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“The Great Transformation: Understanding Industrialization in the Early 19th-century Countryside”

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Let me start by thanking Mr. Sanderson for inviting me to talk with you today. And let me also start by thanking Richard Greenwood, Sarah Zurier, and Janet Balletto for their assistance in facilitating my visit. I appreciate the opportunity to be here. I especially appreciate it because I think it’s vital for historians and preservationists to share their approaches to the past. I’ll come back to this point at the end of my talk. But I want to offer an initial acknowledgement--in the form of a confession--concerning how much historians can miss by ignoring the physical reality--the thingness--of earlier times.

Many years ago, when I was a graduate student writing a dissertation about antebellum industrialization in rural southern Massachusetts, I took some college undergraduates to a nearby history museum focusing on New England textile manufacturing. In a corner of one room we came upon a live demonstration of a spinning wheel. No big deal you’re thinking--except that I’d never before actually seen an operating spinning wheel. So there I stood, having written I thought quite knowledgeably about the production of cotton yarn before the coming of textile factories, finally comprehending what a spinning wheel did. And before I could stop myself, and to the great embarrassment of the students nearby, I heard myself saying in a loud voice: “Oh, now I get it--it spins the cotton! Who knew?”

I returned home and rewrote certain pages of my thesis. But the larger lesson--the lesson that the past historians write about is never not something that has been concretely inhabited by people of the past; the lesson that before they enter scholarly analyses, spinning wheels and for that matter factory buildings as well were directly experienced by contemporaries and that such experiences are part of what historians should ponder--this lesson I have sought to keep in mind.

And it's a lesson preservationists surely help teach--for teaching that lesson is surely also part of how preservation works.

Thus my opening confession. I will, as I say, return later to some thoughts on connections between historians and preservationists. But let me turn now to what I suspect Mr. Sanderson hoped I'd provide when he issued his invitation: not the story of personal epiphanies but an historian's perspective on early industrialization in New England--and more specifically on industrialization in southern New England, in communities like West Warwick and others spread through the Pawtuxet Valley and beyond, from the late 18th century to roughly 1850.

First, some background considerations. I'm using the term "industrialization" rather than "Industrial Revolution" to stress that what happened was not some one-off event but an evolving process. And I'm further underscoring the breadth of what happened by calling it "The Great Transformation," a rubric I'm invoking to signal industrialization's extensive cultural, political and economic ramifications.

Still, for all its reach, industrialization was not everything. For my purposes, the marrow of "industrialization," the core phenomenon as distinct from its multiple consequences, involved a shift in manufacturing, in the making of goods. More specifically, it involved markedly accelerating divisions of labor by which the fabrication of products was increasingly chopped into sub-tasks, often allotted to relatively unskilled workers, with the result that more could be produced more cheaply. Responding in some cases to rising consumer demand and in all cases to mounting quests for profits, industrialization reflected and contributed to a stiffening capitalist grip over America's political economy. At the same time, industrial manufacture contrasted to artisanal or handicraft production by which individual items were fashioned as a whole, from start to finish, by laborers schooled to one or another degree in all the skills of a trade. Of course, the line between handicraft and industrial production was not always neat. But construing industrialization as pivoting centrally around heightened divisions of labor allows us to recognize a process that gained traction in the United States, especially in the North, between the Revolution and the Civil War.

It also allows us to realize industrialization took different forms. It might involve large centralized manufactories (sometimes called “factories”) or small shops. It might involve combinations of central workplaces and outworkers toiling in scattered satellite locations, including their homes. It might unfold with or without new technologies, or with technologies added only late in the game. It could emerge in urban settings--like New York City which hosted relatively unmechanized but meticulously sub-divided ready-made clothing businesses. And it could emerge in the northern countryside, which in these years hummed with the industrial production of clocks and palm-leaf hats, shoes and furniture, books and buttons. And also, of course, with the production of textiles. Because if the textile manufactories springing up in these years demonstrated their industrial credentials with intricate divisions of labor, they likewise represented a form of industrialization that often did depend on machines--and often on machines driven by the waterpower supplied by streams crisscrossing the northeastern countryside.

