

“You did not mention whether you had a cow...”

Cheese making at the Porter Phelps farm, Hadley, MA,  
1770-1815

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“I wish you not to give yourself any uneasiness as to our domestic concerns, as I doubt not we shall get along...” Charles Phelps, a prosperous farmer from Hadley, Massachusetts, sounds rather confident regarding “domestic concerns” when writing to his wife, Elizabeth Porter Phelps, who was in Litchfield, Connecticut, in April 1802. Among these “domestic concerns” Charles was probably thinking about the cheese production, a domain largely under Elizabeth’s control. But this usage of a communal “our” to describe the tasks performed at home –in contrast to the fields or the market place- subtly reveals how men and women in early New England worked together. This “our” complicates the concept of “separate spheres” so often put forward by historians, based on a supposed dichotomy between the home and the economic world outside. Through the study of cheese making in a small Western Massachusetts town at the turn of the nineteenth century, this paper will explore the mechanisms at work behind the construction of public and private domains –usually synonyms of masculinity and femininity, respectively.

This paper will examine the major elements of cheese making at home in the early nineteenth century: how women supervised this household activity, but also how men infiltrated the domestic sphere by infusing new ideas for improvement –ultimately

leading to the industrialization of dairy production. The research will focus on a particular household from the Connecticut River Valley, the Phelps, who lived in Hadley at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although Elizabeth Porter Phelps was responsible for the dairy production at their estate, "Forty Acres," Charles, her husband, frequently gave her advice on how to be a more efficient dairymaid, and contributed to the work in more tangible ways as well.

Little research has been done on cheese making in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England. Most of the research on this topic concentrates on a later period, after industrialization caused cottage industries to disappear and transformed dairy production into a scientific process. At that point, social and economic circumstances had already forced dairywomen to accept the "scientific expertise" of men. But from the colonial times until the mid-nineteenth century, women were still in charge of the bulk of the dairy production on farms, though they did not operate completely independently from men's influence and help.

Cheese making in early nineteenth-century New England reflects the ambiguity of the concept of separate spheres. In *More Work for Mother*, Ruth Schwartz Cowan notices that in pre-industrial times, "although housework was socially defined as "women's work," in reality the daily exigencies of agrarian life meant that men and women had to work in tandem in order to undertake any single life-sustaining chore."<sup>1</sup> Some historians have argued that since colonial women and men were working together on farms to ensure economic success –or at least survival- the male and female spheres may have been less distinctly defined than it would become later in the nineteenth century. Linda

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother; The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (Basic Books, 1983), 38.

Kerber actually deconstructs the concept of “separate spheres” in her article “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History.”<sup>2</sup> After retracing the historiography of the trope, Kerber ends by stating that “to continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships.” Cheese making is very much representative of the “dynamic relationships” between men and women. In this case, Elizabeth Phelps was in charge of the dairy production, but Charles helped her and occasionally participated in her activities. Elizabeth was not confined to one sphere; she worked in cooperation with her husband. Her case supports the argument of those historians who consider dairying as the “significant sharing of tasks” between men and women. To borrow a metaphor from Laurel Ulrich’s *Good Wives*, dairying in the early nineteenth century was certainly the fruit of “two streams in one current.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Elizabeth Porter Phelps stood at the edge of a transition on the verge of being achieved: because of industrialization –and of the world view that accompanies it– Elizabeth and women like her were more and more subdued to the technical innovations advocated by agricultural societies. She was gradually losing control over her “art.”

Elizabeth Porter was born in 1747 at her parents’ farm in Hadley, Massachusetts, where she would spend all her life. Her father, Moses Porter, was killed in 1755 during the French and Indian War, and left the property to her mother, Elizabeth Pitkin Porter.

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<sup>2</sup> Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History*, volume 75, June 88, 9-39.

<sup>3</sup> McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 72; Laurel Ulrich, introduction to *Good Wives; Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* (Vintage Books, New York, 1980), 8. For more on the “separate spheres” argument, see Nancy Cott’s *History of Women in the US*, Mark Faragher’s article, “History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America” (*American Quarterly*), Barbara J Harris’s *Beyond Her Sphere; Women and the Professions in American History* (Greenwood Press, 1978) and Joan Jensen’s *Loosening the Bonds* (Yale university Press, 1986).

Moses's probate inventory lists six cows and several items closely related to the production of cheese on the farm: two "Cheese tub[s]," a "Cheese ladder," a "skimming dish," and even "Cheese."<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth's mother, Elizabeth Pitkin Porter, was obviously making cheese, and it is very likely that she taught the "art" to her daughter. The latter "developed into a strong-minded, sensible, practical and (...) remarkably social woman."<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Porter Phelps' diary and letters show how socially active Elizabeth was, but most of all stresses her strong religious nature. She actually started her diary in 1763, reporting only the sermons she had heard at church; then gradually she started to record special events (storms, deaths), and after a few years the diary began to look like any other rural woman's journal. The everyday routine is dutifully recorded in these carefully kept pages, giving the reader a sense of what daily life was for a white upper-middle-class woman in rural Massachusetts.

Phelps's diary nevertheless does not inform us of her sentimental life. Her grandson, Theodore Gregson Huntington, would later recall that she was to be married to a man named Williams, but preferred Charles Phelps. In Theodore's point of view, "doubtless she had a love for the farm and she could see with her own eyes that Charles Phelps was the man to manage and improve it and when to this was joined goodness of heart and sterling principles why should she not do as she pleased?"<sup>6</sup> Theodore records the strong attachment Elizabeth felt for the farm she had lived on all her life, and also points at her interest in improving it. According to Theodore, Charles and she were a "fitting match."

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<sup>4</sup> Moses Porter's inventory, Probate Inventories, Hampshire County, Reel 1555, microfilm collection, Umass library.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore's *Sketches*, Box 21, Folder 7, PPHP, page 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

In 1770, Elizabeth and Charles married, and the two newlyweds lived on the farm with Elizabeth's mother. They had three children, one of whom died as a baby. They also adopted a girl, Thankful Hitchcock, whose mother had died in labor. Moses (who later changed his name to Charles) and Elizabeth Whiting Phelps did not stay on the farm. Elizabeth and her husband lived in Litchfield, Connecticut, while Charles was in Boston. Therefore, after about 1800, Elizabeth Porter Phelps, who was then fifty-three, did not receive any help from her children in her daily chores, though she did not fail to report her work when writing to her daughter. In fact the main source on her dairy activities remains her letters to her daughter from 1801 to 1815. Curiously, Elizabeth did not mention cheese making in her diary, though it is a recurrent theme in her correspondence to her daughter in Litchfield. Of course, this distinction strikes the reader. Why did she keep dairying out of her journal? Was it because she thought it was not worth recording? In *Our Own Snug Fireside*, Jane Nylander explains the absence of these tasks from journals, underlining that "the ordinary quality and repetitive nature of routine chores seem to have made them beneath any level of notice."<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth's diary seems more oriented towards social activities such as visits to neighbors. Cheese making did not belong to this set of occupations. But, in her letters to her daughter, cheese making appears the most important activity in her set of duties on the farm. This does not seem too surprising; women were still masters of this "art" at the turn of the nineteenth century. Still, no reason could be found to explain why Elizabeth did not record cheese making in her diary.

