2016

The Merchants and the Dyers: The Rise of a Dyeing Service Industry in Massachusetts and New York 1800-1850

Linda Jean Thorsen
linda@lindathorsen.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf

Part of the Art and Materials Conservation Commons, Art Practice Commons, Fashion Design Commons, Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Museum Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/995

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The Merchants and the Dyers: 
The Rise of a Dyeing Service Industry in Massachusetts and New York 
1800-1850\(^1\)

Linda Jean Thorsen
linda@lindathorsen.com

Introduction
Histories of dyeing in the United States have tended to emphasize home craft processes, early textile manufacturing, or the growth of synthetic dyes. But in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a vibrant independent dyeing service industry emerged in U.S. port cities. Using natural dyes, working with a variety of fibers, colors, and finishing processes, and developing sophisticated skills and equipment, these dyers served import merchants, retailers, elite households, and businesses such as hotels. They received cloth, garments, or home furnishings, cleaned, bleached, and/or dyed them, and then returned them “like new.” To satisfy customers, these businesses had to at least approach the original materials’ quality of dyeing and finishing, which meant adapting state-of-the-art practices from London and Europe.

Through a case study of businesses owned and operated by the Barrett family of Malden, Massachusetts and Staten Island, New York, this paper illuminates the nature and growth of the industry in the early nineteenth century. Operating through a succession of partnerships, the Barrett dyeing business expanded rapidly after 1800, aided by internal improvements, and was highly profitable into the 1820s, when the Barrett family opened a second business on Staten Island to serve merchants and households in New York and further south. The enterprise soon grew to incorporate printing as well as dyeing. Profits declined in the 1830s and 1840s as competing dyers and cheaper cloth drove prices down.

It seems that at least before 1830, these independent dyers, rather than the early textile manufacturers in Pawtucket, Waltham, and Lowell, drove technical advances and commercial success in high-end dyeing in the United States. Access to a profitable household market (referred to as the “retail” arm of the business) helped to mitigate dyers’ dependence on powerful merchants. In effect, profit from dyeing for households subsidized the significant “wholesale” dyeing business that reduced merchants’ import risk and increased their profits.

Exploiting a Dyeing Opportunity
The rise of a profitable American trade with the East Indies in the 1790s was probably the chief source of dyeing opportunity. While Americans made homespun wool and linen, many textiles purchased and used by American households toward the end of the eighteenth century were imported. People with money to spend purchased fine woolens, cottons, linens, and silks from the British Isles, Europe, India, or China, and transformed them into garments and home furnishings such as bed linens, drapes, carpets, and upholstery. Indian cotton goods were

available in a range of weights and weaves, plain or brightly colored, and often printed. They had been entering North America—either legally or illegally—since the late seventeenth century, if not earlier. As early as the 1690s, British policymakers viewed Americans as potentially important consumers of British India goods. As a result, they were exempted from the Calico Acts of 1700 and 1721; while British people could not wear imported Indian calicos, Americans could—as long as goods came through London via the East India Company. After independence, Americans could purchase goods directly from India. Because Britain was reluctant to antagonize America, particularly during the various wars with France in which the new country was a neutral party, it kept Indian ports open to American ships. This direct trade reduced the prices merchants needed to pay for India goods—by half or more. Abetted by British merchants, Americans seized opportunities to profit from trading in ports in India and farther east, and also in European ports closed to the warring nations. In addition to cottons, plain or brightly colored silk goods came from India and China. Once Americans began trading in China in the 1780s and 90s, Chinese silks were part of the cargo that returned to the U.S. with tea shipments.

William Barrett (1775-1834), a younger son from a prominent middling family in Concord, Massachusetts, needed a livelihood. In the 1790s he was apprenticed to a local clothier—a village artisan who transformed homespun wool into serviceable cloth. Local households, in addition to bringing their homespun to the clothier stand to be scoured, fulled, and dyed, also sometimes brought garments and home furnishings to be refurnished. When people increasingly brought them cottons and silks, Barrett and his master farmed out the work to Hugh Thompson, an Englishman living in Charlestown who had developed sophisticated dyeing skills in London and could work with silk and cotton. Thompson was one of many textile artisans who came to the young United States seeking opportunity. Though dyers had advertised their service in American cities from at least the 1740s, migration of artisans accelerated in the late eighteenth century. Of 2368 artisans who emigrated from England between Dec. 1773 and March 1776 (a little over two years), or roughly a third were in textile trades.

