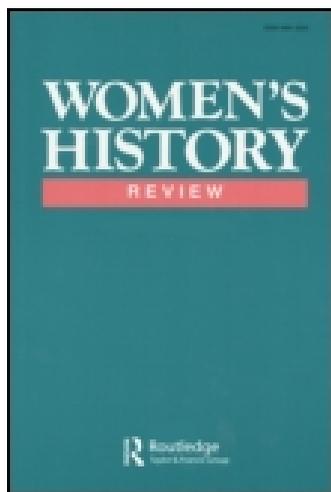


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Homemakers, Supervisors, and Peach Stealing Bitches: the role of overseers' wives on slave plantations in eighteenth-century Virginia and South Carolina

Laura Sandy

The otherwise extensive historiography of slavery in colonial America has rather neglected the overseer and his family, as indeed the wider historiography of colonial society has often neglected the white poor. By considering, specifically, the role of overseers' wives, this article seeks to recover the history of poor white women who, although often vilified by their employers for their allegedly wayward behaviour, made a significant contribution, economically and socially, to the plantation community. By so doing, it casts fresh light upon white women who lived on the margins of wider colonial society and the shadowy 'edges' of slavery itself.

There are few figures more elusive in the history of colonial America than the overseer's wife. Indeed, the situation of their husbands has seldom been subject to rigorous analysis. These men's origins, recruitment, conditions of employment, their role in labour management, and the inherent complexities surrounding their

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status as mediators between master and slave have all been obscured by a powerful stereotype: that of the brutish and vulgar task-master despised by his employer and feared by his reluctant workforce.¹ It is small wonder, then, that their uneducated wives are almost absent from a literature that has, otherwise, probed deeply into the institution of American slavery and the lives of both the enslaved and their owners. Those who occupied the narrow and contested middle ground of class and race relations have largely vanished from our sight. Women who inhabited this middle ground in slave societies, such as overseers' wives, are almost untraceable. Recovering the overseer's wife is made more complicated still by the fragmented and partial archival record of their lives; they have left far less impression on the historical record than the valuable human property that worked the fields and served in the big house. Yet, for the painstaking researcher, there is evidence enough to demonstrate that these women significantly shaped the multiracial plantation society within which they lived and worked. Indeed, the addition of overseers' wives to histories of the Old South adds a new gender dynamic to debates that have primarily been dominated by race and class.²

The relationship between slavery, race and gender has become a central area of study in recent years. The role of the plantation mistress and the lives of female slaves have been investigated rigorously.³ Slave women are far more prominent in colonial records than lower-class white women. Slaves, male and female, can be found in all forms of colonial records: business records, court records, newspaper articles and advertisements, and personal records such as diaries, letters and wills. The majority of slave traders and slave owners meticulously recorded every detail about their human property. Slave women constantly appear in ledgers, account books, deeds of sale, hire contracts, inventories, wills, letters and diaries. Slaves' unfree status meant that logging and tracking them was of the utmost importance to all those involved in their lives. From the day they were born to the day they died, nearly every detail of slaves' lives was recorded. Plantation owners were, in particular, quite curious about the characters and behaviour of their slaves. They made lengthy comments about male and female individuals, often including points about their physique, mannerisms and character. The lives of slave women across the North American colonies have been reconstructed from these plentiful historical records. The intimate details available have allowed historians of the South, such as Carol Berkin and Betty Wood and, for the Caribbean, Barbara Bush, to construct rich and full accounts of the female slave experience.⁴

In contrast, very few people who were literate had more than minimal, if any, contact with, or interest in, the lower classes in the colonial South. Furthermore, unless they committed a crime or raised enough money to buy land or slaves, lower-class men and women do not appear in institutional records. For low-status women, the situation is an even greater challenge. Their gender usually precluded their mention in the few sources in which their husbands, fathers and brothers made a fleeting appearance. Their lack of wealth and personal property, low social standing, gender, and free status meant that little time or effort was spent on recording details about their lives. The women themselves left little

testimony, for most were barely literate or were illiterate. Thus the evidence to recreate a full and vibrant picture of the lives of lower-class white women in eighteenth-century Virginia and South Carolina simply does not exist. Yet, by scouring the plantation records, blurred vision begins to focus and a fuller appreciation emerges of the interpersonal dynamics that shaped life on colonial slave plantations.

This demands the historian's attention because the overseer's wife was not a rare or exceptional character. Although it is commonly thought that the men employed to work as overseers on colonial slave plantations were young and single, this assumption is incorrect.⁵ Plantation records reveal that many overseers in fact had wives.⁶ Indeed, planters looking to recruit a new overseer often desired 'one that has a wife.'⁷ A married man was less likely to pursue sexual relationships with female slaves, which were a powerful source of strife, resentment and discord within the slave quarters. Yet, significantly, the role of the overseer's wife went far beyond ensuring domestic harmony. They (and also overseers' daughters, widows, and some skilled single women) undertook an array of important tasks, crucial both to the productivity and self-sufficiency of the plantation, and they were often commended by leading planter-patriarchs for their diligence and success in their labours. These commendations are evidence enough of the pivotal role played by poor white women on the slave plantation, and studying them thus offers a unique perspective on colonial society in Virginia and South Carolina, enmeshed as they were in a complex web of class, race and gender relationships. Some aspects of these relationships, such as slave women and the plantation mistress, remain frustratingly elusive, for, all too often, the documentary record offers little more than sideways glances and tantalising hints. Kathleen Brown's conception of slave society in colonial Virginia, and the South, rests upon a foundation of gender difference. Brown emphasises that it is important to study not only privileged white women who owned slaves, but also lower-class white women, who occupied a liminal position in hierarchies of race and class, to fully understand the development of the colonial South and slavery in the eighteenth century.⁸ Our evidence, shadowy as it is in places, is telling enough, by focusing on the partnership between overseer and wife, to cast much illumination on the hitherto hidden contributions made by lower-class women to the day-to-day operation of the plantation system and the wider nature of gendered relations.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Linda Sturtz, in their excellent studies of white women in the colonial North and South, also raise valuable questions. Both scholars accept that the construction of colonial women's history is problematic for many reasons, and both found that the study of free, white, working women uncovered more about 'female responsibility', which was 'often very broad', and less about 'economic opportunity'. However, such studies provide new insights into gender relations in the colonial era. Ulrich and Sturtz's work stresses the need to understand the social and economic exchanges and interactions in which these women were involved, with both men and women of different classes and races, to fully understand the development of colonial America.⁹ They also highlight the necessity to reconsider existing assumptions about the

experiences of women in this era. Seventeenth and eighteenth century recruiting pamphlets claimed that women in the American colonies spent all of their time at housework. In the past, it has been argued that many women who lived in the American colonies at this time transcended the gendered constraints of patriarchy with regard to their husbands, and lived in what was portrayed as a 'golden age'. Modern scholarship has refuted this view, which emphasised the 'contrast between self-sufficient, independent colonial women and the oppressed, middle-class victim of industrialization confined to her home by stultifying ideology'. More recent studies of women living in colonial America argue that 'there was no golden age' and regard such theories as nothing more than a 'convenient backdrop for studies of nineteenth-century domesticity'.¹⁰ Though both viewpoints highlight important arguments about colonial wives, neither recognises the true complexity of the lives of poor Southern white women, nor do they do anything to challenge stereotypes of them as feckless and disorderly. The study of overseers' wives broadens the debate. Rather than confining their labours exclusively to the home and the domestic sphere, colonial wives in the South, in particular those who lived on plantations, were likely to be found working in a 'little factory producing the items the family needed to survive', and carrying out chores that went beyond the realms of 'housework'.¹¹