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993), page 116.

First of all, who made cheese? In one of her letters, Elizabeth reminded her daughter of the fact that “the cheese and butter falls prety [sic] much to my part.”<sup>8</sup> She was the “old dairy maid,” as she described herself. On New England farms at the turn of the nineteenth century, dairying was mainly women’s work. Jane Nylander documents this point by looking at several women’s diaries. She noticed that men were more likely to talk about the production, while women described the process. Prescriptive literature on women’s activities at this time reinforces the idea that women were perceived to be more suitable than men for dairying. Women were responsible for many household tasks, such as dairying, spinning, cooking, cleaning and laundry. They also had to raise their children. Men took care of outdoor activities: plowing, taking care of the livestock, harvesting. Men usually did not take direct part in dairy production. For instance, they were reluctant to milk the cows. An 1840 issue of the *New Genesee Farmer* comments that “Thirty years ago [in the 1810s] it would have been almost as difficult to find a man milking as to find a woman mowing, excepting in case of very large dairies.” Thus dairying, and cheese making in particular, was a feminine task on farms<sup>9</sup>.

How did women make cheese? How long was the process? Women, who had both experience and knowledge of this “art,” were the ones making cheese, while men were often the ones describing the process in the agricultural advice books. Men were the ones talking about dairying in books, while women, the actual producers, were eloquent in a more informal setting. In their diaries rural women blended cheese making in the context of household activities. “The ordinary quality and repetitive nature of routine chores”<sup>10</sup> did not seem to be worth recording along the records of deaths, births, and sermons. As

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<sup>8</sup> EPP to daughter, PPHP, October 14, 1813.

<sup>9</sup> *New Genesee Farmer*, May 1840; Mrs Cornelius, *The Young Housekeeper’s Friend* (Boston, 1846), 164.

mentioned before, Elizabeth Porter Phelps did not refer to her dairy production in her diary but in her correspondence to her daughter. She may have kept a separate record, but it has not survived. What does this tell us about the importance of her work to her own eyes? To her husband's eyes? Was she trying to teach something to her daughter?

Elizabeth probably told her daughter that most of the "recipes" were inspired by English methods. In 1784, Josiah Twamley wrote *Dairying Exemplified or the Business of Cheese Making*. This man was the authority on cheese making in eighteenth-century England. His method was reproduced in American agricultural journals, and in publications by agricultural societies. According to Josiah Twamley, cheese making season started in the late spring, when cows "had freshened."<sup>11</sup> One needed the appropriate utensils and most authorities on dairying recommended "wooden vessels."<sup>12</sup> Today, the Hadley Farm Museum holds an extensive collection of cheese making utensils (cheese presses, cheese ladder, cheese curd breaker, cheese basket, cheese curd strainer, etc) which would not mean much to a novice in dairying, but was part of the everyday setting on the nineteenth century farm.

The dairymaid would heat fresh milk to 80 degrees and pour it into a cheese vat. She usually had no thermometer, and could tell the temperature just by touching the milk. Then she added rennet [stomach of a calf] to the vat to make curdled milk. The curd would sit at the bottom of the vat. She would then remove the whey with a ladle and cut the curd into pieces which were ground and salted. The curd was then put into a wicker basket to drain of its whey. The dairymaid moved the cheese into a cheesecloth-lined

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<sup>10</sup> *Our Own Snug Fireside*, 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Our Own Snug Fireside*, 201.

<sup>12</sup> "Further extracts on the business of THE DAIRY, From Anderson's writings," *Hampshire Gazette*, July 7, 1802.



hoop which was placed in a press. The cheese would stay in the press for twelve hours approximately, and then would be stored on a ladder to cure for about four months before eating. Other sources advised women to keep the cheese in the press for two days, and would not use a cheese ladder, but to place the cheese upon a shelf. But they all agreed on the fact that cheese made of unskimmed milk, which were called new milk cheeses, were the “fattest” and the “most valuable.” Dairy women could also make “two-meal” cheese, if they did not have enough milk from one single milking. They would combine “the morning’s milk with that of the previous evening.”<sup>13</sup>

The production of cheese required rather extensive equipment: a fireplace to heat the fresh milk, a vat, a ladle, a basket, cheesecloth, a hoop, a cheese press, a ladder, and most of all, a cheese room. In the work Elizabeth described to her daughter, she must have used the fire-place in the south kitchen (erected about 1797). This kitchen was next to the cheese room. The fireplace was the largest one in the house, “nearly eight feet across and more than four feet high, with a fire box and bake oven housed beneath the lintel.”<sup>14</sup>

Elizabeth left behind clues about the significance of this daily activity; her letters mention her utensils, cows, and “helps.” Moreover, the cheese room at the farm still stands as a physical evidence of Elizabeth’s craft. Elizabeth’s utensils were only mentioned twice in her correspondence but in both cases they appeared in the conversation because her husband looked for them. In the spring of 1803 Elizabeth went to visit her daughter in Litchfield, Connecticut. While she was away, Charles became

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Deane, *The New England Farmer; or Geogical Dictionary* (Arno Press, NY 1972), 79; *Transforming Rural Life*, 82; *Our Own Snug Fireside*, 201.

<sup>14</sup> Marla Miller, “*My Daily Bread Depends Upon My Labor:*” *Craftswomen, Community and the Marketplace in Rural Massachusetts, 1740-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 348.

responsible for the cheese production. He wrote to Elizabeth that they [Charles and the Native American maid Asunah]

“have searched the house to find the new cheese strayner [sic],  
but can find none, I wish you write what we are to do –as  
yet we have made use of the old ones but they are poor  
–Asunah says the new ones were made before you went  
away –but where they were put is the puzel [sic].”<sup>15</sup>

This episode does not reveal much about the provenance of the utensils. They were probably not made at home, but we have no evidence that the cabinet-maker for the family, Samuel Gaylord, was actually providing the Porter Phelps household with cheese ladders, hoops or even a cheese press. In his 1917 *Household Manufactures in the United States 1640-1860*, Rolla Milton Tryon points out that up to the early nineteenth century boys on the farm would “whittle out” the dairy utensils “out of cherry or similar timber.”<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth neither mentioned any utensils made by her son, nor a store where they could have purchased the tools, although her Hadley relatives, the Porters, kept a store in town on West Street. The *Hampshire Gazette* at the time displayed ads of general stores in Northampton which could have provided the Porter Phelps with dairy equipment. Another provenance could have been her father’s inheritance. His probate inventory<sup>17</sup> mentioned previously lists cheese tubs, dry casks, a cheese ladder, a skimming dish, and other utensils related to dairying. Elizabeth may have been using the same press. Elizabeth never mentioned her cheese press(es), but she probably had at least one. There are two left today at the Porter Phelps house, but curator Susan Lisk is not certain of their provenance. One of them may have belonged to Elizabeth.

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Phelps to Elizabeth Porter Phelps, Box 4, Folder 4, May 16, 1803.

<sup>16</sup> Rolla Milton Tryon, *Household Manufactures in the United States 1640-1860; A Study in Industrial History* (University of Chicago Press, 1917), 223.

<sup>17</sup> It is actually common to find dairy utensils in probate inventories.

