

*The Merriams of Brookfield:  
Printing in the Economy and  
Culture of Rural Massachusetts  
in the Early Nineteenth Century*

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IN 1798, TWO YOUNG MEN arrived in the country town of Brookfield, Massachusetts, to undertake the printing business. Ebenezer Merriam of Paxton had just finished his apprenticeship with the renowned printer Isaiah Thomas, publisher of the *Massachusetts Spy*. He was, in fact, very likely Thomas's last apprentice, having as he said, 'obtained a discharge from Mr. Thomas myself when I was twenty years of age in consequence of his relinquishing printing.' With the financial backing of his brother George, a Worcester bookbinder who had also learned his trade with Thomas, Ebenezer and a third brother, Dan, who had been by turns a schoolteacher, pioneer farmer in upper New York, and rural bookseller, 'contrived a project of publishing a paper in Brookfield.'<sup>1</sup>

Brookfield was then a sprawling federation of rural communities. The 'West Parish Village,' where the young printers settled, was an emergent commercial location, one of the largest in western Worcester County, with some thirty dwelling houses, numerous artisans' shops, two stores, and a pair of taverns. The Merriams had been encouraged in this enterprise by a small group of successful farmers, country lawyers, physi-

<sup>1</sup> Homer Merriam, 'My Father's History and Family,' *Annals of the Merriam Family*, Merriam-Webster Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University (hereafter cited as AMF).

cians, and merchants—Brookfield's economic and political leaders—who hoped that a weekly newspaper would stimulate the town's growth into a commercial center capable of rivaling Worcester, the county seat some twenty miles to the east. In 1794, these gentlemen had assisted another Thomas-trained journeyman on the same errand; yet within two years Elisha Hurlbut Waldo had found that publishing a newspaper amid the just-emerging villages and scattered farms of central Massachusetts was unprofitable and had given it up to go south.<sup>2</sup>

Within a few years the young Merriams had learned, painfully, the same lesson of economic geography that their predecessor had, namely, that the region's population density and economic development were insufficient to support a newspaper in competition with Thomas's *Massachusetts Spy* and those papers published in the county seats to the west, Northampton and Springfield. On a number of occasions they were forced to remind slow-paying subscribers to their *Political Repository: or Farmer's Journal* that 'we retain the old-fashioned custom of eating yet.' But such hints and pleas were unavailing. By 1802, the Merriams could diagnose their difficulty precisely: 'The atmosphere in which we move is limited to a very small circle, being hemmed in on every side by "brethren of the type."' In that year, they discontinued the *Political Repository*. Such a disappointment was, judging from the short survival time of most rural New England newspapers, the common experience of early nineteenth-century newspaper publishers.<sup>3</sup>

The Merriam brothers had come to the countryside to print and publish a newspaper, and the failure of this enterprise forced them to consider other means of survival. Their options,

<sup>2</sup> Barnes Riznik, 'Printing, Publishing, and Bookselling in Early Brookfield' (Unpublished paper, Old Sturbridge Village, 1965); Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers 1690-1800*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1947), 1:117-18, 351-53; *Worcester Intelligencer or Brookfield Advertiser*, 1794-95; [Brookfield] *Moral and Political Telegraph*, 1795-96.

<sup>3</sup> 'My Father's History and Family,' AMF, pp. 21-23; Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers*, 1:352; [Brookfield] *Political Repository: or, Farmer's Journal*, 1798-1802.

if they wished to continue to practice the craft in which they had been trained, were to leave the town to find a more promising field for newspaper publishing, as Waldo had done, to depart to look for work as journeymen in other offices, or somehow to contrive to make a living by printing in Brookfield. Unlike Waldo, the Merriam brothers had already struck deep roots into the community, both marrying into local families. They chose to remain, and, 'as a more lucrative employment is the end in view,' they announced in 1802, 'We shall in future devote the whole of our attention to Bookwork, which we shall continue at the Printing-Office we now occupy in Brookfield.'<sup>4</sup> Yet the same conditions that doomed newspaper publishing promised no better fate for any attempt to produce and retail printed matter of any sort exclusively in the countryside. The Merriams' solution was to undertake, as printers, what would become rural Massachusetts's generic response to economic challenge—what Gregory Nobles in his study of broom making in the Connecticut River Valley town of Hadley, has called 'rural production for urban markets.'<sup>5</sup>

How and to what effect book publishing was sustained in the Massachusetts countryside for almost fifty years, is a story that, in addition to some considerable interest in its own right, can illuminate some corners of less-than-fully-understood subjects: the transformation of rural economic life, the structure of the American book trade, and, somewhat more tentatively, the rural cultural landscape.

Set in the broken hills of southwestern Worcester County, Brookfield's rural economy was, in 1800, dominated by mixed farming—the cultivation of crops of rye and corn, and the grazing and overwintering on hay of cattle. Some cheese, butter,

<sup>4</sup> *Political Repository: or, Farmer's Journal*, April 28, 1802.

<sup>5</sup> An editorial in the [Worcester] *Massachusetts Spy*, June 24, 1830, has a remarkably sophisticated analysis of the failure of newspapers in small country towns; Gregory Nobles, 'Rural Manufacture and Urban Markets: A Case Study of Broom-making in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts' (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Cincinnati, 1983).

beef, and a little grain went to wider markets outside the town and its contiguous communities. Most of these goods, however, were consumed in the households producing them or entered a thriving, complex, and predominantly cashless network of local exchange, in which agricultural goods, farm labor services, and the work and products of generally part-time craftsmen/farmers were traded between households. This exchange system is crystallized for historical study in those most common of all the documents left by the ordinary people of rural New England, account books. Patterns of exchange moved along lines of force determined by kinship ties, household sex and age composition, the unequal distribution of land, livestock, and farming implements, and the development of specialized skills.

Economic life was concrete, face-to-face, and inextricably intertwined with family ties, everyday social interactions, and community relationships. Each economic exchange recorded in a farmer's account book, for example, was likely as well to have been a 'visit' or significant social occasion. A recent and perceptive student of Brookfield's rural economy has argued that transactions between farm households were as much affirmations of social equilibrium as they were hard-eyed weighings of gain and loss.<sup>6</sup> Yet these patterns of exchange, structured by the traditional practices of a predominantly agrarian but literate and numerate community, persisted in, and in many ways continued to define, this rural economy as it underwent significant transformation in the early nineteenth century.

Storekeepers (poorly studied but important agents of the marketplace) were also the critical intermediaries between this rural network of exchange and the wider trade patterns of New

<sup>6</sup> Susan Geib, 'Changing Works: Agriculture and Society in Brookfield, Massachusetts, 1785-1820' (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1981); Jack Larkin, 'The View From New England: Notes on Everyday Life in Rural America Before 1850,' *American Quarterly* 34(1982):244-61; Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, 'Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 41(1984):333-64.

