

Introduction

“Lay in a Stock of Graces Against the Evil Day of Widowhood”

On August 30, 1673, in Boston, Massachusetts, Dorothy Upshall, widow of Nicholas, wrote a will in which she divided her earthly goods among two daughters, a grandson, three granddaughters, one brother, and two sisters. Thirty-five years later and about 402 miles south of Boston, in Charles County, Maryland, Elizabeth Diggs, widow of William, left her estate to six sons and three daughters, demanding that daughter Mary receive her share immediately while her other children wait until all her debts were paid. Eighteen years later and 440 miles further south, in Charleston, South Carolina, Catherine LaNoble, widow of Henry, bequeathed her estate—the landed portion of which, she specifically noted, her mother had given her—to two daughters, a son-in-law, a grandson, and a granddaughter.¹ Nearly one thousand widows over a 120-year time span across Massachusetts, Maryland, and South Carolina repeated this seemingly mundane ritual of devising their estates, whether personal property, landed property, or both.

Far from being mundane, will making signaled a significant private and public event in a woman's life, in her family's life, and in her community's life. At the most personal level, leaving a will meant that a woman was facing her own mortality. It must have been a highly emotional time, a fearful time fraught with internal and external conflict. But it also must have been a powerful time. A woman who created a will believed she had something of value to leave, and she wanted to determine who would receive it. Even if she and her husband had talked over the family's future, it was an act over which she had the ultimate say. At a more formal level,

widows' wills reflect the place widows occupied in early British America. Widows were no longer wives and mothers with clearly defined gender roles within the household but rather fell within several contested sites of socially constructed gender roles. Cultural, legal, communal, and economic ideals ensured that widows would not be allowed to wield absolute power and control generally reserved for men. However, as heads of households, they were expected to oversee the family and to represent its interests as their husbands had once done. A widow who left a will understood her responsibilities to her family and to her community, and she must have felt a great deal of satisfaction at being able to contribute to another's economic well-being. But just as they did not necessarily bequeath their estates as men did, neither did all widows across colonies and time bequeath their estates in the same manner. As widows' wills reveal, many widows successfully contested or appropriated their rights and responsibilities for their own reasons, reasons based on age, economic status, tradition, family relations, personal experience, and individual quirks.

The title of this book, "The Widows' Might," expands upon the biblical parables found in the gospels of Mark and Luke. In Mark 12:41-44 and in Luke 21:1-4, we learn about a poor widow who put "two mites" into the collection box along with the rich who "cast in much" as they proceeded through the Women's Court in the Temple at Jerusalem. A mite was a small bronze or copper coin worth about an eighth of a cent and was the smallest denomination made at the time. Whatever the monetary value of the mite, the real message was clear. Although the amount the widow gave seemed insignificant in comparison to what the rich contributed, what made her gift extraordinary was that she gave "all she had, even all her living," while the rich gave their "superfluity," their surplus. Her contribution was greater because her sacrifice was greater and thus more meaningful. The widow's mite symbolizes women's strength, courage, and sacrifice in the face of abject poverty and their abiding faith that God will provide for them. Some of the widows in this study were, indeed, poor when they bequeathed what little estates they had left. Most, however, were women of some means. In both instances, early American widows did have the mite and the might, the economic and social power, to publicly proclaim in their wills their concept of the early American family. This is not meant to diminish the religious significance of their actions. Widows read the Bible and understood the story of the widow's mite; like her, they had faith in God. Widows also read advice books and heard sermons addressing their complex and complicated gender roles in early American communities.

As a result, they gained faith in their own strength, courage, and “might” to provide for their families and friends in the meantime.