In a letter to her husband in May 1803 –a few days after the one previously mentioned- Elizabeth referred to cheesecloth, another essential element in the process:

“...as to the cheese cloaths [sic] etc I can give but a poor account about ‘em  
–they are either in the press-bed place in the sitting room or upon  
the top shelve in the closet, by the Clock –I cant remember  
whether there is any new one made”<sup>18</sup>

The fact that Elizabeth could not remember whether new ones were made could prove that she was not making them herself, although she could have made them, because cheesecloth is a very loose cloth, easy to weave. But she wrote “made” not “bought,” which leads to think that someone else in the household was producing it.

Elizabeth very rarely referred to the milk cows in her correspondence. They seemed to be part of Charles’s domain. We nevertheless can see a progression from eight cows in 1777 to thirteen in 1806 (instead of the sixteen first intended by Charles in 1803).<sup>19</sup> Statistics for 1790 show that “a cow could lactate for forty weeks; so, theoretically, milking at two gallons a day [the average a cow could give per day], annual production would have been 4,816 pounds.” Knowing that it took one gallon for a pound of cheese, we could easily calculate an estimate of the amount of cheese produced by the Porter Phelps household. But we would still need to know how Elizabeth distributed the milk between the production of cheese and the production of butter (for which 2 or 3 gallons of milk are needed for one pound).<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, Elizabeth did not refer to her butter production as much as her cheese making.

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Porter Phelps to her husband, Box 5, Folder 13, May 22, 1803.

<sup>19</sup> 1777 Tax assessment, Box 4, Folder 6; EPP to her daughter, March 29, 1806, Box 6, Folder 3; EPP to her daughter, February 7, 1803, Box 6, folder 1.

<sup>20</sup> Elinor F. Oakes, “A Ticklish Business: Dairying in New England and Pennsylvania, 1750-1812,” *Pennsylvania History*, volume xlvii (jan-oct 1980), 201; Carole Shammas, “How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, volume xiii: 2 (Autumn 1982), 261.

Elizabeth certainly did not make cheese alone; she was very often assisted by “helps.” Her daughter could have been one of her helps before her marriage, but since the correspondence started when she moved to Litchfield with her husband, it is hard to tell whether this happened. In her study of nineteenth-century central New York, Sally McMurry explains that “almost never were daughters and hired women present in the same household.” This does not seem to apply to the Phelps farm. Elizabeth’s daughters – Elizabeth Whiting Phelps and Thankful Hitchcock- probably helped her, along with the slaves they had until 1782. And, contrary to McMurry who asserts that “among families that employed non-family labor, hired men dominated,”<sup>21</sup> the Phelps hired mainly women for their dairy production. Hired men were employed for other farm labor.

After reading Elizabeth’s letters to her daughter and Charles’ letters to his wife, a few names become familiar: Jude, Zerviah, Sally, “sister H,” Polly, and Asunah. Elizabeth was surrounded by a range of social, familial and economic relationships. Even Charles, the son of Elizabeth and Charles, was mentioned once when he came milking after his father’s death.<sup>22</sup> In one of her early letters, Elizabeth also mentioned “Silence Furguson” who “came last night to tarry, till her return which she proposed a fortnight -& this day we have been hard at it I can tell you. Made a cheese...”<sup>23</sup> Therefore it seems that only women were hired in the house. The correspondence and other papers available do not reveal who hired them. Was it Charles alone, or did Elizabeth have some power in this process? When Elizabeth was away visiting her daughter in 1803, Charles was

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<sup>21</sup> *Transforming Rural Life*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> The helps are mentioned in the following letters: Jude in EPP, June 13, 1801 (Box 6, Folder 1); Zerviah in EPP, August 14, 1802 (ibid); “another woman” in EPP, June 17, 1803 (ibid); Sally in EPP, June 17, 1803 (ibid); “your sister H” [Elizabeth Huntington has no sister] in EPP, May 31, 1811 (Box 6, Folder 4); Polly in CP, August 29, 1801 (Box 4, Folder 3) and in CP, August 30, 1801 (Box 4, Folder 2); Asunah in CP, May 16, 1803 (Box 4, Folder 4); Charles Porter Phelps [son] in EPP, May 4, 1815 (Box 6, Folder 5).

<sup>23</sup> EPP, November 4, 1797 (Box 6, Folder 3).

looking for a dairy woman, but this does not necessarily mean that he was always the one in charge of this duty.<sup>24</sup>

These “helps” can be divided into separate categories. Some of them belonged to the immediate family: Charles [the son] of course, and Sally, Charles’s wife. Others may have been neighbors, even friends of Elizabeth and Charles who came to help them when in need of extra hands. The “sister H” Elizabeth referred to in May 1811 must be Thankful Hitchcock, the Phelps’ adopted daughter. In 1804 Charles referred extensively to her help:

“We get along very well as yet –and shall I don’t doubt so long as we can keep Thankful –I asked Mr Hitchcock how long he could spare his wife he expected she would tarry a fortnight, if they were well –I told him she must stay until you came home-...”<sup>25</sup>

Thankful probably learned how to make cheese at the Phelps farm because she was raised by Elizabeth. Other women mentioned as helps could have stayed (“tarry”) at the farm for a couple of weeks. They were, as Theodore Gregson Huntington later remembered them, “the quaint personages that were from time to time inmates of the household in the capacity of servants or “help” as they were then called...”<sup>26</sup>

Some of Elizabeth’s helps were African Americans and Native Americans. In some instances, Elizabeth would have rather employed African-American women. She “owned at least one slave woman continuously from 1754 until 1782.”<sup>27</sup> When looking for a dairy maid in May 1803, Charles went first to “the black folks at Shutesbury,” Sarah and Peter Jackson. Since he could not get any definite answer from them, he “went to Salem and agreed with Zerviah to come for 4 weeks.” Therefore in May 1803, at least

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<sup>24</sup> CP, May 15, 1803 (Box 4, Folder 4): “the next day set out for a Dairy woman.”

<sup>25</sup> CP, July 21, 1804 (Box 4, Folder 4).

<sup>26</sup> Theodore’s *Sketches*, April 1881 (Box 21, Folder 5), 2.

two women were making cheese: Zerviah Ford, a white woman, and Asunah, a Native American woman, who came to the Porter Phelps farm in October 1802.<sup>28</sup> These women were probably hired to do more than work in the cheese room. It seemed not uncommon for the Porter Phelps to hire Native American women to do their washing and make soap. In an 1807 letter, Elizabeth asked her daughter-in-law, Sally, if she could find her a woman to hire. Elizabeth underlined her preference for “black girls:”

“if you could find a black girl down there I should  
be willing to give a good price –or a white girl,  
tho’ a black one would be best on *some accounts for us.*”<sup>29</sup> [my own italics]

Elizabeth never explained this preference for women of color. What were the reasons – “some accounts”- that pushed Charles and Elizabeth to look for black girls as helps? Were they more industrious or obedient? Did the Porter Phelps feel that they had more power over them? No answer could be found in the papers left by the couple.

