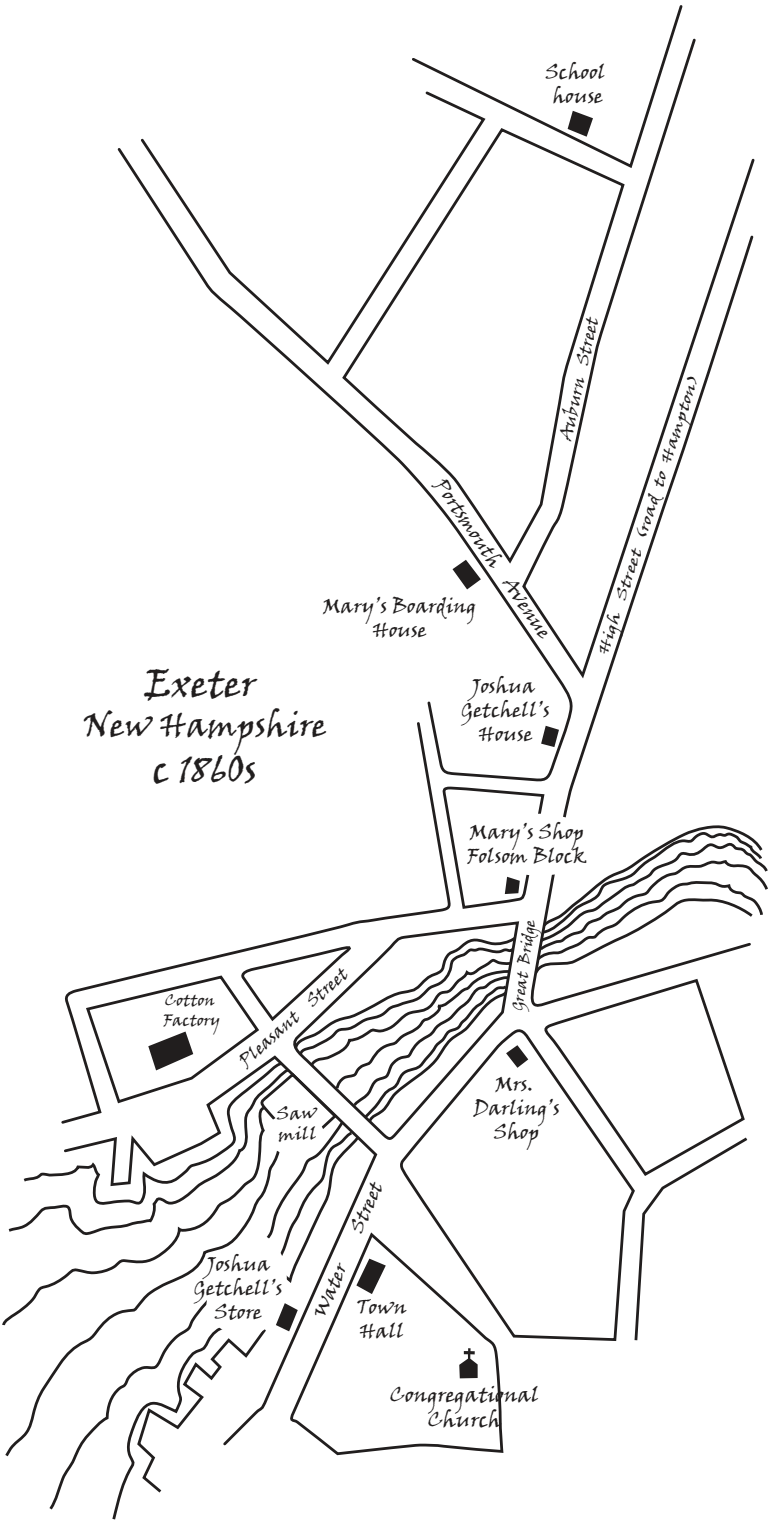
A Page Out of History: A Hampton Woman in the Needletrades 1859-1869

Cheryl A. Lassiter


School house
Auburn Street
High Street (road to Hampton)
Portsmouth Avenue
Mary's Boarding House
Exeter
New Hampshire
c 1860s
Joshua Getchell's House
Mary's Shop Folsom Block
Great Bridge
Cotton Factory
Pleasant Street
Saw mill
Mrs. Darling's Shop
Water Street
Joshua Getchell's Store
Town Hall
Congregational Church

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A Page Out of History: A Hampton Woman in the Needletrades 1859-1869

CHERYL A. LASSITER

2011 Association of Historical Societies of New Hampshire Award Recipient

2012 New England Museum Association Honorable Mention

From the Hampton Historical Society

On a bright autumn afternoon in 2009 the door to the Tuck Museum opened and three people, carrying eight large boxes, entered. They had instructions from their aunt, Carol Wygant Felter, to "drop them off here." Betty Moore, our executive director, quickly realized that into our keeping had been placed a rare multi-generational legacy, one that had belonged to the Page-Cole family, whose ancestors were among the early settlers of Hampton. In 1953, when the family's last Hampton descendant passed away, this rich trove of personal writings and family objects was taken for safekeeping by Carol's mother Ernestine Cole Wygant to her home in New York State.

Over the years, each generation in possession of the legacy, in Hampton and elsewhere, had added its own bits of family lore, history, and insightful commentary. In doing so they enriched and expanded their collective memories of this prominent Hampton family, which in the mid- to late-nineteenth century centered around Carol's great-grandparents, Susan Leavitt Page and her husband William Gowell Cole. As part of our mission to further an understanding of the history and cultural heritage of Hampton, we offer the public this monograph, based on the Page-Cole Family Collection, which explores a ten-year period in the life of Susan's sister and one-time partner in the millinery and dressmaking trades, Mary Anna Page Getchell.

Unless otherwise credited, images and quoted material are from the personal papers of Mary Page Getchell and the Page-Cole Family Collection (PCFC), Hampton Historical Society Archives (HHSA).

Mary M. Bibb

Prologue

"We started for Hampton on our own propellers"

For over a quarter of a century, work and marriage would tie Mary Anna Page Getchell to the town of Exeter, New Hampshire, yet her roots were firmly planted in 'Old Hampton,' a quiet seacoast village whose pastoral and littoral landscapes had inspired the poet John Greenleaf Whittier and the artist Charles Henry Turner. Mary herself wrote sentimentally of the "enchanting beauty [of her] native village," rising up from "the most grand of all objects…the old ocean rolling and heaving its mighty waters, ever and anon raising and dashing its white crest upon the shore."

Born December 1, 1832, the third child of Josiah Page and Susan Leavitt, Mary was a descendant of many of Hampton's founding families,[1] including that of Reverend Stephen Bachiler, the Puritan minister who in 1638 led the first settlers up the winding river, through the salt marshes, to the place they knew as Winnacunnet.

The house where Mary was born, "received" her "earliest impressions," and again inhabited for the last 30 years of her life, still stands in fine shape on Hampton's historic Ring.[2] Her grandfather Abner Page built the house in 1782 on the 1639 homestead of her great-great-great-great grandfather, Robert Page, an immigrant from Ormsby, Lincolnshire, England. Robert's lineal descendants inhabited the homestead for over three centuries, until

1953 when Mary's niece, Anna May Cole, died, and the property was sold.

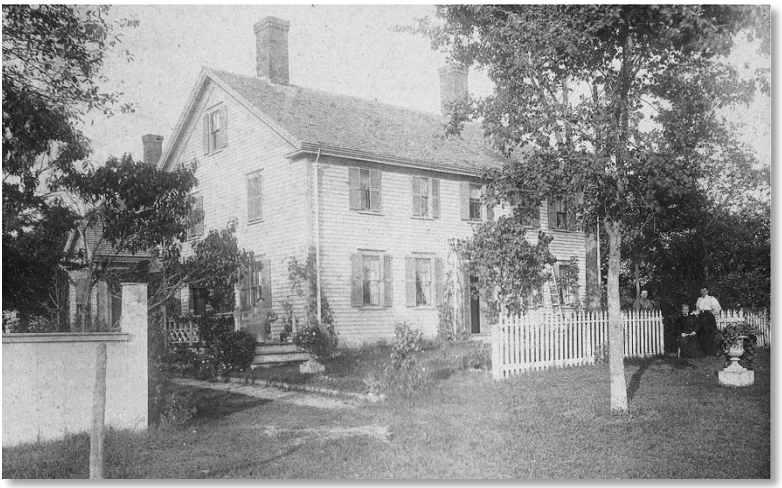
Mary's father Josiah, a farmer who had trained as a teacher, had been a Hampton Academy trustee and its treasurer, a town selectman, librarian, and representative to the state legislature. His cousin Joseph Dow wrote that he was a "born genealogist" and an early "co-laborer" in Dow's research for his history of the town of Hampton, posthumously published in 1893.[3] Mary, in her short history of the Page family, wrote of her father: "He early gave his mind to the study of history and that of Hampton in particular until he [knew] more of the early families and the places they first settled than any other person. His head was a storehouse of anecdotes, traditions, and facts equaled by few."

Mary's maternal grandfather was James Leavitt, Esquire, veteran of the Revolution, justice of the peace, tavern keeper and tradesman, father of fourteen, the town's first postmaster, and a Hampton Academy founder.

In 1802, Leavitt bought the 14-room Georgian mansion once owned by General Jonathan Moulton.[4] The house, favorably situated near the meetinghouse on the Portsmouth-Newburyport road, served as the town's stagecoach stop, tavern, post office, boarding house, and, occasionally, school house. Within its wainscoted parlors Esquire Leavitt hosted meetings of the Hampton Academy proprietors. His daughter, Mrs. Susan Leavitt Page, remembered walking as a child down the lane from Bride Hill when the family took up residence in the house. Later in life she would mark the transiting seasons from her own house a short distance across the village green, watching as the "sun set, farther and farther south, until it was hidden by father's house."

As children, Mary and her siblings had surely trod its wide pine floorboards on many occasions.[5]

In later years, when she was established in Exeter and the mood would strike for a family visit, Mary would set off for Old Hampton on her "own propellers," a distance of about five miles.[6]



The Page-Cole house in Hampton, c. 1880s. Mary is sitting on the porch on the left.

