

"Good Hands, Stout Heart, and Fast Feet" The History and Culture of Working People in Early America

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“Good Hands, Stout Heart, and Fast Feet”:

The History and Culture of Working People in Early America

Marcus Rediker

AN INSURRECTION WAS ORGANIZED in Poplar Spring, Virginia in 1663 by a band of men who had worn the red shirts of Cromwell's New Model Army, and "who had been sent to the colonies on long terms of indentured servitude." Among the conspirators were Independents, Fifth Monarchy Men, and Muggletonians, members of radical religious sects who had struggled with such cunning and passion to turn England upside down some 20 years earlier, and who now aimed to capitalize on widespread labour discontent and to "overthrow [Governor] Berkeley and set up an independent commonwealth." Wealth was already more common in Virginia than in England, but apparently not common enough to suit these rebels. They plotted to seize guns and ammunition to supply a force of 30, and then to "march from house to house, seizing [additional] arms, and killing anyone who offered resistance." The uprising was exposed by an informant, a servant who, for his trouble, was awarded 5,000 lbs. of tobacco and his freedom by the grateful and relieved planters of the province. Nine "labourers" were subsequently tried, and four swung on the gallows for "high treason." Tom commemorate the discovery of the plot, the day scheduled for the rising, September 13, was "to be annually kept holy"¹ Planters and indentured servants probably kept the day holy in different ways.

This incident gives a look at a transatlantic class consciousness that was embedded in peculiarly American circumstances. English struggles, some epochal and revolutionary, others daily and deliberate, gave rise to a complex range of practices and ideas, many of which found their ways to American shores. But they survived only by adjusting to a New World: a new environment, new relations of production, and a new, diverse, internationally-experienced body of labouring men and women. The thoughts and actions that

¹ Richard E. Morris, *Government and Labour in Early America* (New York 1946), 173, 174, (hereafter cited as Morris, *GL*).

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emerged from England were joined and jostled by the rich traditions of working people from Africa, continental Europe, Ireland, Scotland, Native America, and numerous other spots on the globe. From these many strands would emerge America's indigenous working-class traditions.

The American working class had origins of staggering complexity. Everyone knows this, but few understand it; only a handful have studied the American working class before 1800. Worse yet, American historians, especially those looking back from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have tended to treat the working people whose lives predated the factory system as pre-historic creatures, specimens of *genus pre-industrial*. Surely these labouring men and women, like the movement and traditions they initiated, deserve a better fate.²

This essay — and it is just that, an initial tentative effort in understanding — ranges far and wide across the circumstances and context, ideas, practices, and experiences of early American labouring lives. It examines the structural and cultural dimensions of continuity and change in capital-labour relations, outlining the processes within which early American working-class activities and ideas were formed. This broad, if speculative, survey is part theoretical and part empirical. It presents a set of arguments which, given the radically underdeveloped state of early American working-class history, must be understood as a set of questions and as a challenge to further research.

Labour in the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must be viewed as part of the protracted, essentially two-stage, worldwide transition from feudalism to capitalism. The second stage, the ascent of modern industry, has received careful and learned study. During the extended period of industrial revolution, roughly 1770 to 1880, vast amounts of labour were enclosed within factories, and labour processes were revolutionized by the introduction of machinery. Working people came face-to-face (or better, mind-and-hand-to-supervisor-and-machine) with the discipline of the factory.

Stage one was longer, and less tidy, to be sure; it was also absolutely essential to everything that followed. This was the era of "primitive accumulation," the social and economic process by which labour was transformed into a commodity between 1500 and 1800, primarily through rural dispossession, the centralization of agricultural production and population growth. Great masses of men and women were, in the words of Karl Marx, "suddenly and forcibly

² Morris, *GL* is a neglected classic. Originally written in 1946 and now republished by Northeastern University Press, this book assembles a colossal array of data, including some 20,000 court cases, to discuss a wide range of topics. Morris's scholarship is skilled and scrupulous, and this work stands as the zenith of early American labour history. This essay is deeply indebted to it, and to a quickly developing secondary literature. See Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge 1979); Sharon V. Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition: The Decline of Indentured Servitude in late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Labor History*, 22 (1981), 165-91; Billy G. Smith, "The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 38(1981), 163-202 (hereafter *WMQ*); Eric Guest Nellis, "Communities of Work-

torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected, and rightless proletarians." There they faced the impersonal motions of the growing market economy and the discipline of the wage contract. A sailor in 1709 summed up this proletarian condition in a pithy and poetic question: what, he wondered, was a man to expect when he had "but a pair of good Hands and a Stout Heart to recommend him?"³

In the early modern period countless English tenants and labourers were loosed from the land. They "had escaped from the social controls of the manorial village and were not yet subject to the discipline of factory labour."⁴ In this moment of betwixt and between, these masterless men and women roamed the countryside as free and independent economic actors, and they posed in unprecedented ways the problem of discipline. They were the "seething mobility," tramping their collective way toward becoming the "free-born" English men and women of a later period, and, once transplanted, the "free-born" Yankee worker of nineteenth-century America. Yet this Yank's grandparents, or perhaps great-grandparents, those who crossed the Atlantic to the New World, experienced the jarring rattle of a sharp detour into the world of unfree labour.⁵

The reasons for this detour lie in the peculiar circumstances of America. As C.L.R. James, Grace C. Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu observed of the sweep of capitalist development: "Marx discerned in capital accumulation two laws, twin themes of the same movement, the law of the concentration and centralization of capital and the law of the socialization of labour."⁶ These movements, as the experience of early America demonstrated, were reversible. The process of primitive accumulation in England, Europe, and Africa divorced direct producers from the means of production, and in fact helped to make possible the settlement and cultivation of the New World. Once this labour was available,

ers: Free Labor in Provincial Massachusetts, 1690-1765," Ph.D., University of British Columbia, 1979; Stephen J. Rossworm, "Arms, Class, and Culture: The Philadelphia Militia and the 'Lower Orders' in the American Revolution, 1765-1783," Ph.D., Northern Illinois University, 1979; Daniel F. Vickers, "Maritime Labor in Colonial Massachusetts: A Case Study of the Essex County Cod Fishery and the Whaling Industry of Nantucket, 1630-1775," Ph.D., Princeton University, 1981. For a biographical approach to working-class experience in early America, see the splendid article by Alfred F. Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," *WMQ* 38 (1981), 561-623.

³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1 (New York 1977), 876 and Part Eight generally. 873-940. The second quote is by Barnaby Slush, *The Navy Royal: or a Sea-Cook turn'd Projector* (London 1709), 16.

⁴ E.P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, 7(1974), 386.

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1963), 77-101; Mike Davis, "Why the U.S. Working Class is Different," *New Left Review*, 123(1980), 14. In this paragraph, as throughout the essay, I am indebted to Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas in the English Revolution* (New York 1972).