Thus, Elizabeth had always at least one help with her, especially during the busiest seasons of the year. It is hard to determine how much work she delegated to her helps because she often just referred to herself in her letters to her daughter. The reader cannot tell if the help(s) also woke up at 4 o’clock in the morning to help Elizabeth in her daily task. She may have been alone at this time of the day, attending to her occupation in the kitchen and the cheese room. The latter space is described by British historian Deborah Valenze as the “nether region of female space.”<sup>30</sup> According to Valenze, the cheese room was the province of women, and at the Porter Phelps farm, Elizabeth was

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<sup>27</sup> Marla Miller, “*My Daily Bread Depends Upon My Labor:*” *Craftswomen, Community and the Marketplace in Rural Massachusetts, 1740-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 154.

<sup>28</sup> CP, May 15, 1803 (Box 4, Folder 4). See also *The Diary of Elizabeth (Porter) Phelps* (Box 8, Folder 4), page 17: Entry for 1802 Oct 24: “(...)Assmiah [sic] an Indian girl came here to live last Tuesday.”

<sup>29</sup> EPP, November 4, 1807 (Box 5, Folder 15), as mentioned in *My Daily Bread Depends upon my Labor*, 154.

<sup>30</sup> Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 58.

definitely the mistress of this room. Charles probably did not go in the room, except to pick up the cheese and bring it to the market. This small room, now transformed into the office of the house/museum, still retains the main features as when Elizabeth was in the house two centuries ago. The cheese room is a narrow rectangular room (184 by 93 inches) and was built in the late eighteenth century. The “cheese room” (now called the “buttery”) appears on the 1820 floor plan of the house. The Historic Structure Report of the house describes the room as follows:

“Virtually all of the room’s woodwork is unpainted, and shows no signs of having been altered. The walls behind the shelves are lined with planed, beaded, tongue and groove boards 15”-20” wide. The plastered ceiling is supported by split-board lath, also attached with wrought nails. The single window on the west wall is coverable by a crude sliding shutter.”<sup>31</sup>

The cheese room appears fairly austere with its dark walls and its assemblage of identical shelves, but it was primarily a private room, whose access was limited to a few people, usually women. The large amount of storage provided by the shelves illustrates the quantity of cheese that could be produced on the farm. You could probably put seventy pans of milk in this room. Such a room was necessary for storing milk and later, cheese, away from light and higher temperature. A widow from Cummington, Sarah Bryant (1766-1847), who was keeping a diary at the beginning of the nineteenth century, always carried her cheese to the cellar in the autumn and the cheese would stay there all winter.<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth never mentioned using the cellar, and she may have left the cheese in the cheese room the whole year.

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<sup>31</sup> *Historic Structure Report- Porter-Phelps-Huntington House*, Adams and Roy Consultants, Inc, Portsmouth, NH, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Snell Bryant, *Diary 1795-1847*, Special Collections, Deerfield Library, Memorial hall. Every November, Sarah referred to her carrying “the cheese [sic] into the cellar [sic].” See entries for Nov 16, 1812; November 24, 1814; November 24, 1815; December 4, 1816; November 25, 1817.

The cheese room could also be used for the production of butter, and Elizabeth may have stored her churn in the small room. Although Elizabeth mentioned that she had “a deal [sic] to do in the cheese room,” it seems almost impossible that she could have made cheese in this room, considering the narrowness of the place.<sup>33</sup> She may therefore have used the south kitchen with its large fireplace for the main part of her cheese production. Thus the main usage of the cheese room would have been storage, which, according to the Historic Structure Report, could explain the presence of “two square wooden bins, each with their own cover (...) built against the west wall.”<sup>34</sup> The explanation given today by curator Susan Lisk is that these bins were used for grains, which appears more plausible, because there is no material evidence of cheese being piled in bins for storage.

Thus this space “belonged” to Elizabeth; she may have carried its key with her at all times (there is a keyhole in the door, but no lock anymore). It represents “the middle ground between the barn –increasingly dominated by men- and the house.”<sup>35</sup> And it actually stands between the south kitchen and the woodshed. It was specifically female, because of the sexually segregated occupation which was taking place in this space. As when she was preparing food or making soap, Elizabeth was working inside the home, while Charles was either in the fields or in town. But, as Thomas Hubka pointed out in *Big House, Little House, Back house, Barn* (1984), it was also at the very heart of the farm:

“the daily life on a nineteenth-century connected farm revolved around the work centers of the kitchen and the barn. The kitchen with its auxiliary room contained workplaces for the production of a variety of items such as butter, clothing, and handicrafts products, as well as for the daily tasks of cooking, washing and child care. The barn was commonly organized into side bays for animals and their food storage, with a

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<sup>33</sup> EPP, August 14, 1802 (Box 6, Folder 1).

<sup>34</sup> Historic Structure Report, 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Transforming Rural Life*, 95.



central vehicle “floor” giving access to all areas. The centrally located dooryard provided an important focal point for all work activities originating in the kitchen, back buildings, and barn and was an important preparation and staging area for all outside activities.”<sup>36</sup>

Therefore the cheese room was not only a female space -the “nether region of female space”- it also operated as a medium between the inside and outside worlds. Elizabeth was not completely confined to this space. Through her work she was gaining access to the center of the farm. Cheese production was, on both spatial and metaphorical levels, at the core of the farm.

Cheese making was all the more important to Elizabeth because it gave her the title of mistress; she mastered this art, and possessed the skill that others did not have. Cheese making promoted women to a higher status, because it was “a skilled craft; indeed its most distinctive feature perhaps was that it departed from the usual character of women’s work. (...) It was certainly not interruptible, and it involved skill in a number of different operations rather than quickness in one.”<sup>37</sup> Dairying was part of the daily activities, but it required more skills than scrubbing floors or cooking meals. Elizabeth controlled this very complicated process; she knew how to get the proper degree of heat, how long the curd must stand to drain, or what to do to prevent the cracking of cheeses. She could not be replaced by a machine, if such a thing had existed at the time. She was able to do two things at the same time when making cheese. She had so much experience of cheese making that it did not require her to think about it anymore:

“once more my dear child I am trying to write & how are you  
-I can make many a visit to you, when I am over my cheese”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas C Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England* (University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1984), 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Transforming Rural Life*, 91-92.

<sup>38</sup> EPP, September 2, 1803 (Box 6, Folder 1).

She could make cheese and think about her daughter. It did not require much attention from her; cheese making was as natural as breathing to her.

Her husband recognized her gift, and often compared other women's work to hers. He would always come to the conclusion that Elizabeth's cheese was much better, and dairymen could only make "nearly as well as when your mother [Elizabeth] had the oversight of it." Charles remained cautious in judging other cheeses: "whether the cheese will be as good as yours, I will not take upon me to say, ..." <sup>39</sup> The fact that other women came to the household to learn how to make cheese (such as Mrs Hibbard in 1807) <sup>40</sup> also proves Elizabeth's expertise in the domain of dairying.

