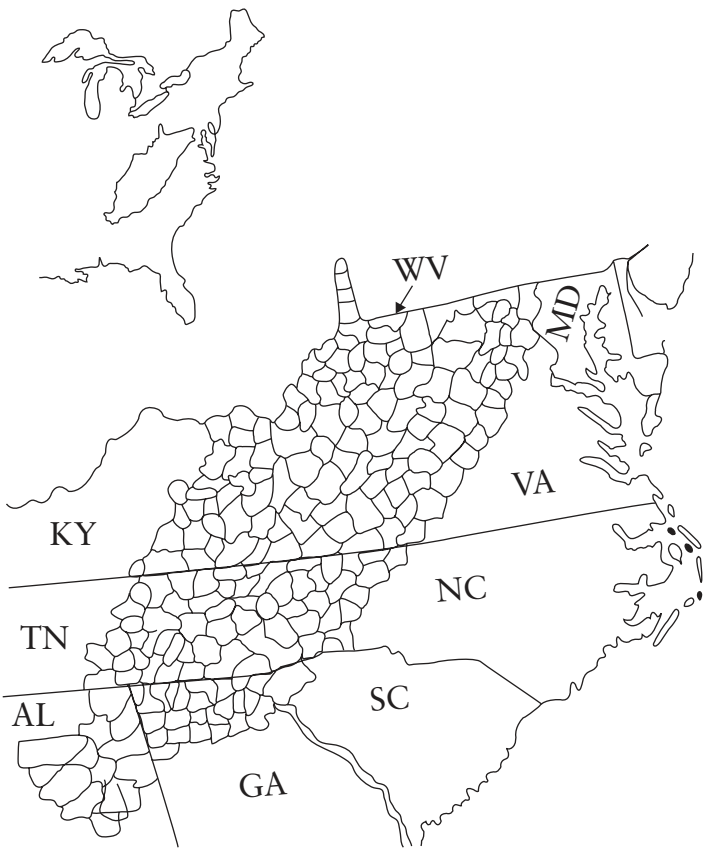
Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South

Introduction

> The history of Appalachia is a drama written largely about men. . . . Women have been extras, hidden behind quilts and sunbonnets in tradition-bound domestic roles that supported their husbands, sons, and fathers as they transformed the region and made its history. . . . Apart from a few, specific individuals, women's experiences and perceptions have been peripheral in the major works of Appalachian history.
>
> (Barbara Ellen Smith 1992, 5)

If, as Catherine Clinton (1994, 1) writes, southern women have been American history's half sisters, Appalachian women have been only *second-cousins-once-removed* in the country's regionally parochial history construction.[1] This study breaks new ground by investigating the multiethnic majority of females who resided in the Mountain South between 1700 and 1860. This geographically massive subregion of the U.S. Southeast was characterized by slavery amid a nonslaveholding majority, a large surplus of poor white landless laborers, and small Cherokee and free black populations. Consisting of 215 counties in six Upper South states and three Lower South states (see Map 1), this large land area was distinguished in the antebellum period by its diverse mix of nonslaveholding farms and enterprises, small plantations, active small town commerce and external trade, mixed farming, light manufacturing, and extractive industry (Dunaway 1996). On the one hand, the population of this region was diverse enough to permit comparative analysis of the racial, ethnic, and class cleavages among women. On the other hand, this region offers an unusual opportunity to explore the complex portfolio of women's economic activities and their challenges to patriarchal family constructs.

[1] For a survey of recent literature about Appalachian women, see Anglin (2000), Smith (1992), and Engelhardt (2003). Anglin (2002, 4–7) provides an overview of works since the late 1980s. For a review of pre-1990 scholarly and fictional depictions, see "Stereotypes about Appalachian Women," Web site.



MAP 1. Where Is Southern Appalachia? 1860 county boundaries are shown. For a list of Appalachian counties, see the Web site.

