The Modernization of Mayo Greenleaf Patch: 
Land, Family, and Marginality in 
New England, 1766–1818 

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THIS is the story of Mayo Greenleaf Patch and Abigail McIntire Patch, ordinary people who helped write a decisive chapter in American history: they were among the first New Englanders to abandon farming and take up factory labor. They did so because rural society had no room for them, and their history is a tale of progressive exclusion from an agrarian world governed by family, kinship, and inherited land. Mayo Greenleaf Patch was the youngest son of a man who owned a small farm. He inherited nothing, and in his early and middle years he improvised a living at the edges of the family economy. He grew up with an uncle and brother, combined farming and shoemaking with dependence on his wife’s family in the 1790s, recruited a half-sister into schemes against his in-laws’ property, then lived briefly off an inheritance from a distant relative. Finally, having used up his exploitable kin connections, he left the countryside and moved to a mill town in which his wife and children could support the family.

That is how Greenleaf1 and Abigail Patch made the journey from farm to factory. But they experienced their troubles most intimately as members of a family; their story can be comprehended only as family history. Greenleaf Patch was a failed patriarch. His marriage to Abigail McIntire began with an early pregnancy, was punctuated by indebtedness and fre-

1 The adult Mayo Greenleaf Patch went by the name of Greenleaf, the name by which his granddaughter knew him and the name that he gave the census-taker in 1790.
quent moves, and ended in alcoholism and a divorce. Along the way, a previously submissive Abigail began making decisions for the family, decisions that were shaped by an economic situation in which she but not her husband found work and by her midlife conversion into a Baptist church.

The outlines of the Patch family history are familiar, for recent scholarship on New England in the century following 1750 centers on its principle themes: the crisis of the rural social order in the eighteenth century, the beginnings of commercial and industrial society in the nineteenth, and transformations in personal and family life that occurred in transit between the two. ² The Patches shared even the particulars of their story—disinheritance, premarital pregnancy, alcoholism, transiency, indebtedness, divorce, female religious conversion—with many of their neighbors. In short, Abigail and Greenleaf Patch lived at the center of a decisive social transformation and experienced many of its defining events.

The story of the Patches throws light on the process whereby farmers in post-Revolutionary New England became “available” for work outside of agriculture. That light, however, is dim and oblique, and we must confront two qualifications at the outset. First, the Patches were obscure people who left incomplete traces of their lives. Neither Greenleaf nor Abigail kept a diary or wrote an autobiography, their names never appeared in newspapers, and no one bothered to save their mail. Apart from one rambling and inaccurate family reminiscence,

their story must be reconstructed from distant, impersonal, and fragmentary sources: wills and deeds, church records, tax lists, censuses, the minutes of town governments, court records, and histories of the towns in which they lived and the shoe and textile industries in which they worked. The results are not perfect. The broad outlines of the story can be drawn with confidence, and a few episodes emerge in fine-grained detail. But some crucial points must rest on controlled inference, others on inferences that are a little less controlled, still others on outright guesswork. Scholars who demand certainty should stay away from people like Greenleaf and Abigail Patch. But historians of ordinary individuals must learn to work with the evidence that they left behind. In part, this essay is an exploration of the possibilities and limits of such evidence.3

A second qualification concerns the problem of generalizing from a single case. It must be stated strongly that the Patches were not typical. No one really is. The Patches, moreover, can claim uniqueness, for they were the parents of Sam Patch, a millworker who earned national notoriety in the 1820s as a professional daredevil. The younger Patch's life was an elaborate exercise in self-destruction, and we might question the normality of the household in which he grew up.4 Indeed the history of the Patch family is shot through with brutality and eccentricity and with a consistent sadness that is all its own. The Patches were not typical but marginal, and that is the point: it was persons who were marginal to rural society who sought jobs outside of agriculture. The number of such per-

3 Historians' attempts to reconstruct the attitudes and actions of ordinary persons have thus far relied upon diaries and biographies, which are exceedingly rare. For the most admirable of these attempts, see Alfred F. Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742–1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly 38 (October 1981): 561–623, and the biography of the immigrant Wilson Benson in Michael B. Katz's, The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Nineteenth-Century City (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 94–111. The Patch family history, in contrast, has been excavated from materials that are available for most Massachusetts families. In large part, their story is a test of what can and cannot be done with that evidence.

sons grew rapidly in post-Revolutionary New England. This is the story of two of them.

I

New England men of Greenleaf Patch's generation grew up confronting two uncomfortable facts. The first was the immense value that their culture placed on the ownership of land. Freehold tenure conferred not only economic security but personal and moral independence, the ability to support and govern a family, political rights, and the respect of one's neighbors and oneself. New Englanders trusted the man who owned land; they feared and despised the man who did not. The second fact was that in the late eighteenth century increasing numbers of men owned no land. Greenleaf Patch was among them.

Like nearly everyone else in Revolutionary Massachusetts, Patch was descended from yeoman stock. His family had come to Salem in 1636, and they operated a farm in nearby Wenham for more than a century. The Patches were church members and farm owners, and their men served regularly in the militia and in town offices. Greenleaf's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all served terms as selectmen of Wenham; his great-grandfather was that community's representative to the Massachusetts General Court; his older brother was a militiaman who fought on the first day of the American Revolution.5

The Patches commanded respect among their neighbors, but in the eighteenth century their future was uncertain. Like thousands of New England families, they owned small farms and had many children; by mid-century it was clear that young Patch men would not inherit the material standards enjoyed by their fathers. The farm on which Greenleaf Patch was born was an artifact of that problem. His father, Timothy Patch, Jr.,

had inherited a house, an eighteen-acre farm, and eleven acres of outlying meadow and woodland upon his own father's death in 1751. Next door, Timothy's younger brother Samuel farmed the remaining nine acres of what had been their father's homestead. The father had known that neither Timothy nor Samuel could make a farm of what he had, and he required that they share resources. His will granted Timothy access to a shop and cider mill that lay on Samuel's land and drew the boundary between the two farms through the only barn on the property. It was the end of the line: further subdivision would make both farms unworkable.6

Timothy Patch's situation was precarious, and he made it worse by overextending himself, both as a landholder and as a father. Timothy was forty-three years old when he inherited his farm, and he was busy buying pieces of woodland, upland, and meadow all over Wenham. Evidently he speculated in marginal land and/or shifted from farming to livestock raising. He financed his schemes on credit, and he bought on a fairly large scale. By the early 1760s Timothy Patch held title to 114 acres, nearly all of it in small plots of poor land.

