

Joseph Long's Slops

Ready-Made Clothing in Early America

Tyler Rudd Putman

Slops-sellers provided poor men in northeastern American port cities with ready-made garments in a variety of materials, colors, and patterns. Slops, cut to fit a variety of body types, offered an inexpensive alternative to the bespoke garments worn by most men. Evidence from the period before 1820, pieced together from newspapers, city directories, and shipwreck assemblages, sheds light on this component of the American clothing trade, demonstrating that the manufacturing and display techniques of slop shops laid the groundwork for the ready-made clothing industry.

THE FIRST WEEK of September 1795 was gloomy in the city of Philadelphia, where wind and precipitation marked the onset of an early fall.¹ In his rush to avoid the rain, John Cooke, a coppersmith, took someone else's green umbrella from the market by mistake.² Elsewhere in the city, Joseph Long's theft was less innocent. A year before, Long had stolen four pieces of Irish linen worth twelve pounds from the shop of Andrew Kennedy, a crime that earned him a two-year prison sentence of hard labor.³ In the late summer

of 1795, he managed to break out of jail, make his way to the Philadelphia waterfront, and burgle a bagful of ready-made clothing from a small "slop shop," the sort of store that sold cheap clothing to the city's laborers and sailors. Soon after, Long was behind bars again, caught red-handed with the evidence of his crime. But he refused to divulge which shop he had robbed, and, hoping to summon the victims of Long's crime, the authorities resorted to the following announcement in *Dunlap and Claypoole's Daily American Advertiser*:

At the Mayor's Office are the following articles of Cloathing, all new, supposed to have been stolen out of some Slop Shop or Shops. They were found upon a Joseph Long, a convict not long since escaped from gaol. They may be seen by the claimants. Sep. 5, 1795.

- 1 pair cotton striped yellow, purple, and white trowsers
- 3 pair cotton striped yellow and white trowsers
- 2 pair cotton striped red and white trowsers

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¹ Philadelphian Elizabeth Drinker recorded the weather in her diary. Elaine Foreman Crane, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 1 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), digitized at North American Women's Diaries and Letters: Colonial to 1950, <http://solomon.nwld.alexanderstreet.com.proxy.nss.udel.edu/cgi-bin/asp/phil/nwld/getdoc.pl?S8567-D300>.

² *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), September 5, 1795, 2.

³ The information about Long's first theft and sentence is in Mayor's Court, "Docket," 1792–96 vol., 266, 130.1, Philadelphia

City Archives. Unfortunately, no trace of Long's prison term or a trial for his second offense appears in the surviving records of the Philadelphia prisons and court systems for this period, all held in the Philadelphia City Archives: Philadelphia Prisons System, "Convicts' Docket," 1792–1806 vol., 38.35; Philadelphia Prisons System, "Sentence Docket," 1794–1803 vol./vol. 1, 38.36; Philadelphia Prisons System, "Prisoners for Trial Docket," 1790–97 vol., 38.38; Quarter Session Court, "Docket," 1790–95 vol., 21.2; Quarter Session Court, "Oyer and Terminer Docket," 1794–1807 vol., 21.3; or Common Pleas Court, "Appearance Docket," March–September 1795 vol., 20.2. Two Andrew Kennedys appeared in the 1794 city directory, a merchant and a soap boiler: James Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Author by Jacob Johnson & Co., 1794), 82. Long's victim was almost certainly the merchant.

- 1 pair cotton striped black and white trousers
- 1 pair plain nankeen trousers
- 1 pair plain nankeen trousers with fringe
- 2 sailor's jackets, plain nankeen, bound with black silk
- 1 sailor's jacket, striped silk
- 1 sailor's jacket, plain nankeen
- 1 sailor's jacket, Russia duck, bound with black
- 1 buff fustian waistcoat, striped yellow and grey
- 2 waistcoats, striped black, red and white
- 1 white waistcoat, with red stripes and spots
- 1 cassimere buff waistcoat, with blue and red spots
- 1 white waistcoat, with blue and white spots
- 1 nankeen purple striped waistcoat
- 1 muslin waistcoat, with red spots
- 1 cotton checked striped shirt
- A sheeting bag with a drawing string.⁴

This stunning variety of clothing, the mayor's office concluded, came from a slop shop. Most people in Philadelphia knew what slops looked like. They saw them every day on the bodies of day laborers, dockworkers, and sailors.

We might be inclined to think of the clothing of early American workers as plain, a misconception this announcement and familiarity with the history of slop clothing corrects.⁵ Believing slops

⁴ "At the Mayor's Office," *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), September 5, 1795, 2. In this quotation, for ease of reading, I have replaced "ditto" and "do." with the words or phrases to which these abbreviations referred, but I have retained the period spellings of gaol (jail), trousers, and various clothing terms here and in later quotations. The advertisement ran again on September 8.

⁵ For examples of earlier conclusions about the clothing of workingmen as plain or merely imitative, see Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 148; John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 24; Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 106. Historian Simon Newman provided a more nuanced portrayal but still concluded that common people often wore mismatched and "fairly drab" garments: *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 98. On the clothing of the poor in England (with only passing references to slops), see the "Special Issue on the Dress of the Poor" of *Textile History* 33, no. 1 (May 2002), with articles by John Styles, Sam Smiles, Steven King, Christiana Payne, and others. Peter Jones responded to Smiles's article in "Clothing the Poor in Early-Nineteenth-Century England," *Textile History* 37, no. 1 (May 2006): 17-37. Beverly Lemire examined various aspects of common clothing in *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1997), and *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c. 1600-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). The most significant work on English common dress is John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). Miles Lambert graciously provided me

to be drab and poorly constructed, historians have dismissed slops and slop shops as insignificant in the history of American clothing. In 1936, Fred Mitchell Jones described slop shops as patronized by "sailors whose stay on shore did not permit time for the cutting and fitting of the tailor."⁶ A 1970 study of the history of the men's clothing industry paid only minor attention to slop shops, whose name, the author concluded, "to a degree ... correctly described the quality and fit of the merchandise."⁷ The Smithsonian's seminal 1974 exhibition *Suiting Everyone* and its accompanying catalog argued that slop shops had "little to do with the democracy of dress" because slops were worn due to "the press of circumstances rather than to a choice on the part of the wearer" and so "marked a man apart from the main in an inferior sense" because "fit was achieved ... quite by accident."⁸ Most recently, Michael Zakim's *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (2003) followed the conclusion of *Suiting Everyone* that "ready-made clothing in eighteenth-century America was not the embryo from which the democratization of dress would grow."⁹ In focusing primarily on the industry of ready-made menswear that grew exponentially beginning in the 1820s, Zakim described slop shops as places "in which merchants with no artisanal pretensions sold cheap garments to a clientele of mechanics, sailors, itinerants, and other urban rabble. The unabashed commercialism of these 'salesmen,' as slops dealers were professionally known, was the traditional antipode of skilled tailoring."¹⁰

As this article demonstrates, the distinctions between tailors and slops-sellers and between bespoke, or custom, garments and ready-made slops

with a chapter of his dissertation on the English ready-made clothing trade. A condensed version of his argument can be found in Miles Lambert, "Bespoke Versus Ready-Made: The Work of the Tailor in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Costume* 44 (2010): 56-65.

⁶ Fred Mitchell Jones, "Retail Stores in the United States, 1800-1860," *Journal of Marketing* 1, no. 2 (October 1936): 134-42, 135.

⁷ Harry A. Cobrin, *The Men's Clothing Industry: Colonial through Modern Times* (New York: Fairchild, 1970), 19. For a study focused on the mid-nineteenth-century New York City ready-made clothing trade, see Egal Feldman, *Fit for Men: A Study of New York's Clothing Trade* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1960).

⁸ Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), 15, 27, 31, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 43.

were not so clean-cut.¹¹ The inventories of slop shops included knit breeches and silk handkerchiefs alongside sailors' jackets. Slops were sometimes patterned, striped, and fringed.¹² Workingmen needed durable clothing, but this did not preclude wearing soft wool "cassimere" and yellow cotton "nankeen" garments as well as those made of strong linen "Russia duck" or linen and cotton "fustians."¹³ Sometimes slops hung loosely about a body, but often tailors and customers altered them to achieve a more fashionable silhouette. As time passed, slops-sellers pioneered the production and sales methods that would dominate the clothing trades in later years.

Writing the history of American slops involves piecing together disparate bits of evidence from newspapers, novels, illustrations, and shipwrecks. No slop shop account or daybooks have been discovered, and no known nonarchaeological slop garments exist in museum collections. Many slops-sellers dealt primarily in ready-made clothing but called themselves tailors, while other tailors exclusively produced bespoke garments for more elite patrons, meaning the two trades, so different in practice, are difficult to distinguish in the historical record. This article reveals how important slop shops became in the network of early American waterside commerce and in the lives and histories of sailors, laborers, and—later, as the ready-made clothing industry expanded into new social levels—gentlemen.

Slops

By 1795, the year of Long's theft, *slops* meant any sort of ready-made clothing. In the fifteenth century, the term first appeared as a label for a type of baggy legwear worn by sailors.¹⁴ These "petticoat

breeches," such as those worn by the boat-hook wielder in John Singleton Copley's 1778 painting *Watson and the Shark*, served as protective garments that varied in form but continued in use into the nineteenth century (fig. 1).¹⁵ An early set of sailor's garments in the collection of the Museum of London, including a protective overshirt and petticoat breeches made from hard-wearing, stained linen, is an unusual survival of once-ubiquitous working apparel (figs. 2–4). As time passed, English speakers applied *slops* not just to protective breeches but also to a wider range of ready-made garments. Eighteenth-century lexicographers defined *slops* as "cloathing for seamen, &c."¹⁶ Indeed, sailors, who already spoke a highly specialized occupational language, even maintained a unique vernacular for the clothing sold in slop shops.¹⁷ Writers parodied these terms for the amusement of nonmaritime audiences, as when the Massachusetts *Salem Gazette* ran a small piece in 1801 translating the slang terms applied to slop clothing back to everyday English (table 1).¹⁸

But Joseph Long's illicitly acquired slops were not just sailors' clothing. Naval and merchant ships required large allotments of garments to sustain

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1894), 459. "Sloppy" and "sloppily," when used in the modern sense in reference to careless dressing, probably draw more on the etymology of "sloppy," referring to mud, than on explicit references to slops clothing. I have found no evidence for the use of the term "skilts" for this same sort of garment before 1845, when it appeared in a context that suggested it was already outdated) in Sylvester Judd's novel *Margaret*. *OED Online*, s.v. "skilts," n., <http://www.oed.com>. Samuel Johnson defined *slop* clothing simply as "Trowsers; open breeches," a definition later lexicographers copied verbatim. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 2 (London: J. F. & C. Rivington, et al., 1785), s.v. "slop."

