Since the publication in 1972 of James T. Lemon’s *The Best Poor Man’s Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania*, scholars of the Middle colonies, like their colleagues working on the Chesapeake and lower South, have exploded the New England mythologizing in early American studies. As historians have broadened the scope of their research to encompass the “lower sort,” Native Americans, and Africans and African Americans within the developmental model of colonial history, conceptualizations based primarily on the perceptions of Puritan ministers and “great families” have lost force. Under attack even by historians of early Massachusetts and its neighbors, Perry Miller’s declension model, which sets forth the fragmentation of corporate Puritanism over the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, lacks explanatory power for other regions of British North America.¹

In particular, the presence of many ethnic and religious groups in the Middle colonies differentiates Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jer-

sey, and New York from regions to the north and south. This diversity has impeded construction of a model of middle Atlantic development that fires the imagination or promotes intellectual debate with nearly the same vigor as Miller's declension. While historians of early New England, and of the southern colonies as well, have felt some ease in describing hegemonic cultures dominated by Puritans and Anglicans of English descent, religious and ethnic divisions in Pennsylvania and adjacent colonies prohibit easy generalizations. Indeed, few common cultural elements are apparent. In fact, as recent studies have made clear, residents of the Middle colonies, like significant portions of the United States population as a whole in later years, shared the experience of building a multicultural society. The most salient feature of that society was the working out of a modus vivendi by individuals and groups originating from rigidly ethnocentric cultures. While posing a more difficult challenge than other regions to understanding the creation of dominant power structures, the Middle colonies offer a model more closely congruent with United States society today.

As the field of early American history, and that of Pennsylvania in particular, has moved towards this understanding, knowledge of the part played by women in shaping interethnic and inter-religious relationships has lagged far behind. On the one hand, women have gone largely unrecognized as significant historical actors by the authors of most influential works on colonial Pennsylvania. Investigators of interchurch rivalries, family and community structures, agricultural practices, local and provincial politics, and specific ethnic groups and classes have retained a mind-set symbolized by the phrase, “best poor man’s country.” In early Pennsylvania history, women remain distinct from “society,” “community,” and rigidly defined turfs of politics, business, and religion, despite the obvious fact that they comprised roughly one-half of the population and apparently surpassed men in numbers in many churches.

On the other hand, those of us who have researched the status and contributions of women in early Pennsylvania have largely failed to

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appreciate the importance of the multicultural model. In early American women's history, even among most scholars who focus on Pennsylvania women, the paradigm of New England remains dominant. At the core of this paradigm, like that of declension, is the concept of one hegemonic ideology/experience modified over time by economic forces. The model has spawned debates, which tend to assume a broad-based commonality among women, over the economic status of women in colonial America, the impact of the American Revolution, and the nature of women's authority in society. The primacy of New England and its conceptual framework has made Pennsylvania women seem oddly tangential to the course of American women's history, when in fact their diversity places them at its center.

How then do we evaluate the status and contributions of women in this multicultural society? First, scholars should liberate Pennsylvania women from their seeming irrelevancy. Three basic themes in women's history have left Pennsylvania women outside the story: 1) the cultural dominance of New England; 2) the middle Atlantic experience of women as generalized from Quaker women's lives; and 3) the Revolution as benchmark in women's experience.

A major reason for the primacy of New England, or the "eastern" states as mid-Atlantic contemporaries called it, is that such excellent scholars as Joy Day Buel, Richard Buel, Jr., Nancy F. Cott, Elaine F. Crane, Mary Maples Dunn, Nancy Hewitt, Carol Karlsen, Lyle Koehler, Mary P. Ryan, and Laurel T. Ulrich have focused on the region, including the adjacent parts of New York state dominated in the nineteenth century by families of Yankee stock. Historians have reached generally convincing conclusions about the status of women among a population that, with the major exception of Rhode Island, was fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and religion. Within the dominant Puritan/Congregational culture, scholars have conceptualized the impact of economic change (or lack thereof) on women's status.³

That stimulating, well-researched work has been and is being conducted on New England is in itself not a problem; rather, the difficulty arises when generalizations about "American women" are made from these studies. In the first place, the protagonists of the New England studies were mostly middle- and upper-class women who were literate and active in churches and benevolent societies. They left a literary trail and offered to twentieth-century historians (of equivalent status and interests) the intellectual framework for understanding how the lives of their foremothers compared with their own. Secondly, the New England focus has obscured the variant experiences of women of other regions in British North America—the Middle colonies, Chesapeake, and lower South. Since we appear to know a great deal about the social history of New England women, the conclusion reached too often is that we have extensive knowledge of the social history of all American women and thus can direct our research in different directions.