From the early eighteenth century overseers and their wives and families quickly became categorised as belonging to a distinct 'overseeing' class. This identity was imposed on them usually by their employers; their behaviour and character was largely judged in relation to their reputation as a group or class of people, rather than as individuals with different backgrounds and experiences.¹² The dominant class of slave owners frequently claimed that overseers were men without morals, education, skill, or ambition. These men were allegedly 'at their best a necessary evil' who enjoyed 'nothing else but thwarting their employer and abusing his Negroes'.¹³ Planters often used the same scathing terminology when referring to overseers' wives. It was not uncommon to call white labouring women 'whores' and 'wenches' if they did not follow the rules of etiquette colonial society expected of the lower classes, or behave with the decorum considered appropriate to their gender. Overseers' wives and their children were viewed by some planters as nothing more than extra mouths to feed. Such negative feelings towards overseers and their families were not always unwarranted. The behaviour of some did indeed justify censure and ill feeling. However, much of the negative stereotyping of overseers and their wives was undeserved and rooted in a marked and persistent class prejudice. The voices of more appreciative colonial planters have been drowned out by the cries of disgruntled, and often misogynistic, planters. Thus, while some overseers' wives and other white female employees were often praised for their skills and good work, many were simultaneously shunned and despised because of their perceived socio-economic inferiority, and not only by their employers, but also by the slaves they were employed to oversee. This denigration of low-status white women is indicative of a powerful impulse to reinforce conventional social hierarchies in a maturing colonial society.

Yet that impulse was often challenged by the fluidity of social relations in the New World. The investigation of overseers' wives illustrates the complexities of class, race and gender interactions in the colonial South, and highlights the different ideologies and distinct relationships that were formed between members of the plantation household in the colonial era. Too often pro-slavery ideology that developed in the antebellum era, which was based on the idea that all blacks were inferior, and thus suited to slavery, while superior whites were free, has been applied to the colonial era. Studying both overseers and their wives reveals that although class prejudice was virulent in the colonial South, deeper analysis of the lives of free white men and women from the lower echelons reveals an interesting and overlooked point. Free whites employed on plantations who worked hard and earned the support and patronage of their employers could overcome such prejudice and move up the social and economic ladder. This is an indication that boundaries between social classes were more porous in the colonial era than the antebellum era. It is, however, worthwhile, first, to look at those troublesome women who, along with their husbands, provoked this marked and persistent class prejudice and undoubtedly contributed to fostering an unsavoury reputation.

Some eighteenth-century planters were fervently against the employment of overseers who had wives and families. They emphasised the additional economic burden to the plantation, and viewed overseers as a class of rogues whose wives doubled their trouble. From 1770 to 1778 Tom Freshwater was an overseer for Landon Carter, a leading Virginian planter. During this time Freshwater's 'mad bitches', his wife and daughters, were caught stealing peaches from the plantation where they lived and worked. Freshwater's wife and daughters were not only caught red-handed, but upon apprehension unleashed a 'vile strain of Abuse' at their social superiors. Carter threatened Freshwater's wife that if she and her daughters continued to misbehave he would have them 'whipped off the plantation'. This first incident nearly cost the overseer his job. A short time later, Carter undoubtedly regretted his decision to keep the Freshwaters in his employ when he found Tom Freshwater 'again abusively outrageous'. Carter complained about the 'gang of Devils of Freshwaters, whose wife and all his daughters ... lie there to do me all kinds of mischief as they can. Stealing away my Chickens ... Quarrelling with the people'. As a result Carter decided he could tolerate the Freshwater family no more and noted their fate in his diary: 'He, wife, and daughters shall be this day drove off'.¹⁴

The Freshwaters, husband, wife and daughters, had compounded their sins by hurling abusive language at their lordly employer, but their thefts and the disruption they caused were the root of their eviction; they threatened the plantation economically. Not only did some overseers' wives add to the running costs of plantations, but some planters claimed that their antics and disregard for their employer's rules and regulations resulted in damaged property and a loss of profit. While it is likely that many problems that arose on plantations involving overseers and their families were unavoidable or accidental, it is clear that some overseers and their families were most unruly servants, unafraid to defy and rob the planters who employed them.

Such incidents cannot be properly understood outside the dynamics of day-to-day life on a slave plantation, in particular in the contest that inevitably developed between labourer and labour manager for status and authority over the enslaved. This point can be well illustrated by a drama that unfolded on another of Landon Carter's Virginia plantations. A slave girl went to her master one evening and claimed that the overseer's wife, Mrs Selfe, had 'stuck pins in her ear'. Another male slave followed and said he had been threatened with a whipping by the overseer, Mr Selfe, over some corn that had gone missing from a store house. He claimed that he had nothing to do with the missing corn, but alleged that Mrs Selfe had left the key in the corn house door when she left to attend another matter. Initially, there was much confusion, over why the slave girl had a bloodied ear and over what happened to the corn supply. The slave girl's testimony immediately placed Mrs Selfe in the spotlight and under suspicion. An inquiry into the incident took place the following day, and after investigation the truth came out. It was discovered by the plantation owner that Mr Selfe, the overseer, had in fact inflicted the injury upon the slave girl for allegedly taking the store house key and passing it on to some slaves. Mr Selfe admitted he had given his wife the key to the store house to lock up some equipment, and that she left the key unsecured in their house when she went to catch some crabs. Furthermore, the young slave girl confessed that her 'Granny' told her to blame the overseer's wife for her injury to spite her and her master. 'Granny Sukey' was unhappy at the placement of her granddaughter in the overseer's home and under his wife's authority. Determined to reverse her master's decision, the slave grandmother placed the blame on Mrs Selfe and ensured her negligence in the theft of the key to the store house was exposed.¹⁵

Although the truth quickly became clear about Granny Sukey's initial attempt to discredit Mrs Selfe, the tale-telling and resulting investigation, headed by Carter, revealed the negligence of the overseer's wife with regard to plantation property and supplies as well as the brutal treatment of a young slave by her husband. The theft of the key and corn supplies would have undoubtedly been dealt with by the overseer himself and hidden from his employer's sight. However, slaves pointing the finger at the overseer's wife in two related incidents forced the intervention of the master. Granny Sukey and her granddaughter appear to have escaped any further punishment related to the matter, and the other slaves involved in the theft of corn stored in the warehouse absconded. Although their guilt was undeniable, at the same time and, by simple means, the slaves had called into question the credibility of the overseer's wife. Her actions were scrutinised, her carelessness exposed, and her reputation with her employer damaged. Furthermore, the incident raises an interesting question regarding slaves' perceptions of lower-class whites employed to work on slave plantations, in particular white women. An overseer's wife was often an easy target for slaves. Overseers' wives, even more so than their husbands, were on some occasions a 'weak point in the hierarchy of white over black'.¹⁶ The placement of a slave girl under the charge of Mrs Selfe and her perceived mistreatment of that slave was deemed inappropriate for a woman of her class by other slaves with whom she had contact. The slave girl's grandmother took action to see that the overseer's wife was kept in her place.