Modern researchers recognize that widowhood is a critical stage in women’s lives and that the disruption caused by a husband’s death and a widow’s need to remarry depends not only on the extent to which her husband was a part of his wife’s life but also on the status of “widow” in the community, a social role strictly prescribed by custom.² Contemporary observations apply equally well to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American widowhood. Until recently, historians of colonial women or communities have downplayed, even dismissed altogether, widows as unimportant, irrelevant, or—as in the case of witchcraft—socially and economically anomalous (if not highly problematic). Because they assumed that marriage and rapid remarriage were the prevailing experience of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women, widows usually occupy an obligatory paragraph, section, or chapter in histories of Anglo-American women.³ Those earlier historians generally assumed that knowledge of widows contributed little to the study of early American womanhood and to the study of early American society. When they did study widows, they did so largely to shed further light on the lives of married women. Widows offered a contrast to married womanhood. As in any study of “the other,” understanding what married women were not helped to clarify what they were. Yet widows were not simply an “other.” They were not generally conceived of as being outside the norm. In fact, other women and many men took the presence of widows in their midst as a matter of course. They were constituent members of society, and, like all social groups, they were both troublesome in some ways and useful in others. They were more visible and had potentially greater influence within their communities and on gender roles in general than has previously been understood. What ultimately makes widows an important group to examine is that they were among the completing definers and constructors of their society.

In 1692, Cotton Mather claimed that the “vast Numbers of Poor widows in Every neighborhood” in Boston proved that many women “may at some time or other, tast the Sad, Sowre, Tear-ful cup of Widowhood.” He believed that women who never expected to face widowhood would “soon find the Days of Mourning brought upon them.” According to Mather, all women would be well advised to “lay in a stock of Graces against the Evil Day of Widowhood.” In 1718, Mather explained that his congregation contained at least eighty widows, about 20 percent of the membership. He

attributed the high proportion to the fact that Boston's population consisted of "so much of Sea-faring People."⁴

While there are few reliable, concrete colony-wide statistics, historians provide more accurate figures about the incidence of colonial American widowhood than Mather's. As the following numbers reveal, widowhood varied by colony and across time, and the proportion of widows in the population differed. In late seventeenth-century Essex County, for example, widows made up less than 9 percent of the adult female population and made up approximately 20 percent of those over age thirty. In 1687, widows made up 10 percent of all Boston ratepayers. Widows were 11 percent of the New Haven, Connecticut, proprietors and 5 percent of the heads of households in the towns of Hartford, Wethersfield, and Windsor. The best figures for seventeenth-century Maryland suggest that women outlived their husbands twice as often as the reverse and that, in a society where men died early, "almost invariably" every woman in the Chesapeake experienced widowhood.⁵

In eighteenth-century Beverly, Massachusetts, widows outnumbered widowers by seven to one. Sixty percent of all marriages in Woburn ended with the death of the husband, and at any one time, 10 percent of adult women experienced widowhood. As the timing of Mather's sermon to the widows of Boston made clear, both King William's War (which ended in 1697) and Queen Anne's War (which ended in 1713) took a heavy toll on Boston marriages. A 1742 census revealed that, by the middle of the century, widows made up nearly 30 percent (1,200) of all adult Boston women. More specifically, widows constituted approximately 8 percent of Boston's total population and 10 percent of all ratepayers in 1742. In Marblehead, Massachusetts, widows also made up 10 percent of the ratepayers. In Prince George's County, Maryland, by 1775, nearly one-fourth of the women over age fifty-eight were widows. And, finally, in one parish in colonial South Carolina, widows made up 51 percent of the adult female population and 27 percent of the entire adult population.⁶

Clearly, widowhood was a common experience for women in colonial America. The statistics indicate, however, that the rates of widowhood varied sharply, depending on war, disease, and maritime employment. They also suggest that over time, rates of widowhood increased, and widows rarely accounted for less than 10 percent of the adult female population. The widowed population, in fact, was probably much larger than 10 percent, since many widows lacked the wealth to qualify as ratepayers, a key measure for demographers.⁷ Remarriage rates and differences in who

actually remarried help explain the statistical consequences of a husband's death for Anglo-American colonial women, but they do not explain what it meant to be an individual widow or what it meant to be a member of a group of widowed women.

