

## Women Wanted: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Plantation Societies

Emily Sackett

During the first generation of English settlement in Carolina, every settler had a price. Under the headright system of land allocation, every freeperson, servant and slave warranted acreage to settle and plant in the new colony. The system worked according to the principle that a settler's land grant would corresponded to his or her ability to work the land. For women, the system presented a unique set of opportunities. In Carolina, the colony's founders made the crucial decision to value free white female settlers as equal to men. The colony's founding documents promised arable land not only to male heads of house, but also "as much to his wife if hee haue one And to every freewoeman that already is or shall arrive into said County with a Sarvent or Sarvents to plant."<sup>1</sup>

The Carolina headright system regarded wives and, more remarkably, unmarried women, as equal in land value to free male settlers. Free women also commanded a grant equal to that which masters received for each able-bodied male servant or slave; only servant women warranted a lesser grant. The same pattern emerges in revised headright policies throughout South Carolina's proprietary era, the period between 1663 to 1719 when eight English nobles founded and governed the Carolina colony by royal grant. In South Carolina between 1670 and 1711, 97 women received 150 warrants for more than 33,000 acres of planting land. An additional 36 women received proprietary grants not recorded as abstracts rather than warrants.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Barbados Concessions, 16 January 1663, in Langdon Cheeves ed, *The Shaftesbury Papers and Other Records Relating to Carolina and the First Settlement on the Ashley River Prior to the Year 1676* (Columbia, South Carolina Historical Society, reprint 2010), 399, hereafter SP.

<sup>2</sup> Warrants authorized individuals to begin the process of securing a formal grant of real property from the proprietors, including grants to newly titled nobles, headright grants, compensation grants, gifts, and lands obtained by purchase. Warrants were not official land grants; settlers received a warrant for land after petitioning the governor and council. The warrant instructed the surveyor to prepare the designated plat of land, after which the grantee brought the survey to the secretary of the province and received a sealed official grant. I have accessed the female warrantees through Alexander Salley's *Warrants for Land in South Carolina*, a three-volume genealogical

We may attribute the gender parity in South Carolina's land policy to the colony's Lords Proprietors. They received their stake in Carolina from the reigning monarch, Charles II, in return for their political support during the Restoration of the monarchy. Under the leadership of Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, the proprietors sought to institute a manorial social and political system in Carolina in which landed nobles would govern free, landed planters. The proprietors' vision emphasized reciprocity within the social and political hierarchy and basic rights for all free settlers. Ashley intended for the Fundamental Constitutions to preserve a "balance of the government" between nobility and the underclasses. Colonial Lords would serve as enlightened administrators who would enforce proprietary policy had steer their subjects away from the exploitative agricultural practices that made staple crop colonies so uncivilized. At the same time, the proprietors would limit the colonial elite by tying title to landownership. Their perfect colony would avoid the rampant economic exploitation and social instability of the Chesapeake and West Indian colonies, without compromising the agricultural economic productivity that made colonial ventures so appealing.<sup>3</sup>

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source containing more than two thousand grants issued from 1670 to 1711. Grants to women constitute 5-10% of the total warrants. Four women are recorded as having received grants both in the South Carolina Department of Archives and History's *Abstracts of South Carolina land grants, 1674-1775* and Alexander Salley's *Warrants for Land in South Carolina, 1672-1711*. In total, Proprietary records show 137 women received 197 warrants or grants for land. A.S Salley, Jr., ed., *Warrants for Land in South Carolina, 1672-1711* vol. 1-3 (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1910-1915), ix-xii; Meaghan H. Duff, "Creating a Plantation Province: Proprietary Land Policies and Early Settlement Patterns" in *Money, Trade, and Power: The Evolution of Colonial South Carolina's Plantation Society* ed. Jack P. Greene, Rosemary Brana-Schute, and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 20-22.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 42-46. 83; Duff, "Creating a Plantation Province," 1-5; M. Eugene Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina: A Political History, 1663-1763* (University of North Carolina Press: 2012), 6-18; L.H. Roper, *Conceiving Carolina: Proprietors, Planters, and Plots, 1662-1729* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29-40; Robert M. Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Millwood NY: KTO, 1983), 53-56; Thomas D. Wilson, *The Anthony Cooper Plan: The Founding of Carolina and the Origins of Southern Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016) 70-83; S. Max Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 33-37; Vicki Hsueh, "Giving Orders: Theory and Practice in the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 3 (Jul. 2002), 435; "The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina," Yale Law School, *The Avalon Project* [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th\\_century/nc05.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp), hereafter FC.

Crucially, the proprietors' vision required settlers of both genders to establish productive English townships made up of permanently-settled white families whose industry and civility would make the colony profitable and attractive to other migrants. The Proprietors were also the first English colonial authorities to write African slavery into their colony's founding documents. Mass slave labor and traditional English community organization often did not coexist peacefully in English New World colonies, a tension that the proprietors hoped their policies would resolve.

The Lords Proprietors' colonial ideal demanded the contributions of white women of respectable social status. The headright system's incentives valued single and married women equally, signaling that white women had a part to play in the colony beyond the duties of a traditional English huswife. Women's roles overseeing domestic production and bearing and raising children would buttress the colonial economy and ensure the growth of a white creole population. Their status as landholders and inheritors bolstered the proprietors' policies that title and social position to landownership. In return, the proprietor's land policy made women active players in colonial development, rather than passive inheritors, especially within the creole landed gentry.

Carolina's construction of white women's roles stands apart from other colonies founded on staple crop agriculture and slave labor. Virginia implemented a similar headright system that encouraged the arrival of landowning women. However, Virginia never developed into the black majority colony in the way that South Carolina did, nor did its early colonial administrators found their colony as a slave economy. Sugar colonies in the Caribbean, on the other hand, historically failed to carve out a place for white women property law and in the social world. With limited potential for landownership, colonies like Barbados and Jamaica could only support women's immigration as wives and indentured servants. Colonial authorities of sugar island

colonies rarely considered white women's value as slave- or landowners relevant to their colonization schemes. But the necessity of both wives and white female servants waned as enslaved women increasingly bore the burden of women's productive and reproductive labor. In other black majority colonies, free and indentured white women found that slave labor significantly diminished their place in society. In the first mainland colony with a dependence on slave labor written into its Fundamental Constitutions, Carolina's white women might have experienced the same fate, if not for proprietary land policy.<sup>4</sup>

Carolina's abundant land meant that the proprietors could carve out a place for free women in their new society. Proprietary land policies had reinforced the primary distinction between free and unfree. As a result, South Carolina's free white women enjoyed enhanced status compared to women in other slave labor colonies. The same policies that elevated white women degraded enslaved women, whose labor proprietary promotional literature recast as the product of white women's supervision in order to maintain white women's place in the chain of command. In Ashley's complex utopian vision for his colony, white women could accomplish much more as mistresses and landowners than as decorative wives. Proprietary land policies gave all free women, married and unmarried, a stake in the colony's social structure. Their status as landowners ensured that they would remain socially relevant within a project slave society in which traditional women's work fell increasingly on the backs of unfree women. The position that free white women occupied within Carolina's social hierarchy, as secondary masters rather than wifely subordinates, ordained all unfree labor as the product of free white management and

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<sup>4</sup> Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants, 1623-1666* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company Inc., 1963), xxviii; Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655-1844*, ed. Verene A. Shepherd and Hillary McD. Beckles (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2008), 21; Trevor Burnard, "Inheritance and Independence: Women's Status in Early Colonial Jamaica," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (January 1991), 110; Trevor Burnard, "A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in early Jamaica," *Journal of Social History* 28, no.1 (Fall 1994): 74.

