

had to forever depend on supplemental income from their wives and young children.

Wage workers—a population disproportionately composed of immigrants and poorer Americans—faced low wages, long hours, and dangerous working conditions. Class conflict developed. Instead of the formal inequality of a master-servant contract, employer and employee entered a contract presumably as equals. But hierarchy was evident: employers had financial security and political power; employees faced uncertainty and powerlessness in the workplace. Dependent on the whims of their employers, some workers turned to strikes and unions to pool their resources. In 1825 a group of journeymen in Boston formed a Carpenters' Union to protest their inability "to maintain a family at the present time, with the wages which are now usually given."<sup>28</sup> Working men organized unions to assert themselves and win both the respect and the resources due to a breadwinner and a citizen.

For the middle-class managers and civic leaders caught between workers and owners, unions enflamed a dangerous antagonism between employers and employees. They countered any claims of inherent class conflict with the ideology of social mobility. Middle-class owners and managers justified their economic privilege as the natural product of superior character traits, including decision making and hard work. One group of master carpenters denounced their striking journeymen in 1825 with the claim that workers of "industrious and temperate habits, have, in their turn, become thriving and respectable Masters, and the great body of our Mechanics have been enabled to acquire property and respectability, with a just weight and influence in society."<sup>29</sup> In an 1856 speech in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Abraham Lincoln had to assure his audience that the country's commercial transformation had not reduced American laborers to slavery. Southerners, he said, "insist that their slaves are far better off than Northern freemen. What a mistaken view do these men have of Northern labourers! They think that men are always to remain labourers here—but there is no such class. The man who laboured for another last year, this year labours for himself. And next year he will hire others to labour for him."<sup>30</sup> This essential belief undergirded the northern commitment to "free labor" and won the market revolution much widespread acceptance.

## V. Changes in Gender Roles and Family Life

In the first half of the nineteenth century, families in the northern United States increasingly participated in the cash economy created by the

market revolution. The first stirrings of industrialization shifted work away from the home. These changes transformed Americans' notions of what constituted work and therefore shifted what it meant to be an American woman and an American man. As Americans encountered more goods in stores and produced fewer at home, the ability to remove women and children from work determined a family's class status. This ideal, of course, ignored the reality of women's work at home and was possible for only the wealthy. The market revolution therefore not only transformed the economy, it changed the nature of the American family. As the market revolution thrust workers into new systems of production, it redefined gender roles. The market integrated families into a new cash economy. As Americans purchased more goods in stores and produced fewer at home, the purity of the domestic sphere—the idealized realm of women and children—increasingly signified a family's class status.

Women and children worked to supplement the low wages of many male workers. Around age eleven or twelve, boys could take jobs as office runners or waiters, earning perhaps a dollar a week to support their parents' incomes. The ideal of an innocent and protected childhood was a privilege for middle- and upper-class families, who might look down upon poor families. Joseph Tuckerman, a Unitarian minister who served poor Bostonians, lamented the lack of discipline and regularity among poor children: "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."<sup>31</sup> Prevented from attending school, poor children served instead as economic assets for their destitute families.

Meanwhile, the education received by middle-class children provided a foundation for future economic privilege. As artisans lost control over their trades, young men had a greater incentive to invest time in education to find skilled positions later in life. Formal schooling was especially important for young men who desired apprenticeships in retail or commercial work. Enterprising instructors established schools to assist "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," such as that organized in 1820 by Warren Colburn of Boston.<sup>32</sup> In response to this need, the Boston School Committee created the English High School (as opposed to the Latin School) that could "give a child an education that shall fit him for active life, and shall serve as a foundation for eminence in his profession, whether Mer-





“The Sphere of Woman,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, vol. 40 (March 1850): 209. University of Virginia.

cantile or Mechanical” beyond that “which our public schools can now furnish.”<sup>33</sup>

Education equipped young women with the tools to live sophisticated, genteel lives. After sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Davis left home in 1816 to attend school, her father explained that the experience would “lay a foundation for your future character & respectability.”<sup>34</sup> After touring the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville praised the independence granted to the young American woman, who had “the great scene of the world . . . open to her” and whose education prepared her to exercise both reason and moral sense.<sup>35</sup> Middling young women also used their education to take positions as schoolteachers in the expanding common school system. Bristol Academy in Tauten, Maine, for instance, advertised “instruction . . . in the art of teaching” for female pupils.<sup>36</sup> In 1825, Nancy Denison left Concord Academy with references indicating that she was “qualified to teach with success and profit” and “very cheerfully recommend[ed]” for “that very responsible employment.”<sup>37</sup>