Country textile mills were in fact the dominant face of industrialization in southern New England and hence key to the Great Transformation of this terrain. And they will loom large in my discussion. But as a further piece of background, we need to appreciate that the mills of southern Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island in these years had particular features. They were different, for example, from what surfaced in Philadelphia, where textile production took root in mechanized but modest shops linked to urban outworkers. Southern New England mills also differed from the famous Waltham-or Lowell-style factories. Inaugurated in 1814 and prominent in northern New England, these mills were typically sizable, heavily capitalized, and incorporated enterprises launched in hinterland communities--but communities which soon urbanized. Committed from the outset to mechanized production of both yarn and cloth, Waltham-style mills were further characterized by an initial ambition to recruit workforces comprised mainly of single young women. By contrast, the textile operations of southern New England--operations that had actually introduced water-powered textile production to America in the 1790s when Samuel Slater launched his Pawtucket venture, but operations that were then

reiterated along the Blackstone, and other southern Yankee waterways--these operations followed the Rhode Island or family system. Unlike the Philadelphia model, they were typically full-fledged mills. But unlike Waltham-style factories, they were sited in townships that remained rural well into the 1800s, were comparatively small and organized as partnerships, were at first often devoted only to producing yarn, and started out hiring both individuals and families.

Over time, it's true, these three versions of textile manufacturing tended to converge. But understanding the Great Transformation in early nineteenth southern New England requires understanding that, for all their incontestably weighty influence, the region's textile mills were ultimately just one thread of industrialization bubbling up in the milieu and, further, just one mode of industrialized textile manufacturing evident in the Republic of these years. On the other hand, these mills were powerfully influential. And we should turn now from background considerations to exploring precisely what their influence was. What difference did the Rhode Island-style factories make? We might answer this question by noting that the cotton they and other northern mills imported from the South and the textile products they shipped across the Republic helped shape the economic connections of the early nineteenth century nation. Or we might note that the machinery these and other textile factories adopted fostered important technological innovations throughout America. But what I want to consider is something else. What I want to consider is the effect of these mills on the places and people they touched most immediately. What I want to consider is the effect of rural Rhode Island-style mills, first, on the townships in which they took root and, second, on their employees. What I want to consider is the local Great Transformation fueled by these factories.

Now to open this focused-down part of our inquiry we naturally need to take up what southern New England rural communities were like before the mills. For the most part--and I'm drawing on my earlier work on the southern Massachusetts townships of Dudley, Oxford, and Webster--they were grounded in what be termed agriculture plus. They contained grist millers and storekeepers; and they contained handicraftsmen like carpenters and blacksmiths. But these

individuals were typically also farmers, for agriculture was the fundament. The nature of farming varied. But it was generally carried out by land-owning households cultivating fruits, grains, and dairy products meant for their own consumption but with small surpluses sold or traded for the services noted above or for goods available at local stores. In sum, the farming-anchored households of these communities mixed limited engagements in the market with readiness to provide for themselves--so, for example, after acquiring (or perhaps producing) wool and flax) they not uncommonly spun their own yarn (Figure #1) and wove their own cloth.

The people of these communities were principally native-born Protestant whites, along with perhaps a few slaves (until formal emancipation took effect) and free blacks. Taken as a whole, local populations were hardly egalitarian, for there were clear gradations of affluence and status extending from prominent individuals and families to those of lesser standing and down to the outright needy. On the other hand, the townships were for the most part run by town meetings in which enfranchised adult males selected their leaders and administered community affairs. Nor for that matter did local wealth necessarily signal economic power. Credit was broadly present but also broadly shared, so that debtors were also creditors. What's more, it was rare for large cohorts of individuals to toil for others as waged employees. The stores and handicraft workshops may have had paid workers, but only a few. And while farming households might take on extra hands during harvests or to aid in domestic chores, such assistance were usually structured more as labor swaps or exchanges among relatives than as formal hirings.