¹⁵ Petticoat breeches would not have seemed stylistically out of place in the seventeenth century, when most men wore baggy legwear. As fashions changed, sailors retained this type of garment even as it became anachronistic. Besides the petticoat breeches and short jacket on the boat-hook-wielding sailor, other types of garments mentioned in this article are visible in this painting as well, including the waistcoat with striped back and striped shirt on the man at center bottom, the gray overcoat on the man at left, and the smock (overshirt) and kerchief on the man standing at left.

¹⁶ Thomas Dyche and William Pardon, *A New General English Dictionary* (London: Printed for Catherine and Richard Ware, 1765), s.v. "slops."

¹⁷ Regarding the importance of language among sailors, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ The table is a slight modification of its printed version as two corresponding columns. "Sailors' Slang" and "Everyday English" are my categorical labels. *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia) ran the same piece on December 17, 1801, 2, but changed "Cold Defender" to "Bold Defender."

¹¹ In this article, I have rendered the occupation of selling slops as "slops-seller," as it was most often written in surviving documents from the period.

¹² Stripes were especially popular among seafaring men; British and other European navies had favored striped cloth for outfitting sailors since before 1700, according to G. E. Manwaring, "The Dress of the British Seaman from the Revolution to the Peace of 1748," *Mariner's Mirror* 10 (1924): 31–48, 33.

¹³ Textile definitions from Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650–1870* (New York: Norton, 2007), 192, 308, 228, 244.

¹⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest use of "slops" in reference to legwear was in 1481–90: *OED Online*, s.v. "slop," n.1, <http://www.oed.com>. Geoffrey Chaucer referred to "sloppes," perhaps suggesting an even earlier usage of the garment. Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*



Fig. 1. Detail, John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark*, 1778. Oil on canvas; H. 71 $\frac{1}{16}$ "', W. 90 $\frac{7}{16}$ ". (Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund, National Gallery of Art, Washington.)

their crews during ocean voyages, and nominal references to "slops" appeared most often in naval records.¹⁹ But American retailers also sold the same sort of garments to institutions and individuals. On September 12, 1787, the Philadelphia almshouse paid shopkeeper John Purdon £62.10.11

¹⁹ British naval slops are considered in Manwaring, "The Dress of the British Seaman," 31–48. The only study of American naval slops focused on a later period. James E. Marshall, "Uncle Sam's Slops": Notes on Clothing for U.S. Navy Enlisted Men, 1830–1840," *Military Collector and Historian* 58, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 252–55.



Fig. 2. Sailor's garments, late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, front view. Linen with linen-cotton patches. (© Museum of London.)

for clothing delivered the previous winter, garments likely made for general use, not with particular wearers in mind.²⁰ Later, American slaveowners became major purchasers of ready-made clothing, but in the eighteenth century, those whose clothing needs surpassed their local production capacities

²⁰ Contributors to the Relief of the Poor, "Treasurer's Accounts," 1780–96 vol., 35.1, Philadelphia City Archives. Purdon appeared in Philadelphia city directories between 1785 and 1816. Francis White, *The Philadelphia Directory* (Philadelphia: Young, Stewart, & McCulloch, 1785), 58; James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1816* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1816), s.v. "p." His widow appeared in *Robinson's Original Annual Directory for 1817* (Philadelphia: Printed at Whitehall, 1817), 356. Purdon also advertised the great variety of textiles he sold, as in advertisement, *General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 15, 1792, 1.



Fig. 3. Sailor's garments in fig. 2, back view.

bought cheap garments from England.²¹ Some slops-sellers relied on large contracts from maritime or institutional clients, but most depended on sales of individual garments to walk-in male patrons. The social elite and more middling individuals classified these men as the "lower sort," using the phrase pejoratively to refer to people of inferior economic and social standing, whom they believed suffered an inborn and perhaps hereditary deficiency of morals and physical qualities that resulted in economic hardships. In the simplest sense, the lower sort encompassed people who, in

²¹ The trade in ready-made clothing for enslaved workers requires further research. Although some slops advertisements mentioned the resale potential of such garments, I have found no mentions of domestically produced slops intended for slaves. Robert Byfield (see later discussion) included instructions for some "negro" clothing in *Sectum, Being the Universal Directory in the Art of Cutting* (1825; facsimile repr., LaVergne, TN: Kessinger, ca. 2010), 117–21. Peter Drege of Charleston advertised the arrival of "10 bales Negro Jackets and Trowsers" among other ready-made clothing imported from London and Liverpool in advertisement, *City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser* (Charleston), October 9, 1818, 3.



Fig. 4. Pleating on front of sailor's petticoat breeches in fig. 2.

the words of one period commentator, "depend on their daily labor, for daily supplies."²²

After food and shelter, clothing was the most important daily supply of the lower sort. With so few historical sources regarding such garments, it is hard to imagine how slop shop patrons dressed and what difference their appearances made to themselves and others. Few people bothered to write about common workers' clothing, paint men at work, or save examples of everyday garments. To help fill this gap and depict such garments in use, figures 5 and 6 present interpretations of some of Long's slops as they might have appeared on the bodies of poor Philadelphians. These illustrations were prepared in a collaborative project between the author and a professional illustrator, both expe-

²² A Citizen, "For the Philadelphia Gazette," *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, August 18, 1797, 3. "Workingmen" is a modern term that nevertheless functions to distinguish similar groups, but I avoid "working class" in this article because of its implications of group consciousness and organized class opposition, phenomena of a later period. Essential studies of the lower sort include Smith, *The "Lower Sort"*; Newman, *Embodied History*; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Table 1. "A Sailor's Demand upon a Slopseller," *Salem Gazette*, November 10, 1801, 4

Sailors' Slang	Everyday English
A shappo	Hat
A mappo	Wig
A flying gib	Handkerchief
An in-defender	Shirt
An out-defender	Small jacket
A cold defender	Flushing coat
Up-haulers	Trousers
Down trampers	Shoes
Trappings & gaskets for the same	Shoestrings and garters

rienced in tailoring and historical research, using original garments, fabric swatches, and visual evidence as a source base.²³ They show how colorful and varied individual garments and the wardrobes of Philadelphia laborers may have appeared.²⁴

The garments among Long's cache and the stocks of most slop shops marked laboring men in both color and cut. Loose-fitting, ankle-length trousers allowed for flexibility in the rigging of a ship or while working on the docks, making them appealing to workers long before social elites abandoned knee-length breeches that fit relatively tightly through the upper leg.²⁵ In 1765, the governor of

²³ Artist Gwendolyn Basala and I both have extensive experience studying surviving garments and visual depictions of historical clothing as well as wearing and sewing reproduction garments. In addition to the Long advertisement, these illustrations are based on surviving garments in a variety of collections, fabric swatches in the collection of the Winterthur Library's Joseph Downs Collection, and the following images: "British Plenty" and "Scarcity in India," by Henry Singleton, 1794; a hairdressing scene by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1797; "Seaman," by Thomas Rowlandson, 1798; "Industry and Oeconomy," by Henry Singleton, 1800; and "Making a Compass at Sea," an early nineteenth-century satire. To view these images, see Gwendolyn Basala, "At the Mayor's Office—Working Mens' Clothing from 1795," March 25, 2011, *Idlewild Illustré: Historical Dress, Costume Design, and Making Things* (blog), <http://idlewildgrey.blogspot.com/2011/03/at-mayors-office-working-mens-clothing.html>. Another useful source for visual evidence is J. Welles Henderson and Rodney P. Carlisle, *Marine Art and Antiques: Jack Tar, A Sailor's Life, 1750–1910* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1999).

²⁴ Notable efforts to visually recreate the dress of early American workers based on runaway advertisements include Peter F. Copeland, *Working Dress in Colonial and Revolutionary America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977), and an insert in the first hardcover edition of Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

²⁵ French Revolutionary "sans-culottes" are traditionally credited with causing the shift from breeches to pantaloons and trousers among fashionable men. This explanation cannot account for more complex and gradual changes, however, and influences on fashions for elite men related only in part to their political leanings. See, e.g., Anne Murray, "From Breeches to Sherryvallies," *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 2, no. 1 (1976): 27–29. Breeches were still in use for court wear and even among some laborers well into the nineteenth century,

Massachusetts remarked that among the mob protesting the Stamp Act, "there were 50 Gentlemen Actors in this Scene disguised with trousers & Jackets on," suggesting how closely viewers associated these garments with poor men.²⁶ Similarly, shirts like Long's "cotton checked striped" one, most often blue and white, were another favorite of the lower sort. In 1748, one regiment of the Pennsylvania Associators militia carried a banner to promote social unity that bore "Three Arms, wearing different Linnen, ruffled, plain[,] chequed; the Hands joined by grasping each the other's Wrist, denoting the Union of all Ranks."²⁷ In this union, everyone was marked by their clothes.

Could we have seen beyond the Associators' arms, we would discover that the gentleman wearing a ruffled linen cuff also wore a personally tailored suit of sumptuous fabric cut to the latest fashion, whereas the plain linen-shirted artisan wore a sturdy outfit of wool or linen, and the sailor with his checked shirt wore loose garments, no doubt acquired from a slop shop. Fit proved significant even when color and material type did not always mark social classes. An elite man might wear a staid, plain wool suit, but it had been cut to his unique body, whereas the sailor he passed on the street wore something that hung a bit too loosely for fashionable standards, the result of generic sizing and occupational necessity. A commentator in 1799 used the sailor's watchcoat, a type of overcoat, as a religious allegory: like some people's faith, it might be "convenient sometimes in stormy weather, hanging loosely about him, and put on or off as may suit the convenience of the moment."²⁸ Loose fit was not only functional, allowing for active labor. It also marked workingmen as part of a distinct social and sartorial group. If a man was lucky, he found a decent garment in a slop shop that pleased him in its color and details and fit him to his personal standards.

as evident in George Scharf's 1834 sketch of London workers laying gas pipes in Peter Jackson, *George Scharf's London: Sketches and Watercolours of a Changing City, 1820–50* (London: John Murray, 1987), 70.

²⁶ Governor Francis Bernard to Board of Trade, August 16, 1765, in Colin Nicolson, ed., *The Papers of Francis Bernard: Governor of Colonial Massachusetts*, vol. 2, 1760–1769 (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2012), 304, online sample, <http://www.bernardpapers.com/>. Trousers seemed unusually common in 1750s America to German Gottlieb Mittelberger, as recorded in *Journey to Pennsylvania*, ed. and trans. Oscar Handlin and John Clive (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1960), 89.

²⁷ "PHILADELPHIA, January 12," *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), January 12, 1748, 3.

²⁸ Fontaine, "COMMUNICATION," *Gazette of the United States and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, September 3, 1799, 2.



Fig. 5. Gwendolyn Basala, Philadelphia men shown wearing slops described in 1795 Joseph Long advertisement, 2011. Watercolor on paper.

