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## "No Obey": Indian, European, and African Women in Seventeenth-Century Virginia

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Pocahontas—Indian princess, savior of Captain John Smith, wife of tobacco entrepreneur John Rolfe—has long been a symbol of the peaceful co-existence of native American and European peoples in the New World. One might easily conclude from the popular legend that the only role women played in Jamestown was that of saving handsome colonists from hostile natives. Yet Indian, English, and African women all filled diverse roles in their native villages; and all were called upon to expand their activities under the pressures of colonization.

Among some Chesapeake tribes, women traditionally held positions of political and social prominence. Thus, despite Pocahontas's choices, few Indian women were likely to be lured away from their countrymen by undernourished, pale, quarrelsome, and seemingly inept Englishmen. Pocahontas's fate—she died of a fever while visiting England in 1617—probably did not encourage other young tribeswomen to follow her lead.

For English and African residents of Jamestown, simple survival far outweighed every other concern in the first decades of settlement. African women and men struggled to survive the passage to America. Once there, most found themselves literally worked to death, regardless of sex or age.

English women came to America as indentured servants or free wives. Either way, life in the colonies took a heavy toll on them. Though the shortage of European females in Virginia villages did increase their value and allow some to gain wealth and status through marriage, even good marriages could not save women from frequent childbearing, back-breaking labor, and early death.

Lebsock's study of Indian, African, and European women in colonial Virginia demonstrates that women in all three groups began the seventeenth century under difficult but fluid conditions that placed great physical burdens on most women but also promised wealth and power to a few. She documents the variety and range of women's contributions to political, social, and economic development in their communities, illuminating the diversity in women's and men's roles that characterized American society in its earliest years. Yet she also shows how the English "established dominion over Virginia" just as "English men were establishing increasingly effective dominion over women."

Both in the early years of settlement and later in the century, Indian, European, and African women had different types and degrees of access to political and religious authority and to land and other economic resources. These distinctions were reflected in the three groups' different, often conflicting, assumptions about the proper role of women and led to miscommunications among Indians, Europeans, and Africans over land, labor, trade, and war. In succeeding articles, we trace continuities and changes in women's and men's roles across class, race, region, and time.

Whereas these later articles assume the dominance of Europeans in the New World, Lebsock captures that moment when their hold was far more fragile. Then the New World was still filled with rich possibilities as well as fearful dangers for women and men of all races.

In the early seventeenth century, people from three parts of the world converged in the land the English named Virginia. In 1600 all Virginians were Indians. Before long their claim to the land was challenged by the colonizing English, who needed laborers to work the land they took from the Indians, and who were willing to fill the bill by buying slaves, people forcibly imported from Africa.

In all three groups, of course, there were women. Reconstructing their lives is a delicate and at times frustrating enterprise, for the evidence is thin, and we are dependent on whatever the English—and English men at that—saw fit to write down. But it appears that not one of the three groups had what we think of as "traditional" sex roles. In Indian Virginia, for example, and in much of West Africa, women were the farmers. Among the English, meanwhile, ideas about the proper roles of women were often undermined by the fluid conditions of life and death in the New World.

By 1700 the English had established dominion over Virginia, and English men were establishing increasingly effective dominion over women. But none of this was a foregone conclusion in 1607. In the beginning, almost anything seemed possible. From the writings of early English chroniclers, we learn of two powerful Indian women. One was Pocahontas, who, as legend had it, saved John Smith's head in 1607. The other was the queen of the Appamatuck, who had received an English exploring party a few months earlier. "She is a fatt lustie manly woman," wrote one of the admiring explorers. The queen wore a crown

and jewelry of copper; she presented a "stayed Countenance"; "she would permit none to stand or sitt neere her." In other words, she reinforced her authority as rulers often did and in ways that Englishmen readily understood—by regal dress, by a dignified bearing, and by keeping her distance.

In the Indian's own language, this formidable woman was a *werowance*, the highest authority in her tribe. Among Virginia Indians, for women to hold such positions was not unusual, and the English, fresh from the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603), knew a queen when they saw one. What was more difficult for them to grasp was the importance of Indian women in the texture of everyday life.

At that time more than twenty thousand Indians lived in what came to be called Virginia. There were more than forty different tribes, and while each had its particular territory and tradition, the tribes were clustered in three language groups. South of the James River were the Iroquoian-speaking tribes, the Nottoway and Meherrin. In the Piedmont lived a number of Siouan speakers. About these groups we unfortunately know little. Most numerous and by far the best known were the Algonquian-speaking tribes of the Tidewater region, among them the Appamatuck, Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Nansemond, Pamunkey, and Rappahannock. Long sharing a common language, many of these tribes had recently become political allies as well. Powhatan, the werowance of the Pamunkey, had inherited control of six tribes, and by the early seventeenth century he had wrestled two dozen other Algonquian tribes into a confederacy—some would say kingdom. The English, for their part, were impressed with the "terrible and tyrannous" Powhatan, just as he intended them to be.

So centralized a political structure could not have been built without a sound economy, and the economy was based on the work of

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In many native American populations, both men and women performed agricultural labor, but their tasks were divided by sex. Men, using wooden-handled hoes made of fishbones, prepared the ground and loosened the soil. Women then dug the holes and planted the seeds. This sixteenth-century engraving is by Jacques Le Moyne.

women. Women were the farmers in a society in which farming was the central occupation. "Their victuall," as John Smith put it, "is their chiefest riches." Corn was the single most important product in the Virginia economy. During the growing season, the Indians drew together in towns of from ten to one hundred houses. Between the houses and sometimes on the town's edge were the fields, where women planted corn and beans together in the same hills (this way the cornstalks doubled as beanpoles and the land stayed fertile longer). They also grew peas, sunflowers, and several kinds of squash.

