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“She is so neat and fits so well”: Garment construction and the millinery business of Eliza Oliver Dodds, 1821–1833

Simon, Amy Catherine, M.A.
University of Delaware (Winterthur Program), 1993

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"SHE IS SO NEAT AND FITS SO WELL": GARMENT CONSTRUCTION
AND THE MILLINERY BUSINESS OF ELIZA OLIVER DODDS, 1821-1833

by

Amy Simon

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

May 1993

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank those people who offered invaluable support and advice during the process of creating this thesis. My advisor, Ann Smart Martin, was always eager to hear my latest discoveries and help me maintain a focus in the midst of ever-increasing avenues of inquiry. Linda Baumgarten, Curator of Costume and Textiles at Colonial Williamsburg, made this project possible as she ended my quest for a mantua-maker's account book. I am ever grateful to Alden O'Brien, Curator of Costume and Textiles at the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, for sharing her research notes and enthusiasm about the Dodds' manuscript. Kristina Haugland, Assistant Curator of Costume and Textiles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, also receives numerous thanks for the many hours I spent with her. She made the Philadelphia collection easily accessible and a joy to visit. I would also like to thank Kim Fink of the Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Shelly Foote of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, and Ulysses Dietz of the Newark Museum for
opening their collections to me. Linda Eaton, Conservator of Textiles at Winterthur, and Joy Gardiner, Assistant Conservator, also offered much-appreciated advice. Thanks also go to Barbara Carson and Ellen Donald for sharing their knowledge of early Washington.

I am grateful to Richard McKinstry, Librarian of the Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, for making the microfilm of the account book possible. I would also like to thank the Historical Society of Washington, DC for providing easy access to the document. Finally, I would like to thank the staff at Winterthur, my family, and my friends for providing boundless support during the last two years.
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ABSTRACT

Although most women sewed during the nineteenth century, few possessed the mantua-maker's ability to cut and fit fashionable garments. By weaving contemporary documents and objects together, this thesis examines how women created their clothing during the early nineteenth century and what additional tasks and duties a professional needlewoman performed. The account book of Eliza Oliver Dodds, a mantua-maker and milliner in Washington, DC, provides rare evidence of her staff, goods, and sewing services between 1821 and 1833. Domestic guides and letters help clarify the distinction between amateur and professional sewing skills while revealing the attitudes of a mantua-maker's clients. Analysis of a dress made during the 1820s offers more specific information about construction techniques.

As the growing textile industry produced cheap, decorated fabric, the increasingly complex construction of women's clothing in the 1820s maintained social distinctions. Working- and middle-class women did not have the skills to properly make fashionable garments.
While craft training conferred status on the mantua-maker, sewing was not highly valued and Dodds turned to selling goods and renting property. She also developed a vital network of needlewomen and merchants to maintain her business. The combined evidence of the dress and documents reveal how manipulating fabric into ornate garments marked the owner's status while providing a livelihood for the professional needlewoman.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I had to pay Miss Pitts the full amount of her bill - rather than have a dispute with her Mother who came for the money - & who was sure that Miss W.?[irt?] could not in honor say that there was any blame to her daughter for the dresses not fitting - and that moreover it was impossible that they should require any alteration - to stop her prating I gave her the $11 & add [?] and dismissed her, but with difficulty - for she talked so long as she had a glimpse of me.1

In a letter to her daughter in 1822, Elizabeth Wirt, wife of the United States Attorney General William Wirt, described a rather heated discussion with her mantua-maker's mother.2 It appears that Wirt was less than satisfied with the fit of the gowns she had ordered and refused payment. The needlewoman ultimately received

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1Elizabeth Wirt to Laura Wirt, Washington, June 18, 1822, William Wirt Papers, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. (Microfilm, Maryland Historical Society; hereafter referred to as Wirt Papers.)

2The term mantua-maker was used from the late seventeenth century when a mantua was the common form of an affluent European woman's dress. The title, dressmaker, did not come into use until the early nineteenth century. Elizabeth Ewing, Everyday Dress, 1650-1900 (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1984), 83.
compensation for her time and labor through the indignant demands of her mother. Why was the fit of her clothing so important to Wirt and what was wrong with the dresses she received? On the other hand, why was did Miss Pitts' mother want payment without providing alterations? While this letter records the attitude of the customer, what professional duties and expectations lie under the surface of this exchange?

This thesis will address such questions in order to clarify the work of a mantua-maker and to understand how women's clothing was acquired and constructed in the early nineteenth century. This is a ripe area for study as previous research has concentrated on other periods. Historians have studied the use of clothing as a marker of status, wealth, age, gender, occupation, and other social groupings. Yet, the initial choice of materials and the methods used to make those garments played an important role in determining the function and message of dresses, coats, hats, underwear, and accessories.

Wirt's mantua-maker, Miss Pitts, remains mute in historical documents, but a detailed daybook kept between

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1821 and 1833 by a Georgetown and Washington milliner and mantua-maker, Eliza Oliver Dodds, survives.\(^5\) This document offers a remarkable window into the business of a skilled craftswoman. With the assistance of a large staff, she sold textiles, sewing supplies and accessories, and made garments for an affluent community in the young capital city. She moved her shop to Washington in November 1823; this study will focus on the transactions recorded in 1824.

Milliners and mantua-makers held the highest status in the needle trades by virtue of their skilled training and costly goods. Mantua-makers and tailors possessed the ability to cut fabric and fit the pieces into garments that sat on the body properly. This knowledge separated these artisans from seamstresses and most amateur needlewomen who merely stitched seams and hems.\(^6\) While many mantua-makers worked out of their homes or moved into households during the winter or spring, many opened shops to sell goods in urban centers. Milliners

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were also shopkeepers who stocked fabrics, trimmings, and accessories as well as constructing headwear.

Before approaching the business of Eliza Dodds, close analysis of a contemporary dress will offer more specific information about materials, construction, and styles of the 1820s. This object study raises the question of who was capable of making that dress? During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women purchased materials and then created their family's wardrobe, independently or with the assistance of needlewomen. Given this interaction, which amateurs and professions possessed cutting and fitting skills and how did social and economic rank determine the ability to construct the dress in question?

Documents, such as diaries, letters, trade descriptions, and prescriptive literature, provide additional evidence. All of these sources, written by middle class and elite authors, reflect their opinions and experiences regarding garment construction and the professionals they hired. Guides to etiquette and domestic tasks also promoted ideals of behavior and attempted to maintain social ranks by establishing "proper" fabrics, garments, and deportment.7 Given these

attitudes and biases, personal and published documents partially reveal the way in which women of varying ranks created and acquired their wardrobes.

By weaving the evidence of the dress, daybook, and documents together, a more thorough understanding of mantua-makers and clothing construction develops. This analysis will trace the movement of the extant dress and those recorded in the daybook as they progressed from bolts of fabric to completed garments that would then be altered, remade or used for another purpose. By retracing the initial creation of a dress during the 1820s, the meaning it held for the women who constructed, altered, wore, or saw it might become more apparent.8

Dodds and her customers lived and worked in Washington during the early nineteenth century. Although it was the nation's capital, the young city bore little resemblance to a bustling urban center. The streets and avenues that ran neatly across Pierre-Charles L'Enfant's

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plan of 1791 were obscured by fields, muddy roads, woods and scattered clusters of buildings.¹⁰

The established communities of Georgetown and Alexandria provided goods and services to the dispersed settlements of government officials and employees. Between the fluctuating economic climate of the early nineteenth century and the lackluster response of investors, little business or industry took hold in the new city.¹¹ By the 1820s, the government population had grown enough to support an increasing number of hotels, boarding houses, and shops along Pennsylvania Avenue.¹²

The creation of the city as a government center—with little industry—created a highly stratified social structure with a large gap in wealth. The vast majority of the population were poor slaves, free blacks, laborers, and artisans. Few middling tradespeople, skilled artisans, or low-ranking professionals came to a city without manufacturing or mercantile businesses. Some

¹⁰Young, 21-24.

newspapermen, clergy, doctors, lawyers, and architects arrived but they were often members of the high status, wealthy community that came to dominate Washington society.\textsuperscript{12}

That small, elite group was made up of gentlemen farmers, merchants, and professionals who dominated the upper levels of the government. In fact, elite Washington society was determined by one's government position; the members of the executive branch and the diplomatic corps sat at the pinnacle of the social structure. This exclusive group lived near the President's House around President Square, which was soon renamed after Lafeyette. The established gentry and merchant families of Georgetown and Alexandria mingled with this circle although they often kept to themselves.\textsuperscript{13} The more transient

\textsuperscript{12} Carson, 7-9; Young, 25-26; For this thesis, I will use the terms "laboring," "middling," and "elite" to describe the majority of poor farmers, urban and rural laborers, and the working or unemployed poor; the artisans, small merchants, tradespeople, clerks, and farmers that would become the middle class; and the small community of lawyers, doctors, plantation owners, merchants, bankers, and gentlemen who held high status if not great wealth. Several studies address the early nineteenth-century shift in social structure. Stuart Blumin, \textit{The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Edward Pessen, \textit{Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War} (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1973).

\textsuperscript{13} Carson, 7-9; Young, xi-xii, 3-7, 66-74, 215-217. Margaret Bayard Smith described this neighborhood and its inhabitants in 1828, many of the people she mentioned
legislative branch initially maintained its own social life on Capitol Hill, but by the 1820s those senators and representatives mixed with the executive branch. All of these people, the majority of whom came from similar elite backgrounds, held themselves separate from the "common" clerks, tradespeople, and artisans who struggled to make a living in Washington.\textsuperscript{14}

Social functions played an important role in this close-knit community, especially in the executive circle. Government officials and diplomats discussed business and jockeyed for power during numerous parties, dinners, balls, and drawing rooms. The social season loosely paralleled the congressional session and the traditional winter round of parties. Once elite society returned from summers in the country, entertainments began and the whirl of the official season ran from January to March.\textsuperscript{15}

This round of functions included a mixture of events open to the general public or extended only to the intimate circle of Washington's uppermost social milieu. The President's weekly drawing room, and those on the

\textsuperscript{14} Carson, 14-15; Young, 50-51, 89-91, 98-102, 226.

\textsuperscript{15} Carson, 103; Young, 215-220.
Fourth of July, Washington's Birthday, and New Year's Day, were advertised in the newspaper and anyone could attend if properly attired. On the other hand, wives of government officials threw their own drawing rooms, dinners and parties for a select group of their social equals. These women often marked their political allegiances and competed for guests through these events.¹⁶

All of this socializing required a fashionable wardrobe and trips to millinery shops. In 1815, Mary Boardman Crowninshield, wife of the Secretary of the Navy, noted the importance of clothing when two friends informed her that another Washington lady would be starting a new weekly salon.

Two drawing-rooms a week would keep the ladies always at it; and a ball a week. Oh, dear, a new investment this morning, - elegant ball dresses, millinery, etc, etc. - This will set the carriages flying.¹⁷

Dodds and other businesswomen provided these elite women, with the materials, accessories and sewing services to construct their fashionable, requisite wardrobe.

Many of these affluent housewives did not spend frivolously. They often reworked and altered garments to

¹⁶Ibid., 154-159; Young, 47, 170-171, 226.

maintain a suitable array of clothing. In another letter written in 1815, Crowninshield described the endless work that social life created for her daughters, servants, and herself. "The Assemblies begin this week in the city; suppose I shall go if everybody goes, but it is too hard work to fix dresses so often..."\textsuperscript{18}

Yet, people needed more than clothing to acquire a fashionable, presentable figure. While the minimal requirement of "proper attire" for the President's drawing room might filter out the lowest ranks of Washington society, elite men and women often disdainfully noted the presence of people they deemed unacceptable.\textsuperscript{19} In a fictionalized account of early Washington society, a fashionable Mrs. Mortimer described the drawing room to a young lady just entering society.

"You will die with laughing, Louisa," said she, "to see what odd figures, odd dresses, awkward bows, scrapings, and courtesies, are exhibited on these occasions. Keep close by me, and I will tell you who and who such and such a nobody is; for you will not see above fifty or sixty somebodies, at most; the rest is a motley crowd, made up of all sorts of folks, that no one ever sees on other occasions."\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{19}Carson, 12-13.

Although artisans, tradespeople, and middling town residents might attend these events, their unfamiliarity with expected behavior and social rituals marked them immediately in the eyes of their genteel superiors.

As the growth of a middle class weakened traditional patterns of deference, social competition became increasingly important during the early nineteenth-century. More people could purchase goods that marked status, making distinctions between the "better" and "common" sort difficult. In order to clarify the blurred visual lines between classes, the elite and upper levels of the middle class created barriers through requirements of gentility. This term covers the knowledge of manners, social rituals, etiquette, and deportment gained through training and continual practice that was not so easily attained at the lower levels of society. The increasing publication of prescriptive literature provided guides to those in the middle class with the desire to learn such rituals.21

The rise of the middle class and codes of gentility coincided with larger developments in American society. As canals and roads provided faster, cheaper access to distant, inland markets, mill-powered factories or shops of hand-workers produced a wide range of

21 Carson, 15-20; Hemphill, 312-315.
inexpensive, stylish goods for the growing number of consumers. This industrialization was linked to a move towards wage labor and a cash economy. Dodds ran her business during the turbulent years when politicians and merchants debated the development of banks and a credit system. The first decades of the nineteenth century experienced wild fluctuations between financial booms and busts and the Depression of 1819 bankrupted many of her customers and their associates.\footnote{Constance McLaughlin Green, \textit{Washington, Village and Capital, 1800-1878} vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 71-72, 82-86; Charles Sellars, \textit{The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19-23, 137-138.}

While the focus of this thesis remains the business of a single mantua-maker and the methods women used to construct wardrobes in the early nineteenth century, these social and economic developments provide a framework. Even before Dodds' lifetime, clothing had been an important marker of social and economic status, but the rise of a middle class along with more affordable goods played a vital role in determining the style, construction and use of the garments that passed through her shop.
Chapter 2
GARMENT CONSTRUCTION DURING THE 1820S

Louisa, who is sitting next to me, hard at work, says "Tell Aunt Wirt, I am in great trouble about my frock."...[she] has now to put on three very troublesome stripes of satin around the bottom of the skirt. She has...been at it for three days. Miss Betsey Hoye has put 10 narrow strips of satin around the bottom, besides a broad piece of inserted lace & a deep + rich lace flounce...these aforesaid 10 satin strips are extremely troublesome, as they fray very easily + have to be sewed down on both sides - she has put them on twice, + taken them off as often, on account of their crookedness; in some places they w[oul]d recede half a mile, + at others almost touch each other - as Louisa had never done anything of the kind before, she found it very difficult + troublesome...

