
Fourth Edition

THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

An American History
WITH DOCUMENTS

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spread of French influence down the Mississippi, the Spanish moved east into what is now Texas. In 1718, a second Spanish capital was established in San Antonio, but the new city was in many ways more connected with French lands and populations in Louisiana than it was with Spain.

◆ CONCLUSION: The Diversity of American Women

As diverse as the lives of North American women were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were some commonalities. All women operated within a fairly rigid sexual division of labor, although the actual tasks assigned to them varied from culture to culture. Most women's roles included childbearing, childrearing, and food preparation. Within their communities, women tended to form strong bonds with other women in similar circumstances—whether grinding corn in the Pueblo communities, planting it in Iroquoia, bartering in female networks in New England, or forming supportive communities of slave women in the southern British colonies. With some exceptions, women shared an exclusion from direct political participation. They also shared the burdens—which varied widely—of adjusting to the new societies created by both contact and conflict in North America.

Despite these commonalities, the differences among women of this period were striking. Not only were there significant variations among Native American, African, and European women, there were also differences within each group. Native American women encompassed perhaps the richest cultural variety. But Africans as well represented various languages and cultural groups. Among European women, too, distinctions emerged. Between first- and second-generation settlers, there were major differences in quality of life, especially in the southern colonies. Beyond that, ethnic, religious, and regional differences proved powerful determinants of women's legal and economic circumstances. And by the mid-eighteenth century, class—both in growing cities and in the plantation regions of the South—had become as important as any other factor that shaped women's experiences.

Earlier generations of historians tended to see the colonial period as a monolithic one in which women's lives were static. Reading back from nineteenth-century middle-class gender roles, which relegated women firmly to the private world of the home, the white colonial women's participation in a preindustrial household economy can be seen as empowering. A similar tendency to romanticize the hard life of Native American women contrasted their freedom and influence with the patriarchal structure within which European women lived. Although comparisons are perhaps inevitable, they can obscure the complexities of women's lives—both the diversity that characterized them and the points of common ground they shared. Such comparisons also deflect attention from the historical changes that shaped these women's lives: the conquest of Native Americans, the importation and enslavement of Africans, the massive migration of Europeans, and the economic and political maturation of the British colonies.

PRIMARY SOURCES

By and About Colonial Women

LITTLE MATERIAL WRITTEN BY AMERICAN WOMEN in the seventeenth century is available to historians. Even in New England, where literacy was prized and most women were taught to read, relatively few women could write, as historians who have examined the signatures on deeds and other legal documents have discovered. In seventeenth-century New England, women produced only two of the fifty-seven surviving diaries from that period. More records exist from the mid-eighteenth century, when educational opportunities for women expanded slightly. But for most of the period from 1600 to 1750, men wrote much of the material we rely on to learn about women's experiences. Even our knowledge of a famous and knowledgeable woman such as Anne Hutchinson comes from accounts written by men, such as ministers like John Cotton and John Winthrop. Yet historians have managed to mine the historical record imaginatively to capture the voices of at least some women of the era.

LETTERS

LETTERS, THOUGH RELATIVELY RARE, are a major source for exploring early colonial women's experiences. The following examples offer insight into very diverse southern women's lives, those of the prosperous Eliza Lucas Pinckney and a desperate indentured servant, Elizabeth Sprigs.

Eliza Lucas Pinckney (1722–1793), a South Carolinian woman, left numerous records detailing her life among her colony's elite. Daughter of a wealthy planter and invalid mother, Eliza Lucas ran the large household, supervised her father's estates in his lengthy absences, experimented with new crops, and was instrumental in introducing indigo to the region. She made good use of her father's legal library and not only represented her family in court but neighbors as well. Lucas married a much older man, the recently widowed Charles Pinckney, and became a devoted wife and energetic mother. At her husband's death, she again employed her business skills to run the complex estate of her family. Pinckney's letters and diaries reflect on the privileged life of an elite woman in the mid-eighteenth-century South, with slaves and servants at her disposal. As you read these letters, consider the factors in early South Carolinian life that shaped her opportunities and limits.

In the following passage from a letter to a Miss Bartlett, Pinckney is unusual in her concern for teaching her slaves to read, but typical of wealthy plantation women in how she spends her time.

ELIZA LUCAS PINCKNEY
To Miss Bartlett

In general then I rise at five o'Clock in the morning, read till Seven, then take a walk in the garden or field, see that the Servants are at their respective business, then to breakfast. The first hour after breakfast is spent at my musick, the next is constantly employed in recolecting something I have learned least for want of practise it should be quite lost, such as French and short hand. After that I devote the rest of the time till I dress for dinner to our little Polly and two black girls who I teach to read, and if I have my paps's approbation (my Mams I have got) I intend [them] for school mistresses for the rest of the Negroe children — another scheme you see. But to proceed, the first hour after

SOURCE: *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney 1739–1762*, ed. Elise Pinckney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 34, 35, 38.

