of new opportunities for youth in education, work, and leisure, constructed moral systems based on persuasion rather than coercion. Each of these recent works emphasizes the ways social leaders constructed the new nation through the expectations for coming of age they placed on the younger generation.65

The second model of nineteenth-century youth history emphasizes the experience of young men and women during this period of economic, social, and political change. Democratization and industrialization gave young Americans new ambitions about their futures, and opened new opportunities for individuality. Joseph Kett and Harvey Graff move beyond examining age as an ideological category to explore the process of growing up as it was experienced by young men and women in the early United States. Kett identifies the early nineteenth century as the first “critical transition for young people” in America. The social upheaval of democratization and commercialization resulted in “the uprooting of young people from agriculture, their migration to cities, a dramatic rise in the degree of occupational and

intellectual choice available to youth, and the increasing disorderliness and violence that marked their educational and social institutions.” Graff outlines unique paths traversed by young men and women based on their economic circumstances. These works show how the coming-of-age process changed in the face of a dynamic economy and a cultural ideology emphasizing choice and self-reflection.66

More recent studies of the lived experience of coming of age have examined the unique gendered boundaries of growing up. Mary Kelley's study of nineteenth-century academies and seminaries shows how the Revolutionary generation’s belief in female education allowed young women to enter civil society as individuals. Martha Thomhave Blauvelt examines how young women created identity through gendered conceptions of emotion. For the experience of young men, scholars have examined changing economic opportunities. Thomas Augst shows how young urban clerks used literary productions to record, predict, and control their coming of age process. J. M. Opal charts the development of the nation's faith in ambition from the experiences of young men leaving agricultural communities for broader economic prospects. Brian P. Luskey shows how young men negotiated the uncertainties of commercial capitalism and redefined economic success. From the perspective of both young men and young women, scholarly accounts of youth in the early nineteenth-century North show how the rising generation adapted to new social and economic demands.67

Recent historical scholarship has expanded the scope of the history of childhood,

showing how conceptions of age and the experiences of young people are central to American history. Historians have used the history of childhood to understand the development of class-based identities in the early nineteenth century. Scholars often connect the emergence of a new attitude toward children and childrearing to the cultural identity of the new middle class. Mary Ryan’s close analysis of family patterns in Utica, New York, reveals the decline of patriarchal authority and the rise of domestic affection. As economic production took fathers into the public sphere, mothers became the center of the home, and the nurture and protection of children became the family’s primary ideological purpose. This new attitude toward child-rearing created the distinctive morality of the new middling classes. Steven Mintz’s synthesis on American childhood charts the creation of “modern” attitudes and practices through Romantic sentiments about innocence and vulnerability. In the new commercial environment, middling parents could treat their children “not as sources of labor but as ‘social capital’ requiring substantial investments of time and resources.”

The history of childhood also illustrates the extension of labor degradation and oppression through the experiences of children. Mintz’s volume shows how the family’s need for cash in the industrial economy “increased children’s economic value” as wage laborers. Although child labor was not new in the nineteenth century, it moved outside household control. Poor children were left out of the expansion of education that created middle-class youth. Sharon Braslaw Sundue argues that access to education beyond rudimentary skills “increasingly delineated the boundary between the chance for middling status...and social and economic marginality.” Poor children were also subject to coming under the custody of local officials. Ruth Herndon and John Murray show the continuation of bound labor among children who were

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deemed a threat to social order.⁶⁹

One of the most prominent books connecting coming of age to cultural development in early-nineteenth century America is Joyce Appleby’s *Inheriting the Revolution*. Studying the “first generation of Americans,” the young men and women who “[grew] to maturity after Independence,” Appleby shows how the popular narratives of the nation’s successful innovators defined the meaning of liberal society by embracing the popular press, expanded civil society, and private enterprise. Like Appleby, I find young people in the early nineteenth century encountering an expanded range of employment opportunities. But where Appleby emphasizes the optimism of the post-revolutionary generation, I equally follow the anxieties these young people faced. Their work was not simply a choice, but a necessity. They navigated their expanded choices not only with a desire to realize the meaning of democracy, but also out of fear for losing social mobility and joining the ranks of the degraded working class. Following the struggles young people faced as they justified the maturity of their labor helps explain the “universality” that was being “claimed for the qualities displayed by successful white men, throwing other people into the shadows of national consciousness.”⁷⁰

This dissertation aims to advance the history of childhood and youth by articulating the significance of maturity in the economic development of the early nineteenth century. Current scholarship has done much to deepen our understanding of young people’s experience, but does not account for the impact of beliefs about coming of age on the organization of work in early America. This project shows how maturity – the social construction of age – was at the center of ideas about self-ownership and authority during the early nineteenth century. Maturity comprised

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a set of character traits that measured an individual’s capacity for autonomy and influence in relation to age. In a society claiming to uphold consent as the qualification for political power, this internal measure offered a democratic means of determining authority. The idea of maturity was a way to see the achievement of self-ownership, character, and respectability as a natural outcome of growing up, rather than the consequence of economic or social privilege. Maturity, then, masked the power of external measures of authority – material wealth or social status – that undermined the democratic potential of the post-Revolutionary period.

Young New Englanders’ experience of and belief in maturity helps explain the simultaneous development of class awareness in the industrial economy and the acceptance of economic hierarchy within a society that celebrated equality. Historians of labor and class in the early nineteenth century recognize this ambivalence: At the same time industrial workers articulated class identity to campaign against capitalist exploitation, middle-class leaders denied class hierarchy as they promoted an ideal of the self-made man who earned his position based solely on his merit and the domestic woman who never needed to work for income.71 Since the publication of Eric Foner’s Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, “free labor ideology” has explained the middle-class belief that denied class antagonism and justified the wage labor system. Scholars continue to question the extent of equality under the ‘free labor’ system within the United States’ industrializing economy. Robert J. Steinfield argues that American workers became legally free in the early nineteenth century when the courts eliminated criminal penalties for breaking the labor contract. Christopher Tomlins counters by emphasizing the continuation of legal hierarchy as the employment relation remained under the scope of common law of master and servant. By examining the cultural definitions of free labor, Jonathan Glickstein shows that

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nineteenth-century Americans considered legal self-ownership the minimum, objective criterion of free labor, even while they struggled to reconcile legal autonomy with what was seen as potential for the degradation that faced manual laborers.\footnote{Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor*, 1991; Christopher L. Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*.}

The experience of youth explains how some Americans constructed the worker as an independent, freely-contracting individual at the same time others decried the exploited laborer as the victim of capitalism. Maturity became the prism through which class awareness in antebellum New England became both linked with and subordinated to the claims to a society based on merit. Workers fought against the industrial labor system when they realized that their work was not providing them with the reputation for maturity required to participate in American society. Yet many Americans supported the capitalist system on the faith that it offered a path from youthful semi-dependence to economic security to every worker. Understanding both the fantasy and reality of coming of age illustrates the relationships between economic power and civic influence.

**Methodology**

This dissertation charts the significance of maturity for defining authority as the primary organization of work shifted from master and servant to employer and employee. While this dynamic occurred at different points throughout the United States, I have focused on commercialization of New England in the early nineteenth-century.\footnote{For youth in other regions, see Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, 2005; Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); John E. Murray, *The Charleston Orphan House: Children’s Lives in the First Public Orphanage in America*, Markets and Governments in Economic History (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).} The decline of the household economy, the result of both political and economic changes in the late eighteenth century, created youth as a distinct experience for the young men and women who came of age.
in the half-century following the Revolution. The process of producing goods at a higher degree of efficiency and specialization in order to increase profit in a wider trade network began in New England and slowly spread across the country, taking different forms in each of the nation’s regions. By confining my study to a limited geographic area, I was able to move deeply within the archives to examine a variety of personal manuscripts and published records. Although I do not claim that one region can represent the rest of the nation, studying New England offers a way to understand how American society redefined adulthood during a period of political and economic transformation.

Focusing on the region of New England, this dissertation investigates the experiences of young men and women who lost, or rejected, the traditional measures of economic security that defined the agrarian economy. My subjects are the children of families who relied on the burgeoning cash economy – either through the occupation of a middle-class breadwinner or the wages of the entire family. They are the sons who could not expect to inherit land or the means of a trade from their fathers and pursued education and training beyond paternal oversight. They are the daughters who left home to support their families, to earn money for a dowry, or to seek a degree of autonomy before marriage. They are the young people who found employment outside the home – as teachers, clerks, factory operatives, domestic laborers, and apprentices – and whose presence outside of the household attracted the attention (and fear) of parents, educators, jurists, reformers, and political leaders. They are the young men and women who wrote about their experiences in letters and diaries as they struggled to define their place in society. Although these young people do not represent the universal experience of the early nineteenth century, they were at the vanguard of the commercial economy and their educational and labor experiences foreshadowed the rural to urban migration that would come in the
nineteenth century.

This project began with research in personal paper collections, including diaries, correspondence, and other private writings. I examined these sources for information on the paths individuals took from youth to adulthood as well as their self-described feelings about these events. Although young New Englanders faced many rites of passage, I chose to make work the primary focus of this study. Young people’s anxieties about work took me by surprise and drove my curiosity. I was inspired by Nancy Cott’s observation that “A person’s work, or productive occupation, not only earns a living and fills time but also contributes to self-definition and shapes social identity.”

74 The connection between finding employment and becoming independent provides an important new perspective on the economic and political changes in early nineteenth century New England. I found that young people’s experiences prompted questions about what ‘free labor’ really meant and how the United States accepted both the liberatory and exploitative aspects of capitalism.

Because work is the dominant theme of this dissertation, the language of work during the transition from an agricultural to a commercial economy warrants a brief mention. Like other historians, I use work in a more general sense of “productive occupation” or life-sustaining activity. 75 This expansive term reflects the broad participation in production in the colonial economy. As Paul Innes writes, with the exception of young children, “the aged, and the infirm, everyone worked directly or indirectly to produce a profit.” 76 The term labor refers to the toilsome, physically or mentally exhausting forms of work. Labor was also an individual

75 Ibid.
possession, reflecting man’s punishment from God and his means of redemption.\(^77\) After the Revolution Americans couldn’t decide whether this toil was a mark of dignity or degradation.\(^78\) In the early capitalist environment, labor was shifting from toil owed to a master to a commodity exchanged in the marketplace. The shift toward the commoditization of work also appears in other terms. In colonial New England, *employment* was a general term for any sort of intentional engagement in an activity, or the use of some object or resource for a designated purpose. The activity or purpose may not have been life-sustaining, but it occupied a person’s time.\(^79\) By the early nineteenth century, the term *employment* was more commonly used to refer to a formal relationship exchanging labor for financial compensation.\(^80\) This shift in usage demonstrates how wage-based exchanges were becoming the primary “means of subsistence” for most of the population as the region shifted from an agricultural to a commercial economy.\(^81\) The newest term referring to work was *career*. As young people established their own trajectory for employment and associated it with their identity, the term “formerly used to denote a horse-racing course…acquired a new reference to ‘a person’s…progress through life.’”\(^82\)

Personal manuscripts record a subjectivity of experience that cannot be captured by other types of sources. However, they are limited in both their scope and their diversity. To contextualize the experience of young men and women in early nineteenth-century New England, I incorporate a variety of published sources. I examined institutional records from schools, both public and private, fraternal and charitable associations, and reform institutions to understand broader institutional developments that structured young people’s opportunities.

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\(^79\) See OED, definition 1.
\(^80\) See OED, definition 4, especially 4c.
read advice literature for young men and women that provided a strong prescriptive vision of adult expectations. These sources outline the expectations that American leaders placed on the future generation, as well as their methods of guiding youth on the appropriate path. Alongside this adult guidance, young people established their own discourses of labor and maturity, in literary societies, debating clubs, and publications. The records of these activities provide the youth perspective on the challenges they faced maturing in new labor environments.

To understand the development of class through the experience of young people, I use age as a category of historical analysis. While all human beings share a similar process of physiological and psychological development, the cultural meanings of maturation vary across history and region. Recently, historians have started to use age to understand the organization of power in society. The cultural meaning of youth changed dramatically during the decades surrounding the American Revolution. With political participation tied to civic competence, the development of capacities for reason and autonomy gained political significance. In a society being transformed by the rhetoric of democracy and the effects of industrialization, young people actively participated in their passage to adulthood, bringing with them values developed in a new social environment.

In examining the coming-of-age process, I focus on the period between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood – the liminal period of youth. The concept of liminality was first theorized by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in *Rites de Passage*, published in 1909. For Gennep, liminality was the transitional phase in a rite of passage, standing between separation and incorporation. The concept was popularized in the field of anthropology by Victor Turner in the 1960s. Turner characterized liminality as a position of

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83 For a series of essays on this topic, see the *Journal for the History of Children and Youth*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2008.
“betwixt and between,” when individuals lived at the threshold of their expected development. Since then, liminality has been utilized by scholars from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, education, literary studies, and international relations, to identify transitional periods between stages of development. In this dissertation, I use the term *liminal* to recognize youth as a distinct stage of life. During the early nineteenth century, young men and women viewed themselves, and were viewed by adults, as being provisional independents, rather than older dependents. They experienced a separation from traditional authority figures as they took responsibility for their development and their position in society. Joyce Appleby writes of the “liminal trial for teenagers” in terms of the temptations they faced in an environment that gave them more responsibility and more opportunities for indulgence. The liminal status of young men and women created a threshold period in which they encountered rites of passage – completing education, beginning work, finding a marriage partner, participating in civil society – that served to create an age-based identity alongside the experiences of race, gender, and class. While many studies of youth emphasize the development from childhood, liminality highlights the ways youth acted as a preparation for adulthood, allowing me to uncover the conflicted views of authority that created class hierarchy in the early nineteenth century.

To understand the relationship between maturity and labor in early nineteenth-century New England, this project primarily addresses the experience of native-born, white, Protestant

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men and women. Race is central to the construction of economic hierarchies in American history. In industrializing New England, African Americans and Irish immigrants formed the ranks of the region’s marginalized and degraded workers. A white racial identity became part of the assumptions of maturity that allowed certain young men and women to claim positions of social prominence. The experiences of non-white New Englanders are largely absent from this study for two reasons. First, I have not found any personal manuscript material on par with that available for white youth that would allow a comparison along the same source base. Second, non-white children did not experience the same transition from an environment in the colonial period in which labor was a product of dependence to one in the early national period in which labor became a symbol of independence. The racial component of maturity will remain an important element of future research exploring the larger story about coming of age and the creation of class.88

The scope and perspective of this dissertation advance broader inquires about the historical and contemporary experience of work and growing up. I show how understandings of labor and maturity figured into the construction of social identities and hierarchies. This project provides historical context for contemporary anxieties about the so-called crisis of adulthood in our own time. The struggles of young people across the globe to find meaningful work has sparked protests and revolutions, as well as incited fears of a "lost generation," of youths' "failure to launch," of being stuck in "adultolescence."89 The prospects of education and employment

88 For new scholarship on African American youth labor during the period of gradual emancipation, see Sarah Levine-Gronningsater’s dissertation in progress, “Delivering Freedom: Gradual Emancipation, Black Legal Culture, and the Origins of Sectional Crisis in New York, 1759–1870” at the University of Chicago.
89 A sampling of the recent popular literature on the struggles of the current rising generation, see Anthony P. Carnevale, Andrew R. Hanson, and Arten Gulish, Failure to Launch: Structural Shift and the New Lost Generation, Center on Education and the Workforce (Georgetown University, 2013); Samantha Henig and Robin Marantz Henig, Twentysomething: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck? (Penguin, 2012); Michael Kimmel, Guyland (HarperCollins, 2009); Diana West, The Death of the Grown-Up: How America’s Arrested Development Is Bringing
also reveal the divergent socio-economic experiences of growing up. Our fixation on the meaning of coming of age in the new economic and social environment of the twenty-first century exposes the historical contingency of this transition from youth to adulthood. An investigation of the past helps illuminate the relationship between the jobs young people take (or are forced to take) and the maturity they are perceived to have by the community.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part one examines young men’s and women’s experiences with labor and coming of age amidst the decline of the household economy in the early nineteenth century. It shows how the category of youth emerged as a distinct stage of life through an association between labor and maturity. The chapters proceed along the life course, from childhood, to youth, to adulthood, focusing on the boundaries between each stage of life. Each chapter explores the experience of growing up and the meaning of maturity that defined the boundaries of youth. The chapters look across diverse experiences of gender and class to show how family labor strategies created an association between work and maturity for families with resources and recast the relationship between labor and dependence for families without resources.

Chapter 1 examines the differences between the experiences of childhood and youth through divergent work responsibilities of middling young men and women. Based on a belief in the innocence and malleability of young boys and girls, parents aspired to treat childhood as a stage of life protected from labor. Families with resources invested in their children’s schooling and delayed their entry into employment, extending the period in which children were dependent on their families of origin. These middling boys and girls measured growing up through gender-

specific conceptions of maturity. However, poor families relied on the economic contributions of their children for their survival. Poor boys and girls were valued by their families for the labor they performed rather than their emerging competence and respectability. The experiences of boys and girls show how family resources created different meanings of growing up, particularly through divergent associations between labor and dependence, which initiated a clearer class differentiation in early nineteenth-century New England.

Chapter 2 explores the young men’s and women’s efforts to conform their labor experiences to middle-class ideals. During the life stage of youth, middling young people took intermediate positions – during which they remained economically subordinate but took responsibility for their character and control over their choices – on their path to gender-specific conceptions of adulthood. Young men and women asserted their maturity in order to overcome the dependent features of their employment that threatened them with degraded status. Middle-class aspirants interpreted labor choices in terms of respectability, autonomy and responsibility by claiming their work as appropriate to their age and gender. In contrast, poor children struggled to find security in menial positions with little opportunity to develop middle-class values. As middling youth promoted their labor as a mark of their maturity, they helped to engrain the material position and internal disposition that justified their privileged status.

Chapter 3 examines the transition from youth to adulthood and identifies the capacities young men and women used in order to gain social authority within their gender-based communities. I argue that conceptions of maturity developed during the transitional stage of youth naturalized adulthood around middle-class conceptions of gender. Adulthood in the middle-class mindset was a period of independence and control, marked by achievement of the character traits that qualified one for social authority within their gender-defined sphere – the
“cult of the self-made man” for men and the “cult of domesticity” for women. The idea of adulthood as the achievement of internal traits could only come after a period of youth distinguished by economic subordination and character development. Although the standard of maturity would seem to have been an ideal measure of meritocracy, this chapter shows how it emerged out of the unique environment and resources of New England’s middle class.

The second section of the dissertation examines institutional responses to changes in youth labor and coming of age in early nineteenth-century New England. Through an examination of education and law, I show the effects of young men and women’s experiences on the adults who determined the social structures for growing up. Education and the law defined when an individual reached the qualifications of reason and self-direction to become a full member of society. These chapters show the broad impact of youth experiences on adult attitudes and practices. As the decline of the household economy placed young men and women in new labor positions, adults had to restructure the route from childhood to adulthood.

Chapter 4 analyzes how elected officials, reformers, educators, authors, and civic leaders responded to the decline of the household economy with educational offerings designed to prepare for young men and women's economic position in commercial society. As young people’s labor positions challenged the traditional model of coming of age, the established generation had to revise both the ideologies and the structures of education. Changes to a wide range of educational enterprises – including schools, juvenile reform institutions, mutual improvement associations, and advice literature – show how adults transformed the institutions that guided young men and women into adulthood to accommodate new patterns of development. As the responsibilities of labor separated the experiences of childhood, youth, and young adulthood, educators created programs based on their expectations for young men and
women’s present and future work. Educational changes in early nineteenth-century New England reinforced the relationship between labor and maturity that defined a new coming-of-age process in the commercial environment.

Chapter 5 examines the ways law divided rights and responsibilities based on age and demarcated relationships of authority and subordination amidst the decline of the patriarchal household. In the early nineteenth century, jurists and legislators adapted the laws that codified the dependence of minors under paternal authority in recognition of the importance of moral, intellectual, and vocational development. By designating a period of childhood as ineligible for work, and by supporting a vision of provisional independence during youth, New England law connected labor to the internalized process of growing up. The legal connection between labor and maturity helped to solidify the assumption that workers were competent, freely-contracting individuals whose juridical self-ownership satisfied the criteria for freedom. This “free labor ideology” grew and persisted because the law ascribed maturity as inherent in labor. Jurists and legislators measured a worker’s ability to act as a competent, freely-contracting individual on the basis of his age rather than on his economic power.

Chapter 6 follows the demise of the association between labor and maturity as New England experienced the intensification of industrial labor by the mid-nineteenth century. The divergence between mental labor and manual labor stratified the coming of age process and justified a political, social, and economic hierarchy. Young men and women in manual labor occupations found that their employment impeded their standing as competent, respectable members of society. In response to these obstacles to their maturity based on middle-class expectations, urban apprentices and female factory operatives negotiated their liminal positions in the public sphere to prepare themselves for adulthood. Through mutual-improvement
associations and public periodicals, working-class youth created a model of maturity, adulthood, and citizenship that adapted manual labor to middle-class expectations. Working-class youth entered public discourse about the cult of domesticity and free labor ideology in a failed attempt to overcome the escalating class boundaries around adulthood and citizenship. As the traits of maturity became even more entrenched in privileged material conditions, New England lost the opportunity to create a truly democratic civil society.
Chapter 1: “How I Long for a Little Leisure!”: Work and the Boundary between Childhood and Youth

On October 7, 1823, seventeen-year-old Jane Noyes finished school at an academy in Newbury, Massachusetts. She recorded the event in her diary, writing that her “happiest days are ended!” Noyes knew growing up meant “relinquish[ing] the dear delightful employments of study, for the noise and confusion of domestic life.” She used the term “employments” to describe her educational activity at a time when the word was increasingly linked to formal relationships of paid work. Noyes portrayed her transition from education to unpaid domestic work as the end of a period of personal fulfillment. The conclusion of Noyes’s formal schooling came on the heels of another transition within the family. In May, Jane’s older sister entered the “matrimonial state” and “a new sphere of action.” The departure of an older daughter pushed Jane into an unfamiliar position of responsibility within her family. Like many children, Noyes’s education and work depended on her family’s abilities and needs.¹

Jane Noyes was one of many early nineteenth-century New Englanders who received the benefit of formal education during her early years. Her limited work responsibilities came from a new conception of childhood among middling families that emerged in contrast to the experience and values of previous generations. In colonial New England, nearly all children worked. Their labor was essential to the survival of the household. As early as six or seven years old, boys and girls started to learn gender-specific skills within a household engaged in agricultural or artisan production. Many children spent their early years with the families of neighbors or kin to receive training and contribute to a household. This labor training, along with rudimentary literacy, was all the education that many children required and the most that even middling parents could afford. Colonial parents viewed childhood as a period to engrain the capacities for obedience

¹ Diary of Jane Noyes, 8 Oct, 6 May 1823, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS).
and industry through strict supervision and economically productive activity.\(^2\)

As the economic foundation of early New England in the nineteenth century moved away from the agrarian household, families of middling means used their resources to relocate production outside the home. By supporting a family on the husband’s economic venture, parents could treat their children “not as sources of labor but as ‘social capital’ requiring substantial investments of time and resources.”\(^3\) Because they did not work during their early years, middling children faced a sharper distinction between the leisure of childhood and responsibility of youth. Parents like Jane Noyes’s invested in their children’s education and delayed their labor inside or outside the home, aspiring to implement what scholars have termed “Romantic Childhood.”\(^4\) But when this period of protection ended, young men and women took responsibility for their own support or the support of their families. Crossing the boundary into the liminal period of youth often meant separating from natal family and taking responsibility for moral development and economic productivity – the key aspects of self-ownership in early nineteenth-century New England. The clear association between life stage and appropriate economic activity made work a component of maturity. The benefits of not working during childhood reverberated through youth, allowing fortunate young people to achieve and preserve middle-class status by portraying labor as a choice rather than a necessity.\(^5\)


\(^5\) Scholars have shown that the rise of the ideal of the home free from labor and the expansion of education diminished the labor expected of middling children. See Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Boydston, Home and Work;
However, not all children had the luxury of delaying labor until they could take a position that would communicate their respectability. Families who relied on child labor to supplement household income, often due to the lack a secure male breadwinner, took employment out of necessity. Because their work signified dependence rather than provisional autonomy, these children and their families fell into working-class status. Poor families’ need for cash in the market economy “increased young children’s economic value” as wage laborers. As middling children experienced provisional autonomy, poor children found positions in the early commercial economy that were based on subordination rather than self-ownership. They found work in the streets, free from adult supervision; they were bound to rural families through indentures; they worked in factories as cheap, deskill labor. Each of these positions denied poor children the gradual transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood through the development of skills and maturity.

This chapter examines the work experiences that defined the boundary between childhood and youth. It shows how young people’s economic roles contributed to the hardening of class and gender boundaries during the early industrial and commercial revolution. The first two sections chart how middling children used their first work experiences after a protected childhood to signify their developing maturity. Young men left in their early teens to pursue education or vocational training that offered economic security. Their experience contracting their labor or funding their own education suggested to them that the signifiers of masculinity were economic control and personal autonomy. In contrast, young women worked based on the needs of their families, either to offer supplemental income or to take responsibility for their own support. Formal schooling was a luxury, giving girls the opportunity to pursue individual


ambitions before contributing to the home. Young women’s experiences leaving the leisure of childhood for the responsibilities of youth emphasized femininity as the willing sacrifice to the domestic sphere. In the final section, I contrast the middling classes’ experience with that of poor children whose dire need confined them to labor positions in the early industrial economy that entrenched their economic marginalization. Young people’s coming-of-age experience would come to define the identity of ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’ as some children were able to express their work as the product of maturity and self-ownership, while other children were degraded by labor that could only be viewed as a personal failing.⁷

Self-Ownership at the Boundary between Boyhood and Youth

In colonial New England, boys started work as soon as they were physically strong enough to assist with agricultural or artisanal tasks. Their labor confirmed their dependence within a patriarchal household. If they did not contribute to their father’s enterprise, they were apprenticed to a member of the community to learn a trade. Patronage was the key to social mobility, allowing young men to pledge loyalty to a successful member of the community in exchange for financial and social support on their path to economic autonomy.⁸ Indentures and apprenticeships formalized patronage and solidified adults’ control over young men’s advancement. Apprenticeship contracts were made between father and master, with the son only as the subject of the agreement, not a party to it. The legal obligations of apprenticeship reinforced household governance. Apprentices lived as part of the master’s household,

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⁷ Scholars struggle to define class in the early nineteenth century as groups based in cultural identities (people adhering to “middle-class values”) and material positions in relation to the means of production. Through this dissertation, I would like to offer a definition of class based on a divergence of coming-of-age patterns. This combines material and ideological definitions. The middle-class was a group who developed separate cultural attributes – in this case a unique process of growing up – as a direct result of their economic position during the decline of the household economy. For recent debates on the meaning of class in early America, see Gary Kornblith et al. “Symposium on Class in the Early Republic,” Journal of Early American History, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter 2005.

exchanged labor for training, and only received material compensation in the form of freedom dues – two suits of clothing and a Bible. Bound as long-term dependents typically until they turned twenty-one, eighteenth-century apprentices received moral discipline and rudimentary education, and had little opportunity to engage with the community or to alter their work environment.⁹

During the early nineteenth century, apprenticeship gradually lost the features of patriarchal authority and became an early proving ground for young men embarking upon ‘free labor’ – an arrangement regarded as a mutually-beneficial exchange of labor and wages that was contracted between two equal individuals.¹⁰ The decline of patronage meant that young men had to find work and pursue social mobility on their own. As young men left the protection of their natal families, they started on a path toward self-made manhood. Parents supported this new conception of emerging masculinity by investing in formal schooling for young men under fourteen years old and allowing young men to arrange employment on their own in their early teenage years. Taking liminal employment required young men to exhibit mature character, self-ownership, and the management of risk – qualities that would demonstrate their ability to act as breadwinners in the commercial economy. This economic autonomy set young men apart from their female peers, who remained confined by domestic roles. As they crossed the boundary between boyhood and youth, young men entered semi-dependent positions as apprentices or students with responsibility for their moral and vocational development. With less expectation of receiving land or the means of a trade from their fathers, boys needed to find a path to self-ownership that would confirm their masculinity in the commercial environment.

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When they entered an apprenticeship in their teenage years, young white men had more control over their labor and more autonomy within their subordinate position than their colonial predecessors because artisans and merchants were less willing to play the paternal role toward young men they viewed as employees rather than household dependents. Instead of simply exchanging the authority of a father for that of a master, entering an apprenticeship in the early nineteenth century signified a transition from the dependence of childhood to the liminality of youth. As artisans lost control over the “mystery” of their enterprise due to mechanization and the dissemination of published manuals, young men had a greater incentive to pursue formal schooling in order to find skilled positions, especially for apprenticeships in retail or mercantile settings. In the commercial economy, young male workers were more likely to receive cash wages and reside outside their master’s home. They were free to move between positions at will and could not claim the master’s paternal obligation to maintain or educate them. William Rorabaugh finds that particularly after the Panic of 1819, neither masters nor apprentices were interested in contracting long-term relationships under the rubric of household governance. As they asserted provisional autonomy, young men navigated their employment choices as self-possessing economic agents and connected their labor to their maturity.¹¹

A period of early schooling before the entrance into work provided a significant advantage for young people entering New England’s commercial economy. Education could overcome a certain degree of poor circumstances due to birth or family situation. Samuel Burling was lucky to be born the son of a prominent Boston merchant, Samuel Curson, but he was unlucky to be born out of wedlock. His seventeen-year-old mother, Elizabeth Burling, never married Curson. Her brother killed Curson in a duel when young Samuel Burling was three years old. As the subject of much family scandal, Samuel Burling was sent away from his mother at

¹¹ Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*. 
five years old when she married in 1786. As he remembered later, his “action of life” began when he went to live with James Perkins, a business associate of the Burling family and a successful merchant in Boston.\(^{12}\) Young Samuel received an education in Boston’s public schools from age five to thirteen when, in 1794, he was apprenticed to the Perkins business, where he learned to keep accounts and ran errands. Despite his less than ideal childhood, Burling was able to delay work and engage in education before the “action” of life fell under his responsibility.

In 1796, seven-year-old George Searle lost his father, which left him as one of ten children to be cared for by his widowed mother. Rather than quickly bind young Searle to another family in order to relieve herself of his support, Mary Searle ran a small shop in Newburyport, Massachusetts, to ensure that her children remained under her care and received formal schooling. At fourteen, after completing his education with a local schoolmaster, George Searle entered the merchant shop of his uncle as an apprentice. Although he did not have freedom of movement within his position, he addressed his labor as an expression of his character. In letters to his older sister, Seale wrote, “I cannot say that I have tired of business yet, but have always wished for more; but can not say how I shall like staying in the Store till 10 o’clock, as I have been informed we shall.” Seale adjusted to the “hurry and bustle of business” by taking pride in his industry. He told Margaret about being “up before sunrise” and in the store “until 8 or 9 o’clock in the evening” with “scarce[ly] any time to go to dinner or breakfast.” But Seale thought this pace “is the best thing that could happen for me & must confess I prefer it to our most leisure season.” He reminisced about the time he once had to “ramble in the fields [and] gather nuts” but when he lived in Boston “we must walk 5 or 6 miles at least to see any thing of

\(^{12}\) Samuel [Burling] Curson, “My Early Days,” Curson Family Papers, 1730-1918 (MS Am 1175-1175.8), HL.
that kind.”¹³ Through his employment, Searle was able to help maintain his family’s middle-class status, which was in jeopardy after his father’s death.

As they grew up at the turn of the nineteenth century, Samuel Burling and George Searle (young men from different family backgrounds who eventually became brothers-in-law) had the opportunity for formal schooling before they started work responsibilities. Both retained some of the traditional features of apprenticeship: they lived in their masters’ household and exchanged their labor for room, board, and vocational training rather than receiving wages. Despite the early loss of their fathers, both came from families with enough means to delay their employment. Their families used kinship networks to avoid letting them become indentured in marginal or degraded positions. Their early education – particularly expanded instruction in writing and arithmetic – not only enabled them to find positions in the mercantile and retail industry (which would offer them greater mobility than artisanal work), but signified a greater division between the period of childhood and the period of youth.¹⁴ As more young men spent their early years as students rather than workers, they recognized employment as the beginning of maturity.

During the early nineteenth century, young men were also more likely to arrange their positions directly with their prospective employers, rather than having them contracted by their father or mother on their behalf. In 1814, prominent New Hampshire printer Isaac Hill took seventeen-year-old Jacob Bailey Moore as his apprentice out of “respect...for your departed father.” The expansion of the printing industry was one important area of economic development that allowed young men to pursue employment beyond traditional agriculture.¹⁵ Hill promised to make Moore “one of my family” as he helped the young man “become an [ornament] to your

¹³ George Searle to Margaret Searle, 29 Mar 1803, 14-16 Apr 1803, 17 Jun 1803, 6 Nov 1803, Curson Family Papers, HL.
¹⁴ Augst, The Clerk’s Tale, 66–71.
¹⁵ This significance of the publishing industry to the changes in young men’s employment is discussed by Appleby, Inheriting the Revolution; Rorabaugh, The Craft Apprentice.
country.” Hill conformed to the paternal features of apprenticeship by assuming a fatherly role over his charge and Moore continued in his position as a household dependent. Although Isaac Hill emphasized his paternal relationship with Jacob Moore, the two made an informal arrangement for the labor and training, rather than a formal indenture that traditionally occurred between an artisan and a prospective apprentice’s father. By arranging the employment with Moore himself, Hill signaled the emerging trend of treating minors more as individually-contracting workers than as household dependents transferred from a father’s to a master’s custody.

These gradual shifts in the institution of apprenticeship placed greater responsibility on young men as they encountered the volatility of the early nineteenth-century economy. David Clapp started his employment experience at fourteen when he “went to live with Mister White for $5 per month” during the summer of 1820. Afterward, he returned home and attended school during the winter season. This seasonal labor continued until 1822, when Clapp studied bookkeeping before beginning an apprenticeship “to learn the printers’ trade” with John Cotton of Boston. Reflecting the declining paternalism of apprenticeships, Clapp contracted his apprenticeship under the terms of “2,50 per week for my board, $10 and the privilege of doing jobs for the first year.” During the early nineteenth century, more families operated in the cash economy, exchanging goods and services – including board and labor – through the medium of currency. As Elizabeth Blackmar finds in her study of New York City, households increasingly “took in boarders for cash payments rather than as workers” and unmarried wage laborers

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16 Isaac Hill to Jacob Bailey Moore, 1 Mar 1814, Jacob Bailey Moore Papers (MS Am 800.51), HL.
preferred to pay for boarding with strangers rather than their employers.\textsuperscript{18} In keeping with the growing autonomy of apprentices, and to avoid having to “degrade” his family by offering boarding services, Cotton paid for Clapp to board with “a mechanic’s family.”\textsuperscript{19}

Shortly after Clapp began his term, John Cotton’s business went bankrupt. To protect the family, his father took over the business, dismissed the other apprentices, and left Clapp to complete the work alone “with no body but the mice, who scamper around the silent office as if they thought it had been deserted on purpose to oblige them.” To save himself the expense of paying for Clapp’s board with another family, the elder Cotton moved Clapp into his own home. Fearful that he would “be made a complete servant of” in his new residence, Clapp decided to seek out accommodations on his own. The next year, John Cotton was back on his feet and took charge of the business again. Although the work seemed “steady,” Clapp considered leaving for a more promising position. The tenuous situation made Clapp anxious, and he wrote in his diary “I hope I shall be able to conclude before long!!”\textsuperscript{20} David Clapp’s experience shows how the paternal relationship of apprenticeship was gradually supplanted by impersonal employment arrangements during the early nineteenth century. John Cotton Sr. viewed Clapp as a worker, not as a dependent to whom he own paternal protection. Cotton took no responsibility for Clapp’s vocational training, and he had no trouble dismissing the other apprentices. Cotton managed Clapp’s work responsibilities in order to maximize the potential of the business, including leaving Clapp to work in the shop unattended. When he took Clapp as a boarder to save money, a domestic arrangement that was traditionally used to solidify the master’s paternal oversight encroached upon Clapp’s sense of self-ownership.

\textsuperscript{18} Elizabeth Blackmar, \textit{Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 62. The importance of the cash wage is also discussed in Rorabaugh, \textit{The Craft Apprentice}.

\textsuperscript{19} David Clapp Diary, 23 May 1822, AAS.

\textsuperscript{20} David Clapp Diary, 15 Dec 1822, 7 Feb 1823, AAS. See also the account in Rorabaugh, \textit{The Craft Apprentice}, 72–73, 103.
Young men who were dissatisfied with their employment conditions exercised their limited autonomy by leaving for a better position – giving them simultaneously more autonomy and more responsibility than young men in the colonial period. During the early nineteenth century, urban communities responded to the influx – both real and imagined – of young, single workers who lived outside of an established household. Unconnected with the patriarchal authority of a father, master, or minister, these young men lived among peers in boarding houses and engaged in disreputable leisure activities, including gambling, attending the theater, and patronizing prostitutes.\(^{21}\) Nineteenth-century conceptions of masculinity simultaneously embraced the freedom young men exercised during their employment and promoted voluntary organizations that would reign in licentious behavior. Young women who lived alone in the urban environment did not have such liberties. Femininity required young women to maintain a connection to a respectable household.

Young men congregated and circulated in growing cities and towns to fill retail positions in the commercial economy. In colonial New England, families produced a large portion of the goods they needed and traded within limited networks. With commercialization, families purchased goods produced by more specialized means in a wider regional and national network.\(^{22}\) The proliferation of these businesses created a new market for young men’s labor. At the age of seventeen, John G. Locke, son of a delegate to Massachusetts’s 1820 Constitutional Convention, traveled to Boston “where I entered as a shop boy in the store of Sumner & Merriam.” As was becoming common for many young men’s employment situations, Locke boarded with a different family. The volatile economic environment disrupted Locke’s

\(^{21}\) Adult responses to the fear of urban youth are discussed in Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale*.

employment trajectory when his employers’ business failed in the spring of 1822 and left Locke “thrown out of employment.” He took another retail position briefly, “but not agreeing upon terms of continuance,” Locke quit for a job in a silk store. He remained “about 4 months” until the owner “became so disagreeable that I left there.” Locke then took a position in a dry goods store, and this time he boarded with his employer’s family. In the course of less than a year, Locke had four different positions. With the exception of the initial business failure, Locke left each because of his own dissatisfaction with the owners.\(^\text{23}\) The ability to exit an employment relationship, without have to resort to running away in violation of an indenture, was a power of self-ownership that stood in contrast to the constraints faced by apprentices who were bound through formal contracts made by their parents.\(^\text{24}\)

During the early nineteenth century, apprentices had greater ability to negotiate their terms of employment. In January 1828, Bradley Newcomb Cumings had been working as a clerk at a dry goods store in Boston, Massachusetts for three years. At sixteen Cumings was living with his mother and father, a grocer, and two siblings in a house near the waterfront in Boston's North End. On March 31, 1829, Cumings’s life took an unexpected turn when his father died from “an apoplectic fit.” Cumings wrote three years later that his father's death “caus[ed] disappointment in my future plans,” though did not specify the nature of those disappointments. In the immediate aftermath, Cumings was able to renegotiate his labor contract with Albert Hobart to receive nearly double the salary originally arranged.\(^\text{25}\) When this arrangement expired six months before his twenty-first birthday, Cumings agreed to stay on with another doubling of his salary. Less than a year later, when his widowed mother sought a new residence, he found

\(^{23}\) John G. Locke Diary, 1820-1822, MHS.


\(^{25}\) Bradley N. Cumings Journal, 1 Mar 1829, 1 Jul 1829, MHS.
himself “hunting up a boarding place” in the city. When Cumings began his apprenticeship at age thirteen, it was contracted by his father, making it an extension of dependent household labor. After his father’s death, Cumings negotiated his labor on his own terms, giving his labor the features of self-ownership and marking a transition from dependent childhood into liminal youth.

In 1831 fifteen-year-old Samuel Dennis Warren needed to end his formal education and begin his employment. He received an offer from Otis Daniell, a paper dealer in Boston, to take a position at his store, in order to receive “a little insight to what would be required in almost any situation.” Daniell described the position to Warren as “a trial to see how a situation in a store agrees with you and how you are calculated for it,” which indicated less formality than a traditional apprenticeship. He offered the position to Warren directly, rather than contracting his labor through Warren’s widowed mother, but included the stipulation of his mother’s approval. Warren quickly wrote for his mother’s “opinion…on this subject,” emphasizing the trial arrangement. Although he initially accepted Daniell’s offer to “accommodate [him] at our house,” after a dispute with his employers three years later, Warren decided to find a boarding place with a different family. By accepting the position himself, Warren left the period of childhood and started on the life stage of youth, and he later enhanced his sense of autonomy by moving to a residence away from his employer’s supervision.

As young men assumed a degree of control over the conditions of their employment, they were able to pursue activities in an expansive civil society. Their opportunities to participate autonomously in the public realm, in contrast to the narrow range of activities available to middling girls, made civic engagement a feature of masculinity. In August of 1830, fourteen-year-old James Lawrence Whittier had been working at a bank in Boston for nearly two years,
although he thought the time did “not seem more than as many days.” During his period of employment, Whittier took full advantage of Boston’s civic opportunities: He attended Sunday school, lectures at Athenaeum Hall, the meetings of the Boston Baptist Association, and the “public examination of the local grammar school.” He attended church and Bible class, but had to sit with the “little children” in the gallery. These opportunities for education, spiritual development, and civic engagement emerged in part over fear about the vice and ignorance among the mass of young men working in the urban environment. Yet they also offered these young men a means to prove their maturity. At the end of 1830, Whittier bade “farewell” to the bank, with his wages of $350, and went to board with a new employer who ran a dry goods store. Early in the next year, Whittier fell ill and was unable to fulfill his obligations “for some days.” The store owner informed Whittier “he should be obliged to get another boy.” Finding himself “without a place” did not worry Whittier, because the prospect of another position came immediately. Whittier initiated a meeting at a stereotype foundry “to show me what work I shall have to do in case of my going there.”

Although many young men were called apprentices, democratic ideology and economic specialization slowly replaced the domestic relationship between master and servant with the contractual relationship between employer and employee. Fashioning labor agreements as a bargain between equals, courts eliminated criminal penalties for workers who abandoned their positions and eroded the liability that employers had for their workers’ welfare. As apprentices found self-ownership through impersonal labor relationships, they experienced their work as a


29 James Lawrence Whittier Diary, 4 Feb 1831, AAS.

process of developing the features of masculinity – economic autonomy, the ability to manage risk, and civil leadership. The transition for boyhood to youth created the conditions that prepared middling young men to become breadwinners within the commercial environment. They entered this liminal period by taking limited control over their working conditions: they received wages as compensation, controlled their leisure time, and could leave their positions at will (except in the case of an organized strike, which was considered a criminal conspiracy until the 1842 decision *Commonwealth v Hunt*). In return, employers could dismiss workers at will and avoided the paternal obligations that were increasingly incompatible with the low-skill, volatile economic environment. Although young men remained vital labor sources, their autonomy was tied to the strength of the New England economy. During prosperous times, young apprentices sought positions compatible with their desires. When the economy contracted, especially following the Panic of 1837, young men were less able to capitalize on their status as independent workers. Despite the vulnerability of employment-at-will arrangements, the decline in paternal features of apprenticeship strengthened the role of labor in demonstrating maturity for young men joining the middle classes.31

As young men navigated the early nineteenth-century commercial economy with limited reliance on patronage, a small but influential portion looked to gain skills, knowledge, and public reputation through a college education. The expansion of higher education following the

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revolution supported young men who were expected to become political leaders by virtue of their masculine self-ownership and rationality. Despite the dramatic increase in female education, young women needed only enough education to make them good wives and mothers, and not too much so that they would reject marriage. As a single-sex environment, colleges supported the intellectual and vocational superiority associated with masculinity. Young men pursued courses of study that prepared them for financial security as lawyers, doctors, ministers and other professionals or in the prestigious commercial occupations of merchant and business owner.

Because students lived amongst a group of peers, took advanced courses, organized their own educational resources, and debated the political issues of the day, the collegiate environment provided young men with a community in which they could establish claims to social authority beyond their years. However, because of the paternalism of college professors and the uncertainty of financial support, colleges offered different avenues to self-ownership than those available in the urban environment. David Allmendinger finds that the dramatic growth in college populations, due to an influx of poor students who could not rely on parents for tuition, “created a new style of student life, with greater independence, maturity, and commerce between students and the adult society.” Many of these young men funded their advanced education by serving as schoolmasters in neighboring communities. As colleges accepted a more diverse student body in terms of age and class, the campus shared more features with the local community than with the pastoral ideal of the sheltered scholarly community. Life as a college student shared many liminal features with apprenticeship: both provided training for future

33 Margaret Sumner, *Collegiate Republic: Cultivating an Ideal Society in Early America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014). The college environment will be discussed in Chapter 4.
35 This will be discussed in Chapter 2.
activity, required young men to take responsibility for their moral development, and refrained from tying young men to long-term obligations. Yet the liberal knowledge and academic credentials to which college students aspired offered them greater opportunities for social mobility in a society that praised reason and self-ownership. The divergent experiences of college students and apprentices prefigured the coming divisions between middle-class and working-class claims to maturity. Although urban workers exerted autonomy through their control of leisure and their ability to change positions, young men enrolled in college pursued greater claims to character and respectability from their advanced schooling and formal credentials.

Andrews Norton was groomed for Harvard College and a professional career from a young age. The son of Samuel Norton, a prosperous shopkeeper and civic leader, Norton continued his formal education beyond the rudimentary period pursued by most young men. Samuel Norton monitored Andrews's education closely. He praised his son’s first letter written home from Harvard, comparing it favorably to earlier “juvenile productions” which were nothing more than the “play things of a child.” During his years at Harvard, Norton received frequent letters from his father, and replied regularly seeking his father’s advice about roommates, college societies, and courses of study. Samuel and Andrews’s correspondence demonstrates the persuasive tone taken by parents toward their children. In 1802 Norton received an invitation to join a “respected” student society, and he wrote to his father “I doubt whether there would be anything improper in doing this, if you think there would, I wish you would write me as soon as you can.”

36 Samuel Norton to Andrews Norton, 30 Aug 1801, Andrews Norton Papers (MS Am 1089), HL.
am content you should join the society.” Samuel’s advice always left the decision in Andrews’s hands, while clearly indicating the only acceptable choice.

Young men whose parents funded their higher education often wrote home descriptions of their increasing capacity for rational, respectable, and independent choice. They expressed their ability to make choices that would conform to the expectations of masculinity. Josiah Pierce of Baldwin, Maine, was one of a growing number of older college students in the early nineteenth century. At age nineteen he left his family to begin a course at Gorham Academy. His first letter home was written to his mother, whom he addressed with deference. He called her his “indulgent parent” and asked “what shall I write that will be worth your perusal?” He hoped his letter would “gain your approbation.” Pierce knew his parents’ “exertions” allowed him to attend the school. He assured his mother “you will never have occasion to be sorry that you let me come.” In the postscript, Pierce admitted to having attended the theatre, but resolved “I think I might have spent my time better.” When Cyrus Woodman entered Bowdoin College at age fourteen, his mother reminded him “you are now forming a character for life and your conduct and reputation while in college will ever be recalled by all with whom you may associate.” His father made a more serious warning: “You know it is expensive for me to send you to school from home and if you should not pay good attention to your studies all the money I give you will be lost.” Aware of the disorder that pervaded college campuses in the Early Republic, parents shifted responsibility for conduct to the students themselves. From this self-ownership

38 Samuel Norton to Andrews Norton, 4 Nov 1802, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
39 Allmendinger, Paupers and Scholars.
40 Josiah Pierce to Hannah Pierce, 26 Sep 1811, Pierce Family Collection, MeHS.
41 Susan Woodman to Cyrus Woodman, 28 Nov 1828, Joseph Woodman to Cyrus Woodman, 23 Mar 1826, MeHS.
42 David Allmendinger describes the growing emphasis in college handbooks (written for students) on “the dangers of antebellum student life.” Rodney Hessinger shows how college leaders addressed their fragile authority by seeking to promote meritocracy among their students – a shift in discipline that emphasized students’ control over their behavior. Allmendinger, Paupers and Scholars, 105; Rodney Hessinger, “The Most Powerful Instrument of
regarding character, young people took on a greater degree of autonomy and were treated more as provisional independents than their colonial predecessors. Developing appropriate character traits signaled young men’s maturity, and thus their ability to secure wealth and prestige in the commercial economy.

The boundary between childhood and youth was more pronounced when aspiring professionals relied on their own labor to finance their college degree. As the son of a modest farmer in East Sudbury, Massachusetts, David Damon “always, even farther back than I remember, had a desire to be liberally educated.” After spending his early years at home learning rudimentary reading and writing from local instructors, Damon took his first step on the path to Harvard College at age twelve by moving to live with Dr. Amos Bancroft, where he earned twenty-four dollars for “taking care of his horse and cow and ‘doing chores’ in his family.” Damon later confessed he had “thought several times of running away” during this period, but he needed “to get money to go to an Academy.” Damon’s service for Bancroft was typical of the traditional practice of sending children to work in neighboring households. However, Damon interpreted this arrangement as an impersonal labor relationship rather than an extension of paternal authority. He remained in Bancroft’s employment not through filial obligation but because of his own ambition for an occupation beyond his father’s means. By asserting his desires, Damon left his boyhood behind and took control of his moral and economic development.

43 C. Dallett Hemphill’s analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century conduct manuals finds a greater similarity between the messages to youth and adults in the revolutionary and early republic periods than in the colonial period. See C. Dallett Hemphill, Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
44 David Damon, “Extracts from David Damon’s Journal, 1803-1810,” 24 Sept 1800, Damon Family Papers (MS Am 2640), HL.
Unlike young men who received the financial support from their parents to pursue advanced education, David Damon’s father “could afford me only my time.” An important step toward financial independence, receiving “time” allowed Damon to take employment for his own benefit, rather than to supplement the family’s income. In this informal emancipation, the father relinquished his claim to his child’s labor; he let the child contract for himself and retain his income as a testament to his maturity. This privilege was granted almost exclusively to young men, who needed to secure employment that could one day support a family of their own. At fifteen, Damon “went to Boston to look for employment.” His goal was not “to acquire any craft or trade, [or] more generally any honest & laudable way to get a living,” as many other farm boys would do. Instead, Damon's “ruling passion” was to obtain a liberal education and enter a professional career. But first he needed money. Damon took a position as a servant, and although he proclaimed it “an employment for which I was very unfit,” it was the only “employment of which I was then capable [that] offered so much immediate profit.” Damon lamented how his “book knowledge” suffered during his domestic service, though he “attained more knowledge of men, and of the world as we say, than I probably would have obtained in any other situation.” His hopes of “usefulness in an honorable sphere” were threatened by the “meanness or disgrace” that was attached to a servant's reputation. As Damon pursued the transitional labor of youth, he was conscious of the need to exhibit respectability and moral reason in order to display the capacities of maturity that would assist his aspirations for professional status. He displayed masculinity through his vocational and moral agency, even within his subordinate status.\footnote{Damon, “Extracts,” Apr 1804, 9 May 1812, Damon Family Papers, HL. Receiving “time” could mean complete financial separation, but it could also include continued financial support to supplement the son’s earnings. “Time” meant that fathers no longer made legal claim to their sons’ earnings. The legal implications of this emancipation are discussed in Chapter 5.}
In the early nineteenth century, colleges expanded as a liminal space between a sheltered childhood and a responsible adulthood for young men to prepare for leadership roles. Elite businessmen sent their sons to college in order to obtain the liberal knowledge that bestowed markers of competence for exercising the social and political rights and duties of citizenship. In contrast, women’s education at academies and seminaries was seen as a preparation for marriage or a credentialing for temporary employment, not the foundation for a career. Colleges provided young middling men, and those aspiring to middle-class status, with networks for occupational endeavors that were essential for masculinity.

For this rising middle-class group, college gradually replaced the traditional apprenticeship as the route to respectable employment. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Amos Lawrence received a formal education until age thirteen, at which point he took a position as a general store clerk. Soon after, he opted for an apprenticeship with a store owner in Groton, Massachusetts. During his seven-year term, he rose to the position of manager. Shortly after he turned twenty one, Lawrence moved to Boston and started his own dry goods firm, which eventually became a prosperous enterprise. When it came to preparing his sons to follow in the family business, Amos Lawrence, Sr., chose a college education. Amos Adams Lawrence entered Harvard in 1831 at seventeen, but left the following year after his tangential involvement in a school prank. During his hiatus, he took private instruction from a tutor in Bedford, Massachusetts. He wrote nearly weekly letters to his father about his habits of study and industry. Lawrence performed his role as the dutiful son, learning the value of rational submission to the wisdom of his elders. He reminded his father:

You have said that boys at the age of sixteen & until they are twenty think they know more than at any other time in life, when actually they know less. This I have sometimes doubted, but now I think it is true & when I think otherwise & am doubtful as to any course you shall think best for me to follow, than I shall consider myself in a bad way &
hope you will recollect to tell me so.\textsuperscript{46}

The ability to act more knowledgeable than one was made youth a dangerous period of life. Lawrence sought to demonstrate his prudence by choosing to follow his father’s advice. When he returned to Harvard, Lawrence resolved to acquire “the character of a scholar,” which he considered necessary for “a young man in his outset in the world.”\textsuperscript{47} Lawrence reminded himself of the continuing need for improvement that was central to the process of growing up.

As the opportunities to inherit land or the means of a trade decreased, young men in early nineteenth-century New England sought new paths to independence. By remaining in school and delaying work until the early- to mid-teens, middle-class young men defined a liminal stage of life that offered a degree of autonomy as they entered the commercial marketplace. Apprenticeships, clerkships, and higher education placed young men in semi-independent positions in relation to their employers and the economy. They earned their own income, but were dependent on the men who paid their wages. They contracted labor for themselves, but were often at the mercy of the labor market. They pursued advanced education for greater occupational opportunities within colleges that enforced a deferential system. Their path to mature masculinity required young men to negotiate the liminality of education and work to assert their autonomy before they achieved economic independence. The self-ownership, character, and respectability attributed to their employment and higher education helped to justify white, middle-class men’s social, economic, and political superiority within the meritocratic environment of the Early Republic. Their experience supported the emerging ideal of the worker as a competent, freely-contracting, male citizen who advanced national ambitions through his transition from childhood dependence to adult authority, creating a standard by

\textsuperscript{46} Amos A. Lawrence to Amos Lawrence, [October 1832], Amos Lawrence Papers, MHS.
\textsuperscript{47} Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 25 Jan 1835, Amos A. Lawrence Diaries and Account Books, MHS.
which less privileged workers would be judged.

Leisure and Labor at the Boundary between Girlhood and Youth

As economic production moved outside the household, middling young women faced disruptions to the coming-of-age process distinct from their brothers. In the early nineteenth century, women remained primarily responsible for the family’s reproductive labor, including caring for children as well as the ill, managing the household, and practicing domestic skills. But the decline of the household economy and the spread of egalitarian ideals following the American Revolution brought significant changes to the scope of women’s duties and the attitudes with which they performed them. Girls had greater access to formal schooling, which families and communities supported in order to expand young women’s labor opportunities outside the home, as well as prepare them for the intellectual obligations of child-rearing. With an emphasis on girls’ individuality and potential for reason, young women pursued personal growth through their education and training, rather than simply the acquisition of domestic skill. In fulfillment of their developing maturity, young women took more control over their employment as they took positions as school teachers or mill operatives – positions that took them away from the family. But this development of prudence, discretion, and even limited autonomy in the public sphere was guided toward the ultimate expressing of feminine maturity: the selection of a husband who offered domestic security. Young women in the early nineteenth century faced many of the same restrictions as their mothers and the same expectations of familial care, marriage, and child-bearing, but received greater investment and resources to define these obligations on their own terms.48 Femininity gave young women more personal

48 Scholarship on women’s history in colonial and early national America has been dominated by a debate about women’s status in relation to their economic position and the theory of rights embraced by the community. Historians in the first half of the twentieth century viewed women’s status in colonial America as a “golden age”
responsibility, but expected that they would willingly sacrifice their liminal freedom for the protection of the domestic sphere.

As a greater portion of men supported their families through professional and business occupations (rather than household production), more young women experienced growing up by taking responsibility for domestic management and maintenance instead of direct economic activity. Mary Harrison Eliot was the oldest child of a prominent Boston banker. Her labor within the home was of less consequence to the family. One task was “a tedious piece of work viz to take down every book in Pappa's room, rub it, see if its name is inserted in the Catalogue, & return it to its Place.” Mary also took on the task of ironing clothes. She remarked after a day of ironing in the winter, “This was not the most agreeable thing in the world for there was a considerable quantity of frozen Cloaths in the room the whole time.” The daughters provided only nominal labor and the family employed other women to help the household operate. Mary and her sisters completed small domestic tasks, such as making handkerchiefs for their cousins and sometimes finishing gowns. The family employed a “Tailoress” to handle the larger tasks, with the agreement that the daughters would provide assistance.49

49 Mary Harrison Eliot to Margaret Searle, 29 Jun 1806, 19 Jan 1806, 21 Sep [1804], Parkman Family Papers, HL.
The Eliot family also employed a woman named Nancy to care for the younger children. Mary referred to Nancy by name (but not title) in her letters when the nurse's schedule required Mary's relief. When Nancy's sister came for a visit, Mary informed her cousin, “I don't think that I shall have much time to write next week,” because she would be unable to “abstract my mind from the surrounding bustle.” When Nancy took a trip, Mary reported having “full employment,” a term she used to signify her dedicated activity in the home, not the paid, contracted labor that was more common for young men. Nancy's work for the Eliot family was a temporary position before marriage. In 1806, as Nancy planned to leave the paid position, Mary Eliot worried about the void that would be left. Her mother wanted to hire a new nursemaid, but Mary disagreed: “I dread it almost as much as doing without entirely. We cannot get another Nancy, & a common kind of person would be a very great injury to the children. Anna is just of an age to learn all the vulgarity that she hears.”

In the Eliot family, the labor of one young woman allowed for the leisure of another. In the colonial period, most families used domestic help to supplement the labor necessary for household production. Only elite families employed servants to wait on them. In the early nineteenth century, middling families replaced their female “help” – typically young kin – with domestic servants whose employment was contractual. Mary Eliot found that her own opportunities for autonomy and intellectual pursuits depended on Nancy’s labor within the home.

As post-revolutionary Americans envisioned women as the guardians of the home, the protectors of civic morality, and the nurturers of the rising generation of citizens, they invested more care and expense in girls’ formal education. In October 1808, sixteen-year-old Sarah Noyes

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50 Mary Harrison Eliot to Margaret Searle, 21 Sep [1804], 16 Aug 1806, Parkman Family Papers, HL.
prepared to transition from schooling to domestic activity within her family home.\footnote{No known relation to Jane Noyes.} She wrote in her diary that she had “finished my Academical studies (I fear forever).” Her school was the site of “the pleasing scenes of childhood.” But she decided to treat the period of schooling as only “the foundation of my education.” As young women left school to assume domestic management, they tried to retain some of their academic purpose. Noyes promised to continue “progressing in scientific acquirements” as she entered a mature phase of life in which she would “study domestic duties.” Her labor provided the “exercise of the body” and helped her to overcome “melancholy meditation” and other “pains of the mind.” Focused on “learin[ing] to be satisfied with my condition,” Noyes found pleasure in the “novelty” of housekeeping.

Eventually, domestic activity “proved to be a source of happiness.” When the family started a “spinning business,” Noyes embarked on “a new employment” which “serve[d] to interrupt the progress of imagination’s tyranic [sic] sway.”\footnote{Sarah Noyes Diary, 29 Oct, 31 Oct, 12 Nov 1 Nov 1808, 3 Nov 1808, 16 Mar 1809, MHS.} For daughters who left school to assist with domestic management in their natal homes, giving up the opportunity for study and personal fulfillment for the domestic responsibilities signified their maturity.

Parents reinforced the importance of girlhood as a period of education and self-improvement before young women had to accept the responsibilities of youth. Ebenezer Heath offered his daughter advice for “spending your juvenile days to advantage.” He wanted young Susan to use her period of childhood leisure to improve her character before labor responsibilities set in. He told Susan she was “preparing for that part which you are to perform on the great stage of life, and it is the ardent wish of your parents that you choose a good part & act it well.” He advised her not to “substitute vain and foolish pleasures for those rational & valid studies which render a person respectable in life, & which makes old age pleasant.”
made similar comments to their sons, who they equally hoped would develop mature character as part of their schooling. But parents specifically reminded daughters that schooling was a freedom reserved for their childhood years. Susan Heath was attending school in Boston when her father wrote, “These days which you are spending for your mental improvement, will be in all human probability the pleasantest days of your life.”54 As parents invested in girls’ education, they allowed them a period of autonomy and intellectual development beyond anything offered to their mothers’ generation.

Girls were expected to use their education to develop the respectability that would protect their activity within the household from the stain of necessary, cash-based employment. School trained girls in the literacy and numeracy, as well as the cultural knowledge, that would make them desirable marriage partners for young men in middling occupations. For young men, economic mobility came through employment in a position that could support a family. Young women gained mobility through the security of a husband, the economic management of a domestic sphere, and moral development of children. They disguised their labor and ignored its economic value.55 Femininity came from domestic management untainted by the competition and self-interest of the economic sphere. The mature character secured during girlhood and youth showed that a young woman could play her part in the middle-class family.

New England parents in the early nineteenth century used schooling to advance the prospects for social mobility of both daughters and sons. For daughters, specifically, they molded childhood years to inculcate dispositions of duty and sacrifice in contrast to the ambition expected from young men. After sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Davis left her home in Plymouth for school, her father, William, explained how the unfamiliar situation would help her to develop

54 Ebenezer Heath to Susan Heath, 20 Feb 1810, Heath Family Papers, MHS.
55 Boydston, *Home and Work*.
maturity. He expected Elizabeth to “have sufficient judgment to recollect that you are now in a situation for improvement & thusly lay a foundation for your future character & respectability.” A few months later, he wrote that her mother “was made happy in her visit & gratified to witness how well situated you are, for your own happiness now & for improvement of your mind & talents.” William Davis viewed his daughter’s education primarily as an effort to instill the capacities fitted for socially-prescribed femininity. He expected Elizabeth to look at her “present situation” as a time when “your manners, acquirements, & principles are to be formed.” The most important step toward improvement “as you age” would occur when Elizabeth recognized that her “future character & happiness will depend on the improvement you now make.”