doubled the number of potential masters whose participation reinforced colonial power structures.<sup>5</sup>

### **Every Free Woman**

Between 1671 and 1711, the Lords Proprietors issued 3,656 warrants to 1,641 settlers for 1,298,794 acres of land. Warrants authorized individuals to begin the process of securing a formal grant of real property from the proprietors, including grants to newly titled nobles, headright grants, compensation grants, gifts, and lands obtained by purchase. Warrants were not official land grants; settlers received a warrant for land after petitioning the governor and council. The warrant instructed the surveyor to prepare the designated plat of land, after which the grantee brought the survey to the secretary of the province and received a sealed official grant.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This essay intervenes in several fields of colonial South Carolina historiography. Proprietary Carolina has been written off by Jack Greene as a “colony of a colony” and by Peter Wood as “a place of “weak sense of community, inchoate social institutions, and a high degree of individual competitiveness.” By refocusing on Carolina’s often overlooked early social history, I hope to demonstrate the role of proprietary policy in the contested terrain of women’s social and legal power in colonial South Carolina. For early perceptions of the proprietorship, see Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina under the Proprietary Government, 1670-1719* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 232; Herbert L. Osgood, *The American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, Macmillan, 1902), 202-212; David D. Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 25-26. Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 50-52. Greene also claims that Carolina did not experience the Chesapeake’s unequal gender ratio, though he presents no statistics. Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), 13; Converse Clowse, *Economic Beginnings in Colonial South Carolina 1670-1730* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 102-103; S. Max Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, 3; Gary L. Hewitt, “The State in the Planters’ Service: Politics and the Emergence of a Plantation Economy” in *Money, Trade, and Power*, 57. For women in colonial South Carolina see Cara Anzilotti, *In the Affairs of the World: Women, Patriarchy, and Power in Colonial South Carolina* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), 9; Inge Dornan, “Masterful Women: Colonial Women Slaveholders in the Urban Low Country,” *Journal of American Studies* 39, no. 3 (2005): 385; S. Max Edelson, “Reproducing Plantation Society: Women and Land in Colonial South Carolina,” *The History of the Family* 12, no. 2 (2007): 131; Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 79. Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women’s Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 308.

<sup>6</sup> Duff, “Creating a Plantation Province,” 10; Robert K. Ackerman, *South Carolina Colonial Land Policies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), 20-38.

Many of the ninety-six women left no trace of their experience in South Carolina beyond their brief petition for a tract of land. However, at least half appear elsewhere in proprietary documents that reveal landowning women's origins, their influence and, most frequently, their marital status. Of the forty-six women of discernable marriage status who claimed land, widows constituted a majority. At least thirty-five female grantees were widows, with 10 listed as widows in their warrant. Proprietary documents identify an additional twenty-five as having lost husbands after settling in Carolina. Six more arrived with their mothers and fathers. For this small group, the use of their maiden names suggests a never-married status, though widowhood cannot be entirely ruled out. At least one woman received a warrant while her husband still lived; Elizabeth Schenckling received a town lot in 1683 though her husband Bernard, an influential Barbadian gentleman, remained alive and well and was accumulating land of his own. He may have resided in Barbados when the proprietors issued Elizabeth's warrant. Schenckling's three daughters, Elizabeth Jr., Catharine, and Amerinthea, also received town lot warrants in their names despite having a living father.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I have isolated the ninety-seven landowning women from Salley's *Warrants for Land*, but most additional statistics about the women's marital and social status are scattered throughout other documents from proprietary Carolina. I am deeply indebted to Agnes Leland Baldwin's *First Settlers of South Carolina 1670-1700* and its list of 3,300 early settlers meticulously plucked from 25 of the period's best surviving sources. A citation for Ms. Baldwin's work will accompany each of this essay's references to the landowning women's social or marital status, because *First Settlers* gathers together all of the disparate sources I used to track the women down (particularly *Warrants for Lands and Records in the British Public Records Office Related to South Carolina* vols. I-IV), as well as some to which I have not had access. Baldwin lists the sources in which each settler appears under the settler's name. When possible, I have cross-checked Baldwin's citations and supplemented with my own findings. In some cases, I have deduced widowhood where neither Baldwin nor my sources can confirm it based on a woman's previous marital status in Salley's *Warrants for Land*. Further social background comes from the genealogical work published in *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (formerly *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*), and from the South Carolina Wills and Probates collection available through ancestry.com. Agnes Leland Baldwin, *First Settlers of South Carolina 1670-1700* (Easley SC: Southern Historical Press, 1985), xi-xii, 9-256; Salley, *Warrants for Land*, 59, 95. A significant number of women appear in warrants *alongside* their husbands, rather than independently or under his headright. Fifty-six women appear alongside a husband, family member, or other man apparently as co-owners of the land warrant. Though demographically interesting, the fact that these co-ownerships appear in blocks, mostly between 1677 and 1680, suggests a quirk in the secretary's recording preferences rather than a high number of co-warrants. Most of the women on co-warrants were most likely wives under the headright of their husbands, so I have chosen to exclude them from the total of ninety-six.

The surviving record of South Carolina's landholding women favors women of means. At least twenty-two female warrantees were the widows, wives, or daughters of men who proprietary records characterize as gentlemen, esquires, planters, or landgraves (the highest title available Carolina's newly titled noblemen). Although the warrants for land only explicitly list eight slaveholders, others certainly owned slaves. Some divided slaves among their children in their wills, while some, like the influential mother/daughter pair of Rebecca Axtell and Elizabeth Blake, managed large plantations with significant enslaved populations. Axtell, the widow of the prominent Parliamentarian and executed regicide Daniel Axtell, amassed more than 5,000 acres over the course of twenty years and managed the enormous Newington Plantation. Her daughter, Elizabeth Blake Turgis, was married first to Governor Joseph Blake and then to gentleman Francis Turgis. Blake accumulated more than 3,700 acres in her widowhood. Other landowning widows from families of influence include Mary Grimball, widow of Receiver General Paul Grimball, and Elizabeth Godfrey, widow of Captain John Godfrey. In total, around one third of traceable female warrantees belonged to families from families who wielded social and political influence in South Carolina.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the proprietors' offer of land to servant men and women at the expiration of their term, the warrants for land only name three women as former servants. Elizabeth Baker, Mary Morris, and Ann Wakefield received their concessions for servitude before 1684. The surveyor's office does not list any female grantee as a servant after that year. Certainly, warrants for more

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<sup>8</sup> I am wary of the fact that elite women are the most well-documented women from this time, which may result in biased reporting of their influence as opposed to poorer, less well-documented women. I have attempted not to overemphasize them outside of my analysis of the landed gentry, where they serve as necessary subjects. Baldwin, *First Settlers*, 9, 17, 26, 102, 108, 236. Blake and Axtell Families: Alex Moore, "Daniel Axtell's Account Book and the Economy of Early South Carolina," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 95, no. 4 (Oct. 1994): 286; Elizabeth Blake to the Lords Proprietors 1704, in Alexander Salley, *Narratives of Early Carolina, 1650-1708* (New York: Barnes and Nobels, 1953), 250-252. Mabel L. Webber, "Grimball of Edisto Island," *The South Carolina Historical and Geneological Magainze* 23, vol. 1 (Jan. 1922), 2.

obscure female landholders might have omitted details of their servitude. However, servant women often married at the end of their term, turning over their land grants to their new husbands. Documentation of servants in surveyors' documents appears shoddy on the whole. The surveyor's office issued nine warrants to newly married men in the name of their formerly-bound wives, though many more women likely married out of servitude.<sup>9</sup>

Despite scant documentation, then, we may draw several conclusions about South Carolina's landowning women from their limited demographic information. The preponderance of widows supports a vision of the warrantees as true *femes sole* representing their own interests to the surveyor's office and claiming land in their own names. The headright program appealed to both free white women and servants, although elite women seem to have taken great advantage of the system. Though documentation favors the most wealthy and powerful women, the fact remains that at least a quarter of female grantees had elite backgrounds. Consequently, we may conclude that South Carolina's land policies more than offer refuge to poor women with no other means of support. These qualities alone paint a picture of a culture in which landownership expanded women's roles beyond the traditional realm of huswifery.

