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[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



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Thesis Statement: The role that women played in colonial Virginia played a significant role in the growth and development of the social and economic construction of their societies.

History: Women in Colonial Virginia

What were the Roles of Women of Colonial Virginia?

Introduction

Throughout history, women have always had an influential role in the growth and prosperity of their communities. These roles varied depending on the race of the people, geography of an area and the time period. America essentially had three significant groups of women from different backgrounds who have played varied roles in their communities and families. They included the native Indians, the Europeans and the Africans. The role that these women played in colonial Virginia played a significant role in the growth and development of the social and economic construction of their societies.

General History of Women in Virginia

Records of women in colonial Virginia begins with the Native Americans in the group as the Europeans and Africans are gradually included. Their experiences vary depending on the status, ethnicity, culture, race and gender roles. In the colonial years, it is survival and not tradition that significantly influenced roles whether women were black or white, slave or free. Slaves, planter's wives and indentured servants would for instance all work in the tobacco fields. As Jamestown, Virginia gradually grew to become a fortified capital and permanent colony, the colonialists began to envision a patriarchal society as was in England. However, they found it had to transfer

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this system due to the uneven sex-ratio, high mortality rates, scattered settlements and frequent marriages of the Virginians.

The Seventeenth Century: A Summary

In Virginia, the first 92 years were extremely difficult and most people had to endure extraordinary hardships. For all the women survival was always a triumph. These groups prospered and suffered in various degrees. For the African women, these years were particularly filled with tragedy. The Native Indian women's plight was similarly tragic since with the invasion of the English, their families were pushed off their land. They also faced death from new diseases and weapons which lead to a consequent staggering reduction in numbers such that by 1700, the population of the Indian women had reduced to almost one-tenth that of its initial numbers. During this time, it was observable that only in the western frontier were people still hopeful to be able to maintain their families and lifestyle and oppose the rapid changes brought about by the white families as they sought to conquer their territorial lands as well as hunting grounds.

For women amongst the white settlers, despite their own share of trouble, from disease, warfare and starvation they were able to witness widespread achievements from the establishment of their colonies that had been sustained with impressive growth. These women had been able to take part in the communal growth process and hence they had managed to clear land, grow crops and initiate trade jumpstarting the wealth creation process.

Although, they received very little credit from their men, it is true that their societies would not have been able to achieve their remarkable growth without their help.

The women realized this through a daily routine of constant work, caring for the aged and their children, nursing of the sick together with great ingenuity in how they used all the resources that were available to them. Wives also worked together with their husbands in the acquisition of property and creation of families. There were numerous cases of women who after all their achievements could even be able to go back to their homes in the countries of origin like England and brag about their success and how they had managed to keep a better home in Virginia more than the ones they had in England.

Women and Slavery

It is evident that women in the 18th century truly worked harder judging from the impressive economic growth that owed much of its development and stability to the women who put in enough labor to see to it that it flourished efficiently. In this century, the women had a more diverse range of work that they could do. Slaves in particular worked harder than anyone else and for the least payment and reward. In some of the biggest plantations, slave women would sew, spin yarn and serve in their master's houses as well as theirs.

The typical African women, however, worked the hardest, from dusk till dawn and sometimes during the night time too doing similar jobs as that of the men. When they had babies, they would bring them over to the fields as they worked to nurse them. The women were encouraged to have many babies their masters wanted to have their children added to their properties especially when they were healthy.

Once they were weaned, these children would spend a larger part of their

day in the fields as though it were their day care center as older children, and elderly slaves watched over them. Teenagers were not left from working and as soon they achieved a considerable age of thirteen to fourteen, they were expected to work for a whole day just like their parents and the rest of the adults. For these women, work did not end in the fields, when they got back home at dusk, they had to still be able to cook dinner for their families and prepare their breakfast the next morning in a normal routine over and over again.

In the 18th century, it however became easier for the slaves to start their own families and hence the numbers for the men and the women were evened out and a larger number of the slaves similarly acquired more plantation farms. However, their families were always under the threat of being split up by their masters at any moment they had wanted to sell someone. Their master's death was particularly the most susceptible time as the slave families were split and divided amongst the heirs of their slaves. Furthermore, however hard the slaves worked, they were never able to get ahead since most of the profits would go to their masters.

It is because of all of these reasons that the slaves often strongly resisted the slave system. Masters would similarly receive their kind of resistance. For instance, slaves could sometimes fake illness, deliberately slow down their work or break hoes. There were cases when they would also poison their masters or set fires in their barns. There were similarly cases of slaves who would run away from work. However, because they were unable to leave their children, most of the runaways were men. There were however cases of women who would manage to make a successful escape.

Women, Work and Freedom

Slavery had been designed to profit masters, and it often did. For instance, in a typical wealthy household along the Tidewater River or in Williamsburg there were always fine ladies that presided over the dinner and the tea tables. They would also engage in gossip, flirtation and games, the matrons would look especially carefree as they entertained almost as though it was all deceptive.

However, if one stayed for a longer while, these women would be seen waking up at 5 or 6 in the morning to set the wheels of the plantations moving. They would similarly plan meals for the day, parceling out the rations to the cooks, visit the sick slaves in their quarters and even to deliver babies as they also took part in teaching their children. Some of them would be pregnant, others would be nursing their infants and still there were those that would hand the babies to the wet nurse who would help in breast feeding.