England and the Atlantic world.<sup>7</sup> Taking in trade the marketable produce of the countryside, they assembled it in wagonloads for the trek to Boston or another metropolis such as Hartford, Providence, or Portsmouth. There, in an often complex series of transactions based partly on cash but also on offsetting credits between buyers of foodstuffs and wholesalers of dry and West India goods, as well as seasonal credits allowed them by wholesalers, storekeepers transmuted such produce into 'assortments for the county trade,' manufactured and distantly produced goods that rural households wanted. With these patterns of local exchange and wider circulation as a kind of matrix, the market orientation of the rural economy became markedly wider and more complex in the early nineteenth century. The most impressive physical testimony to this process could be found in the landscape itself. Looking through the windows of his printing office over the decades, Ebenezer Merriam would have seen the burgeoning of one of central Massachusetts's dozens of 'center villages' out of a landscape of scattered farmsteads. The growth of these commercial central places, just beginning in the years immediately after the Revolution, was accelerating around 1800. Such new villages, astride the region's improving road system, were settlements of artisans, merchants, professionals, and their households. Their work was oriented in part to the needs of travelers, but, far more importantly, to the demands of the countryside for goods, services, and the organization of production.<sup>8</sup> Along ma-

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Sloat, 'The Center of Local Commerce: The Asa Knight Store of Dummerston, Vermont,' *Vermont History* 53 (1985): 205-20; Jeanne Whitney, 'Store Transactions: A Window on a Community, The Daniel Spaulding Store of Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 1829' (Unpublished paper, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Jack Larkin, 'The Evolution of a Center Village: West Brookfield, Massachusetts, 1760-1850' (Old Sturbridge Village Research Report, 1977), and 'Center Village Development in Inland Massachusetts and Connecticut' (Old Sturbridge Village Research Report, 1978); Joseph Wood, 'The Emergence of Commercial Central Place Villages in Rural New England, 1780-1830' (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1977), and 'Elaboration of a Settlement System: The New England Village in the Federal Period,' *Journal of Historical Geography* 10 (1984): pp. 311-36.

lor waterpower sites, a coordinate but quite different landscape of textile and furniture manufacturing villages was emerging. And in center villages and country neighborhoods, some artificers were moving away from locally focused fabrication and repair to the manufacture of edge tools and farm implements for wider distribution. Moreover, in addition to their customary production of butter, cheese, hay, grain, and meat, farm households in Brookfield as in many other Worcester County towns began to produce shoes and palm leaf hats by the thousands. Organized primarily by local merchants and other entrepreneurs on a putting-out basis, this production was funneled through the center villages into the wider streams of commerce flowing toward Boston and New York.<sup>9</sup>

In early nineteenth-century Brookfield, books also became part of this rural-to-urban flow of goods, although at first this appears to violate seemingly reasonable assumptions about the flow of cultural materials between metropolis and hinterland. Unlike their neighboring craftsmen in the Brookfield center village, the Merriam printers faced a critical problem in the marketing and distribution of their products. Oriented primarily toward the service of rural populations, blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, carpenters, wheelwrights, and harnessmakers could, if reasonably skilled and properly situated in an expanding commercial village, interlock relatively comfortably with the local exchange economy. Demand for the products of their craftsmanship was frequent and substantial in volume, had a low distance threshold, and a high urgency in terms of the functioning of farms and households.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Larkin, 'Center Village Development,' pp. 13-17; Thomas Dublin, 'Women and Outwork in a Nineteenth-Century New Hampshire Town,' in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, 1985), pp. 51-70; Christopher Clark, 'The Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut River Valley, 1800-1860,' *Journal of Social History* 13(1979):69-89; Robert A. Gross, 'Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord,' *Journal of American History* 69(1982):42-61; Pruitt, 'Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy'; Richard L. Bushman, 'Family Security in the Transition From Farm to City, 1750-1850,' *Journal of Family History* 6(1981):238-56.

Even in so literate a countryside, books were another matter. Books—except, of course, for pamphlets—could not be efficiently printed in small editions or on demand. The same forces that made a newspaper highly unprofitable in Brookfield—a primarily scattered, rural population, a shortage of cash, and a low demand for printed matter, relative to that of goods—made reaching out for wider markets an imperative of survival for book printing.

The output of the Merriam presses varied considerably from year to year. But as early as 1798, and as late as 1840, a Brookfield imprint appeared on at least one book each year; more often, there were two, three, four, or five of such imprints in various-sized press runs, along with many small pamphlet editions of sermons by central Massachusetts clergymen and occasional orations by laymen of local prominence. In total pages, editions of Isaac Watts's eighteenth-century rhymed version of the Psalms, Testaments, and Bibles, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English devotional works (such as Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted* and *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, Robert Russell's *Sermons*, and John Mason's *Select Remains*), along with numerous editions of William Perry's *Royal Standard English Dictionary* predominated until 1820. After that year, the Merriams abandoned Bible publishing, and a new breed of works of religious instruction and consolation appeared and shared primacy with school textbooks, pocket encyclopedias, town officers' guides, and hymn books.<sup>11</sup> But how,

<sup>11</sup> Merriam Bibliographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department. This file was constructed using the following sources: Charles Evans, *American Bibliography, 1639-1799*, 13 vols. (New York, 1903-55), 12, 13; Ralph R. Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker, *American Bibliography 1801-1819* (New York, 1958-63); Richard H. Shoemaker, *A Checklist of American Imprints 1820-1825* (New York, 1964 [for 1820], then Metuchen, N.J., 1964-69); Richard H. Shoemaker and Gayle Cooper, *A Checklist of American Imprints 1826-29* (Metuchen, N.J., 1970-71); Gayle Cooper, *A Checklist of American Imprints 1830* (Metuchen, N.J., 1972); Scott Bruntjen and Carol Bruntjen, *A Checklist of American Imprints 1831-33* (Metuchen, N.J., 1975-79); Carol Rinderknecht and Scott Bruntjen, *A Checklist of American Imprints 1834* (Metuchen, N.J., 1982). These sources made it possible to find all Merriam imprints recorded by bibliographers, and those books printed by the Merriam office and published elsewhere that acknowledged the printer separately. With the publishers' accounts of the Merriam ledgers, and the *Cost Book of Carey & Lea, 1825-1838*, edited

then, did these books become economic goods? Printers knew from over three centuries of painful experience that, however nourishing to mind and spirit, books could not be eaten and made very expensive fuel for fireplaces and stoves.

We can understand the place of country publishing in the book trade and in the rural economy by dissecting the several distinguishable but interlinked networks that made up the Merriams' economic world, an inquiry made possible by the survival of the office's ledgers and a daybook for the years between 1818 and 1831. The smallest element in this network was the web of kinship, employment, and coresidence that bound the Merriam households together. Moving out in concentric circles were networks of local agricultural/craft exchange, retail book purchase, and, economically most important, a network of wholesale book distribution in the countryside. More specialized exchange paths existed between the office and its suppliers of paper, type, and ink.<sup>12</sup> The largest link was a far-flung network of trade with booksellers and publishers. This pattern of exchange arrangements spanned much of the Northeast. It concentrated most heavily in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Worcester, Hartford, and Albany, but at times it extended from Pittsburgh to Portland.

Brookfield-produced books—about three-fourths of the office's output—were carried by freight wagon to the offices of

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by David Kaser (Philadelphia, 1957), it was possible to locate other books printed by the Merriams for Carey and Lea as well. For Carey and Lea, see also E. & G. Merriam Ledger for 1824–28, p. 192, and the E. & G. Merriam Ledger for 1828–31, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> The principal sources on which conclusions about the economic life of the printing office are based are the E. Merriam & Co. Ledger for 1819–24, which covers the last five years of Ebenezer and Dan's partnership, the E. and G. Merriam Day Book for 1828–31, and the ledgers for 1824–28 and 1828–31, which cover the period of partnership between Ebenezer and George Merriam. These documents are in the Merriam-Webster Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University. Earlier Merriam records are not accessible at this time, although it is rumored that an earlier ledger exists, unavailable to researchers, in Brookfield. The various accounts in the ledgers have been indexed by the author by category; the account indexes are in the Research Department files at Old Sturbridge Village. To document most generalizations, references will be made in the notes to ledger and category, rather than to specific entries. Specific examples and quotations will be cited individually.



such firms as Isaiah Thomas, Jr., or Dorr and Howland in Worcester; Richardson and Lord, Crocker and Brewster, or John Ewer in Boston; Collins and Hannay in New York City; Carey and Lea in Philadelphia; or Gould and Banks in Albany. But the Merriams did not receive cash in return or credits with other urban merchants and suppliers, since both were in short supply. Cash flowed primarily in one direction, up the hierarchy of community size, out of the hinterland and into the cities. Books, of course, were abundant; the circulatory system of the book trade was a two-way flow of printed matter. In return for Brookfield books, books were carted back into the Massachusetts countryside. The basic paradigm of the Merriams' interaction with the book trade was books for books, although occasionally books were traded for type or printing furniture. Debit and credit balances were totaled at irregular intervals, roughly from six to eighteen months, and settled primarily in additional books or, sometimes, in printing work from the Merriams.<sup>13</sup> From a Brookfield vantage point, at least, the American book trade was structured as much in terms of concrete commodity exchange as was the local, rural economy itself.