This was the prevailing opinion expressed in December 1987 at a symposium on gender in the early republic sponsored by the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, when a group of historians of women assessed briefly the state of knowledge on the subject and offered suggestions for further research. Three of the panelists were specialists on New England (Nancy F. Cott, Robert A. Gross, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg) and another (Lynn Hunt) an expert on France. The major work of the fifth panelist (Christine M. Stansell) concerned working-class women in New York City. The moderator (Linda K. Kerber) encouraged a wide-ranging discussion, and indeed

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4. For the most influential synthesis of this kind, see Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984), 609-19.

5. The edited and revised proceedings were published in "Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter, *WMQ*) 46 (1989), 565-85.
the respondents exposed a number of areas concerning women and gender requiring exploration, including transatlantic connections, poverty, and the construction of manhood as well as womanhood. But the weight of argument held that the most fruitful avenue of future inquiry lay in investigating gendered meanings in the language of politics and republican ideology. Smith-Rosenberg in particular argued that with such study, “gender becomes central to any understanding of the ways the hegemonical discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took form, institutionally reproduced, and altered themselves.”

A number of scholars felt disquieted as they left that session. To be on the cutting edge of women’s history, the most vocal participants seemed to be saying, one must abandon the questions and methods of social history—the tools for understanding the work, material condition, kinship relationships, sexuality, attitudes, and beliefs of a broad range of early Americans—to seek gendered meanings in political discourse. Historians should adopt the methodology of literary critics to elicit evidence about the centrality of gender in the discourse of the new republic from its canonical and not-so-canonical texts.

The importance of placing gender, and by implication women, at the center of the history of early America is not questioned. The conceit that approximately 50 percent of the population, because they were disadvantaged legally and politically, had no part in expelling the British, disestablishing the churches, and building new economic and political structures should be put to rest. By going to the heart of the republic—its ideology—the discursive approach has the potential for moving beyond studies that undervalue women’s participation in revolution and nation-building.

But for the social historian who thinks in terms of varied economic interests, religions, and ethnic groups, an approach that targets ideology alone is too narrowly focused. To argue that republican ideology contained notions of womanhood and manhood, one accepts the existence of a single ideology with its accompanying conceptions of gender. Whose ideology is this? “Social historians’ work with nonelite, even nonliterate people,” Jan Radway commented in the discussion period

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of the December 1987 conference, "has altered the way in which we understand American history and culture. In this new departure, is there not a dangerous bias toward print, toward high culture, toward elites? . . . Could this trend be seen as a move on the part of academic elites to reinscribe the importance of 'high' language and the canon, and thus to avoid the challenges posed by social history?" For historians of women in early Pennsylvania in particular, the "new departure" to literary discourse is certainly premature. While some scholars fluent in the history of New England middle- and upper-class women may feel prepared to discuss "American women" as some unified force, much work still needs to be done on the rest of early American society, including the Middle and southern colonies, before we can discuss with any certainty the range of attitudes and beliefs concerning gender and the status of women in this period.

The second tendency in early American women's history that serves to marginalize Pennsylvania women is the focus on Quakers as exemplars of mid-Atlantic women. Despite the fact that Friends were only a minority of Pennsylvania's population by the 1720s (though still in political control), scholarship on Quaker women dominates the field.  

Of course, much remains to be done on eighteenth-century Quakers, as Mary Maples Dunn has argued convincingly in a recent article, but the difference in volume of work completed on Quakers and that on women of other backgrounds is remarkable. Historians of women in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, like their counterparts in New England, have concentrated on the people who left the best record. While many scholars have examined the role of women within the Society of Friends in considerable detail, the history of Presbyterian, Swedish Lutheran, German Lutheran and Reformed, Mennonite, and Anglican women in Pennsylvania awaits thorough investigation.

