

Introduction

Women in Early America: Crossing Boundaries, Rewriting Histories

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Women first arrived in North America at least some fifteen thousand years ago. The traditional view of these migrants who crossed the Bering Strait is of men hunting for prey or explorers braving a new frontier. But we know that women also settled North America. By ten thousand years ago settlements stretched from coast to coast. For thousands of years, millions of women worked the land to provide agricultural sources of nourishment for their communities. Women played key roles in the great ancient societies of North America—the Anasazi, Hohokam, and Mound Builders.

By the time of Spanish settlement in Saint Augustine, Florida, in 1565, English settlement at Jamestown in 1607, and French settlement in Quebec in 1608, women had long established their roles as community builders. Most women who would come to the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, like their male counterparts, came against their will—in chains.¹ *Women in Early America* tells the stories of the myriad groups of women who shaped the early modern North American world.

The essays in *Women in Early America* interpret historical sources with a variety of lenses, including feminist theory, gender theory, critical race studies, environmental history, cultural history, and literary criticism. Thus, the book features new approaches to an older project of recovering women's lives and experiences from a historical record that has until relatively recently focused on men. Many of the essays locate their subjects in spaces that confound traditional boundaries—of gender, status, and ethnicity, for example. Some of the essays employ

a transnational lens. Collectively, the essays offer new ways of viewing early America and, in so doing, highlight the significance of examining women in history.

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One of the earliest goals of the field of women's history was to write histories of women's lives and experiences. For generations, history had focused on men and there was even skepticism within the profession that evidence of women's lives could be located within archives. After all, the argument went, women did not produce extensive written documents or lead troops into battle. Nor did they have roles in government or politics or commerce. Women's work within the home was understood, wasn't it? What more could be studied and how? A generation of women's historians in the 1960s began to search, and, well, the rest is history. Works in the 1970s and 1980s ignited a field and helped to establish the history of early American women as integral to the history of the nation's founding.² From this generation of scholars we learned much about primarily middling and elite white women's involvement in a host of arenas—the family, to be sure, but also the church, politics, and the economies of early America.

In the 1990s, the turn to gendered analysis enriched and complicated the study of women's history in significant ways. Scholars began to shift their focus to social and cultural ideals of womanhood and to interrogating the very category of *woman* to take into account the multiple intersections and divisions among women such as race, class, region, and religion. Works such as Mary Beth Norton's *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (1996) and Kathleen M. Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996) deepened our understanding of gendered power in early America and sparked new avenues for more work. The fields have developed so closely together that many now consider women's history and gender history as a single unified field.³ Indeed it may not be entirely productive to disentangle the subfields associated with women's history. Still, the quantity of scholarship with an explicit focus on women's history lags behind that of newer work on gender and sexuality and by the profession as a whole.

What would gender parity within historical scholarship look like? There's certainly an abundance of scholarship published on early Ameri-

can women. And the historical profession recognizes exemplary work in the field.⁴ But the volume of publications still pales in the face of works published about men. And the most popular topics in early American history, which cross over from the academy to lay readers, remain focused on traditional narratives of war and politics—and great men. It is true that the amount of scholarship on women’s history has increased in recent decades—enough to garner the attention of critics who decry a loss of attention on traditional subjects of state formation and military movements. But consider the following: of articles published in 1985, only about 4 percent covered women’s history. By 2000, this figure had risen to a less-than-whopping 8 percent.⁵ The original goal of the field—examining women’s lives and experiences—remains as relevant as ever.

Moreover, one of the oldest feminist critiques of the field of history, one that drove the early women’s history movement, remains remarkably relevant: It is still largely acceptable for men to be portrayed as the universal historical subject. Authors still present their works as complete histories while focusing almost exclusively on the experiences and writings of male subjects. Monographs and textbooks alike that focus largely on women still must declare as much in their titles, while histories primarily about men are still identified in titles by their subject matter alone. And while more and more work recognizing men as gendered subjects is being produced, as Toby L. Ditz has warned, much of that scholarship still pays only lip service to gendered power and to the experiences of women, and the “new men’s history” threatens merely to recenter men in the traditional historical narrative.⁶