Laborers could often afford more than the minimum amount of clothing required for warmth and survival because slops were cheap. After independence, the US Navy artificially depressed slop prices for its sailors; in 1810, Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton noted that “the sailor on board ship is furnished with slop clothing at from twenty-five to thirty-three and a third per cent less than he could purchase it for out of a slop shop.”²⁹ On

²⁹ Letter from Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton to Burwell Bassett, chairman of the Naval committee of the House

the civilian market, slops cost more but remained significantly less expensive than bespoke clothing. When a day’s work in the early nineteenth century might earn an urban laborer \$1, and a merchant seaman might expect \$20–\$25 per month, the same men usually paid less than \$20 annually for clothing.³⁰ The typical gentleman of the same pe-

of Representatives, February 22, 1810, as quoted in Charles W. Goldsborough, *The United States’ Naval Chronicle*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: James Watson, 1824), 295.

³⁰ Donald R. Adams Jr., “Wage Rates in the Early National Period: Philadelphia, 1785–1830,” *Journal of Economic History* 28, no. 3



Fig. 6. Gwendolyn Basala, Philadelphia men wearing slops described in 1795 Joseph Long advertisement, 2011. Watercolor on paper.

(September 1968): 404–26, 406, 422. An early government study included the same rate for day laborers and cited instances of sailors making only \$10–\$17 per month. United States Bureau of Labor Statistics and Estelle M. Stewart, *History of Wages in the United States from Colonial Times to 1928* (1934; repr., Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1966), 98, 138. For a broader view of real wages, see Paul A. David and Peter Solar, “A Bicentenary Contribution to the History of the Cost of Living in America,” *Research in Economic History* 2 (1977): 1–80. The estimation of annual clothing cost for laborers is approximate. One useful source is Guardians of the Poor, “Clothing Issues Ledger,” 1805–14 men’s vol., 35.81, Philadelphia City Archives. This document suggests that the average in-

mate required one jacket (\$2–\$3), one vest (\$1.50–\$2), two pairs of trousers (\$1.50–\$2 each), two shirts (\$1.50 each), one pair of stockings (\$1), and one pair of shoes (\$1.25) per year; although this rate of consumption seems low. For a more detailed discussion of almshouse clothing production and records, see Tyler Rudd Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse: Ready-Made Clothing in Philadelphia, 1780–1820” (MA thesis, University of Delaware, 2011), 108–48. My estimates of clothing cost relative to wages (5–8 percent of annual income) are comparable to those of Smith studying the preceding years. In 1770, for instance, he concluded that a basic wardrobe could be purchased for £3.74, 6 percent or more of a laborer’s or sailor’s annual earnings. Smith, *The “Lower Sort,”* 101–13.

riod paid around \$30 for a single outfit of coat, vest, and pantaloons.³¹

But just what sort of clothes did \$20 buy? In other words, when Joseph Long broke his way into that slop shop in 1795, what kinds of garments sat on the shelves around the room? In 1813, one slop shop included “great coats, long surtouts, round about and pea jackets, pantaloons, monkey jackets, fancy waistcoats, with a variety of other articles of the trade.”³² Elite men wore some of these forms, such as types of heavy, long-tailed overcoats called great coats and surtouts and the short coats known as “coatees” mentioned elsewhere (see fig. 6, center). Other garments belonged almost exclusively among the wardrobes of laboring men. Americans used the term *pea jacket* to refer to a type of overcoat worn most often by mariners by as early as 1720.³³ A century later, tailor Robert Byfield noted that pea jackets, largely unchanged from their earlier form, were double-breasted with buttons “placed five inches from the edge, which will give them a good lap over, as they are generally worn in cold countries.”³⁴ Roundabouts and monkey jackets, though also outer garments, were more tight-fitting and high-waisted (see fig. 5 and fig. 6, left). *Roundabout* entered common American usage for workingmen’s jackets after independence.³⁵ *Monkey jacket* became a common term still later, remaining absent from newspapers until the second decade of the nineteenth century.³⁶ Byfield explained that “seamen’s jackets, known by the name of monkey jackets” had “two rows of buttons, and two rows of button holes,” but because their body was cut in one large

piece, they “do not require either back seam or side seam.”³⁷ Such ready-made jackets were the mainstay of poor men. And yet, slop coats and jackets were not always thick wool or heavy canvas. Joseph Long’s haul included a Russia duck canvas jacket as well as one of striped silk and two finer nankeen cotton examples trimmed with black silk ribbon (table 2).

Slops-sellers sold many jackets, trousers, and shirts, but they also stocked other types of garments, and patrons might assemble an entire wardrobe from a slop shop. Joseph Long’s victim carried at least nine waistcoats, including ones with vibrant stripes and spots. In 1805, Philadelphian John Waters’s slop shop stock included 28 vests, 22 shirts, 2 “loung coats,” 11 coats, 7 great coats, 24 “round jacoats,” 29 pairs of trousers, 6 pairs of drawers, 9 pairs of stockings, 5 caps, a dozen gloves, 43 handkerchiefs, and a variety of textiles, including velvet, swansdown (a fine wool or wool-cotton blend), baize (a heavy wool), and check, all worth \$489.61, significantly more than his household goods.³⁸

Kerchiefs like those in Waters’s inventory appear in most depictions of early American workingmen, and a rare example recovered from the *General Carleton of Whitby*, a British cargo vessel that sank off the Polish coast in 1785, was originally red or blue with clustered white spots.³⁹ Many sailors also added decorative ribbons, cheap and available at slop shops, to their shoes, especially after buckles fell out of fashion at the end of the eighteenth century. An example recovered from the British warship His Majesty’s sloop *DeBraak*, which sank in Delaware Bay in 1798, illustrates how such a simple addition might express personal taste. This ribbon, long since faded and torn, once featured vivid red warp stripes and woven weft ribs (fig. 7).⁴⁰

³¹ This is only a single example, based on the Robert J. Evans receipt book, 1807–28, Manuscript Collection 684, Series 1(C), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

³² Advertisement, *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), December 10, 1813, 2.

³³ William Glan deserted the *Princess Amelia* in Boston harbor wearing “a dark coloured Pea Jacket, lined with blue Baze,” according to advertisement, *Boston Gazette*, May 9–16, 1720, 3. The term may have taken some time to catch on, not appearing commonly until the second half of the century, according to historian Matthew Brenckle, e-mail message to the author, February 16, 2012. *Pea coat* referred to the same sort of garment but took longer to catch on. The first result for this term in the “America’s Historical Newspapers” database, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>, appeared in “MAYOR’S OFFICE,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), September 4, 1789, 3.

³⁴ Byfield, *Sectum*, 35.

³⁵ Apprentice George Irely ran away from Godfrey Munich’s Philadelphia bakery wearing “a gray round about jacket” according to advertisement, *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, January 28, 1791, 3.

³⁶ The first result for this term in the “America’s Historical Newspapers” database, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>, appeared in advertisement, *Boston Gazette*, February 8, 1816, 3.

³⁷ Byfield, *Sectum*, 37. Matthew Brenckle believes the term was a colloquial one, noting its absence from official documents but its occurrence in Navy-civilian correspondence, as in an 1813 letter in the Amos Binney Letterbook, 1810–14, Mss. Folio vols. B, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. E-mail message to the author, February 10, 2012.

³⁸ File 216, 1805, Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia. For a complete transcription of this inventory, see Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 162–63. Textile definitions from Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 354, 152.

³⁹ Lawrence Babits and Matthew Brenckle, “Sailor Clothing,” in *The General Carleton Shipwreck, 1785*, ed. Waldemar Ossowski (Gdańsk: Polish Maritime Museum in Gdańsk, 2008), 193.

⁴⁰ Ann Smart Martin called ribbons “an index of whirling change in fashion” in *Buying into the World of Goods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 169. John Styles discussed

Table 2. Slops Found on Joseph Long, According to “At the Mayor’s Office,” *Dunlap and Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), September 5, 1795, 2

Number	Type	Material	Decorations	Colors
1 pair	Trousers	Cotton	Striped	Yellow, purple, white
3 pairs	Trousers	Cotton	Striped	Yellow, white ^a
2 pairs	Trousers	Cotton	Striped	Red, white ^b
1 pair	Trousers	Cotton	Striped	Black, white ^c
1 pair	Trousers	Nankeen	Plain ^d	
1 pair	Trousers	Nankeen	With fringe ^c	
2	Sailor’s jackets	Nankeen	Bound with black silk ^c	
1	Sailor’s jacket	Silk	Striped	
1	Sailor’s jacket	Nankeen	Plain	
1	Sailor’s jacket	Russia duck	Bound with black ^a	
1	Waistcoat		Bound with black	Red ^c
1	Waistcoat	Fustian	Striped	Buff with yellow, gray
2	Waistcoat		Striped	Black, red, white ^c
1	Waistcoat		Red stripes and spots	White ^a
1	Waistcoat	Cassimere	Blue and red spots	Buff ^b
1	Waistcoat		Blue and white spots	White
1	Waistcoat	Nankeen	Purple striped ^d	
1	Waistcoat	Muslin	Red spots	
1	Shirt	Cotton	Checked, striped	

^aFig. 5, right.

^bFig. 6, left.

^cFig. 6, right.

^dFig. 5, left.

^eFig. 6, center.

Ready-made knit garments, whose elasticity allowed for a fashionable fit, also appeared in the stock of slop shops. In 1799, Philadelphia salesmen A. Weyman and Son, slops-sellers who hoped to cater to a better clientele as well as to common men, advertised that “Gentlemen may be fitted in a few minutes with any quality, either for sea or land.”⁴¹ Describing their business not as a slop shop but as a “Warehouse of Ready-Made Clothes,” they stocked a variety of coats, overalls (a type of trousers), “Clothes adapted for servants,” “Sea Clothing,” and “Stocking Web Pantaloons.”⁴² Workers created these pantaloons using the same frame-

knitting machinery as stockings, a technology that first appeared in the seventeenth century. Slop shops and other stores usually offered a variety of stockings, and by 1759, frame knitters in Germantown, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia, produced some 720,000 pairs annually, with a retail price of \$1 per pair.⁴³ Stockings recovered from the *DeBraak* are typical of the sort of plain wool ones that most poor men wore and are almost unique among surviving garments of the 1790s (figs. 8–9).⁴⁴

Slops-Sellers

As *slops* came to encompass a variety of cheap ready-made clothing, specialized vendors and stores sprung up in port cities. Diarist Samuel Pepys mentioned a *slopseller* in 1665, and *sloppshop* appeared as early as 1723 in the *London Gazette*.⁴⁵ By 1747,

the importance of ribbons as indicated by the tokens left with babies at the London Foundling Hospital in *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital’s Textile Tokens, 1740–1770* (London: Foundling Museum, 2010), 43–51.

⁴¹ Advertisement, *Porcupine’s Gazette* (Philadelphia), July 17, 1799, 4. A. Weyman and later William Weyman also ran a ready-made clothing store in New York, a business they began advertising in 1797. See advertisement, *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser*, January 12, 1797, 4.

⁴² Advertisement, *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, November 27, 1799, 1. Regarding overalls, see Murray, “From Breeches to Sherryvallies,” 31–32. For an interesting visual depiction of tight-legged, gaiter-bottom overalls, see the two workers in the center of Charles Willson Peale’s painting *Exhuming the First American Mastodon*, now at the Maryland Historical Society. This style was adopted by the military during the American Revolution. An original pair is in the collection of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (1988.342.3).

