

Thomas A. Foster, ed. *Women in Early America*

Zoe Detsi



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11181>
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Zoe Detsi, "Thomas A. Foster, ed. *Women in Early America*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-1, document 11, Online since 17 February 2016, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11181>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

Thomas A. Foster, ed. *Women in Early America*

Zoe Detsi

- Women in Early America* is an intriguing collection of essays offering richly diverse readings of women's lives and experiences in 17th- and 18th- century America. This volume is a significant contribution to the scholarship concerning the role of women in history and their participation in historical moments of political change and cultural negotiation. From Gerda Lerner's seminal work on *The Woman in American History* (1971) to Linda Kerber's enlightening book titled *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (6th ed., 2004), to Mary Beth Norton's meticulous transatlantic study *Separated by their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* (2011), scholarly efforts have been made to deepen our understanding of women's history by initiating a shift of focus from their domestic role and dependent status to their active involvement in political, military, and economic affairs, as well as cultural production.
- The scope of the volume's methodological approach to the history of early women in America is very broad. The essays cover an impressive range of women's experiences from the colonial period to the American revolutionary war offering a number of perspectives that embrace cultural history, gender theory, race studies, while presenting a multitude of women's voices from different social, cultural, political, ethnic backgrounds, and geographical areas. All eleven essays provide scholars and researchers with a wealth of archival material – diaries, letters, narratives, documents – and with fresh insights into examining women in history as active agents in their own right challenging social conventions and political decisions. Either as aristocratic women in New Mexico or indentured servants in Virginia and Maryland, as slave owners in Jamaica or runaway slaves, as interpreters in Puritan Massachusetts or traders in French America and Detroit, as Loyalist women during the revolution or proponents of female education in the new nation, early women in America were deeply involved in (inter)cultural practices and greatly affected by economic policies and social changes.

- 3 The first chapter, “Doña Teresa de Aguilera y Roche before the Inquisition: The Travails of a Seventeenth-Century Aristocratic Woman in New Mexico,” unearths the unknown story of Doña Teresa from the National Archives of New Mexico offering insight into the complexities of social and cultural relations in New Spain from the perspective of an aristocratic woman who finds herself involuntarily drawn into the public sphere of political rivalries because of her husband’s escalating enmity with the clergy. Placing Doña Teresa’s indignation at her confinement within the social context of the time, Ramon A. Gutiérrez brings to light both the precarious existence of women and the intense conflict between ecclesiastical and secular authorities in New Mexico. The essay is an original contribution to the rewriting of women’s history in patriarchal society taking into consideration the crucial differences among women based on class and social status.
- 4 Chapter two, ““Women Are as Knowing Therein as Men””: Dutch Women in Early America,” redresses a major neglect in the field of early women in America –which is too often dominated by references to the English settlers– by focusing on the experiences of Dutch women in New Netherlands and the succeeding colony of New York. Drawing historical evidence from letters, account books, court records, Kim Todt reenacts the most important aspects of Dutch women’s lives and social existence from the founding of the colony in 1624 to the late 17th century: education, marriage, widowhood, participation in trade and management of business. The essay draws attention to the legal status of women during the Dutch colonial period as inextricably linked to the wider context of political practices and economic policies.
- 5 Witchcraft was indeed a serious matter in colonial America designated as a capital crime against patriarchal authority both in religious and secular terms. Matthew Dennis and Elizabeth Reis’ essay, “Women as Witches, Witches as Women: Witchcraft and Patriarchy in Colonial North America,” examines witchcraft as a significant factor for assessing “the status of women, their prescribed roles, and their place within the new, shifting, cross-cultural social worlds of early America”(66). Endowed with extraordinary powers, witches posed a serious threat to the social structure and gender ideology of the Puritan communities of Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut. Witchcraft accusations more often reflected the intense fear of a disruptive “Other” either in the shape of a transgressive woman, or a devilish Indian, or a rebellious African slave, thus justifying both women’s subordination to patriarchal rule and the wider English political scheme of land expropriation and slavery.
- 6 Chapter four, “Servant Women and Sex in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake,” is an interesting addition to the volume as it attempts to reconstruct the lives and experiences of women too often relegated to the fringes of the historical metanarrative about early America. Betty Wood examines the Virginia and Maryland court records in which servant women consistently appear as victims of sexual abuse by their employers, in most cases resulting in the birth of illegitimate children and their punishment for refusing to reveal the name of the father. The essay takes an incisive look into the social and legal structure of the early Chesapeake communities and thoroughly explores the servant women’s physical and emotional victimization as part of a wider economic system that profited from the productive and reproductive contribution of indentured women.
- 7 Chapter five, “Rebecca Kellogg Ashley: Negotiating Identity on the Early American Borderlands, 1704-1757,” recovers the amazing story of Rebecca Kellogg Ashley, an