Historians of early American women initially presented us with opposing images of widows. On the one hand, colonial widows possessed a great deal of power in their communities because they were wealthy. Inheritance could provide widows freedom and independence. Most men who had land to bequeath did so to their wives, even if they denied them the right to sell or dispose of it. Young women with children were more likely to control large portions of their dead husbands' estate than were older widows with grown sons. Moreover, widows' ability to control when and whom they remarried granted them power.⁸ Because of this, a "characteristic glamour . . . hung round every widow." She could provide her second husband with an inheritance that would enable him to pay his debts, and she was, therefore, a widely sought-after commodity.⁹ Control of wealth gave widows an edge over "competitors in the marriage market." This, in turn, encouraged an "imperiousness or even downright tyranny" in widows and created a "widowarchy."¹⁰ However, many widows "of affairs" chose not to remarry, and they led independent and financially secure lives.¹¹

On the other hand, widows did not always remarry quickly, many widows did not have minor children at their husbands' death, and thus most widows were not rich. Most inherited neither large amounts of land nor personal goods. Even though some men bequeathed their widows their entire estates, those estates often consisted of one-room houses, livestock, household goods, little cash, and few slaves. The widows suffered from continual harassment by creditors and insecure land holdings. Colonial widows frequently depended on their adult sons and exerted little influence over family matters and children's behavior. Although eighteenth-century widows made up an increasingly large proportion of the total population, they played no major role in local commerce. Widows were not rich and powerful businesswomen. Because "economic productivity . . . depended on the cohesion of family units headed by men," widowhood was an "interlude" during which a woman carried out her husband's wishes for maintaining a well-ordered family. Few widows took advantage of their situation because they internalized the lessons taught to them in the advice books about their proper economic and social roles.¹² This was no "widowarchy." Two diametrically opposed words seemed to construct

early American widowhood: “relict,” a mere remnant, a deserted or discarded person, and “she-merchant,” the affluent trader and head of household who was a powerful and independent member of society.

Recent research helps us bridge the two concepts by reconceptualizing gender in early America, thereby allowing us to reject the starkly drawn images in favor of a more nuanced understanding of widowhood. In her path-breaking book, *Good Wives*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich argues that women’s lives were far from static and submissive and that, while women were subservient to men, they could assert themselves to a certain degree within the social framework of life. Mary Beth Norton, in *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, argues that Filmerian political theory, resting on the Fifth Commandment that one honor one’s mother and father, created a situation in which the state had a major stake in preserving well-ordered families and parental authority. This enabled seventeenth-century elite women, and, in particular, widowed mothers, to wield political and economic power in their families and within their communities. More recently, Ulrich analyzed John Winthrop’s inclusion of numerous women in his history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. According to Ulrich, Winthrop (the iconic Puritan patriarch), as well as ordinary men and women, recognized that “women . . . mattered in the cosmic scheme of things.” Ultimately, she claims that high-status women and older women (many of whom were widows) were essential to the colony. Both historians suggest that this was “a world considerably less ‘patriarchal’” than we’ve been led to believe.¹³

The historians Karin Wulf, Cynthia Kierner, Terri Snyder, Linda Sturtz, and Cara Anzilotti¹⁴ suggest that this is true to a large extent for the early eighteenth century, as well. In exciting and innovative theoretical models, they explore how women used marital status, wealth, and a gendered cultural ideology to gain autonomy and agency within a society that attempted to define them as marginal. They convincingly argue that the domestic world of women and the public world of men were not constituted as exclusively separate physical and psychological spaces—and thus complicate the previously starkly drawn images of widows. Household and public were realms of activity in which both men and women participated (sometimes successfully, sometimes not), even though women, unlike most men, did so through a complex process of negotiation within hierarchical categories of race, class, and gender. Kierner, Wulf, and Anzilotti argue, however, that women’s public roles remained sex-specific and served the needs of elite white men and the patriarchal structure and

thus limited the degree of autonomy and agency women possessed.¹⁵ Yet, ultimately, all see a decline in women's status (albeit to different degrees and occurring at slightly different times) and a concomitant growing dependence on men as American society became increasingly masculine and women's access to the public arena of court and politics declined.¹⁶ My analysis of widows who never remarried complicates, even challenges, this declension model.