On the afternoon of May 19th, 1820, Laura Wirt wrote to her mother in Washington about the trials and tribulations of her cousin Louisa's wedding preparations. Louisa was in the midst of sewing her dress and the narrow strips of satin she was attempting to stitch would not cooperate. A fashionable young lady of Virginia's gentry society, Louisa was decorating her wedding dress with

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1Laura Wirt to Elizabeth Wirt, Montevideo, VA, 19 May 1820, Wirt Papers.
numerous bands of slippery, lustrous satin. Both her inexperience and the difficult process of stitching narrow strips of fabric to a muslin dress pushed her to tears of frustration on several occasions.

Laura Wirt unwittingly provided historians with a rare description of the often nerve-wracking process of manipulating supple materials into a fashionable garment. What sort of dress did the bride-to-be construct and exactly how did she assemble and decorate it? If Louisa did not know how to apply the troublesome bands of fabric, why did she not resort to the assistance of a skilled needlewoman? Were the fashions of the 1820s difficult for Louisa and Laura alone or did complex trimmings and assembly confound a larger number of women?

By mentally unpicking and reassembling a contemporary dress, we might better understand the frustration of the Wirt girls and the entries in Dodds' daybook. A brilliant green and purple striped dress with applied, padded silk leaves and vines in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art exuberantly demonstrates the fanciful style of women's clothing during the late 1810s and 1820s (figure 2.1).² The raised waist, fitted

²No provenance or family history exists to help reveal the maker. Needlewomen did not use labels until the 1850s, making the distinction between amateur and professional work difficult.
bodice, wide neckline, puffed sleeves, and bell-like skirt form the stylish hourglass silhouette of the mid-1820s.\textsuperscript{3} The costly, imported silk, labor-intensive decoration, and confining fit of this dress suggest its social function. Since it originally had long undersleeves, this garment may have been worn during the day for paying and receiving calls and in the evening at dinners or gatherings less formal than balls, assemblies, and dances.\textsuperscript{4}

\textbf{Materials}

Sometime about 1823, an affluent woman, or possibly her husband or a friend, purchased approximately nine yards of English or French silk to construct a dress in the latest style.\textsuperscript{5} The lustrous dress silk was woven in alternating vertical bands of purple blending to cream satin and stripes graduating from vivid green to aqua. Within the green areas, supplemental cream threads created a ribbed, floral pattern. In addition to this material, 

\textsuperscript{3}Tarrant, 3; Natalie Rothstein, ed., \textit{Four Hundred Years of Fashion} (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984; reprint, 1992), 35.

\textsuperscript{4}Stella Blum, ed., \textit{Ackermann's Costume Plates: Women's Fashions in England, 1818-1828} (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1978), 42-49. Women often had multiple sets of sleeves and those from the Philadelphia dress may have been removable.

\textsuperscript{5}The calculation of this yardage was made by measuring the lengths and widths of fabric used in the dress.
the owner of the dress bought a yard each of solid green silk and cream silk figured with small, stylized flowers, a quarter yard of purple silk, buckram, metal hooks and eyes, cotton and silk sewing thread, and cotton wadding.\footnote{These threads were analyzed visually and might also be linen. Either thread could have been used for preliminary stitching or applying decorations to the garment. All other seams, hems and piping were stitched with purple or green silk thread. See Appendix A for a glossary of fabric, garment and construction terms.}

The graduated stripes of colors and the small woven designs reflect the technological developments of the early nineteenth-century textile industry. After centuries of silks woven on intricate looms that could only be strung with a limited number of colors or a complicated drawloom that needed a boy to raise the harnesses of supplemental colors, the jacquard loom permitted numerous colors in a single fabric. This loom, invented in 1801, used punch cards that eliminated the drawboy and simplified the complex process of weaving complex patterns. By the 1820s the technology had been improved and gradually accepted in England, Europe, and America. A variety of designs in a wider range of colors than ever before rolled off looms in rapidly increasing quantities. While the silks woven on these looms were
still costly, the acceleration of the weaving process lowered prices.\textsuperscript{7}

Some three decades before the jacquard loom affected luxury fabrics, the industrialization of cheap wool and cotton production drastically increased the quantity available and lowered the price of clothing and furnishing textiles. By the 1820s, power driven looms and printing presses in England and America were reeling off cheap, decorated fabrics that a wider range of people could afford. During this period, American textile mills and hand weavers produced cheap, coarse cottons and wools. Europeans produced better quality fabrics of the same fibers as well as of silk. The growing Philadelphia textile industry created fine cottons that competed with English imports, but these mills and hand loom shops were only beginning to weave silk ribbons and fringes.\textsuperscript{8}

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Creating the Philadelphia Dress

Once she gathered her supplies and established the size and shape of the dress, the anonymous needlewoman cut seven shaped pieces from the striped silk for the bodice and five for its lining from the figured cream fabric (figure 2.2).\(^{12}\) She determined which parts were cut on the straight or bias grain and then laid out the parts of a disassembled garment or paper marked from the woman's body in order to match up the fabric design and use the least amount of fabric.

After cutting, the woman first stitched small rectangular side sections to the single bodice front piece in both the lining and dress materials (figure 2.3). Placing these two layers on top of each other, she folded two darts and stitched them on the inside of the bodice front. This manipulation shaped the front section snugly over the bosom and into the narrow waist. The small side panels under each arm further increased the taper of the bodice to the waist."^{13}\)

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\(^{13}\)Tarrant, 13. She describes common construction techniques of the 1820s which appear in this dress.
While a flat fit was possible with one piece in front, two cut sections formed each side of the back in both lining and dress material. A curving seam, which sloped from the armhole to the waist, held the fabric to the body. The use of two parts also eliminated some stress to the fabric when the woman moved her arm, causing the shoulder blades to shift. Slight gathering at the waist near the centerback edge allowed some fullness and give in the fabric as well (figure 2.4).

The needlewoman inserted purple silk piping in that curved joint as well as at the armhole and shoulder seams. This decorative detail reinforced seams, both straight and curved, which stretched and pulled as the woman moved. The needlewoman stitched through the layers of piping, dress fabric and lining all at once with a strong backstitch and then whipstitched the cut edges to prevent fraying.

At this point the bodice had taken shape and the lining was stitched to the outer layer at the piped seams. The needlewoman finished the neck, as well as the cuffs of the upper and lower sleeves, with narrow bands of folded bias strips cut from the additional green silk. She stitched the purple piping to these narrow bands, laid them to the edge of the bodice and sewed all these layers together. She then whipstitched the inside band over the
edge of the lining, neatly encasing the cut edges that might ravel (figure 2.5).

The needlewoman pieced bias sections for the upper sleeve and gathered that fabric at the shoulder and armhole, forming the balloon-like puff (figure 2.6). Long, tapering, one-piece sleeves, lined in the cream silk, were set into the armhole simultaneously with the puff and piping. The shaped fabric and the curved seam along the underside of the arm created a snug fit. The fabric of the curved cuff, turned under to the inside, covered the sleeve lining fabric. Sometime later, the undersleeves were removed from the bodice and a section of one was stitched along the right centerback opening edge to enlarge the dress.\textsuperscript{14}

To fasten the bodice, the selvage edges of the centerback openings were turned to the inside and running stitched. This process covered the remaining edge of the lining fabric. The woman working on this nearly complete garment then whipped the metal hooks and eyes along the inside of the finished edges. When hooked these fasteners created a flush joint.

Skirts of the 1820s reveal similar emphasis on manipulating numerous shaped parts. Five sections, three

\textsuperscript{14}Bits of the light brown cotton or linen thread remaining from the seam appear at the raw armhole edges of the long sleeve.
selvage widths and two triangular gores at the sides formed a cone. The woman initially cut one side of those gores at an angle to the straight grain of the fabric, causing the panel to flare when stitched to the lengthwise rectangular sections (figure 2.7). Small gores often appeared at the hem to extend the circumference of skirts on garments made in this period. The needlewoman gathered the skirt at the centerback of the waist to create fullness.

Once the woman stitched the skirt panels together, she drew up the gathering and attached the bodice and skirt to a waistband, lined in linen (figure 2.8). This additional element became prevalent about 1825 and appeared on most dresses by 1830. Before this development, the bodice and skirt were seamed directly together. Once the bodice fit correctly, this band was basted on with cotton thread that still runs through the fabric.\textsuperscript{15} She then backstitched both the bodice and skirt to the waistband and whipstitched the edges (figure 2.9). To finish the skirt, she determined the proper hem length, turned nearly two inches of the fabric to the inside, and used a running stitch to sew that bottom edge.

\textsuperscript{15}The bodice or its lining would have been pinned or basted before the final stitching to determine that fit, but that work is not visible.
While the dress was complete, the needlewoman added fabric trimming. The appliqued leaves and vines that appear on the bodice, sleeves, and skirt required additional time as the mantua-maker or housewife cut the shapes from the solid green silk. She folded the ovoid leaves over buckram, tacked the fabric down, and edged the forms with purple piping. At the same time bias strips of green material were sewn into tubes and stuffed with the cotton wadding. The needlewoman sewed these pieces together and tacked them down to the dress. The vines extending from the centerfront waist up over the shoulders echoed the sloping seams often used in bodice fronts and reinforced the sheath-like fit (figure 2.10).

She created borders with two rouleux of the plain green silk above and below the diagonal stuffed vines. This applique was tacked on an additional layer of bias cut, gathered purple and green silk. Bows cut from and edged with the striped fabric perch at the top of these stems (figure 2.11). Although this dress does not have a padded hem, women often stuffed cotton wadding in the hems to support and accentuate the wide skirts.

As a final detail, the women carefully pieced two strips of fabric cut from the figured green silk and joined them to create a belt. She folded and whipped this length of fabric over a smaller strip of buckram and
finished the edge with purple piping. This belt was later altered and closed with a metal snap. This additional band may have originally been separate or tacked to the dress as it is now.

Methods of Construction

Many of the methods used to construct this dress would have been unfamiliar to women who learned to make clothing before about 1810. During the eighteenth century, women's gowns were created from minimally cut widths of fabric running from shoulder to hem and fitted to the torso with pleats at the neck and shoulders. Fabric could also be pieced to form these lengths. Mantua-makers measured women with notched strips of paper to determine the length of the fabric panels but they did not draft patterns with those measurements.\footnote{Kidwell, 11-12.} Images from mid-eighteenth-century descriptions of dressmaking reveal the limited cutting and fitting used in this process (Figure 2.12).

This pleated material formed the two dominant types of eighteenth-century gowns. Women wore both the robe à la francaise with the loose back pleats and the robe à l'anglaise with stitched down, torso-hugging back pleats over petticoats. Drawstrings and side hoops, or
paniers, created the oblong shape of the skirt. By the 1780s, the robe à l'anglaise had a close fitting bodice that was created from several shaped pieces of fabric. Curved seams ran up the back to hold the fabric to the torso. This bodice was increasingly attached to the gathered waist of a round rather than oblong skirt.17

Extant eighteenth-century garments usually reveal long stitches and raw edges which allowed easier construction. Women could reuse the precious fabrics by unpicking this stitching and resetting pleats according to the latest style and changing body size.18 The long running stitches provided enough tension to hold the straight seams together and women could complete the job more quickly than with the stronger back stitch. Raw edges of seams were often left unfinished or the selvage widths eliminated the need of additional stitching. Until late in the century, the stiff silks were rarely lined except around the armhole or where the edges might show.19

Women's clothing underwent a major transformation in the 1790s. The voluminous gowns and pleated bodices gave way to gathered waists and bodices constructed from

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17 Waugh, 68-70, 72.


19 Waugh, 75-76.
multiple pieces of fabric. By 1800 fashionable women wore sheer, columnar, high-waisted, one-piece dresses. Drawstrings gathered bodices of small panels of fabric to the torso. The availability of Egyptian and Indian cottons and the development of the English textile industry coincided with the shrinking scale and density of women's clothing.²⁰

Stays, or corsets as they were increasingly called, also changed shape during this period. During the 1790s they shrank from heavily boned, conical structures to small bands of lightly boned or stitched fabric. By 1810, corsets lengthened, forming a narrow waisted tube that extended to the hips. Busks, panels of wood or steel, slid down the front of the corset to maintain this new silhouette.²¹ These foundation garments truly lived up to their name. The stays molded a woman's body to the current ideal. She then fit her clothing to the measurements of the stays, not to her unfettered body.

By the 1810s, dresses and coats revealed an increasing return to structure and snug fit. Instead of making garments by pleating vast widths of fabric or gathering tubes of material on a drawstring, women cut and

²⁰Ibid., 131-133.

pieced numerous shaped parts to create intricate clothing. During the 1810s and 1820s, waistlines wavered but they sat high, gradually descending from immediately below the breasts to the bottom of the rib cage. Darts, which were not often used in the eighteenth century, now appeared frequently in bodice. Combinations of curved and straight seams allowed the needlewoman to create a garment that laid flat and snugly over the curves and joints of a woman's body.

These techniques and the piping and applique seen on the Philadelphia dress reveal an extraordinary level of craftsmanship. Needlewomen displayed a sensitivity to both the structure and the visual effect of the fabric and construction elements. They often cut striped material on the bias and matched those bands to form chevrons on bodice fronts. The piping and applied decoration was often cut from the dress fabric and arranged in a manner that unified the busy printed or woven designs.

In addition to the increased complexity of design and construction, women also sewed garments with a higher degree of finish than in the eighteenth century. They constructed seams with small stitches, increasing the time necessary to make clothing. The edges of these seams and

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22 Waugh, 135-136.

23 Tarrant, 3, 10; Rothstein, *Four Hundred Years*, 35.
the lining were usually whipstitched or flat-felled to prevent fraying. That lining also covered the seams of intricate, pieced decoration set into the bodice.

Patterns and Cutting Guides

The quality of the stitching, finishing, and trimming of the Philadelphia dress becomes more impressive when one realizes that, before the 1830s, women worked without the assistance of paper patterns or measurement systems. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mantua-makers and amateur needlewomen constructed garments by the pin-to-fit method. This technique of draping fabric over the woman, pleating and pinning to attain a proper fit, and then cutting sections of the garment required time and numerous fittings. The Book of Trades described this technique:

The plate represents the Mantua-Maker taking the pattern off from the lady by means of a piece of paper, or of cloth. The pattern, if taken in cloth, becomes afterwards the lining of the dress.