This incident points to more entrenched problems of plantation management and the conflicting interests of planters, overseeing households, and slaves. When the chain of command from black to white was broken, or disrupted by slaves, the resolutions that were reached often did not reflect favourably on overseers or their wives. Although Mrs Selfe's innocence regarding the punishment of the young slave girl came to the surface, as a result her husband's guilt emerged and her own negligence in another matter was exposed. Both husband and wife likely suffered the wrath of a planter who was more incensed by the 'barbarity [of] these few drops of blood on the Ear of a child' and the incompetence of the overseer's wife, than he was by the scheming and theft committed by his slaves.¹⁷

A consistent complaint made by planters was that overseers and their wives got above their 'station', which caused them to abuse their power, enhance their own well-being, and neglect their duties. Carter complained that one of his horses was in poor condition and was 'saddle galled'. Although he had not sanctioned the use of the horse by his overseer, he suspected the horse had been damaged by being used 'as a pad for the overseers lady'. After realising one of his overseeing households had commandeered some of his slaves for their own convenience, another planter in Virginia commented: 'As for their wives and children I shan't maintain them; for I think they do more hurt than good, taking the hands to wait upon them.'¹⁸

In South Carolina, Henry Laurens suspected that one of his overseers, Mr Godfrey, and his wife were misusing his slaves for their own personal comfort and gain; Laurens wrote to his agent in the area: 'And I wonder in what Station he has kept Mary. Probably since his Marriage, he may have taken her into the House. If so, he will be further open to censure. Tis time to enquire particularly, what Negroes and how many he employs, or keeps idle, since the increase of his family.'¹⁹ When Laurens received reports on the occupations of his slaves at the plantation where Godfrey and his wife lived, his suspicions were confirmed. The slave list 'shews that Mr. Godfrey empl[o]y'd 5 Negroes about his house.'²⁰ In Virginia, some overseeing couples appropriated the labour of plantation slaves to ease their own existence without the permission of their employer. After visiting one of his overseers, Landon Carter remarked that 'I was sorry to see his wife act the part of a fine lady in all her wearing apparel with at least two maids beside her own girl to get dinner and wait upon her . . . I would rather have seen the diligent, industrious women '²¹ Such views were reflective of the idea of the productive and useful 'farmwife' that was developed in the colonial era and carried into the antebellum era. Planter hostility to social pretensions among the 'overseer class' was evident and it is clear that class as well as racial awareness occupied the minds of colonial planters to a considerable degree. Often, overseeing families were not viewed as fellow whites by their employers and social superiors, and overseers' wives who did not perform the role of the 'ideal farmwife' were held in contempt.²²

There is, here, an obvious class tension; the planter and his mistress looked askance at behaviour that seemed to challenge established authority and hierarchies of rank and yet the employment they offered inevitably promoted social

mobility and heightened aspirations. In particular, their place, physical and social, close to the planter and the plantation mistress, among yet above the slaves, is likely to have fostered a sense of entitlement and an assertive self-confidence on the part of the overseer and his family. Once again, the paucity of the sources makes gauging the exact extent of a grating friction between lower-class ambition and planter-class reaction problematic, but testimony enough exists to confirm that employment on a plantation provided opportunities too tempting to resist. Those wives granted their own domestic servants as part of a contract might soon assume the airs of one accustomed to being served personally. Others more deliberately strove to erode the distinctions between themselves and their social superiors.²³

Indeed, for some overseers' wives legitimate access to personal servants was not enough and they indulged in criminal activities to improve their economic well-being. Living on a slave plantation gave lower-class white women an unusual amount of freedom, and access to equipment, resources and slaves from which they would otherwise have been kept at a distance. Either collaborating with their husbands or independently, white women who worked on plantations occasionally made off with goods and slaves. Theft was the most serious offence in which overseers and their families took part, and was probably the major contributor to the bad reputation with which most overseers were burdened. For example, one of the overseers employed by William Cabell, a Virginia planter, went to him and revealed that 'his wife confessed she stole a pair of thread stockings' from her employer's house and 'prayed for mercy' for his wife.²⁴

However, more seriously than stealing peaches or stockings, or the unsanctioned use of plantation resources to feed their own livestock and slaves, some overseers and their wives stole from planters on a much grander scale. One overseer's wife stole a slave and absconded with the intention of selling the boy. Another overseer's wife was a clear co-conspirator in the trafficking of goods and slave labour from the plantation where her husband was employed. The slaves and goods were taken to and used on their own plot of land. Furthermore, to cover up the theft the overseeing couple in question falsely claimed that the overseer's wife had brought a fortune to their marriage. The couple claimed that it was this wealth that enabled them to develop their own land into a plantation at the same time as working as overseers.²⁵ One overseer's wife was caught pilfering from the plantation slaves. The slaves in question sought justice and punished the woman with a whipping. The plantation owner defended his slaves against the white 'wench' and commented that they 'only moderately whipt her', rather than punishing his slaves for assaulting a white woman.²⁶ Her social status as a lower-class 'wench', confirmed in his mind by her behaviour, was clearly more significant to the planter than any notion of a shared racial status that must be defended.

Thus, the overseers' wives occupied, alongside their husbands, a contested, and potentially dangerous space between master and slave. As the direct managers of labour in a system ultimately predicated on physical coercion, tension was inevitable. Equally significant, though, were the politics of plantation relationships. As the situation between Granny Sukey and Mrs Selfe illustrates, slaves fully

recognised that overseers and their wives were socially inferior to their plantation masters, and, on occasion, they exploited this vulnerability to meet their own ends. As well as cunning ploys and 'running to the master', physical confrontations were another manifestation of this situation. Such conflicts witnessed by overseers' wives were no doubt harrowing experiences, especially for those whose husbands died at the hands of their charges.²⁷ Yet the wives themselves also ran the risk of death or injury at the hands of slaves. There are a small number of recorded cases in which slaves who had been antagonised by an overseer's wife plotted their revenge. In 1744, the Virginia House of Burgesses heard the case of a slave who had 'murdered his Overseer's Wife'.²⁸ In 1735, a South Carolina planter named Silas Miles put forward a petition to the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly stating, 'the petitioner had the misfortune that one of his Negro Slaves (Primus) to shoot his Overseers Wife'. There is no mention of the events surrounding the shooting or if the attack was provoked. However, as slaves' access to guns was limited, and the slave in question absconded immediately after the attack, it is unlikely that the shooting was an accident.²⁹ What is clear from this incident and others like it is that overseers' wives' proximity to large groups of enslaved labourers, their recognised low social standing among slaves under their supervision, their gender, and their distance from free white populations placed them in particularly vulnerable positions.

Leaving behind, the roguish and the unruly overseers' wives, and the stereotypes they fostered, the social and economic progress of a number of other white women who lived on colonial slave plantations demonstrates the importance of their contributions both to their families and to the broader, multiracial plantation community. In contrast to the 'peach-stealing bitches' and the 'wenches' who maddened their employers, many overseers' wives were viewed as highly valued members of the plantation community. These women often received glowing reports about their work habits and domestic skills from the planters who employed them, despite their low socio-economic status in a world that was structured by class as well as race and gender. Like female traders and tavern owners in towns and cities, overseers' wives, in the plantation countryside, performed roles and skilled labour that determined their reputation to a greater extent than assumptions about their gender.³⁰ The reconstruction of the lives of those women who were hardworking and well respected establishes the place of overseers' wives in colonial history and women's history. Furthermore, examining how their roles affected their husbands' prospects as overseers as well as their own prospects as women and wives presents a more comprehensive understanding of the plantation South in the eighteenth century. It is significant that within overseeing couples husbands could separate themselves from their spouses when they wanted or needed to. Yet, they also made use of their labour in a number of capacities.

According to Mary Beth Norton, 'whether black or white, rich or poor . . . most colonial Southern women can be summed up in one word "circumscribed"'. They were 'tied down by the care of their families'.³¹ Overseers' wives were extremely valuable to their husbands, and sometimes to their husbands' employers, as

homemakers. Their place on the plantation was primarily within the domestic sphere, yet they performed a variety of other tasks. Like most women, overseers' wives provided care for their families and did the washing, mending, cooking and cleaning for the household. Before the onset of the consumer revolution, most wives produced everyday necessities of life such as food, drink, candles, soap, clothes, and sometimes shoes, in their own homes, for use by their families, but often in overseeing households these items were also produced for sale.

