

Did Colonial New England Women Enjoy Significant Economic Autonomy?

YES: Gloria L. Main, from "Gender, Work, and Wages in Colonial New England," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 51 January, 1994)

NO: Lyle Koehler, from *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (University of Illinois Press, 1980)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Gloria Main notes that New England women were highly valued for their labor and relative scarcity in the early colonial period and that their economic autonomy increased in the years during and following the Seven Years War as more women entered the paid labor force and received higher wages for their work.

NO: Lyle Koehler contends that Puritan attitudes toward rights of inheritance, as well as the division of labor that separated work into male and female spheres, discouraged productive, independent activity on the part of New England women.

Students in American history classes have for generations read of the founding of the colonies in British North America, their political and economic development, and the colonists' struggles for independence, without ever being confronted by a female protagonist in this magnificent historical drama. The terms "sons of liberty" and "founding fathers" reflect the end result of a long tradition of gender-specific myopia. In fact, only in the last generation have discussions of the role of women in the development of American society made their appearance in standard textbooks. Consequently, it is useful to explore the status of women in colonial America.

The topic, of course, is quite complex. The status of colonial women was determined by cultural attitudes that were exported to the New World from Europe, by the specific conditions confronting successive waves of settlers--male and female--in terms of labor requirements, and by changes produced by colonial maturation over time. It would be impossible to pinpoint a single, static condition in which all colonial women existed.

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. In the 1970s John Demos and Roger Thompson reinforced this view developed earlier in the writings of Richard B. Morris, Elizabeth Dexter, and Mary Beard. For example, Demos contends that despite the fact that Plymouth Colony was based on a patriarchal model in which women were expected to subordinate themselves to men; women still shared certain responsibilities with their husbands in some business activities and in matters relating to their children. They not only performed all the household duties but also assisted the men with agricultural duties outside the home when the necessity arose.

Women were closed off from any formal public power 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 held 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 suspected witches were female. Many of those accused of witchcraft in late-seventeenth-century New England

were older women who had inherited land that traditionally would have gone to males. Such patterns of inheritance disrupted the normative male-dominated social order. Witchcraft hysteria in colonial America, then, was a by-product of economic pressures and gender exploitation.

The following essays explore the economic status of women in colonial New England. Gloria Main compares types of work, pay scales, and trends in wages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and discovers that the division of labor between men and women was less clearly defined than traditionally assumed. Because they were relatively scarce, she concludes, women were valued for their labor and, as time passed, New England women developed a significant degree of economic autonomy.

Lyle Koehler insists that economic and social factors discouraged productive, independent activity on the part of New England women. Given limited opportunities for occupational training and denied access to public schools, most women were resigned to poorly paid jobs. Rarely did they inherit enough to start their own businesses. The only way for most women to experience upward economic mobility, Koehler claims, was to marry well.

YES

Gloria L. Main

Gender, Work, and wages in Colonial New England

Historians of colonial women tend to ignore economic issues when debating trends in women's status and condition. 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, at least in the seventeenth century in regions such as the Chesapeake. Others posit that economic opportunities for women narrowed as colonial society developed beyond primitive conditions in which women shouldered burdens customarily borne by men. Data presented below lend support to the first proposition but dispute the second.

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 sexes. 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. All of this material can be conveniently summarized by dividing the colonial period into four phases: initial growth (1620-1674), crisis and recovery (1675-1714), stability (1715-1754), and expansion (1755-1774). The sequence, however, defies simple linear interpretations of progression, either from good conditions to bad, declension, or from bad conditions to good, progress. Both the status of women and the region's economy experienced cycles of good and bad times, but the closing decades of the period saw real improvement for both. Perhaps the most important lesson of this investigation is that even relatively modest economic changes can, by their cumulative actions, significantly alter family relations and living standards.

Settlers in a new land must find ways to acquire the goods they want and cannot make for themselves. For New Englanders, this proved a major challenge. Probably the most notable characteristic of the economy that is evident in probate inventories was the economy's dependence on England for manufactures of all sorts, including textiles. In the first generation after settlement, few women could have engaged in spinning, weaving, or

dyeing simply because unprocessed textile fibers were in short supply. "Farmers deem it better for their profit to put away [sell] their cattle and corn for clothing, then to set upon making of' doth." Flax production was labor intensive, and sheep did not thrive under pioneering conditions: wolves found them easy prey, and the woodland underbrush tore away their wool. By the 1670s these conditions had changed. An aggressive bounty system and the spread of settlements into the interior gradually exterminated the wolves and cleared enough pastureland so that sheep became a more familiar sight on mainland farms. Spinning wheels, mentioned in Plymouth Colony inventories as early as 1644, gradually became common and most mid-century householders' inventories in Plymouth and neighboring colonies listed wool and flax, and some mention sheep, cotton, and even homemade cloth. Still, textile production must have continued to fall short of potential demand, because few people chose to invest their time in weaving. Of roughly 1,500 inventories dating from before 1675, only thirty, all for men, list looms. Similarly, when Carl Bridenbaugh recorded the occupations of men in the early volumes of Rhode Island land evidences, he identified only one weaver and one cloth worker out of forty-two artisans before 1670.