Middle-class youths found opportunities for respectable employment through formal education, but poor youths remained in marginalized positions. Their families’ desperate financial state kept them from enjoying the fruits of education. When pauper children did receive teaching through

institutions such as the House of Refuge in New York City, they were often simultaneously indentured to successful families to serve as field hands or domestic laborers. 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.<sup>38</sup> Poor children also found work in factories such as Samuel Slater's textile mills in southern New England. Slater published a newspaper advertisement for "four or five active Lads, about 15 Years of Age to serve as Apprentices in the Cotton Factory."<sup>39</sup>

And so, during the early nineteenth century, opportunities for education and employment often depended on a given family's class. In colonial America, nearly all children worked within their parent's chosen profession, whether it be agricultural or artisanal. During the market revolution, however, more children were able to postpone employment. Americans aspired to provide a "Romantic Childhood"—a period in which boys and girls were sheltered within the home and nurtured through primary schooling.<sup>40</sup> This ideal was available to families that could survive without their children's labor. As these children matured, their early experiences often determined whether they entered respectable, well-paying positions or became dependent workers with little prospects for social mobility.

Just as children were expected to be sheltered from the adult world of work, American culture expected men and women to assume distinct gender roles as they prepared for marriage and family life. An ideology of "separate spheres" set the public realm—the world of economic production and political life—apart as a male domain, and the world of consumers and domestic life as a female one. (Even nonworking women labored by shopping for the household, producing food and clothing, cleaning, educating children, and performing similar activities. But these were considered "domestic" because they did not bring money into the household, although they too were essential to the household's economic viability.) While reality muddled the ideal, the divide between a private, female world of home and a public, male world of business defined American gender hierarchy.

The idea of separate spheres also displayed a distinct class bias. Middle and upper classes reinforced their status by shielding "their" women



from the harsh realities of wage labor. Women were to be mothers and educators, not partners in production. But lower-class women continued to contribute directly to the household economy. The middle- and upper-class ideal was feasible only in households where women did not need to engage in paid labor. In poorer households, women engaged in wage labor as factory workers, pieceworkers producing items for market consumption, tavern- and innkeepers, and domestic servants. While many of the fundamental tasks women performed remained the same—producing clothing, cultivating vegetables, overseeing dairy production, and performing any number of other domestic labors—the key difference was whether and when they performed these tasks for cash in a market economy.

Domestic expectations constantly changed and the market revolution transformed many women's traditional domestic tasks. Cloth production, for instance, advanced throughout the market revolution as new mechanized production increased the volume and variety of fabrics available to ordinary people. This relieved many better-off women of a traditional labor obligation. As cloth production became commercialized, women's home-based cloth production became less important to household economies. Purchasing cloth and, later, ready-made clothes began to transform women from producers to consumers. One woman from Maine, Martha Ballard, regularly referenced spinning, weaving, and knitting in the diary she kept from 1785 to 1812.<sup>41</sup> Martha, her daughters, and her female neighbors spun and plied linen and woolen yarns and used them to produce a variety of fabrics to make clothing for her family. The production of cloth and clothing was a year-round, labor-intensive process, but it was for home consumption, not commercial markets.

In cities, where women could buy cheap imported cloth to turn into clothing, they became skilled consumers. They stewarded money earned by their husbands by comparing values and haggling over prices. In one typical experience, Mrs. Peter Simon, a captain's wife, inspected twenty-six yards of Holland cloth to ensure that it was worth the £130 price.<sup>42</sup> Even wealthy women shopped for high-value goods. While servants or slaves routinely made low-value purchases, the mistress of the household trusted her discriminating eye alone for expensive or specific purchases.

Women might also parlay their skills into businesses. In addition to working as seamstresses, milliners, or laundresses, women might undertake paid work for neighbors or acquaintances or combine clothing production with management of a boardinghouse. Even slaves with





Thomas Horner,  
*Broadway, New  
York*, 1836.  
Smithsonian  
American Art  
Museum.

particular skill at producing clothing could be hired out for a higher price or might even negotiate to work part-time for themselves. Most slaves, however, continued to produce domestic items, including simpler cloths and clothing, for home consumption.

Similar domestic expectations played out in the slave states. Enslaved women labored in the fields. Whites argued that African American women were less delicate and womanly than white women and therefore perfectly suited for agricultural labor. The southern ideal meanwhile established that white plantation mistresses were shielded from manual labor because of their very whiteness. Throughout the slave states, however, aside from the minority of plantations with dozens of slaves, most white women by necessity continued to assist with planting, harvesting, and processing agricultural projects despite the cultural stigma attached to it. White southerners continued to produce large portions of their food and clothing at home. Even when they were market-oriented producers of cash crops, white southerners still insisted that their adherence to plantation slavery and racial hierarchy made them morally superior to greedy northerners and their callous, cutthroat commerce. Southerners and northerners increasingly saw their ways of life as incompatible.

