CHAPTER
3

From the Artisan's Republic to the Factory System

'en Philadelphians celebrated the newly ratified U.S. Constitution in 1791, sters, journeymen, and apprentices marched through the streets under ban- s that announced the unity reigning within each craft; only seventy years r, in the era when northern men rallied in support of the Union, urban rkmen no longer felt it possible to march in the same ranks with merchants l manufacturers, who now employed them. In 1865 most Americans were ners, and artisans working in traditional ways still produced most manufac- ed goods. But the egalitarianism of the early-nineteenth-century workshop l been replaced by a gaping social chasm that divided wage laborers in al- t every trade from the factory owners and great merchants of the Civil War

The artisanal world had been characterized by small-scale production, local rkets, skilled craftsmanship, and a self-reliant sense of community and citi- ship. Early-nineteenth-century workmen thought of themselves as masters n in their household and in their trade, the upholders of an equal-rights tra- on whose roots stretched back to the American Revolution. White women, ks, and unskilled immigrants would obviously have an ambiguous relation- to this tradition. However, many historians have found in republicanism, ideology that links civil virtue and personal independence to self-government, owerful standard by which nineteenth-century workers judged and rejected new men of wealth and power, who seemed to rise so quickly and to chal- ge so dramatically the values and livelihood of America's producing classes. Factories, banks, railroads, and mines did not appear overnight. In nine- th-century America, as in many underdeveloped nations today, large, mech- ed enterprises existed alongside extensive systems of home production and the -based trades. In fact, the process of industrialization had a patchwork lity that deskilled and depressed some trades and skipped others entirely. In v York and Philadelphia, a process of "metropolitan industrialization" cre- l a marvelously heterogeneous working class divided by skill, race, sex, and ionality. In contrast, the textile industry, which put its mills on isolated sites ng the New England rivers, generated a more homogeneous class of workers.

At the famous Lowell, Massachusetts mills, Boston capitalists recruited thousands of young farm women and housed them in dormitory-like boarding houses. The textile factories of Rhode Island and Pennsylvania more typically employed whole families, relying heavily on a brutal system of child labor.

To what extent did these textile operatives share the same outlook as the more skilled artisans? Could women share with their menfolk the equal-rights ideology that sustained antebellum workingmen? Or was the republicanism of these artisans an obstacle to gender equality and class consciousness?

DOCUMENTS

The rise of the factory system revolutionized the shoemaking trade in the pre–Civil War era. The first four documents offer a glimpse of the work culture and protest traditions of Lynn, Massachusetts, workers in the shoe industry. In sketching apprenticeship life during the days of the old-time shoe workshop, David Johnson, a Lynn resident, re-creates in the first document the masculine work culture that members of the Mutual Benefit Society of Journeymen Cordwainers celebrated in the 1844 "Cordwainer's Song," reprinted here as the second document. Their proud republican world view had little meaning for female shoebinders like "Constance," who, in the third document, from the pages of the *Awl*, the newspaper of Lynn's artisan shoemakers, complains of her exclusion from the male fraternity. The fourth document, a reporter's account of a mass meeting of Lynn women during the Great Strike of 1860, demonstrates that both men and women drew upon the equal-rights tradition to attack wage slavery, but it also exposes persistent and deep gender divisions within the shoemaking work force.

The fifth document, testimony from the Pennsylvania State Senate, uncovers some of the horrors of the early textile mills and shows that their workers sought state regulation of excessive hours, child labor, and other exploitive conditions. Finally, in the sixth document, a voice from the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association demonstrates how women made their own ideologically charged attack upon wage slavery.

Why might workers have chosen to turn to the state rather than to their own organizations to fight the factory system? What roles did the increasing division of labor, and employer-hiring practices, play in the inability of so many workers to find common ground?

David Johnson Remembers Apprenticeship Life in the Artisan Shoe Shop, 1830

. . . A boy while learning his trade was called a "seamster"; that is, he sewed the shoes for his master, or employer, or to use one of the technicalities of the "craft," he "worked on the seam." Sometimes the genius of one of these boys would outrun all limits. One of this kind, who may be called Alphonzo, worked on the seam for a stipulated sum. He seemed

David N. Johnson, *Sketches of Lynn* (Lynn: Thomas P. Nichols, 1880), pp. 30, 32–35, 59–62.

to regard his work as an incidental circumstance. When he left the shop at night he might be expected back the next morning: but there were no special grounds for the expectation. He might drop in the next morning, or the next week. He left one Saturday night and did not make his appearance again until the following Thursday morning. On entering the shop he proceeded to take off his jacket as though there had been no hiatus in his labor. His master watched him with an amused countenance to see whether he would recognize the lapse of time. At length he said, "Where have you been, Alphonzo?" Alphonzo turned his head in an instant, as if struck with the preposterousness of the inquiry, and exclaimed, "Me? I? O, I've been down to Nahant." The case was closed. . . .