Page Putnam Miller discussed the role of Presbyterian Sarah Ralston in establishing benevolent societies in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia, but more generally the topic of women in the Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania remains untouched. Doris E. Andrews looked at the participation of Methodist women from the church's earliest years. Her study uncovered the declining role of women in the Methodist leadership as the religion matured, even though women dominated congregations in numbers. Stephanie G. Wolf also found evidence of feminization among Germantown's Dunkard, Lutheran, and Reformed church membership.

The focus on Quakers pushes the mid-Atlantic region to the edges of women's history and at the same time reinforces the notion of a hegemonic middle- and upper-class culture. Because women Friends served as ministers and were responsible, along with men, for church

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10 Although records of religions other than the Society of Friends are unlikely to yield much evidence of women's formal participation in church governance, painstaking research in personal papers, sermons, and court records (like that conducted by Laurel Ulrich for Good Wives) will elucidate the nature of women's piety and informal authority. Linkage of such sources as church membership lists, birth, death, and marriage records, wills, and court documents will provide evidence concerning such topics as feminization of membership, intermarriage, inheritance, and benevolence.

discipline and relief for the poor, their experience is considered extraordinary. Commentators point to the religious egalitarianism of Friends, but dismiss it as a phenomenon of the fringe. Thus, Quaker dominance in Pennsylvania women's history fuels New England hegemony in women's history as a whole. Beyond their special role within the church, however, the Pennsylvania Quaker women who appear on the pages of our studies seem very much like their Puritan counterparts—generally affluent and literate, and active in benevolence and religious affairs.

In fact, except for Marylynn Salmon's study of the law, analysis of Quaker women's status outside the meetinghouse is scanty. In her analysis of women's property rights in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, Salmon demonstrated that Quaker politicians erected a legal structure essentially like that of other colonies: throughout Anglo-America married women were disqualified from controlling property or earnings. Pennsylvania's provision for feme sole trader status for women whose husbands were absent, however, and its singular mandate that creditors of a husband's estate should be paid from the widow's dower if the personal estate was insufficient (thus making the widow equally responsible for family debts) suggest that Quaker lawmakers assumed at least a limited involvement of women in economic activities and financial decisions.12

Scholarship on the family in Pennsylvania has been limited almost entirely to Quakers and has emphasized comparisons with the Puritans. J. William Frost described the Quaker family within the context of Friends' theology and showed how parents nurtured their children within the religion. Barry Levy, on the other hand, emphasized wealth as well as religious beliefs in determining family success in keeping sons and daughters within the meeting.13 To date no one has conducted research on the authority of Pennsylvania women within the family in a way that permits comparison among religions and ethnic groups.


13 Frost, Quaker Family; Levy, Quakers.
To evaluate the extent of Quaker exceptionalism, studies specifically comparing the status of Quaker women with that of other women both inside and outside the meeting are required.\(^{14}\)

The third theme in American women's history, the American Revolution as benchmark in women's experience, has had a more ambiguous role in relegating Pennsylvania women to the periphery than either the dominance of New England or the focus on Quakers. Both Mary Beth Norton and Linda Kerber have utilized the sources of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and nearby repositories in their influential studies of women during the Revolutionary age. Pennsylvanians are central to their analyses, from Mary Hayes, the Carlisle woman mythologized as "Molly Pitcher," who joined a gun crew at the Battle of Monmouth, to Benjamin Rush, who articulated the role of republican mother.\(^{15}\) Journals and correspondence of Elizabeth Drinker, Sally Wister, Grace Galloway, Nancy Shippen, and Elizabeth Graeme Ferguson provide a wealth of information about women's experiences in war and peace.\(^{16}\)

In Norton's analysis of the Pennsylvania materials, as in her evaluation of New England and (a few) southern sources, well-to-do women figure prominently. From diaries and letters of the articulate, Norton constructed a normative and homogeneous experience: the Revolution, in her view, empowered women by forcing them to choose political allegiances and fend for themselves. The struggle with Great Britain politicized American women for the first time; and although full participation in the polity eluded them, the promise of the Declaration of Independence inspired later efforts for women's rights.\(^ {17}\) Norton's

\(^{14}\) My current project on women, religion, and reform in the Delaware Valley from 1680 to 1860 should partially fill this gap.