⁶ C.L.R. James, Grace C. Lee, Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality* (Detroit, 1974 [1958]), 103.

the English productive system was soon being centralized, and capital and labour concentrated by advances in the organization of agriculture and manufacture. England's economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was taking shape as an increasingly interdependent, national whole. The transfer of society and economy to America immediately resulted in a fragmented productive system, a simplified division of labour, decentralized relations of production, and the deconcentration of capital and labour. Working people, whether free and independent agricultural producers, indentured servants, or slaves, were reattached to the means of production. Once reattached, the vast majority of these workers would experience primitive accumulation anew: whether by escape or emancipation from servitude or slavery, dispossession, or population growth, labouring men and women once again were separated from the means of production, free once again to sell their labour power on an open market. In many ways they replicated the experiences through which their forefathers and mothers had already passed. The deconcentration of capital and labour continued in America, advancing with the westward migration and the availability of land. But immediately upon settlement the process of concentration began once again in earnest.

The imperial economy, organized by the policies of mercantilism, supplied the most immediate context for the development of labour in early America. Since the colonies, as outposts of the empire, were necessarily part of a transatlantic world, many working people in America, from the beginning, produced for a market, frequently an international market. The mercantile economic framework linked the colonies to markets around the world primarily through London, the powerful vortex of the empire. Consequently there was neither a national center of production nor any unifying economic or political organization in the colonies. Colonial America became a complex social formation that consisted of multiple regional economies, class structures and cultures.⁷

From the outset, production in North America was organized on a terrain fundamentally different from that in England. It operated within a space opened up by the conquest of an indigenous civilization, that of North American Indians, and was fully outside the constraints of a feudal past. The guild system, for example, was never transplanted to the colonies. Shipbuilding, one of colonial America's most successful manufacturing enterprises, developed little or no formal craft organization. The few guilds that did form in the colonies were largely unable to maintain their cohesion against the pressures of

⁷ For good surveys of the English economy in the early modern period, see D.C. Coleman, *The Economy of England, 1450-1750* (London 1977), and B.A. Holderness, *Pre-Industrial England: Economy and Society, 1500-1750* (London 1976). For a longer perspective on international development, see Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London 1976), and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York 1976), and *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (New York 1980). See also Morris, *GL*, 1-54.

⁸ Morris, *GL*, 141; Joseph A. Goldenburg, *Shipbuilding in Colonial America* (Charlottesville 1976), 14.

incessant immigration, the relatively smooth upward mobility from journeyman to master, and the high wages commanded by almost all types of labour.⁸ Capital and labour could be moved to the New World, but specifically English relations of production could not. The equilibrium that had developed in England between a powerful gentry and a plebeian under-world had to be recreated. New class and cultural relations had to be negotiated. Many of the checks and balances that marked the historical experience of feudalism were never present in America, except perhaps in a limited psychological sense, and this, along with other factors, made possible the transplantation of some of the most advanced and aggressive capitalist relations of the era.⁹

Capitalist expansion, as Immanuel Wallerstein and Philip Corrigan have shown, generates unfree forms of labour. The scarcity of labour in the colonies ripped aside the illusion of a "natural" balance between labour supply and demand. The impersonal workings of the economy and the wage contract did not provide sufficient discipline: free wage labour was both too "undependable" and too expensive.¹⁰ Once it became clear that North American Indians were not to be transformed into a docile and pliant labour force, those colonists who wanted to turn their money into capital faced problems of labour supply and organization quite unprecedented in human history. What, they asked, is to be done?

Labour market entrepreneurs and employers, in the face of grave labour scarcity, were forced to calculate labour needs abstractly, to think of labour as a commodity fully divorced from social context. They needed a transportable form for labour. And they knew that labour could not be permitted to circulate freely on a market like other commodities. As a result of this contradictory set of needs, they drew upon, and ferociously exaggerated, a practice that had developed in England as a means of disciplining the masterless men and women who rambled to and fro about the country. In Maurice Dobb's words, "compulsion to labour [in early modern England] stood in the background of the labour market."¹¹ In America the discipline of compulsory labour was moved to the foreground. Most Africans and some American Indians were forced into lives of permanent unfree labour, and most workers from Europe moved from a life of labour increasingly dominated by the wage contract to a social life literally bound to an unwaged contract. The machinery of labour transportation, the complex business network that scoured the world to supply the labour-hungry colonies, was a crucial mechanism in the treatment of labour as a commodity in early America. Indentured servitude and slavery, the essential transatlantic commodity forms of labour, resolved, at least temporarily, the problems faced by the suppliers and employers of labour: these forms permitted

⁸ Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York 1976), 39, 32; Davis, "U.S. Working Class," 10.

¹⁰ Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, Vol. 1, ch. 2; Philip Corrigan, "Feudal Relics or Capitalist Monuments? Notes on the Sociology of Unfree Labour," *Sociology*, 11(1977), 435-63; Abbott Emerson Smith, *Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America, 1607-1776* (New York 1947), 27.

¹¹ Maurice Dobb, "Growth of the Proletariat," in his *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York 1947), 233; Morris, *GL*, 3.

general calculation of need and use, were fairly easily transported, and once in America did not circulate on an open market.¹²

The Europeans — mostly English, Scottish, Irish and German — who came to the colonies as indentured servants reached that condition in various ways. Most merely wanted a passage to the New World, and agreed to trade two to nine years of labour for the hope of a life of genuine freedom after working off an indenture. Others, quite simply, were kidnapped. Some 30,000 came as "His Majesty's Seven Year Passengers" — a polite or mocking euphemism for transported convicts — and yet others were exiled to labour in America because they were political prisoners. Rebellious Scots were sent in the 1640s, 1650s, 1670s, and 1680s, Loyalists in the 1650s, Quakers in the 1660s, Monmouth Rebels after 1685, Jacobites after 1715, and even more Scottish insurgents after 1745.¹³

Those who came — mostly men it appears, because women were frequently believed to be either unsuited to the work or too "troublesome," meaning too hard to discipline — were apparently a broad cross-section of ordinary folk in their society of origin. The vast majority were between 15 and 24 years of age; the younger the servant, the longer his or her indenture was likely to be.¹⁴ Some came with property, more without; some with skills, more without; some friends, more without. But for a marriage settlement of £35 that he used to pay his passage and a letter of introduction from Ben Franklin, Tom Paine might well have arrived in America as an indentured servant as penniless and as friendless as the multitude who walked off the ship and into a humiliating "cattle-market," where their muscles were squeezed and their docility carefully judged by prospective employers, or where they were taken in gangs by "soul drivers" to be peddled in the backcountry.¹⁵ Another form of forced labour, still prominent in England even though losing its force in the eighteenth century, was apprenticeship.¹⁶

These basic forms of compulsory labour were only the beginnings, for there were countless ways in which the State demanded toil from those who had arrived free or gained their freedom. Most residents of early America were forced to engage in public works. This "class obligation," from which elites

¹² Morris, *GL*, 404; Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 19-20: "The invention and acceptance of this system [of trading in servants] made it possible to handle emigration as a business proposition, and to treat white labor as a commodity."

