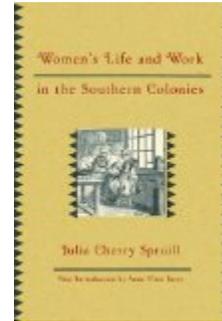


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julia Cherry Spruill. *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998. xviii + 426 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-31758-9.

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Published on H-SAWH (March, 1999)



Julia Cherry Spruill's *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* as a Source for Historians of Women and the South

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The 1998 re-issue of Julia Cherry Spruill's *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* celebrates the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of this classic study on the experiences of women in the colonial South. This book is a classic because Spruill conducted meticulous research, studied southern women in the context of their society, and examined topics that continue to inform the questions that historians of women, and of the South, ask at the end of the twentieth century.

In 1938, Julia Cherry Spruill noted that her "original plan was to make a study of the changing attitudes toward women in the South." She continued, "But as work proceeded, I realized that such a very limited amount of research had been attempted in the whole field of social history of the South that groundwork would have to be done for every phase of the study." Spruill shifted the focus of her work and decided "to find out as much as possible about the everyday life of women, their function in the settlement of colonies, their homes and domestic occupations, their social life and recreations, the aims and methods of their education, their participation in affairs outside the home, and the manner in which they were regarded by the law and by society in general" (p. xvii).

Spruill relied on a wide range of primary documents in order to answer her questions about southern women during the colonial period. As Anne Firor Scott points out

in her revised introduction to the book, Spruill's study was innovative in its nature. Her methodology was similar to that social historians began to use in the 1970s. Spruill's book received praise after its publication in 1938, and historians, including Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., predicted that it would be used by students of the south and of social history. Scott notes that Schlesinger's prediction came true, but not until the 1970s when Spruill's study was re-issued.[1]

Spruill stated her thesis strongly in the book's first chapter, entitled "Women Wanted." She declared that women were essential to the success of newly established colonies and then presented evidence to prove her statement. Once she had established that women were "a force in Southern history" (to borrow a phrase from her friend Mary Ritter Beard), Spruill examined aspects of their domestic lives and social institutions in Chapters Two through Eight. She looked at dwelling houses, the variety of utensils that a woman might have had in her home, family relationships and the idea of patriarchy, domestic work, clothing, courtship, marriage, childbearing and childraising, modes of transportation, social gatherings (church, weddings, funerals, harvest festivals, and fairs), and private leisure time. As Spruill detailed the domestic lives of southern women, she also examined the context of their lives. She noted that the social institutions of the southern colonies were based on those in England. She pointed out regional differences in the South, aspects of life that changed during the colonial period, differences between urban and rural life, and the

impact of status on a woman's life and work.

Next, in Chapters Nine and Ten, Spruill turned to an examination of educational opportunities available for girls, the subjects and activities taught to girls, and literacy levels among females. Because southern women left few extant documents about the books that they read, Spruill analyzed the books that they might have read. She noted that these books "throw considerable light upon the woman of colonial days and make known to us, if not what she was, at least what she was supposed to be" (p. 208).

Although the library of an eighteenth-century upper-class woman might contain books of sermons and lectures intended to instruct the reader about morality, virtue, proper behavior, and the duties of woman, Spruill found that the lives of a number of southern women did not fit the ideal picture. In Chapters Eleven through Fourteen, she presented a series of primary documents that reveal the public lives of women in the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Southern women played a role in Quaker meetings and the services of the "New Light" or "Separate" Baptists. A number of occupations were open to women in the colonial period. Spruill found evidence that female colonists worked as tutors and schoolmistresses. Several women opened their own schools, and a few operated the printing presses. Midwives and nurses delivered babies and tended to the sick. An examination of advertisements in the several colonial newspapers indicated that women worked as shopkeepers, operated ferries, and served food and drink at taverns. A few women managed plantations on their own. Spruill concluded her study with two chapters that focused on crimes committed by women, the punishments that women received, and the legal restraints on southern females.

Spruill's detailed examination of women who lived and worked in the southern colonies serves as a useful introduction to many of the topics that social historians study today: women's lives, vernacular architecture, material culture, work, family structure and relationships, regionality, religion, and differences between urban and rural life. Even though Spruill did not ask questions about the life and work of African American and Native American women, she did mention these women throughout her book.

At the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* has been used to integrate women's experiences into all aspects of the interpretation of Williamsburg as a colonial society. Spruill's book has proved especially useful for getting at the lives of white women who were not members of the gentry and to discuss the issue of status in early Virginia. As a historian at Colonial Williamsburg, I am currently completing a study of the slave community in eighteenth-century Williamsburg, and I am eager to use Spruill's footnotes to find additional documents that I can use. I would like to hear how other members of the H-SAWH list have used, or plan to use, Spruill's classic work in their research and teaching.

Note

[1]. Anne Firor Scott, "Introduction to the Norton Library Edition," in Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life & Work in the Southern Colonies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972) and Anne Firor Scott, *Unheard Voices: The First Historians of Southern Women* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

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Citation: Julie Richter. Review of Spruill, Julia Cherry, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

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