⁴³ Andrew Burnaby, *Travels Through the Middle Settlements in North-America in the Years 1759 and 1760* (1775; repr., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), 58. See also Martha C. Halpern, “Germantown, Philadelphia: An Emigré Textile Settlement c. 1680–1960,” *Textile History* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1998): 158–61.

⁴⁴ Other rare examples of sailors’ stockings were recovered from the *General Carleton*, including both hand- and frame-knit specimens. Babits and Brenckle, “Sailor Clothing,” 192–96.

⁴⁵ *OED Online*, s.v. “slop-seller,” n., and “slop-shop,” n., <http://www.oed.com>.



Fig. 7. Ribbon with red stripes and woven ribs, from a shoe, *DeBraak* shipwreck, Delaware Bay, 1798. Silk; L. $9\frac{1}{4}$ " (maximum), T. $1\frac{1}{8}$ ". (All *DeBraak* textiles Delaware State Archaeological Collections, Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs; photos, Laszlo Bodo, Winterthur.)

some English observers already viewed ready-made clothing sales, what one concluded was "a Business of great Profit, but requires no great Skill to become Master of it," with skepticism.⁴⁶ By the late eighteenth century, slops-sellers on both sides of the Atlantic shared similar business practices, products, and reputations. English sources are helpful but not independently adequate in describing American slops businesses. This article relies primarily on Philadelphia sources as representative of the northeastern American slops trade although regional and local patterns led to minor variations in each port city.

English slops-sellers established themselves before American ones, and they sent many of their products to the colonies. In Philadelphia as early as 1735, merchants offered imported finished gar-

⁴⁶ R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (1747; facsimile repr., London: David & Charles, 1969), 301.



Fig. 8. Frame-knit stocking, *DeBraak* shipwreck, Delaware Bay, 1798. Wool; H. 14" (top to ankle).

ments, such as "Pea Jackets, Wast-Coats, Shirts and Trowsers for Sailors (ready made)."⁴⁷ In 1783, a Philadelphia merchant announced the arrival of the *King David* with a cargo that included salt, wines, oils, china, textiles, and "ready made Shirts and Vests for seamen."⁴⁸ Like other textile goods from abroad, ready-made clothing arrived in America bundled in large bales or crates; the cheapest slops often arrived as profitable dunnage padding

⁴⁷ Advertisement, *American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia), July 17-24, 1735, 4.

⁴⁸ Advertisement, *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), June 25, 1783, 3.



Fig. 9. Detail of stocking foot in fig. 8 showing seams. L. 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (foot).

more valuable cargo, as did the "Slops by the package" offered in one 1784 advertisement.⁴⁹

By 1795, when Joseph Long decided to steal clothing, domestic ready-made clothing production dominated the American slops trade. Local slops-sellers offered clothing in most port cities, where they set up near waterfronts and the workplaces of their laboring and sailing patrons. In 1805, the *New-York Mercantile and General Directory* listed some twenty-six "merchant taylors" and "clothing stores," both labels for slop shops, on Water Street alone, a block inland from the East River docks.⁵⁰ Of the 344 tailors listed in Philadelphia's 1800 *Trade Directory*, eighty-three, or 24 percent, had Water Street addresses, adjacent to the wharves. Including Front Street (the next street inland) and connecting cross-street addresses, over 40 percent of Philadelphia's tailors operated within two blocks of the docks.⁵¹ Known Philadelphia slops-sellers

almost always worked on Water Street or at other addresses near the Delaware River waterfront.⁵²

Most of the tailors near the waterfront dealt partly or entirely in slop clothing, yet their business practices remain obscure because city directories did not typically distinguish between tailors and slops-sellers. Men whose businesses were described as slop shops in newspapers still appeared as tailors in directories. Tailors included successful gentlemen and, more commonly, poor tradesmen, all of whom shared the same occupational title whether they produced exclusively bespoke garments, dabbled in ready-made clothing, or sold only slops. Slops-sellers thought of themselves as tailors. They sold clothing; it did not matter who made it, who bought it, or for what price. This idea was not simply in the mind of the slops-seller, either. A British satirical print from the 1780s shows a bespoke tailor and a ready-made shopkeeper arguing, but despite their apparent differences, the men are "two

⁴⁹ Advertisement, *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), January 22, 1784, 4. Feldman noted the use of "cases" and "camphor wood trunks" without a citation in *Fit for Men*, 20.

⁵⁰ John F. Jones, *Jones's New-York Mercantile and General Directory* (New York: Printed for the editor, 1805). On New York City's spatial organization, see Nan A. Rothschild, *New York City Neighborhoods: The Eighteenth Century* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1990), 118–33.

⁵¹ *The New Trade Directory, for Philadelphia, Anno 1800* (Philadelphia: Printed for the author, 1799), 172–81. This matches with

the conclusions of Mary M. Schweitzer regarding Philadelphia's distinct socio-occupational clustering, resulting in localized neighborhoods of trades and economic levels. Schweitzer, "The Spatial Organization of Federalist Philadelphia, 1790," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1993): 31–57. On p. 50 she notes the clustering of tailors on the waterfront but offers no explanation.

⁵² This is based on work discussed in more detail in Putman, "The Slop Shop and the Almshouse," 36–107.

of a trade” (fig. 10). Both men also carry fabric swatch cards, perhaps to attract potential customers.

Though they remained close to waterfront customers, slops-sellers frequently moved locations

whenever rent surpassed their earnings or new opportunities proved irresistible. Philadelphian William Smiley, for example, who sold both ready-made clothing and bespoke garments, moved his



Fig. 10. After Robert Dighton, *Quarrelsome Taylors, or Two of a Trade Seldom Agree*, ca. 1790s. Engraving, Bowles and Carver, London, publisher. (Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester City Galleries.)

business at least ten times between 1794 and 1818, all within a few blocks of the waterfront.⁵³ In the same city, slops-seller Francis Lynch moved his slop shop, which included “new ready made Clothing, of good quality and extensive variety,” five times between 1800 and 1811, each time to a location on South Front or South Water Streets, while simultaneously operating a dry goods store on Front Street.⁵⁴

Slops-sellers relied more on display techniques than stable locations or individual customer loyalty, and it was easy for men to identify a slop shop when they needed clothes.⁵⁵ In England, ready-made clothing dealers cultivated clientele with elaborate structures and the display of finished garments. An English print from the first decade of the nineteenth century for “Allins Cheap Clothes & York Shoe Warehouse” of Birmingham shows one such presentation of merchandise (fig. 11). In the lower panes of Allin’s castellated building, fashion plates attracted potential customers, even though passersby would have to go elsewhere if they wanted a custom suit.⁵⁶ Allin’s was one of the

best examples of what the English called “show shops,” and in America the “showing” of ready-made clothing became the most important tool of slops-sellers who could not always rely on a stable location or reputation.⁵⁷ Selling to transient and sometimes illiterate patrons, slops-sellers needed instantly recognizable advertising in the form of finished goods. The most significant asset of the slops-seller, and the way he attracted customers and convinced them to spend money, was the immediate availability of his stock. The men who bought slops sought minimal expenditure and ready-to-wear garments, and the slops-seller was ready to oblige. It might take weeks to get a suit from a bespoke tailor. A slops purchase took minutes.

The display tactics slops-sellers used to attract customers distinguished them from bespoke tailors. A hanging sign and newspaper advertisements brought clients to the latter, who, unlike a slops-seller, profited from the credibility of his name and the reputation of his clothing quality. Tailors often stocked uncut textiles, but they rarely had more than a few finished garments, awaiting pickups and deliveries, in their shops at any given time. The windows of tailoring shops were used to light work spaces, not to show off finished wares. Slop shops, on the other hand, like other retail establishments, had to maintain and display a stock of finished garments all the time.

Only two illustrations of American slop shops survive, and both feature the display tactics used by clothing retailers in England and America. On Boston’s Ann Street, as painted between 1816 and 1822, slops-seller Cornelius Simmons displayed his products in unglazed windows in much the same manner as his neighbor, silversmith William Homes, whose windows were glazed (fig. 12).⁵⁸ Proprietors like Simmons maintained slop shops as storefronts in larger buildings and lived in the rooms be-

⁵³ Smiley was first listed as a “merchant taylor” in 1809. James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1809* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1809), s.v. “S.” He was one of only a few Philadelphia ready-made clothing dealers who advertised, and he regularly announced the quality of his imported textiles. See, e.g., advertisement, *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 2, 1807, 4. In 1806, he announced that he was “wishing to decline the [ready-made clothing] business” and offered to sell his stock “either in parcels or the whole together.” He also sought to rent his shop at 75 South Front Street, which was “well fitted up, and a pretty good stand.” Advertisement, *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), April 8, 1806, 3. His movements are based on the city directories for these years. For the earliest entry, see Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register*, 141. For the last entry, see John Adams Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1818* (Philadelphia: Published for the editor, 1818), s.v. “S.”

⁵⁴ Advertisement, *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), June 10, 1811, 3. Both addresses in this advertisement, which does not mention the shop owner’s name, correspond to those of Lynch as listed in *Census Directory for 1811* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1811), 197. For the earliest entry for Lynch, as a “taylor,” see Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1800* (Philadelphia: Printed for the editor, 1800), 80.

⁵⁵ Recent scholarship on the retail display of goods includes Claire Walsh, “Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London,” *Journal of Design History* 8, no. 3 (1995): 157–76; Dell Upton, “Gridding Consumption,” in *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 145–79; Ann Smart Martin, “Setting the Stage, Playing the Part,” in *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 145–72. For more on late nineteenth-century clothing display, see Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion, and City Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), esp. 128–47.

⁵⁶ Beverly Lemire noted the fashion plates in *Fashion’s Favourite*, 196. The date is my attribution based on the use of the 1801 Union flag.

⁵⁷ For “show shops,” see Madeleine Ginsburg, “The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700–1850,” *Costume* 6 (1972): 64–71, 67. Few slops-sellers spent money on printed advertisements. A trade card for an English “salesman,” Kenelm Dawson, appears in Ambrose Heal, *London Tradesmen’s Cards of the XVIII Century: An Account of Their Origin and Use* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1925), pl. 17.

⁵⁸ I am very grateful to Matthew Brenckle for bringing this painting to my attention. Like many slops-sellers, Simmons changed his business, in 1820, from a slop shop to a “clothing store,” according to D. Brenton Simons, *Boston Beheld: Antique Town and Country Views* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2008), 132. Cornelius’s brother, John, also ran a successful slop shop, and Cornelius’s son, George, was an especially active clothing retailer in the 1840s, when he operated a store dubbed “Oak Hall” and peppered Boston newspapers with advertisements. See Cobrin, *The Men’s Clothing Industry*, 22, and Kidwell and Christman, *Suiting Everyone*, 57–59.

