



“By Work in Shop”: Boot and Shoe Production in Calais, Vermont, 1829–1850

Abdiel Kent's boot and shoe shop was organized during a period of transformation, as the earlier system of domestic manufacture and apprentice training slowly gave way to an emerging industrialism based on factory production and wage labor.

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I had the good fortune to be selected as the historical society's Kent Fellow during the summer of 1997. My task, designed to reflect what I found in the collection, was to research the history of Calais in general and Kents' Corner in particular from 1820–1850. Anything relating to the larger economic, social, religious, and political issues commonly associated with Vermont's history during the first half of the nineteenth century was fair game. Waiting for me in the archives was a wealth of information on Abdiel Kent, the Kent brother responsible for the construction of the Greek Revival brick structure now known as the Kent Museum. The museum's founder, Louise Andrews Kent, did much to secure a prominent position for Abdiel Kent within the public historical memory in Calais. So I knew going into the project that Abdiel had been somewhat of a nineteenth-century entrepreneur, that he was involved in a mixture of industry, real estate, and farming both in Calais and in neighboring towns. What leaped out at me from the collection was the significance for Kent's personal economy of a boot and shoe shop located in the complex of buildings at Kents' Corner. Kent established the shop in 1829 after a few years spent in southern New England, which included employment with relatives in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, who operated, among other things, a cotton



*Abdiel Kent (1805–1887).
Portrait by Thomas
Waterman Wood.*

factory and a facility engaged (surprisingly enough) in the production of boots and shoes.

Kent's stay in southern New England exposed him to industrial models that differed from those available to him in Calais. From its very inception, the scale and organization of shoe production in Kent's shop differed markedly from the small-scale domestic manufacture by rural farmer/shoemakers common throughout the countryside during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unlike those part-time shoemakers, who generally supplied local families with boots and shoes on a custom basis, Kent operated his shop year-round, filling local orders and, at times, delivering hundreds of pairs of boots and shoes to merchants ten miles away in Montpelier, by that time both the shire town and state capital, and the nearest commercial center.

Shoe production on that scale depended on the work of outside laborers. Kent's shop was organized during a period of transformation, as the earlier system of domestic manufacture and apprentice training slowly gave way to an emerging industrialism based on factory production and wage labor. Spanning the transition between those shifting systems, Kent's shop, like so many others established during that period, was characterized by what historians have called a mixture of persistence

and change.¹ The employment patterns recorded in Kent's account books document that melding of the old with the new. The steady stream of laborers flowing in and out of the shop over the twenty years between its organization and midcentury clearly reflects a shop aligning itself with new models of production while simultaneously clinging to older patterns of industrial organization. While Kent employed both men and women, apprentices and wage laborers, locals and newcomers, boarders and outworkers, the majority of his laborers were young, unmarried men from Calais or nearby communities, many of whom boarded with Kent while working in the shop for wages. Those arrangements, while lacking the more intimate, paternalistic quality of the traditional one-on-one apprenticeship, cannot be characterized as relationships centered solely on business. Instead, Kent's young journeymen entered a rural industrial world where agricultural demands were answered and where social, civic, and educational interests often took precedence over industrial ones—a manufacturing environment where, in short, cash-poor and landless young men found benefits they measured in more than monetary terms.

In the discussion of the persistence and change that characterized rural industry in general and shoemaking in particular during the first half of the nineteenth century, historians largely have overlooked the ways in which the combination of established and evolving manufacturing practices shaped the work experiences of individual laborers. Indeed, most historical scholarship only skims the surface of that transitional period in an effort to chart the path from domestic craftsmanship to factory production. When the transitional phase is discussed, it is usually to explore the economic participation of women as sewers (or binders in shoemaking) working out of their homes under the putting-out system, and when the analysis centers in the rural shop itself, it is largely to detail the technical changes that occurred as production methods became fragmented, as groups of unskilled laborers, each responsible for one step in the production process, replaced trained craftsmen, each employed to produce the entire shoe.² Although such scholarship does much to explain both the organization of Kent's shop and the marketing of his finished product, it ignores the day-to-day realities within those rural shops, creating a gulf in our understanding by failing to explore the ways in which newer industrial commitments worked in conjunction with older agricultural and civic ones.

Historians generally categorize the shops scattered across the rural countryside during this period as a mixture of older small shops employing a shoemaker and perhaps a journeyman or two, and "twelve-footers"; with dimensions of roughly 12-by-12 or 10-by-10 feet, twelve-footers were production centers large enough to accommodate

an owner or primary shoemaker and several journeymen.³ However, while most rural shops operated roughly within that scale, many Massachusetts shoe factories from the same period were characterized by large-scale production employing scores to over a hundred laborers. Kent's shop falls within the definition of the twelve-footer. Whereas the family shoe shop at Kents' Mills in Rehoboth probably operated within the emerging factory system of southern New England, the version Kent established in Calais reflected an understanding of capitalist production reduced to fit the less industrialized economy of central Vermont.

