



### ELIZA HOWARD BEAN FOSTER (1835–1867)

LIVING ON PROPERTIES RANGING from fifty to 160 acres, Yankee farmers prayed for husky sons to help with the back-breaking chores of domesticating beasts and taming glacial moraine. Ebenezer Shaw Bean (1781–1839) of West Bethel, Maine, sired ten children—six of them sons—by his first wife, Eunice Kendall Bean. When Eunice was carried to her final rest in the spring of 1825, Ebenezer was desperate for household help—and considered a replacement spouse the proper form of that help. Victorian social dictates required a widower to mourn for six months. Eleven months after Eunice was interred in West Bethel’s Pine Grove Cemetery, Ebenezer married a local woman nineteen years his junior.\* His second wife, Mary Holt Bean (1800–1868), soon began to produce offspring.

With a multitude to provide for, Ebenezer may have greeted the birth of his sixteenth child—a daughter, Eliza Howard Bean—at 11:00 on Sunday, March 8, 1835, with more chagrin than enthusiasm. But perhaps he put on a good face for the sake of Eliza’s exhausted mother, Mary.

\* Eunice Kendall was born in 1780. She died March 16, 1825, and is buried in West Bethel Cemetery.

The role of American women in the early 1800s was as tightly circumscribed as a Southern belle's waist. Upon completion of their appointed rounds of chores, females were allowed to read and scribble, but popular magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* instructed them to look no further afield than home and hearth. "Our men are sufficiently money-making. Let us keep our women and children from contagion as long as possible," wrote Sara Josepha Hale, the widow editor of *Godey's*.

The virtues of the True Woman were deemed the opposite of those of the true man: "Man is strong—woman is beautiful. Man is daring and confident—woman is diffident and unassuming. Man is great in action—woman in suffering," proclaimed the catalog in *Ladies Museum* magazine.<sup>91</sup>

Women rarely left the home place except to attend church or the funerals of neighbor women worn out by childbearing. They were escorted everywhere. Females were considered simply unfit, both physically and mentally, for public life. "A woman is never truly her own master," argued Martin Luther in his criticisms of the German Bible. "God formed her body to belong to a man, to have and to rear children. Let them bear children till they die of it. That is what they are for."

## The form of a union

Eliza's future seemed pigeonholed. On the one hand, she lived during a time when Americans were locked into a rigid notion about woman's role in society. Historians later dubbed this phenomenon "the cult of domesticity."

On the other hand, she lived during a yeasty period of social change, a period when the limits of a woman's world were tested, and the women's rights movement flowered. A vocal critic of the traditional domestic role allotted females was Margaret Fuller, author of the 1845 treatise "Woman in the Nineteenth Century." Fuller argued that man was inherently imperfect, and that he saw fit to place woman in an even more imperfect situation. Fuller promoted the perfection of the female spirit—that "immortal

being” whom she judged deprived by law and society of its “nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given to her” by the Creator. Fuller targeted the inability of males to acknowledge the importance of woman’s soul as the root of much female suffering. Marriage, for example, “if it be only to find a protector, and a home of her own” was all too often a matter of “convenience and utility” rather than a “meeting of souls,” she wrote.

From Fuller’s point of view, the “convenience” of most unions deprived man of the spiritual bliss a complete woman would have the capacity to share. If a woman must “obey” in marriage, it was destined to be an imperfect union— “the form of a union where union is none.” If a woman must obey, she is restricted from following the dictates of her unique mind, and subject to those of another. A chintz ceiling of obedience bars her from achieving perfection.<sup>92</sup>

Fuller was up against the law in all its stultifying, patriarchal rectitude. American law was based on English common law, summarized in the Blackstone Commentaries: “The very being and legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated into that of her husband under whose wing and protection she performs everything.” Or, to put it in the words of jurist William Blackstone himself, “Husband and wife are one, and that one is the husband.” There is no doubt Eliza loved Henry. How free she felt has not been recorded, but his letters to her show a generous disposition.

## **Bean’s Corner vs. Brunswick**

In the early nineteenth century, Eliza’s hometown of Bethel consisted of a handful of nodes of population, including Bethel Hill, Walker’s Mills, North Bethel (Swan’s Corner), East Bethel (Bean’s Corner), and West Bethel (Gander Corner). The rustic pace of life was governed by seasons, the vagaries of weather, and the demands of crops and herds.

Life shifted into a higher gear in 1809, when Maine’s first cotton mill was built in Brunswick. By 1810, Maine’s population topped 228,700.

However, in 1815, a push for western migration, known as “Ohio Fever,” infected the district. The fever burned restlessly until about 1870, substantially decreasing Maine’s population, as did a birth rate that gradually declined over the length of the century.

## **Songs of innocence**

Education in rural Maine was generally a domestic or private affair. Children were taught to read, write, add, and subtract by their parents— if their parents were literate. If the home housed educated older siblings, those sons and daughters provided lessons to their juniors. If educated outside the home, children attended classes in teachers’ homes, churches, or one-room schoolhouses. Terms depended on the number of students who could pay tuition and the commitments of the available instructor. Until the age of twelve, students bent their heads over reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, geography, and the lives of great men. Rote learning was the order of the day; spelling tests and recitations were popular. School terms averaged three or four months.

Children as young as six were set behind the plow or trudged off to the mills, cutting short their opportunities for education. Formal schooling for them was generally limited to reading, writing, and arithmetic—taught at a Sunday school on their single day off.<sup>93</sup> The rustic Currier & Ives ideal of hoop rolling, sleighing, and sledding was not available to many New England children in 1830, when 55 percent of Rhode Island’s textile workers were children earning about 15 cents a week.

Maine’s public school system did not coalesce until 1828, eight years after statehood. In 1836, Bethel’s educational opportunities expanded when the doors of Gould Academy swung wide. In Gould’s halls, young ladies plumbed the mysteries of Latin, Greek, and German. Eliza’s name does not appear on Gould’s class lists. She could have attended school at the structure today known as Albany Town Hall, built in 1848. Whatever her formal education, she must have soaked up the intellectual activity of Oxford County, commented upon by no less than Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Stowe had composed much of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Maine, where her husband, Calvin, was a professor at Bowdoin College. Stowe's letter to *The Portland Transcript* was printed on September 25, 1852. She was particularly impressed by the women whose homes she had visited: "I can assure you, by the by, that these [educated] women are yeomen housekeepers, and that you will never taste the Latin and the Greek in sour bread or bad butter. . . . The fact is, that sterile soil and a harsh climate though not good for growing anything else are first rate for raising men and women. . . . The long cheerless winters here are powerful educators, both physically and morally—physically in the amount of oxygen and vitality which they form into the system, intellectually in the leisure which they force on one for intellectual pursuits."

Stowe's comments foreshadow Eliza's fate: "But I must add to what I said about the Maine women and girls, one drawback. . . . the want of an appearance of robust health. The young girls are fair, sparkling, intellectual-looking, but they are wanting in physique. They look like the forest flowers—very fair but as if a breath might wither them. . . . Can we not see in this fact the reason for the predisposition to diseases of the lungs which is constantly the terror of every parent in New England, and which seals every year hundreds of her fairest for the grave?"

## Mad, wicked folly

With the tenacity of a virulent microbe, war bred in the shadow of financial crisis. The South owed \$300 million to Northern merchants—a debt that had to be written off almost totally.<sup>94</sup> To raise funds for its war chests, Congress levied an income tax in August 1861 and enacted luxury taxes in 1862. Leather, wood, and cloth were taxed as raw materials, and license taxes were levied on occupations.<sup>95</sup> The crisis resolved itself, and by 1863 the Union was riding an economic boom. The need for ordnance stimulated coal mining and steel manufacturing. The demand for uniforms, blankets, and tents invigorated textile mills.

The Rebellion cracked the status quo like an egg, and women began to

loosen gender's constricting corsets. In 1837, Massachusetts schoolteacher Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke College, one of the first four-year institutions of higher learning exclusively for women in the United States. Vassar flung wide its doors in 1861. Other colleges (for instance, Oberlin in 1833) became co-educational, and women began seeking higher education in greater numbers. By 1870, about one-fifth of American college and university students were women.

Hand in hand with higher education went a call for women's rights. In 1848, the United States' first women's rights convention assembled in Seneca Falls, New York. Elizabeth Cady Stanton led in drafting a feminist answer to the Declaration of Independence—a “Declaration of Sentiments” pleading for the end of discrimination against women in all aspects of society: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal. . . . The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.” Three hundred women and men signed this declaration.<sup>96</sup> Male philosophers like Thomas Higginson agreed with Stanton that the situation of women could be compared to that of slaves.<sup>97</sup> Conversely, Queen Victoria pooh-poohed the notion of Women's Rights as “mad, wicked folly.”

Commenting in the *North Star* on the general public's reaction to the Seneca Falls convention, Frederick Douglass wrote, “A discussion of the rights of animals would be regarded with far more complacency by many of what are called the wise and the good of our land, then [*sic*] would be a discussion of the rights of women.”<sup>98</sup>

Ebenezer would have wished Andrew, the oldest son of his second marriage, to be afforded the best possible education. Andrew, in turn, might have instructed Eliza in the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Eliza's older sister, Jane, a long-time teacher, may also have had a hand in Eliza's education.

**A reward for achievement in sewing.** Henrietta Foster received this pink and white cup when she was twelve. Photo by Fernand L. Chandonnet.



## Songs of experience

Eliza's life pulsed with the industrial development of her time, with the charge that the cotton gin, the factory, the steam engine, and the power loom sent through the warp of American life. When she was born, homespun ruled fashion. But the perfection of the power loom made domestic printed fabrics widely available and affordable. By the 1840s, women were purchasing commercially printed fabrics to sew.

The American cotton industry geared up in Rhode Island in 1790 with the first yarn spinning mills. Here Samuel Slater earned the title of Father of the American Industrial Revolution. However, two Massachusetts cities, Waltham and Lowell, share the crown as the first sites where power looms wove cloth.<sup>99</sup>

By the 1820s, the New England landscape was studded with four- to six-story-tall textile factories where virtually all workers were young women, each earning two to three dollars a week. (Supervisors—all men—received twelve dollars.)

As the number of slaves working Southern plantations continued to grow, the production of "Negro cloth"—coarse fabric used for field hands' clothing—became increasingly profitable. But gradually demand increased for finer fabric in a variety of patterns.

Like many of her Yankee contemporaries—young, single women from rural backgrounds—Eliza chose to leave the family fireside for the advantages of cash wages. Textile industry historian Paul Rivard called the act of taking work at an urban factory “an initiation, equivalent to young men going out to sea.”<sup>100</sup> The primary motivation for many young women was purchasing a dowry.<sup>101</sup> In some mill towns, a large part of workers’ pay came in the form of goods from the company store, but Lowell’s Boott Cotton Mills paid cash.<sup>102</sup> It is likely that Eliza’s parents encouraged her choice, because her departure meant one less mouth to feed.<sup>103</sup>

Politician and ship owner William King established Maine’s first cotton mill, in Brunswick, in 1809. By Eliza’s teen years, mills operated at Saco, Augusta, Lewiston, Woonsocket, and Winthrop as well. In 1810, an estimated one million yards of linen or partly linen homespun were being laboriously produced on Maine’s domestic hand looms.<sup>104</sup> But as the century progressed, Maine’s “manufactories”—“factories”—began to outshine domestic production.

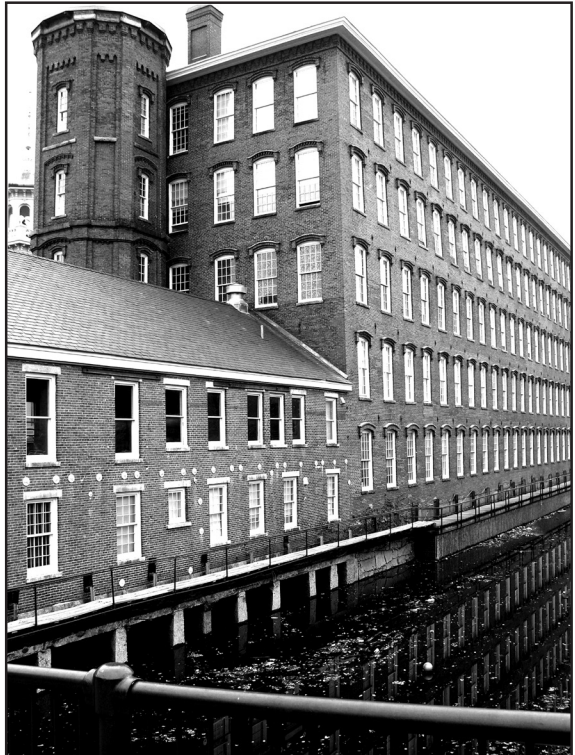
In July 1851, shortly after turning sixteen, Eliza packed her reticule. Her destination was bustling Biddeford. After the building of the Pepperell Manufacturing Company on the banks of the Saco between 1850 and 1855, Biddeford counted eleven separate factories plus the usual assortment of related structures—dye houses, bleacheries, boarding houses, offices, tenements, and brickyards.<sup>105</sup> Pepperell alone sprawled over fifty-six acres.\*

Maine’s population in 1851 stood at 583,169. At the peak of textile manufacturing in Biddeford, twelve thousand people were employed in the industry. Inexperienced workers shuttled bobbins and cans of yarn and

\* Pepperell Manufacturing, a cotton textile firm, operated in Biddeford from 1850 to 1928. It was named for Sir William Pepperell (1696–1759), colonial entrepreneur. Pepperell, J. P. Stevens & Co., and West Point Manufacturing merged in the twentieth century to become West Point Stevens. Among the more than 1,000 volumes of Pepperell records housed in the Harvard Business School library, “Wages and Duties” gives a job description for fly frame girls in the main carding room: “Run 10 frames, or an average of 170 spindles each, 8x4. They set up their roving, oil top rolls and spindle, and doff, and average 77 hanks per week on 1.92 hank roving @ 8 cents per hank.”



**New England textile mills of the nineteenth century. The Pepperell Mill** (above), in Biddeford, Maine, employed many young women in its operations. (Courtesy Maine Historical Society.) **The Boott Cotton Mills** (right), in Lowell, Massachusetts, was nicknamed "the mile of mills." Photograph by Fernand L. Chandonnet.



**THE JAMES BALDWIN CO.,**  
MANUFACTURERS OF

**Bobbins, Spools and Skewers,**  
*Orders by mail promptly attended to.* LEWISTON, ME.

Newspaper ad from the *Lowell Courier* promoting milling supplies from one of many New England suppliers.

roving among the spinning frames, and replaced filled bobbins and spools. Men labored as machinists, loom fixers, expressmen, and machine operators, but the fair sex—ages fifteen to twenty-five, mostly—accomplished the bulk of the work.<sup>106</sup>

Eliza probably entered Biddeford clad in homespun dyed with lichen. She would have stood out like a sore thumb until she could afford more stylish garb. She soon found employment at Pepperell Company. Because her mother was a talented hand weaver, Eliza may have been able to transfer her knowledge of that craft to machine production. She was assigned to the weaving room of Mill No. 2, with lodgings at the boardinghouse of Mrs. Cleaves, the supervisor or “matron.” One Pepperell boardinghouse

was a regular barracks: 420 feet long, four stories high, containing 256 rooms.<sup>107</sup> Girls were required to live in company boardinghouses, to be punctual for work and regular in church attendance.

Mill girls were paid once a month. The average mill girl labored for less than two years, earning \$450 to \$600 per year.<sup>108</sup> Certainly she yearned for the fine paisley shawls, lace fichus, and plumed bonnets beckoning from shop windows, but she was expected to exercise thrift. The amount she could put aside from her cash wages eked out the earnings of the family farm, went to help a brother further his education, or was reserved for her own dowry.

Weavers worked by the light of whale-oil lamps and were warmed by cast-iron stoves.<sup>109</sup> They operated two or three looms at a time. Close attention was necessary to prevent defects or unevenness in the fabric. The job required good eyesight, hand-eye coordination, keenness, and “substantial grace under pressure.”<sup>110</sup> Milking a cow, one could lean into a warm belly and nudge the animal into position—even take the opportunity to sit back on the three-legged milking stool and pet the waiting cat; with a machine loom one has no such companionable relationship. Dangers included breaking leather belts, the flying ends of which could gash—or kill. Clothing could also be drawn into the machinery by belts, removing arms before the loom could be shut down.<sup>111</sup> Sanitary facilities were one privy per floor; waste dropped into the millrace.

About the same time that Eliza left western Maine to earn cash, wealthy New Englanders packed gear for trout fishing, tramping trips, or trophy hunting in the White Mountains. As an adult, the popular author Lucy Larcom (1824–1893) spent several summers in Bethel—enjoying the quiet and scenery of the western gateway to the Presidential Range. Prized for her flexible rhythms, easy rhymes, and strong moral tone, Larcom knew well the din and dangers of Lowell’s mills. Her autobiography, *A New England Girlhood* (1889), records memories of her idyllic infant life and education contrasted with her stint as a factory girl.

Larcom’s widowed mother ran a boardinghouse, but made the mistake

of feeding her boarders with too lavish a hand. When the cupboard grew bare, her blue-eyed daughters were sent to work in Lowell's Lawrence Mill, rising at five, during winter months breaking ice on their basins to bathe. At age eleven, Lucy changed bobbins on spinning frames. She pocketed a dollar a week over her room and board—a sum she handed over to her mother with alacrity. Lucy's excruciatingly long days in the mill left her with a lifelong aversion to loud noise and a wish to escape cities for sanctuaries where she could observe nature.<sup>112</sup>

Although factory work netted women cash income, historian Rosalind Miles believes the shift from home to industrial production had damaging consequences for females. Among those consequences was the loss of partnership status, gained when wife worked alongside husband—digging, sowing, reaping. On the home place, women had control over what they produced—perhaps extra eggs, straw braid, or baskets that could be marketed for “pin money.”<sup>113</sup> Women also chose their hours of work and could take breaks—or switch from task to task—as they wished.

“With the shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy, from country to town, from home to factory,” Miles reasons, “women lost the previous flexibility, status and control of their work. In its place they were granted the privilege of low-grade, exploited occupations, the double burden of waged and domestic labor, and the sole responsibility for child care that has weighed them down ever since.”<sup>114</sup>

After some years in Biddeford, Eliza sought a “better situation.” She headed south, to a destination eighty-five miles away, in another state. Most likely she rode bone-rattling stagecoaches to Portsmouth, lodged overnight, and then boarded the Portland, Saco & Portsmouth railroad for Lowell, Massachusetts. She disembarked, dusty and dehydrated, in the busy “city of spindles.”

Eliza hired on as an “operative” at Boott Cotton Mills—a riverfront complex nicknamed “the mile of mills.” The factory bore the name of Kirk Boott, an ambitious man who had his finger in many local pies. Lowell was erected on the site of a village called East Chelmsford and home to