Timothy Patch may have engaged in speculation in order to provide for an impossibly large number of heirs. Timothy was the father of ten children when he inherited his farm. In succeeding years he was widowed, remarried, and sired two more daughters and a son. In all, he fathered ten children who survived to adulthood. The youngest was a son born in 1766. Timothy named him Mayo Greenleaf.7

Greenleaf Patch's life began badly: his father went bankrupt in the year of his birth. Timothy had transferred the house and farm to his two oldest sons in the early 1760s, possi-


bly to keep the property out of the hands of creditors. Then, in 1766, the creditors began making trouble. In September Timothy relinquished twenty acres of his outlying land to satisfy a debt. By March 1767, having lost five court cases and sold all of his remaining land to pay debts and court costs, he was preparing to leave Wenham.8 Timothy’s first two sons stayed on, but both left Wenham before their deaths, and none of the other children established households in the community. After a century as substantial farmers and local leaders, the Patch family abandoned their hometown.

Greenleaf Patch was taken from his home village as an infant, and his family’s wanderings after that can be traced only through his father’s appearances in court. By 1770 the family had moved a few miles north and west to Andover, where Timothy was sued by yet another creditor. Nine years later Timothy Patch was in Danvers, where he went to court seven times in three years. The court cases suggest that the family experienced drastic ups and downs. Some cases involved substantial amounts of money, but in the last, Timothy was accused of stealing firewood. He then left Danvers and moved to Nottingham West, New Hampshire. There Timothy seems to have recouped his fortunes once again, for in 1782 he was a gambler-investor in an American Revolutionary privateer.9

That is all we know about the Patch family during the childhood of Mayo Greenleaf Patch. About the childhood itself we know nothing. Doubtless Greenleaf shared his parents’ frequent moves and their bouts of good and bad luck, and from his subsequent behavior we might conclude that he inherited

8 Records of the Essex County Court of Common Pleas, sessions of July 1764 (Dodge vs. Patch), September 1766 (Cabot vs. Patch, Jones vs. Patch, Dodge vs. Patch, Brown vs. Patch), and March 1767 (Brimblecom vs. Patch), Essex Institute, Salem; Essex County Registry of Deeds, books 123:103, 120:35, 124:64, 116:96, 123:105, 123:44, 121:132, 120:278, Essex County Courthouse, Salem. Timothy’s land transfers to his sons are recorded in books 120:274 and 115:210.

9 Essex Court of Common Pleas, July 1770 (Andrews vs. Patch), July 1779 (Gerilds vs. Patch), July 1782 (Prince vs. Patch, Putnam vs. Patch, Wilkins vs. Patch, Patch vs. Sawyer, Endicott vs. Patch), September 1782 (Prince vs. Patch), and December 1783 (Upton vs. Patch); “American Revolutionary Naval Service,” New Hampshire Genealogical Record 5 (1908): 169.
his father's penchant for economic adventurism. He may also have spent parts of his childhood and youth in other households. Since he later named his own children after relatives in Wenham, he probably lived there in the families of his brother and uncle. We know also that during his youth he learned how to make shoes, and since his first independent appearance in the record came when he was twenty-one, we might guess that he served a formal, live-in apprenticeship. Even these points, however, rest on speculation. Only this is certain: Greenleaf Patch was the tenth and youngest child of a family that broke and scattered in the year of his birth, and he entered adulthood alone and without visible resources.

In 1787 Mayo Greenleaf Patch appeared in the Second (North) Parish of Reading, Massachusetts—fifteen miles due north of Boston. He was twenty-one years old and unmarried, and he owned almost nothing. He had no relatives in Reading; indeed no one named Patch had ever lived in that town. In a world where property was inherited and where kinfolk were essential social and economic assets, young Greenleaf Patch inherited nothing and lived alone.

Greenleaf's prospects in 1787 were not promising. But he soon took steps to improve them. In July 1788 he married Abigail McIntire in Reading. He was twenty-two years old; she was seventeen and pregnant. This early marriage is most easily explained as an unfortunate accident. But from the viewpoint of Greenleaf Patch it was not unfortunate at all, for it put him into a family that possessed resources that his own family had lost. For the next twelve years, Patch's livelihood and ambitions would center on the McIntires and their land.

The McIntires were Scots, descendants of highlanders who had been exiled to Maine after the Battle of Dunbar. Some had

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10 Reading Town Rate Books, 1773–93, Assessor's Office, Reading Town Hall. In 1787 Patch paid a poll tax and the tax on a very small amount of personal property.

11 Vital Records of the Town of Reading, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850 (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1912), pp. 413, 178. Abigail gave birth seven and one-half months after the wedding.
walked south, and Philip McIntire was among those who pioneered the North Parish in the 1650s. By the 1780s McIntire households were scattered throughout the parish. Archelaus McIntire, Abigail's father, headed the most prosperous of those households. Archelaus had been the eldest son of a man who died without a will, and he inherited the family farm intact. He added to the farm and by 1791 owned ninety-seven acres in Reading and patches of meadowland in two neighboring townships, a flock of seventeen sheep as well as cattle and oxen and other animals, and personal property that indicates comfort and material decency if not wealth. Of 122 taxable estates in the North Parish in 1792, Archelaus McIntire's ranked twenty-third.12

In 1788 Archelaus McIntire learned that his youngest daughter was pregnant and would marry Mayo Greenleaf Patch. No doubt he was angry, but he had seen such things before. One in three Massachusetts women of Abigail's generation was pregnant on her wedding day, a statistic to which the McIntires had contributed amply. Archelaus himself had been born three months after his parents' marriage in 1729. One of his older daughters had conceived a child at the age of fourteen, and his only son would marry a pregnant lover in 1795.13

Faced with yet another early pregnancy, Archelaus McIntire determined to make the best of a bad situation. In the winter of 1789/90, he built a shoemaker's shop and a small house for Greenleaf Patch and granted him use of the land on which they sat.14 At a stroke, Patch was endowed with family connections and economic independence.