For more than 30 years, writers have been calling attention to scholarly failure to produce revisionist analyses that attack a century of accumulated stereotypes about Appalachian females. Even though *Mountain Life and Work* first called attention to the historical distortions of Appalachian women in its 1974 "Special Women's Issue," this concern still resounds among regional female scholars in the contemporary era.[2] The task of analyzing the work and family life of antebellum females might be simpler if Appalachian women were totally absent from history writing, for then we could begin with a blank slate. However, the journey toward a meaningful analysis of Appalachian women is made more difficult by the need to overcome the burden of a century of outdated assumptions about their character flaws and about their debilitating isolation in the separate sphere of their homes. Consequently, a revisionist analysis of Appalachian women must simultaneously overcome entrenched stereotypes

[2] The 1985 "Appalachian Women" special issue of *Now and Then* reiterated this critique.

and myths and convince other regional scholars that feminist analysis is both needed and appropriate. This revisionist research agenda is also complicated by male-dominated and male-privileging history production. As Pat Beaver (1999, xix) has observed, "Appalachian history has been constructed out of masculinist narratives." At the same time that "scholars have been working to discredit derogatory images of Appalachia," contends Sally Maggard (1986, 126), gender analysis remains "underdeveloped in Appalachian Studies," leaving stereotypes of women unquestioned. Barbara Ellen Smith (1999, 1) warns that researchers who attempt to investigate mountain women "must come to terms with implicitly gendered constructions of Appalachia and narratives of regional history that feature men as the determinant actors."[3] Even though history and social science production about Appalachian women has expanded over the last two decades, a majority of these new studies focus on the twentieth century. As Milton Ready (1991, 62) observes, "The most outstanding feature of Appalachian women in the nineteenth century is the fact that we know so little about them."

Conceptual Core of the Book

This study debunks popular mythology about Appalachian women and seeks to end historical silencing about their racial and ethnic diversity. Pat Beaver (1999, xvi) contends that "mythologized conventions of a static and homogeneous (white) society have dominated the literature on the southern Appalachian region." In fact, Indians and African-Americans are absent from the vast majority of the pages that have been written about Appalachia, an omission that transforms them into peoples without regional history. To obliterate nonwhites from regional history is perhaps the ultimate act of academic and journalistic racism, but there is a second pervasive regional myth that compounds the ideological denial of the presence of nonwhite Appalachians. Well before the Civil War, Lanman (1848, 314) acknowledged the presence of slavery in Southern Appalachia, but he described those slaves as "the happiest and most independent portion of the population." Such ideology pervaded the rhetoric of late nineteenth-century journalists, novelists, and clerics and is still predominant in popular regional mythology today. From within the region, early twentieth-century writers extolled the Anglo-Saxon heritage of Southern Appalachians who had not only kept out "foreign" elements but had "still more effectively . . . excluded the negroes." Purportedly, "Appalachian America ha[d] received no foreign immigration" after the Revolutionary War. Consequently, "nowhere will be found purer Anglo-Saxon blood" (Semple 1901, 588). Carter Woodson (1916, 137, 147), African-American founder of the *Journal of Negro History*, embraced this

[3] Unfortunately, the recent *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* (Abramson and Haskell 2006) continues this scholarly marginalization of women. Out of 364,000 lines of text, women, gender, and feminism are allocated only 2,031 lines – or far less than 1 percent of the total coverage. Using the book's index, I counted the number of lines of text used for women and gender topics.

regional mythology, declaring Appalachians to be "more prejudiced against the slave holder than against the Negro." As Pudup, Billings, and Waller (1995, 112) observe, "The concept of Appalachia as a solid bastion of freedom and equality has been difficult to shake." That white Appalachians have themselves been "otherized" and "marginalized" by outsiders (Shapiro 1978; Williamson 1995) is not evidence that they must, therefore, have been less racist or less prejudiced than other southerners.

Second, I challenge the historical silencing that occurs when analysts reduce all women to a shared patriarchal position in subordination to white male elites. Indeed, there was no "common ground" between white and nonwhite women simply because they shared a "peculiarly female" reproductive capacity (Gwin 1985, 22, 39). It is unrealistic to conceptualize U.S. southern women as constructors of an interracial sisterhood "under the skin" that was grounded in shared biological aspects of reproduction and housework (Janiewski 1985, 7–12). Because women were so deeply differentiated by race, class, ethnicity, religion, and rural/urban divides, such a narrow approach cannot elucidate the lived experiences of the majority. Anne McClintock (1995, 6) reminds us that "the rational privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided – if borrowed – power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men. As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting." Poor white, nonwhite, and religious dissident females certainly did not share the same degree of access to political power, economic resources, and dominant culture as either elite slaveholding or middle-class white women. Nor did legal gender biases transform the lives of rural and urban females of different racial, ethnic, and class groupings into mirror images of one another. While they existed in the same slaveholding patriarchal system, antebellum southern women benefited from that system and were exploited and damaged by that system to vastly different degrees. Following the admonitions of minority feminists to avoid the pitfall of the notion of a "southern sisterhood," I have paid careful attention to the structural mechanisms through which affluent white women have benefited from the oppression of nonwhite minorities and have exploited poor white females and males.