### **Seamstresses, Spinners, and Huswives**

Women's necessity to economic production and demographic reproduction made their value to settler colonist projects self-evident. In order for the productive, settled towns of Ashley's imagination to flourish, the colony required women who could make valuable domestic goods and bear white, creolized children. Colonial authorities and promoters touted women's arrival as a means of rescuing a colony rife with disease and lacking English comforts. However,

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<sup>9</sup> Servants received a smaller grant than men and women who immigrated freely, female servants commanded a smaller grant for their masters than their male counterparts. But at the expiration of their term women servants were promised a warrant equal to that of a male servant at his expiration. Salley, *Warrants for Land* I, 212; *ibid.* II, 98, 152.



the basic problems of feminine production and reproduction do not adequately explain the proprietors' desire to incentivize female landownership. By the eighteenth century, enslaved women handled much of the colony's feminized labor. Furthermore, married white women were more likely than single landowners to contribute new children to a creolized white population, and they were just as capable of feminine economic production as single landowning women. In short, the productive and reproductive necessities that traditionally dictated women's value in colonial enterprises explain the value of married women in proprietary land policy. However, such traditional explanations alone cannot account for single women's inclusion in Carolina land policy.

As economic producers, women would provide the basic domestic goods that the colony lacked during its infancy. John Norris' 1712 promotional pamphlet promoting South Carolina, "Profitable Advice for Rich and Poor," designates desirable women's occupations as "good huswives, good dairy-women, Semstresses, Spinsters of Wollen, Cotton, Hemp, and Flax, and either Men or Women that can manage it well from the Seed to the Spinner." Programs that incentivized women's immigration to America often valued traditional women's work such as spinning and sewing. In Virginia's early years, notable skills at spinning, sewing, making clothes and knitting stockings increased a woman's eligibility for the bride programs that imported marriageable women to the New World. Women's productive economic labor took on even greater urgency in a colony plagued by provision shortages. When Ashley took note of the "Proposals and Wants" from proprietary agents in 1671, a common thread emerged. "Want men more clothes," Captain Henry Brayne insisted, echoing similar requests from John Yeamens and

Captain Joseph West. Only cattle and gun powder reach similar heights of necessity in documents outlining the shortages of Carolina's lean early years<sup>10</sup>

Colonial authorities and promoters hoped that the arrival of respectable English women would solve shortage problems and provide the settlers with English domestic goods. The proprietors commissioned Norris' "Profitable Advice" in 1712, and the pamphlet articulated a clear social rationale for Ashley's vision. Although most food production fell under the umbrella of women's work, "Profitable Advice" speaks specifically to women's impact on availability of dairy products in Carolina. The pamphlet presents a dialogue between an English farmer and a Carolina planter. When a question about butter and cheese arises, Norris's all-knowing planter replies:

As I have told you before, we have but few good industrious Huswives, as yet, that know well how to Manage it [the dairy]... Yet I have Eaten as good Butter and Cheese, from a good Huswife's Hands, tho' made in the Hottest Seasons, that I think it may be compareable to what is generally made in England; and Methods may be taken to preserve it as long without spoiling, in cool, underground Rooms, if we had many careful, knowing, and experienced Women to Manage it for their Profit, Credit, and Advantage.

Carolina's climate and material conditions, Norris argued, were not at fault for dairy scarcities. In fact, with enough good huswives, Carolina's settlers could produce enough butter and cheese not just for themselves, "but also to Transport to the West-India Islands." Certainly, Norris intended to conceal the fact that humid Carolina was perhaps not the ideal site for cheese-

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<sup>10</sup> John Norris, "Profitable Advice for Rich and Poor in a Dialogue, or Discourse between James Freeman, a Carolina Planter and Simon Question, a West-Country Farmer," (London, 1712), *Sabin Americana*, Gale Cengage Learning, 114; Edelson, "Reproducing Plantation Society," 70; Davis R. Ransome, "Wives for Virginia, 1621," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (Jan. 1991): 15. Extract from a letter from Carolina, November [16]70, "Proposals and Wants" *SP* 245-246; Joseph Dalton to Lord Ashley, 9 September [16]70, *SP* 183; Carolina agents' specific requests for servant clothing are particularly enlightening, since they imply an emerging paternalist system which held planters responsible for clothing their servants or slaves and which would charge free women with most clothing production, Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, 233.

making. However, the pamphlet's attention to the necessity of huswives also speaks to women's importance to the domestic production chain of command.<sup>11</sup>

The feminine labor shortage Norris describes had, in fact, little basis in reality. South Carolina reached the pivotal point of "black majority" around 1710. Though enslaved men outnumbered enslaved women, a significant portion of the enslaved population was female. In 1708, the colony's governor and council reported a population of 1,800 black men and 1,100 black women. Furthermore, by Norris' own account, female slaves commonly participated in domestic production, not just masculine agricultural labor. Accounting for the cost of slave labor on a South Carolina plantation, Norris includes in his list of necessary human chattel, "Indian Women to work in the Field... Indian Women as cooks for the Slaves, and other Household-Business... [and] Negro Women to be employ'd either for the Dairy, to attend the Hogs, Washing, or any other Employment they may be set about in the Family." This paper will explore in greater detail how proprietary land policy enforced the free/unfree distinction and valued white women as overseers of slave labor. For now, however, I argue simply that given the proliferation of slave labor, Carolina land policy did not need to incentivize white women's settlement for their skilled domestic production alone.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Norris, "Profitable Advice," 24, 48; Norris describes the women fit to run dairies as "good industrious Huswives," as well as "careful, knowing, and experienced." The title "huswife" applied broadly to married women who participated in the domestic tasks and self-provisioning production synonymous with early modern English womanhood. Wifehood was the natural state for adult women; of the 96 South Carolinian female warrantees, all 47 who appear in other documents were either widowed or later married in South Carolina. Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 45-48; Laurence Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 91, 198; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 3-11. Marriage status statistics from Baldwin, *First Settlers* and Salley, *Warrants for Land* 1-3. The absence of marriage records from the proprietary period means the number of warrantee women who married is almost certainly more than 10. I have constructed my numbers largely from warrants in which women reappear as a new wife, from wills, and from Baldwin's finding aid.

<sup>12</sup> See population chart in Wood, *Black Majority*, 144; Norris, "Profitable Advice," 93.