Although it was a skilled craft, cheese making was nevertheless a very repetitive occupation, and this aspect is overwhelmingly present in Elizabeth's letters. She complained that "the same old round of business is constantly pursued," commented upon her "wearied limbs," and even compared dairying to breathing: "it seems like holding breath, churning every other day sometimes." Elizabeth became more and more tired as industrialization was progressively invading her household. She was asked to do more work, for instance, in 1803 when her husband decided to add more cows to the farm in order to enlarge the dairy production. Industrialization, or at least commercialization, put more pressure on women. An implacable fatigue pervaded Elizabeth's letters sometimes, and underscored the repetitiveness of the couple's tasks:

"I think your father does not complain so much of his head, but of being very tyred [sic], cheeese [sic], cheese, hay, hay, cooking, cooking..." <sup>41</sup>

Cheese making did not only require skills, it could also be one of the most exhausting activities on the farm. As years passed, Elizabeth showed more and more

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<sup>39</sup> CP, August 30, 1801 (Box 4, Folder 2), and September 10, 1801 (Box 4, Folder 3).

exhaustion from waking up very early to work in the cheese room. In a letter to her daughter in 1801, when Elizabeth was fifty-four year old, she called herself the “old dairy maid.” As the mistress of the household she had a tight schedule to follow: she told her daughter once that she had “made a cheese – churned – got dinner for between 20 & 30 persons, made between 20 and 30 mince pies.” It did not matter if she was sick sometimes; she still had to get up and work:

“I must tell you of last Satt: about 3 in the morning I wak’d with the sick headache grew worse puk’d a number of times – but knew I must get up.”

And work on a farm did not always distinguished weekdays from weekend. In August 1813, Elizabeth remarked that they had been lucky that year, because “we have not once made one [cheese] upon a Sabbath this summer.” This was apparently not always the case.<sup>42</sup>

If she was so much involved in dairying, her production of cheese must have been quite important. Unfortunately she did not say much about it in her correspondence. The quantity she rarely gave remained very vague (“we make about three cheese in a week,” or “a fine parcel of cheese”), and cannot permit one to determine how big the production was. The Porter Phelps household was nevertheless producing cheese beyond self-sufficiency, since Charles was selling the cheese in Boston<sup>43</sup>. This aspect puts them in an advance position in comparison with other farms. Historian Carole Shammas has noticed that in the late eighteenth century many New England families were not self-sufficient in dairy products. She adds that “to meet the minimum requirement of a pound of cheese a

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<sup>40</sup> EPP, May 23, 1807 (Box 6, Folder 3).

<sup>41</sup> EPP, July 10, 1807 (Box 6, Folder 3), June 10, 1807 (ibid).

<sup>42</sup> EPP, August 13, 1801 (Box 6, Folder 1); November 4, 1797 (ibid); June 13, 1801 (ibid); August 21, 1813 (Box 6, Folder 4).

<sup>43</sup> In a letter to her daughter, Elizabeth mentioned that “neither your father nor I will go to Boston, as cheese is so poor a market.” EPP, September 13, 1802 (Box 6, Folder 1).

week and some milk for a family of six, the household had to have possessed three” cows. “Yet,” she continues, “only a quarter of the Massachusetts inventories mentioned this amount or more.”<sup>44</sup> Having thirteen cows by 1806, the Porter Phelps could have easily provided cheese for the household needs and for the outside market. Elizabeth nevertheless remained silent about the actual amount of the production. This does not mean that she was modest; she liked to talk about how things were going well with cheese, that they “make more than [they] ever did,” that “the cheese do pretty well,” or that her cheese was “quite a dear and valuable treasure.”<sup>45</sup>

Elizabeth may have talked about her cheese with the women who came to visit her. Some of them even came especially to learn how to make cheese. For instance Elizabeth also wrote to her daughter about Mrs Hubbard, a neighbor, in 1807:

“Mrs John Hibbard [sic] is here, she came last night and lodged here to see the whole process of cheese making --as they are setting out in the dairy line...”<sup>46</sup>

Elizabeth did not mention whether Mrs Hibbard brought her own milk with her so the two women could pool their milk and make cheese in common. This practice of pooling milk with a neighbor in order to have enough to make cheese was fairly common, and is described in Sarah Bryant’s diary at several occasions.<sup>47</sup> For instance, she recorded on June 21, 1816 that “Mrs Snell sent her milk here to make cheese.”<sup>48</sup> This practice benefited “families with only a small number of cows,” and by pooling “their resources,”

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<sup>44</sup> Carole Shammass, “How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?” 261.

<sup>45</sup> EPP to her daughter, July 4, 1807 (Box 6, Folder 3), August 21, 1813 (Box 6, Folder 5); EPP to her daughter-in-law, September 26, 1804 (Box 5, Folder 15).

<sup>46</sup> EPP to her daughter, May 23, 1807 (Box 6, Folder 3).

<sup>47</sup> In his manuscript “Hadley,” volume 3, Sylvester Judd records that poor Hadley families pooled milk.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Snell Bryant’s Diary, June 21, 1816.

they were sure to have enough milk to make “good-sized cheeses.”<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth never resorted to this practice, or if she did, she did not refer to it in her letters.

In her diary, Elizabeth recorded all the visits she made and received. In 1803, she made a total of 60 visits and received 74, most of them for tea. A common entry read like the one for February 27:

“(…) we visit at Major Porters. (…) Fryday Dr Porter & Dolly Williams visit here. Last Wednesday the widow Porter visit here.”<sup>50</sup>

As Charles Phelps’ wife, Elizabeth had to obey “visiting obligations.” But her work in the dairy room remained secluded. She rarely mentioned visits related to dairying. As John Mack Faragher noticed in his article “History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America,” there was a persistent “contrast between the essential work of rural women and the leisure of urban ladies.” In this sense, Elizabeth had two identities: she was both a gentlewoman and a farm wife.<sup>51</sup>

Elizabeth was not that separated from the “public sphere” –or what could be considered as such. In *A Very Social Time; Crafting Community in Antebellum New England*, Karen Hansen shows that the use of the public/private dichotomy cannot be applied when talking about social obligations, such as these visits Elizabeth referred to in her diary. Hansen applies to visiting what this research applies to cheese making:

“The boundaries between spheres were not absolute; they overlapped, constantly shifted, and were renegotiated by historical actors.”<sup>52</sup>

Elizabeth Phelps was then definitely not confined to the typical “domestic sphere.” Public and private domains conflicted but also worked in collaboration.

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<sup>49</sup> *Our Own Snug Fireplace*, 201.

<sup>50</sup> *The Diary of Elizabeth (Porter) Phelps* (Box 8, Folder 4).

<sup>51</sup> *Transforming the Rural Life*, 66; John Mack Faragher, “History from the Inside Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America, in *History of Women in the United States*, Nancy Cott ed. (K G Saur, 1993), 5.

If there were such a thing as a “separate sphere,” it would be best illustrated by Elizabeth’s apparent non-participation in marketing the cheese. She made cheese, but did not seem to take part actively in selling it. She never mentioned clearly how the cheese was sold, or to whom. Whenever references were made to the market in her correspondence, she was talking about Charles’s business. But she certainly participated greatly in the farm economy.

Elizabeth’s and Charles’s activities were obviously not separate, but rather overlapping. Elizabeth needed a man’s help to kill the calf (for the rennet) and to cut the wood for the fireplace. In pre-industrial New England, men and women farmers were clearly dependent upon each other for the tasks that were assigned to them according to gender. As Ruth Schwartz Cowan notices, “small wonder that most people married and, once widowed, married again.”<sup>53</sup> A farm could not be run properly without men’s and women’s mutual efforts. Charles Phelps clearly valued his wife’s contribution, which explains why he wanted to increase it. Dairy production was a very lucrative source of revenue on the farm. Cheese making was both for family use and the market.<sup>54</sup>

Elizabeth may even have had power over the marketing of cheese. We have no evidence for or against that. When looking at the early nineteenth-century literature on marketing dairy products, one will notice that women are absent from the discussion. There was no place for them there. Elizabeth did not even tackle this issue, because she

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<sup>52</sup> Karen V Hansen, *A Very Social Time; Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (University of California Press, 1994), 81.

