'Labor Is the Great Thing in Farming': The Farm Laborers of the Ward Family of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, 1787–1860

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On every morning but the Sabbath from before the American Revolution until long after the Civil War, men awoke early to labor on the Ward farm, the largest and most productive in the town of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Laborers living 'in the family'—sometimes only one, sometimes as many as five—customarily slept in the garret of the house, enclosed by the steeply sloping pitch of the roof. Hundreds of sharp-pointed shingle nails protruded through the roof's thin sheathing, and in the winter, as everywhere in New England, the nails accumulated ice and 'shone like stars' on still-dark mornings. They also threatened to tear men's clothes or cut them if they came too close.[1] It was a space the laborers shared with the unmarried sons of the Ward family, who, when they were home and physically able, usually worked alongside their help. Men working by the day, their numbers depending on the season and the year, walked to the Ward place from

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[1] The well-preserved Artemas Ward House, with garret, still stands in Shrewsbury, along with the impressive barn built by Thomas W. Ward II in 1848 at the height of his agricultural ambitions.

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their small houses scattered over Shrewsbury and the western part of adjoining Northborough. Together they fell to the laborious, repetitious tasks of New England farming: plowing, sowing, and harrowing; ditching and draining; cultivating and weeding; mowing, raking, and stacking hay; reaping rye and oats; harvesting and husking corn; digging potatoes; manuring fields; cutting and hauling timber and firewood; picking apples and making cider; tending cattle, sheep, and horses; and slaughtering animals or readying livestock to be driven to market.

Agricultural laborers were rural New England's most evanescent and elusive men. For the most part they have left few traces behind. But because several members of the Ward family wrote about labor and laborers on the farm, and the Ward farm accounts are voluminous and well preserved, there is information about the lives of 363 men and boys who worked there between 1787 and 1860 and about how their employers dealt with them. This essay is about the complex and changing shape of their experience.[2]

The larger the farm, careful historians of New England's rural economy have demonstrated, the greater was its ability to sustain itself in terms of foodstuffs and the material means of production.[3] But there was one enormous exception. 'Labor,' wrote Henry Dana Ward in 1844 to his brother Thomas Walter II, 'is the great thing in farming'—a sentiment to which Thomas, the more practical farmer of the two, might have replied out of his own deep experience, that labor wasn't the great thing, it was the only thing. Over the years since 1787, New England farmers had learned to work more efficiently and more intensively, and had adopted better scythes, hoes and plows, but real mechanization adapted to the region's small fields and steep and rocky slopes was long in arriving. In 1844 as in earlier years, New England farming was almost wholly dependent on muscle power and would remain so for decades longer.[4]

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[2] Farm laborer biographies were compiled from the following sources in the Ward Family Papers at the American Antiquarian Society: Account Books, 1787–1890; Bills Receipted, 1787–1890; Family Correspondence, particularly letters to and from Thomas W. Ward I and Thomas W. Ward II; Thomas W. Ward I, Diaries, 1786–99, 1818, 1829–35; Thomas W. Ward II, Diaries, 1819–20 and 1830–32; Joseph Ward, Diaries, 1812–14, 1816–18, 1818–19. Data from the Ward papers was linked where possible to Shrewsbury tax, federal census, and genealogical records, the Soundex Indexes to the federal censuses for New England 1800–50, and Massachusetts published vital records, to create a Farm Laborers Biographical File, spanning the years 1787–1860. The documentation for the Ward Farm Laborers Biographical File, and a computer version, are maintained at the Research Department at Old Sturbridge Village.

The Wards were not unique in Shrewsbury as employers of contract labor on a substantial scale. Their records refer to workers engaging themselves with several other local farmers, all men farming substantial acreages and holding wealth in the eightieth percentile or above. The first federal census to provide direct evidence about household composition was that of 1850; in June of that year, the population schedules for Shrewsbury recorded thirty-four unrelated 'laborers' and 'farmers' living in thirty-one farm-owning households, one-sixth of the town's total number. Almost all resident laborers were living and working on substantial farms in the eightieth percentile or higher of real property holding on the population schedule for 1850, and with sixty acres or more of improved land as recorded on the agricultural schedule. One-third of such Shrewsbury farms were using resident labor. This data was computed from manuscript population and agriculture schedules for Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, U.S. Census, 1850, (using a copy on microfilm at the Old Sturbridge Village Research Library).

Shrewsbury was a small 'country town' in east-central Worcester County. First settled in 1717 and incorporated in 1727, the town's population grew from just under 1,000 in 1790 to almost 1,500 in 1820, and fluctuated around that figure for the rest of the nineteenth century. Lacking exploitable waterpower, Shrewsbury did not experience the rural industrialization in textiles or furniture making that transformed many other communities in central Massachusetts. The small grist and sawmills that served country neighborhoods never developed into anything larger, and no manufacturing villages emerged. Shrewsbury followed a different, although related, path of economic development through the first half of the nineteenth century. Its town center emerged as a commercial village: a central place for farmers coming to trade with merchants and artisans, a stopping point on the main road from Worcester to Boston, and a focus of small-scale artisanal production in gunsmithing, tanning, and harness making. From the mid-

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[3] See Robert A. Gross, 'Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord,' *Journal of American History* 69 (1982): 42–61, and Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, 'Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 41 (1984): 331–64.

[4] Henry Dana Ward to Thomas W. Ward II, April 3, 1844, Ward Family Papers. (Hereafter cited as WFP). On New England's slow adoption of harvesting and haying technology, see Clarence Danhoff, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820–1870* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 220–43.

1820s on, Shrewsbury also became a center of rural shoe manufacturing in households and small shops, as Worcester County came to lead New England in the production of ready-made shoes for men. Agriculture remained the most important sector of the town's economy, while growing considerably more slowly. But farming, too, underwent a gradual transformation, shifting away from the traditional crops and strategies of mixed farming toward greater specialization in dairy, hay, and livestock production, with a steadily increasing proportion of that production intended for the market.[5]

The Wards were not only Shrewsbury's largest farmers but the town's most visible family in politics and society. Nahum Ward, one of Shrewsbury's earliest settlers and always an important man in town affairs, had built a substantial and prosperous landholding and settled his sons well by his death in 1754. His second surviving son, Artemas Ward, who took the 'home farm' in Shrewsbury, was an archetype of rural New England's eighteenth century 'gentry' leadership—twenty years as selectman, sixteen years as representative to the General Court, judge of the County Court of Common Pleas, a prominent patriot with terms in the Continental Congress and the first two federal Congresses, and (a point never forgotten in Shrewsbury) the man Washington displaced as general of the Continental Army when he came north to take up his command.

The third of Artemas's five sons, Thomas Walter I, inherited the 'home place' in 1800 at the age of forty-two; he had already been running the farm for over twenty years. He, too, was active in local affairs as moderator, town treasurer, and justice of the peace, kept active in Federalist politics, and between 1805 and 1823 served as sheriff of Worcester County. Thomas's youngest son, Thomas Walter II, inherited the farm in 1836 at age thirty-eight—he had actually been managing it since 1830—and farmed until his death in 1890. At various times he 'held every office of trust the town held to offer,' served as justice of the peace, and was a prominent supporter of the antislavery cause through the 1850s, frequently a delegate to the yearly state abolition conventions, and an acquaintance of William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and John Greenleaf Whittier. Even after the Civil War he was called 'Squire Ward,' as were his father and grandfather before him.[6] Between 1787, when the records on which this study is based begin, and 1860, three generations of Wards farmed between 240 and 330 acres in eastern Shrewsbury: the home farm, usually a second, smaller, farmstead and a fluctuating number of detached parcels of pasture, mowing, and woodlot. Along with this went twenty-one acres of woodlot in neighboring Northborough and 150 acres of pasture land in Phillipston, twenty-five miles to the west, where young cattle were taken to graze during the spring and summer.[7]

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[5] See Joseph S. Wood, 'Elaboration of a Settlement System: The New England Village in the Federal Period,' *Journal of Historical Geography* 10 (1984): 331–56; Jack Larkin, 'An Extended Link in the Great Chain of Benevolence: The Shrewsbury Female Charitable Society, 1832–1842' (unpublished paper, Old Sturbridge Village, 1979); Samuel I. Howe, 'Shrewsbury,' *History of Worcester County, Massachusetts*, 2 vols. (Boston: C.F. Jewett & Co., 1879), 2: 269–83; William T. Harlow, 'History of Shrewsbury' *History of Worcester County*, 3 vols., ed. D. Hamilton Hurd (Philadelphia: J.L. Lewis & Co, 1889), 1: 780–810; Andrew Baker and Holly Varden Izard, 'The Marketing Patterns and Strategies of the Wards of Shrewsbury' (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the History of the Early American Republic, 1988).