These women furthermore took care of their gardens though with the assistance of slave keepers and helpers. They would also oversee the dairy, smokehouse, chicken coop as well as the annual hog killing that took place after every first good frost. Moreover, every year they had to cut out the clothes for the annual slave's clothing ration. Wealth, therefore, never brought any leisure for the mistresses in the plantations.

For the teenagers, it was however a different story since adolescence was one of the times when females of the mater class would have the most time on their hands. They never took much of the time in school as it was known that the women never needed much of the formal education. There were

numerous instances when the young women wanted to join their brothers in learning Latin or Greek but would be faced with discouragement instead. Forbidden from too much education and excused from the tasking labor of running the plantations, these white daughters would therefore spend most of their time either reading, sewing, playing musical instruments, dancing or visiting their friends as well as flirting with the young men. This was a life very different from that of the slave girls their age.

For the slaves who lived on smaller farms, their girls would begin to work as soon as they were old enough to toddle and do simple chores as they looked forward to the future of even harder labor. After marriage, which was usually early, these slave girls as well as a considerable number from the gentry would fall pregnant and start nursing their children.

Another significant fact about the eighteenth century is that in the settled areas, most of the Virginians owned much more than what they had possessed almost a hundred years before. However, a peculiar paradox exists in that with the greater material wealth and accompanying prosperity of the eighteenth century; the lives of the women were made significantly harder. Although the money was able to buy new riches, comfort and equipment, the work of these women was made even more complicated and laborious. This is for instance because with all the increased material wealth, the women would have to worry about shinning their mahogany furniture, caring for the imported rugs, polishing their silverware and caring for their satin and silk dresses that were all delicate. With the increased prosperity, the gentry' women also had to oversee more slaves as well as administer to the further responsibility of household, as well as medical care.

Wives in the smaller farms similarly had the extra work of spinning the wool and the flax wheels, as well as the cheese making and butter chums equipment. They too, therefore, had more tasks occupying their days than that their mothers had. With every new flock of chickens or herd of cows came more labor. Ever additional pan and pot meant more cooking and cleaning up after the meals.

This was for instance, noticeable among the gentry whose livestock and gardens ensured that eating was a fancy affair and ritual. Mistresses would import cookbooks from countries like England or even compile their recipes and with their skilled slave cooks they would be able to produce really daunting menus. Most of the meals would for instance be an alternate among boiled a ham, tongue, goose, turtled head, turkey, pigeon pye, eggs and sausage, mince pye, vegetables, jelly, plumbs, custards, apples, almonds and nuts amongst others.

With the advent of the urban life, there was also a multiplication of the responsibilities of the women. There was for instance, the growth of many little shops with the most prosperous ones being those of the milliners who specialized in making hats. Dressmakers also called the “mantua makers” however did well too. In every town, there was always a midwife or more who would help to deliver numerous babies. Similarly, there were women doctors who had a reputation of practicing healing were well known and would be paid well for their neighborly services. Women would also teach children how to read as others struggled with needlework or French lessons for their teenage girls.

There were also advertisements of the services women offered in a broad

range of trades that included blacksmithing, silver-smithing, glassblowing as well as upholstery making. Widows would learn these trades as they worked with their husbands. Since their house and shops were in the same place, family members of the crafts-men would learn the skill as they helped out. With the routine, the women would master the art and start the trade as they also kept a keen eye on their children.

Narrowed Choices

However, with all the hard work and labor that women engaged in, there was still a general inequality between the sexes as no one had started yet to think in that direction. Women were always expected to obey their fathers and husbands and sometimes their brothers too. Their positions in families and societies were always restricted.

In almost all levels of the white society, marriage had always been considered as a natural necessity for all women, and they often had no other option as is the case today. Just like it is today, there were some marriages that were based on love as others were always filled with conflict and hatred. The idea of marriages founded purely on love was just starting to take root and among the gentry, political advantage and wealth were some of the significant areas that were observed as people chose the marriage partners. For these women, marriage meant that her husband had absolute control over any of her properties as was stipulated in the law. It also meant dedicating her life to childbearing to having a baby every two years for at least fifteen to twenty years if she were healthy. This shows that even to the upper class it was still much responsibility and hard work to the women. Most women never considered singlehood in their lives as marriage was a

duty that was expected of every individual. If any of them ever thought of an alternative, they were always few and bleak. Unmarried women were always thought of as pitiful while their married counterparts had hope and reputation as housewives. Marriage was, therefore, a critical role and a path to distinction in the society.

Women and Warfare

During the American Revolution, the women were not left out too. There were large numbers of them in the army as wars were a family affair. Whenever the army marched, women were present in their numbers in solidarity as they roughed it along with their male counterparts. They would look for food, cook, do laundry and sew as well as perform all other relevant housekeeping chores that the men could not organize for themselves. The women who stayed at home would be left with the responsibility of administration of plantations as they wove and spun to keep their shops and industries moving. Some were expected to house troops or bargain with the British officers to not burn their property. Wars were always trying times for all women and especially the slaves who would take the biggest risk and flee with their children to the British camps as they hoped to win the trust and gain their freedom.

Conclusion

Whether in war or peace, women were always responsible for a number of different daily tasks. They kept their families and fed them, took care of their husbands and children and tended the fields as well as putting up with a host of other challenges. Their contribution to the developments and

achievements of Virginia often changed, but neither of them was easy. Only the wealthy had much little work as is the case today, but were still occupied in some responsibility. Women played a significant role in the development of the American fabric to what it is today from the colonial times. They have shown us that they are as powerful and as efficient as they can ever be.

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