

## Dressmakers of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward, 1888-1910

Kimberlee Neitz  
AMSTD 534/Spring 2005  
Penn State Harrisburg

Historically, Americans have spent a lot of time on their careers, at their jobs, and on work-related activities.<sup>1</sup> Herbert Prochnow once said, "If you would like to leave footprints in the sands of time, you had better wear work shoes." Through their occupations, many people have left their mark on the world. By examining the ways by which people made their livings, a great deal about who they were and the communities in which they lived can be learned. Just as the Industrial Revolution can be understood by examining its clothing industry, Harrisburg's Eighth Ward can be appreciated through studying the careers and lives of the dressmakers who lived there.

The clothing business represented the new industrial order of the nineteenth century. The way that each individual within the industry depended upon several others for exchange of labor and supplies of cloth demonstrates how everyone in the 1800s came to rely on a system of exchange to live.<sup>2</sup> Instead of reducing the need for workers by replacing them with machinery, as was the case for other industries, the evolution of the clothing business actually required, and indeed benefited from, a large pool of available labor. Clothiers found that they could effectively meet the seasonality and variety involved in their business by putting out work into employees' homes and out into the countryside to be sewn.<sup>3</sup> It was in this way that seamstresses and their families took in piecework, which was done either regularly or when the family was in

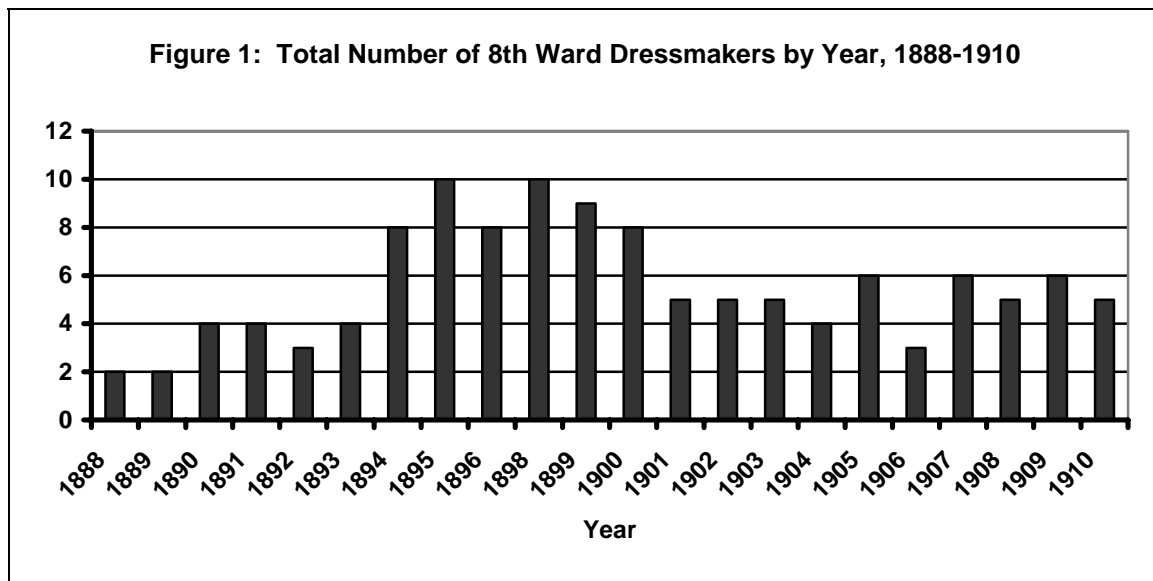
---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been edited and expanded by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, webmaster of *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward*, found at <<http://www.old8thward.com>>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Zakim, *Ready-made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 54-55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

need of extra income. For obvious reasons, these workers were often exploited, as piecework was a popular, low-wage occupation in poor neighborhoods of many American cities.<sup>4</sup>

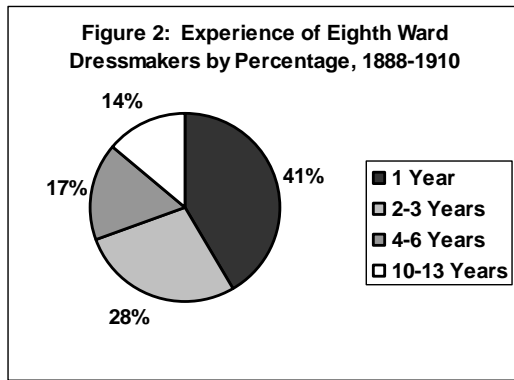


Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward was no exception because it was plentiful in unskilled laborers and immigrants. *Boyd's Directories of Harrisburg* list 122 entries for dressmakers in the Eighth Ward between 1888 and 1910.<sup>5</sup> The number of ward residents who called themselves dressmakers seemed to peak in the middle of the twenty-two year period (Figure 1). Perhaps this is due, at least in part, to increases in productivity brought on by the demand for ready-made clothing. Several ready-made garment factories, such as Gordon Manufacturing, and a few smaller clothing manufacturers were located within the Eighth Ward at this time, and their need for piecework may have increased during the mid-1890s. Further, the influx of Russian Jews into the neighborhood, a population known for its ties to the garment industry, beginning in the late 1880s may have impacted the ward's dressmaking numbers by that time.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> W. Harry Boyd, *Boyd's Harrisburg Directory: Names of Citizens, Map, and a Compendium of Government and of Public Institutions*, (Boyd's Cousins, 1888-1910). The volume for 1897 was missing, so no data was available for that year. The data compiled from this source includes only those dressmakers who were listed in the business section of the directories. See Appendix A for a listing of individuals identified as dressmakers by year throughout the period of study.

<sup>6</sup> Resident data tables, *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* website, <http://www.old8thward.com/residentdir.htm>.



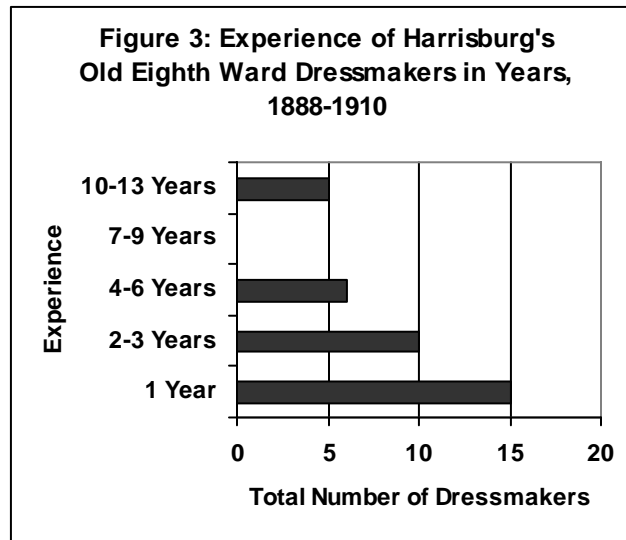
Many of the dressmakers' names appeared multiple times. Thirty-five individuals and one apparent partnership practiced dressmaking in the ward during the period studied. Fifteen of the dressmakers, or forty-one percent, appeared in the directory as a dressmaker only one time between

1888 and 1910 (Figure 2). This would seem to support the notion that dressmaking was a part-time, temporary occupation in the Eighth Ward. Perhaps those years when these fifteen individuals were listed as dressmakers represent a time of economic hardship when other wage earners in their families were unemployed, making piecework monetarily necessary. In addition, this data does suggest that neighborhoods like the Eighth Ward were transient and economically uncertain. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of dressmakers in the ward—sixty-nine percent--worked for three or less years in that occupation. Perhaps people living in the ward did not hold steady jobs because they did not stay in one neighborhood very long. This is not uncommon among Eighth Ward residents, as frequently changing homes and occupations are two trends that previous research on the ward has revealed.<sup>7</sup> Although traveling to work on Harrisburg's trolley system during the time frame of this study was possible, a majority of people during the late nineteenth century worked within their immediate neighborhoods, and commuting to work would not become widespread until midway through the twentieth century.

On the other hand, five dressmakers, or fourteen percent, were in business in the ward for ten or more years (Figure 3). It would appear that some Eighth Ward dressmakers, perhaps those possessing more specialized skills, practiced their profession successfully. For the most part, the dressmakers of the Eighth Ward who were members of the trade for any length of time practiced

<sup>7</sup> Resident and business data tables, *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* website, <http://www.old8thward.com/residentdir.htm> and <http://www.old8thward.com/businessdir.htm>.

their profession with regularity. Not surprisingly, four of the five dressmakers who worked for ten or more years listed the same address every year, probably indicating some stability for them in the dressmaking trade. One of these five, Agnes Trout, continued to be listed as a dressmaker even after she moved out of the ward in 1906. Eight of the thirty-six dressmakers changed addresses within the ward during the period 1888-1910.<sup>8</sup> Of those eight, only one had more than six years of experience, and five of the eight had four years or less, again suggesting the instability of this profession and the ward



itself. Among those who moved, L. Johnson provides the most striking example. This individual was listed as a dressmaker in four separate years at four different addresses. Additionally, eight of the addresses listed for dressmakers showed up under more than one name throughout the period. This would seem to suggest that when one dressmaker moved out another one moved in. Perhaps the amenities or locations of certain houses were conducive to operating a home business, such as dressmaking.

The vast majority of dressmakers who worked for more than one year did so in consecutive years. Their work histories run for uninterrupted stretches of three or four years. In fact, of the twenty-one dressmakers who worked for more than one year, only three (about fourteen percent) displayed a break in their years of service. One can surmise that these breaks were years during which the seamstresses found better paying temporary work elsewhere or had life events, such as childbirth, hinder their ability to work. Because “dressmaker” was a term used to denote mostly female garment makers, these periodic work interruptions and unstable

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix B for an alphabetical listing of Old Eighth Ward dressmakers and their years of experience.

work histories in general can most likely be attributed to times when the domestic duties of such women prevented them from taking on additional work from outside the home. Further, the women possessing continuous and stable work histories could have been unmarried or widowed women who relied on their dressmaking skills to support themselves and their families.

What is the legacy of the dressmakers of the Eighth Ward? It is a varied story of uncertainty and mobility and of experience and stability. In many ways, it is a story of survival, where individuals sought out additional wages when they most needed them. Perhaps work does say something about people--who they are and how they lived. Although they most likely never realized it, the dressmakers of this study were leaving something behind through their work—an employment history that imparts a richer understanding of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward in the last years of the nineteenth century.

<b>Appendix A: Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward Dressmakers, 1888-1910</b>		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>
1888	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
1889	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
1890	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Scrivner & Robinson	410 ½ Walnut
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
	Mary Wennell	114 Short
1891	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Mrs. L. Gilbert	503 Walnut
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
1892	A. Spickler	104 Short
	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Thomas J. McCulley	106 Short
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
1893	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Thomas J. McCulley	106 Short
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
1894	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Mrs. C. Fenstermacher	402 Short
	E. N. Johnson	510 South
	Thomas J. McCulley	106 Short
	S. V. Rivers	428 Walnut
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
	Mrs. K. Taylor	515 State
1895	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	Grace Clark	100 Cowden
	Mrs. J. G. Coder	615 Walnut
	E. N. Johnson	130 Tanner's
	Thomas J. McCulley	106 Short
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
	Eloise Smith	430 State
	Mrs. K. Taylor	515 State
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
1896	Mary Wennell	106 Cowden
	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	J. B. Christy	408 Cowden
	Mrs. J. G. Coder	615 Walnut
	E. N. Johnson	130 Tanner's
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
	Eloise Smith	430 State
	Mrs. K. Taylor	515 State
	Mary Wennell	106 Cowden
	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
1898	J. B. Christy	408 Cowden
	E. N. Johnson	410 South
	L. Matthews	412 Walnut
	Elizabeth I. Myers	520 State
	Mrs. K. Sherger	120 Short
	Mrs. K. Taylor	603 State
	L. Wengert	430 State