Realizing that high-end dyeing was in high demand, William Barrett joined with Thompson to exploit the business opportunity. In February of 1801, their partnership, the firm of “William

---

4 Fichter, *So Great a Proffit*, 177.
5 Ibid., 42.
6 Summarized from Fichter, *So Great a Proffit*.
7 John Jacob Astor, for example, in his arrangement with the North West Company, brought silks and teas back after bringing furs to China. Fichter, *So Great a Proffit*, 217.
8 He was a grandson of Colonel James Barrett, commanding officer at the Battle of Concord on April 19, 1775.
Barrett & Co.,” was announced to readers of Boston papers. Prominent in their ads were mentions of Thompson’s London experience and skill. Thompson said he had been “foreman to one of the first dye houses in London,” and successfully run his own dyeing business in Liverpool. Claims to quality sometimes said “as completely as can be done in Europe,” but often referenced London specifically. High-end cloth manufacturing on the other side of the Atlantic set the bar, and dyers like Thompson knew that their ability to meet that standard would matter to both households and merchants who wanted goods returned like new.

In addition to promising London quality, ads mentioned dyers’ ability to work with a wide array of cloth and garment types, listing many by name. For example, in an 1801 advertisement, William Barrett & Co. explained that they could dye “all kinds of silks, such as satins, damasks, lustings, Modes, and Persians; blond Lace and Netting, silk Velvets, Ribbons, Ferreting, Sewing Silk, silk Gloves and Mitts; silk and camel’s-hair shawls, Muslins, Cottons, and Callicoes, by the piece or bale; muslin Gowns, Coats, Vests, Pantaloons, and Small Cloaths, dyed whole; --Broad-Cloths, Kerseymeres, Lambskins, Rateens, Forrest-Cloths, Elastics, Plains, Swansdowns, Baizes, and Flannels, Hosiery of all kinds, Nankins and Nankinetts, Corduroys and Velvets, by the piece or bale.”

Also very important was the ability to finish cloth properly—a process that required specialized machinery. Ads often stated that the firm could both “dye of warranted colors” and “finish in superior style,” two factors clearly important to customers. William Barrett & Co. assured readers that “they had erected all the apparatus for dyeing and finishing crepes and gauzes. Whole pieces of silk, receiving injury by importation, they carefully extract the spots and preserve the color, or re-dye them if desired. They have also erected a Glazing Machine, where bed and window furniture is neatly cleansed and glazed, and the color preserved or dyed if requested.” In August of 1804, a notice informing readers of the relocation of their office also stated that “a new Machine has, at great expense, been procured, which effects so completely the finishing of new Satins and stiff Lustrings, that no demand will be made for dying, if not satisfactory.” This was, in effect, a guarantee of finish quality. In 1806, the firm advertised “now in operation, their Hot Callender, for the purpose of finishing completely, and in the same manner as done in England, all kinds of stuff’d goods, such as Duroys, Calimancoes, Russells, Shaloons, Florantimes, &c. also for the finishing of Cambricks, Calicoes and Sattins, in a superior and different manner from what they have ever been done [sic] in this country.” In contrast with New England’s early textile manufacturers, who began with a narrow range of

12 “Hugh Thompson, Silk, Linen Woolen, and Cotton Dyer, in Charlestown,” Massachusetts Mercury, Boston, Massachusetts, September 11, 1795, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.
14 For one example, see “Barrett & Shattuck, Silk, Cotton, Woolen, and Linen Dyers, and Finishers,” Independent Chronicle, Boston, Massachusetts, May 31, 1810, 4, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.
16 “Removal, Friends to Economy and Manufactures, Take Notice,” Independent Chronicle, Boston, Massachusetts, August 13, 1804, 4, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.
17 “Barrett & Shattuck,” Repertory, Boston, Massachusetts, July 11, 1806, 4, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.
fibers and weaves, gradually expanding their capabilities, these dyers claimed to be able to handle a wide range of goods.

These capabilities were particularly attractive to cloth merchants. When imported cloth was damaged in shipping, merchants often had no recourse but to sell it at auction for what they could get. By cleaning and coloring damaged goods, dyers helped import merchants avoid steep losses. The ad in the previous paragraph highlighted the dyers’ ability to “extract the spots,” a reference to mildew. If the surrounding air was humid when China silks were packed in the ship’s hold, they could become mildewed (spotted) during the long voyage from the East Indies. Patient ship captains avoided the problem by waiting for the dry autumn winds, but not all were patient, especially those commanding the smaller and faster American ships.

