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Research Seminar Proposal

## **The Poverty Experienced by Female Heads of Households and Their Children During the Mid to Late Eighteenth Century and the Impact it had on the Frontier of Colonial America**

### **I. The Problem and its setting**

#### **A. Statement of the Topic to be Explored**

Poverty in Colonial America, much as it is today was pervasive. During the mid to late the eighteenth century none were more affected than women and their children. Receiving municipal and or relief provided by the church for these women was in some cases contingent upon their give up their sons and daughters to various forms of servitude (Jones 45). In some cases a significant component of overcoming this poverty was the result of relocating to the western frontiers of the various Colonial States.

#### **B. Statement of the Problem and Sub-problems**

By the mid eighteenth century women were finding themselves, by necessity, assuming the role of head of household. Difficult economic times brought on by the end of the Seven Years' War and the ensuing post war recessions (Nash 575). Along with these recessions and a shifting of labor requirements created by the emerging industrial revolution, came the Revolutionary War. All of these events were responsible for forcing more and more women into the position of heads of households (Smith D. 83). The majority of these new heads of households would find themselves challenged with making difficult and unsupported decisions

as to the well being of their families. Processes for providing relief for these women had initially followed the model that had been implemented in England as the “English Poor Laws.” These laws mandated that the responsibility for providing aid rested with their community (Smith B. 109). The colonial method for relief was centered initially on the church. Although the church would, in some cases, provide direct relief for mothers with children, the method most frequently used was to have an appointed overseer place her children in an indentured or apprentices bond (Lockley T. 965).

### **C. Statement of the question**

The question I propose is: Did the pervasive poverty that was encountered in Colonial America, as experienced by female head of households and their children ultimately lead to the expansion and settlement of western frontiers of the Colonial States?

### **D. Statement of the hypothesis**

The hypothesis that I propose for testing is: There is a direct relationship between the poverty of female heads of households and the expansion of the colonial frontier.

### **E. Delimitations**

For the purpose of this study I will limit my discussion to white female heads of households and their children. The scale of research that the consideration of black and indigenous peoples would entail is beyond the scope of this proposal. Furthermore, the children that will be discussed are only those individuals who have, or will eventually break the bond of their indentured or apprentice contract. In addition, a geographically investigation will not take

into account those areas that were not considered by scholars such as Frederick Turner as being the “western edge of free land, beyond advancing civilization” (Turner 200).

#### **F. Definitions of terms**

**Apprentices**, is to be taken as a generic term that unless stated otherwise will indicate all but the craft apprentices as defined by Murray and Herndon in their description of apprenticeships that were common in the colonies (Murray and Herndon 357).

**Family**, for this proposal Family will be limited to those groups that are headed by a single female head of household whose children will be drawn into indentured servitude or an apprenticeship.

**Female heads of households**, when considered in the context of this proposal will be those individuals who are responsible for maintaining a family unit, who in most cases are less well off as compared to their male counterparts. And as discussed by Smith B., can through no fault of their own, received, or eventually will “receive informal aid from kin, charity from private individuals, voluntary groups and public authorities” (87).

**Freemen**, as a group were laborers who were not indentured yet typically possessed no craft skills and routinely worked as tenant farmers (Osborne 85).

**Freedom Dues** “could consist of any combination of cash, land, clothing or work equipment” (Murray and Herndon 362).

**Frontier**, was as Frederick Turner describes, the “western edge of free land, beyond advancing civilization” (200). While Bellington observes “the frontier has been usually defined as an area containing not less than two nor more than six inhabitants to the square mile” (3).

**Household**, as defined by Whitney “servants and slave” and often excluded family members who did not live under the same roof” (37).

**Indentured**, is the contract binding one party into the service of another for a specified term. In the case of this proposal and in-depth consideration must be applied to those particular individuals' classified as indentured. Osborne discusses difficulties that should be considered when discussing the status of individuals of African descent who were indeed indentured by contract yet were actual Freemen and not to be considered as slaves (81).

**Poverty**, as described by Smith B.; is not exclusive to those individuals who rely on outside subsistence, but also those "who must work each day for their survival" (87).

**Runaway**, for the purpose of this proposal is an individual that was serving as an indentured servant or apprentice and for a multitude of reasons chose to flee situations that were perceived as less than favorable.

**Transients**, Were "mostly poor and of lower-class individuals and families that were found in both the congested eastern areas and the frontier. Often moving very short distances from town to town and job to job" (Jones 28).

## **G Assumptions**

The assumption that the quality of life experienced by those living at the frontier as a result of their poverty was better in part because of skills that many received as bonded indentures or craft apprentices.