<sup>53</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> *The First Industrial Woman*, 12, 50; *Our Own Snug Fireside*, 200.

did not consider it as such. She recognized she was given a task as a woman, and she did not question this pre-existing order:

“it is apparently the dictate of providence I should do the business which is allotted for me.”<sup>55</sup>

Charles Phelps, Elizabeth’s husband, probably strongly agreed with these words. Farming was one of his main interests, if not the main one. Born in Hadley in 1743, Charles became a lawyer and a wealthy farmer, after marrying Elizabeth Porter and taking over the management of her farm. Charles made a great number of changes to the house between 1770 and 1799 so it would reflect his social and economic status. If Elizabeth was strongly attached to the farm and her dairy chores, Charles was spending little time in the fields. He seemed to have collected public offices in Hadley: he was a representative for Hadley in the Massachusetts legislature (which explain his frequent trips to Boston), Squire for the town of Hadley, deacon of the church, and chairman of the building committee for the new church in 1808.<sup>56</sup>

Despite all these public functions, Charles remained very much committed to the farm, which he always wanted to improve. Although Elizabeth spent more time on the farm than her husband, Charles was still the one making decisions regarding it, or at least it seemed that way.<sup>57</sup> In a letter to his wife in 1802, he hoped “not to be from home much more as my farming business makes but poor progress when I am about...” Elizabeth had no power to decide for him in the farming business. He was the one holding the reins of the farm, even when in Boston. Since Elizabeth remained at home, she served as a liaison

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<sup>55</sup> EPP to her daughter, June 13, 1801 (Box 6, Folder 1).

<sup>56</sup> Finding Aid to Porter-Phelps-Huntington Papers, Special Collections, Amherst College Library, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Phelps bought the farm from his mother-in-law in the 1790s. The farm never belonged to Elizabeth.

between him and his helps on the farm. The following extract reveals the sort of instructions Charles gave to his wife concerning the running of the farm:

“I wish you to tell John not to give the stear, any meal  
–he must give the oxen about 4 quarts each day –and  
the cow as much as she will bare –as I want to make her  
good beef –the hogs must be fed as much  
as they will eat or we loose their keeping.”<sup>58</sup>

If Charles had doubted that Elizabeth was going to give the orders to John, he could have sent a separate letter to John. But he did not because Elizabeth acted as his surrogate. In *Good Wives*, historian Laurel Ulrich develops the notion of “deputy-husbands.” She explains that “should fate or circumstance prevent the husband from fulfilling his role, the wife could appropriately stand in his place.”<sup>59</sup> Although Ulrich focuses on an earlier period, Elizabeth Porter Phelps could be considered as a deputy husband. She transmitted orders from her husband and she may have made her own decisions about farm activities. Furthermore, in this letter Charles did not give Elizabeth any instructions concerning the dairy production, which may mean that he trusted her and let her control this craft on her own.

The combination of their efforts proved to be successful. The direct tax census of 1798 –twenty-eight years after their marriage- gives some indication of where Charles stood in comparison with other farmers in Hadley. He owned at the time five dwelling houses and a total of 457 acres of land. Other farmers in Hadley usually owned a hundred acres, a figure not as prestigious as the Phelps’s.<sup>60</sup> The success of the household was reflected in Theodore Gregson Huntington’s *Sketches*:

“It seems to have been a fitting match [talking about his grandparents’ union].

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<sup>58</sup> CP to EPP, April 30, 1802 (Box 4, Folder 4); CP to EPP, February 9, 1809 (Ibid).

<sup>59</sup> Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> *1798 Massachusetts and Maine Direct Tax Census*, Microfilm 4778, volume xvii, reel 15, Umass Library. For Hadley-Amherst assessment of land and buildings, see 2-72.



Prosperity attended their labors. The acreage of the farm at first 300 was doubled. As early as 1770 the property was rated highest on the list in Hadley with one exception. Much public business was transacted by my grandfather, and he was also an officer in the church.”<sup>61</sup>

This passage of Theodore’s reminiscence brings several points into light. First the farm kept growing. The family estate expanded to almost a thousand acres by 1814, the year of Charles’s death<sup>62</sup>. Secondly, as mentioned before, the Phelps farm was prominent in the agricultural community of Hadley. But most importantly, Theodore underlined the fact that Charles was in charge of the “public business.” Charles was the one bringing Elizabeth’s cheese production to the market. But was he more involved than that?

Did Charles operate only as a link between the making and the marketing of the cheese, or did he actually get up at five in the morning to milk the cows with Elizabeth? From reading their letters, it seems that Charles took part in the production only when Elizabeth was away visiting her daughter in Connecticut. And he would then be helped by a dairy maid, who may have done the core of the work which he would oversee. Right after Elizabeth left for a few weeks in 1803, Charles “set out for a Dairy woman,” probably because he could not make cheese himself. Zerviah Ford agreed to help, and “we took of the Calves immediately, and have made three cheeses.” Charles included himself in this process by using the pronoun “we” when writing to his wife, but to what extent was he involved? The fact that later in the same letter he told his wife he was looking for the cheese strainer proved his unfamiliarity with the dairy production. If he had used it everyday, or even occasionally, he would probably have known where to find it.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Theodore’s Sketches*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Finding Aid to Porter-Phelps-Huntington Papers, Special Collections, Amherst College Library, 2.

<sup>63</sup> CP to EPP, May 15, 1803 (Box 4, Folder 4).

When she was away on her trip to Boston in 1801 –probably visiting their son and his wife- Charles first clearly revealed his non-participation in the production. The dairy maid, Polly, “has the making of the cheese, and butter.” But later in the same letter, which he wrote to his daughter, Charles associated himself with the production, asserting that “*we* have made a fine parcel of Cheese this summer and *our* butter is excellent.” [my own italics] it seems that Charles tended to see dairy production as much his as his wife’s domain, since he wrote her in April 1802:

“I wish you not to give yourself any uneasiness as to *our domestic concerns*,  
as I doubt not we shall get along, if we can not accomplish *our business*,  
I must procure more help or lessen the work.” [my own italics]

Charles considered himself involved in domestic matters but Elizabeth was the one worrying about them, probably because she was the one responsible for most of them. It is very obvious here that husband and wife worked together on the farm, and the lines between their “spheres of work” were most of the time blurred. If Charles did not make cheese himself, he would help the dairy maid or Elizabeth. The latter mentioned in her letter to her daughter in 1813, only one year before Charles died, that “your father helps a great deal” when talking about cheese making.<sup>64</sup>

But in general, Charles was mainly involved with selling the cheese. From reading Elizabeth’s letters, it appears that he was bringing it to Boston. The most obvious evidence of this comes from Elizabeth complaining to her daughter that “I rather think neither your father nor I will go to Boston, as cheese is so poor a market, it can hardly be given away.” A close look at Boston city directories of the early nineteenth century unfortunately does not tell us where exactly Charles would have sold the cheese. The records list “victuallers,” “retailer houses,” “grocer houses,” “merchants,” and many

more other stores or people which may have bought cheese. Charles did not mention to whom he sold the produce.<sup>65</sup> In her study of “Eighteenth-century Foodways in Deerfield, Massachusetts,” Daphne L Derven embraces the same hypothesis: “Deerfield’s cheese could have been sold in Boston, but there was no direct evidence for this.”<sup>66</sup>