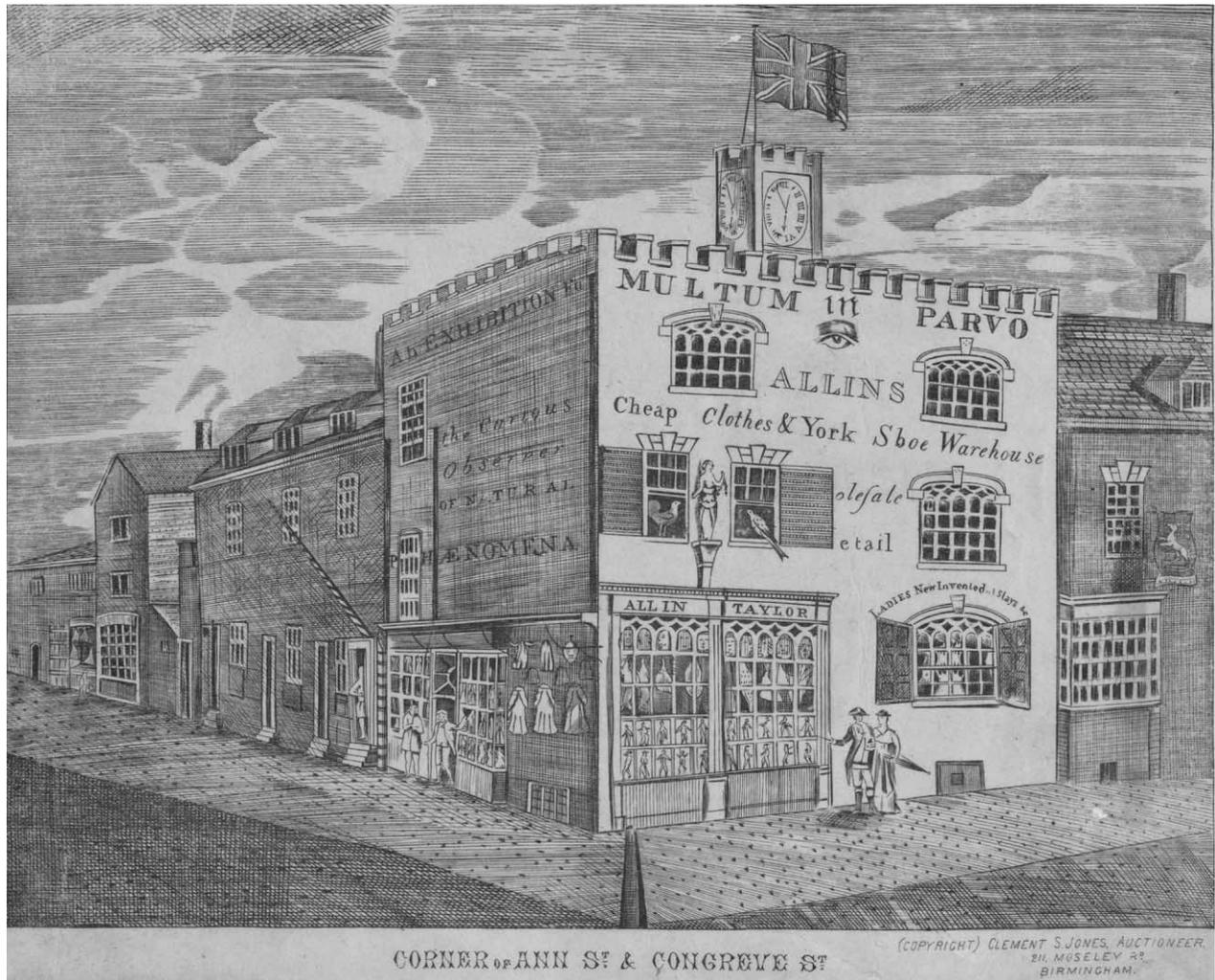


Fig. 11. *Corner of Ann St. & Congreve St.*, ca. 1805–15. Engraving, Clement S. Jones, Birmingham, auctioneer. (John Johnson Collection: Men's Clothes 1 (3), Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.)

hind and above a retail space fronting the street. One such Philadelphia building auctioned in 1811 was described as “a well built four story brick house and brick kitchen ... with a good cellar—it is and long has been a prosperous situation for a slop shop, or other active business. Also in the rear ... [is] one other brick dwelling house ... long occupied as a boarding house or tavern for mariners or others and is a convenient situation for that purpose.”⁵⁹ This was the shop of George Reed, who

⁵⁹ Advertisement, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), February 27, 1811, 3: “A Good & Long Accustomed Stand for Business. A Well built four story brick house and brick kitchen situate on the west side of Water street, above Walnut street, No 75 containing in front 15 feet, and in depth 20 feet, exclusive of the said kitchen with a good cellar—it is and long has been a prosperous situation for a slop shop, or other active business. Also in the rear of the above mentioned property and fronting on a wide

lived and worked there between 1805 and 1811, and it was remarkably similar to one shown on the British trade card of T. Roberts, issued around 1800 (fig. 13).⁶⁰

court or alley leading from Walnut street, one other brick dwelling house three stories high 14 feet 9 inches front, and about 20 feet deep two rooms on a floor, it has been long occupied as a boarding house or tavern for mariners or others and is a convenient situation for that purpose. The whole of the above property, has lately undergone a thorough repair and will be sold together.”

⁶⁰ The identification of this shop as that of Reed is based on city directories for these years. For Reed's earliest entry, see James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1805* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1805), s.v. “R.” For his last entry at this address, see *Census Directory for 1811*, 265. A Jacob Reed began working as a tailor in Philadelphia in 1824, and in 1877 his sons took over what had become a ready-made clothing business, according to *One Hundred Years Ago: Jacob Reed's Sons, Founded 1824* (Philadelphia: Jacob Reed's Sons, 1924). Although this company history on p. 21 lists Jacob Reed's sons as Edward H., Alan H., and George K. Reed, Philadelphia city directories also list a George W. Reed (see



Fig. 12. *Silversmith Shop of William Homes, Jr.*, Ann Street, Boston, ca. 1816–25. Oil on canvas; H. 12", W. 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". (Gift of Josephine Setze, Yale University Art Gallery.)

Other port city slop shops, ramshackle one- or two-story structures fronting the wharves, rarely

McElroy's Philadelphia Directory For 1855 [Philadelphia: Edward C. and John Biddle, 1855], 457), later partnered with Edward J. Reed and Henry H. Reed (*McElroy's Philadelphia City Directory for 1860* [Philadelphia: E. C. and J. Biddle, 1860], 813). Almost certainly this is the same partnership referred to in the Reed company history. George W. Reed's "U.S. Clothing Emporium" at 423 Market Street was featured in one of the prints of "Baxter's Panoramic Business Directory of Philadelphia for 1859," digitized as part of Bryn Mawr's "Places in Time" project, <http://www.brynmawr.edu/iconog/>. The descendant of these businesses, Jacob Reed's Sons, closed in 1983, according to Robert Morris Skaler and Thomas H.

garnered the attention of artists or advertisers.⁶¹ A unique exception appears in a watercolor by William Chappel (1800–1880), a tinsmith who retrospectively created a series of street scenes depicting

Keels, *Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2008), 102. I have been unable to determine whether any of these men were descended from or related to George Reed, the Water Street slops-seller of the previous generation.

⁶¹ Some were the sort of establishments, essentially covered market stalls, described in Upton, *Another City*, 150, as "rough-and-ready affairs designed to do little more than protect merchandise from the elements."



Fig. 13. Trade card, T. Roberts, tailor and salesman, Soho, London, ca. 1800. Etching and engraving. (© Trustees of the British Museum, all rights reserved.)

New York City as it appeared during his childhood. In the background of one, showing a “dog killer” removing a stray from a block “in Water Between Rosavelt & Dover, New York, 1813” stands a slop shop, identifiable by the various trousers and jackets hanging from the pent roof on its front (fig. 14). In 1813, Jacob Abrahams operated a “clothing store” at 360 Water Street.⁶² This second illustration of an American slop shop has not been previously identified.⁶³

Modified captions and paper type suggest that Chappel created or copied these illustrations at some time after 1825 and possibly as late as the 1870s.⁶⁴ Both the drawing’s retrospective nature and the identification of Abrahams’s shop are confirmed by the appearance of trade signs reading “Boarding” and “Davis” next door. There was indeed a boarding house operated by Daniel Davis at 359 Water Street, but no later than 1811, two years before Chappel’s date.⁶⁵ But if the precise date remains in doubt, Chappel’s depiction of material culture, including the display tactics and environment of a typical slop shop such as Abrahams’s, compare favorably with other historical evidence from the same period.

Whether Joseph Long’s victim owned a brick rowhouse or rented a wooden stand is uncertain, but passersby easily recognized the business as a slop shop by garments hung up for display and purchase. The same display that drew customers also sometimes attracted thieves like Long, who knew that slop shops contained finished goods that they could steal easily and resell elsewhere.⁶⁶

⁶² Andrew Beers, *Longworth’s New York Almanac for the Year of Our Lord 1814* (New York: D. Longworth, 1813), 49.

⁶³ A speculative label of “a maker of children’s clothes” appeared in John Caldwell, Oswaldo Rodrigues Rogue, and Dale T. Johnson, *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 1, *A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born by 1815* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 449.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 440.

⁶⁵ David Longworth, *Longworth’s American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory* (New York: David Longworth, 1811), 73 (second pagination set).

⁶⁶ The American secondhand and “cast-off,” or used, clothing market requires further study. Regarding the secondhand trade, see Madeleine Ginsburg, “Rags to Riches: The Second-hand Clothes Trade, 1700–1978,” *Costume* 14 (1980): 121–35; Elizabeth C. Sanderson, “Nearly New: The Second-hand Clothing Trade in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh,” *Costume* 31 (1997): 38–48. Pawnbroking did not nominally appear in America until around 1800, according to Wendy Woloson, *In Hock: Pawning in America from Independence through the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 56. The display tactics of pawnbrokers echoed those of slops-sellers, as demonstrated by surviving trade cards. See, for example, that of John Flude of London, in Heal, *London Tradesmen’s Cards*, pl. 71. Although often criticized as hubs of criminal activity, most pawnshops seem to have operated according to

Textiles remained a favorite target throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when fabric and garments were among the most portable, compact, and valuable commodities. It was certainly easier to sell a stolen length of wool or a pair of trousers, generic and unremarkable, than a stolen piece of engraved silver.⁶⁷ Even slops, among the lowest in value of finished products, tempted the desperate and the opportunistic. In Philadelphia in 1767, for instance, “some Rogues broke into a Slop-shop, in Front-street, and carried off several Seamens Jackets, about a Dozen pair of Trowsers, two Great Coats, and other Things, to the Value of about Twenty Pounds” before the family, who lived above the shop, awoke and chased them away.⁶⁸ In 1800, Patrick Deagan’s slop shop in Baltimore was “broke open and robbed of goods to the amount of 3000 dollars.”⁶⁹ It was broad daylight in 1815 when a thief walked into a Wilmington, Delaware, slop shop and “observing no person in the shop but a young woman, he put on the coat, threw a small bundle of rags tied up in an old black silk handkerchief, on the counter, and walked off, under the pretence of getting a note changed.”⁷⁰ Uncut textiles might tempt thieves to the shops of bespoke tailors, but slop shops stood a higher risk of theft because finished garments caught the eye of every passerby, whether a shopper or a burglar.

the law. Nor was the association of Jews with the used clothing and pawning business based on fact, argued Woloson in *In Hock*, 100. It should also be noted that, despite the regular references to “Jewish slop-shops” in English literature of the nineteenth century, there is no evidence for an ethnic dimension of the business in early America. In any case, pawnbrokers relied heavily on clothing as collateral. Alison Ruth Backhouse calculated that 75 percent of the pawned items noted in one 1770s English pawnbroker’s ledger were garments. Backhouse, *The Worm-Eaten Waistcoat* (York: A. R. Backhouse, 2003), 25.