Oh! Home of my youth,
Will ye ever remain?
To shield from the blast
Of the cold heartless world?
My father, my mother, my brothers, my sister,
Will the furrows of time
Ne'er remove you from sight.

Mary's diary entry, June 18, 1856

1859-60

"The millinery business is a very good business"

"Now for a while we shall buy & sell to get gain instead of trying to teach the young."

With that simple expression of intent, and an earnest aspiration to be self-supporting, Mary Anna Page, with her sister Susan, gave up school teaching for the uncertain world of business.[7] From 1859 until her marriage ten years later, Mary strove to "enjoy an enviable independence,"[8] free to succeed or fail as her skills as proprietor and artisan allowed. In a world of narrow employment choices, she chose well – custom milliners and dressmakers, the "aristocrats" of female needleworkers, enjoyed a certain prestige and commanded the highest wages. Women as shop proprietors fared even better.[9]

It is not known where or even if Mary received formal training in the millinery and dressmaking trades, but she may have apprenticed with Mrs. Elizabeth Odlin,[10] the woman whose shop she was to buy. After the school term ended on March 4, 1859, Mary took an inventory of goods at Mrs. Odlin's millinery and fancy goods "stand" in the Folsom Block[11] in Exeter and prepared to go into the business. On March 29, having given Mrs. Odlin two promissory notes for $2,300, Mary and Susan opened the shop and "began to trade."

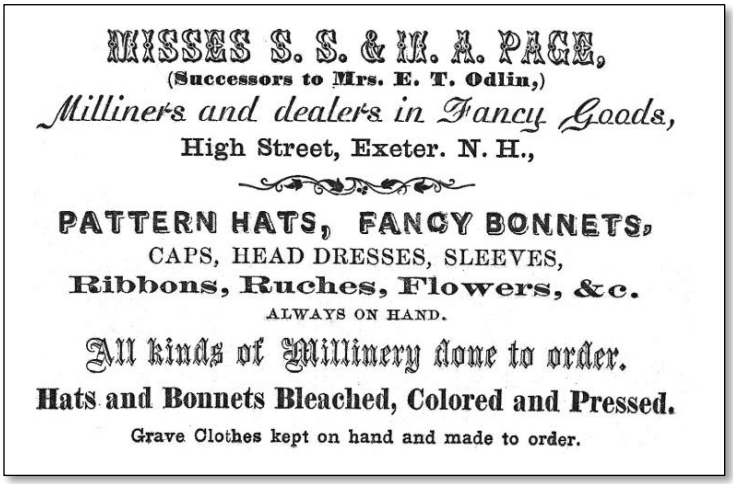
Their younger brother John, who had gone west in 1857, approved of the venture. "I believe the girls will do well," he wrote their mother from Byron, Illinois, in May 1859. "The millinery

business is a very good business because the fashions change so very often. They are stepping into an extensive trade which will be of great service to them. I should advise them to expend a good sum each year in advertising. It will always be a profitable investment for them."

A survey of Exeter Newsletter advertisements during the period 1859-1869 reveals that the sisters generally followed John's advice. Their first advertisement posted in April 1860, and excluding a period between the war years 1862-1865, their advertisements ran almost continuously until 1869 and encompassed four name changes.[12]

Mary's diary and ledger entries infer that the business prospered. She and Susan paid the first note of $500 on time, and by October 1860 had paid $400 toward the second one. In October she opened a second shop in the northern Illinois town of Polo, 110 miles west of Chicago, managing it until she returned to Exeter in late 1862. By April 1867, three years after Susan had left the business and Mary had become a sole proprietor, the Exeter shop inventory totaled over $3,600. The addition of a partner that year enabled her to pay in full all her notes. During 1865-1868 she recorded weekly cash income, amounts due in Boston,[13] the names of employees, when they came and left the shop, their hours worked and pay received, notes paid and to whom, and the names of her business partners and when they joined the firm. In the same ledger she also expended a tremendous amount of energy and ink detailing her grocery bills, down to the item, its cost, and date purchased.

In 1860, thirty-one of Exeter's 3,309 residents worked in the needletrades. Of those, twenty-eight were women, whose average age was thirty. Four of the twenty-eight were heads of households, closer to forty years old than thirty, while the rest were typically younger, unmarried women either living at home or boarding out. Mary, age 27, and Susan, age 30, boarded in Exeter with a young hardware merchant and his wife. The majority of women claimed at most assets of $100, and several could claim assets over $1,000. Squarely in the middle, Susan had $600 in assets and Mary had $400. The men in the group - a hatter and two tailors - were married with children, and two of them had live-in domestics. With assets of $6,000 and $7,500 respectively, the tailor Robert Thompson and the hatter Jeremiah Merrill were among the well-to-do of Exeter.[14]



Mary and Susan's trade card, 1859-60

1860-61

"Doing well for a stranger"

"Little transpired that was out of the daily routine of buying and selling & gathering gain," Mary wrote in her diary, "until Aug. 21st 1860 when I diverged from the regular line & landed in [the] great west."

Mary had gone to see her brother John, then living in Mount Morris, Illinois. This 1,100-mile journey to the west was life-changing for the Eastern girl whose "capacities" until then had been "cramped & pressed down," and who had "little idea of the extent to which things are capable of spreading." Impressed with the endless fields of corn and wheat that rolled by her carriage window on the ride to Mount Morris from the train station, she wondered, "with all this grain which brings in so much wealth, why can't they afford better buildings?"

John, who was teaching school and trying to realize his dream of one day joining the ministry, was thrilled to see a familiar face from Hampton, his first in over three years. "Mary's here!" he gleefully wrote their mother upon her arrival.

And Mary was happy that she had come. "Only a few years ago," she reflected in her diary, "I was a teacher with 50 little children, all looking to me for direction and guidance, and watching my every action by which they would be influenced to either good or evil. God grant that my influence was for good! How interesting it would be if at some future time I could read the history of the lives of each of those little ones. Now here I am – and

well may this land be called the Great West, for it has produced in me a desire to expand and enlarge my ideas of things."

Acting on that desire, she saw an opportunity to increase her trade in the burgeoning West, and perhaps to "hunt a husband," as John in his letters to Hampton had hinted was eminently possible. Mary returned to New Hampshire, arranged her affairs, and by the end of September was setting up a second millinery shop in the town of Polo, ten miles southwest of Mount Morris. According to an advertisement in the Polo Weekly Advertiser for September 24, 1860, the shop was located at "Dr. More's old stand nearly opposite Phelps and Johnson's store."

In October, John wrote their mother that Mary had "several applications from girls who wish to learn the [millinery] trade of her – some of them very good girls… [P]eople who have been in the shop thus far have been well pleased with her goods and her prices. There is not such a store within a dozen miles of Polo, and it is one of the best business points in the State."

The town, which had sprung into existence in 1853, had been named in honor of the Venetian trader Marco Polo. It grew as a station along the Illinois Central Railroad then being built, and it rapidly developed into a bustling shipping point for cattle, hogs, and grain. There was raw energy in the youthful town, so different from the ancient villages of Hampton and Exeter.

The exhilaration Mary felt in her new surroundings was evident. "But such a girl!" John declared to their mother. "I don't know what I shall ever do with her – she is such a case as to carry on. Hannah[15] says her mouth has become one or two sizes larger than ever from continually laughing at [Mary's] nonsense."

It was not long before John would write that the community was beginning to accept his sister as one of their own. "Mary is doing well I think for a stranger," he told their mother. "I am inclined to think that bye and bye she will have as much as she can do."

John came from Mount Morris to set up housekeeping with Mary, and Jennie Perkins of Hampton[16] soon joined her in the shop and as a housemate. Neither woman, it seems, had much practical experience in the domestic arts.

"Oh Mother who would have thought one year ago that now I should be away out here keeping house?" Mary wrote in December 1860. "We get along very well, but often have to stop & think how you used to do this thing & that thing & we don't always hit right at last. We have had hard times making our washing look well. Our clothes look yellow and streaked, as we have been in the habit of washing before day light, when we could not see whether they were clean or not. We have been trying to make bread as the people do here but do not succeed very well yet. I have to leave the bread making to Jennie."

A few weeks later Mary reported that she was getting along better with the housekeeping, but still struggled with cooking. "Mother, I wish you would step in sometime & see how we manage & give us a little advice when we come to a standpoint," she wrote. "[My cake is so dry] we can hardly eat it."

With that in mind, she was glad to write more favorably of her business affairs. "We have considerable work to do in the shop such as dress making, millinery, worsted knitting &c. We are always glad to have Sabbath day come so that we can have a rest." She added

wistfully, "We thought of you on Thanksgiving Day and wished that we could be with you. The salt fish father sent John went well. The pies, cakes, and apples that our friends sent out from Exeter were excellent. We had a second thanksgiving over them."

Polo, Illinois c. 1860s

It was now January 1861, winter on the Illinois prairie. "The coldest, dreariest & dullest season has come," Mary wrote her mother. "Night before last we had a snow storm & yesterday the wind blew a perfect gale & has drifted the rail road so that the cars cannot pass. Many of the lanes across the prairies were drifted to a level with the tops of the fences before, they must be still worse now. Everyone says that they never knew such a hard winter in the past before."

With the horrendously bad weather came a complete drop off in shop business…and plenty of time to write long letters home. "We've no work of any consequence right now," Mary wrote. "We're sewing for ourselves and fixing up our house a little. If I had

the materials on hand, I would have all my sewing and mending done for next summer. We are very glad that we have housework to do, or I am afraid we should be waiting to get back to N. H. to find something to do."

The inevitable expressions of homesickness were not far behind. "I often have a picture before me of you & father sitting by the kitchen-fire," she wrote one cold January night. "Sometimes father sits with his head bent down & I can almost hear him snore, while you sit on the opposite side of the stove with a hood on your head, glasses on your eyes trying to pick up a stich [sic] in your knitting work & with your fat on the old block. Now I would like to step in sometime unexpectedly & sit with you & warm my fat on the hearth in front."

NEW MILLINEARY STORE.