In the view of the town's late-nineteenth-century historian, William T. Harlow, Shrewsbury had awakened to the possibilities of commercial agriculture around 1800, when farmers had realized that 'there was a market in Boston for butter, cheese, eggs, chickens, veal and pork, and for beef on the hoof at Brighton.' But the shift had clearly begun some decades earlier. The rural economy of central Massachusetts in the second half of the eighteenth century was a complex mix of production for family consumption, neighborhood and community-level exchange, and gradually widening longer-distance commerce, primarily in the Boston markets. This trade was not extremely large in scale—a trickle of goods by later standards—but its growing importance was attested to by the gradually expanding number and value of 'bought goods' in household inventories. Across the Commonwealth between 1750 and 1800, the prices farmers registered for their produce moved in increasing synchrony with those in Boston markets.

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[6] Shrewsbury Tax Valuation Lists, 1794–1858, show Artemas, Thomas W., and Thomas W. Ward II consistently with the largest agricultural holdings. These lists are located in the Town Assessor's Office, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts (microfilm at the Old Sturbridge Village Research Library). Charles Martyn, *The William Ward Genealogy: The History of the Descendants of William Ward of Sudbury, Massachusetts, 1628–1925* (New York: Artemas Ward, 1925) pp. 106–11, 156–57, 240; Andrew H. Ward, *History of the Town of Shrewsbury from Its Settlement in 1717 to 1829 . . . Including an Extensive Register* (Boston, 1847); Holly Varden Izard, 'Portrait of the Ward Family of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts' (unpublished paper, Old Sturbridge Village, 1988).

[7] The changing shape and value of the Ward holdings can be followed in the Shrewsbury tax valuation lists; Thomas W. Ward II, Tax Book, 1832–44, WFP.

Artemas Ward was clearly producing for the market in significant amounts before the Revolution; the earliest accounts of his son Thomas Ward I, beginning in 1782, record raising, fattening, and marketing livestock for the Brighton market as ongoing activities. Livestock, meat, butter, cheese, and hay remained, although in shifting proportions, the major marketable commodities the farm produced. Corn, small grains, garden produce and poultry went to sustain the household and the livestock or passed into the networks of community exchange.[8]

The last months of 1829 were an important period of change on the Ward farm. In that year, Thomas Ward I was seventy-one, and the only man in the family who was actively farming. In the years between 1807 and 1821, he had successively lost the assistance of his sons. Two—Andrew Henshaw Ward and Henry Dana Ward—had received Harvard educations and were pursuing professional careers. Nahum Ward emigrated to Ohio in 1808. Artemas Ward II died suddenly of typhoid in 1814, and Joseph Ward became increasingly debilitated with consumption in 1814 and died in 1821. In 1817, Thomas II, the youngest, had injured his knee so badly that after three years of increasing difficulty he gave up farming in 1820 for the more sedentary trade of storekeeping. The elder Thomas was thus forced to rely more substantially on hired labor than ever before. He also grew ever more anxious, his correspondence indicates, about the state of his farming and the management of his workers. In late 1829, he persuaded Thomas II to chance the recovery of his knee and return home 'to carry on the farm and have the care of the help,' after a not entirely successful eight-year venture in storekeeping.[9]

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[8] Harlow, 'History of Shrewsbury,' pp. 802–3; Thomas W. Ward I, Farm Journal, 1781–83, Artemas Ward Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Baker and Izard, 'The Marketing Patterns and Strategies of the Wards of Shrewsbury'; Baker and Holly Izard Paterson, 'Farmers' Adaptations to Markets in Early Nineteenth Century Massachusetts,' *The Farm: Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, 1986*, ed. Peter Benes and Jane Montague Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1988), pp. 95–108; Winifred Rothenberg, 'The Market and Massachusetts Farmers 1750–1855,' *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1983): 283–314; Jack Larkin, 'Country Mediocrity and Rural Improvement: The Domestic Environment and Economic Transformation in Central Massachusetts, 1775–1850' (paper presented at the twenty-first Winterthur conference, 'Everyday Life in the Early Republic,' 1988).

The younger Ward began a diary on January 1, 1830, just after he took over, and kept it into 1832.[10] Far more informative than his father's laconic journals, it provides a richly detailed view of work and labor relations on the farm across three seasonal cycles. In 1830, twenty-one different laborers worked for varying periods of time on the Ward lands under his supervision; fifteen labored in 1831, and eighteen in 1832. Allowing for year-to-year overlap, this represented a total of forty-two men and boys.

Thirty of these laborers were day workers living in Shrewsbury and Northborough, men whose ages ranged from the late twenties through the mid-sixties. Most were propertyless, while the rest had very modest holdings. Some were artisans—shoemakers, a tailor, and a hatter—who worked for a few days at the height of the season haying or reaping. Others were even more marginal men, who cultivated small plots around their rented houses and pieced their livings together working for land-owning families. Some had long-standing connections with the Ward family, sometimes reaching back into the eighteenth century. The Alexanders, father and sons, were the most striking examples. James Alexander, a Scottish deserter from Burgoyne's army, appeared in the earliest surviving Ward accounts, first for making shoes and then for work in the fields. His sons David, Abraham, and Warren appeared frequently in the Ward ledgers over the years, either on seasonal contracts or for odd days and weeks of work. During the period of Thomas II's diary, both James, who chronically 'came late' for work, and his third son, Warren, were laboring. But the day laborers, who supplied about 20 percent of the Wards' total labor during these years, were not Thomas II's primary concern. He was, instead, preoccupied with his long-term help, three or four men each year working on contract.

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[9] Izard, 'Portrait of the Ward Family of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts.'

[10] Thomas W. Ward II, Diary, 1830–32, WFP. The ensuing account of the years 1830–32 is based on the diary and the Farm Laborers Biographical File for all laborers who worked during that period.

As 1830 began, Thomas II had not been able to hire a resident winter-season laborer and was relying primarily on Warren Harrington for winter help in cutting firewood, felling and hauling timber, and caring for livestock. Harrington, who walked two miles to the Ward farm from his small rented house in south Shrewsbury, had agreed to take on two months' worth of labor in exchange for food and firewood for his family. Unfortunately, Harrington was too often 'labouring under indisposition of the bottle' to prove a wholly satisfactory hired man. He lost enough time so that he finished his first month's work 'in debt 47 cents' for goods furnished his family, having hurt his back and twice left 'unable to work.' Ward 'hired a young man from Athol,' twenty-five miles to the northwest, to help get caught up. But the seventeen-year-old Stillman Manly was also a disappointment. 'His mind is apparently not with his body,' his employer noted, 'nor his body much at work.' He departed after one month. In late March, Ward hired two young men. One, David Jennings, hired out for the usual season of eight months, April to November; the other, John Holyoke of Marlborough, fifteen miles to the east, was to work for the year. Holyoke, twenty years old, agreed 'not to have any ardent spirits'—a sign of the growing power of temperance sentiment. The somewhat older Jennings made no such promise.

Work proceeded smoothly through plowing, planting, and cultivating, to the normal midsummer frenzy of haying season. At the height of haying—rural New England's 'high noon' when most other activities, even the conception of children, virtually came to a halt—there were often eight to ten men toiling in the mowing fields. Ward would pick up short-term labor for haying right off the road if he could find it, no questions asked; 'somebody—a stranger, mowed by the red shop,' he noted on July 9, 1830. However, on September 6, before harvest time, Jennings, an excellent worker, 'left on account of health, had his pay, and went home,' two months early. Ward then hired a young man off the road, Leander Taylor, for a week's work of cutting cornstalks, hauling wood, and picking apples, and then pressed his twelve-year-old nephew into service. Despite this, the additional burden of work created by Jennings's premature departure seems to have fallen heavily on young John Holyoke. On December 11, 1830, he left 'in an unexpected manner,' three and one-half months before his own period of service was over. Ward recorded that Holyoke 'left us, he says, because the work is hard and he has to get up too early in the morning. Poor fellow.' Clearly angry, Ward forced him to wait until the following April—when his full year's service would have ended—to get his wages.

With his labor force now seriously depleted, Ward began to look again to the road. Five days after John Holyoke left, 'a young French man came along in the P.M., whom I engaged to work 8 days. He calls himself Mack.' After Mack Floren's trial period ended successfully, he agreed to work for the three remaining months of the winter season. Mack performed well, and Ward, with apparent regret, watched him setting out for Boston when his time was out in March.