¹³ Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, chs. 1, 4-9.

¹⁴ Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition," 169; David W. Galenson, "British Servants and the Colonial Indenture System in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Southern History*, 44(1978), 41-66, and " 'Middling People' or 'Common Sort'? The Social Origins of Some Early Americans Reexamined," *WMQ*, 35(1978), 499-524; Mildred Campbell, "Response," *Ibid.*, 525-40; David W. Galenson, "The Social Origins of Some Early Americans: Rejoinder," *WMQ*, 36(1979), 264-77; Mildred Campbell, "Reply," *Ibid.*, 277-86.

¹⁵ Foner, *Tom Paine*, 16; Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 221.

¹⁶ Morris, *GL*, 368; John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-Century English Industry* (New York 1981), 113, 114.

were usually exempt, exacted labour for agriculture, road construction, river-work, and the building trades: the construction of forts, dams, bridges, or prisons. Colonists were impressed into the armed forces, for conscription was universal in early America. Pressed labour provided an easy way for the army to hold down wages in building a fort, and of course the army and the navy had to be stocked with muscle enough to fight the wars of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ Workmen protested compulsory military service in a variety of ways, whether by lopping off the fingers of a member of a press-gang who tried to board a merchant ship, or by organizing tumultuous seaport crowds to protest the navy's "barbarous business" of body-snatching. Another form of compulsory labour was mandatory participation in the local militia.¹⁸

Courts in early America acted the part of alchemists, transmuting something common, in fact almost every conceivable offence, into something precious, namely labour services. Prosecutions for idleness led to forced labour; for debt, forced labour; for an enormous assortment of crimes, forced labour.¹⁹ And of course any servant who committed a crime had his or her contract extended by a substantial amount of time. Colonial employers, backed by the courts, used systems of credit and debt as means of labour control against workers who were technically free.²⁰

In a recent major review of historical work on labour recruitment in colonial America, Richard S. Dunn had concluded: "Precise figures are impossible, but something like two-thirds of the whites who came from Britain and continental Europe to the colonies arrived as indentured servants, and virtually all of the blacks who came from West Africa arrived as chattel slaves."²¹ Roughly *three out of four men and women* who came to the American colonies experienced a stint of unfree labour. African, and increasingly Afro-American, slaves had few ways out of their condition, but what of those who completed their terms as bound labourers? Many, just like slaves, did not survive their condition: they died before completing their indentures. Abbott Emerson Smith suggested that eight of ten indentured servants perished, went back to England, or became free wage labourers. Only one in ten acquired land. Such acquisitions were much more likely in the seventeenth century, and in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas.²²

¹⁷ Morris, *GL*, 7-10, 279, 295-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 281, 273; Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (Rutherford 1970), 139.

¹⁹ Morris, *GL*, 6, 356, 346-57. Occasionally fines were imposed, but anyone unable to pay "was accordingly sold into service." (347).

²⁰ Danny Vickers, "The Indian Whalers of Nantucket," Paper presented to the Conference in Early American History of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Millersville, PA, May 1981, 17-20, 29-32; Stephen Innes, "Land Tenancy and Social Order in Springfield, Massachusetts, 1652 to 1702," *WMQ*, 35(1978), 53.

²¹ Richard S. Dunn, "Servants and Slaves: The Recruitment and Employment of Labor in Colonial America," Paper presented to the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, September 1981, 3. For other, slightly lower, estimates, see Morris, *GL*, 315, and Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 336.

²² Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 300, 297. Smith's conclusions need finer testing. See

Early American labour systems varied greatly by region. Again in the words of Richard S. Dunn, each area of British America "evolved a distinctive labor system: in the Caribbean sugar colonies, a quick dependence on African slave labor; in the southern mainland colonies, a gradual conversion from white servants to black slaves, with a considerable use also of white tenancy; in the mid-Atlantic colonies, a mix of family and wage labor with immigrant servants, tenants, and slaves; and in New England a heavy reliance upon native-born family and wage labor."²³ The labour systems of the colonies were plural and diverse, and they functioned according to different time schedules and principles of change. Yet given the overall tendency toward the concentration and centralization of capital and the socialization of labour — whether on sugar or tobacco plantations, large farms employing tenants or wage labour, or urban manufactories — the inner logic and process of change was everywhere similar.

There were, from the point of view of capital, seven distinct types of labour in the colonies: hunting, practiced by Indians and many Europeans who lived on the frontier; craft labour, or petty production, largely in urban areas, organized early in the colonial period by custom order, but increasingly producing for a market; domestic labour, performed in all areas both by servants and unwaged women workers; free wage labour, present in both cities and countryside, with few skills, working in casual and seasonal labour markets; then three types of agricultural labour: the free unwaged independent farmer; the temporarily unfree and unwaged indentured servant; and the permanently unfree and unwaged slave. The structural divisions within the working class ran extraordinarily deep given the relatively low social division of labour in the colonies.

Hunting was commonplace in early America, both as a major industry, the fur trade, and as a means of subsistence, whether as a supplement to agricultural pursuits or as an entire way of life. Hunters of the latter sort were usually nomadic frontier dwellers who modelled their lives in meaningful ways upon the practices of North American Indians. In early eighteenth-century Louisiana *voyageurs* or *coureurs des bois*; neither husbandmen nor herdsman, "led a simple, non-accumulative life, more Indian than French," preferring drink and gambling to the "steady, arduous labour of agricultural work."²⁴ Such hunters, derisively called "white Indians" and known as "people who avoid work and prefer to wander around in the woods," were also prominent in the Southern piedmont region, in parts of Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia. Communities of hunters apparently coalesced into "banditti" gangs — consist-

also Russel R. Menard, "From Servant to Freeholder: Status Mobility and Property Accumulation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *WMQ*, 30(1973), 37-64, and "From Servants to Slaves: The Transformation of the Chesapeake Labor System," *Southern Studies*, 16(1977), 355-90.

²³ Dunn, "Servants and Slaves," 1.

²⁴ James T. McGowan, "Planters without Slaves: Origins of a New World Labor System," *Southern Studies*, 16(1977), 10.

ing of red, black, white, mulatto, and "half-breed" members — to contest the expansion of slave-based commercial agriculture into the South Carolina upcountry.²⁵ It is impossible to know how many early Americans depended upon hunting as a way of life and labour, but clearly hunting was available to many as a means of survival during hard times, and represented an alternative to the more traditional, sedentary worlds of work.