I focus on widows who did not remarry because they (unlike widows who remarried and reassumed the role of wife) were in a unique position to define or redefine their norms and construct or reconstruct their worlds in response to both the prescriptive literature directed toward them and the actual circumstances in which they found themselves. Widowhood (for women as well as for society as a whole) was normative, not marginal; widows were not necessarily always problematic. While American culture appeared to be predominantly masculine by 1750, my focus on widows suggests that we need to rethink our understanding of prerevolutionary society. I do not want to engage in a discourse of masculine oppression and female resistance, but I do want to make clear the tensions inherent in competing gendered definitions of "widow." Through widows we can better understand the structure of the colonial family, community, legal system, and economic structure. They rippled through each of these realms, being affected by and affecting them in anticipated and unanticipated ways. Colonial American history comes not only from the masculine voice of magistrates, ministers, didacts, selectmen, sons, and brothers. It comes also from the feminine voices of widowed petitioners, churchgoers, authors, shopkeepers, and, most important, testators. Listening to those voices reveals the complexity of behaviors, family life, encounters between people, and economic roles.

Because seventeenth- and eighteenth-century law stipulated that only single women and widows could leave wills, and because it was believed that the few who remained widowed bequeathed only personal property, those historians inclined to study widowhood were disinclined to examine it through widows' wills. As a result, women's public sentiments for the most part remain silenced by the numerical dominance of men's wills and by the assumptions of the historians who used those sources. Men with little or no real property to bequeath usually did not leave wills, signifying that they understood the supposed insignificance of personalty (that is, nonlanded property) in the patriarchal system. Yet, widows with only personal goods to dispose of—just like those with real property—left

wills, indicating that they, despite society's emphasis on the signifying power of realty, wanted to give meaning to their possessions, as well as to exercise whatever control they could over their own lives and over the lives of their friends and families. Indeed, historians have pointed out the financial importance of personalty for widows, especially as the American economic system changed from family capitalism to corporate capitalism. Even though women may have typically "only" bequeathed personalty, such bequests were their way of shaping familial, kin, and community structures, as they understood them.¹⁷

Moreover, for women, will making was not just a culminating act; often, it was also their first and only public expression of their usually private thoughts and beliefs. There are frustratingly few extant letters and diaries written by colonial women before 1750. According to Mary Beth Norton, writing required not only a reason to write but also "access to paper, a high degree of literacy, and some leisure time, all of which most American women did not achieve" until the late eighteenth century. Literacy rates for women lagged well behind those for men; no woman kept a diary in the seventeenth century, and very few women did so well into the eighteenth century—about the same time that boys' access to writing instruction was extended to girls.¹⁸ Therefore, an analysis of the thoughts and intentions women expressed in their wills—not just in the specific bequests, but in the explanations of or the justifications for those bequests—provides a necessary foundation on which to build our understanding of colonial widows and widowhood. Widows' wills were obviously legal instruments, but they were much more than that, as a close and careful reading of the documents reveals.

I examined the wills of widows in Massachusetts, Maryland, and South Carolina. My data derive first and foremost from probate records for all widows and for an equal number of men in Charles, Prince George's, and Kent counties in Maryland; Suffolk, Essex, and Hampshire counties in Massachusetts; and *all* wills in South Carolina from the first widow's will through 1750. More specifically, my data set includes 1,885 wills and 1,122 inventories: 962 widows' wills (51 percent) and 923 men's wills (49 percent) and 608 widows' inventories and 514 men's inventories.¹⁹ Of these, 1,282 wills (68 percent) are from Massachusetts (653 women, 629 men), 317 (16.8 percent) are from Maryland (165 women, 152 men), and 219 (11.6 percent) are from South Carolina (110 women, 109 men). From these wills, I gathered data on the age of the testator, the total number of male and female heirs, the type of realty (that is, landed property), household goods,

clothing, personal goods, servants or slaves, stock, crops, and intangibles the testator bequeathed or the intestate had in her or his estate. For each category of goods bequeathed, I recorded the first four recipients, as well as the conditions and type of conditions placed on the bequests. I also noted the identification of executors and administrators. For each inventory, I determined the value of the estate by adding in debts due to the estate and subtracting the debts owed to others from the estate.

Massachusetts and South Carolina were the two most influential colonies of their respective regions (New England and the Deep South), which means that regional traits in these colonies were likely to be the most prominent and easily examined. That provides insight not just into colonial widows but also into emerging regional distinctions caused by differences in economic and cultural systems. Maryland is important because it is a second southern sample that adds more data from a longer time frame and because it offsets concerns that Charleston distorts the South Carolina sample. The use of data from South Carolina enabled me to include information from a city comparable to Boston, which in turn helped me sort out the northern/southern factors from the urban/rural factors. I ensured geographic, economic, and social diversity within the colonies by examining widows from large towns and small villages, from urban and rural areas, from inland and seaboard communities.