In addition, among those scholarly histories of women, coverage of the modern period far outstrips work on pre-1800 America. Scholarship on women’s history mirrors the larger historical profession in its disproportionate coverage of the twentieth century. Indeed, histories of early American women accounted for roughly only a tenth of articles published between 1985 and 2000.⁷

Women in Early America, thus, addresses the need for scholarship on women’s lives and experiences as well as the imbalance in the existing literature that privileges modernity over the more distant past. Only by examining early American women’s history can one understand the developments of the modern era—both the advances and the setbacks. Too often, women’s history is thought of by the public as a history marked

by progress. It is true that legal and cultural changes have advanced the opportunities that women today have in education, employment, and the law. But the modern feminist movement is still regularly positioned against an anachronistic and static early American setting. To properly situate contemporary women's history, one must understand gains and losses in a broad context that illuminates the shifting social, cultural, and economic trends that impacted women over the course of four centuries.

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Americans have long been enamored of stories about a small handful of early American women. Generations of schoolchildren have learned about Pocahontas, whose image graces this book's cover, as the woman who saved Captain John Smith's life. But scholars have long argued that the focus on her romantic relationship with Smith (which almost certainly did not happen) obscures the role that she played in securing diplomatic peace between the Powhatan and the English at a key moment of settlement for the Jamestown community. Overlooked in the mythology that has grown up around Pocahontas is the role that countless women played in similar positions as cultural go-betweens, facilitating trade, communication, and diplomatic and economic connections between the Europeans and Native Americans. Pocahontas is, of course, not the only well-known early American woman. Others include Abigail Adams, Betsy Ross, Deborah Sampson, and Phillis Wheatley, to name a few. Some of the women in this book will be familiar to readers. But *Women in Early America* largely examines lesser-known women—both ordinary and elite and not only those who hailed from British mainland America, but also women in New Spain, New France, New Netherlands, and the West Indies.

The eleven chapters cover a wide range of women's experiences from the colonial era through the early republic. In these essays we learn about the conditions that women faced during the Salem witchcraft panic and the Spanish Inquisition in New Mexico, as indentured servants in early Virginia and Maryland, while caught up between warring British and Native Americans, as traders in New Netherlands and Detroit, as slave owners in Jamaica, as loyalist women during the American Revolution, while enslaved in the president's house, and as students and educators inspired by the air of equality in the young nation.

The subtitle of this introduction, “Crossing Boundaries, Rewriting Histories,” is a double entendre: it applies to both the essays and the women who are their subjects. Collectively the book heeds the early call of feminist scholars and historians not to merely “add women and stir” (incorporate women into existing male-centered historical narratives) but to rethink traditional narratives themselves so that we may better understand how women and men created and developed our history. The women in these articles were also themselves agents of change. They crossed boundaries. They rewrote histories by consciously challenging social conventions and norms—and sometimes just by living their lives.

NOTES

1. Alan Taylor points out that two-thirds of the twelve million who came to the New World before 1820 were enslaved Africans. Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 44. See also Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), chap. 2.
2. Joy and Richard Buel, *The Way of Duty: A Woman and Her Family in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1984); Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh, “The Planter’s Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 34, no. 4 (1977): 542–71; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985).
3. For an example of a treatment that approaches women’s and gender history as one field, see Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein, “The Big Tent of U.S. Women’s and Gender History: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (December 2012): 793–817.
4. The American Historical Association has administered the Joan Kelly Memorial Prize in women’s history annually since it was established by the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession and the Conference Group on Women’s History in 1983. The Organization of American Historians has

administered the Darlene Clark Hine Award, given in recognition of the best book in African American women's and gender history, annually since 2010 and the Lerner-Scott Prize, honoring the best doctoral dissertation in U.S. women's history, annually since 1992.

Recent books on early American women's history that have won awards not specifically intended for women's history include Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making An American Public after the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Susan J. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whalefishery, 1720–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

5. Sharon Block and David Newman, "What, Where, When, and Sometimes Why: Data Mining Two Decades of Women's History Abstracts," *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 84. See also Terri L. Snyder, "Refiguring Women in Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 69 (July 2012): 421–50.
6. Toby L. Ditz, "The New Men's History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History," *Gender & History* 16 (April 2004): 1–35.
7. Block and Newman, "What, Where, When, and Sometimes Why," 89–90.