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. Of the four women he mentioned in the 1640s, one received pay for chickens and eggs, one for weeding, one for making hay, and the fourth for domestic service. There is no mention of brewing, baking, or butter making, although in 1648 Pynchon paid Henry Burt for making malt, probably from the barley mowed by Richard Excell that year, and Pynchon paid another man for milking his cows in 1666-1667. The first reference to spinning appears in 1663, to knitting in 1668, and to sewing in 1669.

Most of New England's people were farmers. 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. In early Saybrook Alice Apsley marketed medicinal herbs and onions from her garden. Goody Macksfield supplied a Boston shopkeeper with apples, squashes, beans, cucumbers, carrots, and cabbages, as well as honey, butter, cheese, and eggs. C. Dallett Hemphill examined the work activities of Salem women recorded in testimony before the Essex County court between 1636 and 1683 and found them engaged in men's work or working with men: servant Ann Knight winnowed corn, another woman carried grain to the mill, and others milked cows and branded steers in the company of men; a witness in one case remembered seeing the wife of Joseph Dalaber working alongside her husband planting and covering corn.

The 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. Women could hoe in already-cleared Indian fields, and meadows and salt marshes supplied their small herds of animals with forage. When these sites filled up and the numbers of livestock expanded, newcomers had to break new ground and create meadows planted with English grasses. Inventories record the gradual advent of a more English farming style using heavy plows drawn by teams of oxen, while tax lists and town genealogies trace the growing supply of sturdy young sons. Similarly, the appearance of spinning wheels, firkins, brewing vats, and dye pots attests to

the kinds of activities that came to employ women. The division of labor between the sexes widened and, as it did so, separated them physically.

The use of ox teams, restricted to older men, effectively segregated family members into field and home workers. Men and older boys also did the sowing and harrowing at the beginning of the farm year and the reaping and mowing at harvest. In early spring they planted and pruned orchards and carted and spread dung. In June they washed and sheared sheep. In fall they pressed cider and slaughtered hogs. In the slack seasons men cut and dragged timber, built and maintained fences, cleared underbrush, ditched bogs, and dug out stones. In most of these activities, handling draft animals was essential and was work for males only. The men used oxen to remove stumps and boulders, drag timber, cart dung, and haul hay and horses to drive cider presses. Only men and older boys paddled canoes, steered scows, piloted "gundalows" (gondolas), or rowed boats.

Women participated in none of these activities except at harvest time, when their help was welcomed. Even then, they did not mow grass or grain, because most did not have the height or upper body strength to handle scythes. Diaries after 1750 show them helping with the reaping, probably binding sheaves and sickling wheat and rye. Young Jabez Fitch of Norwich, Connecticut, reported enthusiastically in his diary on July 24, 1759, "there was a great reaping; we Liv'd very well; we had Women enough & some more." A story related in a town history about one woman's feat is no doubt apocryphal but interesting for its celebration of women's physical achievements in a less genteel age: a Mrs. Brown of Chester, New Hampshire, around the year 1800 or earlier, with others had sowed rye for its seed. 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. Both sexes and all ages went berrying and nutting together. Young people often turned such occasions to their own devices, especially when gathering strawberries on long June evenings. The excitement these occasions could create is recorded in the diary of a Harvard undergraduate, who, with other young men, succeeded in transforming a quilting party into a late night gala.

Many farm tasks fell more or less exclusively to the female members of the household. Girls and women tended the fowl and small animals. They milked the cows at dawn and dusk, separated the cream, churned the butter, and made the cheese. They planted and hoed kitchen gardens in plots men had prepared by plowing and harrowing. Women boiled the offal for such by-products as sausage casings, head cheese, calf's foot jelly, and rennet after men killed, cleaned, and butchered animals. Gender-based 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. Females carried out some of the same tasks as younger boys--they helped hay, hoe, weed, harvest crops, and husk corn.

Yet gender ordered male and female spheres in ways that went beyond obvious physical distinctions. For instance, men and older boys not only cut timber but operated sawmills, erected buildings, dug wells and cellars, laid stone, pointed chimneys, and shaved shingles and staves. Men tanned and curried hides, made saddles or gloves, and bound shoes. Older boys got the bark for tanning, shaved it, ground it, and laid the leather away. Skilled craftsmen in these trades earned substantially more than farm laborers. Females never participated in these activities. Nor did girls drive cattle or carry grain on horseback to the mill, as boys did. Women did not thresh grain, even though boys of thirteen or fourteen

did so. Although men and boys traveled abroad freely in their duties, women's work more often kept them inside or near their own home or those of kinsmen or employers. In and around the home they earned income from tasks that males assiduously avoided: cleaning, cooking, sewing, spinning, washing clothes, nursing, and caring for children.

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. The case of John Graves II of East Guilford is illustrative. Five daughters and four sons survived infancy; all of them appear in his accounts at one time or another credited for a day's or a week's work. Of the eighty-nine work occasions he recorded between 1703 and 1726 (the year he died), he identified daughters on twenty-one occasions and sons on sixty-eight. Thus, sons appeared more than three times as often. 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.

An account book of great interest because of the economic activities of women that it records is that of merchant Elisha Williams of Wethersfield, Connecticut, a commercial farm town situated on the Connecticut River just south of Hartford. Williams' ledger begins in 1738, and its pages are filled with references to women credited for onions. A bunch of roped onions weighed about three or four pounds and Williams bought them for 5 pennies per bunch in 1738. Women earned a penny per bunch for tying them in the early 1740s. They generally took their pay in the form of store merchandise, mostly luxury imports such as sugar, chocolate, pepper, rum, cotton lace, and silk romall, a silken handkerchief used as a head covering. Other goods paid for by women's onions included medicine, a pair of spectacles, and a copy of Homers *Iliad*.