\(^{17}\) Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 155-227, 359. For an alternative view, namely that the Revolution had little impact on women's lives and indeed could not reverse long-term economic and demographic changes that affected women adversely, see Joan Hoff Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in Jean E. Friedman et
heavy reliance on wealthy Quaker women and wives of Loyalists in Pennsylvania, however, undercuts her thesis of empowerment by the Revolution—because the religious background of Friends could have prepared them for assertive action—and at the same time obscures the more typical experience of less affluent Pennsylvanians. The state that adopted the most radical constitution in Revolutionary America seems dominated by wealthy Loyalists and pacifists. Although Norton brings mid-Atlantic women to the heart of her analysis, the individuals whose experiences she describes were hardly representative of women of Pennsylvania or the rebellious colonies as a whole.

We need an account of Pennsylvania women in the American Revolution that places Quakers and the wives of Loyalists in the context of a community of women of differing circumstances and political viewpoints.\(^\text{18}\) Granted, evidence is elusive, but Wayne Bodle’s article on Jane Bartram demonstrates the impressive results of tenacious research about a formerly obscure person by a historian sensitive to historiographical issues.\(^\text{19}\) Further biographical and prosopographical research that forces newspapers, court documents, deeds, immigration lists, probate records, correspondence, business ledgers, military files, and church records to yield information about the lives of both husbands and wives will elucidate the Revolutionary era activities of a wide range of Pennsylvania women.

In the field of early American women’s history, then, the New England paradigm continues to reign. The prevailing image of the “colonial woman” is one of English Puritan descent. Her community

\(^{\text{18}}\) Norton urged scholars to investigate “differences as well as similarities in colonial women’s attitudes toward themselves, their lives, and the world around them . . . to ask questions about how women’s race, ethnicity, religion, age, economic status, place of residence, and so forth affected their lives and attitudes during the Revolutionary era.” See Norton, “Reflections on Women in the Age of the American Revolution,” in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, 491-92.

was homogeneous in ethnicity and religion; it underwent change as a result of economic diversification and increasing land scarcity rather than from contact with other cultures. Legally and politically disadvantaged, this colonial woman held a primary responsibility in domestic production; her chief public roles were to act as an intrusive but supportive neighbor and quiet pillar of the church. Only with the Revolution did she engage in political activity—as Molly Pitcher she filled in when her husband collapsed, as Abigail Adams she pointed out how natural rights principles should apply to women as well as to men—but the architects of the new government soon made clear that her role in politics would be constrained.

Quaker women, who represent the mid-Atlantic region in this model, were the exception that proved the rule. They too were of English (or vaguely British) stock, of comfortable means, and devoted to their religion. They assumed a vocal and authoritative role in meeting affairs, however, and so they appeared more influential in religion, though not in other aspects of their lives, than their Puritan sisters. As pacifists, Quakers could not be patriots, but when their husbands were absent, the Revolution forced them as well to take initiative in dealing with the vagaries of war.

This model has obvious attractions. It complements the Whig interpretation of the Revolution as the culmination of colonial history and so permits integration of women into the existing framework of United States history with relative ease. More important, research emphasizing the Revolution underscores the centrality of women's place in the past, in winning independence and helping to define the new republic. Linda Kerber, in her study of the ideology of the Revolutionary era, offered a convincing analysis of both the impact of the Revolution on women's lives and the nature of women's participation in the new republic. The Revolution did indeed politicize women, but as "republican mothers" rather than as full-fledged participants in civic affairs. They could not vote (except in New Jersey until 1807) or hold office. Women would influence politics only from their homes, through the guidance they gave to their sons about public duty and virtue. Thus, middle- and upper-class women, including many in Philadelphia who had access to widening educational opportunities in the postwar years and whose sons could be expected to become civic leaders, experienced an expansion in their own public roles. Still, the role of republican mother kept women outside the center of power: in Kerber's words,
"they were still on its edges." But the most valuable part of her work is in showing the centrality of the image of republican motherhood in republican ideology. "It is a measure of the conservatism of the Revolution," she wrote, "that women remained on the periphery of the political community; it is possible to read the subsequent political history of women in America as the story of women's efforts to accomplish for themselves what the Revolution had failed to do." The same could be said, of course, for African Americans. Thus, Kerber demonstrated that in creating a marginal role for women in the political life of the new nation, the founding fathers determined the nature of the Revolution. Republican ideology was defined by who was left out of the polity as well as by who was brought inside.20

Yet we are brought back to the question of whose ideology is this? And, indeed, whose Revolution? When we are mindful of the women whose sons would play no role in the politics of the infant republic because they were propertyless, or when we consider Native Americans, African Americans, new immigrants, and sectarians who viewed the struggle with Great Britain as irrelevant or even inimical to their interests, the "normative" ideology appears less pervasive.