Devotional works, readers, spellers, and pocket dictionaries went to city publisher-booksellers by the hundreds. Back came almanacs by the thousands, and assortments of other books in lots ranging from two to two hundred items. Yet the economic conundrum of the country printer was seemingly far from solved; only eleven percent of the books taken in exchange and eight percent of the office's own output were disposed of at the 'country bookstore,' which occupied one room of the printing office in Brookfield.

The key to survival lay in the creation of a secondary distribution network for books in the countryside. Merriam books

<sup>13</sup> 'Publishers' Accounts,' E. Merriam & Co. Ledger for 1819-24 (hereafter cited as E. M. & Co. Ledger); 'Publishers' Accounts,' E. and G. Merriam Ledger for 1824-28 (hereafter cited as E. & G. M. Ledger 1); 'Publishers' Accounts,' E. and G. Merriam Ledger for 1828-31 (hereafter cited as E. & G. M. Ledger 2).

alone of course would not have sufficed to keep the office afloat through its storekeepers' network, because the office could not print a wide enough variety of the schoolbooks, almanacs, religious works, and utilitarian volumes that country store customers demanded. Both parts of the exchange cycle were critical. During the years between 1818 and 1831, the Merriam partnership kept accounts with a total of ninety-one rural merchants in twenty-six towns of southwestern Worcester County, northeastern Hampden County, and southeastern Hampshire County; during most years, they traded with twenty-five to thirty storekeepers. The accounts show that the printers made several trips to each store every year, either delivering mixed assortments of Merriam and other publishers' books and a little stationery or picking up store goods in return. Again, in only a very few of these accounts did cash change hands. The printers balanced out accounts with books, the country merchants with goods. Also part of the Merriam network were five textile manufacturing firms, which took books to sell in their company stores in exchange for some store goods and quantities of cloth.<sup>14</sup>

Homer Merriam, who apprenticed at the office, recalled how the exchange network was organized, with the printer 'sometimes driving out 15 to 20 miles to canvass among the country merchants for trade, exchanging books, paper, etc., with merchants in the surrounding towns for such goods as they kept and we could use.'<sup>15</sup> Country storekeepers probably preferred to deal with the Merriams rather than directly with urban publisher/booksellers because payment was so much easier—exchanging store goods for books rather than cash or third-party credits. Most books were delivered in the fall, but the printers took payment throughout the year. Homer Mer-

<sup>14</sup> 'Storekeepers' Accounts,' E. & G. M. Ledgers 1 and 2; E. & G. M. Ledger 2 for 1828-31 noted the location of each account, much of which information could be mapped back onto E. & G. M. Ledger 1 accounts.

<sup>15</sup> 'Homer Merriam,' AMF, p. 64.

riam noted that a typical delivery meant 'often going out for a day, with a horse and wagon, visiting a circuit of perhaps three or four towns, and perhaps ten merchants in those towns, gathering up goods, a list having been prepared beforehand of articles wanted, calico for a dress, possibly silk for ditto, handkerchiefs, gloves of cotton cloth, cloth for coats or pantaloons for the apprentices or for us children, family stores, groceries, sometimes carrying a keg in the hind part of the wagon to be filled with molasses, taking with him perhaps a sister if a silk dress was to be selected or a young brother as a kind treat to the latter.'<sup>16</sup>

Analysis of the office's ledgers reveals what the reminiscences suggest: that this pattern of concrete commodities exchange within the rural context constituted most of the printing office's effective 'income,' even though much of it ultimately derived from interaction with wider markets. In the current state of knowledge about the book trade, the final destination of these Merriam books is uncertain. Did they reach the hands of readers principally across city bookstore counters, or were they recirculated into other parts of the American countryside along the well-worn paths of rural-urban exchange? It seems probable that some of the books, at least, like shoes, tools, and brooms, moved from hinterland to urban distribution center and back to hinterland again.

The Merriams had to 'canvass among the country merchants' in order to survive. With the wide variety of goods taken in patiently negotiated exchange for those books storekeepers could exchange with their customers, the masters of the Brookfield printing office could feed and clothe their families and apprentices, and pay their journeymen. Store goods were also 'recycled' into the local exchange network, primarily, it would appear, to balance out small accounts with local trading partners who were surfeited with payment in books. However, most goods clearly flowed directly into the households dependent on

<sup>16</sup> 'My Father's History and Family,' AMF, pp. 16-17.

the printing office rather than into the office itself; eighty-five percent of the volume of store goods appears in household and employee accounts.<sup>17</sup>

Two generations of Merriams were linked to the Brookfield office into the 1840s. Ebenezer and Dan 'let all things go common' in their partnership, until Dan's death in 1832. All of their sons and daughters worked there in printing and binding. After Dan's death, his oldest son, George, just out of his apprenticeship, replaced him as partner; Dan's widow, Thirza, boarded apprentices. When George left in 1832 to take up publishing and printing in the more promising metropolis of Springfield, Ebenezer's son, Ebenezer P. Merriam, became his father's partner, and when that arrangement failed, Ebenezer took another nephew, Lewis, into the firm.<sup>18</sup>

The households that had to be fed, housed, clothed, and otherwise provided for were not inconsiderable ones. The cast of characters in the 1820s included Dan's eight children and Ebenezer's three, two widowed mothers, a mother-in-law, and two other dependent kinsmen. In addition to partners and their sons, the Brookfield office employed one long-term journeyman and from six to ten apprentices, depending on the volume of work and the precise constellation of family labor available. Ebenezer Merriam's obituary in 1858, probably written by his nephew Charles, estimated that 'the average number of boys in his office was about eight, and the whole number who went through a regular apprenticeship was some 62.' So many printers in training may have imposed a burden of a supervision, but this extended use of apprenticeship was clearly a way of keeping labor costs manageable within the framework of the rural economy. An analysis of the Merriam households from 1800 through 1840, matching census schedules with office led-

<sup>17</sup> E. M. & Co. Ledger; 'Storekeepers' Accounts,' 'Family Accounts,' 'Employees' Accounts,' and 'Local Accounts,' E. & G. M. Ledgers 1 and 2.

<sup>18</sup> 'My Father's History and Family,' AMF, pp. 11-18; 'Account as Written by . . . Ebenezer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 21-25, 27; 'Homer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 45-46; 'Dan Merriam—E. Merriam & Co. Business History,' AMF, p. 44.

gers and vital records, reveals this substantial group living with their masters; from 1810 on, no fewer than twenty-one individuals in two households, once as many as thirty-one in three households, were directly dependent on the office. Resources for the support of the households also included the produce of a thirty-acre farm, worked primarily by a hired man and the labor of sons during slack times at the office.<sup>19</sup>

According to their sons, Merriam wives and mothers had 'a life of hard labor,' in cooking, sewing, washing, and cleaning for households greatly augmented by the presence of apprentices. Daughters alternated between sewing and stitching books for binding and, as a brother recalled, 'staying home to help mother in doing the housework for the family.' Their domestic labor, which we cannot easily quantify or describe fully from the records, was surely no less critical to the maintenance of the printing office as an economic unit than was the printing of books.<sup>20</sup>

The wages of journeymen, and the small 'overwork' payments made to older apprentices, were also primarily exchanges of concrete commodities for labor. The boys took their overwork wages in schoolbooks, almanacs, books for their own reading, penknives, clothing and shoes, credits at country stores, and small doles of cash. The office's long-term journeyman, Chester Kellogg, received only one-eighth of his wages in cash paid to him or to others on his behalf. Over half of his pay took the form of rent of a small house adjacent to the office, store goods and foodstuffs provided directly, credits with Brookfield storekeepers and craftsmen for goods and services provided to his household, and single volumes of textbooks and religious works for his family's use. Most interesting, however, was the remainder of his wages, over one-third,

<sup>19</sup> *Vital Records of Brookfield, Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, Mass., 1909); manuscript of federal population schedules for Brookfield, second through seventh censuses, 1800-50, U.S. Bureau of the Census; 'Biographical Notice of Ebenezer Merriam,' *Springfield Republican*, October 22, 1858.

