The Nineteenth Century Lancaster Artisan as Businessman; The View from R. G. Dun and Company

By Thomas R. Winpenny, Ph.D.

To mention the 19th century artisan is to call forth a variety of images. From the vantage point of the connoisseur and avid reader of *Antiques* magazine there is a reverence for distinguished artisans and their products—for the care taken to produce hand-made objects in which irregular lines are prized for their irregularity. There is a love of what is perceived to be a dedication to excellence that existed prior to the advent of "machine-made" and all the other dreadful trappings of the 19th century factory system.

From the vantage point of those wedded to the merits of pastoral society or the anti-technologists, the artisan constitutes a key part of an earlier, simpler, and more desirable America—a society in which agrarian and republican values dominated and one in which most simple tools and household objects were produced locally by hand. This pastoral ideal, explored by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden,*[1] is both remarkably resilient and inextricably linked to hand crafting.

From the vantage point of the Marxist, the artisan was once part of a Golden Age in which the hand-crafter controlled his own fate. He was independent as he sold a *product* as opposed to his *labor.* He controlled all phases of production. He enjoyed a reasonably high standard of living and respect in the community. Above all, the artisan shared a common experience and consciousness with other artisans—a sense of solidarity.

These three images are, perhaps, the most common, and those who hold them all dutifully lament the passing of the artisan and his culture. They generally assume that his demise was rapid and that it was produced by the onslaught of the industrial revolution. One of the latest to chime in on this familiar theme

is Susan Hirsch, who studied 19th century Newark, New Jersey. She found that by 1860 prevailing capital requirements drove most artisans out of local manufacturing. It followed that Newark craftsmen suffered a loss of status, declined as a percentage of the labor force, and lost their sense of artisan solidarity or consciousness.[2]

What is lacking in these three romanticized images of the early artisan and the well-worn explanation of his decline is an appreciation of the artisan as small businessman. Because the artisan is rarely viewed in this light, hardly anyone has linked the headaches of small business to the threatened or declining artisan population. A recent exception to this is some of the work edited by Stuart Bruchey in a book entitled *Small Business in American Life* that not only draws attention to small business, but explicitly includes artisans and treats them as struggling businessmen.[3] Historians surely have much to learn from pursuing this line of inquiry, and the well-known R.G. Dun and Company reports, readily available at the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library or at the Baker Library at Harvard, can provide a great deal of insight.

Thesis

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the day-to-day or commonplace problems of running a small business had as much to do with the demise of the 19th century artisan as the much-maligned industrial revolution. To be sure, some of the difficulties could be tied directly or indirectly to the emerging factory system, but it is surprising to note how many are not. The evidence for this contention is derived from studying a community of artisans and paying special attention to observations and analysis provided by R.G. Dun and Company reports, being careful to square this information with data in the U. S. Manufactures (manuscript) Census, articles and ads in local newspapers, local histories, etc.

The Town

The artisans under consideration resided in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a town 60 miles due west of Philadelphia and which had been a leading urban center in the 18th century known widely for its Germanic craftsmen. This birthplace of the famed Pennsylvania Rifle and Conestoga wagon once housed such distinguished artisans as gunsmith William Henry, silversmith Peter Getz, clockmaker John Eberman, Jr., organbuilder David Tannenberg, pewterer Johan Heyne, and cabinetmaker George Burkhart. A strong ethnic craft tradition carried into the 19th century and readily coexisted with an emerging factory system that was highlighted by the construction of substantial textile mills in the late 1840s.[4] The ability of the Lancaster artisan to coexist with industrialization is underscored by the following data on the number of artisans in 22 occupations for the years 1819, 1850 and 1880.

While the data suggest a healthy and growing artisan community, what is masked here is the element of struggle and even failure on the part of some. Put another way, the persistence of hand technology was a product of a healthy

number of *new* entries as opposed to the absence of failure. These failures are worthy of attention, and will constitute the primary focus of the rest of this paper. Credit reports for Lancaster between the years 1849 and 1889 shed considerable light on these failures.

