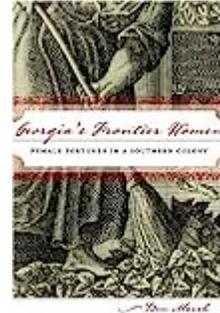




Ben Marsh. *Georgia's Frontier Women: Female Fortunes in a Southern Colony.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. Tables, graphs, illustrations. xiii + 253 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2882-9.



Reviewed by Lisa Crutchfield

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The Transformation of a Southern Colony

As the last of Great Britain's original thirteen mainland colonies, Georgia was settled under a unique set of circumstances. It was not established until the 1730s, it served as a buffer between South Carolina and Spanish Florida, and it was established and governed by a group of trustees who had idealistic goals that originally limited large landholdings and outlawed slavery. All of these conditions meant that Georgia did not immediately mimic its southern neighbors. Ben Marsh argues that by the time of the American Revolution, however, Georgia was firmly ensconced as a representative of southern society. In an interesting and convincing work, Marsh examines this transformation through the lens of family, arguing that familial relationships influenced all others. Examining Georgian families and how they operated in the fledgling province sheds light on the behavior of individuals as well as the larger society. Additionally, Marsh argues, the study of gender and how it was intertwined with race and class helps explain the substantive transformation that Georgia underwent in its short colonial history.

Georgia's Frontier Women presents its argument in a well-organized manner. The prologue sets the stage by examining the ideals (which did not always become realities) of the trustees' plan in establishing Georgia. Marsh believes that the trustees had a very clear idea of what women's roles in the colony would be and believed that the presence of women would lend stability. The trustees therefore expected and encouraged female migration and family formation.

The main body of the work is separated into two sections. The first section, encompassing three chapters, explores the colony during the trustee era. A chapter on population demonstrates that the general demographics of those migrating to early Georgia resembled those of settlers to New England a century earlier. Yet on closer study, Marsh reveals specific characteristics unique to Georgia: higher mortality rates, less availability of women eligible for marriage, and a higher percentage of older women with fewer childbearing years remaining. These peculiar demographics influenced Georgians' marriage patterns so that they married younger,

remarried more quickly, and broadened their sanctioned pool of potential marriage partners. Additionally, Marsh argues that Georgia's unusual economic situation, especially as a southern colony that forbade slavery, meant that women simultaneously had greater latitude and faced increased vulnerability. On the one hand, the frontier conditions required women to perform new tasks and fill different roles. On the other hand, women engaged in these new roles with an eye toward acknowledging gender norms. Marsh asserts that although Georgia's frontier conditions allowed social and economic gains for women during the trustee period, these advantages never effectively challenged the contemporary gendered labor paradigm, making it easy for those gains to dissipate as Georgia moved into the royal period (p. 66).

The book's second section examines Georgia's transformation as the colony came under the administration of royal officials in 1752. Royal policy allowed Georgia to integrate rapidly into the larger southern economy and social structure. Remaining dependent on immigration, Georgia policy continued to favor family formation. In the royal period, however, Marsh finds that more traditional marriage rates, ages, and customs prevailed. He traces the stabilization of sex and age ratios in both of the predominant areas forming in Georgia during this time—the lowcountry elite and the backcountry poor—but he emphasizes the distinction between the two. The lowcountry, as it became settled more quickly, replicated older traditions of marriage, family, and gendered labor more readily than did the backcountry frontier. In fact, the lowcountry areas led the way in establishing the social framework that defined gender within the context of race and class. With the royally sanctioned introduction of slavery, women's labor became more circumscribed and specialized, and class differences, including those among white women, became more evident. Thus Georgians began to emphasize racial and class differences over gender similarities. According to Marsh, the changes in women's roles that he traces from the trustee era through the royal period highlight how patriarchy and white racial superiority became the framework for southern society.

Marsh concludes his work with an epilogue that briefly discusses Georgian women during the American Revolution. He posits that although the war presented the opportunity for radical change to the social structure, southern ideals of race and gender held fast and continued unscathed into the national period.