<sup>20</sup> 'My Father's History and Family,' AMF, p. 13.

which consisted of books and almanacs in larger numbers. He was clearly exchanging these volumes elsewhere in a smaller-scale version of his employers' own network, involving him in the same struggle to turn books into what could be eaten and worn.<sup>21</sup>

Books left the office in large quantities headed for the cities or the country stores. But the printers also carried on a significant retail trade in books, recycled store items, and stationery. The office's 'country bookstore' was the focal point of local contact. Trade with individuals constituted twelve percent of the office's total business, and nine percent of its book sales.<sup>22</sup>

One hundred and ninety-one individuals—more strictly speaking, households—made purchases at the office, from twenty-six different towns. Nearly half of all individual accounts were with individuals living within the town of Brookfield itself, with another third from the adjoining towns of North Brookfield, Western (Warren), Brimfield, Ware, Hardwick, and New Braintree. The remaining one-sixth of these accounts were divided among eighteen towns as far west as Northampton, and as far east as Worcester, and from Sturbridge and Oxford on the south to Barre and Enfield on the north.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of what was sold, the printers' local trading pattern can be described as a net of retail book purchasers. However, in terms of what was taken in payment, the shape of most exchange relationships was remarkably similar to that of other rural craftsmen. In many small accounts, which usually ran over several years, the printers exchanged books, stationery, and a few store goods with farmers for foodstuffs such as rye, corn, veal, cheese, butter, pumpkins, turnips, onions, firewood and lumber, and, occasionally, farm work or the loan of draft

<sup>21</sup> E. M. & Co. Ledger; 'Employees' Accounts,' E. & G. M. Ledgers 1 and 2; E. M. & Co. Ledger, pp. 22, 116, 148, 188, 233, 241, 246, 247, 254, 258; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 84, 169, 180, 195, 211, 213; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 45, 145, 125.

<sup>22</sup> E. M. & Co. Ledger; 'Local Accounts,' E. & G. M. Ledgers 1 and 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

animals. Shoemakers, who were themselves chiefly producing for distant markets, paid for books primarily with mercantile credits, payable in goods, drawn against merchant/manufacturers in the shoe trade. Their accounts were small, as were those of a variety of rural artisans, workers in wood, leather, and metal, who exchanged small amounts of craft products for books.<sup>24</sup>

The office's large, individual accounts were about equally divided into two sharply different groups. One consisted of individuals who were important customers of the bookstore, customers who needed or wanted books or printing in substantial quantities. The other group was made up of those local artisans who were major suppliers of goods and services to the office and its linked household economies. The exchange patterns of these two groups were very different.<sup>25</sup>

Ministers, doctors, and lawyers were individually the best customers; nine-tenths of their purchases were technical works for their professional libraries. Ministers ordered and paid for the printing of sermons. Seminary and district schoolteachers, both men and women, also came to the bookstore to purchase their own copies of schoolbooks and to have 'certificates of merit' and 'rewards' forms printed for their pupils. The preceptors of the Brookfield Female Classical Seminary bought supplies of advanced texts for their students. These professionals were exceptional as well in paying in cash far more frequently than other customers. Because they required books for their work and had fewer opportunities to make exchanges for their services, eighty percent of their payments on account were made in cash, in contrast to the six percent of cash payment totaled by book-buying farmers and artisans.<sup>26</sup> It is im-

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> 'Ministers' Accounts,' E. M. & Co. Ledger, pp. 51, 109; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 66, 144, 148, 159, 183, 223; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 71, 95, 97, 141; 'Physicians' Accounts,' E. M. & Co. Ledger, pp. 41, 111, 147; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, p. 154; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 4, 22, 54; 'Lawyers' Accounts,' E. M. & Co. Ledger, pp. 5, 63, 83; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, p. 68; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 7, 9, 28, 43, 54, 60, 63, 132, 138, 197.

portant to note as well that book customers from beyond the contiguous towns were almost invariably professionals, men for whom books were tools.

The office's vital network of local suppliers included a substantial cross-section of rural artisans. The two largest local accounts in the Merriam ledgers, in fact, were those of two nearby carpenter/builders, Southworth Howland and Samuel Rogers. The size of these two accounts relates directly to the rebuilding of the printing office and repairs to two Merriam houses during those years. Two hatters, four tailors, and a custom shoemaker also had significant accounts; they provided clothing, footwear, and headgear for both apprentices and family members. Two tanners provided leather for book-binding and inkballs. Local carriagemakers repaired and rebuilt the two office wagons, which were critical for the indispensable book trade with county merchants. Blacksmiths performed repairs to the presses' ironwork, shod horses, and mended household utensils. A cabinetmaker repaired furniture for all the Merriam households and made and repaired printing furniture, while a silversmith not only made spoons for Ebenezer Merriam's household but also engraved plates for a pocket encyclopedia and a *Youth's Almanac*.<sup>27</sup>

Books formed only a relatively small part (twenty percent) of the exchange for these crucial goods and services; recycled store goods and credits with Brookfield merchants were the principal medium of exchange. In looking at these accounts, one occasionally senses that books were being pressed on possibly reluctant recipients; for example, the cabinetmaker James Clark, in 1831, was induced to settle a twelve-cent balance in his favor with a copy of Pope's *Essay on Man*, a poor seller that had languished on office shelves since its printing in 1803.<sup>28</sup> These patterns of predominantly concrete commodity and ser-

<sup>27</sup> E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 8, 13, 18, 24, 27, 31, 72, 85, 104, 138, 143, 149; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 6, 33, 34, 36, 42, 43, 67, 94, 186, 218.

<sup>28</sup> E. & G. M. Ledger 2, p. 117.



vice exchange—books for books, books for goods, books and goods for other goods and services, books for cash, and books, goods, and services for work—continued to define the economic life of the Merriams in Brookfield throughout the period for which there is precise documentation. For rural producers, participation in the market economy of the early nineteenth century seems to have meant the constant receiving, sorting, and recirculation of goods, as well as the careful matching of these items with the goods and services others offered. Certainly, for those involved in producing books for market, making a living was, as one of the Merriams remembered, ‘laborious, involving a great deal of mental labor, in planning our publishing, exchanges with other booksellers, and buying, selling, and collecting.’<sup>29</sup> But in the mid-1820s came two significant changes. Both involved a loss of independence, an accommodation to the increased power of larger enterprises in the book trade. One change was the office’s engagement in joint venture publishing with the firms Dorr and Howland in Worcester and Richardson and Lord of Boston. The role of the Merriams in these projects—for *A Massachusetts Town Officer’s Guide*, a *Youth’s Almanac*, and a textbook—clearly seems to have been to provide cheaper printing at country rates, while their partners’ function was to send new type, purchase the copyright, and provide for distribution. Partnership balances, however, were settled up in the traditional way, with books.<sup>30</sup>

Second, and more importantly, cash, the universal solvent, began to penetrate the business of making books in Brookfield. Yet it did so in a curious way. The percentages of cash involved in household/employee, individual/retail, country merchant, and bookseller-publisher exchanges did not increase. However, beginning in 1824, the total cash in circulation in the office’s

<sup>29</sup> ‘Homer Merriam,’ AMF, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 16, 167, 186, 194, 214; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 61, 150, 151, 169, 194, 214; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 95, 198; for information on Dorr and Howland and Richardson and Lord, see E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 80, 171, 207.

accounts did increase greatly. It began with an increasingly asymmetrical exchange relationship between the Merriams and their major suppliers, particularly those who provided paper. Paper remained an enormously important component of the costs of book production in the early nineteenth century. In the Merriam accounts, paper costs ran between thirty-three and forty-five percent of the total for those press runs of books that were 'costed out.' Paper purchases ranged from \$800 to \$1500 per year. Before 1824, the office's primary paper suppliers—Isaiah and David Ames of Springfield and Elijah Burbank of Worcester—had been willing to accept books, store goods, and small mercantile credits, along with printing work on ream wrappers and billheads and a twenty percent infusion of cash, in exchange for paper.<sup>31</sup> It appears that, at that time, firms like the Ames's and Burbank's had exchange networks similar to those of the Merriams, allowing them to find markets in their own rural hinterlands for the goods they received.