Unlike other owners of rural twelve-footers, Kent employed outside shoemakers from the start; he was not expanding an already-established trade in which he had been a primary producer, and there is no indication that he worked steadily or consistently in the shop once it was organized. While he was active in the daily operation of the shop (the account books and day books are recorded in his hand), within a few years after its establishment he was employing a man as a sort of overseer, responsible, it seems, for training and managing the laborers. In her 1882 gazetteer of Vermont towns, historian Abby Maria Hemenway stated that Kent's shoe shop had "at times employ[ed] a dozen or more men," a number verified in surviving documents.⁴ The earliest surviving record for the shop, a small pocket-sized memorandum book, recorded the starting dates for eleven men who began work in the shop between 1831 and 1832, while an account book used between 1839 and 1852 recorded the names of at least fifty-five men employed during that period.⁵

In his discussion of the shoe industry during the same period, economist Ross Thomson outlines a system of production in which individual worker control of or responsibility for the finished product was being supplanted by a more fragmented shop organization. After the leather had been cut into uppers in the shop, they were sewn together through a process known as "binding," a step often assigned to women who served as outworkers, completing the stitching in their homes. Once stitched, those uppers could be delivered to the shop where men would form them to the wooden last and then join them to the sole, a process known as "bottoming." By 1830, the rural shoe shop had become a manufacturing center in which, as Thomson puts it, "workers were trained not to make the whole shoe, or even to bottom it, but to trim, last, peg, or heel."⁶ The records for Kent's shop reveal that in this rural industry, labor was divided according to a less rigid example of the model outlined by Thomson. In contrast to apprentice labor, most of Kent's journeymen were paid according to an estimate for an entire month of work. Those wages varied and suggest that payment was based on skill and position within the shop. While Kent's brother worked for eighteen dol-

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lars a month in what Hemenway called a position of “foreman,” thirty-year-old Chellis Scribner worked for a monthly wage of ten dollars.⁷ Kent did not record the labor of his journeymen in terms of pegging, lasting, or heeling, but it is safe to assume that many of his newer laborers were engaged in such tasks.

As historians have pointed out, while journeymen in shops like Kent’s could have been trained by a craftsman who had learned the trade according to an older system of production and then passed on certain steps to laborers divided into gangs, more often than not training was received from another worker who possessed no craft ethos himself. The combination of a lost craftsman ethic with the division of labor into separate steps made it difficult for journeymen to reapply the skills acquired in shops; without an understanding of the whole system, laborers found that their skills were not portable. As another scholar describes it, an earlier focus on careers for offspring shifted to the creation of wage laborers for capitalists in a way that eliminated a laborer’s chance for upward mobility. As factories grew larger, small-scale producers could not compete, and young wage laborers were left little or no opportunity to establish shops of their own. In that analysis, the changing market economy of the early nineteenth century created a growing workforce of landless laborers in both urban and rural areas, an industrial transformation that cemented a wider and more pronounced economic disparity and helped to demarcate the boundaries of economic class.

To explain the transitional phase of manufacture and the reasons why young men from rural areas would choose what is viewed today as constrictive or even exploitative labor, historians cite a scarcity of available agricultural land that grew more severe as the century progressed. According to that theory, the lack of agricultural opportunity created among young men what has been called a “pool of potential workers which the shoe industry could and did tap.”⁸ While wealthier families could finance education or professional training for their young sons, most men turned to the “common occupation” of manufacturing as “another channel for energies constricted by the scarcity of land.”⁹

While agricultural scarcity was a reality for many wage laborers employed in shops throughout New England during that period, journeymen in Calais appear to have had access to farm land well into the latter half of the century. Town deed books are filled with the sale of agricultural lots, and Hemenway’s gazetteer contains brief biographies of numerous local sons who purchased and established farms during the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century. Kent’s own family provides an excellent example of the continuation of farming in the town. Although Abdiel chose a career with agriculture as only a second-

ary focus, all five of his brothers eventually farmed in Calais, most of them establishing farms in the mid-1830s and 1840s, and none of them on land owned by their father.