So far, the evidence from account books and diaries has helped locate the boundaries demarcating women's work from men's work. Those boundaries, however, were permeable. Men could and did cross into women's domain when the size of the market justified a larger scale of operations than the home could provide. For example, baking and brewing were normally women's work, but men in port towns also made their living by these activities. Men in New England did not lose self-respect if they milked cows, but they did not normally make cheese or churn cream into butter.

If, however, the family began to specialize in dairying for sale, the men might take part. Matthew Patten of New Hampshire mentioned husbands as well as wives buying and selling butter. Thus, when nominally feminine tasks became important to household income, men undertook a share of the responsibility, even if only to keep track of the profits. Male account keepers commonly listed payments due from boarders and lodgers but never credited the work by their wives that made the hospitality possible. On the other hand, some male-dominated occupations were always open to women. Retail trade was perhaps the most common, although before 1740 such opportunities arose in only a few commercial areas. Most women in retailing were widows who had taken over a deceased husband's shop, although one Mary Johnson of Boston, who was not identified as a widow, owned shop goods worth over two hundred pounds¹, according to the 1669 inventory of her estate. Helen Hobart ran a shop in Hingham in 1682 with her husband's approval. By the late colonial period, such opportunities had spread deeper into the interior. In Worcester County in 1760,

¹ In today's money, this would be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

for instance, twelve out of 267 licensed dispensers of spirituous liquors (4.5 percent) were women.

Though women had always acted as midwives, nursed the sick, and disbursed homemade remedies, a few also "doctored." The administrator of the estate of David Clark of Wrentham listed payment to Mary Johnson, "Doctress Physick and Tendance²." William Corbin, minister of the Anglican church in Boston, willed his medical books to Jane Allen of Newbury, spinster and daughter of the Honorable Samuel Allen, Esquire. In 1758 the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman went to see the widow Ruhamah Newton, who had broken her leg in a fall. Friends had called a Mrs. Parker to set the leg, and the time it took her to get her apparatus in order and carry out the operation delayed the diarist's return home "till night."

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. Seventeenth-century records occasionally identify "school dames" who took students for fees, but they do not seem to have been common outside the largest settlements.

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 the year. The town of Amesbury, Massachusetts, voted in 1707 that the selectmen "hire four or five school Dames for the town to teach children to read" and allowed five pounds to two men "to keep a school to teach young parsons to write and sifer³ two months this year." Most towns seem to have found the two-tier system a cheap and efficient way to comply with the provincial school laws. The town meeting of Hingham instructed its selectmen to "hire a schoolmaster as cheap as they can get one, provided they shall hire a single man and not a man that have a family."

There was also a two-tier system in 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. In 1708, the estate of Simon Gross, deceased mariner of Hingham, paid for forty weeks of training as a tailor for his daughter Allis. John Ballantine, minister at Westfield, Massachusetts, mentioned two occasions in 1768 when Ruth Weller came for a week to make garments; in 1773 he noted that "Sally Noble, Tailor" was working at his house.

Gender distinctions were very clear in the processing of textiles. Females did not comb worsted or hackle flax, which was men's work, although women, along with boys, pulled flax, carded wool, and picked seeds out of cotton. Girls and women spun, dyed, and knitted yarn, but few engaged in weaving, traditionally a male occupation in England. Women did take up the craft in the eighteenth century, doing simple weaves while men concentrated on more complex patterns.

Few inventoried estates mention looms in the seventeenth century, and only 6 percent in Essex County, Massachusetts, list them around 1700. By 1774, the proportion of inventories with looms in Alice Hanson Jones's New England sample ranged from a low of 17 percent in Essex County to a high of 37.5 percent in Plymouth County. The spread of looms did not mean that the region's textile industry was in the throes of proto-industrialization. Rather, households in less commercial areas were producing more cloth for home use in order to spend their cash and vendible products on new consumer goods like

² Tend, give attention to

³ How to do arithmetic

tea and sugar. The newer weavers included women who took up weaving as a nearly full-time activity in the years before marriage or during widowhood. Growing numbers of married women also wove part time to conserve or expand family income.

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. Women weavers appear in account books as early as 1704 in Norwich, Connecticut, and in 1728, when Mary Stodder purchased a loom from John Marsh of Litchfield. Altogether, eighteen women weavers appear in the diaries, probate records, and account books consulted for this study, of whom just four are identified as "widow." 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. We can conclude that, in this instance, women did earn equal pay for equal work. However, only two women weavers in the sample, Mary Parker and Hannah Smith of Hingham, received credit for weaving more than the common fabrics--"plain," shirting, linen, tow, and "blanketing." Men produced a much wider variety, including relatively fancy weaves. Judging from these examples, an expanding demand for domestic cloth created opportunities for women to do simple weaving. They could do so without driving down piece rates⁴, which rose by a third between the 1750s and the 1770s; from 4.1 pennies to 5.4 pennies and then to 5.5 pennies in the early 1770s. Although the sources do not reveal great numbers of women working at looms, women's growing presence in the late colonial period signals a trend that accelerated during the Revolution.