The complexity of early nineteenth-century garments drastically increased the potential for improperly cut fabric and poorly fitting clothing.

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24 Kidwell, 13

Eleanor Lewis, George Washington's adopted granddaughter and a wealthy Virginia plantation mistress, wrote a friend in 1827 who had sent her patterns that Lewis could not decipher.

...our mantua-maker does not understand exactly how it should be cut in the body. Will you be so good as to cut me a pattern of the body...She does not fit it well under the arm which arises from her ignorance of the proper manner of shaping it, & I am too stupid to assist her.26

While tailors began to publish guides for measuring and cutting men's clothing in the early nineteenth century, women continued to construct clothing by traditional methods.27 As garments became more complex and as an urban, middle-class market grew, rudimentary patterns became available. Tailor's guides published unmeasured patterns to cut pelisses and riding habits for women. By the 1820s, French and English dressmakers could purchase unsized paper patterns, but little evidence

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27 Kidwell, 9.
remains to prove their use. 28 Commercial patterns would not be available until periodicals such as Godey's Lady's Book and Peterson's Magazine published them in the 1850s. 29

If Dodds and the women who made the Philadelphia dress had no measured patterns, what did they use as guides? During the 1820s, women continued the eighteenth-century practice of turning to fashion plates, fashion dolls, imported or secondhand garments, and their own clothing and stays. Each of these resources offered varying degrees of information about the actual cut and construction. The price of most of these sources also limited their use to more affluent women. They exchanged these garments and images amongst themselves which made the information available to a slightly wider circle. Women could also peruse or purchase these guides from milliners and mantua-makers such as Eliza Dodds.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, fashion plates in periodicals provided images of the latest styles. While they were published in growing numbers, middle-class woman could only readily peruse them when

28 Ibid., 13, 20-21, 99; Waugh, 185; Washington mantua-makers and milliners used the word "pattern" in the sense of the latest style or fashion in their advertisements in the Daily National Intelligencer, 24 Dec 1819, 21 Dec 1820.

29 Kidwell, 15-16.
affordable periodicals became available in the 1830s. These images only offered general construction information with more detailed descriptions of fabric, trimmings, and silhouette.\textsuperscript{30}

For instance, in his \textit{Repository of the Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions and Politics}, Rudolf Akermann provided this information in captions. The description of a dinner dress that resembles the Philadelphia gown discusses the bias cut of the bodice, the fabrics, and the placement of decorations, but offers no specific cutting information (figure 2.13). Dodds may have sold these images although they do not appear in her daybook.\textsuperscript{31}

Fashion dolls—"doll babies" as Dodds referred to them—provided more specific cutting information than the two-dimensional, printed images.\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{31}"40 Fashion prints," at fifty cents each, appear in the probate inventory of Baltimore milliner, Aglai E. Coursault, 12 Nov 1831, "Inventories of Estates," Baltimore County, MD, 1833-35, microfilm, JDCMPE; original, Hall of Records, Annapolis.

\textsuperscript{32}Dodds Account Book, Doctor Henderson, 30 Aug 1821, 61; Mr. T. [Tench] Ringold, 8 Feb 1822, 114.
makers, and their customers studied the dolls' garments for construction and decoration techniques. These dolls also wore the latest accessories and hairstyles.

Full-size dresses and ball gowns imported from Europe offered more accurate information. In December 1818, Dodds advertised that she had "just received an assortment of superb Ball Dresses, the latest Paris Fashions" in preparation for the busy winter social season. She also recorded the cancelled sale of a ready-made "fashionable dress" for twenty dollars in her daybook. Dodds and her customers probably copied the trimming, pattern pieces and construction techniques of these stylish gowns. Yet, these garments needed alterations to fit their American owners.

Only the most affluent women could afford these expensive imports. Rosalie Stier Calvert, a plantation mistress and member of elite Maryland society, ordered garments from Belgium through her sister. In 1819,

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34 Daily National Intelligencer, 22 Dec 1818; Another milliner, Mrs. Jane Doyne, advertised Parisian ball gowns with more specific descriptions. "1 splendid court dress of Lama, with satin train embroidered with silver, with head dress to correspond. 1 do. do. velvet and blond, with head dress, 1 do. do. lace and crepe." Daily National Intelligencer, 21 Dec 1820; Dodds Account Book, Mrs. Guest, 25-30 Dec 1824, 327.
Calvert reported that she had used those gowns as patterns. "I wrote you that the lovely outfits you sent us last year are as good as new, and we had two new ones of the same type made for this winter."\(^\text{35}\)

Secondhand clothing, either imported or local, provided more affordable construction and fashion information. Poor, laboring, and middling women could avoid the time and effort of making their own clothing by purchasing used garments. They altered these garments to fit their own measurements according to interest and ability. Mantua-makers and milliners could also imitate the cut and trimmings or pick these garments apart for general patterns.\(^\text{36}\)

A woman's own dresses and stays provided the most accurate patterns as these garments already contained her own measurements. Women brought properly fitting garments to the mantua-maker as a pattern when they ordered new clothing. Calvert sent these garments when ordering dresses and pelisses through her sister in Belgium. In 1817 she was pregnant and she wrote

You will be surprised when you unpack this case to find an old ragged dress, but it was the only thing I had which could serve as a measure. The

\(^{35}\text{Calvert, 341.}\)

[dresses] I am wearing now are all so large that it would be impossible to guess my size.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite the accuracy of these guides, professional and amateur needlewomen had to repeatedly adjust the fit to achieve the "proper" form. A woman might change weight between the initial and final fitting or she could make a mistake cutting the garment parts. Only those women with time and money developed wardrobe of stylishly cut and well-fitted garments. Calvert described such alterations to her sister who had sent yet another package of clothing in 1817.

All of Caroline's gowns are exactly her size, except for the percale canezou with little pleats which was too small. I opened the bodice under the arm and inserted a small piece there as well as in the sleeve and now it fits her well.\textsuperscript{38}

While the Philadelphia dress does not immediately reveal alterations -- other than the removal of the long sleeves and the fabric added at the back opening --, it was most likely fitted several times on the women who first wore it.

The process of tracing this gown's construction raises several questions. What was the connection between the rising availability of textiles and the increasing

\textsuperscript{37}Calvert, 320.

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., 329.
complexity of fashionable women's clothing? Given the absence of patterns and the difficult process of achieving a desirable fit, who could have made this dress? If sewing was a task known to all women, where did women of various social and economic groups fit in the hierarchy of needle skills? This analysis presents a paradox in which the skills of elite women and trained professionals overlapped, yet those ladies still hired mantua-makers to make their fashionable clothing.
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Chapter 3
THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDLE SKILLS

Will you have the goodness my dear Friend to have 2 handsome dresses made for me in the best manner. Madme. Peto is my favorite, she is so neat & fits so well. The crape [sic] dress is exactly the proper size & length. I wish the two silk dresses to fit as that does...I would not give you this trouble could I get my gowns made tolerably here. I gave $5 for a dress last summer & could not wear it. I gave it to P[arke] who luckily fits herself very well & has made a body to it.

Eleanor Lewis often wrote to her friend, Elizabeth Gibson, for shopping assistance in Philadelphia. In 1823 Lewis was frustrated that dressmakers near her Virginia plantation outside of Washington did not make garments to her standards. Instead, she praised Madame Peto, a Philadelphia dressmaker, for high quality fit and neat construction. The mantua-maker and milliner’s ability to cut and fit garments marked the highest skills in the needle trades. Yet, Lewis’ daughter Parke could also fit

\[\text{\footnotesize\[Lewis, 142.\]}
\[\text{\footnotesize\[Ibid., 142, 145. The Philadelphia directory lists both Elizabeth Peto, corsetmaker, and Madame Pitaux, dressmaker.\]}

49
her own body, or bodice. What skills separated amateur and professional needlewomen and how did that distinction or hierarchy affect a woman's ability to construct the Philadelphia dress?

Plain Sewing

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most women, whether laboring, middling, or upper class, amateur or professional, shared the fundamental needle skills encompassed in plain sewing. From an early age, girls learned to use a scissors and needle to cut and stitch the simple seams and hems of underclothing, work garments, linens, and bed coverings for the household. Knitting, marking, and darning fell within this training. Women also included the construction of children's clothing and men's shirts in their overflowing basket of plain sewing. Because cloth was a precious commodity during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the ability to alter, mend and remake worn or unstylish clothing was valued on all social levels.3

Plain sewing formed the underpinnings of all garments, upholstery, and textile furnishings and women stitched endless yards of seams and hems. If a family could afford them, servants, slaves, and seamstresses performed these eye-straining, laborious tasks. Even with this assistance and the work of daughters, this basic needlework required continuous labor.4

Although they could be counted as professionals, seamstresses performed the commonly known plain sewing. Slave, orphan, laboring and middling girls often served as apprentices to learn the "art and mystery of housewifery and seamstressing."5 In the early nineteenth century, benevolent organizations in England and America, established charity schools to teach orphan and

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4 Swan, 18, 35-36; Karie Diethorn, "Domestic Servants in Philadelphia, 1780-1830" (Research Project, Friends of Independence National Historic Park Internship, 1986, photocopy), 64, 67; Boydston, 41, 78, 97.

5 Swan, 25-27; Kessler-Harris, 14; For examples of indentures see Record Group 21, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, Entry 128, Apprenticeship Book 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Suitland Reference Branch, Washington, DC. (Hereafter referred to as NARA, Suitland.)
impoverished girls plain sewing so they could support themselves.⁶

This training provided poor, laboring women with an income. Because they performed the menial, utilitarian sewing, seamstresses earned little money and held low status. The Book of Trades compared this income with that of mantua-makers: "They are frequently obliged to sit up very late, and the recompense for extra work is, in general, a poor remuneration for time spent. Almshouses also gave out work to poor women, which further devalued the low wages of sewing services."⁷

Seamstresses often hired out these services from their homes and moved into a household during the fall and spring when families constructed wardrobes. They might also live with a family as hired staff. The journals and diaries of elite women living in and around Washington during the early nineteenth century record the presence of


seamstresses in their households.\textsuperscript{8} Upholsterers, tailors, and merchant tailors also hired the inexpensive labor of seamstresses.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{Laboring and Middling Women}

Given their knowledge of plain sewing, laboring and middling women could construct their own daily clothing. In the early nineteenth century, working and farming women continued to wear petticoats, waistcoats and shortgowns, loose fitting, wraparound jackets. These traditional eighteenth-century garments and the one-piece dress, introduced in the first decade of the nineteenth century, were cut and quickly stitched with long, uncomplicated seams. The large, minimally shaped pieces of fabric and drawstrings eliminated difficult cutting that might waste precious fabric. Drawstrings gathered necklines and waists, creating garments that easily fit women of varying shapes and sizes and allowed movement for

\textsuperscript{8}Smith, The First Forty Years, 32, 48; Elizabeth to William Wirt, Washington, 17 Nov 1822, 23 May 1824, Wirt Papers; Calvert, 100, 331; Lewis, 79.

active tasks. The time and labor involved in weaving utilitarian fabric raised its value and people used it sparingly and reworked it until the fabric disintegrated or was sold for rags. Industrialization lowered textile prices, but fabric was still too dear to squander recklessly.

While laboring women scraped together a living and wore simple, loose secondhand or homemade garments, middling women could afford more stylish clothing. Yet, they had the same plain sewing skills of their poorer sisters. These women did not have the training or experience to cut or fit the increasingly complex garments of the 1810s and 1820s. Early guides to measuring and making clothing acknowledged this barrier. The Workwoman's Guide, published in 1838, reorganized charity school lessons in plain sewing for the edification of the growing ranks of middling women. This manual strongly recommended to all those who can afford it, to have their better dresses invariably made by a mantua-maker, as those which are cut out at home seldom fit comfortably, or look so well, as when made by persons in constant practice.

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The wives, daughters, and widows of tradesmen, clerks, and farmers could construct their work clothing and simple versions of fashionable clothing. But, the lack of patterns and assembly instructions barred these women from easy adoption of the cutting and fitting techniques used by professional needlewomen. They might adapt their clothing to follow stylish elements they saw on the street or in a shop window, but these alterations could not compete with the work of experienced needlewomen.\(^{12}\)

Catherine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, suggested how untrained women might learn the mantua-maker's techniques.

The best way for a novice, is to get a dress fitted (not sewed) at the best mantua-maker's... Then take out half of the waist, (it must have a seam in front) and cut out a pattern of the back and fore body, both lining and outer part...When this is done, a lady of common ingenuity can cut and fit a dress, by these patterns.\(^{13}\)

In order for middling women to create a fashionable wardrobe, they had to use professionally constructed garments as patterns. If she was adept and sewed often

\(^{12}\)Mary Ann Poutanen, "For the Benefit of the Master: The Montreal Needle Trades During the Transition, 1820-1842" (M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1985, microfiche), 5-6; Joan Severa, "Cobbled Costume, What is it and why was it done?," paper delivered at "Cobbled Costume" Symposium, Costume Society of America, Region II, March 6, 1993, Newark, DE, photocopy.

\(^{13}\)Catherine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy: For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1849), 326.
enough to gain experience, the amateur could imitate this work. Otherwise, her baggy, misfit dress or coat would separate her from the smooth, snug garments of other middling and elite women.

**Elite Women**

While laboring and middling women were limited to their knowledge of plain sewing, affluent ladies could move beyond that obstacle. As future plantation and townhouse mistresses, wealthy girls learned decorative needlework. These girls often attended seminaries and schools where they studied "fancy work." They practiced tatting, tambour work, and embroidery in order to decorate fashionable garments and accessories. These accomplishments marked a young woman's elite status.¹⁴

Elite girls also gained experience in advanced construction skills as they assisted their mothers in cutting fabric for slave and servant clothing. These women also created their own fashionable garments. The mistress of the household cut and fit the clothing while servants, seamstresses, and daughters stitched the plain sewing and applied trimmings. This division also occurred when mantua-makers came to the home to construct wardrobes

¹⁴Swan, 12, 52, 69.
for the winter or summer. When Calvert described her duties to her sister in 1807, she revealed the sharp distinction between the necessary, menial stitching and the skilled tasks.

I rarely do the sewing, but I cut and piece all my clothes and bonnets, all the children's clothes and linens and all my husband's linen and even his waistcoats.