The education young nineteenth-century women received gave them a sense of autonomy and self-regard generally unavailable to the colonial generation. As young women struggled for the self-ownership that their education promised, most found it through choosing to accept the role of duty and sacrifice to the family.

As young women found more opportunities to express a degree of moral and intellectual control through formal schooling, they struggled to give up the freedom of girlhood for the responsibility of youth. Fifteen-year-old Susan Heath considered her formal schooling a luxury. After giving it up to support her mother at home, she complained to her diary, “How I long for a little leisure!” With her growing responsibilities in the home, she experienced “the never ending hurry.” Heath rejected the popular nineteenth-century attitude that idolized women as nurturers rather than producers – what Jeanne Boydston terms the “pastoralization of housework.” Instead of rejoicing at her ability to preserve the domesticity of the home, she found it “irksome to be engaged where the heart feels no interest.” Heath found her domestic activity at odds with

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56 William Davis to Elizabeth Davis, 21 Mar 1816, 23 Jun 1816, 17 Nov 1816, Davis Family Papers, MHS.
57 Boydston, *Home and Work*, 159.
her desire for intellectual development. She wished to have “leisure to read & think.” But she resigned herself to a new period of life marked by labor. “Leisure is an inheritance we were not born to,” she wrote in her diary.58 Heath understood the approach of womanhood meant giving up the intellectual pursuits of her younger days. During the early nineteenth century, many parents and civic leaders promoted girls’ education, but only for the traditional ends of supporting their role as wife and mother. For young women who found individuality and personal fulfillment in their studies, the end of formal schooling marked a disappointing transition toward the responsibilities of adulthood.

After her period of formal education, Heath pursued her own efforts to improve her claims to maturity. On her seventeenth birthday, she “determined to avail myself of every opportunity of improving my mind & if possible not let a day pass without spending a few hours in reading & writing.” Over the next few years, Heath took greater responsibility for the family’s limited domestic labor. On a January morning she “got up to help wash instead of Mama” because her mother was “not able to.” A week later she “got up again” with her sister Harriet and “finished washing before the folks got up.” But Heath struggled to find fulfillment in the expectations of middle-class young women’s activities. Because Susan Heath’s labor took place within her family, she lacked independent wages and relied on her father to make purchases. After a trip to Boston, Heath “asked my kind affectionate father for one dollar before I went home & his generous heart refused me.” Despite the pleasure of her trip, she could not “banish the thought of my Father’s conduct from my mind.”59

The education that many middle-class girls received allowed them degrees of self-ownership and public engagement in painful contrast to the sacrifice and isolation expected as

58 Susan Heath Diary, 11 Jan 1811, Heath Family Papers, MHS.
59 Susan Heath Diary, 11 Sep 1812, 3 Jan 1814, 10 Jan 1814, 10 Nov 1813, Heath Family Papers, MHS.
they approached adulthood. They approached adulthood. Caroline Healey was the oldest daughter of a leading Boston merchant. As a child she had access to a rigorous liberal education. Her schooling included private tutors and attendance at the academy of Joseph Hale Abbot. Healey interpreted the transition from childhood to youth as exile from the masculine world of learning, which she shared with her father, and entry into the feminine world of domestic occupation. As a maturing young woman, she was expected to undertake regular domestic activity – including sewing and household management – but she was unable to gain a sense of achievement or public recognition from labor that lacked “a better purpose” beyond the gentility of the home. During her teenage years, Healey was caught between her father's expectations for intellectual superiority and her mother's expectations for genteel domestic labor.

More than most women in mid-nineteenth century New England, Healey criticized the subordination that women faced as they grew up. The moral authority granted to women after the Revolution allowed them to exhibit leadership in certain religious circles and with social reform movements, but removed them from sources of political and economic power. Caroline’s mother sought to mark her entry into youth with a coming out party, which Caroline interpreted

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as “a party commemorating my progress in years, my ignorance and indolence.” The event highlighted the restriction Healey faced on account of her sex. She mourned her future place in society, remarking that “at fifteen a woman’s education, in common parlance, is finished – at twenty-five a man’s but just begun.” Healey recognized that the privilege of masculinity gave men access to public authority and intellectual achievement. Desperate to bring academic pursuits into her period of youth, she published articles in the Christian Register (the unofficial publication of the New England Unitarians), attended lectures, and continued reading classical texts. Healey found intellectual companionship during her youth in the Transcendentalist movement, eventually forming a close relationship with Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.⁶⁴ Although Healey could not achieve the authority or public recognition afforded to men, she used her class status to control her leisure activities and participate in an intellectual community that provided some of the benefits a young man might find in college.

The expectations for domesticity required young women to assert their maturity through work that conformed to ideals of usefulness, selflessness, and duty. Fulfilling these features of femininity limited socially-acceptable employment opportunities outside the home. Teaching was one occupation that allowed for limited autonomy while conforming to social conventions of women’s role as nurturers and moral guardians. Young women primarily taught during the summer term, when most of the pupils would be younger children in need of maternal guidance and when older boys, who could pose a challenge to discipline, would be occupied in agricultural labor. This sex-specific trend in school-teaching allowed communities to expand their educational offerings by taking advantage of the lower wages commanded by female teachers.⁶⁵

In the early nineteenth century, young women typically received teaching positions through their

⁶⁴ Dall, Daughter of Boston, 8, 11.
family network. In 1817 John Pierce wrote to his long-time friend to “make a direct application
to your daughter Adeline to instruct our young misses, this season.”

By addressing the offer to Adeline’s father, Pierce reinforced the dependent relationship of the child within the household. However, women a generation later took it upon themselves to find employment positions or waited for the district to contact them directly. Nancy Mallary asked her cousins to look into finding “a vacant place for a school” that could provide her with employment. Districts often competed for desirable teachers. M. E. Lyman complained that applications from two districts seeking her services “have been made very early,” putting pressure on her to decide her place of employment. The ability to arrange labor on their own gave nineteenth-century women more opportunities than their colonial predecessors had to work outside the home. Their experience as teachers also gave them the literacy and public reputation to find work in other areas such as writing and speaking. However, as they relied on their own initiative rather than traditional networks, young women’s expanded autonomy was countered by an increased vulnerability within the impersonal labor market.

As traditional female labor activities, such as textile production, moved outside the household, women gained another opportunity for contracted, formal employment within the industrial economy. Early attempts to mechanize spinning and weaving occurred haphazardly throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and typically utilized children or

66 John Pierce to Abiel Abbot, Jan 1817, Poor Family Papers, SL.
67 Nancy Mallary to her cousins, 25 Jan 1837, Hooker Collection, SL.
68 M. E. Lyman to Susan C. Clarke, 26 Mar 1847, Warren-Clarke Family Papers, MHS.
supported piecework by widows in their homes.\textsuperscript{71} The factories that opened in northern New England during the 1830s followed the Waltham System — a vertically-integrated manufacturing operation for textiles that required a full-time workforce with more skill than children could provide. To avoid the degradation evident in factories in Britain and southern New England (discussed below), agents and managers at the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts and other towns in the region created a liminal environment that balanced the needs of industrial production with the personal, social, and intellectual goals of prospective workers. Because paid labor was a threat to femininity, mill owners constructed a physical and social environment that placed industrial labor within a maternal environment. Young women who wanted to take advantage of this employment while preserving their respectability presented themselves as dutiful daughters assisting their distressed families in order to preserve their femininity. Both groups portrayed factory labor as a temporary positions before marriage and the duties of a wife and mother.\textsuperscript{72}

Central to the effort to make mill labor acceptable to “the daughters of respectable farmers” was the company boardinghouse.\textsuperscript{73} Funded by the company and placed under the charge of matrons, the boardinghouse became the center of the factories’ moral discipline. Boardinghouse matrons enforced curfew, oversaw visitors, and ensured regular attendance at public worship. Preserving the respectability of the industrial environment was essential to the mill operation, as factory supporters recognized that “the existence of any great moral exposure in Lowell would cut off the supply of help from the virtuous homesteads of the country.”\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{73} Nathan Appleton, \textit{Introduction of the Power Loom ; And, Origin of Lowell} (Lowell, Mass: Printed by B.H. Penhallow, 1858), 16.

\textsuperscript{74} Henry A. Miles, \textit{Lowell: As It Was, and as It Is}, 2d ed (Lowell: N.L. Dayton, 1846), 128.
Although many middling women decided against factory employment, considering it a threat to their “dignity,” thousands of rural women took mill work as a means for self-support and a limited opportunity for social mobility. Many ‘mill girls’ used their work as a temporary experience of autonomy and self-improvement before marriage, and a few were even able to use their education to secure respectable employment while remaining single.

The environment of Lowell and other northern New England factory towns provided a liminal experience for young female workers. As young men sought opportunities that could provide the foundation for economic advancement, managers designed factory employment to serve as transitional labor appropriate for the “stage of a woman’s life cycle before marriage.” Female operatives came during their late teens and early twenties, worked for brief stretches of time over a period of about three years, and then left when they got married. Women chose mill employment and “were generally not sent to the mills by their parents to supplement low family incomes.”

Sarah Rice asserted her decision to work in the mill in opposition to her parents because of the financial compensation it promised. “When I considered that I had got myself to take care of,” she told them, “I ought to do that way that I can make the most and save the most.”

The wage of two dollars per week exceeded what she had earned as a domestic. Factory work gave women a measure of self-ownership through their receipt of wages paid on their own account rather than through their fathers. While Susan Heath had to beg her father for spending money, mill workers used their wages to purchase consumer goods such as “a new de laine dress...and a new de laine apron,” “a calico dress 10 cts a yard,” and a “plaid apron.”

Elizabeth Hodgdon, a young woman who worked as a teacher, told her sister to return home from the mills...

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77 Tryphena Gransey, 15 Jan 1847, Tryphena S. Gransey Letters, SL.
“when you have earned as much as you will want to spend.”

In addition to the promise of high wages, Waltham textile mills attracted operatives with educational opportunities and a respectable environment. In addition to the company-paid boardinghouse matrons, young women promoted the morality and intellect of the environment through their own efforts. Operatives were enthusiastic members of local churches. Harriet Farley recalled operatives pasting pieces of poetry or prose in view of their machines “so that they could glance at them, and commit them to memory.” Young women even formed their own “improvement” societies. The community also supported a Lyceum and Institute for mutual improvement, which offered lectures on a variety of liberal subjects that many women attended despite their long and toilsome day. Although female factory operatives worked long hours in a strict environment, the sorority among their peers, opportunities for education, and the ability to control their wages made factory life a unique period that Thomas Dublin labels one “of economic and social independence.”

During the transition from childhood to youth, young women found greater control over their character development and took responsibility for conforming to feminine expectations of maturity. Regardless of the necessity of their labor to their family’s livelihood, young women looked to their daily activity in order to mark their usefulness, self-sacrifice, and moral improvement. However, the contrast between the intellectual engagement of childhood and the limitations of youth made many young women ambivalent about growing up. As seen in the diaries quoted above, they lamented the end of their formal schooling and their beginning of their

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79 Dublin, Women at Work, 1979, 41. Chapter 2 will explore female operatives’ ambivalent attitudes as they made decisions about factory work, and Chapter 6 will examine their attempts to maintain respectability in positions that challenged the domestic ideology of femininity.
domestic responsibilities. Jane Noyes thought that her “happiest days are ended.” Susan Heath knew her opportunity for “leisure” was drawing to a close. Young women’s autonomy reached its peak during the years of youth, as they prepared to make the ultimate mature decision – that of a husband. As Lucia McMahon has shown, educated young women prepared themselves for “mere equality.” Female education was designed “not to provide women with the means to develop personal autonomy and ambition but to enable them to serve men and society.” The irony of female maturity, what made it almost an oxymoron when compared to the experience of young men, was that it was supposed to result in submission and dependence. Young New England women entered the period of youth with a recognition of their familial duties, not prepared to embrace opportunities for economic independence. Labor experiences prepared middling young women to exercise appropriate choice, but confined their choices within roles that supported traditional conceptions of feminine contributions to society.

The cultural aspirations for a leisured childhood among middle-class families elevated the nurturing value of the mother, the vulnerability of the child, and the importance of schooling over work. This increase in the dependence of children established the intermediate period of youth as a time in which labor began and young people assumed distinct gender roles in relation to the home. In middle-class labor positions, the initiation of work was associated with the development of maturity. Employment came at a specific point in the coming-of-age process – after the period of education and moral preparation during childhood. Young men took greater responsibility for contracting their own labor. They also took advantage of educational opportunities that gave them a chance for social mobility. Young women entered a liminal period

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81 Diary of Jane Noyes, 8 Oct 1823, MHS.  
82 Susan Heath Diary, 11 Jan 1811, MHS.  
83 This will be discussed in Chapter 3.  
84 McMahon, Mere Equals, 13.
by assisting with household management or seeking respectable employment outside the home. Although their labor – paid or unpaid – was valuable to themselves and their families, they emphasized not their productivity but their voluntary sacrifice. By connecting employment to gendered expectations of maturity, the transition to youth hardened young men’s roles as ambitious, autonomous leaders and young women’s roles as dutiful, self-sacrificing subordinates, and established the social values that separated the middle class from the poor.

Economically-privileged young people were best positioned to associate their work with the process of internal development.

Child Labor and Dependence

In early nineteenth-century New England, economically-secure families protected children from labor and prepared young people to enter the economy in gender-appropriate roles. For children of the poor, however, labor was a means of survival, not a means for demonstrating character and respectability through appropriate choice. Because they relied on their children’s earnings, poor families could not shield boys and girls within the domestic sphere. With their opportunities restricted to degraded positions, poor children took work that could only be considered the product of necessity. They received less protection and took on greater responsibility than middle-class children within a range of marginal positions in the early industrial economy. A larger portion of working-poor children found work in the streets. Destitute children were removed from their families and bound to the household of a charitable host. With the first introduction of textile factories in southern New England (decades before the Lowell factories described above), a new labor organization offered a source of employment for children of the poor. Each of these locations created alternatives to the traditional household that distanced poor children from the standard for coming of age set by the middle class.
The dislocations created by the industrial economy increased the number of impoverished families whose children engaged in a pattern of casual labor in the streets that ran counter to middle-class expectations. Poor children found a variety of informal, short-term activities in the streets: They foraged for food, fuel, and discarded items for use or sale; they begged and pilfered; they ran errands, took odd jobs for store-owners, and peddled newspapers and small trinkets. Children undertook street jobs in accordance with their gender, physical abilities, and experience. Young girls performed domestic tasks for store owners, such as street sweeping. Young boys served as bootblacks or horse-holders. Young children of both sexes scavenged “to find something which they may sell for a few cents.” Beginning around age eleven or twelve, boys could take jobs “in shops and offices as waiters or runners, that, by earning a dollar a week, their parents may be enabled to pay their weekly rent.” Older children worked as peddlers, selling an array of items to artisans and junk dealers. Unable to rely on the employment of a male breadwinner, poor families relied on the marginal economic activities of children.

The demographics of poverty shifted by the middle of the nineteenth century as African Americans and Irish immigrants took the lowest positions in the economy. For these outsiders,

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85 Multiple factors converged to increase poverty and its urban concentration in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England. After the Revolutionary war, an economic depression ruined the fortunes of some families while making it harder for others to find employment. Some families responded to the depression by moving west in search of cheap, productive land and new commercial opportunities. Those who were unable to relocate faced a more competitive labor market and were forced to take marginal positions with meager compensation. As schooling became more vital for finding secure employment, families that were unable to invest in their children’s education began a cycle of poverty that would continue through the period. Faced with “increasing destitution” and “besieged...with requests for aid,” town officials sought to alleviate poverty through almshouses and workhouses rather than the customary “outdoor relief.” Instead of shuttling paupers to their legal place of residence, town officials confined them to institutions. For families that feared this loss of liberty, and the likelihood that the family would be separated, migration to an urban center such as Boston offered a better opportunity for the family to eke out a living through the combined activities of its member. See Allan Kulikoff, “The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston,” The William and Mary Quarterly 28, no. 3 (July 1, 1971): 375–412; Ruth Wallis Herndon, Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Sundue, Industrious in Their Stations; Eric C. Schneider, In the Web of Class: Delinquents and Reformers in Boston, 1810s-1930s (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

86 Joseph Tuckerman, Mr. Tuckerman’s First Semiannual Report in his Fourth Year of Service as Minister at Large (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1830), 8, 19.
prejudice toward race, religion, or foreign birth compounded the disadvantages they faced from poverty. Because African American and Irish adults lacked the opportunities to enter middle-class occupations, as well as the requisite levels of literacy, they relied more heavily on the income generated by their children’s activities. Discrimination by Anglo-Americans prevented black or Irish children from gaining apprenticeships in trades that would offer some economic mobility. Black children found work as chimney sweeps, boot blacks, or match girls – work that associated them with filth and accentuated their non-whiteness. With the influx of poor Irish immigrants after 1845, poor children presented an even greater challenge to the ideal of opportunity. Irish children assisted their mothers with taking in sewing, piecework, or laundry – work that tainted the home with economic activity – or took to the streets to deliver papers, scavenge for goods, or, if older, find jobs as manual laborers. Prejudged for their lack of maturity, black and Irish families struggled to provide the opportunities for their children to disprove their degraded status through appropriate forms of work.

Street work gave poor boys and girls from different racial backgrounds greater license to operate beyond adult supervision, unlike the confined and protected experience of their middling peers. Although poor children’s informal employment prevented opportunities for self-ownership through formal education, they developed self-reliance through their activities at the fringes of the economy. Children working in the streets were responsible for procuring goods and making sales. They gathered money on their own, with the expectation that they would use it to support

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their families. But they also had the ability to purchase petty luxuries. Although street work enmeshed poor children within the economic needs of their families, the independence of their labor environment allowed them to stray beyond the line of acceptability set by middle-class reformers and their own parents. Children might cross the line of scavenging into theft. Young women might engage in prostitution. Older boys might leave home to live on the streets. Poor children took responsibility for supporting themselves and contributing to their families at an early age. Being sent out into the street gave children “an early autonomy from their parents, an autonomy alien to the experiences of more privileged children.”

Joseph Tuckerman, the American Unitarian Association’s minister at large for the poor of Boston in the 1820s and 1830s, lamented the lack of discipline and regularity among poor children, who “at one hour they are kept at work to procure fuel, or perform some other service; in the next are allowed to go where they will, and to do what they will.”

Without adult supervision, middle-class reformers feared that poor children would never develop the discipline or industry necessary to be integrated into the commercial economy.

Poor children’s labor had different features of dependence and independence in comparison to their middle-class peers. Although they were free from the oversight of an employer, they lacked the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge for secure, respectable positions. For poor families, however, it was a means of preserving economic survival – either because no other means of income was available or because they preferred to avoid the authority of philanthropists. Children could work during hard times, during an illness in the family or

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90 Joseph Tuckerman, *Mr. Tuckerman’s Eight Semiannual Report in his service as a Minister at Large in Boston* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1831), 21.
when their parents could not find regular employment. If poor children were unable to find steady employment at an agreeable wage, they preferred casual labor that would not inhibit their mobility. Rather than the middle-class standards of maturity that came through formal knowledge and moral obedience, street life taught poor children to be “more wary, more cunning, more artful.”

Though disparaged and feared by middle-class reformers, these qualities were essential for surviving in the uncertain and exploitative economic environment.

To middle-class reformers, children’s street work revealed the pathology of working-class family life. Joseph Tuckerman considered street children “indisposed to any employment which will abridge their liberty, or restrain them from their accustomed pursuits and indulgences.” Poor children who were caught as criminals, who were orphaned or abandoned, or who were deemed too destitute, came under the oversight of public welfare officials who sought to re-forge the relationships of social order. A centuries-old system of legal town residence governed the assistance of paupers. One of the most important mechanisms for relieving towns of this responsibility and expense was to bind pauper children to families who could offer support and employment. The prevalence of the pauper apprentice system in New England shows the continuing significance of legally unfree labor in New England. As legal theorists redefined the scope of adult labor relationships through the free contract, indentured labor became viewed as a status acceptable for those under the legal age of adulthood.

In the 1780s, New Englanders adapted the system of pauper apprenticeship used to secure the usefulness of indigent white children as they looked for a way to control the labor and moral

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid, 13.
93 For a set of essays on the diverse experiences of pauper apprenticeship in early America, see Herndon and Murray, *Children Bound to Labor*.
94 For the decline of indentured servitude and the creation of legal standards of ‘free’ labor around the idea of age, see Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor*, 1991.
condition of African American children while they abolished the practice of slavery. New
England emancipation proposals following the American Revolution centered on a process of
post nati emancipation, by which children born to enslaved mothers became free at birth.
However, these proposals included a requirement that these children continue to owe service to
their mother’s master until they reached an age of majority. This combination of gradual
emancipation and statutory servitude was so expected that even when a prominent group of
slaves in Massachusetts petitioned the legislature in 1777, they included the provision that “their
children (who were born in this land of liberty) may not be held as slaves after they arrived at the
age of twenty-one years.”95 When Rhode Island passed an abolition bill in 1784, these “freeborn”
children were required to serve masters until age eighteen for girls and twenty-one for boys.
Connecticut set the age of majority at twenty-five in its original 1784 bill, but lowered the age to
twenty-one in 1797. These terms were made to satisfy the property claims of slave owners, who
expected to be compensated for the loss of their full claim to the enslaved child’s personhood. At
first, New England legislatures created a special category of dependence for black children as
they transitioned out of slavery. In later years, they used the system of pauper apprenticeship to
hold black children, similar to the process of finding guardianship for wayward white children.
The gradual emancipation statutes reflected New Englanders’ inability to imagine African
Americans as anything other than dependent workers.96

The primary purpose of bound child labor was to lessen the burden on public poor relief
by finding a family who would take financial responsibility for an indigent child. The Overseers

95 “Petition of a Great Number of Negroes” to the Massachusetts House of Representatives (January 13, 1777), in A
96 For analysis of statutory servitude during gradual emancipation in New England, see Joanne Pope Melish,
Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860 (Cornell University Press,
1998). For an account of gradual emancipation and child labor in New York, see Sarah Levine-Gronningsater’s
dissertation in progress, “Delivering Freedom: Gradual Emancipation, Black Legal Culture, and the Origins of
Sectional Crisis in New York, 1759–1870” at the University of Chicago.
of the Poor, a quasi-governmental body that coordinated assistance to paupers across Massachusetts, took responsibility for finding appropriate homes for children. Pauper boys and girls were apprenticed typically between the ages of seven and ten, although they could be as young as a few months if a family wanted to invest in a potential worker before the child reached productive age. Indentured white children had legal rights to a rudimentary education and training in the “art and mystery” of their master’s craft. They were also supposed to be provided suitable food, clothing, and housing. The town selectmen monitored the treatment of pauper apprentices and intervened when necessary. However, the indentures of black children (those born to indigent freed women) lacked these educational requirements because people who shared heritage with slaves “were never envisioned as potential citizens.”

Unlike the children of white, middling families, children on the margins, especially due to racial status, were considered less able to progress toward maturity through self-ownership. Class status – hierarchical differences in access to economic resources and political power – emerged in part from a view of growing up that attributed maturity to privileged forms of labor.

Pauper and African American apprenticeships retained the patriarchal relationship of master and servant. They boarded with their masters, had little leisure time, and had few options for leaving their positions besides running away. While the terms of apprenticeship for middling white boys allowed for self-ownership, the indentures of poor children reinforced work as a feature of dependence. As middle-class families sought to protect their own children from labor, the experience of indentured apprenticeship for pauper children and statutory servitude for the children of former slaves became a more distinguished feature of lower-class status. Formal indentures outlined the legal responsibilities of the master and the obligations of the apprentice.

Barry Levy’s analysis of eighteenth-century indenture records shows that elite families who took

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97 Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 78.
in orphans used them to replace the labor of their own children, similar to, though cheaper than, hiring a servant.98 Middling families took in orphans early in their marriage, to assist with domestic and commercial roles before they could depend upon the productivity of their own children. In the nineteenth century, pauper children were sent primarily to farm families, to replace the declining agricultural workforce among young men and women who sought better opportunities in urban areas. As indentured workers, poor children continued traditional patterns of household dependence that ignored the need for individual advancement in the commercial economy.99

The burden placed on poor children to secure income for their families made childhood a period of survival, not preparation for advancement. As formal schooling became more important for the skills and disposition middling youth needed to secure respectable employment, poor children’s conditions of labor compounded their disadvantage.100 Public schools operated on strict schedules and expected pupils to follow a specific trajectory of age and level of literacy. Joseph Tuckerman lamented that children who were “kept from school during a large part of the winter to gather fuel” had trouble returning in the spring because they were considered truants and “their names are stricken by the teachers from their lists.”101 In the early nineteenth century, educators, philanthropists, and reformers viewed institutionalized education as a way to uplift the conditions of poor children, as well as to secure social order among a potentially dangerous class. Children who lacked the resources to conform to social expectations of leisure and education could find themselves placed in juvenile reform institutions under the

100 Sundue, *Industrious in Their Stations*.
101 Joseph Tuckerman, *Mr. Tuckerman’s First Semiannual Report in his Fourth Year of Service as Minister at Large* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1830), 19.
paternalism of philanthropists or public officials. Urban reformers’ attempts to enforce a middle-
class ideal of growing up through educational institutions are explored in Chapter 4.

With the anticipation of mechanized factories in the 1790s, a few political leaders
ambitious about the new nation’s economic prospects looked favorably on the prospect of
finding useful employment for poor children. The social imperative of work inherited from the
Puritan founders merged with political nationalists’ desire to develop American manufacturing.
In his Report on Manufactures, Alexander Hamilton endorsed factory labor because it would employ

persons who would otherwise be idle (and in many cases a burden on the community),
either from the bias of temper, habit, infirmity of body, or some other cause, indisposing
or disqualifying them for the toils of the country. It is worthy of particular remark, that, in
general, women and children are rendered more useful, and the latter more early useful,
by manufacturing establishments, than they would otherwise be. Of the number of
persons employed in the cotton manufactories of Great Britain, it is computed that four
sevenths, nearly, are women and children; of whom the greatest proportion are children,
and many of them of a tender age.102

Hamilton argued that factories could use the labor of otherwise idle individuals, without
threatening the agricultural labor that many Americans viewed as the primary source of
livelihood, respectability, and citizenship.

Supporters of American manufacturing emphasized the importance of employing women
and children in a manner that would alleviate the public burdens of poverty. The Committee of
Commerce and Manufactures assured the public that “a great proportion of the woolen
manufacture is carried on by the aid of labor-saving machinery, which is almost exclusively
superintended by women and children and the infirm, who would otherwise be wholly destitute

102 Quoted in Robert H. Bremner, ed., Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History (Cambridge, Mass:
of employment, whereas they are now able to maintain themselves.”

Mathew Carey, a political reformer who campaigned against the low wages of female seamstresses, praised factories for their ability to “[elevate] thousands of the young people of both sexes, but principally the females, belonging to the families of the cultivators of the soil in their vicinity, and from a state of penury and idleness to competence and industry.”

In an 1822 address, Mathew Carey, a political reformer who campaigned against the low wages of female seamstresses, praised factories for their ability to “[elevate] thousands of the young people of both sexes, but principally the females, belonging to the families of the cultivators of the soil in their vicinity, and from a state of penury and idleness to competence and industry.”

In the 1790s, Samuel Slater became the first American industrialist to systematically employ a large force of child laborers in a manufacturing enterprise. Children who came to work in Slater’s mills were typically between seven and thirteen years old. Unwilling to send their children to work alone, a situation associated with the most destitute paupers, many families came to Slater’s mills together as a single unit. Factories published advertisements for “ten or twelve good respectable families consisting of four or five children each, from nine to sixteen years of age.” Indigent families, usually widows or unskilled male householders, “seized the economic opportunity offered by the factory system” to support the family together. With the addition of children’s wages, the family had a better chance to avoid becoming dependent on public resources, which risked separation of family members. Slater especially recruited families with large numbers of young children, from whom he could gain a greater portion of cheap child labor with fewer adults to pay full wages. These families were responsible for their own housing, food, fuel, and other expenses. Unlike the Waltham mills that came in the 1820s, Slater’s factories did not provide the cloak of respectability for their workers.

In addition to families, Slater also found workers, especially boys, through the pauper

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Slater published a newspaper advertisement for “four or five active Lads, about 15 Years of Age to serve as Apprentices in the Cotton Factory” and quickly brought a number of pauper boys into his employment. Although he was exempt from paying wages, the cost of boarding these boys and providing for their medical and other expenses quickly exceeded the wages of children who were supported by their families. On Sundays, factory children attended a school operated by the company that provided a rudimentary education while stressing work discipline, industry, and obedience. This education was part of Slater’s initial attempt to fulfill the obligations of an apprentice master. However, the responsibilities that a master owed to his apprentice proved more costly to Slater than the wage he paid to a minor employee who lived with his or her family. Furthermore, pauper apprentices were difficult to control. These older, “active Lads” preferred to find casual day labor rather than fulfill the long days of work required by Slater and they often abandoned the mills before their indentures were complete. One young apprentice who ran away explained his decision as “more bennefisheal [sic] to my Interest.”

Lacking family ties to the mill and the community, pauper apprentices exercised their choice to run away when they felt that the terms did not benefit their future prospects.

Children’s labor was vital to the factory economy in early nineteenth-century New England. Factory censuses conducted by the *Digest of Manufactures* (1820) and the *Friends of Industry* (1831) reported that between 40% and 55% of Rhode Island’s 8,000 textile operatives were children. Considering that these reports defined children as those under twelve years old, the percentage of children under age sixteen or even fourteen was likely much higher. Connecticut reported fewer total operatives, but a similar percentage of children. In Massachusetts 43% of the 2,713 workers were children in 1820. By 1831, Massachusetts

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107 Ibid., 78.
reported 13,000 operatives but no boys and girls under twelve years old. Although this record is “preposterous,” according to early labor historian Elizabeth Otey, the percentage in Massachusetts was certainly lower than that in Southern New England because the Waltham factory system used in northern parts of New England relied largely on young women in their late teens and early twenties.\(^\text{108}\) Children worked in the mills twelve to sixteen hours a day, depending on the season, six days a week. Although the work was not physically taxing, it involved “policing machines for a great many hours a day at low wages in a hot, dusty atmosphere.”\(^\text{109}\)

Children took positions tending factory machinery more readily than their parents did. For adult men, working inside the factory walls as machine tenders threatened cultural assumptions about masculine authority. Adult men, especially those with families, preferred to undertake jobs that allowed them to work independently out of doors. Factory organization and discipline placed workers in positions of dependence that male householders could not tolerate. Instead, Slater established company farms and “hired householders to ditch, set posts, plow, harvest…crops, or chop and draw wood.” During the winter season, Slater found “a host of odd jobs” outdoors, including “hauling goods, painting, making boxes, serving as handymen in and around the mills, fashioning boots and shoes, and weaving cloth.”\(^\text{110}\) For married women, employment inside the mill violated the cultural definition of femininity as private and domestic. Instead, mothers supplemented the family income by taking in piece work. Through this age- and gender-based division of labor, Slater was able to gain the support of householders for the employment of their families in the mills.

The role of child workers in Slater’s mill was the result of negotiations between the agent


\(^{109}\) Ibid., 60.

and the parents. Under the traditional household economy, the head of household was responsible for the education and training of his dependents. As a symbol of their position of authority, fathers of factory children wanted the right to control their children even as they were engaged in labor within the mill. The contracts for a family’s labor stipulated the role of each member and the wages earned for the work, all of which was credited to a household account payable to the father. The contracts also included allowances for the children to attend the local common school for three months of the year, which, when followed, provided factory children the same amount of schooling as the average student in New England.\footnote{The best statistics on school attendance in New England comes from Massachusetts. Kaestle and Vinovkis estimate that the average student attended school 60 days out of the year in 1840. See Carl F. Kaestle and Maris Vinovskis, \textit{Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).}

Slater also allowed special privileges for boys to be assigned to learn a skilled trade within the mill, such as mule spinner. Slater accommodated these parents’ demands by requiring children to attend school at different times and making the family supply a replacement during the absence. The system provided benefits for both Slater and parents, by “limit[ing] labor turnover and guarantee[ing] Slater a steady supply of workers” and “ensur[ing] that parents would retain their position as head of the kinship unit and that children would not gain economic independence.”\footnote{Tucker, \textit{Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790-1860}, 148.} Child labor in Slater’s factories diminished by mid-century because the overall supply of labor increased and Slater could obtain adults at the price he was willing to pay children. Shifting away from child labor was beneficial because he did not have to share power with householders in his management of the workforce.\footnote{At the same time, Massachusetts passed legislation that limited the employment of children in factories (discussed in Chapter 5); however Slater’s operations were exempt from those provisions. The company voluntarily conformed to the requirements, but the economic changes that increased the adult labor supply were more significant in the reduction of child labor than the legislation.}

The work experiences of poor children reveal the economic privilege rooted in the ideal
of the transition between childhood and youth based on the delay of labor, the investment in education, and the entry into gender-specific employment. Children who found employment in the streets, who were bound as pauper apprentices, or who entered textile factories, experienced different trajectories of coming of age as their families responded to the decline of the household economy. Because their labor was required during their early years, poor children did not experience the leisured childhood that was coming to define the middle class. Children who worked the streets operated outside adult supervision at a young age, but their labor was not on a path toward culturally sanctioned economy activity that led to full economic independence. Pauper apprenticeship and statutory servitude continued the practice of bound labor as the middle class embraced the freedom of the contract. Under the system of gradual emancipation, many black children spent their minority in bondage, considered the property of their masters with little opportunity to prepare for economic independence. The early factory system promoted the value of child labor and sought to accommodate the household labor system to fit an impersonal, industrial setting. In all, poor children experienced labor primarily as a contractual obligation or a means of survival, rather than an opportunity for self-improvement. By missing out on the education available during a protected childhood, poor boys and girls struggled to obtain employment that offered respectability or economic security. Whatever character traits they developed during their employment, poor young people entered labor positions marked by necessity rather than choice, making them unable to associate their work with maturity defined by middle-class expectations.

Conclusion

During the early nineteenth century, New England experienced a change in the social structures of economic production and familial relationships. Among many middling families,
economic activity moved outside the home as fathers took positions as breadwinners. In place of
the integrated household economy, the home became a domestic sphere dedicated to the nurture
of children. Middling families invested in their children’s education and kept them from labor
outside the home. This transformation created a new ideology of childrearing that emphasized
children’s innocence and malleability. Yet this aspirational ideal was only available to families
who could afford to forgo children’s income. During the early industrial economy, poor children
took new responsibilities for employment amidst the economic dislocations of the early
nineteenth century. Some children experienced the authority of the factory overseer or town
selectmen rather than their own father. Other children found liberty in the streets. Unable to
follow the ideal of a “Romantic Childhood,” these children lacked the education and social
capital necessary to keep them from degraded status.

However, even middling young New Englanders could not remain in leisured positions
indefinitely. After their period of formal schooling, and sometimes in between terms as a means
to earn tuition, young men and women needed to work in order to support themselves and
prepare for adulthood. Middle-class young men and women recognized this change in the life
course as they moved from periods of schooling and began to take on gender-specific work roles.
When young men entered positions as apprentices, clerks, and professionals, they aspired to find
working conditions that allowed for ambition and social mobility. Young women took
employment as teachers or as respectable ‘mill girls,’ or took domestic responsibility within their
homes to fulfill feminine ideals of selflessness and duty. As they moved from the leisure of
childhood to the responsibilities of work, young New Englanders pursued gender-specific
identity as they progressed in maturity.

By associating their privileged work with the self-ownership, character, and
respectability, middling young people claimed maturity as a feature of growing up. However, the necessity of labor among the families of the working poor made children’s economic activity a crucial factor in survival, not a reflection of the capacity to make good choices. Only middle-class children fully benefited from the liminality of youth that allowed them to balance their need to work with the choices that would define respectability. As New Englanders associated labor with an individual’s capacity for maturity, poor children’s marginal labor symbolized their internal failure of agency and competence, rather than a lack of material resources. The type of work young New Englanders performed expressed their ability to develop the character traits that qualified one for gender-specific areas of authority. These emerging attitudes toward work and coming of age contributed to the creation of class by the mid-nineteenth century. As middling Americans fashioned a cultural identity around a model of growing up, the educational and vocational deficits faced by the poor started them on a path to dependence rather than autonomy. By assuming all workers had the power to act as competent, freely-contracting individuals, New Englanders ignored the economic forces that drove poor children into degrading work and promoted a seemingly democratic ideal of labor and independence that masked the emerging class hierarchy in antebellum America.
Chapter 2: “One of the Best and Most Prudent Actions in my Life:”
Labor Choices, Anxiety, and the Construction of Middle-Class Youth

In the spring of 1805, between academic terms at Framingham Academy, eighteen-year-old David Damon traveled to Boston to find employment that could pay his tuition. Unable to secure a position as a school teacher that would advance his goal of becoming a minister, Damon took “the principal care of a wharf & store.” After a few months, Damon suffered a period of debilitating headaches that forced him to recover at home “against the wishes of my employer.” When he returned a week later, “I found my employer so offended at my leaving him at a busy time...that he would retain me no longer, unless I would stay at a reduced price.” Damon took the opportunity to seek out a different position, but he quickly found himself “reduced to the necessity of choosing” between working at lower wages and returning home. Motivated by principle over financial gain, Damon decided to leave his employer. Faced with a busy August season, and the prospect of training another worker, the wharf owner offered a compromise – he would pay full wages, but not for the period of Damon's absence. Damon stood firm and “insisted upon full wages from the time I was taken ill, my absence being excepted, as a sine qua non.” The compromise could extend no further and Damon parted from his employer with his reputation as a young man of conviction intact. He returned to East Sudbury and assisted on his father’s farm before taking a school in the winter term.¹

Describing the incident ten years later, Damon called the decision “one of the best & most prudent actions in my life.” He connected it directly to the process of growing up and assuming masculine authority. Coming to “the age of man” required him to “have some decision & independence, without which it is obvious no man can be of much consequence in society, or even to himself.” This mature capacity was achieved during moments of conflict, for “one does

not know what he can do, till circumstances imperiously demand fortitude, courage, & presence of mind, or an abject submission to every impulse from without.” Unable to command equal bargaining power in his relationship with his employer, Damon interpreted the outcome to show that he was still progressing toward the goals of becoming an independent master in the commercial economy. Rather than “ly down & die or mope into the obscurity of a chimney corner,” Damon would “rise superior to the frowns of fortune, & assert his claim to action.” By invoking the language of control and domination, Damon showed not simply his capacity to make good choices, but his ability to make choices that would lead him to economic autonomy and ultimately the power to serve as an active leader in the community. When young women interpreted their labor choices, as we will see below, they emphasized their maturity to submit to the needs of their families and to seek the stability of a household. This difference in the breadth of self-ownership expected through growing up solidified the domination of masculinity over femininity.

Although influenced by his desire to express masculinity, David Damon’s experience reflected the struggles of many young New England men and women with the dependent aspects of their employment. This subordination conflicted with the autonomy and respectability they needed to exhibit to achieve recognition for their maturity. After spending their early years protected from labor, young men and women from economically-secure families entered employment positions in their mid-teens which served as a transition between the dependence of childhood and the expected autonomy of adulthood. In this liminal position, they worked under the control of superiors who lacked the familiar paternal authority of earlier generations, and they expected a greater degree of control over their conditions. But their age, inexperience, and lack of resources limited their autonomy. Young people took responsibility for their employment

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2 David Damon, “Extracts,” 14 Aug 1805, Damon Family Papers, HL (emphasis in original unless otherwise stated).
conditions and their moral development during youth, embracing their status as one of provisional autonomy rather than continued dependence. This optimistic portrayal fended off the anxiety they felt as they navigated their vulnerable position in the economy and protected themselves from degrading conditions that threatened their middle-class status.

By portraying his termination as the result of “decision and independence,” David Damon demonstrates how maturity provided a democratic rhetoric that prepared young white men for economic and political dominance. The volatility of the commercial economy and the uncertainty of young men’s wage labor positions created a liminal environment. Unsure whether their work would lead them to economic dominance or marginalization, young men constantly evaluated their character. If they could be confident in their maturity, then they knew that they were moving toward prosperity rather than degradation. Young women also entered a liminal position during youth as they took temporary paid labor outside of the home. Fearful that their economic activity could prevent them from finding a stable household, they interpreted their work as a sacrifice to family. Through their anxieties about dependent labor, young men and women constructed a barrier between the habits and character of the dominant middle class and the unfortunate working class.

White, middling New Englanders distinguished themselves from the degraded, non-white population by conforming to the social ideal of respectability. This code of behavior and constellation of character traits “separated the middle class from workers and marginal people” and distributed economic and political power in the ostensibly meritocratic society by policing the boundaries of the ‘separate spheres’ ideology. As men assumed the position of autonomous breadwinners, women followed the dictates of respectability by preparing for the role of guardian over the private, nurturing domestic sphere, rather than the helpmeet in the patriarch’s economic

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enterprise. This emerging ‘cult of domesticity’ gave greater public regard for women’s traditional roles and measured their maturity by their voluntary submission to the needs of their families and the community. Although young people attributed their class status to their own self-governance, the narrative of maturity became a white, male prerogative that justified economic and political hierarchy in nineteenth-century New England.⁴

This chapter analyzes the ways young people navigated choices and confronted obstacles within the liminal period of youth. Their ability to maintain respectability followed patterns of race, gender, and class hierarchy despite the egalitarian ideals of the early nineteenth century. First, I explore the experiences of young, middling white men who had the full benefits of self-ownership. Second, I examine the limits, both economic and cultural, on young women’s choices that pushed them to view maturity as voluntary submission. As white New Englanders adapted to new measures of gender-based authority, they emphasized their development of the personal qualities that signified their success or failure as the result of their own hard work and good choices, rather than the privileges of their birth. Young people’s ability to demonstrate the markers of maturity secured middle-class status within volatile economic conditions. The chapter concludes by examining young people marginalized by class and race, who took positions at the bottom of the labor market because of their inability to claim the ideals of maturity that could overcome their legal disadvantages and racial prejudice. New Englanders’ willingness to bestow respectability on the seemingly meritocratic basis of maturity disguised the hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

Making the Self-Made Man

Young New Englanders who grew up in the early nineteenth century faced an

⁴ Boydston, Home and Work; Zagarri, Revolutionary Backlash.
unprecedented range of opportunities in their transition to adulthood. The rapid growth of cities, the integration of the agricultural market, the expansion of retailing and international trade, and the creation of banks and corporations fueled a dynamic economy ripe for the exploits of individual entrepreneurs and emerging capitalists.\(^5\) This increased opportunity had the most relevance to white, native-born men, who were assumed to possess the capacities of self-ownership necessary to take control in the economy. By asserting these talents through the seemingly natural process of growing up, they developed an ideal of maturity and masculinity that scholars have identified as the “self-made man.”\(^6\) Self-making helped young men overlook their vulnerability in the commercial economy in favor of their autonomy and responsibility. It provided a way for young men to claim masculinity during periods of unstable employment. Masculine ideals emphasized young men’s ability to take appropriate risks in the commercial environment. Although their risk was no more important than that of a woman choosing a husband on whom her livelihood would depend, it was viewed as a crucial qualification for economic and political power. By judging their autonomy and authority based on internal character traits gained through the process of growing up, young men promoted a democratic ideal of success or failure based on maturity.

With a greater degree of occupational choices came increased responsibility to choose the path that provided the best opportunity for success. In the early nineteenth-century, young men arranged their own early employment, rather than relying on their fathers to secure a patron. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, industrial manufacturing and increased trade networks expanded the commercial marketplace of domestic and foreign goods and opened

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opportunities for young men in mercantile and retail businesses.\textsuperscript{7} John G. Locke worked as a clerk for a silk store and a dry goods shop, a bookkeeper for a commission merchant, and as a teacher at a district school between the ages of seventeen and twenty two.\textsuperscript{8} Instead of being bound to a household unit, where they exchanged their labor for vocational training and pledged deference to their master, young men took employment on an at-will basis. This status gave them more autonomy but also more insecurity. They faced the constant risk of being dismissed by their employers and held full responsibility for avoiding work that could compromise their claims to self-ownership.

During the early nineteenth century, a young man’s choice of occupation “[took] on separate meaning and provide[d] the chief substance of his identity,” according to Anthony Rotundo.\textsuperscript{9} Yet many young men struggled to settle on the career that would define their identity. John Porter wrote to his college friend Andrew Bigelow after learning “of the alteration in your views with regard to your future profession.” Although Bigelow had previously claimed to be “fixed” in his “resolution” to study law, he now seemed to be “wavering.”\textsuperscript{10} Bigelow eventually decided on the ministry and graduated from Harvard with a degree in 1817. Two decades later, Levi Lincoln Newton questioned his intentions for the future when he learned that his father would be unable to grant him property due to losses from a recent fire. Although he intended to enter the medical profession, his father “remarked upon the difficulties which the physician was obliged to meet with but said that he did not wish to influence me in the choice of a profession.” His father also advised him to focus on a single occupation and “adher[e] strictly to whatever...

\textsuperscript{7} Peter Knight estimates that the number of men employed as clerks increased by 35% in the 1830s and by 225% in the 1840s. See Peter R. Knights, \textit{The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860: A Study in City Growth} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 84. For more on the increase in the mercantile and retail occupations, see Luskey, \textit{On the Make}, 2010.
\textsuperscript{8} John G. Locke Diary, AAS.
\textsuperscript{9} Rotundo, \textit{American Manhood Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era}, 167.
\textsuperscript{10} [John Porter] to Andrew Bigelow, Feb 1815, AAS.
occupation I should choose,” rather than pursuing a variety of ventures (which was more common for men in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries).\footnote{Levi Lincoln Newton Diary, 2 Mar 1839, AAS.}

Expanded opportunities for education allowed young men to imagine careers beyond their networks of kin or patronage. Amos Adams Lawrence, Jr., son of a leading merchant family, attended Harvard College to increase his range of professional opportunities beyond his father’s business. Amos Lawrence, Sr., hoped that his son would become a doctor, but the younger Lawrence wanted to avoid “a harassing practice, where one cannot make as much money as I could provided I’m taken into the old firm, and am industrious by nine tenths.” His college friend, who was studying medicine, praised the “wisdom” of Lawrence’s choice, “considering the favourableness of your circumstances to mercantile success, and observing also the immense number of Doctors with which the world is encumbered – I meant to say, blessed.”\footnote{Amos Adams Lawrence Diary, 17 Sep [1835?]; William LeBaron to Amos Adams Lawrence, 6 Sep 1835, MHS.} Amos’s older brother William, who had recently joined the family business, advised his brother “that commerce opens a field both to you and me which ought not be lost and which offers a chance of means a hundred times greater than any thing else which might be named.” William thought Lawrence was “better calculated for it than I am.” In fact, ten years later William changed occupations after taking a medical degree and starting work as a physician in Boston.\footnote{William R. Lawrence to Amos A. Lawrence, 18 Feb 1835, (1559), MHS.}

Because of these expanded choices, young men found themselves caught between their economic responsibility and their vulnerability in the commercial labor market. Young store clerk George Searle felt the dependence of his position and confided to his sister that “the liberties of an apprentice are few indeed.” With the arrival of another “apprentice and boarder” George worried that “there will not be enough to employ us all at the store,” but quickly added “I
need not fear it, as I hope I shall always find enough to do, in one way or another, to keep me
from idleness.” Later in his employment, after a busy period that required the young men to be
“at the store almost every night to 10, frequently til [sic] half past,” two of George's fellow
workers ran away, leaving George the oldest of the store's three apprentices. The next spring
George found that “a great part of the weight” of the business “is on my own shoulders.” While
his fellow apprentices exercised their choice by absconding, Searle remained in the position that
offered him the best chance for middle-class status. The freedom to change positions without
resorting to running away often made young men even more vulnerable in the economy. As
many times as John G. Locke left his employer because they could not agree “upon terms of
continuance,” he was forced to find a new position because the business “failed & I was thrown
out of employment.” As more workers shared Locke’s status of at-will employee they took
responsibility for avoiding the degradation that would mark them as lower class.

Even young men with a greater degree of economic stability and privileged resources felt
the instability of intermediate employment. When Amos Adams Lawrence took a tour of the
southern states to gain a perspective on his father’s mercantile business, he was unsure how to
act as an agent of his father’s firm. With letters of introduction to “all of the great merchants
here,” Lawrence felt “rather diffident” in his interactions. Still a subordinate in his father’s
enterprise, Lawrence recognized that he could not take responsibility to reciprocate the dinner
invitations he received. He assured his father that he would tread carefully in this liminal
position, “As I am not wholly on my own hook yet, I will be prudent how I make you a debtor
for my dinners.”

Once young men started into business on their own, their inexperience and lack of capital

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14 George Searle to Margaret Searle, Apr 1806, Curson Family Papers, HL.
15 John G. Locke Diary, Spring 1822, AAS.
16 Amos A. Lawrence to Amos Lawrence, 18 Jan 1836 [1837?], MHS.
posed dangers “to the independence and comfort of families.” Amos Lawrence Sr. knew firsthand how the early economic power given to young men could leave a “respectable” family “ruined.” He recorded one of his early financial endeavors during the Embargo of 1807. He followed the proper character traits “of rigid economy, & never allowed myself to spend a few pence for unnecessary objects.” When he had the opportunity to start a business in Boston, his father mortgaged the farm to borrow $1,000 on his son’s behalf. Paper money was a dangerous investment in the early nineteenth century, so Lawrence thanked his “great good luck and the influence of my brother Luther” when he was able to trade the bank money for silver. Shortly afterward, the bank failed and Lawrence narrowly escaped being responsible for a severe economic blow to his family. This early incident taught Lawrence a lesson that he carried with him into adulthood as a successful merchant. Although often in a position to give credit to young businessmen, he “uniformly discouraged” support when the father acted “as bondsman.” Although his prudence was often “rejected with anger,” Lawrence appealed to the internal capacities for success in the commercial environment, rather than the importance of his financial assistance: “A young man who cannot get along, without such aid, will not be likely to get along with it.”

Early nineteenth-century America seemed ripe with opportunities for young men who lacked access to land. George Searle, John G. Locke, Amos Lawrence, Sr., and others looked for security, wealth, and prestige in the commercial labor market. Like the clerks studied by Brian Luskey, these young men “believed that their occupational posts would prepare them for independence at the head of their own firms.” Lawrence, Sr., was a model of the economic opportunity available in New England’s growing towns and cities. With disciplined investments

17 Amos Lawrence Account Book (7), 7 Jan 1831, Amos Lawrence Papers, MHS.
and hard work paying off, Lawrence viewed his success as the result of his own talents and character. He expected that other young men would achieve a similar fortune with diligence and discretion. But as some men dominated manufacturing and trade in the early nineteenth century, their amassed capital crowded out the rising generation. The retail store and the artisan’s workshop – once seen as the place for young men to prove their merit and earn the economic autonomy they deserved – became sites of menial wage labor. With the advance of capitalism, a new generation of clerks felt “economic and cultural capital [slip] through their fingers.”

In some cases, young men judged their acquisition of character in direct relation to their age, using a sense of maturity to evaluate their character and self-discipline within their subordinate circumstances. Samuel Burling took an assignment as a “clerk of the Vessel” on a voyage to South America, which required him at only “but little over 17” to take on the responsibility of keeping “an eye to the tricks or roguery of [the] agents.” To navigate the politics on the ship, Burling cultivated a studied disposition “such as would have done some credit to a person of elder years.” However, his new character required “much restraint for a vain boy of seventeen” and he reacted with “a foolish habit” in other situations.

Bradley Cumings, an apprentice clerk, recorded an aphorism about growing up: “Man – at ten a child, at twenty wild – at thirty tame if ever – at forty wise – at fifty rich – at sixty good or never.” George Silsbee Hale used his diary to remind him of past behavior that was “silly and boyish” as he prepared to graduate from Harvard College. When Carroll Norcross, an aspiring college student who ran his own writing school, engaged with strangers in a neighboring village, he was disappointed in

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19 Ibid., 3.
20 Samuel [Burling] Curson, “My First Voyage,” Curson Family Papers, HL. Samuel Burling changed his name to Samuel Curson in 1808. This is discussed in Chapter 3.
21 George Silsbee Hale Diary, Apr 1843, MHS.
his “diffidence,” a trait that “ever annoys me and I fear I never shall outgrow it.”

Young men faced with the uncertainty of the early capitalist economy looked to their internalized character traits to help them avoid temptations that their provisional autonomy offered. By expressing the capacity to seek their long-term interest, they demonstrated their middling status and growing maturity. Bradley Cumings served as a clerk in a dry goods store in Boston starting at age thirteen. He witnessed the uncertainty of commercial business as he documented failures around the city, knowing that at any time his own employment could come into jeopardy. In 1830, at age eighteen, Cumings wrote, “There does not appear to me that there can be a poorer place for a young man to commence his pursuits, which shall enable him to live easily in life, than in this City.” However, he was “confident, that by economy and strict attention to business, a person can more than rub along in the world.” Four years later, Cumings joined his employer’s son in a partnership in the dry goods store. He connected his faith in the economy to personal disposition: “If industry, economy, & perseverance still result in success, then I have no fears.” Cumings’s success as a young shopkeeper allowed him to view his position as a product of his own character, the capacities he strove to develop as part of growing up and proving himself worth of the choices that lay before him. Cumings’s belief that good character would be rewarded with financial success was part of a broader cultural shift – later becoming a cultural narrative exemplified by the stories of Horatio Alger – that would define American identity in the nineteenth century. From the early decades of commercialization, the United States was forming its identity as a nation of strivers, often by ignoring the limitations on family or individual resources for the mythology of equal opportunity.

The volatile economy threatened the security and respectability of young men at all levels

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22 Carroll Norcross Diary, 4 May 1852, MeHS.
of society. Amos Adams Lawrence, a scion of Boston’s leading merchant family, also expressed his anxiety about his commercial prospects, even with the benefit of his father’s resources and connections. Starting business in the wake of the economic depression of 1837 made Lawrence wary of judging his success by his financial gains. With his father – the founder of one of Boston’s leading mercantile firms and a respected politician and philanthropist – as his model for adulthood, Lawrence regretted at age twenty-eight that he was “not distinguished even in my own city.” He was unsure of how to guide his ambition, when he could trust neither “wealth” nor “office” to give him happiness. Although Lawrence wanted to put his success in the hands of Providence, “the education of my youth leads me to think that something more is necessary in order to reach eternal bliss.” He declared no ambition to be “rich” if he had to work “like a slave [from] morning till night for money.” His economic privilege allowed him to think he had “no great wants & think I can live well in the country” without constant toil. His work would be an expression of his character, rather than a daily struggle for livelihood.

Cuming and Lawrence’s ambivalence about the role of personal initiative or impersonal economic forces in commercial success or failure was shared by many in early nineteenth-century America. Greater access to credit by middling entrepreneurs meant that more men fell into debt. Rather than viewing insolvency as a moral disgrace, state officials started to recognize debt as simply an economic misfortune. As Edward Balleisen shows, this leniency, critical in a society that imprisoned insolvent men and women, was granted only to commercial men who were deemed to make their livelihood within an amoral marketplace and whose activities could

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24 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 6 Aug 1839, 1558. MHS.
25 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 7 Jul 1838, 1558. MHS.
26 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 7 Nov 1838, MHS.
be seen as furthering the public good. Following the Panics of 1837 and 1839, the view of bankrupts as victims of the capitalist market encouraged the passage of a federal Bankruptcy Act. However, the legislation was repealed amidst outrage that it favored debtors who should be held more responsible for their loss. In this volatile environment, a man measured his masculinity through his ability to take “upon himself the risks and perils incident to his situation.” Assuming the risk for success or failure in the labor market was the heart of men’s self-ownership. Masculinity emphasized the rational management of economic risk. For young women, risk came from choosing a husband, on whom their financial security, and the security of their future children, depended. Men could go into debt because they could be loaned money. Femininity demanded passive economic engagement – ideally dependence on a husband or father, with self-generated resources through writing or running a boarding house as an option of last resort. When young men used the rhetoric of maturity to prepare themselves for risk, the privileges of masculinity lead them to positions of economic and political power.

The commercial economy, with the deskilling of manufacturing and the increase of petty retail work, threatened to make young men perpetual dependents. For young men confined to subordinate positions, the ability to assert control over working conditions could mitigate the features of degraded labor. In order to portray their work as an aspect of maturity, young men interpreted their actions as the result of choice, autonomy, and independence. In 1835 eighteen-year-old Samuel Dennis Warren planned to leave his position with the Boston paper dealers Dean Grant and Otis Daniell. Warren felt unsatisfied with the conditions of his employment. He

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informed his employers, “I think there is more required of me than I am able to do.” Additionally, he considered the wages inadequate, so low that “I am not to have enough to pay for my cloths.” He relied on financial support from his mother during his employment. In these conditions, Warren was in danger of becoming a permanent menial worker, without the financial autonomy that masculinity required. To address his grievances, Warren met personally with his employers: “I plainly told them that I should not wish to stay under this circumstance and we accordingly concluded that I should leave & I must confess that I feel much happier in the idea of going than of staying since that time.”

Although Warren articulated his independence through his ability to leave the position, his mother and employers reinforced his need for further development in character and vocational skill. His mother wrote “you are at a critical age & need much counsel more than I am able to give but I hope you will act with discretion at all times carefully avoiding every temptation to evil [and] be faithful in the performance of all your duties to God & man.” She attributed his desire to leave not to a rational evaluation of the position, but to the passions of youth. “Perhaps you have not viewed the subject correctly,” she wrote, “but had a restless uneasy feeling as is very common to your age and have concluded from such feelings that your business was not suited to your genius.” Warren’s employers warned his mother of the danger of his decision to leave their firm. “He is at a very interesting and critical time of life, one that has more temptations and difficulties to overcome than others…We think it often injurious to Boys and renders them less steady & persevering, to change situations.” The autonomy young men exercised in the absence of formalized apprenticeships risked leading them to perpetual

30 Samuel Dennis Warren to Susannah Warren, 29 Apr 1835, Warren Family Papers, MHS.
31 Susannah Warren to Samuel Dennis Warren, 7 Jul 1834, Warren Family Papers, MHS.
32 Susannah Warren to Samuel Dennis Warren, 8 May 1835, Warren Family Papers, MHS.
33 Dean Grant and Otis Daniell to Susannah Warren, 28 Apr 1835, Warren Family Papers, MHS.
dependence by failing to control their impulses and mold them into steadfast workers.

The dispute over Warren’s employment reveals diverging interpretations of the prospect of mobility and the source of degradation in the emerging commercial economy. Warren’s mother and employers feared his descent into marginal, lower class employment if he abandoned his position without securing skills or a reputation. They portrayed maturity as the ability to submit to the wisdom of one’s elders and to build character through youthful restraint. However, Warren foresaw his continued subordination if he remained in a position that seemed to lack the opportunity for reasonable compensation and advancement. He saw maturity as his decision to pursue his independent will within his employment relationship. While the adults expected wealth and security to follow the development of character, Warren rejected his employment because it seemed to hinder his economic independence and did not reflect his sense of self-ownership.

Ultimately labor market constraints prevented Warren’s exercise of choice. Unable to find a new position, he reluctantly remained with Grant and Daniell. His threat to leave allowed him to negotiate for a better position within the firm. “If I can improve my handwriting so as to be satisfactory,” Warren could take over the book-keeping responsibilities from another employee. A new boarding place away from his employers also bolstered Warren’s sense of independence. He confidently asserted, “I shall endeavour at all times to do what is right and if [Daniell] is satisfied with that very well. If not I am ready and willing at any time to leave them.”

In order to assert his maturity in the republican environment based on reason and consent, Warren had to portray his labor experience in terms of choice. Attitudes like this, which challenged the dependence that was inherent in the employment relation, helped to build the ideal of the worker as a competent, freely-contracting individual.

34 Samuel Dennis Warren to Susannah Warren, 29 Sept 1835, Warren Family Papers, MHS.
Although young men like Warren portrayed themselves as independent workers, free to leave their employers “at any time” and to insist on preferred conditions, the bargaining power of at-will employees generally lacked such opportunities. To counter their structural dependence within the industrial economy, some young men turned to collective efforts such as strikes and union organization. When a group of journeymen demanded a ten-hour day through the Carpenters’ Union of Boston in 1825, the master carpenters denounced the activism as a threat to the ability of subordinate workers to come of age. The union represented a dangerous “combination” that was “a departure from the salutary and steady usages which have prevailed in this city…by an adherence to which, Apprentices and Journeymen, accustomed to industrious and temperate habits, have, in their turn, become thriving and respectable Masters.”

Labor activism in New England in the 1830s and 1840s attempted to promote the reputation of laboring men as responsible members of the community through appeals to morality and civic responsibility. In 1842, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in favor of a union organized among Boston bootmakers, arguing that the workers were capable of acting “in such a manner as best to subserve their own interests.” This recognition of the legitimacy of unions expanded the notion of ‘free labor’ to include working

men’s ability to make decisions as a collective body. In the same year, Shaw ruled that workers should take responsibility for the risk of injury that could occur in the industrial workplace as part of their employment.\footnote{Farwell v Boston and Worcester Railroad (1842). See John Fabian Witt, The Accidental Republic: Crippled Workingmen, Destitute Widows, and the Remaking of American Law (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 43–70. For the legal impact on minor workers, see Schmidt, ‘‘Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood,’’ 2005.} By the mid-nineteenth century, the maturity that young men claimed through their liminal work allowed them to organize, but they were expected to understand the hazards of the workplace and limited in their ability to hold their employers liable for injury caused by fellow workers. The ‘‘free labor’’ ideal treated men as competent and responsible for their own condition, and therefore justified the lack of protection offered to adult male workers. The vulnerability and marginality that laboring men experienced was thus attributed to their own poor character or inability to manage risk, and made their subordinate position in political and economic leadership legitimate.

Like the young urban worker, aspiring professionals struggled to achieve the stability necessary for middle-class status. In the early nineteenth century, more young men entered college to avoid the “declining local opportunity and economic difficulty” in rural New England that threatened to confine them to positions as marginal agricultural laborers.\footnote{Allmendinger, Paupers and Scholars, 4.} In order to fund their scholarly endeavors, many students took employment as district school teachers during the breaks in their own academic terms. David Allmendinger finds that during the early nineteenth century “at least one-third of all New England [college] students took leaves of absence each year after the winter vacation in order to teach,” requiring colleges to adjust their terms to accommodate this seasonal employment.\footnote{Ibid., 92–93.} Teaching gave young men substantial autonomy: they had complete control over their schoolhouse, received limited district oversight, and received a
salary directly from their employers.\textsuperscript{42} However, the dependent features of the position – the meager compensation, isolated location, and transient nature of the employment – undercut this sense of authority. Young schoolmasters needed to assure themselves that the position was the foundation for mobility. By performing masculinity and self-control before their students, they could be confident that they had the capacities necessary to secure more prosperous work.