In 1824, there was a drastic change in the Merriams' terms of trade with their papermakers. From then on, paper accounts were settled not by commodity exchange, but almost exclusively in the negotiable instruments of a cash economy: bank notes and specie, delivered by stage, or the notes of a few large New York and Philadelphia publishers, redeemable in cash at sight or at three-, six-, or eight-month intervals.<sup>32</sup> Given the size of the office's paper bill, and the established economic patterns of Brookfield printing, this was an enormous sum to raise in cash. In all its previous activities, the office had never handled even a quarter of that sum in the course of a year.

Given our lack of knowledge about the economic networks

<sup>31</sup> E. M. & Co. Ledger, pp. 31, 34, 107, 142; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 7, 20, 26, 71, 177, 208, 222; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 104, 136, 154; for statistical descriptions of these paper mills in 1832, see Lewis McLane, *Documents Relative to the Manufactures in the United States*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1833), 1:288-89, 294-95, 474-75, 516-17, 568-69; end sheets of E. & G. M. Ledgers 1 and 2, all marked 'p. 999,' for paper costs; end sheets, E. & G. M. Day Book.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

and strategies of New England papermakers, it is not possible to say anything too precise or certain about why the Merriams' suppliers shifted their requirements for payment so abruptly. It does seem probable, however, that these Springfield and Worcester manufacturers, located in the two largest inland towns of Massachusetts, were opting out of the commodity exchange network still so pervasive in rural economic life. They appear to have been no longer either willing or able to combine the roles of bookseller and country merchant with that of papermaker.

Clearly, this altering of the terms on which the critical raw material of printing could be obtained had potentially disastrous implications for the Merriams' economic network. Neither country storekeepers nor the standing arrangements of the book trade were likely sources of significant additional flows of cash. The Merriams responded to this alteration in the terms of supply by searching out a different sort of business on very different terms of exchange. They began to provide printing for other publishers on a 'contract,' as they termed it, or jobbing basis. Reaching out to a few large city publishers with whom they already had book trade exchange relationships, most significantly, Carey and Lea of Philadelphia and Collins and Hannay of New York, they negotiated to produce books under other publishers' imprints. This new form of work had three interesting characteristics: it was paid for almost exclusively in cash; it was primarily involved in the production of law books; and some eighty percent of the cash generated was used to pay the office's paper bills, both for the job printing itself and for the office's own imprints. Drafts from Carey and Lea and Collins and Hannay, for instance, were routinely signed over to the papermakers.<sup>33</sup>

Printing lawbooks for the great urban publishers seems, for a time at least, to have been a ready source of cash. Without

<sup>33</sup> E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 40, 170, and E. & G. M. Ledger 2, p. 14; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, p. 192, and E. & G. M. Ledger 2, p. 146.

more detailed studies of urban bookselling we cannot speak precisely, but it may be possible to speculate to some purpose. Lawyers were a significantly expanding occupational group in early nineteenth-century American commercial cities. With commerce came contracts, frauds, debt collection, estate settlements, and the transfer and mortgaging of urban property. The apparatus of legal learning—those tomes that furnished law offices—was becoming more abundant and elaborate. Urban lawyers were as likely as any group in the American society and economy of that time to have ready cash to spend on the necessary instruments of their trade, and, through the channels of contract printing, some of that cash flowed to Brookfield after 1824.<sup>34</sup>

In one sense, this venture was not entirely new. Before 1824 the office had undertaken contract printing at least twice, for Isaiah Thomas, Jr., of Worcester in 1819 and for Carey and Lea in 1820. Yet, unlike those involved in the decisive 1824 shift, both of these earlier ventures conformed to the commodity exchange pattern of the book trade; the office was paid for its work with books for recirculation.<sup>35</sup>

The Merriams expanded their workforce to handle the additional volume of printing, adding two apprentices in 1824, increasing the amounts of 'overwork,' and calling a brother back to the office from Boston. Still, the other economic arrangements of printing in Brookfield went on as before. It seems, then, that the Merriams sought out this participation in the cash economy in order to continue as they were, as printer-publishers inextricably embedded in the rural economy of central Massachusetts. It appears that, like many other rural New Englanders, they were increasing their engagement with the market in order to provide for family security and the continuity of established ways of life. However, this transitional

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Gerard W. Gawalt, *The Promise of Power: The Emergence of the Legal Profession in Massachusetts, 1760-1840* (Westport, Conn., 1979).

<sup>35</sup> E. & M. Co. Ledger, pp. 13, 221.

way of doing business, combining the cash economy of the city with the concrete exchange patterns of the countryside, would not last to midcentury.<sup>36</sup>

Both the earlier and later years of the office's operation are much less precisely documented, since we lack ledgers for the years before 1818 and after 1832. From account-book analysis we can reconstruct the middle third of the Merriams' story, with its themes of the rural economic web and the office's changing entanglement with cash. Yet that same account-book analysis can leave us with an excessively structural-functional sense of the Merriams' world, a vision only of interlocking networks. Autobiographical and other sources, although fragmentary, can provide a more complete sense of both the precarious adventure and the fifty-year trajectory of Brookfield printing.

The first decade and a half of printing in Brookfield was a period of experimentation and, frequently, enormous uncertainty. In those years, it appears that a nationwide system for the distribution and publication of books was struggling to develop, propelled by increases in both the supply of and demand for printed matter of all kinds. Under these conditions, information about market conditions was scarce and the opportunity for miscalculation great; this was especially true if the would-be printer/entrepreneurs had little capital, less urban experience, and were inclined, at first, to be trusting.

Expanding their workforce when necessary by taking on more apprentices, the Merriam brothers undertook major publishing projects, enterprises such as a twelve-thousand-copy edition of the Bible in 1815, with only the sketchiest notion of the size of the market they could command and merely casual, verbal arrangements for financing by a group of local investors.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Clark, 'Household Economy'; James A. Henretta, 'Families and Farms: Mentality in Preindustrial America,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 35(1978):3-31.

<sup>37</sup> 'Account as Written by . . . Ebenezer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 24-29.

Frequently, the result was technically good printing but near disaster in economic terms. In a venture in 1808, the partners bought the complete set of type for a Testament from a printer in London, 'sight unseen, off the bill of lading,' and had it carted from Boston to Brookfield, only to discover that the type was worthless—so soft that it yielded to the slightest pressure of the platen. Investors refused to honor their commitments; one Hartford bookseller never paid for the books he received, and a book peddler absconded with hundreds of dollars worth of stock. As Dan and Ebenezer learned, their business world was one of constant uncertainty and frequently broken commercial agreements.

The most engaging moment in Ebenezer Merriam's reminiscences of fifty years as a printer is his description of the denouement of such a series of miscalculations and mischances in the year 1815.<sup>38</sup> In order to finance the paper and type requirements of their large Bible edition, the Merriams had signed promissory notes that were to be paid, they understood, in books. Due to slowly arriving supplies, the edition was delayed beyond the period of the notes, but there were verbal assurances that all would be well, and the office labored on printing the Scriptures late into the evening of May 15, 1815. 'Somewhat elated with our prospects,' and 'feeling thus secure,' Ebenezer noted, the printers went to bed. They were awakened at one o'clock by the discovery that their creditors, without notice, had descended on the office and their dwellings in 'chaises, wagons, carts, and wheelbarrows' and were taking everything movable, from cows and ploughs to printing presses and type cases, as security for payment of their notes.