The Virginia soil was generous with wild fruits, berries, acorns, hickory nuts, and walnuts, and the gathering of these foods fell to the women. So did all of the food processing and preparation. The making of clothing was women's work, too. This meant, among other

things, dressing skins and making thread "very even and readily" by rolling bark, grass, or the sinews of animals between hand and thigh; the thread was good for fishing nets as well as for sewing. Pots were usually made by women. So were baskets; and the weaving of mats was a major industry, for these were used both as furniture and as siding for houses. The women also had to carry the wood, keep the fire alive, and "beare all kindes of burthens," including their babies, on their backs.

As for housework, there was little to do, for Indian houses were very simple—one room, furnished mainly with mats and skins. Made of bark or mats stretched over bent poles, the houses were snug and smokey, as fires burned along the center axis of the floor and the smoke was allowed to find its way out through a hole in the ceiling. It is not clear who built the houses in the summer villages. In winter, however,

when the villagers separated into smaller groups and hiked to their hunting grounds, the women were once again in charge:

In that time when they goe a Huntinge the weomen goes to a place apoynted before, to build houses for ther husbands to lie in att night cariege mats with them to couer ther houses with all, and as the men goes further a huntinge the woemen goes before to make houses, always carriege ther mattes with them.

And what did the men do? One observer summed it up in a single sentence: "The men fish, hunt, fowle, goe to the warrs, make the weeres [fishtraps], botes, and such like manly exercises and all laboures abroad." The men, in short, hunted, fished, fought, and made the implements they needed for each activity. They also cleared the grounds for fields, though since they used the slash-and-burn method, this was not especially laborious; they cleared away small trees and underbrush by burning, while larger trees were stripped of their bark and allowed to die.

Since the English regarded hunting as sport and not as work, they quickly concluded that Indian men were lazy, that the women were drudges, and that the unequal division of labor between the sexes was proof of the general inferiority of Indian civilization. The English were wrong, for men did make substantial contributions to the Indian diet, even though the work of women was more essential to the material welfare of their people. English men and Indian men, meanwhile, had more in common than the English knew, both "scorning to be seene in any woman like exercise." The Indians and the English had differing ideas about what was properly masculine and what was feminine, but men of both groups assigned their own activities more prestige than the activities of women.

For all that, authority in Indian society did not belong to men alone. Succession among Virginia Indians was matrilineal: Political power

was inherited through the mother rather than the father, and females were eligible to become rulers. John Smith explained how it worked with Powhatan: "His kingdome descendeth not to his sonnes nor children." Instead, Powhatan's position would pass first to his brothers, then to his sisters, "and after them to the heires male and female of the eldest sister; but never to the heires of the males."

Our knowledge of family life and family structure is otherwise confined to a few intriguing scraps of information; on the whole, the English chroniclers were much sharper observers of politics and the economy than they were of families. Sexual attitudes were somewhat different from those of the English, at least to the extent that women (whose individual status within the tribe is not clear) were sometimes offered as bedfellows for visiting male dignitaries. Some relatively wealthy men had more than one wife, and divorce was permissible. Parents were said to love their children "verie dearly." Mothers gave birth with no crying out, whereupon English men concluded that for Indian women childbirth was not painful.

Would that we knew more. What we do know, however, adds up to an impressive record of female influence in Indian Virginia. And this is the significance of the Pocahontas story. Pocahontas was a girl with sparkle. Her name, according to the English, translated as "Little Wanton"; we might say playful, mischievous, frisky. She was about twelve in 1607 when John Smith made his first appearance in the immediate domain of her father, Powhatan. Uncertain of Smith's intentions, Powhatan's warriors killed two of Smith's men and took Smith himself prisoner. After three weeks of captivity and feasting, Smith was led to a large stone and made to lay down his head. The warriors raised their clubs as though "to beate oute his braines." Suddenly, Pocahontas sprang forth, the clubs were stayed, and John Smith was spared.

Or so Smith told it. The authenticity of this story has been challenged many times, partly because in John Smith's earliest recountings of

his exploits the Pocahontas episode does not appear at all, and partly because the dusky-princess-rescues-bold-adventurer theme was commonplace in European culture long before Smith set foot in Virginia. He could easily have borrowed it. On the other hand, it could have happened. In Indian warfare, women, children, and werowances were almost always spared. While male warriors were sometimes tortured and often killed, they, too, could be spared and adopted into the victorious tribe. Here the judges were women. Given women's importance as breadwinners and in the kinship structure, their deciding if and when a new person was needed made eminent sense. So Pocahontas could have saved John Smith after all. What Smith experienced, although he did not know it, may have been a ritual of mock execution and adoption.

As time went on, of course, Pocahontas was the one who was adopted by the English. After John Smith's release, Pocahontas continued to live up to her name; she was spotted turning cartwheels through Jamestown, for instance. Her story took a more serious turn in 1613, when she was taken hostage by Samuel Argall, who hoped to use Pocahontas to gain bargaining power with the Indians. While living under English authority, Pocahontas met John Rolfe, who would one day achieve fame as the primary promoter of tobacco culture. They were married in 1614 and had one son. In 1616 they sailed for England, where Pocahontas was received as both a curiosity and a celebrity; early in 1617 she was presented to James I and Queen Anne. A few months later, just as she was preparing to return to Virginia, Pocahontas died. She was no more than twenty-two years old.