12 Cutter, Genealogical and Personal Memoirs, 3:1155; Lilley Eaton, comp., Genealogical History of the Town of Reading, Mass. (Boston: A. Mudge & Son, 1874), p. 96; Will of Joseph McIntire, Administration no. 14496, Middlesex County Court of Probate, Middlesex County Courthouse, Cambridge; Inventory of the Estate of Archelaus McIntire, Middlesex Probate 14481; Reading Rate Books, 1792.


14 Record of debt in Middlesex Probate 14481.
Greenleaf Patch took his place among the farmer-shoemakers of northeastern Massachusetts in 1790. The region had been exporting shoes since before the Revolution, for it possessed the prerequisites of cottage industry in abundance: it was poor and overcrowded and had access to markets through Boston and the port towns of Essex County. With the Revolution and the protection of footwear under the first national tariffs, with the expansion of the maritime economy of which the shoe trade was a part, and with the continuing growth of rural poverty, thousands of farm families turned to the making of shoes in the 1790s.

Their workshops were not entrepreneurial ventures. Neither, if we listen to the complaints of merchants and skilled artisans about "slop work" coming out of the countryside, were they likely sources of craft traditions or occupational pride. The trade was simply the means by which farmers on small plots of worn-out land maintained their independence.15

The journal of Isaac Weston, a Reading shoemaker during the 1790s, suggests something of the cottage shoemaker's way of life. Weston was first and last a farmer. He spent his time worrying about the weather, working his farm, repairing his house and outbuildings, and trading farm labor with his neighbors and relatives. His tasks accomplished, he went hunting with his brothers-in-law, took frequent fishing trips to the coast at Lynn, and made an endless round of social calls in the neighborhood. The little shop at the back of Weston's house

supplemented his earnings, and he spent extended periods of time in it only during the winter months. With his bags of finished shoes, he made regular trips to Boston, often in company with other Reading shoemakers. The larger merchants did not yet dominate the trade in country shoes, and Weston and his neighbors went from buyer to buyer bargaining as a group and came home with enough money to purchase leather, pay debts and taxes, and subsist for another year as farmers.\textsuperscript{16}

Isaac Weston’s workshop enabled him to survive as an independent proprietor. At the same time, it fostered relations of neighborly cooperation with other men. He was the head of a self-supporting household and an equal participant in neighborhood affairs; in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, those criteria constituted the definition of manhood. Mayo Greenleaf Patch received that status as a wedding present.

Greenleaf and Abigail occupied the new house and shop early in 1790, and their tax listings over the next few years reveal a rise from poverty to self-sufficiency with perhaps a little extra. In 1790, for the first time, Greenleaf paid the tax on a small piece of land. Two years later he ranked fifty-sixth among the 122 taxpayers in the North Parish.\textsuperscript{17} Patch was not getting rich, but he enjoyed a secure place in the economy of his neighborhood. That alone was a remarkable achievement for a young stranger who had come to town with almost nothing.

With marriage and proprietorship came authority over a complex and growing household. Few rural shoemakers in the 1790s worked alone; they hired outside help and put their wives and children to work binding shoes. Isaac Weston brought in apprentices and journeymen, and Greenleaf Patch seems to have done the same. In 1790 the Patch family included Greenleaf and Abigail and their infant daughter, along with a boy under the age of sixteen and an unidentified adult


\textsuperscript{17} Reading Rate Books, 1790–92.
male. In 1792 Patch paid the tax on two polls, suggesting that again the household included an adult male dependent. It seems clear that Greenleaf hired outsiders and (assuming Abigail helped) regularly headed a family work team that numbered at least four persons.18

During the same years, Patch won the respect of the McIntires and their neighbors. When Archelaus McIntire died in 1791, his will named Patch executor of the estate. Greenleaf spent considerable effort, including two successful appearances in court, ordering his father-in-law’s affairs. In 1794 he witnessed a land transaction involving his brother-in-law, again indicating that he was a trusted member of the McIntire family. That trust was shared by the neighbors. In 1793 the town built a schoolhouse near the Patch home, and in 1794 and 1795 the parish paid Greenleaf Patch for boarding the schoolmistress and for escorting her home at the end of the term.19 Those were duties that could only have gone to a trusted neighbor who ran an orderly house.

II

Greenleaf Patch’s marriage to Abigail McIntire rescued him from the shiftless and uncertain life that had been dealt to him at birth. In 1787 he was a propertyless wanderer. By the early 1790s, he was the head of a growing family, a useful member of the McIntire clan, and a familiar and trusted neighbor. Greenleaf Patch had found a home. But his gains were precarious, for they rested on the use of land that belonged not to him but to his father-in-law. When Archelaus died, the title to the McIntire properties fell to his nineteen-year-old son, Archelaus, Jr. Young Archelaus was bound out to a guardian, and

19 Middlesex Probate 14481; Middlesex Court of Common Pleas, September 1792, November 1793; Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, book 165:60, Middlesex County Courthouse, Cambridge; Eaton, Genealogical History of Reading, p. 246; Town of Reading: Orders and Receipts, 1773–93, entries for 15 September 1794 and 25 August 1795, Assessor’s Office, Reading Town Hall.
Patch, as executor of the estate, began to prey openly on the resources of Abigail's family. In succeeding years bad luck and moral failings would cost him everything that he had gained.