'The scene in fact was,' one of them remembered, 'a lively representation of what I had fabled in my own mind of Hades.' The tools and printing furniture had to be returned, because the law forbade their attachment, but livestock, firewood, lumber, a new chaise, and 'a great variety of other property' were

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33–37.

taken. Such scenes—midnight assaults by creditors, sheriff's sales, mortgage foreclosures—were the familiar stuff of early nineteenth-century craftsmen and merchants' nightmares.<sup>39</sup> Even when carried out in a rural setting and structured by the seemingly rustic terms of concrete commodity exchange, printing and publishing was still clearly a pursuit in which one could lose one's shirt, or much more.

The years after 1815 saw no such massive, rickety, and uncertain publishing projects. The Merriams adopted a more prudent set of strategies that held their economic world together: varied editions of books with press runs of rarely more than three thousand copies, publishing collaborations with larger firms, and, as we have seen, cash-generating contract printing of law books.

Yet financial uncertainty continued. Between 1804 and 1837, Dan and Ebenezer mortgaged office, houses, and land fifteen times with some of the wealthy merchant landowners, who constituted an informal banking system in rural Massachusetts.<sup>40</sup> These mortgage loans, normally for terms of one to three years, were used to provide infusions of cash and credit to the office. Interestingly, in four cases, the mortgaging of property was coincidental with the arrival of a paper bill. Mortgage notes were paid when due, but within a year or two another note was taken out, so that the burden of debt was never really lifted. Ebenezer recalled feeling that this was a heavy burden indeed, and a sense of struggle and strain suffuses his memoirs.<sup>41</sup>

The Merriam records seem to exhibit a curious disjunction between activity and information. The commodity-based con-

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Mortgages given by Ebenezer Merriam are recorded at the Registry of Deeds, Worcester County Courthouse. The following citations refer to volume and page numbers: 157/343, 161/584, 165/477, 172/407, 201/45, 203/101, 205/323, 215/563, 235/334, 257/574, 261/568, 295/101, 340/146.

<sup>41</sup> E. M. & Co. Ledger, pp. 34, 107, and E. & G. M. Ledger 1, p. 71; 'Account as Written by . . . Ebenezer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 24–39.

creteness of most of their exchange networks, and the similarity of the American book trade's exchange practices with those of their rural neighbors, allowed the Merriams to continue to use the traditional account keeping of the New England countryside while producing and publishing extensively for distant markets. It may well be that a pronounced lack of fit between the emerging scale and pace of production and exchange and a conceptualization of economic life appropriate to communities of craftsmen and farmers was characteristic of the initial phases of America's early nineteenth-century economic transformation.

Although their business was complex, the Merriams had, from the standpoint of even moderately sophisticated accounting practices, remarkably little knowledge or control of their affairs. Their daybooks and ledgers were kept in the rural vernacular of single-entry account keeping and ciphering. The only accounts registered were specific, individual ones for the firm's hundreds of exchange partners. There were no 'conceptual' accounts for such general or summary categories as 'profit and loss,' 'partnership,' 'wages,' 'cash,' 'binding,' or 'paper.' Accounts were settled at irregular intervals and never at the same time for all customers, so that it was impossible for the Brookfield printers even to know what their *total* credits and debits were at any one time. Ebenezer Merriam and his partners never knew precisely what their wage expenses were, how much they spent on paper, or the total dollar volume of their business. The office was frequently subjected to unpleasant business surprises due to the partners' unawareness that several substantial debit balances were accumulated against them at the same time. Their account books were like those of other Yankee farmers and craftsmen, devices for keeping track of obligations between individual trading partners, rather than measurements of the success of the business as a whole. Indeed, a generalized, quantitative view of 'the business as a whole,' or 'the firm' was very likely a rather fuzzy and abstract concept



for them; individual account balances with a Boston publisher, a Worcester binder, or a Brookfield farmer were far more compelling. In such a context, the concept of profit itself seems dubious. Clearly, as rational men in a commercial economy, the printers knew that success was dependent on income overbalancing expenses, yet there was no way for them to calculate either quantity without enormous labor and there is no evidence that they ever attempted such procedures.<sup>42</sup>

In 1832, George Merriam left Brookfield to take up printing elsewhere, and in 1848 Ebenezer Merriam gave up his business. The story of the years between is encompassed by three themes of change: the 'hiving off' of Merriam printing, stasis and decline in Brookfield, and the eventual unraveling of the country publishing system.

Although Merriam partnerships, in Brookfield or, later, in other towns, changed with death, disagreements, or ambition, they were always primarily familial; fathers worked with sons, uncles with nephews, and brothers with brothers. By 1837, there were four Merriam printing offices and bookstores, lo-

<sup>42</sup> See 'Account as Written by . . . Ebenezer Merriam,' and 'My Father's History and Family,' AMF, *passim*. The account books of farmers, craftsmen, professional men, nontextile manufacturers, and merchants in rural New England between 1790 and 1840 universally display these characteristics. There were, of course, more sophisticated models of accounting practice available in the urban, mercantile world. In the countryside, only textile mills and banks—both of which had significant urban-commercial connections—used them, as did the textile manufacturing industry. Even the comparatively small mills of southern New England practiced 'high style' accounting. The Dudley Woolen Manufacturing Company, some seventeen miles away from Brookfield, kept a sophisticated set of interlocking double-entry records, with numerous categorical as well as individual accounts. The records of the Concord (Massachusetts) Bank are similarly organized. But although texts in double-entry bookkeeping were available, such as the numerous editions and American adaptations of Dilworth's *Bookkeeper's Assistant*, rural New England men of business outside these two most advanced sectors of the economy did not use the system. See Dudley Woolen Manufacturing Company Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library; Concord (Massachusetts) Bank Records, 1831-43, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library; Barbara M. Tucker, 'The Merchant, the Manufacturer and the Factory Manager: The Case of Samuel Slater,' *Business History Review*, 55(1981):297-313; Stuart W. Bruchey, *Robert Oliver and Mercantile Bookkeeping in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1946; repr., 1976). Assertions about rural New England practice are based on a survey of the account book collection in the Old Sturbridge Village library, which contains over three hundred manuscript volumes.

cated in Brookfield, Springfield, and Greenfield, Massachusetts, and in Troy, New York, as family members dispersed to build their own rural printing enterprises—with, at first, very similar networks of trade. Mixing country publishing, contract printing, and an extensive network of storekeepers, the new generation of Merriams seemed at first optimistically bent on replicating the patterns they had grown up with.<sup>43</sup>

Only a few years before leaving the business at the age of seventy-four, Ebenezer summed up the gains and losses of his long printing life: 'I began without pecuniary means, and shall probably leave the world in the same. Owing to my manner of doing business, my losses have been heavy, besides smaller debts in abundance. I have dealt with *knaves, rogues, and fools*, and many *honest* men. I have no reflections to cast upon myself, that I have not been industrious and frugal.'<sup>44</sup> Printing in Brookfield, it turned out, had made a living for the printers and their households, had produced many books, had even, in the words of a reminiscing lawyer later in the century, excited 'awe and reverence' in young boys who had walked past the office, but it had accumulated little.<sup>45</sup> After he relinquished printing in 1848, Ebenezer faced a dependent old age. 'Not having accumulated sufficient property to retire upon,' a nephew remembered, the old printer had to be 'assisted by his friends' in his last years.<sup>46</sup> Such a tale was surely far more common than a success story in early nineteenth-century America, although it was more rarely told.