Then the cycles of hiring and labor began again in late February 1831. Ward engaged William Cotnam and Thomas J. Hayden of Harvard, eighteen miles to the northeast, to work for the eight-month season. The week after Cotnam arrived, Ward drove to Harvard in his wagon to bring Hayden back to the farm, but upon arriving in town he heard disquieting stories about Hayden and discovered him 'to be a man of bad character. I therefore found him and told him I did not wish him to come and gave him my reasons.' He continued to look for help while in Harvard, and on his way home he discovered 'another man, Jabez N. Priest, whom I hired . . . to begin his time next Monday.' We can only assume that Priest looked trustworthy, or had good references. Cotnam and especially Priest proved good workers throughout the season, and Ward had no complaints. After Cotnam left in December 'to work no more,' Priest agreed to a two-month extension of labor through the winter, but then went home to Harvard where he would make other arrangements for work for the coming season.

For the 1832 season, Ward in early March hired Alvan Southworth of Ward (now Auburn), Massachusetts, a community ten miles south and west of Shrewsbury. Southworth was 'a good fellow to work,' but after only two weeks he departed following a row, as his employer wrote on March 13: 'Alvan was out last eve and when we went to bed back door was left unfastened and a light burning for him. He came to the east door about ten o'clock, found the east door fastened, turned on his heel, spent the night at the tavern. Next day went to Worcester and on Thursday came for his clothes.' Nothing had happened, Ward thought, that 'should cause offense,' but clearly Alvan Southworth felt the distinction between side door and back door worth leaving for. The elderly Thomas Ward I, who was still keeping the farm accounts, noted sourly in paying out Southworth for twelve days' work that 'in justice he was not entitled to one cent. A foolish blockhead. I want no such help.'

But, of course, help of some sort was wanted on the farm, and badly. On the day that Southworth departed, Thomas II went east to the adjoining town of Westborough to hire Jonah Forbush and the next day to neighboring West Boylston to engage Paul Goodale. The end notes to his diary record, astonishingly, that 'both the above men in three days after they commenced their time became homesick and left.' Now in a frame of mind about which historians can only speculate, the younger Ward then hired a pair of men passing through Shrewsbury from considerably farther off. Orren B. Johnson and William Gould, who came from Vernon in southeastern Vermont, signed on at 'monstrous wages,' or so his father thought. But even at 'monstrous wages' the twenty-year-old Johnson proved unreliable. He went to Worcester on an unauthorized five-day jaunt in early June, and when he returned Ward saw to it that he 'had his pay and [was] sent away.' Johnson was replaced four days later with Ephraim Goodenough, who worked out his five-month stint uneventfully. Yet there was another difficulty to come. Gould 'went home unwell' to Vermont in September before final harvest, almost two months short of his contracted term.

One additional labor problem confronted Ward in these years. Starting in 1826 his father had begun to lease part of his operation, the 'Henshaw Farm,' on shares to a tenant farmer who would take on some of the responsibility for the organization and discipline of labor. He leased it to his son-in-law William Williams for a year and then in 1828 made arrangements with David Nelson, an enterprising young Shrewsbury man who had previously hired out for the family. Nelson ran the Henshaw place successfully for two years; then, in 1830, apparently having saved enough out of his years of labor and tenancy, he left Shrewsbury to farm the Illinois prairie. But Nelson's successor on the leased farm was Marlborough-born Samuel Brigham, just twenty-one, who proved 'a bad tenant.' In February of 1831 he absconded, leaving $200 in account-book debt to the Wards, abandoning his tools and furniture to be attached by his other creditors, and forsaking his wife, who returned to her father's house. Upon hearing of Brigham's defection, Thomas II went almost immediately 'to Boylston to get one Hastings to come and take the Henshaw place but he had just engaged himself.' The best he could do was to secure as a tenant Daniel Maynard of east Shrewsbury, a man who had once owned a farm and sawmill but had lost both and now worked for his father and brothers. After hearing of this, Andrew Henshaw Ward wrote home to his brother that Maynard 'has no force or energy; and if his wife will throw out the window faster than he brings in at the door your hand of the doings will be small.' [11]

Ward's diary and the farm's account books, where entries for labor far overbalance everything else, offer eloquent testimony that labor was indeed 'the great thing in farming.' Land, tools, barns, seed, even cattle and sheep were hardly productive without workers to use them or care for them. Thomas Ward II was discovering that finding and maintaining a farm labor force in Massachusetts in the early 1830s could be difficult, frustrating, and occasionally desperate work.

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[11] Andrew H. Ward to Thomas W. Ward II, March 31, 1831, WFP.

The younger Thomas Ward began his diary to mark both generational change and the continuity of his family on the land. Its tale of tangled labor relations still discloses much about the system of labor on the Wards' farm as it had existed at least from the late eighteenth century. But even more important, the diary spans a fault line, a critical period of transition. Ward's difficulties with his workers were signals of change, not only on his family's farm but in central Massachusetts' agricultural economy.

To make clear the meaning of that change, the story must now turn back to the world that Thomas Ward II had grown up with and inherited, the labor regime of the years before 1830.

Beginning with the earliest surviving records, the Wards had always used substantial amounts of hired labor. But expenditures, and the number of men employed in and out of the household, rose and fell over time, in great part reflecting the complex course of the family cycle. As Ward sons became old enough to provide significant help, the farm's need for hired labor would diminish, although never disappear. It would increase again as the sons left the household to attend school or to set out on their own careers; later it would fall with a son's return to the family and rise again with his departure, death, or incapacitation. Thomas Ward I's six sons entered and left the family work force at varying times for all of these reasons, weaving a complex yet discernible pattern. Labor expenditures were at their very lowest in the years between 1803 and 1805, for example, when there were three Ward sons in their late teens living on the farm. Labor costs hit their peak in the period between 1818 and 1828, when Thomas Ward I was farming without any significant family labor.[12]

The mix of day and long-term labor that Thomas II chronicled from 1830 to 1832 had long been part of the farm's work regime. In terms of dollars and days of work, contract labor—the work of men usually living in the household and always taking their meals there—predominated. Exclusive of sparsely recorded and unquantifiable family labor, men employed on contract accounted for approximately four-fifths of the work performed on the farm between 1787 and 1860.

Occasionally the Wards obtained more than half of their labor for the farming year from what they called 'day's work.' But in five years out of six, contract labor was dominant. It had the great assets of predictability and control, particularly in light of the managerial effort involved in piecing enough 'day's work' together to make up two or more man-years.[13] In most years, the Wards drew widely on day labor to get tasks done at critical times, to fill in when long-term labor was interrupted, and sometimes to allow men to pay their debts.

Day labor was rooted in the community and in long-standing trading patterns in the rural economy. Using the flexible practices of account-book exchange, with little cash and books balanced over long intervals, many households in Shrewsbury exchanged 'day's work' for what the Wards had in abundance—grain, butter and cheese, meat, live animals, cider, and firewood, along with the rental of houses, vehicles, and land. This day-labor economy ran parallel to the practice of 'changing works' of the rural economy, where more equally matched New England farm households made mutual exchanges of labor. Ward men very rarely worked for anyone else, although they exchanged meat and other foodstuffs somewhat more reciprocally with the more prosperous farm households in their neighborhood. Since labor dominated the Ward accounts, the great majority of their exchange relationships within the community were grounded not on reciprocity but on massive inequality in economic resources.[14]

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[12] Another source of variation was that some of the labor yearly performed on the farm was clearly expended on 'farm improvement'—building stone walls or ditching and draining meadows, for example—rather than directly on the tasks of agricultural production. The amount of such work could vary substantially from year to year without immediately affecting farm output.

[13] Total yearly expenditures on day and contract labor were totaled from the Farm Laborers Biographical File, using data compiled from the Account Books and Bills Receipted records, WFP. There was surely some under-documentation of both day- and contract-labor expenses. Dollar figures were occasionally missing from small labor accounts, and the bills receipted records, consisting as they do of hundreds of small pieces of paper, may not be entirely complete.

Day-labor wages varied seasonally, as the hours of working daylight, and the importance of the task in the cycle of agricultural production, rose and fell through the year. They were at their lowest from December through February, rose through the spring and summer to a peak in July, and then dropped gradually to the levels of late spring in September and October, before falling off sharply in November. Daily wage rates were 'found'; laborers were expected to take their meals in the Ward household. The rare exceptions showed distinctively higher rates and the notation 'found yourself.'