Working with a large data set involves some tradeoffs. For example, it was impossible to research the lives of individual widows or even a group of widows, as Lisa Wilson did for widows in Pennsylvania,²⁰ but it enabled me to begin to explore if widows in one part of the country thought and acted the way that widows in another part of the country did—as well as how and why (or why not, of course). It made it possible for me to provide a collective picture of widows in early America, which in turn allowed me to analyze patterns, relationships, and created identities that might not otherwise be visible. Ultimately, it also enabled me to understand widowhood as a transatlantic construction, as a way of thinking about gender that transcended artificial regional and temporal boundaries.

I also explored the gender dynamics suggested by my research into the probate records. A vast array of prescriptive literature, such as the Bible, sermons, especially New England funeral sermons,²¹ advice books, and plays (Charleston, South Carolina, residents regularly attended concerts, balls, plays, and other such amusements), was published in England and then widely circulated in the colonies throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Within those texts, ministers and others variously

labeled widows as sober, grave, temperate, just, honest, faithful, charitable, peaceable, modest, chaste, kind, virtuous, and pious but also as deceptive, wanton, angry, scheming, haughty, sorrowful, pitiful, discontented, odious, and sinful. Although extensive, this catalogue of prescribed behavior presents only a partial picture. This same literature reveals a more practical image of colonial widows as models for “the Excitation of Heads of Families bereaved of their Husbands.”²²

While elite women read books, the ideas contained in them reached the lower orders when ministers preached, when excerpts or serialized versions appeared in newspapers, when disputes reached the courthouse, or when neighbors talked. Ostensibly, the words all advice book authors used to describe widows depicted their true character. In fact, the words more accurately signify how writers and ministers wanted widows to be remembered and imitated—or disdained.²³ To say this is not to deny that widows conformed to at least some ideals. Indeed, many appear to have done so, especially if we take the sermons at face value and believe the tribute paid to colonial widows. However, examining the collective body of ideal images provides a more nuanced, and perhaps more realistic, understanding of the boundaries within which most colonial widows maneuvered. Widows understood the social expectations that they would conform to cultural standards. Not only were widows different from one another, but the advice offered was inconsistent and ambiguous. This ambiguity arose primarily from the nature of widowhood itself.

Court records reveal the place widows held in colonial society, intergenerational disputes, and community networks, not only through the laws imposed to regulate widows’ lives but also through the direct challenges widows made to the laws. While church records, poor relief rolls, lawsuits, and petitions disclose widows’ tenuous social and economic positions, those same lawsuits and petitions, as well as the numerous newspaper advertisements widows placed, suggest that widows played a strong and vibrant role in the economy. Widows operated within a cultural structure, a family structure, a community structure, a legal structure, and an economic structure. While widows “spoke” less frequently and less vocally than men, we hear their voices loud and clear in their wills, petitions, court appearances, newspaper advertisements, poetry, advice books, and rare letters. In these multiple ways, their words bring widows clearly into the world around them and reveal whether their private sentiments coincided with their public declarations. Widows acted out their lives and constructed their identities, identities that have gone

unexamined, in multiple contexts. As Rhys Isaac argues, “It has become a truism . . . that full personhood requires having a validating story of one’s own, just as collective identity requires that one’s gender or ethnic group have a duly acknowledged place in the master narratives that are taken for the society’s history.”²⁴ I explore, therefore, the stories women told about themselves in relation to stories that were told about them to place them more concretely in the master narrative that is colonial American history.

Like many historians, I came to this project assuming that the practices associated with widowhood would vary greatly among the three colonies. However, ideas crossed the Atlantic Ocean and spread along the eastern seaboard. While the ways in which widows created a place in their communities varied slightly in their specific regional contexts, transatlantic print culture, laws, and economic systems created an understanding of widowhood that was consistent over time and across colonies and countries.²⁵ Therefore, as will become obvious as we move through different aspect of widows’ lives in the coming pages, those lives and the identities they created appear remarkably similar whether they occurred in Massachusetts, Maryland, or South Carolina, and this is especially so for Boston and Charleston.