Misses S. L. & M. A. Page,

Will open a st[illegible] Polo on, or soon after the first of October at Dr. More's old stand nearly opposite Phelps and Johnston's Store, where they will sell

EVERYTHING USUALLY KEPT
in a
FIRST CLASS MILLINERY STORE.

Bonnets will be made or trimmed in the latest styles and at the LOWEST CASH.

Bleaching and Pressing Done to Order!

Our stock is direct from Boston and we are confident that we can sell as

CHEAP FOR CASH
as any one West of Chicago,

REMEMBER THE PLACE AND GIVE US A CALL.

Polo Sept. 24th 1860. 26-tf.

1860 Polo Weekly Advertiser
Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society

1861

"I have more work than we can all do"

In April, the fomenting conflict over slavery and states' rights had at last erupted into war. News and rumors both true and false flew over the telegraph wires to be printed in the local press.

"News came last night that Davis with 20,000 men were within six hours march of Washington & afterward that the Capital had fallen," Mary wrote excitedly to her mother on April 22, 1861. "Everybody is on fire & brother is ready to rise up against brother if he is in the least opposed to supporting the Union. It is a dreadful state for the country to be in."

Echoing the worldview of her Congregationalist mother she added, "All we can do, is to do what is in our power & trust in Providence for the result." And of course she was concerned about the war's impact on the folks back home. "I am anxious to hear of you & father. How does Josiah[17] feel? Expect to hear that he is in the field before now."

For her part, Mary was bravely "ready & willing to act, if there is anything I can do for the country." With characteristic industriousness she helped organize a ladies' work group to scrape lint and sew bandages, to "be doing something for the volunteers."

John wanted (and Mary expected him) to enlist in the army, but Hannah refused to allow it. "I have no hope of persuading her to let me go and shall not ask her to do so again," he explained to their mother, adding melodramatically, "I am fully satisfied that my enlistment would kill her." As later family lore relates, neither Mary nor the Hampton kinfolk fully approved of Hannah's refusal to allow John to join the army, resulting in an undercurrent of family conflict.

Jennie Perkins volunteered to join as a nurse. "Mary has an apprentice now that Jennie is going to be another Florence Nightingale," John wrote his mother. But Jennie, thirty-one years old, was afterwards rejected for being underage.

When the initial excitement subsided, John wrote of the war's effect on the local economy. "Business is dull on account of the war. It will probably injure Mary's business very much."

The banks began to fail, causing a shortage of money which further impacted trade. "The financial affairs of the State are in a strange condition," Mary wrote in the latter part of May. "All the Banks of this State & Wisconsin have given out & we do not receive any Bills at all. Specie is very scarce. I did not lose much by the broken banks, but it effects [sic] my work so that we have hardly enough to employ ourselves. About all we can do is to hope for the best."

Yet she expressed a naïve certainty that the monetary crisis would soon pass. "Of course there will be a change soon," she wrote, "as there cannot be any business done except by orders or credit."

In Hampton, Mrs. Page, who lived a few doors east of the Town Hall, had a front row seat to the local war preparations. "They've been drilling here for two weeks," she wrote her daughter in late April. "Twice a day they march between the town hall and our house. They're ready to go when the call comes in."

"There are a few exceptions to our Citizens' devotedness to the Union," she added. "The great Mrs. Delancey, she hopes every Northern man will be shot dead as soon as they reach Washington. The would-be Honorable Charles H. Coffin was in John Towle's store talking loud, saying the ministers were the cause of the war & the republicans were all infidels. It was an insult to your Father. He told [Coffin] he had better shut up his mouth there. I was glad your Father spoke for he thinks no one dares to reprove him.

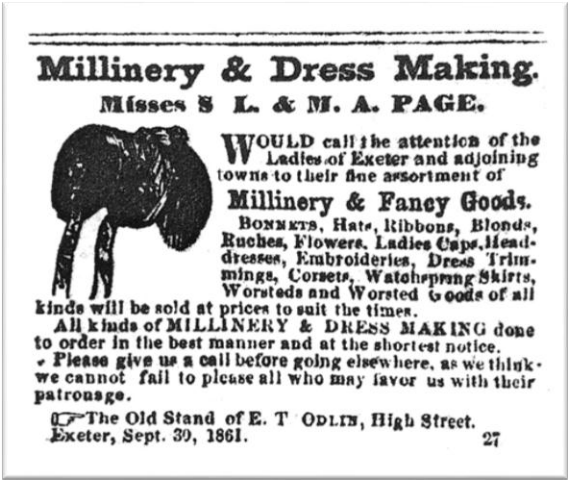
"On Monday we had a solemn meeting at the Town Hall. Our preacher Mr. Colby repeated his sermon he preached Sabbath day. He don't spare the feelings of the Tories at all. John M. Palmer addressed the soldiers as they swore the oath of allegiance before him. He spoke well and affecting. As soon as he closed his remarks the soldiers all at once stepped into the aisles 40 or 45 of them (It startled me) with their arms across their breasts. Ordered to give three cheers for the government & again three cheers, then the drum struck once to a step, slow but loud, and their march seemed like a funeral. When they got half through they struck up quick time and passed out of the Hall.[18] I don't wonder that mothers and wives shed tears." It was her belief that her son Josiah would not enlist, "though he says he shall go if he is called for."

In a passage that suggests Mary had written of a suitor in Illinois, Mrs. Page advised her daughter to "keep up good courage,"

expressing the fear that "I am afraid you will never get money enough to get home again…You had better marry that man that is worth 40 or 50 thousand dollars &c."

Later she hinted that Mary should come home, if only for Susan's sake. "They say Susan is overrun with business. She comes home but seldom & it always rains when she does come & she is so tired O how she needs your help."

But Mary was resolutely determined to remain in Illinois. "On Sue's account it would be better for me to be at home & assist her, but for my own part I am not sorry I came," she replied. She justified her decision by adding, "I feel that my being here has been an advantage to John."



Millinery & Dress Making.

Misses S L. & M. A. PAGE.

WOULD call the attention of the Ladies of Exeter and adjoining towns to their fine assortment of

Millinery & Fancy Goods.

BONNETS, Hats, Ribbons, Blonds, Ruches, Flowers, Ladies Caps, Head-dresses, Embroideries, Dress Trimmings, Corsets, Watchspring Skirts, Worsteds and Worsted Goods of all kinds will be sold at prices to suit the times.

All kinds of MILLINERY & DRESS MAKING done to order in the best manner and at the shortest notice.

Please give us a call before going elsewhere, as we think we cannot fail to please all who may favor us with their patronage.

☞The Old Stand of E. T ODLIN, High Street.

Exeter, Sept. 30, 1861. 27

Exeter Newsletter, Sept. 30, 1861

From her friend Sue Chase, an Exeter schoolteacher, Mary received a happier report on the situation at the shop, where apparently two girls of the same name were employed. "I have been spending the afternoon in the shop," Sue wrote in June 1861. "Nell & Nell were there and have got their work along nicely for Saturday." If Susan Page was in desperate need of her sister's help, Sue Chase was unaware of it. "I wonder what you are doing this warm day," she mused to Mary. "Hurrying as fast as you can, I suppose." Regarding the local reaction to the war, she observed that "The people here are very calm about it. You would never know there was one if it were not for the papers. Characteristic of the people, you know, to take things quietly."

A few miles away, Mrs. Page was becoming increasingly worried for her youngest daughter's welfare. Mary reassured her that the business in Polo would not fail and that she had saved enough money to pay the passage home, should that be necessary. "In the dullest season," she wrote, "I made enough to support the family. I have no debts here & have a great deal due me by men that can be trusted & I have some money on deposit." Still, she acknowledged that she had hoped for business to be better. As she explained to her mother, "I have felt downhearted that I was not doing as much as I expected & that feeling has perhaps entered into the tone of my letters."

In August, Mrs. Page's infant grandson choked to death on a dried apple, and her next letter reflected her gloomy state of mind. "My spirits are depressed in anticipation of coming afflictions…When you receive this probably John will be married to one that will share his joys & sorrows a longer or shorter time.

Perhaps a very short time…Earthly bliss is often a short continuance." As we will see, her words proved prophetic. She passed along the word from Jennie's mother, that "[Jennie] don't know as you want her any longer…She has neither love nor money but Thomas[19] will send her money if she wants to come home."

Perhaps to explain her apparently soured relationship with Jennie, Mary related to Mrs. Page a "series of adventures" that Jennie had lately undertaken, involving trips to Chicago, late hours, and pounding on the door in the middle of the night to be let in.

Not long after, Mary settled Jennie's account at the shop[20] and Jennie went into business for herself in the neighboring town of Freeport. "I shall miss J. very much in the shop & hardly know what I shall do without her," Mary wrote her mother. "But if she can do better for herself I am willing & will help her all I can." As a balm to her grieving mother, she added "There is a prospect of my having plenty to do in the shop this Fall."

By late November the prospect had turned into reality. Even on Thanksgiving Day the ladies "began to come to the shop door to trade," interrupting Mary's dinner preparations. She spent "most of the next two hours…waiting on customers." In the meantime, John had arrived with seven dinner guests. "I then flew round the kitchen & got dinner ready about four o'clock," Mary wrote, adding that "My pumpkin pies were not so good, but I had a good top bake on my turkey…We spent the evening making molasses candy and cracking nuts and trying to have a good time."

The holiday elicited the desire for the comfort and safety of dear old Hampton. "I could not help thinking of home and

wishing I could have spent this one there, free from all care and anxiety."

She stayed busy in the days that followed. "I spent my time in the shop hard at work until last night ten o'clock," she wrote. "Addie & Mrs. Stapley[21] help me all they can. Still I have more work than we can all do & I ought to have another person here with me all the time."

On December 1, her twenty-ninth birthday, Mary was pleased to inform her mother of John and Hannah's upcoming marriage. "Then I shall get rid of the care of housekeeping," she wrote with obvious relief. "They have decided to keep house and I will board with them, and if Hannah has any time to spare she will help me in the shop."

Family members: Mrs. Susan Leavitt Page, Susan Page (Cole), Josiah Page, Jr., Josiah Page, Sr., John Page, Hannah Cheney (Page).