⁶⁷ Both sorts of items were often stolen, and I am grateful to Nicole Belolan for suggesting this point about the relative ease of resale. For an interesting example of witnesses attempting to identify the stolen textiles and garments of a naval slops-seller in England, see Old Bailey Proceedings Online (version 7.0, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>), April 1794, trial of John Woodhead (t17940430-51). I am grateful to Matthew Brenckle for bringing this case to my attention.

⁶⁸ “PHILADELPHIA, November 26,” *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), November 26, 1767, 3 (continued from 2).

⁶⁹ “BALTIMORE, April 24,” *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), April 30, 1800, transcription: Accessible Archives, <http://www.accessible.com>.

⁷⁰ “MURPHY LOST!” *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), October 26, 1815, 3. The thief, “Pat Murphy,” later returned the coat after wandering the city, saying that he had been unable to find the house again after leaving. In 1814, there were at least ten tailors on Front Street in Wilmington, along with a number of female hucksters, tayloresses, and seamstresses, all possible labels for the owner of this store. *A Directory and Register for the Year 1814* (Wilmington: R. Porter, 1814).



Fig. 14. William P. Chappel, *The Dog Killer*, mid- to late nineteenth century. Oil on slate paper; H. 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ "', W. 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". (Bequest of Edward W. C. Arnold, 1954, Edward W. C. Arnold Collection of New York Prints, Maps, and Pictures, © Metropolitan Museum of Art; source, Art Resource, NY.)

Men dominated the tailoring trade, but the Wilmington theft notice and other references reveal that women sold as well as made slops.⁷¹ Women bought and wore ready-made garments throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as indicated by newspaper advertisements for ready-made female work clothing like short gowns and petticoats listed alongside men's shirts and jackets. Poor women purchased such apparel from a variety of sources including tailors, milliners, and merchants.⁷² Unlike these other vendors, however,

⁷¹ On women working in the various needle trades, see Marla Miller, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006). Women, as widows or independently, sometimes managed many types of businesses, so their presence in the slops trade should not be surprising.

⁷² Two examples suffice. John Swanwick's 1783 advertisement of his sale of imported goods included "Shirts ready made" and "Carpeting and Slops" (this latter may be an unrelated usage of the term) alongside "Durant, Tammy, and Calimanco Petticoats." Advertisement, *Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), September 4, 1783, 1. Terrason Brothers and Co. advertised the arrival of imported "Embroidered silk Waistcoats" as well as "ready made Gowns, Hats, Caps, Mantuas, Aprons,

slops-sellers dealt only in menswear. Despite this clientele, slops selling was not an exclusively male trade. Christianna Fraly took over titular operation of the shop of her husband for a year following his death in 1805, and Mary Graham managed a slop shop in Philadelphia until 1812.⁷³ In 1800,

&c." in *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), June 5, 1783, 4.

⁷³ Christianna Fraly's husband was the John Waters mentioned elsewhere in this article. He first appeared in James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory, City and County Register for 1803* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1803), 266. For the last entry for "Waters widow of John," see James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1808* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1808), s.v. "W." The auction notice of his estate, "Ready made Cloths, Household Furniture, &c.," appeared as advertisement, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), January 24, 1807, 4. Fraly was illiterate and "deranged" for some time following her husband's death according to file 216, 1805, Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia. Regarding Graham, auctioneer John Dorsey listed the location of the "Ready made Clothing" shop contents he was selling as "No 8 Walnut Below Water street" without the owner's name. Advertisement, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), March 20, 1812, 2. The attribution to Mary Graham is mine based on the listing for her as a "tailoress, shop corner of Walnut and Water" in *Census Directory for 1811*, 128.

the *New Trade Directory for New York* listed, among twelve slops-sellers, two widows and one independent woman.⁷⁴

Both men and women who managed to move from stitcher to owner benefited from the unusually fluid nature of the slops trade. All slops-sellers came to the business indirectly; there were no slop shop apprenticeships, and many tailors began selling ready-made clothing gradually or sporadically. Only rarely did slops-sellers have any kinship connection to the business, as did the Winters family of Philadelphia. In February 1817, Stacy Winter liquidated his stock, including “a quantity of ready made Clothing, being the remains of the stock of a Slop Shop, consisting of Pantaloons and fancy Vests, Pea and Monkey Jackets, Check, Flannel and Linen Shirts, Great Coats and Trowsers, fine Long Coats, Coatees, &c.”⁷⁵ Stacy, Joseph, and William Winter, probably brothers and all tailors and slops-sellers, appeared at a number of different Philadelphia addresses, sometimes together, at various dates between 1811 and 1849 as they moved within the city and within the clothing trade.⁷⁶ In 1828, for instance, Joseph and Stacy Winter opened a “clothing store” at 6 South Water Street, the sort of ready-made garment emporium that became increasingly common in the 1820s.⁷⁷ Few other slops-sellers passed on their operations to children or relatives because, in many cases, the stocks of their establishments were insignificant, and they rarely established clienteles worth inheriting.

More typical of slops-sellers was Robert Taylor, who, in 1794, after managing a tavern for several years at 170 South Water Street, Philadelphia, moved into a building down the road, where he operated a boardinghouse, shop, and “the different business of Slop Shop and Tavern ... with the greatest success.”⁷⁸ Taylor made the most of his

location and catered to the various needs of his clients, and his nominal occupational changes mark one instance of the flexibility of slops-sellers and other waterfront businesspeople as they worked to make ends meet. These men and women composed part of a complex network of waterfront commerce that included taverns, inns, grocers, and artisans, just the sort of shops depicted in Chappel’s illustration, serving the needs of the lower sort. Such operations, situated among the warehouses and other maritime businesses along the wharves, supported the maritime economy. Sailors and workers earned their money at sea and on the docks, and they spent it nearby on food, housing, and clothing.

The interior of slop shops could be more disorienting than their streetside appearances. In the 1840s, an American author preparing for a Pacific whaling voyage described visiting a slop shop much like those of the east coast of the previous generation, with “long rows of shelves containing flannel shirts, trowsers, hickory and striped shirts, drawers, tarpaulin hats, pea jackets, &c, while the beams overhead are ornamented with tin pots, leather belts, shoes, &c.”⁷⁹ Presiding over this mass of goods was the slops-seller, who “rigs you out in a pair of blue drilling trowsers, ‘a mile too big,’ but says you will grow into them.”⁸⁰ Such scenes were a favorite of British and American satirists, who lampooned the slops-seller’s flattery of naïve customers in an extension of an entire genre that derided tailors and other artisans (fig. 15).⁸¹ Fact could be stranger than fiction, as Englishman James Lackington experienced firsthand during the winter of 1773, his first in London, when he went looking for a new heavy coat and was “hauled into a shop by a fellow who was walking up and

⁷⁴ *The New Trade Directory for New York, Anno 1800* (New York: Printed for the editor, [1799?]), 165.

⁷⁵ Advertisement, *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), February 12, 1817, 2. Like other auction advertisements, this one provided only an address, 76 North Water Street. The former resident of this address was Stacy Winter, who had arrived there the year before and set up shop as a tailor. Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1816*, s.v. “W.”

⁷⁶ *Census Directory for 1811*, 357. John A. Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1813* (Philadelphia: B. and T. Kite, 1813), s.v. “W.” For the last entry for William Winter, see *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1822* (Philadelphia: McCarty & Davis, 1822), s.v. “W.” For the last entry for Joseph Winter, see *McElroy’s Philadelphia Directory for 1849* (Philadelphia: Edward C. and John Biddle, 1849), 411.

⁷⁷ Robert Desilver, *Desilver’s Philadelphia Directory and Stranger’s Guide for 1828* (Philadelphia: Robert Desilver, 1828), 91.

⁷⁸ Advertisement, *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, December 12, 1798, 3 (Taylor had just died). For Taylor’s var-

ious locations and trades, see Clement Biddle, *The Philadelphia Directory* (Philadelphia: Printed for the editor, 1791), 129 (tavernkeeper, 170 South Water); Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register*, 152 (boarding house, 56 South Water); Thomas Stephens, *Stephens’s Philadelphia Directory for 1796* (Philadelphia: Printed for Thomas Stephens, 1796), 182 (shopkeeper, 56 South Water); Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1797* (Philadelphia: Printed for the editor, 1797), 179 (tailor, 56 South Water); Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory For 1798* (Philadelphia: Printed for the editor, 1798), 140 (tailor, 56 South Water).

⁷⁹ “Pacific Whale Fishery,” *Hutchings’s Illustrated California Magazine* 1, no. 10 (April 1857): 438.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Other satires include a very similar 1806 engraving by Charles Williams, published by S. W. Flores, Picadilly, also entitled “Monmouth Street” (Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 806.00.00.42), and a 1791 engraving of “Snip’s warehouse for ready-made cloaths,” published by Robert Sayer of London (Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 791.12.10.04).



Fig. 15. S. Collings and J. Cooke, *Monmouth Street*, 1789. Etching and roulette on laid paper, publisher S. W. Fores. (Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.)

down before the door of a slopseller, where I was soon fitted with a great coat.” Lackington refused to pay 25 shillings for the coat and turned to go, only to find that the door “had a fastening to it be-

yond my comprehension, nor would the good man let me out before I had made him an offer.” Writing years later, Lackington viewed the seller with some sarcasm; he remembered that the “honest

slopman” had tried flattery, complimenting Lackington’s “clean, honest, industrious looks.”⁸² A man who wanted to exit a slop shop with quality goods at a decent price had to be a savvy customer.

Once a buyer selected his clothes, by whatever name, he paid the price in cash.⁸³ Slops buyers had little to offer in the way of goods and services for barter, and even less reliability in credit because they were not always local residents. Fixed prices and cash exchanges made for quick sales and maintained a shop’s immediate finances, even though ready-made clothing garnered a lower profit margin than bespoke garments.⁸⁴ Because they relied more on cash than credit, slops-sellers probably kept only basic accounts, and no such documents have been identified in historical archives.

