

Women in Colonial America

Lecture Website:

[www.history.ohio-state.edu/
people/wu.287/325lectures2003](http://www.history.ohio-state.edu/people/wu.287/325lectures2003)

Comparative Colonial Encounters

- Spanish
 - 16th century
- French, English, and Dutch
 - 17th century
- Russian
 - 18th century



The “Middle Ground”

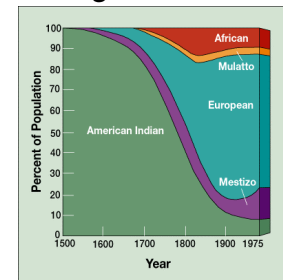
- Fur Trade Societies and Expeditions
- European male migration and adaptation
- Native American women
 - Continuation of “traditional” roles as economic providers and partners
 - Cultural Adaptation and Negotiation
- Sexual partnership or exploitation?
- Metis Communities



1825

Impact of British Settlement: Why fewer opportunities for cooperation and negotiation?

- Settler vs. Expedition/Trade communities
- Intensification of racial boundaries and conflict
 - Warfare
 - Demands for access to resources
- Conflicts in Gender Expectations



A closer look at women in the British Colonies

- What factors shaped women’s experiences in the colonies?
- Cultural beliefs and legal status of women
- Demographics
 - Sex ratio
 - Family units
 - Fertility and Mortality
 - Racial composition
- Economy and Class Status
- Changing nature of religious institutions

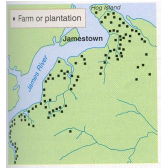


The “weaker vessel”

- Religious and Social Hierarchy
 - Yet “in souls there is no sex”
 - “
- Intellect vs. emotional instability
 - Reading vs. writing
 - 30% to 60% in mid-17th century could sign their names among whites
 - 1775 – 9/10 men and less than half of women
 - Anne Bradstreet, “The Tenth Muse”
- Feme covert
 - No independent legal standing
 - Dower third
 - Feme Sole
 - Single women over 21 and widows
- Division of labor
 - Field vs. House work
- Ideals vs. Realities of Colonial Life
- Change over time

European Women in the Southern Colonies

- **Gender Imbalance: Why?**
 - 3:1 immigration ratio
- **Servant Society – 17th century**
 - 80-90% indentured servants in Chesapeake
 - 4-7 years of servitude
 - 1/5 pregnant before term ended
 - 2 additional years for childbirth
- **Mortality Rate**
 - “Seasoning”
 - 40-75% mortality rate
 - Improve by 1650s and 1660s
 - Average age of death for men 43
 - Chances of widowhood and remarriage
 - Mortality rates for children
 - 25% in first year
 - 50% before adulthood
- **“Headright” and Planter’s Wife**
 - Small, labor intensive farms (50 acres)
 - Socially isolated



Settlement Patterns along the James River

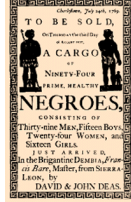
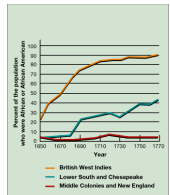
What makes gender differentiation possible for white women?

- South as Slave Society
- Black population grew 5X between 1670 and 1700
- 3-5x more expensive than servants
- ¾ whites in Virginia did not own servants or slaves
- 1/3 “free” colonists worked as tenants
- Why slavery?



Evolution of Slavery

- Bacon’s Rebellion 1676
- Settlement of Carolina in 1670
 - Extension of Barbados
 - ½ African American by 1700
- Natural Increase
- Escalation of slave trade
 - West Indies to Africa
 - 20,000 in 1700 to over 400,000 in 1770



African American gender roles

- Until 1660s, 2:1 gender ratio among slaves
 - 15% died during Middle Passage
 - 10-15% from Africa died during first year
- Was there gender differentiation in terms of slave women’s work?
 - “Labor of love vs. labor of sorrow”
 - Under 20% assigned to household service in first half of 18th century
 - Only men trained for skilled trades
- Meanings of “motherhood”
 - Sexual coercion and “marriage”
 - Reproducing the slave force
 - Extended and adopted kinship



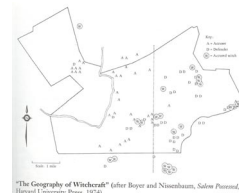
New England Colonies

- Economic vs. Religious motivations
- Family migration and Community creation
- A Good Housewife
 - Hierarchy?
 - Mutuality?
 - “Nearest to equality” among “all the Orders which are unequals.”
- Marriage
 - Patriarchal decision?
 - 1/10 premarital pregnancy
- Motherhood
 - 9/10 infants survive 1st year
 - ¾ survive to adulthood



Religion

- Reinforce gender hierarchy or opportunity for female empowerment?
- Anne Hutchinson (1636) – women as religious leaders
- Halfway Covenant (1662)
- Salem Witchcraft Trials (1691-1692)
 - 95% accusations in New England
 - 20 executed (34 total)
 - 82% of accused were women
 - Gendered expectations of witchcraft (53% vs. 29% conviction rate; 15 to 2 execution rate)
 - 2/3 over 40 years old
 - Accusers
 - 90% adults; 10% young girls between 16-25
 - 60% men
- Great Awakening 1730s -1760s
- By mid-18th century, women 75% of congregations



“The Geography of Witchcraft” Ghera Boyer and Ninoanbaum, Salem Press, Harvard University Press, 1974.

Native Americans and Religious Contact

- Catholicism vs. Protestantism
- Religion combined with gender expectations
 - Sexuality
 - Marriage
 - Gender roles
- Yet why did Native American women convert at higher rates than men?
- Hybrid religions and cultural negotiations



A huge basket full of beads is sent to the image of Saint Michael based in a Jesuit church established by missionaries. Although native religions were strongly different from Catholicism, some groups wanted to integrate the two by comparing the basket to Catholic saints, for example.

Middle Colonies

- Ethnic and religious diversity
- Opportunities for women's empowerment?
- Quakers and religious nonconformity
 - "Why should women meet apart? We think for a very good reason...women whose bashfulness will not permit them to say or do much, as to church affairs before men, when by themselves, may exercise their gift of wisdom and understanding, in a direct care of their own sex." William Penn, 1692
- Roman-Dutch Law in New Netherlands
 - Women could run a business, sue, inherit equally, make a will
- Economic Development
 - Class status and gender roles
 - Merchant wives and servants
 - Single women and widows
 - Proximity to urban areas and trade networks



NEW YORK STREET SCENE

British Colonial vs. Native American gender roles

- Family arrangements
 - Extended to nuclear
 - Male-headed households
 - Divorce and Sexuality
- Economic roles
 - Farming
 - Housework
 - Ownership of Property
- Political Roles
 - Who speaks on behalf of Native Americans?
 - Who is perceived as representative?
- Cherokee constitution of 1828
 - Right to vote and to hold office in the General Council restricted to "free male citizens"
- Increasing differentiation between women/men – private/public



Officials of the U.S. government believed in a white ideal for Cherokee women. Here, students at the Cherokee girls' seminary in Oklawaha in 1899 wear dresses and hats fashionable to white society. The school was founded as Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (now called Mount Holyoke College) in Massachusetts.

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