I have made it my goal to make invisible Appalachian women visible, in all their class, racial, ethnic, and religious complexities. I concur with Trouillot (1995, 27–29) that we need to pay far more attention to marginalized peoples who have been silenced and erased from official history production. I am convinced that the way to accomplish that kind of more inclusive history is through the pursuit of *dialogic truth*, which, according to Immanuel Wallerstein (2000, 13), "assumes and thrives on the notion of a community of many voices and multiple perspectives." The path to dialogic truth "is through very intensive, often very emotional dialogue tempered by careful sifting of the evidence, in order to arrive at a multivoice, multiple perspective version of the truth." Consequently, I have heeded the advice of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall that "we need

a historical practice . . . that releases multiple voices" (Bernhard et al. 1992, 15). In order to avoid reducing women to a homogeneous gendered category, I investigate the racial and ethnic schisms among women, as well as the class junctures that divided women of the same racial groupings. I also explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender that often situated women in contradictory social and economic positions that placed their families and children at risk of public stigmatization and regulation. In addition, I have taken to heart the counsel of Hall that a truly "inclusive history of women" must be simultaneously multicultural, rather than isolating groups of women from one another (Bernhard et al. 1992, 16). For that reason, I analyze all the diverse racial, ethnic, and class groupings of Appalachian women, and I present them side by side within chapters so that similarities and differences are immediately rendered visible.

Moving beyond Separate Spheres Ideologies

Because they have made a blunder that Trouillot (1995, 27) describes as the production of history through the lens of a "conscious ideology" of dominant elites, U.S. women's historians have far too often engaged in academic legitimation of the racist, sexist gender ideologies of southern slaveholders and of affluent New Englanders by treating as factual representation of women's lives the separate spheres notions that are bound up in the "cult of true womanhood" (Boydston 1990, 1–29).[4] Even though the ghosts of separate spheres conceptualizations have not yet disappeared completely from recent scholarship, this framework has received increasing criticism in recent years (Warren 2006).[5] Glenna Matthews (1987, iii–xi) points out that this ideology is grounded in the assumption that the "housewife" is a manager of servants or slaves. Consequently, the ideal model depicted a lifestyle that was not affordable for the majority of white and nonwhite women (Kerber 1988).

Perhaps the most damning weakness of this ideology lies in its intellectual roots in popular notions about biological determinism. Antebellum U.S. intellectuals and southern elites were drawn to the work of the Lamarckian evolutionist Herbert Spencer (Perdue 1986, 56–67), touted by an 1864 *Atlantic Monthly* (14, 775–76) as "the scientific spirt of the age," whose "established principles" would "become the recognized basis of an improved society."[6] Highly respected American intellectuals termed Spencer "the most powerful thinker of our time," convinced that his writings were "far more fruitful and quickening here than in Europe" (Hofstadter 1944, 31). Spencer has been

[4] The term *cult of domesticity* is also used to refer to these antebellum gender conventions.

[5] It remains to be seen whether twenty-first-century scholars will toll the death bell for separate spheres since this framework remained popular with many feminists and U.S. women's historians throughout the 1990s (e.g., Osterud 1991; Mehaffey 1992, 131–32; Bernhard et al. 1992, 3).

[6] According to Coser (1977, 110), Spencer was heavily influenced by the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who popularized the notion of inheritance of social behaviors in Europe in the late eighteenth century. In turn, Spencer influenced the thinking of Charles Darwin (1859).

termed a "social Darwinist before Darwin" (Coser 1977, 90) because he argued that there was a "natural hierarchy of human beings." In this natural order, "there is no way from the lower forms of social life to the higher" except through extremely slow evolution. That evolution was not unidirectional because the person could be handicapped by the reemergence of a preceding lower evolutionary stage. As a consequence, people at the bottom of the social hierarchy often act from "principles at variance with those of modern man." Those antisocial aberrations result from the exposure of lower human beings to environs that cause them to develop "adaptive changes" that are suitable to their existence in their lower status, but at odds with civilized society. Unfortunately, parents pass along these unsuitable adaptations of behavior and character to their offspring. In short, one's societal subordination and status are determined by one's biological past. Since "character is inherited," Spencer maintained, "the children of the superior will prosper and increase more than the children of the inferior." People are segregated by nature into distinct classes and orders, and society should not intervene to alter the life chances of those on the lower rungs. "When once you begin to interfere with the order of Nature," Spencer (1851, 100, 102, 124, 157) contended, "there is no knowing where the result will end." Because women and several racial groups are biologically endowed with premodern tendencies, behaviors, and characters, they are dangerous to societies that do not effect appropriate controls. Spencer insisted that society "would have been better off" if many lower classes and racial groups and nondomestic females "had never been born." He went so far as to question whether society should "kill off certain classes of troublesome and bewildered persons."