Most craft labour was located in the Northern towns and cities, where crafts proliferated with the growth of commerce, which attracted shipbuilders, riggers, mastmakers, blockmakers, caulkers, joiners, coopers, and others, and with the growth of consumption among middling and especially upper classes, who regularly demanded the services of carpenters, cabinetmakers, blacksmiths, hatters, glassmakers, cordwainers, tailors, and numerous others.²⁶ Although some craft labour was performed at home, the most common productive unit here was the workshop, organized around the traditional triad of master, journeyman, and apprentice, and, in some crafts, slaves. The typical workshop in America was small by European standards, containing between five and ten workers, or up to 25 in the larger shipyards and ropewalks.²⁷ The division of craft labour steadily increased over time, especially after 1750, despite the efforts by Britain to limit the colonial capacity to produce craft goods. Considerable cooperation existed among different craft workers. Crafts were also practiced in rural areas, by settled or tramping artisans.²⁸

For most of the colonial period craft labour was organized in a fluid fashion, permitting considerable horizontal mobility from one craft to another, and substantial vertical movement from journeyman to master and beyond.²⁹ Master-journeymen relations were less antagonistic than in England — which helps to explain the unity of these groups in their anti-British protests in the 1760s and 1770s — and this relative harmony lasted until the 1780s when journeymen undertook independent organization.³⁰ Given the relative absence of guilds and the chronic shortage of skilled labour, colonial workmen often developed multiple skills and talents: "The blacksmith was a toolmaker, a soap boiler, a tallow chandler, and, despite restrictive legislation, the tanner often acted as currier and shoemaker." Richard Morris illustrated both the cooperation within the craft division of labour and the progression — the "really revolutionary way," in Maurice Dobb's words — from master craftsman to industrialist: "Paul Revere, the distinguished silversmith, who gained greater renown for carrying the messages of the Committees of Correspondence and

²⁵ Rachel N. Klein, "Ordering the Backcountry: The South Carolina Regulation," *WMQ*, 38(1981), 668, 672, 675. See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, 1973), 233, 156-157, 262, and James Axtell, "The White Indians of Colonial America," *WMQ*, 32(1975), 55-88, for discussions of how Europeans were "Indianized" in America.

²⁶ Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (Chicago 1950).

²⁷ Morris, *GL*, 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24; Foner, *Tom Paine*, 37.

²⁹ Foner, *Tom Paine*, 32; Morris, *GL*, 49.

³⁰ Morris, *GL*, 188, 200.

the Sons of Liberty, was also a well known copperplate engraver, although not a very good one, a dentist who set false 'fore-teeth', a manufacturer of clock faces for clockmakers, of branding irons for hatters, and of spatulas and probes for surgeons. After the Revolution, while continuing his workshop craft as a silversmith, he branched out into large-scale industry, setting up a foundry and later a mill for rolling copper into sheets; this," Morris concluded in 1946, "has now become one of the greatest establishments of its kind in the country."³¹

Domestic labour was performed in all households, wealthy or poor, urban or rural, by indentured servants, waged servants, wives, or children. The nature of domestic labour changed with the passage of time. Its basic components were the upkeep of the home, child-rearing, gardening and the preparation of food, and other activities such as sewing, weaving, spinning, quilting, preserving, soap and candle-making — all designed to help make the household self-sufficient. In addition to regular chores, domestic labour after 1750 often came to include the production of cloth, clothing, shoes, hats, and other items for sale on the market. The broad transition in early America from household manufacture for personal self-sufficiency to domestic manufacture for a merchant to full-scale factory production continually redefined women's work through a pervasive deskilling process, and made women a central force in the formation of America's early industrial proletariat.³²

Other forms of waged labour were most prominent in the seaport cities, where maritime, construction, and transportation industries produced steadily expanding markets for seasonal and casual labour. Waged labour increased significantly after 1750, and was employed in merchant shipping, docks and warehousing, fishing, lumbering, forge and furnace industries, breweries, distilleries, paper and powder manufactories, the military, and at the lower end of many of the crafts, particularly the shipyards and the ropewalks. Most journeymen were waged workers, and they, along with apprentices, day labourers, and sailors, constituted the rowdiest, and in many ways the most radical, part of the urban population, often coalescing into a crowd seeking popular justice.³³

Recent work in the social history of early America has discovered a prominent and apparently permanent pool of free wage labourers in agricultural areas, both north and south. Jackson Turner Main in 1965 suggested that 10 to 40 per cent of the rural population was landless around the time of the Revolu-

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34-5; Dobb, *Studies*, 123.

³² See Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York 1982), chs. 1, 2; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven 1977), ch. 1; Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana 1980), ch. 4; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 189-97.

³³ Smith, "Material Lives," 183. For a later period see David Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830," *Labor History*, 9(1968), 3-22. See also Morris, *GL*, 40-1; Foner, *Tom Paine*, 45-56.

tion, and more recent work has extended this picture back into the late seventeenth century. Although most work in rural areas was organized within the family, performed by farmers, sons, and perhaps a servant or two, waged labour was also employed in the fields at harvest time, and to clear land, remove stumps, build walls and fences, and split wood. Much of this waged labour was provided by landless tenants who hired themselves out for specific tasks. The numbers of tenants and wage labourers were increasing in rural regions throughout the eighteenth century and especially after 1750.³⁴

From agricultural waged labour we move to unwaged labour, to the farmers who became small independent producers. As Richard Morris tellingly observed, "In the main, the ultimate economic objective of colonial workmen was security through agriculture rather than industry."³⁵ Shamefully little is known about the ways of labour on family farms, but it is clear enough that many colonial workers sought to retire from the wage labour market to the land. As New Englander William Wood said in 1663, "if any man doubt the goodness of the ground, let him comfort himself with the cheapness of it."³⁶ High wages and cheap land were a matched pair until the middle of the eighteenth century and provided excellent opportunities for the acquisition of land, and hence for a largely autonomous and independent social existence. As Karl Marx wryly commented, "This constant transformation of wage-labourers into independent producers, who work for themselves instead of for capital, and enrich themselves instead of capitalist gentlemen, reacts in its turn very adversely on the conditions of the labour-market. Not only does the degree of exploitation remain indecently low, the wage labourer also loses, along with the relation of dependence, the feeling of dependence on the abstemious capitalist."³⁷ The transition from wage labour to independent production not only lowered the level of the exploitation of labour, but changed its very character: no longer was the point of production the primary locus of exploitation, as it was on the ship, in the manufactory, or in the workshop.³⁸ The

³⁴ Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton 1965), 18, 46, 61, 62; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *WMQ*, 35(1978), 6, 7, 9; Darrett B. Rutman, *Husbandmen of Plymouth: Farms and Villages in the Old Colony, 1620-1692* (Boston 1968), 42; Jack Michel, in "Cottagers, Yeomen, and Gentlemen Capitalists: The Culture of Rural Pennsylvania, 1682-1735," (Ph.D., University of Chicago, in progress), discusses the increase in landless tenants and labourers. For example, the 298 houses in Bradford Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania in 1798 belonged to only 31 owners. See also Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review*, (1977), 42-71.