Before I leave this discussion, it is important to address what some may call my “Massachusetts-centric focus” in this research. It is true that numerically widows from Massachusetts dominated because, during the period from 1630 to 1750, there were simply more widows who left wills in Massachusetts than there were in either Maryland or South Carolina. In fact, the population of each colony in 1750 suggests this was not an aberration. The populations of Massachusetts, Maryland, and South Carolina in 1750 were 188,000, 141,000, and 64,000, respectively.²⁶ Moreover, while I spent a long time in the archives and historical societies in both Maryland and South Carolina, ultimately there was more additional primary evidence to be found for Massachusetts. But ignoring the other colonies would have produced an account different from that which I wanted to relate.

I begin each chapter with an opening anecdote that relates a story from one widow’s life. These vignettes are important because they not only put an intimate, personal face on select widows but also, and more important, illustrate the key concepts on which the chapter focuses. Each chapter explores in depth the different roles widowhood entailed.

Chapter 1 explores the ideology and the reality of remarriage. Because the rate of widowhood was high in both England and America, large

numbers of widows, writers, ministers, playwrights, and members of the community believed they had to deal with those widows. On the one hand, the prescriptive literature projected what the authors hoped would be an ideal way of thinking about remarriage. In projecting their ideals, the various writers were neither clear nor consistent about their solutions to the so-called problem they established. On the other hand, prescriptive literature did not reflect reality or create a reality for widows. But the confused or ambiguous discourse of the advice literature did give widows a new vocabulary to use to describe themselves. They could create an identity through public opinion. By reading books, listening to sermons, and watching plays, widows could pick and choose, to a certain extent, how they wanted to be viewed and how they wanted to live their lives. It would be unrealistic to argue that such materials created a stable self-concept for all widows; instead, individual widows constructed their own identity out of a sometimes disordered world. Together, those collective identities help us understand early American widowhood more fully.

Chapter 2 examines the ways in which widows appropriated social and cultural norms embodied in the law and legal processes. Laws regarding dower, inheritance, and intestate estates conveyed male-defined cultural ideals and social norms that instructed all community members, especially widows, about gender roles. The laws imposed a male hegemony and codified masculinity. The law, however, was also a discourse and an arena of conflict among the various groups that accessed that law. Although widows did not always have full access to legal resources, they had specific ideas about how conflicts should be resolved, especially when they attempted to alter the restraints on their gender.

Chapter 3 explores how widows exploited the fact that they were as much “fathers” as mothers to their children and stepchildren and that they were members of families and households. Such a role expanded the widow’s rights and responsibilities. It also placed her in an anomalous position with respect to her own household and to the wider community. Part of the responsibilities embedded in the masculine roles assumed by widows was raising and protecting the children. Colonial funeral sermons preached for male community members asserted that a man’s responsibility was “in his ship as in his house,” to maintain, even command “good order, wise government, and religious worship” within his family. Wives became masters of their ships and of their houses at their husbands’ deaths. Acting as a father meant that a widow had to put aside her emotional attachment to her children, order her family strictly, teach her children

to read, and look after their fortunes—functions normally undertaken by the husband.

Because the necessity for widows to conduct worldly business went beyond tending to their own households, chapter 4 explores their roles as recipients of charity, as providers of charitable assistance, as friends, and as neighbors. It also examines their roles as citizens in the polity, who assumed both rights and obligations of citizenship, providing for the common good even if mostly within the domestic realm.

Chapter 5 explores what it meant socially, culturally, and spatially when widows handled money, acted as creditors, or sought credit. I investigate how this participation shaped the organization of the shop/marketplace or transformed customarily noneconomic sites into a locus of financial transactions, how women's reputations were enhanced or harmed by their involvement with money and credit, and how the world of money and commerce that is the "circulation of goods" influenced their "personal lives."