The history of weaving and tailoring in New England illustrates the flexibility inherent in the region's gender-based work roles. The further removed the activity was from hard-core masculine tasks associated with oxen, plows, and heavy equipment, the more likely that respectable women did it. The history of work and gender in New England during the colonial years divides readily into four periods of unequal duration. In the earliest period, before the 1670s, the economy simplified compared to England's economy, and the variety of occupations open to either sex contracted sharply. Women spent more time outdoors and working alongside men. The second period came with the proliferation of activities by which men habitually and strictly segregated themselves from women, and women undertook domestic manufacturing tasks with which historians have so often associated them: brewing beer, baking bread, churning butter, making cheese, spinning yam, and knitting stockings and mittens. Not every housewife practiced all these arts, and specialization encouraged exchange between them.

The third period, beginning about 1715, constituted the farm maintenance stage in older settlements during which demand for unskilled labor declined relative to skilled labor. Increasing population densities created exchange opportunities that encouraged both men and women to specialize and invest more time in non-farm occupations. This stage might have continued indefinitely, with population growth putting continuous downward pressure on wages, but outside forces intervened, creating the fourth and final phase of New England's colonial development. Beginning in 1739, wars and their aftermaths administered a succession of shocks to the system, creating sudden demands for men and provisions and putting large amounts of money into circulation. The conclusion to the Seven Years' War opened up northern New England and Nova Scotia to British settlement, and the treaty that ended the War for Independence swung open the gates to Iroquoia in New York, as did the Battle of Fallen Timbers (1794) for the Ohio Valley. Much of the labor supply that might have

⁴ How much they were paid for each piece they completed.

depressed wage rates emigrated instead; in New England, it was not replaced by immigrants.

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. Evidence for economic expansion appears in both account books and probate inventories. First, stores with new consumer wares appeared. Storekeepers began moving into the rural interior during the 1740s, and their numbers grew dramatically in the ensuing decades. Proportionately, there were nearly as many retailers in Massachusetts in 1771 as there were in the United States in 1929. Many hopeful young businessmen were assisted by merchants in port cities who had advanced their wares on credit to the neophytes.

The lure was the money jingling in farmers' pockets from increasing prices for their products, beginning with the preparations against Louisburg⁵ in 1744-1745. Prices for livestock began to soar faster than inflation, offering strong inducements to farmers to expand their herds. The sterling equivalent of Connecticut inventory values of oxen, for instance, jumped 19 percent in the 1740s, continued to rise in the 1750s, and by the early 1760s reached 80 percent above levels of the 1730s. During the height of the Seven Years' War, Connecticut prices for cows and barreled pork climbed 50 percent, while prices for sheep doubled. After dropping modestly in the late 1760s, prices for oxen and cows rose sharply in the early 1770s, attaining levels not seen since the 1640s. Livestock values in Massachusetts did not keep up with this torrid pace, but the cost of oxen ballooned by more than 70 percent in 1758-1763 and grew again in the early 1770s. Connecticut wheat prices ascended a bit more demurely: 43 percent in the 1750s and 48 percent in 1772-1774. Farmers in newer settlements sent off, besides barreled meat and draft animals, loads of lumber products, such as staves and shingles, potash, tar, turpentine, and maple syrup. New Englanders also shipped thousands of pounds of well-preserved butter and cheese every year.

For men with resources, the rational reaction to such prices would have been to devote more of their own and their sons' time to farming and less time to crafts such as weaving. To raise and feed more livestock, farmers had to create more pasture and mowing lands, plant more timothy and clover, maintain longer fence lines, and store many more tons of hay in their newly erected barns. Winter chores expanded, cutting the time available for craft activities.

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. Every attempt by the colonial governments during the Seven Years' War to recruit soldiers for the summer campaigns further reduced the available pool of young men, and farmers found themselves engaged in a bidding war that raised wages and bounties. According to Fred Anderson, men in military service during these years could earn far more than a fully employed farm laborer. With an eight-month enlistment, plus bounty, minimum income for soldiers in Massachusetts rose from £10.1 sterling in 1755 to £13.9 in 1757, and bounced between a high of £21.75 and a low of £15.75 thereafter. When bounties for reenlistment are figured in, estimated maximum incomes reached £32.3 in 1760 and £29.2 in 1762. Anywhere from one-fourth to one-third of

⁵ Small outpost near the Atlantic Ocean in French-Canada attacked by the British in every war they fought against France.

men aged sixteen to twenty-nine served with Massachusetts forces at some point during the war.

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. The account books show that men abruptly began employing greater numbers of women in the final two decades of the colonial period. Women had already begun moving into tailoring and weaving, but the labor shortages of the Seven Years' War boosted demand for their services, and the migration out of southern New England in the 1760s apparently worked to cushion the postwar depression in farm wages and prices.

Rising wages and expanding employment meant higher incomes for those who did not emigrate. The probate inventories of the late colonial period show that most New England families were prospering. The estimated sterling value per capita of consumer goods in 1774 was 10 percent higher than in the middle colonies, for instance, and an index of amenities in probate inventories from rural New England registered substantial gains in the decades before 1774, catching up and then keeping pace with Chesapeake households that had long been engaged in a commercial economy.