In almost every one of these shops there was one whose mechanical genius outran that of all the rest. He could "temper wax," "cut shoulders," sharpen scrapers and cut hair. The making of wax was an important circumstance in the olden time. To temper it just right so that it would not be too brittle and "fly" from the thread, or too soft and stick to the fingers, was an art within the reach of but few, or if within reach, was attained only by those who aspired to scale the heights of fame, and who, "while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night." Such a one eyed his skillet of melted rosin as the alchemist of old viewed his crucible wherein he was to transmute the baser metals into gold. When the rosin was thoroughly melted, oil or grease was added until the right consistency was supposed to be nearly reached, the compound being thoroughly stirred in the meantime. Then the one having the matter in charge would first dip his finger in cold water and then into the melted mass, and taking the portion that adhered to his finger, would test its temper by pulling it, biting it, and rolling it in his hands. If found to be too hard, more oil or grease would be added, but very cautiously, as the critical moment was being reached. Then the test would be again applied. When the right result was supposed to be nearly gained, a piece of wax would be passed around among the crew for a confirmatory verdict. If the judgment of the master of ceremonies was indorsed, the experiment ended, and the mixture was poured into a vessel of cold water—usually the "shop-tub"—to cool sufficiently to be "worked." . . .

The shop-tub was an indispensable article in every shop. In early times, before the manufactures of wooden ware had become plenty and cheap, some rudely-constructed wooden vessel of home manufacture served the purpose. Afterwards a paint-keg or a firkin with the top sawed off, and still later a second-hand water-pail, was made to do service.

The theory was that the water of the shop-tub was to be changed every day. As this water was used for *wetting* the "stock"—which meant all the sole leather put into the shoe—and also often used for washing hands, it was somewhat necessary that it should be changed occasionally. The shifting of the "tub" often devolved upon the boy of the shop, except when he was too bright. In that case he "shirked" with the rest of the crew. This was the sort of boy that looked out of the attic window of the dormitory

where he slept, to see if the smoke was gracefully curling from the shop's chimney, in the gray of the morning as he stretched himself for a supplementary snooze.

The man who had an "eye" for cutting "shoulders" occupied a niche of distinction among his fellow-craftsmen. If it was not necessary that he should have a "microscopic eye"—which Mr. Pope [the eighteenth-century English poet] tells us man does not need because he "is not a fly,"—it was needful that he should have a "geometric eye" when called upon to adjust the "shoulder" to "convex" and "concave" edges. To do this successfully required little less than a stroke of genius. Two cents was the usual price for cutting a "shoulder," and an experienced cutter would gather in each week quite a pile of the larger-size coppers of those days, whose purchasing power of many things was twice as great as at present. . . .

Perhaps one of the sorest experiences a boy had in old times in learning the "craft," was that which came from *breaking awls*. In order to fully appreciate the situation, the reader must take a survey of the whole field. It was a period of low wages. Awls were the most expensive "kit" used by the shoemaker. . . .

The awls were of two kinds, diamond and round, so called from the shape of their points. The diamond-shaped were usually preferred, as they were thought to be less liable to become dulled by use; but the so-called round awls—these were rather flatted at their points—were often used by "don" workmen, as they were less liable to "cut" the "upper." The awls first in use in this country were of English manufacture. The name of the manufacturer was stamped upon each awl, and there were three kinds, more or less in use, some fifty or more years ago when those of American make began to take their place. These were known as the Allerton, Wilson, and Titus awls, respectively. After the introduction of the American awl, the English article was not held in very high esteem by workmen employed upon ladies' shoes. They were badly shaped, and the points were left unfinished. The Allerton and Wilson had usually too long a crook, while the Titus was faulty in the opposite direction, being too straight, especially for certain kinds of work. They had, however, two important recommendations—they were better tempered, and therefore less liable to break, and their cost was only one-half, or less, that of the American awl.

Before the English awl was used, it was necessary to finish the points. This was sometimes done by grinding, sometimes by filing, and sometimes by sandpaper; and the points were smoothed off on a "whet-board," or by rubbing them on the pine floor. The man who could do this job skillfully was considered something of a genius. As already intimated, a boy could spoil a day's wages by breaking a few awls. If he was working on the seam on "long reds," and had a lot of extra hard soles on hand—some *hemlock tanned leather* for instance,—he had gloomy forebodings of the peril of the situation. If the master was a "hard" one, and the boy somewhat careless, there would most likely be an appeal to the "stirrup," whenever accidents of this kind rose above the average in frequency. . . .