³⁵ Morris, *GL*, 48.

³⁶ Quoted in Rutman, *Husbandmen of Plymouth*, 48.

³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, I, 936. For a contrasting situation in which control was maintained by denying settlers property in land, see Gerald M. Sider, "The Ties that Bind: Culture and Agriculture, Property and Propriety in the Newfoundland Village Fishery," *Social History*, 5(1980), 1-39.

³⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 931-40.

independent farmer gained full control over his labour. But this control was soon to be challenged. As market relations extended into the countryside, exploitation came to reside at the point of exchange, in the power relations established between the small farmer and the market, whether mediated by larger farmers, planters, and merchants, or controlled by the impersonal fluctuations of an international economy. Rural self-sufficiency and autonomy were plainly declining by the outbreak of the War for Independence.³⁹

In the westward migration many men made the move from wage labourer to tenant farmer to freeholder, though the last third of the journey was increasingly arduous in the course of the eighteenth century. Some working people seem to have discriminated between different forms of dependency, and chose tenancy over wage labour. As Stephen Innis said of Springfield, Massachusetts, "Like tenants in eighteenth-century New York, men without sufficient capital to purchase the land, provisions, and equipment required to start their own freehold, saw tenancy as an attractive alternative to the life of a wage laborer."⁴⁰

Large parts of the colonial economy, particularly those farms and plantations in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas where the greatest volume of commercial agriculture was practiced for most, if not all of the colonial period, were dependent on slave labour. The large plantation represented the greatest concentration of capital and labour in all of North America. Supervision and labour discipline were crucial to the plantation regimen, and were as easily applied to manufacturing as to agricultural efforts. Slaves, under the vigilant gaze of overseers, undertook flax, cotton, and wool spinning; salt, gunpowder, and potash manufacturing; brewing, tanning, brickmaking, cooperage, and other types of labour. Virginian Robert Carter, owner of 300,000 acres and 350 slaves in the early eighteenth century, boasted an extraordinary division of labour on his plantation: in addition to his agricultural pursuits, he put slaves and white artisans to work in a blacksmith shop, a wool spinning and weaving shop, a grain mill, a fulling mill, and two bake ovens.⁴¹ Most slaves, of course, lived on much smaller farms, in less collective communities of labour, particularly in the piedmont South.

Having surveyed the setting and assembled the fundamental parts of the labour system of early America, let us now try to set the contraption in motion, to see how the situation of labour changed over time. Early in the colonial

³⁹ Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat," 61-6; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley," *Journal of Social History*, 13(1979), 169-89.

⁴⁰ Innes, "Land Tenancy and Social Order," 144; Henretta, "Families and Farms," 8.

⁴¹ Richard B. Morris, "The Organization of Production During the Colonial Period," in Harold F. Williamson, ed., *The Growth of the American Economy* (New York 1946); Morris, *GL*, 38-9. On the increase in the size of the productive unit in the South, see Russell R. Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population, 1658 to 1730: A Demographic Profile of Blacks in Four Counties," *WMQ*, 32(1975), 44, and Allan Kulikoff, "The Origins of Afro-American Society in Tidewater Maryland and Virginia, 1700 to 1790," *WMQ*, 35(1978), 229.

period, Richard Morris indicates, "most productive enterprises were sufficiently small that they could be adequately financed by individuals or partnerships." Not only was capital in short supply, but many other factors, most of them imposed by the mercantile organization of the economy, inhibited the growth of larger productive units, especially manufacture: little money was available due to the chronic scarcity of specie; interest rates were high; cheap land lessened the availability of labour, and even when labour could be found, it was often prohibitively expensive. Finally, imperial policies subordinated colonial to British manufactures.⁴²

Yet the 1760s and 1770s brought changes: the nonimportation agreements stimulated domestic manufacturing, and led to the "establishment of larger units of production employing more labor." The War for Independence further spurred manufactures to meet military needs.⁴³ The surplus of women's and children's labour in the eastern cities, coupled with an increasing population of the dependent poor, facilitated the growth of manufacture. Consequently, larger-scale production, such as William Molineaux's "Manufactory House," built by the Boston Society for Encouraging Industry and Employing the Poor, and the United Company of Philadelphia for Promoting American Manufactures, began to appear.⁴⁴ American woolen and worsted industries were boosted by "British military prisoners who remained in the country after the war and by deserters from the British army." Other industries, such as shipping, iron foundries, and gristmills, were also beginning to show a concentration of both capital and labour.⁴⁵

The social division of labour in early America grew rapidly more complex, and larger numbers of men, women and children entered new, more cooperative labouring relationships. This process was not confined to northern urban centers, but was equally visible in the South, where capital and labour on slave plantations were dramatically increasing. From the vantage point of this process, it is not the least contradictory that wealthy planters, who had such experience in the organization and supervision of large units of labour, should undertake complex industrial production.

One of the greatest concentrations of labour during the colonial period occurred in the military. Life in the army or the navy, whether for the enlisted man or the soul unlucky or clumsy enough to be nabbed in a hot press, produced a collective experience of extraordinary proportions. Little is known of the concrete nature of work in the military, and equally little known of the colonists' response to it. Yet there is evidence of dramatically disciplined strike

⁴² Morris, *GL*, 38, 44; Morris, "Organization of Production," 57; Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition," 189; Foner, *Tom Paine*, 32; James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade and the Economic Development of Colonial North America* (Cambridge 1972), 25.

⁴³ Morris, *GL*, 44, 13; Morris, "Organization of Production," 64, 65.

⁴⁴ Montgomery, "Working Classes," 19. See also Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 333-8.

⁴⁵ Morris, *GL*, 305; Morris, "Organization of Production," 60; Bernard Bailyn and Lotte Bailyn, *Massachusetts Shipping, 1697-1714: A Statistical Study* (Cambridge 1959), 46, 68.

activity and mass desertions by New England soldiers during the Seven Years War.⁴⁶ The military also furnished vital experiences for colonial elites. Merchants and planters, for example, accumulated immense logistical and supervisory experience during wartime. George Washington, well prepared to be a general by his past of overseeing an army of slaves who worked at cloth manufacture as well as agriculture, probably learned lessons from the battlefield about the deployment of human resources that helped his own accumulation of capital after the War for Independence.⁴⁷ War also posed for elites the problem of scarce labour power, pitting civilian versus military economies in ways that required extensive strategy and planning. For both rich and poor, war produced new and intensified experiences of class relations.⁴⁸

Service in the colonial militias was equally, if not more, important. The militia, as Steven Rosswurm's innovative work on Philadelphia has shown, served as an arena for the politicization and radicalization of lower artisans, journeymen, and other free labourers, and as an institution capable of generating important democratic principles and sentiments. Certain radical sentiments were already circulating among Philadelphia's "lower order," for when the militia was formed in April 1775, the rank and file quickly "objected to the uniforms which their officers had recommended. They instead proposed hunting shirts which not only would be cheaper, but also would 'level all distinctions.'" ⁴⁹ Richard Morris noted that "Even as late as the Revolution the New England militia was looked upon as a hotbed of democracy, with a great many officers in proportion to men and the pay of officers and men too nearly equal, although the practice of having the men choose their officers was by no means confined to New England."⁵⁰ Both militia and military service were formative parts of working class experience. James Henretta has argued that colonial American society was "militarized" after the Seven Years War: "There were more arms and ammunition now available in America than ever before and more men experienced in their use."⁵¹ Militarized perhaps, but also democratized: such experience was obviously crucial to the War for Independence, and one wonders if this also created other kinds of independence for working people.