It is also hard to find out when exactly the cheese was sold. According to McMurry, in the nineteenth century, cheese was sold once a year, “by the dairy.”<sup>67</sup> The rest of the year, the farmers would rely on the system of barter and credit, exchanging cheese for some other good(s). Did Charles follow this pattern? In Elizabeth’s correspondence, only four references can be found related to the marketing of cheese. They appear chronologically in September 1802, August 1804, November 1805, and March 1810. Only one mentions Boston; the other three remain vague concerning the destination of the cheese. It is also interesting to notice that the references are spread throughout the year, and not concentrated in one season. This illustrates the fact that cheese was made from March to October and the early cheeses could be sold later in the year. In her study of Deerfield, based on account books from 1700 to 1799, Daphne L Derven also noticed that “cheese transactions peaked in October and November, accounting for about 60 percent of the total” cheese production for the year. Dairywomen were waiting for the fall to sell their aged cheese.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> CP to his daughter, August 30, 1801 (Box 4, Folder 1); CP to EPP, April 30, 1802 (Box 4, Folder 4); EPP to her daughter, August 21, 1813 (Box 6, Folder 5).

<sup>65</sup> EPP to her daughter, September 13, 1802 (Box 6, Folder 1). I examined Boston Directory for 1810, at the Umass Library, microfiche 16.

<sup>66</sup> Daphne L Derven, “Wholesome, Toothsome, and Diverse: Eighteenth-Century Foodways in Deerfield Massachusetts,” in *Foodways in the Northeast*, (Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Annual Proceedings, 1982) page 51.

<sup>67</sup> *Transforming Rural Life*, 45.

<sup>68</sup> Daphne L Derven, “Eighteenth-Century Foodways in Deerfield, Massachusetts,” 51.

This does not inform us whether Charles was bartering cheese in neighboring stores, such as Northampton. Issues of the *Hampshire Gazette* often showed advertisements for stores looking for cheese in exchange for other goods. In an October 1807 issue, William Moore, a store keeper in Greenfield, put an ad for “a general assortment of European and West Indian Goods,” and added that “Pot-Ash, Salts of Lye, Beef Cattle, Pork, Butter, Cheese, (...)” could be “received in payment as cash for the above.” This system of barter was very common in rural areas, and it seems unlikely that the Phelps family did not resort to it.<sup>69</sup>

Finally cheese makers could have a “factor” operating for them. They could sell cheese to country stores through a middleman, or a “factor.” Factors would come in the spring to make a contract over the price of cheese with the farmer. McMurry, whose studies focus on central New York, noticed that both men and women farmers would take part in the negotiations over this contract. Then the cheese was delivered to the factor in the fall, and he was responsible for selling it, which meant that “farmers risked total loss in the event that the cheese went unsold.” This tactic may have been used at the Porter Phelps farm, because once Elizabeth mentioned that “the man to take the Cheese etc is to be here very early, this day.” This man may have been marketing all the dairy production, and maybe other farm products as well since Elizabeth added “etc” after cheese.<sup>70</sup>

Charles’s main involvement in cheese making, then, was through the market. Some men farmers would have helped their wives wash the cheese room before the beginning of a new season, but Elizabeth never received this kind of help from Charles, or at least never mentioned it. It is doubtful that he even milked the cows with her.

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<sup>69</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, October 10, 1787, Umass Library, microfilm ?

Charles was primarily interested in improving the farm, and in showing his social status. His descendant, James Lincoln Huntington, remembered him in his book, *Forty Acres*, as a “great and good man, richly endowed.”<sup>71</sup> Charles was not so much interested in the details of ordinary life –washing the floor of the cheese room was not his primary concern, since his wife was there to take care of that. Charles was nourishing grand ambitions as a farmer. A small receipt found in his papers at the Amherst College Special collections can tell us as much as all his letters compiled. In February 1802, Charles Porter received a note to acknowledge his membership at the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture. This membership can explain why he became more and more interested in the cheese production. The Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture was one of these “agricultural societies, composed of educated urban gentlemen, who set up expensive experiments and published their proceedings.” These societies started in the eighteenth century in England and then started to appear in the United States towards the end of the century. The first American agricultural society was founded in Charleston, South Carolina in 1784<sup>72</sup>. Massachusetts had its own incorporated in 1792. The men involved in these Societies were usually large landowners, wealthy merchants, and gentleman farmers. They had enough time and money to engage in agricultural experimentation. They had nothing to do with the numerous New England families would could not reach self-sufficiency. According to Mark A Mastromarino, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, a second generation of agricultural societies emerged, emphasizing even more surplus over subsistence farming. Charles Phelps was one of

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<sup>70</sup> Transforming Rural Life, 47. Elizabeth mentioned this man once in a letter to her daughter, November 15, 1805.

<sup>71</sup> James Lincoln Huntington, *Forty Acres* (Hastings House, NY, 1949), 16.

these gentleman farmers who both saw patriotic and economic values in improving agriculture<sup>73</sup>.

In 1793, *Laws and Regulations of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture* was published. This booklet defines the goals of the society (“to obtain and publish an account of the improvements of other countries, and to procure models of machines in which they excel”), gives its “rules and regulations” concerning the appointment of its members, and then approaches several themes. Among these themes, the booklet gives “An Account of the Manner of Making Cheese in England,” written by the authority in cheese making, Mr Twamley. The Massachusetts Society was obviously very much influenced by English methods.<sup>74</sup>

Charles Phelps’s name did not appear in the original list of members given in this booklet. But his subscription receipt indicates that that he paid in 1802 for “his assessment as a Member of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, for Six years ending April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1801.” Therefore he must have been a very early member of the Society, probably starting in 1795. This is very telling about Charles’s approach to agriculture. In many books on the Porter Phelps family, Charles is always portrayed as the one who most improved the farm. The membership in the Society seemed to symbolize his ambitions. The paternalistic tone found in the booklet reflects the attitude Charles may have had towards the people working on the farm, his wife being the first person on this list. Charles very clearly agreed with “forward-looking agriculturalists like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson” who “hoped they could transplant the

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<sup>72</sup> Mark A Mastromarino, “Cattle Aplenty and Other Things in Proportion; The Agricultural Society and Fair in Franklin County, Massachusetts, 1810-1860,” *UCLA Historical Journal*, Volume 5, 1984, 50.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

European agricultural revolution to the United States and nurture it in the fertile seed-bed of post-Revolutionary America.” Like them, Charles “wished to weed out the unscientific folk customs which characterized the old tradition-bound system of American farming.”<sup>75</sup>

Charles Phelps represented this young class of gentlemen ready to work towards the improvement of their country through the agricultural medium. No inventory of his books was made, so we cannot tell if he owned any agricultural press publications. The Franklin Agricultural Society (from the neighboring Franklin County), which was founded in 1814 opened a borrowing library with essential readings, such as “Mills’ *On Cattle*, Davy’s *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry*, Bordley’s *Animal Husbandry* and the 1799 and 1810 communications of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture.”<sup>76</sup> It would have been interesting to know whether Charles owned any of these books, or even if he was reading the *Hampshire Gazette*. This weekly newspaper was often giving advice to farmers. For instance, the July 7, 1802 issue featured an article on “Further extracts on the Business of the Dairy.” Unfortunately, no evidence was left of Charles’s readings, and the only sources we can rely on are his letters.

