Making Furniture in Preindustrial America
Fig. 1. Detail of Bernard Romans's map, *Connecticut and Parts Adjacent*, 1777. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
INTRODUCTION

The Need for the Artisanal Voice

Samuel Goodrich, author of the many Peter Parley stories published in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, grew up in the southwestern Connecticut hill town of Ridgefield during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Reflecting on his childhood home several decades later, Goodrich commented on the local agrarian economy, the role of yeomen-craftsmen, and the “simple character” of domestic furnishings. “Nearly all the inhabitants of Ridgefield were farmers, with the few mechanics that were necessary to carry on society in a somewhat primeval state,” he wrote. “Even the person not professionally devoted to agriculture had each his own farm, or least his garden and home lot, with his pigs, poultry, and cattle. . . . The household, as well as political, economy of those days lay in this,—that every family lived as much as possible within itself.” Among those not professionally devoted solely to farming were the blacksmith David Olmstead and the joiner, or furnituremaker, Elisha Hawley. These craftsmen served both economic and cultural roles. Their “articles of use” were important items of exchange in the specie-poor economy. On a deeper level, the artifacts they produced “expressly” for their fellow townspeople became cherished possessions. Goodrich fondly recalled the identity of the local craftsmen who helped to create his family’s domestic environment.

Goodrich’s reminiscences draw attention to an important segment of the New England preindustrial population, yet his commentary reveals how difficult it can be to integrate the study of craftsmen and farmers with analysis of artifacts and economics. In spite of his perceptive suggestion that craftsmen such as joiners played an important economic and cultural role in the network of independent households in Ridgefield, Goodrich was not able to explicate fully the meaning of yeomen-craftsmen and their work in
preindustrial western Connecticut. His recollections reveal a distance from the artisanal world. Goodrich had considerable knowledge of agricultural practices and rhythms that enabled him to comment on the agricultural economy of Ridgefield, but he lacked familiarity with the craftsman's practices and rhythms. Activities and decisions of the joiner's shop remained obscure and mysterious, and Goodrich consequently could not link completely the artisanal to the agricultural economy. Goodrich also seemed unable to understand the full dimensions of the craftsman's products, lumping Elisha Hawley's furniture under the rubric “simple” or “primeval.” Such comments reveal both Goodrich's limited experience—he was a user or owner of only a certain set of products made in Hawley's shop—and his perspective as someone who gained abundant domestic refinement in his later years. Generalizations drawn from a few pieces of furniture precluded a full grasp of the range of choices and possibilities within that shop or the alternatives offered by other shops. Goodrich could not understand the artifactual language on its own terms or within the context of its production and use; he merely compared the furnishings of his youth with those of his later life.

The limitations of Goodrich's observations about the fit of artisanal work in the mixed agricultural economy of Connecticut in the late colonial and early national period indicate the need to look more closely and analytically at craftwork during this time, understand its integral role in a community's economic and cultural activity, probe artisans' values and decisions in a period of economic intensification and diversification, uncover the multiple meanings of craft products, and develop a more complete sense of preindustrial production and its links to industrial manufacture. Examination of craftwork's economic context builds upon the studies of many social historians who have focused considerable attention on the agricultural elements of household economies—interdependence of a community's farms, the dense network of service transactions that drew a neighborhood or community together and permitted an even distribution of work, and the cognate structure of kinship and transmission that ensured the establishment of new households within the existing structure.3

During the sixty-year period between 1760 and 1820, New Englanders experienced many significant changes that included war for independence, creation of a new federal government, growth of commercial and manufacturing interests, and a steadily increasing and more mobile population. New forms of economic relationships—greater availability of cash, increasing reliance on credit, institution of interest payments, job specialization, and
closer connections with external markets—began to transform the New England countryside into a capitalist economy. Many New Englanders sought to preserve familial autonomy and local exchange value while adapting to the various changes around them. In describing the coping strategies of rural New England farmers living in the capitalist world but not of it, the historian Christopher Clark coined the term *involution*. Rather than simply adopting a new form of society, rural New Englanders intensified or specialized their production to grapple with demographic growth, social inequalities, and land shortages. This permitted rural farmers to blend a traditional *mentalité* with market awareness. The structures or institutions for concentration and control of production were nascent and weak, so *involution*’s form and rate took on a very local and regional character.\(^4\)