OTHER LETTERS FROM PINCKNEY show the energetic businesswoman at work. In the following excerpt from a 1740 letter to a friend, she explains her plans for one of her father's plantations, which she clearly considers her property.

Wont you laugh at me if I tell you I am so busey in providing for Posterity I hardly allow my self time to Eat or sleep and can but just snatch a minnet to write to you and a friend or two now. I am making a large plantation of Oaks which I look upon as my own property, whether my father gives me the land or not; and therefore I design many years hence when oaks are more valueable than they are now — which you know they will be when we come to build fleets. I intend, I say, 2 thirds of the produce of my oaks for a charity (I'll let you know

dinner as the first after breakfast at musick, the rest of the afternoon in Needle work till candle light, and from that time to bed time read or write. 'Tis the fashion here to carry our work abroad with us so that having company, without they are great strangers, is no interruption to that affair; but I have particular matters for particular days, which is an interruption to mine. Mondays my musick Master is here. Tuesdays my friend Mrs. Chardon (about 3 mile distant) and I are constantly engaged to each other, she at our house one Tuesday — I at hers the next and this is one of the happiest days I spend at Woppoe. Thursday the whole day except what the necessary affairs of the family take up is spent in writing, either on the business of the plantations, or letters to my friends. Every other Fryday, if no company, we go a vizeting so that I go abroad once a week and no oftener.

my scheme another time) and other 3rd for those that shall have the trouble of putting my design in Execution. I sopose according to custom you will show this to your Uncle and Aunt. "She is [a] good girl," says Mrs. Pinckney. "She is never Idle and always means well." "Tell the little Visionary," says your uncle, "come to town and partake of some of the amusements suitable to her time of life." Pray tell him I think these so, and what he may not think whims and projects may turn out well by and by. Out of many surely one may hitt.

IN STARK CONTRAST to the lives of elite southern women like Pinckney were the lives of their servants. Details about the thousands of European women who came to the colonies as indentured servants in the seventeenth century are largely lost to historians because such women left few written records.

The following is a rare document, a letter written by a distressed servant in Maryland to her father. We cannot know what she had done to so displease her parent, but what does her letter indicate about the hardships facing indentured servants in America?

ELIZABETH SPRIGS
To Mr. John Sprigs White Smith
in White Cross Street near Cripple Gate London

Maryland Sept'r 22'd 1756.

Honred Father

My being for ever banished from your sight, will I hope pardon the Boldness I now take of troubling you with these, my long silence has been purely owing to my undutifullness to you, and well knowing I had offended in the highest Degree, put a tie to my tongue and pen, for fear I should be extinct from your good Graces and add a further Trouble to you, but too well knowing your care and tenderness for me so long as I retaind my Duty to you, induced me once again to endeavour if possible, to kindle up that flame again. O Dear Father, belive what I am going to relate the words of truth and sincerity, and Ballance my former bad Conduct [to] my sufferings here, and then I am sure you'll pittty your Destress[ed] Daughter, What

SOURCE: Nancy Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), 89–90. Original Source: Isabel Calder, ed., *Colonial Captivities, Marches, and Journeys* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 151–52.

we unfortunat English People suffer here is beyond the probibility of you in England to Conceive, let it suffice that I one of the unhappy Number, am toiling almost Day and Night, and very often in the Horses druggery, with only this comfort that you Bitch you do not halfe enough, and then tied up and whipp'd to that Degree that you'd not serve an Annimal, scarce any thing but Indian Corn and Salt to eat and that even begrudged nay many Negroes are better used, almost naked no shoes nor stockings to wear, and the comfort after slaving dureing Masters pleasure, what rest we can get is to rap ourselves up in a Blanket and ly upon the Ground, this is the deplorable Condition your poor Betty endures, and now I beg you have any Bowels of Compassion left show it by sending me some Relief, C[on]fessing is the principal thing wanting, which if you should condescend to, may easely send them to me by any of the ships bound to Baltimore Town Patapsco River Maryland, and give me leave to conclude in Duty to you and Uncles and Aunts, and Respect to all Friends

Honred Father
Your undutifull and Disobedient Child

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENTS

ANOTHER SOURCE THAT ALLOWS US to recapture women's voices are newspaper ads appearing in colonial publications. While men predominate among those offering services and goods for sale, as the eighteenth century wore on, women's names appeared with greater frequency. What does this ad suggest about the expansion of women's economic roles in urban colonial America?

*South Carolina Gazette,
Charleston, October 22, 1744*

This is to give Notice, to all Persons inclinable to put their Children to board, under the Care of the Subscriber [illegible], that she has noow Vacancies; where there is taught, as usual, Writing, and all

sorts of fine Needle work. Masters likewise attend to teach Writing, Arithmetick, Dancing, and Musick, if required. Mary Hext.