Rather than being extra mouths to feed and consumers of plantation resources, deeper investigation reveals that many overseers' wives were vital members of the household unit and were often an asset to their husbands' employers. Although colonial wives provided their husbands with the resources, sustenance, and the daily stability they needed to carry out their work efficiently, the significance of the traditional role overseers' wives played in the domestic sphere, as wives, mothers and homemakers, for both black and white inhabitants of the plantation, has gone unacknowledged. Furthermore, the records of colonial planters show that overseers' wives were rewarded with payments and bonuses for their diligence both in domestic and skilled tasks. They carried out skilled labour, such as spinning, sewing and weaving, taught slaves their crafts, directed slaves in the production of dairy goods and the rearing of livestock, and played nurse and midwife, enhancing the profitability of the plantation.

In both South Carolina and Virginia, some planters specifically advertised for overseers with wives. The *Virginia Gazette* reveals that one planter requested 'a married man as overseer on the farms'. Another wanted an overseer with a 'wife that understands a dairy'. Furthermore, recognising that planters were sometimes in need of skills and habits traditionally associated with women, some overseers advertised their married status when seeking employment. One overseer advertised that he was 'a married man'; another potential overseer advertised himself as 'a man, with a family'. A wife and a family were attributes that gave men an air of stability and morality in the colonial South. Notions about women's intrinsic moral nature and 'civilizing influence', which were to become enshrined in the 'cult of domesticity' in the nineteenth century, were important to planters looking for men to oversee their slaves and plantation affairs.³² Single women, some 'elderly', and others with children also placed advertisements seeking work on plantations, touting the skills and stabilising influence associated with their gender.³³ In contracts of employment, most planters were willing to provide for overseers' wives and families. George Washington allowed his overseers as much corn, milk and butter as they and their families could eat and use without waste. He wrote to one overseer that if he had 'any matrimonial scheme in view' he did not wish to hinder his plans, and if he intended to bring a wife to the plantation she would also be provided with food 'to eat, and in all respects, fare as you do', with no deductions from his wage. One planter was particularly pleased when his overseer's wife turned out to be 'a neat, Housewifely woman'.³⁴

There were a number of more practical reasons to employ these white women alongside their husbands. Many planters realised that a hardworking wife added to, rather than wasted, plantation resources.³⁵ Overseers were expected to direct

the slaves under their supervision constantly 'and never stir from them during their hours of work'.³⁶ This theoretically left them time for little else, so they needed someone to keep house for them. Planters acknowledged the importance of fulfilling these basic domestic needs for overseers who were not married. They usually provided slave women to carry out domestic duties as a standard part of their compensation package. At the very least, 'a single man' was provided 'with his washing'. Other planters placed one or two slaves at their overseer's disposal to take care of housekeeping and attend to any other domestic tasks. Sometimes planters even paid slave-owning overseers an additional sum, on top of their wages, to use their own slaves as domestic help, accommodating the overseer's domestic needs at the same time as preventing any loss of earnings.³⁷ It remained a prerequisite for eighteenth-century unmarried overseers to be provided with domestic care and services which would not be deducted from their wages.

However, the labour of a slave who was able-bodied enough to do domestic tasks for an overseer was worth more than the cost of the provisions planters would need to allocate for an overseer's wife. Thrifty planters recognised that overseers with wives saved them the cost and trouble of providing such services for their employees. Even more indicative of the importance some planters accorded to domestic satisfaction within the overseers' household was their willingness to provide additional remuneration. While it was normal to provide board and provisions for overseers' wives, some planters also supplied wine, cheese, cloth and luxury items.³⁸ Some hardworking wives were given the additional help of young slaves in their homes.³⁹ The provision of domestic support for overseers was clearly recognised by planter-employers, and additional provisions and payments for overseers' wives were formalised in their husbands' contracts.⁴⁰

An incident regarding an unmarried overseer and a slave on the plantation of Henry Laurens, one of the wealthiest planters in colonial South Carolina, highlights a more specific social reason why planters sought married men as overseers. Laurens, like many of his contemporaries, unreservedly condemned sexual relationships between slaves and overseers. Such relationships were not only a breach of contract but were viewed as extremely disruptive to plantation life. Some masters worried about their overseers harassing and abusing female slaves.⁴¹ Moreover, planters wanted to prevent any potential upset that would disturb labourers and prevent them from carrying out their assigned workload. In 1763, upon discovering a relationship between his overseer James Lawrence and Hagar, a slave under Lawrence's supervision, Laurens wrote to his overseer, 'I am now to inform you that I have provided a man to come and succeed you at Mepkin [plantation] as Overseer there'. He made clear to Lawrence the grounds for his dismissal: 'The true reason of my taking this step is your familiarity with Hagar which besides being wrong & unwarrantable in itself must be extremely offensive to me and very hurtful to my Interest, as it must tend to make a good deal of jealousy and disquiet amongst the Negroes'.⁴² According to Laurens, such a relationship was 'foolish', would cause rivalry and resentment amongst the other slaves under Lawrence's control, and had the potential to erupt into violence. Other planters who encountered similar relationships

between overseers and slaves, whether consensual or not, no doubt viewed overseers with wives as a far more appealing and practical option. Although Laurens dismissed his overseer for having an affair, he promised not to reveal the details of his misconduct to anyone who enquired about the matter. Instead, he offered to simply inform people that he was to be discharged in favour of 'a Man of more experience & one that has a wife'.⁴³

Planters recognized that inappropriate relationships were more likely to develop between female slaves and unmarried overseers than those with wives. A wife was valued as a mechanism of control against white men's sexual desires towards slave women. Following the incident with James Lawrence, Henry Laurens sought to employ overseers with wives. Laurens replaced Lawrence with a man named Abraham Schad who, while less well qualified as an overseer, had recently married. Bearing in mind Laurens's recent experience with James Lawrence, and that Abraham Schad had relatively little experience in slave management, it is probable that Schad's wife, Mary-Anne, was an important factor in Laurens's decision to hire him. Laurens hoped that Mary-Anne Schad, even though she was 'young', would encourage her husband to work diligently and return straight home to her, keeping him out of mischief. Thus, wives and their 'civilising influence' sometimes determined the employability of their husbands.⁴⁴

Many colonial planters favoured married overseers as the more stable option.⁴⁵ Not only did planters hope to discourage overseers from seeking solace and pleasures among slave women, they tied negligence on the plantation to other unsavoury habits such as drinking, gambling, womanising, visiting friends, and entertaining unruly company, black and white, on the plantation.⁴⁶ These bad habits were more generally associated with single men than married men. Thus, planters predicted that allowing white women to reside with their husbands would encourage them to settle down and reduce the risk of wayward behaviour. Planters hoped that overseers' wives would create an agreeable place of retreat for their husbands after a day's work, and that family life would provide a distraction and evoke a sense of greater responsibility, thus increasing the overall stability of the plantation.