The uneven spread of capitalist systems and the ability and willingness of New Englanders to adopt *involution* strategies raise the question of an appropriate term to describe the constantly changing social and production relations of New Englanders during this period. What existing structures, habits, and values were the foundation for the varied intensification of agricultural and craft activity in the early nineteenth century? The term *social economy* is an appropriate one for New England because it refers to a particularized web of relations and activities that preceded a capitalist political economy. Since markets were created in, derived from, and responded to social circumstances, the locus of power remained rooted in communities and regions during this transformation. Social economy affirms the conscious decisions of households or of a series of households about resource allocation for production and exchange. The demands of craft processes and the demand for the craft product often guided decisions about household activities and relations, consumption, and involvement with the market. An analysis of the social economy thus allows consideration of craftwork and manufacturing as equals to agriculture rather than as only supplemental to it.\(^5\)

Social economy provides a particularly valuable paradigm with which to probe the craftsman’s role and product in a specie-poor, preindustrial economy. The period under study was a time when the value of work and objects was gauged more by social standards than by monetary ones. The product both emerged from and helped to shape a specific set of social relationships. In such an integrated community, *skill* took on meanings far different from today’s notions of quality. The act of making a domestic object or farm implement was much more than the competent creation of a functional or utilitarian thing. Making an object could be a favor, a service, an obligation,
or a payment. The craftsman chose from a wide variety of locally acceptable forms and details to match the intention or social or economic credit of his client. Notions of design concept and work performance were defined through dynamic local social relations.6

Unfortunately the artisanal voice has not been an integral part of recent scholarship on New England society during the late colonial and early national periods. Most of the new historical scholarship has focused on agrarian production and exchange with local storekeepers or merchants. Few historians have considered the true diversity of by-employment in the mixed agricultural economy of colonial New England. Their analytic energies are devoted to the types and extent of crops, the species and uses of animals, and the merchant’s increased power in determining farmers’ decisions. By ignoring artisans or viewing craftwork as a new occupation, historians leave unexamined the true mixed agricultural economy of the region, an economy that incorporates grains, animals, and crafts.7

Lack of historical interest in premechanized production, even in textiles, has hindered full interpretation of early craft production as an economic and cultural process. Rural artisans rarely have been the focus of analytic research. One of two standard secondary works that continue to be cited is Rolla Tryon’s 1917 publication Household Manufactures in the United States, 1684–1860, in which the author falsely separates the “system of family manufacturing” from the “handicraft system.” Concentrating almost exclusively on textiles and wearing apparel, Tryon seeks to demonstrate that home industry made people virtuous citizens. Most rural families produced their own material necessities or patronized itinerant or part-time craftsmen for those items beyond their capabilities. Implicit in Tryon’s argument is that part-time craftsmen were semiskilled or unskilled artisans. Romanticism, inadequate analysis of shop-floor practices and technology, and no consideration of the relationship between imported work and locally produced work call Tryon’s analysis into question.8

Carl Bridenbaugh’s The Colonial Craftsman, a 1950 publication that is the other most frequently cited book, suffers from similar shortcomings. Bridenbaugh contrasted the rural craftsman with his urban counterpart, who sharpened his skills through competition and followed fashion closely. In setting up this polarized framework, Bridenbaugh overlooked the potential competence of rural craftsmen—part-time does not necessarily mean part-skilled—and their access to a variety of styles. Competition among urban craftsmen easily could have resulted in shoddy workmanship or a concentration on cheap, conservative furniture for export. Ignoring craft processes
and products, the historian removed craftsmen from their particular work and its context. The broad strokes of Bridenbaugh’s impressionistic overview obscure the realities of the artisans’ varied experiences and preclude any understanding of their actual fit in local economies.9