OTHER ADVERTISEMENTS OFFERED SLAVES for sale or slaves or servants for hire. What clues do the following ads give about these women's experiences?

*South Carolina Gazette,
Charleston, December 23, 1745*

To be hired out a home born Negro girl about thirteen or fourteen years of age who has been for some years past kept employed at her needle and is a handy waiting maid. Enquire at the Printer [illegible].

*Boston Gazette,
April 28, 1755*

A likely Negro woman, about 25 years of age, has had the smallpox, and been in the country ten or twelve years, understands all household work, and will do either for town or country.

Boston Gazette, June 20, 1735

A white Servant Maids Time to be disposed of for about four years and a half; she is a Scotch woman that can do all sorts of Household Business and

Knit, and thoroughly honest. Enquire of The Publisher.

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

ALTHOUGH IN ENGLISH AND BRITISH COLONIAL LAW, married women as *femes covert* had no legal identity, women appear frequently in legal documents. Unmarried women and widows could act for themselves, and even some married women successfully petitioned the courts for *feme sole* rights in order to conduct a business—usually in the absence of their husbands. They sued and were sued, sold and bought property. Women appeared as beneficiaries or as servants and slaves in men's wills. Women were also brought to court as defendants, on trial for sexual offenses, slander, theft, infanticide, and witchcraft. With one exception, the will of Elizabeth Howland, the documents offered here are from courts in the Chesapeake region, but they have many similarities to those from other British colonies.

SLANDER AND THE COURTS

Slander cases were common throughout the colonies, revealing the way in which individuals in small communities placed great store on their reputations; when their neighbors engaged in gossip accusing them of inappropriate behavior, many victims turned to the court for satisfaction. In analyzing defamation cases from seventeenth-century Maryland, historian Mary Beth Norton has discovered that while women participated in only 19 percent of the colonies' civil cases, they appeared in over 50 percent of the slander cases.²⁸ Cases that men brought against their defamers tended to concern questions of business and honesty, while those by women focused on sexual irregularities, although witchcraft was another common accusation. While some women came to court to protect their reputations, others were summoned for having spread rumors.

The following case featuring Michael Baisey's wife revolves around issues of sexuality and paternity. What does women's gossiping indicate about their role in the community? What does this suggest about privacy in colonial towns?

Michael Baisey's Wife (1654)

Richard Manship Sworne Saith that the wife of Peter Godson related . . . that Michael Baiseys wives Eldest Son was not the Son of Anthony Rawlins her former husband, but She knew one at Maryland that was the father of him, but Named not the man, and that the Said Michael Baisey's wife was a whore and a Strumpett up and Down

the Countrey, and Said that Thomas Ward of Kent tould her Soe.

Elizabeth Manship Sworne Saith the Same.

Margaret Herring Sworne Saith that the wife of Peter Godson affirmed that Anthony Rawlins Son was not his Son but the Son of another man at Maryland. . . .

Whereas Peter Godsons wife hath Slandered the wife of Michael Baisey & Saying She was a whore & a Strumpet up and Down the Countrey, It is ordered that the Said Godson's wife Shall be Committed into the Sheriffs hand untill She Shall

SOURCE: *Archives of Maryland Judicial and Testamentary Business of the Provincial Court, 1649/50-1675*, ed. William Hand Browne (Baltimore, 1887), 10:399.

WOMEN "JURORS"

Other court cases reveal the ways in which women could expand their limited public power. When women were accused of witchcraft, the court might ask a group of women, which usually included a midwife, to examine the defendant's body for telltale signs of witchcraft. They might also be called to duty in cases in which it was crucial to determine whether a woman had given birth.

In the following complex murder accusation, the court officially termed the group of women a "jury." What does the case suggest about women's access to authority in their communities?

Judith Catchpole (1656)

At a Generall Provinciaall Court Held at
Putuxent September 22th
Present Capt William ffuller, mr John Pott Present
m^r Richard Preston: m^r Michael Brooke
m^r Edward Lloyd

Whereas Judith Catchpole being brought before the Court upon Suspicion of Murdering a Child which She is accused to have brought forth, and denying the fact or that She ever had Child the Court hath ordered that a jury of able women be Impannelled and to give in their Verdict to the best of their judgment whether She the Said Judith hath ever had a Child
Or not . . .

The Names of the Jury of women Impannelled to Search the body of Judith Catchpole . . .

find Security for the behaviour which the plft [plaintiff] is Satisfied with as he hath declared in Court. . .

Whereas Mrs Godson was bound in a bond of Good behaviour from the 21st of October till the 5th of December towards the wife of Michael Baisey, and none appearing to renew the Said Bond, It is ordered that she be remitted from her Bond of Good behaviour.