**Expanding Geographic Scope and Defending the Market**

Changes in the early United States made it easier for dyeing businesses like William Barrett’s to expand their scope and defend their market, including improvements in roads and bridges; rapid proliferation and wide distribution of newspapers, aided by the U.S. Postal Act of 1792; and ability to protect intellectual property. Barrett bolstered his competitive advantage by inventing new machinery and processes, obtaining patents, and aggressively defending them.

Barrett opened the Malden dye house in 1804 after dissolving his partnership with Thompson. A new partnership, Barrett & Shattuck, continued until partner Meshack Shattuck’s death in 1811. Construction of bridges over the Charles and Mystic Rivers in the late 1780s enabled the business to maintain an office that served customers comfortably in downtown Boston, while the dye house itself operated in Malden along Spot Pond Brook, a few miles to the north. These bridges “radically changed the pattern of life in Boston, for regions that had been remote cul-de-sacs suddenly developed into busy thoroughfares…” William Barrett traveled between the dye house and the Boston office at least twice per week in a horse-drawn carryall. The 1804 dye house, built of wood, was destroyed in an 1816 fire. Undaunted, Barrett immediately built a new and expanded dye house in brick (see Figure 1).

William Barrett grew his business by engaging agents in other cities. These were dry goods retail merchants, or occasionally clothiers, who already had customer relationships. Barrett and his agents advertised the connection in local newspapers. Through the ads, we can trace the establishment of agents in Salem (1806), Providence (1806), Portsmouth (1808), Hartford (1810), and Newport (1811)—all cities in which one would find elite households and

---

18 Paul Pressly, conversation with the author, October 2016.
20 Barrett held several patents of his own and some jointly with others. A full discussion of his patents and related lawsuits is beyond the scope of this paper and can be found in my master’s thesis.
21 Whitehill, *Boston, a Topographical History*, 50.
22 This was his habit in the 1820s, and he likely took a similar approach during the earlier decade. Jacob Richardson, “Some Recollections of Old Times,” 1856, Box 110, Folder 6, PPHFP.
merchants.\(^{24}\) By August 1817, the network had expanded to include agents in Ipswich and Marblehead in Massachusetts as well as Bedford and Merrimack in New Hampshire.\(^{25}\) The Postal Act of 1792 stimulated growth and exchange of newspapers during the early nineteenth century, making it easier for people in these and other cities to learn about Barrett’s services.\(^{26}\)

\[\text{Figure 1.} \ 1817 \text{ Engraving of the New Barrett Dye House in Malden}\(^{27}\)\]

Dyers faced challenges similar to those of today’s drycleaners. People left items and forgot to pick them up; they also sometimes took away items that did not belong to them.\(^{28}\) Once the business had expanded to include agents, instructions had to be especially clear. One 1808 notice informed readers in Portsmouth that “Persons sending Cloths or Garments of any kind are desired to have them accompanied with a pattern of the colour they wish them made, (as in many colours there are a variety of shades) also to enclose them in paper describing on the outside the contents, colour to be made, and owner’s name.”\(^{29}\) Figures 2 and 3 show dyeing receipts.


\(^{25}\) “Notice,” Concord Gazette, Concord, New Hampshire, August 19, 1817, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.


\(^{28}\) “Barrett & Shattuck,” Columbian Centinel, Boston, Massachusetts, February 23, 1811, 4; “Notice,” New England Palladium, Boston, Massachusetts, February 7, 1809, 4; Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.

Figure 2. 1806 Receipt for Dyeing, Barrett & Shattuck, affixed to an advertisement. Note that Goodwin’s Store was a Charlestown agent for Barrett & Shattuck. Order numbers could be “written” onto the items in thread by the firm’s female employees to enable goods to be tracked and returned.30

Figure 3. 1809 Receipt for dyeing a silk gown and coat, written on the back of Barrett & Shattuck advertisement. The garment’s complexity, in terms of breadths of cloth, gores, and bits, affected the price. Note the listing of agents as well as the dyestuffs available for sale. The firm ground dyestuffs and rasped dyewoods at a mill upstream from the Malden dye house for their own use and for sale to others.