For a long time no one took much notice of her story. Then some 150 years after her death, Pocahontas took hold of the American imagination as no other woman has. She was brought to life on stage, in verse, and in the pages of novels and of countless children's books. Her name was given to people, places, and an

astonishing variety of things, from tobacco and quack medicines to cotton mills and coal mines. As powerful legends usually do, the Pocahontas story had several symbolic meanings. But there is no doubt that the national romance with Pocahontas helped to soothe the troubled conscience of white America. Pocahontas had rescued one colonizer and had married another. She professed the Christian religion and was baptized "Rebecca." She learned to speak the English language, sat for her portrait in English costume, and met her death on English soil. Symbolically, Pocahontas put an Indian stamp of approval on white people, white culture, and white conquest.

We could opt for a different symbol. The queen of the Appamatuck—the "fatt lustie manly woman" the English encountered in 1607—thought it all very interesting when the first explorers appeared. She looked the visitors over, fed them, and asked them to shoot their guns, "whereat she shewed not neere the like feare as Arahatec [the werowance of the Arrohaeck tribel] though he be a goodly man." The following year, when the English were desperate for food, she supplied them with corn. By 1611, however, she was alarmed. Launching an aggressive policy of expansion, the English began carving out plantations on her tribal territory. The queen of the Appamatuck decided to resist. She began by inviting fourteen colonists to a party. When the men arrived, they were ambushed and every one was killed. Reprisal was immediate. An English detachment attacked her town, burned it, and killed everyone they could find, including women and children. The queen herself was shot, probably fatally, as she tried to escape.

Or we could take for our symbol the queen of the Paspahagheh tribe. In 1610, the English governor engaged Powhatan in negotiations over the return of some Englishmen who had run off to join the Indians. Frustrated by Powhatan's "disdaynefull Answers," the governor ordered punitive raids on nearby tribes. The

English marched on the Paspahagheh's chief town, killed several people, torched the houses, cut down the corn, and took the queen prisoner along with her children. Returning to Jamestown by boat, some of the soldiers complained about the sparing of the children. This situation was resolved by throwing the children in the river and "shoteinge owtt their Braynes in the water." On hearing further complaints about the sparing of the mother, the commander decided against burning and instead had her led away and stabbed to death.

This was unspeakable brutality, even for a brutal age. After Pocahontas married John Rolfe, an uneasy peace was established for a few years, but the basic pattern was already in place. Regardless of the Indian's strategy—be it aloofness, cooperation, or armed resistance—the determination of the English to take Indian land for soil-depleting tobacco crops was paramount. The brutality escalated. Under the leadership of Opechancanough, the Powhatan Confederacy made a concerted effort to expel the English in 1622; this time women and children were not spared, and nearly 350 colonists were killed. The English reeled from the blow—and retaliated with extraordinary force. Somehow, after many years, Opechancanough's allies regrouped, and they struck again in 1644. By this time the English were far stronger, and their counterattack demolished the Powhatan Confederacy. In a treaty of 1646 the surviving Indians were placed on reservations and promised protection in exchange for their help in fending off outlying tribes. Still, for the Indians there was no real safety. Whites were divided on Indian policy, and in 1676 the followers of renegade Nathaniel Bacon, Jr., made war on Indians of every description. A new treaty was signed in 1677, but in the meantime the Indians had suffered another bitter disaster. Killed in battle, wasted by disease, driven out and starved out, the Indian population of Virginia by 1700 was perhaps one-tenth of what it had been a century before.

Among the survivors was Cockacoeske, the queen of the Pamunkey. In the treaty of 1677 all the subscribing tribes pledged their allegiance to her as well as to the English king. And as a probable reward for her loyalty during Bacon's Rebellion, the government presented her with gifts including a dazzling silver badge. The English, it seems, were still willing to accept female political authority when they encountered it.



Virginia was named for a female ruler, of course, and the point was not lost on Virginia Ferrar. In 1650 Ferrar wrote to Lady Berkeley, the wife of Virginia's governor, offering encouraging words and a novel interpretation of history. Women, she claimed, deserved the credit for Europe's discovery of the New World. First there was Queen Isabella of Spain, "to the Eternall honour of her Sexe . . . (though laughed at by all the wise Conceited Courtiers)" sent Christopher Columbus on his famous voyage of 1492. Then Elizabeth I of England ordered the "planting" of a colony in North America, "giving it as she was a Virgin Queene the Happy and Glorious name of Virginia." Next, Ferrar suggested, the governor's lady herself might continue the "Heroyicke Interprize" by funding an expedition to find a route to the East Indies.

For Virginia Ferrar and many historians after her, heroism was found in exploration and conquest. For the women who helped colonize Virginia, there was heroism in survival. Wherever they came from—the British Isles, the West Indies, Africa—Virginia's new women faced a rugged existence. Thanks to Indian women, the colonists after a few years learned how to grow enough food to support themselves. Then in 1614 they began marketing the crop that would sustain their colony and run their lives. This was tobacco, of course, the seeds imported from the West Indies and the cultivation techniques once again borrowed



from the Virginia Indians. Profits were high, at times spectacular, and so an entire society dedicated itself to putting more land in tobacco.

For the women life was not easy. The death rate was appalling. Living conditions were crude, and all but the wealthiest could expect a lifetime of hard labor. Yet, if a woman lived long enough, she could sometimes experience a surprising degree of personal freedom. If she began as a slave, she might become free. If she started as a servant, she might become a planter. If she were a member of a wealthy family, she might become a politician. In the rough-and-ready world of the seventeenth century, almost anything might happen.

