

## **Introductory Essay on Gender and Opportunity in Colonial America**

by Dave Neumann, Long Beach Unified School District

The position of women in colonial America varied from region to region and changed from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the general pattern was consistent: women were subordinate in a patriarchal system reinforced through religion, law, and social custom. The different forms of Christianity in the colonies all supported some ideal of women's submission to their husbands. In addition, married women had few independent legal rights. Social practices reinforced women's dependence upon men. There were some exceptions to these patterns, but they were relatively rare.

### **Patriarchy**

#### **Patriarchy and religion**

People in England and its colonies were concerned with maintaining order in society. Central to the creation of an ordered society was the construction of harmonious families. The family was often thought to represent a miniature version of society as a whole. (See [document one](#)). In this miniature society, God had established a patriarchy, an arrangement in which a woman submitted to her husband's authority in an unequal partnership. This submission was supported by reference to various Biblical texts. The husband in turn protected his wife and their children. Though seventeenth-century Puritans talked the most about the patriarchal marriage relationship as a divinely-ordained design, patriarchy in some form was practiced among all English colonists. (See [document two](#)).

#### **Patriarchy and law**

The unequal partnership of patriarchy was a legal ideal as well as a religious one. The English legal doctrine of coverture, carried to the colonies, taught that a woman ceased to exist as a separate legal person when she married. In other words, her identity was united with her husband's, and the two spoke with one voice. This concept was based in part on the assumption that a husband had a right to his wife's company, labor, and body. If she were able to enter into contracts on her own, she could be held liable in ways, such as through fines or imprisonment, that might deprive a husband of services to which he had first claim. Coverture was also designed as a protection for the married woman, but the result was that it left her with little ability to own or acquire property. Also, she could not initiate lawsuits, sign contracts, or write wills.(1) (See [document three](#) and [document six](#)).

#### **Patriarchy and social custom**

Patriarchy shaped women's social experience in terms of housing, education, and economic activities. First, women did not generally live on their own. Married women were expected to live in respectful submission to their husbands. Single women often lived with a brother or some other family member in a household headed by a male, where they did housework and childcare in exchange for their room and board.(2) The only women who typically lived alone were widows or spinsters, women who had never married. In a society that strongly emphasized male authority, women who lived alone were often looked at with some suspicion or mistrust.

Second, women were generally not trained or educated in the same ways as males. Many girls were taught basic literacy at home. The relatively few women who received education outside of the home did not learn practical skills that would enable them to handle financial matters. Paid education at special schools for girls stressed ornamental accomplishments, such as music, dancing, drawing, painting, needlework, and handicrafts. These skills might allow a woman a

chance to display her decorative abilities, but they were not directed toward fostering economic self-sufficiency.(3)

Third, women were unable to engage independently in most economic activities. Some advice literature urged husbands to ask their wives' opinions before making important financial decisions, but evidence reveals that most husbands ignored this input. Women often did not know their husbands' income, the value of tools or property, or the legal language of property transactions.(4)

## **Limitations to Patriarchy**

### **Religious limitations to patriarchy**

Though it may seem as if women had little power or independence, there were some exceptions to the pattern just described. In many cases, however, these exceptions only confirmed the general pattern of patriarchy. For example, alongside discussions of women's subordination to men, some ministers, especially those in the Puritan and Quaker traditions, emphasized the spiritual equality of men and women. But this affirmation of spiritual equality did not overturn the divinely-ordained social order of women's submission to men.(5)

### **Legal limitations to patriarchy**

Coverture laws provided some protections to a wife. If a husband chose to sell property during their marriage, the wife was supposed to be interviewed independently of her husband by the court to confirm that she agreed with his decision.(6) Coverture also provided that a widow receive rights to one third of the total value of her husband's estate to protect her from poverty. Also, she could not sell the property or transfer it to another person in a will.(7)

Furthermore, a separate legal tradition called equity developed in both England and America as an alternative to coverture. Equity courts allowed a woman to retain control of property she brought to a marriage if her husband agreed by signing a prenuptial agreement. Again, though this right was available to some women, it was rarely exercised.(8) Also, colonies like Massachusetts did not establish equity courts, so prenuptial agreements there in the eighteenth century were informal, and therefore somewhat insecure.(9)

### **Social limitations to patriarchy**

In the pre-industrial world, the home was the center of family economic activity. Therefore, on occasion, married women conducted financial business on their husbands' behalf. The wife was allowed to behave in ways outside her traditional role because she was acting as a representative of her husband.(10) Under certain conditions, a woman might help plant crops, order supplies, or keep shop. In some cases, married women were permitted to conduct business on their own apart from husbands and even own their own businesses. But this practice was not technically legal in most colonies, and it could be challenged in court.(11) (See [document four](#) and [document five](#)).

Women's opportunities to engage in business independently "varied according to their assets, as well as their class, training, and place of residence."(12) Women who engaged in businesses that were considered men's work - shoemaking, printing, shipwrighting - were usually carrying on professions begun by their now deceased husbands. Widowed women might become shopkeepers, using resources they inherited from their husbands; single women shopkeepers were rarer. Large ports like Boston offered some women the opportunity to work as midwives, teachers, tavernkeepers, and shopkeepers.

## NOTES

1. Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 41; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 7; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1850* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 45-50.
2. Norton, 41; On literacy statistics, see Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: an Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: Norton, 1974), 58.
3. Norton, 259-260.
4. Norton, 5-6.
5. Ulrich, 107.
6. Norton, 45-47.
7. Salmon, 141-147.
8. Norton, 45-47.
9. Salmon, 120-121.
10. Ulrich, 35-50.
11. Salmon, 45-46.
12. Patricia Cleary, "Who shall say we have not equal abilities with the Men when Girls of 18 years of age discover such great capacities?": *Women of Commerce in Boston, 1750-1776*," in Conrad Edick Wright and Katheryn P. Viens, eds., *Entrepreneurs: The Boston Business Community, 1700-1850* (Boston, 1997), 41-42.