The study of preindustrial craftsmen has been the focus of decorative arts scholars, most of whom have written object-centered descriptive biographies or compiled long lists of craftsmen with genealogical information or skeletal biographies. Such publications, which have their origins in antiquarianism and are perpetuated by the predominant collector/dealer mentality of the field, require merely the gathering of new data to prove who made a specific object and when. The genealogical approach has overemphasized the visible master craftsmen who signed their work or who advertised, with less attention paid to craftsmen who appear rarely in the more accessible historical records. Such biases preclude gaining information about artisanal hierarchies and the context of production and use.10 Furthermore, most artisanal studies have concentrated on craftsmen working in major urban areas; objects made elsewhere often are viewed as generic New England examples. Works from the rural Northeast have been interpreted as slavish imitative works, eccentric creations, or simple wares, all produced by anonymous craftsmen. As a result we understand little about the material culture in specific rural areas, why certain patterns of production and use gained acceptance, and how the artifacts reveal broader issues of social and economic activity.11

Clearly there is a need to reassess craftwork on two concurrent fronts. First, we need to integrate information drawn from account books, inventories and wills, tax lists, census records, town and church records, land deeds, genealogies, diaries, and other pertinent material in a more sophisticated manner. Scholars of preindustrial crafts typically use these records to chronicle the forms made by a single artisan or to demonstrate the time he devoted to making his wares. Most of these studies also analyze the works’ monetary value and the tax ratings of craftsmen and their clients. There is little attempt to reconstruct the local economy and customers’ status beyond these criteria.12 Along with such basic issues as seasonal rhythms, sources of tools and materials, clients, and identification of the workforce, we should explore the initiation of transactions, locations of different productive tasks, how work was organized, how tasks were altered when demand fluctuated, how the craftsman’s age affected the organization of the shop and the type of work, and how the shop related to others in the town or region. In short we need to ask deeper questions to allow us to reconstruct
the craftsman’s world of relationships, the choices or influences that affected him, and the reasons behind behavioral patterns. In this way historians would apply questions to craftwork similar to those they already apply to agricultural work.\textsuperscript{13}

Woodworkers of the preindustrial “age of wood” are a particularly promising artisanal group for in-depth analysis. In the eighteenth century, wood possessed a psychological as well as a sociotechnic meaning. New England settlers viewed the howling wilderness of the native forests as dangerous and believed that their mission was to clear, cultivate, and occupy the land. The progress of cultivation was tied inextricably to an agricultural economy and to subjugation of the forest. The woods remained part of the frontier where economic, social, and political life were wild and lacked all rules. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, however, New Englanders’ attitudes about the forest began to change. The colonists came to recognize that cultivation of the land could be accompanied by cultivation of the forest, with the resources of the woods adding immeasurably to their quality of life and to commercial activity. Thus the processing and manipulation of wood took on an important role in the New England psyche. Leaders of New England society sought to distinguish themselves through possession of time-consuming, material-consuming, or style-consuming craftsmanship such as rusticated architectural details, complex hipped or gambrel roofing systems, elaborately carved decoration, or elaborately shaped blockfront or bombé furniture made in a wasteful manner from imported mahogany.\textsuperscript{14}

On a sociotechnic level, the extensive stands of hard and soft wood that covered the landscape provided an enormous source of raw material, which was supplemented by walnut and mahogany brought to New England ports through coastal trade. The greater cultural value placed upon wood that had been improved through artifice, an increased awareness of the economic opportunities in forest cultivation, and the intensified commerce in forest products provided additional opportunities for woodworking craftsmen in the eighteenth century. In the tax lists of rural New England communities from this period, craftsmen working with wood consistently represented the greatest number of artisans. Their impact was not merely in numbers but also in their products. Housewrights, carpenters, furnituremakers, wheelwrights, coopers, and similar craftsmen built the physical community —its meetinghouses and churches, houses, bridges, and fences. They also constructed components of its economy —barns, vehicles, storage containers, and tools—and provided social props for its inhabitants, such as domestic interiors and furniture. They shaped the community and gave it a par-
icular feel or look. The number of woodworkers and their widespread influence warrants close analysis.\textsuperscript{15}