While the market revolution remade many women's economic roles, their legal status remained essentially unchanged. Upon marriage, women were rendered legally dead by the notion of coverture, the custom that counted married couples as a single unit represented by the husband. Without special precautions or interventions, women could not earn



their own money, own their own property, sue, or be sued. Any money earned or spent belonged by law to their husbands. Women shopped on their husbands' credit and at any time husbands could terminate their wives' access to their credit. Although a handful of states made divorce available—divorce had before only been legal in Congregationalist states such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, where marriage was strictly a civil contract rather than a religious one—it remained extremely expensive, difficult, and rare. Marriage was typically a permanently binding legal contract.

Ideas of marriage, if not the legal realities, began to change. This period marked the beginning of the shift from “institutional” to “companionate” marriage.<sup>43</sup> Institutional marriages were primarily labor arrangements that maximized the couple's and their children's chances of surviving and thriving. Men and women assessed each other's skills as they related to household production, although looks and personality certainly entered into the equation. But in the late eighteenth century, under the influence of Enlightenment thought, young people began to privilege character and compatibility in their potential partners. Money was still essential: marriages prompted the largest redistributions of property prior to the settling of estates at death. But the means of this redistribution was changing. Especially in the North, land became a less important foundation for matchmaking as wealthy young men became not only farmers and merchants but bankers, clerks, or professionals. The increased emphasis on affection and attraction that young people embraced was facilitated by an increasingly complex economy that offered new ways to store, move, and create wealth, which liberalized the criteria by which families evaluated potential in-laws.

To be considered a success in family life, a middle-class American man typically aspired to own a comfortable home and to marry a woman of strong morals and religious conviction who would take responsibility for raising virtuous, well-behaved children. The duties of the middle-class husband and wife would be clearly delineated into separate spheres. The husband alone was responsible for creating wealth and engaging in the commerce and politics—the public sphere. The wife was responsible for the private—keeping a good home, being careful with household expenses, and raising children, inculcating them with the middle-class virtues that would ensure their future success. But for poor families, sacrificing the potential economic contributions of wives and children was an impossibility.



## VI. The Rise of Industrial Labor in Antebellum America

More than five million immigrants arrived in the United States between 1820 and 1860. Irish, German, and Jewish immigrants sought new lives and economic opportunities. By the Civil War, nearly one out of every eight Americans had been born outside the United States. A series of push and pull factors drew immigrants to the United States.

In England, an economic slump prompted Parliament to modernize British agriculture by revoking common land rights for Irish farmers. These policies generally targeted Catholics in the southern counties of Ireland and motivated many to seek greater opportunity elsewhere. The booming American economy pulled Irish immigrants toward ports along the eastern United States. Between 1820 and 1840, over 250,000 Irish immigrants arrived in the United States.<sup>44</sup> Without the capital and skills required to purchase and operate farms, Irish immigrants settled primarily in northeastern cities and towns and performed unskilled work. Irish men usually emigrated alone and, when possible, practiced what became known as chain migration. Chain migration allowed Irish men to send portions of their wages home, which would then be used either to support their families in Ireland or to purchase tickets for relatives to come to the United States. Irish immigration followed this pattern into the 1840s and 1850s, when the infamous Irish Famine sparked a massive exodus out of Ireland. Between 1840 and 1860, 1.7 million Irish fled starvation and the oppressive English policies that accompanied it.<sup>45</sup> As they entered manual, unskilled labor positions in urban America's dirtiest and most dangerous occupations, Irish workers in northern cities were compared to African Americans, and anti-immigrant newspapers portrayed them with apelike features. Despite hostility, Irish immigrants retained their social, cultural, and religious beliefs and left an indelible mark on American culture.

While the Irish settled mostly in coastal cities, most German immigrants used American ports and cities as temporary waypoints before settling in the rural countryside. Over 1.5 million immigrants from the various German states arrived in the United States during the antebellum era. Although some southern Germans fled declining agricultural conditions and repercussions of the failed revolutions of 1848, many Germans simply sought steadier economic opportunity. German immigrants tended to travel as families and carried with them skills and capital that enabled them to enter middle-class trades. Germans migrated to the Old





Northwest to farm in rural areas and practiced trades in growing communities such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee, three cities that formed what came to be called the German Triangle.

Catholic and Jewish Germans transformed regions of the republic. Although records are sparse, New York's Jewish population rose from approximately five hundred in 1825 to forty thousand in 1860.<sup>46</sup> Similar gains were seen in other American cities. Jewish immigrants hailing from southwestern Germany and parts of occupied Poland moved to the United States through chain migration and as family units. Unlike other Germans, Jewish immigrants rarely settled in rural areas. Once established, Jewish immigrants found work in retail, commerce, and artisanal occupations such as tailoring. They quickly found their footing and established themselves as an intrinsic part of the American market economy. Just as Irish immigrants shaped the urban landscape through the construction of churches and Catholic schools, Jewish immigrants erected synagogues and made their mark on American culture.