As college students flocked to this opportunity to support their advancing education, they struggled to exercise discipline over younger children while they were still learning to master their own character. As Andrew Bigelow prepared to start a position as a schoolmaster, his friend assured him “that if you play the part of the Master as well as you did that of the student, your scholars will fully answer the expectations of their patrons, and the fond hopes of their parents.”\textsuperscript{43} David Damon criticized himself for being “imprudent in letting my vexation be known out of the school.” He found that his position required him to display “decision of character,” but when he was pleased with his exercise of maturity, he had “the satisfaction of going to bed with the consciousness that I have manfully discharged my duty.”\textsuperscript{44} William Barrows, Jr. saw that he “was not careful enough in my conduct before many of my scholars.” He feared the consequences of his “levity” and warned himself that the “scholars will take liberties which do not belong to them and you will feel yourself hardly filled to correct them.”\textsuperscript{45}

Another young schoolmaster, Josiah Pierce, found “the responsibility of an instructor is very great, much more so than I was formerly aware of.” He saw how his “attention or neglect” could determine “their respectability or infamy in society.” Given this critical position, “a

\textsuperscript{43} F. D. Quash to Andrew Bigelow, 13 Jan 1813, AAS.
\textsuperscript{44} David Damon Diary, 3 Dec 1812, 21 Apr 1812, 30 Sep 1812, HL.
\textsuperscript{45} David Damon Diary, 3 Dec 1812, No. 20, Damon Family Papers, HL; William Barrows, Jr. Diary, 3 Dec 1804, Maine Historical Society (hereafter, MeHS).
teacher ought to have a high moral sense of duty, if he do not he is not qualified to teach, however well he may be versed in literary knowledge.” Pierce tried to maintain authority in his classroom by sometimes forbidding his students to go to the stove whenever they asked. But then he second-guessed his strictness because he sat at “a warm desk & therefore am not a fit judge of their feeling of heat and cold.”46 To find the proper mode of authority, William Barrows decided to “consider yourself as the father of those under your care and hearken not to their whimsies but use your own judgment.” Barrow wrote that “owing to bashfulness and ignorance thou dost not insist on the civility due to my station. You coincide with another merely because he says so, without reason. Remember that others opinions are fallible as well as your own, and be not so hasty to agree with them, but speak your own sentiments.”47 Young schoolmasters recognized that teaching allowed them to experiment with masculine authority and they used their role in the classroom to exhibit the capacities for maturity they needed in the labor market.

Even with an elite education, young men were at risk of falling into marginal positions that lacked the responsibility, reputation, and financial compensation that they thought they deserved. Maintaining their path toward middle-class status depended on securing positions that could be portrayed as a choice, rather than necessity. Andrews Norton received his degree from Harvard College in 1804 and quickly faced a constricted labor market for a young man with high academic credentials. Norton’s path to adulthood was marked by limited choices for employment that could meet his (and his father’s) expectations. Through a friend, Norton heard about an academy in Fredericktown, New Brunswick, that needed an instructor. He wrote to his father about the benefits of the situation, both materially – in that it “will afford me support and

46 Josiah Pierce to Hannah Pierce, 20 Jan 1815, Pierce Family Collection, MeHS.
47 William Barrows, Jr. Diary, 4 Feb 1806, MeHS.
something more” – and for his reputation – that “the station is respectable.” Norton must have considered himself prudent for highlighting these positive features of the position, while downplaying “some things that would be at first very disagreeable, especially the entire separation from my friends.” His father, however, considered the isolation of the position a negative reflection on its quality. Afraid that his son would be degraded by taking a position outside the nation’s borders, Samuel Norton questioned “whether talents and learning are held in so low estimation in this state and others in the US that [young scholars] are obliged to flee for support to the settlements of another nation?”

Bowing to his father’s advice, Norton stayed in Cambridge after graduation to work as a tutor and lecturer for the college. After three years, passing his twenty-first birthday without mention, Norton received an offer to teach at a school in Haverhill, Massachusetts. He declined because he feared “withdrawing myself from my profession and going out of the way of notice (which would not be so much the case with regards to an office at college, which however there is no certainty of my immediately obtaining).” With high expectations for employment, and feeling limited by his family, Norton had difficulty choosing positions that could advance his career. Instead, he avoided responsibility to make the choice and wrote to his father that “I shall be governed entirely by what may appear to be your inclination.” Two years later, Norton was still working in marginal positions for Harvard College as a tutor and lecturer. With an offer to serve as a tutor at Bowdoin College, Norton’s father gave him a weak endorsement, writing “under existing circumstances, you have had a repeated invitation to go to Brunswick and have accepted it, though I think the salary small.” After a year, Norton decided to return to

48 Andrews Norton to Samuel Norton, 26 Dec 1804, Andrews Norton Papers (MS Am 1089), HL.
49 Samuel Norton to Andrews Norton, 20 Dec 1804, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
51 Samuel Norton to Andrews Norton, 22 Sep 1809, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
Cambridge “in hopes of obtaining some better and more lucrative situation, or if not with an almost certainty of not being out of employment, as if I cannot get one thing I shall satisfy myself with another.”  

His father expressed concern about the decision to “give up your present connexion without a rational prospect of succeeding in some other business.” Both men portrayed Andrews’ choices in terms of the positions that would help him advance toward the reputation and remuneration appropriate to his credentials and social status.

Norton defied his father’s advice, moved back to Cambridge, and worked for a Unitarian publication before finally receiving a lectureship at Harvard College. As he started to make his own employment decisions, Norton assured his parents that “one of the strongest motives to exertion in any studies in which I have been engaged, that whatever reputation I might acquire would be a means of giving pleasure to you and my mother.” As he exerted more independence, he recognized that maturity came from recognizing the wisdom of his elders. He wrote: “I am indebted for the foundation of my own opinion on those feelings and principles which I received from you in early life.” As Norton asserted his own employment choices, he refrained from claiming independence beyond his status by exhibiting a deferential attitude toward his parents.

He chose to display maturity by balancing self-determination over his labor with submission to the rational views of his elders.

Each step toward independence raised the stakes of securing employment that fostered social and economic mobility. Resorting to a more marginal or subordinate position after experiencing greater autonomy risked degrading a young man’s masculinity and class status even if the position offered respectability to someone moving upward. At age twenty-six, John Proctor left his position as a schoolmaster in Lancaster, Massachusetts, to join the first class at Harvard.

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52 Andrews Norton to Samuel Norton, 16 July 1810, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
53 Samuel Norton to Andrews Norton, 26 Apr 1810, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
54 Andrews Norton to Samuel Norton, 2 Apr 1817, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
College’s newly-established Law School. He remarked that “the idea of returning to College again is not the most pleasant.” But he made the decision “after mature deliberations” to advance his academic credentials. But Proctor took a gamble by trusting his advancement to a formal institution rather than following the traditional path of a legal apprenticeship.\textsuperscript{55} Despite the lack “of agreeable society, particularly that of females,” Proctor viewed his new station as a place to achieve higher employment goals. He committed himself to taking “sufficient amusement in his own study.”\textsuperscript{56} Returning to the life of a student was difficult for Proctor, because it meant a reprise of solitary and studious behavior when he “much prefer[ed] an active life.” Proctor portrayed his decision to leave his employment for higher education as a “mature” choice that placed him on a trajectory toward a middle-class maturity. Despite the disadvantages of the choice, voluntarily isolating himself from “agreeable society,” Proctor viewed this temporary sojourn into student life as preparation for his future goals. He viewed his period of education as a time of delayed gratification, but adulthood would “afford some immediate reward” from employment.\textsuperscript{57}

To fund his tuition at law school, John Proctor also needed to work during breaks in Harvard’s academic schedule. He had taught previously, but took a poorly paid position for the winter term near his hometown of Danvers. He took the position “not so much upon my own account, as because I thought it would please my Father,” who had always been “extremely kind and obliging.” But teaching school at this point in his educational career injured Proctor’s sense of maturity and social mobility. Labor that was appropriate for a teenage student at an academy

\textsuperscript{55} For a discussion of changes in the training of professionals, particularly the formalization of study following the Civil War, see Burton J. Bledstein, \textit{The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America} (New York: Norton, 1976).
\textsuperscript{56} John W. Proctor Diary, 16 Oct 1817, MS Am 1566, HL.
\textsuperscript{57} John W. Proctor Diary, 17 Oct 1817, HL.
or college lacked the authority expected of a young man in his mid-twenties. Proctor had already left a job as a local schoolmaster, and returning to teaching at a lower position seemed to suggest a failure of his occupational goals. He called it a “humiliating task,” not because of the work itself, but because it was a downgrade in position, and noted that “it embarrasses my progress in my profession.” After the next summer term, Proctor found employment that better fit his professional prospects: a law office in Salem, where he could continue his studies. He passed the day making out writs for clients and reading law texts. The situation offered practical instruction that a law school could not easily provide and Proctor found “that it is quite important for an attorney to be familiar with the practical as well as the theoretical part of his profession.”

As Proctor advanced toward an occupation that promised wealth and prestige, he sought intermediate work that provided responsibilities suitable for his age and class status.

To make choices that conformed to middle-class standards of competence and respectability in the early nineteenth-century labor market, young men had to fulfill expectations for independence, responsibility, and conviction defined in terms of their age and gender. In a society now increasingly defined by self-made men, adults who failed to secure appropriate labor positions lacked the qualities of maturity. Subordinate positions that were sought by young men became unsuitable for older men. In 1837, fifty-year-old former sea captain Joshua Gray was looking for work. In a reversal of typical practice, he asked his sons, both involved in the maritime business, to help him find a position. His twenty-five-year-old son Harrison wrote about the lack of positions for captains. Although Joshua Gray would have considered finding employment as a first mate, Harrison warned “you are a getting too old for that capacity.” Since he could not find a position that was suitable for his age, Harrison recommended that his father remain occupied with “what little you can do on the farm till you can get a capt[ain’s] birth.”

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58 John W. Proctor Diary, 3 Nov 1817, 8 Dec 1817, 7 Sept 1818, HL.
Harrison expressed concern for protecting his father’s reputation. When he asked about the prospect for “business” with another “Capt of my acquaintance who is out of employ,” he assured his father “I did not mention of your being out of employ.” Father and son recognized that labor responsibilities needed to be considered in relation to the worker’s age in order to gain the social benefits of maturity and avoid the threat of degradation. Resorting to a lower position signified an act of desperation rather than choice, and a loss of independence unfitting of masculine adulthood.

Regardless of the occupation to which a young man aspired, he started his employment in a subordinate position. During their liminal experiences as quasi-apprentices, schoolmasters, and other intermediate workers, young men pursued this self-making by navigating their labor choices to find positions of mobility that fit their class, gender, and age status. In order to meet middle-class expectations of ambition and social mobility, the symbols of a mature disposition, young men’s choices regarding education and employment needed to demonstrate their ability to achieve greater rationality and authority as they grew up. The expectation that men would continually develop their capacities gave them power over women, whose highest achievement of maturity came from relinquishing her youthful autonomy for the stability of a male-headed family. The ideals of independent labor benefitted young men who inherited the fullest scope of equality and opportunity from the American Revolution. As fewer young men faced the volatility of the commercial economy, they upheld the ideals of self-ownership, merit, and consent as the essential characteristics of masculinity developed through the process of growing up. By portraying the position as the result of their capacity to make appropriate choices, they promoted maturity as an egalitarian ideal for the emerging democratic and commercial society that solidified the authority of middle-class white men and justified the subordination of women, non-

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59 Harrison Gray to Joshua Gray, 10 Apr 1837, Gray Family Correspondence, SL.
whites, and the poor.

**Domesticating Young Women**

With the rise of the commercial economy, young New England women faced anxieties of their own. With the rise of specialized production and the introduction of new technology such as powered looms in the early nineteenth century, families required less of the female labor that sustained the household. Alice Kessler-Harris finds that the rise of specialized production did not “reduce the farm wife's labor, but [minimized] the need for extra female help.” For young women, the lack of household production decreased the value of their labor to “marginal significance” as families shifted to the cash economy.60 Early nineteenth-century commercialization increased women’s opportunities for paid labor outside the home, but gradually eroded the income-generating activity they could do within the household. In the commercial environment, unmarried women experienced some of the “occupational and intellectual choice” available to their brothers, but found that these new sites of labor could only provide an avenue to respectability if they appealed to “pleas of patriotism” and “injunctions to render useful service.”61 By relying too much on paid labor, young women could fall into lower class status. Instead of simply fulfilling the economic needs of the household, the demands of respectability required young women to establish their employment within a rhetoric of voluntary submission to the needs of the family and the nation.

As young women faced a new range of choices in the commercial economy, they were restricted by the cultural expectation that women find their authority within the domestic sphere. Jeanne Boydston theorizes that this “emergence of the ideology of separate spheres must be

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viewed at least in part as a hardening of the attitudes of certain groups against specific actual practices of gender they deemed particularly threatening.”  

For the daughters of elite families, this meant finding ‘usefulness’ and ‘duty’ in domestic management and avoiding any of the drudgery traditionally associated with household work. Less privileged young women, especially those who lost a father’s income, had to find employment outside the natal home that followed expectations of domesticity. Any woman who worked for income risked losing her and her family’s middle-class status because remunerated female labor was generally considered a necessity rather than a choice.

Among families who remained engaged in agricultural labor during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, young women performed vital tasks of economic production that helped sustain the family. Elizabeth Fuller was the daughter of a minister in Princeton, Massachusetts, who also ran a farm. At fifteen, Fuller was responsible for baking pies, making candles, and picking wool. When her mother “began to spin the wool for Pa’s coat,” Elizabeth was there to “card for her & do the household work.” Elizabeth then took on the task of weaving the wool into yards of cloth for the family to sell. In May 1792 she recorded in her diary “I have woven a hundred and forty Yards since the ninth of March.” In the late eighteenth century, daughters could supplement their household labor with terms teaching school in local districts. Seventeen-year-old Ruth Henshaw’s labor initially revolved around domestic concerns. With her younger sister Phoebe, Ruth washed floors, baked bread, and assisted in home textile production. At age eighteen she was able to attend school and earn the credentials to work as a teacher. Henshaw taught school during the summer session and worked in spinning and weaving of cloth during the remainder of the year. The family’s enterprise required Henshaw to “engaged a girl to come &

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help us spin a while.” Within the agricultural household, young women pursued a range of productive activities for the financial benefit of their families.

Elizabeth Fuller and Ruth Henshaw followed many of the labor patterns of colonial women, but their activities were being transformed by commercialization. As the nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner replaced the integrated household economy, young women’s traditional activities slowly became intertwined with emerging capitalist production. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, proto-industrialists experimented with more efficient methods of textile production. To capitalize on the isolated efforts of thousands of young woman like Fuller and Henshaw, textile merchants implemented a system of outwork by distributing machine-spun yarn to regional families to finish into woven cloth. This system, which peaked around 1820, gave work to “approximately twelve thousand weavers across New England,” mostly women.63 Economic production remained within the home, but it was part of a larger regional enterprise organized by elite merchants. As spinning and weaving technology improved, capitalists invested in mechanized factories that supplanted the outwork of local women. By the mid-nineteenth century, this manufacturing labor relocated to urban centers, sparking “massive rural-urban migration and foreign immigration to create a female urban industrial workforce.”64

In addition to finding new sites for traditional domestic production, young women continued the feminine task of educating children as the process shifted from a responsibility of the family and the church to an enterprise of the community and the state. The growth of formal schooling to prepare children for the expansion of citizenship in republican government. As towns sought teachers to enlarge the schooling offered to children, they hired young women who commanded a lower salary than their male peers. In the early nineteenth century, women

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64 Ibid., xv.
comprised between 30 and 50 percent of common school instructors in New England states. By 1860, women were 80% of the teaching force in most of the region. Teaching provided young women with an opportunity for employment that fulfilled feminine expectations of child nurture and moral uplift. By drawing on their post-primary education, working as a schoolmistress enabled young women to claim middling status, demonstrate their support of the republic, and exert cultural authority through their employment. Given these economic and social benefits, it is not surprising that in the early nineteenth century one-quarter of all white women in Massachusetts took employment as a school teacher in the years before marriage.

For young women who remained at home during youth, the challenge of preserving class status came from promoting refinement within the domestic sphere. Although the productive aspects of the household moved to the public sphere, domestic life required maintenance and management – cooking, cleaning, mending, and caring for others. To secure middle-class status, women needed to perform these activities without revealing drudgery in their employments. For young women who had the privilege of formal schooling, domestic management represented a loss of freedom. To make sense of this necessary change in situation, they prepared themselves to choose the needs of their family over their own desires. Seventeen-year-old Hannah Howe marked the beginning of a new year with “many good resolutions, which I hope I may have strength to keep.” She prepared to take responsibility for the care of children in her family, and expected “many many times when the patience is severely tried.” She appealed to “that Father who over-looks our sins and follies, to give me strength, and assist me in being a good and

dutiful daughter.” Another young woman wrote to her cousin about the “increased pressure of domestic duties” she felt since her mother’s poor health and her father’s responsibilities at the local college left her with “the care of everything – company, kitchen, & children.” But rather than complain, she hoped to avoid her self-described natural indolence. As daughters’ productive role in the household diminished, their activities symbolized a family’s gentility, which required young women to embrace their domestic labor as means to develop character fitting women’s supposed submissive, virtuous, and caring natures.

Young nineteenth-century women continued to perform labor traditionally designated for females, yet the relationships of employment had changed. Persis Sibley was born in Maine in 1814 to an agricultural family. By 1841, she described herself as a “lady of a certain age” who, given her unmarried state, found herself “freed almost entirely from domestic cares.” As she approached age 28, she received “an unusual number of flattering marriage offers…which together have caused the subject of matrimony to dwell much upon my mind.” Matrimony and the labor it required were on the mind of Persis’ mother as well. Instead of sending Sibley to live with a relative or neighbor to learn specialized domestic skill, the family brought in a “tailoress,” who was given Persis’ services for the duration of her stay. Persis’ mother told the tailor “you may have the advantage of what you can get out of her, for what she will learn, may, some day, be of great advantage to her.” Sibley had no desire to add to her domestic skills, “already hav[ing] as many trades as I can well follow, for I do everything else but just cooking.” She wrote in her diary, “If I get this I shall have to neglect something else, and I greatly fear it wo’d come out of my reading and writing time.” Over the next two weeks, Persis stuck to her convictions and avoided working with the tailor whenever possible. She helped with the thresher,
and even worked in the kitchen: “anything rather than tailoring, is the motto.” However, Persis could not avoid her mother’s instructions and, by the end of the tailor’s stay, she found “I have something to boast of – of [which] I am very proud i.e. of making first rate button holes...there is satisfaction in learning how to do what we didn’t know before.”

Domestic activities such as tailoring became a specialized skill that could serve as a single woman’s sole occupation, and middling families preferred to have their daughters schooled in domestic skills within the home, rather than boarding them with another household in an arrangement that was too similar to paid domestic service.

As parents of middling means invested in their daughters’ education, they promoted the ideal of usefulness and sacrifice to domestic duty when their daughters entered youth. Nineteen-year-old Mary Eliot, daughter of a prominent Boston businessman, struggled to balance her desires for leisure with her limited duties within the family. When Eliot spent time with her grandmother in Newbury, her father wrote to advise her to “be as useful as you can, for I do you the honor to think, that it is a delight to you to be serviceable.” He encouraged her to find intrinsic value in her labor: “if you could want a stimulus, you might easily find it in a real & arduous lesson [on] the labours & exertions, to which you [assent] has been very long called, & has most earnestly & exemplary executed.” Although nineteenth-century daughters contributed little to the livelihood of an elite family, parents still expected them to look upon their activities as a service to others and a reflection of their character. Through this display of respectability, they signified their potential as a wife and mother and secured their transition into a stable household as an adult.

For young women who had greater intellectual and occupational opportunities outside the

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69 Persis Sibley Diary, Vol. 2, 7 Jan 1841, 15 Jan 1841, MeHS.
70 Samuel Eliot to Mary Harrison Eliot, 14 Apr 1807, Parkman Family Papers (MS Am 2120), HL.
home, the expectations of femininity demanded that they willingly stifle their academic and leisure pursuits to fulfill their duty to others: making this choice represented their maturity. Mary Eliot wrote to her beau that the “week has been unusually full of employment, I hardly know how I find so much occupation.” She portrayed herself as welcoming industry, asserting that “a life devoted to useful pursuits is so much happier than one without employment.” However, she admitted her “regret that I have not more time for reading.” When she described to her cousin and confidant Margaret Searle a book that she had started, and inquired about what her friends thought, Eliot also warned herself that it was “almost dangerous for me to take it up at this time when I have so much sewing to do.” She had been educated to have an interest in liberal knowledge and feminine accomplishments, avocations that sometimes clashed with adult women's duties within the home. She sought sympathy from Searle about the “trial” of being “very desirous of drawing,” but “obliged to spend the Morning in sewing.”

Yet at the same time, taking responsibility within the family made Eliot feel useful. She soon recognized that her authority would come not from her intellectual ambitions or her refinements, but through her appeals to duty and sacrifice within the home. In the year before her marriage to Edmund Dwight, Eliot remarked a number of times to Searle about her growing responsibilities to her family. She was accustomed to taking frequent trips to Newbury, where she stayed with her maternal grandmother and enjoyed the company of her Searle cousins. In July 1808, shortly after her twentieth birthday, Eliot reported that “Mamma seems to think I had better not go [to Newbury] at all.” At first she rejected her mother's desires, but then reconsidered because “I cannot think of leaving home at present.” Her mother was sick and “as I flatter myself that I am useful to her I must not leave her till she recovers her health.”

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71 Mary Harrison Eliot to Edmund Dwight, 12 Feb 1808, HL; Mary Harrison Eliot to Margaret Searle, 16 Aug 1806, HL; Mary Harrison Eliot to Margaret Searle, 24 Jul 1808, HL.
decided that she needed to put her responsibilities above “amusement.” She reluctantly told Searle that taking the trip to Newbury would “seem like deserting duty for pleasure.” At the end of the summer, Eliot reiterated her desire to visit Searle in Newbury, but resolved to “control these flights & submit to the drudgery of useful employment.” Mary took pride in her belief that “I am now important to my mother.” Taking over some of the maternal responsibilities within the family provided a way for Mary to “return some part of this debt of gratitude.”

Eliot framed her responsibilities to her family as an act of choice. She expressed her maturity in her decision to voluntary forgo her personal desires in order to support the domestic management of the home. As more young women like Eliot grew up without a direct economic role in their families, they emphasized an internal sense of authority through the self-restraint and sacrifice as preparation for their role as wives and mothers.

For women from less privileged circumstances, employment in the years before marriage was an economic necessity, but they had enough social and economic capital to choose work that avoided degradation. In the early nineteenth century, as families earned respectability through the activities of a male breadwinner and the domestic management of a wife, the labor of children – and especially daughters – signified a family’s class status. In order to support themselves while retaining their marriageability, young women needed to earn money while portraying their work as a voluntary submission to the duties of the family or the community. As young women navigated the choices and obstacles before them, they focused on the acquisition of habits and dispositions which they viewed as the keys to their success. Despite the barriers placed on female economic activity, young women interpreted their conditions as the product of character developed through the process of growing up. By pursuing employment with the goal

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72 Ibid; Mary Harrison Eliot to Margaret Searle, 2 Aug 1808, Parkman, HL; Mary Harrison Eliot to Edmund Dwight, 13 Jan 1809, Parkman, HL.
of marriage and domestic activity, young women demonstrated femininity through their mature
decision to seek the stability of a male-headed family.

In this new economy, young women found creative ways to gain the respectability they
needed while working for their livelihood. By the early decades of the nineteenth century,
women boarded with relatives, neighbors, and even strangers to gain access to schools rather
than to learn weaving or a similar skill. In 1824 young wife and mother Abigail Bradley Hyde
wrote to her mother that “the assistance Sarah,” her younger sister, “would be willing to render”
would allow her to forgo hiring domestic help. With Abigail's husband starting a school, she
proposed that Sarah “stay 3 months & attend this school.” Sarah seemed to prefer the change of
environment that working in her sister's family provided. She wrote to her mother that she was
“very contented to stay” and attend school for the winter session. But without the full
responsibilities of a household, employment and education for unmarried women were transient.
In 1827, Abigail's husband Lavius Hyde wrote to his father-in-law about a new girl “who
performs service for Mrs. Hyde, morning and evening and pays her way while she attends
school.” Abigail Hyde supervised these household workers, but had to accommodate the young
women’s education.

In the volatile nineteenth-century economy, a father’s loss of income threatened even
elite families with degradation and forced young women to justify their decision to seek
employment outside of their family-of-origin. Caroline Healey was the daughter of a leading
Boston businessman and had the privilege of obtaining a liberal education. In the aftermath of
the Panic of 1837, when she was twenty years old, Healey’s father suffered bankruptcy, which
threatened the class status of the entire family. In order to support the family, which included

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73 Abby Bradley Hyde to Mrs. Asabel J. Bradley, 11 Oct 1824, Lavius Hyde to Mr. Asahel Bradley, 18 Dec 1827,
Hyde Family Papers, SL.
seven younger brothers and sisters, Healey volunteered to take paid employment as a governess or a teacher. For the daughter of an elite family, the decision was shocking. Healey’s sister Ellen complained that Caroline had “no right...to insult her so much.” Ellen feigned a threat to “hire herself out as a chambermaid,” so offensive was the thought of any paid employment for a young woman in her family. Employment as a teacher, work acceptable for a middling daughter, demeaned the status of an elite family. Although recognizing the class boundaries surrounding her labor, Healey prioritized her family's need and ignored social conventions to look for a job of her own.74

By pursuing employment against class prescriptions, Healey asserted autonomy beyond what was expected of an elite young woman. Her decision gave her unfamiliar, and unprecedented, authority within the family. After making applications to genteel academies in New England, Healey found a position at an elite female boarding school in Georgetown. As she prepared to leave her family for the first time, Healey learned that her parents would be taking the younger children out of school because of the family's finances. Healey insisted that her wages be used to continue her siblings’ education. By sacrificing her own comfort by leaving “family and friends, for Georgetown,” Healey recognized that she “gave not only my time but my money to the cause” of helping her family. She argued that she had “a right to require that they should be well educated.” When her father responded with stories of his own neglected education, Caroline firmly concluded “that I was going to earn the means of having them taught.” Earning wages allowed Healey to decide how her money would be spent, and her father's diminished financial state put him in the position of acquiescing to her expectations.75

The constraints of femininity meant that adult women needed to find secure work within

74 Dall, Daughter of Boston, 50.
75 Ibid., 56.
the domestic sphere. Labor outside of the family was acceptable for young women, but quickly
degraded the status of an older woman. By the mid-nineteenth century, women who worked in
the labor market outside the home fell further from middle-class status for failing to achieve a
secure domestic position, namely as a wife and mother. Mary Pride Knight saw her family
separated when her father’s death forced the seven siblings to seek employment away from
home. Knight remained in Otis, Maine, to care for her mother. Already in her mid-twenties,
Knight left home during the summers to “keep school” despite her “hate and dread to go amongst
strangers.” But she took the undesirable employment on account of her “duty” to her mother and
her siblings. She later took employment as a domestic in Portland, though she confided in her
diary, “If I had money do you think I should stay [here] long, no.” Knight’s lack of a secure
household made her lonely and vulnerable. A few years later she considered “goin[g] to the
factory” for work. But the prospect of industrial employment “makes me feel bad to think I at
thirty four must turn out into the world to get a liv[ing].”76 Knight considered herself to be at an
age when factory work inappropriate, and was thus unable to derive meaningful responsibility or
respectability from her labor.

Without the security of a family home, women might be forced to take employment
positions that lacked any association with feminine duties merely for survival. Young women
faced a greater struggle to find employment than young men, making them more dependent on
their families. After spending a term as a student at an Academy, Rachel Stearns found herself
forced to “[move] about from place to place” in search of employment. To look for a position as
a teacher, she traveled to Boston and “spent half a day, but with no success.” Stearns’s extended
family “could do nothing for me, and were afraid if I obtained a school in [Boston] that I should

76 Mary Pride Knight Diary, 11 Jun 1837, 11 Jun 1941, 26 Oct 1845, MeHS.
wish to board with them.”  
Sarah Pratt, a young woman from Providence, Rhode Island, was jealous of a friend who was “profitably” working at home for her family, because she knew her own “services are not needed and consequently I have nothing to do.”  
Family and kin was the first source of young women’s employment, and provided a safety-net whenever their attempts for employment failed. Without this crucial resource, young women were left more vulnerable to employment that lacked the qualities of femininity.

Young women who worked in the commercial economy struggled with their limited opportunities. Believing in the power of femininity to reform the community, many sought personal fulfillment through their work. When their control over their position fell short of their desires, they often blamed their immature disposition rather than the structural barriers to women’s employment. In the 1810s in Massachusetts, Lucinda Read blamed her unwarranted ambition for her failure to be satisfied with her station in life. Early in her working life, Read was one of thousands of young women who sought paid labor outside her home in the years before marriage. At age seventeen she started teaching school in her local district during the summer term. However, after a few years as an “instructress,” the occupation lost its appeal. Read complained that her school was “large and laborious.” “I have labored harder in it this week than ever before,” she wrote, “I much regret that I have engaged for one month longer for it has been a long time and I am almost gone.” Read was anxious for a change of scenery and employment, but financial strain prevented the free exercise of choice. Fueled by her recent religious conversion, developed an ambition to join a mission to Asia. However, she discovered that “there are more [missionaries] who offer to go than can be supported.” Unable to satisfy her original desire, Read adjusted her plans to be more realistic. She received an invitation from “a

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77 Rachel Stearns Diary, 25 Dec 1836, 1 Jan 1837, SL.  
78 Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 4 Dec 1838, Winsor Family Papers, RIHS.
cousin in Kentucky” to join a mission converting Indians. However, the travel expense of 200 dollars was more than she could afford.  

Read admitted her “distress” in her “pecuniary situation.” But she took heart in “the reflection that there has always been a place for me.” She interpreted her unmarried state as a message from God about her purpose. “I might have rushed heedlessly [into] that life which I have generally thought the happiest, before I was in any measure fitted for that place were it not for the restraining grace of God.” Lacking the domestic duties of marriage, Read reasserted her intention “to offer myself to the board of American missions.” But as her teaching continued to “fatigue” her, she regretted her ambition. “I do not know but I ought to blame myself for a will of my own in wishing to go to Asia,” she confided in her diary, “for I have sometimes thought that I should feel rather unhappy here after if I should not go.”

Frustrated in her efforts to leave the life of a district school teacher, Lucinda Read placed her fate in the hands of God rather than her own endeavors. She concluded to “try to make the will of Heaven my guide instead of my own.” Lucinda Read’s experience reveals the importance of employment choices to young women’s struggle with maturity. During her work as a teacher, Read was determined to find employment that would fulfill her religious convictions. But achieving employment goals took more than independence of will, particularly when the prospects for securing adulthood through marriage were not evident. When she failed to accomplish her desires, she justified her “station” as a submission to God’s will. Nancy Cott argues that young women joined the religious revivals during the Second Great Awakening.

79 Lucinda Read Diary, 24 Aug 1818, 8 May 1821, MHS.
80 Lucinda Read Diary, 18 May 1821, 31 May 1821, MHS.
81 Lucinda Read Diary, 31 May 1821, MHS.
because of the decline of the household economy. Religion allowed women to interpret their obstacles as tests of their faith in God. Lucinda Read hoped that she would “not shun the path of usefulness and duty even though it be a path of the severest trials, for one fitted to my common wishes.”

Young women evaluated a range of choice and necessity when deciding where to work. Delia Warren wrote to her brother to “have a little talk as to where I shall put myself, to winter.” Although she had received “kind invitations and tender solicitation of many of my friends” to board with them, she was concerned about being a burden on her community. Women without an established household, as either as a daughter or a wife, lacked independence because they often needed to put financial need above the goals of respectability. The growth of institutional schooling made teaching an attractive option for single women to conform to the expectations of femininity while gaining limited financial autonomy. Warren told her brother that she “very much wished to engage in teaching the coming winter, and have bent my forts to obtain a situation favorable, wherever I have thought there was a possibility of success.” The competition for teaching positions was growing and the financial situation of many districts made employment tenuous. After being unsuccessful in her attempts to gain employment, Warren reflected that she might be “bent too much upon the idea of being employed in that particular way.” Warren concluded that she was setting her expectation too high relative to her needs for employment by “looking too much for a pleasant situation rather than for one where by exercising more self denial and laboring more I can do the more good.”

In the fall of 1850, Aurelia Smith learned that her district “was quite anxious I should

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83 Lucinda Read Journal, 31 May 1821, MHS.
84 Delia Warren to Samuel Dennis Warren, 29 Oct 1846, Warren Family Papers, MHS.
remain during the winter & teach.” However, Smith desired freedom from the confinement and monotony of the schoolhouse. Although teaching provided her with an income, she aspired to experience greater pleasure in the “society” of the town than her duties to the pupils, writing to her brother, “I should prefer my liberty this winter rather than be confined within the walls of the school room.” The next spring, Smith again faced a choice in her employment. Despite “two applications to teach” Smith “made up my mind that I have done about my share of that business.” A friend who lived on a dairy farm invited Smith to board and help with the domestic labor, and Smith decided “I should prefer making cheese rather than teaching.” She worried that basing her decision about employment on her desire for the company of a close friend was “selfish.” But as a dutiful daughter, Smith offered to come home to help her mother “if you really think I had better come home and cannot well get along without me.” She wanted to spare her mother from having to hire domestic help, a perennial burden in mid-nineteenth century New England.

Lucinda Read, Delia Warren, and Aurelia Smith each had preferences about where to find employment, even within the narrow space granted to women in early nineteenth-century New England. However, when they were unable to achieve these desires, they attributed their failure to deficiencies of character. They scolded themselves for being “selfish” and too particular about their conditions. They resolved to defer to parents, an older brother, or even to God to guide them to employment that would fulfill the expectations of “usefulness and duty.” Their failed attempts to find employment in accordance with their ambition, self-interest, or personal desire for “liberty” reinforced the conception of maturity for women as a voluntary sacrifice to the needs of others. Especially for young women, who faced legal and cultural barriers to full economic opportunities, the narrative of the pre-determined “situation in life”

85 Aurelia Smith to her mother, 12 Apr 1851, Hooker Collection, SL.
provided a sense of maturity and usefulness central to women’s assertion of authority. When the expectations of the community conflicted with their own desires, young women found that their femininity pushed them to sacrifice their individuality for the good of others.

By the 1830s, young New England women had new opportunities to find financial support as their agricultural households required less of their labor. Textile factories, such as the cotton mills of Lowell Massachusetts, provided an avenue for employment within conditions of contrived gentility. Unlike the mills of Samuel Slater, which relied primarily on child labor, the textile factories in northern New England followed the Waltham system. By bringing together nearly all aspects of cotton manufacturing into a single facility, the Lowell mills used machinery that was too complex for children. Instead, agents sought young women from rural communities who desired comparatively high wages and the promise of a respectable environment. Managers, parents, and mill operatives considered these positions a temporary opportunity before marriage. The managers of Lowell mills made a concerted effort to maintain the respectability of their operatives’ community by offering lodging in boarding houses run by matrons employed by the factory, requiring church attendance, enforcing a curfew, and other paternal oversights.86

Women evaluated the decision to pursue factory employment by balancing the physical comfort and reputation of the position against the pecuniary prospects. Women who chose to work in the textile mills emphasized the financial advantages such work had over other female employment. Sarah Rice was providing paid domestic service for a family when she considered moving to the “Cotton Factory” in Millbury, Massachusetts. She found the factory “a noisy place” and “we are confined more than I like to be.” However, she determined the position was superior to domestic work “if I can make 2 dollars per week besides my board and save my

clothes and shoes.” Mary Paul was working in a house when she asked her father “to consent to let me go to Lowell,” because she “could earn more.” When describing her factory employment to her niece, Malenda Edwards noted, “very many young Ladies at work in the factories that have given up millinery dressmaking & school keeping for work in the mill.” Ann Blake determined “it would be best for me to work in the mill a year” before starting in the millinery trade. When Charlotte Varney could not earn as much as she wanted from school teaching, she pulled a “yankee trick” by leaving New York for a better paying position in a Massachusetts mill. Lowell operatives used the term “Yankee” to emphasize their as autonomous economic agency rather than their subordination as workers, connecting their regional identity with the pursuit of capitalist self-interest.

However, the vision of mill work as an idyllic period of labor before marriage never fit the reality of the factory as a site of industrial production. After six months working at a factory in Millbury, Massachusetts, Sarah Rice returned to domestic service after she “realized that it was killing me to work in it.” An adult operative confided that after her first days in the mill, “I was so sick of it at first I wished a factory had never been thought of.” Lucy Davis took work in Nashua, New Hampshire, as the only “chance” that might “suit me,” but found the work “much harder than I expected.” She was frequently ill, enough that she “was obliged to give it up altogether.” These conditions were only exacerbated as factory managers introduced speed-ups, decreased the piece-rate operatives earned, and raised the price of boarding in order to

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88 Mary Paul to father, 13 Sep 1845, published in Farm to Factory Women’s Letters, 1830-1860, 1993, 124.
89 Malenda M. Edwards to Sabrina Bennett, 4 Apr 1839, published in Ibid., 74–75.
90 Ann Blake to Sabrina Bennett, 14 May 1843, published in Ibid.
91 See also Harriet Farley quoted at pg 2 and 334 from “To Our Friends,” Mechanic Apprentice, May 1845.
92 Sarah “Sally” Rice to her father, 14 Sep 1845; Malenda Edwards to Persis Sibley, 4 Apr 1839, Lucy Davis to Sabrina Bennett, 25 Sep 1846, published in Farm to Factory Women’s Letters, 1830-1860 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
maintain high profits.

What began as an experiment to prove the harmony of industrial relations quickly emerged as a site for self-conscious activism on the part of female workers. Some ‘mill girls’ responded by waging a public-relations campaign to secure the middle-class status of their employment, through publications such as the *Lowell Offering*, a magazine of mill workers’ urbane writings. Other operatives took an offensive approach by organizing strikes and eventually establishing a union. In 1834 Lowell workers walked out from their jobs to protest a pay cut. They claimed their actions as part of the legacy of the American Revolution. They were “daughters of freemen” who “imbibe the spirit of our patriotic ancestors who preferred privation to bondage and parted with all that renders life desirable – and even life itself – to produce independence for their children.” Although “the oppressive hand of avarice would enslave us” they resolved to “remain in possession of our own unquestionable rights.” These short-lived activities developed into the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in the 1840s, showing the development of class awareness out of a critique of the relationship between labor and maturity.

Despite efforts to organize against factory exploitation, Lowell operatives quickly found that factory labor could not avoid conditions of degradation. Yankee daughters abandoned the mills and managers replaced the workforce with Irish immigrants who lacked the literacy, family resources, and ideals of liberty to resist industrial working conditions.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the idealized vision of femininity rooted largely in domesticity and child rearing conflicted with the labor experiences many women found necessary to support themselves and their families. To negotiate these oppositional ideas was the central anxiety of femininity. As young women grew up, they experienced this contradiction

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93 This is the subject of Chapter 6.
between the ideals of domesticity and the reality of finding income outside the domestic sphere. Unmarried women’s economic position in the commercial economy was less stable and less domestic than that of her colonial ancestors or of her married peers. Before she reached the ideal position of wife and mother, she needed to move through a liminal period that often required earning income. Young women held a degree of provisional independence during youth as they worked outside the household and took responsibility for their moral development. Yet they prepared to enter adulthood not through ambition or economic self-ownership, but by voluntarily sacrificing their own desires for the good of their family. Both young men and young women experienced the liminality of youth, but the nature of their experience depended on the gendered capacities of adulthood expected by nineteenth-century society. As young women transitioned from youth to adulthood, they focused on their development of character – ensuring not their economic autonomy and ambition, but their concern for duty and their sacrifice for family that would prove them as capable wives and mothers in adulthood.

*Creating an Underclass*

The expansion of choice that defined youth in early nineteenth-century New England benefitted children from economically-secure families who could invest in their education and delay their labor until they could take positions that confirmed their respectability. The ability to express work as the result of prudent and respectable choices, regardless of the constraints actually faced, provided middling young people with a sense of maturity that justified their dominant status. During the market revolution and the decline of the household economy, many families lacked the resources to set their children up for labor positions that could lead to middle-class respectability and independence. Poor children found themselves caught between dependence and independence in ways that violated socially accepted models of growing up.
They could be legally bound to a master until adulthood or they could take positions in the casual labor market. As a result of their limited skills and vulnerability to exploitation, poor young people were usually confined to degraded employment that could only be viewed as a means of survival rather than a process of developing character and a means of advancement. Because this manual labor failed to signify choice and self-ownership, it gradually came to mark a dependent class of people who failed to develop maturity as they aged.

Poor young people often worked outside adult supervision in the urban streets. Their labor was at best inappropriate and at worst criminal.95 Civic leaders responded to the threat of poor, vagrant children by indenturing them to young families keen on using their labor for their own economic advancement.96 Bound children had little opportunity to negotiate their own labor conditions, with the exception of running away. Early American newspapers frequently printed advertisements for apprentices who absconded from their masters before the completion of their term. In the years following the American Revolution, runaway apprentices “were so common that the public was on the lookout,” and a group of master mechanics in Boston organized a voluntary society expressly for the purpose of petitioning the legislature for a remedy.97

Hundreds of New England apprentices left their masters to pursue alternative means of support. Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, which detailed his decision to “assert my freedom” by running away from his brother’s printing business in 1723, became a lesson on self-making

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95 See the discussion of child labor in Chapter 1.
96 Barry Levy, “Girls and Boys: Poor Children and the Labor Market in Colonial Massachusetts,” Pennsylvania History 64 (July 1, 1997): 287–307. The institutions through which civic leaders managed poor children and youth are discussed in Chapter 4. For an examination of social control in the mid- to late nineteenth century, see Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism.
97 W. J. Rorabaugh, The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 49. The organization was the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, formed in 1792 with Paul Revere serving as its first president.
for strivers in the Early Republic. However, most runaways remain only names on the back page of a newspaper; few found their way into official correspondence. In 1797, young Richard Galley became the informal apprentice of Daniel Wellington, a painter from Boston. After six months of service, Wellington moved to Newburyport for better opportunities and took Galley with him. Likely seeing the low prospects of the painter’s profession and enticed by opportunities in the commercial market, Galley left Wellington and “made some agreement” to work for a merchant. Confessing to the “hurt and damage” of his lost apprentice, Wellington appealed to the Newburyport Overseers of the Poor to have Galley returned to his bound service. Because Galley was a resident of Boston, the Newburyport officials wrote to their Boston counterparts. They affirmed that Galley was treated “as well as any boy has a right to expect from any master,” and that his self-initiated change of employment was likely to “damage” his ability to become a self-sufficient worker. The Boston Overseers agreed and wrote the formal apprenticeship. Galley had no voice in the proceedings which resulted in his indenture to an occupation he did not prefer. His attempt to exert choice was denied by a system of labor control that stressed the economic value of minors and the maintenance of social order over their exercise of self-determination.

In the 1790s, poor children were often indentured to successful artisans or businessmen, which gave them the possibility of mobility and eventual self-ownership, and also allowed them to leverage their training into more desirable positions, as Richard Galley attempted to do. After 1800, only fifteen percent of Boston paupers were apprenticed to local craftsmen. The majority were bound out as agricultural laborers to surrounding farms. In the early nineteenth century,

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99 Newburyport, 25 Dec 1797, Indenture File, Boston Public Library.
employment with a merchant was a coveted position that required formal education in skills such as book-keeping, which were rarely taught to impoverished children. Without the opportunity to exercise choice in their employment, poor children used a variety of methods to protest their enforced dependence. A “disobedient” boy of sixteen years old was indentured in 1828 and absconded from his master. A “vagrant” was indentured at fourteen but ran away and was “sent to sea” after he was caught. A fourteen-year-old boy was returned to the House of Reformation after his indenture on suspicion of stealing from his master, after which he ran away from the institution. Girls were less likely to run away, but a fourteen-year-old “dissolute” pauper “absconded” from her master “taking more clothes than her own.” A young female “pilferer” was returned to the House “with a certificate from five persons as to their belief that she had set fire to the house.”

As the new nation upheld self-ownership and ‘free labor’ as the democratic ideal of employment, young people working in marginal and subordinate positions were less willing to extend traditional deference to their supposed ‘masters’ and ‘mistresses.’ European visitors to the United States marveled at the nomenclature used to obscure deference and servitude. Chief among these “Americanisms” was “Hired Girl for Servant Girl” and “Hired Man for Servant Man.” In New England during the first half of the nineteenth century, the term “help” signified a young woman employed as a domestic. British traveler Charles W. Janson published a (now famous) anecdote of an exchange with “a servant-maid” when he called at the home of an American acquaintance:

"Is your master at home?"--"I have no master."--"Don't you live here?"--"I stay here."--"And who are you then?"--"Why, I am Mr. ----'s help. I'd have you to know, man, that I

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102 For a full account of the decline of indentured servitude, see Steinfeld, The Invention of Free Labor, 1991.
103 Quoted in Albert Matthews, The Terms Hired Man and Help (J. Wilson and Son, 1900), 3.
am no *sarvant*; none but *negers* are *sarvants*." Janson attributed this attitude to “the arrogance of domestics in this land of republican liberty and equality.”

Another travel writer, Alfred Bunn, echoed this report. He found that waiters in private homes were “chiefly Irish…and no Americans; the latter would rather want bread than *serve* to gain it, they having especial notions of freedom and equality!” Bunn recorded the popular sentiment that, “the darkies are the best waiters, but the biggest thieves; the Irish the worst, and the most insolent.”

Young white workers, even those in subordinate positions, asserted their racial status to protect their labor from full degradation. They drew upon widespread and long-standing assumptions about the servile ‘nature’ of African Americans and the presumed superiority of Anglo-Saxons. Whiteness provided young men and women with ingrained respectability that kept them from the lowest economic positions and retained their stake in American nationhood. By spreading the myth of free labor, white New Englanders attributed the most degraded labor – the necessary and under-compensated toil that built the industrial and commercial economy – to racial status rather than seeing it as an ingrained component of capitalism.

Young New Englanders who could not claim race as a symbol of their competence and rationality took work without the characteristics of choice, mobility, and respectability. Instead of rising through liminality to eventual autonomy, they faced legal subordination, racial prejudice, and a lack of skills that constrained their choices. Unable to participate in the social

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ideal of independent labor, African Americans and Irish immigrants struggled to survive. Forced to take the lowest forms of work, these racialized others came to symbolize the division between mental and manual labor – work associated with authority and choice and work tainted by degradation and perpetual dependence. As middle-class managers and proprietors justified the bifurcation of the industrial economy by likening unequal employment relations to the naturally hierarchical relationship between the head and the hand or the mind and the body, racial ideology marked non-whites as lacking competence, self-ownership, and autonomy that made them suited for subordinate work.\(^\text{108}\)

For young African Americans in early nineteenth-century New England, economic barriers during the process of growing up stemmed from the continuing legacy of slavery. Although New England state legislatures dismantled the system of racial bondage in the spirit of the American Revolution, the status of chattel slavery continued decades into the nineteenth century. James Mars was born in 1790 in Connecticut two years after the legislature passed an act that freed all enslaved persons born after 1792. Because of his infancy at the time of the act, Mars was expected to serve his master until he was twenty-five years old. When he entered the service of a meager farmer, Mr. Munger, at eight years old, he was shocked to learn “that white boys who were bound out, were bound until they were twenty-one” and would receive “one hundred dollars, a Bible, and two suits of clothes” upon the expiration of their term. Even James’s younger brother, born after the critical year of 1792, would only serve until the standard age of majority of twenty-one years.\(^\text{109}\)

James Mars tried to challenge this “statutory servitude” to Mr. Munger as he approached


his twenty-first birthday.\footnote{110} He frequently informed Munger and his family that he intended to leave when he turned twenty-one years old, regardless of Munger’s legal claim to his labor until twenty-five. Munger refused to grant Mars his time, insisting that his service until twenty-five “was fair and just.” The conflict erupted after Mars turned twenty-one when he left Munger’s home and Munger threatened to have him thrown in jail for the violation. Upon reaching this impasse, Mars and Munger agreed to put the conflict before a group of local arbiters, who decided that Mars could purchase the remainder of his term from Munger for ninety dollars. Munger offered to “hire” Mars to allow him to earn the money that would pay off his service, but Mars preferred to take a position with a neighboring family. Although Mars stuck to his principles about the injustice of his service, his personal sense of authority was not enough to overcome his continued subordination.\footnote{111}

Even young African Americans who were born free without obligations to a master struggled to achieve the education and vocational training necessary to claim equality with white youth. William J. Brown, born in Rhode Island in 1814, started performing chores and errands for his mother at eight years old. He also attended a free school for colored children, and then later a tuition school. When Brown had the opportunity to take a position in a white ship captain’s home, his father made the arrangement to include “schooling one half each day.” After years of struggling to pay for tuition to complete his studies, sixteen-year-old Brown “thought it time for me to look for a place to learn a trade.” After unsuccessful inquiries with a carpenter, a shoemaker, a grocer, and other “gentlemen doing business” – all presumably white – Brown recognized that his failure was “on account of my color.” Despite the “kindest feelings” expressed in public, Brown thought that “white people seemed to be combined against giving us

\footnote{110}{“Statutory servitude” is the term used in Melish, \textit{Disowning Slavery}.}
\footnote{111}{Cottrol, \textit{From African to Yankee}, 64.}
any thing to so which would elevate us to a free and independent position.”

As young black men sought employment that would bring them financial security and respectability, young black women faced difficulty attaining the cult of domesticity that marked “true womanhood.” Avoiding paid work was not an option for black women, especially when their husbands’ faced discrimination in the labor market. The biography of Elleanor Eldridge, written by her white patron Frances Harriet Whipple, describes the early labor experiences of a young black woman by emphasizing her domestic skill and her agency. When she lost her mother at ten years old, Eldridge “launched out boldly into the eventful life which lay before her, commencing at once, her own self-government, and that course of vigorous and spirited action, for which she has since been so much distinguished.” During her period of domestic service, Eldridge “learned all the varieties of house-work, and every kind of spinning,” including “plain, double, and ornamental weaving, in which she was considered particularly expert.” The memoir’s narrator reminded her readers that “few girls of fourteen [are] capable of mastering such an intricate business.” During these years, Eldridge learned arithmetic, but reportedly never learned to read. Later, Eldridge took a position as a dairy woman, another profitable task within the household economy, in which “she took charge of the milk from twenty-five to thirty cows; and made from four to five thousand weight of cheese annually.”

Although Eldridge’s skill at weaving and dairying was exemplary and useful at the turn of the nineteenth century when she performed it, such productive aspects of womanhood were less valued by middling white Americans at the time the ‘Memoir’ was published in 1838 when

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112 Ibid., 130.
Eldridge was fifty-four years old. Frances Whipple used the biography to build Eldridge’s legal fund after she lost her hard-earned property to a white male “extortioner.” As the memoir’s narrator, Whipple admitted that the praise of Eldridge’s skills was “not very poetical” for a “sentimentalist” view of femininity.” The language of agency was also a departure from the submissive tone women typically used to describe their lives. Eldridge was able to use her economic skill to gain capital for entrepreneurial activities. She found independence through her work, without aspiring to the leisureed domesticity upheld by white womanhood. The memoir’s depiction of Eldridge’s character helped her recover her property through the Rhode Island court system. However, this positive portrayal distanced her from the standards of the white middle class, and thus retained her subservient position in the labor market.\footnote{Ibid., 43.}

In the antebellum period, African American women used realistic portrayals of work to counter the narrative of domesticity that was unavailable (or maybe unappealing) to them.\footnote{Xiomara Santamarina analyzes four such works, including \textit{Our Nig}, in Xiomara Santamarina, \textit{Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).} While uplifting the figure of the black woman, they insisted on the dignity of labor – even that which was servile and toilsome. According to Xiomara Santamarina, the fictionalized autobiography \textit{Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black} written by Harriet Wilson, a free black woman in New Hampshire, “participates in uplift’s exhortations to self-reliance, even as it defines self-reliance” through domestic drudgery.” Through a fictional alter-ego, Wilson tells of her indenture to domestic service after the death of her black father and abandonment by her white mother. During her time as a servant, she faced abuse from her white mistress as she was “trained up” to take subordinate labor of “drudgery” and “toil.” As Santamarina describes, the novel “pointed up the ironies in the nation’s simultaneous exploitation and disparagement of
its free black workers.” Because Wilson “could not simply abandon labor structures that offered [black women] little choice in the labor they performed,” she found dignity in the labor she performed rather than aspiring to white domestic femininity.\textsuperscript{117} Wilson knew that black women’s labor outside the home was not a temporary sojourn before the security of marriage, as was the case for middling white women. Given the discrimination faced by black men, most African American families relied on paid labor from both the husband and wife to survive. Accepting toil and drudgery was central to maturity for free African Americans seeking security in communities that denied them equality.

In the early nineteenth century, New Englanders embraced democracy by replacing a hierarchy based on legal structures of slavery and indentured servitude with one based on discriminatory assumptions about race, character, and competence. African Americans in New England found limited opportunities for economic advancement in the commercial economy following the gradual elimination of slavery in the early nineteenth century. When they were able to escape a status of legal subordination, they remained degraded because of their racial status. As they faced an influx of impoverished Irish immigrants, white native-born New Englanders further entrenched whiteness as a symbol of self-ownership and respectability. Between 1840 and 1860, nearly two million men and women from Ireland came to the United States to escape a devastating potato famine and their loss of access to land. Although Irish immigrants did not face the remnants of enslavement, they encountered racial prejudice. They came to the United States with little to no education, skill, or social and economic capital suited to the industrial economy of New England. Irish Catholics had long been subject to a system of penal codes enforced by English lords in Ireland that restricted their economic, political, and religious freedom. These laws treated Catholics as a non-white ‘race.’ The prejudice continued

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 67, 30.
when Irish men and women immigrated to New England. They lived near and worked alongside African Americans in menial, degraded, and dangerous places. Native-born New Englanders described the Irish as “niggers turned inside out.” A popular magazine suggested the new immigrants from Ireland “seemed to be the ‘worn down, servile victims of licentiousness and poverty.’” Another writer wrote, “They are degraded by the oppression of the landlords” which “discourages the spirit of industry.”

Alongside the racial animosity that closed opportunities, Irish immigrants lacked the material ability to make their labor an expression of choice. Entering Boston without money or connections “any element of selectivity was denied to them.” Only able to consider their immediate survival, their poverty “destroyed the possibility of choosing a job or preparing for a trade.” As an Irish priest observed, “It is a clear case that these poor friendless strangers, having no money, must have recourse to their only means of subsistence – namely, street or yard laborers or house servants.” Irish immigrants provided the largest share of labor in canal and road-building projects that served New England’s industrialization. These temporary positions lacked the opportunity for secure employment. Boys needed to find employment early to help their families, but “had to compete with adults willing to work for boys’ wages.” Irish women took positions as domestic servants in middling and elite New England homes, a job that was “beneath the dignity of native American girls.”

Some New England workers viewed the influx of unskilled Irish immigrants and the emancipation of African Americans as a threat to their economic livelihood. Edward Everett

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120 Ibid., 61.
Hale, a prominent Boston author and Unitarian minister, viewed the situation as an opportunity for “well organized and well trained” white Americans to earn the economic place they deserved. In his *Letters on Irish Emigration*, Hale promised

> when they come in among us, they come to lift us up. As sure as water and oil each finds its level they will find theirs. So far as they are mere hand-workers they must sustain the head-workers, or those who have any element of intellectual ability. Their inferiority compels them to go to the bottom; and the consequence is that we are, all of us, the higher lifted because they are here. If into the civilized community made up of hand-workers, and workers in higher grades, you pour in an infusion of a population competent at first only to the simplest hand-work, they take the lowest place, and lift the others into higher places...factory...and farm work comes into the hands of Irishmen....natives...are simply pushed up, into foremen..., superintendents..., railway agents, machinists, inventors, teachers, artists...etc.

Hale saw Irish immigration as the key to securing for “competent” American workers the higher places of economic and social privilege. Pro-slavery advocates took a similar position, arguing that with enslaved labor handling the menial and toilsome tasks in Southern agriculture, the planter class was freed to pursue more refined activities.\(^{122}\) The mass migration of Irish families helped expand New England’s economic industrialization and became the context for racialized perceptions of maturity that separated low-status manual labor from middle-class mental work. Irish immigrants entered a workforce already based on the ideal of the competent, individually contracting worker. As they filled the lower positions in factories, public works projects, and genteel homes, their ethnicity became a further mark of their lack of maturity.

Poor and non-white young people in nineteenth-century New England found themselves unable to pursue choices that avoided degrading work environments. Although white New Englanders upheld an ideal of free labor, the continuation of indentures, lingering slavery, and the prejudice of the middle class kept many young people in dependent and marginal positions of

employment as they grew older. As the legal and economic hierarchy of the household economy purportedly freed young people for self-ownership, a capitalist, industrial hierarchy gradually emerged in its place. For middle-class leaders, work was expected to symbolize one’s character and respectability, which developed through the coming-of-age process. They viewed industrial employment relations as a natural hierarchy of merit and competence that produced a mutually-beneficial relationship between the ‘head work’ of managers and proprietors and the ‘hand work’ of the common laborers. If some people remained as subordinate workers long after they should have achieved adulthood, it was the product of their lack of maturity.

Conclusion

In colonial New England, young people’s status was determined by their position within a system of household production and governance. Young men depended on patronage to secure economic positions. Young women lacked opportunities for education or labor outside of the household. Young people’s choice were determined by adults and strictly limited by custom. As commercialization and the ideological assault on household governance eroded traditional patterns of labor and coming of age, young people were free to seek work on their own but were vulnerable to the degradation of the labor market. As ideals of “‘independence’ – from the mother country, masters, landlords, and physical wants – assumed heightened political significance,” young people needed to avoid associations with dependency in order to assume positions of authority.

In order to claim middle-class status, New Englanders needed to perform labor appropriate to their age and gender. For young men and women whose semi-dependent positions threatened to degrade their status, asserting the appropriateness of their work in terms of their

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123 Rice, *Minding the Machine*.  
maturity helped to offset the structural features of dependence. The expression of choice in the labor market meant young people were responsible for charting their own path toward respectability and authority within their gendered and classed spheres of activity. Young New Englanders’ anxiety about maturity shows the precarious position of labor in the early nineteenth-century economy. Analyzing the labor experiences of youth is critical for understanding how men and women achieved the material positions and internal identities that marked socially-dominant status.

In the early nineteenth century, young men’s and women’s labor positions were necessarily less autonomous than the positions they expected to achieve as adults. Youth was defined by liminality that created an environment for reflection on character and the growth of respectability and autonomy. Middle-class aspirants needed to counter the dependent aspects of their labor in order to assure themselves and others that their work was leading to authority, whether as a breadwinner or homemaker, rather than degradation. Even with legal and racial privileges, the path from partial to fully independent adulthood required conscious attention to the boundaries that defined middle-class status. Because coming of age in early nineteenth-century New England meant young people were responsible for their own advancement, choices regarding labor became an expression of maturity. The expectation that young people were responsible for their own advancement meant that individuals received either credit or blame for their position in life.
Chapter 3: Becoming a Man or Woman “in Resolution as Well as in Age”

On September 11, 1815, the day she turned twenty years old, Susan Heath confided in her diary feelings of inadequacy for “how little proficiency I have made in any branch of my duty.” She lamented the “vain & useless regrets that so many of my hours have been misspent.” But as it was her birthday, she resolved to “not again be left voluntarily to relapse into my former indolence.” As an older unmarried daughter, Heath accepted more responsibility for domestic labor and promised “to exert all my time and talents to some good purpose & try to imitate the good example I have daily set me by my dear & indulgent Mother.” As middling women assumed emotional rather than economic roles within the home, Heath identified adulthood as a set of dispositions and habits that demonstrated her fulfillment of feminine responsibilities. She held her mother as a model not on the basis of her age or her married status, but for her “good example” of womanhood through daily activities. Heath concluded the day's entry: “With the age I ardently wish for the feelings and capacity of a woman. Hitherto I have considered my self a Child, but now the pleasing delusion can exist no longer, and I must endeavor to [possess] the qualifications which are naturally expected in a girl of my age.”

As twenty-four-year-old Amos A. Lawrence, a young merchant with the benefit of a well-connected family, struggled to assume his adult identity, he wrote in his diary, “Good heavens when shall I be a man in resolution as well as in age!” Lawrence reflected on his maturity not as a chronological measure of time, for he had been a legal adult for three years. Rather, he wanted a more abstract sense of maturity – the confidence to make decisions in order to fulfill his expectations of masculinity. Like Susan Heath, Lawrence defined adulthood as the full control over one’s character necessary for the exercise of authority in gender-specific realms of activity.

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1 Susan Heath Diary, 11 Sep 1815, Heath Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS).
2 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 22 Aug 1837, Amos A. Lawrence Diaries and Account Books, MHS.
More than just a stage of life, adulthood was a privileged status that marked men and women with presumed authority in gender-specific spheres of activity. Yet as young people sought the character and respectability that would earn them recognition as adults, they also struggled to achieve stability, wealth, and prestige that would give them the economic foundation to participate as full members of the community. The democratic potential of self-ownership was open equally to all members of society, but it failed to overcome the power of wealth and respectability as markers of authority. Although young men and women viewed maturity as the exercise of capacities within their control, their authority within their community was increasingly tied to specific types of labor – the gendered activities of respectability – that were quickly becoming the privilege of the middle class.