With Archelaus McIntire dead and his son living with a guardian, the household that the senior Archelaus had headed shrank to two women: his widow and his daughter Deborah. The widow described herself as an invalid, and there may have been something wrong with Deborah as well. In the will that he wrote in 1791, Archelaus ordered that his heir take care of Deborah. His son would repeat that order ten years later, when Deborah, still unmarried and still living at home, was thirty-five years old. Shortly after the death of Archelaus McIntire (and shortly before Patch was to inventory the estate), the widow complained to authorities that "considerable of my household goods & furniture have been given to my children" and begged that she be spared "whatever household furniture that may be left which is but a bare sufficiency to keep household." At that time two of her four daughters were dead, a third lived with her, and her only son was under the care of a guardian. The "children" could have been none other than Greenleaf and Abigail Patch, whose personal property taxes mysteriously doubled between 1791 and 1792. Greenleaf Patch had entered a house occupied by helpless women and walked off with the furniture.20

Patch followed this with a second and more treacherous assault on the McIntires and their resources. In November 1793 Archelaus McIntire, Jr. came of age and assumed control of the estate. Greenleaf's use of McIntire land no longer rested on his relationship with his father-in-law or his role as executor but on the whim of Archelaus, Jr. Patch took steps that would tie him closely to young Archelaus and his land. Those steps involved a woman named Nancy Barker, who moved into

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20 References to Deborah McIntire in the Will of Archelaus McIntire (Middlesex Probate 14481) and the Will of Archelaus McIntire, Jr. (Middlesex Probate 14483). Abigail McIntire, who was sixty-two years old at her husband's death, calls herself an invalid in a letter in his probate file. Her complaint is found there as well.
Reading sometime in 1795. Mrs. Barker had been widowed twice, the second time, apparently, by a Haverhill shoemaker who left her with his tools and scraps of leather, a few valueless sticks of furniture, and two small children. Nancy Barker, it turns out, was the half-sister of Mayo Greenleaf Patch.\(^{21}\)

In November 1795 Nancy Barker married Archelaus McIntire, Jr. She was thirty-one years old. He had turned twenty-three the previous day, and his marriage was not a matter of choice: Nancy was four months pregnant. Archelaus and Nancy were an unlikely couple, and we must ask how the match came about. Archelaus had grown up with three older sisters and no brothers; his attraction and/or vulnerability to a woman nearly nine years his senior is not altogether mysterious. Nancy, of course, had sensible reasons for being attracted to Archelaus. She was a destitute widow with two children, and he was young, unmarried, and the owner of substantial property. Finally, Greenleaf Patch, who was the only known link between the two, had a vital interest in creating ties between his family and his in-law's land. It would be plausible—indeed it seems inescapable—to conclude that Nancy Barker, in collusion with her half-brother, had seduced young Archelaus McIntire and forced a marriage.\(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\) Nancy Barker is identified as the daughter of Patch's mother in the Will of Job Davis, Essex Probate 7278. She had lived in Wenham and had married into some branch of the Patch family; at her marriage to Jonathan Barker of Haverhill in 1786 she was "Mrs. Nancy Patch." Jonathan and Nancy Barker then show up in Haverhill as the parents of children whose names are the same as those later brought to Reading by Nancy. A shoemaker named Jonathan Barker died intestate and nearly propertyless in Haverhill in 1791. The "apparently" in the text is due to the fact that the probate file identifies that man's widow as "Anna," but vital records do not list a marriage or children for a Jonathan and Anna Barker; neither do they list the death of another Jonathan Barker. My guess is that a probate clerk simply misrecorded the name of Jonathan Barker's widow. \textit{Vital Records of Haverhill, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849}, 2 vols. (Topsfield, Mass.: Topsfield Historical Society, 1910), 2:247, 1:29; Essex Probate 1682.

\(^{22}\) \textit{Vital Records of Reading}, p. 587. This line of reasoning raises suspicions about the earlier marriage of Abigail and M. G. Patch. With one in three brides pregnant, we may safely assume that the vast majority of people experienced sexual relations before marriage. As many of them faced propertyless futures, it would be surprising if some did not realize that they could acquire property or the use of it through seduction and the hurried marriages that often resulted.
Of course, that may be nothing more than perverse speculation. Nancy and Archelaus may simply have fallen in love, started a baby, and married. Whatever role Greenleaf Patch played in the affair may have added to his esteem among the McIntires and in the community. That line of reasoning, however, must confront an unhappy fact: in 1795 the neighbors and the McIntires began to dislike Mayo Greenleaf Patch.

The first sign of trouble came in the fall of 1795, when town officials stepped into a boundary dispute between Patch and Deacon John Swain. Massachusetts towns encouraged neighbors to settle arguments among themselves. In all three parishes of Reading in the 1790s, only three disagreements over boundaries came before the town government, and one of those was settled informally. Thus Greenleaf Patch was party to half of Reading’s mediated boundary disputes in the 1790s. The list of conflicts grew: after 1795 the schoolmistress was moved out of the Patch household; in 1797 Patch complained that he had been overtaxed (another rare occurrence), demanded a reassessment, and was reimbursed. Then he started going to court. In 1798 Greenleaf Patch sued Thomas Tuttle for nonpayment of a debt and was awarded nearly $100 when Tuttle failed to appear. A few months earlier, Patch had been hauled into court by William Herrick, a carpenter who claimed that Patch owed him $480. Patch denied the charge and hired a lawyer; the court found in his favor, but Herrick appealed the case, and a higher court awarded him $100.52. Six years later, Patch’s lawyer was still trying to collect his fee.23

There is also a question about land. In the dispute with

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23 Records of the Town of Reading, Massachusetts, 1639–1812, 3 vols., Land Grants and Boundaries (typescript), 3:148, Lucius Beebe Memorial Library, Wakefield, Mass. Reading Orders and Receipts, 14 November 1797. Middlesex Court of Common Pleas, December 1798 (Patch vs. Tuttle); Essex Court of Common Pleas, October 1798 (Herrick vs. Patch) and March 1804 (Reid vs. Patch). See n. 28: the lawyer sold his note to another creditor.
John Swain, the description of Patch's farm matches none of the properties described in McIntire deeds. We know that Patch no longer occupied McIntire land in 1798, and town records identified him as the "tenant" of his disputed farm in 1795. Perhaps as early as 1795, Patch had been evicted from McIntire land.24

Finally, there is clear evidence that the authorities had stopped trusting Mayo Greenleaf Patch. Nancy Barker McIntire died in 1798 at the age of thirty-four. Archelaus remarried a year later, then died suddenly in 1801. His estate—two houses and the ninety-seven-acre farm, sixty acres of upland and meadow in Reading, and fifteen acres in the neighboring town of Lynnfield—was willed to his two children by Nancy Barker. Archelaus's second wife sold her right of dower and left town, and the property fell to girls who were four and five years of age. Their guardian would have use of the land for many years. By this time Greenleaf and Abigail Patch had moved away, but surely authorities knew their whereabouts and that they were the orphans' closest living relatives. Yet the officials passed them over and appointed a farmer from Reading as legal guardian.25 The court, doubtless with the advice of the neighbors, had decided against placing Greenleaf Patch in a position of trust. For Patch it was a costly decision. It finally cut him off from property that he had occupied and plotted against for many years.