Calvert and other women in the elite community participated in selecting materials and designs for garments and were proud of their fashionable creations. In fact, their work could be mistaken for the work of professionals. Eleuthera DuPont, daughter of the Frenchman who founded blackpowder mills in Delaware, wrote her sister Victorine that a friend asked me what was the name of our mantua-maker in Philadelphia, the one who fitted our plaid frocks and she would scarcely believe me when I told her that you did it.

While the DuPont family had a live-in dressmaker who assisted with the construction of their clothing, it appears that Victorine performed the all-important fitting for Eleuthera's dress.

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15 Swan, 23
16 Calvert, 177.
17 Betty Bright-Low, Eleuthera to Victorine DuPont, 5 Jan 1822, "Notes on correspondence of E.I. DuPont's daughters," Special Collections, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.
If an elite woman enjoyed the process, she had the knowledge to cut and fit elegant clothing. Pleasure and personal talent were less tangible factors, but they played a role in determining whether a lady made some of her own garments or hired a professional. Unlike middling women, these ladies had the money and experience which allowed room for choice. The elite letter writers who lived in or near Washington often described altering and trimming clothing. They refurbished their own garments and used professionally-made clothing as patterns. This eliminated some of the difficult steps in cutting and fitting.  

These elite women did not undergo specific training to learn those procedures, but over time, they gained experience in cutting and fitting fashionable clothing. This knowledge blurs the distinction between the skills of accomplished amateurs and professionals. But, when they needed extremely well fit and stylish garments for balls, assemblies, dinners, social calls, or boarding school, elite women turned to mantua-makers and milliners.

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18 Calvert, 346; Crowninshield, 37-38.
Professional Needlewomen

By analyzing the levels of sewing knowledge held by amateurs, it is evident that a only small percentage of women possessed the mantua-maker's cutting and fitting skills. If most women performed the plain sewing of a seamstress, who then became skilled professionals? Exactly what skills and tasks fell within the "art and mystery of millinery and mantua-making?"

Slave, laboring, and middling women could easily apprentice or hire out as domestic servants or seamstresses. However, only upper level artisan or middling women could afford the fees and unpaid labor required for craft apprenticeships. Their families supported these girls and forfeited their daughter's income during this period. Like the indenture contracts binding male apprentices and masters in other crafts, mistresses in the needle trades provided room, board, clothing, and, less commonly, incidental expenses.

During the early nineteenth century, mistresses and masters increasingly laid the burden of food and lodging, as well as laundry and other costs, upon

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parents. At the same time, families often had to pay an apprenticeship fee to cover the mistress' expenses. This charge also helped her select from a large labor pool created by a female population eager to enter one of the few skilled crafts open to women.

During these apprenticeships, girls first learned plain sewing. With that foundation they moved on to the restricted skills of cutting and fitting. As they worked with the mistress, mantua-making apprentices gradually perfected the art of draping and pinning to create costly, stylish clothing. They also developed the crucial skill of cutting garment parts from the smallest amount of fabric, and at the same time, manipulating bias and straight grains. Milliners' apprentices focused on cutting, shaping, and trimming elaborate hats, bonnets, and caps, although they probably learned the basics of garment construction as well. While these skills could be developed over time, a woman's personal flair and talents heightened her ability to create beautiful gowns that attracted and pleased customers.

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20 Poutanén, 48-49, 96, 105-106.
21 Ibid., 142; Gamber 61, 67-68.
Milliners and mantua-makers with shops also taught their apprentices the precious skills of reading and writing. This crucial education provided powerful leverage as the future businesswoman would have to sign loan notes, check shipping bills, and confirm her stock orders. She also learned the process of keeping accounts and the more difficult skill of collecting outstanding bills from customers who often paid their long-standing accounts in kind as well as cash. In addition to this vital craft and business training, apprentices served as domestic servants and errand girls during their indentures.23

The need for credit to establish a business further hindered laboring women from joining the ranks of milliners and mantua-makers. Daughters of upper level artisans and tradesmen were part of a business and social network which increased their ability to borrow money and repay those loans. Once girls graduated to paid assistantships, they often borrowed money from parents, painstakingly saved their earnings, or pooled that nest egg with sisters and other women in order to set up their own businesses.24

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23 Poutanen, 63, 125-6, 152. Indentures often added clauses that attempted to restrict this practice.

24 Gamber, 73-75
Accumulating capital allowed a woman to rent a shop and stock goods and textiles rather than merely hire out services from her home.\textsuperscript{25} It was difficult for a mantua-maker to make a profit as her construction fees were minimal in comparison to earnings from textiles and accessories. Running a shop immediately raised her prospects.\textsuperscript{26} The highest ranking and most prosperous mantua-makers had shops where they sold accessories, fabrics, trimmings, fashion plates and dolls, stationary and toiletries.

When mantua-makers offered materials and goods, their business overlapped with that of a milliner, who sold fabrics, trimmings, and accessories. By the early nineteenth century, women increasingly combined millinery and mantua-making enterprises; milliners were regarded as specialists in the craft of making hats.\textsuperscript{27}

Customers determined the status of both milliners and mantua-makers. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century trade descriptions emphasized the importance of

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 64-65; Poutanen, 61, 66-68.

\textsuperscript{26}Buck, 160; Poutanen, 55-56, Book of Trades, Part 3, 37-38.

connections in determining a needlewoman's success. Given the low earnings garnered by construction, The Book of Trades advised against apprenticing girls to mantua-makers unless they already had acquaintances who would help them set up business and improve their chances of success.28

Affluent, elite customers needed and could afford luxury items and elaborate garments for the social functions they attended. Therefore, the location of a shop in a prestigious shopping district immediately boosted the businesswoman's status and profits. The quality of her goods and services also affected this position, but she would be able to sell higher priced goods more readily along a bustling, fashionable street.29 The Book of Trades noted this relationship when it stated that "the business of a Mantua-maker, when conducted on a large scale and in a fashionable situation, is very profitable."30

Marriage, while increasing a woman's potential connections and credit, existed as a double-edged sword. Merchants might lend more readily to a man and he could provide connections through his trade network. A husband's income also supplemented the needlewoman's.

28 Book of Trades, Part 3, 41.
29 Gamber 65; Poutanen, 43-44, 76-77.
30 Book of Trades, Part 3, 40-1.
Yet, women lost legal and personal independence when they married. Husbands controlled the family earnings and could fritter away their wife's capital and income.\textsuperscript{31}

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, single women dominated the needle trades. As in other crafts, indentures attempted to forbid marriage during apprenticeships.\textsuperscript{32} Despite the difficulty of attaining credit and barriers against women in business, the needle trades offered unmarried women legal and personal independence.\textsuperscript{33}

Even with credit, stock, a prestigiously located shop, and an elite clientele, mantua-makers and milliners earned a precarious living. The failure rate of small businesses, especially during the turbulent economic climate of the early nineteenth century, ran high. Millinery shops rarely operated for more than five years and needlewomen with a staff of one or two counted themselves successful.\textsuperscript{34}

These professionals also held lower status than the equivalent male craft. Tailors traditionally reserved the right to construct men's clothing and women's riding

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{31}Gamber, 76-78; Poutanen, 71. \\
\textsuperscript{32}Gamber, 66; Poutanen, 71; Sanderson, 19-21. \\
\textsuperscript{33}Gamber, 74-75, 79-80. \\
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 70; Poutanen, 45. 
\end{flushleft}
habits, which required a knowledge of pattern drafting. Sewing, in general, was perceived as women's work and the fact that most women shared knowledge of plain sewing weakened the value of a craft skill. Some tailoresses and mantua-makers, such as Dodds, ignored the demarcations between the work of the male and female needle trades, but the gender-defined status of needle skills affected the rank and wages of professional needlewomen.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite this status and the precarious existence of their businesses, milliners and mantua-makers sat at the pinnacle of the female needle trades. These middling, artisan women rose above their less fortunate, plain sewing sisters by virtue of their talents and ability to cut and sew intricate garments.\textsuperscript{36} While these women shared this knowledge with their social superiors, elite women did not have the experience gained by constant practice. Even ladies who appeared to enjoy and have a talent for making clothing hired professionals for their most elegant gowns and pelisses. Within this structure, it seems likely that either a mantua-maker or an elite woman cut the parts for the Philadelphia dress from the various lengths of silk. Apprentices, servants and

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\textsuperscript{35} Stansell, 107, 111. \\
\textsuperscript{36} Poutanen, 40. \\
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daughters could have assembled the garment and its
detailed applique decoration.

Given the hierarchy of skills and the difficulty
of maintaining a viable millinery or mantua-making
establishment, how did Dodds fare during her years in
business? Where did she fit within the range of
professional needlewomen and how was her shop and staff
organized? With a solid understanding of garment
construction and the varying skills of needlewomen, we can
now turn to the daybook of Eliza Dodds.
Chapter 4

THE LIFE AND BUSINESS OF ELIZA OLIVER DODDS

Those who go to Washington to spend the winter will find it to their advantage not to purchase their clothing for the winter season until they arrive: for there fashionable clothing can now be purchased...There is a number of the first rate mantua-makers in Washington, direct from Paris and London, who make it their business to fit out strangers and others, in a suitable and fashionable style, for the president's levees and other fashionable parties.¹

In 1824, Eliza Oliver Dodds' millinery shop catered to an affluent Washington clientele. It was located in the developing commercial district on Pennsylvania Avenue. Sitting on the north side of the avenue between 14th and 15th streets, Dodds' shop was half a block from the President's House and the Treasury

¹ E. Cooley, M.D., A Description of the Etiquette in Washington City. Exhibiting the Habits and Customs that Prevail in the Intercourse of the Most Distinguished and Fashionable Society at That Place, During the Session of Congress (Philadelphia: L.B. Clarke, 1829), 78-79.
Building. Many of her customers were members of the executive community who lived in that neighborhood.

On November 1, 1823, Dodds moved her business from the established shopping venue of Bridge Street in Georgetown. The gentry and merchants of that established urban center had patronized her business since its opening about 1815. When she relocated, Dodds followed a general trend as Washington sporadically grew into a city out of scattered clumps of houses among woods and fields. As Dodds' customers entered from the avenue, they found a shelf-lined room stacked with bolts of lustrous French and English silks and crisp brightly printed cottons. Drawers were filled with ribbons, ostrich feathers, leather gloves, knitted stockings, floral scented soaps, buttons covered in fabric or metallic threads, and shawls from India and China. Amidst this treasure trove, customers could also find the more mundane corset laces, sewing thread, and cotton wadding necessary to construct clothing from these glimmering, rustling materials. In the window and on the counters, bonnets perched on hatblocks to entice customers.

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3Dodds Account Book, 1 Nov 1823, 246.
An assistant pulled out a drawer of striped or floral ribbons and laid them on the counter for a customer to inspect more closely. Another young woman sat at the counter trimming bonnets to fill orders. Dodds helped another client select fabric and then ushered her into the workroom for a fitting. As they conferred over imported fashion plates to create a dress, apprentices stitched seams and hemmed skirts for other orders. One of Dodds' tenants came in to pay their rent on a room above the shop, in the cellar or in another building that she subleased. Yet another apprentice scurried in after delivering a completed dress or pelisse.

Dodds represented the potential success that lured women to the millinery and mantua-making trade. By 1824 she had run her business for nearly ten years. In that time six apprentices and assistants worked in her shop. In 1824, she supervised a staff of four young women. When Dodds moved from Georgetown to Pennsylvania Avenue, she expanded her business by renting apartments and buildings throughout Washington.

**Background and Training**

Who was this woman and how did she attain this success? Dodds apparently inherited or assumed the business of another milliner—Eliza Oliver—who may have
been her mother or aunt. This relationship established Dodds place within the needle trades and facilitated her ability to establish credit and a clientele. Eliza Oliver emigrated from Ireland to Georgetown around 1800 and lived there until her death in 1831. Upon arrival to America, she quickly established a millinery shop on the fashionable shopping district of Bridge Street. The senior Oliver was either a widow or single and headed a household of young women. In 1800, she owned three female slaves and had two young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six living with her. Dodds may have been one of these females as she was between six and twenty-six that year.

4No wills, inventories, naturalization papers or other legal documents exist to pinpoint this relationship. None of the needlewomen in the account book or the Daily National Intelligencer appear in tax records which recorded property ownership.

5Poutanen, 74-75.

6"Abstracts of Marriage and Death Notices from the National Intelligencer" (Washington: National Genealogical Society, microfilm), 322; National Intelligencer, 5 Dec 1804. For the sake of clarity I will refer to the elder woman as Oliver and the younger as Dodds, even before her marriage.

While the coincidence of names and dates suggests a tenuous connection between Oliver and Dodds, an advertisement in Washington's *Daily National Intelligencer* confirms the relationship. On July 4, 1815, Oliver announced that she was moving her store to F Street in Washington.

E. Oliver, Sen. Has removed from Georgetown to the City of Washington, and has this day opened at her store in F Street, a few doors east of the Bank of the Metropolis, a new and fashionable assortment of Fancy Articles and Dry Goods...

This location, on the other side of the block from Dodds' future Pennsylvania Avenue address, was in the heart of the fashionable diplomatic and executive neighborhood.

In the same issue, an Eliza Oliver described her recent shipment of spring millinery. Newspaper advertisements represented an additional expense and it seems unlikely that a businesswoman would advertise twice in the same edition. The elder Oliver apparently opened a new shop while the younger woman remained at the Georgetown location. In December, the F street location

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8 *Daily National Intelligencer*, 4 Jul 1815. The designation "senior" in the ad presupposes that readers knew that there were two related women named Eliza Oliver.

9 *Daily National Intelligencer*, 4 Jul 1815. Unfortunately there is no designation specifying Washington or Georgetown.
went out of business or Oliver moved again. On December
8th, 1815, an ad offered the building and shop for rent.

TO LET The Store and Dwelling House, lately
occupied by Mrs. Oliver, A FEW doors east of the
Bank of the Metropolis on F Street North. This
has always been considered a good stand for
business. Apply to JAMES HOBAN.10

Announcements describing the seasonal shipments
for Eliza Oliver's Georgetown shop continue to appear
during the following months and years. These could refer
to either Oliver or Dodds until November 1818, nine months
after her marriage to James Dodds, an English
stonemason.11 Therefore, Dodds was in business three
years before she began recording sales in the extant
daybook.

Oliver probably gave her stock and business to the
younger woman and retired around 1815. This transfer
would explain, at least in part, the absence of any estate
inventory or will at the time of the elder woman's death.