We should note, too, that the households themselves generally functioned as corporate units operating under the authority of husbands and fathers. There were female tasks (like cooking, spinning, and weaving), and male work (like outdoor farming jobs). But farming families characteristically sought to bend their members' energies toward patriarchally-defined notions of collective wellbeing. And the wellbeing attaching to these households was characteristically simply to remain farming households. Aligned with their semi-subsistence/semi-commercial orientation, their priority was not to maximize gain so much as to

secure what was termed a “sufficiency,” not to get-ahead but to retain their holdings and hence their place within New England husbandry.

Thus the world of southern New England rural communities in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. But this world was also beset by important destabilizing pressures. To start with, there was the growing pull of commerce. Because notwithstanding their desire for sufficiency, it was becoming increasingly attractive to buy services from others and, especially, to buy goods from stores. And there was consequently growing need to generate the added income to cover these added purchases--a challenge exacerbated for farmers because even those inclined to sell more crops in the market were not certain their long-used land could generate greater yields or produce items that would attract more customers. By the same token, the slow but steady population growth of these communities was pressing against fixed land supplies, so that many families were finding it impossible to bequeath viable homesteads to all their children. The result of this demographic pressure was in some cases a greater emphasis on the non-agricultural ventures in these townships. But the result was also movement--either to cities or to new land further out in the hinterland. Natural increase and infusions of newcomers (often to run the local stores and handicraft shops) ensured net increases of local residents. But at least by the early 1800s the northeastern countryside, including the countryside of southern New England, was marked by chronic restless movings-about.

All this--the need for more income, the uncertainty about farming outputs, the transiency --all these pressures, I'd suggest, invested rural Yankee communities with a certain deep fragility and doubt. How could they preserve their heritage of husbandry and in truth any continuing sense of themselves amidst the buffeting shifts of life and work engulfing them?

One answer, significantly, was industrialization. Now on the one hand the spread of industrialized manufacturing helped provide the very goods fostering the unsettling desire of country folk for store-bought “stuff.” In truth, the spread of industrially produced goods into the hinterland may have fostered a measure of material democratization whereby items--clocks, say--hitherto available only to the rustic wealthy were now produced sufficiently cheaply to come

within reach of at least middling sorts. But hardly less important was that the spread of rural industrial manufacturing itself into the countryside provided new employment opportunities and so new reasons for people to enter or stay within rural townships. The employment might be inside manufactories. But it might also involve participation in the outwork networks industrial production often fostered. It might, that is, involve participating in systems by which parts of shoe or palm-leaf hat fabrication, for example, were given out to members of farming households--usually wives and daughters--to be worked up and then returned to central locations.

Nor was it difficult to view textile mills in this light. For if they obviously helped diffuse manufactured textile goods across the countryside, they also provided employment. And again their employment ranged from workers inside the manufactories to others--with these others in this case including local artisans serving the mills' technologies and construction needs and, at least at first, impressive flocks of outworkers. Rhode Island-style factories often started out using outworkers (once more mainly females) to prepare wool and cotton for their machines by "picking" it clean. And since many of these factories, even early on when they limited themselves to spinning operations, aimed to market cloth as their end product, they commonly combined their water-powered spinning of yarn with networks of outworking handloom weavers (again mainly women) laboring in their homes. In their first few years of existence, the southern Massachusetts mills I studied employed some 150 pickers and more than 700 handloom weavers, with the latter contingent spilling into 29 townships in three states and covering some 800 square miles. (Figure #2) And then, as a vital added bonus, the workers inside mill buildings comprised ready consumers for the foodstuffs produced by nearby husbandmen.