In his examination of the trustee period, Marsh is

especially successful in mapping out the effects women and frontier conditions had on each other and in explaining how those components helped shape colonial Georgian society. His demographic study is extremely helpful, and not just to those interested in gender history. He is comprehensive both in the data he presents and in the conclusions he draws, addressing broad ideas relating to marriage and family, immigration and emigration patterns, cross-cultural relations, and labor roles, as well as parental, social, and institutional control. He therefore clearly makes his case that a historical study of Georgia women sheds significant light on the region's larger colonial history. Many scholars, beyond those interested in gender, will find his work compelling and useful.

One area of weakness in the first section, however, lies in Marsh's conclusions concerning labor and gender roles. For one, he argues that the conditions of Georgia's frontier extended both ends of the spectrum of female economic experiences, offering some a miniature golden age and others a dark age, but he never fully explains this dichotomy (pp. 36-37). Additionally, he asserts that female labor was both necessary and gender specific, claiming that Georgian men refused to do certain types of labor that they deemed women's work. This, according to Marsh, underlined the depth of the psychological commitment to gendered place (p. 42). Yet he provides many examples of women on the frontier engaging in men's work, even performing such tasks as clearing land and running plantations. If the foundation for gender roles was so clearly in place, even on the frontier, should it not have gone both ways? And if that was not the case, meaning men refused to do the work of women but women were allowed to do the work of men, additional analysis is in order.

It is precisely this foundational belief in defined gender roles that Marsh sees carrying over into the royal period and ultimately winning out, so that Georgia conformed to southern views of patriarchy and race. As Georgia became more settled, frontier conditions and the temporary gender roles that went along with them waned. Marsh successfully explores this transformation in the second half of his book, drawing nice contrasts to the earlier period. Again, his demographic study is exceptionally informative and is not limited to women. He successfully argues that the more specialized and gender-specific labor opportunities available for some white women during the royal period helped exacerbate class and racial divisions among women. He also finally has an opportunity to talk about African Americans as a major component of the society. His arguments cul-

minate in a chapter entitled "Consolidating Gender," in which many of Marsh's major points are brought together convincingly. He ties gender, race, and class into a web that supports Georgia's identity as a southern colony embedded in southern values.

There are a few minor problems that do not, however, get neatly addressed in the final chapter. Marsh tends to draw a clear distinction between the trustee period (as the frontier era) and the royal period (as the civilized era.) While he convincingly argues that the transfer of power from the trustees to the Crown marked a substantive transformation for Georgia, the framework of frontier trusteeship and civilized royal colony is problematic, as he himself acknowledges by distinguishing between the lowcountry and backcountry. The transformation was not complete in all areas of Georgia at the same time, and he could have given this issue more consideration. Additionally, Marsh frequently hints that his study will be all-inclusive of Georgia's women, including natives, whites, and blacks, but for the most part he does not deliver. There are a few impressive exceptions, especially his consideration of African American families in light of the stabilizing life expectancy of whites. But most often, the casual nod to native values is too little

and rather serves as a distraction. These are minor complaints, however, of an otherwise impressive project.

Overall, Marsh provides a readable and compelling work on Georgia's formative years and effectively uses family and gender to help explain the colony's transformation into a southern stronghold. His sources are varied and sound, including statistics, wills, land grant petitions, newspapers, and slave advertisements. He succeeds in incorporating recent historiography and drawing connections with the literature, as well as trying to position his arguments on Georgia within a wider context. The tables, graphs, and illustrations are helpful and provide pertinent information on many groups and circumstances. Additionally, the work extends from the colonial period to 1800. Certainly those interested in colonial southern women would benefit from reading *Georgia's Frontier Women*. It would, however, be a mistake to recommend this work only to gender historians, as Marsh has made a significant contribution beyond that scope. Those interested in demography, African Americans, societal formation, or early American history in general will also find something of value in this comprehensive study.

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