The great bulk of the Wards' 'day's work' was done by men who labored over the course of three years or more. Some had substantial and enduring connections that lasted throughout their adult lifetimes. Kinship ties also structured the labor system, as sons followed fathers, or brothers came to work in succession. Three out of four day laborers had at least one other close kinsman already in the Ward exchange network. Others had a more transitory connection, working during the course of only one year. Most of them remained in town but simply left the labor network; a minority were transients who briefly touched down in the community before moving on.[15]

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[14] For discussions of the account-book economy, see Michael Merrill, 'Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States,' *Radical History Review* 7 (1977): 42–71; Winifred Rothenberg, 'The Market and Massachusetts Farmers'; 'Farm Account Books, Problems and Possibilities,' *Agricultural History* 58 (1984): 106–13, and 'The Emergence of Farm Labor Markets and the Transformation of the Rural Economy: Massachusetts, 1750–1855,' *Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988): 537–66; Christopher Clark, 'The Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley 1800–1860,' *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979): 69–89; Jack Larkin, 'The Merriams of Brookfield: Printing in the Economy and Culture of Rural Massachusetts in the Early Nineteenth Century,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 96 (1986): 39–72, and 'Accounting for Change: Exchange in the Rural Economy of Central New England' (paper presented at the meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, 1988); Susan Geib, '"Changing Works": Agriculture and Society in Brookfield, Massachusetts 1785–1820' (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1981).

Smaller farmers than the Wards engaged in asymmetrical exchanges of labor. Philemon Shepard of Sturbridge, a middling farmer with sons too young to be of much assistance, rarely worked for others but exchanged substantially for day labor with poorer families. See Holly Izard Paterson, 'A Small Farmer's World: The Economic and Social Networks of Philemon Shepard of Sturbridge, Massachusetts' (paper delivered at TARS Symposium on Social History, 'Locality and Mentalite,' 1984).

Across the decades, the men providing day labor for the Wards were, like those in Thomas II's diary, usually in modest economic circumstances, and most often poor. Substantial farmers or their sons occasionally exchanged a few days' work, but they were heavily outnumbered. Of the day laborers whose property holdings were determined for five sample years between 1794 and 1830, virtually all aged twenty-five or older ranked below the fiftieth percentile of wealth holding on the Shrewsbury tax-valuation lists. Most often they owned no land at all. Day laborers' fathers still surviving and living in Shrewsbury were also most commonly men of slender means; only a few of them ranked above the fiftieth percentile.[16] (See tables 1A and 1B)

Contract laborers worked within a very different structure of arrangements and expectations. Most of them, nearly eight out of ten, came to live and work in the Ward household; a minority slept elsewhere within walking distance, living at home or with kin. Labor contracts were informal, oral agreements about wages and periods of service; their terms were usually jotted down in diaries or account books, but, with the exception of a few formal indentures for young boys, they did not take the form of signed and witnessed documents.

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15. But such short-term day workers were comparatively unimportant in the labor system, totaling only 5 percent of all wages paid for day labor. The computation is based on the Farm Laborers Biographical File.

16. Some of them, in fact, had their first contact with the family in Sheriff Ward's official capacity when arrested for debt or taken and convicted of minor crimes. They later appeared on the labor accounts, sometimes working off debts incurred to the sheriff during their incarceration.

Table 1a

Economic Status of Ward Day Laborers,
1794–1858, by Property Holdings

Year	*Total Number of Laborers*	*Laborers over Twenty-five and on Tax List*	*Laborers without Property*	*Holding Property below Fiftieth Percentile of Tax List*	*Holding Property above Fiftieth Percentile of Tax List*
1794	6	3	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	1
1800	8	7	4 (57.1%)	4 (42.8%)	—
1810	4	3	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	—
1820	16	10	9 (90%)	1 (100%)	—
1830	10	9	9 (100%)	—	—
1840	9	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1
1850	5	5	5 (100%)	—	—
1858	3	3	1 (33%)	2 (66.7)	—

Source: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department; Shrewsbury, Tax Valuation Lists, 1794–1858, Town Assessor's Office, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts

In the years before 1830, the men who worked on contract for the Wards came predominantly from nearby and overwhelmingly from Massachusetts. Nearly 40 percent had been born in Shrewsbury itself, nearly 70 percent came from communities within a twenty-mile radius of Shrewsbury, and almost 90 percent came from within the state. (See table 2). Contract laborers were also overwhelmingly young, unmarried, and strikingly mobile. Before 1830, their mean age was just under twenty-four. One out of six laborers was under eighteen; a few had come to work at twelve or thirteen.

On the Ward farm, eighteen years of age, not the legal poll-tax age of sixteen, marked the dividing line between men and boys. Workers seventeen or younger received half or less of what older laborers earned. These youngest workers invariably had their wages paid to their fathers or widowed mothers. In a legal sense, laborers between eighteen and twenty were also still working for their fathers, who could assert an enforceable claim to their wages

TABLE 1B

Economic Status of Ward Day Laborers, 1794–1858,
by Property Holdings of Laborers' Fathers

Year	*Fathers on Tax List*	*Fathers without Property*	*Holding Property below Fiftieth Percentile of Tax List*	*Holding Property above Fiftieth Percentile of Tax List*
1794	1	—	1 (100%)	—
1800	2	—	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
1810	1	1 (100%)	—	—
1820	5	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)
1830	—	—	—	—
1840	2	—	2 (100%)	—
1850	—	—	—	—
1858	—	—	—	—

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department, linked to Shrewsbury Tax Valuation Lists, 1794–1858, Town Assessor's Office, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts

until their majority. Most seem to have allowed their sons economic independence, saying as one father did, 'He may have all he can earn.'[17]

References in family correspondence and diaries to laborers returning 'home' for short visits during their terms and going 'home' at the end of their contracts suggest that many, if not most of them were 'working out,' still tied to their families and using their parental homes as bases to which they could periodically return.[18]

Most laborers did not stay long enough to become familiar 'hired men.' Four out of every five worked on the farm for twelve months or less, and nine out of ten labored for no more than two years. Most of those who were hired from outside the community

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[17] Thomas W. Ward II to Thomas W. Ward I, March 2, 1829, WFP.

[18] On working out and semidependence for young New England men, see Joseph Kett, 'Growing Up in Rural New England, 1800–1840,' *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. Tamara Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp 1–16.

TABLE 2

Place of Birth, Contract Laborers, 1787–1829

Birthplace	*Number of Laborers*	*Percentage of All Contract Laborers*
Shrewsbury	26	38.2%
Neighboring towns[1]	21	30.9%
Other Massachusetts towns	14	20.6%
Connecticut	2	2.9%
Canada	1	1.5%
Ireland	3	4.4%
Germany	1	1.5%
TOTAL	68	100%

(For twenty laborers, place of birth could not be determined.)

[1] These are towns within a fifteen-mile radius of Shrewsbury.

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department

were also transients in a larger sense. Seventy percent of them left Shrewsbury as well as the Ward farm in less than two years; they either escaped mention on the town tax lists entirely or stayed only long enough to be recorded once. Another 20 percent remained in town for between two and five years. Only one in ten persisted for seven years or more. (See tables 3 and 4).

Laborers born in Shrewsbury and thus embedded in the community were more likely to stay in place. Yet, for one out of three of them, working on the Ward farm was the last stop on an outward journey. They left the community after their season of labor and did not reappear on the tax lists. One in seven stayed between two and five years and then departed. Just over half remained in town for more than seven years.

The Wards' laborers worked on contracts substantially longer than those common in the grain-growing Middle Atlantic and midwestern states. Most men 'let themselves' for six to eight months during the season of heavy agricultural work, usually be-

TABLE 3A

Property Holdings of Fathers of Contract Laborers Born in Shrewsbury[1]

	Number on Tax Lists	*Number without Property*	*Holding Property below Fortieth Percentile*	*Holding Property Seventy-fifth Percentile and above*
Fathers of Laborers	21	6 (28.6%)	4 (19%)	10 (47.6%)

TABLE 3B

Property Holdings of Contract Laborers[2] Working Seven Years or More

	Number on Tax Lists	*Number without Property*	*Holding Property below Fortieth Percentile*	*Holding Property Seventy-fifth Percentile and above*
Number of Laborers	10	5 (50%)	—	5 (50%)

1. Father's rank is computed on basis of tax list closest to son's first appearance in the Ward records.

2. Persisting laborer's rank is computed on basis of last appearance on tax lists or appearance at age fifty.

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department, linked to Shrewsbury Tax Valuation Lists, 1794–1830

ginning in April and ending in the fall. At times, the Wards hired a 'twelve months man' who would work through the year. In New England's semipastoral, rural economy, with its comparatively small reliance on grains, farmers needed labor fairly steadily across the growing season, except during the sharp peak of demand during haying time, when almost every conceivable sort of laborer was pressed briefly into service.[19]