Spencer (1851, 194) laid the groundwork for separate spheres thinking when he argued that women enjoy equality with males only among "the rudest [i.e., uncivilized] people" and that the truly civilized female exists only "in the domestic sphere." Those females who exist outside this appropriate sphere are "a lower form" who are exhibiting social retardation caused by past or current racial mixing. The purported evidence lay in the poverty and lack of acceptable social behaviors among poorer classes. "If women comprehended all that is contained in the domestic sphere," Spencer contended, "they would ask no other" (Blakemore 2000, 124). The resultant elite gender conventions romanticized affluent women as the intergenerational bearers of societal ideals that they shielded from corruption in the sanctity of their homes. In sharp contrast, those elite standards accounted for the awkward presence of poor white women by claiming they were inferior "racial throwbacks" who could not hope to achieve the degree of "gentility" essential to the ideal woman. Nor could they ever be "civilized" fully because their brains never developed beyond that of white male infants (Vogt 1864), a biological deficiency that led to "character weaknesses" that caused their poverty and ignorance.

Increasingly, writers are also calling into question the assumption that by the midnineteenth century the cult of true womanhood (Boydston 1990, 1–29) was so culturally hegemonic that all women constructed their families and

constrained their work lives to meet these social ideals. On the one hand, it is not clear that separate spheres gender conventions "designated the values and code of behavior that predominated among the middle classes" (Harris 1985, 35). Several writers contend that alternative womanhood ideals had greater impact on the lives of a majority of middle-class white women. The gender conventions of "republican motherhood" (Kerber 1976) and the "farmwife ideal" (Hagler 1993) appeared in antebellum publications just about as frequently as separate spheres ideology, and these models depicted females working at income-earning endeavors outside and inside their households. The ideals of "evangelical womanhood" (Boylan 1978) and of the "real womanhood" survival ethic (Cogan 1989) also presented middle-class standards for females who were neither economically dependent upon husbands nor isolated from participation in solving the problems of their communities (Berg 1978; Cott and Pleck 1979, 555–78). If we are to move beyond historical silencing, we must recognize that there was class and racial struggle over gender conventions. While acknowledging the diversity of middle-class standards, we must also be cognizant that slaves (Cott and Pleck 1979, 298–310), Indians, poor whites, religious minorities, and free blacks (Horton 1986) developed their own gender conventions, even though they were demeaned by the nineteenth-century popular magazines that too many contemporary scholars privilege as evidence of widespread adherence to separate spheres ideology.

Despite recent challenges to claims about the cultural hegemony of separate spheres conventions, it is still important to test these notions against the realities that faced nineteenth-century Appalachian women. Perhaps to a greater extent than the females of any other U.S. region, Appalachian women have been repeatedly stigmatized by separate spheres thinking that represents some of the worst elements of antebellum *biological determinism* (Spencer 1851; Vogt 1864) and of its postbellum derivative, *social Darwinism* (Sumner 1963).[7] From the 1890s through the 1980s, yellow journalists and policymakers reduced their lives to that of illiterate mountain matriarchs who are menial victims of toil, of sexual promiscuity, and of a backward culture.[8] Writers have claimed that Appalachian women cannot overcome their poverty because they carry the debilitated genes of racial throwbacks who settled the region's frontiers (Fischer 1989).

Since 1980, revisionist regional writers have either not mentioned women at all or they have accepted uncritically the stereotype that women's roles were confined to the home (e.g., Waller 1988, 58).[9] In a period when so many feminist writers are questioning separate spheres assumptions, the recent *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* (Abramson and Haskell 2006, 170) reduces women to a

[7] For more extensive discussion, see "Legacy of Social Darwinism in Appalachian Scholarship," Web site.
[8] For a discussion of this literature, see "Stereotypes of Appalachian Women," Web site.
[9] Lewis, Johnson, and Askins (1978, 115) offered a short, low-key contradiction of separate spheres notions, but the only 1970s feminist challenge to this ideology was Kahn (1974).

racially and economically homogeneous group who are confined in their homes. According to the entry on gender roles:

> Appalachian families generally follow traditional gender roles. Typically they consist of a provider father, a caregiving mother, and the couple's dependent children. Following this model, Appalachian households have been historically patriarchal with men serving as heads of households – owning land, directing production, controlling income use, and making decisions – while women act as loving nurturers to their husbands and children.