Rose Smith mrs Cannady
mrs Belcher mrs Bussey
mrs Chaplin mrs Brooke
mrs Brooke Elizabeth Claxton
mrs Battin Elizabeth Potter
Dorothy Day

We the Jury of Women before named having according to our Charge and oath Searched the body of Judith Catchpole doe give in our Verdict that according to our best judgment that the Said Judith Catchpole hath not had any Child within the time Charged.

Whereas Judith Catchpole Servant to William Dorrington of this Province of Maryland Was apprehended and brought before this Court upon Suspicion of Murthering a Child in her Voyage at Sea bound for this Province in the Ship Mary and ffrancis who Set forth of England upon her intended Voyage in or about october Last

1655 and arrived in this Province in or about January following, and her accuser being deceased and no murther appearing upon her Examination denying the fact; was Ordered that her body Should be Searcht by a Jury of able

SOURCE: *Archives of Maryland Judicial and Testamentary Business of the Provincial Court, 1649/50-1675*, ed. William Hand Browne (Baltimore, 1887), 10:456-58.

women, which being done the Said Jury return- ing their Verdict to this Court that they found that the Said Judith had not had any Child within the time Chargd And also it appearing to this Court by Severall Testimonies that the party accusing was not in Sound Mind, whereby it is Conceived the Said Judith Catchpole is not Inditable, The Court doth therefore order that upon the reasons aforesaid, that She the Said Judith Catchpole be acquitted of that Charge unless further Evidence appeare.

WIVES AND WIDOWS: PROPERTY SETTLEMENTS AND WILLS

Court records are a vital source of information about property holding. Through wills and property settlement documents, we can determine the range of goods that people owned and make distinctions between rich and poor; we can discover patterns of slave ownership and servant holding; and we can acquire some infor- mation about women's economic circumstances.

The following is a prenuptial settlement by Ralph Wormley, a wealthy man, on a widow, Mrs. Agatha Stubbings, whose first husband had been a successful mer- chant. How does it shed light on the economic advantages widows in early Virginia might have experienced? What clues does the reference to black "servants" give us about African Americans' circumstances in early Virginia?

Mrs. Agatha Stubbings (1645)

To All to whom these presents shall come I Ralph Warmley [sic] of the Parrish and County of Yorke in Virginia gentleman send Greeting etc. Knowe Yee, That I the sayde Ralph Wormley For and in consideration of the unfayned love and affection That I beare unto Mrs. Agatha Stubbings late the wife of Luke Stubbings of the County of Northampton gentleman deceased, And especially in Consideration of Matrimony intended presently (by gods grace) to bee solemnized betweene the sayde Ralph and the sayde Agatha doe by these presents give graunt confirme and endow, And by these presents have given graunted and in nature of a Free Joynture endowed unto Nathaniell Littleton Esquire and Phillip Taylor gentlemen . . . in trust

For and on the behalfe of the sayde Agatha six Negro servants . . . Fower Negro men, and Two women, To say Sanio, and Susan his wife, and greate Tony, and his wife Dorothis, Tony the younger, and Will, Tenn Cowes, six Draught Oxen, two young Mares, two Feather Bedds and Furniture, sixe paire of sheetes of Holland, two Dyaper table cloathes, two dozen of Napkins and Cubboard Cloath to it, two dozen of Napkins, Twelve pewter dishes, one dammaske table cloath, one Dozen of Napkins and cubboard Cloath to it, To have and to hold, the said Recited promisses and every parte thereof, unto her the sayde Agatha, and the heyres [heirs] Lawfully ingendered between mee the said Ralph Wormley and shee the sayde Agatha whether Male or Female

or both to bee equally devided after his decease Provided alwayes that the same and every parte thereof graunted as aforesaid shalbe and Remyne to the only use benefitt and behoofe of mee the said Ralph Wormley during my naturall Life, And in case I the said Ralph shall happen to depart this lyfe without issue begotten betweene mee the said Ralph and shee the said Agatha as aforesayde, Then the said demised promisses and every parte thereof with the proceeds and increase thereof shalbe and Remyne to the only use benefitt and behoofe of the sayde Agatha her heyres Executors or Administrators And For the true and reall performance of this deede and every parte and parcel thereof in

SOURCE: Susie M. Ames, ed., *County Court Records of Accomack-Northampton, Virginia 1640-1645* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), 433-34.

manner and Forme aforesaid I the said Ralph Wormley doe bynde over unto the said Nathaniell Littleton Esquire and Phillip Taylor gentlemen the said Six Negroes and Six other Negroes, the sayde Tenn Cowes and other tenn Cowes, the sixe Oxen and other sixe Oxen, one plantation and houses whereon I now live scituate at Yorke aforesaid Conteyning Five hundred Acres more or lesse according to the purchase lately made by mee of Jefery Power to bee all Lyable and Responsable For the full Assurance of makeing good the abovesaid Joynture for the use of the said Agatha her heyres Executors or Administrators as aforesaid In Witnes whereof I the sayde Ralph Wormley have hereunto sett my hand and Scale the second day of this instant July Annoque Domini 1645.