In colonial New England, a system of household governance granted political and economic power to elite patriarchs and treated the rest of the population as a type of dependent. Authority came not only through age, but also through householder status. Alongside the clear separation between master and dependent in the economic and political realms, colonial New Englanders viewed all individuals as spiritual equals aspiring “toward the unreachable stature of God.” This made all persons – regardless of age – immature. During the eighteenth century, the economic, political, and spiritual revolution against patriarchal authority gave more regard to the capacities of young people and recognized adulthood through the achievement of reason and autonomy rather than the material position of a householder. As the emphasis on predestination “gave way to a theology that emphasized the individual’s capacity to gain salvation through his own effort,” New Englanders placed greater emphasis on character as a secular measure of

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worth. While instituting restrictions on the legal rights of minors to solidify the meaning of consent, Americans distinguished the capacities of children from those of youth and sought to prepare the latter group for interactions in society alongside adults. By the early nineteenth century, young people received greater liberty but found the transition to adulthood more elusive. In a society with weaker systems of patronage and expanded economic choices, young people claimed adulthood by finding economic security in the volatile capitalist economy. Their positions of wealth, stability, and prestige communicated their internal strength of character, and earned them the privileges of middle-class masculinity and femininity.

As young men and women, especially among the emerging middle class, found new paths to security in the commercial economy, their relationships within courtship and marriage evolved to fit the ideology of separate spheres and the cultural emphasis on affection. In colonial New England marriage was primarily an economic union that subordinated a woman’s labor within the household economy. In the revolutionary period, men and women embraced a limited ideal of equality that replaced the strict subordination and obedience of the matrimonial union with a relationship of mutual benefit, affection, and consent. In the early nineteenth century, as socially-recognized economic enterprise moved outside the home, men and women took on distinct roles that reflected the cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Men engaged in the public marketplace and pursued the family’s economic livelihood, while women cultivated the domestic sphere as a refuge from competition and a center for the nurture of children. These new gender-based ideals of adulthood structured courtship and marriage, as young men and

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7 For the decline of patronage and the rise of economic choices, see Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*; Kett, *Rites of Passage*. For an analysis of the role of inheritance in the relationship between generations, see Greven, *Four Generations*. The legal changes that codified consent by restricting rights based on age, see Brewer, *By Birth or Consent*. For an excellent overview on the history and historiography of adulthood, see Corinne Field, “Woman’s Rights and the Politics of Age” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia, 2008), 1-64.
women defined their adult roles in relation to the opposite sex. In order to make the ideology of separate spheres compatible with the nation’s proclaimed belief in equality, young men and women needed to enter marriage as equals in their character and capacity for maturity. Despite the barriers to women’s full participation in society, the new conception of maturity as the ability to make good choices gave men and women adult power based on their claims to self-ownership, character, and respectability.\(^8\)

This chapter examines the meaning of adulthood for young New Englanders as they proved themselves worthy of prosperity in a commercial, democratic society. The first section examines this process among young men, who held the greatest claim to choice and autonomy. For middle-class male workers, adulthood meant exercising independence and taking responsibility of disappointment and failure. Although many realized that obstacles to autonomy continued, they were able to claim civic leadership because their employment symbolized their rationality and competence. In contrast, men at the margins of the New England economy found little opportunity to portray their labor as an expression of choice, and thus were unable to claim authority. The second section explores the search for authority among young women. As women’s productive role within the household declined, they claimed authority through maintaining respectability and asserting their moral character. Although marriage remained an institution of subordination, the ‘cult of domesticity’ allowed married women to extend their influence beyond the home, while providing an alternative measure of adult womanhood for unmarried women. In contrast, poor women lacked the resources to fulfill the separate spheres ideology. Without a stable domestic sphere, poor women were left at the mercy of the market.

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Their vulnerability, and the necessity of their paid employment in their older years, left them short of the ideals of femininity. As middle-class, white young people transitioned from youth to adulthood, they viewed their relative security in society and their exercise of authority as the outcome of their own character development, rather than the product of privilege.

_Achieving the ‘Active Life’_

In colonial New England, young men remained subordinate within the household until they received the land or proprietorship necessary to begin a household of their own. They achieved these material qualifications for authority through family networks. During the eighteenth century, single men of legal age critiqued their social subordination and helped usher in a conception of citizenship based on the qualities of masculinity without patriarchy—autonomy, rationality, and sexuality.⁹ The emancipation of young men continued after the American Revolution as many New England states eliminated property qualifications for voting and office holding, granting formal political participation to nearly all white men over the age of twenty one. These factors shifted the characteristics of adulthood from patriarchal mastery over a household to a more diffuse sense of competence, represented by biological age and internal dispositions. In the early nineteenth century, adulthood came through the gradual development of the capacities necessary to manage risk, misfortune, and failure in the commercial economy. As young men prepared to assume authority based on their conception of maturity, they focused on an ideal of “active” engagement with the community. In seeking the “active life,” they embraced adulthood as the achievement of capacities perceived as necessary for the exercise of power in the masculine sphere of business. Within their expectation of self-ownership, young men experienced a conflict between their assessment of their character and their wealth, security, or

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prestige. By the mid-nineteenth century, a new conception of adulthood granted middle-class status to men who displayed maturity, building on the expectation of occupational mobility and civic leadership that young men cultivated through their education and training during youth.\(^{10}\)

To recognize their authority in the commercial environment, young men needed to contend with the legalistic view of adulthood that remained within their employment relationships. Under the traditional apprenticeships and indentures, workers were bound until age twenty-one, the point at which they were legally emancipated and received formal political and economic rights. As George Searle approached his twenty-first birthday, his sister Margaret reported to the family that Searle's employer was dissolving his partnership and passing his capital to Searle and another clerk “who is just free” from his apprenticeship term. The young men, now able to contract business on their own, began to exercise authority as mature citizens. The transition, Margaret Searle noted, “will make George independent directly if their business is successful & they have every advantage for making it so.”\(^{11}\) As he reached the point of being an independent businessman, Searle was able provide greater financial assistance to his widowed mother, who was still taking care of her younger children. When Searle returned home to make “a revolution” in his mother’s shop by “packing up all the old goods to send to Boston” to take advantage of a scarcity of manufactured goods, Margaret wrote to a cousin, “George never looked so well, or seemed so happy as he does now.”\(^{12}\) With the success of his business efforts

\(^{10}\) For an overview of historical constructions of masculinity in the United States, particularly the impact of commercial society, see Rotundo, *American Manhood Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. For analysis of manhood in the colonial period, see Greven, *Four Generations*. More specific analysis of the effects of commercialization on manhood comes from Luskey, *On the Make*, 2010. Based on recent evidence, scholars have refuted the view of suffrage expansion in the nineteenth century, finding a high rate of voting in the colonial period. However, the narrative of democratization through universal manhood suffrage remains a strong feature of the literature. See Donald Ratcliffe, “The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787-1828,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 33, no. 2 (2013): 219–54.

\(^{11}\) Margaret Searle to Mary Harrison Eliot, 15 May 1809, Parkman Family Papers (MS Am 2120), Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter, HL).

\(^{12}\) Margaret Searle to Mary Harrison Eliot, 3 Dec 1809, Parkman Family Papers, HL.
and his mother’s financial security, Searle started to look beyond Boston for commercial
opportunities. He wrote to Margaret, “we feel our own importance & are nerved with fresh
vigour to fight our way in the world & to support a respectable standing in life.” At the same
time, Margaret was on her own path to a “respectable standing in life” as she was courted by
Samuel Curson. After crossing the legal age of majority, George Searle and his family
emphasized as a masculine prerogative his emerging influence within commercial society during
his transition to adulthood.

Yet the freedom of legal maturity was different from the settled future Searle considered
as the true mark of adulthood. The political crisis with Britain and France harmed trade in New
England, so twenty-three year old Searle decided “there is immediate prospect of my doing much
in England” and he hoped “to take advantage of opportunities” abroad “in these times of
uncertainty in mercantile & political prospects.” Searle interpreted maturity as the decision to
place a “sense of duty” above his preference for home and family. As Searle assumed
responsibility for finding employment abroad, he distinguished the active striving of youth from
what he expected would be the steadiness of adulthood. Although he regretted leaving his family,
he stated that “youth is a time for activity and nothing but idleness would have been my lot by
remaining.” Searle’s mother echoed his sentiments when she expressed concern for her
youngest child’s inability to find work. Mary Searle regretted the “Melancholy to see so many
Idle young men” like her sixteen-year-old son Thomas. The lack of employment threatened
Thomas’s ability to develop the capacities for activity and to take advantage of opportunities that
would prepare him for a settled adulthood. George Searle and his mother viewed youth as a
period of social mobility, ambition, and striving. Adulthood, in contrast, represented a period of

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13 George Searle to Margaret Searle, 23 Dec 1809, Curson Family Papers, 1730-1918 (MS Am 1175-1175.8), HL.
14 George Searle to Mary Russell Searle, 7 Jul 1811, Curson Family Papers, HL.
15 Mary Russell Searle to George Searle, 5 Oct 1811, Curson Family Papers, HL.
economic stability and increased competence in the eyes of the community, when a young man could exert the influence of his station.

As young men remained in a liminal period after age twenty-one, the idea of adulthood was removed from legal emancipation. A young man could mark the transition later in life in his own way. Samuel Burling grew up as a bastard child with his mother’s surname and without the support of his father, who was killed in a duel when Burling was three years old. In 1808, at age twenty seven, he decided to reconnect with his paternal lineage by taking his father’s name. He successfully petitioned the legislature to be known as Samuel Curson.\textsuperscript{16} That same year, he also started courting Margaret Searle, his future wife. He was just starting his career as an independent merchant and described in his diary a meeting with an established merchant in Boston, who “was much pleased at my visit [and] spoke in extravagant terms of my father, who it seems he had known in New York. He was the first I have met that seemed to take pleasure in hearing & pronouncing the new name; a proof you will say of his having felt more interest in the father than in the son.”\textsuperscript{17} The use of a new name gave Curson a public identity to feel confident in his commercial role. Although his father was not present to guide Curson into adult employment, Curson followed in his footsteps. He read his father’s travel diaries, met his former colleagues, and shared his name. As a middle-aged man, Curson started a memoir because he believed that “every man should write his own biography if he has children who can benefit by his experiences.”\textsuperscript{18}

For young men in mercantile occupations, the exercise of authority during adulthood required the inner capacities to handle the uncertainties and misfortunes of independent business in a global commercial environment. In 1806 (before he changed his surname) Samuel Burling

\textsuperscript{16} Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, June 1808.
\textsuperscript{17} Journals of Samuel Curson, 23 Jun 1808, Curson Family Papers, HL.
\textsuperscript{18} Samuel [Burling] Curson, “My Early Days,” Curson Family Papers, HL.
undertook a voyage to Lima, Peru, as the ship’s supercargo (an officer employed by a merchant to take responsibility for the transactions relating to the cargo), which resulted in financial disappointment and a test of character. The cargo was seized by the Spanish government, forcing Burling to stay in the city “until I get part of what I have [brought] out or I have ascertained that all hope is vain.” He told a friend that in the face of this setback, “duty, ambition, and pride oblige me stay, & among these the last is by no means the least.” He continued, “Many will call me a fool & some will not fail of calling me a madman. My employers, after planning the voyage & leaving nothing of me to say than merely whether I would, or would not, take charge of it, will no doubt leave the public in the belief that I have been the means of leading them into a speculation by which there are such heavy [losses].” Burling demonstrated concern about his commercial reputation, but considered the integrity of his character more important than the negative interpretations that his actions might elicit. Burling looked to the incident as part of the process of advancing in business. He wrote “what has been the means of ruining for me one prospect may open to me another.”19

Burling’s estranged mother, with whom he had recently started a correspondence, offered her own consolation. She wrote, “I am happy to find that your repeated disappointments and embarrassments does not injure your health, or reputation.” She advised Burling to treat disappointments as preparation for engagement with the world after the semi-dependent period of youth. “We must learn to submit to all other misfortunes, you my Dear Samuel will be as inured to them [when] you are thirty as your unfortunate mother has been, it is certain that after repeated Misfortunes continued for a length of time, it becomes so much what we are accustomed too, that we scarcely feel the last calamity if ever so great equal to the smallest in the

19 Samuel Burling [Curson] to Joseph May, 26 Oct 1806, 2 Dec 1806, Curson Family Papers, HL. For a discussion of the connection between accepting commercial risk and maturity, see p65 above.
commencement of our lives.” The autonomy and responsibility of adulthood were accompanied by trial and adversity – two sides of assuming the authority of age. Yet men and women faced the challenges of adulthood with different expectations and resources. Young men needed to assert the responsibilities of manhood in the face of adversity in order to gain a position as a respectable breadwinner. Young women, such as Elizabeth Burling Whitell in her younger years, placed their fate with their husbands and faced economic devastation if his venture failed or if he abandoned her.

The idea of maturity as the ability to exercise self-ownership in the economic realm was not confined to aspiring merchants navigating the commercial economy. During years of frustration and disappointment in his quest for employment befitting his educational credentials, Harvard graduate Andrews Norton received encouragement from his friends that emphasized these obstacles on the path to adulthood. One friend consoled the young graduate by reminding him that these obstacles provided “a good introduction to life.” The struggle for authority was “emblematical of the tumult of life” and served “to increase our attachment to the retirement of the profession on which we shall enter.” Later, after another lost opportunity, Norton again received letters encouraging him to persevere despite the “uncertainty of your prospects.” Andrews Norton did not secure solid employment until he was thirty years old. After receiving a position worthy of his academic training, Norton was able to reverse the financial dependence that had tied him to his father for fifteen years. In a letter that marked Norton’s adult status, his father wrote, “I wish if you could, with convenience, you would lend me hundred or one hundred & fifty dollars for a short time and bring it down with you, but I would not have you do it because it is I who ask it nor if it will in the least interfere with any plan or interrupt the pursuit

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20 Elizabeth (Burling) Whitell to Samuel Burling [Curson], 7 Apr 1808, Curson Family Papers, HL.
21 S. C. Thatcher to Andrews Norton, Aug 1804, Andrews Norton Papers (MS Am 1089), HL.
of any object you are aiming at.”

The shift toward wage labor of the early nineteenth-century economy blurred the line between youth and adulthood. Legal emancipation at age twenty-one gave young people the right to control their own income (which women kept until marriage). Yet most young men, and a good portion of women who worked outside the household, received an early emancipation as they took liminal positions as clerks, apprentices, teachers, or factory operatives. In the cash economy, young workers could earn income just as adults did and young men took the same risks as older men. The cycles of boom and bust that frequently wiped out a man’s fortune provided opportunities for young men and women to assume positions of authority in relation to their parents. Andrews Norton assisted his father after the Panic of 1819; Caroline Healey took employment after her father’s bankruptcy following the Panic of 1837. Because no age guaranteed economic security in the unstable commercial environment, nineteenth-century New Englanders asserted their authority through their control of resources and, when these markers failed, through their character, as a symbol of their competence for leadership within the community. Although many elite families lost fortunes during the volatile cycles of the early capitalist economy, class privilege and especially racial privilege protected most from falling into the degraded ranks of the working class.

As they navigated the commercial environment, young men needed to relate to their business associates as equals, even in cases where they were younger and former employees. In 1813 Elijah Pope Clark, a twenty-two year old merchant, received “a very unusual and improper request” from his former employer, Joseph Head. Clark had recently returned from a trip to Lisbon, Portugal, acting partly as Head’s agent, but also on his own account. Head ignored the

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22 Samuel Norton to Andrews Norton, 23 Nov 1819, Andrews Norton Papers, HL.
23 This episode is discussed in Chapter 2
distinction and “requested [Clark] to deliver him the merchants’ account who did my business.” The request upset Clark because it treated him as a subordinate employee, rather than a business peer. The next day Clark composed a letter to express his grievances, telling Head he could not “in justice either to my feelings or my character” provide the information. From Clark’s perspective, he had given proper account “for the property intrusted [sic] to my care” by Head. Asking for more information about his private business dealings wounded Clark’s sense of maturity. He told Head that if “this request could have arisen from any want of confidence in my integrity...I have lost the only object at which I aimed” during his seven years in service to the elder merchant. Clark’s letter reflected the deep importance of maturity for a young man entering business on his own. After leaving the subordinate position of apprentice or employee, often the only change in his status would be a new relationship with business partners. However, the transition to adulthood was never clearly defined, making the assertion of authority ambiguous. Attitudes of deference remained long past the twenty-first birthday. Less than a week after writing his passionate letter, Clark “sent [Head] the accounts he required of me.” Clark went against his own principles out of “consideration of the state of mind Mr. Head must be in for the loss of his son,” which he had learned about only days before.

Although Clark failed to assert his power in this December incident, the tensions in his relationship with Joseph Head returned the next year. Again, Clark engaged in a business deal with his former employer that he thought would be conducted on equal terms. He agreed to give Head a bond of indemnity for a ship that had been “seized by the government for an alleged violation of the Non-Intercourse Law.” When the time came for the deal to be finalized, Clark was shocked to discover that Head instead wanted “a note of hand for the amount.” Whereas the

24 Elijah Pope Clark Diary, 2 Dec 1813, 3 Dec 1813, MHS.
25 Elijah Pope Clark Diary, 7 Dec 1813, MHS.
bond was conditional, Clark understood that with the note “I should be creating a debt recoverable itself, independent of any event that may take place.” Unwilling to put himself in debt, Clark made his objections “which appear to me in every respect just & consistent with mercantile correctness.” Head tried to persuade Clark that the note would never be in danger of “some improper use.” However, in the end Clark “persevered and [Head] finally gave up the point.”

Despite his ability to uphold his position, Clark felt unsettled by the incident. The conflict with Head demonstrated that Clark lacked the authority appropriate for his commercial status in his relationship with his former employer. In order to maintain his independence in the matter of the bond, “I have been under the necessity of offending this gentleman, in whose service I have spent seven years of my life, and whose opinions I have heretofore been accustomed to view with respect.” But Clark assured himself that “the friendship of no man is worth preserving if it is to be purchased at the expense of principles which we know to be correct.” Clark struggled to assert his convictions while simultaneously adjusting his relationship with his former employer to recognize their equal claims to respect as free, white businessmen.

Clark also struggled for independence in his relationship with his age-based peers. As a member of the Independent Company of Cadets, Clark participated in the selection of new militia members. When the application of “a Mr. A.G.T.” came before the company, Clark “made some objections to this gentleman.” In Clark’s estimation, A.G.T.’s “juvenile manners and unsettled character” were not suited for “the dignity or respect of the corps.” Clark’s comments set the company against the admission of A.G.T., and “by some means or other it became the general impression that the opposition originated with me and the opinion of the company was

26 Elijah Pope Clark Dairy, 11 Apr 1814, MHS.
27 Ibid.
said to be predicated on mine.” When word came to A.G.T. and his friends that he had been
denied entry into the company, Clark “was named as the author of his disgrace.” The incident
immediately threw Clark’s convictions into conflict with his concern for his reputation. He
decided that maintaining his position against A.G.T. was not worth “sacrific[ing] the good
opinion of his friends.” Clark reversed his position on A.G.T.’s membership, and “he was
consequently admitted a member by nearly a unanimous vote.”

Clark expressed deep disappointment for going against his convictions to assure the entry
of A.G.T. into the Independent Company of Cadets. It violated all of the expectations he had for
autonomy and independence of will, thus signifying his inability to act with authority in his civic
encounters. Yet he recorded the incident in his diary “in order that I may see at some future
period to what inconsistent and unjustifiable conduct the narrowness of my circumstances and
my dependent situation at this time compel me to stoop.” Although Clark had reached the age of
legal maturity and was able to conduct business on his own, the dependencies of the commercial
environment limited his ability to stand by his convictions. Clark painfully discovered that legal
adulthood did not guarantee the conditions of independence. Struggling to conform his attitude to
his situation, Clark resolved, “whilst I suffer my principles to bend to circumstances I shall be
cautious that they be not destroyed and I hope the day is not far distant when they may act in
their full rigour unrestrained by any of those fears which now have too powerful an influence on
them.” As he struggled with the implications of his emerging social clout, Clark idealized
adulthood as a time when he would have the civic and economic power to follow his conscience
without fear of social pressure.

Ambitious young men encountered many barriers that hampered their ability to exercise

28 Elijah Pope Clark Diary, 29 Apr 1814, MHS.
29 Ibid.
the authority befitting their age and intellectual status, showing the conflict between an internal assessment of maturity and an external economic position. In May 1819 John Proctor ended his formal study at Harvard Law School. He hoped that the “termination of my Collegiate Course” would mean the beginning of active employment. He was “heartily sick of studying” and wanted employment that gave “advantages and profits” in the present, not just in preparation for the future. Although Proctor recognized that he was leaving “this favoured seat of Science,” to progress through the stage of youth, he contended that “study must be relinquished” for “active scenes.” After removing his possessions from Cambridge, Proctor returned to his job in Salem where he was “attentively engaged in the business of the office.” He soon heard the disappointing news that Harvard would not confer his law degree until the next year. In the meantime, Proctor contemplated how he could begin the “active life” that he so desperately sought. He considered moving west, in order to find “some business from which I could realize some advantage.” When his twenty-eighth birthday arrived, he wrote that he “wish[ed] to be so situated as to be useful & respectable.” But he lacked any prospect of a “favourable opportunity.”

Proctor judged his maturity based on his economic independence, and thus could not think of himself as an adult until he achieved the employment that he felt was appropriate for his age and education.

In August Proctor traveled back to Cambridge to receive his degree. He maintained a mature disposition when he met his classmates, considering it his “duty to deny myself the pleasure of dining with them.” “I will not sacrifice the dictates of my judgment to avoid the censure of the idle and dissolute.” Receiving the degree had little effect on Proctor’s efforts to settle his employment. The first month passed with “many plans of life, and visionary schemes

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30 John W. Proctor Diary, 21 May 1819, 28 May 1819, 7 Jun 1819, 29 Jul 1819, 30 Jul 1819, MS Am 1566, HL.
31 According to Harvard’s records, Proctor received his law degree in 1820.
of employment” unfulfilled. He had failed to meet his expectation of securing “some lucrative employment.” With the beginning of a new year, Proctor despised his study of law because he was not “contented with my situation and prospects.” He had spent the year living with his family in Danvers and studying with a lawyer in Salem. He admitted that “this situation was not the most favourable for improvement in my studies,” but he took it “because it was the most economical; and because it has afforded me some opportunity at becoming acquainted with those men, whose business I hope to be favoured with.”

Facing financial and occupational obstacles, Proctor was frustrated with his inability to achieve the authority he expected after his legal training.

As Proctor transitioned from his education to his legal career, he wrote, “I sincerely regret that I chose the profession of law, for I believe that I should have succeeded better in some other employment.” Unable to achieve professional security or prestige, Proctor asserted the maturity of his character, writing, “it is folly to repine or despair. Industry and perseverance will overcome all obstacles.” John Proctor closed his diary with self-criticism and shame. He portrayed his own journal as a sign of immaturity and weakness, claiming that it “contain[ed] hasty scribblings of careless moments.”

For John Proctor, adulthood meant living an “active life,” in which he had control over his situation, could choose a life of public engagement rather than solitude, and was directly receiving the rewards of his diligence and industry. The isolation of legal study and the delayed reception of its advantages made it a period of youth. Adulthood marked the crossing of a threshold of maturity that gave young men autonomy and a position of authority in society. Although this emphasis on self-ownership broadened civic influence for men across the socio-economic spectrum, the association between maturity and respectable labor

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32 John Proctor Diary, 31 Oct 1819, 21 Oct 1819, January 1820, HL.
33 John Proctor Diary, January 1820, 24 Jan 1820, HL.
reconstituted economic privilege. As young men took responsibility for demonstrating their competence, many felt an increased anxiety to display their respectability and capacity for rational consent through their employment.

For young men who spent their youth within the collegiate environment, the anxiety of transitioning into employment centered on the expectations of achieving civic influence. In a composition written in 1835 (his final year at Harvard College), Amos Adams Lawrence addressed the subject of the country's opportunities for “a young man about to enter an active life.” Lawrence was concerned about the influence of economic conditions on the formation of morality in the rising generation. An age of luxury would seem to offer prosperity, but in fact was damaging to a young man's future. “However virtuous a young man's inclination, there is little inducement to maintain high principles of honour & integrity.” Lawrence contended that nations were “strengthened by the industry & simplicity of those who compose them.” Lawrence and his classmates were poised to enter an environment that was, in his mind, promising: it was free of war, secure in government, and open to trade. He concluded that “on the whole we have no reason to complain of our ill fortune being born when we were, nor that we are brought into active life at this time.”

College-educated men like Lawrence found a political and economic system that supported masculine claims to authority through privileged access to financial resources and civic institutions. Yet, because the opportunities were laid out before them, it was the responsibility of young men themselves to prove their worth.

In his college composition, Amos A. Lawrence recognized the institutions that secured and advanced individual ambition during the early nineteenth century. By the 1840s, the nation transformed from “a collection of parochial agricultural communities into a cosmopolitan nation integrated by commerce, industry, information, and voluntary associations as well as by political

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34 Amos Adams Lawrence College Theme, “The Active Life,” 1835, Amos A. Lawrence Papers, MHS.
ties.” This transformation solidified a vision of nineteenth-century America as a bastion for the individual efforts of free (white) men. The expansion of suffrage to nearly all native-born white men reinforced an ideal that the nation’s government advanced the will of the people. Federal and state leaders financed internal improvements to unite each region’s economy and society. Political leaders also supported commercialization through local and national monetary systems and opportunities for international trade. And when these commercial institutions failed to provide them with the resources for independence, they could always leave the settled regions of the eastern seaboard for the vast and presumably empty western frontier. The young nation idolized a mythology of ‘self-made’ young men who rose to positions of respectability and authority through their own efforts, ignoring the resources and ingrained privilege that supported their mobility and social power.

Amos A. Lawrence was among the generation, and the class group, that reaped the benefits of these advancements. When he reached age twenty-one, Amos, Jr. received from his father “a donation of a very independent bachelor's fortune” – gift of “$15,000, well invested.” Lawrence described himself at twenty-one as “free” and “independent,” but his position in labor remained unfulfilled. His father, Amos, Sr., took the gift of such a large sum of money very seriously. Having learned the importance of judicious management of money during his own transition to adulthood, he advised his son “not to feel that there is less for you to do, because I have the means of giving you a start in life. On the contrary, you ought to feel that your

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37 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 1 Aug 1835, Amos A. Lawrence Diaries and Account Books, MHS.
38 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 29 Jul 1835, MHS.
duties and responsibilities are greatly increased by this start, and to bring into use all your talents, if so, happy will it be for you.”

But the generous inheritance was not enough to give young Lawrence a sense of maturity. Because his independent fortune symbolized his familial privilege rather than his own rational capacity, Lawrence struggled to view himself as an adult. After his twenty-first birthday, he left college and came to live in the family home in Boston. He quickly found that “I cannot have my own way at home, because I am watched and criticized by the family, and cannot, as I have been accustomed to, live as an independent bachelor.” Lawrence expected that as a single man free of domestic responsibilities, he would have the private accommodations, freedom of movement, and perhaps even the sexuality that bachelors had come to expect by the early nineteenth century. He was able to secure a separate parlor with his brother, a private space being “very necessary to making any advance in literature and in useful sciences.” By the following year, Lawrence knew he needed to find a domestic space of his own. During this period, Amos Adams Lawrence tried to think of himself as an adult: “I am free, I have an independent fortune, I am a citizen” – all factors that should have solidified the privileges of adulthood. But at the same time Lawrence struggled with self-confidence, a “filthy fault” of lacking the “assurance, and at the same time good manners to make my opinions go for as much as they are worth.” This lack of independent will made Lawrence “a foolish boy.” He prevailed upon “the favoring spirit” to

39 Amos Lawrence to Amos A. Lawrence, 26 Jun 1835, Amos A. Lawrence Papers, MHS.
40 John McCurdy finds that bachelorhood shifted from an “uncomfortable moment of liminality to a time full of...preparation for the rights and responsibilities of manhood” during the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, unmarried men who completed their education and found employment that demonstrated their self-ownership and respectability could claim independence and social authority before taking on the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood. However, despite the legal and cultural changes that shifted bachelors “from dependents similar to single women to independents similar to married men even though they did not become masters,” marriage served a crucial role in demonstrating young men’s character and maturity. McCurdy, Citizen Bachelors, 123, 8. Masculine adulthood and marriage is discussed further below.
empower him with “ambition,” and to “assist me in cultivating true honour and knowledge.”

Despite his secure economic position, Lawrence relied on inner features of character to feel like a man.

Middling and elite young men used their employment to stake their claim to political and economic authority. Because their positions provided economic autonomy suitable to their age and conformed to the expectations of respectability, they could portray themselves as rational and responsible members of the community. Even before he considered himself fully mature, Amos A. Lawrence took leadership roles in a variety of voluntary societies. At age twenty-one, his father helped him gain a position in the Seaman’s Aid Society, which offered “a means of learning how to transact business” as well as “a source of pleasure at the thought that I am doing a kindness to the poor.” Two years later he became a fireman after “the old department resigned & we better sort of folks took their place.” Later, as an established, married businessman, Lawrence became a member of the Trustees for the Bunker Hill Monument and of the Suffolk Bank board of directors. Because of his economic position and his family associations, Lawrence advanced to positions in highly-visible associations connected to economic power and civic identity. However, young men from less illustrious circumstances also found social authority through membership in associations. Bradley Cumings was a member of the Young Men’s Benevolent Society from its founding in 1827 when he was sixteen-year-old dry goods clerk. He

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41 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 1 Oct 1835, MHS.
42 For more on membership in voluntary societies as a reflection of personal autonomy, see Kevin Butterfield, “Unbound by Law: Association and Autonomy in the Early American Republic” (Ph.D., Washington University in St. Louis, 2010). Participation in voluntary societies as a feature of maturity is discussed in Chapter 4.
43 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 27 Nov 1835, MHS.
44 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 22 Aug 1837, MHS. Until 1837, Boston relied on volunteer fire companies comprised of working-class men. In 1837, a group of these firefighters started a riot with Irish immigrants after finding a congregation of the newcomers gathering for a funeral in front of the firehouse. The riot spread throughout the city and caused “thousands of dollars” of damage and left many Irish homeless. In response to this incident of violence, Boston’s city elites established a permanent fire department. Richard D. Brown and Jack Tager, Massachusetts: A Concise History (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Amy Sophia Greenberg, Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998).
also participated in the Young Men’s Temperance Society and encouraged temperance in his
friends and family. In 1834, as a twenty-two-year-old shop owner, he travelled to Worcester,
Massachusetts, as a delegate to the group’s annual convention. As they achieved economic
autonomy as business owners, young men were able to take on leadership roles in the voluntary
associations that marked the mid-nineteenth century. Although their sense of maturity wavered,
they had the privilege of secure financial resources to display the external conditions of
authority.

Early nineteenth-century New Englanders shared a belief in self-ownership as a capacity
available to all, even as the economic conditions necessary to exercise self-ownership were
increasingly relegated to the middle and upper classes. For young men without a commercial
apprenticeship or a family legacy, adulthood often came as a formal process of emancipation that
pushed poor young people into economic activities associated with necessity, rather than choice.
Poverty among the white, native-born population occurred as men lost access to land or skilled
trades. For African Americans and Irish immigrants, the lack of economic opportunities was
compounded by ethnic prejudice based on perceived intrinsic traits of ignorance, indolence, or
immorality. Because their work lacked the ideals of rationality and independence, poor and non-
white men and women took subordinate positions in the economy and were relegated to less
influential political or social organizations. Their presumed lack of maturity entrenched their
economic subordination by closing off opportunities to express full social authority equal to their
middle-class neighbors.

Many poor young men and women spent their minority as indentured apprentices, legally
obligated to work for their masters until age twenty-one (for men) and eighteen (for women).^{45}

^{45} The job of managing the care and indenture of pauper children fell to the Overseers of the Poor, a body of elected
officials charged with addressing poverty and vagrancy in their town. See Eric Guest Nellis and Anne Decker
Public officials expected apprentices to enter their majority with vocational skills to support
their own livelihood and basic literacy to function as citizens. Indenture contracts required the master to
provide the departing apprentice with “two Good Suits of Wearing Apparel, fitting all parts of
[her or his] Body, one for the Lord’s Day and one for the Working Days, suitable to [her or his]
Degree.” A few indentures required the master to give his departing apprentice a cash sum,
typically twenty dollars. One contract stipulated the apprentice’s right to “a pair of young oxen
near three years old, & a heifer about the same age.” By the 1830s, indenture contracts included
a clothing allowance within the typed text of the document, indicating that its inclusion had
become standard practice. Upon release from their apprenticeship, young men bound to learn the
“art and mystery of a farmer” were to be given “forty dollars in cash.” Women bound to learn
housewifery, as well as men bound to learn a trade, received no such compensation. In addition
to the payment to farm apprentices, masters of both young men and young women owed the
Overseers of the Poor one hundred dollars, presumably as compensation for facilitating their
acquisition of a cheap source of labor.\footnote{Indentures Files, 14 Jun 1793, 2 Mar 1799, Boston Public Library.}
The policies surrounding pauper indentures continued
the colonial practice of keeping household dependents in legally-subordinate positions, rather
than providing opportunities for provisional autonomy. Without the opportunities to assert self-
ownership during their youth, young paupers lost access to security and prestige in adulthood.
Poor young men achieved legal adulthood, including the right to vote, and might earn enough to
support their families. Poor young women could marry, have children, and care for a home. Yet
the contingent, subordinate, or physical nature of their work prevented them from associating
their labor with the capacities of maturity prized by the middling classes.

\footnote{Cecere, *The Eighteenth-Century Records of the Boston Overseers of the Poor* (Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2007). The lower age of emancipation for women recognized the importance of marriage for women’s support. By releasing women earlier, public officials expected that they would get married and thus become the legal responsibility of their husbands rather than the state.}
Even young apprentices who were not bound to their positions through the Overseers of the Poor looked forward to their entry into manhood at the end of their legal dependence. Edward Jenner Carpenter, a nineteen-year-old cabinet-maker’s apprentice in Greenfield, Massachusetts, recorded the approach of his twenty-first birthday in his journal. On April 11, 1844 he marked his two-year anniversary at the shop. “I suppose I must stay till the 4th of August, 1846, a long time to look ahead, but short to look back.” A few days later Carpenter conversed with a co-worker, a German immigrant, who “Says when I am 21 if I can’t find work to come to New York... & he will find me work.” On August 4, Carpenter celebrated his nineteenth birthday, writing “2 years & I am a man.” He viewed age twenty-one as a critical threshold to receive control over his labor and be able to move to another city, although he expected to continue working for others. Carpenter saw the example of a journeyman in the shop who was forced to remain because he could not find work. Although legal maturity would bring a degree of self-ownership, the inability to find work that could support claims to autonomy and respectability limited the social authority working-class men could expect in adulthood.47

The legal status of minority and dependence especially affected young African Americans as New England states phased out the institution of slavery. The experience of James Mars in Chapter 2 demonstrates the limitations that legal racism placed on young African Americans. Like other young people who were released from ‘statutory servitude’ at age twenty-five, he entered the labor market able to make a contract on his own.48 After earning his freedom, Mars returned to work for Mr. Munger, this time as a hired employee. As an adult he “worked where I chose.” Mars’s measured his maturity by his legal status and he recognized that

47 Edward Jenner Carpenter Journal, 11 Apr 1844, 14 Apr 1844, 4 Aug 1844, 4 Sep 1844, AAS).
48 Melish, *Disowning Slavery*. 
emancipation that offered limited autonomy through the ability to enter a wage labor contract.\textsuperscript{49} However, once black men like Mars reached legal emancipation, their opportunities were restricted by racial prejudice. Although they could be seen as adults by members of the black community, racist attitudes among the white population limited their ability to exert maturity in the larger society. Even African Americans who were never subject to gradual emancipation could not freely choose their occupations as middling white men did. Like poor whites, young African Americans were prevented from entering the occupations that offered the most economic security and public regard. Yet unlike young white men, their exclusion was based on a racial prejudice that associated blackness with dependence and immaturity.\textsuperscript{50} Many white New Englanders viewed African Americans as inherently inferior in morality and character. Common prejudice held that “if left to pursue their own inclinations” free blacks would “spend their days in idleness and their nights in vice, depending on charity or theft for the necessities of life.” Menial and subservient employment was considered the best and only position for African Americans, who “never aspire to become mechanics, or even respectable laborers; they will always be found doing the lowest drudgery and all the money they obtain is spent for rum, which prepared them for the poor house, the penitentiary and the prisons.”\textsuperscript{51} The negative view of African descendants – increasingly explained through pseudo-scientific claims about inherent racial attributes – justified the continuing dependence of African Americans.\textsuperscript{52}

Advocates for racial equality denounced the “caste” system that denied black men an equal chance at privileged positions in the labor market. Lydia Marie Child questioned the

\textsuperscript{49} Cottrol, From African to Yankee, 68.
\textsuperscript{50} James Oliver Horton, Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999).
meaning of emancipation in New England if “a colored man, however, intelligent, is not allowed to pursue any business more lucrative than that of a barber, a shoe-black, or a waiter.” She found it “unjust that a man should, on account of his complexion, be prevented from performing more elevated uses in society.”\(^5^3\) An anonymous author wrote in a pamphlet, “The black man, whatever may be his talents, acquirements, or moral worth, can seldom rise above the condition of servile labor.”\(^5^4\) By exposing the economic discrimination that denied black men the opportunity to exhibit their mature capacities, these critics challenged the white ideal that an individual’s position in society was determined by merit and maturity. However, it would still be decades before systematic challenges to racial hierarchy would begin to erode the power of whiteness.

Irish immigrants also encountered racial prejudice that prevented them from being viewed as rational, competent citizens. They were viewed as “wild” and “semi-savage” and a common phrase for “rowdy, undisciplined behavior” was “acting Irish.” To compound these attitudes, Irish men were forced into manual labor positions that did not pay enough to support a family. By relying on the income of their wives and children, men could not portray themselves as independent breadwinners. As a group, Irish immigrants faced virulent anti-Catholic sentiment that removed them from the progressive vision of the nation. In *A Plea for the West*, Lyman Beecher sounded the alarm to protect new territories from the corrupting influence of the Catholic Church. In Boston, this nativist ideology incited a mob to burn down the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. Urban Irish immigrants were only accepted as citizens

\(^{53}\) Lydia Maria Francis Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (J. S. Taylor, 1836), 207.

when the Democratic Party began to see them as a voting bloc in the 1850s.\textsuperscript{55}

Poor men and racialized others were placed at the bottom of New England’s economic, political, and social hierarchy through an ideology of paternalism that justified white, middle-class authority through ideas about merit and civic competence. With the decline of household governance and slavery – legal mechanisms that subordinated workers to a moral, independent patriarch – elites feared the disorder, crime, and vice that would result from traditional dependents being left to their own devices. For white workers, the struggle over the laboring classes’ reputation for morality, industry, and competence resulted in the Ten Hour Movement – a protest among factory workers, apprentices, and journeymen to restrict the working day to have more time for leisure. Teresa Anne Murphy describes this movement as an attempt to replace employers’ paternalism with their own patriarchal authority over the household. While industrialists used “the rhetoric of moral uplift and traditional community values” to justify their control of worker’s time, labor activists asserted their own “moral self-reliance and independence” to control their own time, in addition to the labor of their wives and children.\textsuperscript{56}

Of course just because African Americans, Irish, and poor whites were treated as perpetual dependents by middle-class politicians, philanthropists, and moralists does not mean that they viewed themselves in the same way. Even men at the margins of society were able to build authority within their segregated communities. William J. Brown secured an informal apprenticeship with a black man to learn the trade of shoe repair. When his mentor died, Brown “purchas[ed] all of his tools…determined to work until I could raise the means…to go some place where my prospects would be more encouraging.”\textsuperscript{57} African American political leader

\textsuperscript{56} Murphy, \textit{Ten Hours’ Labor}, 14, 64.
\textsuperscript{57} Cottrol, \textit{From African to Yankee}, 133.
David Walker opened a used clothing shop and used his network of clients to spread his abolitionist message. Prominent black writer and activist Maria W. Stewart exhorted “black men to take up trades and open businesses, to establish themselves as prosperous community members.” Through economic independence, they would “demonstrate their manhood and the manhood of their race.”

Irish immigrants also found degrees of success within conditions of discrimination and oppression. One “storybook” example was Andrew Carney, who immigrated to Boston in 1816 at twenty years old and worked as a peddler before establishing trade as a tailor. After securing “a lucrative government uniform contract” and utilizing the newly invented sewing machine, Carney became “one of the wealthiest and most respected Catholics in Boston.” Immigrants in the 1840s faced more stringent economic times with only the means to work as day laborers. However, some Irish scraped together the capital to open grocery stores or liquor stores in Irish neighborhoods. These shops became centers of the social life by “providing a convivial atmosphere to which...customers could congregate.”

The white working class also developed a segregated community that fostered awareness about their antagonism toward capitalist interests. As Edward Jenner Carpenter waited for the expiration of his apprentice term, he participated in a number of civic activities controlled by laboring people. He subscribed to The Hampden Washingtonian, a temperance newspaper geared to the working class. Although he “could not afford to go” to many concerts and lectures, he participated in the town’s Mechanic’s Fair, a charitable event organized by working-class

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60 Ryan, Beyond the Ballot Box, 83.
families. He also attended a dancing school, and remarked that the “big bugs” – his term for the upper classes of the community – held “a dance tonight in opposition to ours.” Carpenter also reported on “an adjourned meeting of the ‘rabble’ (so called by the aristocrats).” And he noted that when the “‘big bugs’” refused to allow the mechanics join a dance in the town hall, the working-class group “staid [sic] outside & made such a noise that they could hardly hear the music.” With the development of a working-class identity came the opportunity to establish cultural institutions, such as mutual-improvement societies and charitable organizations, that provided leadership and rewarded competence within the working-class community. Carpenter participated in these groups, but recognized the subordinate position they held in relation to middle-class society. A responsible young man could achieve authority within a community of his class peers because of the dignity of his work, but unless his employment signified maturity on middle-class terms, he would be shut out of the larger political, economic, or cultural power structures dominated by the middle class.

For men at the margins of New England’s commercial economy, adulthood was a struggle to survive. It often began with a legal transition from household dependent – apprentice or quasi-slave – to a free man. But legal freedom did not guarantee economic security and for many young men, the conditions of legal dependence during youth foreclosed the possibility of gaining education or vocational training that would prepare them for respectable employment, as defined by the middle class. Poor young men could identify their own internal sense of autonomy and self-respect and the dignity of their work could be recognized by their peers, giving them recognition of adulthood within the working-class community. However, they would remain below middle-class men in terms of wealth and prestige as long as their work was associated with toil. The organization of labor in early nineteenth-century New England defined masculinity
based on “active” labor that signified control over themselves and their working conditions and put them on track for economic mobility. Men who could only find employment as day laborers or in servile positions could not earn maturity through efforts that would be recognized by the middle-class community. Unless they could portray their work as an expression of choice, they would be unable to claim the full capacity to consent that made them eligible for social authority.

For men struggling in the early nineteenth-century economy, marriage could help improve their financial status through the addition of a wife’s income and domestic labor. In colonial America, marriage was central to men’s political and social status because it was the first step toward governing a household. Single men lacking property worked within a system of household government under a financially independent and politically-recognized patriarch on much the same terms as women. Under these conditions, John McCurdy argues that “gender was less consequential than mastery” over household dependents. During the eighteenth century, bachelors identified themselves as a unique group isolated from masculine power because of their economic status. By criticizing laws that placed specific civic obligations, such as taxes and military service, on single men, bachelors “improved their status by claiming that all men regardless of marital status or social standing were equal.” Bachelors used the features of masculinity to overcome their lack of householder status in order to achieve political authority.

By the early nineteenth century, young men claimed maturity based on their self-ownership, regardless of their marital or economic status. Full possession of masculine character traits, such as intellect, reason, ambition, and autonomy, allowed men to end their period of

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61 Scholars discuss the role of women’s unpaid domestic labor in reproducing the workforce, and also the significance of domestic income (boarding, laundry, etc). See Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Boydston, *Home and Work*.


63 McCurdy, *Citizen Bachelors*, 7, 8.
liminality and incorporate themselves into the political, economic, and social power of patriarchal society. In this environment, a young man’s sense of maturity depended on his decision to sacrifice individual liberty for long-term benefit, as well as the decision of his betrothed to abandon her own autonomy for the security he promised to provide. Nathaniel Cheever displayed this attitude in a post script on an 1804 letter to his betrothed, Charlotte Barrell. Writing to acknowledge his twenty-seventh birthday, Cheever noted that Barrell had “arrived at that age one or two months since.” Emphasizing the capacity for reason and choice that came through the process of growing up, Cheever considered “we have both come to years of discretion, at least to that period when we are [allowed] to act for ourselves.”

Despite the removal of civil penalties on bachelors, advice writers portrayed marriage as an expression of young men’s character development. Although men could achieve influence without marriage, social commentators encouraged young men to fulfill their duties to the community. Marriage motivated the “honorable young man” with “important ulterior objects,” and molded his “earlier plans and exertions” in a socially appropriate manner. Marriage ensured that men’s labor was prudently employed for the benefit of society. This prescriptive literature made marriage essential for crossing the boundary between youth and adulthood. Marriage was also vital for displaying the capacity for authority within the community. A young man needed to be a husband before he could “consider himself as perfectly settled in life, and prepared to take his proper station in society.” By working to support a family, a young man proved his usefulness, a central component of maturity. Any man “possessing health and habits of industry” was capable of the labor necessary to provide for a family “by the time” he arrives “at a suitable age for wedlock.” By contrast, the perpetual bachelor limited his concern “to his own narrow personal wants” and “squanders freely” his material gains “in the belief that he can always

64 Nathaniel Cheever to Charlotte Barrell, 19 Aug 1804, AAS.
procure enough to support himself.” The responsibilities of marriage molded a self-interested boy into a productive man. The care of a family would inspire a young man to use “honest and persevering exertions to obtain a reasonable income.”65 The prescriptive literature pressured men to marry – a choice that involved sacrificing their own freedom from familial obligations – to solidify their claims to authority.

Young men also expressed the belief that marriage symbolized their prudent character. Yet, if they were not fully confident in their maturity before they proposed, they looked to their union with a respectable woman to achieve the stability and rationality of adulthood. Young John Pierce remarked “How soon are those loose ideas dispelled, which arise from the impulse of youthful passions, and from intercourse with immodest companions, when we enter the state of ‘holy matrimony!'”66 Nathan Landesford Foster thought marriage would give him “resolution, firmness, virtue, & strength of mind, adequate to the fulfillment of the important covenant into which I have this day entered.”67 By relying on a woman’s mature choice to select him as a husband, young men viewed femininity as a force to restrain their natural ambition and reach a higher state of maturity.

By linking marriage to maturity, advice writers criticized healthy young men who voluntarily remained single. Authors described bachelors as “ungenerous and dishonorable… unnatural and unreasonable.” Men who chose the single life also condemned vulnerable young women to a life as spinsters. Advice authors reminded their male audience that “many young

65 John Mather Austin, *A Voice to Youth: Addressed to Young Men and Young Ladies* (Utica, N.Y.: O. Hutchinson, 1841), 242, 238.
66 John Pierce to Abiel Abbot, 22 Jan 1799, Poor Family Papers, SL.
67 Nathan Landesford Foster, 30 May 1810, AAS.
68 Elliot to Amos A. Lawrence, 11 Aug 1834, MHS.
ladies remain single…more from the force of circumstances, than from choice.” Young women were at the mercy of eligible bachelors because “ladies can not seek out and select companions; they must remain to be sought.” Because of this passive position, society expected young men to take responsibility for bringing women into a household. By rejecting this responsibility, a bachelor “makes himself justly the object of animadversion and contempt!”

Young men who remained bachelors faced gentle mocking from their peers, but rarely the outright derision found in advice books. Eighteen-year-old Andrews Norton received a letter from his friend S. C. Thatcher that described the love of beauty. After the philosophical discussion, Thatcher remembered “I am talking to one who avows his intention of becoming one of the crabbed, sour, hallow brotherhood of old bachelors.” Yet Thatcher predicted that “some pretty Beatrice” would convince Norton to change his mind, and promised to be “the first to congratulate ‘Benedict, the married man.’” Benjamin Kent advised his twenty-two-year-old friend Jacob Bailey Moore to enter the “delectable state” despite himself being “a settled, despised, solitary bachelor.” He only asked Moore not to “laugh at others” who remained unmarried. After reporting his older brother’s engagement, twenty-four-year-old Amos A. Lawrence added, “he bets me a thousand dollars I cannot be engaged in 6 weeks & requires me to make no forfeit, but I shall not take him up.”

Chronological age framed social understandings of the connection between marriage and maturity. Conventional wisdom held that men should marry between the ages of “four or five and twenty” and “thirty,” before “the habits and temper of the parties has become fixed.”

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69 Austin, A Voice to Youth, 240–41.
70 S.C. Thatcher to Andrews Norton, 10 Feb 1804, Andrews Norton Papers (MS Am 1089), HL. This is likely a reference to William Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing.
71 Benjamin Kent to Jacob Bailey Moore, 26 May 1819, Jacob Bailey Moore Papers (MS Am 800.51), HL.
72 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, 7 Jan 1838, Amos A. Lawrence Diaries and Account Books, MHS.
73 Austin, A Voice to Youth, 242.
Young men and women shared this concern, but never fully accepted these dictates. Luella Case learned of her friend Sarah Edgerton’s engagement and had no trouble believing Edgerton had “been ‘taken captive, hand and heart’” by Amory Dwight Mayo’s character. Case praised Mayo’s language quoted in Edgerton’s letter, which gave her “still higher appreciation of his mind and heart than even your vivid and poetical sketch would warrant.” Case acknowledge that some people might object to the fact that Mayo, at twenty years old, was five years younger than Edgerton, but “I am not foolish enough to think a year or two of seniority on the lady's part can have any influence on married happiness.” However, Case expressed concern about Mayo’s immaturity. She warned Sarah that “young gentlemen of twenty rarely have the character fixed, and are sometimes addicted to inconstancy, especially if of an ideal and loving temperament.” But as soon as Case voiced the concern, she added that “traits of the heart and mind…can over balance the temptations of youth.” She concluded that based on Edgerton’s description that Mayo possessed “a pure and unsophisocated character,” and she preferred him as “as he is, young, poetical, truthful, and affectionate.”

With the high expectations for men’s maturity as they approached marriage, young bachelors felt pressure to obtain a woman’s approval of their economic position. Many young men wrote to their peers that they could not consider marriage until they were sure that their employment appropriately displayed their capacity for autonomy. But in the commercial economy, the foundation for stability was more nebulous than the land requirement faced by men in the colonial period. Twenty-one-year-old George Barrell, a struggling midshipman, confessed to his sister that he found the woman whom he wanted to make his wife, once he was “in a situation to marry.” Aspiring minister John Pierce wrote to his friend, his decision “never to

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74 Luella Case to Sarah Edgerton, 26 Mar 1844, Hooker Collection, SL.
75 George B. Barrell to Charlotte Barrell, 21 Oct 1799, AAS.
marry _____” until he “paid my debt, (I can hardly say debts,) procured a good library, & have something beforehand.” Jesse Appleton, a newly-settled minister in Hampton, New Hampshire, compared marriage to “a great house, seen at a distance:

You give it a general glance, & it appears well. You have no objections to live in such a one thro life. But if you think seriously of purchasing it, a thousand considerations will influence the bargain, which never entered your mind, when you took but a general view. Appleton avoided marriage on account of his perception of his “situation,” not the lack of eligible young women. He assured his academic mentor, “were I in a marrying condition, there are half a dozen, charming creatures, to any one of whom I could be very happily tied (meaning if they had no objection).” However he stressed he might be ready “in a year or two.” The financial and emotional responsibility of marriage weighed on his mind and “the nearer such a period advances, the greater appear the difficulties & dangers, which attend it.” The ambiguous measures of wealth in early capitalism made men uncertain of their economic standing. Their employment was not just their access to material resources, but also an external sign of their internal character.

To assure their prospective wives of the security of their position, young men detailed their employment in courtship letters. Because young women were expected to be more concerned with a suitor’s maturity than his wealth, men used their income to symbolize their authority and self-ownership. Alongside effusions of love and fidelity, young men explained practical concerns of salary and housing. James Morss informed Eliza Heath that he “received an application to settle” in Newburyport, Mass., as a minister. The town “offered a salary of 700 Dollars per ann. & have mentioned in their address that, unless convenient, they would not expect me to deliver more than one discourse of my own, every Sabbath, for 18 months to

76 Pierce indicates that he knows the woman he intends to marry, but refrains from naming her in the letter in accordance with standards of propriety.
77 Jesse Appleton to Ebenezer Adams, 3 May 1797, AAS.
come.” Hoping to hear encouragement from his intended, Morss added, “I have not yet formed a decision, but think it most probably I shall stay here.”

Cyrus Farnum included a long description of his business in a letter to Annie White. “I am most happy to add that I confidently hope this may often be the case now, as I am of opinion (and this is an opinion which has not been formed without observation) that business matters will look differently for the next year, from what they have for the two years past.” He offered his perspective on the general state of business in the region. “For my own part I sincerely hope this may be the case, as people (the business class I mean) of course have been so long depressed by the disastrous state of business offices that they seem to have lost half their energy and activity and instinct of driving their business as they ought.” After giving this long account of assurance, Farnum apologized for “this long disquisition on a subject which I am well aware can possess little, if any interest, for one of your sex.” This dismissal allowed Farnum to assure White of his economic prospects without implying her interest in financial concerns.

In January 1839, after a year running his own business as a textile merchant, Lawrence predicted “next year at this time I think I shall be a married man.” Although the unmarried state “gives one more time for study, improvement,” Lawrence considered his nature “averse to bachelor’s life.” Everything in Lawrence’s life seemed to fit the ‘situation for marrying.’ He had met the right woman, and his “income last year was $6000 & more clear of all outgoings, which is pretty well.” But wealth was not enough. “I aspire higher, higher....I have gained the reputation of being a good manager of business, [which] if it be true is certainly instinctive, for my mercantile education was small enough.” However, the coming year was less profitable than Lawrence expected, delaying his engagement. In 1842, at the age of twenty eight and with his

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78 James Morss to Eliza Heath, 31 Oct 1803, Heath Papers, MHS.
79 Cyrus Farnum to Annie White, 4 Jun 1843, Hooker Collection, SL.
marriage only a few weeks away, he recorded the previous year “as unprofitable a one as I passed for many back.” He thought that marriage would encourage him to “spend my time more rationally.”

For middle-class young men, marriage was not a pre-requisite to political power, but an indication of mature decision making. Although the economic and political domination of men remained intact through the early nineteenth century, young men relied on volatile resources and uncertain employment as their promise of economic stability. They expected women to solidify their maturity by agreeing to marriage, an act that confirmed a young man’s economic prospects and his capacity for maturity. They contemplated marriage not as a source of mastery over dependent labor but as an assurance of internal development. Marriage signified a man’s achievement of gendered authority by his own sacrifice of liberty for stability, and the choice of a mature woman to submit her well-being to his care. Through these qualities of maturity, young men promoted an ideal of democratic citizenship that reinforced the systems of race, class, and gender privilege in early nineteenth-century New England.

Authority through Domesticity

In 1818, twenty-seven year old Huldah Foote traveled to Cold Spring, New York, from her family’s home in Colchester, Connecticut, to take a position as a district school teacher. She had “near 30 scholars daily…and more expected when their quarter is out with Mr. Conklin, the yearly instructor in the other district.” Foote evaluated her position judiciously, remarking “I have many privileges and am deprived of some, but upon the whole I find it a very good situation.” Teaching school reminded Foote to privilege duty over self-interest by finding satisfaction “in whatever state” she might encounter. In evaluating her employment, Huldah

80 Amos A. Lawrence Diary, January 1839, 2 Jan 1842, MHS.
expressed more interest in her stability than in her opportunity for advancement, which would have been the perspective of her male peers. Invested in her prospects for moral rather than economic authority, Foote wrote optimistically about her “wide field of usefulness” as a teacher. She pursued her employment with “the zeal and spirit of a missionary” to bring her young charges on a path to “virtue and religion.”

Many young middling women in early nineteenth-century New England shared the experiences of Huldah Foote as they searched for a position of “usefulness” and authority outside the household and waited longer to take on the role of wife and mother (if they did so at all). Economic and ideological changes after the American Revolution repositioned the role of marriage and motherhood in the construction of adulthood for middle-class white women. The processes of industrialization decreased women’s role as economic producers within the family by displacing traditional female tasks. At the same time, women faced a shortage of male partners as young New England men migrated to frontier regions in search of new land. By 1850, New England had as many as 20,000 ‘surplus’ women of marriageable age. Amidst these economic and demographic changes, women delayed marriage as they took advantage of opportunities for education and employment. In early nineteenth-century New England, young women pursued these traditional female roles of marriage and motherhood as symbols of their capacities for rationality, self-ownership, and ultimately a limited form of citizenship. As they

81 Huldah Foote to Abigail Foote, Jun 1818, Connecticut Historical Society (hereafter CHS).
redefined their value within the home, women appropriated some of the character traits once
cconfiné to elite men.

In colonial New England, unmarried women were legally, economically, and politically
dependent on their fathers, masters, or guardians. Even adult women who operated as *femes sole*
typically required the legal representation and economic support of male kin. Accomplished
women might manage important economic enterprises (such as a father’s or husband’s store),
and even take on public visibility by serving as a “deputy husband,” but they lacked a legal voice
under the principle of coverture. As American leaders proclaimed reason and merit as the
foundation of society, women pushed for a civic identity based on traditional roles of wife and
mother. The ideology of ‘republican motherhood’ emphasized women’s roles as educators of the
rising generation of citizens. In the early nineteenth century, the ‘cult of domesticity’ defined
the non-productive home as “woman’s proper sphere and empire.” It was the space for “the
display of her excellences and her worthiness,” just as the husband enacted his citizenship on the
public stage. Marriage provided women with a situation to “profitably employ your minds,
minister to the health of your bodies, and become competent of making yourselves useful.”
While men pursued ambition and economic control in the public sphere, usefulness, selflessness,
and duty gave women authority within the domestic and moral spheres of society. Alexis de
Tocqueville remarked how the American woman, at least those of the well-to-do sort with which
he was acquainted in his travels, found the ability to submit “in the firmness of her reason and in
the virile habits which her education has given her.” He used the language of masculine
autonomy to describe a woman’s decision to confine herself “within the small circle of interests

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85 Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill:
86 Austin, *A Voice to Youth*, 310, 319.
and domestic duties.”

Young women demonstrated competence for adult authority through the prudent exercise of choice, albeit within the limitations of nineteenth-century gendered restrictions on women’s participation in society. Advice literature emphasized the need for rational, mature judgment among young women contemplating the choice of a partner. Marriage represented “a total revolution in her circumstances” for daughters. The gravity of the choice required “deep, solemn, mature deliberation.” Authors advised women to delay marriage “until the body has obtained full growth and maturity – which in females is seldom before the age of twenty or twenty one.” In addressing biological markers of adulthood, advice authors showed continued concern for women’s physical maturation – their ability to conceive and carry children – to their familial roles. But young women also needed the mental capacities of “reflection and discernment, before they can possess that maturity of judgment, so essential to the efficient discharge of the responsible duties, which devolve upon the head of a family.” A mature choice would be “divested of all romantic imaginations” more suited for girlish fantasies. According to Tocqueville, “American women marry only when their reason is exercised and mature, while elsewhere most women ordinarily begin to exercise their reason and become mature in it only within marriage.”

As young women took more control over their choice of a spouse, naiveté and immaturity could result in a disastrous match. In an 1803 letter to her beau, Mary Wyllys recounted her first experience with a suitor. At fifteen, Wyllys met a Mr. Miller, in whose “countenance” she found something immediately “unpleasing.” However, the older man was “violently in love” with

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88 Austin, *A Voice to Youth*, 379.
89 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 566.
young Mary, a fact apparent to everyone but her. As barely a young woman, “I could not possibly tell what they meant.” She understood love as a feeling of friendship, something she felt for “every person that I thought good and agreeable.” When Mr. Miller shared his feelings and intentions with Mary, she considered herself “too young and inconsiderate to know my own mind, that my youth and inexperience precluded my ever seeing or treating him in any other way than as a common acquaintance.” Connecting her age to her internal development, Wyllys recognized her immaturity in romantic relationships that made her ill-prepared to make so significant a decision as choosing a husband. Despite her reservations, Miller “persisted and finessed considerable to gain my affection.” He eventually secured the consent of Wyllys’s parents “to give their child at the age of 19.” The marriage would have proceeded, presumably with tragic results, had “the particular hand of providence” not intervened and “a letter was incautiously put into my hands from him to a friend of his.” Reading the letter “filled me with disgust and abhorrence,” and ended the engagement. The story served to underscore the importance of a young woman’s maturity for discerning the man who was most likely to provide her with stability in marriage. Both men and women demonstrated their maturity in their choice of a partner, but women faced much higher stakes. A poor choice could result in abandonment and a lifetime of insecurity. Young women pursued reason and emotional experience as a foundation for a prudent courtship and ultimately the preparation for feminine authority.90

Young women’s ability to represent themselves as rational and independent in marriage also came from their ability to control fertility. Following the American Revolution, women seized on the language of reason and liberty to find social, political, and economic positions beyond their reproductive functions. They demonstrated their civic potential by portraying “self-control, self-mastery, and restraint” – powers traditionally confined to men – through their bodily

90 Mary Wyllys to John Mico Gannett, Jan 1803, MeHS.
control and specifically their ability to avoid pregnancy. Knowledge of fertility was circulated through published manuals, such as Charles Knowlton’s popular 1832 guide *The Fruits of Philosophy*, for the benefit of young people who had less access to the advice or dictates from their elders. The subtitle – *The Private Companion to Young Married People* – indicated that reproduction was associated with youth, even as couples took on adult responsibilities of parenthood and household management. The result of couples taking control of their fertility was a dramatic drop in birthrates in New England during the nineteenth century, from eight or more children per woman in the colonial period, to seven in 1800, to five in 1850 and three and a half by 1900.

The ability to limit births came not through a dramatic advance in contraceptive technology, but through the dissemination of knowledge of age-old techniques (periodic abstinence, withdrawal, douching, abortifacients) and by the cooperation between husbands and wives to use them. Authors of these manuals desired the “power” of contraception to “be placed, where it ought to be, in the hands of the woman.” By controlling their reproductive powers, women showed themselves to be “foresighted, responsible, and thoughtful.”