Slops Makers

In most tailoring shops, drapers and cutters prepared the pieces of a garment before assembly. The best tailors knew how to cut flat cloth so precisely that, once assembled, the pieces would form a fitted, three-dimensional garment. That assembly depended on other tailors who sat cross-legged atop sturdy tables to keep textiles away from the dust and grime of the floor. Sitting close to a window for light, a tailor placed his tools within easy reach, spread around him, as shown in Denis Diderot’s 1771 *Encyclopedie* (fig. 16). Most men in the eighteenth century wore custom garments made by tailors, though the quality and fit depended on the wealth of the wearer and the skill of his tailors.

⁸² James Lackington, *Memoirs of the Forty-Five First Years of the Life of James Lackington* (London: Printed for the author, 1793), 208–9.

⁸³ An apocryphal story holds that each patron also received a drink upon a purchase at the early Brooks Brothers shops, according to *Established 1818: Brooks Brother Centenary, 1818–1918* (New York: Cheltenham, 1918), 13. Having abandoned an earlier story that Henry Brooks was an artisanal tailor, Brooks Brothers now claims a more mercantile pedigree, albeit one that attributes too much originality to the company. A recent company history stated that “Brooks Brothers was, if not the first, at least among the first to offer ready-made clothing,” and that “‘Off the rack’ clothing was unheard of in Europe at this time.” John William Cooke, *Generations of Style: It’s All about the Clothing* (New York: Brooks Brothers, 2003), 21. Interestingly, the slops-seller mentioned in “The Bobadiliad,” discussed below, promised to seal the deal with a drink of “lasses water” (rum) with Dearborn. Evangelicus Sockdollager [pseudonym], “The Bobadiliad,” *The Tickler* (Philadelphia), July 7, 1813, 4.

⁸⁴ Lambert noted the relative profitability of bespoke over ready-made clothing in “Bespoke Versus Ready-Made,” 58. Walsh discusses elements of the operations of such shops in “Shop Design,” 170.

Slops producers operated in environments much more cramped and cluttered than Diderot’s workshop. The cost of sewing tools was among the lowest of any trade and the required space minimal, making it relatively easy to establish oneself in the business.⁸⁵ Most eighteenth-century slops-sellers employed a few outworkers, men and women who sewed in corners at home, using garret lights and candles for illumination.⁸⁶ When slop shops did include production space alongside retail, these areas resembled Thomas Rowlandson’s 1823 satire (fig. 17). In his depiction, Rowlandson played with the vocabulary of tailoring; a “hot goose” was a tailor’s iron, as the young boy is placing in the fire, and “cabbage” referred to scraps of fabric.⁸⁷ It was said that tailors were on holiday and did not make much money in “cucumber time” (summer) when their gentleman patrons left the city, and also that “tailors are vegetarians, because they live on ‘cucumber’ while at play, and on ‘cabbage’ while at work.”⁸⁸

Even lowly tailors and slops makers understood something about cutting and fitting clothing. Whether or not they developed or employed such skills depended on their position in the trade and society. One tailor might skip the steps of fitting and sew a monkey jacket in a generic size to save time while another might never learn any trade skills beyond constructing a garment from pieces cut by a more skilled artisan. Knit goods such as breeches and pantaloons (as well as professionally embroidered garments such as “fancy vests”) arrived as “patterns” in slop shops, where stitchers assembled them to fit a particular buyer.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Miller, *Needle’s Eye*, 80.

⁸⁶ Bruce Laurie mentioned antebellum outwork briefly in *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 24–25. A good history of outwork in England, albeit of a later period, is Duncan Bythell, *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Batsford Academic, 1978).

⁸⁷ Scraps of fabric left from cutting garment pieces were known as “cabbage,” and piecing a garment was called “cabbaging.” *OED Online*, s.v. “cabbage,” n. 3, <http://www.oed.com>. I am grateful to Charles Fithian for bringing this term to my attention. James L. Kochan, in *The United States Army 1812–1815* (Oxford: Osprey, 2000), 5, noted a similar term for scraps, “shafeings,” in the correspondence of Irvine, but I have been unable to find reference to this word elsewhere.

⁸⁸ The precise origin of the connection between cucumbers and tailors is unclear and possibly a German importation. The best discussion I have located, containing the quoted passage, is Michael Quinion, “Cucumber Time,” *World Wide Words* (blog), <http://www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-cuc2.htm>.

⁸⁹ The term “fancy vests” appears in numerous advertisements (see, e.g., those cited in nn. 32 and 76) and referred to garments usually constructed of a silk body adorned with a variety of embroidery techniques. A number of unassembled patterns



Fig. 16. Detail, *Tailleur d'habits et tailleur de corps* [tailor's shop], 1771. From Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie: Recueil de planches sur les sciences, les arts libéraux, et les arts mécaniques, avec leur explication*, vol. 8 (Paris: Briasson, 1771), pl. 1. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)

Just as slops could vary from plain to patterned in material, they could be sturdy or flimsy depending on the skill and dedication of the stitcher. A few fragments of clothing recovered from pre-1820 shipwrecks offer the only known examples of possible slop clothing and confirm this qualitative variety.⁹⁰ Although British in origin, garment frag-

survive, including one worked with tambour embroidery at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and another at Winterthur Museum. In 1797, Philadelphia tailors Ashby and Tyson had in stock “knit breeches patterns,” or the unassembled pieces of the garments, in silk, worsted (wool), and cotton. Advertisement, *Porcupine's Gazette* (Philadelphia), May 1, 1797, 199. The fashionable elite often wore knit breeches, but such garments also appeared in advertisements for runaway apprentices, suggesting their adoption by a variety of wearers, even if sometimes as hand-me-down garments. See Bryan Paul Howard, “Had On and Took With Him: Runaway Servant Clothing in Virginia, 1774–1778” (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 1996), 119.

⁹⁰ Many works have presented clothing as art or delineated the precise details of cut and construction, but few have combined this sort of examination with the historical concepts of material culture. One such exception is Claudia B. Kidwell, “Riches, Rags and In-between,” *Historic Preservation* 28, no. 3 (July–September 1976): 28–33. Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Lan-*

guage of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002) is the seminal work.

⁹¹ Babits and Brenckle, “Sailor Clothing,” 189.

⁹² Montgomery, *Textiles in America*, 218. For more on this waistcoat and other *DeBraak* textiles, see Tyler Rudd Putman, “Textile Artifacts from H.M. Sloop *DeBraak*,” *Military Collector and Historian: Journal of the Company of Military Historians* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 75–88.



Fig. 17. Thomas Rowlandson, *Hot Goose, Cabbage, & Cucumber*, 1823. Etching on wove paper, John Fairburn, publisher. (Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.)

regularly “cabbaged,” or pieced, and the waistcoat’s buttonholes are slightly coarser than those of other extant garments from the same period (fig. 19). But it was carefully constructed, with pockets trimmed in red silk, and it would have been a hard garment to miss on the street or aboard ship (fig. 20). The waistcoat was not saved for special occasions; its original owner wore it enough

to necessitate replacing a lost button with a different type (fig. 21, showing original button type).

The Rise of Merchant Tailors

When he entered that slop shop in Philadelphia in 1795, Long stepped into a business on the cusp



Fig. 18. Upper left breast section of waistcoat showing buttonholes along center opening at left, *DeBraak* shipwreck, Delaware coast, 1798. Cotton body, linen lining, brass buttons; H. $5\frac{3}{8}$ " (along edge), W. $7\frac{5}{8}$ " (maximum).

of new things. The growth of ready-made clothing production and sales in the years that followed resulted from gradual developments in the slops trade punctuated by sudden increases in military and naval demands. Military uniforms, not considered slops, were nevertheless ready-made garments assembled under the same conditions as slops. During the American Revolution, local sources and contract production supplied soldiers' uniforms. In 1799, the federal government established the Schuylkill Arsenal in the Gray's Ferry neighborhood south of Philadelphia, where it operated under several other names over the next century and a half.⁹³ With the outbreak of the War of 1812,

expanding federal and state military forces placed unprecedented demands on government supply networks. Local tailors received federal contracts for army uniform production. John Curry, for instance, oversaw the production of 2,000 linen jackets in 1812.⁹⁴ Soon after, however, US Commissary General of Purchases Callender Irvine restructured the system, and the government began employing its own network of outworkers.⁹⁵ Irvine rented a building in Philadelphia where tailors cut fabric pieces into kits and inspected the finished

⁹³ See Kochan, *The United States Army*; Stephen E. Osman, "Background Notes," essay in sewing pattern *Past Patterns* #041, *U.S. Army Roundabout Circa 1812* (Dayton, OH: Past Patterns, 2003); Francis Burke Brandt and Henry Volkmar Gummere, *Byways and Boulevards in and about Historic Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Corn Exchange National Bank, 1925), 259.

⁹⁴ Osman, "Background Notes," 2.

⁹⁵ Erna Risch, *Quartermaster Support of the Army: A History of the Corps, 1775–1939* (1962; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1989), 119–27. A valuable discussion of Army clothing production at an earlier date is John U. Rees, "'The tailors of the regiment': Insights on Soldiers Making and Mending Clothing and Continental Army Clothing Supply, 1778 to 1783," *Military Collector and Historian* 63, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 254–65.



Fig. 19. Reverse of upper left breast section in fig. 18 showing applied lapel facing at upper right and “cabbaged” lining (horizontal seam at upper left).

work of many outwork tailors and seamstresses, between 3,000 and 5,000 individuals at any point in the war.⁹⁶ This combination of skilled preparation, outwork, and final inspection was remarkably productive. In 1813, Irvine told Secretary of War John Armstrong that he could “have 10,000 cotton jackets with sleeves made in 2 weeks.”⁹⁷ This was a speed and scale most slops-sellers would have found incomprehensible only a few years before, but by now many of them employed more outworkers than ever, producing military uniforms, sailor slops, and ready-made civilian garments.

⁹⁶ Risch, *Quartermaster Support*, 145–47. Kochan also discussed prewar and wartime clothing production in *The United States Army*, 5–8.

⁹⁷ Callender Irvine to Secretary of War General John Armstrong, June 17, 1813, entry 2117, Commissary General of Purchases Letters Sent, Record Group 92, National Archives and Records Administration, as quoted in Osman, “Background Notes,” 2.

The hands that made this rapid military production possible were not idle when the War of 1812 ended. Tailors already felt threatened by legions of outworkers before the war, as when Baltimore’s journeymen tailors went on strike in 1799, crying that masters hired “every Woman whom they are informed can make her own children’s clothes ... nay, the very slop makers are put in a state of requisition.”⁹⁸ Shirts and trousers were one thing, but garments such as coats and vests had been the province of trained tailors. “They who heretofore could hardly put together check’d shirts, and duck trowsers,” continued the protesting Baltimore artisans, “are now employed in making vests, breeches, pantaloons, coatees, and summer

⁹⁸ “To the PUBLIC,” *American And Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore), June 5, 1799, 3. See also Charles G. Steffen, *The Mechanics of Baltimore: Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution, 1763–1812* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 116–18.