Ralph Wormeley
The Seale

LIKE AGATHA STUBBINGS, Elizabeth (Tilley) Howland of Plymouth, Massachusetts, was also a widow. She died in the home of her daughter Lydia in December 1687. The 1672 will of her late husband, John Howland, left plots of land to his three sons, and to Elizabeth, "the use and benefitt of my now Dwelling house in Rockey nooke in the Township of Plymouth aforesaid, with the outhousing lands, . . . During her naturall life to Injoy make use of and Improve for her benefitt and Comfort."²⁹ He also made Elizabeth the executor of his estate. His six daughters received 20 shillings each. Elizabeth's 1686 will, reproduced here, offers many insights into her life, both spiritual and economic.

What kinds of goods does Howland leave to her descendants? What do they suggest about her class status? Is it significant that the only money she specifies is given to her eldest son? And that the only property she lists goes to the son of her eldest son? She itemizes a number of books in this document, yet she signs with her "mark," not a signature. What does this suggest about her education? Whom does she choose as her executors and why? Finally, why does Howland dedicate so much space to religious concerns in this will?

Elizabeth (Tilley) Howland (1686)

In ye Name of God Amen I Elizabeth Howland of Swanzey in ye County of Bristoll in ye Collony of Plymouth in New Englnd being Seventy nine

yeares of Age but of good & perfect memory thanks be to Almighty God & calling to Remembrance ye uncertain Estate of this transitory

Life & that all fflesh must Yeild unto Death when it shall please God to call Doe make constitute & ordaine & Declare This my last Will & Testament, in manner & forme following Revoking and Anulling by these prsents all & every Testamt & Testamts Will & Wills heretofore by me made & declared either by Word or Writing And this to be taken only for my last Will & Testament & none other. And first being penitent & sorry from ye bottom of my heart for all my sinns past most humbly desiring forgivenessse for ye same I give & Committ my soule unto Almighty God my Savior & redeemer in whome & by ye meritts of Jesus Christ I trust & believe assuredly to be saved & to have full remission & forgivenessse of all my sins & that my Soule wt my Body at the generall Day of Resurrection shall rise againe wt Joy & through ye meritts of Christs Death & passion possesse & inheritt ye Kingdome of heaven prepared for his Elect & Chosen & my Body to be buried in such place where it shall please my Executrs hereafter named to appoint And now for ye settling my temporall Estate & such goodes Chattells & Debts as it hath pleased God far above my Deserts to bestow upon me I Do Dispose order & give ye same in manner & forme following (That is to say) First that after my funerall Expences & Debts paid wc I owe either of right or in Conscience to any manner of person or persons whatsoever in Convenient tyme after my Decease by my Execrs hereafter named I Give & bequeath unto my Eldest Son John Howland ye sum of five pounds to be paid out of my Estate & my Booke called Mr Tindale's Workes & also one pair of sheetes & one pr of pillowbeeres & one pr of Bedblanketts, Item I give unto my son Joseph Howland my Stillyards^o & also one pr of sheetes & one pr of pillobeeres Item I give unto my son Jabez Howland my ffetherbed & bolster yt is in his Custody & also one Rugg & two Blanketts yt belongeth to ye said Bed & also my great Iron pott & potthookes Item

^o Probably a weighing device.

I give unto my son Isaack Howland my Booke called Willson on ye Romanes & one pr of sheetes & one paire of pillowbeeres & also my great Brasse Kettle already in his possession Item I give unto my Son in Law Mr James Browne my great Bible Item I give & bequeath unto my Daughter Lidia Browne my best ffetherbed & Boulster two pillowes & three Blanketts & a green Rugg & my small Cupboard one pr of AndyIrons & my lesser brasse Kettle & my small Bible & my booke of mr Robinsons Workes called Observations Divine & Morrall & also my finest pr of Sheetes & my holland pillowbeeres, Item I give unto my Daughter Elisabeth Dickenson one pr of Sheetes & one pr of pillowbeeres & one Chest Item I give unto my Daughter Hannah Bosworth one pr of sheets & one pr of pillowbeeres, Item I give unto my Grand Daughter Elizabeth Bursley one paire of sheets and one paire of Pillowbeeres Item I give & bequeath unto my Grandson Nathaniel Howland (the son of Joseph Howland) and to the heires of his owne Body lawfully begotten for ever all that my Lott of Land with ye Meadow thereunto adjoyning & belonging lying in the Township of Duxbury neare Jones River bridge, Item I give unto my Grandson James Browne One Iron barr and on Iron Trammell now in his possession, Item I give unto my Grandson Jabez Browne one Chest Item I give unto my Grand Daughter Dorothy Browne my best Chest & my Warming pan Item I give unto my Grand Daughter Desire Cushman four Sheep, Item I give & bequeath my wearing clothes linnen and Woollen and all the rest of my Estate in mony Debts linnen or of what kind or nature or sort soever it may be unto my three Daughters Elisabeth Dickenson, Lidia Browne and Hannah Bosworth to be equally Devided amongst them, Item I make constitute and ordaine my loving Son in Law James Browne and my loving son Jabez Howland Executors of this my last Will and Testament, Item it is my Will & Charge to all my Children that they walke in ye Feare of ye Lord, and in Love and peace towards each other and endeavour the true performance of this my last

