

## Weaving Moves into the Mills

"The short period between 1810 and 1830 saw the center of gravity of textiles shift from the fireside to the factory," observed business historian Victor S. Clark in 1929. "The transfer of spinning and weaving in America from homes to factories was a greater change than their transfer from workshops to factories in Great Britain. No other industrial arts were so universally practiced by our people and no other were so suddenly taken from their hands."<sup>1</sup> Clark's conclusions about the timing of the transfer from domestic to factory production in the early decades of the nineteenth century are relatively accurate, but, as we have seen, his claims about the universality of spinning and weaving are not. If we compare how local textile manufacture operated in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with the better-studied region of New England, it is clear that even without technological change, there were regional variations.

In New England, what ultimately became massive textile factories and mill towns originated in the countryside, close to waterpower and a native-born, rural female labor force, many of whom were hand weavers. The large-scale industrialization of cloth manufacture in Pennsylvania, although less well known, was an urban phenomenon that drew on a large pool of skilled, immigrant textile workers. Outside Philadelphia, the tradition of bespoke, or custom ordered, weaving continued as small rural mills extended the operations of the male hand weavers. Until now, scholars have failed to recognize why industrialization evolved so differently in New England and Pennsylvania given their similarities. Closer examination of the differences between the two regions, however, combined with the deeper understanding of eighteenth-century cloth production provided by this look at Chester County, helps to explain more broadly the industrial process in the United States. A summary of the New England experience, therefore, will provide the basis of contrast for that of Pennsylvania.

The agricultural base of the Massachusetts economy was in general decline over the eighteenth century. Inhabitants of Essex County, just

By the third and fourth generations of settlement in Massachusetts, farm formation took up less energy and rural properties were diminishing in size. With this transition gradually came the time and the need to extend household manufacturing. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observes, "In families where field labor was thought unseemly and wage labor a sign of declining fortunes, household manufacturing allowed men to employ their girls without appearing to do so."<sup>8</sup>

Not only was household cloth making becoming more prevalent over the eighteenth century in New England, but, by the last third of the century, it was clearly women's work and functioned quite differently than the domestic industry of Pennsylvania and seventeenth-century New England. Although some New England female weavers sold their cloth and others exchanged various stages of textile work with their neighbors, for most the work was episodic and had to fit around the many other female household responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, these rural women were pivotal for the first phases of New England's industrialization, in contrast to Chester County farm women, who generally did not weave. 141

New England farm women who did outwork weaving were young and single and glad to earn money for the kind of work to which they were accustomed. They were not prepared to alter their life-styles to do it, however, much to the frustration of the merchants and manufacturers who were increasingly dependent on the weavers. As Almy and Brown noted when they were first attempting to put out yarn to rural women weavers, they "do not in general follow the occupation regularly; it is done during their leisure hours, and at the dull times of the year."<sup>16</sup> According to Thomas Dublin, "workers were members of rural, property-owning families who engaged in outwork in slack periods when it suited their purposes. They might weave a piece of cloth in a week or keep the yarn for three months before completing their task."<sup>17</sup> To increase production under this system, more weavers had to be brought into the network by expanding the geographical base. There was still the problem of controlling the quality of finished pieces and having the fabric returned in a timely manner. These difficulties resulted in yet another stage of industrialization that was unique to New England—boarding-house mills. 142