

WOMEN IN EARLY VIRGINIA

With a name like Temperance Flowerdew, anybody would stand out. She certainly did. She was a young woman who arrived in Virginia in 1609, survived the Starving Time, and in 1613 married Captain George Yeardley, a prominent military leader in Virginia. Yeardley became Deputy Governor of the colony in 1616, and returned to England in 1617 where he was knighted in 1618, making Temperance “Lady Yeardley.” He was also appointed Governor of Virginia at that time.

Lady Yeardley certainly would have been noticed because of her standing in the colony, but even more so, because of her gender. Two women came to Virginia in late 1608 and a few more arrived in 1609, but women were always in the minority. The first women were wives or daughters of settlers. But in the years 1620-1622, the Virginia Company recruited and sent about 140 maids to the colony. These young women came at the request of



planters, to become their wives, provided the men reimbursed the Company for the women’s passage, initially set at 120 pounds of tobacco. The maids who came in 1621 were highly recommended for their social respectability and domestic skills. The Company provided a variety of clothing and accessories for each of them. Other English women signed on to go to Virginia as indentured servants for terms of four to seven years. In the first meeting of the General Assembly in 1619 in Jamestown, the Assembly members concluded that “in a new plantation it is not known, whether man or woman be the more necessary.”

In the early years of the colony, the ratio of men to women was about six to one. In the 1619/20 census of the English and other Christian people in the colony, there were 677 men and 119 women. Later in the century, men outnumbered women at a ratio of about three to one. This ratio reflected the heavy reliance of the colony upon tobacco cultivation, primarily a male occupation. It also slowed the creation of stable families, something that Company leaders early on had hoped to achieve. The Company wrote in 1621, “The plantation can never flourish till families be planted and the respect of wives and children fix the people on the soil.” English colonists viewed the family as the basic building block of society and government, and tried to establish traditional nuclear families whenever possible.

In Virginia as in England, women had fewer rights than men. Women could not vote or hold public office, and could not control property except under special circumstances. Before they married, women’s economic affairs were directed by their fathers, and after they married their husbands made all major business decisions. Only widows could be free from the economic control of men, and only when their late husbands made it possible. The high death rate in Virginia and the overall shortage of women meant that the remarriage of widows was common. A previously married woman could make legal arrangements to protect her estate from the control of her second husband, but if she did not, the new husband had the right to manage all her property.

One notable Virginia woman, Hannah Bennett Turner Tompkins Arnold, lived in the mid-seventeenth century. She was her parents’ only child to reach adulthood, so she inherited 450 acres of land. Her first husband helped her get title to the land, and when he died, she inherited his possessions. In her next marriage, she and her husband probably entered into a marriage agreement that protected her rights, and when he died, she added his property to her landholdings. Before she married a third time, she drew up a deed of gift to bequeath her land and possessions to her children and protect their rights in case she died before her husband. Yet, she outlived her third husband and inherited his estate too. By accumulating land from her father and three husbands, her wealth and influence in the community grew. She had used legal strategies and the help of her first husband to maintain control of her property.



Virginians lived on relatively isolated farms and plantations, and for the most part the people they saw on a daily basis were the members of their own households. This included the planter’s family plus any other unrelated people like servants or slaves that lived on the plantation. Because of the high death rate in the colony, plantation families usually consisted of just parents and children, and sometimes from numerous marriages. Even though married women gave birth to children every two or three years, large families were rare. Because of their relatively few numbers and isolated farm life, most women had few opportunities for interaction with other women.

Women’s work generally consisted of supporting the plantation. If a planter had servants or slaves, the wife may not have had many chores to do. But on smaller plantations, women may have cared for the pigs and barnyard fowl, and raised vegetables for the family’s consumption. Most cloth was bought from England, so the tasks of spinning and weaving were not as common as in England. But women did make clothing, cooked and cared for the children.

Individual planter families, especially of the upper class, were often linked by ties of blood or marriage to a wider network of people who lived in the colony. Members of these extended families often maintained close relationships even though they did not live under the same roof. Virginians also had fairly frequent contact with near neighbors who lived within a few hours travel on surrounding plantations. Wealthy people had a wider circle of contacts than did poor people and did more traveling for social purposes

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