	Mary Wennell	106 Cowden
	Tracy Wilhide	419 North
1899	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	J. B. Christy	408 Cowden
	Mrs. C. Fenstermacher	135 N 4 <sup>th</sup>
	Mrs. M. B. Johnson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	412 Walnut
	L. Matthews	102 Short
	Elizabeth I. Myers	520 State
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
	Mary Wennell	106 Cowden
1900	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	J. B. Christy	408 Cowden
	M. M. Emerick	411 Filbert
	Mrs. C. Fenstermacher	135 N 4 <sup>th</sup>
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	412 Walnut
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
	Mary Wennell	106 Cowden
1901	Willa Chisholm	611 Walnut
	J. B. Christy	408 Cowden
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	412 Walnut
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
1902	M. Bealor	419 Walnut
	Mrs. L. L. Bond	500 ½ South
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	412 Walnut
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
1903	M. Bealor	419 Walnut
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	414 Walnut
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
	Mrs. S. E. Wilbert	104 Cowden
1904	Mary Lee	608 State
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
	Mrs. S. E. Wilbert	104 Cowden
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
1905	Mrs. M. E. Berkheiser	512 Filbert
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	608 State
	Agnes Trout	100 Cowden
	M. Wilson	608 State
	Mrs. S. E. Wilbert	104 Cowden
1906	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	Mary Lee	608 State
	M. Wilson	515 Walnut
1907	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	L. Johnson	107 Cowden
	Mary Lee	608 State
	Mrs. C. E. Smith	128 Tanner's
	M. Wilson	515 Walnut
	L. Zatlín	104 Cowden
1908	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	L. Johnson	520 N 5 <sup>th</sup>
	Mary Lee	608 State

	Mrs. B. A. Turner	106 Short
	M. Wilson	606 State
1909	Mrs. M. Baer	603 State
	M. Dixon	626 Walnut
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	L. Johnson	507 N 5 <sup>th</sup>
	Mrs. C. Stetler	615 North
	M. Wilson	606 State
1910	Mrs. M. Baer	603 State
	M. Dixon	626 Walnut
	H. F. Jackson	108 Short
	L. Johnson	440 South
	M. Wilson	606 State

**Appendix B: Experience of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward Dressmakers,  
1888-1910**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Starts</i>	<i>Ends</i>	<i>Years Worked</i>
Baer, Mrs. M.	603 State	1909	1910	2
Bealor, M.	419 Walnut	1902	1903	2
Berkheiser, Mrs. M. E.	512 Filbert	1905	1905	1
Bond, Mrs. L. L.	500 ½ South	1902	1902	1
Chisholm, Mrs. Willa	611 Walnut	1888	1901	13
Christy, J. B.	408 Cowden	1899	1901	3
Clark, Grace	100 Cowden	1895	1895	1
Coder, Mrs. J. G.	615 Walnut	1895	1896	2
Dixon, M.	626 Walnut	1909	1910	2
Emerick, M. M.	411 Filbert	1900	1900	1
Fenstemacher, Mrs. C.	402 State	1894	1894	3
	135 N. 4 <sup>th</sup>	1899	1900	
Gilbert, Mrs. L	503 Walnut	1891	1891	1
Jackson, H. F.	108 Short	1900	1910	11
Johnson, E. N.	510 South	1894	1894	4
	130 Tanner's Ave.	1895	1896	
	410 South	1898	1898	
Johnson, L.	107 Cowden	1907	1907	4
	520 N 5 <sup>th</sup>	1908	1908	
	507 N 5 <sup>th</sup>	1909	1909	
	440 South	1910	1910	
Johnson, Mrs. M. B.	108 Short	1899	1899	1
Lee, Mary F.	412 Walnut	1899	1902	10
	414 Walnut	1903	1903	
	608 State	1904	1908	
Matthews, L.	412 Walnut	1898	1898	2
	102 Short	1899	1899	
McCulley, Thomas J.	106 Short	1892	1895	4
Myers, Elizabeth I.	520 State	1898	1899	2
Rivers, S. V.	428 Walnut	1894	1894	1
Scrivner & Robinson	410 ½ Walnut	1890	1890	1
Sherger, Mrs. K.	120 Short	1888	1898	10
Smith, Eloise	430 State	1895	1896	2
Smith, Mrs. C. E.	128 Tanner	1907	1907	1
Spickler, A.	104 Short	1891	1891	1
Stetler, Mrs. C.	615 North	1909	1909	1



Taylor, Mrs. K.	515 State	1894	1896	4
	603 State	1898	1898	
Trout, Agnes	100 Cowden	1893	1905	10
Turner, Mrs. B. A.	106 Short	1908	1908	1
Wengert, L.	430 State	1898	1898	1
Wennell, Mary	114 Short	1890	1890	6
	106 Cowden	1895	1900	
Wilbert, Mrs. S. E.	104 Cowden	1903	1905	3
Wilhide, Tracy	419 North	1898	1898	1
Wilson, M.	608 State	1905	1905	6
	515 Walnut	1906	1907	
	606 State	1908	1910	
Zatlin, L.	104 Cowden	1907	1907	1