ARTISANS - CITY OF LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA

	1819*	1850**	1880**
Blacksmiths	55	79	140
Bookbinders	5	1	15
Cabinetmakers	27	56	53
Carpenters and Joiners	90	199	274
Chairmakers	7	13	11
Coach and Wagonmakers	32	34	154
Coopers	22	17	33
Coppersmiths	13	25	6
Gunsmiths	19	32	13
Hatters	34	15	9
Piano and Organmakers	1	1	1
Potters	8	16	19
Printers	15	45	135
Saddle and Harnessmakers	48	30	41
Shoemakers	121	193	159
Silver and Gold Work	7	3	14
Tailors	63	93	184
Tanners and Curriers	28	19	59
Tinsmiths	17	29	54
Turners	11	12	7
Watch and Clockmakers	7	14	53
Wheelwrights	3	3	15
	1,449	631	929

*1819 derived from Lancaster County Tax Assessment Lists
**1850 and 1880 derived from U. S. Population Census (MS)

A Word about R.G. Dun & Co. Reports for Lancaster

While the reports on credit-worthiness are easily the single best source of information on the business life of the Lancaster artisan, they are not without problems.[5] Some entries have an impressionistic quality inasmuch as they are the product of guesswork or rumor. For example, someone is rumored to have a wealthy father-in-law who will provide financial backing in a tight situation. It appears, however, that most rumors are labeled rumors; and, in general, where there is uncertainty, tentative language is utilized. Occasionally snide remarks appear in the entries; and, not surprisingly, anti-Semitism is present. It is not unusual to find an entry in which a business that is described as sound in every way is deemed a bad credit risk solely because the owner is a Jew. One further limitation is that not all artisans are included. There are three explanations for this: (1) some may have operated on too small a scale, (2) some may not have conducted business beyond the community of Lancaster, and (3) others were simply overlooked.

Despite these limitations, the R.G. Dun and Company reports were still enormously useful. Their primary purpose was to determine the credit-worthiness of a firm based on past history and current circumstances, and in the case of Lancaster artisans the reports essentially did this. Specifically, the reports provided a foreshadowing of trouble in 28 of the 43 cases (65%) in which artisans went out of business. This ability to alert potential lenders and business associates of impending difficulties in two out of three cases strikes this observer as commendable, particularly considering the fact that some failures were a product of unforeseeable calamities.

Another positive characteristic of these reports is the extent to which the same questions are consistently raised. Thus anyone subscribing to the service might expect to read about an artisan's volume of business, the extent of his inventory, and his estimated worth. Entries also note property owned outright as opposed to property encumbered—in addition to the level of rent being paid, when applicable. Subscribers receive commentary on the subject's business skills, attention to business, and general willingness to pay debts promptly. Finally, there is almost always personal information addressing such matters as marital status, drinking habits, financially supportive parents, and standing in the community. Admittedly, there are some entries that fail to provide all of this information, and that failure stems from either the lack of industry and initiative on the part of the agent or the reluctance of Lancastrians to respond. Initially a subscriber received information by visiting the office where ledger books were kept, or by making requests by mail. Starting in 1859, however, rating or reference books were published twice a year—later four times a year.

The Demise of the Lancaster 43

Who are the local artisans that went out of business and what contributed to their demise?

ARTISANS WHO FAILED IN 19TH CENTURY LANCASTER

Boot and Shoemakers	8	Tinsmiths	3
Carriage & Coach Build.	7	Tanners & Curriers	3
Cabinetmakers	5	Printers	2
Tailors	5	Harnessmakers	1
Hatters	4	Bookbinders	1
Watch & Clockmakers & Jewelers	4		

Source: Compiled from R.G. Dun & Co. records for Lancaster Co., PA in the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Greenville, Delaware.

Reasons for Failure

Some general observations must necessarily precede the reasons for decline cited by R.G. Dun & Co. First, small enterprise has always been associated with high risk and a high rate of failure, and this perception has been reinforced by Clyde and Sally Griffin's study of artisans and shopkeepers in Poughkeepsie, New York in which they found that 32 percent of the enterprises failed in three years or less.[6] Second, the very introduction of credit reporting constituted an added burden for struggling artisans as written reports documenting shortcomings become an additional liability for that business. Third, it is possible for a failing artisan to mask his declining status by taking on more repair work or by subtly shifting to the status of shopkeeper.