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[19] Carville Earle and Ronald Hoffman, 'The Foundations of the Modern Economy: Agriculture and the Costs of Labor in the United States and England, 1800–1860,' *American*

TABLE 4

Broken Labor Contracts, Ward Laborers, 1787–1859

Period	*Number of Laborers*	*Number of Broken Contracts*	*Percentage of Total Laborers with Broken Contracts*
1787–99	18	3	16.6%
1800–9	11	2	18.2%
1810–19	29	6	20.6%
1820–29	30	10	30.0%
1830–39	26	8	30.8%
1840–49	9	2	22.2%
1850–59	17	5	29.7%
TOTAL	140	37	

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department

Usually, workers looked for a place in March or April at the beginning of the agricultural year. But men could be found seeking work later in the season—those who had lost or left their seasonal positions or were stopping in mid-journey across Massachusetts to earn money. Two-thirds of these short-term workers signed on during haying season when they were paid a premium wage. Most others were hired in September or October to replace men who had broken their contracts and left.[20]

When the Wards did not have a 'twelve months man,' they usually hired a laborer on a winter contract that bridged the period between harvest and planting, at a lower wage that reflected the reduced demand for labor in the rural economy. Laborers on regular seasonal contracts either 'went home' to their parental households in the fall after they finished up their time or were

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Historical Review 85 (1980): 1055–94, find an average term of four months for seasonal labor contracts in Pennsylvania and the upper Midwest before 1860.

[20] Thirty percent of the labor contracts were for three months or less, but represented only 7 percent of the total months of work. Computed from Farm Laborers Biographical File.

faced with the problem of finding 'a place for the winter' in a slower labor market.

The Wards' laborers, all the sources suggest, were expected to appear early in the morning and to toil hard and long, but they did not live under an enormously burdensome work and household discipline. Laborers took time off for mandatory militia training in spring and fall, for town meetings and election days, and for Fourth of July celebrations. Winter-season workers sometimes went to singing schools. The youngest laborers attended district school in the winter term between harvest and the start of plowing, by previous agreement between the Wards and their fathers. At times, they went to meeting on the Sabbath with the family, but they were clearly not coerced into doing so. Occasionally, one of the 'boys' would turn up missing, having taken an afternoon off 'at play,' or 'playing ball.' On rare occasions, such as a rainy day in haying season, it was noted that exhausted workers were allowed to go 'afishing.' Laborers sometimes walked a mile to Shrewsbury center to make small purchases at the stores and charged them to their employer's account. Men from outside Shrewsbury often arranged for short trips home when work temporarily slackened or a family crisis occurred, even borrowing a farm horse, or horse and wagon for the journey.

Joseph Ward's diaries, kept between 1812 and 1818, and Thomas Ward II's diary for 1819–20, show the regime of labor on the farm from the viewpoint of young unmarried men, peers in age of most of the workers, who had some supervisory duties but not full responsibility. Before he fell ill, Joseph Ward in particular was much more a work mate than a superior, and his diaries record a world of informality and comradeship. Rum was still the great lubricant of heavy work in New England, and Joseph recorded its abundant use. In August of 1812, he noted that a worker came to haying late but 'helped a little bit before noon in order to get some grogg.' Rum circulated freely in winter as well. The next February he wrote sourly that laborer Josiah Knight 'broke the rum bottle in the sled box,' while both were hauling wood. On a number of occasions during those years he joined a couple of Ward laborers and a few neighboring young men in late-night drinking bouts, where they 'burnt down old Scotland' or 'blew out the bluebells of Ireland.' The Ward farm's consumption of 'liquors to cheer the laborers,' in the pretemperance years before 1820, was prodigious. For the year 1817, Joseph recorded that the household consumed roughly three gallons a month during the winter and spring, but this amount was eclipsed by the summer's consumption, intended to speed the work of haying and harvest. On September 30, 1817, Joseph noted that 'since July 22 we have drunk 22 gallons of N. Rum. Had a multiple of men.'[21]

Some young workers, both Ward diarists noted, spent much of their free time in courtship. Preserved Bruce of Westborough worked in the winter season of 1805, stayed through 1806, and left near the end of 1807. Shortly afterward he married Nelly Campbell, who had been a hired girl in the Ward household during the same years. The laborer Christopher Gardner, noted Joseph Ward in February of 1816, was 'rather unwell, has sore heels. I imagine he galled them against the bedpost when with Eliza or (should I say) Miss Allen on Sunday night last.' When Gardner settled accounts for his year's work in March and prepared to leave, he seemed 'anxious, some inward trouble perplexes his better feelings—perhaps a girl!' The apparently infatuated young man lingered around the Ward household for a few more days, before deciding against 'going home to mother' as he had planned and hiring himself out to another farmer to remain near Eliza.[22]

During 1819 Shapley Caswell, a hired man from Leominster, was wooing Mary Newton, the daughter of a neighboring farmer. Thomas Ward II wrote on October 1 that he had done 'a very good day's work considering he sat up all night with Mary Newton.' The other hands took the opportunity to harass Caswell, declaring that since he had already 'gone to bed' the night before, he 'should not have much rest,' and they kept him up till long past midnight cleaning a poorly winnowed batch of winter rye. Shapley continued seeing Mary Newton, and later walked nearly a mile between the Ward and Newton farms with what turned out to be a broken ankle, 'so anxious was he to see his dear.' Three days after Caswell completed his term of labor and settled for his wages, they were married. Although Mary was already thirty-two, the match may not have been a happy one for Mary Newton's parents; Thomas Ward II noted that 'married they must be in spite of all the people,' suggesting that premarital pregnancy may have forced the issue. The Caswells left Shrewsbury soon afterwards.[23]

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[21] Joseph Ward's diary for 1812–14 has sporadic references to drinking throughout; September 30, 1817, Joseph Ward, Diary, 1816-18, WFP.

[22] February 21, March 20, 23, 29, 1817, Joseph Ward, Diary, 1816–18, WFP.

For adult workers, there was only the discipline of the labor market; 'time lost' was marked off for lateness and absence, and they could be discharged for gross incompetence or misbehavior. But young workers were required to 'obey family rules,' and were subject to corporal punishment. As head of the family, Thomas Ward I sometimes whipped his youthful laborers, as he probably had his sons, but not very often, judging by the infrequency and dramatic flourish with which the incidents were reported. 'Allen flogged!!' wrote Joseph Ward in 1813, when the seventeen-year-old Timothy Allen Stone was whipped for an unnamed infraction. In 1818, he recorded the whipping of sixteen-year-old Joseph Smith for telling 'an intolerable lie' about one of his fellows. 'The stick flew on wings of judgement,' wrote the unsympathetic Joseph, 'till the carcass of the vile wretch was obliged to cringe under the smart of the well levelled stripes.'[24]

One young farm worker who stayed for several years was not noted in any of the farm's accounts or stacks of bills receipted. He was William Jackson, usually called Bill or Black Bill, whom Thomas I recalled as 'the black boy I brought up.' He entered the household some time before 1810 as a young child, most likely an orphaned pauper; in 1820 he was still under eighteen, referred to as working with the 'boys.' Bill worked alongside the other youths in the fields but also played a more servile role, that of carriage driver for Thomas Ward I and his wife Elizabeth. In March of 1819 Joseph noted that 'Bill got a drubbing for striking William Seaver—a bloody jolt in the face with his fist.' Correction may well have been harsher for him than for his white fellow workers; the next day Jackson was called on to make a humble apology in order to avoid a second, more serious flogging, where 'his skin would fly.' Four months later, in July, as Bill Jackson and eighteen-year-old David Nelson were racing to finish hoeing a cornfield, Thomas II overheard him say, in language that parodied plantation slavery, 'The corn we must hoe well or "Massa" he will whip us well.' Jackson left a few years later, moved to Worcester, then to Boston, where he opened a barber shop and married. Unfortunately, by 1828 he had fallen into criminal ways and been sentenced to the state prison for theft. Thomas I was distressed by this news but consoled himself with the thought that he had not neglected Jackson's moral instruction.[25]

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[23] October 1, November 30, December 3, 1819, Thomas W. Ward II, Diary, 1819–20, WFP.

[24] June 3, 1813, Joseph Ward, Diary, 1812–14; March 6, 18, 1818, Joseph Ward, Diary, 1816–18, WFP.

