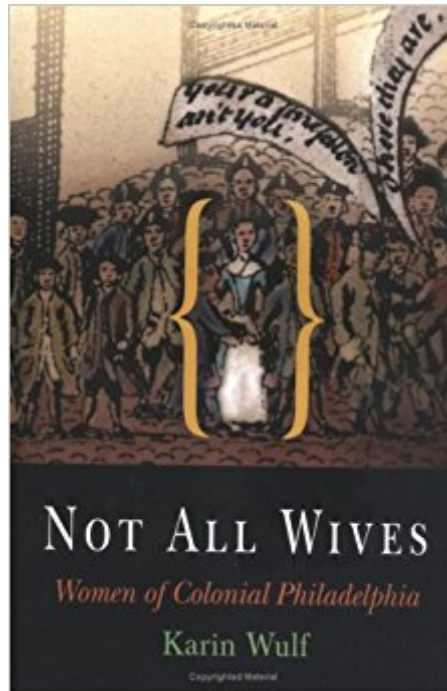




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Not All Wives: Women Of Colonial Philadelphia



Synopsis

Marital status was a fundamental legal and cultural feature of women's identity in the eighteenth century. Free women who were not married could own property and make wills, contracts, and court appearances, rights that the law of coverture prevented their married sisters from enjoying. Karin Wulf explores the significance of marital status in this account of unmarried women in Philadelphia, the largest city in the British colonies. In a major act of historical reconstruction, Wulf draws upon sources ranging from tax lists, censuses, poor relief records, and wills to almanacs, newspapers, correspondence, and poetry in order to recreate the daily experiences of women who were never-married, widowed, divorced, or separated. With its substantial population of unmarried women, eighteenth-century Philadelphia was much like other early modern cities, but it became a distinctive proving ground for cultural debate and social experimentation involving those women. Arguing that unmarried women shaped the city as much as it shaped them, Wulf examines popular literary representations of marriage, the economic hardships faced by women, and the decisive impact of a newly masculine public culture in the late colonial period.

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Customer Reviews

"Wulf organizes her book around a series of elegantly intertwined essays, each centered on the experiences of a particular woman and touching on a different aspect of women's lives, from their attitudes towards marriage or their sense of self, to their commercial transactions or their political activities. This approach allows Wulf to create brief but vivid sketches of the lives of individual single

women even as she discusses the broader implications of their experiences." — *Journal of Social History* Karin Wulf has made an important contribution to early American women's history. *Not All Wives* is a gracefully written, extensively researched account of unmarried women's experiences in colonial Philadelphia." — *Reviews in American History*

Karin Wulf is Associate Professor of History at American University. She is the coeditor of *Milcah Martha Moore's Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America*.

Excellent book. Well researched account of women in colonial Philadelphia and Pennsylvania that differentiates that culture and its beliefs from colonial New England as well as from the South. The book is very thorough and looks at a full range of Quaker women's positions, behaviors and beliefs, from Quaker fathers' care and attention in ensuring their daughters did not get into oppressive marriages, to Quaker women's participation in the Stamp Act civil disobedience, to Quaker businesswomen routinely voting in city matters, to the ethical voice women were given on a par with men in the religion. It also looks at the conflict between this system and that of many other colonial populations, including later arriving immigrants, especially Catholic immigrants but even other Protestant sects (nearly all Protestant sects recognize women as "spiritual equals" to men, unlike Catholicism, and Jews recognize a "law of the blood" in the mother, but the Quakers took a different approach of a full recognition of person holding primacy over gender, with public political and economic roles for women, male responsibility for children, i.e. "Jesus has come to speak with his children himself", etc.). The failure of the Quaker-designed political structures to follow through on responsibilities of citizenship, not just rights, perhaps for no other reason but that paternity was not provable, then led to these other systems building a civic system of poverty in women and "masculine independence". The colonial era Quakers' civil disobedience of the Norman Conquest laws of coverture is an underreported and misunderstood phenomenon that likely played a role in the framing of the Constitution to recognize fundamental rights of adults (i.e. Persons) rather than just for men (even if the Constitution has not always been interpreted that way). The Quakers probably also would extend rights to children vis-a-vis both parents and the state. Very interesting contrast with the cultures that produced the French Revolution and French "Rights of Man" Constitution, as well as the "natural law" and "all men are created equal" of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The psychologically differentiated identity of Quaker women, both in and outside marriage, their freedom from stigma (including being labeled "witches", etc.) that such differentiated women, particularly single women, faced in New England, etc., the economic and political