Plantation owners utilised the labour of overseers' wives to make plantations as efficient and cost-effective as possible. In his correspondence with agents and overseers, Henry Laurens frequently expressed his hope that his overseers' wives would work hard and benefit the plantation. In his letters to his overseers, he outlined the tasks he expected their wives to undertake. On one occasion he informed Mr Schad that he was sending twenty-seven new slaves to the plantation, and that he was consigning the slaves in question 'particularly to your care & Mrs. Schad'.⁴⁷ On another occasion he wrote to Schad, 'Your own, Mrs. Schads, Mr Myers [overseer], & his wives care and constancy at home will be all necessary now at this time of sickness & will the more oblige me'.⁴⁸ Many overseers' wives were expected to tend to injured or ill slaves and to prevent the spread of sickness and diseases. The ill health of slaves constantly affected the productivity of a plantation. Even though doctors tended serious cases, planters were eager to avoid such costly visits.⁴⁹ Thus, the burden of slave welfare and recuperation fell upon

overseers and their wives. With their husbands supervising slave labourers during the day, wives played a crucial role in slave welfare, battling against the outbreaks of contagious illnesses that depleted the number of slaves well enough to work. Confronting the reality of plantation life and the challenges which women like Mrs Schad took on confirms the poverty of a notion of a 'golden age' for colonial women; this life was hard, demanding and the inherent responsibilities of their position went far beyond the realms of housework.

The situation of lower-class white women on the plantation did not quite mirror that of women living in cities such as New York, Boston and Philadelphia, who sometimes led largely autonomous lives working as artisans or running businesses.⁵⁰ In South Carolina and Virginia, the dominance of the plantation economy meant there was little opportunity for the private enterprise of women. While some women in towns such as Charleston did take part in trade and artisanal activities, the majority of white Southern women were subordinate to their husbands.⁵¹ However, the tasks taken on by overseers' wives awarded them a degree of independence. Overseers' wives contributed to the domestic and to the plantation economy in a way that allowed them to exercise significant informal authority in the household as well as over some other aspects of plantation business. Overseers' wives received payment and reward for their labours and as a result may have 'lived under conditions of rough equality' with their husbands in the eighteenth century.⁵²

Both colonial demographics and the maturation of plantation slavery had the potential to disrupt established notions of gender just as they did the rigid barriers of class. In the seventeenth century the demographic imbalance between men and women in the South meant there was a shortage of women to carry out the work of producing necessary consumables like food, drink and clothing. In fact, inventories reveal that most seventeenth-century farms and plantations did not possess the equipment needed to carry out 'labour that was traditionally defined by English women's work, and that was indispensable for the furnishing of goods and services for home consumption—dairying, brewing, baking of bread, poultry-keeping, spinning, and so forth.'⁵³ By the eighteenth century more women inhabited the Southern colonies and possessed the knowledge, skills, and some of the equipment that allowed them to produce some everyday necessities. White women who lived on plantations had greater access to resources and equipment used to produce items such as cheese and butter, candles, soap, tailored clothing, wools, dyes and shoes. Overseers' wives used this equipment to advance their skills and the well-being of their families and in return the planters who employed overseers with wives, rather than losing a slave labourer, gained a free white labourer, at a relatively low cost, who could be employed in roles and given responsibilities that neither slave women nor plantation mistresses could perform.⁵⁴ As a result, overseers' wives carved out a distinctive niche within colonial society that traversed established lines of class, race and gender.

They were well placed to do so because of an important emerging economic trend. During the eighteenth century planters began to recognise the value of self-sufficiency on the plantation. Many worked to achieve what Max Edelson

has termed the 'plantation enterprise'. To increase their profit margin, and in conjunction with the ethos of the 'plantation enterprise', planters aimed to produce or manufacture certain goods, in particular dairy products, clothes, shoes and other daily necessities, at the plantation rather than buying costly imported goods. Planters expected and encouraged the wives of their white employees to be able to produce provisions for slave families as well as the planters' own. Numerous payments made to overseers' wives for the additional services they provided can be found in plantation account books, which in turn reflect the array of jobs carried out by overseers' wives and the rewards with which their efforts were met.⁵⁵

Overseers' wives were paid to run the dairy, tend to poultry and livestock, supervise and instruct spinners and weavers, make cloth, and act as nurses and midwives to all those living on the plantation, black and white.⁵⁶ These roles could be considered managerial; one planter went so far as to demand, in the contract with an overseer and his wife, that 'she will superintend a dairy and turn it into the best and most profitable account the means on the estate will afford'. Another offered payment equal to £100 South Carolina currency per annum to any single woman who could manage the dairy and raise poultry. This job included supervising and teaching slaves.⁵⁷ On her arrival from Germany, the wife of John Ehlers, who was overseer of George Washington's slave gardeners, was expected 'to undertake to superintend my Spinners, and if required a Small dairy'. In 1776, Virginia planter Robert Carter requested that one of his overseers' wives teach six slave girls to spin, and in 1782 twelve of his spinners were under the supervision of a white, female overseer.⁵⁸ Women of good reputation might be 'head-hunted' to work as supervisors or overseers of groups of female slaves on plantations. One plantation mistress in Virginia asked a friend to recommend a man to oversee and instruct her spinners and weavers. Instead, her friend recommended a woman as the best choice. The woman she suggested was considered 'capable of managing weaving and spinning', and more than able to supervise slaves and teach slave weavers and spinners her craft. Her future employer offered her '£30 for managing the spinners and instructing the weavers' or £40 per annum, Virginia currency, if she undertook the supervision and instruction of slaves, as well as 'constantly weaving' herself, a wage that was at least equivalent to, and in some cases surpassed, that which overseers received annually.⁵⁹

It was not just the wives of overseers for whom the plantation economy offered particular opportunities; young single women and widows also advertised their availability for various types of plantation work. One notice read, 'a single woman, with a child, would be glad of a place on a plantation, to take charge of a dairy, raise poultry, etc', and another that 'A dairy woman who can make negro clothes wants work', Even a 'single elderly woman experienced in the business' of looking after a dairy and attending poultry sought employment on a slave plantation. It is apparent that many planters were eager to place overseers' wives, and sometimes single white women, in charge of dairy operations, poultry, other domestic farm animals, spinning and weaving on their plantations.⁶⁰ Thus, overseers' wives, when called upon, were used to supervise groups of slave seamstresses and spinners, or slaves who worked in the dairy, raised poultry, or cared for

other domestic farm animals, which no doubt involved 'overseeing' slaves in a manner similar to their husbands.

However, unlike single women and widows, who also were employed as supervisors and artisans, overseers' wives were rarely compensated with an annual wage. In some ways, their contribution to the plantation economy was largely expected as payment for the housing, provisions and other items provided by their husband's employer. Yet, the evidence suggests that overseers' wives usually stood to gain financially from their employment and received small cash payments and extra provisions for their own households. Like overseers, who were paid a share of the crop that slaves under their control produced, some overseers' wives were paid a share of the produce that was made by slaves under their supervision. Furthermore, they were often allowed to sell surplus produce, sometimes to their employers or at market. This enabled some wives to enhance their family income. Planters were generally content to reward initiative and hard work and entered into mutually beneficial arrangements with the white women on their plantations. In South Carolina, John Ewing Calhoun gave his overseer's wife the 'liberty to raise poultry' from his stock as long as she also supplied his 'family in Town with some Poultry'.⁶¹ Mrs O' Brien, the wife of one overseer, was included by name in her husband's contract, and her duties detailed therein. Part of her role was to 'superintend and take care of the said negroes, the dairy & poultry', for which she was to be paid with 'a third of all poultry she raised' and a share of all dairy products.⁶² In 1766 John Blake, overseer for Philip Grymes, settled his account with his employer, of which £2 was for his wife for making butter in that year. Robert Wormeley Carter, a planter in Virginia, noted in his accounts that he paid his overseer for '20 Turkeys purchased of his wife'.⁶³

Planters and their agents were often grateful for and impressed by the diligence of overseers' wives. An agent acting in the interests of an absentee planter commented on the endeavours of Mrs Brown, the overseer's wife:

The Overseers Wife at Ashpoo [plantation] being very industrious, hath afforded me a tolerable supply of poultry & Butter from thence the past year but before then I scarce got any & from Perdee [plantation] I very seldom got above 2 pair Turkeys in a season, with a pot of Butter now & then.⁶⁴

Mrs Brown's efforts not only earned her praise and separate mention in correspondence to her employer, but she also undoubtedly received payment for her work. Overseers' wives were also regularly paid for acting as midwives at the births of black and white babies. One planter paid an overseer's wife four times in a short period for her role as a midwife and for attending pregnant slaves and, as he noted in his account book, for also preventing them from having miscarriages.⁶⁵ Overseers' wives were homemakers, supervisors, nurses, midwives, and farm hands rolled into one, and although they were usually paid for playing multiple roles, it must be remembered that the number of gruelling tasks they were expected to perform made their employment extremely demanding.

