



## **Vermont Women 1800-1900**

**by Lyn Blackwell**

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In 1800, many Vermont women lived on farms in newly settled towns. They churned butter, tended chickens and hogs, grew flax, produced cloth, sewed garments, processed meats, made candles, and helped their neighbors with childbirth and sickness. Many households were also beginning to sell their excess production, including potash, livestock, wool, and wheat, in the commercial marketplace. The operation of primitive textile mills, tanneries, iron foundries, furniture-making shops, and machine factories would soon change the Vermont economy and women's lives.

Women on farms experienced less and slower change than those living in Vermont's growing commercial centers, where they increasingly relied on an array of manufactured products. This decline in household production influenced the work and gender roles of nearly all women, with the exception of Abenakis living outside settled communities or in the northwestern part of the state.

As the production of cloth moved to textile factories and farm production became mechanized, women adjusted their work in response to changes in the marketplace. In the 1820s, women began spending more time sewing garments than weaving cloth. Some women began working for local merchants in what was called the "putting-out" system. They braided straw hats, grew and spun silk, made buttons and shirts, or stitched leather shoes at home and exchanged their products for goods at the village store. Others produced butter or made cheese for the local market until cheese factories and local creameries with mechanized processing replaced these homemade products. To boost household income, wives often took in boarders or helped operate family stores, small shops or mills.

Young unmarried women were more likely to work outside the home than their mothers. They were recruited as spinners and loom handlers in textile mills, either in Vermont villages or in the mill towns of southern New England. Many lived in boardinghouses in these textile centers for months at a time, leaving their close-knit communities and parental authority behind. Others were encouraged to teach either at home or in district schools and board with local families, first in the summer term, and by mid-century, for winter term as well. Still others became milliners, making elaborate hats for elite buyers, or seamstresses, traveling from house to house to cut and design clothing. While they were expected to contribute to family income, these experiences outside the household provided young women with new opportunities to earn a living before marriage and to develop relationships with men and other women outside their parents' supervision.

These changes in the economy also influenced widespread shifts in Vermont culture, especially in market towns in the Connecticut River and Champlain Valleys. In these villages, most married women still labored in

their homes, while their husbands and sons worked at local mills, in shops, or small factories, earning cash to purchase consumer goods but also leaving their wives in charge of the household and child rearing.

This shift had already occurred in large eastern cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, where a new cultural ideal for women evolved, centering on the importance of the domestic arts and motherhood to the nation. Writers and educators advocated that women could perform their civic duty by becoming good companions to their husbands and by training their children as citizens. Republican motherhood or womanhood, as historians describe it, provided a rationale to support improved education for women. Families who could afford to educate their daughters beyond district schools sent them to female seminaries like Emma Willard's school in Middlebury, which opened in 1819, to prepare them for such a role.

In the 1830s, as the literate population expanded and religious revivalism swept the region, the Republican motherhood ideal transformed in response to changes in the growing class of educated, pious middle-class women. Ministers gathered female followers into their congregations and helped them organize societies to support the churches, to care for the needy, and to encourage piety in their children. These benevolent activities and the advice of ministers and women writers contributed to the development of the "true womanhood" ideal, which outlined an enhanced woman's sphere of moral influence in the home.

Much of a woman's education was designed to develop the female sympathy and domestic skills necessary to become a "true woman"; domestic, pious, sexually pure, and accommodating to her husband's wishes. A woman who devoted herself to home and motherhood was pursuing her highest calling and most useful occupation while she relied upon her husband for support.

By associating a higher morality with womanhood, this ideal provided white middle-class women with more respect in their families and communities. But as men were increasingly paid in cash wages, it set up a false premise that women's housekeeping had little monetary value while seeking paid work outside the home was unseemly for a married woman. Poor women and immigrants, mostly from Ireland and Quebec, were channeled into domestic service at meager wages or other occupations related to women's domestic roles, such as canning, cigar-rolling, sewing, and textile production. Teaching, nursing, and writing were considered acceptable for unmarried or widowed women with more education.

Because of the persistence of rural life in Vermont, many women had difficulty reconciling their daily lives with the expectations of "true womanhood." They continued to labor at housekeeping, needlework, and family care while trying to boost household income. Even women who lived in growing villages were more likely to think of themselves as frugal housewives, which coupled Yankee values of hard work and thrift with the devotion to family and children characteristic of a "true woman." The ideal represented an important resource for them because it recognized their importance in the family and thereby in society.