No indenture remains to document Dodds' apprenticeship

10Daily National Intelligencer, 8 Dec 1815.

11Daily National Intelligencer, 27 Dec 1815; Daily
National Intelligencer, 12 Mar 1818, 26 Nov 1818, 22 Dec
1818; Marriage of Eliza Oliver and James Dodds, 12 Mar
1818; Old Marriage Records Index, Supreme Court, District
of Columbia, Vol. 1 A-K, Dec. 23, 1811-Sept. 1, 1858, 235,
Recorder of Marriages, DC Courthouse, Washington; Dodds
emigrated from England in 1816 and worked as a stonemason.
Jewett, Vivian Holland, "Abstracts of Naturalization
Records, Circuit Court, District of Columbia," National
Genealogical Society Quarterly 44 (March 1956), p. 16.
even though girls often signed official contracts when they apprenticed with their mothers and grandmothers.

**Loans and Credit**

The relationship between Oliver and Dodds places the latter squarely in the upper levels of the artisan class and explains her ability to establish credit. Between 1813 and 1820, Dodds borrowed at least $5624 from merchants in Georgetown, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.\(^\text{12}\) Her lenders may have known Dodds when she worked for Oliver and she would soon purchase goods from them for her own business. Lawrence and Stephen Brown, Philadelphia hatters and straw hat manufacturers, lent Dodds substantial sums.\(^\text{13}\) During similar trips to Baltimore, Dodds borrowed money and purchased goods from John Durham, milliner. Closer to home, Dodds took loans from Thomas C. Wright who ran an auction house in Georgetown.\(^\text{14}\)

Most of these notes specified sixty- or ninety-day terms. Dodds carefully noted payments and outstanding debts during the first years of her daybook. When these

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\(^\text{12}\)Dodds Account book, n.p. The notes are glued onto pages in the daybook. See Appendix B.


notes came due, she often paid her lenders through the 
banks in Washington and Georgetown.\textsuperscript{15} While more thorough 
analysis might reveal how Dodds juggled her capital, debts 
and income from her store, these notes and her entries 
reveal the intricate relationships and financial 
manipulations necessary to run a business in early 
nineteenth-century America.\textsuperscript{16}

Dodds began her business and these financial 
dealings as a single woman and continued after she married 
James Dodds in 1818. With the evidence of the account 
book, Dodds' new status did not affect her business. With 
the exception of his signature on several loan notes, her 
husband did not appear to be involved in Dodds' 
enterprises.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Apprentices and Assistants}

These loans offer glimpses into the early years of 
Dodds' business. The daybook recording transactions 
between 1821 and 1833 gives us an even clearer notion of

\textsuperscript{15}Dodds Account book, 30 Jun 1821, 47-48; 23 May 1821, 37.

\textsuperscript{16}Dodds worked at the same time that a furious battle 
raged between Republicans and Federalists over the 
government support and the necessity of banks, industry 
and public works for the American economy. See Sellars for 
a discussion of this debate.

\textsuperscript{17}James Dodds signed a notes on Dec 3, 1818 and Feb 
the daily work of this remarkable businesswoman. This document provides evidence about the tenure, wages, and attendance of the six women who worked for Dodds as apprentices and assistants. The 1820 census enumeration for James Dodds’ household lists five women between the age of sixteen and twenty-six as well as his wife.\(^\text{18}\) While these young women may have been daughters, they were most likely apprentices and assistants living with their mistress.

The daybook reveals the names and position of some of these women. In 1821, Dodds paid or lent cash to one of her assistants, Ann Brooks and recorded the absence of another, Huladay Armstrong.\(^\text{19}\) Both women worked for long periods in the millinery shop. Armstrong appears until 1824 and Brooks officially left Dodds’ service on the 30th of August in 1825.\(^\text{20}\) Margaret Pain, who may have been an assistant, only appears in 1821 and 1822. On April 10,

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\(\text{18}\) "Dodds, James, 1 female 26-45, 5 females 16-26. 1 unnaturalized female, 1 male 26-45," U.S. Census Records, District of Columbia, 1820, 39. He and his wife do not appear in any other year.

\(\text{19}\) Dodds Account book, Ann Brooks, 2 Feb 1821, 12; Huladay Armstrong, 29 Aug 1821, 60.

1821, the busy mistress hired another assistant, Biddy Dougherty, to supplement her staff.\(^{21}\)

In addition to these experienced assistants, Dodds trained two apprentices in the "art and mystery of millinery and mantua-making." Jean and Nancy Stuart indentured with Dodds in 1821 and then were hired as assistants in 1824. Dodds carefully recorded these dates on pages for each girl in the back of her daybook. "Jean Stuart came to me on 21 day of May 1821 for 3 yrs Apprentice [sic] ending on the 21 May 1824." Nancy served the same three year term and both women worked in Dodds shop through 1829. During the early nineteenth century, indentures in the needle trades usually lasted for three years and girls began in their early teens.\(^{22}\)

Once they completed this apprenticeship, Jean and Nancy Stuart immediately joined the ranks of the paid staff "at $4 per Month." These girls earned more than Biddy Dougherty when she hired on at $3 per month in

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\(^{21}\)Dodds Account Book, Margaret Pain, 24 Jul 1821, 54; Margaret Pain, 25 Mar 1822, 130; Biddy Dougherty, Apr. 10, 1821, 25.

\(^{22}\)Ibid., n.p. Dodds kept two nearly identical pages for Jean Stuart; Sanderson, 23; Poutanen, 130-1; Gamber, 71, 73. No indentures for the Stuarts appear in the apprenticeship records for Washington, DC. Another indenture binding Sarah Wilson to Elizabeth Braiden, milliner, for three years on Jan 19, 1813 reveals standard contract wording. RG 21, Entry 128, Apprenticeship Records, NARA, Suitland.
1821.23 The Stuarts may have earned more as they trained with Dodds; Dougherty could have come from another shop. Dodds never mentioned the wages of the other assistants who may have started before the daybook begins.

These skilled assistants commanded markedly higher wages than seamstresses. In 1821, publisher Matthew Carey issued a report on the needlewomen of Philadelphia. Mantua-makers and milliners earned fifty to sixty-two and a half cents a day -- or $3.50 to $4.40 a week -- along with meals. On the other hand, seamstresses working in shops or homes often earned half that rate. When they took in work at home seamstresses survived on about $58 a year, paying for all sewing supplies as well as household expenses. Milliners could earn $1.80 to $2.00 a week beyond expenses, placing their annual earnings at $64, if they worked every week.24 Dodds' assistants most likely lived with her and she did not appear to deduct their work supplies.

Dodds carefully tracked the absences and debts incurred by her staff. Apprenticeship contracts usually included clauses that stated "...from the services of her

23Dodds Account Book, 21 May 1824, n.p; "Biddy Dougherty came here this day at 3 Doll per month," 10 Apr 1821, 25.

24Kessler-Harris, 37; Dexter, 179-180. Seamstresses worked on a more seasonal basis than milliners making their abysmally low wages were even smaller.
said mistress, she shall not absent herself..." While the assistants may not have signed a similar agreement, their mistress could easily dock their wages. She often noted these days off in her daily accounts. In 1821, "Margaret Pain absented herself without leave on the 1st day of July and returned on the Twenty Fourth same month." Dodds entered the days, weeks, and months Jean and Nancy Stuart were not present on their pages in the daybook. When she totted up the wages due them, Dodds deducted these days away from the shop. These pages also reveal that Dodds often paid several years wages at one time. Dodds' customers often did not settle their accounts for months or years; this practice may have affected the rate at which she paid her staff.

The assistants frequently borrowed cash against their pay. Dodds entered these loans alongside purchases by customers, noting "cash paid" or "cash given" to the girl in question. Usually they borrowed between $1 and

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25 Indenture of Sarah Wilson to Elizabeth Braiden, 19 Jan 1813, Record Group 21, Entry 128, NARA, Suitland; Poutanen, 127.

26 Dodds Account Book, 24 Jul 1821, 54.

27 Ibid., Pages for Jean and Nancy Stuart, 1821-1829, n.p.
These loans appear on the pages for the Stuarts. Dodds also entered purchases they charged at other shops.

Barnes Bill got by Nancy
6 yds Blue Calico  $0.25  1.50
3 " flannel [sic]  $0.62  1.87
1 Pair blk hose .62
3 yds Cotton  $0.12  .37
4 1/4 " Gingam[sic]  $0.37  1.78

[6.14]

It appears that Dodds paid for the various fabrics, collars, and stockings, as well as doctor's bills, and then deducted them from the assistants' ever-shrinking wages.29

These attendance and loan notes also record the common practice of hiring out assistants to customers. During her search for a seamstress, Elizabeth Wirt wrote her husband about the needlewoman hired by Mrs. Stephen Decatur.

It is true that Mrs. Decatur's plan was to have a good mantua-maker's girl sent to her for a few weeks at a time, twice a year, I believe, to do up her sewing for her.30

In 1824 and 1825, Jean Stuart worked for several of Dodds' customers -- Mr. Labele and Mrs. Salazar -- for a week at

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She hired out to those households during the fall and spring when families constructed their entire winter or summer wardrobes.

In 1824 alone, Dodds supervised a staff of four. The Stuarts completed their apprenticeships that year while Ann Brooks and Huladay Armstrong provided experienced assistance. These women ran errands, stitched the plain sewing, performed domestic tasks, and generally freed Dodds to focus on business dealings and her growing number of tenants.

Rental Properties

Dodds' stock of fabrics and accessories earned far more than her sewing services. In addition, she augmented her income through rental properties. If they had the capital, milliners and mantua-makers could earn a steady profit by subletting apartments and houses. At the bottom of a lengthy advertisement announcing new goods in her Pennsylvania Avenue millinery shop, Mrs. Jane Doyne added a note describing her boarding services, "N.B. Six or eight gentlemen can be accommodated with board and lodging by the week, month, or year." 

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31 Dodds Account Book, n.p.; the first entry also appears in the daybook, Jean Stuart, 30 Nov 1824, 319.

32 Poutanen, 57-58.

33 Daily National Intelligencer, 21 Dec 1820.
When Dodds moved to her new location in November 1823, she immediately began to rent out rooms above the shop and in other buildings. Dodds provided much needed shelter during the housing shortage experienced in early Washington.\textsuperscript{34} On the same daybook page that she noted the move to Pennsylvania Avenue, Dodds wrote, "Maria Rented front little Brick house at $3 pr month."\textsuperscript{35} During the next few months, Dodds sublet cellars, single rooms, back houses, apartments and entire houses to a rapid succession of tenants.\textsuperscript{36} Each renter paid $3 or $4 per month, the same amount the assistants received as wages. During 1824, Dodds usually had at least three tenants. That income increased the cash flow necessary to pay her business expenses.

Besides single rooms, Dodds rented a section of the building where she worked. Doctor Barber, who lectured to the public on such topics as "Public Eloquence," and his wife paid Dodds the substantial rent of $150 per year plus and additional $12 for three months

\textsuperscript{34}Carson, 3-6.

\textsuperscript{35}Dodds Account Book, Maria, 6 Nov 1823, 246.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., Mrs. Howard, 18 Nov 1823, 244; Miss Wadd, 5 Dec 1823, 250; Bready, 18 Dec 1823, 252; [no name], 1 Jan 1824, 260; Dr. Barber, 10 Feb 1824, 253; Dr. Barber, 22 Mar 1824, 254.
of firewood.\textsuperscript{37} This tenant required more work on Dodds part, as she had to haul the wood and move his furniture, but Barber paid separately for those services.

Although she was less specific about the location and size of the apartment, Dodds rented at least two other houses in Washington. On May 1, 1824 she "Rented one of the Houses to Mr. Wright for one year at 4 Doll Pr Month."\textsuperscript{38} In July of the same year, a Miss Proctor "Rented House at City Hall for four Dollars per Month at this Date." Procter made the most regularly recorded payments and then transferred the house to a Margaret Brown.\textsuperscript{39} The people who paid the rate for a single room undoubtedly lived in different conditions than those enjoyed by Doctor Barber.

These rental properties provided a steady income that would tide the business over during the slow summer months when elite society fled to the country. Dodds' customers and tenants often held long outstanding accounts and the more frequent rental payments provided much needed cash. The income from the 1823 rentals was greater than the wages she paid Ann Brooks and Huladay

\textsuperscript{37}Dodds Account Book, Dr. Barber, 21 Mar 1824, 275.
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., Mr. Wright, 1 May 1824, 284.
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid., Miss Procter, 29 Jul, 1824, 305; 1824 rental payments, 331.
Armstrong. Dodds could have also used this to cover half of the $45 rent she paid to a Mr. More on February 2, 1824.40

Given her substantial credit, large staff, and numerous rental units, Dodds attained great success as a skilled businesswoman. She trained in the "art and mystery of millinery and mantua-making," yet, needlework represented only a small portion of her income. Once she had established her reputation, an affluent clientele, and solid credit, Dodds could afford to take on apprentices and assistants. That staff required room, board, and wages, but they performed the laborious sewing and domestic tasks. Dodds could then cut and fit her most prestigious customers and pursue her business and rental dealings.41

What role did garment construction play in this multifaceted business? Affluent Washington women

40Ibid., 2 Feb 1824, 266. Dodds recorded rental payments to numerous people without noting which property those payments covered.

41Little evidence remains to describe Dodds' later years. The lack of a will, inventory or obituary obscures the date or reason of her death. After 1827, the entries in the daybook become less accurate and record fewer sales. By 1830 Dodds only made a few dresses. In 1833 she stitched shirts for a few customers. While Dodds may have kept other books, this evidence suggests the decline of her business. James Dodds remarried in 1851. Unless he divorced his milliner wife, she must have died prior to the second marriage.
patronized skilled professionals such as Dodds and her staff for their ability to construct elaborate clothing. The account book offers clues as to how the needlewomen produced clothing in Dodds' shop and how garments, such as the Philadelphia dress, moved though their hands from flat, shimmering material to a structure that swirled around a woman's body.
Chapter 5
FROM FABRIC TO CLOTHING IN DODDS' SHOP

Feb [24], 1824 Madame Gruhmn[sic]
to amount of bill rendered
2 hnk [handkerchiefs] 1.50 to 1 Do Cap 2 3.50
Crimping 2 Rufels[sic] .08
9 yds blk Box Crape[sic] [0.87] 7.87
13 " Cotton Cord [0.02] .26
Making Dress 2.50
4 Skeins Silk .25 to 7 Buttons 14 to 3 hokes[sic] .03 .45
2 Cap $4 4 Ruffels[sic] 4 cnts [?]4.16
6 1/2 yds florence .62 [?]4.03
12 1/2 yds Mode $1.37 17.18
" Cord $1 S[ewing or skein] Silk .75 1.75
3 " Ribband[sic] .37 Making Mantle 4.37

[53.91]

The daybook of Eliza Oliver Dodds offers a rare glimpse into the daily routine and the seasonal rhythms of a milliner and mantua-maker in early nineteenth-century Washington. While close analysis of the silk dress in the Philadelphia Museum of Art raised issues of materials, construction methods, the hierarchy of skills, and the

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2At least two different people entered transactions in this account book, most likely Dodds and her assistants.