The survival of South Carolina's white population also required white women's settlement. In 1672 only 69 out of 406 settlers were women. Although South Carolina never experienced demographic disruption at the level of early Chesapeake settlements, the proprietors' vision of a stable, self-reproducing white creole population did not seem viable in the colony's first decades. Colonial authorities did what they could to combat the news of death and disease in South Carolina. Promotional campaigns promised healthy life and profitable labor in the lowcountry in stark contrast to "sickly Virginia." In reality, diseases like malaria struck down many children born in South Carolina. In certain parishes as many as 57 percent of males with recorded birth and death dates died between ages one and five.<sup>13</sup>

Colonial promoters assured potential settlers of the colony's healthfulness, suggesting that brief distempers promptly seasoned colonial newcomers, women in particular, against New World diseases. In general, the proprietors and their agents were loath to discuss the colony's sickness, except in specific cases such as governors' illnesses or isolated incidents when a number of servants took ill "of the bloody flux occasioned by the green corn." Women's health appears as a trope in several South Carolina promotional materials. "A Brief Description of the Province of South Carolina" pointedly notes women's resilience against unfamiliar New World diseases like the "dry-belly-ake" that allegedly proceeded "from drinking too much rum and punch." Seventeenth-century humoral theory also inspired hopes that women would thrive in humid South Carolina, designating women as more "moist" than men and therefore better suited to the colony's heat and humidity. In truth, malaria and other lowcountry diseases disproportionately affected women, especially during pregnancy and throughout their

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<sup>13</sup> H. Roy Merrens and George D. Terry, "Dying in Paradise: Malaria, Mortality, and the Perceptual Environment in Colonial South Carolina" *The Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 4 (Nov. 1984): 535, 542; Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina*, 22; Robert Home, "A Brief Description of the Province of Carolina" in Alexander Salley, ed., *Narratives*, 70.

childbearing years. Such disease patterns slowed the population's self-reproduction and necessitated the continued arrival of new fertile white women.<sup>14</sup>

A certain number of South Carolina's female land warrantees may have fulfilled the colony's practical need for population reproduction. At least six arrived with children of their own, and an additional five left wills which suggest biological heirs born in Carolina. Six more arrived with one or both of their parents, indicating youth. The ten landowning women who married or remarried upon settling in Carolina likely had some childbearing years left as well. However some made poor candidates for childbearing, such as the elder Elizabeth Schencking who arrived with at least three of her six adult children, or Mary Basden, who never married in South Carolina and died childless in 1741. Discerning remaining childbearing years for the majority of widows and women with no traceable marriage status remains a challenge.<sup>15</sup>

Other groups of South Carolinian women illustrate better the colony's fight against demographic disruption. Between 1663 and 1719, 177 men received a warrant for land that listed a wife or daughter among their headright. At least 50 with wives also came with children. The 14 women who married out of their term of servitude and thereby forfeited their promised warrant also constituted a demographic group likely to reproduce, albeit a small one. Such women probably arrived within their childbearing years and maintained value as settlers for their marriageability and their reproductive capacities. In fact, the only headright variants that value servant women as equal to servant men stipulate that the female servants be of "marriageable" age. All these women were as likely to reproduce a white creole population than single

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<sup>14</sup>Merrens and Terry, "Dying in Paradise," 242; Norris, "Profitable Advice," 92; Joseph West to Lord Ashley, 20 March [16]70/1, *SP* 266-67; Council Journal, Oct. 2 1671, *SP* 352; Joseph Dalton to Lord Ashley, *SP* 381-82; Burnard, "Inheritance and Independence," 98.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Schencking: Baldwin, *First Settlers*, 209; Salley, *Warrants for Land II*, 59; Mary Basden: Baldwin, *First Settlers*, 15; Salley, *Warrants for Land III*, 155; Will, Mary Basden, from *South Carolina Wills and Probates Collection*, ancestry.com.

landowning women. And the proprietors valued married women as much as their husbands and single female arrivals.<sup>16</sup>

Women who received their own grants of land, then, helped combat demographic disruption, but the proprietors desired women's settlement whether they were likely to marry and reproduce or not. While land grants may have attracted a number of fertile women, the policy appealed equally, perhaps even more favorably, to older widows. Regardless of age or marriage status, South Carolina's female warrant recipients commanded the same acreage as did free men. Such a policy stands in stark contrast to other colonial authorities' approaches to including women in their founding generation of settlers. Whether in Virginia's brides program or Jamaica's land incentive policies which excluded single women, demographically disrupted colonies historically valued marriage and reproduction in their attempts to win female settlers. The irrelevance of reproductive capacity or marriageability in Carolina's land incentives suggests that women of landholding classes served a purpose to the proprietors' vision beyond practical productive and reproductive concerns. They sought to strengthen the landholding classes and codify the distinction between landed and landless, and free and unfree, in the colony's social hierarchy.

### **Women of Means**

South Carolina's land policies demonstrate how the proprietors valued free women beyond their most basic productive and reproductive functions. Headright warrants, which comprised probably 40 percent of proprietary warrants for land in colonial South Carolina, notably extended equal landholding privileges to unmarried women. The policy originated in the

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<sup>16</sup> Warrant statistics from Salley, *Warrants for Land I-III*; Proprietors to Joseph Morton and Maurice Matthews, "Instructions for Granting Land in Carolina," in William J. Rivers, *A Sketch of the History of South Carolina to the Close of the Proprietary Government by the Revolution of 1719 with an Appendix Containing Many Valuable Records Hitherto Unpublished* (Charleston, McCarter & Co., 1856), 402.

Barbados Concessions, a 1665 agreement between the proprietors and a group of influential Barbadian settlers. The concessions offered a hundred acres to free men arriving in Clarendon County, with as much to each man for his wife and manservants and, vitally, to every free woman as well.<sup>17</sup>

Though land policy evolved as Ashley took charge of the proprietorship, his reforms changed little about the manner in which colonial authorities distributed land according to gender and free status. Policies that incentivized single women's immigration remained in line with Ashley's vision. Throughout the proprietary period, Ashley and his successors ordered colonial authorities to allot land according to similar standards. Any free settler, male or female, received a grant for immigrating (150 acres at the most in 1670, 50 acres at the least by 1682), with a grant of the same size due to a man for his wife and a master or mistress for each manservant or male slave. Female servants, children, and weak or young manservants and slaves commanded a smaller grant, usually thirty to fifty acres less than free people and able-bodied male laborers. Servants also received a warrant for land at the expiration of their term of servitude, at which point all policies except certain promotional pamphlets once again promised an equal grant of land to men and women.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Duff, "Creating a Provincial Province," 12; "The Barbados Concessions," 16 January 1663, *SP* 41-43. News of the proprietors' offer certainly reached potential settlers. Though not legally binding, promotional material also contained variations on the proprietors' headright offers. Robert Horne's 1666 pamphlet promised "Every Free-man and Free-woman that transport themselves and servants" by March 1667 "shall have for Himselfe, Wife, Children, and Men-servants for each 100 Acres of Land for him and his Heirs forever, and for every Woman-Servant and Slave 50 Acres." Horne, "A Brief Description," in ed. Salley *Narratives*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> For example: In 1670, the proprietors offered 150 acres for every free person and an additional 150 to the master or mistress for each servant, and 100 acres for every woman servant and young or weak manservant; in 1671, 100 acres for every free person and manservant and 70 acres for each woman servant or weak manservant; and in 1672, 70 acres for each free person and manservant and 60 acres for each woman servant or weak manservant; The proprietors reduced headrights to 70 acres per freeperson and manservant and 50 acres per woman servant in 1679. In 1682, land offerings declined again to 50 acres per freeperson and manservant, though in this iteration of the headright policy "marriageable" women servants also warranted 50 acres while unmarried ones claimed only 40. Governor Sayle's Commission, 26 June 1669, *SP* 117-23; "Instructions to the Governor and Council of Ashley River," 1 May 1671, in Rivers, *A Sketch of the History*, 366; "Instructions to Governor Captain John Comins," 19 May 1679 in Alexander Salley ed., *Records in the British Public Record Office Relating to South Carolina, 1663-*