In these ways, for these reasons, the presence of industrial enterprises in rural townships like those of southern New England might well have seemed a solution to vexing problems. For working inside these enterprises might well have appeared to offer employment capable of offsetting eroding husbandry, while the outwork wages and foodstuff-customers these same enterprises provided to farming families might well have seemed to offer ways for such household both to continue farming and pay their mounting bills.

But gauging what industrialization meant to the southern New England countryside requires realizing that this multi-faced process was controversial. Here, it's true, we need to connect local developments with wider contemporary currents. Because what happened in the communities of this region was importantly framed by contesting attitudes swirling across the Northeast--and indeed the nation.

Thus, on one side, Thomas Jefferson early on urged that Americans preserve the virtuous independence central to republicanism by remaining landholding husbandmen rather than succumbing to the dependency of wage labor, including industrial wage labor. "While we have land to labor, then," ran his famous late eighteenth century pronouncement, "let us never see our citizens occupied at a work bench...[L]et our work-shops remain in Europe." As the United States moved into the 19th century, antipathy to waged hirelings was supplemented by stories of horrid conditions festering in English factory cities--conditions frequently contrasted to this nation's splendid natural vistas. In fact, combined with the spiritual impulses of the Second Great Awakening, salutes to scenery in America molted into outright sacralizations of the American rustic. The notion grew that nature in America was particularly imprinted with the Divine, a "lecture...bound by the Almighty," and that--consequently--the nation bore special responsibility not to permit its hinterland to devolve into ghastly encampments of urban industrialization.

Further cautionaries involved worry that employment inside manufactories would pull too many people from husbandry. "Oh, sir, my boys have all left me and turned shoe-peggars," ran a lament in the Old Farmer's Almanack in the 1830s. "If this is the way things are going on, our farms must soon run up to bushes." There was worry, too, that the opportunity to sell to industrial employees might pull farmers too far into the market, causing them to surrender their core value of striving for sufficiency rather than gain, of foresaking the prosperity that (as one writer had it) "money cannot purchase, and money cannot measure..." And there were suspicions that outworkers living at home were evincing unsettling new autonomy. For there were whispers of outworkers coming to believe that the wages they received from weaving or toiling on palm-leaf hats were theirs and should be used as they wished rather than surrendered to the corporate

needs of the family. Since, moreover, many of the outworkers purportedly exhibiting such attitudes were females--the wives and daughters shouldering much industrial outwork in this era--this emergent autonomy carried the added bite of appearing to question the patriarchy of rural families.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there were answers to at least some of these anxieties. Jefferson's warning against shedding the independence of husbandry was countered by arguments that for the nation as a whole "independence and security" actually necessitated exchanging dependence on European workshops for reliance on America's own manufactories. From another angle, the fact that many of America's early industrial enterprises, particularly enterprises like textile mills that required hinterland water power, were located in the countryside--this fact was woven into an argument that if America was exceptional because of its Divinely-touched Nature, it was also exceptional because here, on this side of the Atlantic, industrialization often proceeded not in grim cities but amidst the country's blessed countryside. There were even pictorial formulations of this position. For textile factories came to be imaged nested within a safe middle landscape: a zone between foreground and background that presented mills as comfortably integrated within the countryside--as neither destructively dominating nor immune from the leavening inspiration of fields and valleys ([Figure #3](#)). And by the same token there were suggestions that encounters with industrial operations would bring far more benefit than harm to Yankee farmers. Female outworkers might grow restive. But husbandmen were told that selling crops to nearby mills would promote efficiency and that even the internal organization of factories might provide yeomen with salutary lessons in management. "For within...a single textile mill," a contemporary pamphlet concluded, "there is more...skill and science...than in a township of farms."