Like other employers, the Wards worried and complained about the wages of labor. The oft-repeated plaint in their correspondence was that 'labor is much higher than produce,' one echoed in the *New England Farmer*, to which they regularly subscribed. Thomas Ward I's agonies of spirit over 'monstrous wages' or paying out twelve days' wages to a 'foolish blockhead' are readily understandable in terms of a significant feature of the contract wage system. The Wards did not deal with contract laborers' wages through the account-book exchange that structured other economic relationships in the community, including day labor. Contract labor was almost invariably a matter of cash.[26] Workers received some account credits for shoes, clothing, and bills of goods charged at Shrewsbury stores, but they drew small amounts of cash throughout their periods of employment and settled their accounts with large lump-sum payments. Young and unmarried contract laborers, not permanently tied to Shrewsbury's particular set of economic relationships, had little use for the commodities and the long-term rhythms of rural exchange.

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[25] March 14, 15, 1819, Joseph Ward, Diary, 1818–22; July 13, 1819, Thomas W. Ward II, Diary, 1819–20; Thomas W. Ward I to Thomas W. Ward II, March 15, 1828, WFP.

[26] Except for those few married individuals who exchanged work in part for firewood, food, and house rent, contract laborers were normally paid 80 to 90 percent of their wages in cash. Farm Laborers Biographical File.

Labor and production, market and cash, moved in a reinforcing and inescapable circle. Production for the market, and hence cash, was dependent on sufficient labor. Cash to lay out on wages could only come from the market. As employers, they would bargain hard over a dollar per month in wages, for, as Thomas I said, they 'had to sell produce' for the cash in which to pay them. There occasionally were times when the Wards were too short of cash to settle their accounts when due, and laborers had to take promissory notes—redeemed within a few months—for all or part of their wages.

Employer and workers negotiated within the invisible rules of a farm-labor market characterized by widely circulating information.[27] The correspondence between Thomas Ward I and Thomas

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[27] The following table compares Ward wage rates with Stanley Lebergott's estimates for southern New England.

Weighted Mean Seasonal Monthly Wage Rate, Adult Hired Ward Laborers		*Lebergott Estimate Monthly Seasonal Wage Rates, with Board*			
			Mass.	*Conn.*	*R.I.*
1800–04	[illegible]				
1805–09	[illegible]				
1810–14	[illegible]				
1815–19	[illegible]	1818	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
1820–24	[illegible]				
1825–29	[illegible]	1826	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
1830–34	[illegible]	1830	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
1835–39	[illegible]				
1840–44	[illegible]				
1845–49	[illegible]	1850	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
1850–54	[illegible]				
1855–59	[illegible]	1860	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]

Weighted by number of observations, the average of Ward day-wage rates for the years 1825 to 1829 was $.74 per day, tallying closely with Lebergott's estimate for Massachusetts in 1830. Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: the American Record since 1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 257–64, and table A-23, p. 539. Rothenberg, Ward II in the 1820s indicates that laborers as well as employers were well-informed about current wages and often tenacious in bargaining. 'The wages some are asking,' Thomas I wrote in 1827, were 'more than I can afford to give.' Thomas Ward II found a young man named Barton whom he was trying to hire 'as immovable as to price as the hills.'[28] Not only were workers aware of prevailing wages, but the substantial majority of them kept their own records of time worked and wages due. At least eight out of ten contract-labor accounts in the Ward Family Papers contain clear references to the workers' own account keeping—phrases such as 'by his account,' 'settled all book accounts,' and 'receipted his book.'

The most extensive account of wage negotiation in the Ward papers concerns Orren Spencer, a laborer from Connecticut who arrived in the spring of 1826 to work for a year. Thomas Ward I was 'pleased with his work and his attention to my cattle.' When Spencer went home for a few days in February 1827, six weeks before his time was out, Ward noted Spencer's parting words that 'he would be working out this coming year, and had no objection to working for me.' However, Spencer wanted to know what his wages would be. Ward's initial response was that 'I could not tell.' Spencer countered that he wanted an increase, and 'should not work for the wages he had the last year.' His employer continued to resist, insisting that he could not afford to pay any more. Spencer did not press the matter and left for Connecticut without naming the wage he wanted. When Spencer returned to finish out the year, Ward discovered, although Spencer did not volunteer it, that he had hired himself out to another farmer because 'he thought I would not give him such wages as he had let himself for.'

'Farm Labor Markets,' provides evidence, based on day-wage rates, and interpretation for the emergence of an ever more integrated market for farm labor in Massachusetts. Her data suggests that central Massachusetts came late, the early 1820s, to the convergence of wage rates across farms and towns that signify market integration. Interestingly, these were also the years in which Thomas Ward I and his son Thomas discussed wage rates with great concern.

[28] Thomas W. Ward I to Thomas W. Ward II, March 6, 1827; Thomas W. Ward II to Thomas W. Ward I, March 2, 1829, WFP.

Ward blamed Spencer for not setting an explicit price or allowing him to match the second offer. Spencer, who met Ward's later comments with silence, had clearly expected an increase in wages to accompany his employer's praise.[29]

Workers' propensity to move could make economic sense as a path to a better wage. But choosing to move on was also one of the few expressions of occupational autonomy open to a farm laborer. Laborers might have moved simply to assert themselves against the formidable Wards, as well as to seek a better situation or at least a different one on a new farm or in a new town—just as central Massachusetts textile-mill workers did, whose rates of mobility were equally high.[30]

The youth and high mobility of most contract workers clearly indicate that laboring for the Wards was a transitional stage in their lives. This same transience also makes it difficult to follow their life courses over time. But for thirty-seven laborers in all before 1830 (about 40 percent of the total), it has been possible to find some evidence about their economic paths. Thirty-two laborers could be tracked down in the Shrewsbury tax lists: twenty-one of them could be linked to their fathers' wealth holding; twenty-one persisted in Shrewsbury long enough for their own economic achievement to be measured; and eleven could be traced from father's wealth to son's achievement. (See tables 3A and 3B). Five other workers, born outside Shrewsbury, could be linked to their fathers' wealth-holding on the 1798 federal direct tax list for Worcester County.

The twenty-one traceable Ward laborers born in Shrewsbury came from two strikingly different economic strata. Half had fathers who were poor or marginal, ranking below the fortieth percentile of taxpayers in wealth holding; most of them were landless or owned only a few acres, much less than would constitute a viable family-sustaining farm. The other half came from households ranking at the seventy-fifth percentile or above. Significantly under-represented were the small and lower-middling farm families, those with modest resources but more independent situations; these were, perhaps, the families who found it hardest to spare their sons' labor.

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[29] Thomas W. Ward I to Thomas W. Ward II, February 22, 1827, WFP.

[30] See Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 144–56, 267–68.

Although far more difficult to track, some laborers from beyond Shrewsbury can be identified as coming from similar backgrounds. Four of the five laborers linked to the 1798 direct tax list had fathers who owned property sufficient to rank them at or above Shrewsbury's seventieth percentile of wealth holding. Unlike day labor, then, contract labor had an ambiguous social meaning; it was a status that both prosperous and poor men's sons could assume.

For young men whose futures were reasonably secure, laboring on the Ward farm was an agricultural apprenticeship, a year or so spent working for someone other than their fathers. After an interval spent away from home they could return to their families' farms or pursue their own paths with family support. This was the path for most of the Shrewsbury-born laborers who came from prosperous families. Laborers who were sons of successful farmers were much more likely to remain in the community, and with the exception of two brothers whose lives were marked by drink and emotional instability, they achieved an economic status comparable to that of their fathers, ending up with farms whose value ranged from the sixty-fifth to the eightieth percentile of the tax lists. Conversely, none of these young men whose fathers ranked high on the 1798 tax list remained in Shrewsbury; they returned, at least for a time, to their own communities.[31]

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[31] Federal Direct Tax List of 1798, Schedules C and D, Worcester County, Massachusetts, National Archives (microfilm in Old Sturbridge Village Research Library). Fathers who could be identified in the Farm Laborers Biographical File between 1790 and 1810 were searched for in the 1798 federal direct tax schedules for their communities and their property holdings determined from that source. Using the figures as adjusted by the tax commissioners in order to bring different communities' valuations into parity, fathers' wealth-holding was estimated based on the characteristics of the Shrewsbury wealth-holding profile for 1798, which has been fully analyzed based on both the direct tax schedules

For two men only, both born outside of Shrewsbury, laboring for the Wards was a step on the 'agricultural ladder,' part of a process of gradually accumulating capital until it was possible to buy a farm. They arrived with little or nothing in their pockets, persisted in the community, acquired property, and ended up as moderately prosperous farmers. One was Orville Lothrop, who at the age of twenty-one was hired for the winter term in 1819. In ten years' time he had a small farm, a decade later a sizable one, and ten years after that he ranked in the eighty-fifth percentile of the town's taxpayers. The other laborer with a comparable history was John S. Fessenden, who worked for the Wards in 1827–28, began to accumulate land five years later, and died in 1844 with a fifty-acre farm ranked in the sixtieth percentile.[32]

For the rest who remained, laboring for the Wards signaled an entry into an adult world of perpetual landlessness. The poor men's sons born in Shrewsbury remained as propertyless as their fathers. Two prosperous farmers' sons slipped down the ladder to poverty. And while Lothrop and Fessenden climbed, the other eight persisting workers born outside the town continued over the decades as they had begun, without land.