The sudden influx of immigration triggered a backlash among many native-born Anglo-Protestant Americans. This nativist movement, especially fearful of the growing Catholic presence, sought to limit European immigration and prevent Catholics from establishing churches and other institutions. Popular in northern cities such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other cities with large Catholic populations, nativism even spawned its own political party in the 1850s. The American Party, more commonly known as the Know-Nothing Party, found success in local and state elections throughout the North. The party even nominated candidates for president in 1852 and 1856. The rapid rise of the Know-Nothings, reflecting widespread anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment, slowed European immigration. Immigration declined precipitously after 1855 as nativism, the Crimean War, and improving economic conditions in Europe discouraged potential migrants from traveling to the United States. Only after the American Civil War would immigration levels match and eventually surpass the levels seen in the 1840s and 1850s.

In industrial northern cities, Irish immigrants swelled the ranks of the working class and quickly encountered the politics of industrial labor. Many workers formed trade unions during the early republic. Organizations such as Philadelphia's Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers or the Carpenters' Union of Boston operated within specific industries in major American cities. These unions worked to protect the economic power of their members by creating closed shops—workplaces wherein





sure time was part of the male working-class effort to expose the hollowness of the paternalistic claims of employers and their rhetoric of moral superiority.<sup>49</sup>

Women, a dominant labor source for factories since the early 1800s, launched some of the earliest strikes for better conditions. Textile operatives in Lowell, Massachusetts, “turned out” (walked off) their jobs in 1834 and 1836. During the Ten-Hour Movement of the 1840s, female operatives provided crucial support. Under the leadership of Sarah Bagley, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association organized petition drives that drew thousands of signatures from “mill girls.” Like male activists, Bagley and her associates used the desire for mental improvement as a central argument for reform. An 1847 editorial in the *Voice of Industry*, a labor newspaper published by Bagley, asked, “who, after thirteen hours of steady application to monotonous work, can sit down and apply her mind to deep and long continued thought?”<sup>50</sup> Despite the widespread support for a ten-hour day, the movement achieved only partial success. President Martin Van Buren established a ten-hour-day policy for laborers on federal public works projects. New Hampshire passed a statewide law in 1847, and Pennsylvania followed a year later. Both states, however, allowed workers to voluntarily consent to work more than ten hours per day.

In 1842, child labor became a dominant issue in the American labor movement. The protection of child laborers gained more middle-class support than the protection of adult workers. A petition from parents in Fall River, a southern Massachusetts mill town that employed a high portion of child workers, 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.”<sup>51</sup> Massachusetts quickly passed a law prohibiting children under age twelve from working more than ten hours a day. By the midnineteenth century, every state in New England had followed Massachusetts’s lead. Between the 1840s and 1860s, these statutes slowly extended the age of protection of labor and the assurance of schooling. Throughout the region, public officials agreed that young children (between ages nine and twelve) should be prevented from working in dangerous occupations, and older children (between ages twelve and fifteen) should balance their labor with education and time for leisure.<sup>52</sup>

Male workers sought to improve their income and working conditions to create a household that kept women and children protected within the domestic sphere. But labor gains were limited, and the movement remained moderate. Despite its challenge to industrial working conditions, labor activism in antebellum America remained largely wedded to the free labor ideal. The labor movement later supported the northern free soil movement, which challenged the spread of slavery in the 1840s, simultaneously promoting the superiority of the northern system of commerce over the southern institution of slavery while trying, much less successfully, to reform capitalism.

## VII. Conclusion

During the early nineteenth century, southern agriculture produced by slaves fueled northern industry produced by wage workers and managed by the new middle class. New transportation, new machinery, and new organizations of labor integrated the previously isolated pockets of the colonial economy into a national industrial operation. Industrialization and the cash economy tied diverse regions together at the same time that ideology drove Americans apart. By celebrating the freedom of contract that distinguished the wage worker from the indentured servant of previous generations or the slave in the southern cotton field, political leaders claimed the American Revolution's legacy for the North. But the rise of industrial child labor, the demands of workers to unionize, the economic vulnerability of women, and the influx of non-Anglo immigrants left many Americans questioning the meaning of liberty after the market revolution.

## VIII. Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Jane Fiegen Green, with content contributions by Kelly Arehart, Myles Beaurpre, Kristin Condotta, Jane Fiegen Green, Nathan Jeremie-Brink, Lindsay Keiter, Brenden Kennedy, William Kerrigan, Christopher Sawula, David Schley, and Evgenia Shayder Shoop.

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### NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

1. *Niles' Weekly Register* (December 2, 1815), 238.
2. Douglass C. North, *Economic Growth in the United States, 1790–1860* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 25.