Men also found a measure of autonomy from the ability to participate in the control of reproduction. After reading about the withdrawal method in Robert Dale Owen’s *Moral Physiology*, a young man wrote and thanked the author for helping him become “a free agent, and in a degree, the arbiter of my own destiny.” As both men and women took control of their fertility, New England couples redefined femininity to recognize “reason and prudence” as capacities necessary for “the

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93 Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 8, 126.
important task of guarding and rearing the next generation,” rather than women’s “physicality and sexuality” that served only to increase their husband’s lineage.\footnote{Klepp, \textit{Revolutionary Conceptions}, 127. This view is also supported by Gloria Main, who finds that the decline in fertility was the result of a greater degree of sexual restraint. Not only did rates of premarital pregnancy decline in the early nineteenth century, but the total number of births before age thirty also fell and the spacing of children increased. Although access to chemical means of contraception may have increased, Main posits that couples modified their attitudes toward sexuality “to cease regarding childbearing as a self-justifying end in itself and to embrace the new view of sexual reproduction as a process that could and \textit{should} be under the control of wives and husbands.” See Gloria L. Main, “Rocking the Cradle: Downsizing the New England Family,” \textit{The Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 37, no. 1 (July 1, 2006): 51.}

As young women emphasized their control over their own bodies, they helped to invest “new meaning in the traditional cliché that women were the sources of virtue in a society.”\footnote{Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters}, 1980, 255.} By promoting their “mental and spiritual capacities,” young women like Huldah Foote found a narrative of usefulness and a mark of higher purpose when their employment deviated from traditional feminine expectations of domestic work.\footnote{Klepp, \textit{Revolutionary Conceptions}, 126.} When Foote received another offer to teach the following year, she remarked to her brother that the position “is attended with some disadvantage.” However, she considered it “a way of duty and usefulness” to continue her work as an “instructress,” even if she had to “sacrifice[e] the pleasure of spending the whole of my time at home.”\footnote{Huldah Foote to Israel Foot, 20 April 1819, CHS.} As they struggled with the choice between labor outside the home, such as teaching, and working within the household for their families, young women like Foote cultivated the qualities of selflessness, responsibility, and moral sensibility as expressions of their mature womanhood. By locating their authority within the private, moral realm, young women promoted the ‘cult of domesticity’ that uplifted the cultural influence of women while denying their economic and political participation.

The feminization of American religion during the early nineteenth century gave women a
means to assert their capacity for authority in civil society.⁹⁹ At the end of the eighteenth century, after the secular rationalism of the American Revolution took root and the concern for commercial prosperity began to dominate New England society, established churches perceived declining membership and weakened religiosity.¹⁰⁰ Religious leaders responded by issuing a call for renewed faith through a personal relationship with God. A revival movement spread across New England, sought new converts, and renewed the public presence of religion. Single women predominated among participants in these revivals, as they struggled to recast familial and social roles in a changing economic environment. Interpreting their employment as service to God allowed women who labored for their own support and lived outside the household to articulate their selflessness and the development of moral sensibility. Evangelical religion held particular appeal among young women facing the transition to adulthood during the decline of women’s traditional household roles. Commercialization eroded women’s economic value and “may have had a crucial impact on young women in the process of establishing their adult identities.” Participating in revivals and professing religion may have appealed to young women in this anxious state because “the Christian’s struggle was comprehensible, its consequences were well-defined, and a supportive community echoed the individual’s experience.”¹⁰¹

The prerequisite for religious authority in early America was the conversion experience. Only after professing personal knowledge of God’s saving grace could a man or woman join the church. Colonial New Englanders insisted on a public proclamation of salvation before entry into the Church. In the early nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening revived the significance

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of personal conversion within a society that was secularizing and liberalizing. Although converts moved “through spiritual stages not unlike those of their Puritan forebears, the entire experience was quickened and intensified, climaxing with a powerful ‘moment’ of connection.”  

For young women who achieved social influence through morality and selflessness, conversion provided a conscious threshold of adulthood. Lucinda Read, a nineteen-year-old school teacher and aspiring missionary, confided in her diary her self-doubt about the idea of “stand[ing] out in the presence of the whole assembly in the presence of God...and declar[ing] him to be your rightful sovereign.”  

E. S. Gunnell wrote to her friend Weltha Brown about “two of the most solemn engagements ever entered into by mortals.” The first in her letter was her conversion, in which she had “professedly given myself to the Lord.” The second engagement was her marriage, in which she “gave my heart with my hand to one very worthy of a much better [one].”  

The transformative moment of conversion complemented the expected authority offered by marriage. For many women, conversion and marriage were periods of anxiety about the appropriateness of their decisions. The conversion experience proved more troubling when a young woman entered a faith against the wishes of her family. Rachel Stearns wanted “to go immediately and join the Methodists,” but struggled with the disapproval of her orthodox mother who “has felt very unhappy on account of my speaking and praying in meeting.” Stearns searched for “energy and resolution” to enable her follow her own religious convictions against her family’s expectations.  

Across the particular circumstances of these different women, conversion offered an avenue to social influence through a significant change in their activities and disposition. In an

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103 Lucinda Read Journal, 4 May 1816, MHS.
104 E. S. Gunnell to Weltha Brown, 17 May 1820, Hooker Collection, SL.
105 Rachel Stearns Diary, 15 Mar 1835, SL.
environment that offered greater religious choice for individuals, the decision to join a church was an exercise in autonomy. To profess conversion in the growing Methodist or Baptist communities, young people expressed the emotional aspect of their faith. This emphasis on self-discovery made young people more responsible for their spiritual maturity than the rational, intellectual conversion required by Puritans in the colonial period. During the Second Great Awakening, young people, particularly unmarried women, became the largest portion of converts. The internal conflict that surrounded many young women’s conversion experiences signified the weight of accepting self-sacrifice and moral authority as the guiding features of one’s life. Rebecca Root turned away from her religious development when her mind was “obscured & dark clouds hang over it.” A strained relationship with her mother gave her “impure affections” in her conscience. Root informed her friend Weltha Brown, “I think it would be wrong in me to make a public profession of Religion while my mind is in such a state.”

Frances Elizabeth Gray was approaching her twenty-first birthday in 1832 when she considered joining a church. She recorded in her diary that she felt “myself a poor condemned sinner, saved entirely by my Saviour’s righteousness.” A few months later, Gray recounted the “solemn scene” and hoped that God would “enable [me] from hence forth to walk in newness of life.”

Conversion provided a foundation for femininity and adulthood by demonstrating young women’s acceptance of selflessness and moral conviction. As a key stage in their maturation, conversion showed their willingness to sacrifice worldly desires and personal ambitions for the sake of their families, their communities, and ultimately their God. Piety was central to femininity because it signified rational submission to a greater authority.

107 Rebecca Root to Weltha Brown, 9 Aug 1815, Hooker Collection, SL.
108 Frances Elizabeth Gray Dairy, 15 Feb 1832, MHS.
109 Frances Elizabeth Gray Diary, 26 Jun 1832, MHS.
Religious conviction also helped young women cope with the vulnerability they felt making a living with limited family support. Through a narrative of God’s will, women could justify and cope with insecurity that came from working outside of a domestic sphere. Young women relied on religious networks because they lacked the economic power ascribed to masculinity. Rachel Stearns had worked hard to earn enough money to fund her own education at a Methodist academy. When she returned to employment, she found herself forced to “[move] about from place to place.” Without a home, it was “not possible I have seen much of the kindness of the world, and some of its selfishness the scenes of the past month I do not feel like detailing.” Her recent conversion to Methodism made her an outcast. Unable to find work in her orthodox community, Stearns worried that “all my opportunities of usefulness are withdrawn, since I joined the Methodists.”

She took solace that “God has been my friend.” Her luck seemed to turn when “a letter from [Newport, Rhode Island] stated that my services would be acceptable, and inviting me to come on immediately, having engaged to teach French in Br. Rice's school.” Unfortunately, the school committee received a negative recommendation from Stearns’s former employer, and thought it “would not be expedient for me to attempt to take the school as would probably result in the disappointment of all concerned.” The ordeal required Stearns to find authority without employment. She wrote that she was “made wiser and better, a more devoted Christian, a better character” from her struggles.

By associating maturity with moral authority, selflessness, and duty, women established a place in civil society for their voices and their activities. The religious sentiment promoted by the

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110 Rachel Stearns Diary 12 Sep 1835, SL.
111 Rachel Stearns Diary, 25 Dec 1836, SL.
112 Rachel Stearns Diary, 4 Jan 1837, SL.
113 Rachel Stearns Diary, 25 Jul 1837, SL.
Second Great Awakening provided young women a means to negotiate their insecure status. By participating in reform movements, young women gained an opportunity to engage with broader civil society, finding a public role beyond their direct responsibilities as wives and mothers. Like young men, they began experimenting with voluntary societies as girls in school. While a student at Dorchester Academy, Sarah Ripley created “a society to be called ‘The Band of Sisters.’” With both a President and a Secretary, the youthful society mimicked adult institutions. The girls “met every Saturday & read in some instructive Book & on Sundays in the bible.” Eleven years later, after she was married, Sarah Ripley Stearns (the mother of Rachel Stearns) helped form a “Female Charitable Society...the object of which is to assist the destitute children & furnish them with the means of attending school & public worship.” Stearns reported, “We have now become organized & regulated & the Society prospers & I hope will receive the smiles of Providence & the favour of the Almighty friend of the distressed.” At the same time, Stearns remarked on “a little band of youthful females” who “likewise formed themselves into a society for improvement in piety.”

Amidst the religious revivals of the nineteenth century, women also found authority as preachers. Evangelical denominations, especially Baptists and Methodists, “allowed women into the pulpit in numbers that earlier eighteenth-century evangelicals and sectarians never could have imagined.” Instead of trying to transcend their femininity, their religious authority came from their sisterhood with “biblical heroines and prophetesses such as Phebe, Huldah, and Debora.”

The feminine sex was associated with piety and trusted to lead the community on a path to moral

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116 Sarah Ripley Diary, 19 May 1804, AAS.
117 Sarah Ripley Stearns Diary, 24 Dec 1815, SL.
righteousness. Female preachers considered themselves “laborers in the harvest” of souls. Through their religious activity, they could achieve authority at a young age. Salome Lincoln delivered her first sermon at age twenty, and continued her informal ministry until her marriage eight years later. Clarissa Danforth was ordained by the Freewill Baptist congregation at age twenty-three. Despite the growth of female preachers, their authority was exceptional, and most women received the message to “set their sights on more humble forms of religious service.”

Religiously-motivated reform societies structured women’s engagement with people outside their domestic network and introduced them to the ideals of democratic politics. Sarah Pratt struggled to deal with “the difficulties which have disrupted the harmony of” the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, when the members disagreed about how meetings were conducted in accordance with the group’s constitution. Pratt identified enough with the abolitionist cause that she defied the will of a well-positioned man to uphold her own convictions. Two years later, Pratt received an offer to work for a family in Virginia with the help of ‘Professor’ Taylor, a man who conducted a teacher training course. As a condition for her accepting the position, Taylor demanded that Pratt “get rid of all my abolition notions” because it would ruin his reputation. Pratt “received an excellent letter written by the President of the anti-Slavery society remonstrating with me and urging me to decide on such a manner, that their confidence may be renewed in me.” Although the position offered “a very liberal salary,” Pratt could not betray her conscience. She told Prof. Taylor “I never would deny my principles, that I

119 Ibid., 125.
120 Beth A. Salerno, Sister Societies: Women’s Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America (Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).
was an abolitionist at the South as well as at the North.”

Women’s participation in charitable societies followed social expectations of appropriate public activity in accordance with their stage in life. While men engaged in the direct process of governing and apportioning resources, women exercised political and economic control through the mediums of domestic reform. In the early nineteenth century, young, unmarried women typically took subordinate positions in benevolent societies, and contributed to organizations that emphasized young women’s typical work of sewing, spreading religion, teaching young children, and caring for the aged and infirm. Older women controlled societies that dealt with prostitution and poor or unwed mothers. By mid-century, however, the proliferation of reform societies challenged the traditional division of charity work based on age and marital status. In reform societies, young, unmarried women were more likely to have leadership roles and be engaged in all manner of charitable activity – even those connected to sexuality and child birth.123

Young women who joined charitable societies felt their lack of maturity as they worked under the direction of older women. Abby Frothingham served as Secretary of the Boston Female Asylum, one of the officer positions available for young women, and recalled feeling like “a young and timid girl who almost wondered at finding herself thus associated with venerable widows and dignified matrons.” She was impressed by the older women’s “confidence to make such a choice,” while she overcame her reserve to join the society. The later generation of women reformers avoided such deferential attitudes based on presumptions of maturity signified by marital status. For example, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society challenged the cultural division around marital status and “refused to indicate, by the use of titles such as ‘Miss’ or

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122 Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor, 29 Jan 1839, 9 Jan 1839, 29 Jan 1839, RIHS.
‘Mrs.’ whether their members were married or single.”

Young middle-class women made growing up a process of achieving maturity through their embrace of religiosity during the Second Great Awakening. Engagement with religion provided a narrative for women's usefulness outside the home during a period of declining household production. Religion also provided justification for women's public activity through charitable societies. Young women gained a sense of maturity from their control of morality, which in turn became a foundation for civic participation. Conceptions of feminine adulthood continued to subordinate women’s activity to the needs of the family and the community, but stressed women’s moral authority and provided an avenue for women’s agency, even if it was sometimes narrated as an act of submitting to God’s will. Women left behind the dependence of childhood through their acceptance of sacrifice and duty. To achieve authority within the expectations of feminine activity, women deployed moral sensibility on behalf of their families and the community.

As they found authority through religion and moral reform during their years before marriage, many young women feared that becoming a wife would end their period of provisional independence and pushed them into the dependence of coverture and the perceived powerlessness of old age. Young women contemplating marriage shared the views of woman’s rights activists that when, as Corinne Field describes, a “‘husband invested [his bride] with his ideal of womanhood while she was yet a child’,” women lost the ability to gain authority or respect as they “matured in ‘years and development.’” Men, in contrast, could generally expect to receive more familial and civic regard as they aged. Anna Thaxter confided in her beau her fear of losing “perpetual youth” with her marriage. Benjamin Cushing assured her that he did not

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124 Ibid., 72.
take her “sacrifice” lightly, “but will try to study how I can make you forget your loss, by making your old age happy.”¹²⁶ Sarah C. Clark found the situation paradoxical. As a child she “wanted to have people think me a young lady,” so she acted more mature than her age. However, as she approached marriage to Talmon Perry, “I feel younger than I ever did.” But she at age twenty was “approaching ‘old-woman-hood,’” which required her to “don dignity, make my manners [like a] straight jacket.” The conflict between biological age and social expectations of maturity made Clark wonder “Must I act a character all my days?!”¹²⁷ Many middling young women expressed ambivalence about the adult expectations that came with marriage. During youth, they had the autonomy to pursue education and seek employment outside of their natal families. Becoming a wife gave women the security that was necessary for adulthood. It also allowed them a domestic sphere of authority and the opportunity to take leadership positions within female voluntary associations. But marriage put an end to their education and their employment outside of the home. Couples accepted this sacrifice by claiming the “mere equality” between husbands and wives. Women could hang on to their intellectual achievements and moral autonomy, while taking a subordinate position in the domestic sphere and giving up on financial independence.¹²⁸ Maturity for young women meant showing their ability to willingly sacrificing their youthful liberty for the long-term benefits that only marriage could provide.

But young women also took advantage of the positive effect of marriage on their character and their reputation in the community. Louisa Adams described her unmarried self as “a heedless girl,” a quality she outgrew when she obtained “a good husband.”¹²⁹ Marriage could only be successful if a woman eliminated “the frivolity of her mind” in order to achieve “that

¹²⁶ Benjamin Cushing to Anna Thaxter, 23 Aug 1847, AAS.
¹²⁷ Sarah C. Clark to Talmon Perry, 13 Apr 1850, CHS.
¹²⁸ McMahon, Mere Equals.
¹²⁹ Louisa Adams Park Diary, 28 Dec 1800, Park Family Papers, AAS.
modest dignity so essential to command the esteem of her partner.”  

Women felt the maturing effects of marriage most acutely as they “quitted the abode of [their] youth, left the protection of [their] parents” and gave up their birth name “to enter upon a new and untried scene.” After her marriage to Charles Stearns, Sarah Ripley “accompanied him immediately home,” where she awaited “the great & important duties which now devolve upon me.” Because marriage gave women a position of authority within the home, they began to recognize the importance of maturity as a collection of internal capacities that could guide them at this critical transition in their lives. However, because marriage ended the autonomy middling young women experienced through schooling or independent employment, it remained a source of ambivalence. Although she would face subordination as a *fémé covert* and would be confined to the domestic sphere, marriage and motherhood offered the most security and the best opportunity to influence the community by facilitating participation in a benevolent society.  

The expectations of an affectionate companionate marriage required men and women to view each other as moral and emotional peers. In a society that supported legal coverture, maintained men’s economic dominance, and silenced women’s political participation, this parity came through emotional expressions of maturity. Rather than equity in legal, economic, or political realms, New Englanders expected young men and women to have equal claims to rationality and respectability within their matrimonial bonds. A crisis in the courtship of Sarah C. Clark and Talmon Perry demonstrates how even perceived accusations of immaturity could derail a long-standing relationship. In 1850 Sarah C. Clark informed her beau that she needed to find employment. Though she admitted that teaching in a school was “the height and the depth of  

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130 Huldah Brainerd Diary, [n.d.], CHS.  
131 Sarah Ripley Stearns Diary, 10 Nov 1812, SL.  
132 For more on women’s ambivalence toward marriage, see Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 1980, 40–70. For more on women’s participation in benevolent societies, particularly the increased opportunities for leadership among married women, see above.
my ambition,” Clark needed to find something “profitable.” Clark recognized her limitations, not feeling “fitted to teach,” and unable to engage in other traditional female labor such as sewing, she suggested “a situation as a Companion to some lady.” She was even “Ready to stand for a Chamber maid or a Baby’s nurse, or for Cook’s scullion.” Worried about the income needed to support her aging mother and cover the family’s debts, Clark expressed her willingness to take subordinate positions in order to fulfill her duty to her family. With all of these ideas about possible employment, Clark asked for Perry’s “consent & assent to my proposal to seek immediately for what seems to me to be the best think I can do.” She described the situation in detail to Perry, but begged him to keep the information private.133

A year later, Clark’s letter to Perry referenced a rumor of her acting “selfish and calculating.” She feared that her beau was “joining such an opinion…that we are engaged to be married for Money.” The insinuation of such a motivation for marriage deeply offended Clark’s sense of respectability. She informed Perry in unequivocal terms:

If to such a noble woman as I am in your opinion, if such an idea is ever accepted in your mind,…never let the thought pass the boundaries of your mouth for so true as I am a living woman, give me but a knowledge of it and I would leave you; if engaged I would break the engagement…if married, I would leave you, once and forever. Oh! I cannot conceive of greater agony on earth for me, than once to hear from your lips such an accusation.

In defense of her non-pecuniary marital motivations, Clark stressed her heritage of noble work from her parents. Her mother “tended store in her Father’s retail grocery” and her father “once set up store with a capital of 20 or 30 dollars.” In referencing her parents’ work experience, both that her mother was not too proud to help the family business and that her father obtained his living through his own resources, Clark implied that she was raised with an appreciation for the dignity of labor. As the daughter of a presumably ‘self-made’ man, Clark derived a sense of

133 Sarah C. Clark to Talmon Perry, 13 Apr 1850, 15 Apr 1850, CHS.
maturity from her work ethic and used it to demonstrate her qualities as a prospective partner.

Sarah C. Clark’s correspondence shows that respectability and independence – her ability to act as a peer rather than a dependent – were prerequisites for marriage among women as well as men. In addition to the accusation that she was seeking money, Clark feared that Perry would view her as “a silly weak girl that is acting from impulse passion or romance.” Clark knew that her marriage would only be successful if Perry thought of her “as a woman…of an independent heart…of sound sense and good judgment.” Clark claimed a rational character from her willingness to work not to claim authority as a potential breadwinner in her proposed union with Perry, but to assert her capacity to follow duty and selflessness in her transition from a daughter to a wife. Although married life would confine Clark’s labor within the home and deny its economic value, she resisted any attempt to deny her maturity in terms of ability to make prudent and respectable choices.

In the summer of 1842 Caroline Healey learned that her father, once a prosperous merchant in Boston, was headed toward bankruptcy. The loss of status placed a demand on the twenty-year-old daughter’s labor that the family had never before experienced. Healey was eager to make herself useful in the respectable occupation of governess. She asked the matriarchs in her social circle if they “would be glad of a private teacher or if they knew of any one who would.” But the prospect of an elite young woman seeking employment would embarrass the family, so “I spoke of myself as of another person – without suspicion.” Healey initially expected that her labor “was capable of earning $500.” However, after investigating the labor market for governesses, Healey found she “must reduce my pretensions to $300.”

As Healey spent the summer searching for employment that would contribute to her

134 Sarah C. Clark to Talmon Perry, 21 Apr 1851, CHS.
135 Caroline Healey Dall Diary, 15 Jun 1842, in Dall, Daughter of Boston.
family’s support while maintaining their appearances of status, she faced criticism that her efforts were motivated by immaturity rather than the rational, self-sacrificing desire to help her family. Healey’s younger sister “thought my desire to take a school arose from the love of show – and was not necessary.” Although middling and elite women typically avoided associating their labor with necessity, Healey needed to prove that her desire to work came with a sacrifice to her family rather than misplaced ambition. By portraying the necessity of work as a fulfillment of feminine duty, and by securing a position in a genteel academy, she could avoid the degradation of paid employment. But this attempt to show maturity through employment was undercut when Healey received letters from a suitor that downplayed her father’s financial distress and questioned Healey’s reasons for seeking paid work. For Healey, desperate to prove her worth, “nothing has moved me so painfully” as to read her beloved, Samuel Haven of Worcester, Massachusetts, disparaging her quest to help her family. Proving to him “that I have some experience, that I have seen some suffering,” would demonstrate her maturity derived from the ability to act rationally in the face of hardship.\textsuperscript{136} To portray her search for employment as an act of ambition or delusion rather than a selfless act on behalf of family duty prevented Healey from demonstrating the desirable qualities of a wife.

The paternalist tone of Samuel Haven’s letters signaled the end of his romantic interest in Caroline Healey. By dismissing her ability to undertake employment in the service of her family, he denied her claims to maturity. Healey wanted Haven to understand her and recognize the “strength” she exhibited by searching for employment, something that was never expected from the daughter of an elite family.\textsuperscript{137} Since shared conceptions of maturity provided a foundation for parallel authority between men and women within the ideology of separate spheres, Haven’s

\textsuperscript{136} Caroline Healey Dall Diary, 19 June 1842, 21 June 1842, in \textit{A Daughter of Boston}.
\textsuperscript{137} Caroline Healey Dall Diary, 23 June 1842, in \textit{A Daughter of Boston}. 

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rejection of Healey’s judgment eliminated the prospect of courtship between them. When Healey finally took a position at a private school in Washington, D.C., Haven did not even come to see her when her train stopped in Worcester.

Because of the high standards for mutuality in marriage and the increased ability to earn independent income, more women in nineteenth-century New England remained single compared to their colonial forbearers and their southern contemporaries. In the colonial period, only four percent of women remained single. By the mid-nineteenth century, a greater portion of New England women remained unmarried. According to analysis of vital statistics, 14.6 percent of Massachusetts women remained unmarried in the 1830s, a number that increased to 16.9 percent in 1850. These rates were twice as high as the national percentage. Although a few single women critiqued their economic subordination as an obstacle to full adulthood, most expressed their maturity through their domestic employment. The cult of domesticity idealized women’s authority within the home and viewed feminine adulthood as the achievement of maternal authority suitable for limited civic participation.

Women could forgo marriage if they were confident in their ability to maintain financial security without a husband. As a widow with two daughters, Ruth Lambdin supported her family by running a small, private boarding school in Pennsylvania. In the summer of 1834 Lambdin received a marriage proposal “from a certain gentleman in Dayton, Ohio.” He met Mrs. Lambdin briefly and by all accounts he was a good match: “a dry goods merchant with three children...a pious man and an elder in the church.” However, Ruth confessed to her brother that “as I have no

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138 Karin A. Wulf, Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Chambers-Schiller, Liberty, a Better Husband. The “surplus” women due to the out migration of men may have also contributed to lower marriage rates. However, Chambers-Schiller contends that the “excess” women never made up more than two percent of the female population and thus cannot explain a singlehood rate of up to 17%. (29)
139 Main, “Rocking the Cradle,” n9.
acquaintance with him I can of course feel no personal interest in him or his concerns.” The prospect of marriage would provide Lambdin with a stable household under a male breadwinner. But she was “doubtful what course to pursue” and asked her brother for advice. A week later, Sarah Lambdin addressed the subject of her mother’s possible marriage in her own letter. She told her uncle that the family was “much happier where we are” and “the idea of a stepfather is not a very agreeable one to me.”141

In September Ruth wrote to her brother about her decision. While Mr. Osborn came off well in his letters, upon the actual meeting, Lambdin found “so much reluctance in my mind as to compel me” to decline the marriage offer. The changes that a second marriage would bring not only to herself, but also to her children, convinced Lambdin to remain in her “state of single blessedness.”142 She remained dedicated to her school, remarking that the recent performance of her students “encourages us to proceed in our attempts to be useful.” Although managing a school was a difficult task, the employment provided enough financial support to allow Lambdin to decide against marriage.

Twenty-three year old teacher Rachel Stearns was enjoying the religious fraternity of Methodists in Waltham, Massachusetts, when a “brother” in Christ asked about the “duty of a young man to be married.” With the self-assurance she felt after spending years working to support her mother and struggling with her religious identity, Stearns answered as “an aged maiden, giving advice to a young man.” She counseled that “everyone is their own judge of duty...if anyone thinks they can serve God better in a married state that is his duty, but if not then his duty is to remain single.” Stearns took pride in “being consulted about so important a matter.” However, her feelings shifted from pride to indignation when the young man revealed that he

141 Sarah H. Lambdin to Jeremiah Wilbur, 28 Jun 1834, AAS.
142 Ruth Wilbur Lambdin to Jeremiah Wilbur, 29 Sep 1834, AAS. For more on this attitude, see Chambers-Schiller, Liberty, a Better Husband.
was seeking Stearns’s hand. As she recounted in her diary, the proposal “struck me like a thunderbolt.” She felted ambushed by the “journeyman mechanic” who presumed to know her feelings about marriage. For a young woman who once lost her “opportunities for usefulness” due to her religious conversion, the prospect of marrying a man of her faith might have been a joyous prospect. However, Stearns replied that she was “not in a situation to be married to anyone at present.” Her obligation was to support her mother “who is now in part and will be entirely dependent on me for assistance.” Stearns’s experience with employment convinced her that she “was destined to lead a single life.” She was raised with the expectation that she would find adulthood through her own support, and consequently Stearns “had not fed myself for that situation” of being a wife.¹⁴³ For Stearns, not being in a “situation” to marry was a permanent decision based on her inability to sacrifice her obligations to her mother, and possibly the autonomy of single life, for the responsibilities of husband and children. For young men, the “situation” was temporary, based on their assessment of their ability to support a family.

With more opportunities for employment, some young women were able to build an independent career out of contingent employment and piece-meal education. Lucy Larcom started work at the Lowell factory mills in her teenage years and took advantage of the intellectual offerings of the community. She was a regular contributor to the *Lowell Offering* and found a position in the cloth room that allowed her “hours of freedom every day” to read and study.¹⁴⁴ When the conditions of the mill provided incompatible with workers’ desires for respectability and education, Larcom joined many Yankee women in leaving the industry. She travelled with her sister’s family to Illinois, where she earned a position as a district school teacher. Although she considered a marriage with her brother-in-law, she determined that he was

¹⁴³ Rachel Stearns Diary, 22 Nov 1836, SL.
impulsive, passionate, and seems much younger than I,” traits unlikely to provide her with security. After earning enough to fund a formal education at a female seminary in Illinois, Larcom secured a position as a teacher at Wheaton Seminary in Massachusetts. She also used her intellectual network to pursue her writing career, which supported her as a single woman for the remainder of her life. As a late-nineteenth-century biographer wrote, Larcom “grew fond of her independence, and as her ability asserted itself, she seemed to see before her a career as an authoress, which she felt it her duty to pursue.” From the first opportunities for autonomy and education during her work in the mills, to her opportunities as a teacher in the western frontier, Larcom was able to find independence and public regard by fulfilling traditional female roles outside marriage.

Because of their education and economic security, Ruth Lambdin, Rachel Stearns, and Lucy Larcom could choose to remain unmarried while retaining their middle-class status. The respectability granted through ‘republican womanhood’ – whether they chose to marry or not – was a privilege held by middling women who were able to distance themselves from the necessity of economic enterprise. For poor women – white and black – the need to contribute to the household income diminished the respectability that might be gained through marriage and motherhood. Poor women turned the domestic sphere into a site of economic transaction through a variety of employments – particularly outwork and boarding services. During the early nineteenth century, merchants and shop owners recruited rural women to perform specialized production tasks such as weaving cloth from factory-spun yarn, braiding hats from pre-cut palm leaves, or binding shoe uppers to be completed in factories. These activities may have provided poor families with the means to survive, but because they violated the expectations of the

separate spheres ideology, they deprived women of the respectability necessary for social authority on middle-class terms.\textsuperscript{147}

Poor women who were widowed or abandoned by their husbands often lost even this limited degree of independence. Given the limitations on female employment and the ubiquitous practice of paying women less than men, many unmarried mothers became dependent on charitable institutions. In the early nineteenth century, middle-class women found social authority through their management of voluntary associations designed to alleviate the condition of poor women and children. The Providence Female Society for the Relief of Indigent Women and Children, founded in 1801, hope “to give an opportunity to the disconsolate Widow to feel the honest pride of giving bread to her offspring by her own industry. In order to receive the society’s support (which was “given in necessaries; never in money”), the mother had to agree to send her younger children to school and her older children “to service or trade.” Women who sought assistance from charitable associations needed to have suitable “characters and circumstances” and be good examples of morality to be deemed fit for support. Although poor women accepted by middle-class charities received the approval of their respectable peers, the requirements of the societies’ managers placed poor women in dependent positions.\textsuperscript{148}

Yet even women who fell short of the white, middle-class ideal of domestic womanhood found authority within their segregated communities as they grew up. Elleanor Eldridge, an African American, worked as a weaver and a dairywoman for a series of white families during her youth. At age twenty-seven she left these positions to help raise her younger siblings. Although she never married, she took the traditional “mother’s place in the care of the whole


\textsuperscript{148} \textit{The Constitution of the Providence Female Society for the Relief of Indigent Women and Children} (Providence: John Carter Jr., 1801).
family.” She continued to work in a variety of employments, including “weaving, spinning, going out as nurse, washer, &c,” which allowed her to gain enough capital to enter the real estate and rental market. Following the death of her husband only three years after their marriage, Maria Stewart turned to her religious faith and found herself “born again.” These experiences encouraged her to join in the black political community. She started a career of writing and speaking in order to be a “strong advocate for the cause of God and the cause of freedom” and used biblical interpretations to advance radical claims for women’s rights and African Americans’ rights. Although unable to claim the respectability of white, middle-class womanhood, black women asserted authority within the African American community through their domestic, economic, and political roles.¹⁴⁹

The meaning of adulthood for women in early nineteenth-century New England transformed as economic production moved outside of the household and the domestic sphere became a haven from male economic ambition as well as the aggressive state of democratic politics and a place for the nurture and education of children. In order to claim feminine authority through these new roles, young women asserted their development of appropriate powers of character as a product of growing up. Although women claimed greater public recognition for their activities, their authority came through presenting these endeavors as dutiful sacrifices to family need rather than individual ambitions. The ‘cult of domesticity’ allowed women authority within the home and, in limited ways, in civil society, but only if they could distance their activities from the taint of economic necessity.

Conclusion

Among the emerging middle class in early nineteenth-century New England, adulthood shifted from a legal status based on control of labor within the household to the capacity for authority within gender-specific spheres of activity. Propertied householders lost their monopoly on familial power and civic participation. Following the American Revolution, New Englanders expanded political rights to non-propertied white men and accepted young people’s participation in a growing civil society. Young men and women showed their maturity by making choices that secured them respectable positions: for young men, as breadwinners; for young women, as domestic managers. These achievements of material status and stability communicated their worthiness for leadership in their respective gendered spheres. When they reached the security of their masculine and feminine roles, young people arrived at adulthood. Rather than simply a biological age, adulthood was a status, conferred by society, in recognition of an individual’s capacity for prudence, discretion, self-control, and the other qualities of maturity. From this presumption of responsibility, adults accessed power as men or women.

Most nineteenth-century New Englanders accepted the gender hierarchy that was built into the status of adulthood. As Susan Heath’s quote from the opening of this chapter shows, women sought authority by distinguishing themselves from girls rather than comparing themselves to men. Few questioned the inequality in the fact that men earned political and economic power as they grew up, while women displayed maturity by giving up their autonomy in exchange for stability as a wife and mother. By the mid-nineteenth century, a small group of privileged women began critiquing their subordination, recognizing the ways that femininity kept them as perpetual dependents. Because they never gained suffrage or independent legal identities, women were perpetual minors. It was through a language of maturity that woman
rights activists campaigned for full equality in the middle and late nineteenth century.¹⁵⁰

The transition from youth to adulthood solidified a divergence between the coming-of-age experiences among the poor and the middle class. Middle-class New Englanders, especially men, used their mental labor to symbolize their self-ownership and justify their political and economic domination, while struggling to overcome the contradictions between their assessment of their maturity and their authority or prestige in society. For middle-class youth, an extended period of semi-dependence provided the opportunity to pursue education and employment that allowed for social mobility. As they worked in liminal positions, they fought to maintain respectability by exhibiting mature capacities despite the dependent features of their work.

Although these capacities for self-awareness were democratic markers of maturity available to all, the relationship between maturity and the type of work an individual pursued divided the privileges of adulthood along gender, racial, and class lines. For men and women relegated to positions without respectability, growing up did not coincide with political power. Young men and women in lower-class families followed traditional markers of adulthood based on the legal status of chronological age and on physical development. Members of the working classes found dignity in their work and leveraged that dignity to claim leadership within their ethnic or class community. But the dominant institutions of New England society were controlled by men and women whose work signified their maturity. During the transition from youth to adulthood, middle-class men and women asserted their character as evidence of rationality and conformity to gender expectations of independence and usefulness. But the belief that work showed the ability to make rational and prudent choices defined the patterns of coming of age that were uniquely available to middle-class children as the ideal of growing up for productive citizens in a capitalist democratic society.

¹⁵⁰ Corinne Field, “Woman’s Rights and the Politics of Age.”
Chapter 4: “Forming [the] Habits of Life:” Education, Work, and Coming of Age

On a November evening in 1849, famed Massachusetts school reformer Horace Mann addressed Boston's Mercantile Library Association on its twenty-ninth anniversary. Mann praised the “capacities of the ingenuous youth who compose” the Association, which was founded by a group of aspiring businessmen in 1820. The young audience members were “now at the most intensely interesting period of their life.” Soon, by age twenty-five in Mann’s estimation, the “great objects” of their life would be “pretty distinctly defined and mapped out.” They were about to enter adulthood. Mann’s advice to a young man at this “critical point” of life was to preserve his health through intellectual, physical, and spiritual improvement. A broad program of self-education would assist men in their transition from liminal youth to masculine authority in adulthood. Speaking to an audience of young clerks, Mann identified work as one important tool for individual development. The duty to work applied “no matter what may be the fortunes or the expectations of a young man.” Work contributed not only to individual development, but also to the “well-being of the race.”

Mann's speech brought together the multiple forms of education available to young people in New England by the mid-nineteenth century, as they experienced work as part of the process of growing up. As a common-school reformer, Mann promoted the standardization and centralization of formal instruction as a way to protect children from employment. Mann's speech was later published as *A Few Thoughts for a Young Man*, adding to the growing collection of advice literature addressed to young people who took responsibility for their occupational opportunities. The Mercantile Library Association, the host of the speech, was one of many voluntary associations designed to assist urban young men in their transition to adulthood through educational opportunities suited to their occupational status. Faced with the

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1 Horace Mann, *A Few Thoughts for a Young Man* (Boston: Horace B. Fuller, [1850] 1871), 5, 6, 45, 44.
need to promote the capacities for navigating the commercial economy, educators like Mann recognized that the dependence of childhood and the liminality of youth required new forms of education. This multi-faceted, diffuse system of education arose from young people’s increasing need to demonstrate self-ownership and respectability in order to show their worthiness for freedom and self-government.

Horace Mann’s efforts represent a significant shift in New England attitude toward children’s education. In colonial New England, schooling was limited because work expectations were narrow and predictable. The household prepared young people for their adult roles through vocational training, rudimentary literacy, and obedience to authority.² Although reading literacy was high, based on the expectation that all Puritans could read the Bible, knowledge of writing and numeracy was low.³ Most young men relied on their fathers or other patrons to train them in the agricultural or artisan skills they would need to lead a household. Formal schools like Boston Latin – the preparatory school centered on classical languages – and Harvard College were reserved for a small number of prospective ministers or scions of the elite. Young women learned the skills of domestic production – from weaving cloth to making cheese – from their mothers or other female kin. Parents invested very little in daughters’ formal schooling, expecting that the father, not the mother, would take responsibility for children’s education. From the household patriarch, children learned to fear God and show deference to their elders.

As the integrated, productive household was gradually replaced by the unproductive nuclear family, children required education and vocational training beyond what their parents could provide. The commercial occupations – like clerks, lawyers, merchants – required literacy

in reading and writing, as well as numeracy, book-keeping, and other advanced skills. The expectations of democratic citizenship required young people be familiar with history and philosophy and have the capacity to speak and be persuasive. More education meant a greater need for teachers. The capitalist economy created conditions that encouraged parents and political leaders to invest more in children’s education in order to provide them with the social mobility that the new society promised.4

But social mobility was not the only goal for education in early nineteenth-century New England. The capitalist economy forced many families to rely on intermittent wage labor rather than the security of a father’s occupation. Children’s informal labor in the streets or contracted labor in textile factors worried political leaders. These children might never gain the skills to properly participate in the economy, and thus threatened to become a burden on public resources. Street children also posed an immediate danger to social order by operating beyond adult supervision and frequently violating the law. In the early nineteenth-century, political leaders and philanthropists devised educational institutions that could corral poor children and prepare them for proper labor roles.

This chapter shows how, by preparing young people for their expected labor roles, early nineteenth-century New England education reformers and parents maintained hierarchy alongside the promise of mobility. I define education as the processes through which individuals gained the intellectual, moral, and vocational capacities that enabled them to claim authority in relation to their expected adult role. As Lawrence Cremin has argued, to fully grasp where and how people were educated in the nineteenth century, educational history should focus on a diverse range of opportunities, including public and private schools, juvenile institutions, advice

literature, and mutual-improvement societies.\(^5\)

For a generation coming of age outside the household, education needed to instill self-ownership, character, and respectability in order to provide young people with the tools to make appropriate choices. This chapter argues that young people's labor responsibilities shaped the development of educational opportunities in early nineteenth-century New England, including the expansion of common schools by local leaders, the opening of academies for women and men, the founding of mechanics institutes and other self-help organizations, and the shifting role of colleges. The growth of these mechanisms of education responded to changing views about the role of young people in the economy. The first section charts the rise of institutionalized, centralized, and standardized models of education for children under fourteen designed to keep boys and girls from working in exploitative conditions. The second section shows how advice literature, private schools, and indentures promoted youth as a period to develop the capacity to make appropriate choices, while ignoring the resources necessary to make these opportunities a reality. The final section examines the educational opportunities available to youth as they approached adulthood. During this transitional period, in the late teens and early twenties, young people were torn between the demands of employment to satisfy immediate needs and education that would advance their future prospects. These divergent forms of education show that the more young people were set up to make choices about their work, the better chance they had at achieving middle-class status.

*The Decline of the Household and the Rise of Educational Institutions*

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, New England political leaders and parents recognized that families could not provide all of the education that children needed to find

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success in the new economy. As commercialization eroded traditional social structures, state officials used formal institutions to promote an orderly coming of age process for children under age fourteen. These institutions included a comprehensive public school system and a network of asylums for poor, orphaned, or delinquent children. Both types of institutions were designed to prepare young people for integration into the commercial economy and republican society by giving them literacy and numeracy in their childhood years and to set them on the path to respectable employment when they entered youth. Education reformers hoped that common schools – tax-supported, tuition-free schools for middling as well as poor students – could promote equality by educating middling and poor children side by side.\(^6\) However, for delinquent children who lacked effective guardians, public schooling was not enough. Their deficiency was not just in education but in character. Juvenile asylums tried to recreate middle-class childhood for their charges, but reverted to the assumptions about the benefits of labor in developing obedience. New England reformers could look to their common schools as engines of social mobility because they had separate institutions to restrain the dangerous poor.

Boston’s comprehensive school system began in 1789 when, following authorization by the Massachusetts General Court, the town selectmen instituted a plan to expand the opportunities for publically funded grammar schools. In order to instruct children in English and mathematical literacy that would prepare them for basic employment in the market economy, and the moral training they would need as they exercised citizenship, the Boston School Committee established a system of free instruction for boys and girls between the ages of seven and fourteen. In 1789, the Committee authorized three “reading School[s]” and three “writing School[s]” (collectively termed ‘Grammar schools’), spread geographically throughout the town. Boys and girls who had “learned the alphabet, the powers of the letters” and could “read

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\(^6\) Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*. 
monosyllables without the assistance of pointing” could enroll in their neighborhood school. At the reading schools, children were “taught to spell, accent, and read both prose and verse, and also be instructed in English Grammar and Composition.” At the writing schools, students learned “arithmetic in the various branches usually taught in the Town-Schools, including Vulgar and Decimal Fractions.” School regulations prohibited the study of Arithmetic until a student was eleven years old. In order to elicit “diligence and exertion” among the students, the schools awarded “honorary distinctions” to recognize high academic achievement. The Committee charged itself with regularly inspecting the schools to ensure that the young “Scholars” held “a laudable ambition to excel in virtuous, amiable deportment, and in every branch of useful knowledge.”

After establishing a free schooling system for children seven to fourteen years old, the School Committee turned its attention to the city’s younger children. Admission to the Grammar schools required a preparation in basic reading, typically received from a family member or in the home of a literate woman (an informal venture known as a dame school). The growing inability of many children to obtain this prerequisite knowledge prompted concerns that Boston would fail in its efforts to democratize education. In 1818, the city responded by establishing a system of primary schools design to instruct “at the public expense, all children, of either sex, between four and seven years of age.” Employing young women as teachers, the primary schools made “their object to bring the first rudiments of knowledge so near to the doors of those who need it, and make instruction in them so thorough, that all who are not determined to keep their

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8 Regulations for the Government of the School in Federal Street, Adopted by the Proprietors, (Boston, 1797).
children in ignorance, shall have no excuse for neglecting to begin the work of their education.”  

The desire to uplift the prospects of poor children also came from a fear of the idle boys and girls wandering the streets, and the specter of a growing poor and unemployed population.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, Boston operated a system to instill the necessary skills of literacy and numeracy, along with moral sensibilities, among the city’s children. However, the School Committee found that the public education system was not effectively preparing sons and daughters of the emerging middle class for the positions in commercial society that would offer prosperity within gender-specifics spheres. A report in 1820 stated that, although Grammar Schools provided basic education more than sufficient for the needs of previous generations, they were “not sufficiently extensive, nor otherwise calculated to bring the powers of the mind into operation, nor to qualify a youth to fill usefully and respectably many of those stations, both public and private, in which he may be placed.” The committee considered boys’ future employment positions central to their educational mission. Achieving employment that provided economic security and respectability could not come just from instilling moral independence and rudimentary knowledge. The report lamented that “a parent, who wishes to give a child an education that shall fit him for active life, and shall serve as a foundation for eminence in his profession, whether Mercantile or Mechanical, is under the necessity of giving him a different education from any which our public schools can now furnish.”  

In response to these concerns, the Boston School Committee established an English High School for Boys in 1821, which provided boys between twelve and fifteen years old with

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9 The System of Instruction Pursued at the Free Schools in Boston (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard & Company, 1823), 56.
10 Proceedings of the School Committee, of the Town of Boston, respecting an English Classical School (Boston: The Committee, 1820).
an advanced education in preparation for employment rather than academic study.\textsuperscript{11}

The Boston School Committee lauded the creation of an English High School for Boys as a new “era in the history of free Education in Boston.” The new secondary school was the first alternative to Boston Latin, which was established in 1635 to prepare students to attend Harvard College. Committee members viewed the English High School as the fulfillment of democratic ideals of equality and meritocracy. Rather than confining advanced liberal education to future ministers, doctors, and lawyers, the English High School promoted liberal knowledge – including subjects such as natural philosophy, literary criticism, and moral philosophy – as a foundation for young men’s future roles as citizens. The school also included instruction in vocational subjects, such as surveying, bookkeeping, and navigation that would assist young men in their search for employment.\textsuperscript{12} This course of education would “bring forward to places of high responsibility young men of talents and learning, who have a reputation and fortune to gain.” The School Committee celebrated its provisions “for the gratuitous instruction of the children of all classes of the citizens of Boston.” Education could also help insulate democratic society from the dangers posed by ignorant masses vested with civic power, such that “the poorest inhabitant may have his children instructed from the age of four to seventeen.”\textsuperscript{13} By extending the ages of children in public schools, committeemen imagined an extended period of protection, through which parents could delay their son’s entry into work in order to prepare them for superior positions.

A few years after the opening of the English High School for Boys, the committee

\textsuperscript{11} For more on the development of formal secondary schooling, see William J. Reese, \textit{The Origins of the American High School} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{12} Alexander James Inglis, \textit{The Rise of the High School in Massachusetts} (Teachers College, Columbia university, 1911).

\textsuperscript{13} “Regarding the English Classical or English High School,” \textit{The System of Education Pursued at the Free Schools of Boston} (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard & Company, 1823). Emphasis in original.
expressed concern that public schools were failing the young women of the city as well. Rudimentary knowledge did not provide young women with the gentility that nineteenth-century society expected wives and mothers to possess. Additionally, public schools did not give young women the qualifications to take positions as teachers in the expanding common school system throughout the region. The committee acknowledged that “parents, especially, who have wished their daughters to prosecute their studies further than the nature and arrangements of the Grammar schools will permit, have deeply felt the want of an institution, where instruction in the higher branches of education might be obtained.” Despite the increasing number of private academies, the committee worried about the accessibility of advanced education for non-elite young women because “the necessary expense of these, closes them against many, whose daughters would be ornaments to any family or any society.” In 1826 the High School for Girls opened to students between twelve and sixteen and offered an advanced education that was both “liberal and practical.”  

Female students learned many of the same advanced subjects as male students, including composition, rhetoric, natural philosophy, history, logic, and bookkeeping. By extending free education to young women until the middle teenage years, the school committee promoted an extension of childhood through a delay in daughters’ commitment to domestic management or her shift to employment outside the home.

From the beginning, the High School for Girls faced over-enrollment as young women rushed for the opportunity to enjoy free advanced education. In its first year of operation, the school received applications from over 400 girls, but could accept only 130. The School Committee responded by narrowing the ages of eligibility and shortening the duration of study at the High School, rather than investing in another school. The Committee understood that “Girls

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14 *An Account of the High Schools for Girls*, (Boston: Thomas B. Wait and Son, 1826).
15 Inglis, *The Rise of the High School in Massachusetts*.
in general have little to prevent them from attending School till seventeen years old, and consequently most of them would continue through the whole course of studies.” The report noted that while many boys left the High School when they found employment, “not a single Girl voluntarily left the High School during its continuance.” The Committee explained the difference by referring to the divergent civic destinies of the city’s young men and women. The School Committee affirmed that “the future destination of Boys, as to their pursuits and professions, among which may be reckoned services to the community in public stations, requires a difference in their preparation.” Boston's early educational efforts privileged men's civic participation as a justification for limiting the educational opportunities for young women. Instead of providing support for educational meritocracy, the committee feared that the High School's selectivity allowed daughters of means to receive an education at the public expense. Because the School Committee was unwilling to accommodate young women's advanced education on equal terms, the city council closed the High School for Girls after two years. In consolation, girls were allowed to attend the grammar schools year round and could remain until they were sixteen years old. The Committee’s desire to extend public schooling was limited by their ingrained belief that the community’s resources should be used to support boys over girls, despite the fact that many more female students were ready to take advantage of expanded education.¹⁷

Boston School Committee's efforts to centralize and standardize the schooling were guided by the expectation that childhood was a period to be protected from work. By 1826 Boston had fifty-one public primary schools with 2,595 children, and eight Grammar Schools

with 5,224 students. Above age fourteen, young men and especially young women had fewer options for public education. Male scholars preparing to enter a university attended the Boston Latin School. Young men seeking a non-classical education could attend the English High School. For two years, young women could attend the High School for Girls. In total, 325 young people over the age of fourteen received public schooling according to a report in 1826. Compared to the city's private schools, the public school system focused the vast majority of its resources on children under the age of fourteen. Children over fourteen made up 4% of all public school students and 15% of students in the 141 private schools recorded in the report. The resources offered by city-run institutions were better suited to the protection and management of childhood and proved unable to compete with employment opportunities available to many of the city’s young men and women. As they approached their mid-teens, young men and women sought out educational opportunities that promoted their self-ownership and emerging autonomy.

Despite the goals of equality and meritocracy, Boston’s school system used public resources to educate children based on the work they were expected to do when they grew up. Local officials supported boy’s education to prepare them for new opportunities for employment in the commercial economy. The education of girls increased during this period, but was limited by the expectation that women’s primary objective was the duties of wife and mother. For children in the lower classes, schooling was designed to maintain social order and integrate the poor into the wage-labor economy.

The Boston School Committee, like other New England common school leaders, followed the dictates of femininity by aligning girl’s schooling with women’s supposedly natural position as nurturers in the domestic sphere. Although girls studied nearly identical subjects

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compared to boys, their schooling was limited in duration.\(^{19}\) Many early national leaders supported female education because they viewed women’s roles as mothers “to implant in the tender mind such sentiments of virtue, propriety, and dignity as are suited to the freedom of our governments.”\(^{20}\) This future role required less educational investment, such that girls had no dedicated High School after the short-lived experiment in late 1820s. Because of the limitations on labor opportunities for respectable women, committeemen did not see a need for advanced education beyond that which would prepare women to contribute to the stability of a household through their intellect and moral sensibility.

African Americans struggled to receive the full benefits of public schooling as the community tried to enter positions of prosperity in the commercial economy. As early as 1787, black parents petitioned the School Committee for a separate school for black children in order to avoid the racist behavior of white teachers and classmates.\(^ {21}\) By 1812 the African American community won modest financial support for an all-black school under the instruction of a black teacher. But the constituency of black students was hampered by poor African American families’ need for income. Yet their employment options were constricted by socially-ingrained prejudice among white Americans that blacks were intellectually inferior, morally depraved, and lacked the capacity to properly rear their child. In the 1820s segregation was first established in response to black parents’ desire to avoid the racism of white families. As it became an institutional feature of the Boston school system, this segregation served to reinforce the


workplace segregation in the city.\textsuperscript{22}

By the 1840s, black abolitionists such as David Walker charged the segregated school system with perpetuating the ignorance and degradation of the black community and pursued a campaign for integration. The campaign culminated in the case of \textit{Sarah C. Roberts v the City of Boston}, in which a four-year-old African American girl was denied admission to her nearest primary school and sent to the “colored” school further away. When the case came before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1850, Charles Sumner argued that the School Committee’s policy created a “caste” system inappropriate for a society that claimed to be based on equality. Although he admitted that “the Committee may classify scholars, according to their age and sex” or “according to their moral and intellectual qualifications,” their decision to segregate schools by color stemmed from a belief that “an entire race possess[ed] certain moral or intellectual qualities, which shall render it proper to place them in a class by themselves.” Sumner called upon the court to declare this classification unreasonable and forbid state entities from dividing citizens based on race. However, Justice Lemuel Shaw ruled that despite the state’s commitment to broad claims of equality, “it will not warrant the assertion, that men and women are legally clothed with the same civil and political power, and that children and adults are legally to have the same functions and be subject to the same treatment.” Shaw justified disparate treatment based on the assumption of individuals’ unique needs. The legal inequalities based on sex and age, widely accepted in early nineteenth-century New England, justified the disparate treatment of children based on the expectations of racial patterns of growing up. The school committee’s decision to classify pupils by race was “best adapted to promote the

instruction of that class of the population,” just like its policy of dividing schools based on age and sex.\textsuperscript{23} In a society comfortable dividing civic roles by gender and age, race was not considered an unreasonable measure of classification.\textsuperscript{24}

With the influx of Irish immigrants in the 1840s, city officials hoped to use schools to “domesticate” newcomers and “to give them American feelings, and identify them with ourselves as one people, with common interests.”\textsuperscript{25} The push for common schools was partly an effort to integrate the foreign-born population by educating immigrant children alongside native-born children. However, the massive increase of population strained public resources. Irish children became the majority at many schools. At the same time, attendance by poor, immigrant children was chronically irregular, shaped by families’ economic needs, by the overcrowded conditions, and by the perceived benefits of street work over formal instruction. This inability to conform to middle-class standards of childhood as a period protected from labor made Irish children a threat to the development of native-born children. According to the School Committee, “the bad boy at school acts on other boys susceptible of evil, and prompt to propagate it.”\textsuperscript{26} During the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class parents abandoned the public schools in certain neighborhoods because they were dominated by Irish children whose ethnic status and working-class background failed to meet middle-class standards of respectability and sent their children to private academies. In the urban center of Boston, Stanley K. Schultz finds that “by 1860, educators had abandoned their hopes of creating a unified system of public


\textsuperscript{24} The United States Supreme Court cited Roberts v Boston when it established the “separate but equal” doctrine in Plessy v Ferguson in 1896 – a doctrine that remained until 1954. However, formal school segregation in Boston lasted only a few years. Following a successful petition campaign from black residents (particularly mothers of young children), the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill integrating the state’s public schools, which was signed into law by Governor Henry J. Gardner in 1855. See Lynda Morgenroth, Boston Firsts: 40 Feats of Innovation and Invention That Happened First in Boston and Helped Make America Great (Beacon Press, 2007), 216.

\textsuperscript{25} Quoted in Schultz, The Culture Factory; Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860, 279.

\textsuperscript{26} Quoted in Ibid., 288.
education for the rich and the poor alike.”

During the first half of the nineteenth century, education reformers hoped that public schools could give middling and poor students alike the benefits of a childhood free from labor. But efforts to encourage schooling only worked for children who attended voluntarily (at least until states turned to compulsory school laws, beginning with Massachusetts in 1852). Faced with a growing population of poor, orphaned, and delinquent children who could not or would not attend school, New England reformers also used a different institutional approach. Parents who lacked the economic resources to protect their children from labor and establish them in respectable employment positions when they entered youth risked losing custody to paternalistic state officials and local philanthropists who hoped to uplift the condition of the poor while protecting the community for the social disorder brought on by fractured families. As the ideology of domesticity and Romantic Childhood emphasized the importance of maternal influence within the home, the once traditional practice of sending a child to a neighboring family to gain labor skills became a mark of deviance. Overseers of the Poor targeted children they deemed “idle and vicious” because they lacked parental discipline. Instead of receiving useful instruction, these vagrant and delinquent children they argued “are found begging in our streets, or haunting our wharves or market places.” Although these children operated “under the pretense of employ,” reformers viewed their loitering as “watching occasions to pilfer small articles, and thus beginning a system of petty stealing.” This informal street education violated reformers’ ideals of social mobility, and instead terminated “often in the gaol; often in the penitentiary; and not seldom; at the gallows.”

To prevent this downward path of delinquency and to set poor children on the path

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28 Hawes, Children in Urban Society: Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-Century America.
29 Boston Committee on the Subject of Pauperism and a House of Industry in the Town of Boston (Boston, 1821).
toward social proficiency and legitimate productivity, civic leaders addressed pauperism and its impact on children from two different directions. They responded to the increase of orphaned, fatherless, and abandoned children by creating “asylums” for their protection and proper education. Separately, they addressed the increase of juvenile crime by establishing a “house of reformation” as an alternative to the regular sites of incarceration used for adults. In both cases, directors assumed parental authority over vulnerable children and confined them to institutions designed to instill appropriate character and habits of industry. Juvenile reformers joined a broader movement in the early republic to address social ills through residential institutions in which “a carefully designed environment” could bring about internal moral change. Where the family and community failed to instill discipline, the control and routine of the asylum or house of reformation would make wayward children into orderly youths. Although they maintained equality as a goal, these institutions pushed poor children toward a future of manual labor in subordinate positions that lacked mobility.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Massachusetts incorporated two private associations, the Boston Female Asylum (1800) and the Boston Asylum for Indigent Boys (1814), to provide guardianship for vulnerable children. For children typically between seven and fourteen years of age, institutional care offered protection “from the influence of the bad examples of the young, who are doubly unfortunate, in being early exposed not only to the evils of poverty, but to scenes of depravity and vice.” These organizations received state sanction “to instruct [the children of the virtuous poor] in the elements of education, and to give them those early habits of industry and piety which will prepare them for usefulness and respectability in

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mature years.” The orphan asylum in New Haven, Connecticut prepared its charges “for usefulness, and consequently happiness, in the world, by giving them the rudiments of a plain education, and training them to habits of industry, neatness, and morality.” These private institutions received children who were surrendered by their parents or admitted by the Overseers of the Poor. By the 1830s, when asylums became a more systematic method for dealing with impoverished children, any child of reduced circumstances, even those with living parents who “seemed to be morally, if not financially, inadequate to their task,” could be removed from their natal family and confined within a reform institution.

In 1826, Boston started a facility for juvenile delinquents called “the House for the employment and reformation of Juvenile Offenders,” modeled on the “House of Refuge” in New York City, the first juvenile reform institution in the United States. Anxious about the increase in pauperism, a group of philanthropists turned to the reformatory model to address the problem of vagrant children. They created a residential institution that served “as both a school for moral rehabilitation and a training center for mechanical skills.” This dual emphasis on education and work reflected the class bias with which middling reformers viewed the poor. More progressive-minded reformers wanted to recreate the middle-class idea of childhood as a period without labor, but conservatives wanted to ensure that lower-class children received the skills and discipline necessary to be integrated into the commercial economy, even if they remained at the marginal level.

While Boston’s Selectmen considered reforming adult criminals “hopeless,” Mayor Josiah Quincy believed that institutions targeting juvenile offenders could be successful in

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31 An Account of the Boston Asylum for Indigent Boys (Boston: John B. Russell, 1823).
33 Cremin, American Education, the National Experience, 1783-1876, 443.
“suppressing vice in its infancy.” Delinquent boys and girls were committed to the House of Reformation by the Police Court or the Municipal Court for crimes of vagrancy, pilfering, lewd behavior, or drunkenness. Soon after the House’s creation, the director sought to restrict local officials’ power to sentence children for minor offences of stubbornness or truancy, especially when the request came from a “stranger” rather than a “parent, guardian, or master.” Once committed to the institution, children were to experience both “restraint and reform.” Under the management of Episcopal minister Eleazar M. P. Wells, the institution opted for the more idealistic practice of using education to reform pauper children. Instead of “leasing the boy’s labor to local tradesmen,” Wells instituted four hours of schooling and several hours of play each day. But work, conducted within the institution itself, continued to dominate the children’s schedule. Wells instituted a self-judged merit system that gave the children privileges based on their behavior. Through these reforms, Wells hoped that delinquent children would develop the internalized character traits that would inculcate them into the middle class.\textsuperscript{36}

Even as Wells promoted rehabilitation through education rather than work, he demanded order and discipline in the reformatory that reminded his contemporaries of a “Prussian parade at Potsdam.”\textsuperscript{37} Children ate in silence and marched for one activity to the next. He limited their contact with their parents and lamented that the institution was so close to the city that “parents are continually soliciting permission to visit their children, and making application for their discharge.” Wells thought that moral reform could only happen if the boys were “deprived of all hope of escape, and their expectations of a discharge, be founded on continued good

\textsuperscript{35} In Common Council, Feb 23, 1829, the committee to whom was referred the report of the committee on the memorial of the directors of the Institution for Juvenile Offenders (Boston, 1829).
\textsuperscript{36} Schneider, In the Web of Class, 1992, 37.
\textsuperscript{37} Quoted in Ibid.
behaviour.” Delinquent children needed reform because they had not imbibed the lesson that success came from diligence, industry, and morality. Until they learned how to operate in the free market, they were a danger to the community. Even with this emphasis on discipline, Wells was criticized by conservative leaders for allowing delinquents to benefit from their bad behavior by providing them with more education than many children of the virtuous poor. These city leaders preferred to treat the house of reformation as a punishment for deviancy, hoping to encourage better morals through forced labor.

When Wells was dismissed from his position for pursuing the more costly method of education as rehabilitation, the city tried to use the less expensive model of reform through work. Unwilling to completely protect impoverished children from labor, juvenile reformers were content to supervise their charges in acceptable work environments. By the mid-nineteenth century, conditions at the House of Reformation had deteriorated. Managers gave up on the rehabilitative goal of the institution and considered the institution “a prison for young criminals.” During the first half of the nineteenth century, juvenile reformers struggled with their attempts to rehabilitated poor children through a system of education and a competing system of work. They viewed the labor of orphaned and delinquent children in terms of service and obedience, rather than social mobility. They praised their institutions’ ability to transform unruly boys and girls into docile and obedient men and women. During the early nineteenth century, juvenile reform institutions provided children with the rudimentary skills and an introduction to morality that created the foundation for economic participation. Reformers hoped that keeping orphaned and delinquent children in a moral and disciplined environment would

38 “At a Meeting of the Directors of the House for the Employment and Reformation of Juvenile Offenders,” published with “City of Boston: At a Meeting of the Directors of the House of Industry,” (Boston, 1827), MHS.
39 Schneider, In the Web of Class, 1992, 40.
40 Ibid., 41.
make them worthy of freedom. However, the early education of these disadvantaged children was tainted by the expectation of future dependence and manual labor, which prevented them from developing the capacities of self-ownership that would be recognized by society when they left the institution.

Public schools and juvenile institutions each attempted to prepare children for the complex opportunities of commercial society by protecting them from labor and investing in their education. The school system allowed families to invest in their children’s education, and thus prepared them to claim self-ownership and respectability, regardless of their economic resources. However, public schools could not meet the needs of families who relied on their children for income. City leaders and philanthropists expected that orphan asylums and reform institutions would recreate middle-class norms of childhood among children whose economic activity in the streets violated legal regulations or moral precepts. Despite the early egalitarian motives of juvenile institutions, the deficiencies in education and family resources experienced by poor children consigned them to a future of work undertake from necessity, rather than choice.