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transmission of fashion information, what complementary perspective does this document offer about the work of professional needlewomen? How did the textiles and supplies arrive in Dodds' shop? Whose hands did the dress pass through and what tasks did they perform? What duties and responsibilities occupied Dodds' days, weeks, and years as a milliner and businesswoman? How does this work clarify the relationship between the customer and milliner seen in the disgruntled interchange between Elizabeth Wirt and Miss Pitt's mother?

Account books have particular limitations for historical research. They were kept to record moneymaking transactions and not to describe the details of those goods and services or the relationships between the participants. Only purchasing customers appear in the daybook and Dodds left no record of whether their visits overlapped or spread over the course of a day. She noted dates inconsistently, obscuring the number of clients in one day or the number of days between paying customers. She also made no note of how long it took to construct or alter garments. This document only records a fragment of the surrounding business environment and we will never know what Dodds' patrons purchased in other Washington and Georgetown shops.
This businesswoman kept her books to track income, expenses, and debts. She noted types of textiles, yardage, unit and total price, basic names of goods and services, and, occasionally, designs and colors. Dodds and her staff produced and sold a variety of garments, headwear and ready-made goods, but she did not describe the details of form or decoration. She tracked absences, loans and wages for her staff and intermittently listed money she took in on rental properties or loaned out. Dodds' bookkeeping methods record payments but the "paid" or "paid in full" scrawled across the entries offer no evidence about the time between initial purchase and the settling of bills.

According to the daybook, a several days or weeks might pass without paying customers. Yet, Dodds and her staff continued to serve those browsers and customers who perused her goods. Although men continued to purchase goods for their families, the mistress of the household increasingly took responsibility for shopping by the early nineteenth century. A woman's ability to compare and select quality goods at the best price became more and more important as the range of shopping emporiums and goods expanded. The Workwoman's Guide offered middle-

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3 Cott, 44-45; Boydston, 35, 83-84, 102-103, 124; Amanda Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possession, 1751-81," in
class women one of the first written guidelines for purchasing affordable, well-made fabrics.4

Yet, shopping expeditions, especially for clothing and domestic goods, served a social function as well. Women in Washington often called on each other and then browsed together in the various shops in Georgetown and along Pennsylvania Avenue. Margaret Bayard Smith, wife of the National Intelligencer's publisher and editor, described such an afternoon in 1800. "Mrs. Tingey called for me the other day, to accompany her to G. Town. After shopping we drove to Mrs. Bells, where as usual, I met a most affectionate welcome."5 Dodds and her staff waited on these women as they chatted, compared goods, and juggled their budgets and clothing requirements.

Dodds did not record whether a Madame Van Gruehmn arrived with companions, but on February 24, 1824, she made one of her frequent and extensive purchases at the millinery shop. This single entry provides a springboard for the analysis of this lengthy document. Van Gruehmn bought the full range of supplies, materials, and services from Dodds to construct a dress and mantle. This is one

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5Smith, The First Forty Years, 4-5.
of the more precise examples of this type of transaction as the fabric, supplies, and construction fees are grouped together for each garment. Given the relative clarity of this entry, it can be broken down to extract the various tasks Dodds that performed to sell goods, construct clothing, acquire stock, and supervise her staff.⁶

Originally a governess, Van Gruhm men broke the barriers of Washington's elite society by marrying the Prussian Minister. She became mistress of Kalorama, the country estate where she had previously worked as hired staff. When Frederick Van Gruhm men died in 1823, she inherited that land along with property in Washington.⁷

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⁶This will not be a study of consumption patterns, though there is ample material for that type of analysis. The majority of Dodds' customers were members of Washington's elite government and planter society. Wives of tradesmen and slave women also appear on these pages, revealing the different socio-economic groups that patronized Dodds. Although Dodds sold numerous accessories and constructed headwear, this study will focus on the garments she created as a mantua-maker.

Range of Materials and Prices

On the 24th of February, during the busy social season, Eliza and her assistants bustled around the shop pulling out boxes of goods and bolts of fabric for the wealthy widow. She chose three handkerchiefs and a handkerchief cap, which was most likely of thin cotton and was worn under a bonnet or at home. After inspecting bolts of fabric and trimming, Van Gruehm selected enough black box crepe for a dress and more than ample yardage of florence and mode for a mantle.

Dodds could have measured Van Gruehm with a piece of tape or used another dress as a guide to determine the amount of fabric needed. From experience, she and most housewives would have shared knowledge of the requisite yardage. Attorney General William Wirt often purchased the materials for his family's wardrobe while working in Baltimore. In 1820, he and his wife Elizabeth exchanged a lively round of letters discussing various opinions on the proper amount of fabric needed for a dress. She ended the debate by writing

It takes 5 and a half, or 6 yards (of 3 quarters muslin) or gingham, to make a dress plain - but the ruffling and ornamented part of the dress will require at the least a yard more - I shall prefer to have 7 yards of each - Those french muslins are the very thing, I suppose, that I have been in search of - the eighth yard, was

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for altering, or mending with it another season.9 Wirt's emphatic statement reveals how each yard of fabric was employed for the various elements of the garment and its decoration. This penny-wise woman also purchased fabric with alterations and repairs in mind, a common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Van Gruehmn selected her dress fabrics from Dodds' wide variety of cottons, wools, silks, and blends. These textiles ranged from cheap, sturdy domestic to expensive, lush velvet. Yet, most of Dodds' customers chose silks of varying sheerness and delicacy from the middle price bracket of her inventory.10 Van Greuhmn's crepe, mode, and florence, all popular fabrics during the 1820s, and the figured green and purple silk of the Philadelphia dress fell in this category.

A comparison between the value of these textiles illustrates the striking ability of people to announce their affluence, status, or aspirations by their choice of fabric. Van Greuhmn paid $7.87 for nine yards of mid-range crepe that was probably used to make an overdress.

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9Elizabeth to William Wirt, Washington, 24 May 1820, William Wirt Papers. Silks were usually narrower than cotton fabrics; Wirt would have needed a larger quantity of silk to construct the same dress.

10See Appendix C for fabric prices and occurrence of purchases during 1824.
In drastic comparison, Governor Barber, a senator from Virginia, bought the same yardage of velvet for $23.75. On the other hand, nine yards for a dress of "fine calico" could cost as little as $3.37.\textsuperscript{11} Dodds' calicos and cottons cost a fourth of the mid-range silks and a tenth of the luxurious velvets, pluses, and cassimeres.

Although Dodds catered to a predominantly affluent clientele, the wide price gap between categories of dress fabrics created economic barriers that some people could not hurdle. In 1830, Margaret Bayard Smith noted the separation of social groups through the exorbitant price of highly fashionable clothing:

\begin{quote}
The city is thronged with strangers, fashionable ladies come from all quarters, a great many mothers with daughters to show off, a great many young ladies to see relatives and to be seen by the public and all coming in such high ton and expensive fashions, that the poor citizens can not pretend to vie with them and absolutely shrink into insignificance.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

While working and middling women might be able to save for a dress of florence or figured silk, the velvet was prohibitively expensive for most.

Even Dodds' wealthy customers developed strategies to accommodate the price of these expensive textiles. Many of her patrons purchased small amounts to trim

\textsuperscript{11}Dodds Account book, Gov. Barber, 1824, 256; Chief of the Iowa's wife, 25 Jul 1824, 301.

\textsuperscript{12}Smith, The First Forty Years, 313.
clothing and headdresses, rather than making entire garments from the luxury fabrics. Given this range of values, people would immediately understand the message proclaimed by a woman wearing a dress of velvet as opposed to one of sturdy, rough cotton or wool. The context of the occasion and the status of the wearer would also determine the impact of this presentation, but the material itself played a vital role.

Yet, industrialization and the burgeoning availability of cheap, decorative fabrics blurred social lines. People who could not afford to patronize Dodds might purchase cheaper variations of the same materials from dry goods merchants. Prescriptive literature attempted to squelch the desire and tendency of the laboring and middling classes to wear fashionable, machine woven textiles. The Workwoman's Guide described class distinctions according to dress fabric.

Those commonly worn by servants, and the working classes, are of print, linen, stuff, and for best, light ginghams, merinos, or bombazine; ladies wear muslin, gingham, silk, merino, and

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13 Dodds' customers usually bought an eighth to a quarter yard of velvets and plushes and often hired her to make or alter garments at the same time.

14 Richard B. Stott, Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 174-175.
for dress, either lighter or richer materials, as satins, velvets, gauzes, etc.\textsuperscript{15}

While the cost of certain textiles and accessories, such as $6 bonnets and $5 ostrich feathers, might serve as obstacles to less affluent women, the value of goods did not necessarily determine the wearer's status. One of Dodds' cheapest materials, calico, appeared in less formal, fashionable clothing throughout the 1820s.\textsuperscript{16} The cut of a woman's dress and the manner in which she moved in it communicated the distinction between two women wearing calico dresses. Although more women could afford fashionable silks and cottons, they did not often possess the experience or patterns to achieve the fit of a professionally made garment or the more elusive deportment and etiquette of genteel society. Construction, along with materials and the personal flair of the maker and wearer, played a crucial role in distinguishing a woman's social status through her clothing.

\textsuperscript{15}Workwoman's Guide, 106.

\textsuperscript{16}Since Dodds sold goods to an upscale clientele and her prices were most likely higher than that of a dry goods merchant.
Garment Construction

After Van Gruehmn chose her silk dress fabric, she selected the sewing supplies and trimmings needed for construction. Cheap sewing silk, hooks and eyes, buttons, and lining usually appear together in Dodds' entries. Van Gruehmn did not purchase lining material, which might have been cheaper silk and cotton or remnants of dress fabrics. While fabric-covered or metal buttons served as fasteners, they also provided decoration on wrists, applied trimming, or bodices. Customers also purchased the cotton wadding that filled out the applied trimming on the Philadelphia dress.\textsuperscript{17} Dodds did not charge for pins and needles as she would have kept these tools among her shears, measuring strips, irons and bonnet blocks.

Once van Greuhm's supplies lay piled on the counter, Dodds ushered her into the workroom to be draped and fitted. As the mantua-maker or her most experienced assistant pinned the fabric, she and her client discussed necklines, sleeve lengths, and hem widths.\textsuperscript{18} Van Gruehmn explained the type of trimming she desired, which she

\textsuperscript{17}Dodds Account Book, Amelia Beal, 17 Dec 1824, 322.

\textsuperscript{18}Of Dodds' staff, Ann Brooks and Huladay Armstrong had the most experience after working for three years in the shop. Nancy and Jean Stuart probably performed the less skilled tasks, having completed their apprenticeship in May.
could have selected from a friend's dress, fashion plates, or the French ball gowns in the shop.

When Dodds was satisfied with this fitting session, she left the materials in the workroom and wrote up the sale in her daybook. Van Gruehmn took the bundle of remaining goods and departed. As with most of Dodds' customers, Van Gruehmn charged the sale to her account and paid at a later date. Dodds did not include this customer in her end of year list of outstanding debts suggesting that Van Gruehmn paid her substantial bills before January 1825.19

While the box crepe for Van Gruehmn's dress amounted to nearly $8, Dodds charged a fraction of that, $2.50, for the "making." This term encompassed the cutting, fitting, stitching, hemming and trimming procedures necessary to construct a fashionable garment. Dodds also used the phrase "doing a pelisse" or "to work done to a robe" which might have included construction or merely the trimming and altering of garments.20 Dodds normally charged $1 to $2 for making garments. The larger fees for the dress and mantle might suggest a great amount of labor in cutting, fitting and decorating.

19Dodds Account Book, 1824 Accounting, 330.

20Ibid., Chief Justice Marshall by Mrs. Ringold, 2 Feb 1824, 268; Mrs. Guest, 25-30 Dec 1824, 327.
The supplies Van Gruehmn purchased provide clues to the hierarchy of tasks performed in the shop. Dodds or her experienced assistants would have cut the garment from the box crepe, florence and mode.\textsuperscript{21} The apprentices and assistants then basted the bodice and skirt together with cotton thread.\textsuperscript{22} The daybook reveals little about the shop structure, but this distinction between basic and skilled tasks follows craft tradition. The apprentices may have specialized in either garment or headwear construction which further organized labor in the shop. During the busy winter season, all of the women would have stitched the yards of hems, seams and trimming.\textsuperscript{23}

The basting stitched by her staff allowed Dodds to double check the crucial fit of the bodice. She may have gone to Madame Van Gruehmn's house for that session or asked her to visit the shop again. An entry in Jane Thompson's diary, which records her family's journey from England to America in 1818, offers a clue to the location

\textsuperscript{21}Madame Van Gruehmn bought so much material, especially mode, that it is likely that she took the excess home for other purposes.

\textsuperscript{22}While Madame Van Gruehmn bought silk thread, it seems unlikely that she would use this more expensive fiber for preparatory stitching. The Philadelphia dress revealed the use of cotton or linen threads for basting and tacking.

\textsuperscript{23}See Appendix C for the occurrence of garment construction during 1824.
of that fitting. When the Thompson arrived in New York City, she wrote

Dressmaker sent for Mrs. Allen to try her dress on. I remarked that it was unusual; Mrs. Allen said it was the custom. I find dressmakers do not wait on their customers as in England.24

It appears that Mrs. Thompson, wife of the English bookseller Pishey Thompson, was not accustomed to being called into the shop for a fitting.

In either case, once Dodds and her customer deemed the fit satisfactory, the needlewomen stitched the garments together with secure seams of small stitches. As the dress and mantle took shape, Dodds may have set her assistants to the task of sewing Madame Van Gruehn's cotton cord into tubes of the dress fabric to create ribs around the skirt.25 Customers often bought up to fifty yards of cotton or silk cord with their clothing supplies. The silk trim would have been stitched directly to the surface of the garment to create a raised decoration.

The apprentices finished the garments by whipstitching metal hooks to the back opening of the bodice and to slits at the wrists. Van Gruehn did not purchase matching eyes so the needlewomen probably created

24Thompson, Jane, Sep 1818, "Diary of Mrs. Pishey Thompson," [tss] Historical Society of Washington, DC, Washington; original in Flower Collection, Stratford-on-Avon; Delano, 76.

25Tarrant, 13.
thread loops to fasten the openings. They also stitched the buttons in place and then cut and whipped buttonholes where needed. The mantle would have been constructed in a similar fashion although its loose, sleeveless form reduced construction labor.

In addition to ordering the dress and mantle, Van Greuhmn hired Dodds to crimp ruffles, borders and frills. In the workroom, one of the assistants heated an iron, wiped it clean, and pressed the gathered edge of a cap or skirt flounce over that heated metal to form crisp ruffles. Tailors used large, heavy goose irons to press materials; mantua-makers would have owned flat, sad irons in various sizes to smooth fabrics and finished garments.26

Van Greuhmn was the only customer during 1824 to hire this service and its low value—four cents per ruffle—reflects the low status and skill of ironing.27 Most affluent families left this arduous task to laundrywomen or the servants and slaves in their household. Ironing usually completed the grueling, weekly

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26 Norwalk, Mary, Kitchen Antiques (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 60-64; "1 fluting apparatus .50," Inventory of Aglai E. Coursault, 1831, Inventories of Baltimore, Co., MD, JDCMPE.

27 Dodds Account Book, 21 Jan 1824, 263; 4 Feb 4 1824, 266; 14 Feb 1824, 269; 4 Mar 1824, 274; 10 Apr 1824, 280, Madame Van Gruehumn. She ordered this service on several occasions that winter and spring.
washing process, but Van Gruehn may have hired Dodds out of convenience or when items needed pressing out of the regular laundry cycle.

When the needlewomen completed the garments and ironing, Dodds sent one of her assistants to deliver the order. Customers often purchased boxes and bandboxes with their supplies, accessories, and clothing and these may have served as carriers and storage. Just as Miss Pitt's mother demanded reimbursement from Elizabeth Wirt, the errand girl may have requested payment for Dodds' services when she appeared on the doorstep.

If the customer was not satisfied with the garment, she might call the needlewoman back for yet another fitting. In 1815, Mary Boardman Crowninshield described such an incident to her mother when she wrote, "I have had the mantua-maker here for she did not make the gown to suit me, but she will fix it right now." These alterations required additional time and labor on the mantua-maker's part, but customers could refuse to accept both the garment and the bill, as Crowninshield did in 1816.

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28 Anna Maria Thornton, 1 Feb 1800, "Diary of Mrs. William Thornton, 1800-63," Columbia Historical Society Record 10 (1907): 102. It was common practice to deliver goods to the customer. Many of Dodds customers purchased boxes and bandboxes along with other goods.

29 Crowninshield, 31.
I was disappointed in my pelisse. First it was made too short - it was then pieced down and the border quilted; it really looked handsomer, but she charged me ten dollars more than she engaged to make it for, so I sent it back.  

Although women hired Dodds for her experience and skill in creating properly fitting clothing, she received little compensations for the hours of stitching and trimming. Dodds and her sisters-in-trade truly relied on their ability to cut and fit clothing well. If they made mistakes, customers could easily refuse payment for additional charges or for the entire garment. The frustration on the part of Crowninshield and other disgruntled customers reflects the importance of wearing properly fitted dresses and coats to separate themselves from the puckered, gaping, baggy masses. Also, Crowninshield demonstrated her superior status and power over her mantua-maker by refusing to accept the pelisse even though she approved of the alterations.

Other Sewing Services

Dodds' daybook illustrates the range of services a mantua-maker provided. Besides "making" dresses, pelisses, and mantles, she and her staff created parts of dresses and decorations for finished garments. They also

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Ibid., 36.
retrrimmed and altered clothing as customers repaired and updated their wardrobes. As with the various construction charges, the fees for this labor were minimal compared to the price of the fabric.

Feb 26, 1824 Mrs. Barber
Making Dress .75 trimmings .12 .87
Do. 2 Bodys 1.00 trimming 1.00
Lining for 3 Dresses .25
[2.12]^{31}

On February 26, 1824, Mrs. Barber hired Dodds to make a dress, two bodices, and linings which may have been applied to the first items. While this customer purchased trimmings at the same time, she brought the fabric and sewing supplies with her. During 1824 only one other customer hired Dodds to make a body for a dress, yet this was probably more common as this practice provided unskilled women with the crucial element of her clothing.^{32} Dodds cut and fit the bodice as if she were making a complete dress. Her customers then added the skirt at home. They could have also used the body as a

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^{31}Dodds Account Book, Mrs. Barber, 26 Feb 1824, 256. She could be the wife of either Governor Barber, senator from Virginia, Dr. Barber the lecturer and Dodds' tenant.

^{32}Ibid., Miss Magruder, 21 Apr 1824, 281.
pattern, knowing that it was fit by the skilled mantua-maker.\textsuperscript{33}

When customers requested ornate applique or trimming, Dodds charged them for the additional labor.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{verbatim}
Jan 7, 1824 Miss Thomson[sic]
2 yds White Satin @1.50 3.00
1/8 " Do Crape @.87 .75
7 " Cotton Cord .07 hookes [sic] .02
    Cotton .06[?] .15
to Making Satin and Crape folds .50
Making Dress 2.00
lining .12 Sowing Silk .25 10 Buttons .10
to 3/4 yds Fringe .37 Making Robe 3.00 3.85
\end{verbatim}
\end{footnotesize}

The daughter of Jane and Pishey Thompson, who had traveled from England in 1818, paid Dodds to make a dress and robe. She also selected white satin and crepe from the bolts on Dodds' shelves and hired her to make folds from that material. Dodds and her assistants spent a great deal of energy on cutting, hemming, and applying this fabric decoration, but their work earned fifty cents, a mere sixth of the price of the $3.00 fabric.

On several occasions, customers hired Dodds to apply trim to garments they brought in to the shop. Miss Lee, daughter of William Lee, second auditor in the Treasury Department, bought gauze, black florence, cord,

\textsuperscript{33}Severa, n.p; Account Book of Polly Green Wiley, 1815-1830, Stoneham, MA, JDCMPE. The majority of this mantua-maker's business consisted of cutting and basting garments that her customers could complete at home.

\textsuperscript{34}Dodds Account Book, Miss Thompson, 7 Jan 1824, 261.
and sewing silk and paid Dodds $1 for "puting [sic] on trimming on dress." A Mrs. Salazar also hired Dodds for "Changing the Satin on the trimming." Dodds charged her $1.50 for the painstaking, time-consuming labor of picking out stitches which held the satin trim to the dress, constructing new decorations, and tacking them down to the dress.

These services reveal a mantua-maker's maintenance role. Dodds' connection to the garments she made and trimmed did not end when they left the store. As food spilled, flies spotted, hems frayed, soot blackened, or decorations drooped, clothing returned to Dodds' shop for refurbishment. The customer might only want trimmings changed or they might ask Dodds to replace entire sections of the garment. The daybook offers no reason for the alterations, but reveals the common practice of reworking the precious fabric into new garments or other uses. As garments tore and fabric wore thin, customers set their servants and daughters to ripping up garments and saving the trimming and salvageable fabric for other garments, household articles, or rags.


36Ibid., Madame Van Gruehm, 10 Apr 1824, 280.

37Amy Boyce Osaki, "A Truly Feminine Employment,' Sewing and the Early Nineteenth-Century Woman," Winterthur
While the majority of her customers hired Dodds to construct fashionable garments of expensive materials, she did not turn away plain sewing. A Native American delegation, in Washington to sign land treaties, bought large quantities of goods and clothing during July 1824. While they did not purchase the same goods as Dodds' regular customers, the Native Americans ordered shifts and shirts. Dodds charged thirty-seven and fifty cents for constructing these simple garments, revealing the minimal skill required to make them.

On separate occasions, Miss Thompson and Mr. Blondieu, a guide for the Native American delegation, also paid twenty-five and twelve cents for Dodds' assistants to hem and mark handkerchiefs that they brought in. As with the crimping services, these customers could have easily hired the lower status, cheaper, seamstresses who

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38 The Chiefs of the Iowa, Fox and Sauk and their wives and daughters came to Washington to sign land treaties that would push them west of the Mississippi. Their appearance in Dodds' account book raise intriguing questions of cross-cultural interaction and consumption, but I am merely using these entries to discuss tasks that do not appear elsewhere in this document.

39 Dodds Account Book, Major Taliaferro, 19 Jul 1824, 297; Keokuk of the Sauk, 24 Jul 1824, 299; Tima, Chief of the Iowa, 24 Jul 1824, 300; Chief of the Iowa's wife, 25 Jul 1824, 301; the Chief's daughter, 24 Jul 1824, 304.

40 Ibid., Miss Thompson, 12 Mar 1824, 275; Mr. Blondieu, 26 Jul 1824, 302.
lived in the neighborhood. Affluent women could also set their servants, slaves, and daughters to these basic tasks. Both customers may have left their handkerchiefs with Dodds out of convenience, even though Miss Thompson certainly had the skill to perform this plain sewing.

Dodds offered a range of services to construct, alter and repair fashionable garments. Although she and her staff offered the experience and skills to create complex, properly fitted garments, Dodds accommodated her clients' need for simple sewing and maintenance duties. Yet, no matter how complex the satin folds or piped applique, the fees for this time-consuming, eye-straining labor earned only a fraction of the income from textiles and accessories. Dodds' daybook clearly demonstrates how much a milliner or mantua-maker relied on her stock, rather than her needle skills, for financial well-being.

Acquiring Stock

While her staff worked on the dresses, pelisses, and mantles, Dodds could focus on the crucial task of selecting and ordering her profitable and extensive inventory of gloves, feathers, textiles, sewing supplies, accessories, and toiletries. In the process of serving customers, she developed a sense of what they wanted.

Delano, 65.
As she ordered merchandise according to expected sales, Dodds developed relationships with merchants and milliners that extended her ability to meet customers' needs.

In order to provide her patrons with fashionable, quality goods, Dodds dealt directly with merchants in the ports of Philadelphia and Baltimore. Her advertisements in the Daily National Intelligencer often announced that Dodds "has just returned from Philadelphia with her Winter Millinery..." The process of selecting goods, writing merchants and traveling to their stores occupied Dodds several times a year. She closed the shop or left it in the hands of her most trusted assistants. The slow periods in August and September, when she recorded no transactions for weeks at a time, may have given her a chance to take the coaches and ferries necessary to reach the port towns.

Dodds corresponded with merchants, ordering goods by style numbers in their sample books. Although Dodds did not regularly enter her orders in the daybook,

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she glued in a letter received with a shipment. On June 27, 1828, Joseph Michard wrote on behalf of C.W.F. Jerome in Baltimore that "I could not find any lustring ribbon No. 22, plain edge, please to let me know of what kind of Goods I must make up the balance of your claims." He enclosed an order of satin ribbon, white florence, black mode and satin, and coarse chips for a total of $40.50.\footnote{Dodds Account Book, 18 Feb 1821, 298. Jerome does not appear in the Baltimore directory.}

Dodds also bought merchandise from or sold goods on commission for local Georgetown merchants. Elizabeth and George Abbot and Doctor Charles Worthington ran dry goods stores on Bridge Street in Dodds' former neighborhood.\footnote{A Full Directory for Washington, 1834, 21, 57. Dodds also dealt with the Georgetown merchants Daniel Conner and Mr. Peet in 1821.} On November 28, 1824, Dodds purchased dozens of kid and beaver gloves, mantua ribbons and papers of pins from the Abbots.\footnote{Dodds Account Book, n.p., 28 Nov 1824. The Abbots, especially Elizabeth, appear continually in the account book.} Dodds also sold goods for Doctor Worthington. On July 23, 1824, he signed a receipt for shawls he gave her to sell. She returned seven shawls to him, having sold six for a total of $15. On January 26 of the same year, she also received payments from

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Worthington for dresses she sold to a Miss Young. Dodds earned a sizeable profit from these expensive, imported garments without expending the time and energy entailed in construction.

When placing orders, Dodds tried to avoid poor quality or unpopular goods that would languish on her shelves, wasting space and eating up her capital. In 1821, she returned a substantial amount of fabric, stockings and shawls to Francis Boyle, a Baltimore dry goods merchant. She ordered supplies in bulk as the nearly fifty-three yards of florence, thirty-seven yards of striped leventeen, and half a dozen stockings, among other goods returned, reveal. Dodds must have miscalculated her market if she needed to return these goods to the merchant. Such mistakes would be costly if the merchant refused to accept them or if she could not sell them to an auction house.

While she provided information about new European fashions and textiles, Dodds recognized that her patrons chose their purchases carefully and could easily take their business elsewhere. She would not want to lose sales to a neighboring shop or the businesses in other cities that Margaret Bayard Smith resorted to in 1818.

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48 Ibid., 45, 16-21 Jun 1821, F. Boyle; Keenan, 33.
After breakfast I went forth on a shopping expedition... One article I could not get, curls, French curls, parted on the forehead, you know how. You must get them for me either in New York or Phila. Now remember CURLS!

**Trade Network**

Although Dodds competed for Smith's business with a variety of millinery, fancy goods, and dry goods shops, she also traded goods and services with local businesspeople. The network of milliners and mantuamakers provided a support systems when Dodds needed supplies or was understaffed. At the same time that she sold goods for Doctor Worthington on commission, Dodds also produced goods and supplies for other merchants. All of these interactions represented additional income and relationships among tradespeople rather than between a milliner and her customers.

Dodds occasionally noted when she sent her apprentices out to buy requested items at neighboring shops. When Dodds and her staff worked on Chief Justice Marshall's robe she "found Satin Silk fringe [and] Sewing Silk" for 2$. Chiefs of the Sauk and Fox and their wives purchased lengths of silver lace to trim dresses. On the same day, Dodds noted that she bought the same widths of

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49 Smith, *The First Forty Years*, 143.
silver lace from Mrs. Abbot. The milliners Elizabeth Braiden and Mrs. Jane Doyne and the tailor Christopher Cummins also appear in the daybook when they purchased small amounts of gimp, ribbons and fabric from Dodds.