In United States women's history the overarching purpose is to articulate both women's central role in American society and the diverse experiences of women of different regions, classes, races, nationalities, and religions. Often this goal seems unattainable, as each of its components takes us in opposite directions when the common ideology or conditions we describe for women in general mask an underlying complexity experienced by particular groups. Investigation of mid-Atlantic women, in New Jersey, New York, and Delaware as well as in Pennsylvania, could help to remove this apparent contrariety. For in studying the mid-Atlantic region, we examine a society whose foundation is diversity.

Indeed, work done by many scholars on early Pennsylvania women is grounded in the conviction that differences in economic activity, class, marital status, ethnic background, and religion affected their social condition and can help to explain their behavior and world view. Even so, much more research must be done before we can understand the forging of a pluralistic and relatively tolerant society, but also one in which race, nationality, class, and gender determined status and power.\textsuperscript{21}

Of historians of early Pennsylvania, demographers have been most attentive to differences among groups. In fact, Susan E. Klepp has observed that “the work in Philadelphia demography” is notable even among demographic histories for “the extent to which class, race, ethnicity, and religion are conceived to be integral to the study of population.”\textsuperscript{22} Wide disparities have been found in fertility rates, celibacy rates of men and women, and levels of mortality and morbidity. Differences in the demographic experience of urban and rural residents, and within Philadelphia variations by class and race, were especially striking. Demographers, and especially Klepp herself, more than any other group of Pennsylvania scholars, have structured their investigations in comparative frameworks and rooted their studies in specific places and times.\textsuperscript{23}

Historians who have researched topics as diverse as work, inheritance, marital discord, and infanticide have also been sensitive to the specific circumstances in which women lived. Carole Shammas, focusing on two Philadelphia wards in 1775, explored the intersection of class and gender in an urban setting. She found that many women (45 percent in affluent Chestnut Ward and 21 percent in working-class Mulberry Ward) were hired or bound servants or slaves. And while

\textsuperscript{21} For an important essay advocating an approach to historical inquiry that investigates “the inter-relatedness of the various aspects of the system of patriarchal dominance” over one that regards “class, race, and gender dominance as separate though intersecting and overlapping systems,” see Gerda Lerner, “Reconceptualizing Differences Among Women,” \textit{Journal of Women's History} 1 (1990), 106-22 (quotation on p. 116).


\textsuperscript{23} Susan E. Klepp, “Fragmented Knowledge: Questions in Regional Demographic History,” ibid., 223-33.
the urban occupational structure allowed some female heads of household, who comprised about 10 percent of women in both wards, to hold such positions as schoolmistress, retailer, and mantuamaker, the majority of female heads of household were so poor that they were exempted from paying taxes. Most were widows, of whom many had "no visible means of support." Shammas concluded from this dreary scenario that, despite coverture, married women in Philadelphia experienced more favorable circumstances, both economically and in household authority, than their unmarried counterparts.24

Claudia Goldin picked up the investigation of the economic status of women in Philadelphia in 1790, specifically addressing the debate, fueled by Mary Beth Norton, over whether women’s participation in the labor force increased or declined from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.25 Using evidence from city and business directories and the decennial census, Goldin found a decline in labor force participation of female heads of household over the period from 1790 to 1860, but not enough change "to justify terming the early period a golden age for women." Throughout the period the participation of women in the labor force was quite substantial—an average of about 44 percent of female heads of household.26


Lisa Wilson (Waciega), with evidence from probate records and family papers, supported Goldin’s findings on women’s participation in business for Philadelphia and extended the analysis to rural Chester County. Wilson disputed the historiographical stereotype that middle- and upper-class women knew little of their husbands’ business dealings with data showing that a substantial minority of widows were able to increase the personal wealth that their husbands had left them. “Successful ‘men of business,’” like innkeeper Margaret Holman and farmer Catharine Boothe, had participated in the family enterprise before the deaths of their husbands, and then in widowhood had “actually improved their economic circumstances and provided effectively for their children.”