The Independence of Youth and the Rhetoric of Choice

While Boston's elected leaders mobilized local resources to support the education of children and their removal from the workforce, a diverse group of concerned adults recognized the distinct needs of young men and women entering the labor market. Young people used available educational opportunities in their teenage years to develop their claims to self-ownership and respectability. These opportunities guided them to appropriate choices in the complex commercial environment. Young people expanded their knowledge, skills, disposition, and credentials using advice literature, private schools, and indentures. Although reformers
viewed these educational opportunities as paths to autonomy for young people regardless of economic resources, access to schooling tracked some young people toward positions that promised social mobility and left others to work as legal dependents.

In contrast to the increased paternal and maternal oversight of younger children in nineteenth-century institutions, self-appointed moralists viewed self-ownership as central to the process of growing up in commercial society for young men and women. This ideology of youth was evident in a new genre of advice literature that emerged during the 1820s and targeted young men and women operating outside their parents’ direct authority. The emergence of mass production in the publishing industry coincided with new efforts aimed at helping young men and women succeed as self-reliant agents in the volatile economic environment of early capitalism. Instead of preparing young people to accept their status as given at birth (common in early eighteenth-century texts), nineteenth-century advice writers promoted the development of capacities necessary for “a competitive status system” that required men and women to engage with their equals and develop their natural talents to meet their individual potential.  

Embracing New England’s emerging political and economic transformation, advice authors promoted youth as a period of choice. These messages in popular literature promoted new expectations for coming of age that placed the burden of attaining maturity on young men and women themselves, in conjunction with formal and informal institutions.

The authors of popular advice books considered youth “the commencement of a rational and immortal existence.” Youth was the “form[ing], fix[ing] period” and it was the time in which “the character assumes its permanent shape and color.” Guidebooks were aimed at young people who had “finished their education, at fourteen, or fifteen years of age – at the very time, 

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when their minds are most susceptible of improvements – when they are most exposed to
temptation.” Youth was also a time when “the mind is then in the most favourable state for the
admission of instruction, and for learning how to live.”44 Although often using the gender-neutral
term ‘youth,’ their message was particularly salient to young men, “soon to occupy the houses,
and own the property, and fill the offices, and possess the power, and direct the influence that are
now in other hands.”45

Advice writers encouraged the development of self-ownership among young women as well. The decline of household production and the “cult of domesticity” eliminated the need for much of young women’s labor within the middle-class home. Advice authors condemned young women who “float[ed] along the stream of inaction or insignificance.” William Alcott decried the
“many females who are trained in the bosom of ease and abundance” and “have no idea of any attempts at benevolent effort, or even of active, untiring industry.” He demanded that “every American young woman ought to be able…to support herself through life.” Although women had limited employment opportunities, choosing to embrace industry over idleness helped to develop a mature character.46

When addressing a female readership, advisers stressed the virtue of industry, but also recognized that most women’s labor would occur within the home as wives and mothers. Marriage marked “an important era in the life of a young female” which “devolves upon her a set of cares, duties, and responsibilities, to which she has hitherto been unaccustomed.” Advice to young women recognized the higher emotional stakes of marriage and focused on helping women develop the character that would help them select the ideal husband. To face this component of adulthood, young women needed “independence of mind,” which William

45 Hawes, Lectures to Young Men, 35.
Sprague defined as “the quality which leads us to form all our opinions deliberately, and from the best light with which we can gain, and then to adhere to them firmly and practically, until there shall be sufficient evidence to reverse our convictions.”

Although guidebooks stressed the need for young men and women to develop the capacity to make appropriate choices, they also emphasized the need to know one’s station in life. The literature reinforced the traditional social order by counseling young people to accept their positions determined by “Providence,” “nature,” or another force beyond human agency. William Potter emphasized natural hierarchy by recommending that “the peculiar genius of a young person should be consulted, in reference to the situation in life which he is to occupy, and the department of usefulness, in the general system, which he is to fill.” He warned against giving youth too much freedom in choosing their station, “such persons, after having lived useless, have died unregretted, simply because they have mistaken the situation in life, and the class of society, in which they should have moved.”

John Gregory warned young women not to assume that “it is essential to happiness to be married.” But on the other hand, “unmarried women of active, vigorous minds and great vivacity of spirits, degrad[ed] themselves; sometimes by entering into a dissipated course of life, unsuitable for their years…All of this is owing to an exuberant activity of spirit, which, if it had found employment at home, would have rendered them respectable and useful members of society.”

Advice literature viewed youth as a period of choice – required by the necessity of self-support and new occupational opportunities, but limited by legal prohibitions on consent and dependence on parents and guardians. Authors reminded young people that choice offered both

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47 William Buell Sprague, *Letters on a Practical Subject to a Daughter* (New York: John P. Haven, 1821), 115, 71.
possibilities and dangers, which made the capacities of maturity so essential. Proper management of their choices, including knowing when to follow traditional prescriptions, was the key to success. Young people encountered this paradox of choice as they found themselves balancing liminal employment with their attempts to prepare for future authority. The period of youth, which early Americans defined as roughly between the mid-teens and mid-twenties, was a time to cultivate “that quality which leads us to form all our opinions deliberately...and then to adhere to them firmly and practically.”50 After leaving institutions of formal schooling, a young man (and even a young woman) entered “on the stage of life, to act his part according to his own judgment.” The primary threats to youth were “slender and childish motives” that could impede rational conduct as they “fixed in the pursuit which is to continue for life.”51 During the years of youth, young men and women had to develop the character traits of maturity that would help them exert influence during the “active” stage of life. The anxiety young people felt as they made these choices fueled a growing industry of “success manuals” throughout the nineteenth century.52

Given the ideology that promoted youth as a period of gradually increasing autonomy and the difficulties faced by Boston’s public high schools, the Massachusetts legislature recognized that young men and women needed a wide variety of educational opportunities. The state incorporated dozens of private academies to ensure “the diffusion of sound learning.” Rather than concentrating all education within the public system, the legislature affirmed that “for the great purposes in view, the learning to be diffused, must be that, which can be brought home to the business and bosom of every individual in the land.” The legislature linked this

50 Sprague, Letters on a Practical Subject to a Daughter, 91.
51 Butler, The American Gentleman, 23.
diffusion of education to the nation’s democratic ideals: “All must be thoroughly educated, in
order that all may be truly freemen.” Civic leaders in New England turned to private schools to
create an educated citizenry while balancing the need for employment that fell on many young
men and women.53

Private secondary schools dominated New England’s educational landscape because they
offered flexibility and diverse curricula to fit young people’s need to prepare for the working
world. It was primarily private academies, supported by community donations, and venture
schools, supported entirely by tuition payments, that offered formal schooling to young men and
women beyond the early teenage years. Massachusetts passed legislation in 1827 requiring towns
with more than five hundred families to operate a school to teach the “upper-level” subjects of
“American history, bookkeeping, geometry, surveying, and algebra.”54 However, two years later,
the state modified the law so these upper schools were optional. Maris Vinovskis finds that by
1835, only four communities outside of Boston had secondary schools. Where state and local
officials were unwilling to fund secondary education, philanthropic and entrepreneurial
individuals stepped in.55

The range of private schools available to young men and women in their mid-to-late teens
blurred the boundaries between liberal and vocational, and between secondary and higher
education. What distinguished such academies, institutes, and seminaries during the nineteenth
century was the “idea of formal, popular education beyond the rudiments.” During the period
when common schools were centralizing and standardizing the rudimentary education of

53 Massachusetts, Secretary’s Office, Jan. 23, 1827...Report to the House of Representatives a Statement of “the
Number of Academies Located in This Commonwealth, the Places Where They Are Located, How Much Assistance
Each Has Received from the Commonwealth, and How Many Have Received No Assistance, with Their Names and
Places of Location,” (Boston: True and Greene, 1827).
54 Maris Vinovskis, The Origins of Public High Schools: A Reexamination of the Beverly High School Controversy
(Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 61.
55 Ibid.
children, private academies were “the dominant institution of higher schooling.”  

Each school served particular needs, whether to attain occupational skills, enhance gentility, or explore religious identity. Young workers seeking education in specific skills or subjects would attend an “entrepreneurial venture school” – institutions with a focused curriculum supported entirely by tuition. Young people aspiring to a broader liberal education would attend a chartered academy or seminary, which was incorporated by the state to ensure financial stability. By pursuing specialized education that conformed to individual desires for knowledge, skills, or reputation, young people used private schools to support their emerging autonomy.

Private academies and seminaries in the early nineteenth century offered a broad curriculum to help young people achieve social mobility and avoid the potential for degradation in their subordinate work. In order to widen their base of prospective students, schools often included the traditional preparatory training in Greek and Latin alongside a ‘modern’ course of study that combined English education with the liberal arts and sciences. Despite wide-spread acceptance that women were suited for the home rather than social leadership, “assumptions regarding women's work as wives and mothers did not result in curricular ideals very different from those held for men.”

Elite young women who attended academies and seminaries learned classical languages, science, rhetoric, and philosophy, just as their brothers did at college. However, female academies fit into a different trajectory for women than college provided for men. While colleges represented the final steps before entering a profession, women's academic pursuits qualified them as companions for educated men and mothers to future citizens, or for a temporary career as a teacher.

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56 Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727-1925 (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), 3. [emphasis in original]  
57 Ibid., 36–37.  
Private schools often advertised the vocational training they provided, with messages that made clear their divergent expectations for young men and young women. The co-educational Bristol Academy advertised that their male pupils were “fitted for college, the store, and the counting room,” the latter two groups would achieve “considerable classical and scientific attainments” in place of training in ancient languages. Many academies emphasized that the course of instruction would be “suited to the capacity of the scholar and the employment for which he wishes to fit himself.” School founders demonstrated that they understood the new knowledge and skills required for the commercial economy. Aspiring merchants, who fit into neither the classical education of ministers and lawyers, nor the apprenticeship instruction of artisans, wanted a place to achieve “a familiarity with the principles of book keeping, and the whole business of accounting; and...habits of accuracy and method as well as neatness and dispatch.” Private academies wanted to assure parents that their “course of instruction is to be as extensive as this enlightened age requires.” Private school founders promoted specific training and knowledge to enhance young people’s opportunities to find employment in the commercial economy. Schooling beyond the primary subject gave young men the means to pursue economic autonomy through the development of character and talent, demonstrating the democratic promise of the new nation.

The financial obstacles to advanced schooling created a new market for institutions that could balance education and employment. A growing number of private venture schools responded to new employment conditions by accommodating the schedule and curricular needs

60 Plan of the Boston Seminary (Boston, 1834).
61 William J. Adams, Practical Education: Circular, the Subscribers Propose to Open a School for Boys (New York, G. H. Evans, 1829).
of working boys. A broadside advertising a school in 1820 for “young gentlemen preparing for mercantile and other pursuits, who may wish for an education superior to that usually obtained in the common schools, but different from a college education, and better adapted to their particular business.” Another school broadside offered an evening school for young men over fourteen, the typical age for apprenticeships to start, acknowledging that “the City offers no school, out of business hours, where they can attain a knowledge” related to mercantile practices and “character.” An evening school for apprentices had the additional advantage of keeping male youth “from those perhaps worse idle diversions, which enervate the youthful mind.” These irregular educational opportunities provided young workers with ways to avoid the potential degradation of their liminal employment by reinforcing and advancing their claims to intelligence, self-control, and choice.

When William J. Adams and Samuel P. Parker, former instructors at Boston’s Latin School and English High School, planned to open a similar institution in New York, they took the practical knowledge of business even further. Considering that “every educated man ought to be familiar” with the principles behind manual labor, they proposed to take their pupils “to the shops of the different artisans in the city,” where they could witness firsthand “various mechanical operations, and the elements of machinery.” This education would teach young men “of the progress of modern improvement” more than any book. Adams and Parker hoped to attract the parents of prospective pupils with their discussion of the importance of “joining to classical learning…the elements of scientific and general knowledge.”

Private secondary schools also offered instruction in teaching, a growing occupation that

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63 Warren Colburn, “Advertisement for Colburn’s school for young gentlemen preparing for mercantile and other pursuits, 19 Sep 1820,” (Boston), MHS; Monitorial School, “Constitution: the subscribers associated to establish a permanent seminary under the style of [blank] adopt the following constitution for their government...” (1823), MHS.

64 Adams, Practical Education.
was open to women as well as men. A few institutions portrayed their goals beyond liberal education specifically to “furnish Teachers for our common schools.” An academy in Taunton, Massachusetts, advertised “instruction...in the art of teaching” for women, while preparing men for “college, the store, and counting room.” Zelia Lunt attended her local academy in Westbrook, Maine, and after she had completed the course of study, she served as an assistant instructor. Private academies used recommendations to secure employment for their students outside their immediate network. Carroll Norcross, an aspiring teacher in Winthrop, Maine, received numerous recommendations from the members of the Superintending School Committee in his home town. Their recommendation, a pre-typed statement with the proper gender-specific pronouns written in, emphasized “the capacity for instructing, and for government and discipline.” The president of Concord Academy wrote a similar statement for Nancy Denison, a twenty-six year old graduate, informing the reader that Denison had been “marked for uniform propriety of conduct and faithful application to study.” He assured the reader that Denison was “qualified to teach with success and profit” and “very cheerfully recommend[ed] her to that very responsible employment.”

Advertisements for women’s schools emphasized not only the respectable status that “a literary and polite” education would provide, but also the benefits that a liberal education offered in their unique feminine duties. The Female Classical Seminary in Worcester praised “the increasing attention that is paid to the education of the destined mothers and instructresses of future generations.” By creating a female workforce to staff the expanding school system in New England, these institutions considered themselves part of the “future elevation of our country in

66 Carroll Norcross recommendation, Town of Winthrop, 1851, Cargill, Knight, and Norcross Family Papers, Maine Historical Society (hereafter MeHS).
67 Nancy Denison recommendation, May 1825; Titus Orcott Brown Papers, MeHS.
refinement and manners, in moral culture, and literary rank among the nations of the earth.”

The role of private academies as institutions for teacher training helped school leaders counter the criticism that private schooling fostered elite privilege. As concerns about the privileges available to wealthy families emerged from numerous quarters in the mid-nineteenth century, the role of private schools seemed more likely to ensconce the privileges of learning rather than “diffuse” it as the Massachusetts Legislature had expected. But the Bristol Academy responded that rather than being “established to educate one class above the rest,” private schools “equalized the advantages of learning and intelligence generally through the land” through their function of educating teachers.” After gaining teaching credentials through a private school, many young women of modest means helped support themselves or contribute to the income of their families of origin. The Young Ladies’ Institute in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, even offered “a small reduction” in tuition “for young ladies with limited means preparing themselves for the business of teaching.”

Private secondary schools flourished because educational entrepreneurs recognized the unique conditions of youth. These institutions offered a range of educational opportunities to prepare middling young people for social mobility by providing not only vocational credentials, but solidifying their reputation for self-ownership and respectability. Academies and venture schools catered to employment needs and the desire for cultural refinement that would solidify class status. Although the education of children was becoming more centralized and institutionalized during the common school reform movement of the 1830s and 1840s, the educational experiences of young men and women were sporadic, irregular, and fragmented

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across public and private, formal and informal, institutions because of the nature of youth employment. By taking control of their education and future employment prospects, young people furthered the association between labor and maturity that defined the experience of middle-class youth in early nineteenth-century New England.

The ideal of youth as a period of emerging self-ownership pervaded New England reformers’ attitude toward young people. The goal of educational institutions was to prepare young men and women to navigate the complex choices of commercial society. Although young people who were able to enroll in private schools had material advantages that supported these choices, the rhetoric of self-ownership also extended to young people in less privileged circumstances. The directors of juvenile reform institutions expected their departing charges to hold the same capacity for individual responsibility as middling children from intact families. As young paupers, orphans, and delinquents left reform institutions, they took responsibility for their character even as they entered the largely subordinate positions that were available to them.

In 1833 thirteen-year-old John Potter left House of Refuge in New York City for his new home on a Connecticut farm. With a large, strained signature, he agreed “voluntarily, and of his own free will and accord” to indenture himself to Sylvester Lusk. As a parting gift from his institutional guardians, Potter received a form letter from the Board of Managers, with standard language and blank spaces to fill in the gender-specific pronouns. The managers bound children like Potter when they reached an age considered appropriate for labor. As they left their institutional home in their early teens, indentured minors had limited resources and few labor choices besides running away. Despite these legal and economic limitations, the Board’s letter to John Potter, which they provided to all apprentices, used the rhetoric of choice and self-determination. The managers told Potter that he had reached “an age when you are capable of
distinguishing between virtue and vice” and, as a young man, “your welfare depends upon yourself.” The letter promised that “the errors of your infancy will be forgiven or forgotten” with industrious and virtuous behavior in his new sphere of life. The letter offered advice for how Potter could become “a good and respectable man” by attending diligently to his employment. The directors ignored the forced circumstances that placed Potter in an indenture, and the features of his position that would relegate him to manual labor, promoting instead an ideal of independence through the management of internal character traits.71

This language of choice obscured the constraints faced by young paupers and delinquents who reached the age appropriate for labor. The goal of juvenile reform institutions in early nineteenth-century New England was to protect the moral development of vulnerable children by replacing depraved environments with virtuous ones. However, once these young New Englanders reached their early teens, they were expected to continue the process of becoming productive members of society through dedicated work. The Overseers of the Poor relieved the financial burden of caring for destitute youth by binding them to “proper” families as “places where children learned to serve the larger community by contributing meaningful labor.”72 These indenture apprenticeships offered few opportunities for the kind of control of labor that was necessary to exert authority as an adult. Local magistrates in New England “sought community stability through the business of binding out poor children in indentures that were calibrated to reflect each child’s particular place in that community.”73 The growing importance of self-ownership contributed to a class divergence between middling youth whose apprenticeships were

71 Letter from the Managers of the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents (New York) to John Potter, 1 Oct 1833, Sylvester Lusk Papers, CHS. The italics indicate where the gender-specific words were written into the typed form letter.
72 Ruth Wallis Herndon and John E. Murray, Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America (Cornell University Press, 2009), 3.
73 Ibid, 51.
largely voluntary, and poor, vulnerable youth who were legally indentured by a state institution for destitute children.

The home environment to which paupers and delinquents were bound became the site of both employment and moral development through a system of legal dependence carried over from the colonial period. For poor young men and women under the control of reform institutions, education and employment became a unified force to transform depravity into virtue. As they worked for new guardians during their teenage years, indentured young men and women found ways to increase their skills and knowledge. Pauper apprenticeships attempted to retain the dual role of the household to develop both citizens and workers. Institute directors who managed the care for destitute minors put young men and women to work as quickly as possible, often sending them to neighboring towns and states. The Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents in New York City sent its wards to places like Sylvester Lusk’s farm in Enfield, Connecticut. Lusk took boys to learn “the trade and mystery of farming” and girls to learn “the trade and mystery of housewifery.” In exchange for “sufficient Meat, Drink, Apparel, Lodging, and Washing, fitting for an Apprentice,” and a rudimentary education, the apprentices promised obedience, morality, and loyalty. Lusk took six apprentices (four boys and two girls) between 1828 and 1838. They ranged in age from nearly twelve to nearly seventeen years old. All but one could legibly sign his or her name to the indenture. One of the apprentices, Maria Peterson, was noted to be a “colored girl,” although the indenture made no special provisions for her term to learn housewifery.74

For juvenile delinquents released from institutions, the decline of the apprenticeship system limited the chance for occupational mobility by decreasing the educational component of

74 Indentures and Other Documents Binding Minor Wards of the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents of the City of New York as apprentices to Sylvester Lusk of Enfield, 1828-1838, Sylvester Lusk Papers, CHS.
the relationship between master and apprentice. Indenture contracts required only rudimentary instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The primary educational value was expected to come through vocational training, but this aspect diminished as masters used indentures to gain cheap labor for their own enterprises. While apprenticeships, at least in terminology, were still dominant in many mechanic occupations, W. J. Rorabaugh notes that only 10% of young paupers under the care of the Boston Overseer of the Poor were apprenticed to craftsmen by 1800. The majority were bound to farmers, which was a less desirable occupation because it provided little opportunity for economic advancement. The pauper apprentice system attempted to reinstate the system of household labor that connected work to legal and economic dependence within a patriarchal structure. This reality not only violated the rhetoric of autonomy promoted by refuge managers, but also ignored the changes in household production that made dependent household labor a position of perpetual subservience rather than the beginning of a vocational education that would culminate with the mastery of a trade.

The directors of the House of Reformation were able to maintain a supply of artisan apprentices during the period, but their charges were entering occupations transformed by industrialization. The first cohort of male juvenile offenders received instruction in shoemaking and was then bound out as apprentices to that trade, which was facing rapid decline in craft knowledge due to the intrusion of outwork and factory production. Despite the benefits of this industrial education, the directors quickly found it too expensive to teach technical skills within the institutions. Later inhabitants of the House of Reformation were apprenticed to farmers and woolen manufacturers to take positions that required little training. Several “older and less

75 Rorabaugh, The Craft Apprentice.
77 City of Boston, Report...the House of Reformation of Juvenile Offenders (Boston, J. H. Eastburn, 1832).
promising boys” were bound to whaling ships. Poor young women’s employment opportunities were limited almost entirely to “carding, knitting, and sewing,” and the more general category of “housewifery.” These young women likely performed domestic labor for their master’s family with little opportunity to learn a self-supporting trade. The decline of the household labor system through the deskilling of artisan crafts limited young paupers’ ability to achieve independence through their indentured work. Although New England’s juvenile reform institutions claimed to uplift the prospects of poor children, their primary function was to corral unsupervised young people and provide them with enough education to fill subordinate positions in the labor market.

The construction of youth as a period of choice, self-ownership, and autonomy benefited young people who had the resources to pursue opportunities in respectable and secure positions. Young men and women who could afford tuition at a private academy received the social and economic benefits of formal credentials and the mark of respectability. This social capital enhanced their prospect of finding positions that would allow for the assertion of authority in gender-defined spheres and conform to ideals of mental labor. Young men and women released from juvenile institutions entered a labor environment of entrenched marginality in manual labor positions. The conception of maturity as young people’s ability to guide their employment through social expectations for gender-based authority ignored the reality of class divisions that made social mobility a possibility for some and an improbability for others.

*Self-Education, Labor, and Civic Leadership*

During the early nineteenth century, many young people’s formal schooling ended in their mid-teens. Educational opportunities for older youth developed in relation to changes in young men’s and women’s labor and prepared young adults for their gendered positions of

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authority. The assumption that an individual’s employment signified his or her maturity created an occupational hierarchy within civic leadership that helped to entrench divisions between the middle and working classes. Most young men and women lacked the opportunities to display self-ownership, respectability, and liberal knowledge as they pursued employment in the commercial environment. New England elites feared that the mass of young men in the urban population would fall behind the civic capacities of those educated at academies and colleges. They also worried about the effect of industrial employment on the reputation of female factory operatives. These leaders, as well as young men and women themselves, developed new institutions that expanded liberal education beyond formal schooling in order to prepare themselves for civic leadership in a variety of occupations. The expansion of opportunities for self-education in the commercial environment helped create a myth of the self-made man – a young man without parental support who achieved social mobility through his own industry and merit. Although many young people parlayed their education into middle-class occupations, the ‘rags-to-riches’ narrative popularized by authors such as Horatio Alger further entrenched the blame placed on the young people whose lack of resources kept them in subordinate positions. The social conditions of this literary trope emerged in the early nineteenth century as the first generations of Americans struggled to come of age in the unstable environment of nascent capitalism.

For educators fearful of the impact of commercialization, the “civil blueprint of American society” came from colleges. As the premiere institutions for the education of future leaders, colleges faced unique challenges caught between traditional ideals of civic virtue and the commercial ethic of ambition and self-interest.\(^79\) Although they enrolled at best 1-2% of the male population before the Civil War, colleges developed a more liberal character and enrolled

\(^{79}\) Sumner, *Collegiate Republic: Cultivating an Ideal Society in Early America*, 3.
students from a broader range of economic backgrounds. As young men took more responsibility for developing their character, college leaders transformed disciplinary procedures to embrace ambition and meritocracy. These changes occurred despite the effort of college faculty and their families to maintain “the classical definition of virtue based on self-sacrifice and action for the common good.”

Instead of aspiring to join a model community, many young men entered college to pursue their own immediate goals. They paid tuition themselves and saw their degree as a means to achieve social mobility. Yet because of their parents’ early investment in primary school and their ability to use their resources to pursue their own endeavors rather than to support their natal families, these ‘needy’ or ‘indigent’ students had a chance to secure middle-class respectability through advanced education. College students and faculty created a liminal environment that recognized student life for “its independence, its dense social commerce between students and society, and its ever present need for self-discipline.”

In the early nineteenth century, New England colleges struggled to adapt their classical and religious curriculum to the emerging self-interest in democratic and commercial society. Many traditional practices remained from the colonial period. At Dartmouth College, freshman Rufus Choate complained about the “sluggish uniformity” of his daily routine, governed by the morning and evening bell, and divided between recitation, study, and prayer. However, by the

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80 Ibid., 4.
81 According to David Allmendinger, the number of students whose families could not readily afford college tuition increased during the first half of the nineteenth century. This trend encouraged the creation of provincial colleges located throughout New England, to satisfy the needs of young men who could not afford periodic travel to and from Cambridge and New Haven. Although colonial colleges offered opportunities for poor students to earn money toward tuition and board through positions as waiters, discipline monitors, and secretaries, in the early nineteenth century they sought employment as schoolteachers, or sometimes seasonal laborers, that gave them greater autonomy outside of the campus environment. See Allmendinger, Paupers and Scholars.
82 Ibid., 97. Sumner also contends that college leaders treated students as “adults in need of training instead of children in need of discipline.”
83 Rufus Choate to David Choate, 16 June 1816, Rufus Choate Papers, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College (hereafter RSCL). Selections from the following pages appear in Jane Fiegen Green, “‘An Opinion of Our Own’: Education, Politics, and the Struggle for Adulthood at Dartmouth College, 1814–1819,”
1810s colleges were losing their strict control of the student body.\textsuperscript{84} Colleges required students to complete the traditional curriculum based on classical Greek and Latin texts to inculcate the lauded virtues of individual sacrifice to the common good. But even as college leaders tried to isolate their communities from the self-interest promoted in the commercial society beyond campus, they were drawn in to the new ethic of ambition and competition. Faced with greater competition from upstart institutions and expanded demand from rural boys leaving their family farms to pursue an academic or professional career, colleges diversified their subjects – including science and modern languages – while maintaining the classical curriculum that conferred social prestige.\textsuperscript{85} These changes created a new atmosphere on campus in which students had more control and “scholarship became a competitive activity.”\textsuperscript{86} As Choate wrote to his family, “the class is ambitious, and to be among the first...will be an arduous undertaking.”\textsuperscript{87} As colleges embraced the principles of ambition and competition, campuses mirrored some aspects of the urban environment. With young men taking more responsibility for their own success, colleges transformed from sites for securing privilege and instilling moral obedience to liminal environments within which students experimented with adult identities and commercial values. 

During the Revolutionary-era, American society started to embrace a philosophy of


\textsuperscript{85} Sumner, \textit{Collegiate Republic}, 7.


\textsuperscript{87} Rufus Choate to David Choate, 8 March 1816, file 92519, RSCL.
individuality that transformed the family, the church, and the state by emphasizing the development of consent over the use of force. However, authoritarian control persisted in elite colleges, creating a conflict between students’ feelings of maturity and college officials’ expectations of deference. As a result, many campuses in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries experienced epidemics of student violence. Enflamed by arbitrary punishment or substandard living conditions, college students could terrorize a campus and effectively nullify professorial authority. Following the larger shift against coercive authority, discipline shifted from an authoritarian paternalism toward one founded on nurturing through persuasion and positive reinforcement rather than punishment. By the 1820s, colleges used a system of meritocracy to disrupt students’ horizontal allegiances and encourage students’ desires to “please their professors.”

College faculty and their families designed the collegiate enterprise to correct the passions of young men, whether from “romantic attachment, sexual competition, or even personal enmity.” Although college students were exclusively male, they had frequent interaction with the daughters and other young female kin of college leaders – young women who were denied the formal education of the collegiate community, but participated in its educative enterprise. As Margaret Sumner finds, “the college world relied on its ‘ladies’ to help deflect these passions.” By upholding their own chastity and virtue, young women encouraged scholars to discipline their own behavior. While male students learned virtue to promote the common good of society, young women in the college community learned to internalize the scrutiny on their behavior in order to perform their feminine role of “direct[ing] male minds toward

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89 Novak, *The Rights of Youth*.
virtue.”

College students developed means to control passions and promote their ideal of the common good through their own informal means of education, most prominently the organizations known as literary societies. Students used literary societies to explore a wider range of reading and discussion than the curriculum allowed and to experiment with politics in preparation for leadership in civic life. Members organized and funded their own libraries, which were more useful and more accessible than the library run by the college. The societies also held weekly meetings to debate issues important to their generation, supplementing the classical curriculum of their professors with contemporary political topics and skills. Within students’ deferential, constrained collegiate lives, societies provided opportunities for leadership and autonomy. Moreover, when two literary societies existed on one campus, they created a democratic rivalry. At Dartmouth College two separate societies – the Society of Social Friends and the United Fraternity – competed to have the best students, the best library, and the best academic displays. Through competition, autonomy, and leadership, literary societies created transitional spaces that connected students with contemporary political culture and allowed them to experiment with adult authority in a protected environment.

Although literary societies provided autonomous space for students, they were not egalitarian organizations. Instead, they embodied the ideals of hierarchy and distrust of expanded

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91 Sumner, *Collegiate Republic: Cultivating an Ideal Society in Early America*, 73–75.
92 The larger question of sexuality and maturity is beyond the scope of this dissertation, which focuses on young people’s experience with work. However, the role of sexuality, marriage, and adulthood was discussed in Chapter 3.
94 The Society of Social Friends was instituted in 1783 in order to manage a student library and hold weekly debates. In 1786, members of the Social Friends seceded and formed the United Fraternity. The ‘Socials’ and the ‘Fraters’ competed to initiate the best freshmen. They also clashed over the honor of performing dramatic pieces during commencement celebrations. The conflicts between the Socials and the Fraters led to the Social Friends’ records being burned by Fraternity members on three occasions. [From RSCL finding aids]
political participation, such as through the practice of ranking student by their family’s social status. Students enforced a strict hierarchy based on educational rank, with privileges granted to seniors and responsibilities delegated to freshmen. In both societies, seniors owed less in membership dues but were allowed to withdraw more books from the libraries than freshmen were.\(^95\) With their precise constitutions, students structured their societies to inculcate the values of republican gentlemen by “promoting useful knowledge, informing the manners, [and] correcting the morals of youth.”\(^96\) At their weekly meetings, society members debated topics of current interest, such as “Does party spirit contribute to preserve National independence?” and “Is the mode of elections practiced in the United States calculated to bring the best men in office?” which encouraged a skepticism toward growing partisan sentiments and instilled a concern for elite leadership over democratic representation.\(^97\)

Despite the influx of older and poorer students, college remained a luxury that many young men could not afford. However, concern for the education of young men at the brink of adulthood did not end at the college walls. In the early nineteenth century, the Boston Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge – a self-education association organized by prominent city leaders – recognized “from seventeen to the age when men enter on the more active and responsible duties of their several stations” as a crucial period which required unique forms of education. Many of these young men were working under artisans, merchants, or shopkeepers throughout the city and had long since left formal schooling. Bradley N. Cumings, the young dry-goods clerk in Boston, ended his formal schooling at thirteen to begin his apprenticeship.

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\(^{95}\) Yearly membership dues ranged from five dollars for freshmen to one dollar for seniors. Seniors could withdraw as many as four books at one time, while freshmen were not allowed more than two. Fines for overdue books were four cents per day regardless of class. The United Fraternity also instituted a 25 cent fine for talking in the library during designated reading hours.

\(^{96}\) Society of Social Friends Constitution, folder 8, box 3, series 3, DO-2, RSCL.

\(^{97}\) United Fraternity minutes, folder 1-2, box 1, series 1, DO-4, RSCL.
However, the growth of voluntary societies gave him a variety of opportunities to continue his education and earn the respectability necessary for civic authority. In his journal he recorded attending lectures at the Lyceum, Athenaeum, Mechanics Hall and Masonic Temple on subjects ranging from acoustics to temperance.\textsuperscript{98} Many of these educational opportunities were aimed especially at young apprentices and clerks in the urban environment.

The desire to provide educational opportunities for Boston’s urban youth spurred the development of a vibrant civic society filled with associations of mutual improvement. In 1831 Stephen Clarendon Philips, a thirty-year-old merchant from Salem, Massachusetts, lectured to a series of New England lyceums on their “usefulness…in connexion with the influence of the country and age in which we live, on the condition of man, as an individual, a member of society, a political agent, and an intellectual and moral being.” According to Philips, a young man in the new commercial and democratic age faced nothing “to confine [him] to any particular pursuit, to cultivate any particular habits, or to assent to any particular opinions.” In this environment of unencumbered self-making, “our institutions confer upon the individual…the highest prerogative of his nature.” The lyceum reflected the nation’s commitment to equality because it assembled “in a spirit of mutual respect, all classes, all ages and both sexes.”\textsuperscript{99} By spreading the traits of intelligence and moral autonomy to the masses, Philips envisioned a democratic civil society built on the maturity of the citizenry.

This belief in the uplifting power of mutual-improvement societies applied primarily to the fortunes and destiny of native-born white men, the group placed at the head of the body politic. Library companies formed for a specific set of subscribers – either an elite class or an

\textsuperscript{98} Bradley N. Cumings Journal, MHS.
\textsuperscript{99} S. C. Phillips, \textit{A Lecture on the Usefulness of Lyceums} (Boston: Hillard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1831).
occupational group such as mechanics or merchants dominated by white men. Elite men generally controlled the organizations that sponsored lectures and lyceums, and white males faced few obstacles to attendance at public forums. However, some public educational forums, such as lyceums or public lecture series, catered to an all-female audience, while radical speakers addressed “promiscuous” groups that included both men and women. All of these offerings required an admission or subscription fee, putting them out of reach for poor individuals. The primary purpose of these mutual-improvement institutions was to fill urban workers’ leisure hours with respectable activities, especially for young men who might otherwise go unsupervised and patronize the disreputable entertainment of theaters, taverns, or even brothels. Women and non-white residents pursued mutual improvement through their own institutions, although their opportunities lacked the resources invested in self-cultivation for white men. Mutual-improvement societies promoted an ideal of diffuse knowledge as a foundation for democratic citizenship, while distributing education based on the civic roles imagined for individuals based on gender and race.

To bring liberal education to the growing population of urban young men, the Boston Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge offered a monthly lecture series “at a cheap rate, and in an inviting form.” This society was part of a growing movement for “popular education” that could extend knowledge to men in the non-professional classes and keep these young men from “profitless amusements.” The Society would “prepare them to engage more understandingly, with a deeper interest, and with better prospect of success, in the pursuits to

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100 In addition to the mercantile and mechanical associations discussed below, see an analysis of the Boston Athenaeum in Ronald Story, “Class and Culture in Boston: The Athenaeum, 1807-1860,” American Quarterly 27, no. 2 (1975): 178-199.
which their lives are to be devoted.”¹⁰³ The Boston Lyceum provided another set of opportunities for education among urban male workers. Open to “any person, of 16 years of age, and upwards,” the Lyceum offered a course of lectures and a class in elocution. An annual report in 1842 remarked on the growing popularity of elocution as evidence that the community had “begun to regard it as an art, and not as a mere school-boy task, and though it may be “the youngest of the sister arts” yet it is of vast importance, whether considered merely as an accomplishment desirable in private life, or an essential requisite for the bar, the pulpit, or the forum.”¹⁰⁴

The Lyceum’s elocution class mimicked the instruction at college. Topics of the lectures included American and World history, health and physical education, and ethics and law. These mutual improvement societies provided the outlines of a liberal education that clerks and apprentices were unable to pursue formally, thus allowing them the potential to claim civic participation equal in status to college graduates. Working-class and elite men shared a concern about the reputation for intelligence and civic regard held by their respective occupations. Amos Adams Lawrence, a Harvard student and son of a wealthy merchant family, wrote a “theme” on the effects of “cultivated taste & fondness for literary studies” on “the success or happiness of a man of business, say a statesman, lawyer or merchant.”¹⁰⁵ Edward Jenner Carpenter, a woodworking apprentice in Greenfield, Massachusetts, also attended a literary club that addressed the question of civic leadership and occupation. In a debate on the question of “Which have done the most good Lawyers or Mechanics,” Carpenter recorded “it was decided in favor of

¹⁰³ Boston Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge Address and Constitution (Boston, 1829).
¹⁰⁴ Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Boston Lyceum (Boston: Mudge & Evans, 1841).
¹⁰⁵ Amos A. Lawrence, “Of a cultivated taste & fondness for literary studies as affecting the success or happiness of a man of business, say a statesman, lawyer or merchant,” [1835?], Amos A. Lawrence Papers, MHS.
the Mechanic.”

Clerks and other mercantile and retail businessmen engaged in a diffuse public relations campaign to assert the respectability and authority of their occupation. Although they achieved a greater degree of wealth than teachers or ministers, commercial men represented the ambition and volatility of the emerging commercial economy. For a community still ambivalent about the benefits of the commercial revolution, merchants and businessmen struggled to earn the public regard held by professional men such as lawyers, doctors, or clergy. Young men of business had to assert their intelligence and morality in order to claim social authority. Bradley Cumings was a member of a debating society for young commercial men in Boston’s North End. Like debating societies on college campuses, young men gathered to discuss central political and social issues. At a meeting on December 20, 1832, the topic of debate was “Can business men possessing the advantages afforded by Lyceums and similar associations, qualify themselves as well for the highest trusts and most responsible duties of public station, as professional men of scientific and literary attainments?” After a spirited discussion that extended into the next week’s meeting, “the question was carried in the affirmative by a large majority.”

Many of Boston’s mutual-improvement associations catered to a specific occupational group. In 1820 a group “of young men engaged in Mercantile pursuits” formed a library for their mutual improvement “consisting of such works as are of approved authority and character, and adapted to disseminate useful and entertaining knowledge, and to improve the members in elocution and debate; also the formation of a cabinet of curiosities.” Under the group’s constitution, the library admitted members over the age of fifteen, and “no man in business for

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106 Edward Jenner Carpenter Diary, 2 Apr 1844, AAS.
108 Bradley N. Cumings Journal, 20 Dec 1832, 27 Dec 1832, MHS.
himself be allowed voice in its affairs.” The early years of the Mercantile Library Association were deemed “disastrous” by the group’s own history, with barely enough funds to stay in operation. Success that came from the patronage of a handful of generous merchants allowed the association to survive.¹⁰⁹

The Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, which began as a cooperative organization to address the problem of runaway apprentices, organized informal educational opportunities for young men engaged in the mechanical trades. Only master mechanics and owners or superintendents of manufacturing operations could become members of the society, but the organization offered apprentices a regimen of discipline and a vision of adulthood suited for their employment path. Cumings, a dry goods clerk, attended numerous lectures at Mechanics Hall, and enrolled in the Minors' Class to learn about subjects such as locomotion and architecture. In 1832 the Mechanic Association transferred its Apprentices' Library to an association of apprentices “for their sole management and control,” giving many young men access to education that was otherwise restricted by commercial labor.¹¹⁰

Contemporaries viewed these informal educational opportunities as a solution to class divisions that emerged when some New Englanders found themselves unable to take positions of leadership – either through elected office or the dominant cultural institutions – due to the reputation associated with their employment. Twenty-nine-year-old Zachariah Allen, a college-educated lawyer-turned-industrialist, expected the Providence Mechanics Library to be an institution “of the greatest public utility...when a sufficient number of books shall be collected.”

The institutions would allow “the humblest laborer or mechanic” to participated in civic

¹⁰⁹ Constitution and By-Laws of the Mercantile Library Association (Boston: Dow & Jackson, 1839).
leadership, possibly to “rise to the first office of the state.” Self-improvement societies embodied the narrative of self-making that permeated New England literature. Allen considered education essential for social mobility and democratic stability. He believed education, whether in schools, mechanics’ institutes, or lyceums, prevented the formation of “a permanent aristocracy in the country.” Middle-class leaders, who typically had the benefit of formal education at an academy or college, saw mutual-improvement societies as institutions that could eliminate the emerging hierarchy between mental and manual labor by providing working-class New Englanders with access to liberal education.

The community’s desire to expand civic leadership across occupational groups was a gendered process that privileged the political participation of men. However, the desire for an educated citizenry filtered some opportunity to young women in the urban environment. Entering the factory workforce in a thriving city gave young women access to new civic institutions. Lowell was home to an Institute and a Lyceum that offered twenty-five lectures every year that were within reach of an operative's disposable income. Susan Brown Forbes, a nineteen-year-old mill worker with a limited education, attended multiple lectures at the institute every month during her employment. The Lowell Institute offered lectures on topics ranging from geography to anatomy to religion, topics that would appeal to a mixed-sex, middling audience. The availability of popular education gave female mill workers similar access to civic participation enjoyed by male apprentices in the commercial occupations. While men formed debating societies, the women of Lowell organized an “Improvement Circle” to read literature and share original compositions. The circle, “organized by women themselves, though commonly under the supervision of ministers” gave female operatives a purpose beyond their

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111 Zachariah Allen Diary, 10 Feb 1824, RIHS.
112 Susan Forbes Diary, SL.
daily, repetitive labor.”

The communal, age- and gender-segregated environment gave female mill workers many of the benefits that commercial and industrial labor provided to young apprentices in the city. Although still confined to the paternalistic environment of mill boarding houses, young women experienced the freedom of life away from their parents. Thomas Dublin argues that, along with earning wages, mill operatives’ participation “in new institutions such as improvement circles” helped some of “them [develop] a new self-confidence that was reflected in changing relations with their parents.” The educational opportunities afforded by their labor environment gave young women a new sense of authority. The intellectual work they did in that environment allowed young women to maintain their respectability, a necessary characteristic for their future role as wives and mothers.

African Americans were also barred from the mutual-improvement societies that young white men used to enhance their public reputations. Instead, the black community established institutions of its own to promote the intelligence and respectability of its members. The Adelphic Union Library Association, established in 1838, organized a lecture series open to a mixed race and sex audience. The Afric-American Female Intelligence Society encouraged moral uplift through education and mutual aid. These societies retained some exclusivity by charging a high admission fee, twice that charged for lectures at the Lowell Lyceum. Young African Americans formed their own Juvenile Garrison Independent Society to promote education among young people through lectures and to contribute to the community through self-help projects and anti-slavery rallies. This organization of black youth helped launch the career of

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113 Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 99.
114 Ibid.
William C. Nell, who used his education to become a writer, printer, and activist.\textsuperscript{115}

The question of racial integration in public spaces plagued New England even as the cause of abolition gained support. In 1845, African Americans in New Bedford, Massachusetts were denied membership to the town’s lyceum for no other reason than their race. In an attempt to compromise, the white lyceum members voted to allow blacks to attend lectures “without expense, provided they would sit in the North Gallery.”\textsuperscript{116} Unwilling to take a segregated place in the lyceum, African Americans leaders in New Bedford founded “an independent lyceum, where men, irrespective of accidental differences, could freely assemble, and have dispensed to them the precious stores of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{117} Although campaigns against racial discrimination continued, African Americans found opportunities for education limited by public prejudice that assumed their intellectual and moral inferiority and feared racial mixing.

Educational voluntary associations, whether organized by employers, public leaders, or youth themselves, offered young working men and women opportunities to develop liberal knowledge and the capacity for self-ownership that would mark the emerging middle class in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. Young male apprentices and female factory operatives enthusiastically supported lecture series designed to impart cultural literacy as a way to make up for their lack of extended formal schooling. Choosing to attend educational lectures rather than patronizing the locations of urban vice helped young people live up to adult expectations of mature behavior. These mutual improvement societies, including the composition groups among Lowell mill workers, were critical for the personal and professional development of African Americans in the antebellum North.

\textsuperscript{117} Philip Sheldon Foner, \textit{The Voice of Black America: Major Speeches by Negros In the United States, 1797-1973} (New York: Capricorn Books, 1975), 4. Women continued to be excluded from the New Bedford Lyceum, but prominent women were involved in protesting the lyceum’s policy of segregation. See Kathryn Grover, \textit{The Fugitive’s Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts} (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 176–179.
workers or debating clubs among Boston’s apprentices, allowed youth to assert their own voice into debates about adulthood and maturity.  

Despite the efforts of self-improvement societies, the gulf between college educated men and their self-educated peers remained a feature of New England’s political landscape. By treating youth as a period of investment and preparation for social mobility, the parents of college-educated men enabled them to achieve the social authority to participate in civic discourse and assume positions of leadership beyond that which self-educated artisans and businessmen could wield. Yet the availability of liberal education through lyceums and mechanics’ institutes for young men engaged in employment served to obscure the class divergence that was emerging by the mid-nineteenth century, although they may have provided a modicum of mobility for a few attendees. The democratization of knowledge during the antebellum period offered hope for a reversal in the emerging division between mental and manual laborer, which ultimately failed during the intensification of industrial labor after the Civil War.

**Conclusion**

The opportunities, structure, and content of education in early nineteenth-century New England demonstrated how adult leaders and reformers envisioned the skills and dispositions necessary for coming of age. In colonial America, education occurred primarily within the family and the church, and consisted of basic literacy, deference to elders, and obedience to God. Following the American Revolution, elected officials promoted public schools to teach the skills and attributes necessary for republican citizenship, including literacy and the attitude of sacrificing personal interest for the common good. Early American nationalists supported

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118 This will be explored in Chapter 6.
institutionalized public schooling in the belief that the “impressions received in early life usually form the characters of individuals, a union of which forms the general character of a nation.”

During the early nineteenth century, as commercialization eroded traditional paths to financial independence and opened new employment opportunities, educational reformers’ goals for creating an intelligent and responsible citizenry responded to expectations about appropriate labor based on gender, race, and class distinctions.

The decline of the household economy changed not only the process of growing up but also the components of social authority in the new democratic society. Because the home no longer functioned as a workplace and was less able to provide vocational training, civic leaders as well as parents looked beyond the institution of the family for the education that would bring children into adulthood. They recognized that respectable employment in the commercial economy required a broader set of intellectual and moral skills than earlier forms of education could provide. In order to prepare children for both their roles as workers and as citizens, different groups of elected officials, reformers, and young people themselves created a range of educational opportunities suited to prepare for and mediate the unique relationships between education and employment at distinct stages of life. For children, this meant protection from labor and an early investment in rudimentary skills. During the period of youth, this meant opportunities for employment-specific education and an inculcation of the gendered values of ambition and social mobility. For young adults, the continuation of intellectual and moral improvement needed to be fitted to the demands of work. Through these diverse forms of education, young people and concerned adults attempted to reconcile the higher standard of intellect and reason required for participatory citizenship with the labor demands of the early capitalist environment.

119 Webster, “Essays on Education in Early America (1790), in Essays on Education in the Early Republic, 43.
Civic leaders envisioned education as the solution to the moral degradation of urban life and the hardening of class lines through occupational stagnation. The range of low-cost opportunities purportedly gave all young people the ability to improve their intellect and reason in preparation for democratic citizenship. But the responsibility to participate in these educational opportunities remained with young people themselves, and their choices about self-improvement became a way for the community to judge their maturity. Privileged educational reformers saw young people’s participation as a reflection of their rationality. However, young men and women’s need to support themselves with paid employment often limited the amount of education they could obtain. The expansion of educational opportunities created an illusion of democratized citizenship, by presumably opening liberal knowledge to all members of society. As a result, education helped to reaffirm class privilege by further stigmatizing working-class New Englanders for not furthering their education. The ideal of maturity allowed the middle class to view social mobility and internal development as the natural process of growing up, masking the economic and social limitations that kept the working class from reaching the same degree of economic autonomy or civic participation.
Chapter 5: To “Enjoy the Fruits of His Own Labor”: Minors, Work, and the Legal Construction of Maturity as Gender and Racial Privilege

In 1804, eleven-year-old James Mye, a Mashpee Indian, was bound to Joshua Hall as a result of his ethnic status as a ward of the state.¹ Hoping to profit from his legal guardianship over the boy, Hall attached Mye to a seal-skinning voyage with the expectation of receiving the wages for himself wages from the boy’s service. When the ship owners cheated Hall out of what he thought was his entitlement, the issue went to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. In making its decision, the justices ignored any preference Mye might have had for working as a mariner and instead evaluated the legitimacy of Hall’s assigning Mye’s labor away from his supervision. The ruling declared that an apprenticeship was “a mere personal trust and could not be transferred.”²

In 1843 Ann Adams, a minor from Massachusetts, took employment for wages at a textile factory in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Objecting to his daughter’s employment, Ann’s father John sent his son to Woonsocket to forbid the company from employing her. According to testimony in the court of common pleas, the company “continued to employ her, and refused to let her go.” In early 1844, John Adams sent a letter to the agent of the Woonsocket Company reasserting his position and threatened to “demand pay for her time, labor, and services, if you continue, after this date, to keep or employ her” on account of his paternal rights. In its ruling, the court affirmed not only John Adams’ power to forbid his daughter’s employment, but also his right to collect the wages owed to her since his insistence that they end her employment.³

In early nineteenth-century New England, parents, masters, and guardians struggled to

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¹ The Mashpee Indians came under guardianship of state-appointed overseers in 1789. Their power included the ability to validate apprenticeship agreements between Mashpee children and white residents. See Mark A. Nicholas, “Mashpee Wampanoags of Cape Cod, the Whalefishery, and Seafaring’s Impact on Community Development,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2002): 165–97.
adapt their authority over minors to the conditions of young people’s labor in the commercial economy. This chapter investigates the ways jurists, legislators, and political activists responded to the new realities of young people’s employment by replacing a legal regime that recognized young people as economic assets within a household with law that recognized young white men’s potential to become competent, freely-contracting individuals, while denying the economic autonomy and legal status of women and African Americans. Legal changes in the relationship between minors and their parents, guardians, and employers codified gender and racial subordination through the seemingly democratic category of maturity.

In early modern England and colonial British North America, legal capacity was a feature of gender, race, and birthright. As Holly Brewer explains, “under patriarchal political theory, obligations…depended upon status relationships, upon one’s rank in society.”4 White children engaged in a variety of legal transactions and activities with little regard for their mental capacity: They could sign indentures before they could walk. They could be found guilty of crimes as young as eight years old. In sixteenth-century Britain, boys with inheritable property claims could make wills, be elected to Parliament, or vote. Girls could marry as early as age seven. And of course, a child could become king, leaving the monarchy vulnerable to, as Thomas Paine warned in *Common Sense*, a regency with “every opportunity and inducement to betray [his] trust.”5 During the early modern period, legal privileges and rights facilitated patterns of inheritance, control of property, or efficient transfers of parental obligation. This common law, carried over to the British North American colonies, emerged from a corporate view of society in which individuals first represented their rank in society before claiming individuality.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Anglo-American society moved away from the corporate view of society to an individualistic one, in which individuals first claimed their individuality before representing their rank in society. This shift in legal capacity reflected broader changes in the social and economic landscape, as well as the growing importance of individual rights and freedoms. The new legal regime recognized young men’s potential to become independent economic actors, while disregarding the legal and economic status of women and African Americans. This codification of gender and racial subordination through the seemingly democratic category of maturity had far-reaching consequences for the development of modern law and society.

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4 Brewer, *By Birth or Consent*, 4.
from legal codes based on hierarchical status and toward contractual relationships among fictive equals. Drawing on principles from the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, “a hierarchical system based on status, where people have ‘grades of legal capacity,’ began to give way to one where all people were legal equals, free to define their relations with others by means of contract.”

New England shifted from a corporate view of society to a liberal vision of society as comprised of individuals with unique needs, interests, and capacities. The belief that consensual political relations should replace arbitrary authority ultimately resulted in the American Revolution. Not only did the legal transformation inspire representative government and expanded franchise, it also eroded legal structures of dependence in the family, church, and economy. This rise of individuality and consent gave the Revolutionary period its radicalism, and spurred long-lasting effects on the treatment of young workers.

By upholding rational consent in the religious, political and familial realms, early Americans created a hierarchy based on age and maturity. To secure consent as a meaningful threshold for civic participation, Anglo-American legal theorists restricted individuals’ legal actions based on their age. Because adults viewed minors (those under age twenty-one) as incapable of rational consent, law demanded greater protections on binding contracts and legal responsibilities that involved minors. As part of the growing concern for young people’s development of their rational and sentimental capacities, jurists instituted restrictions to protect

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6 Brewer, By Birth or Consent, 6.
children and prepare young people for the choices they would face as adults.\textsuperscript{8}

However, even with the revolutionary ideology of equality that grounded this emphasis on consent, only white men received the full benefits of economic and political rights earned by maturity. To prepare young men to act as breadwinners in the commercial economy, jurists expanded the allowances for minors’ contractual capacity to allow young men to enter impersonal, at-will employment relationships, rather than only long-term, domestic apprenticeships. But while young white men’s employment was associated with maturity, young women and African Americans continued to work in positions that associated labor with dependence. Legal restrictions on women’s self-ownership pushed young women into male-headed households as their only choice for stability. For African American children, the specter of slavery threatened their entry into autonomous labor. Understanding the legal status of minors not only helps early American scholars position the role of age in social constructions of power, but also demonstrates the ways conceptions of maturity solidified gender and racial hierarchies in the wake of the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{9}

This chapter follows three areas in which young peoples’ labor conflicted with traditional legal conceptions of minors’ incapacity. Each shows how New England law handled the tensions created by young people’s labor in the commercial environment by recognizing either the provisional autonomy or continuing the need for protection among young people. First, opportunities for impersonal employment in the commercial labor market gave young white men provisional autonomy to make contracts independently of their fathers, while young women and African Americans continued to face legal forms of dependence. Second, the debates about the

\textsuperscript{8} Brewer, \textit{By Birth or Consent}, 291, 250, 206.

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poll tax on minors show how the increasing commodification of young white men’s labor forced political leaders to remove a traditional feature of the household economy while delaying the full responsibility of adulthood. Finally, legislators enacted restrictions on minors’ employment and passed mandates for education that solidified a distinction between protecting children and allowing young people to pursue employment. These legal changes at the intersection of age and labor recognized the capacity for self-ownership as predominantly a feature of white masculinity. The model of maturity – in which young men gradually developed rationality and competence as they grew up – helped New England adapt to the commercial economy while maintaining traditional racial and gender hierarchies.

*Parental Authority and Minor Emancipation*

During the early nineteenth century, the conflict between the legal requirements of apprenticeship and the arrangements in which many young men’s work posed problems for judicial efforts to resolve disputes between children and their masters or employers. Many of these arrangements continued to rely on the term ‘apprenticeship,’ even as they lacked many of the traditional stipulations for education and moral training. Yet judges were reluctant to end the legal structure of apprenticeship and imagine a new form of appropriate labor for young men. Faced with the increased opportunity, even necessity, for young people to work outside parental oversight, judicial conservatives in the early nineteenth century preserved apprenticeship as a legal relationship based on the connection between labor and dependence. According to James D. Schmidt, judicial attitudes toward child labor first legitimized young people’s wage work in the first half of the nineteenth century, only to turn against it after the Civil War.¹⁰

Even as more young people entered commercial employment for wages rather than

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traditional education, training, and discipline, judges preserved the legal requirements of apprenticeship as a domestic arrangement. Rulings in the early nineteenth century reinforced the traditional obligations of masters despite the larger shift to impersonal employment that was emerging in the early industrial economy. In 1814, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court released a pauper apprentice from her indenture because of “abuse, ill-treatment, and neglect” by her master. In 1824, the court required a master to maintain his obligation to his apprentice even after the boy lost a limb in an accident and was unable to work. The court also invalidated an indenture that failed to stipulate the requirement for the apprentice’s general education, beyond vocational training. These rulings distanced apprenticeship from wage labor by solidifying the paternal relationship expected between master and child.

Massachusetts judges also preserved an aspect colonial apprenticeship by forbidding masters from assigning their wards to other members of the community. Elevating the relationship to a “personal trust,” the court prevented apprenticeships from adapting to the dynamic economy and allowing minors or masters to seek more lucrative opportunities. Even when an apprentice claimed to consent to the assignment, the court ruled that the minor had “no will of his own” in relation to the labor agreement. Assigning an apprentice to another master was a violation of the father’s “due regard for the interest of his child.” A man’s ability to act as “a wise and prudent parent” by arranging an apprenticeship that would benefit his child’s moral and productive development would be impossible if the apprentice could be traded to a stranger. When a labor arrangement made by a father for his son failed to meet the standards of apprenticeship, its legitimacy was principally judged by whether the benefits of the labor were

13 Davis v. Coburn, 8 Mass. 299 (1811).
“secured” to the minor. Fearful that child labor would devolve into slavery or cheap, disposable employment, the Massachusetts court in the early nineteenth century shored up the requirements and limited the flexibility of apprenticeship law. The consequence, as Schmidt argues, was that young men’s labor outside apprenticeship would “be judged by common-law rules that governed adult wage work, not by older statutory regulations that had applied to minors.”

Both sons and daughters entered the economic world outside the paternal household in the early nineteenth century. However, because only men were expected to become independent economic agents, judges privileged the experience of young men when they interpreted the legal responsibility of fathers to provide the conditions for the development of autonomy. In 1818 Arthur McLellan’s son fled his home in Maine (at the time considered the Eastern District of Massachusetts) after being indicted for a felony and traveled to the West Indies. Having no money or means of support, the minor sought assistance from a local merchant, Samuel B. Angel. Angel knew the young man’s father, Arthur McLellan, and expected to receive compensation for payments made on his behalf. When Angel sued McLellan for the expenses, the trial focused on whether “the articles furnished were necessaries to the son...and [Angel] was ignorant of the circumstances under which the son was absent from his father, and a fugitive from justice.” These criteria being met, the jury ruled in Angel’s favor and required McLellan to reimburse Angel for his support of McLellan’s son.

Arthur McLellan, while having every intention of repaying Angel as a matter of honor, sought a new trial before the Supreme Judicial Court to assert his right not to cover his son’s debts. He wanted the court to acknowledge that a father’s responsibilities evolved as the son grew up. New England law was receptive to unique legal treatment for young men who “arrived

14 Day v Everett, 7 Mass. 145 (1810).
15 Schmidt, Industrial Violence, 128.
16 Angel v. McLellan, 16 Mass. 28 (1819).
at years of discretion, but not of manhood” and acted with provisional autonomy in the
community. Recognizing the many instances of a young man “leav[ing] his parent’s house
voluntarily, for the purpose of seeking his fortune in the world,” the judges confirmed that “the
parent is under no obligation to pay for his support.” But McLellan also wanted the right to deny
his son assistance as an exercise in discipline, to make his son suffer the consequences of
profligate behavior. The court agreed with this conception of paternalism. If the child could
claim the father’s support in all instances “the father would be deprived of the right of exercising
his discretion, as to the manner and degree of his support.” Judge Parsons held that “one of the
greatest restraints upon the bad passions and vicious propensities would be removed, if young
persons should feel that they could flee their parents’ presence, without suffering in any of the
essentials of life.” By allowing a father to deny customary support to his young adult son, the
court recognized the development of youth and importance of instilling good character.17

The imperative of governing young men and providing for their industrious labor outside
apprenticeships also led the court to support the authority of a mother over her husband. In a case
brought in 1840, Joseph Wodell sued William Coggeshall and others for “entic[ing] and
seduc[ing] the plaintiff’s son, Merrick Wodell, and carr[ying] him away on a whaling voyage,
without the consent and against the will of the plaintiff.” In normal circumstances, the judges
would have upheld a father’s custody over his sixteen-year-old son. However, the court soon
learned that Joseph Wodell had abandoned his family and “suffered his son to remain under the
custody of the mother.” Left on her own, Merrick’s mother “found it difficult to control him.”
She tried to have him employed in the Fall River factory where she and her other children
worked, “but [Merrick] soon ran away and got into mischief.” Without his father’s discipline,
Merrick “was of vagrant habits” and spent time “in the house of correction, for larceny.”

17 Ibid.
mother finally convinced him to join a whaling voyage, at which point Joseph came forward to claim his parental rights against the ship’s agents.\textsuperscript{18}

The judge began his decision with a clear articulation of the father’s “right to the services of his children, during their minority.” However, given the facts of the case, he added the stipulation that the father’s rights existed “while [his children] are under his care and maintained by him.” Joseph Wodell lost his legal claim when he abandoned the family and left his wife to support the children on her own. Merrick Wodell’s behavior provided the court with clear evidence that Joseph had failed in his paternal duties. Under these circumstances the mother’s consent to Merrick’s employment by the whale ship “was equally valid...as it would have been if it had been made by the father himself.”\textsuperscript{19} With the breakdown of a traditional father-dominated household threatening the discipline of a son, the court asserted conditions on a father’s authority— it could only be enforced while the father fulfilled his paternal duty to care for and provide discipline to his family. The cases of McLellan and Wodell demonstrate judges’ interest in making sure young men were prepared to make appropriate choices as they operated beyond parental supervision in the commercial environment. As New England society formed relationships through contract rather than patronage, the expectations of masculinity required boys to develop the capacities of self-ownership in order to achieve adulthood.

To allow young men to operate in the commercial economy while preserving parental authority as the foundation for moral development, jurists established a set of legal precedents that empowered young men, but not young women, to make provisional contracts within the commercial labor market. Two legal doctrines allowed young men to develop into independent workers despite the constraints on the household vision of minors’ status and the legal handicaps

\textsuperscript{18} Wodell v Cogeshall, 43 Mass. 89 (1840).
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
placed on wage laborers: ‘Implied emancipation,’ which first emerged from Judge Isaac Parker’s decision in *Nightingale v. Withington* (1818), allowed employers to assume a father consented to his son’s labor contract; and the ‘privilege of infancy’ (a long-standing common law practice modified for the commercial economy by Parker in 1824) allowed minors to avoid the penalty for breaking a labor contract. Together, these doctrines codified the liminality of youth, at least for young men entering the commercial labor market. Under implied emancipation, young men had the freedom to contract their labor on their own. The court authorized the presumption of a father’s consent, which allowed young men to operate as independent economic agents as they sought positions away from their families. Yet, the privilege of infancy protected young men from the consequences of their early choices. Under common law, a minor could not form a contract expect for necessities or education. To insulate young men from the full autonomy of a wage worker, the court applied this principle to employment contracts, making them voidable and allowing minors to collect wages earned even when they left the position before the expiration of the contract. Implied emancipation viewed young men as independent, but the privilege of infancy recognized their incapacity. This contradiction encapsulated attitudes toward youth in the early nineteenth century.