1862

"The last lone one left on the family tree"

The happy day arrived January 2, 1862. With a wife to see to his housekeeping needs, John, who held strong religious beliefs, now felt free to criticize his sister's conduct. As Mary set out on February 18 for a visit to Hampton, he complained to their mother that "Mary has thus far resisted all claims of her God upon her. She has been strongly wrought upon, and earnestly labored with and prayed for. She is popular and many have tried to induce her to submit to the claims of her Savior." This is the first we hear of a conflict brewing between the siblings, and it would only deepen as the year advanced.

As Mary rode the train to Chicago she was deeply touched by her first encounter with the sad effects of the war. "As I had to pass through the men passenger cars I had to pass close by six wounded soldiers who were striched [sic] out on the floor like so many dogs, poor fellows," she wrote in her diary. "But a short time ago they left home full of life & patriotism & now return broken down & sick having done what they could for their country."

Her unlooked-for arrival in Hampton surprised everyone. Her visit there was, in her mother's words to John, "Short and sweet!" adding, with a characteristic mix of angst and patient resolve, "But then, every sweet has its bitter. Two long years must pass before I can see her again…Who would have thought that you would have stayed from home for so long? O John how I want to see you…but I am perfectly willing that my children should go where their interest calls them."

Mary returned to Polo in April. The country was learning to accept the intractability of the warring sides, and people got on with their lives as best they could while their men fought and died by the thousands. As Mrs. Page wrote to Mary, "24 thousand ushered into eternity in a day or two, how sad. We know but a little about war…as those do that are in the midst of it." Yet farmers still farmed, merchants still sold, teachers still taught, and ladies still wanted hats and clothing. By the latter part of May John was reporting to Mrs. Page that "Mary has as much work as she can do and seems to be doing well."

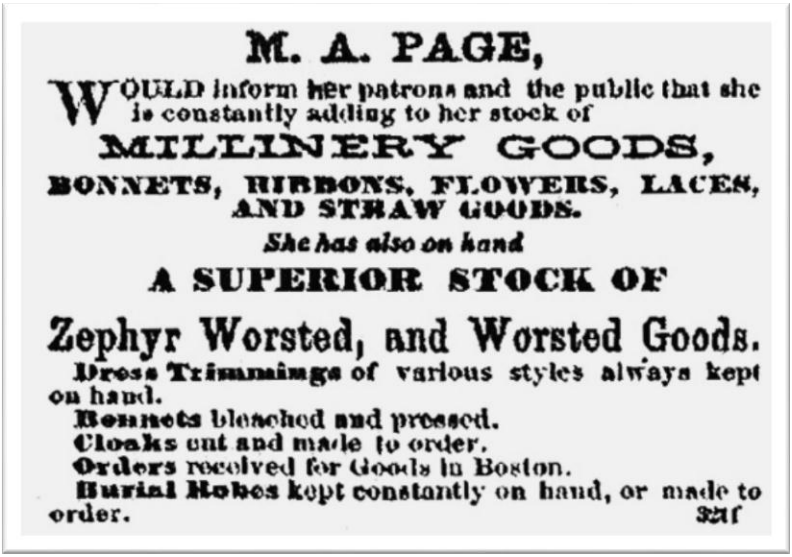
Reading between the lines, it was clear that attitudes were changing. Reports of federal failures on the field of battle strained relationships. Hannah worried for kin actively engaged in the fighting and she fretted that John would be drafted. John felt he was grossly underpaid in Polo, and hinted that his duty to help Mary settle there had prevented him from seeking a better-paying position in another town. He wanted to move on. As for Mary, we don't have to look far for the object of her disdain when she wrote to her mother that "some [women] seem to take pride in talking of their ailments & think it genteel to be delicate." Tensions bloomed like prairie wildflowers between sister and wife, and consequently, between sister and brother, prompting John to wheedle information from their mother.

"Mother, I wish you would write me something of what Mary told you about Hannah," he wrote in June. "I would like to know how she is regarded by [Mary] because you have received all you know of her through Mary."

Resentful of his sister, he couldn't resist disparaging her, using bigotry to do so. "Mary seems to be doing well tho' some of her old customers do not patronize her this summer," he wrote smugly. "This week she has had a good deal of work to do for the Catholics who have had a great turnout to a series of meetings lasting five or six days closing with planting a cross in front of their church.

"The priest preached several sermons in which he proved to the satisfaction of all Irishmen the value & efficiency of all their mummeries," thus putting their mother on notice that her daughter had stooped to working for "idolaters."

The friction intensified. "I have an idea that Mary thinks that Hannah is not very economical," John wrote in July, "but I am not


M. A. PAGE,

WOULD inform her patrons and the public that she is constantly adding to her stock of

MILLINERY GOODS,

BONNETS, RIBBONS, FLOWERS, LACES, AND STRAW GOODS.

She has also on hand

A SUPERIOR STOCK OF

Zephyr Worsted, and Worsted Goods.

Dress Trimmings of various styles always kept on hand.
Bonnets bleached and pressed.
Cloaks cut and made to order.
Orders received for Goods in Boston.
Burial Robes kept constantly on hand, or made to order.

32tf

M.A. PAGE *operated from late 1862 until April 1867*
Exeter Newsletter, Dec. 31, 1866

in the least disappointed in her...I do not think Mary does as well this year as last. I do not know the reason."

"When will this war end on righteous and peaceful terms?" Mrs. Page lamented in an August letter to Mary, perhaps thinking about her children's tribulations as well as those of the fractured nation.

A resolution came in late August when John and Hannah packed their bags and moved back to Mt. Morris. John then accepted a teaching position in Belvidere, Illinois, and by September 4th he and Hannah had moved into a boarding house there.

Around the same time, Mary learned from her mother that Susan was "a-going to give up her single blessedness," and that she, Mary, was expected to "come home & take her place, unless you have a lodestone to attract you there."

The immovable object of Mary's resolve had just met the irresistible force of family obligations. The latter won out, and by mid-September she was making plans to sell her shop in Polo and return to New Hampshire. She would do what was required, but couldn't help feeling a little sorry for herself. "[Now] I shall be the last lone one left on the family tree," she wrote to her mother in the days prior to her departure. Possibly to explain the motive behind John's sudden move and her own discontent, she added, "we hear nothing here but war…all want to be on the move & are nervous & restless…I don't know but I am affected the same way."

"If I could only get a good milliner"

In Belvidere, John was feeling left out of the wedding preparations. "Mary wrote me that she had concluded to go home," he sulked. "She did not tell me the reason but I knew it before. I have not heard yet who Susan is to marry, but suppose from all indications that it must be William Cole."

Before leaving Polo for good, Mary wrote her mother that John stood a good chance of being drafted into the army. "As probably they will have to do if the Federals continue to be so defeated in every battle," she wrote soberly. "There have a good many of our best men gone & there seems to be but few left."

Anticipating that Jennie Perkins would take her place in Polo, Mary surmised that Jennie "will do better here than she can in Freeport." No record remains, but it is seems likely that Jennie gave Mary a note for the purchase of the shop stores. As we will see, in later years Mary would write of legal problems that involved her friend.

Mary wrote in her diary that on "Sept. 31st [sic]" she "left Polo Ill. in company with Miss Cutts having disposed of my goods. V. Perkins taking my store." On their way to catch the "midnight train to Chicago," Mary and Miss Cutts stopped to say goodbye to John and Hannah. From all indications it was a cordial parting.

The two women then boarded the train, and after a stop in Chicago, "where we had some shopping on Lake St. to do for Jennie Perkins," followed by a side trip to see the "awful chasm" of Niagara Falls and the Suspension Bridge, "which is the most

wonderful of all human inventions," Mary arrived back in the confining East on October 7, 1862.

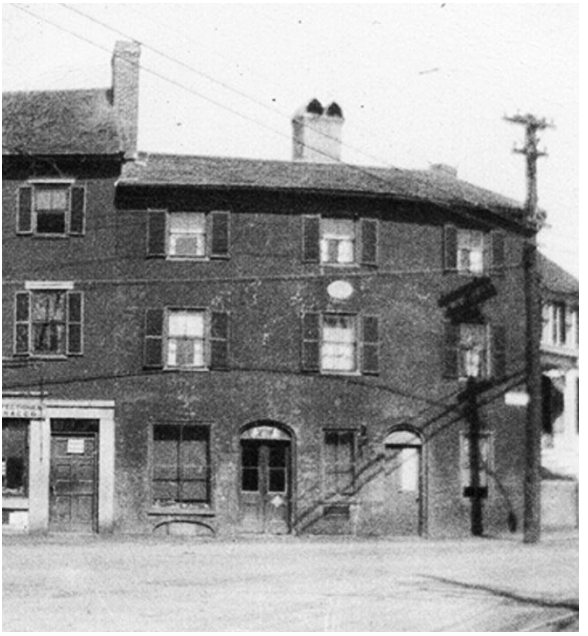
On November 15, as John had deduced, Susan married William Cole, a widower with three young children. She moved to Portsmouth with her new family, and Mary was left to run the Exeter shop alone.

Early 20th-century view of the Folsom Block, Exeter, New Hampshire, the site of Mary's shop.

With the exception of a few mundane diary entries, for nearly a year Mary made no record of her activities or those of her family. Only through other family papers do we learn that in the spring of 1863 Hannah gave birth to a son, Edward, and that the following September John was making plans to work for the Great Pacific Railroad, laying track for the transcontinental railroad.

But he never got the chance. On October 10, 1863, a telegram arrived at Mary's in Exeter telling of John's death. Mary wrote in her diary that she "immediately telegraphed to Sue & then went home to be with Mother & carry the sad news. Sue met me there."[22]

A later letter from Jennie explained that John had "suffered from dysentery and inflammation of the bowels," and had "died very easy and without any pain."[23] In the same letter she wrote that she had "written you several letters lately & sent you papers but do not seem to hear from you. The box of goods you sent me has not come yet. What can I do!"



