

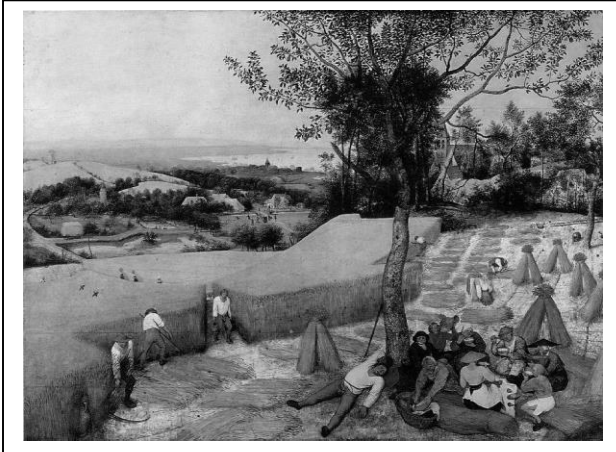


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## Framingham's First Industry: Straw Bonnets



### Who invented straw hats, and when?

Agricultural workers of both genders on several continents wore straw hats for protection from the sun for centuries before straw hats became high fashion in Europe. Exactly where and when straw hats were first made is not known.

*Illustration: "The Harvesters," by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1565. The men harvesting, on the left, and several of those seated under the tree are wearing straw hats.*

### How and when did straw hats become fashionable?

Interest in country life and country fashion grew out of the fantasy of returning to the "natural" life, inspired by a book written by Swiss-French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (The Social Contract, 1762). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century straw hats – more carefully shaped and elaborately decorated than those worn on farms - were in great demand in Italy, France and England.

*Illustration: "Marie Antoinette en chemise," by Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun, 1783.*

*The Queen of France and her attendants spent time at her "cottage" at Versailles ("Le Hameau"), where they could enjoy "the simple life," wearing their straw bonnets.*



### How and when did straw hats come to Framingham?

"Dunstable bonnets" imported from Dunstable, England, arrived in New England in large numbers in the 1790s. Beginning about 1798, straw hats were produced commercially in several towns in southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Framingham was one of the first, and one of the most prolific, producers of straw goods.

### Who made the first straw bonnets in Framingham?

Framingham's Betsey Bennett, aged 16, and her mother made the first straw bonnets in 1800. Their neighbor, Mary Eames Rice, and her daughters soon learned the skill, and sold \$340-worth the first year.

### **What materials and equipment were needed?**

Straw braid was made from winter rye - already a local crop. The only tools needed were a splitter – a simple piece of wood with iron teeth and a tin or brass strip closing over it, and a flattener – with rollers for flattening straw before or after braiding. A braider's household could provide a barrel of soapy water, for soaking the straw, and a pan of live coals sprinkled with sulphur, to bleach the straw.

### **How was straw braid produced and turned into bonnets?**

Women and children sorted, soaked, split, bleached and flattened the straw, and braided it in any of several patterns.

The braid was then stitched into a continuous coil, and the damp coil shaped on a pressing block or "blockhead" into a bonnet or hat.

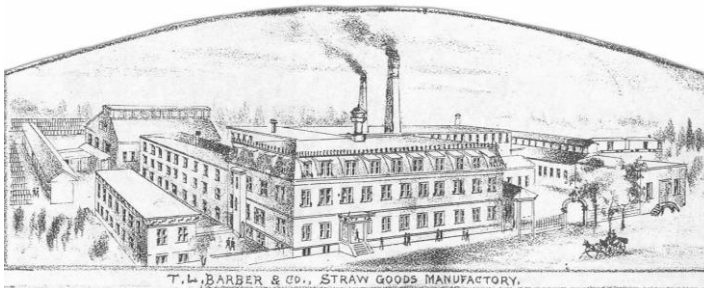
*Illustration: straw bonnet, c. 1810*



### **How did the straw bonnet industry change over time?**

By the 1850s straw bonnet production was the major manufacturing business of Framingham. Women, and children, continued to prepare and braid straw at home, but most bonnets were assembled, pressed into shape ("blocked") on wood or plaster blocks, and decorated in factories.

By the 1880s the market had been saturated, and Framingham hats were giving way to imported "Leghorn" bonnets from Livorno, Italy. By about 1910 the factories were gone, although a few individuals kept the old art alive into the 1940s.



### **Where were the factories located?**

The straw bonnet factories were clustered in the Clark's Corner neighborhood (later known as South Framingham), near the railroad tracks. From here completed bonnets were shipped to Boston and all over New England, to New York and even to the South.

*Illustration: T.L. Barber & Co. Straw Goods Manufactory, Park Street, after 1864*

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### **Advantages of the straw industry:**

- Beginning a bonnet-making business required little capital investment, and bonnet-making materials could be obtained locally.
- Braiding straw and assembling bonnets were skills easily learned.

### **Disadvantages of the straw industry:**

- Braiding straw often replaced traditional home industries such as spinning, weaving and knitting. In many families, these skills were lost.

- Braiding straw required hours of sedentary manual work, contributing to numerous health problems.
- Educational opportunities were lost when children were kept out of school to make bonnets.