Taking Sides

Issue Four

p. 71, ¶ 2, line 3 – “What was the status of women in the British North American colonies? To what degree did the legal status of women differ from their *de facto* status? A half-century of scholarship has produced the notion that colonial women enjoyed a more privileged status than either their European contemporaries or their nineteenth-century descendants.”

p. 71, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Women were closed off from any formal public in the colony even when they performed essential economic functions within the community. In colonial America and during the American Revolution, they practiced law, pounded iron as blacksmiths, trapped for furs and tanned leather, made guns, built ships, and edited and printed newspapers. At the same time, however, colonial society viewed women as subordinate beings. They had no political power within the individual colonies and still were suspect as the transmitters of evil, simply because they were women. Nor was it a coincidence that most of the suspected witches were female. Many of those accused of witchcraft in late seventeenth-century New England were older women who had inherited land that had traditionally gone to males.”

Yes

p. 72, ¶ 1, line 2 – “Most believe that white women were more highly regarded in the colonies than at home, because of the higher value of their labor and their relative scarcity...”

p. 72, ¶ 2, line 1 – “This article examines the types of work women in early New England did compared to men, weighs relative pay scales, and explores trends in the wages of both. Evidence comes from two types of sources: wage ceilings discussed or imposed by governments in 1670 and 1777 and pay rates found in account books, diaries, and probate records. These sources also supply the basis for estimating women’s rates of participation in the paid labor force and for tabulating the types of work women performed for pay.”

p. 73, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Nor did many early households possess the tools for such women’s tasks as brewing, baking, or dairying. Only a few women appear anywhere in John Pynchon’s Connecticut Valley accounts.”

p. 73, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Women who were not tied down by young children probably spent their time outdoors working in gardens or with their men in the fields. Although English women did not customarily do heavy field work, they did garden with hoes, and in the colonies the hoe played a major role wherever families could use existing Indian fields.”

p. 73, ¶ 4, line 1 – “[T]he ratio of women’s pay to men’s pay was at its highest point in this early period when the division of labor between men and women was less clearly defined than in contemporary England or as it later came to be in New England.”
The use of ox teams, restricted to older men, effectively segregated family members into field and home workers.

Women participated in none of these activities except at harvest time, when their help was welcomed.

At harvest time she prepared breakfast, nursed her child, walked five or six miles to the field, reaped her rye (finishing before any of the men), and walked back home.

Men’s diaries also describe both sexes and all ages gathering corn by day and husking together at night, making the work an occasion for a frolic.

Girls and women tended the fowl and small animals. Gender-base assignment of many farm chores centered on objective differences in body height and strength rather than on what was deemed culturally appropriate to one sex or the other.

Yet gender ordered male and female spheres in ways that went beyond obvious physical distinctions.

Thus, people allocated work among themselves based on physical capacity but also on gender. The advent of English-style agriculture, involving large draft animals and deep plowing, helped fix many boundaries between the sexes.

Graves hired occasional male help in addition to his sons and kept a young servant named Thome for two years when his younger boys were too small to hoe, make fences, or mow hay. Meanwhile, his girls did chores – but never farm work – for his neighbors. They sewed, spun, nursed, and kept house.

Men could and did cross into women’s domain when the size of market justified a larger scale of operations than the home could provide.

Most women in retailing were widows who taken over deceased husband’s shop...

Though women had always acted as midwives, nursed the sick, and disbursed homemade remedies, a few also ‘doctored.’

Women taught school, as did men. Generally speaking, women taught young pupils of both sexes to read and spell, and men instructed more advanced classes in writing and arithmetic.

In the eighteenth century, women usually taught the younger children and girls during the summer, often for only half the wages of the young male college graduates who took the older children the rest of
p. 76, ¶ 6, line 1 – “There was also a two-tier system for making apparel. Men normally tailored coats and breeches, and women sewed shirts and gowns; however, women in the eighteenth century also engaged in tailoring to a limited extent.”

p. 77, ¶ 4, line 1 – “Weaving may be the only occupation in the colonial period for which there is sufficient documentation to compare men’s and women’s pay for the same type of work.”

p. 77, ¶ 4, line 7 – “Of those for whom pay rates are available, comparisons with contemporary male weavers show that the sexes earned similar rates per yard for common kinds of cloth.”

p. 77, ¶ 5, line 1 – “The history of weaving and tailoring in New England illustrates the flexibility inherent in the region’s gender-based work roles.”

p. 78, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Despite New England’s limited resources and the absence of technological change, demand generated by war and export markets drove the region’s economy at a faster rate than its population grew.”

p. 79, ¶ 3, line 1 – “When farmers endeavored to raise more livestock and the grass to feed them, and when farm wives found themselves milking more cows, churning more butter, and making more cheese, men and women were putting pressure on a labor force that in the short run could expand only by crossing the gender division of labor.”

p. 79, ¶ 4, line 1 – “The rise in wages beginning in the 1740s at first touched only men but in the long term affected everyone by loosening the bonds between parents and their grown children as daughters found work outside the home and sons joined the military or emigrated.”

p. 80, ¶ 2, line 8 – “When combined with evidence that increasing numbers of country girls were attending school and learning how to write, the growing ability of women to earn money and conduct business at the local store can be viewed as a positive good, giving them greater control over their own lives.”

p. 80, ¶ 2, line 15 – “There is also a demographic indicator that women’s lot was improving: life expectancy of married women rose.”

p. 80, ¶ 2, last sentence – “Women would not gain politically or legally from American Independence, and equality was never even a prospect, but in the decades before 1776 they had won a little liberty, and comfort is no mean thing.”