<sup>43</sup> 'Dan Merriam—E. Merriam & Co. Business History,' AMF, p. 44; 'Homer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 53, 64–66.

<sup>44</sup> Letter quoted in 'Biographical Notice of Ebenezer Merriam,' *Springfield Republican*, October 22, 1858.

<sup>45</sup> Lyman Whiting, *A Bi-Centennial Oration Made in West Brookfield* (West Brookfield, 1869), p. 64.

<sup>46</sup> 'My Father's History and Family,' AMF, 18; Ebenezer Merriam to Josiah Gleason, Worcester County Deeds, 215/563, 369/412; Ebenezer Merriam to Josiah Gleason and George Davis, *ibid.*, 261/568; Ebenezer Merriam to George Davis, *ibid.*, 590/425, 412/537, 415/310; 'Account as Written by . . . Ebenezer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 38–39; 'Dan Merriam—E. Merriam & Co. Business History,' AMF, p. 44; Ebenezer Merriam to George and Charles Merriam, Worcester County Deeds, 419/237.

It was during Ebenezer's last years as a printer that the interlocked systems of exchange that made book publishing possible in Brookfield and elsewhere in the rural North fell apart. Homer Merriam, who had printed in Brookfield and several other country locations, succinctly described the book trade practices that had lasted to about 1845: 'The country printer would order from the city publishers his publications as needed, he to take ours as payment. He would therefore push the sales of the books published by the country printers.' After that time, however, he noted that 'a change was made—by which balance of exchange accounts were to be paid in cash, and the city publisher, instead of ordering our books, accumulated cash balances against us.'<sup>47</sup> For Homer and his brothers and cousins, this penetration of the cash economy into book exchange signaled the end of the world of rural publishing and printing that they had known. Some left the trade; the rest regrouped in the expanding city of Springfield, where G. & C. Merriam abandoned country patterns, successfully adapted to rapidly changing conditions in the book trade, specialized, and is today still a thriving publisher of dictionaries and other reference works.

In turning to the reading rather than the printing and selling of books, this essay may be moving on to somewhat more dangerous ground. The documents that the Merriams have left not only give a picture of economic networks, strategies, and striving, but they also afford a partial and tentative glimpse of the rural cultural landscape. The glimpse is partial because the Merriam office was only one of the agencies of print distribution in central Massachusetts, and it is offered only tentatively because research into this aspect of the Merriams' activities is far from complete.

The books that the Merriams distributed in the central Massachusetts countryside were a striking combination of the traditional, the utilitarian, and the modestly innovative. The lists

<sup>47</sup> 'Homer Merriam,' AMF, pp. 72-73.

of works sent among the country people in the 1820s and early 1830s, composed both of the office's own imprints and those received in exchange, were dominated by school texts, Bibles and Testaments, religious works, almanacs, and toy books.<sup>48</sup> The traditional culture of colonial New England persisted in many of these works. Almanacs continued their immense popularity, sold to almost every customer, whatever else his trading/reading pattern might be. Bibles, Watts's *Psalms*, and exegetical works persisted as major components of bookstore sales.

Yet signs of change there clearly were as well. Rather than the reading of fiction, which into the 1830s seems to have played a very limited role in this cultural world, the critical new component was extensive but informational reading.<sup>49</sup> Traditional works of devotion, the 'steady sellers' so clearly popular with earlier New England generations and well-represented in Merriam publishing before 1821, were declining in numbers, although not disappearing entirely. Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted* and *Saints' Everlasting Rest* continued to find purchasers, but such works sold at the rate of one or two a year, and the purchasers were almost invariably farmers. The eighteenth-century sermons of Robert Russell or John Mason, prominent items in earlier Merriam publishing ventures, were not found at all. Instead, contemporary religious works by English Evangelical authors, notably Thomas Dick's *Christian Philosopher*, *Philosophy of Religion*, and *Philosophy of a Future State*, and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time*, sold steadily in the place of Baxter, Russell, and Mason. Dick's works, some of which the Brookfield firm was the first to pub-

<sup>48</sup> See table below, 'Percentages of Book Sales,' based on all accounts in which books were sold to storekeepers or individuals.

<sup>49</sup> David D. Hall, 'The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850,' and Richard D. Brown, 'From Cohesion to Competition,' in William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench, eds., *Printing and Society in Early America*, (Worcester, Mass., 1983), pp. 3-47, 299-309, provide path-breaking discussions of these issues.

lish in America, may in fact provide us with a useful window into changing reading preferences in the countryside. Dick's volumes were strongly evangelical in tone, but were emphatically not nineteenth-century updates of Baxter or Doddridge. His books combined religious discourse with information-packed expositions on various aspects of natural science and natural and moral theology. Clearly meant for instruction and edification rather than intensive devotional use, such books belonged much more to the emerging cultural matrix typified by the lyceum lecture than to the traditional one of private devotional practice.<sup>50</sup>

Schoolbooks were the countryside's true best sellers, making up almost three-fifths of total sales volume. They were scarcely a new genre; yet even a casual student of American bibliography gains a sharp sense of their increasing number and diversity during the early nineteenth century. The schoolbooks of the 1820s and 30s seem enormously abundant, varied, and specialized in comparison with those of the late eighteenth century, and there is some evidence that in these same years rural New England children were increasingly likely to bring their own textbooks to the district schools. This flood of primers, spellers, graded readers, arithmetics, geographies (often with elaborate atlases), and histories of the United States testifies to the increasing importance in the countryside of the transmission of elementary literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge of the world to the younger generation.<sup>51</sup> Of children's literature per se, there was nothing besides the toy

<sup>50</sup> E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 62, 107; table cited and accounts, *passim*, also E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 9, 112, 115, 193, 221; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 37, 44, 46, 47, 115; Brown, 'From Cohesion to Competition,' and Donald M. Scott, 'Print and the Public Lecture System, 1840-1860,' in Joyce, et al., eds. *Printing and Society in Early America*, pp. 278-99; Thomas Dick, *The Philosophy of a Future State*, (Brookfield, Mass., 1829) and *The Philosophy of Religion*, (Brookfield, Mass., 1829) were first American editions. The Merriams also distributed Dick's *The Christian Philosopher* (New York, 1826, and subsequent editions).

<sup>51</sup> Jack Larkin, 'Dimensions of Childhood,' *Old Sturbridge Village Educational Publications* 1(1981):11-13.

books, which were tiny, extremely rudimentary, and sold for a few cents each.

Clearly by midcentury, fiction had become the hallmark of the new world of popular reading, in striking contrast to colonial patterns. For the Merriams' hinterland readership, however, that new world was still in the future. Fiction could be found on the country bookstore's shelves, but up to the early 1830s it seems to have played no transforming role in the cultural lives of ordinary rural people. Fiction moved slowly, in minuscule numbers, against the predominantly orthodox cultural grain of central Massachusetts, where Puritan-bred suspicion of novels remained powerful. Merriam sales of fiction averaged between three and four volumes per year. The office's only venture into novel publishing on its own account, with Susannah Rowson's *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* in 1819, was not locally successful; approximately half the press run was taken by booksellers, but almost all the rest lingered long on the shelves as unsold inventory. When, in 1827, the office printed Grace Kennedy's novel *Dunallan; or, Know What You Choose* for the publisher Charles Ewer of Boston, the Merriams held back for local sale only sixteen copies of the press run of one thousand. By 1831, they had sold only three of them.<sup>52</sup> Farmers and rural artisans bought no fiction at all, and only two volumes were purchased by country storekeepers, possibly for their own reading. Physicians and lawyers occasionally purchased novels along with professional works (although no ministers did so). They were joined as fiction readers by the apprentices of the printing office, who sometimes took a novel as part of their overwork payments. These young men, members of