But it is to some extent an artificial construct. What this structure reveals is not only how widows bequeathed their estates but also their complexly interconnected and intertwining lives; in fact, at times it seemed almost impossible to distinguish one aspect of their lives from another. Widows assumed responsibilities that took them into the legal system, created new relationships within the household, highlighted their significance to the neighborhood, and pushed them into the commercial realm. Wills, letters, and newspapers reveal not only widows' role in consumer society but also complicated female networks where women were both divided and connected by their status, assumptions about gender, and widows' self-identity. The roles and responsibilities widows undertook at various times overlapped much as a mathematician's Venn diagram.

The foundational research for this book is based on quantitative data and statistical analysis. However, I've chosen to keep that numerical analysis to a minimum, opting instead to focus more on widows' words and deeds. Throughout I have paid particular attention to different aspects of widows' worlds as they moved beyond their roles as wives and mothers and into ever increasingly masculine public roles. I am mapping out colonial American widowhood by triangulating individual widows' lives, the ideology pertaining to widows, and recent theories of early American gender. I am looking at not just women whose husbands have died, but, more important, the meanings and consequences of that state of being, the conceptual significance of those women's ways of believing and behaving.

In general, sermons and advice books described two broad economic categories of widows: poor and wealthy. Most authors sympathized with the plight of poor widows, but they wrote very little about their proper behavior. Poverty implied both a passive acceptance of paternalistic support systems and a withdrawal from familial and communal responsibilities. Colonial writings on widowhood focused on those wealthier widows who possessed the means as well as the motivation to fulfill the prescribed qualities. The writers prescribed two realms, household and community—the first normally female, the second almost always a male space. Neither clergymen nor advice book writers, however, established clearly defined boundaries for these spaces. Such categories oversimplified the complexities of colonial widowhood that allowed the women to violate the conventional gender norms of their communities.

Only widows who followed the rules in the prescriptive literature were worthy of “remembrance and praise.”²⁷ No widow could have adhered to all the rules—they were simply too complex, too ambiguous, and too contradictory. If a widow excessively mourned her husband, she neglected her children and community. She also questioned God’s wisdom. If she did not, she found herself accused of sexual licentiousness and arrogance. To best serve her children, she entered the public realm but, in doing so, risked being accused of unwomanly assertiveness. If she failed to assume her public responsibilities or married a greedy man as her second husband, she was accused of neglecting her children. Widows, as women who acted as men, exemplified the resourcefulness of all colonial women in the face of the severe limits placed on them by a society that could imagine them only as frail and imperfect copies of men. Perhaps Cotton Mather best expressed this ambiguity: “Some Women have the Names of Men, a little altered, as Jaquet (from Jacoba) Joanna, Joan, Jane, Jennet (all from John), Thomasin, Philippa, Frances, Henrietta, Antenia, Julian, Dionysis, and the like; *But all our Widows are put upon thus doing the works of Men may their God help them!*” [emphasis added].²⁸

However, the authors of the prescriptive literature could not control the lessons widows took from the advice or how widows used it in their daily lives. Clearly, some women hoped their widowhood would be temporary, while others enthusiastically embraced financial independence, but for many women widowhood was not a choice, and they did not have the option to withdraw from or could not afford to be pushed out of the so-called masculine world. Therefore, in the profusion and confusion of advice, widows learned to negotiate the often conservative and limited

boundaries prescribed for them. Widows did not just respond to the advice literature; they created their own identities from it. I am not analyzing masculine oppression and female resistance (although sometimes that was the case), but I am arguing that the category “widow” allowed individual women to negotiate their space in society; it enabled them to be strong, resourceful, and competent—or weak, deferential, or incompetent when it served their and their families’ interests. They used the contradictions and inconsistencies to their advantage in forging their identities as widows.

Ultimately, I see early American widows neither as feminists nor as serving the needs of the patriarchy. Widows were distinct from married and single women and from husbands and fathers. They used prescriptive literature; household, communal, and economic rights and responsibilities; and the legal system to fashion a fluid and flexible identity that redefined traditional gender boundaries. Our contemporary interest in examples of female independence should not obscure the very real struggle for subsistence that many colonial widows confronted. Widowhood could be a constraint on women’s lives. It could also be an avenue for women to expand their roles. Widows were no longer wives and mothers with clearly defined roles within the household. Although domesticity influenced their public activities, widows entered this realm as women assuming maternal *and* paternal responsibilities. This ambiguity allowed widows to be among those defining and constructing their society. It also enabled them to be visible and vocal heads of households and members of their communities as they engaged with the courts and the economic world.