The gentlemen of the General Assembly had their moments of insight. "In a new plantation," they declared in 1619, "it is not known whether man or woman be the most necessary." Believing that a permanent colony would not be established until the planters settled down and raised families, influential men had for some time tried to bring more women to Virginia. Decisions on who would come to America, however, were not made by legislators alone. Instead, they were made by hundreds of individuals, among them planters who decided that in the short run, on their particular plantations, men were the most necessary. The result was an extremely unbalanced sex ratio. Among blacks there were at least three men for every two women. Among whites, men outnumbered women by three or four to one.

The Virginia Company, chartered in 1606 to finance and oversee colonization, resolved to send shiploads of "Maydens," young English women who would dare an ocean voyage and marriage to a stranger on the other side. In her novel *To Have and to Hold*, Mary Johnston later imagined the commotion when the first group of maids arrived in Jamestown. "I saw young men, panting, seize hand or arm and strive to pull toward them some reluctant fair; others snatched kisses, or fell on their knees and began speeches out of Euphues; others commenced an inventory of their possessions—acres, to-

bacco, servants, household plenishing. All was hubbub, protestation, frightened cries, and hysterical laughter." The narrator drew closer and heard some bargaining: "Says Phyllis, 'Any poultry?'"

*Corydon:* A matter of twalve hens and twa cocks.

*Phyllis:* A cow?

*Corydon:* Twa.

*Phyllis:* How much tobacco?

*Corydon:* Three acres, hinny, though I dinna drink the weed mysel'. I'm a Stewart, woman, an' the King's puir cousin.

*Phyllis:* What household plenishing?

*Corydon:* Ane large bed, ane flock bed, ane trundle bed, ane chest, ane trunk, ane leather cairpet, sax cawfskin chairs an' two-three rush, five pair o' sheets an' aughteen dowlas napkins, sax alchemy spunes—

*Phyllis:* I'll take you.

The legend of early Virginia was somehow brightened by the tales of this strange marriage market, although the Virginia Company in truth sent out only about 140 maids. Other English women made the crossing in ones and twos, sailing with their husbands or following husbands who had ventured over earlier. The vast majority of women colonists, however, were unfree laborers. Some, though their numbers were small in the first half of the seventeenth century, were slaves brought by force from different parts of Africa (and from Africa via the West Indies). About 80 percent of all English immigrants, meanwhile, were indentured servants. These people owed from four to seven years of faithful labor to whoever paid their passage from England. Until their time was up, they were not free to marry at all.

The new arrivals, single or married, bound or free, could expect rude beginnings. If, like the fictional Phyllis, her new household really



Realizing that women and families were essential for the successful colonization of the New World, the Virginia Company arranged to send shiploads of young Englishwomen to the new colonies. In this idealized depiction, the hardy young "Maydens" have just arrived at the marriage market at Jamestown. In truth, most women colonists came to America as indentured servants or as slaves.

contained five pairs of sheets, she would be doing very well indeed. The newcomer would need only a few seconds to size up her surroundings. From the outside the typical Virginia farmhouse looked (and was) small, and it probably needed patching. The inside could be inspected in three or four glances. This was a one-room house, measuring perhaps twenty-five by sixteen feet. It was a story and a half high and probably had a loft where children and servants slept. Otherwise one space had to suffice for every indoor purpose.

Except for its enormous fireplace, it was something like an Indian house, and like an Indian house, it was sparsely furnished. Standard equipment for a house owned by a middling planter was one feather bed (not to say a bedstead), a chest for storage, a cooking pot, a mortar and pestle for pounding corn, an axe, some knives, a few wooden dishes, some odd spoons, and containers for storing crops. Stools

and benches were not standard, although some households had them, nor were tables, forks, sheets, skillet, lamps, or candles. Occasionally, some bright and beautiful object would light up a Virginia household, and some of the most prosperous planters lived in higher style. But the typical planter stuck to ruthless utility. If furnishings were spartan and houses leaked and leaned and all but tumbled down, no matter. The money was in tobacco, and the planter who wanted to succeed invested every spare shilling in laborers.

That, of course, is what brought most women to Virginia. Indentured servitude was the system that connected young English people in need of work to planters in need of workers. In the England of the middle seventeenth century, finding a place in life could be difficult. The population was exploding, wages were falling, and unemployment was acute. Looking for something better, the resourceful left

villages for towns, towns for cities, and some of them took a chance on Virginia.

They were in for a few surprises. Servitude was no lark in England, but it was harsher still in Virginia. Masters were required by law to provide adequate food and clothing (including a send-off of three barrels of corn and a new suit of clothes when the servant's time was up), and they were instructed to keep punishments reasonable. The economic interest of masters, however, dictated squeezing their servants to the limit. By the same token, the interest of servants lay in resisting. This could be dangerous, though, because the master literally had the whip hand. Court records are rife with testimony concerning life-threatening punishments. One young woman was "sore beaten and her body full of sores and holes." Another was beaten "liken a dogge." More than one was killed in the course of a whipping.

Sexual abuse was an added hazard. According to law, an indentured servant who became pregnant was obliged to serve her master an additional two years. Not until 1662 did the House of Burgesses respond to the logic of the situation: The old law encouraged masters to sexually exploit their own servants or to stand by while someone else did the exploiting. The new law of 1662 stipulated that the pregnant servant would still serve two more years, but she would serve them under a new master.