<sup>52</sup> David Hall's overall argument on the significance of fiction in 'The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850,' is quite persuasive; Inventory of Dan Merriam, 1824, Docket 40440, Series A, Worcester County Probate Records, Worcester County Courthouse; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, p. 37; 'Nathan H. Ellis,' E. & G. Merriam Day Book, July 24, 1828; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 27, 161, 215; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 51, 162; E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 181, 203, 205. See, for example, George Frisbie Hoar, *A New England Boyhood Sixty Years Ago* (Boston, 1898), pp. 30-31, for central Massachusetts's suspicion of fiction.

households and work environments in which books were an abundant and a highly convenient means of payment for their employers, and somewhat less closely supervised than they would have been at home, were responsible for more than half of the office's total sales of fiction. Interestingly, one of the novel-buying apprentices later lamented his fiction reading, believing that it had permanently injured his powers of factual retention and concentration.<sup>53</sup>

To learn more about the cultural assumptions of rural printers and readers, it might be profitable to take a close look at a locally produced work of nonfiction, *Merriam's American Reader*, first published in 1828. A successful venture, this school text had been compiled, published, and printed by George Merriam. The *Reader* was a compendium of short excerpts for the use of older pupils; its contents were balanced almost precisely between selections by English and American authors, and readings included evangelical exhortation, cautionary moral tales, exegeses of Scripture, lessons in astronomy and natural history, descriptions of foreign countries and scenes in the American West, and essays on American and New England history and biography. There were selections from the Bible, but none from the seventeenth-century classics of Puritan devotion. The writers were English and American Evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although there was a heavy emphasis on contemporary New England Evangelical authors such as Timothy Dwight, Heman Humphrey, and Lyman Beecher, as well as the regional orator-statesmen Daniel Webster and Edward Everett and the sentimental poet Lydia Huntley Sigourney.<sup>54</sup> In a schematic way, this book describes for us a frame of mind that was evangelical and insistently moralistic, yet one that was also hungry for information

<sup>53</sup> E. & G. M. Ledger 1, pp. 146, 205, 219; E. & G. M. Ledger 2, pp. 90, 124, 138, 153, 167, 183; 'Homer Merriam,' AMF, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> George Merriam, comp., *Merriam's American Reader* (Brookfield, Mass., 1828, and subsequent editions).

and instruction. This intellectual temper, according to the Merriam reminiscences, prevailed in the printing office, and it seems to have had powerful resonances with neighbors and customers.

It can, of course be argued that the very economic strategies previously discussed—the Merriams' heavy reliance on storekeepers who might well be unlikely to stock any but the most widely popular and quickest-moving books—pushed the offerings of the Merriams as country book distributors toward the lowest common denominator. Works bought at the office's bookstore in Brookfield did exhibit a more variegated pattern than those distributed to storekeepers. Almanacs, textbooks, toy books, religious works, Bibles, and town officers' guides constituted ninety-nine percent of what went out to country merchants; they made up eighty percent of bookstore sales. Yet, with the additional sixteen percent of bookstore sales made up from the sales of strictly professional books to ministers, lawyers, and doctors, we have accounted for ninety-six percent of the country bookstore's offerings as well.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps, too, the Merriams were highly conservative and unadventurous as book distributors. And yet, as thoroughly interconnected as they were with urban booksellers, it seems that they could have exchanged for any books available in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. They did not completely ignore fiction, history, belles lettres, and other books meant for extensive and noninstrumental reading. They simply bought and sold them in very small numbers. In general, one is struck by the Merriams' eagerness to negotiate exchanges. Had there been a significantly larger demand in their hinterland for books that they already dealt with in small numbers, it seems reasonable to assume that the booksellers would have moved to supply it.

Of course, this is not the whole story. There were other sources of books available in rural central Massachusetts. Dur-

<sup>55</sup> See table below, 'Percentages of Book Sales.'



ing the fourteen years covered by detailed accounts, there were printing offices with bookstores in the county seats of Worcester, Northampton, and Springfield, as well as intermittently existing offices in the towns of Enfield, Palmer, Leicester, and Southbridge. There were also book peddlers. And there were also the well-filled bookstores of Boston, Hartford, and Providence. The records of one agency of book distribution cannot define an overall pattern of book purchasing, let alone give us its precise cultural significance. Most important, we are missing the book-buying patterns of those in rural central Massachusetts who could and did travel to Worcester or Boston to buy their books, the economic and cultural elite of the country towns, whose range in reading was almost surely considerably wider and deeper than the Merriam records suggest.

But there are other reasons to suspect that the Merriam records do mirror the rural, cultural landscape for the ordinary farmer and artisan. The Merriams' book distribution patterns are in close agreement with the characteristics of book ownership evidenced in an Old Sturbridge Village study of probate inventories; this study covers the years between 1790 and 1840 for four towns on the western side of the Brookfield office's trading area—Palmer, Brimfield, and Chester in Hampden county, and Sturbridge in Worcester county.<sup>56</sup> Close to half (forty-six percent) of the probated estates reported no books at all, and half of the reported book collections contained fewer than five volumes. Bibles, religious and devotional works, and school texts predominated in the estates of farmers and artisans; in the much larger collections of professional men, technical works were most abundant. From decade to decade, both the average size of libraries and the percentage of estates with books grew very gradually, with a more noticeable increase in the diversity of holdings. Fiction, history, biography, and po-

<sup>56</sup> S. Dana Snyder, 'Reading in New England 1790-1840,' and 'Statistics of Book Ownership: Brimfield, Palmer, and Chester, Massachusetts, 1790-1840' (Unpublished papers, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department, 1975).

etry were components of the libraries of a few men, almost all of whom were in the top ten percent of probated wealth.

One additional piece of evidence suggests that some of these cultural characteristics may have endured even longer among ordinary folk in central Massachusetts. Charles Barton of Oakham had a varied mercantile career, but he sold books in that town between the years 1847 and 1848. His customers were primarily young farmers and shoemakers, as well as a variety of other artisans. These New Englanders, the great majority under thirty-five, continued to buy Bibles, Testaments, hymn books, and scripture histories, and they tended to avoid fiction. What was new in their book purchasing were cookbooks and books of advice for young men and women, both genres that developed rapidly in the later 1830s and 40s, and a few sensational, but overtly nonfictional, tales of adventure.<sup>57</sup>

As printers of books, the Merriams were clearly both participants in a large and complex commercial system and artificers still living much of their lives in a face-to-face economic world. Analogously, as sellers of books, they may have faced a similar, transitional, cultural situation, bounded on the one hand by traditional religious belief, a distrust of fiction, and a determination that reading be directed toward utilitarian ends, and, on the other, by an increasing demand for information that traditional intensive reading patterns could not provide. Over the long term, the transformation of reading habits in the nineteenth century was as inevitable as was the transformation of American economic life. However, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, in the New England countryside, both processes of change were uneven and complex.

<sup>57</sup> Charles U. Barton, *Account Book, 1846-54*, Oakham, Massachusetts, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library. Occupations of book buyers in 1847-48 were determined from the manuscript of federal population schedules for Oakham, New Braintree, Hardwick, Barre, North Brookfield, and Spencer, Massachusetts, seventh census, 1850, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

PERCENTAGES OF BOOK SALES BY CATEGORY  
MERRIAM PRINTING OFFICE, BROOKFIELD,  
1825-31

<i>Subject Category</i>	<i>Storekeepers</i>	<i>Bookstore</i>
Textbooks	63.5%	50.5%
Almanacs	11.6%	8.5%
Bibles and Testaments	6.1%	5.4%
Devotional books	6.2%	5.1%
Dictionaries	4.1%	3.4%
Lists of town officers	4.0%	5.1%
Toy books	2.4%	1.5%
Law books		7.8%
Books on theology		6.0%
Medical books		2.3%
Fiction	.1%	1.6%
History books and biographies		1.8%
Poetry	.1%	1.0%

SOURCE: E. & G. Merriam Ledger 1, 1824-31, microfilm in Old Sturbridge Village Research Library.

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