While some of the men employed by Kent turn up in documents ten and twenty years later as day laborers, most of the members of Kent's workforce who can be traced arrived at the shop as unmarried men in their late twenties and early thirties, worked for a few years at the most, and eventually went on to farm their own lands. Rather than being a response to a lack of agricultural land, then, work in Kent's shop can be interpreted as an example of young men biding their time while they waited for other, more permanent, opportunities to open to them. While some of his shoemakers went on to lives as wage laborers, most were simply waiting for land in the way nearly all manufacturers in New England had done fifty years earlier, a biding of time still possible for them as laborers working in the less-thickly-settled areas of northern New England. The Calais shoe shop operated within a larger world of economic and industrial transition, and its geographic location meant that its young laborers could utilize the new method of production to meet a more traditional or persisting objective.

Perhaps the clearest example of the ways that Kent's shop served as a place of temporary employment for young men before undertaking an agricultural career is seen in the strong ties of so many individual laborers to agricultural obligations. Chellis Scribner worked for Kent off and on during the mid-1840s, and, during that time, Kent recorded the wages Scribner lost for drawing wood and once for being "home haying." Similarly, Hiram Robinson worked both in the shop and on Kent's farm between 1839 and 1840, during which time he lost over seventy days for everything from sheep shearing to cutting hay and plowing gardens. Although Kent credited Robinson on a steady basis for work in the shop during that period, both employer and employee seemed to accept that Robinson's membership in the Calais community necessitated frequent lapses in his shoemaking. Kent's accounts are filled with similar entries for nearly all his laborers, both those who were local and those who were not. While Robinson had been born in Calais, Scribner came from a neighboring town; although entries for both men employed similar language, many other entries for nonlocal journeymen contained only brief entries of "at home" to record days spent away from the shop. Although Calais native Hersey Slayton lost days "to haying" and repairing a barn, nonlocal worker Jason Trask spent several days "to home" during the same period.¹⁰ There is no reason to doubt that Trask's time at home was spent in the fields and barn. Shoemakers could labor with Kent for a week or two, take a six-month leave from

the shop, and return to work again for as long as they wished. Such work patterns continued to midcentury and suggest that Kent's shop was part of a rural manufacturing system answering to a schedule different from that imposed by increasingly regimented conceptions of industrial time.

Still, the significance of agricultural concerns to the daily lives of shop laborers should not be overemphasized. While Kent's laborers did leave the shop to answer the calls of haying and plowing, their employment patterns did not fall exclusively within the framework of the agricultural calendar. Unlike so many shoemakers of the late eighteenth century, men who engaged in craft production during the slow season on the farm, Kent's journeymen were part of a much larger and modern capitalist manufacturing system operating year-round. But unlike the more strictly regimented patterns of production employed in large-scale Massachusetts factories during the same period, laborers in rural shops were able to more thoroughly balance agricultural and industrial demands.

Moreover, it should be remembered that agricultural chores likely were performed on the farms of neighbors or family members, and did not require a strictly seasonal commitment on the part of young, unmarried men. Of eleven men documented as working in the shop during the first half of the 1830s, six began work in the spring or summer, while an additional four began in the fall between early September and mid-November, the height of the harvesting and slaughtering seasons.¹¹ Only the record for Jonas Kelton, who began work on the last day of November, falls into the seasonal pattern cited in historical scholarship. Similarly, while the records for the men employed during the 1840s include more examples of winter work, they continue to chart a predominance of work cycles following no clear agricultural pattern.¹² Although Kent's shoemakers spent days fulfilling agricultural commitments, such obligations in no way ordered or defined their time.

The relative flexibility with which Kent operated his shop also afforded his shoemakers the freedom to pursue interests outside of both farming and industry. Again, the entries in Kent's account books offer revealing illustrations. In addition to time off in 1839 for haying and plowing, Hiram Robinson "lost one day to hunting" and half a day in February spent "fishing for pickerl," while Jason Trask lost half a day on a "squirrel hunt." Similarly, twenty-one-year-old A. P. Slayton lost time that year for "fishing + hunting" one day and another time for "fishing with Langdon," another young journeyman boarding along with Slayton in Kent's brick house. It is difficult to imagine that those trips were strictly utilitarian, that Kent's young laborers did not often make a day of hunting or fishing together at one of the many ponds scattered throughout Calais. Similarly, the time journeymen spent away from the shop on trips to

neighboring towns was taken by choice. Kent's records contain scores of references to days laborers spent in other towns, trips that frequently involved charges deducted from wages. Trask's account was debited \$1.50 in July, 1839, "to cash to Craftsbury," while Langdon was charged \$2.00 for spending money for Montpelier. Often those charges reflected transportation fees, such as the time James Deale took Kent's "team to Waitsfield." As with the hunting and fishing trips, many of those day trips involved more than one shoemaker. At times Kent's records for those days suggest his sense of humor, such as the reference to the half day on April 28, 1842, that both Oren Deming and Richard Silloway took what Kent called an "exploring voyage."¹³