Turning to the reasons for failure that appear in the R.G. Dun and Company reports, the one factor that overwhelms all others is limited capital, being cited in 21 of the 43 cases.[7] This finding squares with the Poughkeepsie study in which a positive correlation existed between low capital investment and high mortality.[8] The Lancaster artisan's struggle to obtain adequate investment capital at the outset or to maintain an adequate supply of operating capital was compounded by the ever-subjective decision making that surrounded the flow of capital resources.

Informed observers have long understood that those who control the lending of money in a community are in a position to somewhat arbitrarily decide who stays in business and who fails.[9] Dun and Company reporters recognized this and often alluded to it in their analyses. So it was that a report might indicate that a particular cabinetmaker was operating with very limited capital and substantial debts, and yet as a highly regarded member of the community his creditors were unlikely to press him. In contrast, a debt-ridden tinsmith who had long had a reputation for sharp dealing could expect little or no indulgence from his creditors. Having noted this, it was never entirely clear just how long one's standing in the community could serve as a substitute for paying overdue obligations.

Another cause of failure, in some respects related to the problem just cited, was that of allowing a business to become *overextended.* (This cause was cited in five different cases.) The assumption here is that while an artisan may

have had sufficient capital and customers to support a modest enterprise, too much ambition or optimism could lead to unwarranted expansion, and in turn financial trouble. For example, George Pfeiffer, a German-born shoemaker in Lancaster in the 1870s who had conducted business in a small way for several years, borrowed money to expand and found himself trying to do too large a business on too little capital.[10] A slightly different version of the same problem can be seen in the case of P. J. O'Rourk, a tailor who, in the mid 1850s, had been in business for six years. The credit report on O'Rourk indicated that his carriage trade clientele were leading him down a path to financial ruin.[11] Just precisely how they were doing this is not clear, but conceivably their expectations regarding O'Rourk's inventory of fabrics were unrealistic.

A third major reason for failure noted in the credit reporting, this one appearing in six instances, was that of *dependency* on some other party followed by the loss of support from that party. For example, Andrew McGinnis, who was trained as a practical mechanic, went to work for Lancaster coachbuilder Daniel Altick in the late 1870s, and from that employer-employee relationship a successful partnership evolved. A few years later, however, McGinnis ventured out to establish his own coach works and failed. As the credit reports indicate McGinnis possessed adequate capital for his new venture, it seems quite likely that he lacked the necessary business or managerial skills.[12] In short, McGinnis was more dependent on Altick than he had realized.

Another example of dependency can be seen in the case of H. R. McConomy, who as a young man in the 1870s took over his father's well-established and highly regarded boot and shoe establishment. H. R.'s line of credit was substantial so long as his father, Peter McConomy, stood willing to secure the loans. H. R.'s personal conduct and performance in business, however, soon alienated his father. The credit reports indicate that H. R. was young, unmarried, and owned no real estate. Far worse, he was perceived as lethargic and too fond of alcohol, though reports fail to pinpoint whether the lethargy led to alcohol or the alcohol to lethargy. In any case, H. R. managed to ruin in less that five years what his father had built up over 35 years. When judgments and finally a sheriff's sale closed the business in October, 1875, Peter McConomy came out of retirement to salvage what he could.[13] To note that H. R. was overly dependent on his father is to belabor the obvious.

Bad management is the fourth major reason for failure that emerges from these reports, though surprisingly this is cited in only four of the 43 cases. Parenthetically, this researcher expected it to be more common. One of the more interesting examples in this category is John Carr, who started out in the 1840's as a cabinetmaker and who by 1850 had some ten hands working for him producing bedsteads and wardrobes.[14] During the 1850s Carr expanded his horizons by becoming an oyster dealer as well, and credit reports indicate that by 1855 he was doing a good trade in oysters. It appears that in expanding his business activities John Carr not only became overly encumbered with debt, but that he also attempted to manage more than he was capable of handling effectively. By the spring of 1857 he was deemed very slow to pay, and by the fall of the same year creditors had to sue to collect. John Carr was inclined

to pay only when executions were issued.[15] He continued in business through the fall of 1860, beyond which point he failed and departed for Philadelphia.

Flawed character might be the most appropriate label for the fifth major category explaining failure, with anywhere from six to eleven causes appearing under this heading depending on variations in definition. Clearly belonging in this category are three artisans who were found to be dishonest, two who had recognized drinking problems, and one who engaged in "fast living." In addition, those who were consistently unwilling to pay anyone if they could possibly avoid it, and those who paid only in the face of a law suit were often cited for weak character. In two instances artisans were labeled "irresponsible," but there is some question regarding precisely what the credit reports meant by this.