In order to protect the “fictive equality” of capitalism and promote adult workers as competent, freely-contracting individuals, jurists allowed young white men to gradually develop responsibility for their labor before being subjected to the full consequences of their choices.\(^\text{20}\) From their privileged race and gender identity, young white men exercised autonomy within the labor market before assuming the full responsibilities of adulthood. Between 1815 and 1837, judges on the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts gradually authorized greater authority among young men to contract in the labor market, while retaining their protection from the full

\(^{20}\) Schmidt, “‘Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood,’” 333.
consequences of their actions. The first step was providing judicial sanction to the customary practice of a father giving his son “his time” – releasing him from household labor obligations, consenting to his employment beyond parental oversight, and allowing to keep his wages. In 1815, Justice Parker gave his approval to “an agreement having been entered into by the father, that the son should enjoy the fruits of his own labor, although not of an age to be emancipated.” Here he was responding to testimony that the father in question explicitly granted his son “his time, or all that he should earn, till he should be twenty-one years of age.”21 As more young men took employment that did not fit the standards of apprenticeship, the court recognized the legitimacy of a minor’s emancipation to seek work on his own.

Three years later, Parker considered the case of a son who did not receive explicit approval from his father to seek wages on his own. Robert Vose was abandoned by his father, but his income was nevertheless pursued by his father’s creditors on the principle that a child’s wages were the property of his father. Parker ruled that a father’s claim to his child’s labor “must be founded upon the obligation of the parents to nurture and support their children; which obligation is compensated by a right to their services, or to the fruits of them if, by their permission, they are employed by other persons.” However, the circumstances in the case convinced Parker that Vose’s father “discharged himself of the obligation to support the child, or has obliged the child to support himself.” Under the principles of free labor, only “slavery” would “continue his right to receive the earnings of the child's labor.” Based on the expectation that parental authority should be used to advance the child’s development, “if the father should refuse to support a son, should deny him a home, and force him to labor abroad for his own living...the law will imply an emancipation of the son.”22

From this statement, Justice Parker solidified the principle of patriarchal authority while allowing young men to work around it in practice. By invoking slavery to contrast the ideal parent/child relationship, Parker underscored the expectation that a young white man would develop into an independent agent, rather than remain perpetually under his father’s authority. This expectation – the heart of free labor ideology – demonstrated how Northerners distinguished commercial wage labor from chattel slavery. Justice Parker only reluctantly expanded the ability of young men to enter contract labor, allowing the authority of the father to remain present, though invisible, within a young person’s employment in the commercial market. To maintain the illusion of the dependent child labor, Parker used implied emancipation to justify minors’ wage labor in nearly any context. In 1825, ruling in a case without a clear granting of “time” to the son, Parker confirmed that “where a minor son makes a contract for his services on his own account, and the father knows of it and makes no objection, there is an implied assent that the son shall have his earnings.”

At the same time Parker expanded young men’s ability to circulate in the labor market, he affirmed their protection from the consequences of labor contracts. In 1824, he reversed a lower court ruling and confirmed the common law rule that wage workers could not receive unpaid wages if they left their position before the end of the period agreed to in the contract. The same year, the case of Moses v Stevens tested the principle in the case of minor workers. Eighteen-year-old orphan Jonathan Moses contracted with his neighbor Stevens to work for three years but left shortly after the beginning of the term and sued for his wages earned. But legal custom granted minors the “privilege of infancy,” which prohibited their contracting for anything beyond necessities and made any contract beyond that voidable without penalty to the minor.

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24 Stark v Parker, 19 Mass. 267 (1824).
Disputing the privilege of infancy, Stevens’ lawyer argued that “a contract made with an infant, which is made with fairness, and which is obviously for his personal benefit, ought to, and in law does, bind the infant.” The attorney went further and claimed that the employment relation would instill “habits of industry and virtue which would probably be acquired from a faithful performance of it.” Drawing on the expectation of youth as a period for moral development, Stevens contended that allowing Moses the opportunity to avoid the consequences of breaking his contract would be “in violation of the plainest principles of moral honesty.”

Justice Parker, who only reluctantly expanded the legal capacity of minors, rejected these arguments and asserted the privilege of infancy as “elementary.” Despite the growing reality of young people in the labor market, Parker asserted that a minor was “not presumed to be capable of judging the value of his services, nor of the kind of labor most suitable to him.” As a result, Stevens was ordered to pay Moses the wages he earned during his term of employment, without any penalty for damages due to his early departure. Critical of child labor outside the apprenticeship system, Parker, according to Schmidt, was enforcing childhood “as a sanctuary where young people could live without the responsibilities of adulthood, but also without its rights.” This legal precedent attempted to hold minors within household authority. However, because it came alongside the development of implied emancipation that legitimated young men’s wage labor, the preservation of the privilege of infancy established the liminality of youth. Young men had the opportunity to work outside the home, with their father’s consent, but were legally protected from the consequences of their contracts.

When Lemuel Shaw became Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1830, he continued the doctrine of implied emancipation, but in a manner that promoted

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26 Schmidt, “‘Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood,’” 334.
young men’s contracted labor rather than seeking to preserve patriarchal authority. Instead of using emancipation to legitimize young men’s labor through the fiction of a father’s consent, Shaw, according to Schmidt, “saw minors as legal persons, capable of making contracts for work in their own right.” As head of the court, he loosened the standard of ‘implied emancipation,’ allowing for the assumption of the father’s consent “if the son does in fact act and make contracts for himself, with the knowledge of the father.” Once the tacit assent was issued, the son claimed full ability to contract for his labor and retain control of any wages earned.

Justice Shaw took implied emancipation further in an 1837 case, allowing employers to contract with minors directly, on the assumption that the father’s consent was granted. When thirteen-year-old George Corey received his time from his father, Shaw took it to be “a general permission to go abroad and seek employment, or to engage in a particular service.” By receiving this emancipation, Corey “became, to a certain extent, independent, with a power to act in his own right.” Shaw qualified the minor’s autonomy, and subjected it to the father’s wishes, but nevertheless granted the implied emancipation to any employment offer. The son’s right to his earnings was “derived from his father,” whether or not the employer was aware of the arrangement. Implied emancipation thus pertained to any agreement made between a minor and a prospective employer, and legally permitted young men to contract for wages on their own account.

The Shaw court also affirmed and extended Justice Parker’s ruling on the voidability of minors’ labor contracts. Fourteen-year-old John Vent contracted with a whale ship to join as a mariner, with the consent of his widowed mother, but left the voyage before the end of his

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27 Manchester v. Smith, 29 Mass. 113 (1831).
28 Corey v. Corey, 36 Mass. 29 (1837).
term. He nevertheless sued for his wages when he managed to return to Massachusetts. Under the contract law applicable to adults, Vent would have lost any right to wages because he failed to fulfill the contract. But, as in the case of Jonathan Moses, Shaw applied the privilege of infancy. However, where Parker upheld the privilege of infancy on the grounds of minors’ incapacity, Shaw allowed young men to break their contracts without penalty on account of their powers of discretion and their need for development. A minor was obligated to work only as long as “the service [was] consonant with [his] health, taste, and enterprise.” Shaw ruled that “the law allowed him the privilege or right to judge for himself” whether the contract served his interests. This perspective placed young white men in charge of their own development and allowed them to void any contract deemed detrimental to their goals. In order to protect young men’s rational development, judges allowed young workers to contract labor in the market without being subject to the full consequences of their actions.

By 1840, the doctrine of implied emancipation firmly established the ability of young men to contract labor as individual agents, while preserving their ability to void a contract at will in acknowledgement that they needed time to develop their capacities. The court emphasized young men’s maturity in order to reconcile the requirements of contract law with the assumed incapacity of minors. To justify the emancipation of sons engaged in labor on their own, judges described the young men in a liminal period between the complete dependence of childhood and the full independence of adulthood. They lacked the full rationality of adulthood, but nevertheless exhibited greater capacity than dependent children. Judges assumed that when a young man entered employment on his own, he “had now arrived at an age, when he was to

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some extent capable of acting and judging for himself.”31 When a father granted the son his time, “the son became, to a certain extent, independent, with power to act in his own right.”32 The law presumed that a young man was able to “judge for himself” in matters of employment.33 As judges issued rulings that, according to Schmidt, “increasingly imagined young people as capable of judging their own interests and acting for themselves,” they severed the ties between labor and dependence that were the basis of the colonial economy.34 In the commercial economy, emancipation from household service was “necessary for the encouragement of young men,” making labor outside the home beneficial for individual development. Furthermore the court recognized that “it is often convenient for a father wishing to be relieved from the burden of supporting his son, to allow him in this manner to support himself.”35

Although young white men experienced provisional autonomy when they entered the labor market, emancipation held different meanings for young white women and African Americans. The cases that involved young women’s labor rights typically emphasized a daughter’s dependence and rulings functioned to reinstate the authority of a father rather than liberate the child. In 1804, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court heard the case of a father demanding wages earned by his daughter from a third party. David Benson had abandoned his family, leaving his daughter Phoebe to take domestic service in the home of Joshua Remington. When Benson returned and sought Phoebe’s earnings, community opinion forced him to drop his claim because he had not supported Phoebe during his absence. Instead, Benson and Remington agreed to leave Phoebe in Remington’s service, “provided that [Benson] should have a right to take her away whenever it should please him.” Three years later, Benson returned to claim his

31 Manchester v. Smith, 29 Mass. 113 (1831).
32 Corey v. Corey, 36 Mass. 29 (1837).
33 Vent v. Osgood, 36 Mass. 572 (1837).
34 Schmidt, “‘Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood,’” 319.
daughter’s earnings and Remington refused, arguing that Benson had neglected his paternal duties and therefore forfeited his claim to her wages. However, because Benson only claimed the wages earned after his verbal agreement with Remington, the court could not find any reason to deny the principle that “a father is entitled to the earnings of his daughter, while under age.”

The case of Phoebe Benson, as well as the case of Ann Adams at the beginning of this chapter, shows that young women’s labor was tied to the male-dominated household. Young women who worked outside of the home did not receive the legal support that jurists provided for young men. Their labor away from their families was seen as a temporary position. Young women fulfilled their mature potential through marriage and motherhood, as the moral guardians of a stable, respectable home. Femininity was the recognition of women’s place within the domestic sphere. The law acted to keep women tied to a household by preventing from receiving the legal protections of self-ownership or the benefit of implied emancipation.

Courts asserted young women’s subordination in the ways they awarded damages to a father who lost his daughter’s services due to illicit pregnancy. In 1806, Edward Mason sued Zephaniah Graves for impregnating and abandoning his daughter Elizabeth. Mason asserted that Elizabeth had been “a good & faithful Child & servant” who served her father by “promoting his happiness & earning for him large sums of money.” The testimony emphasized her “unsullied reputation.” Mason’s suit explicitly stated that Graves “seduced, deflowered, debauched, carnally knew, and begat with Child” his daughter. Mason’s suit argued that because Graves was responsible for Elizabeth’s condition, Mason “hath been deprived of the service of his said child & servant interrupted in the peace and comfort of his family and put to great trouble and expense to the damage of the Plf two thousand dollars.” Edward Mason won his suit, but the jury

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36 Benson v. Remington, 2 Mass. 113 (1804).
awarded him only $400. Although this amount was not as high as the compensation awarded to
Elizabeth herself when she sued Graves for breaking his promise to marry her, it nonetheless
signified Elizabeth’s value to her father’s livelihood.

When a young woman reached the age of majority, her legal independence remained
constrained by her gender and depended largely on her marital status. The courts upheld a young
woman’s right to earn income on her own after age twenty-one in a case in 1833. Abigail Guild,
an unmarried adult woman, sued her brother, the executor of her father’s estate, for wages she
claimed were owed to her for domestic service she provided to her father’s household after she
reached the age of majority. Curtis Guild argued that Abigail’s services were “not rendered
under any expectation of receiving wage or any compensation therefor, except by voluntary
presents and accommodation, or be the share she might have expected to receive of the estate of
her father.” However, the court concluded that the “law raises the presumption that she was
entitled to pecuniary compensation, therefor, and throws the burden of proof on the defendant, to
show that they were performed without any view of such compensation.” The court recognized
Abigail’s rights to her wages because she was an unmarried women over twenty-one years old.
Adult women only controlled their income for their own benefit if they were single. If Abigail
had been married, the laws of coverture would have denied her the right to her earnings. Even
the advances of married women’s property rights during the mid-nineteenth century (Maine in
1840 and New Hampshire in 1842) were designed to protect a father’s legacy to his daughter
from her profligate husband, rather than promote women’s economic self-determination.

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37 Edward Mason v Zephaniah Graves, 1806, Rhode Island Judicial Records.
38 A woman could sue a man for abandonment if she had evidence that he had promised to marry her. However,
women who did not have a promise of marriage had no legal recourse, even in the case of out-of-wedlock
40 Linda E. Speth, "The Married Women's Property Acts, 1839-1865: Reform, Reaction, or Revolution?", in D.
The law also differentiated the legal authority of male and female parents. A mother’s control over the body and labor of her children was much more limited, and ceased entirely if she remarried. In 1810 Margaret Larey of Canada, a remarried widow issued a writ of habeas corpus to regain custody of her daughter, Catherine Cuddy, by her late husband. Cuddy had been apprenticed to William Hamilton, who moved from Canada to Massachusetts. When the chief justice asked Cuddy “if she was restrained against her wishes,” she replied that “she was very desirous of continuing” to live with Hamilton. Larey’s attorney described Cuddy as “under fourteen years” giving her “no right of choice by our statute.” The court recorded that Cuddy appeared to be about 14 years old,” making her old enough to consent to her apprenticeship and to her guardianship under Massachusetts law. When the court ruled against Larey, allowing Cuddy to remain with her desired guardian, the decision hinged not only on the girl’s age, but also on her mother’s status as a prospective guardian. Because Cuddy consented to the move, “and as the defendant [Hamilton] is under obligations to provide for her...it would be unreasonable to take her from his care, and deliver her to her mother.” The court’s decision regarding Catherine Cuddy’s custody hinged not only on the girl’s age, but also on her mother’s inability to serve as a guardian on account of her remarriage. Unlike a woman who was abandoned by, but still legally married to, her child’s father (such as the case of Wodell v Cogeshall referenced above), the widowed Larey “ceased to have any power of controlling her own actions, or of providing for the support and education of her child.” A fatherless child was considered an orphan and the mother lost “whatever rights she might have as a guardian by nurture.” The court refused to replace Cuddy’s preferred guardian with her mother’s new husband, a man who was “under no legal obligations to be at any expense for” the girls support and maintenance.41 At only fourteen years old, Cuddy was able to exercise a choice over her

guardianship in spite of her mother’s wishes, in large part because she found a more suitable paternal guardian.

When young women worked in industrial environments, the authority of their overseers occasionally clashed with the authority of their fathers. Teresa Anne Murphy describes the 1833 case of Paulina Brown, who was publically humiliated and beaten by her overseer, Parris Richmond, for allowing an accident on her machinery at Samuel Slater’s textile factory in Smithfield, Rhode Island. In response, Paulina’s father charged Richmond with “trespass, assault, and battery.”

The local justice of the peace nominally ruled in Brown’s favor, but awarded her only 10 cents in damages. When Walter Brown took his case to the Court of Common Pleas in Providence and Paulina’s co-workers testified about the abuse they suffered at the hands of Richmond, Richmond countered that he was justified in chastising his “servant.”

The jury sided with Brown and the other workers, awarding her $20 for the assault. The primary question in the case was who held paternal authority over Paulina – her overseer or her father. In a similar case in 1823, by contrast, a jury had supported the overseer and found that the “authority” to “inflict corporal punishment…had been so delegated by the father.” In neither case did the jury consider a young woman free from the threat of physical abuse – only who was authorized to give it.

Young women who took employment away from their families also faced the prospect of sexual harassment, coercion, and rape. If pregnant, they were vulnerable to being abandoned by men in positions of power. However, legal redress for women had to come through their fathers. The tort of seduction emerged in feudal England to grant a master monetary damages when seduction or pregnancy interfered with the labor he expected from his female servant. In the

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42 Murphy, *Ten Hours’ Labor*, 9.
early nineteenth century, as Lea VanderVelde describes, American courts adapted this common law provision to allow fathers “to sue for sexual interference with their daughters’ services while their daughters were working outside of the household’s confines.” With these limitations in the law, young women’s emancipation could actually prevent them from receiving justice in the case of sexual exploitation. Only a father – who could claim his daughter’s services or who was still obligated for her welfare – had the standing to bring a tort of seduction.

In 1826, the Maine Supreme Judicial Court heard the case of a daughter Emery (no first name given), who was “seduced” and impregnated by a man named Gowen while living with and working for her grandfather. When Emery’s father sued for seduction, Gowen argued that Emery had no cause for action because his daughter “resid[ed] out of his family.” Gowen contended that Emery lost his grounds to sue for seduction when he gave up his right to his daughter’s labor. A few years before, Emery had granted his daughter permission to work for her grandfather, “though for no fixed time for service,” during which time she was impregnated by Gowen. Because the daughter Emery lived outside her father’s household and was released from his service, Gowen claimed that her father could not plead the tort of seduction. A lower court agreed, but Supreme Judicial Court, according to Lea VanderVelde, “reconstructed the father’s mastery over the daughter” based primarily on the age of the child, rather than her physical presence within his household. For a daughter under twenty-one years old, the father could bring at tort of seduction no matter the place of his daughter’s service. But when the daughter reached the legal age of adulthood, “it must appear that she resided in her father’s family; and some acts of service, however slight, must be proved, in order to maintain the

45 *Emery v. Gowen*, 4 Me. 39 (1826).
By basing a father’s right to his daughter’s labor (and thus the right to sue anyone who interfered with her productivity) on the daughter’s age, the court limited women’s self-ownership and subordinated their legal rights to those of a man. Women could enter employment on their own, but they were vulnerable to sexual abuse. This danger to their safety and their virtue signified young women’s lack of self-ownership. When they lived on their own after reaching legal adulthood, women could not seek redress for sexual predation. Under these conditions, the rational decision was to transfer from the protection of a father to a husband. By limiting the legal recourse women had to protect themselves, the court affirmed femininity as the voluntary submission to masculine authority. Maturity for women meant gaining enough discretion and reason to find a permanent male-headed household – either through marriage or by continuing to provide service for their fathers. The law failed to extend young women the legal rights of self-ownership to act as fully independent individuals.\footnote{Emery v. Gowen, 4 Me. 39 (1826).}

For black New Englanders, law functioned neither to open access to the opportunity for self-ownership nor to protect young people from exploitation. Instead, young African Americans continued in employment relationships that promoted dependence based on racial prejudice. When Connecticut and Rhode Island abolished slavery, legislators retained a master’s control of an enslaved child’s labor until he or she reached a designated age of maturity (in Rhode Island, this was eighteen years for girls and twenty-one years for boys; in Connecticut, the age was twenty-five for both sexes). Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, finding the institution\footnote{Although free black women were arguably more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, according to VanderVelde, they “could not file successful seduction complaints against white men because such suits would supply the basis for a criminal prosecution for interracial fornication.” (VanderVelde, “The Legal Ways of Seduction,” 877 n.337.)}
incompatible with the proclamation of liberty and equality in the state’s constitution.\footnote{Commonwealth v Jemison (1783) (Quock Walker Cases).} In spite of this support for free labor, the Overseers of the Poor in Massachusetts bound African American children to white families “in disproportionately large numbers” in the years before 1820.\footnote{Ruth Wallis Herndon, “‘Proper’ Magistrates and Masters: Binding Out Poor Children in Southern New England, 1720-1820,” in Herndon and John Murray ed., Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), 40.} In the following decades, African American children found idle or vagrant were sent to asylums where white reformers hoped they would be redeemed from a life of vice.

Massachusetts anti-slavery activists and their judicial allies used their resources to free enslaved children transported into the state, but failed to handle the void of guardianship left in the wake of a legal emancipation. Black children released from unlawful bondage entered a vulnerable world of freedom without the social or economic capital to navigate the commercial economy. In 1832, the New England Anti-Slavery Society sued a visitor named Mrs. Howard for traveling with “Francisco, a colored boy, twelve or fourteen years of age,” thinking that she kept the boy as a slave and would keep him as such when she moved to Cuba. When confronted by the court, Mrs. Howard claimed that Francisco “was free, and that she did not claim him as her slave.” To resolve the case, Justice Lemuel Shaw interviewed Francisco and considered the boy mature enough to have a voice in his custody. Finding that he preferred to remain with Mrs. Howard, Shaw decided not to interfere with the relationship. Because Howard did not claim Francisco as a slave, and because of the evidence that she “treated” him “kindly” and he “was attached to her, and desirous of going with her,” Shaw found no reason to appoint a different guardian.\footnote{In re Francisco, 9 Am. Jur. 490 (1833) quoted in Paul Finkelman, An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity, Studies in Legal History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 101–02.}

The case of Commonwealth v Aves (1836) demonstrates how Massachusetts elites
challenged slavery but failed to provide the conditions for freedom to African American children. In 1836, Mary Aves Slater traveled from New Orleans to Boston to visit her father, Thomas Aves. She brought her six-year-old slave, a girl named Med, with her. Shortly after the pair’s arrival in Boston, women from the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society grew suspicious that Slater’s young companion was enslaved. After investigating the situation the women hired prominent lawyer Rufus Choate to bring a suit of *habeas corpus* against Thomas Aves. The case quickly came before Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, with Choate and his associates arguing that Med was held in slavery against the laws of Massachusetts. Aves’s attorney countered that Massachusetts needed to respect Louisiana law during Slater’s temporary visit in order to preserve the union. Elias Loring, speaking on behalf of those petitioning for Med’s release, claimed “this child, if freed, will be educated for usefulness and respectability. She will never want a friend, nor the means of improvement and happiness.”\(^5^2\) Choate and Loring depicted slavery as the chief obstacle to Med’s development from a dependent child to a respectable woman. Shaw ruled in favor of Med’s freedom, rejecting any doctrine of comity that would require Massachusetts to recognize Louisiana’s slave law.

Although the Massachusetts legal system worked to free Med from her captivity, it did not ensure her ultimate liberty. Following the case, Med was bound to Isaac Knapp, the publisher of *The Liberator*, and later became a resident of the Samaritan Asylum for Colored Orphans. There the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society gave her “the blessings of instruction, in a region of light and freedom.”\(^5^3\) She died less than two years after her emancipation, without ever being

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reunited with her family.\textsuperscript{54} The commitment to freeing African American children from bondage did not mean extending them the legal privileges afforded to white children, and most prominently to young white men. White abolitionists in New England criticized Southern slavery for its perverse ideal of domestic protection, yet the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society did little to ensure that Med received the care a middle-class child would have expected.

As Massachusetts abolitionists grew more critical of the “domestic relations” between master and slave, they grew bolder in their willingness to interrupt black children’s guardianship.\textsuperscript{55} In 1839, thirteen-year-old Anne was brought to Holden, Massachusetts by Mrs. Olivia Eames. After Anne’s activities drew suspicion for “the method of her labor and the attitude of her mistress,” concerned citizens charged Eames with holding Anne as a slave, in violation of Massachusetts law. They issued a writ of personal replevin to have a jury determine the case. When Eames refused to submit Anne to the court, a supportive group of men took her by force. The court then considered whether the men were guilty of “devising and intending to deprive” Eames “of the voluntary service” of Anne, or if they were justified in attempting to rescue an illegally bound girl.\textsuperscript{56} Anne’s preference to remain with Eames or not was central to the case before the Worcester Court of Common Pleas. She claimed loyalty to Eames, but also “admitted telling two women she wished to be free, and she said her mistress had hit her in the head with a toasting iron for this act.” When Anne described her labor, which included carrying “a great many pails of water in a day” on her head, and that she had attended neither school nor

\textsuperscript{54} Although returning to her family would have required re-enslavement, the case of Anson below indicates that at least some children preferred that option.

\textsuperscript{55} The phrase “domestic relations,” drawing on English law of the household, was popular among abolitionists to undercut slaveholders’ claim to paternalism in regards to their property. See David Root, \textit{The Abolition Cause Eventually Triumphant: A Sermon, Delivered Before the Anti-Slavery Society of Haverhill, Mass., Aug. 1836} (Gould and Newman, 1836), 5; \textit{Proceedings of the New-England Anti-Slavery Convention: Held in Boston on the 27th, 28th and 29th of May, 1834} (Garrison & Knapp, 1834), 71.

church while in Massachusetts, the prosecutor was convinced that the men acted lawfully in their attempt to take Anne from Eames’s custody. Although slavery supporters called these men kidnappers for removing Anne from her mistress, the Massachusetts court saw no violation in the forcible removal of a black child from an illegitimate domestic relationship.

The court had a more difficult time determining the case of Anson, a seven or eight-year-old boy brought from Arkansas to Massachusetts in 1841. His mistress, Mary B. Taylor, claimed that she would only take him back if he consented. But Justice Shaw worried that such a young boy would have “natural and strong feelings of a child…which induce him to cling instinctively to those whom he has been accustomed to regard as his natural protectors.” Because of Anson’s immaturity, his expressed preference “cannot be regarded as the exercise of a legal will, or of an intelligent choice.” Anson did in fact violently express his desire to return home where his parents and siblings lived. However, because Shaw judged Anson too young to understand his best interest, he ruled that the boy remain under guardianship in Massachusetts. As in the case of Med and Anne, Massachusetts abolitionists rejected Southern slavery as a proper domestic arrangement, even if it kept a child with his natal family. New Englanders became more invested in the sectional conflict over slavery as they took their identity from the way they treated children. The Northerner model of growing up, with its emphasis on Romantic Childhood, gave young people the means to be self-reliant as they became contributing members of society. The protection of childhood was the foundation necessary for young men and women to take responsibility for their own choices. Abolitionists rejected slavery in part for the detrimental

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58 *Commonwealth v Taylor*, 3 Mass 72 (1841).
effect it had on children. By forcing them to work and keeping them in legal bondage, it denied them the opportunity for self-ownership. But because middling reformers thought that freedom was enough to ensure prosperity, they failed to provide the full opportunities for maturity to rescued black children.

Although ‘minor’ was a race- and gender-neutral category, judges (and parents) used the law to promote young white men’s autonomy while maintaining women’s and African Americans’ dependence. The benefits of implied emancipation and the privilege of infancy gave young white men access to opportunities in the labor market and allowed them to develop their talents as they saw fit. These doctrines established youth as a liminal period in which young white men could test their autonomy by stepping outside the parent-child relationship before they took on the full responsibilities of adulthood. Young women and African Americans did not experience the same opportunities to test their maturity. Although young women increasingly took employment outside the household, legal cases kept them “conceptually tethered in some way to their fathers’ household.”

New England abolitionists worked to free black children from enslavement, but failed to provide them with autonomy or equal opportunities for growing up. As political leaders challenged the traditional dependence of minors’ labor, they extended the benefits of self-ownership to young men who had the economic and social capital to find employment that signified their maturity.

*Poll Tax on Minors*

In early nineteenth-century New England, the tax code offered another vestige of the traditional connection between labor and dependence that would come under scrutiny in the commercial environment. Since 1646, Massachusetts statute required the town Selectmen “to

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assess all male polls above the age of sixteen years,” for a flat tax separate from any property they might own. Carried over into the national period, the poll tax reflected an economy in which wealth was gained through the control of dependent labor. By assessing a head tax on all men over sixteen, separate from taxes on real estate, the tax system assumed that young men were economically productive and that their labor should be taxed to support the state. If a young man over sixteen was living and working on his own, the statute required that he be “personally taxed for his poll, as though he were of full age.” However, the statute recognized that young men’s labor benefited a head of household, mandating “that every minor whose poll shall be taxed by force of this Act, may be assessed to his parent, master or guardian, under whose immediate government he may be living.” Under this provision, fathers and masters took responsibility for the underage male labor they controlled as part of their household authority. The poll tax application to minors supported a system in which the labor of a young man – whether a son, apprentice, or indentured servant – was tied to the patriarch through legal and financial dependence. This tax burden treated labor as property and taxed heads of household for their mature (productive) male dependents in addition to their cattle, oxen, and other livestock. Derived during a period in which control of dependent labor provided the path to prosperity, the statute taxed heads of household for the resources they gained from their male dependents who were over sixteen but under twenty-one years old, legitimizing labor relationships based on patriarchal authority and minor dependency.

The poll tax on minors represented an obsolete system of employment based on the civic

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61 Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1793, p 372. See Robin L. Einhorn, American Taxation, American Slavery (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 53-78. The poll tax should not be confused with the tax levied on individuals at the election polls that was the subject of protest during the Civil Rights era. The poll/head tax discussed here had no direct relationship to voting eligibility, although both were a male prerogative.

62 Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1804, Chapter 144. Like other colonies, Massachusetts did not place a poll tax on white women of any age. This gender disparity reflected both a devaluing of women’s labor and a denial of women’s potential for political participation. See Einhorn, American Taxation, American Slavery, 37-38, 68-69.
responsibilities of heads of household. With young men less likely to work under a traditional apprenticeship, political leaders had to decide whether commercial and industrial employers acted as paternal figures in their relationships with minor employees, such that they should be responsible for the poll tax as parents and masters were required to do. Additionally, because the poll tax on minors continued to burden men who relied on young people’s labor, it disadvantaged a group of men who were losing economic autonomy in the face of capitalist supremacy. When a company challenged the legitimacy of the poll tax on minors before the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in 1842, the justices ruled in favor of exempting commercial employers from paternal responsibility. In response, the legislature amended the law the following year to lift the tax burden on young men under twenty-years old. In the early nineteenth century, the ultimate success in eliminating the poll tax for most minors represented a new vision of youth not as older dependents but as provisional independents. This change in New England law offered another means of supporting young white men’s path to self-ownership in the commercial economy.

Democratic reformers challenged the poll tax assessed on minors because of the burden it placed on their parents and guardians. As early as 1792 the Massachusetts legislature considered removing the poll tax requirements on minors.\(^6^3\) The proposal had such mass support that “exempting minors from the poll-tax” earned mention in an article on easy ways for “a man of weak intellects, yet extremely vain, without science, and as obstinate as \textit{a mule}, conversant with low company, and a dabbler in politics” to gain political popularity.\(^6^4\) In the same year, a group of self-described mechanics petitioned the General Assembly of Connecticut to “consider the evil occasioned by the Poll Tax, especially that on Minors.” According to the signatories, the policy of taxing teenage males for their polls threatened the circulation of labor in the

\(^6^3\) Proceedings of the Legislature, January 23, 1792.
commercial environment. By requiring masters to pay for the poll tax assessed to minors under their care, the statute placed “so heavy a burthen on Masters, that it has discouraged many Mechanics from taking Apprentices without such allowances from their Parents and Guardians, as many useful Citizens have not been able to make; in consequence of which many of our Youth lose the benefit of acquiring useful trades; and great numbers emigrate from this, into other States to seek Bread.” The petitioners recognized that the poll tax on minors reflected an outdated system of household labor that was incompatible with independent wage work in the commercial economy and acted as a disincentive for employers to hire young men.

The challenges to the poll tax, specifically the assessment on minors, provoked critiques of economic inequality driven by divergent class interests. As a tax on mature men capable of economic production, many defenders of the “laboring interest” considered it a tax on productivity. Walter Brewster, the author of a series of articles titled “The Mechanick on Taxation” in the *Norwich Packet* (Connecticut), called for government “to encourage, honest labour and industry” and “to discourage idleness, dishonesty and fraud.” A writer to the *National Aegis* (Worcester, Massachusetts) addressed the burden placed on men who were taxed for their sons or apprentices “as soon as the minor becomes of an age to be in any degree useful.” The author lamented, “I have frequently known a poor farmer or mechanic with a numerous family to support, subjected to pay a heavier tax than his rich neighbor, who was unencumbered by an expensive family.” The state obligated payment from fathers and masters without consideration for “the great and continued expense of maintenance, and education imposed…both by the laws of nature, and municipal laws of society.” Thus a “prolific parent” shouldered the expense of “defend[ing] and populat[ing] our thinly inhabit[ed] country,” while

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the “sterile old bachelor” shared none of the expense. Among political reformers, the poll tax on minorities served as a tool for identifying the injustices committed against “the useful, industrious, and virtuous poor” by the “artful class of citizens.”

The Massachusetts legislature addressed the poll tax on minors multiple times during the early nineteenth century, often bringing forth a bill to eliminate the requirement, but never succeeding in the action. In May 1812, the House moved to consider “an Act to exempt by law in this Commonwealth, of the age of sixty five year & upwards, & also all minors under the age of twenty one years, from the payment of any part of the taxes hereafter to be assessed in the state.” In June 1831, the House “Resolved, that the Committee on the Judiciary be instructed, to enquire into the expediency of so altering the laws of the [Commonwealth] that the Poll tax on Minors under twenty one years of age may be taken off.” Neither of these actions came to fruition. The House of Representatives tried again in 1841, with support from Democratic Party members. A bill “exempting minors from a poll tax, that the poor man might not be taxed for his children” was successful in the lower chamber, but died in the Senate. The Democrats also tried to lower drastically the amount of the poll tax without success.

While politicians in Massachusetts fought over the poll tax on minors, reformers in Connecticut successfully removed the liability for the poll tax on young men under twenty-one years old in 1818. Reformers succeeded by connecting the burden on fathers to a critique of undemocratic privilege in the commercial economy. A popular pamphlet criticized the statute for exempting young men enrolled at college, arguing that “the farmer and mechanic were taxed for

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68 1812: 7302 – Draft Act to exempting certain polls from taxation, Massachusetts State Archives (hereafter MSA).
69 1831 – 11.666 – Order draft for abolishing Poll tax on minors, MSA.
70 *Pittsfield Sun*, 3 June 1841.
no other reason than that they were not rich enough to educate [their sons] at Yale College.”

Both Connecticut and Massachusetts exempted college students from the poll tax because they were presumed to be unproductive. Because the poll tax required all eligible men to pay the same amount, it became “a tax upon the poverty instead of the property of the country,” wrote The Columbian Register in 1818. The poll tax burdened fathers “as soon as [their sons’] labor becomes of any value,” and required them to pay their sons’ polls along with a tax on “horses, oxen, and other cattle, which were employed in the cultivation of the soil.” A sum which was easily afforded by “a man…who rolls in his carriage, with an income of five or six thousand dollars a year to sport with,” could threaten the livelihood of “the humblest farmer who is hardly able to make the two ends of the year meet.” Reformers used this language to praise the self-sufficient yeoman and cast suspicion on the leisured aristocrat. Amidst the industrial environment that facilitated the concentration of wealth, middling Americans hoped to secure a nation that benefited the man whose labor improved the community, rather than the wealthy capitalist. The tax reforms following these critiques demonstrated Connecticut’s recognition of a transition from an agricultural economy in which wealth came primarily through labor to a commercial/industrial economy in which capital generated the majority of wealth.

By eliminating the poll tax on minors, whether assessed to the young men themselves or to their parents or masters, Connecticut lifted a burden on men who still gained wealth through the control of labor, acknowledging the disadvantages they faced in the emerging capitalist

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The legitimacy of a poll tax on minors was also a controversial topic among young men who understood firsthand the transition from youth to adulthood in the commercial environment. Bradley N. Cumings, the young owner of a Boston dry-goods store, was a member of the Northern Debating Society, a group of young men in the North End who met to discuss topics of public importance. At their meeting on January 23, 1835, the group debated, “Is the tax upon minors consistent with the principles of our government?” Although Cumings gave only a brief mention of the question and outcome for other debates, this topic must have held special interest. His record offers insight not only into the contours of the discourse around the poll tax on minors, but also into the perspectives of young men for whom it was most salient. At the time of the debate, Cumings was twenty-three years old and worked at the dry goods store he had purchased less than a year before from his former employer. Having recently crossed the divide from youth into adulthood, Cumings and his peers had a unique perspective on the issue.\(^74\)

The Northern Debating Society’s deliberation about the poll tax on minors centered on the economic value of young men and the relationships of dependence under which they worked. Society members understood that a minor’s poll would be assessed to the “parents, master or guardian, who have the control of the persons of such minors,” in keeping with the subordinate position of young men’s labor in the household economy.\(^75\) The young men of the Northern Debating Society who affirmed the legitimacy of the poll tax on minors recognized that “a man with ten apprentices, by their work, undoubtedly clears 25 cents a day, which 250 daily, is equitable to a capital of 15,000 dollars, and why should he not be taxed as well as one who has the visible capital?” The poll tax was a means for the state to gain revenue from men who

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\(^74\) Bradley N. Cumings Journal, 25 Jan 1835, MHS.
\(^75\) Ibid.
profited from young men’s labor. In the commercial environment of nineteenth-century Boston, another proponent argued, “minors are usually away from their parents, so they [parents] are not taxable for them, but those [employers] who are benefited by them.”76 Another debater pointed out that youth men increasingly took positions as individual wage laborers rather than as dependents of a head of household. In these cases, young men would be responsible for paying their own poll “as though [they] were of full age.”77 Yet this situation of requiring a male youth to pay a tax before he was allowed to vote or sign a binding contract seemed reasonable to one young debater: “As all are benefited by our government, minors should pay their portion.”

The objections to the poll tax focused on the ways the law placed unequal burdens on citizens. Some argued that the law assumed that all boys over sixteen were employed and earning income to support themselves or their families. One opponent argued that it was “unjust, as minors who earn nothing are taxed no less than those who do well and lay up money.” In fact, the tax law did offer some exemptions for young men presumed to be unproductive. Students, as well as professors and tutors, at Massachusetts colleges were not assessed for their polls or estates. The law also granted tax assessors leeway to exempt or abate the polls of “any persons, who by reason of age, infirmity, or poverty, may be unable to contribute towards the public charges.”78 Nevertheless, privileging college students and accommodating the destitute did not negate the principle injustice of the poll tax on minors in the eyes of some members of the Northern Debating Society. Another debater objected to the unequal impact of the tax “being paid principally by poor folks, who, it is well known, have the most children.” Another young man suggested that the poll tax on minors could “aim destruction at [the] population.” He added

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76 Ibid.
77 Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, 1804, Chapter 144.
78 “Tax for the Year 1819,” Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1819.
“it would be more just to tax bachelors,” as was the practice in the colonial period.\textsuperscript{79}

At the end of the evening, fifteen society members affirmed that the tax on minors was consistent with the principles of democratic government. A slight majority, eighteen members, negated the question and won the debate. Although this account is limited to a group of public-minded young men who had successfully transitioned into business on their own, it came at a moment when political leaders were reevaluating the relationship between young workers and the adults who employed and claimed responsibility for them. With the rise of the commercial economy and the deskilling of manufacturing, employers sought workers through at-will arrangements based on wages, rather than the paternal responsibility required by the master-servant relationship. Families that relied on their sons’ labor were increasingly vulnerable in the commercial economy and the tax burden of minors’ polls could further entrench their economic disadvantage. The ability of politicians to put the burden of the poll tax on minors’ parents, masters, or guardians eroded in the face of new economic relationships between youth and adults.

Successful opposition to the poll tax in Massachusetts came not from struggling producers saddled with liability for their dependent kin, but from a profitable industrial enterprise eager to transform labor relations from a personal trust to a financial transaction. In 1840 the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company, a manufacturing firm, sued the city of Boston over its assessed taxes. In addition to challenging its property taxes, the Company sought to recover the poll taxes it had paid on behalf of its minor employees. Because it paid the minors a wage, the company argued that its relationship did not have the domestic features of a master and apprentice that would warrant responsibility for the poll tax. The poll tax on minors operated on the assumption that young men over sixteen would be productive assets in a master’s household.

\textsuperscript{79} Bradley N. Cumings Journal, 25 Jan 1835, MHS.
The expansion of wage labor across age boundaries challenged the legitimacy of holding adults responsible for minors’ liabilities. Industrial labor ideology viewed workers as individuals, contracting freely with their employers for their own best interest. The tax assessment forced a vision of dependence on young men that was incompatible with new forms of labor.\(^80\)

The Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts concluded that “the poll tax of minors, who are in the service of a manufacturing corporation, and receiving salaries, cannot legally be assessed to such corporation.” The court no longer saw labor as primarily a relationship of dependence between a master and servant. Instead, they viewed it as an agreement between equals. Since the firm was not seen as benefiting from young men’s work more than the young men benefited themselves, the judges declared that “nothing in the case…indicates any such relationship between the plaintiffs and those for whose polls they were taxed, as would justify such taxation.”\(^81\) By this ruling, the court determined that corporations employing young men were not acting as their guardians or masters.

The ruling in *Boston and Sandwich Glass Company v. Boston* left young men caught between dependence and full autonomy – either their parents would pay their poll tax whether or not they worked at home, or they would be liable for their polls before they could even vote. To restore youth as a transitional period, the Massachusetts legislature chose to remove the tax liability from these young men. In an 1843 bill, they raised the age of poll tax liability from sixteen to twenty years. Young men, whether they worked for wages, remained with their parents, or enrolled in school, would not be assessed for their polls until the eve of their majority. The poll tax system in Massachusetts now reflected the realities of labor in the commercial environment. Neither young men under twenty years old nor their parents would be held liable

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\(^{81}\) Ibid.
for the tax. Regarding men twenty years or older, tax assessors were instructed that “all clerks and journeymen mechanics, and all others having no place of business of their own, should be taken at their houses, where they live, board, or lodge.” No mention was made about parents or masters paying for a minor’s poll. The tax system was no longer based on dependent household labor, but on the independence of young workers in the commercial economy. By increasing the age for poll tax liability, New England lawmakers granted the commodified nature of labor desired by employers, while granting young men an intermediate position necessary to prepare for adult responsibility.

The evolution of the poll tax on minors during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries demonstrates the ways New England political leaders and reformers adapted to the new realities of coming of age. The poll tax, with its origin in colonial society, assumed a household organization that connected labor to familial dependence. It functioned in a society where young men were economic assets under the direct authority of a parent or master, and where wealth derived from labor rather than capital. As these features of the colonial economy declined amidst New England’s industrial revolution, young men had to earn their keep in a wage labor system. By removing the poll tax on minors, first the courts and then the legislature eliminated a legal vestige of household government that was increasingly incompatible with the limited, contractual relationship favored in the commercial environment. This change in the laws regarding labor and minority granted maturity based on white masculinity and came to epitomize free labor ideology.

Child Labor Legislation

As judges and political leaders gave young white men provisional autonomy in the commercial economy, they struggled to handle the new industrial work experiences faced by

82 Directions for Assessing Taxes, 1860, BPL-RBD.
poor children, especially girls and young women. Although the ideal minor who received ‘implied emancipation’ was a young man heading into a freely-contracted position that would prepare him for financial security, an increasing number of children left their parent’s homes to work in factories tending machines. Instead of preparing for autonomy, these young industrial workers faced a future of economic subordination under the guise of freedom of contract. Faced with this unsettling turn in the capitalist economy, political leaders adjusted the laws defining the unique rights and protections of children to recognize the conditions needed for young people to develop into rational individuals. Laws enacted between 1836 and 1852 established a minimum level of maturity (measured in terms of age) necessary to contract dangerous and degrading work and mandated a minimum term of formal schooling. After decades of industrialization and the accompanying growth of child labor in factories, the law tentatively substituted its encouragement of children’s productive employment for new regulations that mandated provisions for schooling and shorter working hours. The history of child labor legislation in New England shows how social reformers and labor activists envisioned the distinction between childhood and youth based on who worked. The legislative and judicial acquiescence to antebellum labor activists, including the limitations placed on child labor, emerged not simply out of concern for the welfare of children, but from a desire to appease working-class organizers and prevent them from gaining political power. As a result, New England leaders codified a coming of age process that separated the vulnerabilities childhood from the provisional independence of youth.

Legal efforts to curtail child labor in the early nineteenth century reversed centuries of legal and cultural support for industrious children in colonial New England. Laws in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries actually encouraged, or even forced, heads of household to actively employ their dependents in productive enterprise. With the extreme labor scarcity following settlement in New England, the General Court of Massachusetts instructed town officials to investigate “what course may be taken for teaching the boys and girles in all towns the spinning of the yarne.” The Court further required “the masters of families should see that their children and servants should be industriously implied so as the mornings and evenings and other seasons may not bee lost as formerly they have bene.” A child watching over cattle was not considered industrious enough, and the court desired the labor to be supplemented with “some other impliment withall as spinning upon the rock, knitting, weveing tape, etc.” As New England communities continued to face labor shortages from the late-seventeenth and through the eighteenth century, local leaders viewed children as a vital resource that needed to be effectively managed. Town selectmen removed children from poor households (those that did not earn enough to pay local taxes) and indentured them to prosperous families that could use child labor efficiently. A Connecticut law, first passed in 1702, and renewed in 1750 and 1784, warned parents who allowed their children “to live idly or misspend their time in loitering” could have them bound to another household, "a man child until he shall come to the age of 21 years; and a woman child to the age of 18 years or time of marriage." In a community organized around household production, and within an environment of labor scarcity, children’s work needed to be legally compelled in order to ensure the prosperity of the community.

The positive attitude toward productive, industrious children continued in the late eighteenth century when opportunities for employment in factories first presented themselves.

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With a desire to support domestic manufacturing, cities and states provided incentives for businessmen to start enterprises that would engage the labor of children who might otherwise be idle. Child labor was not simply tolerated, but served as the “subject for public congratulation.”

The fact that manufacturing enterprises could utilize the labor of women and children rather than adult men helped to justify public support because they allowed the United States to grow its industrial capacity without impinging on men’s ability to achieve the independent yeoman farmer ideal. These opportunities were especially desirable as the industrial revolution increased the number of families seeking support from the Overseers of the Poor. Some factories appealed for public support on the grounds that they “are not only useful to the community but the poorer sort are able in some measure to assist their parents in getting a livelihood.”

In order to avoid supporting healthy children with public funds, the Overseers of the Poor expected poor children to support themselves at a young age. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, pauper laws excluded residents “over 12 and under 60 years of age, and in good health” from receiving poor relief. This age regulation assumed that healthy minors over the age of twelve should be able to earn their keep by working for a master rather than relying on local charity. As the cost of supporting paupers grew during the early nineteenth century, local officials celebrated the opportunity to place their dependents in unskilled work in factories. As late as 1825, the Massachusetts legislature considered intervention in children’s employment “inexpedient,” exhibiting a hesitancy to infringe on private enterprise and domestic relations.

In the 1830s, the extent of child labor in factories caused enough of a disruption in New

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87 Ibid., 22.
88 *Boston News Letter*, 1 Mar 1770, quoted in Ibid.
England’s ideal for coming of age to warrant the attention of political leaders and labor activists. As more children worked away from home in menial positions and as education became more important for social mobility, the legislature devised protections that limited the employment of children before the early teenage years. They envisioned children under age fourteen or sixteen as requiring special protections. But beyond this threshold, legislators acknowledged the life stage of youth – an intermediate period of provisional independence that required no special labor restrictions. Political leaders worked to create a period of protection from labor for white, native-born children in order to secure the education and health necessary for development. But these protections lifted when young men and women were deemed ready for labor and were expected to earn their own support.

The campaign against child labor was the earliest and most successful effort organized by New England’s nascent labor movement. The region’s first cross-class labor organization, the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen (NEA), walked a fine line between asserting the rights of laborers and demanding government protection. The group’s 1832 constitution claimed their goal was “to re-establish the usage by which our labor may be offered and disposed of as any other article in the market – to be allowed, in our own behalf to be consulted as to the prices and hours of labor – that so [sic] we may be enabled to obtain a comfortable livelihood, by the reasonable exercise of industrious habits.” The document concluded with a call to ensure that “our children be afforded the necessary means and opportunities to acquire that education and intelligence absolutely necessary to American freemen.” The NEA represented an emergent free labor ideology that separated the labor choices of mature men from the protections necessary for vulnerable groups.91

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Focusing on the social dangers posed by child labor allowed workingmen to gain middle-class allies and promote their position as authoritative breadwinners. By emphasizing the plight of children denied education, labor activists created a “metaphorical” paternal relationship between themselves and child workers. They took the role of male protector even though many of them had no children, or, if they did, were determined to keep them out of the factory.\textsuperscript{92} The campaign to incorporate education into young factory workers’ lives depicted adult workingmen as paternal figures looking out for dependents. Male labor organizers asserted their authority by claiming responsibility to protect the interests of women and children who “would not be able to negotiate successfully with their employers.”\textsuperscript{93} Despite their manual labor occupations, male labor activists reinforced the middle-class ideal of a male breadwinner who supported a wife and children who did not have to work. Restricting the employment of children also benefitted unskilled men who faced competition for young workers who commanded a lower wage.\textsuperscript{94}

Motivated by concern for their own livelihood and influence, in addition to the plight of young workers, the NEA helped to establish the boundary between childhood and youth. Their desire to regulate labor focused on children before the early-teens. This was the age that required protection and an investment in education. For children in the later teens, gender influenced assumptions about dependence. Young men could claim provisional authority as they grew up, but young women were considered vulnerable until they had the protection of a husband. As one working-class author wrote, “Men are not so easily frightened into submission as girls.”\textsuperscript{95}

Because labor activists were adult men and factory workers were typically children or women,

\textsuperscript{93} Murphy, \textit{Ten Hours’ Labor}, 47.
\textsuperscript{94} Zonderman, \textit{Uneasy Allies}, 31–32.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{The Artisan}, 5 Apr 1832, quoted in Murphy, \textit{Ten Hours’ Labor}, 49.
the activists used their masculinity – the combination of their power from age and gender – to assert their authority. In their effort to reconstitute traditional household responsibility within the commercial environment, workingmen defined women and children as immature through their inability to act independently in the labor market.

To protect working-class children while advancing their own authority, members of the NEA took two different approaches. Members (white adult men in the skilled trades) voluntarily pledged to limit their labor to ten hours per day, or face expulsion from the organization. This tactic relied on the individual bargaining power of working men (especially before the Hunt decision (1842) that legalized collective action by workers) and their presumed competence and honor to uphold their promise. In contrast, when it came to limiting the labor of children and ensuring their access to education, the NEA pursued state legislation. Group leaders encouraged local “vigilance committees” to monitor the employment of children in their communities and petitioned the government for legislation that would cap children’s labor at ten hours per day and mandate a period of schooling. This campaign occurred as Massachusetts education reformers, led by Horace Mann, promoted common schooling as an essential part of growing up.96

With the expansion of publically-funded institutions to separate children from work, the NEA believed “government had the right and the duty to regulate the conditions of labor, especially by legally limiting the length of the workday for those who could not secure such limits for themselves.”97 Freely-contracted labor was the duty and privilege of men – individuals with claim to a gender, age, race, and ability identity that gave them social, political, and economic authority. By relying on state power rather than individual contracts to police the labor of children, the NEA drew a distinction between the contractual capacity of children and young

96 Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*.
97 Zonderman, *Uneasy Allies*, 34.
men. This division supported an association between labor and maturity that became the foundation of free labor ideology. At the same time labor activists campaigned to restrict child labor, they fought for the right of adult male workers to organize through unions. When Justice Shaw affirmed the legality of labor strikes and other organized union actions in 1842, he hoped that offering activists piecemeal victories could prevent a larger protest movement that could threaten the social order.  

In 1836 the Massachusetts legislature responded to these campaigns with “An Act to provide for the better Instruction of Youth employed in Manufacturing Establishments.” The proposal responded to the industrialization of manufacturing workplaces, “which tend to produce and are rapidly producing great changes in the employment and condition of large classes of the people of this Commonwealth.” As more young men and women found employment in factories, Massachusetts’s claim to universal education became harder to fulfill. A report from the legislature asserted that industrialization, which brought rural New Englanders into “compact villages” and proliferation of employment in “simple operations consequent upon that minute subdivision of labor,” threatened the intelligence and morality of the region. The industrial labor system, which relied on the cheap semi-skilled work of young women and children, prevented the emergent working class from participating in educational institutions. The needs of labor “deprive young females particularly, and young children of both sexes…of those means and opportunities of mental and moral development and cultivation, which are essential to their becoming the intelligent mothers and educators of the next generation, and good citizens of the

98 Tomlins, “Criminal Conspiracy and Early Labor Combinations.” Scholars have debated how in the same year, Justice Shaw could issue the ostensibly pro-labor ruling in Commonwealth v Hunt and the pro-employer ruling in Farwell v Boston & Worcester Railroad. A full description of this scholarship can be found in Alfred S. Konefsky, “‘As Best to Subserve Their Own Interests’: Lemuel Shaw, Labor Conspiracy, and Fellow Servants,” Law and History Review 7, no. 01 (1989): 219–39.
Although radical labor activists decried the effects of specialized labor for all individuals, reformers – including those within the working class – emphasized the danger specifically to young people’s development. The narrative of the vulnerable woman or child supported working-class leaders’ attempts to appropriate middle-class identity by promoting the male breadwinner model of the family.

In his first annual Report as Massachusetts Secretary of Education, Horace Mann praised the 1836 law for having “been already most salutary in its operation.” He reported the positive results of children attending school for the first time because of the requirement. However, both parents and employers evaded the law, showing in Mann’s estimation that they “hold their children to be articles of property, and value them by no higher standard than the money they can earn.” Mann’s attitude demonstrates the cultural shift toward an idea of the “priceless child” that dominated middle-class New England. An era of “Romantic Childhood” emerged during the early nineteenth century that sought to preserve the innocence of children, especially among middle-class families who could survive without sons’ or daughters’ wages. This moral shift in attitudes toward children sparked a reform agenda pitting, as Viviana Rotman Zelizer describes, “the price of a useful wage-earning child” against “the moral value of an economically useless but emotionally priceless child.”

The 1836 Act was the first in a series of legislative limitations on child labor designed to protect the education and future maturity of Massachusetts youth. This early success encouraged labor activists and families to seek more regulation. In 1838 parents in Fall River, a southern

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99 James G. Carter, et al, Report, filed with “Act to provide for the better Instruction of Youth employed in Manufacturing Establishments,” 1836, MSA.
100 For a discussion of the fear of degraded intellect among adult workers, see Chapter 6.
101 Murphy, Ten Hours’ Labor, 47–48; Zonderman, Uneasy Allies, 34.
Massachusetts mill town with a high portion of child workers, sent a petition to the state legislature regarding the harmful effects of labor on children that continued despite the regulations in place. Unsatisfied with the enforcement of the law, the parents reminded legislatures that children’s labor “prevent[ed] the proper and healthful development of their physical natures, and must prove wholly incompatible with that training and mental education, which are essentially necessary to prepare them for the proper performance of their civil, social, and domestic duties.”¹⁰⁴ By 1842, child labor became the spearhead for the labor movement’s campaign for a ten hour day. A petition in that year by Fall River residents asked the legislature for a law “prohibiting the employment of children in manufacturing establishments at an age and for a number of hours which must be permanently injurious to their health and inconsistent with the education which is essential to their welfare.”¹⁰⁵ Shortly after, Massachusetts passed a law prohibiting children under the age of twelve from working more than ten hours a day, likely to avoid the larger repercussions of mandating a ten-hour day for the adult working population.

The limitation on labor for children under twelve years grew out of a belief in the need to protect children’s health and development for their future use. In the same way, the legislature protected children’s consent to a variety of binding contracts until their reason was deemed strong enough to ensure a good decision. Public officials were willing to extend legal protections to young workers, accounting for their mental and physical immaturity. By establishing legal restrictions on labor based on the age and schooling of boys and girls, this legislation strengthened the principle of freely-contracting labor expected among mature men and women. The law implied that a worker’s ability to contract freely was a function of his or her age and

¹⁰⁴ Petition of Hezekiah Battelle and others of Fall River for a law regulating the employment of children in factories and for the appointment of factory commissioners, filed with “An act in addition to an Act to provide for the better instruction of Youth employed in Manufacturing Establishments,” 1838, MSA.
education, rather than a product of comparative economic leverage. Successful challenges to the wage labor system came primarily from those who emphasized the maturity workers needed before they could enter a contract. Less successful were the claims that wage labor was inherently unjust for the relationship between employer and employee.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Massachusetts political leaders extended and expanded the protections on children and solidified youth as the beginning of legitimate employment. The restrictions on children’s labor in factories and the mandates for schooling were part of a larger evolution in public officials’ views of labor and maturity. Attitudes toward appropriate ages for labor were also reflected in the laws governing the support for paupers. By the 1840s statutes increased from twelve to fourteen years the age at which a pauper was expected to work on his or her own behalf rather than receive public support. In 1848, the legislature passed an act requiring overseers of the poor and the directors of the almshouses to make yearly “returns of all the children in their respective towns and cities under fourteen years of age, who are supported at the public charge” including “the name, age, and sex, of each child so supported.”¹⁰⁶ This effort indicates that state leaders viewed minors under fourteen as a group that warranted special consideration. These laws, along with the restrictions on factory work and mandatory school attendance, represent an ideological shift in attitudes toward children, maturity, and labor. Instead of encouraging employment among boys and girls, legislators and judges tried to ensure that childhood was a time for education and leisure rather than work.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the limitations on child labor were complemented by increased requirements for formal schooling. In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to mandate school attendance for children between eight to fourteen years of age. This came as part of an effort to standardize attendance in public schools and a desire to limit the

¹⁰⁶ Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Chap 247 (1848).
numbers of Irish immigrant children roaming the streets of Boston and other growing towns. By the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class reformers viewed childhood as an age protected from labor. The more children were separated, legally, ideologically, and in reality from employment, the greater the claim to maturity labor gave to youth who worked. New England state legislatures increased the dependence of children by restricting their employment and mandating their attendance at schools. The laws that protected children under the age of twelve or fifteen implicitly condoned employment for young people who crossed that age threshold. Young men and women abandoned parental household oversight, with their fathers’ consent, to work in the commercial and industrial economy. Young people experienced the mixed blessing of greater independence as jurists recognized their legal capacity to enter wage labor contracts. As political leaders adapted to the social changes brought on by the decline of the household economy, they supported a coming of age pattern based on the association between labor and maturity, which envisioned work as part of young men and women’s development of rationality and competence as they transitioned from childhood to adulthood.

By the mid-nineteenth century, every state in New England followed the pattern of child labor protection established by Massachusetts. Between the 1840s and 1860s, these statutes slowly extended the age of protection of labor and the assurance of schooling. Rhode Island mandated three months of school attendance for children under age twelve in 1840. A decade later, the state prohibited children under age twelve from working in factories, and children under age fifteen were limited to an eleven-hour day. Connecticut set a maximum ten-hour day for child factory workers under fourteen years old in 1842, and children under the age of fifteen needed to attend school for three months out of the year. In 1855, the state prohibited children under nine years from working in factories and limited children under age eighteen to twelve
hours a day. Vermont took a less regimented approach by empowering the Overseers of the Poor and town Selectmen to “admonish the parents of children employed at “unreasonable hours and times,”” and to “see that the education of children was not unnecessarily neglected.” Throughout the region, public officials agreed that young children (between nine and twelve years) should be prevented from working in dangerous occupations, and older children (between twelve and fifteen years) should balance their labor with education and time for leisure.\textsuperscript{107}

New England legislation regarding the employment of children changed dramatically between the colonial period and the mid-nineteenth century. Legislators, pushed by parents and labor activists, gradually sought to limit child labor rather than encourage it. The line between protected childhood and provisional autonomy in youth increased from the 1830s to the 1850s, as officials raised the standard of maturity for working children. By the mid-nineteenth century, civic officials in New England agreed that childhood, a period from birth until the mid-teens, should be a time for education and restricted physical labor, even if they enacted only a bare minimum of restrictions in working hours. Legislators and their active constituents reacted to the growth of industrial labor by reimagining the role of children in the nation’s economic advancement. The legal institution of graded child labor laws helped to associate work with maturity and presaged the more stringent legislation that followed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

\textit{Conclusion}

In early nineteenth-century New England, the colonial view of minors as dependent workers had to accommodate the realities of coming of age in the commercial environment. New England law governing the rights, responsibilities, and relationships of minors come under

pressure to support the ideals of mobility within the capitalist society, while also maintaining
gender- and class-based social order. Through actions relating to parent-child relations, the poll
tax on minors, and regulations on children’s work and schooling, legislators, jurists, and political
activists adapted New England’s legal regime to accommodate a new model for coming of age.
Legal conceptions of minority had to adjust to an environment in which young people
increasingly worked outside their natal households and in positions arranged without their
parents. Nineteenth-century jurists, legislators, and reformers struggled to reconcile the growing
emphasis on contract in commercial employment relations with young people’s presumed
incapacity to consent. The legal conflicts surrounding young people’s labor show political
leaders relying on the connection between labor and maturity.

As legal authorities refashioned the protections for and responsibilities of minors, they
privileging the experience of young men. Jurists and reformers campaigned for laws based on the
expectation that young men needed a liminal environment to prepare for their future roles as full
citizens and independent economic agents. The autonomy that came with the age of majority was
a reality only for middling white men. Statute and judicial precedent constructed the legal
category of minor in ways that supported young men’s idealized development from childhood to
adulthood. Rather than simply enforcing the dominion of patriarchs over the body and labor of
their dependents, New England law recognized the responsibility of fathers, and in some cases
mothers, to prepare their children for moral, and in the case of sons, civil, autonomy. Rationality
and consent became central capacities that differentiated those who could be trusted with the fate
of the nation’s republican experiment and those who needed to be protected or controlled. \(^{108}\) Yet
these were gendered and racialized capacities that served to justify the political exclusion of
women and African Americans while lauding the democratic expansion of political participation.

\(^{108}\) Brewer, *By Birth or Consent*. 
among white men. The recognition of semi-dependence as central to the new life stage of youth gave young men a process to demonstrate their fitness for adulthood while continuing to subordinate the economic and civic participation of women and racialized others.