Courtesy Exeter Historical Society

Rarely introspective, Mary left unwritten her feelings about John's untimely death and Jennie's insensitive mingling of business with family tragedy. Her next diary entry, on October 22, simply reported that "Ednah Dow came in to work in the store taking the place of Mrs. Burnham who has gone into a store of her own."

In January 1864, her brother Josiah left his wife and two children in Hampton and enlisted with the 23rd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. On March 1, Mary wrote in her diary that "Susan came from Portsmouth to advertise that we part on business

affairs. Settled up our affairs I giving her my note for $1000.00. I taking all debts etc on my own hands."

Mary was now the shop's sole owner. As the millinery and dressmaking trades were largely seasonal businesses, and periodic unemployment the norm,[24] there surely were times when money to pay the bills was in short supply. The day after Susan left the shop, Mary borrowed $148 from Mrs. Odlin and a month later she tapped Josiah's wife Cordelia for $100. Yet by the 26th of April business had improved and she was able to at least repay Mrs. Odlin's "small note" in full.

May was an unsettling month. In the midst of the busy spring season, Mary undertook a refinancing of her debt. In the weeks before the transaction would close, she read in the newspaper that her brother had been wounded in a battle at Petersburg, Virginia,[25] and no one had heard from him since a letter that had arrived earlier in the month. Then came another unpleasant surprise: Mary was evicted from her lodgings at Mrs. Head's to make room for a returning daughter. She then rented rooms at Mrs. Grant's, a move that by winter she would sorely regret. On May 23, to complete the refinancing, she "received [a] check for $800.00 from Wm. Cole to pay note Mrs. Odlin has against me," and a week later she "settled all up with Mrs. Odlin & gave Wm. Cole [my] note for $800.00." She was now in debt only to family, and the next month she "sent Wm. Cole $115.00 on note."

In the late summer of 1864, with Union General Sherman's maneuvers to capture Atlanta occupying the news, Mary went to Illinois by way of the Great Lakes to visit friends and family, returning in mid-September. She noted in her diary that on

September 22, a friend and teacher, Carrie Smith, had gone to the South to teach the freedmen.

That winter Mary was busy sewing for family as well as customers, as Susan, who had moved to Saco, Maine, was pregnant with her first child. Mary made a bonnet for Susan and clothes for the baby, but a problem with her eyes delayed the finishing of the fancy work on a receiving blanket. "My eyes have been bad the last week," she explained in a letter to Susan. "I have done but little as yet." She was also making undergarments at the time and added "I got some mainsook and a waist[26] in Boston & will work what I can on it." Also, she had her ears pierced and "have got the string out of one & it is healing up. The other is still sore."

Dressmaker[27] Ednah Dow, who was "not a favorite with very many," had been with Mary for over a year. Now she was "discontented" and seemed to be leaning toward setting up a shop of her own. Mary was worried about losing her.

"Ednah wants to go out the last week of this month & that will soon be here," Mary wrote to Susan in January 1865. "Work does not entirely fall off yet. She has as much as she can do. A while ago she said that she wanted to know how Mrs. Burnham was coming out & if she made any thing she was going to open a store herself. Now I find that Ednah is thinking more of it although she does not say much directly about it."

Her concern was real. Exeter Newsletter advertisements for the period show a shifting line-up of millinery and dressmaking proprietors. Finding experienced replacements was not always easy. For the majority of women, working outside the home was still a short-lived affair, making turnover in the trade high: only two of

the 28 female garment workers enumerated in the 1860 census were also enumerated in 1870.

Ednah's dissatisfaction caused Mary to question her own skills as a proprietor and to measure her success against that of Mrs. Darling, a prosperous Exeter shopkeeper.[28] "What is it that makes all I have with me want to strike off for themselves?" she complained to Susan. "Jennie first. E. Brown. Mrs. Burnham next & now Ednah. Mrs. Darling's girls do not."

Mary never recorded Ednah's wages, but entries in her ledger show that her highest paid workers received $3.00 per week. This was fair for the times,[29] so it seems unlikely that low wages were the cause of the defections to self-employment. She concluded that she "let them know too much of my affairs," and left it at that.

A related worry was the growing field of competitors.[30] "Sue Chase seems to be getting the fever," Mary wrote Susan. "She says if she only had someone to set her up she would open very soon. Lydia Vissey was in Boston this week to get a sewing machine & she is going into the dress making & cloak making another season. Mrs. Clark talks as if she means to open a store somewhere."

While her dressmaker was threatening to leave and the competition was heating up, Mary was having trouble hiring an experienced milliner. "If I could only get a good milliner in the Spring & have Annie James[31] to come in & tend store I would not fear any of them," she wrote Susan. After a moment to reconsider her circumstances she added "I do not know as they would as it is. Mrs. Lyford I hear is going to retire from business. So you see there is a prospect of a good deal of charge in the Spring."

Even so, complete failure was always a possibility, especially for women, whose access to capital from outside the family circle was notoriously restricted. "Malinda Bryant has failed," she wrote Susan. "There were Boston men who took possession of everything in the store, but she seems now as bright as ever. I do not know how they have arranged matters."

In another letter to Susan, Mary, who must have been feeling the squeeze from all sides, felt compelled to enumerate her rapidly rising costs. "The Insurance company has sent in their assessment. It is $55.50. It is too bad but there is no help for it. The dyehouse bill was for the last three months $79.63 & the three months before $46.90 so you see that these bills are nearly twice as large as they used to be. The bleaching bill is sent every three months & they were about $75.00 for six months."

The problem between Mary and her friend Jennie Perkins surfaced during this time, with Mary threatening some sort of legal action. "I have heard nothing from Jennie," Mary wrote heatedly to Susan. "I have written to Jennie...& I told her I wanted a copy of her work & I told her I would send a copy of the note to Judge Bogue[32]if she would abide by his decision in regard to the matter."

The note in question may have been for Jennie's 1863 purchase of the Polo store, or for goods that Mary bought and sent to Jennie on a regular basis (for example, when Dora, a friend from Polo, wrote on September 28, 1864, asking Mary to purchase a set of books in Boston, she instructed her to send them with "Miss Perkins' goods…You can charge Miss Perkins, and we will pay her," indicating a known routine of sending goods on credit to Jennie).

In late January 1865, Mary wrote Susan "I do not hear from Jennie yet but had some papers from her last week, so she is coming to her senses I guess." And she noted that "Work keeps coming in. One bonnet has come in this morn. Ednah is still here. She has a bad cold."

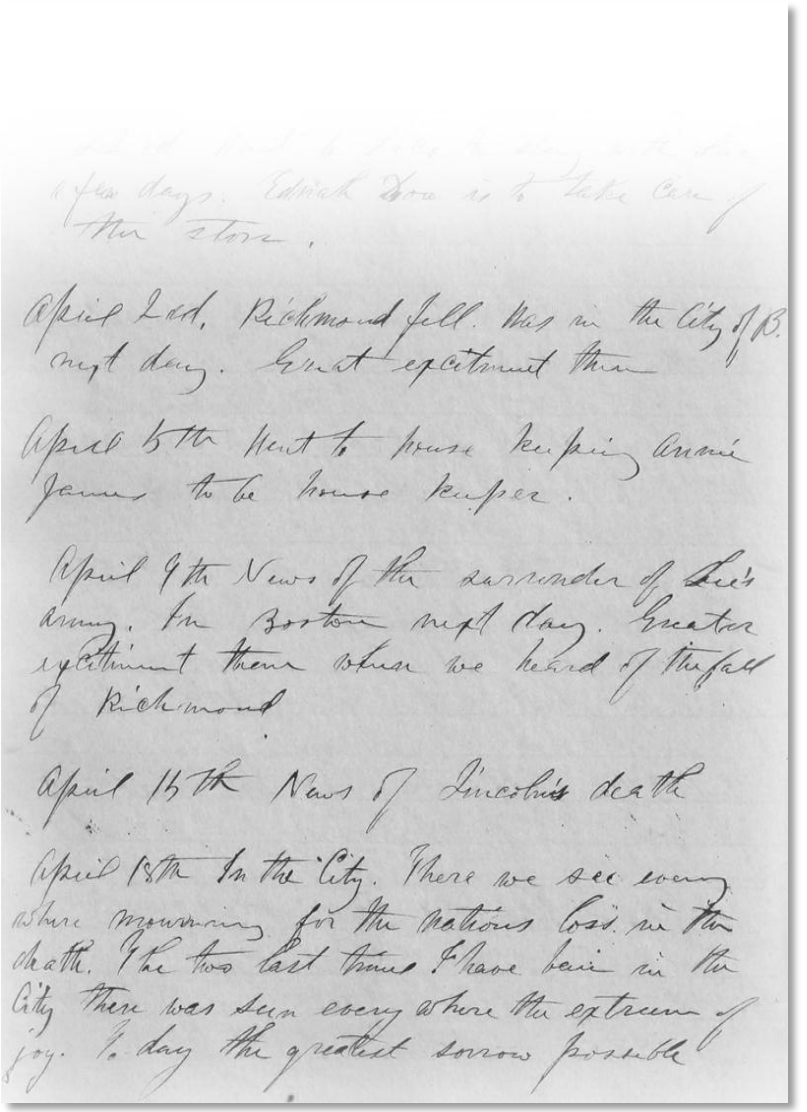
In the intimate world of custom female fashion, we might expect a little bloodletting in regard to the ladies who patronized her shops, but such was not the case at M.A. Page. Mary's ledger for the Polo years is a prosaic account—among her customers we find a minister, a judge, a hotel keeper, several farmers, school teachers, and shopkeepers. We see what they bought and when, and how and when they paid. Her ledger for this period is a window into the local barter economy: as payment for bonnets, cloaks, and trim, she accepted milk, eggs, lard, potatoes, pork, and even postage stamps.

In Exeter she kept her inkwell firmly capped on every aspect of her clientele—with one exception: her cousin Susan Page, to whom she obviously felt superior. "She did not want a silk," Mary wrote her sister. "[And] as she objected to every color I spoke of except a drab she decided to have a drab dress of some kind & then concluded to have an all wool delaine. As she wanted a bonnet to wear through the Summer, I advised her to have a drab drawn silk bonnet."