In *Loosening the Bonds*, Joan Jensen made rural women her focus. She too was interested in determining the economic status of women during the century from 1750 to 1850. Women of the Brandywine Valley, and perhaps of the mid-Atlantic region more generally, she argued, contributed substantially to overall economic development by fostering a considerable trade in butter. Her analysis is important in underscoring the generally forgotten fact that domestic production, which was counted in “women’s sphere” and often invisible because it was not listed in men’s ledgers, was a major component of family and regional income.

The research of several scholars further elucidates the magnitude of women’s production, both in domestic work and in areas traditionally considered male. Their work demonstrates the importance of identifying class and ethnic backgrounds. In a larger study of the rural work force, Lucy Simler presented data showing that, in 1799, women and girls comprised about 46 percent of the landless labor force of Chester and Delaware Counties (not including adults or minors of landholding

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families). Women were hired for such domestic occupations as spinning, nursing, and buttermaking; but they also reaped, pulled flax, butchered, and made hay—and were paid equivalent wages with men.

Simler’s examples, which to the extent she could determine included workers and employers of English, Welsh, and Scotch-Irish descent, raise serious doubts about the validity of the commonplace that colonial women avoided working in the fields. Strictly defined sex roles were apparently a cultural ideal shared by sufficiently affluent yeoman families of British descent, but such an ideal was not the actual experience or perhaps even the aspiration of lower-class Anglo-Americans and women of other cultural backgrounds. Simler’s evidence of the diversified work of laboring women combined with Marianne Wokeck’s data that families, and thus women and girls, were a sizable proportion of German settlers (who comprised about one-third of Pennsylvania’s population in the late eighteenth century) suggest that a majority of rural Pennsylvania women performed a wide range of household and agricultural tasks. According to Priscilla Waggoner, German farm women reaped and raked in the fields, tended poultry and gardens, cooked, pulled flax, spun, and controlled the processing and marketing of butter, cheese, eggs, garden vegetables, and feathers. Sale advertisements of African-American slave women demonstrate that they too were expected to labor in the fields as necessary. Indeed, typical of laboring women was the Chester County slave woman who could “do town or country work, but [was] most suitable

29 Lucy Simler, “The Landless Worker: An Index of Economic and Social Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1750-1820,” *PMHB* 114 (1990), 163-99 (percentage computed from Table 3). In 1799 all landless workers were 8,639 of a total labor pool of 21,452.

30 Ibid., 182-88.


for the country, as she was brought up there, and is very handy and active in tending cattle and horses, and can do many sorts of out-door work.33

The research of Simler, Waggoner, Debra Newman, and others demonstrates that ethnic differences must be considered in examining gender roles in colonial society. In respect to African-American women, a systematic analysis of the community of free black women in Philadelphia and its hinterland, from 1780 to the Civil War, needs to be done. No one has yet paid special attention to the decisions and circumstances of Pennsylvania black women as they made the transition from slavery and servitude to freedom.34 Did many, as Suzanne Lebsock found in Petersburg, Virginia, avoid marriage and begin to accumulate property? Was this a conscious rejection of a new kind of oppression represented by coverture or the result of a skewed sex ratio and/or meager job opportunities for men?35 Cross-cultural studies exploring all walks of life and including German, African-American, Native American, English, Scotch-Irish, Swedish, and Dutch women are required before we can attempt to generalize about the status of women in Pennsylvania society.

Studies designed to measure Pennsylvania women’s authority and autonomy within the family and society by looking at inheritance patterns focus on urban-rural differences and wealth, but not ethnicity or religion. Since Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh presented


their pathbreaking research in “The Planter’s Wife,” many historians have employed probate records to uncover attitudes of dying men toward their wives.\textsuperscript{36} In these studies, decisions concerning executorship and division of real and personal property are correlated with a number of attributes, which may include the decedent’s stage in the life cycle, wealth, occupation, family size, residence, ethnic group, and religion, in ways that are often enlightening and suggestive. This multitude of variables is welcome but makes comparison difficult, as do disparity in beginning and end dates and variations in presentation of data.