Elizabeth Abbot appears repeatedly throughout the daybook. Dodds regularly sold her quantities of boxes and bandboxes. She may have ordered these containers and then resold them or set her assistants to the task of assembling the boxes from pasteboard during slow season. Dodds had the supplies in stock as one customer, Mr. Barber, bought pasteboard. Abbot frequently purchased fabrics, ribbons, and corset bones as well as bundles of willow reeds, cane, and wire for making hats. Besides providing supplies, Dodds constructed two or three green bonnets at a time for Abbot. Given these transactions and the 1824 order, the two women relied on each other to

50Dodds Account Book, Chief Justice Marshal by Mrs. Ringold, 2 Feb 1824, 266; Tima, Chief of the Fox, 24 Jul 1824, 300; Keokuk of the Sauk, 24 Jul 1824, 299; Mrs. Abbot, 24 Jul 1824, 303.

51Ibid., Betsy Braiden, 8 Aug 1822, 361; Mrs. J. Doyne, 1-11 Oct 1821, 72; Mr. C. Cummins, 13 Dec 1824, 320.

52Ibid., Dr. Barber, 3 Apr 1824, 278; 16 Jan 1824, 262; Mr. and Mrs. Abbot, 1 Mar 1824, 270; 25 Feb 1824, 274; 10 Jun 1824, 289; 21 Jun 1824, 290; 15-23 Nov 1824, 317; 15-28 Sep 1824, 310.
stock their respective businesses. They also lent each other cash on several occasions.\textsuperscript{53}

These loans represented a crucial safety cushion. Milliner and mantua-makers repeatedly request their customers to settle their accounts through newspaper advertisements. The elder Oliver placed such an ad, "E. Oliver earnestly requests those who are indebted to her to call and pay their accounts."\textsuperscript{54} Many of Dodds' customers ran up large accounts which tied up her capital. When her notes came due or merchants and landlords demanded payment, Dodds might not have the cash on hand. Loans from Abbot, other business people, and clients allowed her to cover expenses, continue business, and forestall the ever looming threat of bankruptcy. In turn Dodds lent cash to her staff, tenants and customers creating a network of interdependence.\textsuperscript{55}

Dodds also traded services and goods with other needlewomen. Ann Dodds left her service on August 30, 1825. A fancy goods store run by an Ann Brooks appears in

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., Mrs. Abbot and Dodds, 15 Jan 1821, 5; Feb-Apr 1821, 11; 13 Jan 1823, 206.

\textsuperscript{54}\textit{Daily National Intelligencer}, 3 Jan 1815; this might be an ad submitted by Oliver, senior.

\textsuperscript{55}Dodds Account Book, Mr. Peet, 21 Feb 1821, 12; Dr. Barber, 1 Apr 1824, 278; Daniel Conner, 21 Jun 1821, 45; Bready, 1 Apr 1824, 278; Mr. Tellivera's boy, 31 Jul 1824, 307; Poutanen, 70-71. She notes that a needlewoman's ability to offer loans reflected a prosperous business.
the 1822 directory but there is little information to determine whether the women were related or were one and the same. A daybook entry in 1828 reveals that Brooks continued to work for Dodds after leaving the shop. Brooks signed the note "Received the above for work done for Eliza Dodds" under a long list of accessories, fabrics, sewing supplies and stationary and accessories.\textsuperscript{56}

If Dodds was short-staffed or could not complete her orders, she hired Brooks to return and assist her.

The transactions Dodds recorded in her daybook reveal a trade network that add a new dimension to the tasks and responsibilities of a milliner or mantuemaker.\textsuperscript{57} Businesswomen who do not appear in tax rolls or city directories surface through this document. While they competed for the business of customers who were often difficult to please, these milliners, mantua-makers, and merchants relied on each other to survive. The needlewomen also shared skills which they used to assist each other or to supplement their own income.

\textsuperscript{56} Delano, 20; Dodds Account book, Ann Brooks, Sep-Nov 1828, 395.

Given the difficult task of running a profitable business and earning a living from the relatively low construction fees, we can more clearly understand the anger of Miss Pitt's mother when Elizabeth Wirt initially refused to pay for the dresses she had ordered. Professional needlewomen could not afford to offend their customers who could turn potential clients away with negative reviews. Yet, needlewomen needed to claim their fees for the time and labor involved in the fitting and construction of garments. Rather than relying on the whims and tolerance of their customers, mantua-makers sold goods and rented property as soon as they had the means. These services provided a steadier, less labor-intensive income than their needle skills.
Chapter 6
CONCLUSION

The daybook of Eliza Oliver Dodds and the Philadelphia dress demonstrate the intricacies of constructing fashionable women's clothing and running a successful millinery business during the 1810s and 1820s. Dodds worked during the early years of industrialization, yet the specialization of tasks and devaluing of skills experienced in other trades did not greatly affect the traditional structure of her shop. She and her staff constructed garments on an individual basis for their elite patrons. These women created complex gowns, pelisses, and mantles without the benefit of measured patterns. Dodds and other professional needlewomen provided the cutting and fitting skills necessary to create fashionable garments.

A large-scale, power-driven textile industry developed at the same time that the cut, construction, and decoration of women's garments became increasingly intricate. The expanding variety and quantities of fabric, ribbons, and trimmings that reeled off looms
during the 1820s quickly appeared in fashionable clothing. Although it was not a conscious decision or the sole contributing factor, the growing complexity of fit and construction created a barrier to prevent middle- and working-class women from presenting themselves as fashionable. More affordable bolts of fabric in a dazzling array of colors and designs provided those women with stylish materials. But, the quality of that fabric and of their clothing separated them from their superiors. The multiplying number of etiquette books stressed the importance of being a lady, dressing modestly in properly fitted clothing, and, at the same time, not wearing garments or fabric above one's station.

Novelty may have also played a role in this early nineteenth-century emphasis on the cut and fit of clothing. By the 1810s, women constructed their garments by manipulating numerous shaped pieces of fabric that snugly sheathed their bodies. The preceding style of draped gowns that loosely clung to the torso with the aid of drawstrings, and eighteenth-century pleated ensembles, had not required detailed fitting. Given this drastic technical and stylistic shift, the numerous references to proper cut and fit during the 1810s, 1820s, and 1830s might reflect the adoption of a new style or ideal that superceded the previous, out-dated fashions. Yet, as
styles changed during the nineteenth century, correspondence and prescriptive literature continued to stress the connection between proper fit and fashionable clothing.

Dodds and other early nineteenth-century mantuamakers possessed those crucial skills of cutting and fitting. Their customers, mistresses of plantations and townhouses, were familiar with these procedures. Yet, those ladies and less experienced middling women turned to Dodds when they needed stylish garments that sat on the body correctly. Snug, smooth-fitting bodices, properly set in sleeves, flat seams, and skillfully applied decoration cut from costly materials were all critical elements that established one's social status and gentility. As the century progressed and elite women became less involved in the construction process, the technical procedures continued to determine the status of a wardrobe and its owner.

Despite the value of a professional needlewoman's trained skills, her construction fees could not easily support her. The lowly stitching performed by her apprentices and assistants formed a small portion of those fees; sewing, a skilled shared by most women and designated "female" work, held little esteem or monetary value. Despite the hours of stitching and assembling
complex garments, the cost of the materials filled the businesswoman's till.

Dodds achieved success by extending her business beyond mere construction. A fashionable inventory, skilled assistants, and an independent income from rental properties put her beyond the whim of customers. Seamstresses and mantua-makers who did not sell goods led a far more vulnerable existence, yet proprietors of millinery and mantua-making shops had little recourse against late or non-paying customers or those who provided negative referrals.

In addition to these multiple sources of income, Dodds relied on a network of businesswomen and merchants. She exchanged goods, services, and loans in order to survive slow seasons, outstanding accounts, and miscalculated stock orders. Dodds' daybook reveals a community of skilled businesswomen who do not appear in documents although they provided services to their community and a livelihood for each other.

Given the longevity and range of Dodds' business by 1824, Eleanor Lewis might have praised her by stating "she is so neat and fits so well." If Dodds managed to sustain her large business for ten years, she and her staff most likely produced garments that met current standards of fit and assembly. While social, economic,
and cultural factors influenced the way people perceived those gowns and pelisses, they also understood the powerful message transmitted by the materials and construction. By providing well-made garments that marked her customers' status and aspirations, Dodds established a business that determined her own success.
Appendix A

GLOSSARY

Alamode: A thin, glossy, lightweight silk, often dyed black for mourning.

Applique: Trimming or fabric applied to another material or garment for decoration.

Backstitch: The needle passes underneath the length of the stitch on the reverse of the fabric and loops over it to enter the fabric beyond the end of that first length of thread. This stitch uses twice the amount of thread, takes more time and is much stronger than a running stitch.

Bias: Garment parts cut on the diagonal rather than the straight grain of the fabric.

Barege: A sheer, lightweight fabric in the same weave as gauze with a silk warp and worsted wool weft, or a combination of the two, often used for dresses, veils or shawls.

Basting: Long, preliminary, running stitches that loosely hold garment pieces together. Easily removed for fitting adjustments.

Bombazene: A twill weave fabric with a silk warp and a worsted wool weft. Black or blue bombazine was often used for mourning.

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Buckram: A coarse, stiff, open-weave fabric stiffened with sizing. Used as a lining or foundation for clothing, headwear and shoes.

Calico: Cotton cloth originally woven in India, in many weights and grades. The term usually refers to fabrics that were printed with all-over patterns.

Cambric: A fine, tightly woven white plain weave linen or cotton fabric, with a glaze on the right side.

Canezou: A women's jacket, often sleeveless.

Cap: A close-fitting head covering usually made of a soft material. Women often wore them at home or under other headwear.

Cape: A sleeveless outer garment that hangs loosely from the shoulders.

Cassimere: A soft, mediumweight wool fabric with a twill weave, often with printed or woven designs.

Chintz: A printed or painted cotton that was sometimes glazed and was originally imported from India.

Chip: Inexpensive straw or wood shavings used to make chip hats.

Cloth: Generic term for fabric.

Cord: Heavy cotton or silk string used for decoration, or a dense cotton or wool fabric with ridges woven lengthwise, often simulating pile woven corduroy.

Cotton: Coarse wool fabric used for clothing by laborers and slaves.

Crepe: A transparent, lightweight fabric similar to gauze of silk, wool or a blend. Tightly twisted raw, gummed silks and different weights of wool created a crinkled texture.

Dart: A fold of fabric, usually triangular, that is stitched on the reverse to shape the garment to the body.
Domestic: Sturdy cottons for sheets, shirts and household usage that was woven in the United States.

Figured silk: A generic term for silk dress fabrics with woven patterns.

Flat-felled: A strong, flat seam with the raw edges turned over on each other and encased with two rows of stitching.

Florence: A lightweight silk in a ribbed plain weave.

Gathering: Several rows of running stitches that are drawn up to pull the fabric into folds to create fullness.

Gauze: A thin, lightweight, sheer fabric, usually of silk or cotton, in an open weave with intertwined double warp threads.

Gimp: A trimming made of silk, wool or cotton cords twisted together to create an open design.

Gingham: A strong, light- or mediumweight cotton fabric woven with multiple warps and wefts in stripes and checks, produced in large quantities by American textile mills.

Gore: Triangular or tapering sections of fabric, often used to create skirts.

Grodite: The definition of this fabric has been lost; it may be a corruption of another textile name.

Gusset: Tapered or shaped piece of fabric inserted to shape or strengthen a garment.

Holland: Generic name for fine quality linen cloth used for shirts, undergarments, accessories, and household linens.

Leventeen: A soft, twill weave silk with different colors on the front and back, usually woven in solid or striped colors.

Mantle: A loose outergarment, usually without sleeves and similar to a cape.
Merino: Fine, lightweight, high quality cloth woven from the wool of merino sheep.

Mode: See Alamode.

Mull: A finely woven, white cotton muslin imported from India or Europe, the name was shortened from the Hindu word mulmul.

Muslin: Plain weave cotton originally produced in India. This finely woven fabric was created from thinly spun threads. Book muslin refers to high quality Indian calico that was sold in booklike folds.

Nankeen: A plain weave cotton originally imported from Nankin, China. The variety of cotton created the yellow color

Paniers: Oval hoops worn at the sides of the waist to support the oblong skirts of 18th-century gowns.

Patinet: The definition of this fabric has been lost; it may be a corruption of another textile term.

Pelisse: A long outer garment opening down the front and cut like a coat with sleeves and a fitted bodice.

Piping: Narrow, bias strips of fabric folded lengthwise and stitched into seams or edges to create a tube-like decoration.

Pleats: Lengthwise fold of fabric folded back and stitched or tacked down in order to shape the width of material.

Plush: A wool or silk velvet with a coarse reverse, often used for winter clothing. The silk version had a longer pile than silk velvet.

Rib: Possibly rep, a heavy, plain weave silk, wool or cotton fabric with crosswise ribs created by a thicker weft than warp.

Rouleaux: Bias strips of fabric stitched into tubes and stuffed with wadding to decorate skirt hems during the 1810s and 1820s.

Running stitch: The most basic stitch used in sewing. The needle passes up and down through the fabric
leaving thread only on one side or the other. Several stitches can be rapidly picked up on the needle at one time.

Satin: A smooth, lustrous silk fabric with a finer, more numerous warp than weft which creates the distinctive satin surface.

Self-fabric: Lining, facing or decorations cut from the material used for the garment.

Selvages: The finished, lengthwise edges of fabric as it was woven on the loom.

Shift: A loose-fitting undergarment, also called a chemise, usually made from cotton or linen.

Spencer: Short, high-waisted jacket with a fitted bodice which was popular during the early nineteenth century.

Velvet: A fabric of silk, wool or cotton woven with loops that are then cut to create a pile.

Warp: The lengthwise threads on a loom and in fabric.

Weft: The crosswise threads on a loom and in fabric.

Whipstitch: A short, diagonal stitch that wraps around edges of fabric, often used on cut seams.
Appendix B

LOAN NOTES, 1813-1820

These notes often have payments recorded on the reverse as well as references to the banks where Dodds could settle her accounts.

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Total = $5624.55
Appendix C

OCCURRENCE TABLES FOR 1824

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2 The purchases by the Native American delegations during July greatly increased sales during an otherwise slow season. They ordered and purchased all but one dress and one length of fabric.
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<td>15</td>
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<td>Shirts</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Services:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work to garment</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting on or changing trim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making folds</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting back on dress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimping frills, ruffles and borders</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hemming or marking handkerchiefs</td>
<td>9</td>
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