But days spent hunting in the woods or traveling to Montpelier were not the only occasions for which journeymen were excused from the shop. Just as Kent seemed to understand that agricultural obligations necessarily called his laborers into the surrounding fields and farms, so, too, did he allow his shoemakers time off to attend educational, civic, and social functions. Kent's accounts contain an abundance of references to both time and spending money given for town meetings, muster trainings, and militia meetings. Calvin Remick was charged twenty-five cents "to cash to Town Meeting" in March 1840, while Simeon Martin lost a total of ten and a half days between May and November 1841 for everything from fishing to an election and a muster training. Such events could be both civic and educational, and gave both Calais residents and outsiders employed in the shop an opportunity to interact with other members of the community.

Other educational or recreational events functioned similarly. In addition to hunting, fishing, and traveling in 1839, Trask took at least one half day to attend a concert at the meeting house, while Nelson Harris twice attended an "exhibition or speaking school" in 1846. However educational or exciting such events may have been for young men from rural hill towns, it is difficult to imagine that they held a significance equal to the opportunity to attend New Year's balls and parties. Joel Langdon spent December 31, 1840, away from the shop "to distribute ball cards," while Horace Hawes lost one and a half days in January 1844 "to Ball," perhaps traveling northeast to his hometown of St. Johnsbury for the event. It is easy to imagine some of the social benefits of attending mixed community gatherings. Richard Silloway surely was not the only laborer in attendance at a party on January 1, 1842; we cannot help but wonder whether Kent's twenty-two-year-old neighbor, Roxa Tucker, a young woman who had both boarded with and worked for Kent the previous year, was in attendance along with Silloway. In any event, the two were married the following fall.¹⁴

Those examples suggest that, contrary to popular scholarly opinion, work as a wage laborer in a rural shop did not necessarily signify a loss of artisanal authority in exchange for a life controlled by inadequate wages. Rather, Kent's shoe shop provides a case study with which to problematize that interpretation. In addition to the benefits of days spent fulfilling personal obligations and interests, wages or equivalent amounts of credit largely spent on goods obtained in Kent's small store gave journeymen access to otherwise unobtainable commodities. Although payment in goods equivalent to the wages due laborers (often referred to as the truck system) was a common practice during this phase of industrialization, scholarship touches on it only briefly. When truck payment is discussed, it is largely to illustrate how it created a class of laborers under capitalism, and with the assumption that credit was used to purchase overpriced food staples and other necessities from company stores.¹⁵ Surviving account records for Kent's journeymen, men paid largely through that truck credit, reveal very different uses for shop wages. Rather than purchasing staple goods in Kent's store, many laborers used their credit not only on spending money for day trips, but on an assortment of material goods Kent was able to provide for them. Clothing, cigars, tobacco, and liquor dominated those purchases and, combined with the fee many laborers owed Kent for board in his house, often surpassed the credit they had earned. Joel Langdon earned \$113.08 between March and August 1839, mostly for work done in the shop, but by August he owed Kent \$30.00 for twenty week's board. In addition, Langdon began to accumulate charges in the store during his first week of employment; by August he had purchased on credit everything from liquor and cigars to sugar, buttons, and a straw hat. When Kent totaled the debit side of the account, Langdon owed him \$83.08 for merchandise plus the boarding fee. He had saved nothing during his six months of employment. Similarly, Benjamin Richardson earned \$10.22 for a little over a month of work in 1845; during that time, however, he purchased pants, mittens, cigars, and shaving utensils from Kent's store, running up a debit of \$10.47. In the end, Richardson settled the account by paying Kent twenty-five cents cash. The choices those young men made with their money do not suggest an awareness of their place within what is commonly cited as a growing class of permanently landless and powerless wage laborers. In addition to shaping their own employment periods, journeymen gauged the benefits of labor in the shoe shop on a scale that included access to social and civic events, as well as a ready supply of nonutilitarian, perhaps even extravagant or luxurious, material goods.