Each of these facts and inferences says little by itself, but together they form an unmistakable pattern: from the date of his marriage through the mid-1790s, Greenleaf Patch accumulated resources and participated in the collective life of Abigail's family and neighborhood; from 1795 onward he entered the record only when he was fighting the neighbors or being shunned by the family. The promising family man of the

24 Records of the Town of Reading, Land Grants and Boundaries, 3:148; Federal Direct Tax of 1798: Massachusetts, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, lists Archelaus, Jr. as the owner of two houses, neither of which was occupied by M. G. Patch.

25 Middlesex Probate 14483.
early 1790s was a contentious and morally bankrupt outcast by 1798.

Late in 1799 or early in 1800 Greenleaf and Abigail and their four children left Reading and resettled in Danvers, a community of farmer-shoemakers on the outskirts of Salem. We cannot know why they selected that town, but their best connection with the place came through Abigail. Danvers was her mother’s birthplace, and she had an aunt and uncle, five first cousins, and innumerable distant relatives in the town. Indeed Abigail’s father had owned land in Danvers. In 1785 Archelaus McIntire, Sr. had seized seven acres from John Felton, one of his in-laws, in payment of a debt. Archelaus, Jr. sold the land back to the Feltons in 1794 but did not record the transaction until 1799. Perhaps he made an arrangement whereby the Patches had use of the land. (Doubtless Archelaus was glad to be rid of Greenleaf Patch, but he may have felt some responsibility for his sister.)

Danvers was another shoemaking town, and the Patches probably rented a farm and made shoes. In 1800 the household included Greenleaf and Abigail, their children, and no one else, suggesting that they were no longer able to hire help. But this, like everything else about the family’s career in Danvers, rests on inference. We know only that they were in Danvers and that they stayed three years.

Late in 1802 Greenleaf Patch received a final reprieve, again through family channels. His half-brother Job Davis (his mother’s son by her first marriage) died in the fishing port of Marblehead and left Patch one-fifth of his estate. The full property included a butcher’s shop at the edge of town, an unfinished new house, and what was described as a “mansion house” that needed repairs. The property, however, was mort-

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26 Population Schedules of the Second Census of the United States, 1810: Essex County, Massachusetts, lists a “Mahue” G. Patch in Danvers. The sexes and ages of members of his household fit the family of Greenleaf Patch perfectly. In 1803 the recorder of a deed involving Patch spelled his name “Mayhew” (Essex Deeds, book 172:252). The McIntire-Felton transactions are recorded in Essex Deeds, books 153:95, 165:60.
agaged to the merchants William and Benjamin T. Reid. The survivors of Job Davis inherited the mortgage along with the estate. They sold their interest to the Reids.

The other heirs sold to the Reids without a struggle, but Greenleaf Patch, whether from demented ambition or lack of alternatives, moved his family to Marblehead early in 1803. He finished the new house and moved into it, reopened the butcher's shop, and ran up debts. Some of the debts were old. Patch owed Ebenezer Goodale of Danvers $54. He also owed Porter Sawyer of Reading $92 and paid a part of it by laboring at 75¢ a day. Then there were debts incurred in Marblehead: $70 to the widow Sarah Dolebar; a few dollars for building materials and furnishings bought from the Reids; $50 to a farmer named Benjamin Burnham; $33 to Zachariah King of Danvers; $35 to Joseph Holt of Reading; another $35 to Caleb Totman of Hampshire County. Finally, there was the original mortgage held by the Reids.

Patch's renewed dreams of independence collapsed under the weight of his debts. In March 1803 a creditor repossessed the property up to a value of $150, and a few weeks before Christmas of the same year the sheriff seized the new house. In the following spring, Patch missed a mortgage payment, and the Reids took him to court, seized the remaining property, and sold it at auction. Still, Patch retained the right to reclaim the property by paying his debts. The story ends early in 1805, when the Reids bought Greenleaf Patch's right of redemption for $60. Patch had struggled with the Marblehead property for two years, and all had come to nothing.

With this final failure, the Patches exhausted the family connections on which they had subsisted since their marriage.

27 Will of Job Davis, Essex Probate 7278.
28 The debts, court cases, and land transfers can be followed in Essex Court of Common Pleas, March 1803 (Sawyer vs. Patch), June 1803 (Burnham vs. Patch), December 1803 (Dolebar vs. Patch), March 1804 (Goodale vs. Patch, King vs. Patch, Sawyer vs. Patch, Reids vs. Patch), June 1804 (Totman vs. Patch, Shelden vs. Patch, Holt vs. Patch); Essex Deeds, books 172:252, 175:35, 175:186. The last entry—the purchase of Patch's right of redemption—is dated 2 February 1805.
The long stay in Reading and the moves to Danvers and Marblehead were all determined by the availability of relatives and their resources. In 1807 the Patches resettled in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, the pioneer textile milling town in the United States. It was the climactic event in their history: it marked their passage out of the family economy and into the labor market.

When the family arrived in Pawtucket early in 1807, they found four textile mills surrounding the waterfall at the center of town. The mills were small and limited to the spinning of yarn, and much of the work was done by outworkers. Children picked and cleaned raw cotton in their homes, then sent it to the mills to be carded by other children. The cotton next went to the spinning rooms, where, with the help of water-driven machinery, a few skilled men, and still more children, it was turned into yarn. Millers put the yarn out to women, many of them widows with children, who wove it into cloth. There was thus plenty of work for Abigail and her older children, and it was they who supported the family in Pawtucket. Samuel, the second son, spent his childhood in the mills, and his sisters probably did the same. It is likely that Abigail worked as a weaver; certainly the wool produced on her father’s farm suggests that she knew something about that trade.29

That leaves only the father. Pawtucket was booming in 1807, and if Greenleaf Patch were willing and physically able, he could have found work. We know, however, that he did not work in that town. He drank, he stole the money earned by his wife and children, and he threatened them frequently with violence. Then, in 1812, he abandoned them. Abigail waited six years and divorced him in 1818. She recounted Greenleaf’s drinking and his threats and his refusal to work, then revealed what for her was the determining blow: Greenleaf Patch had

drifted back to Massachusetts and had been caught passing counterfeit money. In February 1817 he entered the Massachusetts State Prison at Charlestown. He was released the following August. Patch was fifty-two years old, and that is the last we hear of him.30

III

In a society that located virtue and respectability in the yeoman freeholder, Mayo Greenleaf Patch never owned land. We have seen some public consequences of that fact: his lifelong inability to attain material independence, the troubled relations with in-laws, neighbors, creditors, and legal authorities that resulted when he tried, and the personal and moral disintegration that accompanied unending economic distress.

Now we turn to private troubles, and here the story centers on Abigail McIntire Patch. Recent studies of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century family life have documented a decline of patriarchal authority, the creation of a separate and female-dominated domestic sphere, an increase in female religiosity, and, bound up with all three, the elevation of women's status and power within the home.31 Most of these studies center on middle- and upper-class women, and we are left to wonder whether the conclusions can be extended to women further down the social scale. In the case of Abigail Patch, they can: her story begins with patriarchy and ends with female control. In grotesque miniature, the history of the Patches is a story of the feminization of family life.

30 "Petition of Abigail Patch for Divorce," Records of the Supreme Court of Providence County, September 1818–March 1819, Box 39, Providence College Archives. Convict Registers for the Charlestown State Prison, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston. A check of probate and vital records in all of the counties in which Patch or members of his family had lived turned up nothing concerning his later life.

Abigail grew up in a family that, judged from available evidence, was ruled by her father. Archelaus McIntire owned a respected family name and a farm that he had inherited from his father and that he would pass on to his son; he was the steward of the family’s past and future as well as its present provider. As a McIntire, he conferred status on every member of his household. As a voter he spoke for the family in town affairs; as a father and church member he led the family in daily prayers; and as a proprietor he made decisions about the allocation of family resources, handled relations with outsiders, and performed much of the heavy work.

Archelaus McIntire's wife and daughters were subordinate members of his household. He had married Abigail Felton of Danvers and had brought her to a town where she lived apart from her own family but surrounded by his; her status in Reading derived from her husband's family and not from her own. On the farm, she and her daughters spent long days cooking and cleaning, gardening, tending and milking cows, making cloth and clothing, and caring for the younger children—work that took place in and near the house and not on the farm. That work was essential, but New England men assumed that it would be done and attached no special importance to it.32 The notion of a separate and cherished domestic sphere was slow to catch on in the countryside, and if we may judge from the spending patterns of the McIntires, it played no role in their house. Archelaus McIntire spent his money on implements of work and male sociability—horses, wagons, well-made cider barrels, a rifle—and not on the china, tea sets, and feather beds that were appearing in the towns and among the rural well-to-do. The McIntires owned a solid table and a Bible and a few other books, and there was a clock and a set of glassware as well. But the most valuable item of furniture in the house was Archelaus's desk. Insofar as the McIntires found time for quiet evenings at home, they probably spent them

listening to the father read his Bible (the mother was illiterate) or keeping quiet while he figured his accounts.33

As the fourth and youngest of Archelaus McIntire's daughters, Abigail had doubtless traded work and quiet subordination for security, for the status that went with being a female McIntire, perhaps even for peace and affection in the home. As she set up housekeeping with Mayo Greenleaf Patch, she doubtless did not expect things to change. Years later Abigail recalled that in taking a husband she wanted not a partner but "a friend and protector." For her part, Abigail spoke of her "duties" and claimed to have been an "attentive and affectionate wife."34 It was the arrangement that she had learned as a child: husbands protected their wives and supported them, wives worked and were attentive to their husbands' needs and wishes. All available evidence suggests that those rules governed the Patch household during the years in Reading.

Abigail and Greenleaf Patch maintained neither the way of life nor the standard of living necessary for the creation of a private sphere in which Abigail could have exercised independent authority. The house was small and there was little money, and the household regularly included persons from outside the immediate family. Greenleaf's apprentices and journeymen were in and out of the house constantly. For two summers the Patches boarded the schoolmistress, and Nancy Barker may have stayed with Greenleaf and Abigail before her marriage. With these persons present in hit-and-miss records, we may assume that outsiders were normal members of the Patch household.

At work, rural shoemakers maintained a rigid division of labor based on sex and age, and Greenleaf's authority was per-

33 The estate inventory of Archelaus McIntire and a letter that his widow signed with a mark are in Middlesex Probate 14481.
34 "Petition of Abigail Patch for Divorce." For indications that this language was in fact Abigail's, see Nancy F. Cott's, "Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records," Journal of Social History 10 (Fall 1976): 32–33, which demonstrates widely varying marital expectations among divorcing persons.
vasive.\(^{35}\) Abigail’s kitchen, if indeed it was a separate room, was a busy place. There she bound shoes as a semiskilled and subordinate member of her husband’s work team, cared for the children (she gave birth five times between 1789 and 1799), did the cooking, cleaning, and laundry for a large household, and stared across the table at apprentices and journeymen who symbolized her own drudgery and her husband’s authority at the same time. As Abigail Patch endured her hectic and exhausting days, she may have dreamed of wallpapered parlors and privacy and quiet nights by the fire with her husband. But she must have known that such things were for others and not for her. They had played little role in her father’s house, and they were totally absent from her own.

Greenleaf Patch seems to have taken his authority as head of the household seriously. Available evidence suggests that he consistently made family decisions—not just the economic choices that were indisputably his to make but decisions that shaped the texture and meaning of life within the family.