Mary's future husband, a wealthy Exeter merchant some twenty-five years her senior, entered the narrative for the first time. "Mr. Joshua Getchell wanted to know the other day if I did not want to change my stand & get down in Town farther," she wrote to Susan. "He is going to change the Shute house into a store & have a tenement connected with it. I told him that if I was going to change I would much prefer to go farther in Town than that." Afraid (or flattered) that he had offered something other than a more convenient place of business, she added tartly, "I do not know his object in telling me that. He might have had sense enough to know I would not move there if he thought I had any sense left."

Beyond any personal motives, Getchell's offer of a "tenement attached" may have been meant to help Mary out of her unsatisfactory living arrangement at Mrs. Grant's. "I do not have any home at Mrs. Grant's," she complained to her sister. "I cannot have a fire in my room on the Sabbath. I have to come [to the shop] to wash. Next Summer…the folks will be wanting to go away to beach visits & then we should be turned out of a home."

This lack of consideration struck a nerve, and when the chimney of the house next door caught fire and threatened her own quarters,[33] Mary decided that she would be "more independent if I lodge myself." She approached Mrs. Judith Folsom, the owner of the building that housed the millinery shop, and asked for the "tenement over the store & to have gas put in the store." Mrs. Folsom agreed to the requests.


a few days. Edwin Dow is to take care of the store.

April 2nd. Richmond fell. Was in the City of B. next day. Great excitement there

April 5th Went to house keeping Annie James to be house keeper.

April 9th News of the surrender of Lee's army. In Boston next day. Greater excitement there than when we heard of the fall of Richmond

April 15th News of Lincoln's death

April 18th In the City. There we see every where mourning for the nations loss in the death. The two last times I have been in the City there was seen every where the extreme of joy. To day the greatest sorrow possible

"News of Lincoln's death," diary entry, April 15, 1865

"Trade is very good"

"I can sleep here & I think Annie James will like it better than boarding," Mary wrote to her sister. "She will be good help about such work. I can have a door cut through from the front store to the stairs."

The tenement had no cooking facilities, but that shortcoming was remedied with the purchase of a stove, teapot, frying pan, and ice chest. Some of the items had been purchased at Joshua Getchell's store.

As the living quarters took shape above the shop, Mary sought to increase sales through competitive pricing. She purchased a quantity of "wide good cloth" and priced it at "37 ½ cents per yard…which is cheaper than the others sell it." Consequently, "there has been quite a rush for it...trade is very good. I took in $50.00 yesterday." She was delighted with her accomplishment, and it allowed her to make another $100 payment on the note held by her brother-in-law William Cole.

On February 21, 1865, Susan gave birth to a daughter, Anna May. Mary went to Saco to stay with them for a few days, entrusting Ednah Dow "to take care of the store."

In April, Mary wrote in her diary that she was in the "City of B" the day after Richmond fell (April 3) and witnessed the "great excitement there." On April 10 she was again in Boston, where the news of Lee's surrender caused "[g]reater excitement than when we heard of the fall of Richmond."

Amid the rejoicing, Mary christened her new home over the

shop the "Old Maid's Hall," and with Annie James "went to housekeeping" there. Perhaps put off by the spinsterish name, "Ednah remain[ed] at Mrs. Leavitt's." Mary bought a carpet on sale in Boston for the sewing room and had the rooms painted and papered. "Our chambers," she later wrote to Susan, "are very pleasant."

The problem of hiring a milliner persisted. "I have no milliner. It seems fated that I shall have none," she despaired on April 12. "There was a prospect of having three different ones from Boston but I have been disappointed. Do you know of any?" she asked her sister. She considered hiring an unskilled apprentice to fill the void. "If I could have a good smart girl to learn of me I could get along. Ellen Brown is sick & Susie [Leavitt] says she will not be able to do much this Summer. There is such an entire change in the forms of bonnets[34] there will be a good deal of work to be done this season."

Mary again gauged her success against her well-financed competitor. "Mrs. Darling has been to New York for styles & she has two girls from White's Bonnet rooms," she wrote. "But they did not know of any for me."

Regardless, she continued to forge ahead, frugal as always. "I am going to have a hat block," she wrote Susan. "I have pressed my bonnet myself & can press over one of the old style black bonnets I have in the store & trim it with something which will not cost much. Annie is ripping those trimmings off which I have had laid away & I am going to see what I can do with them this summer." With plans to make a dress for Susan's stepdaughter Isa, Mary included fabric samples for Susan's approval, advising that "Little loose sacks for girls are worn now more than anything else."

On April 15, Mary wrote in her diary that President Lincoln was dead. On April 18, she noted that she had been "[i]n the City," and saw "everywhere mourning for the nation's loss in the death. The two last times I have been in the City there was seen everywhere the extreme of joy. Today the greatest sorrow possible."

To Susan she wrote "What sad times we are having. Yesterday the stores were all closed & we went to the Town Hall to listen to speeches by different persons." As to shop business, "Work comes in but I have no milliner yet."

It seemed the perfect time for a good belly laugh. Mary's newly-married cousin unwittingly provided the chuckles. On April 26, Susan Page married Coffin Tuck of Brentwood and the next day the newlyweds came to Mary's shop.

"Oh Sue, you ought to have seen them," Mary wrote somewhat mean-spiritedly to her sister in Saco. "We laughed until we ached to see them today. She had on a cloak cut three or four years ago out of her mother's old blue coat, bonnet three years ago style with plenty of red & yellow flowers, [and a] very small hoop or none at all [and a] short dress. He would cast such looning glances at her. She was nervous & excited as she could be.

"They were in her old broken down wagon tied up with ropes. His hat & coat looked as if he had worn them at least ten years in the plow field. They had a half barrel tied over the top with a white cloth, a big bushel basket full of something in the back part of the wagon & the front was filled with bundles of all kinds & she had a looking glass in her lap tied up carefully.

"She came in to get her bonnet I have made. It is very pretty & stylish of drab silk drawn with pink & white flowers inside. I am to

cut her a cape of light cloth this week & she is coming down on Sat. after it. She will not look like the same person when she is dressed with her new rig that she did to-day."

As Spring steadily greened the New Hampshire countryside and the nation stumbled toward reconciliation, so the situation in the shop improved. Ednah had decided to stay on after all. On the 2nd of May, "Helen Smith came to learn [the] trade of Ednah Dow," and three days later "Amy Batchelder at the beach came to work on millinery." To Susan, Mary wrote, "We have a good deal of work for the time of the year & have five bonnets which ought to be trimmed today."

The 20th of the month brought the installation of gas lights to the store, and with June came new of family. Josiah had returned from the army. "He was completely used up," Mary's laconic diary entry noted. "I went to Hampton to see him. He is a mere skeleton."

1865-68

"Her own work to offset my work"

On July 6, 1865, Annie James left the shop and the Old Maid's Hall "for good." On the same day, for an unexplained reason, Mary had her head shaved by Mr. Cutler, the town hairdresser. A few weeks later, she "went home & saw Jennie Perkins who is home on a visit from the West." On August 14, eighteen-year-old Eva Lane came to work at .50 per day, and on the 5th of September, Lottie Folsom came to work at .75 per day.[35]

In April 1866, Mary's brother Josiah and his family went to homestead in Minnesota and Susan and her family moved to Hampton, having bought Josiah's half of the Page homestead. Mary had her "teeth put in by Dr. Pray," an Exeter dentist. As to shop business, on May 3, 1866, she wrote that "Abby Grant came to work for me. Susie Leavitt out sick." On May 7, "Lucy Gould came to work for me."

Mary's diary again fell silent until January 1, 1867, when she noted that she "[h]ad my life insured for $2000.00." A commonplace transaction for women today, her purchase was unique for the times in which it was accomplished. A 1906 history of the New York Life Insurance Company succinctly spelled it out: "Until 1894, [the company] treated women applicants very much as all companies treated sub-standard lives—it did not seek them, and when it accepted them it charged an extra premium."[36]

Mary had also taken an interest in her mother's future financial security as well as her own; during this time she was purchasing bonds for the both of them.

Whether intentional or not, that year Mary employed a familiar strategy to limit the competition—if she couldn't beat it, she would join it. On April 1, 1867, she "[f]inished taking an inventory of goods in the store find the amt. to be $3652.33." The afternoon was spent with "Esq. Stickney" learning "what papers were required to form a partnership between Mrs. R.A. Tilton[37] & myself."

Ladies' Furnishing Store.

NEW FIRM.

M. A. PAGE & R. A. TILTON

HAVING formed a Partnership, April 1st, 1867. will keep at the Old Stand, near Great Bridge, an assortment of

CHOICE MILLINERY,
BONNETS,
FLOWERS,
RIBBONS,
LACES AND
STRAW GOODS,

of different kinds; New Dress Goods and Trimmings; Shawls and Scarfs; Hosiery and Gloves; German and American Corsets; Cambrics and Muslins; White and Colored Edgings; German Worsted and Worsted Goods; Materials for Outside Garments; Latest Styles of Hoop Skirts, and skirts made to order.

ARTICLES FOR FAIRS furnished at a reasonable discount.

Straw Goods Sewed, Bleached, Colored and pressed. Orders received for Goods in Boston.

BURIAL ROBES, kept constantly on hand or made to order.

Exeter, April, 1. 1867.

Exeter Newsletter, April 1, 1867

The next day she "received papers showing that we had formed a partnership, Mrs. Tilton giving me her husband's note for $1217.44, which was endorsed by her husband's father for thirty days." She carefully recorded the legal details of the partnership in her diary. "That amt. is one third of the worth of the stock & she is to have one third of all profits in the business. Her own work to offset my work. We are both to give our whole time & interest to the interests of the firm." The infusion of cash enabled Mary to pay the balances on William and Susan's notes.

The newly formed partnership, which would operate as the *Ladies' Furnishing Store, M.A. Page & R.A. Tilton*, was immediately announced to the public. Later that month Mary wrote in her diary that "Addie Pike[38] is to stay to do the housework & to tend store." Ednah had apparently left, as Mary noted that a "Miss McGlinley came to work for us at dressmaking." Ednah is not mentioned again. An April 29th Exeter Newsletter advertisement informed patrons that the partners "[had] secured the service of an experienced Dress & Cloak Maker and are prepared to cut and make Ladies' and Childrens' Garments of all kinds at short notice."