The New England economy took time to recover from the crises of war and destruction in 1675-1694; it grew only slowly for a long period before heating up during the Seven Years' War. That war accelerated economic change, bringing more women into the paid labor force and expanding the penetration of the market into the rural interior. The growing proportion of young women working outside the home in the final decades of the colonial period accompanied a rise in their wages, which no doubt helped attract them. 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. Furthermore, the addition of tea, sugar, and spices to their diets, painted earthenware to their tables, featherbeds to sleep on, and greater privacy, all surely added pleasures to generally hard lives. Although marriage still meant a refuge, more women chose to remain single and access to divorce became easier. There is also a demographic indicator that women's lot was improving: life expectancy of married women rose. Mean age at death increased from sixty-two to sixty-six for women marrying between 1760 and 1774 and to sixty-eight for those marrying between 1775 and 1800. On balance, these changes appear beneficial. 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
Lyle Koehler
Women in Work and Poverty: The Difficulties of Earning a Living

For some time now, many scholars of early American history have asserted that the absence of sufficient manpower resulted in extensive economic freedom for the "weaker sex." As Page Smith puts it, "There were, in the early years, very few negative definitions--that this or that activity was unsuitable or inappropriate for a woman to engage in. In consequence

colonial women moved freely into most occupations in response to particular needs and opportunities rather than abstract theories of what was proper." Eleanor Flexner has more emphatically concluded, "In a struggling society in which there was a continuous labor shortage, no social taboos could keep a hungry woman idle." Barbara Mayer Wertheimer enthusiastically catalogues many of the jobs held by colonial women, and asserts that the earliest female settlers possessed "power and responsibility such as they had never known in seventeenth-century England or on the European continent. They labored at many kinds of work outside the home from which they were later barred."

Despite such assertions, there has been no systematic effort to determine the exact occupations available to women, and the extent to which these utilized skills *not* focused strictly around the domesticity and nurturance of the conventional female role. Moreover, we do not know how many 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. In fact, as we shall see, economic factors discouraged productive, independent activity on the part of women.

Limitations on Searching Out a Calling

Puritans certainly believed in the efficacy of work. Detesting those who lived "idle like swine," they felt that labor brought "strength to the body, and vigor to the mind," thereby providing an outlet for energies which could otherwise lead one to sin. The authorities encouraged each person to search out a suitable calling through apprenticeship, self-training, or hiring out. Boys had considerably more options than girls; apprenticeship contracts specified that the latter be taught only housewifely duties like cooking and sewing, while boys could learn the "secrets" of any number of trades, including blacksmithing, husbandry, shop management, milling, carpentry, and seamanship. It is unlikely that those daughters who never served as apprentices learned any of the male occupational "secrets," because limited opportunities for occupational training, as well as denial of access to public schools, put at a disadvantage any "strong-minded" woman who wished to advance in the world of work. Even if she could overcome the limits of her socialization for domesticity, or use that training to hire herself out in a female vocation, a young woman still could not readily accrue the funds necessary to set herself up in a business or trade; besides, she was unable to earn very much at women's jobs.

Moreover, fathers neglected to give their daughters a portion of the family estate as a nest egg, while they did sometimes convey realty⁶ to sons. 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 actually have taken steps to become economically self-sufficient after her father's demise. Furthermore, daughters tended to receive their share in personalty⁷, not in realty which could be converted into a permanent productive income, whereas for sons the reverse was true. In fact, daughters inherited proportionally smaller legacies than had been customary in late medieval England.

The mean and median (£22) values of daughters' inheritances yielded some immediate purchasing power, but did little to increase their occupational possibilities. The average

⁶ Land, real estate

⁷ Personal property, household items, etc.

inheritance did not allow a daughter money enough to purchase a home lot near the town's center, which sold for £80 or £100. Nor could she rent a shop and stock it with goods. While the young man could work at a trade and save a tidy sum by his late twenties, the young woman possessed no similar option. Hartford County records indicate that seventeenth-century inheritance patterns made it virtually impossible for a maiden, whose access to employment was already limited by her training and lack of education, to become part of the property-holding group which ran New England affairs.

The Single Woman as Servant

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 one 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. Female servants assisted with household duties, child care, and garden maintenance--but always under the supervision of a "mistress" or "master," whose orders had to be obeyed unless they violated criminal law. Servants received meals, clothing, and a place to sleep, but generally earned no financial remuneration in return for their valuable work. The few women who hired themselves out (unlike those invariably single ones who served as apprentices, redemptioners⁸, indentured domestics, and even slaves) enjoyed a small measure of economic reward. Their typical annual salary was just £3 or £4, only 50 to 60 percent of the male hired servant's wage. Even with the addition of a sum for the room and board furnished by the master, the female domestic drew one of the lowest annual incomes of any working person.

Since before 1650 domestic servitude was considered an honorable occupation for a woman, some newly arrived single women sought employment in that capacity. These females, whose mean age was 20.7 years, often lived briefly in Puritan households under conditions of relative equality, and then married into the best families. Still, their actual numbers were few; in addition, male domestic migrating to New England outnumbered females three to one.

In the first three decades of settlement, then, a handful of women used servitude as a vehicle for marital advancement, although not as a means to accumulate money for future investment. Since such women labored as indentured servants (usually for seven years, in return for the cost of their passage), before 1650 there is no instance of a female hiring out her own time. After that date, however, the image of the servant deteriorated so remarkably that only a severely impoverished single woman would want to become a domestic. Scottish, Irish, Indian, black, and poor English servants soon replaced the earlier "most honourable" English.

