

THE “STRAW TOWNS” OF NEW ENGLAND, HOW THEY ORIGINATED

A WEEK: It was still wild and solitary, except that at intervals of a mile or two the roof of a cottage might be seen over the bank. This region, as we read, was once famous for the manufacture of straw bonnets of the Leghorn kind, of which it claims the invention in these parts; and occasionally some industrious damsel tripped down to the water's edge, to put her straw a-soak, as it appeared, and stood awhile to watch the retreating voyageurs, and catch the fragment of a boat-song which we had made, wafted over the water.

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How has rural and northern New England been able to maintain its cherished “race purity”? —Because few immigrants are ever attracted to places that offer few jobs. These back-country locales remain pure, that is, not due to their purity, but due to their backwardness. Having little besides to pride themselves on they would of course pride itself on this purity: making a virtue of necessity in the usual manner they cast themselves as “Old New England, guardian of the tradition.” — Meanwhile, to stay alive while waiting for the tourists to arrive, they have fabricated straw hats.

1786

March 29: [Betsey Metcalf](#) was born in [Providence, Rhode Island](#) to Joel Metcalf (1755-1834) and Lucy Gay Metcalf (born during 1759). Her father was by trade a tanner and currier. She would at about the age of 24 write an account of her life at 64 Benefit Street on Providence's East Side and in West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts from 1798 to 1804, a writing taking the form of a retrospective diary. Later than that, she would extrapolate from this reconstruction a document of twelve pages which we have preserved at the New England Historical Society in Providence, Rhode Island. The focus of this memoir is on her education and early experiences, including the braiding of straw bonnets similar to one she had seen in a local store.¹

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1. Curiously, this account does not specify from what source she had been able to obtain the needed raw materials — and the use of local grasses as the raw material for such ladies' bonnets definitely did not begin until later.



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1790

During the 1790s, a Congregationalist girl of the East Side in [Providence, Rhode Island](#) named [Betsey Metcalf](#) would, with the encouragement of her aunt, be developing a process for weaving women’s bonnets, from cultivated straw, similar to one she had seen in a local store. She would teaching this process to neighbors. Eventually, when she was grown, she would become a schoolteacher in West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts and then get married with a local man named Obed Baker (1783-1868). Then, a whole lot later, Mrs. Baker would realize that she had accomplished something of significance, and would write an ex-post-facto “diary” made up of recollections, and lay claim to this one thing of significance that allegedly she had accomplished in her life.²

2. Well, that — or maybe during the British embargo of the maritime commerce of Napoleonic Europe **somebody else** performed this American act of imitation of the peasant weavers of Livorno, Italy. There’s no evidence whatever, other than the belated testimony of the lady in question: no samples of the early work survive, we have only this one self-serving and uncorroborated and belated reconstruction of the events, and anyway it was admittedly a mere act of imitation of a foreign bonnet that was on display in a local store. Also, the lady in question actually had no way to know for sure after the fact that it had been she who had been the one whose childhood bonnets had sparked this local industry — rather than someone else with a similar inspiration but less of an inclination to lay a claim to importance.

The story persists because it is a nice story with a nice moral –and because it may be true –and because male historians have considered it to be woman-oriented local-history stuff and therefore unworthy of any challenge. Local histories are full of such stories of localities considered locally to be of historical significance, which may or may not be of any actual historical significance, and nobody wants to be the one to challenge the firm knowledge of a local-history tour guide who is escorting one down toney Benefit Street on the toney East Side of Providence on a sunny afternoon. It is the sort of story upon which one may build relentlessly, as one explores the absolute spirit of altruism in which the little girl teaches this foreign process which she has imitated and recreated, for free to various anonymous East Side neighbors.

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1798

At the age of 12, Mrs. [Betsey Metcalf](#) Baker would later allege, in her family home on Benefit Street in the East Side of [Providence, Rhode Island](#), under the encouragement of an aunt, she fashioned her 1st bonnet out of split oat straw, shaping it along the lines of an expensive imported bonnet which she had seen in a local store. She used a seven-strand braid, bleached, and lined the hat with pink silk. Later she would be teaching this craft, which she termed a God-given gift, to neighbor women, and thus helping to establish a rural New England economy termed the “straw town.”

Here is an American straw bonnet dating to about the year 1800:



The primary source of such bonnets had been the Italian peninsula (headcoverings from the Livorno area were termed “Leghorns”) — but the British blockade of Napoleonic Europe had made such commerce difficult and the President of the United States of America had been encouraging American artisans to remedy this problem.

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Here is a typical "Leghorn" bonnet:

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1809

➡ Mary Dixon Kies devised a process for weaving straw with silk thread. This was the first US patent issued to a female. Since the importation of European headwear was being interdicted as part of the government's effort to isolate the USA from the Napoleonic wars, her invention (intervention?) could not have been better timed.

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1810

➡ In about this year Mrs. [Betsey Metcalf](#) Baker of West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts wrote, in the form of a retrospective diary, an account of her life on [Providence, Rhode Island](#)'s East Side from 1798 to 1804. We do not have this writing, but she would later extrapolate from this writing a memoir of twelve pages, mostly about her education and her experience as a 12-year-old in the braiding of straw bonnets, which we do have now at the New England Historical Society. Here are some extracts:

I was then old enough to write, therefore I was sent to a Men's School, But not having patience enough to be very particular about writing, I was too neglectful and by that means never attained that art.... I do not consider that I understand cyphering, for in my opinion a person might do a thousand sums, and yet be ignorant of the first rules of arithmetic.... I never should have persevered [in the making of straw bonnets] had it