The increasing concentration of labour posed the problems of supervision and discipline in unprecedented ways. Increased productivity, the driving impulse behind the aggregation of labour, required careful coordination of the productive process. The manager of the Hibernia Iron Works reported in 1774:

⁴⁶ F.C. Anderson, "Why did Colonial New Englanders Make Bad Soldiers? Contractual Principles and Military Conduct during the Seven Years' War," *WMQ*, 38(1981), 395-417.

⁴⁷ James Henretta, *The Evolution of American Society, 1700-1815*, (Lexington 1973), 129; Morris, *GL*, 38.

⁴⁸ Morris, *GL*, 528.

⁴⁹ Rosswurm, "Arms, Class, and Culture," 112. See also Foner, *Tom Paine*, 63-5.

⁵⁰ Morris, *GL*, 506.

⁵¹ Henretta, *Evolution*, 128.

"Gillis McPherson is so lazy and impertinant that I can't manage him without using Violence which [I] would choose to avoid if possible." Many employers began to realize the wisdom of sayings such as, "The diligent eye of the master will do more work than both his hands," and "Not to oversee your workmen is to leave them your purse open."⁵² Such were the imperatives if certain workers were to be "managed." The concentration of capital and labour brought forth new supervisory strategies and workers' counter-strategies.

Increases in the size of the productive unit were part of a complex cluster of changes within the labour systems of mid-eighteenth-century America, part of a transition that is only beginning to be understood. Indentured servitude began a broad decline after 1760, as many began to criticize the "traffick in White People."⁵³ Simultaneously poverty dramatically increased, as did geographic mobility, and land grew scarce, especially in New England.⁵⁴ Population density increased, and many were forced to leave overcrowded family farms. Farmers themselves began to move toward more commercial production, and from extensive to intensive agricultural techniques, a move that paved the way for the expansion of domestic manufacture.⁵⁵ The depletion or parcellization of land and an attendant underemployment, largely of women, led family farms to channel labour into the production of shoes, cotton, woolens, and linen for the market. The period 1775 to 1815 became the "heyday of domestic manufactures" in America.⁵⁶

Free wage labourers began to appear in vastly larger numbers, particularly in urban settings, during the span 1750 to 1790. In Philadelphia, for example, the number of taxable day labourers almost tripled between 1756 and 1774.⁵⁷ The urban casual labour market expanded, and easy mobility from journeyman to master, so prominent throughout most of the colonial period, began to diminish. After the War for Independence there was a near-simultaneous emergence of trade unions and masters' associations. Employers entered "trade associations to protect their economic interests," and labourers turned "to the more permanent type of trade-union organization." American workers began to resort to the strike as a prime economic weapon. These changes corresponded with the transition from custom to market production in the cities, increasing market production in the agricultural sector, and a growing complexity in the

⁵² Morris, *GL*, 462f., 39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 322; Foner, *Tom Paine*, 44; Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition," 189-91.

⁵⁴ Gary B. Nash, "Poverty and Poor Relief in Pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia," *WMQ*, 33(1976), 3-30, and *Urban Crucible*, 253, 185; Douglas L. Jones, "The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of Social History*, 8(1975), 28-54, and "Poverty and Vagabondage: The Process of Survival in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 133(1979), 243-54.

⁵⁵ Henretta, *Evolution*, 19.

⁵⁶ Morris, "Organization of Production," 58-9; Henretta, "Families and Farms," 30-1.

⁵⁷ Smith, "Material Lives," 181; Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition," 189; Foner, *Tom Paine*, 45.

division of labour.⁵⁸ The scope of these changes, however, should not be exaggerated: some 83 per cent of the American population in 1800 remained in agriculture. But dynamic changes, radiating from the cities to the countryside, were well underway. The Seven Years War and the period between 1750 and the War for Independence seem to have been crucial to the transition.

Now let us turn from the structural forms and dimensions of change to the cultural, to the formation of a culture of labour in early America. Did an equivalent to English plebeian culture exist in the colonies? Alfred F. Young has recently argued that some of the conditions for a "massive carry-over of popular culture from Britain to the colonies" did exist: in particular, there was a constant infusion of culture through successive waves of immigration; a similar oral tradition; and increasing social stratification that presented opportunities for the use of older cultural practices such as status reversal.⁵⁹ Yet such transfer was limited in several ways. First among them was the radically changed the nature of the class relation between the gentry and plebeian elements of North American society. *Paternalism*, the defining feature of English gentry hegemony, according to E.P. Thompson,⁶⁰ was diluted in the colonies by a huge array of factors: the dispersion of population and the consequent limits on reciprocal social obligations; geographic mobility; labour scarcity; high wages and competition among employers for labour; extraordinary racial and ethnic diversity; upward social mobility; and the unstable power and limited wealth of colonial elites, except perhaps in the South, until well into the eighteenth century. Further, colonial upper classes had relatively little cohesion, representing, as they did, different regional economies and class structures, and lacking a national center of political power and culture like London.

A plebeian culture was emerging, however, especially as the seaport cities grew, as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston each became a submetropolis for its own productive region. The structural conditions for a patrician-plebeian cultural system were present by 1750 in the cities, their surrounding countrysides, and in large parts of New York, Pennsylvania, and with a difference, in many areas of the South. This culture was taking shape from the converging experiences of craft, domestic, free waged, free agricultural, and slave labourers. Since fine recent work has revealed much about artisan and slave cultures, and since work is under way on domestic and agricultural labour, I will concentrate on the culture of free wage labour, probably the least understood and perhaps — at least in terms of the direction of change — the most important of all of these lifeways.

⁵⁸ Morris, "Organization of Production," 55; Morris, *GL*, 200, 198-202, 523, 525; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 321; Salinger, "Colonial Labor in Transition," 190; Henretta, *Evolution*, 205.

⁵⁹ Alfred F. Young, "English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth-Century American Radicalism," Paper presented to the Conference on Anglo-American Radicalism, Institute for Historical Research, New York, November 1980, 4-5; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 262.

⁶⁰ Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," 382-405; see also his "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History* 3(1978), 133-65.