Taken together, these patterns suggest strongly that opportunity on the land through farm labor was virtually blocked in early nineteenth-century Shrewsbury. Most prosperous farmers' sons who labored could sustain a position comparable to their fathers' through a combination of inheritance and accumulation. But for other men, there was little cause for optimism. Land in Shrewsbury, like that in most other towns in southern New England, had long been farmed and was comparatively expensive. Only a very few could climb through their agricultural earnings.[33]

C and D for Shrewsbury and the town tax valuation list for 1798. That is, a man was given an estimated percentile ranking based on where the same amount of wealth would have placed him in Shrewsbury.

[32] The most recent discussion of the 'agricultural ladder' is in Jeremy Atack, 'The Agricultural Ladder Revisited: A New Look at an Old Question with Some Data for 1860,' *Agricultural History* 63 (1989): 1–26.

[33] For the majority of the Wards' laborers, who did not stay long in Shrewsbury or could not be traced back to their fathers, there can, at this point, only be conjecture about

In his struggles with finding and keeping help in the early 1830s, Thomas Ward II was riding a rough transition between the old regime of farm labor and the new. Historical hindsight can detect earlier, subtle signs that things were changing. The proportion of laborers whose contracts were broken—who were discharged, more frequently 'went home unwell,' 'took French leave,' or simply left with little explanation—had been increasing over time. Before 1800, one contract laborer in six had departed before his time was out. The proportion rose, decade by decade, to peak at nearly one in three in the years between 1820 and 1839. (See table 4).

After 1830, the faces and voices in the Ward's farm fields changed dramatically. The social geography of their labor system shifted radically outward. Shrewsbury-born workers completely disappeared from the ranks of contract laborers. The proportion of laborers from neighboring communities slipped from one in four to one in nine, and the fraction born anywhere in Massachusetts dropped precipitously, to below one-half. With an average age of twenty-seven, these new laborers were three full years older than the pre-1830 work force. They were men or, more rarely, boys, from less productive or more crowded agricultural regions: northern New England, Nova Scotia, French Canada, and Ireland. Travel-weathered men from much further away, most of them culturally alien, more migratory but less hopeful, replaced the young Massachusetts laborers. Names like Louis Gautiens and Lawrence Ahern could now be seen on the farm accounts, rather than the locally familiar ones of David Nelson or Amasa Munroe.[34] (See table 5).

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their economic backgrounds or career paths. Laborers who pushed on to other towns and other farms may have had greater success climbing the agricultural ladder, particularly if they went west where land was cheaper. But answering such questions about these men will require a record-linkage project, beyond the scope of this present study, that would track them through the countryside and cities of New England, New York, and the upper Midwest.

[34] For Irish immigration, see Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Brian Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821–1861* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Vincent E. Powers, 'Invisible Immigrants: The Prefamine Irish Community of Worcester, Massachusetts, 1825–1860' (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1976). On the

TABLE 5

Place of Birth, Contract Laborers, 1830–59

Birthplace	*Number of Laborers*	*Percentage of All Contract Laborers*
Shrewsbury	—	—
Neighboring towns	5	12.8%
Other Massachusetts towns[1]	13	33.3%
Connecticut	1	2.6%
New Hampshire	2	5.1%
Vermont	2	5.1%
Maine	1	2.6%
Nova Scotia	4	10.3%
French Canada	4	10.3%
Ireland	7	17.9%
TOTAL	39	100%

(For thirteen laborers, place of birth could not be determined.)

1. These are towns within a fifteen-mile radius of Shrewsbury.

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department

The Wards were thus encountering a doubly unwelcome change. Local, culturally familiar workers were increasingly harder to find; those who could be found were more fractious, harder to retain, often less reliable. The last young man from Shrewsbury to work on contract for the Wards was David Nelson, whose competence as a tenant farmer was so sorely missed when he departed for Illinois.

In part—although there is little direct evidence for this—the Wards may have been dealing with the consequences of pushing their laborers harder. Both men had committed themselves to agricultural improvement. They subscribed to agricultural jour-

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forces that impelled Vermonters to migrate, see Lewis D. Stilwell, 'Migration From Vermont 1776–1860,' *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society*, new ser., 5 (1937): 63-245, esp. pp. 134–214.

nals, participated actively in the local Shrewsbury Agricultural Society and the Worcester County Agricultural Society, and in the years after 1800 made major efforts to improve their livestock, their pastures and hay fields, their barns and outbuildings, their plows and smaller tools, their cropping and manuring. It is reasonable to suppose that they also strove for more efficient work in field and barn; it has recently been argued that the increasing productivity of agricultural labor in Massachusetts before 1840 contributed heavily to economic transformation. Such a possibility is hinted at in the introduction of temperance into the farm's work regime beginning in 1825, when Thomas I and then Thomas II were expressing disapproval of alcohol use and encouraging their laborers to work without drink by offering higher wages. Farm laborers may have felt an increasing strain—like John Holyoke, for whom 'the work was too hard.' But the massive changes in the composition of the work force need further explanation.[35]

The *New England Farmer*, the Bible of agricultural improvement in Massachusetts, provided a different and more revealing perspective on this transformation. Henry Colman, its second editor and the Commonwealth's first commissioner of agriculture, concerned himself in 1840 with the question of farm labor. In recent years, he asserted, it had become 'the greatest of all difficulties connected with farming in Massachusetts,' due to changes in the structure of economic opportunity in the state over the previous three decades. Colman saw that 'the great variety of mechanical employments existing among us,' along with 'the emigration of young men into the new States, the great number who go into the learned professions,' and 'the unnumbered herds that crowd into our cities' to seek commercial opportunities had reshaped the occupational landscape. These shifts had combined to 'sweep the country almost clean of young men,' he thought, making farm labor on native ground an increasingly rare occupation for Massachusetts men.[36]

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[35] See Baker and Izard, 'The Marketing Patterns and Strategies of the Ward Family,' for the Wards as improving farmers; Rothenberg, in 'The Emergence of Farm Labor Markets and the Transformation of the Rural Economy,' argues for the importance of increasing farm labor productivity to economic growth.

Commercial and professional opportunities were beckoning to prosperous farmers' sons in particular. As early as 1818, for example, Robert B. Thomas's *Farmer's Almanac* fulminated against the increasing number of young men who were abandoning their families' agricultural heritage for desks and store counters, feeling that it was 'ungentlemanly to handle a hoe or pitchfork.'[37]

'Mechanical employments' had changed the structure of economic opportunity for young men in Shrewsbury itself. The experience of earlier generations of Ward laborers attested that opportunities on the land in Shrewsbury had long been limited for less prosperous men. That did not change. But an alternative path appeared. Beginning just after 1820, 'sale shoemaking'—the production of men's shoes for the mass market organized on a putting-out basis—was an increasingly powerful force in the rural economy of central Massachusetts.[38]

'My boys have all left me and turned shoe-peggers,' The *Farmer's Almanac* had the archetypal 'Farmer Thrifty' say in 1837. 'They have all five gone into the leather line. ... Money, much money, comes of shoe pegging. Yankees love money and will leave farm and all to obtain it.' Poorer men's sons could spend three to six months learning the rudiments of 'bottoming' shoes and then set up for themselves, either with one or two others in 'ten-footer' shops or working out of their parents' houses, receiving orders and materials from the local merchants and 'shoe manufacturers' who organized the trade. Sale shoemakers, like laborers, were paid in cash. And compared to agricultural labor, the shoe trade offered lighter work with opportunities to socialize and control the work's pace, greater autonomy and flexibility, and the possibility, with skill and good luck, of higher earnings. In 1850, Shrewsbury had 131 shoemakers, half of them men under twenty-four. Most of the working-age sons of small farmers, and of other men with property holdings below the fiftieth percentile, were, like 'Farmer Thrifty's' sons, making shoes.[39]

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[36] 36. Henry Colman, 'Agriculture in Massachusetts,' *New England Farmer and Horticultural Register* 19 (July 23, 1840): 22. For Colman, see *Dictionary of American Biography*, s. v. 'Henry Colman,' and Karen Bradley, 'Henry Colman' (undergraduate internship paper, College of the Holy Cross/Old Sturbridge Village, 1979).