At the same time we need to examine surviving objects more closely. Rather than consider an individual object solely from an idealized stylistic point of view, it is necessary to examine as many surviving objects from a single shop or community as possible and to understand the full range of choices available to a shop or a client. Casting such a wide net helps in two ways. First it encourages detailed analysis of conventions and techniques that might shed light on the world of the maker. Evidence of habits or idiosyncrasies helps to establish the shop practices of the period. A large object pool also makes it possible to evaluate the original meaning of an object’s form, decoration, and use, permitting recovery of the local parameters of production and patronage. What was possible but not used or what was not even a possibility often can be as important as what was chosen in creating the surviving object. Analysis of objects within what the anthropologist Grant McCracken calls “a system of goods” and “a system of cultural categories” demonstrates that the creation and use of objects are integral parts of a dynamic social process, not just static events or ends unto themselves. Artifacts evolve out of and in turn shape cultural values and social relationships. In a period of limited advertising and fluctuating exposure to several fashion systems, the local arena was where the meanings of goods were invested, adapted, or divested.\textsuperscript{16}

Furniture possesses particular significance. It can provide functional enjoyment or comfort for a person or household; indicate surplus exchange power; signify recognition or rejection of fashion; manifest memories of past experiences and social relationships; unify or differentiate people; embody abstract ideals such as accomplishment or achievement, social power, and stability; and serve as an owner’s legacy. Too often in the study of historical furniture we focus only on the name, rank, and serial number of a surviving example—its attribution to a maker, style of the object, its date and origin, and its genealogy. All of this information is used to address issues of style and fashion in a formal and superficial way. The study of the object instead should be a departure point to uncover the multiple meanings and uses of furniture. The decision to make or purchase a piece of furniture, the variety of formal and decorative choices, and the context in which the artifact is used arise from a localized social economy and sustain or alter that social economy.\textsuperscript{17}

How does the study of furnituremakers, who played an active role as agents and recipients of new ideas and fashion, shed light on the early
stages of the transformation of rural life? The supply of furniture, evident in
the number of makers and the types of shops, and the demand for furniture
(the increase in the number of furniture pieces per household, sets of
furniture, new forms, or new decorative conventions) help to chart the
penetration of the external market and a local community’s response. Mak­
ing furniture, like many other craft skills, was not merely a supplemental
pursuit during the colonial period or a new strategy to provide for a house­
hold during a phase of involution in the early national period. Rather, it was
an integral part of a community’s economic and cultural life.

Changing agricultural opportunities always played a role in the decisions
of rural joiners. During good harvest seasons, the demand for furniture
might grow, yet the craftsman had to weigh the social and economic value of
agricultural work against that of craftwork. A healthy agricultural economy
could lead to a variety of responses: intensification of existing shops, more
decentralized production, or the emergence of larger full-time shops or
specialists. When natural disasters or the declining size of farms affected
agricultural opportunities, craftsmen had to balance their productive time
with local demand. Similarly, population growth in a town could fuel de­
mand for new furniture, meaning that more inhabitants had to intensify
their craftwork. New furnituremakers might appear, competing with exist­
ing local shops through further division of the local market and the intro­
duction of new forms or decoration. Growing demands of external markets
and the appearance in the early national period of urban warehouses that
sold furniture made in nearby rural communities also provided increased
opportunities for joiners and necessitated the more frequent or more in­
tense application of skills. Some furnituremakers embraced the oppor­
tunities of a larger market, while others resigned themselves to outwork for
other firms.18

Furnituremakers, whose products combined enduring utility and chang­
ing fashion, worked at the interface of traditional household values and
modern market forces in production and consumption of domestic goods.
Thus increased opportunities for furnituremakers may also be attributed to
the effect of the consumer revolution in the last half of the eighteenth
century. As English and American merchants employed more efficient and
aggressive distribution systems and as American society’s expansion and
mobility placed additional emphasis on the role of personal possessions to
provide status, a greater demand for and supply of domestic goods may have
fueled an increase in quantity and quality of furniture. The increasing
artifactual literacy of New Englanders resulted in a class of consumers who
demonstrated greater interest in the fashion of furniture, its uses in social behavior, and its meaning as a symbol of accomplishment or aspiration. Within each community the nature of local exchange networks and the extent of contact with the external market, as well as the dynamic balance between the two, forced the local craft system to respond according to local parameters.