The cultural world of free wage labour was essentially picaresque, full of those whom the upper classes never tired of calling rogues, rascals, and tramps, who swarmed with restless movement.⁶¹ Its members included journeymen, day labourers, landless agricultural workers, seamen, and escaped servants, slaves, and apprentices. These men and women may have had more international experience than any other "labour force" in history. Once divorced from the means of production, these people faced the discipline of the wage contract and the fluctuations of an increasingly international economy. Their culture developed within the class relations of their work, forming around the "free" in free wage labour. The defining feature of this culture was mobility, and what follows is a brief and preliminary exploration of free wage labour's life on the run.

Many workers took to their feet, or threatened to take to their feet, in an effort to influence the conditions of their labour. They ran, individually and collectively, in "confederacies" and after "conspiracies," from city to countryside, or vice-versa, in search of better work, from seaport to seaport looking for better maritime wages, or from one seasonal or casual labour market to another.⁶² They were truly footloose, pushed or pulled according to the vagaries of the economy, and they used their mobility in an effort to maintain a continuity of income in an era when there was often little or no continuity of work.⁶³

This culture took shape in the nexus of the class contest over the availability of labour, a struggle that was intense in labour-scarce America, particularly between indentured servants, the major social source for an emergent culture of free labour, and their masters. As Richard Morris explained, "The absentee

⁶¹ I follow Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price [*An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective*, ISHI Occasional Paper in Social Change, No. 2 (Philadelphia, 1976)], defining culture as a body of beliefs and values, socially acquired, patterned and articulated, that serve a group as guides of and for behavior. For working people, a chronic tension is produced by the conflict between the demands of work and the desires to assert autonomous interests and values. Cultures, therefore, even when transferred from one continent to another, will always be formed and reformed within the class relations of work. Part of this formulation is adapted from Richard Johnson, "Three Problematics: Elements of a Theory of Working-Class Culture," in John Clarke, Chas. Critcher, and Richard Johnson, eds., *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London 1979), 201-37. Cultures, like classes, "always stand in relations of domination — and subordination — to each other, are always, in some sense, in struggle with one another." See John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in post-war Britain* (London 1975), 12, 9-74. I take the term "picaresque" from Thompson, "Eighteenth Century English Society," 157.

⁶² Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 19; Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 297.

⁶³ This theme, crucial for early American labour, is developed by M. Sonenscher, "Work and Wages in Paris in the Eighteenth Century," Paper presented to the SSRC Conference on Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory, Balliol College, Oxford, September 1980. See also Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 10.

and the deserter posed a serious problem for the colonial producer. From earliest days bound laborers sought to terminate their contracts of employment unilaterally." The "loss of time from absenteeism and desertion laid a heavy tax upon the profits of colonial productive enterprises." Further, "the administrative and judicial machinery" of the colonies was helpless "to restore fugitive servants to their masters and to keep them at work."⁶⁴

Not that the machinery was not well-oiled and running at breakneck speeds; quite the contrary. In every colony strict, even ruthless, punishments were administered to runaways, ranging from whippings to the imposition of as much as ten days extra service for every day away. This last penalty varied significantly by region, and was most rigorously and heavily applied where *indentured labour was most central to the economy*, as it was in Virginia and Maryland.⁶⁵ Legislators attempted to implement identification systems that required all working people to carry passes or certificates to attest to their freedom. Numerous laws were passed against those who "harbored" any fugitives, against the use of taverns by servants, and against any "straggling" free labourer — usually a seaman — who might set a bad example to servants and slaves.⁶⁶ Workers' self-termination of contracts kept the colonial courts and legislatures steadily at work.

There is an intriguing possibility that this movement of labour was more orderly than it appeared. In fact it is distinctly possible that something like an early version of the underground railroad existed for escaped servants and other free labourers. Richard Morris noted that "Fugitives were harbored by sympathetic folk," and that "No servant was allowed to go on board ship without a pass, as this was a favorite means of escape."⁶⁷ Apparently seamen were sympathetic folk. There is evidence of an underground trading network among servants that dealt, almost surely, in stolen goods. These matters along with restrictions on tavern use and even of horses by servants, perhaps provides only the outlines of a material reality that was instrumental to a culture of mobile labour.⁶⁸ Many of these runaways gravitated toward the frontier, and particularly to Georgia. Most significantly, as Abbott Emerson Smith concludes in *Colonists in Bondage*, "Probably the great majority of runaways got successfully away."⁶⁹ Clearly this mobility had some effect upon the decline of indentured servitude in the colonies. Lawrence Towner strongly implies that fleet evasions of bound labourers were central to the demise of servitude in New England.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Morris, *GL*, 434, 435, 519.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 452, 457, 425-31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 449, 416-7, 450; Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 265-6, 269.

⁶⁷ Morris, *GL*, 416, 435, 455.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 455, 510-1.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 269, 297; Morris, *GL*, 439, 460.

⁷⁰ Lawrence Towner, "A Fondess for Freedom": Servant Protest in Puritan Society," *WMQ*, 19(1962), 215, 217.

Other labourers used their feet to good ends. Sailors, of course, were notorious for their willingness to leave a ship and terminate a labour contract at the slightest grievance. As Morris points out, "Legislation was enacted against seamen similar in character to the statutes against fugitive servants." Desertion from both the merchant service and the Royal Navy was reckoned by many one of the most troublesome problems of the day.⁷¹ Sailors ran from port to port in search of a few shillings more a month, beer that did not stink, biscuit that did not move by itself, a less "precise" master, or a safer ship. Journeymen and apprentices also kept on the move, prompting in 1767 an association of masters, the Cordwainers' Fire Company of Philadelphia, to create an insurance system "against the loss of their workmen."⁷² Other employers sought to limit the mobility of free labourers. In 1771 Henry Stiegel, owner of a Pennsylvania glass manufactory, sought through legal means the return of one of his workers. The labourer responded, "I am no servant," and "I am not by the laws of nature, to drudge and spend my whole life and strength in performing my part of the articles [wage contract], and Mr. Stiegel not paying me my wages."⁷³ Some employers trapped free workers within a "debt peonage" in an effort to circumscribe their mobility.⁷⁴

In sum, running away was a vital part of the self-activity of the early American working class. While legislatures denounced the practice as a crime, and Cotton Mather denounced it as a sin,⁷⁵ the desertion of a job was a form of struggle that enjoyed wide circulation among working people. Such movement was well-suited to class relations in America. The same factors that made full-scale revolt by either indentured servants or slaves nearly impossible — that is, the dispersion of population and the fragmentation of the productive system — served to encourage desertion and mobility. Working people used their feet to exploit competition among employers and to assert their own end. Not for nothing did mercantilist writers call workers "the Feet of the Body Politick." What these writers did not quite understand was that workers acted the part of the Feet to get away from those who styled themselves the Head.⁷⁶

Such mobility has traditionally been seen in a negative light, perhaps because of early trade union efforts to make workers stay and fight their bosses in a particular location. But this earlier "labor movement" had a positive side, helping to define and extend the community and culture of working people in early America. As Christopher Hill demonstrated in another context, a mobile worker, whether an itinerant craftsman, a soldier, a seaman, or an escaped apprentice, was both a carrier of information and ideas between different groups of labouring people, and also someone who, by way of new experi-

⁷¹ Morris, *GL*, 230, 247.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 446.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Vickers, "Maritime Labor in Colonial Massachusetts," ch. 4.

⁷⁵ Towner, "Fondness for Freedom," 213.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Galenson, "Middling People or Common Sort," 522.

ences, was in a position to be able to generate new ideas.⁷⁷ The culture of free labour was, in fact, the only cross-regional culture of working people in early America. Mobile workers were strategically-situated in the social division of labour to be able to contact many other kinds of working people. This footloose group served as something of a medium for the exchange of experience and information within a more broadly defined culture of labour. When the early eighteenth-century seaman wondered what the proletarian with only "a pair of good Hands and a Stout Heart" was to expect, his mates might have answered that he could expect to use his Fast Feet.

Running away was only one means of resistance used by working people to assert their own interests. In both town and country working men and women protested their plight with actions that ranged from strikes and slowdowns to arson and the murder of their masters.⁷⁸ In addition to the Poplar Spring insurrection discussed earlier, Virginia suffered the turbulence of numerous other tumults. In 1672 the Assembly passed a militia act which "admitted into the armed service only those white servants whose terms had nearly expired, and who would therefore have little incentive to turn their weapons against their masters."⁷⁹ Once freed, however, these former servants did not cease their troublesome ways. "How miserable that man is," wrote Governor Berkeley, "who Governes a People wher six parts in seaven at least are Poore Endebted Discontented and Armed."⁸⁰ Governor Berkeley's misery grew with Bacon's Rebellion.

Despite the diversity of regional productive systems and class structures in early America, certain activities and trends suggest a growing cultural coherence, often in subterranean fashion, over sizeable areas of the world of labour. After 15 years of study devoted to crowds and popular protest in the colonies, it is clear that cooperation among different sorts of labourers was, at critical moments, extensive.⁸¹ Alfred F. Young has affirmed that the mob in America, like its counterpart in England, was a "horizontal" sort of beast, full of concerted solidarity. More specific work is needed on the networks of communication

⁷⁷ Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, chs. 3, 4. See also Kulikoff, "Origins of Afro-American Society," 226-59, for a study that approached community through mobility.

⁷⁸ Morris, *GL*, 197, 467; Towner, "Fondness for Freedom," 209.

⁷⁹ Morris, *GL*, 187-188.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Dunn, "Servants and Slaves," 18. See also Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York 1975), 215-92; Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (New York 1957).

⁸¹ See, for examples, Gordon Wood, "A Note on Mobs during the American Revolution" *WMQ*, 23(1966), 635-42; Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York 1972); Dirk Hoerder, "Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb 1976), 235-71; John Lax and William Pencak, "The Knowles Riot and the Crisis of the 1740's in Massachusetts," *Perspectives in American History*, 10(1976), 163-214.

and the bases for cooperation and collective action within the culture of working people. What, for example, should we make of a situation in which a band of pirates — just a group of seamen who had crossed the line into illegal activity — took a ship full of bound servants and immediately ripped up the indentures and set the servants free?⁸² Or what is the significance of the solidarity of slaves, servants, and seamen who took to the streets in common protest in Philadelphia and Boston in the 1770s?⁸³

Other trends suggest a significant convergence toward a general culture of labour. The shared experience of moving to the New World as *unfree labourers* could have had an impact upon the creation of broadly-held values, in particular in producing a driving aspiration among working people toward self-sufficiency and independence. The collective experience of unfree labour, labour scarcity, and class struggle over mobility suggest that the activities and ideas of the "War for Independence" had a special meaning for working men and women. As Richard Morris has argued, "the bulk of the settlers in this country had a greater respect for the dignity of labor, and the working class in turn was possessed of a greater spirit of independence." Further, Morris adds, "the high wages commanded by colonial workmen, the relative independence enjoyed by them, and the wide recognition of the importance of labor accounted in large part for the greater esteem accorded workmen, particularly skilled craftsmen, in the colonies than in the mother country."⁸⁴ Morris went on to argue that this forceful position blunted the growth of class consciousness in the colonies, when in fact it seems more likely that the very respect and self-esteem he describes was itself a manifestation of working-class consciousness. In any case, his conclusion is certainly a measure of working-class power in early America.

Other points of cultural convergence among diverse groups of working people were a rough egalitarianism with distinctly democratic tendencies, and an ethic of sustenance and security that tempered impulses toward acquisition and accumulation. Many of those who peopled the colonies, Gary Nash reminds us, came from places "where the Protestant ethic did not beat resoundingly in every breast."⁸⁵ In fact a quite contrary pounding of the heart, perhaps first and most clearly heard in the bodies of the religious radicals in the English Revolution, came to beat to a distinctly American rhythm.

In closing, let us return to the issue of class relations in early America. We have seen that a new, complex productive system was created in the colonies, beyond the constraints of a feudal past, but firmly within the constraints of severe labour scarcity. The social relations of power and reciprocity that had

⁸² Young, "English Plebeian Culture and Anglo-American Radicalism," 41; Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," 397; Morris, *GL*, 136, 273, 313.

⁸³ Foner, *Tom Paine*, 54.

⁸⁴ Morris, *GL*, 52, 51.

⁸⁵ Gary B. Nash, "Up from the Bottom in Franklin's Philadelphia," *Past and Present*, 77(1977), 59, 68; Smith, "Material Lives," 180; Henretta, "Families and Farms," 19; Alfred F. Young, "Afterword," in his *The American Revolution*, 456-7.

been worked out between ruler and ruled in England, Europe, and Africa had to be established anew with the massive and momentous move across the Atlantic. Labouring men and women were, in numerous ways, reattached to the means of production. Compulsory labour was commonplace. The working people of early America withstood deep and varied bondage and coercion. The experience of unfree labour lies coiled like a snake in the heart of early American working-class history.

These early experiences and this snake, I would suggest, are intricately intertwined with America's sweeping history of ferocious, often violent, conflict at the point of production. The snake has generations of wisdom, and frequently says, "Don't Tread on Me."⁸⁶ If early American elites and employers, facing extraordinary labour scarcity and a diverse working class, gained unprecedented experience in dealing with labour as a commodity, then by the same logic and process, American working people accumulated equal experience in defining, limiting, and resisting this treatment. Many labouring folk in early America learned that they needed Good Hands to get a living, a Stout Heart to endure grim and grisly oppression, and Fast Feet to free themselves from exploitation and to assert autonomous values and interests.

⁸⁶ See Ronald Hoffman, "The 'Disaffected' in the Revolutionary South," in Young, ed., *The American Revolution*, 273-316.

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