The deterioration of servant status after 1650 made domestic work no longer a realistic option for the "middling" and "better sorts." Because women of those classes no longer became servants, opportunities for them to leave home and hire out their labor decreased. Nor did the poor English, Scottish, Irish, black, and Indian women who became servants and slaves gain even a small measure of control over their own lives. For sustenance, every woman had to rely on a father, master, or husband; marriage became literally basic to survival for many New England women.

⁸ Indentured servant

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. Women certainly contributed to the productivity of the family farm. Although they did not often work outdoors planting and harvesting crops, as English farm wives did, many spent a good deal of time cleaning house, spinning flax, dipping candles, canning preserves, roasting meat, caring for children, and performing untold other tasks. Some spun and made stockings, shirts, or breeches, which they sold to neighbors for an occasional shilling. Goodwives also sold poultry, butter, cheese, and garden produce, or bartered such items for desired commodities in the informal village trade networks. 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. Above all else, the wife was not to use her presumed "free time" to exceed her ordained station by taking an interest in commercial activities or any other "outward matters." She could contract for rents and wages, sell goods, and collect debts only when her husband had so authorized. The records from seventeenth-century civil cases reveal that New England husbands granted their wives such privileges in only 6 or 7 percent of all families. The wife's access to experience in "outward matters" which could have provided her with some income in either marriage or widowhood was, therefore, much circumscribed.

The Nurturant Callings of Wet Nurse, Teacher, Doctor, and Midwife

Of course, Puritans did allow married women to labor at activities other than housewifery; but those activities also centered around the female's assumed nurturance, and were unremunerative⁹ and part-time. Serving as a wet nurse was one such activity, even though its short-term and low-demand characteristics made it a very insubstantial "occupation." Wet nurses enjoyed some popularity because, despite the strong cultural ideal affirming maternal breastfeeding, Puritan mothers sometimes found it impossible to perform that "duty." Puerperal fever or other serious illnesses incapacitated mothers and, it was believed, could be transmitted through the milk. Sore or inverted nipples, breast inflammations, and scanty milk also necessitated the occasional use of a wet nurse. Fear of the presumed toxic effects of colostrum¹⁰ caused mothers to observe a taboo on suckling infants for three or four days after delivery, which increased possibilities for wet nursing. Still, wet nurses rarely received more than temporary employment, and the payment for that service was probably never very great. In fact, such short-term help may have been freely given, much the way neighboring wives helped out during measles or other epidemics. There is no record of New Englanders "farming out" babies to wet nurses for anywhere from ten to nineteen months, as was common in England. Indeed, Puritan women who wet nursed infants probably did not even think of themselves as being employed at an occupation.

Like wet nurses, teachers maternally provided for the needs of the young. At dame schools, where a wife or "poor patient widow sits/And awes some twenty infants as she knits," the female teacher instructed her neighbor's younger offspring for 10shillings to £2 per year, 1/10th to 1/12th of the salary for male teachers in the public schools. As early as 1639 Mistress Jupe taught pupils at the Ipswich dame school; before the century's end, twenty-three or twenty-four other women assisted young scholars in reading, writing, and

⁹ They didn't pay very much, if any at all.

¹⁰ A form of milk produced by the mammary glands in late pregnancy and the few days after giving birth.

religion at fourteen different New England locales. These schoolmarmes were expected to rely upon their husbands' or ex-husbands' estates for sustenance, not upon any salary for their own work. Moreover, they were barred from working with the upper grades (over age nine or ten), lest the difficulty of the material studied at those levels overtax a woman's "weak" intellectual ability. They constituted only 12.6 percent (25 of 199) of all school-teachers this researcher could locate in the seventeenth-century Puritan records.

The practice of medicine was another nurturant occupational activity open to married women. Many English housewives and their American counterparts learned "chirurgery"-the use of herbs, potions, and poultices to cure any number of maladies. Knowledge of the medicinal properties of wild herbs passed through the female line in some families for generations. Alice Apsley, Lady Fenwick, one of the first women to settle at Fort Saybrook, Connecticut, distributed homegrown herbs to sick callers at her residence from 1639 until her departure from the colony in 1645. Mistress Field of Salem prepared a green "sympathetic ointment" which purportedly healed sprains, aches, cramps, scaldings, cuts, mange in cattle, stench blood, tumors, the bites of "Venomous Beasts," and "old Rotten Sores." Doctor Margaret Jones of Charlestown, Massachusetts, secured some reputation as a witch because the aniseed, liquors, and small doses of herbs she administered produced "extraordinary violent effects." Hannah Bradford of Windsor, Connecticut, was such a capable physician that she reputedly "taught the first male doctor much of his medical lore." At least three women proved to be able surgeons. Henry Winthrop's widow reportedly "hath very good success in her Surgerye; Mistress Allyn patched up wounded soldiers as an army surgeon during King Philip's War; and, on Martha's Vineyard, Mistress Blande dispensed "Physicke and Surgery" to many sick Indians.

Altogether, women comprised 24 percent (42 of 175) of New England's medical practitioners. These female doctors, nurses, and midwives earned the respect of their neighbors, but evidence suggests that they received little income from their services. Medicine in the seventeenth century lacked the financial advantages of ministry, governorship, or commerce; not until the 1690s did physicians begin to achieve some recognition as highly paid, self-conscious professionals. Before that, almost all doctors practiced medicine as a second profession, spending the bulk of their working hours in the ministry, the magistracy, husbandry, or housewifery.