Will & Testament In Witnesse whereof I the said
Elizabeth Howland have hereunto sett my hand

& seale this seventeenth Day of December Anno
Dm one thousand six hundred Eighty & six.

The mark of Elisabeth E H Howland

Signed Sealed & Delivd

in ye prsence of us Wittnesses

Hugh Cole

Samuel Vyall

John Browne

SOURCE: The Plymouth Colony Archive at the University of Virginia, <http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/plymouth/howlandwill.html> (accessed February 5, 2015).

LAWS ON WOMEN AND SLAVERY

ALTHOUGH SLAVE WOMEN OF THIS PERIOD left behind no written documents, references to them do appear in newspapers and in their owners' letters and diaries (see pp. 77–79). As the prenuptial settlement of Agatha Stubbings suggests, property inventories are another clue that historians use to determine something of slave women's environment. More impersonal, but vital to understanding slaves' experiences, are the laws that, taken together, created the system of perpetual slavery.

In the southern colonies, the laws that created boundaries between slave and free and black and white were added in a piecemeal fashion. One of the first legal distinctions between blacks and whites concerned the labor of women. Instead of taxing land, Virginia taxed planters according to the numbers of the laborers who worked in their tobacco fields.

In this first sentence of a 1643 statute designed to support the colony's ministers, the assembly refers specifically to taxing ("tithing") the labor of "negro women." Although white women worked in the tobacco fields, they are not mentioned here. What does the presence of black women and the absence of white women in this law suggest about the distinctions being made between the two?

Laws of Virginia (1643)

Be it further enacted and confirmed That there be
tenn pounds of tob^o. per poll & a bushell of corne

per poll paid to the ministers within the severall
parishes of the collony for all tithable persons, that
is to say, as well for all youths of sixteen years of
age as upwards, as also for all negro women at the
age of sixteen years.

SOURCE: William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large, Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), I:242.

AN EVEN MORE DRAMATIC INDICATION of the hardening of lines between black and white is the short 1662 law that assigned the child of a black woman and a white man to the status of the mother. The statute also assigned penalties for

interracial sex. The use of the term "christian" was common, to distinguish English people from Africans, who were considered heathens. What are the implications of this act for the institutionalization of slavery?

Laws of Virginia (1662)

WHEREAS some doubts have arrisen whether
children got by any Englishman upon a negro
woman should be slave or free, Be it therefore

enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother. And that if any christian shall committ fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.

SOURCE: William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large, Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), I:242, II:170.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What evidence do these documents offer about the diversity of women's experiences in colonial America? What are some of the hardships or challenges that women encountered? In what ways did women of this period seek control over their lives?
2. What do these documents suggest about societal expectations for white elite women's roles? About the roles of servants and slave women?
3. How do legal documents allow us to understand the experiences of women who left no personal writings behind? What insights can descriptions of property give about the social circumstances of colonial women? How does the court case concerning slander portray women and expectations about their behavior?

PRIMARY SOURCES

Depictions of "Family"
in Colonial America

IN THE VARIED CULTURES OF seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North America "family" meant different things — different groupings of people, different relations of affection, different hierarchies, and different implications for the larger society. One of the only characteristics that all these different meanings of "family" had in common was male dominance. Visual sources can convey relationships of power within the family in ways that written sources cannot.

The period explored in this chapter predates the sentimental ideal of the nuclear family that characterized nineteenth-century middle-class American society (see pp. 156–63). Nonetheless, family relations were, if anything, more crucial to daily life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, because family was a system not only of emotions and kinship but of economics and production. While some of the family bonds illustrated here may seem unusual to modern Americans, they were nonetheless deeply felt and fundamental to the people who lived them.

Although family paintings were a luxury of the wealthy, American painters were struggling artisans more than they were purveyors of high culture. In these earlier years, we do not even know the names of the artists; scholars identify them by the families who patronized them rather than by their own reputations. Traveling from place to place and looking for commissions, American painters, unlike their British counterparts, were usually not formally trained.