In the end, of course, these upbeat arguments were further, and powerfully, bolstered by the prospect of profits. For in the sector of the economy involved with industrialization, entrepreneurs and their allies were not hampered by worries about excessive devotion to getting ahead. On the contrary, in this sector of the economy there was no hesitation to embrace the

priority of profits. And facilitated where needed by technological innovations, as well as by hope industrial manufacturing could benefit rural communities, the lure of earning profits from making shoes, hats, or textiles prompted substantial industrial development in the southern New England countryside. By 1819, as many of you know, there were 40 textile mills running off the Pawtuxet River alone; and by 1832 the Blackstone was driving 119 such factories. One might even argue that over time some of the skepticism directed toward the changes wrought by rural industrialization devolved into merely ventings of nostalgia that gave country folk psychological cover to accept the inevitability of these changes. Yet the skepticism did not vanish. It was braided into the atmosphere of the period. And as such it ensured that at deep levels the response to industrialization percolating in the milieu and enveloping what happened in southern New England remained mixed: approval blended with measures, at least, of abiding doubt.

But then what did happen in these communities? To say industrialization in these settings was framed by a surrounding context of acceptance and ambivalence begins to shed light on what transpired. But we need to dig further. What more can we say about the concrete meaning of industrialization's Great Transformation in these townships? And specifically what more can we say about the local import of the textile mills that were so often central to industrialization?

We can say several things. First, much of how these factories affected local communities involved their scale. Though smaller than Waltham-modeled factories, the family-style mills of southern New England were generally larger than non-textile industrial manufactories of the area. They were usually also bigger than most barns or meeting houses and soon came to exert fairly distinctive profiles against the landscape (Figure #4). They likewise reflected distinctively sizable investments. While less than the underwriting needed by Waltham-style factories, the funding levels needed to launch the partnerships running southern New England mills ran from \$10,000-\$30,000. And because of these relatively substantial amounts, those joining these partnerships might well include both local and non-local residents, both modest townspeople and major entrepreneurs like Samuel Slater who moved from Pawtucket out further into Rhode Island and then into the southern Massachusetts communities I studied. Or they might involve

the Draper brothers who by midcentury had taken over most of the textile operations in Hopedale. So too, these textile mills were commonly surrounded by ancillary structures--workers' residences and outbuildings of various sorts--that comprised sub-towns (so-called factory villages) constituting the most thickly gathered constellations of people for miles around (Figure #5).

. Which in turn meant these mills typically boasted the largest paid laborforces in hinterland communities. Unlike the limited rosters of individuals working for employers in rural townships before the factories, textile mills introduced substantial assemblages of waged workers. And so the corollary. Given the considerable number of individuals toiling directly for them, the proprietors and managers of these establishments emerged as wielding a new kind of concentrated wage-dispensing economic power. And of course this power often fused with concentrated wealth. Even as we acknowledge industrialization's capacity to widen--democratize--distributions of manufactured goods, we need to realize that the authority attaching to the mills' large scale employment commonly joined with the appreciable personal affluence of mill proprietors and hence the rise of newly stark economic hierarchies inside rural communities.

All these novelties of scale were noticed by townspeople outside the mill villages. And taken together these departures from familiar norms could be jarring. That they were not more jarring is explained by the notions we've already noticed circulating through the culture and proposing that industrialization had at least the potential to benefit the Yankee countryside. On the ground, however, in the immediate confines of rural townships, what also made the mills less disconcerting was the way they often presented themselves as supportive participants in local affairs. What eased their integration into rural communities, in other words, was that the mills supplemented the jobs and markets they offered with hefty tax payments and sponsorship of facilities open to all townspeople.

But amidst the civic bonhomie lurked questions. Could a rural township host major manufacturing ventures and not be dominated by them? Would such domination be wrong? Or put differently: Could the kind of influence textile mill proprietors enjoyed over their factory

properties be comfortably integrated with the communal administration of rural townships? Or again: How should the authority flowing from business enterprises be meshed with local community governance. Often these questions only lurked beneath the surface. Occasionally, though, they came to the fore. In 1832, having determined that he in fact no longer wanted to share jurisdiction over his mill villages in Dudley and Oxford with the town meetings of those communities, Samuel Slater petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to set aside his factories into a new township: the township of Webster, Massachusetts. Faced with losing significant resources and tax revenues, Dudley and Oxford naturally resisted. But in doing so, the towns reached beyond self-interest and, evoking the never-quite-stilled concerns about industrialization's threat to independence, made a basic point about governance in a Republic. Since the new town would be almost entirely made up of mill workers "dependent on one man [i.e. Slater]," Dudley and Oxford argued, its incorporation "would be...contrary to the spirit of our free institutions and republican principles. [For i]t would be investing an individual, not merely with [managerial] rights but with municipal authority--a power, too great ...to be wielded...under a free government." In the event Webster was created. But the position Dudley and Oxford had staked out--that "free government" meant the "municipal authority" of New England communities should not devolve entirely into "managerial rights"--this position spoke to profound issues of town/business relations. And directly or indirectly, overtly or implicitly, that issue reverberated across the hinterland during these and indeed subsequent years.

But what about life and labor inside the mill villages themselves? What more can we say about how the local Great Transformation played out inside these enclaves? To begin with, who was employed in the southern New England factory settlements in this era? While typically white and native-born, they were generally more varied than the single young women favored by Waltham-style factories. To some degree, the mill villages of southern New England recruited employees from nearby. But operatives in any given mill village also commonly drew individuals from across considerable distances. There were unattached individuals. But because they followed British employment precedents and (we should add) because there were few

strictures against child labor, there were also whole families. Some of the unattached individuals were sent by their farming families in the expectation that, like outwork, factory berths would yield wages that would be funneled back to the operatives' households of origin. But unattached individuals and perhaps some family groups as well were also among those who no longer expected to inherit land--or in some instances simply found farming unattractive. And yet others, individuals and families alike, and drawn from both cities and countryside, were poor: the hardpressed victims of reversed fortunes or chronic neediness. Notably, though, by the 1820s operatives in the southern New England mills, whatever their original backgrounds, encompassed veterans: not life-long factory workers necessarily but operatives who arrived at factory villages with prior experience in millwork and with expectations of continuing in such labor for a while. Even given the gender and age differentiations of millwork (with men, women, and youngsters assigned to separate areas of production), veterans were soon thickly represented in southern Yankee factory villages: "I can spin," wrote an operative to a prospective employer in 1827, "[and have] one boy that can spin...another his large enough and one that has ben feeding the breaker in the carding room."

They came, this variegated troop, and in some cases they lingered, because the jobs were available, because the work, much of which involved monitoring machines, was not obviously physically taxing, and because the wages were fairly good. In 1832, the daily pay doled out by Slater's southern Massachusetts mills ranged from 88 cents for men to 43 cents for women and 25 cents for children, which averaged out to roughly \$160 a year. That said, millwork was scarcely a walk in the park. It often meant working in sharply varying temperatures and often amidst teeth-jarring noise few would have encountered before. Moreover, if the work was not obviously strenuous, the task of watching continuously running technologies was still stressful. And it was especially stressful because of factory work schedules. The twelve-hour days stipulated by mills in these years would not have been unfamiliar to rural New Englanders. But factory days stood out because there were few breaks, because they were measured meticulously by the clock, and above all because they were tightly supervised.

Mill proprietors and managers believed their success depended on exercising firm control over their employees. This was why many Rhode Island-style factories ultimately brought outworkers into their mill villages and part of why they took the further step of replacing handloom weavers with powerloom operatives (mostly female) toiling inside mill buildings. It was also why the mills promulgated intricate “rules and regulations.” And it was why labor inside manufactories was overseen by room “overlookers.” But while such fine-grained supervision made managerial sense, it had few precedents in rural or even handicraft labor. Indeed, the kind of overlooking implemented in mills was most closely associated with slaves, which may explain why there are few images of the supervised interiors of American mills in this period--and why images of factory interiors that do show up in American publications were often lifted from abroad ([Figure #6](#)).