Another surprise was that some women servants were set to work in the fields. A popular ballad called "The Trappan'd Maiden: Or, the Distressed Damsel" made the point:

I have play'd my part both at Plow and Cart,  
In the Land of Virginny, O;  
Billets from the Wood upon my back they  
load,  
*When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary*  
O.

Through ballads and by other means, the rumors about the nature of women's work in Virginia reached England. Because proper

English women were not supposed to do heavy field work, this posed a problem for Virginia's promoters. A pamphlet of 1656 offered a neat resolution to the problem: The only English women "put into the ground," it was explained, were those "wenches" who were "nasty, beastly, and . . . aukward."

It was not as though women needed work in the fields to keep them busy. Slaves, servants, mistresses, and daughters carried out all the day-to-day never-done tasks that made life possible. Every day they ground corn by hand and made it into soup or bread. If their children had milk, it was because the women tended cows. If there was butter or cheese, it was because the women made them from the milk. If there were eggs, it was because the women raised chickens. If there was meat, it was because the women had butchered it, preserved it, and boiled it. If there were vegetables, it was because the women gardenized. If there was cider or beer, the women brewed it. While cloth was mainly imported, women did all the sewing, washing, and mending, major chores in a time when work meant sweat and when most people had few changes of clothing. If someone fell ill, women did the nursing; in large households someone was probably sick all of the time. And if the family prospered, chances were that the master would acquire a new male indentured servant. The women, as a result, acquired another bundle of laundry, another person to be nursed through inevitable illness, and another hearty appetite.

If the woman was married, she was likely to be pregnant, breastfeeding, or looking after a young child. This was a duty and a labor of love. It was also a major economic contribution as surely as growing tobacco or corn. The planters' primary economic problem in the seventeenth century was the shortage of labor. Anyone who brought children into the world, therefore, and nurtured them until they grew into productive adulthood, made direct and essential contributions to Virginia's economic development.

Rearing a child to adulthood, however, was often out of the parents' power. Death was simply everywhere. It came, as we have seen, from wars between colonists and Indians. It came much more often from disease, from what the colonists called "fluxes," "agues," and "fevers"; we would say typhoid, dysentery, smallpox, and malaria. A child born in Virginia had only a fifty-fifty chance of living to see adulthood. About a quarter of all babies died before they reached their first birthday.

Adults were vulnerable, too. Although experiences varied a great deal from one person to the next, we can reconstruct the life of a typical white woman. She was twenty when she arrived in Virginia as an indentured servant. If she lived through her term of service (her chances were not especially good), she would marry almost as soon as she was free. She was now about twenty-five, and she would begin bearing children, one every two years, as was commonly the case in societies without benefit of birth control. Two of her children would die in childhood. Whether she would live to see any of her children grown was doubtful. After seven years of marriage her husband (who was older) would die, and she would follow in a few years.

Some additional statistics (again, these are for whites) help us appreciate the disruption that death wrought in Virginia families. Only one marriage in three lasted as long as ten years. From the perspective of the children, losing a parent was the normal experience. By the time they reached the age of nine, half of the children had already lost one or both parents. Virginia was a land of widows, widowers, bachelors, and above all, orphans.

As a consequence, families hardly ever matched the English ideal. A family, in English theory, consisted of a father, a mother, their children, and servants. In Virginia practice, few children were raised exclusively by their own parents, and many people found themselves raising other people's children. Families were suddenly bereft, then just as suddenly recombined into new households as surviving parents remarried, each bringing with them the children,

stepchildren, orphans, servants, and slaves from their previous households. The shape of the family, therefore, was complex, unpredictable, and always changing.

Virginia practice also challenged English views concerning the proper lines of authority within the family, and this was a major step forward for women. In theory, English families were "patriarchal." That is, the husband and father was responsible for the welfare and good behavior of the entire household; he ruled, and everyone else—wife, child, and servant—owed him unquestioning, uncomplaining obedience.

Virginians may have believed in patriarchal authority with all their hearts, but conditions in the New World at times made enforcement difficult. The patriarchs simply did not live long enough. In marrying, for example, young people often made their own decisions; they could hardly ask permission of fathers who were back in England or long since dead. Fathers often realized that their families might have to get along without protectors. Accordingly, the terms of men's wills tended to be generous, more so than in England. Virginia daughters stood a good chance of inheriting land, and Virginia wives were very often given larger legacies than the law required. What is more, the Virginia wife was usually named her husband's executrix—the pivotal person who controlled the property until it was finally handed over to the heirs.

Add in the sex ratio, and the result was a formula for considerable upward mobility among women. Because women were dramatically outnumbered, they could often "marry up." A former servant might marry a property owner, and if she outlived him, she might assume control of the property. She might marry still better a second or third time around.

If she was anything like Sarah Harrison of Surry County, she would have a strong sense of her own bargaining power. When Harrison was married to James Blair in 1687, the wedding ceremony began like any other. Presently,

however, the minister intoned the standard question: Did Sarah promise to obey her husband? "No obey," said Sarah. The minister repeated the question. "No obey," said Sarah again. The minister tried yet again. "No obey," said Sarah, one more time. The minister was checked, and the ceremony went on, no obey.

Virginia had its share of Sarah Harrisons, women who were strong willed or rowdy or powerful, women who made their influence felt not only in families but in local communities and in the colony. Nothing in English law or thought encouraged their participation in public affairs. The prevailing idea, in fact, was that women were inferior to men in every way—in physical strength, in reasoning ability, in their capacity to withstand moral temptations—and thus was justified the exclusion of women from voting and holding public office. Yet officeholding was only one way to exert influence. In the seventeenth century Virginia women explored some fascinating alternatives.