One of the earliest family group paintings from colonial British America was the 1674 portrait of Elizabeth Clarke Freake (b. 1641) and child shown in Figure 2.1. By 1674, Freake had already borne six children, and although tradition identifies this baby as a girl, in fact infant boys and girls were dressed exactly alike, so it is difficult to distinguish them. This portrait is part of a series that includes a separate painting of the husband and father, Boston merchant John Freake. Painted as standing and facing toward his left, John Freake's portrait was probably meant to hang alongside that of his wife and child. John Freake died just a year after the painting was completed, and his widow — like so many other New England women — went on to remarry.

Art historians have discovered that this version of Elizabeth Freake and child was painted over a previous portrait created three years earlier. The major difference is that, in the later version, the mother's right arm is around her child, whereas in the earlier version, it was crossed in front of her chest. Why do you think, after three years, the painter was asked to make this change? What aspects of the painting convey Elizabeth Freake's piety? What details suggest her wealth and social



◆ Figure 2.1 Elizabeth Freake and Child
The Granger Collection, New York.

standing? How do these two dimensions come together in the overall portrait of mother and child?

Joint portraits of husband and wife from this period are very rare. Family portraits were meant to illustrate intergenerational family descent, not conjugal affection. Art historians are not sure who painted the example in Figure 2.2, but it is generally attributed to John Watson, a Scots immigrant who arrived in the colonies in 1714. A traveling artist in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York, Watson is one of the first generation of painters working in America whose name is known to us. His style is much more refined than that of the anonymous painter of Elizabeth Freake and child in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.2 records the alliance through marriage of two of the wealthiest Dutch American families in New York State, the Schuylers and the Wendells. Both were located in Albany and began to accumulate their wealth in the late



◆ Figure 2.2 Johannes and Elsie Schuyler

© Collection of the New-York Historical Society, USA/Bridgeman Images.

seventeenth century through trade with the Mohawks and through extensive agricultural holdings. The husband, Johannes Schuyler, was an Albany merchant and later became the city mayor. The wife, Elsie Staats Wendell, also a member of a founding Dutch American family, was a decade older than her husband and already quite wealthy from her father and her first husband. A widow, she had given birth to nine children before she married Schuyler. Their first child was born eight months after their marriage and together they had three more. How do the details of this marriage help to explain the Schuylers' decision to commission a joint portrait? Notice that she chose to be pictured with papers and books in her hands; what might she be trying to indicate about her tastes and activities? What other aspects of this portrait signal the Schuylers' social status?

We have no paintings of black families, slave or free, from the early eighteenth century. Indeed, African migrants were just beginning to live long enough to



◆ Figure 2.3 The Potter Family

The Newport Historical Society (53.3).

establish multigenerational kinship ties. However, some portraits of white families included a black domestic slave or servant among the family grouping.

The group portrait of the Potter Family of southern Rhode Island in Figure 2.3 was painted around 1740 by an unknown artist. The Newport Historical Society identifies the white male head of household as John Potter, a wealthy land- and slaveowner who later became a Quaker and freed his slaves. The Potters lived near Narragansett Bay, on one of several large plantations in the area whose land had been seized from Native people. Included in the picture are three unidentified women, no doubt Potter's wife, their daughter, and probably a collateral relative or friend of his wife. But what draws our modern attention is the young black boy holding a tea tray. Newport, Rhode Island, was the center of New England slave trading, and Potter was both a slave trader and slaveholder. Unlike most of Potter's slaves, who worked in the fields, this young child was likely a full-time domestic servant. How does the picture itself signal this information? Curiously, this slave child and Mr. Potter are portrayed as looking directly at the viewer, while the three women look slightly away. Why might the painter have chosen to do this?

Why do you think that the Potters made the deliberate decision to include this child in the painting of their family grouping? The painting was permanently installed over the family's mantelpiece. How might it have affected master, mistress, and slave to see themselves together in the portrait day after day? Remember that the slave, in addition to being a worker, was also a marker of wealth: the Potters owned many. What else about the portrait suggests their wealth?

Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 are portraits of particular families, each with its own intentions, relationships, and personalities. All are products of Protestant New England and New Netherland societies, which revered domestic life and parent/child and husband/wife relations. Spanish America grew out of a very different religious and artistic tradition. Like the artists of Catholic Europe, most of its painters concentrated on religious themes. Undoubtedly the family they painted most frequently was Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

Castas paintings were a genre unique to New Spain and represent a distinct pictorial approach to family relationships. *Castas* — in English, “castes” — refers to the intricate system, part racial and part economic, that constituted the social and political hierarchy of New Spain. Among English colonists, racial inequality was enforced by legal prohibitions against interracial marriage and a system in which only two racial identities were available: white and nonwhite. By contrast, in New Spain, interracial marriage within the church was encouraged, as a means to civilize, absorb, and ultimately eliminate nonwhite populations. This racial system, although different from the Protestant English one, was also hierarchical and white-dominated. The goal was to move up the racial scale, toward the apex of whiteness.