Once again there were countervailing factors and arguments. Workers got used to the noise. And, significantly, family-style mills sought to blunt irritations sparked by their oversight by anticipating the Waltham-modeled factories in asserting that their supervision signalled a “paternalistic” interest in their operatives. If the Waltham mills became famous for their matron-supervised boardinghouses, Rhode Island-style factories boasted of providing employees access to churches and schools and, more broadly, by insisting that their worktime regimens would instill the punctuality, temperance, and overall self-discipline requisite for moral behavior.

But millwork could still seem burdensome. In practice the relatively attractive pay levels cited earlier were eroded by costs of food and boarding, by stoppages caused by weather or missing raw materials, or by wage cuts driven by rising competition and consequent pressure to cut costs. So too, paternalist gestures were always constrained by management’s need for profits and, indeed, by growing tendencies to meet heightened competition by stressing the productivity over the moral lessons expected from stiff worktime discipline.

How then did operatives respond to the mixed bag of millwork? Some simply left, returning to whatever situation they had known before entering factory life. Some softened the

stress of mill life by moving back and forth between factory and non-factory berths. As we've noted, however, others seem to have lingered in millwork, becoming veteran operatives. It's difficult to generalize about the attitudes of this group. Some of the men and boys likely hoped to climb from less to more skilled positions or even to become mill proprietors. And some succeeded. Others, though, continued to circle within roughly the same positions. And these veteran operatives seem to have displayed complex blends of autonomy and mutuality. On the one hand, millworkers who might have had been expected to return their wages and ultimately their bodies to the households whence they had started may have become veterans precisely because, even more than outworkers, they found that receiving wages instilled a desire to use the money for themselves and escape control of their birth families. (Indeed, even households within the mill villages might face erosion. It was not unknown for youngsters in Slater's Massachusetts establishments to receive wage payments, and even to reside, apart from parents employed by the same factory. On the other hand, balanced against this mounting autonomy, the shared experience of being millworkers for protracted periods bred a sense of operative solidarity. And this solidarity could prompt group actions. It was rumored that some of the fires destroying mills in these years was the work of disgruntled employees. It was not rumored but plainly the case that occasionally, in response to wage cuts, millworkers joined together to "turn out": to strike. And believing that easing their workplace situations required systemic reforms, they now and again also joined in backing the Ten Hours Movement and political parties supportive of wageworkers' rights.

But probably the most effective tactic among southern New England textile operatives was movement. At least by the 1820s, the millworkers I've dubbed "veteran" commonly carried out their millworking careers in factory villages scattered across this region. Admittedly most practical in good times when mills found themselves scrambling to fill their rosters to maximize their output, workers adopted a practice of purposefully shifting berths, or teasing managers with the possibility of shifting berths, to improve their separate "bargains": "...[I]t would not be an object for me to change places," wrote a prospective Slater hand in 1827, "unless I can receive

as pay one dollar pr. day and board.” But I’d argue that these separate initiatives amounted to a collective strategy of transiency that involved men and women, adults and youngsters, and that obliged factories to sweeten their deals to employees and burnish their reputations as attractive places to work. “You may think [it] rather strange why I keep writing you” a worker wrote a Slater mill in these years, “the reason is that your place has been recommended to me as a good one.” The resulting swirl of movement scarcely removed all the downsides of millwork. But with voluntary turnover often approaching 50%, operatives effectively turned the corrosive impact of transiency on pre-factory communities by now using movement to gain some fair leverage over their situations.

All told, textile operatives in this era were probably less overtly militant than workers in the more thoroughly male-dominated skilled trades confronting the recastings and (in their view) diminishment of industrialization. But I’d suggest that the way textile operatives did assert themselves, and particularly their assertions-through-mobility, reveals a rather remarkable phenomenon. It reveals laborers in workplaces informed by few traditional norms of acceptable conditions demonstrating sufficient cooperation among one another, and sufficient creativity, to determine for themselves what they wanted, or would tolerate, from their employers.