With the emphasis on efficiency, plantation mistresses as well as planters encouraged informal trade between all members of the plantation household, black and

white, rich and poor. The desire for self-sufficiency, independence, and reduced overheads encouraged men and women from the planter elite to look for new sources of supply and to develop internal trade links within and between the plantations. Plantation mistresses traded and bartered with female employees and slaves who lived on their plantations, and some even developed a network with other plantation mistresses in the locale. These small-scale mercantile ventures and trade networks were exclusively female. In the eighteenth century, plantation mistresses like Martha Jefferson bought livestock, eggs, honey, vegetables, and other farm produce and home-made items from both overseers' wives and slaves. Martha Jefferson not only stocked her own kitchen and household, but also resold some of the produce, cloth, and other goods to women on neighbouring plantations.⁶⁶ The active trade on plantations, in consumables and domestic goods, between women of all stations in life, transcended conventional gender roles and racial boundaries. Overseers' wives who took part in these networks were forced into competition with slaves by their employees and social superiors, a position remarkably similar to that of overseers, who were sometimes forced to vie with slaves for favour and authority on the plantation. At the same time, plantation mistresses who were in need of certain items for their households were willing to pay a fair price for the goods produced by the black and white women who lived on their plantations.

These characteristics of a plantation economy thus granted overseers' wives a measure of autonomy and economic opportunity within these dynamic, female, trading networks. Overseers' wives' extra duties enabled them to contribute more than usual to the household economy of their family, in the form of goods and cash. Furthermore, these women were sometimes accorded a role alongside rather than beneath their overseer husband. Planters consulted overseers' wives on important issues concerning slaves and plantation matters. After the suspicious death of a slave named Chloe, Henry Laurens wrote that 'Mr Schad & his wife are of the same opinion' over the matter.⁶⁷ Overseers' wives were considered part of a supervisory team, and their views were considered in a variety of matters relating to day-to-day plantation business. Mrs Schad was not simply a housewife and appendage of her husband, but was an equal member of an overseeing partnership. Her thoughts on various aspects of plantation business and slave-related affairs were clearly highly valued. In some cases they performed as 'deputy husbands' when their husbands were away from the home or the plantation as part of their job.⁶⁸ Mrs Bone, wife of Thomas Bone, overseer for John Calhoun in South Carolina, was paid an annual stipend for her role on the plantation which was outlined in her husband's contract. Furthermore, it was stipulated that when her husband, Thomas Bone, was 'not present' on the plantation she was expected to take care of aspects of business that he usually attended to, such as to receiving provisions and attending to the welfare of slaves.⁶⁹ While the activities overseers' wives took part in were not necessarily unusual and in fact were often gender-specific, the daily interactions and exchanges they took part in with both slaves and slave owners, and the compensation they received, placed them in a unique position, one that allowed them to gain access to small amounts of cash or increased plantation resources and occasionally luxuries.

Evidence is abundant that many planters had come to hold their overseers and wives in high esteem. Robert Carter was extremely pleased with an overseeing couple who worked on one of his plantations in Virginia. He praised both husband and wife for their success with both the crops and the slaves, who 'appeared to have an affection for both him and her'.⁷⁰ On the death of his overseer's wife, planter Josiah Smith lamented, '[her] death has been a great loss to him & also the plantation, as she appeared to me to be a very clever active woman'.⁷¹ Smith had praised Mrs Brown for being an industrious woman and later remarked that Mr Brown '& wife will both save what money they get' and be able to buy 'a couple of New Negroes on Credit' and progress into the world of independent, small-scale slaveholders. The positive reports of this overseeing couple reached their employer, who resided in Britain. Social ambition born of hard work, thrift and diligence was respected. This respect, and the consequent support of a grateful plantation owner, could go a long way. Mr and Mrs Brown's efforts were rewarded when their employer lent them the money to purchase slaves, with the intention of facilitating their intended move to become independent planters.⁷²

As they lived isolated from white society but surrounded by slaves, the social standing of overseers' wives inevitably suffered, in spite of their contribution to the maintenance of the plantation system upon which so much prosperity rested. This helped to foster the negative stereotypes of the brutish overseer and his trashy wench. Certainly the unruly behaviour of some individuals and their families conformed neatly to the idea of a feckless, lowly 'class' whom weary planters were necessitated to employ. Yet the stereotype should be contested and the inherent complexities of their situation, arguably a unique one in colonial society, should be recognised. The place in colonial society occupied by the overseer and his family was fraught with specific challenges: the isolated and dangerous physical environment (Mrs Brown herself succumbed to disease before her ambitions could be fulfilled); the violence of the plantation, and the ambivalence of their own status, whether mediated by class or race. A more detailed study of these overseeing teams of husband and wife reveals how well many met these challenges: they were diligent, hardworking, capable men and women who, as individuals as well as partners, managed to maintain a productive relationship with their employers and were often acknowledged as such by their employers. While barely noted by contemporaries, or chronicled by historians, the overseers' wives themselves played a significant and dynamic role in the making of colonial society: they brought the stability of domesticity to their husbands' lives, and embraced the unique opportunities, financial and social, of the plantation economy. For many couples, overseeing became active training for the move to plantation ownership, a route to respectability and social mobility within the colonial South. Industrious overseeing couples rightfully earned the patronage of their employer, and, in this context, the overseer's wife deserves to be understood as a homemaker, a supervisor, and a valuable contributor to the well-being of the plantation community, instead of just a peach-stealing 'bitch'.