One of the best examples of the ethically creative artisan is Frank Miley, a harnessmaker working in the 1880s. Under pressure from creditors, Frank Miley ran an advertisement in the local newspaper announcing that he had disposed of his business, and that a certain M. Miley would be taking over and running it. The credit report indicates that what Frank Miley was actually doing was running the business through his wife, who had no assets. This ploy managed to frustrate Miley's creditors for a time while he plotted a permanent removal to Connecticut.[16]

Calamity best describes the reason for the demise of three artisanal enterprises. Joseph Fritchly started a jewelry and watchmaking business in 1873 with limited capital. One evening in February of 1875 he was robbed of items estimated to be worth $2,000. With no insurance and no recovery of the stolen items, Fritchly struggled for a few more years before selling out at auction.[17]

Christian Kieffer was a successful coppersmith in the 1840s who used his profits to acquire part ownership in an extensive foundry and speculate in real estate. He was heavily encumbered with debt when the Panic of 1857 hit, and his problems were compounded by a ruinous fire that struck in the winter of 1857-58. In the wake of this calamity he exhibited some signs of recovery, but in less that two years he was out of business.[18]

The *Panics of 1857 and 1873* that brought about a general decline in business activity are specifically cited in only three instances, yet a careful check of the dates by which particular artisans were in serious financial trouble strongly suggests that anemic levels of business activity may have contributed to failure in as many as 16 of the 43 cases—11 were suspiciously close to the Panic of 1857 and five to the Panic of 1873.[19]

Two final cases that do not readily fit into any category are, nevertheless, worthy of attention. W. H. Amwake, who was trained as a machinist, carried on a business in the early 1870s making clocks, locks, and padlocks. Credit reports indicate that Amwake had good habits and put in long hours; and yet, curiously, financial problems started to plague him. After wrestling with those problems for about five years, he sold out to the Prangly Hardware Company of New York that, in turn, expanded the Lancaster business, renamed it the Amwake Lock Company, and made W. H. Amwake the superintendent of manufacturing.[20] This appears to be a textbook example of a struggling artisan caving into the pressures of the factory system.

Philip Doersom, a German-born carriagemaker who conduced a successful business in the 1870s and 80s, is fascinating because of the extent to which he reversed his well-established approach to business with disastrous results. Between 1873 and 1887 the R.G. Dun and Company reports construct a portrait of a careful and conservative artisan who was thrifty and exhibited nothing but good personal habits. As he prospered he bought a substantial home and later proceeded to purchase his business premises. He was described as "old fashioned," as "prudent," and predictably he enjoyed good credit. His financial ruin stemmed from a growing desire to promote his version of a "fifth wheel." (This fifth wheel was a horizontal metal ring that aided the stability and steering of a carriage.) The concept became a consuming passion that ruined a well-established business and ultimately left Doersom reduced to blacksmithing and boarding at a local hotel.[21]

One final point regarding reasons for failure cited in the R.G. Dun and Company reports is that in some instances there is not a clue as to what went wrong. That is, a series of entries indicating that everything in the artisan's enterprise appears to be fine is occasionally followed by the abrupt notation of "out of business."

What Happened to the Artisans Who Failed?

The most common and predictable course of action taken by an artisan who failed was leaving town. Of the 43 who failed, thirteen left no trace of their whereabouts while it is known that another four headed West and three headed East. In short, 20 of 43 or about half of those who failed left Lancaster and perhaps angry and frustrated creditors. Parenthetically, credit reports took a great interest in property ownership as it was one of the very best guarantees against "midnight flight."[22]

It is far more difficult to say what an artisan who failed turned to for his livelihood. At least four later reentered business in the same craft in Lancaster, and conceivably a reasonable number of those who left town may have tested their artisanal skills in another market. For those who entered some other line of endeavor, however, no generalization is possible.