No

p. 81, ¶ 2, line 4 – “... we do not know how man women worked at some occupation other than that of housewife and mother, or how much they earned. Because the characterization of woman as the weaker sex affected Puritan
views of sexual behavior, intelligence, and social privilege, we might suspect that it also deterred women from supporting themselves.”

p. 82, ¶ 2, line 2 – “...The daughter who inherited very much from her father’s estate was quite a rarity in seventeenth-century Connecticut; only the daughter of a very wealthy man could have actually taken steps to become economically self-sufficient after her father’s demise.”

p. 82, ¶ 4, line 1 – “While her parents were still alive, or after she inherited too little to buy her own financial independence, a single woman could strive to earn money at only occupation before 1685. Domestic servitude did little more than insure that the young woman would continue to exist as a member of the submissive, inferior, financially dependent class.”

p. 83, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Since before 1650 domestic servitude was considered an honorable occupation for a woman, some newly arrived single women sought employment in that capacity.”

p. 83, ¶ 4, line 1 – “The deterioration of servant status after 1650 made domestic work no longer a realistic option for the ‘middling’ and better sorts.”

p. 83, ¶ 5, line 1 – “As a result, housewifery served as the chief ‘occupation’ for almost all New England women, and it no more facilitated financial independence than had other forms of domestic servitude.”

p. 83, ¶ 5, line 11 – “However, woman’s work in the home was assumed to be less dangerous and time-consuming than men’s – a conclusion which may have rankled Puritan women as much as it has irritated housewives in more modern times.”

p. 83, ¶ 5, line 16 – “She could contract for rents and wages, sell good, and collect debts only when her husband had so authorized.”

p. 84, ¶ 2, line 1 – “...Puritans did allow married women to labor at activities other than housewifery; but those activities also centered around the females assumed nurturance, and were unremunerative and part-time.”

p. 84, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Like wet nurses, teachers maternally provided for the needs of the young.”

p. 84, ¶ 3, line 8 – “These schoolmarms were expected to rely upon their husbands’ or ex-husbands’ estates for sustenance, not upon any salary for their own work.”

p. 84, ¶ 4, line 1 – “The practice of medicine was another nurturant occupational activity open to married women.”

p. 85, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Altogether, women comprised 24 percent (N = 42 of 175) of New England’s medical practitioners. These female doctors, nurses, and midwives earned the respect of their neighbors, but evidence
suggest that they received little income for their services.”

p. 85, ¶ 5, line 1 – “Midwives occupied a position of some influence. They were given the important function of examining women accused of premarital pregnancy, infanticide, or witchcraft; often the guilt or innocence of the accused rested on the findings of these female juries.”

p. 86, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Limitations on daughters’ inheritances and the lack of remunerative work for single women meant that few could join the property-holding group which controlled capital investment in land. So, too, did the paltry wages of midwives, physicians, teachers, and wet nurses, along with husbandly control over their incomes, prevent working wives from acquiring the economic security which would have enabled them to become property owners.”

p. 86, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Businesswomen, whether married or widowed, were few throughout New England.”

p. 87, ¶ 2, line 1 – “An examination of those licensed to keep inns or sell alcoholic beverages indicates that few women supported themselves in this occupation, at least before the 1690s.”

p. 87, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Although innkeeping or some other business may have given the individual woman some measure of personal satisfaction and self-sufficiency, the Boston tax list of 1687 suggest that businesswomen fared less well than businessmen.”

p. 87, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Women also lacked the capital necessary to establish large scale businesses. Only after her husband died did the typical woman strike out on her own, with the help of the widow’s portion.”

p. 88, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Even those few widows who enjoyed some occupational independence were expected to restrict their activities to nurturant, housewifery, and comparatively low-status occupations.”

p. 88, ¶ 2, line 5 – “Perhaps deterred by the sentiment expressed in Maine law, no woman of record ever fished at sea for a profit. Nor could women become sailors...”

p. 88, ¶ 4, line 1 – “The limited, poorly paid, comparatively low status employment opportunities available to early New England women meant that they could not really participate in the expanding possibilities opened by the Commercial Revolution.”

p. 89, ¶ 4, line 1 – “The circumstances of life in seventeenth-century Puritan New England hardly had an emancipating effect. New England wives sometimes maintained family businesses in their husband’s absence, or occasionally ran shops of their own; but so did English women. In fact, Alice Clark’s research indicates that English women, as members of a more urbanized society, labored at many more occupations than did their New England counterparts...”