To defend their market, dyers had to keep up with advances in their craft. While they consulted books and journals, most practical knowledge was gained through working directly with experts. The Barretts consulted with at least two other dyers from across the Atlantic. John Rauch from

Switzerland spent time at dye houses in Germany and France before coming to the United States sometime in 1812. Traveling in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States between 1812 and 1815, Rauch “instructed more than 30 persons,” including the Barretts, sharing his expert knowledge for a fee.\(^{32}\) London dyer Cornelius Molony visited dye houses in New England in the 1830s, including the Barrett dye house. While both men also wrote books, these were intended as references for experienced professionals, not for novices. It is telling that in 1833, 25 of Molony’s 63 subscribers were from Lowell. The cloth manufacturers had arrived!

While both merchant and household markets were important to the business, merchants could drive a hard bargain, especially when dyers needed credit and merchants had money to lend. Jacob Richardson, who had been a clerk in the Boston office in the 1820s and later kept the books, complained that he had “known Chase engage to dye a case or two of sarsnetts for E. T. Andrews at something like a quarter under price for the loan of 3-4 thousand dollars for some short, indefinite time. This was a bonus, for he paid interest besides.”\(^{33}\)

**The New York Market and Beyond**

In 1808, Barrett’s partner Meshach Shattuck went to New York in an effort to publicize the company’s services and encourage New York merchants to send their goods to Boston.\(^{34}\) From that point up to 1812, at least, the company had an agent in New York.\(^{35}\) When Barrett rebuilt in Malden after the 1816 fire, one ad included the following request: “The numerous and respectable mercantile houses in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New-York, &c., who have hitherto patronized his establishment, are solicited to continue their favours.”\(^{36}\) While Barrett could have exaggerated, by the time his second business in Staten Island opened in 1820, one of its stated goals was to get closer to customers in New York and as far south as Savannah.\(^{37}\)

The first steam ferry service began operating between Manhattan and Staten Island in 1817, the same year construction began on the Erie Canal. In 1820, William Barrett formed a new partnership to take advantage of the growing New York opportunity, and a new factory opened on Staten Island.\(^{38}\) The new location offered fresh water, cheap land, room for expansion, and a

---

\(^{32}\) John Rauch, *John Rauch’s Receipts on Dyeing, In a Series of Letters to a Friend...* (New York: Printed for Joseph I. Badger, Proprietors in New Haven, 1815). In its rare book and manuscript collections, the Winterthur Library, Wilmington, Delaware, holds a copy of a handwritten manuscript of this book (Doc. 308) as well as the published version and a printed copy of the key to the coded recipes (Rauch required a significant payment for the code key).

\(^{33}\) Jacob Richardson, “Some Recollections,” 1856. Richardson’s use of punctuation was somewhat eccentric.

\(^{34}\) “Take Notice. To the Merchants and Traders in New-York and to whom it may concern,” *Mercantile Advertiser*, New York, August 17, 1808, 2, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.

\(^{35}\) “New Dye-House on Staten Island,” *National Advocate*, New York, October 14, 1820, 1, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.

\(^{36}\) George M. Barrett, William Tileston, and William Barrett, “This Indenture...”, September 15, 1820, Box 109, Folder 5, PPHFP. Whittemore appears in the contemporary announcements as a partner, but his name does not appear on the extant partnership agreement. Whittemore may have been a financial backer for Tileston. For “Count
location where ships could come right up to the factory door by water. Partners included George Barrett, William’s brother, who ran the operation; William Tileston, an indigo merchant known as “Count Indigo”; and Thomas Whittemore. Skilled Malden employees also moved to Staten Island to work at the new factory, including a nephew, Nathan Barrett.

In an effort to attract the attention of merchants and highlight the quality of work, the firm placed an “elegant pattern card of silks, crapes, and velvets” in a gilt frame and hung it on a wall of the Tontine Coffee House—a merchant center of commerce, trading, and political activity.39 The card was later stolen, perhaps by a competitor.40 In November 1820, the sloop Jane, laden with a cargo of dry goods, sank in the Hudson near New York, and lay under the water nearly a week, damaging the cargo. Barretts, Tileston & Co. cleaned and restored them, re-dyeing some, so that roughly 92.5% of the cargo’s value was salvaged.41

**Dyers, Merchants, Printing, and the Tariff**

The Staten Island firm added printing to its services and brought in printers from England and Ireland. One report on a regional fair exhibit explained that the firm had “…presented for inspection some very handsome Woollen Table Cloths and Silk Handkerchiefs as specimens of their work in the art of Printing and Dying…. The Handkerchiefs exhibited were originally striped and cross-barred silks. They were shop goods damaged—the original colours were extracted—they were re-dyed and printed as exhibited.”42