Notes

- [1] This stereotype is most conspicuous in popular works of fiction, such as the character Jonas Wilkerson in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Academic historians of slavery have shown little inclination to revise this image; for example, see Allan Kulikoff (1986) *Tobacco and Slaves: the development of Southern cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), Philip Morgan (1998) *Slave Counterpoint: black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), Ira Berlin (1998) *Many Thousands Gone: the first two centuries of slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); Kenneth Morgan (2000) *Slavery and Servitude in North America, 1607–1800* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press); Robert Olwell (1998) *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: the culture of power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); Joyce Chaplin (1993) *An Anxious Pursuit: agricultural innovation and modernity in the Lower South, 1730–1815* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Max Edelson (2006) *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- [2] For a full historiographical context, see Linda Sturtz (2002) *Within Her Power: propertied women in colonial Virginia* (New York: Routledge); Julia Cherry Spruill (1938) *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Lois Green Carr & Lorena S. Walsh (1979) The experience of white women in seventeenth century Maryland, in Nancy Cott & Elizabeth Pleck (Eds) *A Heritage of Their Own: towards a new social history of American women* (New York: Simon & Schuster); Mary Beth Norton (1979) Eighteenth-Century American Women in Peace and War, in Cott & Pleck (Eds), *A Heritage of Their Own*; Eugene Genovese (1979) Life in the Big House, in Cott & Pleck (Eds), *A Heritage of Their Own*; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988) *Within the Plantation Household: black and white women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Catherine Clinton (1982) *The Plantation Mistress: women's world in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books); Mary Beth Norton (1996) *Founding Mothers and Fathers: gendered power and the forming of American society* (New York: A. A. Knopf); Carol Berkin & Mary Beth Norton (1979) *Women of America: a history* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin); Kate Fawver (2004) Women's Economies in the Chesapeake: the organization of labor in a plantation society, paper presented at Program for Early American Economy and Society, Philadelphia, October 2004; Laurel Ulrich (1998) Wheels, Looms and the Gender Division of Labour in Eighteenth Century New England, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 55, pp. 3–38; Kathleen Brown (1996) *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: gender, race, and power in colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Sally McMillen (2002) *Southern Women: black and white in the Old South* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson); Catherine Clinton & Michelle Gillespie (Eds) (1997) *The Devils Lane: sex and race in the early South* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [3] Joan Gundersen (1986) The Double Bonds of Race and Sex: black and white women in a colonial Virginia parish, *Journal of Southern History*, 52(3), pp. 351–372; Judith Carney (1996) Rice Milling, Gender and Slave Labour in Colonial South Carolina, *Past and Present*, 153, pp. 108–134; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*; Deborah White (1999) *Aren't I a Woman: female slaves in the plantation South*, rev. edn (New York: W. W. Norton); Deborah White (1992) Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South, in W. Harris (Ed.) *Society and Culture in the Slave South* (London: Routledge); Sally McMillen (2002) *Southern Women: black and white in the Old South* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson); Betty Wood

- (2003) Some Aspects of Female Resistance to Chattel Slavery in Low Country Georgia, 1763–1815, in Gad Heuman & James Walvin, (Eds) *The Slavery Reader* (London: Routledge), pp. 551–569.
- [4] Carol Berkin (1996) *First Generations: women in colonial America* (New York: Hill & Wang); Barbara Bush (1990) *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Betty Wood (1995), *Women's Work, Men's Work: informal slave economies of Low Country Georgia 1750–1830* (Athens: University of Georgia Press). The majority of work on the lives of slave women has concentrated on the antebellum period, for which records are still fuller. See, for example, Emily West (2004) *Chains of Love: the lives of, and the relationships between, male and female slaves in antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press) and Daina Ramey Berry (2007) *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: gender and slavery in antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press).
- [5] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, p. 326. Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, pp. 43, 410.
- [6] Laura Sandy (2006) *Between Planter and Slave: the social and economic role of plantation overseers in Virginia and South Carolina, 1740–1790* (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester), pp. 184–206.
- [7] Philip Hamer, George Rogers & David Chesnutt (Eds) (1968–2003) *The Papers of Henry Laurens, 1746–1792* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press) (hereafter *PHL*), vol. 3, p. 248.
- [8] Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs*, pp. 187–367.
- [9] Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, pp. 111–112; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (1980) *Good Wives: image and reality in the lives of women in northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Knopf).
- [10] The debate over American women's history is discussed in Mary Beth Norton (1984) The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America, *American Historical Review*, 89(3), p. 594; Mary Beth Norton (1980) *Liberty's Daughters: the revolutionary experience of women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little Brown & Co.). For further discussion of the colonial era as the 'golden age', see Elisabeth Dexter (1924) *Colonial Women of Affairs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin); Richard Morris (1930) *Studies in the History of the American Law, with Special Reference to the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Octagon Books); Berkin & Norton, *Women of America*, pp. 37–48; Norton, 'The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America', pp. 593–619; Berkin, *First Generations*, pp. 3–21; Mary Beard (1971) *Women As a Force in History: a study in traditions and realities* (New York: Collier Books); Jeanne Boydston (1990) *Home and Work: housework, wages and the ideology of labor in the early republic* (New York: Oxford University Press); Kathleen Brown (1993) Brave New Worlds: women's and gender history, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 50, 311–328; Fawver, 'Women's Economies in the Chesapeake'; Cynthia Kierner (1998) *Beyond the Household: women's place in the early South, 1700–1835*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press); Carole Shammas (1990) *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 52–69; Roger Thompson (1974) *Women in Stuart England and America: a comparative summary* (London: Routledge).
- [11] Morris, *Studies in the History of the American Law*; Norton, 'The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America', p. 593.
- [12] For discussion among planters of the overseeing 'class', their habits, behaviour, and collective reputation, see *PHL*, 4, p. 503; Thomas Jefferson to William Wirt, 14 August 1814, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress (hereafter LC); George Washington to Antony Whitting, 16 December, 1792, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John Fitzpatrick (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), 34, p. 193; Lewis Gray (1958), *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Gloucester, MA: Peter

- Smith), pp. 501–503. The status and role of the overseer was defined by law in the state legislatures. For examples see T. Cooper & D. McCord (Eds) (1836–1841) *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia: A. S. Johnson), pp. 363, 272, 125, 175; W. Hening (Ed.) (1969) *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia). For further discussion on the varied backgrounds and experience of overseers see Sandy, *Between Planter and Slave*, chapter 2.
- [13] Eugene Genovese (1972) *Roll Jordan Roll: the world the slaves made* (New York: Pantheon Books), p. 12.
- [14] J. P. Greene (Ed.) (1965) *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752–1778* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press) (hereafter *DLC*), volume 2, pp. 1140–1142.
- [15] *DLC*, 2, p. 760; Also quoted in Rhys Isaac (2004) *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: revolution and rebellion on a Virginia plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 217–219.
- [16] Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, pp. 100–101.
- [17] *DLC*, 2, p. 760
- [18] *DLC*, 2, p.1020; Joseph Ball to Joseph Chinn, 19 March 1745, *Joseph Ball Letter Book* (hereafter *JBL*), Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (hereafter CWF).
- [19] *PHL*, 8, pp. 89.
- [20] *PHL*, 8, pp. 287.
- [21] *DLC*, 2, p. 779.
- [22] Harland Hager (1980) The Ideal Woman in the Antebellum South: lady or farm-wife?, *Journal of Southern History*, 46, pp. 405–418.
- [23] Sandy, *Between Planter and Slave*, chapter 2.
- [24] *William Cabell Common Place Books*, 5, p. 69, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS).
- [25] 6 July 1767, *South Carolina Gazette* (hereafter *SCG*); *DLC*, 1, pp. 305, 385, 389–390, 482.
- [26] Quoted in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, p. 313.
- [27] *PHL*, 6, p. 583; *Henry Laurens Account Book, 1766–1773*, College of Charleston, pp. 347, 362.
- [28] H. R. McIlwaine (Ed.) (1909), *Journal of the House of Burgess, 1742–1749* (Richmond: Colonial Press, E. Waddey Co.), pp. 84, 94–95.
- [29] Terry Lipscomb (Ed.) (1974) *The Colonial Records of South Carolina: Series I: The Journal of the Commons House of Assembly November 21, 1752–September 6, 1754* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), p. 114.
- [30] Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, p. 106.
- [31] M. B. Norton (1978) 'What an Alarming Crisis Is This': southern women and the American revolution, in J. Crow & L. Tise (Eds) *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 210–211.
- [32] Barbara Welter (1966) The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860, *American Quarterly*, 18(2), Part 1, pp. 151–174. For new perspectives on the 'Cult of True Womanhood' with regard to American women's history, see Nancy Hewitt (2002) Taking the True Woman Hostage, *Journal of Women's History*, 14(1), pp. 156–162.
- [33] 31 October 1745, *Virginia Gazette* (hereafter *VAG*); 30 October 1766, *VAG*; 2 September 1773, *VAG*; 15 June 1775, *VAG*; 5 November 1764, *SCG*; 16 January 1769, *South Carolina and American General Gazette*.
- [34] Overseer Agreement, 4 November 1755, *Custis Family Papers*, section 11, VHS; George Washington to John Fairfax, 3 March 1789, 'Mount Vernon Transcripts', *Maryland Magazine*, 13, p. 73; *PHL*, 8, p. 89.
- [35] Joseph Ball to Joseph Chinn, 19 March 1745, *JBL*; January 1752, June 1754, January 1755, October 1764, June 1765, January 1766, December 1768, *SCG*.