interpreter that helped negotiate the problematic relationship between the Iroquois nations and the English settlers. Joy AJ Howard reconstructs Ashley's most compelling life-story from evidence drawn from colonial reports, letters, and missionaries' journals. Captured by the Mohawks at the age of eight, Ashley lived among them for many years, got married and raised children, before returning to the English settlement in western Massachusetts to take up the role of mediator of cultural exchange between the Indians and the whites. The essay's significance lies in its positioning of Ashley's historical presence outside the captivity narrative context –the story of the captive white woman who returns to English civilization after her savage frontier experience– exploring her hybrid existence, her ability to transcend cultural and racial borders and her contribution to the successful rendering of transcultural communication.

- 8 Christine Walker's "Womanly Masters: Gendering Slave Ownership in Colonial Jamaica," shifts focus to the geographical area of colonial Jamaica where slavery quickly became deeply entrenched as an economic system. The essay, in an attempt to redress the lack of information about women's engagement in slavery, explores female slave ownership drawing evidence from court cases, colonial wills, correspondence, and newspaper ads. Regardless of social status, most free women, whether of European or African ancestry, gained access to various aspects of the colonial economic system increasing their wealth and enhancing their authority without challenging long-standing patriarchal ideas about the proper sphere and behavior of women.
- 9 In a similar vein, Karen L. Marrero's "Women at Crossroads: Trade, Mobility, and Power in Early French America and Detroit," explores the ways in which French women of merchant families participated in the commercial transactions with Native American nations in the area of Quebec and the continental interior, thus gaining for themselves a considerable degree of power and authority. Sifting through a wealth of archival material, Marrero examines the impact of the French-Native trade on the formation of a transitional zone of transcultural contact and exchange where French women engaged in business activities often transgressing the boundaries of European notions of proper behavior from women.
- 10 Susan Sleeper-Smith's essay on "The Agrarian Village World of Indian Women in the Ohio River Valley" explores how Indian women not only contributed to the production of extensive food resources but also seriously challenged the colonial belief that the Indians were primitive and nomadic rather civilized and sedentary. The central role that Indian women played in the creation of the agrarian villages had far-reaching political and cultural resonances as the agrarian skills of these women undermined the new nation's claim to the creation of a republic of independent male yeomen farmers and called into question the American government's scheme of land expropriation on the basis of the Indians' intransigence at becoming civilized and farmers.
- 11 Chapter nine, "Loyalist Women in British New York City, 1776-1783," traces the revolutionary experience of Loyalist women examining their involvement in the war either as active agents or as fervent supporters of the King and Britain. Ruma Chopra's essay explores both these women's assertiveness, evident in their public declarations of their political allegiance, and their precarious position in revolutionary America as victims of humiliation and hostility, evident in the failure of British administration to protect them.

- 12 Chapter ten, “‘I Knew That If I Went Back to Virginia, I Should Never Get My Liberty’: Ona Judge Staines, The President’s Runaway Slave,” reconstructs the unknown story of Ona Judge, slave to one of the most revered families in America, George and Martha Washington’s. Judge’s escape and her life as a fugitive have come down mainly through two oral interviews given to abolitionist papers. While the Washingtons continued their concerted efforts to capture her until their death, Judge, amazingly enough, managed to escape the bounty hunters and establish a family for herself. The significance of Ona Judge’s story lies in its contribution to research into the struggles and accomplishments of fugitive slave women.
- 13 Last but not least, Mary C. Kelley’s essay, “‘The Need of Their Genius’: A Women’s Revolution in Early America,” traces the changes in the schooling of women from colonial times to the years before the Civil War, and the opportunities these changes afforded American women who began to redefine their social identity and cultural role. Offering a wealth of archival sources, this essay presents the gradual social and political empowerment of American women.
- 14 *Women in Early America* is an enlightening and insightful volume which takes scholarship on the field of women’s history a step further by exploring women’s lives from a broad range of perspectives. Original and carefully researched, all the essays combine archival information about largely overlooked aspects of female experience with an examination of the intense socio-political complexities and cultural contradictions of the time. *Women in Early America* is a large-scale project that revolves around the interplay of gender, society, and politics from the first settlements through the American Revolution and the formation of a new national identity. The volume successfully restructures the historical past taking into consideration the particularities embedded in the category of “woman” in terms of economic status, cultural profile, and racial identity, as well as the changing social landscape and women’s dynamic involvement in cultural exchange, economic transactions, and political power structures. *Women in Early America* is essential reading for historians and scholars of gender, a first-rate textbook for students of early America and women’s history.
-

AUTHOR

ZOE DETSI

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece