

## REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

---

### Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

*Georg Leidenberger*

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in July 1993 included several papers of interest to historians of laboring people. To be sure, few of the presentations dealt with the “classic” themes in labor history, such as work experiences, industrialization, or workers’ collective responses; instead, most centered on workers’ racial and gender identities, thus clearly emphasizing cultural and ideological factors over economic ones.

One of the central themes concerned working-people’s relationship to a national republican ideology that proclaimed the superiority of white men over African Americans and women. In his “Rending the Veil? Meanings of Race for Black and White Sailors in Dartmoor Prison, 1814–1815,” W. Jeffrey Bolster (University of New Hampshire) inquired whether white sailors’ daily encounters with black sailors in the British prison led them to reassess their racist stereotypes of African Americans. Although noting white seamen’s willingness to perform plays and boxing matches with their black fellow inmates as well as their attendance of black religious services, Bolster ultimately concluded that white sailors adhered to an exclusionary and racist ideology. White seamen refused black seamen entry into their segregated living quarters and upheld racist perceptions of blacks as thieves. Moreover, they considered African-American inmates’ quasi-monarchical form of self-government unsuitable for a democratic (and American) republic. Despite their daily interaction with black sailors, first on ships and later in the equally confining prison, white sailors never rended “the veil” of racist ideology.

Michael Kaplan’s (New York University) “B’hoys will be B’hoys: Tavern Violence and the Creation of a Working-Class Male Identity in Antebellum New York City” also addressed white workers’ racial perceptions, in this case those of young, mostly Irish, laborers. Economically excluded from the promises of Jacksonian Common Man rhetoric and without the revolutionary republican tradition of native-born artisans, the “b’hoys,” according to Kaplan, found their identity in a white, “rough but humble” tavern-based culture. Citing cases of rapes of working-class women and

*International Labor and Working-Class History*

No. 45, Spring 1994, pp. 133–141

© 1994 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

attacks on the city's African Americans (especially tavern keepers), Kaplan described how white laborers created a working-class youth culture defined by opposition to those even lower on the social ladder. According to Kaplan, the b'hoys' cultivation of white maleness contributed to the racism and sexism inherent in the dominant republican ideology, yet, as he also suggested, this boisterous tavern culture often conflicted with middle-class senses of propriety and also provided a forum for white laborers' political expression through ward-based politics.

In "Artisans and Reaction: Democratic Party Ideology and Its Impact on Racial Attitudes in Antebellum New York City," Anthony Gronowicz (Pennsylvania State University at Hazleton) offered a provocative reassessment of the city's artisan politics in the antebellum period. Gronowicz contended that artisans' racism, based on their economic self-interests as slave-holding entrepreneurs and later as "labor aristocrats," undermined any possibilities for a working-class alternative to Tammany Hall politics. Even after the gradual abolition of slavery in New York, Gronowicz asserted, white mechanics' supposed radicalism continued to exclude African Americans and the dependent poor from its agenda. Movements such as the Workingmen's party of 1829 and the 1850 Industrial Congress not only affirmed "a virulently racist Democratic ideology," but, according to Gronowicz, also failed to pose a challenge to industrial capitalism. Demands for land reform and naive calls for "an ahistorical cooperative commonwealth" merely played into the hands of southern slave owners and northern capitalists.

In "Eradicating the Offensive Color': Political-Economic Thought and Free People of Color in Early National Baltimore," T. Stephen Whitman (Johns Hopkins University) also explored questions of racial attitudes, in this case of white middle-class views on manumission in antebellum Baltimore. According to Whitman, that debate shifted by the early eighteenth century away from moralistic toward economic and utilitarian arguments. Some whites hoped that the promise of manumission would encourage slaves to be thrifty and self-motivated, thereby rendering them "fit" for a free-labor economy. Most Baltimore industrialists and the press, however, argued against manumission and considered free birth a prerequisite for political and economic citizenship. Apart from blackening the white race through intermarriage, they argued, freed slaves would constitute an economic liability, because they would not be able to grasp the "mysteries of property." White Baltimoreans also felt that blacks would make poor consumers because of their "lack of artificial wants." Whitman's analysis of perceptions of African Americans as ill-suited for a capitalist economy thus complemented other authors' discussions of the exclusion of African Americans from a democratic polity and a national ideology.

Mary Ferrari's (Radford University) study, "Women Artisans in the Southern City: Charleston, Norfolk, and Alexandria, 1782–1808," was the only presentation at the conference on women workers. Arguing against a

“golden age” for working women, Ferrari emphasized the small number of independent female artisans in Southern towns and the precariousness of their economic existence. Even when listed in city directories as blacksmiths or shoemakers, Ferrari pointed out, most female artisans were merely managing their deceased husbands’ slaves, who actually performed the work. The few women performing a trade did so largely in the clothing sector. While some female dressmakers enjoyed relative economic stability, retained their shops through marriage, widowhood, or remarriage, and often had access to considerable capital, most craftswomen, Ferrari stressed, found themselves in highly unstable and short-lasting positions. Thus, the author concluded, to a woman a “trade” often meant an added burden and not, as in the case of their male counterparts, a source of pride, identity, and relative economic stability.

## New England Labor History Conference

*Robert L. Cvornyek*

*Leslie Ann Schuster*

Rhode Island College

The Forth Annual New England Labor History Conference, sponsored by the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission and the University of Rhode Island’s Labor Research Center, convened in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, April 2–3, 1993. Papers and events were aimed at a popular audience and included several reports of works in progress.

In the opening session, entitled “New England Mill Workers,” Bruce Cohen presented “The Organization of the Garment Industry in Worcester, 1919–1950.” He modified Worcester’s reputation as an antiunion town by demonstrating the success of Jewish workers, mostly women, in organizing the city’s garment trades, especially after 1923. Cohen traced the evolution of a seamless web of labor and community relations in the Jewish neighborhood bordering Water Street through the life of Daniel Goldman, a labor organizer turned garment manufacturer. In “The Corset Industry and its Employees in New Haven during the Gilded Age,” Frank Annunziato analyzed the convergent effect of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, paternalism, and Republican political dominance on labor relations in New Haven’s corset industry. Although this expanding industry emerged as Connecticut’s seventh-largest employer by 1890, the mostly female and immigrant work force remained outside the fold of organized labor and under the “protective” eyes of industry operators. Mary