In the 1690s, the professionalization of medicine had severe consequences for female physicians. Men trained through apprenticeship to male doctors began displacing local female surgeons. One can search the colonial records in vain for some mention of female physicians during that decade. For the first time, particularly in urban areas, Puritans began distinguishing between male "doctors" and female "nurses," even though such "nurses" assisted Boston wives in recovering from childbirth, cared for infants' ailments, and treated cases of smallpox. Sam Sewall mentions seven different male physicians in his diary for the years 1674 to 1699, but all women who treat illnesses are referred to either as midwives or as nurses.

Throughout the seventeenth century both sexes dispensed medical advice, but one realm of expertise, midwifery, remained the exclusive province of women. (In fact, the York County authorities fined one man fifty shillings "for presuming to Act the Part of a Midwife.") Women learned midwifery from personal experience, from other midwives, or from standard obstetrical texts like Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* (1651). There were no medical examinations to pass in New England, nor did a prospective midwife take out a

license to practice, as was required in England and in nearby New Amsterdam.

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. In return for this necessary service, the town selectmen sometimes issued grants of land to widowed midwives. However, that happened only in a few instances, and it is significant that this researcher has found no account book or other record which mentions a midwife receiving any reward for her services.

Women in Business

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 mid-wives, 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. As urbanization increased, especially late in the century, working women were generally unable to accumulate the capital necessary to participate in the Commercial Revolution enveloping New England.

Of course, some women who possessed both money and prestige also maintained small-scale businesses. As early as 1640 Philippa Hammond operated a shop at Boston. So did Widow Howdin (1645), Alice Thomas (before 1672), Ann Carter (1663), Jane Bernard (1672-76), Abigail Johnson (1672-73), Mistress Gutteridge (1690), Elizabeth Connigrave (1672-74), Rebecca Windsor (1672-74), and Mary Castle (1690). Almost all of these women ran coffee or cook shops, thereby utilizing their domestic training. Mary Avery and Susanna Jacob kept shop between 1685 and 1691, but whether they were owners or merely employees is unknown. Esther Palmer, a merchant, located in the metropolis in 1683, and Florence Mackarta, in partnership with two men, constructed a slaughterhouse on Peck's Wharf in 1693. A 1687 Boston tax list gives the names of forty-eight different women who derived some income from a trade or their estates--11.4 percent of all such persons rated. But businesswomen were rarer than the initial impression suggests. For example, it is not actually specified how many of the women on the 1687 list owned businesses and how many merely drew income from the estates of their deceased husbands. What is clear is that fully 85.4 percent of these women were widows.

Businesswomen, whether married or widowed, were few throughout New England. The paucity of early businesswomen can be readily demonstrated by searching through transcriptions of courtroom proceedings, town records, and other sources. In all of New England outside Boston there are records of only nine women who worked at a trade or who ran a business other than innkeeping. By late century Margaret Barton of Salem, a chair frame maker, had accrued a fortune in "ventures at sea." In Hartford County, Elizabeth Gardner, Mary Phelps, and Mary Stanly owned interests in (respectively) an iron mill, a grist mill, and a shop. Jane Stolion appeared in court in 1645-46, accused of charging excessive prices at her New Haven dress and cloth shop. Mistress Jenny came before the Plymouth General Court in 1644 for not keeping the mortars at her mill clean, nor the bags of corn there from spoiling. Elizabeth Cadwell operated her husband's ferry across the Connecticut River at Hartford after his death in 1695. One Maine widow, Elizabeth Rowdan, maintained a

blacksmith shop and mill. Other women may have worked their husbands' bakery, cook, or apparel shops, or may have tailored clothing for sale; but the records observe a rigorous silence on that score, mentioning only one female baker at Salem (1639). Altogether, only 2.3 percent (23 of 988) of all tradespeople-merchants (again excluding innkeepers) were members of the "weaker sex."

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. Since all innkeepers had to secure licenses from the authorities, the records are quite complete. The first female innkeeper does not appear until 1643. Between 1643 and 1689 at least fifty-seven other women operated inns; however, they constituted but 18.9 percent of Boston's innkeepers and only 5 percent of those in the remainder of New England. On Ebenezer Peirce's *Civil, Military, and Professional Lists of Plymouth and Rhode Island Colonies* just three of seventy Plymouth innkeepers are female. In the 1690s, with large numbers of men away fighting in the Maine Indian wars, the New England total increased sharply, to eighty-four women-eight in Maine, twenty-four in New Hampshire, and fifty-two in the Bay Colony. Women then comprised over half of the tavern keepers in Boston and approximately 20 percent of those in other locales.

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 suggests that businesswomen fared less well than businessmen. An occasional woman like the Widow Kellond might derive an annual income as high as £80 from her trade and estates, but she was much the exception. Only nineteen members of the "weaker sex"--39.6 percent of all tradeswomen--earned £10 or more from their trades and estates, while 74 percent of all tradesmen earned that much. The forty-eight female traders made £580 over the previous year, an average of £12, whereas the 373 male traders made £7,383, or £20 each.

There were several reasons why tradeswomen, when they managed to open shops, earned only 60 percent as much as tradesmen. Since the women possessed little training, their businesses tended to accent service in a way that was compatible with female sex-role stereotyping. Distributing beer, maintaining a cook shop, keeping an inn, and operating a millinery shop utilized talents common to housewives, but ones which returned little profit. Women in such businesses could not easily attract customers on the open market, for they lacked the mobility of carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, and coopers. They could not advertise in newspapers, for none existed. They could not reap the benefits of an international trade, since they lacked ties to the great English trading houses and familiarity with foreign markets. Even credit was a problem. As milliner Hannah Crowell complained in 1696, "being a Woman [I] was not able to ride up and down to get in debts."