The obstacles to female participation in public affairs were formidable. Women were not allowed to vote, to serve on juries, or to hold office in either government or church. This in turn meant that women were seldom drawn out of their immediate neighborhoods for court days and militia musters. Women ordinarily could not read, either. Church was as far as they could expect to go. Consequently, for most women the known world was isolated and small. It was perhaps five miles across and populated mainly by family and a few neighbors.

Within that small world, the challenge for women and men together was to forge some sense of community. In England and in Africa, most people lived in villages. In Virginia, Indians excepted, most people lived on scattered farms; thus for people to form bonds with their neighbors was especially important. Here the Sunday church service was central. So were weddings and funerals, and when a woman went into labor, she was attended by other

women from the neighborhood. Women also served their communities by taking in orphans, paupers, and those who were physically and mentally disabled. In a time when there were no orphanages, almshouses, hospitals, or old people's homes, people in need were taken care of in households. Local authorities recognized this care as a community responsibility; the families who provided it were accordingly compensated by the taxpayers.

Since many of the surviving records for the seventeenth century are court records, we know more about the negative means of maintaining community. Enter the stocks, the whipping post, and the ducking stool—the instruments of public humiliation. Inflicting pain and shame was a practical means of controlling troublemakers in a society with no jails to speak of and with no police force. Transgressors were expected to confess and to beg forgiveness. In the process they reaffirmed the neighborhood's notions about what was right and what was wrong.

Cases of fornication and adultery—the crimes that most frequently involved women—showed how the system worked. Virginians did not as a rule prosecute those who engaged in premarital sex; probably a third of Virginia brides were already pregnant at the wedding. Non-marital sex was another matter altogether, a violation of good order and, if a child was born to the offenders, a possible drain on the local welfare funds. Among the lawful penalties were whippings and fines. A third penalty required each offender to appear in church, draped in a white sheet and holding a white wand. Standing on a stool in front of the congregation, the offender was then expected to apologize.

Like other systems this one did not work every time. Edith Tooker of Lower Norfolk was brought before her congregation in 1641 for the "foul crime of fornication." On being instructed to say she was sorry, she instead proceeded to "cut and mangle the sheet wherein she did penance." The court was not amused;

"a most obstinate and graceless person," the clerk muttered. Tooker was resented to twenty lashes and, two Sundays hence, to another try at the sheet treatment.

Tooker was getting to be a regular. In an earlier case the court had compelled her to apologize for slander, the other crime frequently perpetrated by women. In early Virginia most information circulated by word of mouth, and personal reputation was extremely important. (Imagine your marriage prospects, your employment credentials, or your credit rating being established by rumor.) Virginia was also a place in which bawdy joking was a way of life. It was therefore a thin line between conversation and slander, and legal actions were legion. In Northampton County, Goodwife Williams called John Dennis a "knave and base knave" and had the satisfaction of seeing him put into stocks for calling her "a whore and a base whore" in return. Edward Drew sued Joane Butler for calling his wife a "common Cunted hoare." Ann Fowler of Lower Norfolk was sentenced to twenty lashes and a public apology after she said, in reference to a high public official no less, "Let Capt. Thorouggood Kiss my arse."

By 1662 the House of Burgesses was so vexed by the "brabbling" women that a new law was passed; each county was required to build a ducking stool to quiet female scandalmongers. (Besides making the offender look ridiculous, the ducking stool held her under water until she spluttered out an apology.) This was testimony to the power of the spoken word. The power to wreck a reputation or to ignite conflict in a community—this was well within the reach of women, and some of them used it to even scores, to intimidate neighbors, or merely to show that they could not be pushed around. At the same time "gossip" could be a force for good. A man who beat his wife, a woman who whipped her servant, might both behave better when they found out their neighbors were talking about them.

Witchcraft demonstrated some of the same dynamics. A witch was someone who used supernatural powers to bring harm to someone else. Everyone believed that witchcraft was real, because it accounted for evil and suffering in a world where scientific explanations were not yet available. In 1671 in Northumberland, for example, Edward Cole's "people all fell sick and much of his cattle dyed." We would look for a germ or virus. Edward Cole suspected witchcraft.

That he accused a woman was no coincidence. In the witch traditions of Europe and Great Britain (Virginia's Indians and Africans probably had their own traditions, but we do not know the details), alleged witches were almost always female. Women, especially the old and poor, were easy scapegoats. For centuries, moreover, women had been stereotyped in the image of Eve—passionate, lusty, and easily seduced by the devil, the culprit who presumably gave witches their magical powers. Actually, a woman who was otherwise powerless might find her only leverage in behaving as though she might be a witch; that way neighbors who feared a bewitching would be likely to treat her with more care.

Or they might take her to court. Virginia seems to have had the dubious honor of hosting the first witch trial in British North America: Joan Wright of Surry was accused (and released) in 1626. No one was ever executed for witchcraft in Virginia, however, and the most famous case on record suggests that the authorities tended to proceed with caution. In 1698 and at several times thereafter, Grace Sherwood was accused of bewitching various neighbors. In the investigations that followed, a gallows-happy set of justices could have found sufficient evidence to convict. A panel of matrons found "two things like tits" on her body, the extra nipples with which witches supposedly suckled the devil. Later, Sherwood was bound and thrown in the river to test whether she



would sink or float; the spot in Virginia Beach is still called Witch Duck Point. She floated—more evidence of her guilt.