Take the naming of the children. Greenleaf Patch was separated from his own family and dependent on McIntire resources, so when children came along we would expect him and Abigail to have honored McIntire relatives. That is not what happened. The first Patch child was a daughter born in 1789. The baby was named Molly, after a daughter of Greenleaf’s brother Isaac. A son came two years later, and the Patches named him Greenleaf. Another daughter, born in 1794, was given the name Nabby, after another of Isaac Patch’s daughters. A second son, born in 1798, was named for Greenleaf’s uncle Samuel. That child died, and a son born the following year (the daredevil Sam Patch) received the same name. The last child was born in 1803 and was named for Greenleaf’s brother Isaac. None of the six children was named for Abigail or a member of her family. Instead, all of the names came from

the little world in Wenham—uncle Samuel's nine-acre farm, the shared barn and outbuildings, and the eighteen acres operated by brother Isaac—in which Greenleaf Patch presumably spent much of his childhood.36

Religion is a second and more important sphere in which Patch seems to have made choices for the family. Abigail McIntire had grown up in a religious household. Her father had joined the North Parish Congregational Church a few days after the birth of his first child in 1762. Her mother had followed two months later, and the couple baptized each of their five children. The children in their turn became churchgoers. Abigail's sisters Mary and Mehitable joined churches, and her brother Archelaus, Jr. expressed a strong interest in religion as well. Among Abigail's parents and siblings, only the questionable Deborah left no religious traces.37

Religious traditions in the Patch family were not as strong. Greenleaf's father and his first wife joined the Congregational church at Wenham during the sixth year of their marriage in 1736, but the family's ties to religion weakened after that. Timothy Patch, Jr. did not baptize any of his thirteen children, either the ten presented him by his first wife or the three born to Thomasine Greenleaf Davis, the nonchurchgoing widow whom he married in 1759. None of Greenleaf's brothers or sisters became full members of the church, and only his oldest brother Andrew owned the covenant, thus placing his family under the government of the church.38


37 Information on Archelaus, his wife, and his daughter Mehitable is from the records of the United Church of Christ, North Reading (Mrs. Arthur Diaz, Church Clerk, personal correspondence). Abigail's sister Mary lived in Salem but baptized a child in Reading, suggesting that she was a member of a church in Salem. Archelaus, Jr. died at the age of twenty-nine without having joined a church, but his will is laden with religious language.

38 Here and in the following paragraph, information is from the records of the First Church in Wenham, Congregational (Carol T. Rawston, Church Clerk, personal correspondence); baptisms from Vital Records of Wenham.
Among the Wenham Patches, however, there remained pockets of religiosity, and they centered, perhaps significantly, in the homes of Greenleaf’s brother Isaac and his uncle Samuel. Uncle Samuel was a communicant of the church, and although Isaac had no formal religious ties, he married a woman who owned the covenant. The churchgoing tradition that Greenleaf Patch carried into marriage was thus ambiguous, but it almost certainly was weaker than that carried by his wife. And from his actions as an adult, we may assume that Greenleaf was not a man who would have been drawn to the religious life.

As Greenleaf and Abigail married and had children, the question of religion could not have been overlooked. The family lived near the church in which Abigail had been baptized and in which her family and her old friends spent Sunday mornings. As the wife of Greenleaf Patch, Abigail had three options: she could lead her husband into church; she could, as many women did, join the church without her husband and take the children with her; finally, she could break with the church and spend Sundays with an irreligious husband. The first two choices would assert Abigail’s authority and independent rights within the family. The third would be a capitulation, and it would have painful results. It would cut her off from the religious community in which she had been born, and it would remove her young family from religious influence.

The Patches lived in Reading for twelve years and had five children there. Neither Greenleaf nor Abigail joined the church, and none of the babies was baptized. We cannot retrieve the actions and feelings that produced these facts, but this much is certain: in the crucial area of religious practice, the Patch family bore the stamp of Greenleaf Patch and not of Abigail McIntire. When Greenleaf and Abigail named a baby or chose whether to join a church or baptize a child, the decisions extended his family’s history and not hers.

Abigail Patch accepted her husband’s dominance in family affairs throughout the years in Reading, years in which he
played, however ineptly and dishonestly, his role as "friend and protector." With his final separation from the rural economy and his humiliating failure in Marblehead, he abdicated that role. In Marblehead Abigail began to impose her will upon domestic decisions. The result, within a few years, would be a full-scale female takeover of the family.

In 1803 the sixth—and, perhaps significantly, the last—Patch child was baptized at Second Congregational Church in Marblehead. And in 1807, shortly after the move to Rhode Island, Abigail and her oldest daughter joined the First Baptist Church in Pawtucket. At that date Abigail was thirty-seven years old, had been married nineteen years, and had five living children. Her daughter Molly was eighteen years old and unmarried. Neither followed the customs of the McIntire or Patch families, where women who joined churches did so within a few years after marriage. Abigail and Molly Patch presented themselves for baptism in 1807 not because they had reached predictable points in their life cycles but because they had experienced religion and had decided to join a church.

At the same time (here was feminization with a vengeance) Abigail's daughters dropped their given names and evolved new ones drawn from their mother's and not their father's side of the family. The oldest daughter joined the church not as Molly but as Polly Patch. Two years later the same woman married under the name Mary Patch. Abigail's oldest sister, who had died in the year that Abigail married Greenleaf, had

39 Vital Records of Marblehead, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849, 3 vols. (Salem: Essex Institute, 1909), 1:380. The baptisms of Abigail and her oldest daughter were recorded in "Baptist Church of Christ, August 1805 to November 1837," 4 April 1807 and 12 April 1807, First Baptist Church, Pawtucket.

40 "Baptist Church of Christ," 4 April 1807: "Mrs. Patch and her daughter Polly came forward...." A Mary Patch married Goodman (Edward) Jones in 1809 (James N. Arnold, Vital Record of Rhode Island: North Providence [Providence: Narragansett Historical Publishing Company, 1892], p. 92), and the Manual of the First Baptist Church, Pawtucket, R.I., Organized August, 1805 (Providence: Providence Press Company, 1884), p. 28, identifies Mary Patch Jones as having joined the church in April 1807. The Molly Patch born in 1789, the Polly Patch of 1807, and the Mary Patch of 1809 were definitely the same woman.
been named Mary. The second Patch daughter, Nabby, joined the Baptist church in 1811. At that time she was calling herself Abby Patch. By 1829 she was known as Abigail.41 The daughters of Abigail Patch, it seems, were affiliating with their mother and severing symbolic ties with their father. It should be noted that the father remained in the house while they did so.