Undoubtedly, of course, some of Kent's shoemakers struggled to sur-

vive on their wages. A handful of the men employed by Kent between 1839 and 1852 can be traced a decade or two later to wage labor. Some continued in Kent's shop, where the census enumerator found them after midcentury still employed as shoemakers. Although those men were the heads of their own households, the enumerator's failure to record property valuations (coupled with the lack of surviving grand lists for Calais) makes it impossible to chart what level of economic success they might have achieved. Still, by 1880 the shop was all but motionless; without land or skills and thorough training, those shoemakers perhaps were forced to leave Calais in order to survive. Former shoemaker Nelson Harris failed to find success after he left the shop: By 1850 Harris was thirty-three years old and living in the neighboring town of Worcester where he struggled as a day laborer with personal property estimated at \$150.00.¹⁶ Even if not all of Kent's laborers eventually acquired farmland, even if, for some of them, employment in the shop signaled an initiation into what would become a lifelong dependence on the emerging world of industrial wage labor, their experiences in the Calais manufactory cannot be viewed strictly as a case of capitalist exploitation. Even Nelson Harris found in the shoe shop an environment where he could earn a monthly wage, learn (at least part of) a trade, and exercise the freedom to take days off to attend exhibitions and speaking schools. Kent's account books document over and over again a cluster of laborer interests that could be simultaneously agricultural, civic, familial, educational, or social—but never solely industrial.

Kent's Calais shoe shop was established during a period of economic and industrial transformation. Tethered between an older system of craftsmanship and apprentice training and an emerging one of large-scale factory production, Kent's twelve-footer prospered by juggling a mixture of persisting and evolving techniques. Indeed, it embodied that state of economic flux, of industrial metamorphosis. The shop employed apprentices but mostly adhered to the newer system of wage labor, a system in which truck credit soon would be replaced by cash. It employed a few women as binders, but largely relied on the more traditional labor of male shoemakers. Located in a hill town in central Vermont, the shop was both near enough to a commercial center to prosper from its shoe market, and distant enough from Massachusetts factories to succeed without a strictly regimented work cycle. As a result, Kent's shoemakers were granted significant control over their own work schedules.

But the Calais shoe shop was established on the cusp of cultural change; straddling a dying world of domestic manufacture and an emerging one of factory mechanization, the shop eventually would slow. Its success had depended on economic fluidity, on a period of

transition; it would not survive the century. In comparison both to the system it replaced and the one to which it soon gave way, its span was brief. Its walls, however, concealed a whirl of worker activity—the details of which we have only begun to uncover.

NOTES

¹ For the theory of persistence and transformation in rural industry during the nineteenth century, see Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

² The most commonly cited study of the shoe industry is Blanche Evans Hazard, *The Organization of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Massachusetts Before 1875* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921). See also John R. Commons, “American Shoemakers: 1648–1895: A Sketch of Industrial Evolution,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 24 (November 1909): 39–84; Ross Thomson, *The Path to Mechanized Shoe Production in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989). For the social conditions of rural laborers in general, see Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

³ Hazard, *Organization*, 43; Thomson, *Path to Mechanized Production*, 23. For a description of earlier small shops, see Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 99. Smaller shops evolved during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as seasonal exchange by individual farmers gave way to “craft production proper, skilled work conducted full time in shops that might also employ journeymen and apprentices.”

⁴ Abby Maria Hemenway, *Vermont Historical Gazetteer IV* (Montpelier: Vermont Watchman and State Journal Press, 1882), 158.

⁵ Abdiel Kent, Account Book, 1839–1852, Vermont Historical Society manuscript collection, X MSC 20. This account book is missing some pages, which probably contained accounts for additional shoemakers.

⁶ Thomson, *Path to Mechanized Production*, 23–25.

⁷ Hemenway, *Gazetteer IV*, 158; Abdiel Kent, Account Book, 1839–1852.

⁸ Thomson, *Path to Mechanized Shoe Production*, 31.

⁹ Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*, 94.

¹⁰ Abdiel Kent, Account Book, 1839–1852.

¹¹ Abdiel Kent, Memorandum Book, 1829–1836, Vermont Historical Society, AC B K413.

¹² Abdiel Kent, Account Book, 1839–1852.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Vermont Vital Records, 1760–1870 (Middlesex: Office of Records and Research, microfilm).

¹⁵ Thomson, *Path to Mechanized Shoe Production*; Clark, *Roots of Rural Capitalism*; Prude, *Coming of Industrial Order*. According to Hazard, many shoe shop owners also had stores on their premises; *Organization of the Boot and Shoe Industry*, 51. However, it is important to remember that Kent’s store functioned primarily as a trading place for other Calais residents. Kent supplied his store with goods both from Montpelier merchants and traded in by Calais farmers; I have not attempted to analyze whether or not he significantly raised the prices he then passed on to his shoemakers.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Seventh Census, 1850*, Vermont (Montpelier: Vermont State Library, microfilm); Vermont Vital Records, 1760–1870; Hemenway, *Gazetteer IV*, 128–177.