Repeating the rhetoric that was typical of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, the entry further generalizes that farm labor "was divided spatially. Mothers and daughters were primarily responsible for work done in the house and yard area; fathers and sons were responsible for crops and other chores beyond the house." Not only do such claims ignore the realities of the lives of Native American, enslaved, free black, and poor white females, but they also ignore the few revisionist works (e.g., Hall 1986; Seitz 1995; Anglin 2002) that have emerged about Appalachian women's work and community roles.

The Need to Capture the Complexity of Women's Work

It is in the analysis of women's work that U.S. women's history is probably weakest. Delfino and Gillespie (2002, 1) alert us to this void in the accumulated scholarship: "We know too little," they remind us, "about the work lives of ordinary women in the Old South. . . . Although the past two decades have witnessed an explosion of scholarship on southern women in the nineteenth century, much of this work has focused on the world of the plantation." However, the absence of scholarly attention is not the only problem. Conceptually, we need to stop being blinded by oversimplified stereotypes about women being trapped in housebound labors outside the reach of patriarchal market forces (Matthaei 1982), an idea that is a ghost of the separate spheres legacy. If we search only for unpaid and income-earning labors that were "manifestations of their private roles as housewives and mothers," we miss the real "dialectics of waged and unwaged labor" that characterize most women's resource accumulation (Collins and Gimenez 1990, 25–47). Zillah Eisenstein admonishes us to employ a "multigridded conceptualization" of women's work, taking into account differences of race, class, ethnicity, marital status, and religion (Hansen and Philipson 1990, 139–40). We must also stop assigning an overstated "rural isolation" to women (Anglin 2000, 82) that neither reflects the capacity of women to market commodities nor gives voice to those females who resided in or near towns. Because supervision and completion of back-breaking tasks are not the same thing, we need to recognize real gradations in the degree to which women worked hard and publicly at manual labor.

Finally, we must move away from the naive notion that all work done by women in households was *without* economic value and was *outside* the market. On the one hand, we need to investigate how women's work is "embedded,

indeed hidden, within a gendered division of labor that allocated different tasks and status to women and men" (Smith 1999, 6). It is not enough, however, to search out "women's work" as a distinct category from "men's work." That can only lead us toward silencing and homogenization of much of women's work that is disguised behind class and racial junctures among women. An effective analysis of women's work, then, must examine "women's and men's differential access to and control over material resources" (Smith 1999, 8) alongside the structural inequalities that exist among females. On the other hand, we must take special care when analyzing the work done inside women's households, for some of that work is almost always aimed at the marketplace (Dunaway 2001).

To varying degrees depending on their class and racial positions, antebellum U.S. women engaged in a complex portfolio of agricultural and nonagricultural labors that included three types of unpaid labor and three types of paid labors:

- unpaid labors to sustain the household, clan, or family,
- unpaid labors associated with biological reproduction and child rearing,
- waged labor outside the household,
- business operation inside or outside the household,
- income-earning labors within the informal sector, and
- unpaid charitable or community work.

This diverse labor portfolio calls attention to three historical trends that are too often silenced. First, we cannot so cleanly separate women's household labors from work that is aimed at the external economic arena, for much income-earning activity occurs in the home, and women contribute significant "hidden labor" to male-dominated economic activities. Second, almost all rural women engaged in some nonagricultural labors from which they earned income. In order to capture much of the economically valuable work of women, we must pay attention to the conceptual importance of the *informal sector*, those non-waged, undocumented economic activities that result in the sale of commodities or services. Like females of today's poor countries, far more antebellum Appalachian women earned income from informal sector exchanges than from wages or from business entrepreneurship.

Therefore, I have attempted to document the diversity and complexity of women's labors – inside and outside their households. In the process of teasing out the diversity of women's paid and unpaid labors, I will call into question the separate spheres thesis that "both unmarried and married women did their primary work in households, in families" (Cott 1977, 26). Indeed, four historical realities of the everyday lives of a majority of Appalachian women stand as stark contradictions of "separate spheres" ideologies:

- the contributions of women's home-based labors to the market economy,
- participation of women in waged jobs, business or farm management, and cash earning outside their homes,