[37] 37. See the following almanacs, edited by Robert B. Thomas: *Farmer's Almanac for 1818* (Boston: West and Richardson, 1817); *Farmer's Alamanac for 1829* (Boston: Richardson and Lord, 1828); *Farmer's Almanac for 1838* (Boston: Charles J. Hendee, 1837); *Farmer's Almanac for 1843* (Boston: Jenks and Palmer, 1842); and *Farmer's Almanac for 1844* (Boston: Jenks and Palmer, 1843).

[38] 38. For the development of the shoe trade in rural Massachusetts, see Blanche Evans Hazard, *The Organization of the Boot and Shoe Manufacture in Massachusetts before 1875* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921; repr. New York: A. M. Kelley, 1969), pp. 1–96; Mark Sipson, 'Shoe Making in Early Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts: An Introduction' (unpublished paper, Old Sturbridge Village, 1980). For a discussion of social and economic change in Massachusetts to 1860, see Jack Larkin, 'Massachusetts Enters the Marketplace, 1790–1860: An Interpretation of Recent Work in Social History,' *A Guide to the History of Massachusetts*, ed. Martin W. Kaufman, John W. Ifkovic, and Joseph Carvalho (Hamden, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 69–82.

Contract workers remained just as transient as before. Their average term of work for the Wards—less than one year—and their length of stay in Shrewsbury—rarely more than two years—were virtually identical with those of pre-1830 laborers. One in six

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[39] Thomas, *Farmer's Almanac for 1837*. In 1820, there were five shoemakers who owned property and were heads of household in Shrewsbury; by 1830, there were twenty-nine; ms. population schedules for Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, U.S. Census, 1820 and 1830 (microfilm in Old Sturbridge Village Research Library) and Worcester County Property Deeds, 1810–30, Worcester County Registry of Deeds, County Courthouse, Worcester, Massachusetts (microfilm in Old Sturbridge Village Research Library). Federal and state industrial surveys, which provide later estimates of Shrewsbury's shoemaking population, were the source for the table below.

	Employed in Shoemaking		
Year	*Men*	*Women*	
1832	70	50	
1837	140	109	
1845	170	162	
1850	131	—	(Women's occupations not listed)
1855	110	66	

[Lewis McLane,] *Documents Relative to the Manufactures of the United States*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Duff Green, 1833), 1: 781; John P. Bigelow, *Statistical Tables Exhibiting the Condition and Products of Certain Branches of Industry in Massachusetts, for the Year Ending April 1, 1837* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), p. 63; John G. Palfrey, *Statistics of the Condition and Products of Certain Branches of Industry in Massachusetts, for the Year Ending April 1, 1845* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1846), p. 128; population schedules for Shrewsbury, U.S. Census, 1850; Francis DeWitt, *Statistical Information Relating to Certain Branches of Industry in Massachusetts, for the Year Ending June 1, 1855* (Boston: William White, 1856), p. 532.

was married, far greater than the proportion in earlier years, and usually rented a subdivided half of one of the Wards' small houses. These workers surely came from poorer families. The Irish were almost uniformly destitute, and Nova Scotians, Quebecois, and Vermonters, all from less prosperous agricultural regions, were all ranging widely from home in search of work. And it seems unlikely that many of the dwindling number of Massachusetts-born laborers among them were young men from economically secure families following the path of agricultural apprenticeship; two post-1830 laborers could be linked to their fathers on the 1850 census for Massachusetts, but the paternal households were landless.

The shape of day labor on the farm was changing as well. From the mid-1830s onward, there was a dramatic alteration in the composition and geographical extent of the Wards' network of day labor within the community. After 1840, Shrewsbury-born men were much less likely be working for the Wards by the day. Their proportion in the labor network slipped from close to 60 percent in the years between 1787 and 1839, to just over 20 percent in the next two decades. (See tables 6A and 6B). Traced on a map of Shrewsbury for 1832, the first that shows houses and locations, the Ward labor exchange network for 1827–37 extended widely through the town, reaching into neighborhoods three to four miles away. But plotted on the next nominative map, that of 1857, the network for 1850–59 was substantially reduced in size and extent. Much less likely to be rooted in the community, the great majority of day workers were now comparatively new arrivals living within a half-mile of the Ward farm.[40]

The new day workers were no poorer than the old ones, although that was poor enough. They were still paid through the traditional paths of rural exchange, with food, firewood, the use of vehicles, pasture, and occasionally the rental of houses. But they

[40] Day laborers for 1827–37 were plotted on 'A Map of the Town of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, by Henry Snow 1832' (photocopy, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library); day laborers for 1850–59 were plotted on 'A Map of the Town of Shrewsbury, 1859' (photocopy, Old Sturbridge Village Research Library) and checked against the Shrewsbury section of Henry F. Walling, 'Map of Worcester County, Massachusetts,' 1857.

TABLE 6A

Place of Birth, Day Laborers, 1787–1839

Place of Birth	*Number of Laborers*	*Percentage of All Day Laborers*
Shrewsbury	82	56.9%
Neighboring towns[1]	24	16.7%
Other Massachusetts towns	31	21.5%
Connecticut	1	.7%
New Hampshire	1	.7%
Vermont	1	.7%
Ireland	3	2.1%
Scotland	1	.7%
TOTAL	178	100%

(For thirty-four laborers, place of birth could not be determined.)

[1] These are towns within a fifteen-mile radius of Shrewsbury.

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department

TABLE 6B

Place of Birth, Day Laborers, 1840–59

Place of Birth	*Number of Laborers*	*Percentage of All Day Laborers*
Shrewsbury	7	20.6%
Neighboring towns[1]	4	11.8%
Other Massachusetts towns	13	38.2%
Connecticut	1	2.9%
New Hampshire	3	8.8%
Vermont	1	2.9%
Other parts of Canada	2	5.9%
Ireland	3	8.8%
TOTAL	45	100%

(For eleven laborers, place of birth could not be determined.)

[1] These are towns within a fifteen-mile radius of Shrewsbury.

SOURCE: Farm Laborers Biographical File, Old Sturbridge Village Research Department were much likelier to be strangers. The familiarity and the kinship-connectedness of 'day's work' diminished.

There are no farm diaries and relatively little farm correspondence for the years after 1832, so that it is hard to know as much in detail about the changing experience of the Wards and their laborers in later years. Thomas II worked his own lands until near the end of his long life, but it is very likely that there was less comradeship in the fields. The convivial world of drink, with family members and laborers sharing a bottle in the hayfield or the winter woods, had surely disappeared with the emergence of powerful temperance sentiment. Accepting of necessity what the tides of change in the labor market brought him, Thomas Ward II clearly had no great love for the Irishmen who were becoming increasingly important to him as workers. His accounts after 1840 include remarks like 'Irish scamp' and 'as he is Irish I must take Irish pay for the balance [i.e., nothing].' Irish and French-Canadian workers' commitment to Roman Catholicism further separated them from Ward, who was with his family a devout orthodox Congregationalist. By virtually every measure, the cultural and social distance between farmer and laborers had greatly increased.[41]

Once, local connections, comradeship in the fields, and the diversity of contract laborers' economic status had blurred or softened some of the boundaries between workers and employers—without negating the realities of power, economic inequality, and limited opportunity on the land. But in the years after 1830, changing occupational opportunities for Massachusetts-born men and the tides of long-distance labor migration from the north and across the Atlantic created a very different farm-labor force. Men who once would have labored for the Wards now stitched shoes or worked in stores. The new farm laborers were now much easier to see as a group set apart—rarely originating in the community, unambiguously poor, and often culturally alien. The world of work on the Ward farm, and in rural Massachusetts, had changed irrevocably.

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[41] The Wards' contract and day laborers of the 1840s and 1850s were not idiosyncratic groups but representative of the community's laboring population. The profiles of age and place of origin for Shrewsbury's resident agricultural laborers listed on the 1850 census were a close match for those of the Ward contract workers for 1840–59. Across the community, Irish, Canadian and northern New England laborers had come to predominate over those born in Massachusetts. Locally born resident farm laborers had virtually disappeared from the town as well as from the Ward farm; only 5.9 percent of the farm workers living in their employers' households were Shrewsbury-born. The place-of-birth profile of the Ward day laborers between 1840 and 1859 was virtually identical to that of an approximation of the town's day-labor pool in 1850—those laborers and propertyless farmers who were not living on farms in 1850.

This data was computed from manuscript population and agriculture schedules for Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, U.S. Census, 1850.

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