For Pennsylvania, as part of a study that crosses three centuries, Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin presented evidence from rural Bucks County for the period from 1685 to 1756. They found that, in later decades, Bucks County testators, like those in other colonies during the same period, became less generous toward their wives and less likely to appoint them executors. With increasing scarcity of land, decedents turned to strategies that kept the family farm intact—joint ownership by several sons or provision for one son to purchase the homestead from the others.\textsuperscript{37}

Lisa Wilson evaluated probate data for Philadelphia and Chester County for a later period, from 1750 to 1850, and discovered a contrary trend. She found that over the century men in both places generally became more liberal toward their widows, but that Philadelphia husbands were more likely than men in the countryside to leave their entire estate to their wives. The trends of executorship diverged: while an increasing percentage of Chester County men excluded their widows from managing their estates, a lower and more stable proportion of urban decedents did so. Rather than interpreting these data against a standard of women’s autonomy and power, Wilson has emphasized the perspective of family strategy in which husbands and wives established priority in “the overwhelming importance of family


\textsuperscript{37} Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, \textit{Inheritance in America From Colonial Times to the Present} (New Brunswick, 1987), 41-62.
and the welfare of the children after the death of a husband and father." She suggested that urban-rural economic differences account in large part for discrepancies in testamentary practices in the two locales.  

Both of these studies were done thoughtfully and add to our understanding that a woman's authority within her family was determined in part by family wealth and economic endeavor. We are nagged, however, by the knowledge that other variables could explain evolutionary and regional differences. In particular, the decline of Quakers (among whom women enjoyed some greater measure of authority) as a proportion of the population throughout southeastern Pennsylvania and differing ethnic profiles in Philadelphia and rural areas (and indeed among various sections of the hinterland) bring into question explanations that rest primarily on economics.  

Other topics explored by historians of women in early Pennsylvania include marital discord and crime. Merril D. Smith used Philadelphia and Chester County records to investigate marriages that ended in divorce, separation, desertion, and escape. Looking at the break-ups from the vantage of both husbands and wives, she found the source of much discord in the differing expectations men and women took to marriage; she shrewdly uncovered the idealistic hopes for marital bliss from documents testifying to its woeful end. Employing an urban-rural comparative model based on legal records from Philadelphia and ten Pennsylvania counties, G.S. Rowe detected changes over the Revolutionary period in the rate and kinds of criminal prosecution of women. Sharon Burnston, in seeking to explain the presence of two infant skeletons in an eighteenth-century Philadelphia privy pit, systematically exhausted other possibilities and concluded that the


babies had been born out of wedlock and either killed by their mother (or an accomplice) or born dead and their birth and burial concealed. Burnston’s analysis explored women’s motivation for such action and suggested, given the paucity of privy pit excavations, that such behavior could have been common.42

Obviously, there are as many more projects to be done on women and work, family, religion, sexuality, crime, politics, and economics as imagination and the sources will allow. Studies to date have been shaped by a commitment to understanding differences arising from class, economic circumstances, religion, and ethnic background, but on several fronts we must work towards a more inclusive and analytical strategy that places women at the center of Pennsylvania history, and Pennsylvania at the center of early American women’s history. At some point—one would hope soon—historians will as a matter of course seek to determine whether eighteenth-century Pennsylvania was also “the best poor woman’s country.”

If we are to comprehend the differences among women, to explain why the behavior and apparent beliefs of Pennsylvania women varied among themselves and diverged from those of their counterparts in New England and the Chesapeake, then we must pay stricter attention to ethnic, religious, and class divisions. Even more, as Gerda Lerner has suggested, we should go beyond investigating distinct though overlapping experiences arising from gender, race, nationality, and class to determine how these experiences interacted—to discover the process by which a society’s power structure is created from such differences.43 Beyond knowledge of the lives and ideologies of different groups of Pennsylvania women, we want to know how they contributed to building a multiethnic, multireligious, and multiclass society. It is within reason to predict that women’s part in producing this

43 Lerner, “Reconceptualizing Differences.”
pluralistic, hierarchical society outstripped in importance any other of their assigned public roles.

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