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 her widow's portion. Of all women who were licensed to sell spirituous liquors, some 71.1 percent were widows. Innkeeping was a ready source of sustenance for any widow whose husband left her their house and little else. Working at a trade became an acceptable means of support for widows of artisans, but even they could only rarely increase the net value of their estates over the amounts they inherited. Age, decreased mobility, and a lack of appropriate training or education each took a toll. Moreover, husbands were often reluctant to provide for their wives by leaving them a full or part interest in their trade tools or their

shops. Only two of fifty-seven Hartford County artisans, merchants, and shopkeepers bequeathed their widows interest in their businesses. Another man left a shop at Hartford to his sister.

Even those few widows who enjoyed some occupational independence were expected to restrict their activities to nurturant, housewifely, and comparatively low-status occupations. High-status positions such as public grammar-school teaching, the ministry, and major public offices were limited to men. Elizabeth Jones, appointed the Boston poundkeeper in 1670, 1676, and 1689, was the only woman to serve as a public official on even a minor level.

The woman who wished to work "by her own hand," whether widowed, married, or single, faced still other disadvantages. Before 1647 the Maine General Court forbade any woman from inhabiting the Isles of Shoales, thereby making it impossible for females to help out with the fishing or to operate stores at which the fishermen might buy provisions. 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--when one dressed as a man and left Massachusetts on a vessel, her fellow seamen, upon discovering her sex, tailed and feathered her in a nearly fatal maltreatment. The presence of working women on the Atlantic was so inconceivable to Puritans that when a mysterious "Shallop¹¹ at Sea man'd with women" was reported, men attributed the phenomenon to witchcraft.

Wealth and Poverty

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. Despite such disabilities, some observers might argue that dependent wives were rewarded in the end, by inheriting sizable properties (although not businesses) from their deceased husbands. Such widows could enjoy some independence in their later years. The tax lists seem to provide some evidence for this view; women appear as heads of families approximately 6 percent of the time, and fare well when their estates are compared to those of male family heads.

It would be incorrect to assume, however, that as a group widows in Puritan New England were comparatively well-to-do, for most never appeared on a tax list. Many husbands, well aware that their wives might have difficulty maintaining an estate, specified that their widows live with one or more sons in the family dwelling unit. Such men usually reserved one room, a garden, a cow, and some household goods for their widow's use. In one-tenth of all wills (30 of 282) fathers directed children to maintain their mother with annual supplies or a monetary allotment. The annual maintenance payment rarely amounted to much, however, averaging £9 13shillings; most widows received less than£7.

Although one-sixth or one-fifth of all widows (those of the middling and better sorts) enjoyed limited affluence, many more suffered poverty. The appointment of "keepers" for the indigent, or lodging them in the almshouse under a male attendant's supervision, blatantly reinforced female dependence. Such control angered some poor women, and at least two of them entirely rejected the dependence entailed in any form of relief. Mary Webster, a "wretched woman" of Hadley, Massachusetts protested the efforts of church deacon Philip Smith to mitigate her indigence expressing herself so sharply "that he declared himself apprehensive of receiving mischief at her hands" (ca. 1684). Jane Bourne of

¹¹ A small open boat fitted with sails or oars or both.

Cambridge refused to accept an allotment from the town for her food and lodging, instead moving out of town to secure employment elsewhere as a servant (1663). A third woman, Abigail Day, was "full of Discontent" and "Impatience under her Afflictions" while at the Boston almshouse. She would "thank neither God nor man" for the objectionable diet there, and she complained that her keeper "had several times made attempts upon her chastity" (1697).

The dissatisfaction of poor women like Abigail Day, Jane Bourne, and Mary Webster is readily understandable, for the paternalism of the Puritan system of poor relief too easily reflected women's difficulties in searching for gainful employment or starting businesses. Wherever they turned, women encountered the fruits of Puritan sexism--in low pay, lack of education and job training, decreased opportunities to secure the funds needed to open a business and limitations on the kinds of employment available. The great majority of women in early New England worked under a condition of dependence, whether as servants under the control of masters, poor women under the control of almshouse attendants or other keepers, widows under the relative control of their children, or (in the most common occupation of all) housewives under the control of their husbands.

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. While all of the information is not yet in, it is striking that 40 percent of New England's adult population comprised just 25 percent of all servants, 24 percent of all medical practitioners (if nurses and midwives are subtracted, the percentage drops to 9.6), 12.6 percent of all schoolteachers, 18 percent of all innkeepers, and 2.3 percent of all tradespeople-merchants. Moreover, these women received much less remuneration than their male counterparts. Although labor shortages were frequent in the first few decades of settlement, such times did not lead to more women on the job market, or to women doing men's work. Inheritance patterns in agrarian locales made it virtually impossible for daughters and wives to exercise much control over capita investment in land. All but a few urban women were similarly unable to acquire real estate or capital which would have enabled them to expand their incomes. The only way for women to experience any upward mobility was to marry well. Seventeenth-century New England was a "Garden of Eden" only for the woman who pursued economic opportunity dependently, as the rib of a (hopefully) prospering and generous Adam.