While enriching many, [the] commercial boom [of the 1800s] had made life more precarious for the nine out of ten urban dwellers who worked with their hands. Already about half of these working-class people were without skills or property. Laborers, sailors, cartmen, domestics, and small shopkeepers eked out a bare subsistence, constantly threatened with disaster by unemployment or illness. Most vulnerable were blacks and women, who bore the special burdens of racial and sexual discrimination.

Insecurity was also overtaking the skilled half of the urban working class, the artisans or mechanics. These leather-apron workers were divided into dozens of different crafts, each manufacturing (“making by hand”) in home workshops a different product. Every neighborhood had bakers and butchers, shoemakers and tailors, to supply its daily essentials. Buildings constructed by carpenters and masons were furnished by cabinetmakers, glaziers, pewterers, and chandlers; while the merchant fleets that sustained the urban economy were built and maintained by shipwrights, caulkers, cordage makers, sailmakers, blockmakers, and riggers. A mechanic learned the “art” or skill of his particular craft as an unpaid apprentice to a master mechanic. Then he typically worked a few years for wages as a journeyman, until he acquired the tools and capital needed to set up his own shop as a master. Once established he might take on several apprentices and a journeyman or two.

The mechanic culture shared much of the precapitalist quality of the subsistence culture. Skills, tools, and shop gave master mechanics something of the security and independence that land gave farmers, as well as a similar patriarchal control over their families, including apprentices and journeymen. In the moral economy of their European artisan tradition, they were not competing for wealth but providing essential services to the community in return for the right to a decent competence. Often they banded together by craft to enforce production standards and adequate prices….

But [the] commercial boom inaugurated a historic shattering of mechanics’ unity by extending markets for their products beyond neighborhood and local customers. As widening markets intensified competition, cost-cutting masters with access to merchant capital in the major ports intensified the division of labor by subdividing work processes to exploit cheap, unskilled labor under close supervision in central workshops. Alternatively, to avoid the high cost of large workshops on expensive urban land, many of these mechanic/entrepreneurs paid unskilled workers low piece rates to complete at home single steps in the production process.

1 Unless otherwise noted, your history teacher wrote the footnotes.
This “putting-out” system of preindustrial manufacturing flourished first in producing clothing and shoes, items of universal consumption that could be sold in large lots to southern slaveholders or to the “slop shops” that clothed the urban poor. Every effort was made to simply work processes so the cheapest labor could be used. Shoe uppers were put-out to be sewn together, precut cloth to be sewn into garments, or semifinished garments to be provided with cuffs, collars, or button-holes. Soon cheap furniture, gloves, stockings, and hats were being mass-produced in this fashion.

Most of this tedious work was done by women and children, of the the families of widows with no other means of support. Barred by social convention from most jobs outside the home, they had to work for so little, compared with males, that only constant toil yielded a bare living. Increasingly such work was put-out to labor contractors, who initiated a long-lived pattern of urban sweatshop production by crowding workers into strictly supervised garret workshops.2

Journeymen in these trades found themselves pushed back to the level of unskilled wage workers and unable to acquire the skills that formerly gave them bargaining power with masters and the promise of becoming masters themselves. The increasing capital required to set up in competition with established masters was harder to get. Disparities of wealth between journeymen and masters widened; the average age of journeymen approached the average age of masters; and journeymen, once fewer than masters, began to outnumber them, from three-to-one in some trades up to eleven-to-one in printing. “Very few,” complained journeyman printers facing the high cost of printing presses, “ever have it in their power to realize a capital sufficient to commence business on their own account.”

Although many crafts were at first less affected, especially in smaller centers, [the] commercial boom had inaugurated an irreversible proletarianization of the mechanic class.3 In many of the largest urban crafts, mechanic/entrepreneurs were becoming capitalist bosses who could survive intensifying competition in widening markets only by cutting labor costs. As apprenticeship decayed into an excuse for cheap labor, journeyman become permanently dependent on wages. Sharpening competition between white workers and blacks, both free and slave, intensified pressures in Baltimore and other southern centers. Fears of total destitution in hard times were borne out in the wake of the Embargo [Act of 1807].4 In 1809 over a thousand men were incarcerated for debt in New York City alone, half for owing less than ten dollars, a week’s wages.

Journeymen mechanics, with their tradition of skills and craft pride, fought back. They began excluding masters from journeymen’s societies organized in the various crafts to defend labor against capital. Isolated strikes by journeymen are recorded as far back as 1768. The first journeymen’s society clearly designed to protect wages—the first labor union in the modern sense—was organized by Philadelphia shoemakers at the beginning of the commercial boom in 1794, and a surge of journeymen organizations and strikes filled the boom years. Employers

2 A garret is a room in the top floor or attic of a building. The word connotes cramped, unpleasant conditions.
3 Proletarianization: think back to your lessons last year on Karl Marx. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production, the proletariat are those who hire out their labor to owners of industry.
4 We will talk more about this in class. In brief, as part of an effort to keep the United States out of the Napoleonic Wars between Britain and France, Congress passed the Embargo Act, which forbade American ships from leaving American waters. This had devastating effects on American trade.
eventually resorted to the courts. Hard times and the conviction of striking shoemakers for conspiracy at Philadelphia in 1806 and New York in 1810 quelled worker militancy for a decade.