On January 19, 1824, Representative Storrs of New York presented to the U.S. Congress a petition from William Barrett, William Tileston, Samuel Marsh, and Isaac McGaw, all associated with the Staten Island firm, requesting a change to the tariff for imported and exported India cottons and silks.43 Supporting the petition were seventeen New York merchants, including John Jacob Astor & Sons and Arthur Tappan. Under existing tariff law, when India goods were imported for sale in the United States, a federal duty was imposed. When the goods were instead imported and then re-exported, remaining only temporarily in the U.S., owners could receive a drawback (a.k.a. debenture) on the duty; items that did not remain in the U.S. were subject to only a nominal import tax. The petition requested that the policy be expanded to apply to cloth that was imported and then dyed or printed in the United States before being re-exported. Merchants said this change in policy would enable them to satisfy demand in the “West Indies, South America, and other markets” for colorful and printed cloth by using the services of the “extensive dyeing and printing establishment.” They noted that “from one hundred to one

---

39 Also known as the Merchants’ Coffee House, the Tontine Coffee House was said to be a “daily resort for shipping merchants.” From the Coffee House it was possible to learn which ships were in the lower harbor. William Torrey, “Reminiscences of Old New York,” *Magazine of the Daughters of the Revolution* 1, no. 2 (April 1893): 5-6.
40 “The Elegant Pattern Card….” *Patron of Industry*, November 18, 1820, 2.
42 “Messrs. Barrett, Tileston, & Co…..,” *Columbian Sentinel*, Boston, Massachusetts, October 23, 1822, 1, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.
hundred fifty workmen are employed in dyeing and printing a variety of fabrics, and the colors here given are as brilliant and permanent as the same could receive in Europe or elsewhere.” The petition was partly successful, changing the rule for silks but not for cottons.44

The Market Matures in the 1840s

During the 1830s and 1840s, dyeing in greater Boston and New York gradually transformed from a profitable high-end luxury to a low-margin commodity service. Barriers to entry declined, and some skilled employees, though well paid, wanted to be their own masters. A crowded market led to consolidation and the Barretts’ Malden business became a multi-brand concern.45 At the same time, growth of cloth manufacturing in the U.S. and Europe reduced the price of new cloth, further depressing prices customers would pay to refurbish goods. According to Jacob Richardson, the cost of dyeing a silk dress went from $9 or $10 to $1.46 While household dyeing had always been the more profitable side, and firms continued to conduct both arms of the business, retail dyeing was critical to the Staten Island firm’s profitability by 1845.47 Though the businesses continued, the heyday of highly profitable dyeing services had come to an end.

Europeans distinguished between petit teint, the ordinary dyeing that households and small clothiers practiced, and grand teint, or the state-of-the-art dyeing pursued by masters of the craft in large-scale manufacturing operations. In this paper, I have attempted to show how and why American entrepreneurs pursued grand teint in the early nineteenth century. Independent dyers exploited a window of opportunity when cloth imports were plentiful—but still costly—and native cloth manufacture barely started. Dyers initially relied on skilled immigrants but rapidly transferred technical skill to Americans. The businesses helped American merchants reduce the considerable risk of East Indies trade. They also enabled elite households to economize by repurposing valuable items and goods, a practice that persisted into the twentieth century. A 1929 article highlighted loyal customers of the Staten Island firm: “Men and women well past their teens bring their patronage ‘because my grandmother told me about it.’ Numerous families have been on the books as customers since the first orders for dyeing were taken, and the present list of clients reads in parts like a page from the social register, containing, as it does, the names of most of the old-established and prominent families.”48

Note on Sources

The Porter-Phelps-Huntington Family Papers (abbreviated PPHFP in the notes), Amherst College Archives, Amherst, Massachusetts, contains Barrett family and business papers passed down through William Barrett’s son Henry Barrett, who led the business after the death of his father and his older brother William Barrett, Jr. While business records are incomplete, especially for the early period, annual financial reports for the period after 1834 provide insight into the relative importance of retail and wholesale dyeing, business costs, and changes over time.

45 “A Grand Wedding,” Boston Daily Bee, Boston, Massachusetts, March 31, 1843, 1, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers. See also Aaron Barrett to Henry Barrett, undated. Box 111, Folder 2, PPHFP.
46 Jacob Richardson, “Some Recollections,” 1856.