No matter their position in society, landowning women had a part to play in the colony. Poorer landed women could support the proprietors' vision for colonial social organization in civilized townships. In an effort to curtail the disorganized, exploitative nature of colonial staple crop settlements, the proprietors strove to organize colonists into compact townships. Ashley described organized towns as "The Cheife thing that hath given New England soe much the advantage over Virginia and advanced that Plantation in so short a time." He instructed Sir John Yeamens to "put them [the settlers] in such a way of settling in Towns," and encourage "neareness of the Neighborhood," arguing that scattered frontier settlements encouraged barbarism. However, because the proprietors departed from the New England system by issuing individual rather than corporate grants, they had little real power to dictate town settlement to their colonists. If the proprietors wanted towns, they would have to prevail upon individual settlers to take up town lots.<sup>19</sup>

Traditionally less inclined towards individualistic economic exploitation and considered more vulnerable to the dangers of frontier settlement, women were prime candidates for town lot settlement. Between 1680 and 1692, female warrantees received 45 grants, of which 22 were town lot warrants in Charles Town. The previous seven years produced only one town lot warrant to a woman, and from 1692 to 1711 women only received nine. During a lull in South Carolina settlement, after the heyday of headright grants but before the proprietors began encouraging colonial officials like John Archdale to sell large tracts of land, women of modest landholding status claimed their town lots. In doing so, they occupied an important place in

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1684 (Columbia: Historical Commission of the State of South Carolina, 1895), 82-84; "Instructions to Joseph Morton esq.," 10 May 1682 in *ibid.*, 138-141; Further headright policies consistently value women equal to men: "A Declaration & Proposealls to all y[t] will plant in Carolina," 25 August 1663, in Rivers, *A Sketch of the History*, 337; "Coppoy of Instruccions annexed to ye Commission for ye Govern[o]r & Councell," 27 July 1669, in *ibid.*, 347-349. Duff, "Creating a Plantation Province," 7; Ackerman, *South Carolina Colonial Land Policies*, 20-38.

<sup>19</sup> Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina*, 16; Duff, "Creating a Plantation Province," 2; Salley, *Warrants for Land I-III*; Ashley to Sir John Yeamans, 10 April 1671, *SP* 315; Maurice Matthews to Lord Ashley, 30 August [16]71, *SP* 344.



Ashley's vision for a civilized South Carolina, combatting the "barbarisme" of other southern colonies.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Carolina's founders also needed their colony to attract larger landholders to serve as a colonial gentry class. Ashley drafted his proprietary land policy to create noble creole landholding class. By placing New World nobility at the head of the colonial government, Ashley and the proprietors sought to organize Carolina society around "enlightened economic actors" who could steer poorer settlers away from destructive self-interest and instead promote productivity and community. Land policies that favored the gentry worked both to appease the nobility with greater, more accessible landholdings, and to regulate them by ensuring that titles remained tied to landownership, which the proprietors controlled. Even as proprietary land policy evolved, the gentry remained clear beneficiaries. Social position always implicitly informed landownership, as headright grants rewarded settlers wealthy enough to import large numbers of servants and slaves. In the eighteenth century, the increased availability of land for purchase meant that affluent women and men could amass even greater quantities of land than previously possible.<sup>21</sup>

Many female land warrantees originated from wealthy families, particularly those who received warrants in the last two decades of the proprietary period. When new policies opened large tracts of South Carolina land for sale in the early eighteenth century, the number of women purchasing their land from the proprietors rose steeply. From 1692 to 1711, the average size of warrants to women rose to nearly three-hundred acres per warrant, with individual women receiving multiple warrants worth thousands of acres over the course of two decades. Hannah

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<sup>20</sup> Salley, *Warrants for Land I-III*.

<sup>21</sup> Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, 33-37; Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina*, 6-13; Vicki Hsueh, "Giving Orders," 435; Roper, *Conceiving Carolina*, 34.

English paid £25 for 500 acres in Berkeley County in 1692, where Sarah Barker would pay £20 for a warrant twice as large in 1706. Many women from this period either received land adjoining to their existing property or received multiple warrants within several years, meaning they purchased warrants rather than receiving land for their arrival. Margaret Moore received 500 acres in 1706, which the surveyor described as “land adjoining to her plantation.” Rebecca Axtell, who previously receive a warrant of 2900 acres for her arrival with family, servants, and slaves, returned to claim an additional 2500 acres between 1697 to 1707. Her daughter Elizabeth Blake accumulated at least 3420 acres in just two years. In fact, most female warrantees who one can reasonably assume belonged to the gentry claimed land in the last period of land records, 1692 to 1711.<sup>22</sup>

Carolina’s Fundamental Constitutions tied title to landowning status in order to assure that the proportion of high- and low-ranking settlers would remain balanced. The conflation of title with land would in theory establish the “balance of government” between manorialism and limited republicanism. Ideally, the balance would also foster colonial authorities who would manage the equally important balance between economic productivity and stable colonial settlement.<sup>23</sup>

Linking noble title to landholding required inheritance laws that would not divide the manor in subsequent generations. The proprietors did not wish to see the nobility divide their large plantations among many heirs, a practice that could leave inheritors with too little land to

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<sup>22</sup> Lord Craven of the proprietors instructed Governor John Archdale to sell land at 20£ per thousand acres in 1694 and £25 per thousand acres in 1695; “Instructions to the Governor,” in Governor John Archdale’s Papers, 1690-1706, located in the Library of Congress. Though land records become less detailed in the proprietary period’s later years, in the last twenty years of records only two women received warrants for their arrival, while the rest presumably involved land purchase; Salley, *Warrants for Land*, 3, 137, 193, 206, 207, 208, 227-37. This is not to say that female warrantees did not represent a diverse swath of South Carolina’s population. Many likely occupied a place in society similar to that of Hannah Smith, who married former servant Abraham Smith, a freeman with modest landholdings, and purchased an additional 50 acres from the proprietors in her widowhood. Some, like, Susanna Varine, widow of a Swiss joiner and merchant, represented the diverse populations of European settlers that the proprietors settled in South Carolina.

<sup>23</sup> FC, clause 17.

maintain their title. The Fundamental Constitutions display a number of provisions intended to prevent nobles from dividing their estates. Ashley recognized that female heirs could assist in keeping title and land together. In the Fundamental Constitutions the proprietors decreed:

Since the dignity of proprietor, landgrave, or cazique cannot be divided, and the signiories or baronies thereunto annexed must forever all entirely descend with and accompany that dignity, whensoever, for want of heirs male, it shall descend on the issue female, the eldest daughter and her heirs shall be preferred, and in the inheritance of those dignities, and in the signiories or baronies annexed, there shall be no coheirs.