The *castas* system was a kind of taxonomy, or system of classification, and the paintings themselves contained indicators of that system. Most *castas* paintings consisted of sixteen different categories, painted on either a single canvas or separate canvases. The paintings depicted highly stylized categories rather than real people, and each family’s racial composition was inscribed on the canvas. The artists painted their fantasy family groupings in beautiful colors and wearing exquisite clothes, so as to convey a sense of beauty, opulence, and wealth. Both as idealizations of interracial families and as depictions of New World wealth, the *castas* paintings were a kind of advertisement for the wonders and possibilities of New Spain. But scholars also suggest that the emphasis on hierarchical categorization indicates anxiety about the potential disorder of racial mixing and may have been “intended as reminders to the Spanish Crown that Mexico was still a rigidly structured society.”³⁰

The actual lives of interracial families, and their experience of racial inequality and hierarchy, bore little relationship to the depictions of the *castas* paintings. *Castas* were usually painted in the urban centers of Mexico City and Lima, but we can be confident that the images they purveyed and the system they represented would have been familiar on the northern borders of Mexico, among the colonists who came to Santa Fe and El Paso, for whom interracial liaisons and difficult living conditions were major factors of life.

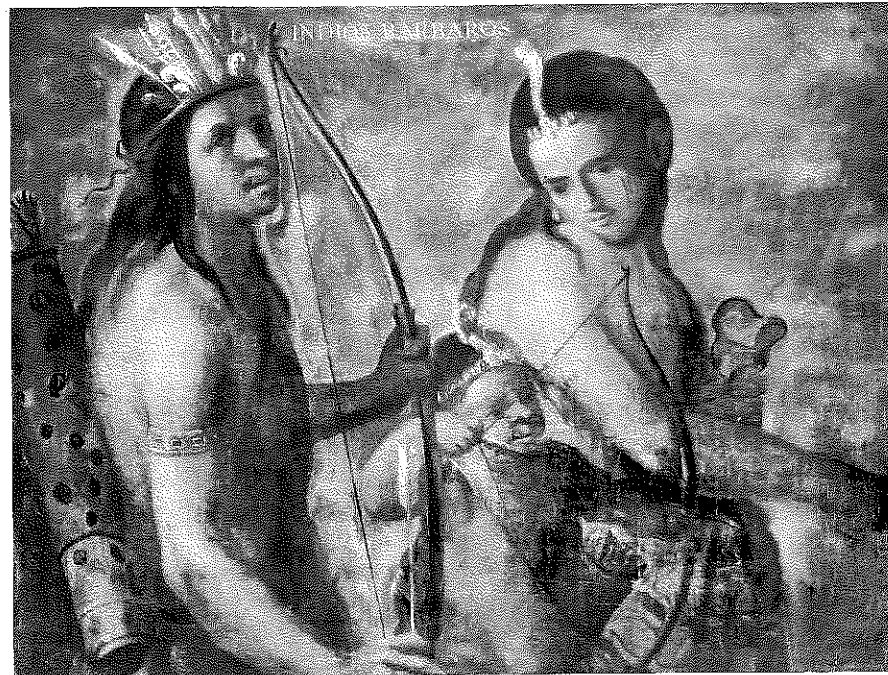
The elaborate depiction of interracial combinations and offspring in Figures 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6, dated about 1715 and attributed to Juan Rodríguez Juárez, conveys the abstract and idealized quality of the *castas* genre. The two family combinations in Figures 2.4 and 2.5 are *español/India/mestizo* and *español/negra/mulatto*. *India/mestizo* here means Christianized, urbanized people of mixed Spanish and Indian descent. Note that in both these paintings, the man is European and white and the woman is not. Significantly, according to the *castas* system, Indian blood, in



◆ Figure 2.4
Mestizo Family
Breamore House,
Hampshire, UK/
Bridgeman Images.



◆ Figure 2.5
Mulatto Family
Breamore House,
Hampshire, UK/
Bridgeman Images.



◆ **Figure 2.6**
Indian Family
Breamore House,
Hampshire, UK/
Bridgeman Images.

contrast to black blood, could be redeemed (Christianized and civilized) by admixture with Spanish blood. Figure 2.6 portrays an *India Barbara*, an Indian family unredeemed by any Spanish blood. What are the differences between the three images that suggest the hierarchical *castas* system? Why does each family unit consist only of mother, father, and child, rather than the much more diverse and numerous family units depicted in the Protestant portrait tradition?

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. In what different ways is male headship of family life depicted in these paintings?
2. What do these images tell us about women's roles in family relations?
3. What similarities and differences do you see among the women portrayed in these images?

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