As judges gave young men greater capacity to enter contracts without parental oversight, they restricted the industrial labor of younger children and limited the self-ownership available to women and African Americans. But the gender and racial privilege remained invisible within the legal doctrine of implied emancipation. The law supported a conception of provisional independence, which recognized young people’s capacity to consent while protecting them from the full responsibilities of adult workers. Yet this support for minors’ developing maturity was granted almost exclusively to white men. This belief that development of rational capacities naturally produced the financial resources for the free exercise of labor choice helped to obscure the varieties of compulsion that remained in nineteenth-century labor relations.
In the decades following the American Revolution, a new organization of family and labor transformed the models for coming of age among New England boys and girls. Instead of working within a system of household production, young people sought employment in liminal positions outside the family. During their teenage years, young men worked as apprentices, clerks, and schoolmasters, while young women took positions such as schoolteachers or factory operatives, which gave them responsibility for their moral development but continued their economic subordination. Young people also took advantage of educational opportunities that provided them with claims to rationality and intelligence. Employment in appropriate gendered positions marked their acquisition of self-ownership – their ability to control their moral, intellectual, and social development according to the expectations of the community. Young workers expressed their maturity, and thus their possession of the traits necessary to exercise influence within the community, by retaining a separation between economic and domestic spheres, adhering to gendered divisions of work, and emphasizing their position as the result of their own self-making, rather than their access to privileged resources. Forming the heart of New England’s middle-class ideology, these ideals naturalized a coming-of-age model based on the protection of childhood, the liminality of youth, and the assumption of gender-specific authority at adulthood.

Yet, for many young New Englanders, the conditions of work failed these standards of respectability and self-ownership. Particularly for young people engaged in deskillled, mechanized labor, the divergence between the leisured and working classes became more apparent in the experience of growing up. Middling families discovered that the respectability of

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a leisured childhood was not enough to protect young people from degradation when they entered manual labor positions. The proliferation of industrial labor threatened to expose the association between work and maturity as a product of economic hierarchy rather than a democratic means of expanding political and social influence. Privileged forms of labor—clerkships, professional careers, school-teaching, and domestic management—distanced the worker from physical toil by claiming to rely on the application of mental faculties. New Englanders associated this ‘head work’ with choice and reason, the pillars of citizenship. For manual laborers—such as the young women and men who tended machines—work indicated dependence, incompetence, degradation. Their toil was the product of necessity and signaled their inability to make proper choices. Without this maturity, laboring youth found themselves unable to claim the status of adulthood. Their degraded labor meant that the leaders of economic and social institutions would not presume their authority or competence. In antebellum New England, adulthood was a privileged status conferred by society. Ostensibly a democratic inheritance for anyone with good character, in the capitalist environment it became a means to deny groups of people worthiness for freedom on the grounds of their own failure to grow up.

For laboring youth aspiring to the security and recognition of adulthood, the growing gap in respectability and civic competence between mental and manual workers threatened to solidify a class hierarchy antithetical to the professed ideals of the American Revolution. Many young workers who entered the textile factories of Northern New England or the mechanic shops of Boston had benefited from a leisured childhood and early investments in education. Faced with the prospect of losing this middle-class status, young factory operatives and mechanic apprentices used their limited resources to uplift the public reputation of their work and assert

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their claims to maturity. The *Lowell Offering*, a literary magazine featuring articles from female factory workers, highlighted the intelligence of working-class youth by praising the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association, a mutual-improvement society organized among young Boston workers. An author in the *Offering* described a polite, domestic scene of a brother and sister sharing a book of poetry “written by very young men...apprentices you see...engaged in manual labor.” Both siblings praised the compositions’ “patriotism” and “their enthusiastic love of every thing [sic] beautiful and good.” In a later issue, the reader learns that the book was produced by the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association, which offered “intellectual improvements” to young men of “business.” The sister highlighted the group’s literary opportunities, including “declamation, debate, extemporaneous speaking, and the reading of original essays.” She told her brother that “every apprentice in Boston, who has any taste for moral or intellectual excellence...will lose no time in becoming a member of that excellent institution.”

The *Lowell Offering*’s endorsement of the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association displays an attempt by working-class young people to overcome the growing division between mental and manual labor. Young people who worked in the manufacturing environment struggled to assert their competence and rationality within a degraded economic and social environment. By the mid-nineteenth-century, ideological distinctions between independent and subordinate labor among men, and domestic management and waged or unwaged toil among women, distinguished the socially dominant middle class from the economically, politically, and culturally marginalized working class. The *Offering* articles countered this growing perception

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4 My analysis of class is drawn from the following: Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*; Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 1981; Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties*, 1992; Gary John Kornblith, “Introduction to the
by casting manual labor in respectable terms, suggesting that industrial work could lead to a stable, independent adulthood. The sister stressed the apprentices’ intellectual achievements alongside their employment in manual labor. The author placed the characters within a familial setting, distancing the reader from the author’s own experience in the mechanized textile factory. Through the polite exchange between siblings, the articles tried to replace the growing awareness of class – social groupings that allocated social, political, and economic resources based on wealth and occupational status – with a vision of coming of age that opened respectability and civic participation to all men and women who maintained moral stature, pursued intellectual development, and contributed to the productive enterprise of the nation.

With the rise of industrial manufacturing, young manual workers who had enjoyed a leisured childhood nevertheless struggled to achieve recognition as competent members of society because the manual nature of their work did not meet middle-class ideals of choice and maturity. The northern United States’ celebration of ‘free labor ideology’ promised every young man of virtue and talent would become an employer of others through his ability to contract in the labor market. The ‘cult of domesticity’ uplifted young women’s moral authority as long as they remained within the domestic sphere. These expectations for appropriate labor based on age and gender privileges of men and women who had access to significant social and economic capital. For both men and women, the ability to claim responsibility, moral autonomy, and gender-based authority through a gradual transition from childhood to adulthood became an expression not simply of maturity but also of class power. The democratic ideal of the early nineteenth century promised prosperity regardless of wealth or birthright, but only to young people who could prove their competence. To fight their degraded status, young manual workers

used claims of maturity to achieve the traits of respectability – the personal character traits that served as a boundary served to distinguish between trusted members of the community and the ‘lower sorts’ – required by economic, political, and cultural elites to act as citizens of the United States.\textsuperscript{5}

This chapter examines how attitudes about labor and maturity created economic and political hierarchies within the democratic ideals of the mid-nineteenth century. The first section analyzes how the middle-class ideal of free labor ideology and the cult of domesticity defined distinct paths to adulthood for men and women and delegated specific forms of civic participation based on gender roles. The second section examines two monthly magazines published by working-class young people that promoted an alternative means to recognize adulthood and alternative gender roles for the nation’s working-class citizens. Through the \textit{Lowell Offering} and the \textit{Mechanic Apprentice}, young industrial workers critiqued the capitalist pledge that wealth and status came from merit. The publications question whether economic inequality was the justifiable expression of individual capacity, as the proponents of free labor ideology claimed, or whether it was an expression of undemocratic hierarchy of privilege. Upholding the connection between labor and maturity, they envisioned a society in which working-class conditions could be expressions of respectability through honorable toil and sacrifice to family. Although they found injustice in an economic system that forced them into degraded positions, in order to claim maturity they needed to express their labor as a choice. The rhetoric of maturity allowed New England’s political and economic leaders to ignore growing economic inequality, while simultaneously giving young marginalized workers an avenue to

circumvent the middle-class ideology that only privileged forms of employment demonstrated worthy character traits. This chapter concludes this dissertation by showing how Americans struggled to openly confront class hierarchy as a component of early capitalism because maturity, as it was constructed in early nineteenth-century New England, framed individual achievements as the result of the natural process of growing up, rather than the result of economic or social privilege. The fantasy of coming of age proved to powerful too overcome the reality of entrenched race, gender, and class hierarchy.

Coming of Age and the Problem of Industrial Labor

The ‘free labor ideology’ that Northerners used to assert their superiority over the Southern system of chattel slavery was defined by the myth that young men achieved positions of economic independence based on their merit and competence and that young women ascended to positions of moral leadership in a domestic sphere supported by their husbands’ labor. The free labor ideal in the northern United States also served to contrast the practice of independent wage labor (which emerged out of the decline of indentured servitude) from the continuation of chattel slavery. The distinction between the free laborer and the slave, as articulated in the illustrative case State v. Mann (1829), rested on the limitations of patriarchal authority and the resulting prospect for coming of age. Relationships of unequal power, whether “the parent over the child, the tutor over the pupil, the master over the apprentice,” were legitimate only because they existed to bring the subordinate member from dependence to independence. The power granted to the dominant party was designed to promote “the happiness of the youth, born to equal rights with that governor, on whom the duty devolves of training the young to usefulness, in a station which he is afterwards to assume among freemen.” However, slavery was envisioned as a domestic and economic relationship in which “the end is the profit of the master, his security
and the public safety.” Without the recognition of the enslaved person’s humanity and subsequent need to develop into a fully rational, competent, and autonomous being, “the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect.”

The ability to come of age – to achieve recognition as an autonomous and contributing member of the community – was the hallmark of freedom.

By distinguishing between the perpetual dependence of the slave and the potential mobility of the free worker, northern leaders justified economic hierarchy within the industrial environment. In a lecture to the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in Boston on November 11, 1836, leading Whig statesman Daniel Webster discounted any conflict between the interests of ‘capital’ and ‘labor.’ Because free labor gave every young man the opportunity for independence, maturity was all that separated the “laborers to-day” from the “capitalists tomorrow.” All “young men” who were “industrious and sober” would find “a career of usefulness and enterprise” as they grew up. Self-ownership, rather than capital ownership, was the ingredient for success: Even young men “without moneyed capital” could claim “a capital in their intelligence, their knowledge, and their good habits.” Upholding the legitimacy of the economy through the potential of young men, Webster reframed critiques of capitalists’ power over workers as merely a temporary distinction between “they who have earned property, and they who have not yet lived long enough to earn it.”

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6 State v. Mann, 13 N.C. 263 (1829).
8 Daniel Webster, “Lecture Before the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge,” in The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster: Writings and Speeches Hitherto Uncollected, v. 1. Addresses on Various Occasions, ed. Edward Everett (Little, Brown, 1903). This idea that America is a community of ‘haves’ and ‘soon-to-haves,’ continues to have political power in the twenty-first century, as a December 16, 2011 speech by Senator Marco
Free labor promoters saw the ability to rise from dependence to autonomy not only on an individual level, but also through the structure of groups in the capitalist economy. In an 1849 article, William Ellery Channing defined the “Middle-Class” as “those who are combining their capital with their labor” and “the People” as “those who live on wages sufficing for bare subsistence.” Yet the differences between these two groups were not based on immutable nature or even access to resources. Rather, Channing attributed class difference to perfectible character traits. Because of its privileged position as the “Ruling Power in this Republic,” the middle class was charged with controlling “the temptations, ignorance, helplessness, self-confidence, above all the exuberant talent and spirit of the working classes and the poor.” Channing imagined the middle class as the rational protectors of society. The group would act as “an elder brother charged by the Privileged to protect the family estates, and to provide means of education, till the People come of age.” In this formulation, the successful members of the community held trust over its resources until the lower sorts fully developed their capacities to join in economic and political governance.

The support for New England’s emerging system of private capital ownership and unbound wage labor centered on the belief in the potential for young men to rise from the dependence of childhood to the autonomy of adulthood through their control of character. This emphasis on maturity – that a man’s position in society was the result of his capacity to make appropriate choices in relation to his age – also disparaged men who failed to achieve independence. A dominant strain in economic and political philosophy attributed failure to

Rubio attests. This vision was also the subject of a brilliant parody by The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, featuring John Hodgeman, on February 2, 2012.

internal traits within the individual’s control.\textsuperscript{10} Explaining American attitudes from the perspective of a foreigner, German-born immigrant Francis Grund remarked how even though “credit is given to those who succeed…a proportionally larger discredit must attach itself to those who are unfortunate and poor.” A man’s status at the start of life reflected only chance, but “every year which passes, without adding to his prosperity, is a reproach to his understanding or industry.”\textsuperscript{11} Horace Greeley echoed this sentiment, justifying the shame attached to men who failed to rise during their productive years. No matter how humble a man’s origins, any man “having had twenty years’ control of his own time and faculties” should have been able to rise to a more respectable position.\textsuperscript{12}

Free labor ideology imagined the North’s commercial economy as a hierarchy not of privilege but of talent and maturity. The men who promoted the commercial economy viewed any hierarchical division in economic or political status as temporary and ultimately reversible based on individual merit and the natural process of growing up. Thus young men and women’s coming of age process became a measure of the economy’s legitimacy. Northerners could celebrate ‘free labor’ as long as young men were able to eventually achieve economic autonomy to serve as breadwinners. For young women, the cult of domesticity could remain relevant as long as women were able to enter the private sphere of the home. These ideologies masked the emerging hierarchy based on access to material resources, imagining an ideal democratic community in which social status was based on individuals’ true worth.

However, the deteriorating conditions of manual labor employment soon revealed cracks

\textsuperscript{10} Although prevalent, this attitude was not universal in antebellum America. For an analysis of the complex attitudes toward debt and failure, see Edward J. Balleisen, \textit{Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Scott A. Sandage, \textit{Born Losers: A History of Failure in America} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{11} Francis J. Grund, \textit{The Americans, in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations} (Boston, 1837), 172-73.

\textsuperscript{12} Horace Greeley, \textit{Essays Designed to Elucidate the Science of Political Economy} (1870), 160. Although this particular quote is drawn for the post-Civil War years, Jonathan Glickstein finds it characteristic of Greeley’s statements in the antebellum period.
in the free labor façade. While Northern political commentators proclaimed the equal potential of all young men and upheld character as the key to democratic success, many writers simultaneously reminded workers to remain content with their station in life. In a lecture before the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association in January, 1840, William Ellery Channing took a narrow, conservative position on his subject of “the elevation of the laboring portion of the community.” In calling for “elevation,” he cautioned that he did not mean “that they should become self-important politicians; that, as individuals or a class, they should seize on political power; that, by uniting their votes, they should triumph over the more prosperous; or that they should succeed in bending the administration of government to their particular interests.” Dignity, he told his audience of young mechanics, came through the uplift of the soul, not through holding political office.¹³

The belief that laboring men and women should assume a reputable but deferential position in society was widespread within the nation’s juvenile literature. Directed at young people, but rarely including the voices of actual children, this genre promoted middle-class values of industry, piety, and respectability.¹⁴ Despite the proclamations about the dignity of manual labor and the ability of all men and women to rise, authors justified the second-class status of manual laborers. According to analysis by Rex Burns, advice authors, such as Lydia Maria Child in *Juvenile Miscellany* and Samuel Griswold Goodrich in *Parley’s Magazine*, “gave more prestige to business or the professions than the so-called “true producers” of wealth.” They made cursory statements about the importance of physical toil, but agreed that “for non-manual occupations – where men toiled with their brains in their own firm – success meant both greater

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wealth and greater respect.”¹⁵

Even self-improvement periodicals directed at the laboring population of young men emphasized the lower status of physical work. In *The Young Mechanic*, author and editor John Frost attributed manual labor not to “pleasure” but to “necessity.” Because their labor lacked the crucial factor of choice, advice authors expected young mechanics to be content “with a humble life of manual work and simple domestic pleasures.”¹⁶ These attitudes that promoted the acceptance of subordinate status among working-class youth can be attributed to a desire for social control in the changing urban environment. Middle-class reformers feared the growth of the urban masses, particularly young men who lacked the authority of traditional family and church structures. As the traditional household system of labor and familial governance declined, antebellum cities witnessed a greater separation between manual and nonmanual work environments, which served to further accentuate the respectability and competence of mental laborers and the distrust of the working class.¹⁷

Manual laborers obtained their degraded status in part through the lack of mental exertion and development in their activities. As deskilling increasingly shaped manufacturing, workers took more specialized roles in the production process. Although proponents of mechanization, such as New Orleans writer Charles Gayarre, commented that this “distribution of labor secures the rapidity, the cheapness, and the perfection of production,” it threatened not only workers’ livelihood through diminished wages, but also their mental capacity. Gayarre worried about the capacity of the ‘mechanic’ whose “mind, confining its attention to a single object, shrinks

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gradually into so contracted a space as to leave no room for thought or invention; and we may
easily understand how a man of the most splendid intellect,…would turn out to be an idiot at the
end of his probation.”\textsuperscript{18} Massachusetts Unitarian leader Andrew Preston Peabody agreed that
“the minute subdivision of labor” growing more common among mechanics “has a direct
tendency to dwarf the intellect.” The erosion of mechanical skill made a young worker “less of a
man in intelligence, skill, range of ideas, [and] scope of activity.”\textsuperscript{19} A Southerner explained the
hierarchy between manual and mental labor, in which “those who have only capacity enough to
perform the menial offices of minute details of the supposed operation, or whose necessities are
such as to compel them to accept such employment, are continually cramping their faculties with new fetters.” In contrast, “those whose mental abilities enable them to take charge of higher
departments – receive more wages – have more leisure, and are constantly widening the
difference between themselves and their inferiors.”\textsuperscript{20}

As fewer men seemed able to fulfill the promise of free labor, the legitimacy of the
capitalist system came under attack from two different fronts. Progressive critics of industrial
capitalism exposed the myth of free labor ideology, arguing that the exploitation of wage labor
prevented even talented, virtuous young men and women from receiving the prosperity they
deserved. In opposition, conservative critics of capitalism exposed the whole premise of free
labor as a fraud for its insistence on equality. As social critics debated this so-called ‘Labor
Question,’ they denounced free labor ideology, either because it prevented the emergence of true
equality or because it ignored the proper racial and gender social order.”\textsuperscript{21}

Using the rhetoric of ‘free labor,’ labor reformers and activists drew attention to the

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\textsuperscript{20} “Some Thoughts on Social Philosophy,” \textit{Southern Literary Messenger} 22 (Apr 1856): 314-15.  \\
\textsuperscript{21} Glickstein, \textit{Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America}. \\
\end{flushright}
plight of factory operatives. During the 1830s and 1840s a movement of working-class activists and middle-class reformers began consolidating a critique of industrialization into a campaign for improved working conditions for all types of manual laborers. The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen (NEA) mobilized to establish a ten-hour day across industries, which would improve the immediate conditions of laborers while leaving “time and opportunities for intellectual and moral improvement.”22 Workingmen advocated a shorter work-day in order to allow for greater participation in civic life. The campaign for leisure time was part of the male working-class effort to counter the paternalistic claims of employers’ moral superiority. Prominent activist Seth Luther depicted the economic system not as a path from dependence to autonomy but a process of exploitation. While campaigning for a shorter workday, Luther proclaimed, “the whole system of labour in New England, most especially in cotton mills, is a cruel system of extraction on the bodies and minds of the producing classes, destroying the energies of both, and for no other object than to enable the ‘rich’ to ‘take care of themselves’ while the poor must work or starve.”23 Instead of portraying a natural and temporary hierarchy between those who possessed capital and those who were working to acquire it, Northern labor activists and sympathizers viewed the capitalist economy as leading managers and owners to a life of luxury and privilege while damning workers to an early grave.

In July 1840, Orestes Brownson, the editor of the Boston Quarterly Review, published an attack on the factory labor system in the United States. Central to Brownson’s argument was the degraded condition of female operatives. Bright, healthy young women left the farms of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine to die slowly in the mills. Once they entered the employment, Brownson contended, “few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with

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22 *The Artisan*, 8 Mar 1832.
reputations unimpaired.” In attempting to bring sympathy to the plight of factory operatives, Brownson presented factory labor as an impenetrable obstacle to young workers’ achievement of the moral character necessary to become a wife and mother, claiming that working in a factory was “almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.”24 The destruction of white female domesticity was a widespread charge leveled against factories that utilized female labor.

Critiques of the free labor ideology of Northern industrialists also came from elites in the South. Rather than imagining a society in which all men and women held an equal chance to develop their full potential, slavery apologists depicted a racial hierarchy based on talent and intelligence that justified the subordinate position of African Americans. John H. Van Evrie denied that the system of racial bondage could be considered slavery, for the only man who was a slave was the white factory drudge who was “forced into a position in society below the claims of his intellect.”25 By treating blacks as chattel – and confining them to the only positions for which they were deemed worthy – plantation owners allowed whites, those capable of self-ownership, to experience freedom. Proslavery writers gave special attention to the plight of female factory operatives as the antithesis of the southern ideal of white womanhood. A newspaper in Fredericksburg, Virginia, claimed “the whole South does not furnish a parallel for the grievous and degrading slavery of northern manufacturing towns.” The author derided Northerners for allowing “the future mothers of our land” to toil away in factories.26 These writers viewed chattel slavery as a means to liberate white men and women from the danger and drudgery of manual labor, allowing them to assume higher positions as community leaders or guardians of the home. The maturity that slavery apologists saw was a set of inborn capacities

for reason and productivity derived from one’s racial heritage.

By the mid-nineteenth century the growth of industrial labor in New England threatened the association between labor and maturity developed by the emerging middle class. Although the proponents of free labor ideology clung to the belief that the commercial economy provided opportunities for all talented youth to achieve autonomy, more men and women realized that self-ownership was a privilege for young people who entered occupations associated with mental activity and choice. Young people whose labor was associated with toil, drudgery, and the needs of survival not only lacked the traits of respectability valued by middle-class leaders, but also found their claims to citizenship diminished. As free labor ideology helped to solidify self-ownership as the main criterion for social authority, the lack of maturity associated with manual labor threatened to cement a class-based hierarchy within the democratic ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity.

*Maturity, Labor, and Citizenship*

For the New Englanders who addressed the ‘Labor Question’ in the mid-nineteenth century, young men’s and women’s ability to achieve adulthood became a measure of the economy’s morality. Within the expansion of industrial labor, female factory operatives and urban male apprentices challenged the class-based model for coming of age. They used mutual-improvement associations and public periodicals to overcome the obstacles to adulthood that their work presented in the minds of social leaders. An analysis of young people’s public writings demonstrates an ambivalence about class that permeated the antebellum period. While some authors accommodated their experiences to middle-class standards, others recognized a working-class identity antagonistic to middle-class expectations about the nature of work and the recognition of adult authority.
Unlike other magazines written by adults for young people, two short-lived publications record the attempts by working-class youth to negotiate adulthood in a stratified class environment. The *Lowell Offering*, published from 1840 to 1845, received national and international attention during its run and has remained a significant source for contemporary scholars interested in factory life, women’s print culture, and constructions of gentility.\(^\text{27}\) Scholars have yet to analyze the social constructions of age central to the magazine, and the insight it reveals into operatives’ experience of maturity. The *Mechanic Apprentice*, printed between 1845 and 1846, was (and continues to be) more obscure, but is nevertheless significant for uncovering working-class young people’s attitudes. Both magazines emerged from a conscious awareness of their authors’ age-based position in the mid-nineteenth-century economy and recognition of growing class disparities of wealth, security, and prestige. And both hoped to improve the public reputation of working-class young people through efforts to associate their labor with maturity – either to claim middle-class status for themselves or to redefine working-class identity to include maturity and the capacity for self-ownership.

First published in October, 1840, the *Lowell Offering* was designed as a “Repository of original articles on various subjects, written by Factory Operatives.” The early issues were produced under the direction of Rev. Abel C. Thomas, Lowell’s “enthusiastic young Universalist minister.” Thomas, and pastors at other Lowell churches, took paternalistic responsibility for young female workers’ moral and intellectual development. Articles published in the *Offering* came from the Universalist Church’s ‘Improvement Circle,’ a mutual improvement organization.

where operatives shared written compositions. By creating a literary publication written and edited solely by young female operatives, the contributors hoped to achieve respectability in the face of public criticism. The primary audience for the publication included national and international readers seeking insight into the peculiar new system of labor. Thomas, writing shortly before he transferred responsibility for the paper to Harriet Farley and others, proclaimed its purpose “to encourage the cultivation of talent; to preserve such articles as are deemed most worthy of preservation; and to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills.”28 Although much of the Offering featured poetic odes to pastoral life, familial love, or religious sentiment – subjects that distanced the authors from their industrial environment – the publication also served as a platform for young operatives to participate in public debates about capitalist labor relations in antebellum New England.

Defenders of the mechanized factory, and women's industrial labor specifically, used the Lowell Offering to prove that American factories were not reproducing the degrading conditions of British textile mills. The magazine supplied evidence that New England’s textile workers would not succumb to the same degradation as the families working in British factories. The literary contributions on subjects such as religion, family, and nature demonstrated the authors’ intellect and middle-class sensibilities, reflecting their aspirational status as educated, highly literate, and socially confident young women. Local newspapers praised the “refined and intellectual habits” that could coexist with “eternal and confounding whirl and clatter” of the cotton mill.29 The Christian Examiner (Boston) claimed that the literature of the “hard-working factory girls” could compete against “a committee of young ladies, selected from the most

refined and best educated families in any of our towns or cities.”

The* Chambers Edinburg Journal* in Scotland (confronting its own region’s problem with exploited factory labor) dissented, confessing, “candidly, we have found amongst the pieces extremely few which would have any chance of admission into a British periodical work above the humblest class.”

However, given the obstacles that faced the authors, the *Journal* conceded, “it must also be admitted that, even where there is no positive attraction, there is nothing irreconcilable with good taste; and some of the articles would appear as respectable efforts for females of any rank in life.”

The *Offering* reprinted these excerpts to showcase the magazine’s positive impact on the operatives’ reputation.

The critiques of industrial labor by Orestes Brownson and other labor reformers presented young female workers as innocent victims of capitalist exploitation. Many operatives preferred to cast themselves as competent agents who remained in control of their labor as well as their virtue and planned to eventually enter the domestic sphere. Harriet Farley became known as one of the most ardent defenders of Lowell’s employment of women as factory operatives through her work as the editor of the *Lowell Offering* from 1842-1845. After Brownson’s attack on factory organization implicated operatives’ reputation, Farley issued a public response that portrayed women as independent actors, rather than pawns of capital accumulation. Workers came to the mills knowing they would be “under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome.” This mobility allowed female workers to avoid identifying as an exploited working class. They viewed their ability to choose employment as a mark of their maturity. Despite limitations on

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women’s labor, girls came to Lowell because “the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers.” They made a rational choice “and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it.” Farley firmly stated: “Yankee girls have too much *independence for that.*”

The *Lowell Offering* was not the only publication by working-class youth in 1840s New England. In an environment that threatened their ability to achieve the status of adulthood, a group of male apprentices in Boston formed their own magazine, the *Mechanic Apprentice.* The magazine, which published its first issue in May 1845, was organized for “the purpose of mutual improvement, for the purpose of acquiring knowledge” and “of cultivating the social and moral faculties.” The editors used literary contributions from apprentices to demonstrate the intellectual capacity of young mechanics. They took pride in being “written, edited, printed, and published, solely by apprentices, members of the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association.”

By highlighting their labor identity, the *Apprentice* authors, like those of the *Lowell Offering,* hoped to repair their reputations with the refinement of their literary productions.

The *Mechanic Apprentice* gave young male workers an independent voice within the voluntary associations of the artisan community. The publication grew out of the Elocution Class offered by the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association (MALA), an off-shoot of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association (MCMA). The MCMA, a mutual-benefit organization for master mechanics, organized a library in 1820 to serve the needs of its members’ apprentices. In 1832, the MCMA turned over control of the library to a group of apprentices to relieve themselves of the “time and labor involved in the care and direction of the

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34 “To Our Friends,” *Mechanic Apprentice,* May 1845.
The Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association opened its membership to “minors only” – meaning those under the age of twenty-one – even though “the term ‘apprentice’ in its most extended sense, means one who is learning a trade.” Using age to restrict membership, the MALA made the unique needs of youth central to their operations. The association functioned like many other voluntary societies in the mid-nineteenth century, offering membership to a candidate who succeeded in “producing a certificate that he is worthy of confidence – paying into the treasury the sum of One Dollar per year – and signing the Constitution.” In August, 1845, the magazine became “the official organ of the association.” By the end of 1845, the MALA claimed to have three hundred members, by its own estimation 20% of the “young men preparing for a mechanical profession in [Boston].”

Inspired by the Lowell Offering, members of the Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association started the Mechanic Apprentice in 1845 to uplift young laborers. Urban apprentices needed to account for their age and subordinate position before asserting opinions about “the wrongs of Labor, and the means of its elevation.” The Apprentice recognized that many political leaders considered it “a subject in which persons of our time of life can have no immediate interest.” However, because they expected to play a larger role in the economy and in politics as they grew up, “the period will so soon arrive when we may be called upon to act.” The apprentice writers claimed a political voice not on account of their current status, but based on their trajectory from youth to adulthood. The author recognized youth as a liminal period by emphasizing how young men’s current position acted as a preparation for the full responsibilities

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that would come with incorporation into the adult world. The publication claimed apprentices’ right to express independent opinions as an aspect of their path to full maturity and citizenship.40

Although targeting different audiences, the *Lowell Offering* and the *Mechanic Apprentice* shared a desire to promote the potential of both men and women engaged in manual labor. In the *Lowell Offering* from the beginning of this chapter, the sister sharing an apprentices’ book of poetry with her brother rejoices in being “a daughter of New England, where I may claim as countrymen, these noble-spirited youths.”41 The editors of the *Apprentice* referred to the *Offering* as “our worthy contemporary.” Their discussions of the *Offering* and of the female editors avoided paternalism or expectations that young women should be working in the home. They saw female operatives as “laboring on in the same good cause...in the same sphere, and on the same footing.” Making explicit connections among youth who were demeaned by their employment, these young authors called upon “all, then, who are engaged in a laborious calling, whether by the loom of the factory or the bench of the workshop, strive to this end, the proper appreciation and elevation of labor.”42 The young apprentices felt “sincere and heartfelt sympathy with” female workers and claimed to “value their good opinion.”43 Working-class youth struggled to gain the privileges of adulthood as their labor failed to receive the markers of maturity and competence earned by mental workers and domestic managers, such as formal schooling, genteel leisure pursuits, and supervisory work positions. As young people found their opportunities for employment subsumed by the wage labor system, they built social acceptance for industrial labor as an appropriate foundation for adulthood.

The *Offering* and the *Apprentice* were not the only working-class publications that sought

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41 “Poems, Delivered on Various Occasions . . .,” *Lowell Offering*, May 1843.
cross-gender solidarity. With the increasing employment of women in textile factories and with the deskilling of artisan manufacturing, labor activists sought to expose the oppression of workers and the ‘aristocracy’ created by capitalist ownership. In May 1845, twenty-four-year-old mechanic William F. Young started the *Voice of Industry* in Fitchburgh, Massachusetts, to promote the campaigns of the New England Workingmen’s Association. Before the end of the year, the operations moved to Lowell, where the newspaper publicized the activities of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. Under the direction of former operative Sarah Bagley, the *Voice* charged Harriet Farley with sacrificing the needs of Lowell workers to the needs of factory managers. To agitate for equality, the *Voice* emphasized the forced nature of factory labor. While Farley proclaimed mill employment as a rational choice, Bagley exposed it as the product of financial necessity. In writing about the harsh conditions, *Voice* authors displayed operatives as victims of economic coercion. To critique the capitalist labor system, these militant operatives showed the lack of “free will” central to their employment. Although this strategy gained them sympathy and promoted their reform causes, it also divorced their labor from the sources of self-ownership and respectability that would qualify them for social authority.44

In contrast to the anti-capitalist strain of the *Voice of Industry* and other labor publications, the *Lowell Offering* and the *Mechanic Apprentice* balanced their critiques of working conditions and labor exploitation with support for the ideal of free labor and domesticity. Their working-class authors tried to reconcile the divergent paths to adulthood by confronting the pillars of middle-class identity and demonstrating that laboring youth could achieve the same standard of respectability and authority as their privileged peers. They presented their periodicals and other forms of mutual improvement as alternatives forms of

education. They developed an ideology of labor dignity that offered working-class youth a place within America’s national development and portrayed working-class exploitation as a betrayal of the nation’s promise of meritocracy, a core republican value. Both publications supported dominant narratives of gender roles, while adapting the constructions of masculinity and femininity to fit working-class conditions. And both magazines contributed to abolition debates, uniting with middle-class activists and implicitly showing that the true labor division was between free and unfree, not mental and manual. By asserting claims to intelligence, merit, duty, and morality within appropriate gender roles, these working-class authors appropriated middle-class values and applied them to the contributions and experiences of young people in manual labor positions. Through their writings, authors in the *Lowell Offering* and *Mechanic Apprentice* correlated industrial labor with the gradual development of maturity on a path to appropriate adult authority, despite the growing perception that manual work by its nature lacked the traits of competence necessary for citizenship.

During the early nineteenth century, formal schooling defined the emerging middle class.\(^45\) In a democratic society based on the rational consent and independence of its citizens, education was essential for managing the range of choices available in the commercial economy. Education reformers in Massachusetts created the common-school system both to uplift the conditions of the lower classes and to inculcate the virtues of intelligence and self-control in the population.\(^46\) Despite these efforts to extend the capacities for maturity to manual as well as mental laborers, men and women who had credentials from an academy, seminary, or college monopolized the highest levels of wealth, security, and prestige. The daily responsibilities of

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laboring youth prevented formal schooling, especially at the more advanced levels. To contest
the middle-class standard of education solely as formal schooling, working-class youth
demonstrated their ability to pursue knowledge within their labor environment. Demonstrating
liberal knowledge could prove to skeptical social critics that wage labor did not create a mass of
second-class citizens.

The stated goal of both the Lowell Offering and the Mechanic Apprentice was to improve
the educational reputation of young laborers through the production of literary material. The
Offering acknowledged, “it is in the intelligence of the mass, that the permanency of our
republican institutions depends.”47 Knowledge protected the population from threats to citizens’
character: “Intelligence is the safe-guard of virtue; virtue is the promoter of intelligence.”
Workers’ cultural literacy presumably distinguished the independent American laborer from the
European drudge. With moral autonomy, the American working class would be able to
contribute to the common good of the nation in its experiment with expanded citizenship. The
Offering assisted in this endeavor, arguing that without the “intelligence and virtue of our
population, there would be a downward tendency to the degradation, want and woe of the mill
operatives of Great Britain.”48 On this account, “the Offering is prima facie evidence, not only of
the American ‘factory girls,’ but of the intelligence of the mass of our country.”49

The Mechanic Apprentice editors framed their periodical as part of the community’s
effort to uplift urban young men. Nineteenth-century Boston had no shortage of newspapers and
magazines intended for apprentices, clerks, and other urban youth. These periodicals covered a
range of issues, from religion, to science, to cheap amusement. The Apprentice editors “aim[ed]

47 Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson, Loom and Spindle: Or, Life Among the Early Mill Girls: With a Sketch of “The
48 “Permanency of the Offering,” Lowell Offering, Mar 1841.
to render our magazine distinguishable by its devotion to the instruction as well as the amusement of our youthful readers.” Positioning their monthly periodical as part of the effort to educate urban youth, the editors staked their claim to maturity. While other periodicals “teem[ed] with silly stories and senseless trash,” the editors of the Apprentice “resolved to keep ours from the like degradation.”50 Because most young men in nineteenth-century Boston needed to work, MALA hoped to function as the primary educational institution for urban apprentices. But while Boston had many societies committed to the education of urban youth, MALA was unique in that it was an association for young men, run by young men.

The Mechanic Apprentices’ Library Association aspired to enhance the intelligence of urban apprentices in order to improve their claims to prestige in the community. The organization offered a variety of literary outlets to provide apprentices with the tools for civic engagement. The library unlocked a “fount of knowledge within the reach of every young man engaged in a mechanical employment, who would make himself an intelligent and respected citizen.”51 Knowledge achieved through the various offerings of the association, particularly of scientific principles foundational to artisan practices, offered “one of the best passports to future usefulness.”52 The magazine was responsible for “upholding the character of the Apprentice, and proving his mental abilities...before the public.”53 Society needed to ensure that apprentices would become “men, rather than mere machines” by educating “the apprentice to assume and maintain a position in life which shall be his glory and his pride.”54

As the divergence of class in the early nineteenth-century separated men and women who

51 “Our Library,” Mechanic Apprentice, Sep 1845.
53 “Circular,” Mechanic Apprentice, Dec 1845
worked with their hands from those who worked with their minds (or in the case of middle-class women, purported to avoid work altogether), the Offering and the Apprentice emphasized the importance of physical toil in the progress of civilization. Labor created humanity “wherever man has been himself a creature above the brutes around him, and aspiring to a higher dwelling-place than the earth which is their home.”

However, despite the social value of manual labor, workers remained subordinate in politics and the economy. Not only were workingmen less likely to obtain positions in city government, manual laborers faced persistent attitudes that they should remain content with their meager lot. A laborer’s situation was viewed as the product of his own capacity, not the result of economic hierarchy. A New York editor proclaimed, “If any class of men do not hold that position in our social organization which they should…the fault is in themselves.”

Articles in the Offering exposed middle-class prejudice against factory operatives. In one fictionalized account, a well-off young woman criticizes her friend’s inclusive attitude, complaining, “I suppose you would have the merchant’s daughter stoop to associate with the ignorant and vulgar factory girl, but I shall never do it.” Despite the claims of equality and meritocracy, an author in the Mechanic Apprentice concluded, labor could not achieve “the respectability, or receive the reward, which its usefulness, nay, its indispensable importance, should claim for it.”

Appealing to middle-class ideals of meritocracy, factory operatives and urban apprentices envisioned worthiness defined by physical contribution rather than status. They challenged the stigma toward manual labor that prevented working-class people from claiming full roles in

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57 E. G. Squier, “The Laboring Classes,” New York State Mechanic 2, 15 Apr 1843, quoted in Burns, Success in America, 111.
moral, civic, and political leadership. Factory owners and managers – the core of the middle class – divided labor into a dichotomy of mental employment and manual employment that justified the authority of “head” labor and the subordination of “hand” labor using metaphors of the body. As the industrial economy drew labor from the farm and into low-skilled jobs, many social commentators romanticized agricultural labor because of the worker’s control of nature. Concerns about the dignity of manual labor threatened the nation’s democratic project, as reformers worried that a class of degraded workers could never be free from conditions of economic dependence.

In proclaiming the dignity of labor, working-class youth also recognized when the fruits of toil were unjustly denied to them. An emerging class consciousness pitted the “poor” – honest working men – against the “rich” – men who did not need to work. The young editors of the Mechanic Apprentice asked “which of the two does the more good to society; the rich drone, that lives in his palace, or the poor hod-carrier that aided in its construction.” The author claimed that the social hierarchy should privilege “he who can from Nature’s coarse materials produce the useful and the beautiful, to benefit himself and his race.” However, the author continued, the social, economic, and political order of the mid-nineteenth century North kept the worker “physically, morally, and politically depressed and degraded.” The non-producing elite “seiz[ed] upon the fruits of an industry of the burdens of which they have not partaken and appropriate it to their own personal aggrandizement and splendid ease.” This violation was not only material, but it affected citizenship as well. The laboring classes were not only “robbed of their fair and just inheritance,” but also “deprived of social importance and political equality.”

60 Rice, Minding the Machine.
61 Glickstein, Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America.
62 “Poor But Respectable,” Mechanic Apprentice, Sep 1845.
63 “Redemption of Labor, No. II,” Mechanic Apprentice, Dec 1845.
In the *Lowell Offering* and the *Mechanic Apprentice*, working-class youth transformed the dignity of labor into a gendered vision of adulthood that embraced their labor conditions as different paths to the same middle-class ideals. Since the American Revolution, women’s civic role had been confined within their home, in service of their families. “Republican motherhood” made women responsible for schooling their sons in the social values of independence, virtue, and pursuit of the common good. With the rise of industrialization and the decline of household production, women were charged with making the home a sanctuary from the competitive public sphere. But working women lost domestic status when the necessity of labor took them outside circumscribed feminine roles. While some working-class women joined the labor movement to campaign for higher wages and better conditions in an attempt to improve their lives as factory operatives, the women of the *Lowell Offering* imagined a transition from factory labor into middle-class domesticity.  

Authors in the *Offering* affirmed the separate spheres ideology that confined women’s activities to the home because of their presumably natural role as nurturers. They recognized that a “woman might engage in noise and strife, but the overtasked heart would yearn for a humbler lot, and prematurely exhaust itself in the violence of self-contest.” Articles criticized women who wanted to leave the domestic sphere for public life. Given the “the pleasant duties that await her at her own fireside,” the author could not understand why any woman would pursue activities “which require the daring and bold spirit, and more enduring frame of man to execute.” Because a woman was “fervent in her devotion to whatever is pure and good,” her influence was better

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used in the domestic sphere. Authors in the *Offering* viewed women as destined to become wives and mothers. They fulfilled their duty through domestic employment, with mill work being only a temporary stop along the way.

The *Offering* promoted an image of factory operatives as selfless young women who pursued the heartless world of wage labor in order to support aged parents and orphaned siblings. By publically asserting their fidelity to familial concerns, Lowell workers connected their manual labor to accepted narratives of femininity. In a story following a common trope, Catherine comes to Lowell to help her parents. When her parents succumb to illness, Catherine faces the prospect of pulling her younger siblings out of school and putting them to work. In a display of her “self-sacrificing spirit,” Catherine declares, “I will work till I die, before I will consent to such a course.” As the oldest child, most capable of enduring “privation,” she takes the burden on herself, rather than let her siblings learn “that the cup of human existence is mixed with bitterness and sorrow.” This image of domestic concern allowed operatives to preserve feminine claims to authority through duty within the private sphere, even while venturing into the masculine world of mechanized wage labor.

Articles in the *Offering* also rejected marriage as women’s only path to domestic duty. Authors wrote pieces that vindicated the social role of “old maids.” Rather than being viewed as “unlucky, derided, and almost despised,” the author claimed that society should view single women as “part of that wise design” for human happiness. Unmarried women contributed important resources to domestic harmony, stepping in whenever the family needed a capable and consoling female. When a couple’s adult children had married and left home, the unmarried daughter would “be the light, life and joy of those who would otherwise be sad and solitary.”

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67 “Tales of Factory Life, No. 2,” *Lowell Offering*, Nov 1841. Thomas Dublin’s analysis shows that most women used mill employment to fulfill their own goals of education, marriage, or a period of independence.
parents’ declining health, the single daughter was ready “to repay their care of her early years, by the constant and much needed attentions.” Married women, after an event of domestic heartbreak, could find “help and consolation from the one of their number who remains free from such cares.” Widowers “consigned their motherless children to the love and care of the trusty old maid.” Whether through the natural life course, or from an unexpected accident, domestic life could be fractured, and single women were ready to repair the damage. *Offering* writers demonstrated how women actually improved their ability to fulfill feminine roles by remaining single.\(^6\)

For young men in early nineteenth-century New England, the dignity of manual labor served as a foundation for economic and political autonomy. With the rise of industrialization, middle-class leaders promoted an ideology of the free laborer that promised young men recognition of adulthood from their own efforts. As an alliance between wage workers and independent proprietors against the economic exploitation of slave labor, free labor ideology emerged in the early nineteenth century as a narrative of Northern nationalism. It allowed men across the economic spectrum to “rally to the defense of the superiority of their own system, even as [they] questioned whether the contrasts with slavery did not disguise the forms of compulsion within free labor,” writes Eric Foner in the classic study of the subject.\(^6\)

As the boundaries of political inclusion incorporated the masses of propertyless men, the rhetoric of free labor established a standard of political independence on based self-ownership and the potential for economic ownership. Free labor ideology embraced the cult of the self-made man and judged individual success based on the ability to conform to middle-class values. However, the stigma on unskilled manual laborers, and the poor, degraded men who seemed to lack the ability to

\(^6\) Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, x.
improve their economic station, presented a powerful obstacle to the civic role of workers.

In response, the Mechanic Apprentice embraced the image of the self-made man as a coming of age narrative that connected artisan apprentices to independent manhood. As Eric Foner describes, proponents of nineteenth-century free labor ideology lauded “the opportunity it offered to wage earners to rise to property-owning independence.” The Apprentice’s narrative of adulthood portrayed the coming of age process as a parallel achievement of maturity in the economy and in society. A brief narrative told the story of a “youth who left his native village in 1820, to seek a livelihood in New York, by industry and honorable dealings with all men” and became “the possessor of one of the largest establishments in the city, and looked upon as one of the most influential persons in the state.” The story, which shared common tropes with juvenile literature of the mid-nineteenth century, emphasized not the financial reward, but the social respect gained through honest labor. The apprentice achieved adulthood by becoming “his own master,” a status that gave him a claim to masculine conceptions of citizenship. This narrative of social mobility, in which the young man from humble beginnings achieved prominence through his ingenuity and character, would become a dominant theme in juvenile literature later in the nineteenth century, particularly through the writings of Horatio Alger.

This story of an apprentice's transition to adulthood demonstrated an idealized path for manual laborers to achieve prosperity in the commercial economy. The editors invoked this image whenever they referenced “the honored and successful career in life” achieved by their former members. In the magazine’s self-narrative, the Library Association's opportunities for mutual improvement redeemed apprentices from vice and ignorance, setting them on that path to

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70 Ibid., ix.
respectability and authority expected of their gender status. They praised their former members while taking credit for “those, who, having arrived at their majority, represent our association, not only in our own city, but in the ‘uttermost parts’ of the Union.” These articles invoked the rhetoric of the free labor ideology through appeals to virtue, honor, and character. The goal of the association was to improve apprentices' lives through education and moral uplift, consistent with free labor ideology assumptions about meritocracy and the self-made man. They pushed back against the class divergence that privileged managers, businessmen, and professionals when awarding civic leadership. The story showed other young mechanics, as well as the general public, that manual work provided the foundation for citizenship equal to any other type of work.

Alongside editorials that promoted the manual workers’ ability to achieve wealth and prestige, articles in the *Mechanic Apprentice* also challenged systemic obstacles to manual laborers’ advancement endemic within the commercial economy’s division between mental and manual work. Some authors articulated the ways economic structures, rather than the claim to internal capacities, stratified civic leadership. Despite the respectable and worthy character of New England's laborers, economic and political success remained elusive. The young mechanics interpreted the degradation of labor as a threat to the important tenets of manhood: economic independence and political influence. By critiquing the exploitation and political domination of laborers by the capitalist system, the *Mechanic Apprentice* demonstrated how assumptions about labor and maturity could be reformed to create a society that truly offered success based on merit, without the disadvantages given for gender or class.

In a three-part series “The Redemption of Labor,” an apprentice asserted his right to speak on one of the nation's most pressing issues. Instead of proposing a means of uplifting the character of Boston’s apprentices through mutual improvement, the author, “A. L. M.,” charged
the political and economic system of capital with denying New England’s working men their just claims to prosperity. The threats to mechanics’ economic livelihood and political standing were “closely interwoven with each other,” preventing laborers from achieving adult independence. A. L. M. listed the numerous obstacles faced by manual laborers that violated America’s promise as a land of equal opportunity for fulfilling human potential.

To be a workingman is to court poverty, - to stand as a sign of reproach, - to be a mark of general contempt. A man of that class is considered to be without mind, without soul, and entitled to none of the decencies of life – and when he attempts to rise above his condition, to assert the innate supremacy of humanity over all the accidents of birth or fortune, he is met by an opposition that seeks to crush him to the earth.73

The power of capital, harnessed by the “idle few,” reduced working men to slaves by co-opting their productive capacity and silencing their political efforts.

Instead of emphasizing the opportunity available for young men to rise to positions of economic authority, A. L. M. outlined the antagonistic relationship between workers and employers. Rather than depicting laborers as potential owners – the heart of free labor ideology – he wrote that Labor and Capital represented two “conflicting interests” that needed equal representation in government “to preserve the proper balance, and prevent oppression and injustice.” Capital was not the “elder brother” described by William Ellery Channing but a potential oppressor whose interest needed to be restrained. Because labor was “an interest of predominant importance, though shamefully insignificant influence,” manual laborers needed campaign for labor to “represent itself, in the halls of legislation.” The political emancipation of labor would fulfill the civic ideals of masculinity. A. L. M. assured his readers that labor representation would appeal “to the plainest dictates of sacred duty, to the warmest love of liberty, to the best feelings of noble pride, to the most rigid regard for justice, to the innate promptings of humanity, and to every consideration of common defence [sic] and common

73 “Redemption of Labor, No. II,” Dec 1845.
safety.” Rather than articulating a robust critique of the distribution of capital and the inequality that sprang from ownership of the means of production, A. L. M., like many other Mechanic Apprentice contributors, focused on the divergence of public reputation and civic leadership between mental and manual workers and tried to prevent the capacities of maturity from being monopolized by the middle class.

But the Mechanic Apprentice did not view its campaign for labor’s dignity as a purely masculine endeavor. During a period in which women were legally and culturally separated from labor by the “cult of domesticity,” the Mechanic Apprentices’ interest in maturity allowed them to create an ideology of labor that celebrated the female wage worker. By praising “the bright array of youthful work-women that daily thread our narrow thoroughfares in obedience to the never-ceasing promptings of the life-task,” male apprentices extended their own goals of maturity to their laboring sisters. Female workers had “independent feelings,” as well as financial autonomy because they “prefer[ed] their own burdens rather than should their parents.” Working women claimed the same work ethic because they “deem[ed] reward more rightly due when bestowed for virtuous qualities than for gay appearance.” As a mark of their virtue and maturity, the working girls of Boston were “not ashamed of honest industry.” The gendered ideology of labor in the mid-nineteenth century portrayed women as nurturers, sanctifying the home from economic corruption and ambition. The apprentices viewed urban workers as “girls, too, who deem propriety of conduct of some avail in the estimation of personal character, and who feel that though their calling is now to toil, toil daily, yet labor can be made honorable and worthy.” By praising the diligence and industry of working women, the author distinguished the laboring classes from the presumed luxury and ostentation of the leisured classes. This article

74 “Redemption of Labor, No. III,” Jan 1846.
offered an alternative model of citizenship based not on the nature of labor (mental or manual), but based on industry, sacrifice, and character. By praising the toil of Boston’s young female workers, the author appropriated the character traits upheld by the middle class and connected them to the conditions of working-class life.

The young apprentices and factory workers also used the dignity of labor to build solidarity across racial boundaries. New England's dominant labor narratives sought to consolidate the moral superiority of the Northern labor regime against the Southern practice of chattel slavery. Both the Lowell Offering and the Mechanic Apprentice proclaimed anti-slavery sympathies in order to bolster the autonomy that wage labor offered for Northern youth. By offering public support for the anti-slavery cause, working-class authors showed sympathy for the middle-class abolition movement. Anti-slavery provided a credible cause to serve as the content for young men and women's public discourse, allowing them to assert respectability and elevate their labor positions. Through their discussions of abolition, working-class youth challenged the gender, class, and age barriers within the public sphere. Their critiques of slavery elevated the power of free labor to confer maturity in contrast to the perpetual subordination of the slave. Although some working-class Americans opposed slavery out of fear of the degraded labor condition of enslaved blacks could threaten their own livelihood, the authors of the Lowell Offering and the Mechanic Apprentice promoted abolition on the basis of racial justice.76 For working-class youth, anti-slavery was not simply a moral position, but could build solidarity among free laborers, whether manual or mental.

The Lowell Offering condemned slavery in order to defend female operatives from the criticism of conservatives who used the “wage slavery” of northern factories to justify the plantation’s labor practices. Editor Harriet Farley countered this attack by simultaneously

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76 Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, 279.
uplifting factory labor and leveling charges of inhumanity against slaveholders. She defended mill labor by emphasizing operatives’ control of time, their access to education, and their opportunities for marriage. Each of these characteristics represented a key feature of maturity claimed by Northern white women, but denied to enslaved black women. In Lowell mills “the northern operative comes and goes at pleasure, and no one can prevent it.” Rather than being “seduced” as the proslavery critic contended, another author insisted that operatives’ “engagements are voluntarily entered into with our employers, with the understanding that they may be dissolved at our pleasure.” Factory operatives were not kept in their positions by threat of being “branded, imprisoned and tortured.” While operatives worked long hours, they were better off than the slave, for whom education and leisure time “must be considered a favor not a right.” A factory worker was “encouraged...to improve her intellect.” Most importantly, the Lowell worker was free to marry “at her own pleasure, the man of her choice” without fear of being separated from her children, unlike the slave who “marries at the choice of her master, and when her master chooses, the husband and wife are separated – the children scattered abroad.”

Although the polite nature of the Offering did not allow Farley to mention it, readers would have known that enslavement also made black women subject to sexual abuse and impregnation by their masters or other white men. By demonstrating the personal autonomy enjoyed by female workers, Farley attacked both the oppression of slavery and Southern conservatives’ attempts to deny women’s labor.77

Farley’s article used the northern, middle-class ideology of domesticity to test the morality of factory labor and slave labor. Her critique assumed that black women deserved the same opportunities for education, marriage, and domestic security as white women in the North and the South. But Farley was unapologetic about the labor white factory workers performed.

77 Editorial, Lowell Offering, Apr 1844.
Ignoring the physicality of factory work, Farley stressed the operatives’ ability to enter and leave the factory at will, rather than the seduction portrayed by the defenders of slavery. In Farley’s narrative, manual labor and domesticity coexisted as long as women had choices in both labor and love. Her defense of factory labor posited a reorganization of dichotomies of women’s labor – away from the separation between toil and gentility toward a privileging of choice over coercion.

The Mechanic Apprentice also presented a vision of cross-racial sympathy. A short story published in 1845 displayed an encounter between a Southern “young man...of a strong nervous temperament, delicate constitution, and evidently a stranger to labor of any kind” and an apparent northerner, “a strong, muscular man, several years his elder.” The two start an argument about the charges of cruelty toward slaves levied by Northern abolitionists on plantation owners. The Southerner denies all allegations of violence against slaves, claiming that “it is only your low bred Northern nigger-drivers who are in the South, who ever act in that way.” But the muscular man counters with a shocking revelation: “I was born a Southern slave; I have been house-servant, coach-driver, and field-hand. I have been through every grade in a slave’s life; I have been beaten, branded, and sold.” By revealing the “muscular man” as a former slave, the author challenges the reader’s assumptions about race and respectability. At first glance, elder discussant has the respect automatically afforded to white laborers, leaving the reader to question whether he should think of this character any differently knowing his true racial status.78

The story encouraged identification between Northern white laborers and enslaved African Americans by denigrating the character of the Southern son. The muscular man, now revealed as a slave, makes another revelation: “Your father is my father – I am your brother!! I am as white as you are, and you did not know me because I am a white man, among freemen.”

78 “Facts are Stubborn Things,” Mechanic Apprentice, Aug 1845.
Both the nervous young man and the strong man came from the same line. However, labor forged the older slave into a mature and confident man, while the favored son was protected from labor and was therefore denied a chance for autonomy. The ‘black’ man tells his brother that his education was financed “by means of money that was received for me.” The story not only demonstrated the dignity of the black male laborer, but also linked the plight of black men and white apprentices who each found the fruit of their labor appropriated by elites.

Anti-slavery articles in the Mechanic Apprentice condemned the South’s exploitative labor system and challenged the acquiescence of Northerners that allowed slavery to continue. By addressing the political concerns surrounding the slavery debate, the authors of the Mechanic Apprentice represented the civic aspects of their manhood. They claimed the right to speak alongside the formally-educated leaders of business and government. The Apprentice’s political discourse tested the equal standing of able-bodied white men presumed by Northern conceptions of citizenship.

The Mechanic Apprentice also addressed slavery as an issue of national character. It drew upon the rhetoric of maturity to criticize the nation’s tolerance for the “abhorrent” practice. The continuation of the slave trade showed American’s “moral turpitude.” It revealed “men – christian men – men who by no other rule of action than that golden one laid down by our Saviour, and who in their national character have expressly declared that men are created free and equal” could succumb to hypocrisy. The lapse in values and resolve not only threatened the character of American leaders, but it threatened the United States’ status “among nations the

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79 Although not explicitly mentioned in the story, the fact that the white man and black man shared the same father was almost certainly a result of the white father’s rape of one of his female slaves. This brutal, systemic practice offered abolitionists further evidence for the immorality of the South and its threat to idealized white, Northern domesticity. See Joshua D. Rothman, Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

80 Welke, Law and the Borders of Belonging.
most civilized.” The solution to the problem of this profound moral lapse was for “us as individuals and as a government, to take some decisive measures for the immediate suppression of this appalling traffic.”81 For the nation and its leaders to claim autonomy and morality, they needed the fortitude to stand behind their principles. Only be rejecting slavery could the United States claim maturity.

The Mechanic Apprentice’s anti-slavery position modeled the mainstream abolition movement by taking a definitive stance for preserving the Union. As one author wrote, “A true patriot, one who cherishes a sincere regard for the honor and interests of his country, is continually pained while perusing the public journals of the day, at the frequent and continued allusion to the prospect of separation.” The author appealed to “the duty of every American editor and every American citizen” as a member of the adult political community, calling upon people of influence “to frown indignantly upon any such manifestation, from whatever source it may come.” The apprentice author portrayed the discussion of possible dissolution as the problem of adults who did not understand the full value of the Union.82

Opposition to slavery and fierce loyalty to the Union was the defining feature of the Republican Party that would become the standard-bearer for free labor ideology in the 1850s. When the party took the mantle of “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men” (emphasis mine), it signaled a status of maturity as much as gender. It was a statement that Republican Party members were men as opposed to boys. Because their authority as men over women was understood, they explicitly recognized their maturity. Although the free labor ideology of the Republican Party lauded Northern society for “the opportunity it offered wage earners to rise to

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81 “The Slave Trade,” Mechanic Apprentice, May 1845. This article received a mixed review from William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator. Garrison praised the “commendable zeal of the “youthful writer,” but faulted the author for not condemning Southern claims to chivalry, which might appear honorable, but was “nothing but mingled cowardice and ruffianism.” Liberator, 23 May 1845.
82 “The Integrity of the Union,” Mechanic Apprentice, Aug 1845.
property-owning independence,” the apprentices sought to tie the status of adulthood to wage earning itself, and carve out a place for working men within American civil society without the barrier of proprietorship. Even within their liminal position of apprenticeship, and with the specter of perpetual manual labor before them, the young mechanics addressed the civic debate about the evils of slavery, the importance of the Union, and the ability of wage labor to create maturity. Their efforts to portray manual labor within the narrative of middle-class respectability failed to overcome class prejudice, but helped to solidify the relationship between self-ownership and citizenship which would continue through the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

The short-lived publications of the *Lowell Offering* and the *Mechanic Apprentice* show the struggles working-class youth faced when trying to prove themselves worthy of freedom in the capitalist economy. These young men and women from middling backgrounds started their childhood with the benefits of schooling and were protected from the most degraded forms of labor. They expected that their work experiences would lead them to gender-specific positions of adulthood: Young mechanics would become business owners with enough financial stability to act as a family breadwinner. Young factory operatives would marry and maintain a domestic sphere. When they entered employment in the industrial environment, they aligned their work with middle-class values by continuing to pursue education and moral uplift. They used their public writing to improve the reputation of working-class youth by showing their moral character and their ability to make good choices. But despite their efforts, industrial labor did not give them the advancement they expected. Young industrial laborers quickly found that few New Englanders looked on their work as an expression of maturity. Middle-class leaders assumed that only professional men and young women sheltered in the domestic sphere had the internal
capacities necessary to further the nation’s experiment with democracy. Those who benefited from the commercial economy used their experiences as proof of democracy’s promise. Young people’s struggle to prove themselves worthy of prosperity fueled American culture in the nineteenth century.

Early nineteenth-century New Englanders – both those who succeed and those who failed – found themselves caught between the fantasy and the reality of early capitalism. Operatives and apprentices tried to show that the inequalities of the economy kept them in subordinate positions. But in order to demonstrate their own maturity, they needed to treat their labor as a choice. Maturity created a paradox for those seeking to denounce their conditions of employment. Young workers could not simultaneously declare themselves degraded workers while proclaiming themselves competent and respectable members of the community. The *Lowell Offering* ended publication in 1845, as native-born mill workers abandoned the increasingly harsh conditions of the textile factories. An influx of impoverished Irish immigrants, who lacked the cultural experiences necessary for middle-class refinement, filled the ranks of mill workers. The *Mechanic Apprentice* ceased in 1846 as the term ‘apprentice’ became more antiquated and lower-skilled manual labor was relegated to non-Anglo immigrants. Young Americans who could claim some inherent maturity from whiteness abandoned the most degraded positions rather than continue to fight for their recognition as competent, productive citizens.

Belief in choice was the foundation of American society. Generations before the success manuals and juvenile fiction of the Gilded Age, young New Englanders pacified their anxiety about degradation with an inner quest to perfect their character.\(^3\) Freed from the legal, political, and economic constraints of the colonial era, Americans tied personal prosperity and national

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\(^83\) Hilkey, *Character Is Capital*. 
destiny to individual decisions of long-term interest over short-term gain. Through the process of
growing up, young men and women made the choices that revealed their competence and worth.
But this ideal assumed that young people held control over when, where, and how they worked.
The promise of liberal capitalism was that prosperity would flow to those with the capacity to
responsibly manage their choices. Maturity obscured the economic resources that supported
these capacities and the entrenched gender and class disparities that belied these ideals. As
middling Americans sought to protect themselves from the taint of the working class, they
constructed a narrow definition of appropriate choice through the ideals of respectability. By
following respectable gender roles, men and women demonstrated their maturity. In the early
nineteenth century, masculinity was the possession of qualities associated with breadwinner
status in the commercial, democratic society. Femininity was the possession of qualities
associated with domestic status in a society that enforced the ideal of separate male and female
spheres. Gender and class hierarchy were forged during the process of growing up. By making
inequality palatable to Americans’ sense of nature and justice, maturity held liberal society
together in the nineteenth century.

As early commercialization eroded New England’s dominant institutions of social order,
parents and children sought new sources of hierarchy. Rejecting the inherited status of birthright,
New Englanders found a legitimate hierarchy in consent and reason – the ability to make good
choices, or as described here, maturity. Because Northerners viewed “commercial expansion” as
“the moral and material handmaiden to their liberal society,” making individual’s work within
the economy a demonstration of his or her conformity with liberal principles.\(^84\) Youth as a stage
of life became critical to the transition from dependent household labor to contractual labor
within the industrial economy. Middling youth moved through this liminal stage in a variety of
\(^84\) Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 88.
respectable occupations before settling into secure adulthood as breadwinners or housewives. For poor young men and women, socioeconomic deficits in childhood led to the perpetuation of legal and economic dependence. This division between the middle and working classes became a legitimate hierarchy because it gave men and women the status that they presumably deserved. In a nation founded on the consent of the governed, people who can claim to possess reason and self-ownership receive authority and people who cannot are placed in subordinate positions. This makes the study of coming of age – claiming the privileges of adulthood – essential to our understanding of American identity.
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Abbreviations

AAS – American Antiquarian Society
CHS – Connecticut Historical Society
HL – Houghton Library, Harvard University
MHS – Massachusetts Historical Society
MeHS – Maine Historical Society
RIHS – Rhode Island Historical Society.
RSCL – Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth University
SL – Schlesinger Library

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