Nevertheless, Charles appeared to be very much influenced by the discourse of the agricultural press of the time. As Deborah Valenze pointed out in her study of industrialization in England, “scientific discourses infiltrated the world of dairying,” and this would lead to challenging “the very values and practices upheld by generations of dairying families.” Science would soon replace art; men would take over the realm of women. Clashes appeared between the “informed man of reason and the ignorant

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<sup>74</sup> *Laws and Regulations of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture*, by the Trustees, (Printed at Boston, by Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T Andrews, 1793).

<sup>75</sup> “Cattle Aplenty and Other Things in Proportion,” 50.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

practitioner,” as the literature of the time would put it. In this case Charles would trespass into Elizabeth’s territory. He represented reason and improvement, while his wife remained the keeper of a long tradition which gradually appeared backward to this herd of male agriculturalists.<sup>77</sup>

The section on cheese making in the *Laws and Regulations* booklet of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture provides an interesting example of the scientific rules which were suddenly applied to dairying. If farmers wanted to make good cheese, they had to obey a list of rigorous directions concerning the heat of the milk, the “time allowed for the runnet [sic] to take effect,” and other aspects of cheese making. Josiah Twamley, the author of this set of rules, was well known for his disdain of dairywomen. His tone suggests that he believed his knowledge to be superior to any of them. There was obviously an effort here to dismantle women’s monopoly in the cheese room.<sup>78</sup>

But cheese making was not only an agricultural activity, it was also part of a network of values that emphasized, among other things, purity and cleanliness. The agricultural literature published at the turn of the nineteenth century underlined these special values inherent to dairying. Women and cows were part of the patriotic discourse which started to pervade cheese making in the nineteenth century. William Townsend, author of *The Dairyman’s Manual* (1839), described dairying as an activity “more conducive to moral uprightness” than lumbering and fishing. He continued by stating that

“we think the [dairy] district...is to become the richest in moral worth, in republican virtue -in the treasures which improve society and render man happy of any portion of our country.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *The First Industrial Woman*, 54.

<sup>78</sup> *Laws and Regulations of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture*, 28.

<sup>79</sup> William Townsend’s *The Dairyman’s Manual* as it is mentioned in McMurry’s *Transforming Rural Life*, 13-15.



The Republican virtue seems to fit well with the previous discourse on the purity and cleanliness of dairying. This reflects the efforts of men to take over female activities. Over time, Charles became more dominant and towards the end of his life, the terms of the relations between him and Elizabeth were changing. Charles was more and more dedicated to the improvement of the farm.

Charles Phelps' letters to his wife and to his son reveal much about his ambitions regarding the farm. Charles asked his son to get him seeds from Boston. He believed that he could get better products from the city than from local rural sources. He gave very detailed instructions to his son: "...the seed we want are ½ ounce early Dutch –1/2 lb early York –1/2 ounce Turnip raddish ½ lb Salmon raddish –and one ounce of beets seed & lb worth sweet margerum. & a pint Winsor beans."<sup>80</sup>

Charles also paid much attention to his cattle, and in 1814, the year of his death, he purchased a Merino sheep, which was at the time a precious animal for a farm. He received this letter from Gorham Parsons from Brighton, the man to whom he probably sold his cattle –because we know that Charles was selling his cattle to a man in Brighton:

"By your Grandson Charles I have sent you a Full Blood Merino Ewe Imported from Spain by my Father with a fine healthy Ewe Lamb by her side. (...) [T]hey are I believe in good health and free from any disease, and with your fine feed will improve very much."

Charles paid \$200 for the "Full Blood Merino Ewe" and the ewe lamb "of the pure Guadaloupe [sic] Flock." Here Charles followed the advice of the Society for Promoting Agriculture: he imported a ewe, because it was the best way to improve his stock<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> CP to his son, April 7, 1791 (Box 4, folder 6).

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Gorham Parsons to Charles Phelps, May 5, 1814 (Box 4, Folder 11). *Laws and Regulations* also asked the members of the Agricultural Society to "acknowledge that the science and practice of husbandry in some foreign countries, are far superiour [sic] to our attainments." (iii)

The dairy production was also the object of his ambitions. In her letters Elizabeth hinted at her husband's desire to enlarge the production. She actually did not appear very enthusiastic about her husband's 1803 scheme to get more cows:

“Your father seems to have set his heart very much  
upon a dairy (16 cows this summer) which puts  
everything in a family into confusion –but so it must be...”

Elizabeth may have disagreed with her husband, because she was the one milking the cows and working in the cheese room. She probably asked him to hire a dairy maid to help her, which could explain why, right after Elizabeth left for Litchfield in May 1803, Charles “set out for a Dairy woman[sic].”<sup>82</sup> He was trying to transform her small craft into a wider enterprise and she was obviously reluctant to take such a step at almost sixty. In 1806 she mentioned that they milked 13 cows, which means that Charles's goal in 1803 was not achieved, but still implies a large amount of work for the dairywomen. Charles's happiness was very much derived from the quantity and quality of the production of his farm, as the following excerpt shows:

“We have made a *fine* parcel of Cheese this summer  
and our butter is *excellent* –our farm produces *abundantly*  
–and we enjoy good health.”<sup>83</sup> [my own italics]

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<sup>82</sup> CP to EPP, May 15, 1803 (Box 4, Folder 4).

<sup>83</sup> EPP to her daughter, February 7, 1803 (Box 6, folder 1); March 29, 1806 (Box 6, Folder 2); CPP to his daughter, August 30, 1801 (Box 4, Folder 2).

Elizabeth Porter Phelps's letters to her daughter illustrate the gradual change in the relations between her husband and she. The dairy became a "contested territory," a place where both men and women farmers were trying to defend their own sets of values. Female authority was challenged by the male's appropriation of the cheese room. Cheese making was no longer women's art; it became man's science. Fortunately, Elizabeth died before she could see male agriculturists taking over the cheese room. Actually no man really managed to take over her territory. A century later, Henry Barrett, Elizabeth's great-great-grandson, tried to start a dairy farm at the Phelps farm. He was originally a Professor of English composition and literature, and taught at Harvard, then at Dartmouth and finally at Brown University. He was very fond of his ancestors' farm, and he thought he could commute from Providence to Hadley in order to take care of the dairy farm. But the enterprise was unsuccessful. The cheese room was not to be used again, at least not for its original purpose.

Throughout Elizabeth's life, the cheese room remained her territory, despite Charles's attempt to occupy it. The "separate spheres" always overlapped in this room. The two realms were never that distant from each other. The cheese room was an intermediate working space between the private and the public. And just as he tried hard to find the cheesecloth and the strainer, Charles also did his best to uncover his wife's secrets. But what was hidden behind the cheesecloth was not just cheese, it was Elizabeth's power within the household.