This brings us to midcentury. Here the story changes. From midcentury into the early 1900s there were, as I’m sure you know, new infusions of immigrants into the Northeast. Large numbers of Irish, French Canadian, and fresh streams of skilled English recruits poured into the industrial workplaces of southern New England, joining with native-born employees, to begin forming what can truly be reckoned a permanent industrial labor force. Also in this period, southern New England saw the rise of major urban textile centers, like Fall River, and intermittent but unprecedentedly dramatic detonations of labor unrest. At the same time, of course, there was the changing fortune of New England textiles as a whole. There were good times and slow times. But overall textile manufacturing began winding down in the North, not least in southern New England.

Yet despite this ultimate diminuendo I'd contend that grappling with early, pre-1850, industrialization in this setting discloses a vital heritage. It discloses a confluence of changes--a Great Transformation--that permanently reconditioned this part of New England. At the same time, the specific kind of economic enterprise highlighted in this story--the small, scattered, proprietary establishments including--indeed featuring--small, scattered, proprietary textile factories proved a resilient and broadly applicable model for America. Long after 1850, and long after much of the textile industry exited New England, a crucial core of the nation's economic energy lay in just such dispersed, modest, partner-run or minimally incorporated ventures. And finally, I'd suggest that the complex changes of early industrialization as I've sought to sketch them here discloses a heritage of both benefits and losses that has also lasted. Because the growth of the Republic's political economy throughout the 19th century and beyond has never been something that should be only lamented or only celebrated as triumphant progress. It has always been what it was in the early mill towns of rural southern New England: an alloy of advantages and disadvantages, of empowerment to some and dislocations and disempowerment for others, of winners and losers, of rising individual autonomy and weakened traditional ties along with (as I've tried to intimate) new group loyalties. Grappling with industrialization in this setting invites us to appreciate the uneven, even contradictory, lessons of history.

But now let me return--very briefly--to where I began and say a few words about historians and preservationists. And the point I want to stress is again that the two groups should see themselves as collaborating. I might suggest that what historians can offer preservationists is a heightened alertness to the contexts--the broader patterns and questions--into which the things preservationists curate can be slotted. I won't suggest, I know, that what preservationists provide historians--the gift to historians of how preservation works--are countless insights into how this or that piece of history actually was. Even after my spinning wheel tutorial, my book on early New England industrialization would have been richer had I had firmer grasp on what the family cottages of operatives were like or exactly how workers dealt with broken threads on a power loom. In the final analysis, though, I think historians and preservationists should see themselves

collaborating in the joint project of understanding the past both as it can be known today by recognizing wider frameworks and as it was directly known by contemporaries.

This brings me to the final topic I want to mention. Another way historians and preservationists might see themselves joined at the hip is that they both root their knowledge in evidence from earlier times, whether documents or buildings. There have always been forces affecting access to such sources, whether inclinations to shred payroll books or temptations to replace old structures with shopping malls. And we need to continue raising our voices to defend documents and buildings from such depredations. In this sense we're all preservationists. But we need to acknowledge a new variable in play: digitization. The possibility of placing both texts and views of places or things online is fast upon us and we need to think together about how to respond. Should we willingly accept libraries and archives that are only digital? Are we open to virtual tours of the Old Slater Mill--to tours that are only virtual? I think these questions are related and merit serious thought. Because if we want to have a voice in determining the place of digitization in the years ahead we need to develop our arguments thoughtfully and, I'd suggest, cooperatively. We need to listen to one another. Because by listening to one another we will be able to determine how best to keep safe, interpret, and share with our audiences the imprints of history. Imprints like the piece of wood found in a Webster, Massachusetts mill, preserved in that town's local museum, and on which a Ph.D. candidate in history, shortly after having his close encounter with a spinning wheel, found this inscription:

“On this 1st day of January 1866/ I place this board under the eaves,

I am a laborer on the Mill/ I work at planing floor boards/ My age is 18 years.

Perhaps when you find This here laid/My bones perhaps will have decayed.”

Thank you.