But Grace Sherwood was not condemned. Possibly, Virginia communities were too fragile to withstand the potentially explosive impact of witchcraft convictions. In the Sherwood case the local population was apparently badly divided; when two subsequent panels of matrons were summoned to give evidence, they refused to appear. Were they deliberately protesting the proceedings?

They may have been, for seventeenth-century women did launch into political battles when the occasion arose, and high-born women were involved at the highest levels. Margaret Brent arrived in Virginia around 1651. She lived out her days quietly on a Westmoreland plantation she named "Peace," a welcome change after a career in Maryland that had been anything but peaceful. Brent had served as the executrix of Maryland's governor, she had headed off a mutiny of hungry soldiers, and she had asked for the vote—the first woman in America to do so. In fact, she asked for two votes in the Maryland assembly, one as executrix and one in her own right. When she was denied, she lodged a protest against all the assembly's further actions.

Margaret Brent would probably have recognized kindred spirits in the women who were caught up in the turmoil of Bacon's Rebellion. Civil war broke out in Virginia in 1676. Indian policy precipitated the trouble; believing themselves too vulnerable to Indian attacks, planters on the frontier found a leader in Nathaniel Bacon and began making war on peaceful Indians. When Governor William Berkeley tried to stop them, Bacon's followers rebelled against their government, burning Jamestown and pillaging the plantations of Berkeley's supporters. Luckily for the forces of the governor, Bacon died in the fall of 1676 and the rebellion fizzled soon after.

While Bacon's Rebellion was apparently set in motion by men, women were quickly em-

broiled, too. One of the most important histories of the rebellion was written on the scene by a woman. Anne Cotton apologized for writing "too wordishly," but her *Account of Our Late Troubles in Virginia* was in fact an eloquent summary—and it earns her the distinction of having been Virginia's first woman historian. On the side of the rebels were several fiery women. One of them was Sarah Drummond, whose husband was executed for his role in the rebellion. Sarah herself was said to be "a notorious & wicked rebel, in inciting & encouraging the people to the late rebellion: persuading the soldiers to persist therein, telling them they need not fear the king, nor any force out of England, no more than a broken straw."

In this she was mistaken, for Lady Frances Berkeley soon returned from England with a thousand redcoats and orders to crush the rebels. Lady Berkeley was the wife of the governor and well connected at court. When the rebellion flared, the governor dispatched her to England to act as his representative. On returning to Virginia, she continued her vigorous defense of her husband's actions, and after he died in 1677, she harassed his successor unmercifully. She was joined by several influential men who met at her home, Green Spring, to plot strategy; they were collectively known as the Green Spring faction. Eventually Lady Berkeley married the governor of North Carolina (her third governor), but they lived at Green Spring and she remained a force in Virginia politics until her death in the 1690s.

From the widow who served as executrix of a small planter's will to the adventures of a Sarah Drummond or a Frances Berkeley, women in seventeenth-century Virginia frequently assumed positions of power, authority, or trust. There was a catch, however. No matter how well these women performed, their achievements did not undermine the prevailing belief in the natural inferiority of women. Instead, these active women were thought of as exceptions, as honorary men; ideas about women as a group changed not at all.

As the century drew to a close, these ideas were expressed and given new strength by two developments. First was the founding of William and Mary in 1693. The college was for men only and would remain so for 226 years. Then in 1699 a new law spelled out who in Virginia could vote and who could not. While custom prevented women from voting everywhere, Virginia was the only colony to say explicitly that women could not vote. It was the beginning of a long tradition of legislative conservatism on issues affecting women.

As the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth, then, some doors began to close on women. For black women, unfortunately, this was nothing new. Their turning point seems to have come in the 1660s. Before then Africans in Virginia had at least a slim chance of becoming free people, and those who were slaves had work routines not very different from those of English indentured servants. But from 1662 on, Virginia lawmakers made a series of momentous decisions: One law after another made slavery more rigid, more degrading, and more difficult to escape.

So far as anyone knows, the first blacks arrived in Virginia in 1619. It is certain that they were brought by force. Less is known about their status over time—whether they remained slaves who were kept in bondage all their lives, or whether they became indentured servants who went free after a few years. Since there was no slavery in England, white Virginians had no fixed ideas about what they should do with their new laborers from Africa. We do know that among the relatively small numbers of Africans who came to Virginia in the early years, a few did achieve freedom.

An outstanding example was the family of Anthony and Mary Johnson of Northampton County. "Antonio a Negro" and "Mary a Negro Woman" arrived in separate ships in 1621 and 1622. They met when they were put to work on the same plantation; Mary was the only woman on the place. How they got free is not known, but at some point they married, and their family

life proved to be a miracle of good health. They raised four children, and Mary and Anthony both lived to see grandchildren. Economically they did well. When the entire family moved to Maryland in the 1660s, Anthony sold a 250-acre plantation. Their grown son John owned a 450-acre plantation.

The Johnson family was surely not exempt from racial prejudice. Long before the English had laid eyes on actual Africans, they associated blackness with evil, and they made up their minds that darker-skinned peoples were inferior beings. English prejudice must have weighed on the Johnsons and all other black Virginians.