Artisanal Failure as a Function of Industrial Failure

This paper had demonstrated that while artisans were imperiled in the 19th century, it is an oversimplification to argue that the threat came almost exclusively from the emerging factory system. Still it is necessary to ask to what extent industrialization did contribute to the 43 failures under consideration. Certainly the capital requirements of modern manufacturing taxed existing capital markets and thereby contributed to the hardships of the hand-crafter working with limited means. Yet it is also true that the artisans who had difficulty attracting capital might also want to blame their own lackluster reputation or prospect. A second way in which industrialization intruded can be seen in the case of the New York hardware firm that bought out W. H. Amwake's enterprise in order to expand it and manufacture hardware on a grander scale with Amwake

as superintendent. A third threat—though one not cited in the R.G. Dun reports—is direct competition in the marketplace such that factory-produced furniture at some point became a threat to the less distinguished cabinetmakers. In the aforementioned way the advent of modern production threatened hand technology in 19th century Lancaster. All other reasons for failure cited in the credit reports were essentially unrelated to industrialization.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that while artisans are rarely thought of or studied as small businessmen,[23] there is a good deal to be learned from such an approach, particularly when utilizing resources as laden with insights as the R.G. Dun and Company reports. The single most important insight in this case is that a wide variety of problems common to small businessmen were at least as great a threat to artisanal persistence as the modern factory system.

Endnotes

1 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.) See also, John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine* (New York: Penguin, 1977.)

2 Susan E. Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978.) In addition to Hirsch, both Sean Wilenz and Stuart Blumin also see the demise of the artisan taking place prior to the Civil War. See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984,) and Stuart Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia" in Stephen Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, *Nineteenth Century Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.) Recent works by Steven Ross and Francis Couvares, however, place the demise of the artisan much later in the 19th century. See Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985,) and Francis Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh* (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1984.)

3 Stuart W. Bruchey, editor, *Small Business in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.) Two articles that make the same point are by Barbara Ward, "Boston Goldsmiths, 1690-1730" and by Susan H. Myers, "The Business of Potting, 1780-1840," both appearing in Ian Quimby, editor, *The Craftsman in Early America* (New York: Norton, 1984.)

4 For the story of industrialization in Lancaster see Thomas R. Winpenny, *Industrial Progress and Human Welfare,* The Rise of the Factory System in 19th Century Lancaster (Washington: University Press of America, 1982).

5 For a detailed analysis of R. G. Dun and Co. or 19th century credit reporting in general see James D. Norris, *R. G. Dun & Co., 1841-1900* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), James Madison, "The Evolution of Credit Reporting Agencies in 19th Century America," *Business History Review*, Summer, 1974, and Andrew Beveridge, "Social Effects of Credit" in *Working Papers From R.E.H.R.C.,* Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1977, Eds. Glenn Porter and William Mulligan.

6 Cyde and Sally Griffin, "Small Business and Occupational Mobility in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie" in Stuart Bruchey, *Small Business in American Life,* p. 126.

7 Compiled from R. G. Dun and Company credit reports for 19th century Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Greenville, Delaware (microfilm copy).

8 Griffin, "Small Business . . . in . . . Poughkeepsie," p. 127.

9 Andrew Beveridge's study, cited above, examines this issue in some detail while Howard Rock's study of artisans in early 19th century New York City notes that artisans and bankers were often at odds politically, and that bankers preferred to lend to merchants. See Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of The New Republic*, (New York: NYU Press, 1979), p. 165.

10 R. G. Dun, Lancaster Co., PA.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, Another distinct possibility was that the local market was already saturated with coachbuilders.

13 *Ibid.*

14 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census, 1850, Manufactures,* manuscript (microfilm copy) in the Eleutherian Mills Library.

15 R.G. Dun, Lancaster Co., PA.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.* One reason why the Panics were not cited is that Dun and Company had already made allowances for the 1873 Panic by devaluing "Pecuniary Strength Ratings" in 1876. See Beveridge, "Social Effects of Credit."

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, and *Lancaster City Directory, 1890.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 John McCusker's review of Silvio Bedini's *Life and Times of Anthony Lamb* in *Technology and Culture* makes the point that Anthony Lamb is presented almost exclusively as a heroic innovator and maker of navigational instruments. Yet, this 18th century instrument maker also made scales, gauging devices, and hydrometers for merchants; ruler, pens, and engraved forms for office clerks; and levels, chains, protractors, dividers, calipers and compasses for surveyors and builders. The more mundane devices brought no glory to Lamb but they surely had a lot to do with maintaining a viable shop—and putting food on the table.

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