A fitting place to move more deeply into this exploration of widowhood is with Rebecca Holmes Amory. Like the vignettes with which I begin each chapter, her life puts a human face on widowhood. However, Amory’s extensive family letters and account book and the advertisements she placed in newspapers enable me to dig deeper and more consistently into her life and into those issues. As I move from chapter to chapter, I reveal the rich details of her life as she faced the tragedy of widowhood, as she assumed family responsibilities, as she created a new identity for herself, as she stepped out into the neighborhood, and as she undertook a wide variety of economic roles. Here I start where her life started and leave off right before her widowhood. Her parents, Rebecca Wharfe and Francis Holmes Sr. were born in Massachusetts and were married in Boston in 1693. They had six children, all of whom were born in Boston. Francis

Holmes Sr. was a merchant with a warehouse at Long Wharf and owned the Bunch of Grapes tavern in Boston. He also owned land in Charleston, to which he began traveling for business in 1702, just nine years after he and Rebecca were married. When he moved to Charleston permanently, in 1721, he took two of his four sons with him. They became merchants and shippers in Charleston.

Rebecca Holmes, her two other sons, and her two daughters (Rebecca and Ann) stayed in Boston, making Rebecca at this point a surrogate widow, the female head of the northern half of the family. Unfortunately, records do not indicate who made the decision or why the decision was made to separate the family. We do know that she ran the tavern while Francis was living in Charleston. To complicate this family structure even further, one of her grandchildren—Francis Holmes III, son of Francis Jr. and Elizabeth Holmes—lived with her in Boston while his parents remained in Charleston. Francis Holmes Sr. died (when Rebecca Holmes was aged fifty-six and they had been married thirty-three years) while still living in Charleston. He bequeathed to his wife some clothing and household goods, a slave, and £1,666—all in lieu of her dower rights in his estate. He divided his South Carolina land among his four sons, he left his daughter Rebecca £500, and he ordered that his remaining property in Boston be sold. Rebecca not only continued to run the tavern²⁹ but also purchased outright her husband's brick house on King Street, as well as his warehouse on Long Wharf. Like other older colonial widows, Rebecca Holmes did not remarry. Older widows usually did not have dependent children to support and thus were more economically secure. In addition, the work they did find was adequate for their personal needs, and frequently their husbands left enough wealth to support them. If not, in Massachusetts, a widow's dower rights entitled her to a minimum of one-third of all her husband's real property for her lifetime, as well as one-third of his personal estate forever.³⁰ However, when a widow remarried, as a *feme covert*, she would lose control of the real property (although it would legally remain hers) and she would lose outright the personal property she brought to that marriage. Consequently, older widows more often chose to remain widowed; indeed, Rebecca Holmes lived for another five years as a Boston widow. She makes an interesting "role model" for her daughter—living altogether for ten years as a powerful and independent woman—first as a surrogate widow and then as an actual widow.

In 1721, the younger Rebecca Holmes married Thomas Amory in Boston. His parents, Rebecca Houston and Jonathan Amory, were born in

England but then migrated to Charleston around 1685 (by way of Dublin and the West Indies).³¹ Thomas Amory and his sister were born in Ireland. His father became a wealthy merchant in Charleston, importing large quantities of English goods and then disposing of them from his warehouses to traders, planters, and shopkeepers. He also served as Charleston representative for several Boston merchants.³² His mother (who was a widow with property when Jonathan married her) died shortly after they arrived in South Carolina; his father married again. From that marriage, Thomas Amory acquired three stepbrothers and stepsisters. They all lived in Charleston. Like his father, he was a merchant; he lived for thirteen years in the Azores (on the island of Terceira, where he settled in Angra, the main city on the island and a key trading point). Rebecca Holmes and Thomas Amory lived together as man and wife for eight years. As we will learn in the following chapters, when Thomas Amory died, Rebecca's life changed, sometimes dramatically and sometimes more routinely. In that she was not alone; she did, however, give voice to her experiences through letters, something that most early American women did not leave behind.