Still, there was a time in Virginia's early history when race relations were fluid, possibilities were open, and blacks and whites of the same class could expect roughly similar treatment. The best evidence of this comes from the courts' reactions to affairs of the heart. Black couples and interracial couples who were found guilty of adultery or fornication took the same punishments as white couples; in 1649 William Watts (white) and Mary (a "negro Woman" servant) found themselves "standing in a white sheet with a white Rodd in their hands in the Chapell." Blacks and whites who actually married each other—and there were several documented cases of this—were left in peace.

But not for long. At midcentury the black population was still small—perhaps 500 people in a total population of about 14,000—and the great majority of bound laborers were still English servants. By century's end Virginia was fast making its fateful transition to slave labor. There were thousands of blacks in Virginia by 1700 (between 6,000 and 10,000, it is thought, in a total population of 63,000), and for every new indentured servant imported from England, four black slaves arrived from Africa or the Caribbean.

The legal system was ready for them. From 1662 to 1705 the assembly passed a series of laws that together defined the essential character of slavery and race relations in Virginia. It

was a chilling list. Who was a slave? Any child born of a slave mother, the law answered (1662). Indians, too, could be made slaves (1682). Could a slave ever become a free person? Hardly ever, the law answered. An owner who wanted to free a slave would have to pay to send the freed slave out of the colony (1691). In 1723 the law was revised; henceforth a slave could be freed only by special act of the assembly. Could a white person marry a black or an Indian? No, and any white who tried was to be banished from the colony (1691). Could a slave own property? No, a slave *was* property, and any livestock belonging to slaves was to be confiscated and sold (1705). How could a slave be lawfully disciplined? If in the course of punishing a slave, the owner or overseer killed the slave, it was legal (1699). A runaway slave who resisted arrest was to be killed on the spot (1680).

### Questions for Study and Review

1. How might differences in women's roles among Indians and Europeans have affected negotiations between the two groups over land, trade, and war?
2. In what ways did English women and men share a common experience of settlement, and in what ways did their experiences differ?
3. How was the status of Africans transformed between 1619 and 1700 and why?
4. Given what you know about present-day roles of women in each of the three groups studied by Lebsock, what might contemporary women in these three groups learn by examining their counterparts in the seventeenth century?

A slave who was merely unruly could legally have fingers or toes cut off (1705).

The law, fortunately, was not the only influence on the lives of slaves. As we shall see, slaves themselves continually invented ways of exerting influence on their owners, on the system, and on one another. Yet it is important to appreciate the law's full power. By 1700 the typical black Virginia woman was "chattel"—property—and as such she could be bought, sold, mortgaged, or swapped, or even gambled away in a card game. She would remain property all of her life, and so would her children, who could be taken away from her at any time. She could try to protest, but she did so knowing that her owner had life-and-death power over her. These were among the basic facts of life under slavery, and they would remain in force for more than a century and a half.

### Suggested Readings

- Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938).
- Rayna Green, "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture," *Massachusetts Review* (Autumn 1975).
- Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly* (October 1977).
- James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (1985).
- Alan Kulikoff, "The Beginnings of the Afro-American Family in Maryland," in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (1978).

## TWO

# The Salem Village Cataclysm: Origins and Impact of a Witch-hunt

Lyle Koehler

In late seventeenth-century Massachusetts, Puritan women and men were no longer confronted by powerful Indian societies, nor were they as dependent as their Virginia counterparts on African labor. Nonetheless, Indian attacks on frontier villages and the religious practices of Caribbean slaves fed the fears of English settlers and thereby contributed to one of the most shocking incidents in colonial history—the Salem witch-hunt. Within fifty years of the founding of Plymouth, social and economic tensions began to plague the colony. Internal dissent—over religion, land, and politics—combined with external threats—from Indians, the Dutch, and the French—to disrupt the early vision of a "city on a hill" that would stand as a beacon of righteousness for the rest of the Christian world.

Women were often at the center, symbolically and literally, of these upheavals. Heretic Anne Hutchinson, Quaker martyr Mary Dyer, and the Salem women hanged as witches were some of the most visible manifestations of Massachusetts's spiritual decline and earthly disarray. Both the accusers and those accused of witchcraft in Salem were predominantly female. The two groups of women reflected the deep economic and political cleavages and the social and sexual tensions that divided not only Salem but the colony as a whole.

The ever growing number of non-Puritan settlers, the expansion of commerce and shortage of good farm land, the migration of younger men, the resulting surplus of marriage-age daughters, and increasing numbers of poor folk and transients heightened anxieties among many settlers.

Koehler explores the question of why that anxiety was translated into a witch-hunt in Salem. He notes that the breakdown of family and community cohesion that became apparent in this now notorious village eventually spread throughout the colonies, and was accelerated in the next century by revolution, revivalism, and industrialization. Then, too, as Linda Kerber and Paul Johnson show in later readings, changes in women's lives were a good barometer of changes in society as a whole.

Only in Salem, however, did the barometer fail to reflect the prevailing social climate. Perhaps the recognition, when the hunt ended, that innocent women may have been put to death kept such outbursts of witch hysteria from invading other towns. Yet the contagion of witchcraft was as believable in the seventeenth century as the germ theory of disease is today. Diatribes against the social, moral, and sexual practices of witches were not unlike those hurled against AIDS victims in our own time. Perhaps the most intriguing point is that the witch-hunts in the colonies did not become more severe. In the larger historical context, this was a period of great turmoil, during which European nations burned tens of thousands of witches. It is significant that New World residents managed to contain their fears. This was most important for women, who were most likely to be the targets of accusations and executions. Koehler traces the horrors and the limits of the Salem witch-hunt, illuminating both the powers and perils it offered women.