Fig. 20. Lower right stomach section of waistcoat showing pocket remnant at upper center and center opening at right. H. 6 $\frac{5}{8}$ "", W. 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (maximum).

coats."⁹⁹ By 1815, with the war over and a labor surplus of newly trained female sewers hitting the civilian market, journeymen tailors realized their worst fears. Whereas late eighteenth-century slopsellers usually employed only a handful of outworkers, retailers now assembled networks of dozens and even hundreds of stitchers. In American port cities, entrepreneurs began operating on an expanded scale that both consolidated labor and dramatically increased domestic ready-made garment production and sales.

Despite such business expansions, slop shops carried a lingering reputation, sometimes merited, for inferior goods. By 1818, when an editorialist railed that "it seemed for a while [after the War of 1812] as if every house was converted into a slop shop; and that the whole pursued no other business but the purchase and sale of dry goods," the term encompassed any store that sold cheap and low-quality fabric and notions as well as clothing.¹⁰⁰ Soon after, another columnist rejected old mindsets of colonial status and dependency as relics of a time when "we were accustomed [*sic*] to consider this continent only as a sort of slop shop for the sale of English commodities."¹⁰¹ As "slop shop"

became ever more widely derisive, clothing merchants saw an opportunity to rebrand themselves and approach a more genteel clientele while continuing to rely on the same proven system of outwork. John Curry, the man who oversaw the large jacket contract of 1812, recognized the trend early. By 1810, Curry dubbed himself a "merchant tailor," joining a burgeoning class of tradesmen who dealt primarily in ready-made clothing while adopting a name that had long referred to men who offered tailoring services and sold uncut textiles.¹⁰² It was not revolutionary when other tailors, many of whom had occasionally offered some ready-made clothing alongside their bespoke garments, also converted to selling only ready-made garments be-

⁹⁹ Steffen, *The Mechanics of Baltimore*.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Saunders, "To the Members of Both Houses of Congress of the United States," *Weekly Aurora* (Philadelphia), December 14, 1818, 344 (second of two editorials under this heading).

¹⁰¹ "The Force of Habit," *Weekly Aurora* (Philadelphia), June 7, 1819, 122.

¹⁰² James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1810* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1810), 74. John Curry first appeared as a tailor in James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1804* (Philadelphia: Printed for the publisher, 1804), 61. As early as the sixteenth century, *merchant tailor* denoted a clothes maker who also supplied textiles, according to *OED Online*, s.v. "merchant tailor," n., <http://www.oed.com>. In 1819, William Thomas arrived in Philadelphia from London on the brig *Alexander* with a large assortment of men's clothes, intending to engage in "the business of a Merchant Tailor in all its branches." Advertisement, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), March 3, 1819, 1. The first nominal merchant tailors (two) appeared in the 1801 Philadelphia city directory. Cornelius William Stafford, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1801* (Philadelphia: Printed for the editor, 1801), 10 and 97. By 1810, the directory listed at least nineteen merchant tailors. Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1810*. In 1820, there were twenty-eight. Edward Whitely, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1820* (Philadelphia: McCarty & Davis, 1820).



Fig. 21. Fragment of waistcoat with conical button. H. $2\frac{5}{8}$ " , W. $1\frac{5}{8}$ " .

cause they could produce them cheaply and sell them readily.¹⁰³

Along with a new name came new tailoring techniques. James Burk, owner of the Shakespeare Fashionable Clothing Store on Philadelphia's Sixth Street, cleverly obscured the origin of his garments in 1819 by assuring potential customers that "he can fit any person from the above assortment, they all being cut by measure."¹⁰⁴ Next door, M. Thomas operated The Cheapest Clothing Store in the United States, and, at the dry goods store of R. and H. Jones only blocks away, "gentlemen wishing to leave the city in a short time, may have one or more suites made in 6 hours notice."¹⁰⁵ In a "sham

¹⁰³ Lambert found frequent evidence among English tailors for the sale of finished ready-made garments alongside bespoke clothing. Lambert, "Bespoke Versus Ready-Made," 57–58.

¹⁰⁴ Advertisement, *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser* (Philadelphia), September 22, 1819, 4. Later, Burk posted a want ad for fifty journeymen tailors with coat-making experience: advertisement, *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 10, 1819, 3. Zakim noted Burk's establishment of two other shops in New York City in 1821 and 1822: *Ready-Made Democracy*, 41–43.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas advertisement, *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser* (Philadelphia), March 10, 1819, 1; Jones advertisement, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), January 13, 1819, 1; John

heroic poem" of 1813, "The Bobadiliad," General Henry Dearborn entered a "tonish [fashionable] Slop shop" where the proprietor offered to "take the measure of your person."¹⁰⁶ Merchant tailors like Burk, Thomas, the Joneses, and the Bobadiliad retailer did in fact cut garments "by measure," but these measurements were not the personal ones taken by bespoke tailors. Instead, merchant tailors adopted systems of average body sizes to create standardized clothing, inspired in part by the necessity of creating military uniforms that would fit any number of new recruits during the War of 1812.¹⁰⁷ The six-hour coats of the Joneses were not the result of frenzied labor from cutting to finishing by a crew of tailors, but rather of slight modifications to nearly complete garments waiting in the back of the shop.

Slops-sellers oversaw the new changes in plotting patterns and sewing garments, standardizations that dramatically altered men's clothing production. Byfield described his 1825 guide *Sectum, Being the Universal Directory in the Art of Cutting*, part of an expanding genre of tailoring manuals used in both England and the United States, as directed to "the *Slopseller*, who may employ numerous work-people, on different sized articles."¹⁰⁸ He promised "an unimpeachable standard ... upon such plain mathematical principles as leave no doubt with respect to fitting the shapes."¹⁰⁹ His guide offered numerical tables for over fifty unique garments for men using a system based on body types and average sizes. The chart for "Seamen's Pea Jackets," for instance, included six standard sizes,

Adams Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1819* (Philadelphia: Published by the editor, 1819), s.v. "JON."

¹⁰⁶ Sockdollager, "The Bobadiliad," 4. That the slops-seller seemed to be offering to make Dearborn a custom coat suggests that the label was derisive for the purposes of the poem, rather than descriptive of ready-made clothing sales. I have been unable to determine any link between the title of this poem and the similar, derisive phrase sometimes applied by contemporaries to abolitionism, "blobalition." See John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 366, 378–92.

¹⁰⁷ The US Army employed four jacket sizes during the War of 1812, according to Osman, "Background Notes," 2. The Navy also employed standardized sizes at this time, as suggested by an 1816 document in Amos Binney, *Documents Relative to the Investigation, by Order of the Secretary of the Navy, of the Official Conduct of Amos Binney, United States Navy Agent at Boston, upon the Charges Made by Lieutenant Joel Abbot and Others* (Boston: Published by the accused, 1822), 147–48. I am grateful to Matthew Brenckle for bringing this source to my attention. Private slop shops probably maintained idiosyncratic sizes unless they adopted a published system.

¹⁰⁸ Byfield, *Sectum*, v. Byfield described the slops-seller in this instance as dealing "in the wholesale," probably a reference to institutional and naval contracts.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, iv–v.

each with eight measurements for the body and sleeves of the jackets.¹¹⁰ *Sectum* was not simply a slops handbook, however. It also included charts and patterns for, among other garments, frock coats, coatees, “men’s fine trowsers,” and even some women’s clothing.¹¹¹ With books like this at hand, tailors with minimal experience in drafting patterns could cut garments suitable to a range of individuals, and such guides helped them make inroads into men’s clothing production beyond common trousers and jackets.

Slops-sellers and merchant tailors, ranging from master craftsmen to businessmen with little personal sewing experience, expanded their businesses in the early nineteenth century. When Philadelphia slops-seller John Waters died in 1805, his stock included 129 garments and a variety of textiles.¹¹² Such operations grew dramatically over the following decade. When John Antrim died in 1818, his Philadelphia store contained 485 garments including “ready made Coats, Panteletts, Vests, Canton and American made, Hose, Shirts, &c.” worth over a thousand dollars.¹¹³ He also operated a shop in Reading, fifty miles northwest of Philadelphia, which contained another 404 garments and 48 pairs of suspenders, not to mention various textiles, worth \$700.45, plus \$189.96 in cash.¹¹⁴ Even this stock was small compared to what would come. In 1879, historian John Fanning Watson explained that “the ‘clothier’ of the present day is the successor to the slop-shop keeper of the past. The latter had a small establishment which, when full, might hold three or four hundred garments. The clothier turns out coats, vests, and pants by thousands, and being therefore in his own estimation a more important man than the slop-shop keeper, he is entitled to another ap-

pellation.”¹¹⁵ As Watson realized, scale alone did not necessarily make clothiers any more genteel than their slops-selling forebears, but the fact that they sold ready-made clothing to more gentlemanly clients certainly marked a major change in business.

Many British and American streets now featured clothing stores whose display tactics differed little from earlier slop shops. In 1849, Englishman Henry Mayhew compared, with some nostalgia, “the quiet house of the honourable tailor” with “the show and slop-shops” where “every art and trick that scheming can devise or avarice suggest, is displayed to attract the notice of passer-by, and filch the customer from another.” The result was that “the quiet, unobtrusive place of business of the old-fashioned tailor is transformed into the flashy palace of the grasping tradesman.”¹¹⁶ They might have bigger buildings, larger stocks, and more refined clients, but nineteenth-century clothing emporiums resembled nothing so much as enlarged slop shops.

Joseph Long’s stolen slops straddled two eras. In 1795, middling and elite men scoffed at slop shops. Only a few years later, new clothing emporiums sprung up, with genteel storefronts and advertisements that shielded their slop shop practices from all but the most discerning critics. Waterfront slop shops, little different from their predecessors, remained a mainstay of poor laborers for decades, but elsewhere in American port cities, salesmen adapted the practices of slops-sellers to a broader clientele, brokering the mass production and sale of ready-made garments to more than just poor dockworkers and wandering sailors. Eventually, ready-made clothing became the standard for men of almost all social levels, a phenomenon apparent in the shops of later clothiers. A gentleman of 1865 would have balked as much at the idea of patronizing a slop shop as his grandfather would have in 1795. But when he walked into a clothing emporium and purchased a ready-made suit, he bought something whose roots lay in the production and sales techniques devised in the slop shops.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹² File 216, 1805, Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia. For a complete transcription of this inventory, see Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 162–63.

¹¹³ Advertisement, *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), August 15, 1818, 2. “Canton and American made” probably suggests the distinction between vests embroidered in China and those embroidered in America. The number of garments and approximate value is based on Antrim’s inventory, file 200, 1818, Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia. A complete transcription of this inventory appears in Putman, “The Slop Shop and the Almshouse,” 164–68.

¹¹⁴ File 200, 1818, Philadelphia Register of Wills, Philadelphia. See Antrim’s advertisement, *Berks and Schuylkill Journal* (Reading, PA), January 3, 1818, 4.

¹¹⁵ John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: J. M. Stoddart, 1879), 125.

¹¹⁶ Eileen Yeo and E. P. Thompson, eds., *The Unknown Mayhew* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 196–98.