- [36] George Washington Overseer Agreement with Burgess Mitchell, 1 May 1762, *George Washington Papers*, series 4, LC.
- [37] Overseer contracts with John Hazebrig, Joseph Dozier and William Wroe, 22 August 1778, *Robert Carter Letter Book, 1775–1780*, part 2, p. 51, Duke.
- [38] Sandy, *Between Planter and Slave*. See the discussion of overseers' terms and conditions in chapter 2, pp. 74–108.
- [39] *DLC*, 2, p. 760; George Washington Overseer Agreement with Edward Violet, 5 August 1762, *George Washington Papers*, series 4, LC; John Ewing Calhoun Overseer Agreement with Peter Read, 10 February 1796, *John Ewing Calhoun Papers*, box 1, series 2, Southern Historical Collection (hereafter SHC).
- [40] Sandy, *Between Planter and Slave*, p. 189. Overseers' wives often received separate mentions, by name, in contracts and account books, with regard to the duties they were expected to perform or had carried out and the payment, extra provisions or other rewards they would receive for their role on the plantation, such as wine, cheese and household items, and small amounts of cash.
- [41] Trevor Burnard explores the problems caused by sexual relationships between overseers and slaves on Jamaican plantations and claims that the sexual depredation of one overseer, Thomas Thistlewood, undermined the harmony of the plantation. Trevor Burnard (1999) *Theatre of Terror: domestic violence in Thomas Thistlewood's Jamaica, 1750–1786*, in Christine Daniels & Michael Kennedy (Eds) *Over the Threshold: intimate violence in early America* (New York: Routledge), pp. 237–253.
- [42] *PHL*, 3, p. 248.
- [43] *Ibid.*
- [44] *PHL*, 3, pp. 248, 426; *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* (1916) xvii, pp. 42, 43, 76; *PHL*, 4, p. 598, *PHL*, 5, p. 101.
- [45] For examples of advertisements placed in South Carolina newspapers by planters who expressly wanted overseers with wives, see: January 1736, August 1745, October 1748, September 1752, March 1753, December 1754, February 1755, March 1756, March 1757, October 1758, December 1758, September 1765, November 1766, *SCG*; October 1777, *Gazette of the State of South Carolina*.
- [46] See for examples, Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, pp. 412–420; Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, pp. 410–411, *PHL*, 11, pp. 491–492; Joseph Ball to Joseph Chinn, 18 February 1743, *JBL*, CWF; Nelson Kelly and George Washington, September 1, 1762, Contract for Overseer, Edward Violet and George Washington, August 5, 1762, Contract for Overseer, Burgess Mitchell and George Washington, May 1, 1762, Contract for Overseer, *Papers of George Washington*, Series 4, LC; *PHL*, 5, p. 590.
- [47] *PHL*, 4, pp. 598, 634, 666; *PHL*, 5, p. 123.
- [48] *Ibid.*
- [49] Sandy, *Between Planter and Slave*, pp. 127–130.
- [50] For more detail on women who lived and worked in large urban centres see, Wulf, *Not All Wives: women of colonial Philadelphia*; Cleary, 'She Will Be in the Shop' pp. 181–202.
- [51] Norton, 'What an Alarming Crisis Is This', p. 209.
- [52] See n. 10 for literature on 'golden age'.
- [53] Shammass, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*, pp. 52–69.
- [54] Gail Collins (2003), *America's Women* (New York: Harper Collins), p. 49.
- [55] Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, pp. 200–255.
- [56] Norton, 'The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America', p. 604.
- [57] 12 October 1769, *SCG*; 28 October 1777, *Gazette of the State of South Carolina*, quoted in Chaplin, *An Anxious Pursuit*, p. 215.
- [58] *Robert Carter Letter Books*, 2, pp. 3, 27–28, 189, LC; *Robert Carter Letter Books*, 5, p. 11, LC.

- [59] To Francis Bland Randolph Tucker, 16 November 1776, *Tucker-Coleman Papers*, Swem Library, College of William and Mary (hereafter Swem); Sandy, *Between Planter and Slave*, pp. 74–108.
- [60] Nelson Kelly and George Washington Contract for Overseer, September 1, 1762, Edward Violet and George Washington Contract for Overseer, August 5, 1762, *George Washington Papers*, series 4, LC; Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig (Eds.) (1976–1979) *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 1, pp. 262, 414–413; R. F. Dalzell & L. B. Dalzell (2000) *George Washington's Mount Vernon: at home in revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 141–144, 155–156.
- [61] John Ewing Calhoun Overseer Agreement with Benjamin Foster, 10 November 1790, and John Ewing Calhoun Overseer Agreement with Thomas Bone, 18 February 1797, *John Ewing Calhoun Papers*, Box 1, series 2, SHC.
- [62] John Ewing Calhoun Overseer Agreement with Joseph O'Brien, 27 March 1794, and John Ewing Calhoun Overseer Agreement with Thomas Bone, 18 February 1797, *John Ewing Calhoun Papers*, box 1, series 2, SHC; Philip Grymes Account with John Blake, 1765–1766, *Harrison Papers*, section 12, VHS.
- [63] Entry for 21 December 1792, *Robert Wormeley Carter Diaries, 1764–1792*, Swem.
- [64] Josiah Smith to George Austin in England, 30 January 1772, *Josiah Smith Letter Book* (hereafter *JSL*), SHC.
- [65] Account Mr Edward Ambler Estate in Hanover and Louisa County 1760, Box 2, Series 1, 4, *Charles William Dabney Papers*, SCH. The names of overseers' wives regularly appear in plantation account books in both South Carolina and Virginia as receiving payments to 'attend births', and for acting as a midwife. In other cases they were paid for acting as a nurse to sick slaves.
- [66] Household Accounts of Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, series 7: 1, Household Accounts and Notes of Virginia Court Legal Cases, LC.
- [67] *PHL*, 5, p. 123.
- [68] Though the family was treated as an economic unit in colonial America Linda Sturtz discusses the role that some Virginia women played as 'deputy husbands'. Sturtz asserts that some women took on the responsibilities when their husbands were in 'poor health', on 'travels', or prevented from accomplishing their tasks due to some other 'impediment'. While much has been written with regard to plantation mistresses taking on the role of their husbands and directing plantation affairs while they were absent from the plantation, it is clear that overseers' wives played a similar role as 'deputy husbands' in both Virginia and South Carolina when their husbands were occupied or absent carrying out plantation business. Sturtz, *Within Her Power*, p. 112.
- [69] John Ewing Calhoun Overseer Agreement with Thomas Bone, 18 February 1797, *John Ewing Calhoun Papers*, Box 1, series 2, SHC.
- [70] Robert Carter Testimonial to Youell Rust, 22 July 1784, Carter Daybook, XVI, *Robert Carter Papers*, Duke.
- [71] Josiah Smith to George Austin, 22 July 1773, 31 January 1774, *JSL*, SCH.
- [72] *Ibid.*; Josiah Smith to George Austin, 25 February 1772, *JSL*, SHC.