In November, "Fannie came to work in the store at $3.00 per week" and "Mary Prescott[39]came to learn the millinery trade she giving her time for six months." Prescott was learning her trade without the benefit of pay, an arrangement that by this period had become a vestige of a declining system of apprenticeship.[40]

The following April Mary again diluted her interest in the business, selling "1/4 part of my share of the stock we have in the store to Emily A. Bachelder[41] for $631.22." In her ledger she recorded "Writings made out admitting [Emily] as a member of the

firm which is to be called M A Page & Co." In her diary Mary again carefully noted the details of the transaction, receiving from Emily a "5/20 Bond of Government $1000.00 No. 172558" and in return giving "a note on demand for the balance. The premium being $7.00 on a hundred the bond amts. to $1070.00. $1070.00 - $631.22 = $438.78. Articles of agreement drawn up by Esq. Stickney & signed in his presence Friday eve April 3rd 1868 by E.A. Bachelder, R.A. Tilton, and myself."

Into this new firm came "Mrs. Hill...to work at dress making, terms to be decided on when we know what she can accomplish." This turned out to be not much, and Mary took swift action. Six days later Mrs. Hill was dismissed "as unfit for the work we want of her."


FASHIONABLE MILLINERY
AND
DRESS MAKING,
AT
M. A. PAGE & CO.'S,
tf HIGH STREET, . . EXETER.

Exeter Newsletter, April 6, 1868

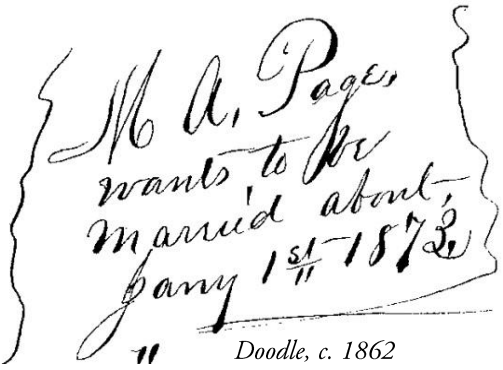
"Now you will forsake us all for husband"

On October 14, 1868, Mrs. Lydia Bennett Getchell died. Five months later, Mary was publishing to friends her intention to marry the widower, Joshua Getchell. "Yours rec'd this afternoon," Carrie Scott, a friend from Princeton, Illinois, wrote on March 10, 1869. "[T]he news it contained caused me so much joy…I must congratulate you upon your prospective future and trust the change will be pleasant. Now you will forsake us all for husband."

The shop operated as M.A. Page & Co. until May 1869, when it was announced in the Exeter Newsletter that R.A. Tilton & Company had taken charge at the "Old Stand of M.A. Page & Co. (near Great Bridge)."

Mary's career as an independent tradeswoman had come to an end. The final disposition of her ownership in the shop is unknown, but presumably she sold out to her partners, Rebecca Tilton and Emily Bachelder.

On August 3, 1869, 36-year-old retired milliner, dressmaker, and shop proprietor Mary Anna Page married the wealthy, 61-year-old dry goods merchant Joshua Getchell.



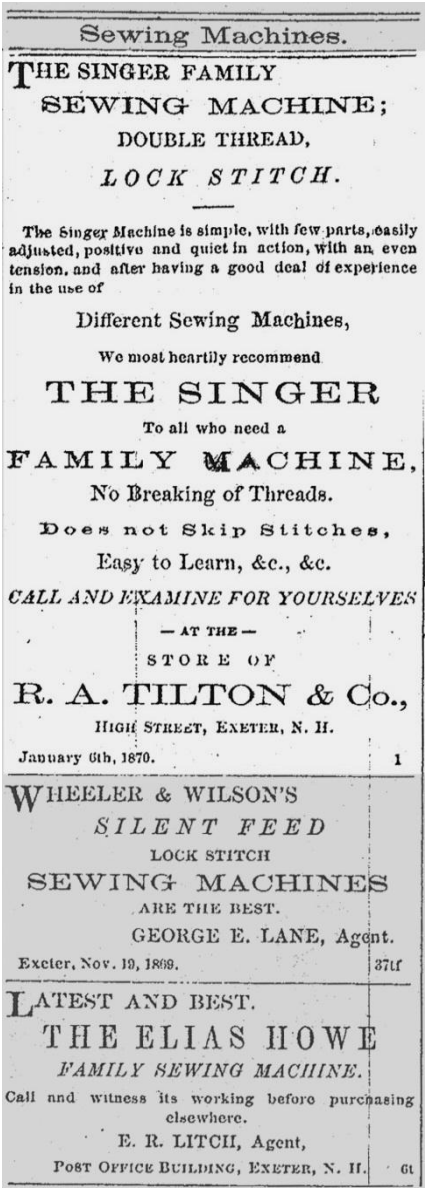
Doodle, c. 1862

She joined her new husband, his 19-year-old daughter Lucy B. Getchell, and a servant in the Getchell home on High Street, only steps away from her old "stand."

While the moralists of the day cautioned against women moving outside the domestic sphere, Mary had quietly assumed ownership of an established business and had traveled thousands of miles to start another one from scratch. With determination, frugality, and instinctive business sense, she had enabled her shops to survive the turbulent war years and beyond. She retired from the needletrades moderately well off, claiming $4000 in her own right.[42]

1869 and on…

Small, female-owned, custom millinery and dressmaking shops would provide employment to many women for years to come, but post-war industrial expansion was rapidly gaining ground. The future was in "ready-made" garments, made in factories that competed directly with the highly-skilled artisans employed in small shops. And marketers of the new "scientific" methods of garment making had convinced women that they could create fashionable clothing in their homes using their own sewing machines and modest skills. In 1870, whether by choice or necessity, Mary's former partner Rebecca Tilton advertised Singer "family" machines as her primary offering. Even Mrs. Darling's shop would one day become a sales room for the company.[43]



Sewing Machines.

THE SINGER FAMILY
SEWING MACHINE;
DOUBLE THREAD,
LOCK STITCH.

The Singer Machine is simple, with few parts, easily adjusted, positive and quiet in action, with an even tension, and after having a good deal of experience in the use of

Different Sewing Machines,

We most heartily recommend

THE SINGER

To all who need a

FAMILY MACHINE,

No Breaking of Threads.

Does not Skip Stitches,

Easy to Learn, &c., &c.

CALL AND EXAMINE FOR YOURSELVES

— AT THE —

STORE OF

R. A. TILTON & Co.,

HIGH STREET, EXETER, N. H.

January 6th, 1870. 1

WHEELER & WILSON'S
SILENT FEED
LOCK STITCH
SEWING MACHINES
ARE THE BEST.
GEORGE E. LANE, Agent.

Exeter, Nov. 19, 1869. 37tf

LATEST AND BEST.
THE ELIAS HOWE
FAMILY SEWING MACHINE.

Call and witness its working before purchasing elsewhere.

E. R. LITCH, Agent,

POST OFFICE BUILDING, EXETER, N. H. 6t

Exeter Newsletter, January 1870

If Mary wrote of her married life, those writings are lost to history. Did she stay engaged in the business world, helping her husband in his Water Street hardware store, or did she become a lady of the house, supervising servants and entertaining guests at tea in the Getchell parlor? Future research may one day yield an answer.

From the public record we learn that legal problems in the 1870s resulted in Joshua Getchell's loss of his amassed fortune. He died in 1878, intestate and insolvent.[44] Mrs. Mary Page Getchell returned to her ancestral home, the western half having been deeded to her in 1865.[45] In 1881, Lucy Getchell, perhaps mentored by her stepmother, launched her

own career in millinery and ran a shop on Exeter's Water Street for the next twenty-four years.[46] In 1908, Mary named Lucy the executor of her estate, and Lucy performed as such upon Mary's death in 1913.[47]

When we pick up the threads of Mary's life again in the early 1880s, we will find her in a new career – as a writer. That story will be told in an upcoming book featuring her own writing.

Epilogue

It's easy to imagine the real life characters that Mary drew upon in composing the following (edited) essay entitled "The Coming Woman," written in 1886 for the Mutual Improvement Club of which she was a member. We sense the presence of genteel, controlling Hannah, aging apprentice Mary Prescott, failed milliner Malinda Bryant, larger-than-life Asenath Darling, as well as Mary's aspiring partners and the generous and supportive figures of her sister and brother-in-law, Susan Leavitt Page and William Cole.

"The New Woman of the 20th Century who is now agitating the minds of mankind is supposed to be the Woman that is to take a place in the business world, and in a variety of enterprises compete with man in the battle of life, and share equally the prizes which result from labor.

"There is an aspiration on her part to fill a more independent position than women as a class have occupied in the past. She wished to be no longer the clinging vine but another sturdy oak, and we find satisfaction in the prospect that the number of these clinging, twining tendrils by which often the life-hood has been crushed from the noble tree, will by these aspirations be rendered less in the future than they have been in the past.

"There were in the past only three occupations open to woman: that of teacher, seamstress, and housekeeper. There was no means by which she could receive the training necessary to qualify for other work; consequently the thought necessary in trade and commercial transactions was beyond her ability. Nor could she unravel the scientific problems that men could handle so easily.

"It is true that to most women, marriage and domestic life must be the ultimate aim of their ambition and they often enter business life only as a temporary work, and however skilled they may become in any particular line, they are only biding the time till the day of marriage when they leave all for home cares.

"It is also true that many women on whom falls the necessity of living and striving alone find that this impulse toward a greater freedom is of the greatest advantage.

"In the U. S. there are 1½ million more women than men and more than half of these are widows, unmarried women, or orphans who are dependent upon their own exertions for support. They rejoice in the new order of society, and the coming century will see woman in many positions of trust and responsibility now monopolized by man.

"The modest, earnest, aspiring, genuine woman will be welcomed by mankind, and she will find support and help through trial and misfortune. To enter almost any field, she will find abundant opportunity if she is patient, tactful, and careful to be true to her womanhood."

Notes

"We started for Hampton on our own propellers"

1 Using Dow's genealogies, four original 1638 settlers and seven between 1639-1654 (Joseph Dow, edited/published by his daughter Lucy Dow, *The History of the Town of Hampton, New Hampshire, from Its Settlement in 1638 to the Autumn of 1892,* Salem MA: Salem Press Publishing, 1893, 2nd edition, Randall, 1970. Hereafter cited as *Dow*).

2 The area of the Meetinghouse Green and the roads that encircle it.

3 Josiah died Oct. 31, 1869 (*PCFC);* Joseph Dow died Dec. 16, 1889 (*Dow, v, vi*).

4 Whipple to Leavitt, *Rockingham County Registry of Deeds, Bk 163 Pg 261.*

5 In later years the house suffered neglect and came to be known as the 'Haunted House,' but in the twentieth century was restored, placed under a restrictive deed, and is today Hampton's most historic residence (Moulton House clippings collection, *HHSA*); Anna May Cole's notes on Susan Leavitt Page (*PCFC*); Anna May was Mary's niece.

6 If you were travelling from Exeter to Hampton, the road was called the Hampton road; if travelling from Hampton to Exeter, it was called the Exeter road.

"The millinery business is a very good business"

7 After attending Salem Normal School from 1854-1856, Mary taught school in Exeter, 1856-1859 (*PCFC*); the *Exeter Newsletter,* Dec. 28, 1857, citing the 'Report of the Boards of Education,' stated that the average weekly wage for female schoolteachers in New Hampshire was $1.93.

8 Quoted from Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2 (hereafter cited as *Gamber*).

9 *Gamber, 60, 76-7.*

10 Elizabeth Taylor Folsom Odlin, wife of Benjamin Odlin—a "gentleman" with considerable assets (*1860 Federal Census*)—and daughter of James and Judith (Morrill) Folsom who owned the Folsom Block where the shop was located (for genealogy see Elizabeth K. Folsom, *Genealogy of the Folsom Family*, vol. I, Baltimore MD: Gateway Press, 1975 reprint).

11 In 1859-60, Robert Todd Lincoln boarded upstairs while attending Philips Exeter Academy; his father Abraham Lincoln "enjoyed Sunday dinner and an evening of entertainment [in the Folsom boarding house] on March 4, 1860" (*Exeter Historical Society*).

12 The Misses S.L. Page & M.A. Page, M.A. Page, M.A. Page & R.A. Tilton, M.A. Page & Company (*Exeter Newsletter* advertisements, various editions, 1859-1869).

13 Presumably amounts due her suppliers; Mary didn't detail the inventory associated with these figures.

14 Exeter population from the Data Center Library, New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning, 2010; I counted 13 dressmakers, 7 milliners, 8 seamstresses, 2 tailors, and 1 hatter; Mary and Susan's enumerated ages were 23 and 25, respectively (*1860 Federal Census*); I assumed that all enumerated needletrade workers were employed in Exeter; women not enumerated in the census also operated millinery and dressmaking businesses in Exeter at this time; for example, see ads of Mrs. E.R. Dresser and Miss Mary D. Colket (*Exeter Newsletter*, April 9, 1860); I define "needletrades" as comprising the job titles listed above plus "tailoress."

"*Doing well for a stranger*"

15 John's teaching assistant and future wife (*PCFC*).

16 Virginia W., b. 1830, daughter of David and Asenath (Batchelder) Perkins (*Dow, 914*).

"I have more work than we can all do"

17 Mary's elder brother, a currier and farmer; lived with his wife and children in Hampton and Salem, MA (*PCFC*).

18 Possibly members of the Winnacunnet Guards, the militia unit formed in October 1860 that later became the foundation of Company D, 3rd Regiment of New Hampshire Volunteers *(Dow, 301*).

19 Jennie's younger brother (*Dow, 914*).

20 On Sept. 19, 1861, Mary paid Jennie $61.33 for 30 2/3 weeks at $2.00 per week (*PCFC*). It's not hard to imagine why Jennie wanted to leave; it was the only way to get paid!

21 Addie Pike; Mrs. M. Stapley sewed for Mary from November 19, 1861 to July 1, 1862 (*PCFC*).

"If I could only get a good milliner"

22 See original telegram, Mary to Susan at 18 Dennett Street in Portsmouth (*PCFC*).

23 No doubt with the help of laudanum.

24 *Gamber, 81.*

25 Josiah's regiment, the 23rd Massachusetts, took part in the operations against Petersburg and Richmond, May 4-28, 1864 (Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion,* p. 1256, Des Moines, IA: The Dyer Publishing Co., 1908).

26 Mainsook is a very fine material for making underwear; a waist, also called a 'basque,' is a formed bodice.

27 I assumed Ednah was a dressmaker as she replaced Mrs. Burnham, who was a dress and cloak maker (see, for example, L.M. Burnham's advertisement, *Exeter Newsletter*, Oct. 3, 1866); Mary contrasted Edna's place in the shop with that of Amy Batchelder who had "come from the beach" to work on millinery.

28 In 1864, Asenath W. Darling purchased the house that would be known a century later as the Gilman Garrison House; she paid $3,450 for the property and owned it "independent of any present or future husbands" (*Rockingham County Registry of Deeds, Bk 404 Pg 148*); at age 47, she claimed assets of $8500 in her own right (*1870 Federal Census*).

29 *Gamber, 78-9*.

30 While the population of Exeter stagnated throughout the 1860s, by 1870 the total number of needletrade workers had grown nearly 50 per cent; dressmakers increased from 13 to 20, milliners from 7 to 10, and the tailoress had appeared to take the place of the seamstress; five women reported that they "work[ed] in a tailor shop" (*1860/1870 Federal Census data*).

31 Probably Mary's 2nd cousin Ann Matilda, b. 1846, d. of Joshua and Martha (Leavitt) James of Hampton (*Dow, 764*).

32 A Polo, Illinois judge (H.F. Kett, *A History of Ogle County, Illinois,* p. 553, Chicago, IL: H.F. Kett & Co, 1878).

33 "The alarm of fire about 8 o'clock last evening was caused by the woodwork near the chimney taking fire in the attic, of the house and heirs of James Folsom, near Portsmouth Avenue" (*Exeter Newsletter,* Feb. 13, 1865).

"Trade is very good"

34 From Mark Twain's 1865 essay *A Love of a Bonnet Described:* "Well, you ought to see the new style of bonnets, and then die...they have thrown aside the bunches of curls which necessitated the wearing of a bonnet with a back-door to it, or rather, a bonnet without any back to it at all. You know the kind of bonnet I mean; it was as if a lady spread a diaper on her head."

35 Daughter of widower Charles Lane, blacksmith, who m. Harriet A. Nudd of Hampton in 1856 (*Dow, 887);* by 1870, Eva was working in a "Tailor Shop" (*1870 Federal Census*). Mary paid her $11 on Nov. 7, 1865. Lottie Folsom was paid $82 on Feb. 9, 1866. As to Jennie Perkins, in 1871 she married G. W. Morgan, a vineyardist in Polo, Illinois. By 1900, age seventy and widowed, she had returned to Hampton and was

living with her sister Elizabeth in the family home (*Dow, 914; 1880/1900 Federal Census).*

"Her own work to offset my work"

36 James Monroe Hudnut, *History of the New-York Life Insurance Company, 1895-1905* (New York, 1906), 29.

37 In 1870, 'milliner' Rebecca A. Tilton of Exeter was 36 years old with two children and $1000 in assets (*1870 Federal Census*).

38 I believe this is Addie Pike who helped Mary in the Polo shop (see fn 21).

39 In 1860, Mary M. Prescott of Exeter was 45 years old, a seamstress, took in boarders, and claimed $100 in assets (*1860 Federal Census*).

40 *Gamber, 13*.

41 In 1870, 'milliner' Emily A. Batchelder was 36 years old, living at home, with $1000 in assets (*1870 Federal Census*). The spellings *Batchelder* and *Bachelder* are used interchangeably.

"Now you will forsake us all for husband"

42 *1870 Federal Census.*

43 *Gamber, 128*; Tilton, see *Exeter Newsletter,* Jan. 6, 1870; Darling, see Carole Walker Aten, *Exeter, Images of America Series* (Dover NH: Arcadia Publishing, 1996), 24.

44 Strafford Savings Bank v. Joshua Getchell, *Rockingham County Registry of Deeds, Bk 459 Pg 467, 1876; Commissioner's Notice*, Exeter Newsletter, Nov. 1, 1878; *Rockingham County Probate #2555*, May 4, 1909.

45 Page to Page, *Rockingham County Registry of Deeds, Bk 407 Pg 422*, August 16, 1865.

46 *Exeter Newsletter*, Sept. 30, 1881; Nancy Carnegie Merrill, *Exeter, New Hampshire 1888-1988* (Exeter NH: Peter E. Randall, 1988), 71.

47 Mary Page Getchell's will and probate administration of estate, *Rockingham County Probate #16391*, February 4, 1908 and April 8, 1913.

The Hampton Historical Society and Tuck Museum

The mission of the Hampton Historical Society is to increase public knowledge and understanding of the history and cultural heritage of the town of Hampton, New Hampshire, from its earliest inhabitants to the present generation. We will communicate that history through an active museum, educational programs, and a resource library.

The Society was originally incorporated in 1925 as the Meeting House Green Memorial Association to honor the original puritan settlers of Hampton. Edward Tuck, a descendant of one of those families, provided funds to purchase a house on the site of the original meeting-house green. The land surrounding the house was laid out as a park and the house was made into a museum.

Since then the Tuck Museum has continued to grow and the aims of the Society (whose name was officially changed in 1994) have also broadened. Other buildings on the green have joined the main house - a 19th-century schoolhouse, a restored 1796 barn, a classic beach cottage, a firefighting museum - all amply illustrating Hampton's past as a small New England town, farming community, and seaside resort. To accomplish its mission the Society conducts active educational programs, tours, and lectures throughout the year.

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Cover images - Godey's Lady's Book c. 1860