The document includes four clauses that sanction female inheritance among Carolina's nobles. From Carolina's founding moment, women represented a vital link in the inheritance chain. In order to ensure that land and title remained linked, the proprietors had to accept women as worthy stewards to both land and title.<sup>24</sup>

If the Fundamental Constitutions made women equal landholders by law, proprietary headright and land purchase policies made landed women active participants in the development of a colonial gentry. Granting equal landowning privileges to single women allowed women of means to advance, rather than simply sustain, their families' status. Elizabeth Blake, for example willed the massive landholdings she acquired in widowhood to her son Joseph Blake and her relative Walter Izard, increasing her family's influence far beyond what she received in inheritance from her husbands and mother. In an idealized social system that tied class organization to land ownership, unmarried and widowed women could do more for elite families as landholders and independent plantation mistresses than as *femes covertas* or as widows and executors with limited power over their late husbands' holdings. The headright system and South Carolina's permissive

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<sup>24</sup> FC, clause 15; Hsueh, "Giving Orders," 438. Carolina was not the only colony who adapted its gendered landholding policies to suit high-status settlers. Several decades later, the Georgia Trustees, who initially considered women, "a dead charge to the trust, excepting a few who mended the Cloathes, dressed the Victuals and washed the Linnen of the Trustees Men Servants," bent to the colony's affluent men who demanded real property inheritance rights for their wives and daughters, according to Lee Ann Caldwell, "Women Landholders of Colonial Georgia," in *Forty Years of Diversity: Essays on Colonial Georgia*, ed. Harvey H. Jackson and Phinizy Spalding (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 183-185.

land purchasing policies expanded women's landholding role beyond that of placeholder heirs to influential families.<sup>25</sup>

Even women who did not yet belong to gentry families and had not yet married could serve Ashley's vision better as landowners than they could under their families' guardianship. The link between landownership and title meant that any accumulation of land could advance a settler's status. The Fundamental Constitutions designated plantations of over 3000 acres as manors. Landed women who married or remarried could elevate their husbands' social position. Vera Aurora Pepper arrived free and unmarried, but ultimately brought her granted land into her marriage to Thomas Hurst, contributing to his elevation to gentleman planter status. Pepper's warrant not only enabled her to travel to the New World and create a productive family with a previously unmarried man, but her landholdings contributed to her husband's status as a rising member of the creole gentry. Similarly, Elizabeth Beadon, the widow of gentleman George Beadon, remarried to John Raven, a freeman and victualler who arrived in the colony as a servant but eventually accumulated the land and influence to join the Commons House of Assembly. Whether an independently-landed woman married a gentleman or a freeman on the rise, their marriage served the proprietary vision for an organized social hierarchy, either consolidating land within gentry families or inviting men to climb the social ladder through land acquisition.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Memorials for Land, unpublished database by S. Max Edelson; Marilyn Salmon, "Women and Property in South Carolina: The Evidence from Marriage Settlements 1730-1830," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 656; Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property*, 79; South Carolina was more like the Chesapeake than New England in its unrestrictive dealings with widows, Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 146.

<sup>26</sup> Vera Aurora Peper: Baldwin, *First Settlers*, 182; Salley, *Warrants for Land* I, 179; Elizabeth Beadon: Baldwin, *First Settlers*, 17, 193; Salley, *Warrants for Land*, 95. None of this is to say that women's landholding privileges did not benefit lower-status families. Female warantees of more modest holdings, like Elizabeth Collins, who passed her two-hundred acres grant to her youngest son, demonstrated influence via their wills. However, poorer women did not have the opportunities to accumulate land through purchase or servant and slave importation. Furthermore, though a poorer woman's warrant could certainly make a difference to her future husband or heirs, land that men inherited or acquired through marriage had less potential to alter the status of smaller landowners who did not come close to amassing a 3000-acre manor. The stakes of landholding were simply higher within the gentry, whose title and influence depended on accumulating profiting from their land. Therefore, women's landholding privileges

The Schenckings family effectively illustrates how women's independent acquisition of land could sustain a gentry family's influence. The elder Elizabeth Schencking's entitlement to town lots for herself and her adult daughters ensured that the influential Barbadian family would survive and prosper in Bernard Schenckings's absence and later in the wake of his death. In 1696, more than a decade after her initial warrant, the widowed Schenckings expanded her family's holdings and purchased an additional 500 acres from the proprietors. Her daughter Amerinthea also claimed 260 acres in South Carolina's Berkely County in 1710. The Schenckings represent what may have been a best-case scenario for the proprietors, as women from an influential family not only ensured their family's survival, but expanded their influence through independent land acquisition.<sup>27</sup>

Dorothy Ogle, a widow who acquired a warrant for 400 acres in Colleton County in 1710, had four daughters and no sons at her death in 1729. Ogle's will suggests she lived the life of an industrious landowning widow, much in line with the idealized huswife of Carolina's promotional pamphlets. Her will lists "Slaves, with all my Chattell, Sheep & Hogs, plantation tools, canue corne mill with the remainder part of my household goods," all of which she divided into fourths among her four daughters, along with her land. However, at least two, probably three, of her daughters had married by 1729, meaning their inherited property legally belonged to their husbands. Ogle recognized her sons-in-law's influence and named two of them executors of her will. One, Paul Hamilton, was the son of John Hamilton, a gentleman, Deputy Secretary of the Province, and a member of the Common House of Assembly. Two of Ogle's daughters – Elizabeth and Martha – bear the surname Hamilton in their mother's will, indicating that more

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presented more opportunities to South Carolina's elite families and elite women had more opportunities to accumulate land

<sup>27</sup> Salley, *Warrants for Land* II, 60 and III, 127 and 140.

than one of the Ogle sisters married into an influential family. Dorothy Ogle's will exemplifies two proprietary ideals at play in granting unmarried women land: first, Ogle's landholding privileges enabled her to live a respectable, productive life milling corn, raising livestock, and overseeing a small plantation without a husband to supervise her work; second, her landed status helped obtain affluent husbands for her daughters, who in turn profited from Ogle's estate upon her death.<sup>28</sup>

Elite women still could not officially exercise the political rights of a nobleman. The proprietors did not intend for women's independent place in land acquisition to empower them politically. Rather, Ashley recognized that Carolina had nothing to lose and everything to gain from giving women broad rights to acquire land outside of inheritance. Wealthy widows, who could employ their power and status largely unchecked by male oversight, had always threatened to disrupt the English social hierarchy. Ashley saw an opportunity to make wealthy unmarried women work to his ultimate end, rather than viewing them as a potential major social disruption. Landowning women could sustain the colony's nobility and advance gentry holdings, all while overseeing plantation production, servants and slaves. In short, women's equal right to acquire land independently advanced Ashley's well-ordered society on one hand, and the profitable agricultural production plan on the other. In terms of land acquisition, gender mattered considerably less than one's ability and willingness to support the proprietary vision of a manorial social order. Such priorities demonstrate the proprietors' commitment to landholding as the ultimate marker of status in Ashley's utopia.

Yet the fact that the proprietors granted women landowning rights to serve Ashley's vision and to see land consolidated in men's hands does not diminish the active role female

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<sup>28</sup> Will of Dorothy Ogle, 1719, "Wills Volume 1-2, 1671 to 1731," in *South Carolina, Wills and Probate Records 1670-1980* at [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com); John Hamilton: Baldwin, *First Settlers*, 112.

warrantees played in colonial development. The fact that landowning women could advance Ashley's social utopia and perpetuate plantation growth encouraged the proprietors to enact policies that incentivized unmarried women to accumulate land. In setting forth headright and land sale policies that valued women as landowners equal to men, the proprietors incidentally engaged with and appealed to women as landowners, not just as huswives, mothers, or a last resort in the inheritance line. No matter the motivation, proprietary land policy made elite women active players in the practice of land acquisition and colonial development.

### **A Woman's Place**

Women in proprietary South Carolina were agents of social hierarchy. Landed women helped create the networks of domestic production and creole landowning social groups necessary to Ashley's project. Both such roles implicitly speak to women's necessity in the colonial social hierarchy. However, the proprietors' vision clearly did not require stark social distinctions between men and women, at least in the field of landholding. Given that proprietary policies exhibit a vested interest in maintaining a utopian social hierarchy, we might ask what social distinctions proprietary land policies *did* reinforce, if not a gendered hierarchy among free white settlers. Proprietary headright policy draws a distinction between the value of free and unfree labor, specifically women's labor. White women's landholding privileges enabled them to assert the power of their class and race, importing slaves and overseeing plantation labor even outside of marriage to a planter. Proprietary policy cast free white settlers of either gender as potential masters, and categorized women's unfree labor as the product of white supervision.