In Pawtucket Abigail built a new family life that centered on her church and her female relatives. That life constituted a rejection not only of male dominance but of men. For five years Abigail worked and took the children to church while her husband drank, stole her money, and issued sullen threats. He ran off in 1812, and by 1820 Abigail, now officially head of the household, had rented a house and was taking in boarders.42 Over the next few years the Patch sons left home: Samuel for New Jersey, Isaac for the Northwest, Greenleaf for parts unknown. Abigail's younger daughter married and moved to Pittsburgh. Among the Patch children only Mary (Molly, Polly) stayed in Pawtucket. In 1825 Mary was caught committing adultery. Her husband left town, and Mary began calling herself a widow. Abigail closed the boardinghouse and moved into a little house on Main Street with Mary and her children sometime before 1830.43 She and her daughter and granddaughters would live in that house for the next quarter-century.

The neighbors remembered Abigail Patch as a quiet, steady little woman who attended the Baptist church. She did so with

41 "Baptist Church of Christ," 12 November 1810, 31 January 1811, and 1 January 1829.

42 Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, 1820: Providence County, Rhode Island. The household was headed by Abigail Patch and included six men between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, all employed in manufacturing.

43 "Baptist Church of Christ," 2 June 1825. The "widow" Mary Jones headed a household in Pawtucket in 1830 (her husband did not, and there is no record of his death or of a divorce), and a local historian states that Abigail moved into the Main Street house "about 1830." See Robert Grieve, An Illustrated History of Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Vicinity (Pawtucket: Gazette and Chronicle, 1897), p. 66.
all of the Patch women. Mary had joined with her in 1807, and each of Mary’s daughters followed in their turn: Mary and Sarah Anne in 1829, Emily in 1841.\textsuperscript{44} First Baptist was a grim and overwhelmingly female Calvinist church, subsidized and governed by the owners of Pawtucket’s mills. The Articles of Faith insisted that most of humankind was hopelessly damned, that God chose only a few for eternal life and had in fact chosen them before the beginning of time, “and that in the flesh dwelleth no good thing.”\textsuperscript{45} It was not a cheerful message. But it struck home among the Patch women.

Apart from the church, the women spent their time in the house on Main Street. Abigail bought the house in 1842—the first land that the Patches owned—and her granddaughters Mary and Emily taught school in the front room for many years.\textsuperscript{46} The household was self-supporting, and its membership was made up of women whose relations with men were either troubled or nonexistent. Abigail never remarried. We cannot know what preceded and surrounded the instance of adultery and the breakup of Mary’s marriage, but she too remained single for the rest of her life. Sarah Anne Jones, one of the granddaughters, was thirty-six years old and unmarried when called before a church committee in 1853. Although she married a man named Kelley during the investigation, she was excommunicated “because she has given this church reason to believe she is licentious.”\textsuperscript{47} Sarah Anne’s sisters, the schoolteachers Mary and Emily, were spinsters all their lives. The lives of Abigail Patch and her daughter Mary Jones had been blighted by bad relations with men; the women whom they raised either avoided men or got into trouble when they did not. Abigail Patch lived on Main Street with the other

\textsuperscript{44} Manual of the First Baptist Church, p. 29.


\textsuperscript{46} North Providence Deeds and Mortgages, book 8:523, Pawtucket City Hall. On the schoolhouse, see Grieve, Illustrated History of Pawtucket, p. 101.

\textsuperscript{47} “Church Meetings, January 1858 to January 1874,” 29 August 1853, 30 August 1853, and 23 September 1853, First Baptist Church, Pawtucket.
women until 1854, when she died at the age of eighty-four.\textsuperscript{48}

We know little of what went on in that house. The women lived quietly, and former pupils remembered Abigail's granddaughters with affection. But beyond the schoolroom, in rooms inhabited only by the Patch women, there was a cloistered world. Within that world, Abigail and her daughter Mary reconstructed not only themselves but the history of their family.

Pawtucket celebrated its Cotton Centennial in 1890, and a Providence newspaperman decided to write about the millworker-hero Sam Patch. He asked Emily Jones, one of Abigail's aged granddaughters, about the Patch family history.\textsuperscript{49} Emily had been born after 1810, and her knowledge of the family's past was limited to what she had picked up from her mother and grandmother. Her response to the reporter demonstrated the selective amnesia with which any family remembers its history, but in this case the fabrications were sadly revealing.

Miss Jones told the newspaperman that her oldest uncle, Greenleaf Patch, Jr., had gone off to Salem and become a lawyer. That is demonstrably untrue. No one named Greenleaf Patch has ever been licensed to practice law in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{50} About her uncle Sam Patch, Emily said: in the 1820s he operated a spinning mill of his own north of Pawtucket, but failed when his partner ran off with the funds; it was only then that he moved to New Jersey and became a daredevil. That too is a fabrication. What we know about Sam Patch is that he was an alcoholic with powerful suicidal drives, and that he succeeded in killing himself at the age of thirty.\textsuperscript{51} Miss Jones re-


\textsuperscript{49} Undated clipping from the \textit{Providence Journal}, Sam Patch Scrapbook, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, New York.

\textsuperscript{50} Phone conversation with John Powers, Office of the Clerk of the Supreme Judicial Court for Suffolk County, Mass.

\textsuperscript{51} A search of deeds and tax lists from the town in which Sam Patch supposedly operated a mill and a search of bankruptcy petitions in the years 1820–25 turned up nothing. Smithfield Tax Lists, Central Falls City Hall; bankruptcy petitions, Records of the Supreme Court of Providence County.
membered that her youngest uncle, Isaac, moved to Illinois and became a farmer. That was true: in 1850 Isaac Patch was farming and raising a family near Peoria.\textsuperscript{52} It seems that Abigail Patch and Mary Patch Jones idealized the first two Patch sons by giving them successes and/or ambitions that they did not have. The third son was born in 1803 and grew up in a household dominated by Abigail and not by her dissipated husband; he became a family man. By inventing a similar ordinariness for the older sons, Abigail may have erased some of the history created by Mayo Greenleaf Patch.

Emily's memory of her grandfather provokes similar suspicions. We know that Greenleaf Patch lived in Pawtucket until 1812. But Miss Jones remembered that her grandfather had been a farmer in Massachusetts, and that he died before Abigail brought her family to Rhode Island. Greenleaf Patch, it seems, was absent from Abigail's house in more ways than one.


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