This book, which examines furnituremakers, community social structure, domestic possessions, and surviving pieces of furniture, demonstrates the value of revising Tryon's and Bridenbaugh's views of the rural craftsman, underscores the importance of localized studies of social economy, and provides important insights about rural western Connecticut during the late colonial and early national periods. A two-pronged research strategy guided the study: analysis of local records to identify joiners, become familiar with clients, and reveal patterns of economic change and material consumption; and establishment of an object pool containing furniture pieces with local histories of ownership and containing related examples without provenance. A synergism exists between joiners, their furniture, and the environments in which they lived and worked; analysis of each generates ideas, provides proof, and sheds light upon the others. The resulting study blends the contextual richness of social history, the artifactual analysis of material culture studies, and the interest in shop-floor practices of labor history.

The community parameters of this analysis permit a sound explication of the social economy of the joiner. I begin with a discussion of the joiners' technical system, then examine their active economic and cultural role in the community. Much of the discussion in chapters 1 and 2 is based on information drawn from southwestern Connecticut, particularly northern and eastern Fairfield County and southern Litchfield County (see fig. 1). During the late eighteenth century this region, which featured fertile hilly land along Long Island Sound and the Housatonic River and less fertile upland, supported a moderate population and diversified economy. Towns such as Fairfield, Stratford, and Derby were ports for schooners and ships engaged in coastal trade with Boston, New York, and the West Indies. Danbury, New Milford, and Woodbury formed a ring of northern towns settled at the turn of the eighteenth century and served as important links to the northwestern hill towns that were laid out and settled from the 1730s to the 1770s. The lack of high-quality farmland in the region contributed to a diverse economy including coastal trade, fishing, and grain and fruit harvesting along the coast and rivers; animal husbandry for salted meat, wool,
and dairy products in the hilly regions; small shop craftwork in all of the communities; and even iron mining in the Roxbury and New Milford area.

After talking about woodworking and joiners in the larger region, I turn to adjacent, seemingly similar communities: the “yeoman town” of Newtown and the “gentry town” of Woodbury. Chapter 3 provides information on the towns’ joiners, while chapters 4 and 5 discuss the socioeconomic structure and consumer behavior in the towns. Chapters 6 and 7 analyze the actual products of the joiners. Careful analysis and linking of manuscript and artifactual sources reveal that each town’s social economy was actually quite different and responded in a separate manner to changes of the period. A final chapter emphasizes the importance of artifact-driven studies in understanding the transformation of the rural New England countryside, especially in showing that artisans as well as merchants and capitalists played active and important roles in the early phases of industrial production.

Intense analysis of a specific artisanal activity in a restricted geographical area is not an isolated case study incapable of generating new lines of inquiry about the American past. Rather, careful documentation and assessment of the activities and products of a local social economy, undertaken with full awareness of larger events and patterns of the period, underscore the necessity of conceiving broad lines of historical inquiry. Such inquiry informs and in turn is shaped by documentation and re-creation of specific local activities. The study of a community is the means, not the end, of the examination of social economy. Mastery of local events and values can lead to greater understanding of the nuances and shape of larger issues. In Newtown and Woodbury, as well as myriad other communities in New England, shifts in joinery practices, furniture design, and productivity took place in the context of community development, social stratification, economic opportunity, and consumer behavior. Analysis of consumer behavior, so popular at the present, must be conducted alongside the analysis of production. There is an inextricable link between the two activities, and the best place to observe them is at the local level.

Returning to Samuel Goodrich’s Ridgefield, we need to probe the activities and understand the perspective of the local rural craftsman. How did the craftsman view changing economic opportunities? How did he allocate household resources and his time to earn a livelihood for his family? How did he develop a common understanding with patrons about designs and performance? In short, we need to restore a voice to silent craftsmen like the joiner Elisha Hawley.