The proprietors highly valued free white women but devalued women who labored. Free men and their wives commanded an equal grant for their status as free white settlers and for the usefulness of their labor. Free men and women received a warrant in their names in

acknowledgement of their capacity to work the land. Women's equality under headright indicated that a woman's domestic labor was no less valuable than her husband's agricultural labor. Significantly, their equality also indicated that men and women were equally qualified to *oversee* the agricultural and domestic labor their servants and slaves performed. Male servants and slaves earned their masters an additional hundred acres in recognition of the servant's ability to work the land and, in the case of white indentured servants, his future status as a free white man. Conversely, servant and slave women consistently commanded smaller grants than any group of able-bodied adults, despite their significant contributions to the colony's labor force. The logic of this discrepancy suggests that unfree men made up for their lack of status with their labor, but unfree women produced agricultural labor less valuable than their male counterparts and domestic and reproductive labor less valuable than free women's.<sup>29</sup>

Ashley's vision recognized the usefulness of free women who reinforced the social hierarchy as landholders and commanders of labor, rather than contributing to the social hierarchy through their subservience. Ensuring that all free unmarried women owned land and all free married women added value to her husband's holdings repositioned free women at the center of the social hierarchy rather than the bottom, where they fortified the social superiority of free white landowners and the inferiority of subservient laborers. Every free woman had the same potential as any white man to manage vast acreage of land, and by extension had the same capacity for mastery as any white man.

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<sup>29</sup> The proprietors were very concerned with preventing settlers from accumulating land they could not cultivate, therefore grants to servants constituted an estimate of how much land each servant could work. Most headright policies do not distinguish between the value of servants and slaves, but a set of 1663 instructions to very early settlers valued slaves below servants, and slave women below slave men. Duff, "Creating a Plantation Province," 7; Ackerman, *South Carolina Colonial Land Policies*, 22-28.



Slave labor colonies that valued white women only has wives risked demographic collapse. The presence of slave and servant women could easily muddy a colony's social configuration. Historians may look to Jamaica as a foil to South Carolina in terms of free white women's status. Like South Carolina, Jamaica evolved into a staple crop colony dependent upon slave labor under English leadership. The colony struggled to maintain a white creole population throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, eventually collapsing under the weight of massive demographic disruption. Yet despite the dire demographic situation and the relatively broad availability of land, Jamaica's colonial authorities did little to encourage women's settlement. Jamaican settlement incentives tied landownership to military service and did not reward settlers for importing their own slaves. In theory, the Jamaican system valued women as equal to men, in that both genders commanded a grant of thirty acres of planting land upon their arrival. However, the military service requirement meant that the law discriminated against single women. Without a husband, a woman could not expect a grant of land for her arrival in Jamaica. In the event that a white woman inherited property, her capacities as a planter remained inferior to a white man's in the eyes of the law. The Council of Trade and Plantations advised governor Hamilton that, when managing slaves, "two white women shou'd be reckoned equivalent to one white man." The nature of colonial Jamaican demography was such that free white women had no value as landowners, slave-owners, or planters. The colony's laws of land- and property-ownership enshrined white women's value exclusively as wives.<sup>30</sup>

Those few women who fulfilled their wifely role in Jamaica found their position untenable. Trevor Burnard has observed that white Jamaican women became increasingly socially irrelevant due to the proliferation of slave labor. The feminine duties, both productive

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<sup>30</sup> Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 21, 37

and reproductive, from which white women traditionally derived their value, increasingly became the work of female slaves. Ultimately, white women's social irrelevance contributed to the colony's demographic collapse. The situation in Jamaica illustrates both the ease with which white women could disappear from a slave state and their necessity to the demographic survival of a white creole population. If colonial authorities in slave societies valued white women exclusively as wives, white women would grow scarce within the colony's creole population. However, if colonial authorities carved out new roles for women, they might remain.<sup>31</sup>

Eight female warrantees claimed headrights in the name of their servants and slaves, half of whom specifically referred to their servants as negroes. More than eight certainly owned slaves and employed servants in their time as landowners. Those who left wills all owned slaves whom they bequeathed to heirs at their death. Rebecca Axtell and Elizabeth Blake managed large plantations with [many] slaves, and other creole gentry women like Elizabeth Godfrey, Elizabeth Schenckingh and her daughters, Margaret Moore, and Mary Grimball oversaw slave labor in their lifetimes.<sup>32</sup>

South Carolina promotional literature provides us with an advanced understanding of white women's value to a slave state. In "Profitable Advice for Rich and Poor," John Norris invites "Plenty of good Huswives to manage a Dairy and to make it to Advantage," saying the colony's thousands of cows go un milked "for want of People to manage it Advantageously."

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 108; Barbados also attempted to recruit women as wives in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, *ibid.* 76; Burnard, "Inheritance and Independence," 110; Burnard, "A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in early Jamaica," 74.

<sup>32</sup> In a traditional planters' household, wives oversaw the domestic labor of female servants and slaves. Notably, unmarried women also displayed a preference for female servants and slaves, perhaps because they represented a clearer power dynamic than that between a free woman and an unfree man. Women outnumber men in women's headright warrants that list the gender of their slaves. Dorothy Ogle's four slaves were all women, including Flora, whom Ogle manumitted and praised as "a faithful just honest and laborious woman." Elizabeth Collins' will also names only female slaves, Nancy and Clair.

Norris published his pamphlet in 1712, by which time Carolina had become a black majority colony. No shortage of labor prevented Carolinians from milking their “many Thousand of cows.” Most significantly, Norris likens free women’s oversight of domestic production to men’s oversight of agricultural production, a pair of separate but equal means to profit in the New World, both of which involved a labor hierarchy. Norris writes,

A careful diligent Man, and a good Huswife, is at once settled with this 100 acres, in a Prospect of Reaping forthwith by careful Industry great, good, and profitable returns; the Man and his Negro, being well employ’d by Planting; the good Huswife and her Indian Woman, diligently Employing themselves, in careful Management of the Dairy, Hogs, and other Profits that might arise for her Diligence.

The “good huswife” and her female slaves were part of a dual managerial system, the equal mirror image of a “careful diligent Man” and his slaves in the field. The colony presents both free men and free women with the opportunity for profit and pleasure, and both genders project the hierarchical power of their race and their free landed status.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, designating free women’s oversight as an element of domestic production degraded the labor of unfree women. Consider the implication of Norris’ passages: the absence of huswives has given rise to a shortage of butter and cheese, not because the colony lacks women engaged in domestic production, but because the domestic production lacks free white women’s oversight. The labor of unfree black or Indian women making butter and cheese means little or perhaps nothing without a huswife’s management. If the colony has no cheese, the pamphlet’s logic dictates, South Carolina’s servant and slave women must not be able to produce

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<sup>33</sup> Norris, “Profitable Advice,” 24, 89. A hundred years later, eighteenth-century observers specifically noted that black “dairy wenches” had charge of South Carolina dairies, according to Louisa Susanna Wells, *The Journal of a Voyage from Charlestown, S.C., to London Undertaken during the American Revolution by a Daughter of an Eminent Loyalist in the Year 1778 and Written from Memory Only in 1779* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1906), 43; “wench” is loaded term in early American gender history, referring to low-status physically laboring women and connoting the antithesis of the domestically employed, respectable goodwife; see Brown’s aptly titled, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 88; Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, 148.