Masters, too, felt threatened by capitalist relations of production. When “wealthy capitalists” built an enormous bakehouse in New York to mass-produce bread with wage labor, three hundred mechanics met to declare solidarity with besieged neighborhood bakers. The Bread Company’s backers, charged “A Mechanic,” intended to “monopolize by degrees all profitable mechanical branches.” Their large capital would enable them to buy flour cheaper, or to forego profits temporarily, so as to undersell and drive out of business any “obstinate mechanics… unwilling to become servants.” They would then hire hundreds of mechanics at miserly wages, reserving for themselves the extra profits. “They will screw down the wages to the last thread,” this prophetic newspaper essayist asserted. “Next, the independent spirit, so distinguished at present in our mechanics, and so useful in republics, will be entirely annihilated. The workmen will be servants and slaves.” This crisis was resolved by destruction of the bakehouse in a fire of undetermined origin.

While deskilling and proletarianizing a majority of the urban working class, market growth opened unprecedented opportunities for a minority. Masters who commanded the capital to exploit more wage labor energized market revolution as nascent manufacturers. New York’s tax assessments identifying many of these successful masters. The potter Clarkson Crolius increased his taxable worth from $8,300 in 1808 to $22,400 in 1815, while the holdings of the baker Thomas Mercein rose from $2,600 to $11,100. The 1815 assessments included a tailor worth $15,900, a shoemaker worth $18,300, and two builders worth $49,500 and $9,100.

Success on an even greater scale enabled some masters to push through the status boundary into gentility. Particularly inspiring to the upwardly mobile was Stephen Allen, who began as a penniless apprentice sailmaker, had his own sailmaking partnership by the time he was twenty-one, and ended worth $32,000 and occupying the gentleman’s position of mayor. Painter and glazier Jacob Sherred accumulated assets valued at $120,000. Tanner Jacob Lorrilard, beginning business with a $3,000 loan from wealthy relatives in 1800, owned $90,700 worth of property by 1815, including three houses, two leather stores, and forty acres of Manhattan real estate. Noah Brown, a “barefoot frontier boy” who began as an unknown journeyman shipwright, became a prominent shipbuilder. His activity in Republican politics eased his way upward, doubtless helping him obtain during the War of 1812 a $200,000 navy contract on which he employed over 200 men. The famous cabinetmaker Duncan Phyfe almost went broke after he served his apprenticeship and opened a small shop. Saved by the patronage of John Jacob Astor’s daughter, he developed a large shop and elegant salesroom and was eventually worth $500,000. Phyfe’s elaborate display for the 1815 peace celebration won newspaper praise along with that of eminent gentlemen.

By example, precept, and shopfloor discipline, these successful mechanic/entrepreneurs preached a new ethic of ascetic effort against the easygoing pace and free-drinking camaraderie of traditional workways. Eschewing such workingclass entertainments as cockfights and bull

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5 Nascent: starting to exist; being born
baitings, Duncan Phyfe followed strict Calvinist work habits, while sailmaker/mayor Allen ascribed his prosperity to working fourteen hours a day, avoiding debt as much as possible, and “employing the utmost economy in all my concerns.” Mechanics, said Allen, should labor with “industry and full attention to business.”

Through New York’s General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, the mechanic elite established a school and a library for apprentices. “Who can tell how many Franklins may be among you?” society president Thomas Mercein asked apprentices at the library’s dedication. Baker Mercein’s $11,500 worth lent credibility to his assertion that “your opportunities are great and liberal.” If, aided by the new library, they would shun “the alluring but fatal paths of vice and dissipation,” he promised, “industry, ardour, sobriety and perseverance in your different pursuits, will lead to successful competition in the world.”

Sharpening competition enforced the stricter discipline imposed by these exemplars of capitalist success. While most rank-and-file mechanics resisted, others embraced the ethic of “successful competition in the world” to avoid falling into the despised urban underclass of propertyless and demoralized laborers. Seeking ideological reinforcement through working-class churches and associations, some even embraced the dominant mythology, endlessly proclaimed by the successful, that opportunity was rife and that success or failure turned on effort and character alone.

[In the North,] class lines sharpened among a swelling urban populace. The old “walking city,” where counting rooms, merchant townhouses, and mechanic home/workshops mingled in compact familiarity around the docks, fractured outward in a mosaic of class neighborhoods. Gentry mansions withdrew to exclusive enclaves bordering the commercial centers—Boston’s Beacon Hill, New York’s Greenwich Village, Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square, and Baltimore’s St. Charles Square. Soaring land values (up nearly 750 percent in Manhattan in thirty years) drove small tradesmen and mechanics out of homeownership into multifamily tenements and boardinghouses provided by speculative builders and landlords on the cheaper land of the urban periphery. Maritime workers clustered around New York shipyards at Corlear’s Hook and textile workers around Philadelphia cotton mills at Manayunk. Laborers and blacks crowded into the slum cellars and garrets of South Philadelphia, East Baltimore, Boston’s North End, and New York’s Five Points.

Conflict broke out all along the class lines shaping urban geography. In shopfront chapels and fields, “Mechanick preachers” gave fleeting public expression to the anger of the unskilled and deskilled who staved off the hunger of winter layoffs, recession or sickness by laboring up to 16 hours a day for perhaps two hundred dollars a year.

7 Think back to your ninth-grade lessons on the Reformation. Also, the Puritan settlers in New England were Calvinists.
8 For all practical purposes, this means “banks.”
9 This word is defined in the previous reading.
10 This is an old-fashioned spelling of “mechanic,” which in the nineteenth century referred to a manual laborer or artisan.