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not been for her [an aunt living in the home], for my mother and sisters thought I was spending my time in a useless manner, though they did not say much about it.... My sister [her sisters were Katy, born during 1780, Sophia, born during 1784, Lucy, born during 1788, and Ruth, born during 1794] then learned and we had considerable of a manufactory ... for 2 or 3 years it was very profitable business. I could frequently make 1 dollar per day....³ ...instead of being dressed in the apparel of their own making, they have purchased the vanities of Europe and have brought dress more in fashion when it was quite enough so before. ... The consequences I fear have been more of an injury than otherwise to the New England states, for girls forsook all other employments such as spinning, weaving and the care of a family, and because they could get more by it continued to persevere, by which means they have neglected a necessary part of a females employment.... Gentlemen say that it is almost impossible to get a girl to do housework in the country, they are so engaged in braiding straw. ... It is very injurious to the health, especially to work very steady. We used to do a great deal of business and was always hurried making bonnets. ... My father (who was one of the town council) was always anxious to have public schools. There was great exertions made by some of the opulent citizens of the town to prevent their being established.... I continued going to school until I was 17.... I then began to see the value in learning and my parents were not willing I should let work take my attention from the studies of the school. ... My father willing to give us the means, bought a right in the town library. I then began to read History and have read a number of good books. Ancient history was particularly pleasing, but they gave me strange ideas of mankind. ... I always went to meeting if I was well enough and was learned to sit still, though I think now I did not pay much attention to the preaching or I should not be so ignorant.... I used to sit with the singers in the [Congregationalist] meeting house, which made me more fond of going to public worship. [She relates how she was recruited as a school teacher in 1804 while visiting cousins in Dedham, Massachusetts:] ...they being in want of a school mistress persuaded me to stay and teach 4 months. I told them at first I would not undertake, as I was unacquainted with the business, but they insisted on my trying and I finally told them I would stay if my parents were willing.... I had about 70 different scholars, though about 40 at a time.

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3. The record production of which we are aware is a nimble-fingered anonymous individual who was able to produce 300 such bonnets per year.



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1812



The women and children of the rural families of Franklin, Massachusetts were supplying enough braid of oat straw to enable the manufacture of 6,000 ladies' bonnets per year.

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1821

➔ In the Hartford area of Connecticut, Sophia Woodhouse (1799-1883) developed a variant of a process for weaving bonnets, which had been available since it had been pioneered by [Betsey Metcalf](#) on the East Side of [Providence, Rhode Island](#) in the 1790s, but using native American grasses rather than cultivated straw. She managed to get a patent on this process, and the bonnet she produced would soon become known as the “Wethersfield” after her town. Various New England towns would become known as [straw towns](#) because of their heavy involvement in the weaving of hats and bonnets.

Here is a lady’s straw bonnet on a wire frame, dating to approximately 1830 and rather the worse for wear:



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Here is a bonnet woven of straw and horsehair, dating to about 1840-1845:



1825



There was published, in [Providence, Rhode Island](#), an anonymous essay on the local origins of the making of straw bonnets that alleged: "About the year 1797 straw bonnets were first manufactured in New England. To Mrs. Naomi Whipple [daughter of Thomas W. Whipple and Naomi Dexter Whipple born on October 28, 1728 in Providence] is due the credit of introducing the manufacture.... She was in the habit of receiving consignments of bonnets from a merchant in New York.... At length she conceived the idea of manufacturing bonnets herself.... She procured some straw and sent for a young lady in the neighborhood (Miss Hannah Metcalf), and they made the attempt, ... and soon found themselves successful."⁴

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4. The above account would in after years be controverted by Betsey Metcalf Baker, who would allege that it had been her, rather than this Mrs. Naomi Whipple and Miss Hannah Metcalf, who had in her pre-teen years been the early weaver of local bonnets in imitation of the ones that had been being imported from foreign climes such as Livorno, Italy. Betsey would allege that it had been "an aunt" who had encouraged her, and failed to specify how she, a city girl, had been able to obtain the needed straw as raw material. If the above account was a false one, no explanation has ever been offered as to the egregious inaccuracy which had been committed.



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1826



At about this period, a hat woven locally of imported palm leaf imported was popular during the New England summer.⁵ Six hundred tons of palm leaf were being imported from Cuba per year. The weaving was being done in the homes of the weavers, primarily in the [straw towns](#) of Worcester County, at piecework rates, and the weavers were typically girls 14 years of age and upwards. The hats retailed for about \$0.²⁵ (of the best quality in the best stores, up to \$2.⁰⁰).

I will insert her a recollection [Henry Thoreau](#) had, at the age of 34, of an incident of **roughly** this time frame in his life:



July 16, Wednesday, 1851: ... I remember how glad I was when I was kept from school a half a day to pick huckleberries on a neighboring hill all by myself to make a pudding for the family dinner. Ah, they got nothing but the pudding –but I got invaluable experience beside– A half a day of liberty like that –was like the promise of life eternal. It was emancipation in New England. Oh what a day was there my country-man. ...

1858

In the TRANSACTIONS OF THE RHODE ISLAND SOCIETY FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF DOMESTIC INDUSTRY FOR 1858, a letter was published from a Mrs. Betsy Baker whose maiden name had been [Betsey Metcalf](#). She confessed that it had been her (rather than Miss Hannah Metcalf or Mrs. Naomi Whipple as had been reported a generation earlier, in 1825) who had developed the art of making straw bonnets — that it had been her who had taught neighbors, so that the industry of making these bonnets had begun to spread through neighboring towns. The original of this letter is stored at the Rhode Island Historical Society in [Providence, Rhode Island](#).⁶

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1867

February 24: [Betsey Metcalf Baker](#) died in Dedham, Massachusetts.

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5. At the time, imported ready-made hats of Leghorn, straw, or grass were subject to a duty.
6. Is this story true? We have no reason to doubt it, and also, we have no reason to believe it.



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



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ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT
GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.



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Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

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