responsibility many (but unfortunately not all) of these Quaker women took, the Quakers' recognition of and emphasis on male personal responsibility for children and the public esteem in which many of the differentiated women were held for their own agency, including single women such as Susannah Wright, is really interesting. The author posits that the Quaker women inspired non-Quaker women to seek more differentiated identities but it seems that colonial Pennsylvania women not raised in Quaker families, without the support of the Quaker Meeting* or married to men who did not take shared personal responsibility for their children, or who ran into opposition from people who did not recognize this type of female responsibility, ended up not being able to follow through on this and thus their autonomy became threatening, and, because it was associated with Quaker women inspiring non-Quaker women to do this, ended Quaker rule in Philadelphia in the late colonial era. Also, she illustrates how some of the wealthier Quaker single women, such as Eliza Norris and Hannah Griffitts, seem to have become gender essentialist in their autonomy, rather than seeking a broader responsibility beyond domestic concerns. (Griffitts, a poet and pundit, who often wrote about broader issues, in a late-colonial era poem shows exasperation with Thomas Paine's advocacy of violence and his "knowing nothing of the feminine", calling him a "snake in the grass"). And the laws of coverture were enforced against many. She doesn't discuss directly but alludes to some problems with the Quaker views being based in religion contributing to this political failure of the Quaker ideals when tested in practice.** A male-centric, male-dominant ethic thus took over (an example being how William Penn's sons renounced their Quaker roots and became Anglican). There were still many people influenced by and who admired the "Quaker experiment", however, and some of them played a role in drafting and ratifying the Constitution. Also William Penn's Quaker principles had been built into some Philadelphia and Pennsylvania governing structures that were then used in framing the U.S. Constitution. The rise of more secular Delaware Valley politicians who shared the basic values of the Quakers, such as John Dickinson, coincided with this. This book and "Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson" are good complements to each other for those interested in how this culture affected the framing of the Constitution. Dickinson's wife, Mary Norris, was partly raised by Eliza Norris (mentioned above and the subject of one of the chapters of this book). [...] Barry Levy in "The Origins and Legacy of the Pennsylvania Quakers" posits that the New England Puritans actually admired the self-control in the adult Quaker men, as well as the success and inventiveness of the Pennsylvania economy, and then, paradoxically, romanticized this culture into the "separate spheres" and "female cult of domesticity" (perhaps through focus on women like Eliza Norris) that took root around the beginning of the 18th Century, thus unfortunately defeating accomplishment of what they wanted. De

Tocqueville's admiring and stereotyped view of U.S. women in "Democracy in America" may also reflect a confused conflation of the Quaker and Puritan traditions, overlapping but with important differences.*As Wulf notes, the Quaker Meeting actually policed marriages to ensure they were egalitarian. A book of historical fiction called "The Purchase", released in Canada, to be released in the U.S. in August 2013, and based in historical facts about a colonial era Quaker shunned for not following these rules, illustrates this as well. [...]**Was the Quaker Meeting part of the problem in that the emotional availability of some male and female Quakers was constrained, and some Quaker Meetings encouraged this type of repression? There has been some writing about the Quakers' difficulty with these issues - particularly some leaders' mistaken conflation of anger with acted-out violence and thus their resulting suppression of anger, and how this prevented the Quakers actualizing their ideals. Also, despite their view that "in souls there is no gender" the Quakers placed faith in a male deity, which may have led to some psychological distortion and gender essentialism. Wulf describes women like Eliza Norris seeing themselves as "closer to God" through not marrying.

Colonial American studies have traditionally focused on the dominant roles of men in the household and their respective spouses. Breaking new historical ground, Karin Wulf creates a new colonial paradigm and explores the relatively uncharted history of single women during the mid-eighteenth century in *Not All Wives*. The focus of the work centers on marital status and "engages the historical problem of detangling the history of women from the history of women in marriage." (6) With a clear and novel narrative, Wulf's gender study addresses the social, political, and economic roles of single women residing in, or near, Philadelphia. This largest colonial city, according to the author, provided a generous population of single females. "The presence of unmarried women," notes Wulf, "affected household arrangements, intense and emotional ties, and inheritance practices." (110) These contentions, and more, were well argued by the author and add a new dimension to future colonial studies. The opening chapters, which are exemplars of careful and exhaustive research, establish the strong belief that gender norms included a form of autonomy, which generally had been ignored by historians, from single females such as widows, unmarried women, spinsters, and others in the mid-eighteenth century. Key to the aforementioned arguments is Wulf's reliance on Moravian and Quaker groups that inhabited eastern Pennsylvania. The latter faction, through poetry, almanacs and other literary vehicles, influenced many single women to question the status quo and to gain more dependence and express their individualism. One of the overarching themes of this work centers on the identity of women and how it was defined in colonial times. Wulf explains

this emergence in exacting terms, by indicating that individualism and independence were viewed collectively as male attributes. The cultural imperative, in fact, drifted to an uncomfortable area for colonial Americans. Wulf teases out, and unpacks, this compelling perspective and she illustrates that gender dilemmas occurred when women adopted individualistic functions such as heads of households, priests, and political spokespeople. The former is a valid argument as many "kin" such as sisters, and sometimes servants, carried an important, and many times, autonomous role in the family. The latter functions, however, fall short of completely illustrating individualism within colonial Philadelphia. The crux of Wulf's argument highlights, and historically connects, the downfall of Quaker political power with the emergence of female autonomy. This, of course, marries well with Bary Levy's emphasis on the importance of females in the Quaker community. At times, it seemed as though Wulf was simply rehashing Levy's arguments in this regard. Discussion about tax assessments and land ownership seemed to mimic and mirror the conclusions of Levy. Of course, the author pays sufficient homage to fellow historians and claims to build on existing scholarship. A minor detail, but at times the work seems to unnecessarily repeat, vice build on, existing scholarship. Scholars may wish to explore more detailed comparisons between unmarried women in New England and Virginia during the colonial period, or study the relationship between capitalism in the New World and gender roles. This work is appropriate for both colonial novices and experts, and those who have a passion for gender and religious studies. A well written and well argued work that introduces a new, and contemporary, chapter to gender and colonial studies.

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