In the late 1830s and 1840s, some Vermont women were comfortable supporting petitions against slavery and drinking partly because they were encouraged to act as moral mothers of society. During the Civil War, frugality and working to support soldiers became a form of female patriotism. Women organized Soldiers' Aid societies to prepare bandages and blankets, which were sent to the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Others served as nurses, and a few received appointments as government clerks in Washington, a patriotic service that provided war widows and daughters with higher wages than most women could command.

After the war, middle-class women expanded their voluntary societies dramatically as they transferred the "true womanhood" ideal from the household to the broader community. By joining the Woman's Christian

Temperance Union (WCTU), Village Improvement societies, Children's Aid societies, the Woman's Relief Corps, and other religious and charitable associations, educated women focused on community and self-improvement as well. They aimed to end the flow of liquor, to help poor women and orphans, and to beautify cities while educating themselves in civic life. These activities, the reduction in physical labor they experienced, and the class status they achieved made "true womanhood" an attractive ideal for middle-class white women while distinguishing them from farm and factory workers as well as the increasing number of immigrants in the state.

Farm women by contrast continued to do much of the labor-intensive work their grandmothers had done even as their daughters and sons left home for opportunities in the West or large cities. By the 1870s, it was obvious to many observers that Vermont's rural towns were losing young people. Rural women were likely to miss their daughters' labor as well as their companionship. Even as farms produced more specialized dairy products, women sewed, they cooked, they washed, they ironed, they planted, they hoed, they milked cows, they fed the chickens, they canned vegetables, they chopped wood, and they nursed family illnesses. Improved stoves and sewing machines provided some relief, but families were more likely to invest in equipment for planting, harvesting, and dairy processing before purchasing household technology. Women's labor on farms remained largely invisible. It was usually the "family farm" or male "farmer" who got the credit for superior butter or cream.

Farm daughters experienced greater changes than their mothers as educational and work opportunities expanded for young, single women. By this time, middle-class women could attend secondary schools, teacher and nurse training programs, and even the University of Vermont after 1871, to prepare for professional work. Others ran millinery or dressmaking shops, and clerked in retail stores and offices before marriage. Still, most single women were expected to contribute to family income. Perhaps that is why one young Vermont mill worker found her new job outside the farm both liberating and frustrating. "Must I go home, like a dutiful girl," she wrote, "and place the money in father's hands & then there goes all my hard earnings." Whether they were able to control all or none of their wages, most young women looked forward to their futures as wives and mothers.

In Vermont cities, like Burlington, Rutland, Barre, Bennington, and Brattleboro, women became more divided by class, race, and ethnic differences than previously. Attracted by industrial work, Irish, French-Canadian, Swedish, Italian, and other southern Europeans often settled in ethnic neighborhoods, where wives ran boardinghouses or worked along with their daughters in small factories or as domestic servants. Because there were few African-Americans in Vermont they were more likely to blend into low-income neighborhoods or live on farms than create their own communities. Young farm women and men who migrated into the city lived with relatives or in boarding houses on their own and often mingled in these immigrant neighborhoods.

Sexual exploitation either in the workplace or elsewhere became a problem for young women; others resorted to prostitution, a viable means to earn money but also a crime that could send a woman to prison. While members of the WCTU focused on drinking among young men, they also became concerned about female sexual behavior and used their moral clout to urge more protection for victims. Vermont lawmakers raised the age of consent from eleven to sixteen by 1897.

For working-class wives and widows, the biggest problem was low wages. French Canadian and Irish women filled the ranks of domestic servants and factory workers in textile and canning operations. Paid by the piece

rather than by the hour, women's industrial employment was intermittent because factories without orders shut down for months at a time. In Barre, Scottish and Italian women operated boardinghouses, where they also brewed and served homemade liquor to granite workers to boost their household income.

By the end of the century, the advent of industrialization had divided Vermont women by rural and urban location, by class, and by ethnicity, while helping to change the social significance of women's work. Most women continued to labor, if not at physical work, at least to meet the increasing demands of maintaining a home. Women's labor on farms, in factories, and in boardinghouses was undervalued while their roles as mothers, homemakers, and moral leaders became elevated.

Despite low wages and sex-segregation in the workplace, young women found new opportunities to establish lives away from their parents and took advantage of higher education and training programs. While most women still expected to devote themselves to family and home, an increasing number remained single throughout their lives. As the need for their labor increased, it became acceptable for a woman to forego marriage for a career.