to the best of their abilities without a free white woman giving orders and making cheese the proper English way. Within South Carolina, the huswife, not her subordinates, made dairy profitable, plentiful, and desirable. Whereas other slave labor colonies witnessed a change in the social hierarchy which made white women's domestic labor nearly obsolete, South Carolina projected a social hierarchy in which subservient domestic labor required a free white women's supervision.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, women who took an active role in colonial settlement through land warrants necessarily disrupted traditional English social hierarchies. Unmarried women with plantations of their own answered to no man in their home. But sacrificing a fragment of women's subordination to men ultimately nurtured a population with more free white colonists whose landholding privileges would reinforce the social hierarchy that Ashley hoped would make Carolina pleasant and profitable for white settlers. In the context of Ashley's reforming vision, ensuring the subordination of unfree people mattered more than ensuring women's subordination to men. South Carolina land policy therefore valued free women for being free and landed, not only for their subservience to men or for the labor that traditionally distinguished and elevated a goodwife. Because more than anything, the proprietors' willingness to grant equal land to women proves that in South Carolina white women's capacity to give orders mattered as much or more as their subordination to men. The proprietors valued women according to their superiority over unfree people, not necessarily their inferiority to men. A society founded on slave labor needed to consolidate a powerful landed class to control the unfree population, and with scores of slaves and servants, men had ample opportunity to express their status as the master gender and race without having to subjugate all free women to the fullest extent.

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<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches*, 83-88.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, much of proprietors' utopian vision crumbled in the first decades of settlement. Lord Ashley died in 1681, following years of false imprisonment for treason and exile in Holland. Without strong leadership, the proprietorship floundered. Proprietary rule grew tenuous in the first decades of the eighteenth century, as the proprietors struggled to handle opposition from the powerful Barbadian settlers known as the Goose Creek men, religious and political factionalism, and indigenous and Spanish attacks that began with Queen Anne's War and continued with the Yamasee War of 1715 to 1717. The South Carolina assembly petitioned to remove the proprietors from power in 1719, at which point King George I converted South Carolina to a royal colony. Besides the establishment of a landed gentry and the contested success of religious toleration measures, the majority of Ashley's utopian plans never took shape. South Carolina's colonists never even ratified the Fundamental Constitutions.<sup>35</sup>

As individual settlers, the ninety-seven women who received proprietary land warrants behaved much the same as men comparable status. Many went through life in South Carolina making little mark on the historical record beyond their name on a list of warrants for land. Fifteen appear on the list of memorial landowners filed from 1731 to 1776, where their heirs established a legal claim to inherited land. The memorials reveal at least nine female warrantees still owned the land they received during the proprietary period. Ten had lost their holdings due to death, marriage, or sale. Five of the more influential women, Mary Warnock, Elizabeth Godfrey, Miriam Gantlett, Elizabeth Blake, and Rebecca Axtell, appear in the memorials as both current and former landowners. Blake and Axtell proved loyal friends of the proprietorship

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<sup>35</sup> Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina*, 103-129; Weir, *Colonial South Carolina*, 47-75

through the turbulent eighteenth century, joining forces with several landgraves to pursue action against the Goose Creek men. The influential mother and daughter drew the attention and ire of their opponents, who described Blake and Axtell as “remarkably zealous and diligent.”<sup>36</sup>

But those women without political connections who did not manage large plantations had minimal impact on the state of the colony. Despite promotional claims that the arrival of women would improve the colony, shortages, disease, war, and inhospitable land plagued South Carolina even in the presence of huswives. Ninety-seven women could not remedy the absence of quality textiles or keep butter from spoiling in the tropical South Carolina summers. Nor could women mitigate the impact of malaria and other lowcountry diseases that stole their children at staggering rates, preventing a self-reproducing creole population from taking root in South Carolina until the late eighteenth century. Nor did the presence of women entirely prevent the exploitative, individualistic agricultural and wealth-accumulating practices the proprietors hoped to avoid. If the tendency of elite women to accumulate vast tracts of land indicates anything, women of means were no less inclined than men to embrace lucrative plantation operations. When stability came to South Carolina, it would come from the improvements of royal management and settlers’ ability to adapt and survive, not from the arrival of women.<sup>37</sup>

However, wherever the proprietorship succeeded, landowning women succeeded in turn. Landed women reinforced the parts of Ashley’s plan that worked: making landholding the pillar of gentry status, and establishing an intensified reformed version of the English social hierarchy that supported a variety of white landholding classes *and* a slave labor force. Women’s

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<sup>36</sup> Edelson, unpublished database based on memorials for land. Observation on Axtell and Blake quoted in Roper, *Conceiving Carolina*, 134

<sup>37</sup> Senegambian women, in fact, may have introduced the proper “folding” method that advanced South Carolina’s dairy production, according to John S. Otto, “The Origins of Cattle-Ranching in Colonial South Carolina, 1670-1715,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 87, no. 2 (Apr. 1986): 122. Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise*, 4.

empowerment within proprietary land policy ensured elite white women's position as secondary masters rather than wifely subordinates. Their empowerment under proprietary property law ordained all unfree labor as the product of free white management and doubled the number of potential masters whose participation reinforced colonial power structures.

Ashley and the proprietors carved out a position for elite women that stabilized the colony's social hierarchy. To actively include free white women in the planning of a new British American settlement was a rare decision among founders of staple-crop colonies, who initiated colonization with largely economic and imperial motives. But Ashley's vision of a colony that brought together New England's safe and well-ordered town settlements with the Chesapeake's productivity could not afford to leave women out of the picture. So he invited women to be both wives and landholders, a move that promised women social relevance regardless of their marital status or the overwhelming demographics of a majority-enslaved society. Carolina needed free women in spite of, and perhaps because of, the proprietary vision of a colony founded to depend on slavery. The plan was singular in its willingness to promise free white women an active and important place in society even as slaves took on the bulk of women's work.

Perhaps Ashley knew from witnessing other colonial projects that the position of women within a settler society mattered; or, more likely, he saw in women a population of potential settlers no less capable of advancing his utopian vision than men. Regardless, he put forth a plan that offered women a clear and desirable place within his hierarchical society. Ashley's plan valued free white women as highly as free white men, incentivizing women to immigrate, stay, and prosper in his colony. In doing so, he hit upon the social formula that would prevent settler demographic collapse in the Southern mainland colonies, in which the presence of plantation mistresses became an integral part of controlling unfree people. A settler society that devalued

white women in the presence of slave labor would crumble demographically. But a colony that elevated white women in the presence of slave labor, implicitly acknowledging that free women served a social function beyond their productive and reproductive capacities, created for itself a population of settlers who actively benefitted from and reinforced the colony's social order, rather than being simply subordinated to it.

Through land grants, authority over slaves, inheritance, marriage settlements, and other means, South Carolina's women exerted significant economic and social power throughout the proprietary and royal periods. But the proprietary era's landed women prove that South Carolina's women did not obtain their elevated status only from benevolent husbands and fathers as the result of an abundance of inheritable land. South Carolina had granted women the power of equal property- and landownership from the colony's very conception. The proprietors opened the door to female landholders in order to promote their doomed vision of a perfect colonial society. Even as the proprietorship foundered, no colonial authorities could take from women what Ashley had given: the right to own and manage their land to the same capacity as any man.

The ways colonies dealt with women from their founding moment mattered. Creating a place for women within a colony, rather than considering them ancillary to the colony's economic function, ensured that free white women could stay, survive, and prosper in a settlement where slave labor ought to have made free women irrelevant. Women's place promised to perpetuate a white settler population and continually reinforce the social hierarchies that elevated all free people above all unfree people, regardless of the fact that free people took on only a fraction of the labor. The proprietors failed to advance the vast majority of their vision for Carolina, but the implications of their gendered policies outlived the proprietorship by generations.