## **II Review of the related literature**

### **A. Major issues explored by scholars who have researched this topic and problem**

Poverty experienced during the mid to late eighteenth century in Colonial America, affected the structure of families much as it does today. None were more affected by poverty than female heads of households and their children. In their efforts to overcome this poverty many desperate actions were taken. Difficult economic times, as a result of a post war recession

forced more and more women into the position of heads of households (Nash 578). The majority of these new heads of households would find themselves challenged with making difficult and unsupported decisions as to the well being of their families. Children of a female head of household, who had become an indentured servant or apprentice to alleviate poverty and in some case provide an opportunity and motivation to resettle in areas of the Frontier, could provide opportunities of self development.

These decisions were often traumatic and more often than not resulted in the division of the family (Murray and Herndon 359). Rutman and Rutman (172), in their study of the associations of families of Middlesex county Virginia, highlighted the utilitarianism of a move that was often necessary yet doubtlessly traumatic with their observation that “the apprentice moved from a family of origin (mother and father) to a family of labor (master and mistress)”. Ultimately these experiences contributed to the economic, social and geographic expansion of the western frontiers of the colonial states (Lewis 3).

The articles reviewed first considered that poverty was pervasive throughout the colonies and secondly that, generally, women were more negatively affected than men by this situation. Poverty has many faces, all of which are wretched and none more deplorable than that of a mother with children, without resources. While men can also be victims of impoverishment, historically the greatest effects of poverty have been endured by women and their children (Smith B. 106).

Initially the poor of Colonial America were more prevalent within the coastal cities of the colonial states. Over time, as urban populations increased, the burden and lack of methods for

assistance began to drive female heads of household and their children to leave these urban areas of Charleston, Boston and New York, and seek relief in other inland locations.

The most common reason for women finding themselves in the position of head of household was the loss of a husband due to a war. In the case of the “French and Indian War”(Jones 34), not only were many husbands killed, some chose to abandon their families in pursuit of opportunities provided as a result of their military service, “veterans of the Revolution received warrants for western public land ranging from 100 acres for a private” (Rockoff 342).

An understanding of the impact of the poverty endured by these women can be developed by taking into account the social changes that were occurring throughout the Colonies. Fraser explains that in the early 1750s through the early 1770s the “vast majority of those being relieved by the [city and church] were women and young children” (168-169). The early relief sources or “schemes,” as described by Ziliak that were available for the poor “were influenced by British examples, the financial and legal responsibility for the destitute being assumed by the town, the Parrish or the county” (624). The focus of poverty relief within the Anglican Church rested typically within the hands of vestries. Lockley’s assessment of the methods employed for providing relief discusses how the “vestries [were] empowered to assess the property of the inhabitants of the Parrish in order to fund public poor relief. (957)”

One of the differences that created the greatest opportunity for children to become bound away from their mothers occurred when an overseer became involved, according to Murray and Herndon. “Among these bound workers were thousands of destitute and abandoned children who had been indentured by overseers of the poor”(356). Poverty was the prevalent reason for children

becoming indentured, although Withey noted that while poverty was a typically reason, that it was not unusual for “children to spend part of their formative years ... as apprentice or servant ...for general education” (46).

Billy Smith discusses families choosing to move to areas that were becoming more agrarian; these decisions to relocate were driven by the expansion of larger farms and plantations and the labor requirements that were created (111). Not all of the relocations that occurred were immediate moves to the frontier. Most were a progression of opportunistic events. Billy Smith notes that as labor availability improved some individuals once again moved away from the smaller communities back towards larger urban areas, seeking to take advantage of the labor boon that occurred as a result of support products needed in the new markets created by this westward expansion (2).

As pointed out by Lewis, many of the dwellings and settlements that evolved into communities were established at what was considered to be the frontier or fringes of colonial society (3). Many of these settlements came into existence because of their geographical location, locations “that served human ends” (Lewis 3). Some grew from existing farms and many from transportation junctures, roads, trails or water ways. All tended to be collecting points for the poorest inhabitants of Colonial America.

These communities drew their inhabitants from a wide and diverse cross section of colonial citizens. Although the majority of those who settled in new locations were poor and had few skills, others such as a runaways or immigrants might arrive with craft or journeyman skills (Osborne 85). Some became merchants; others pursued their craft as a cobbler, Waggoner’s or blacksmith (Osborne 86). Many were “runaway” servants, landless freemen, or

newly released indentured servants,” with few had skills other than husbandry or common laborer (Osborne 85). Some, after completing their indentured contracts, left with nothing but clothing on their backs’, while a few lucky individuals left with a small amount of cash, referred to as their “Freedom Dues” (Murray and Herndon 365).

Jones suggests;

That given the high proportions of single transients, it is plausible to suggest that many transients were ex-servants. Servitude of whites in Massachusetts usually was not permanent. At the end of their terms of service, men and women were often in their early twenties and ready to begin a new "stage" in their personal and economic growth. For example, over one-fifth of the privates from Essex County who served in the French and Indian War in 1758 were servants. For some, the experience of travelling to other parts of New England during military service may have opened up hitherto unknown opportunities for settlement (41).

Jones presents an image of orphaned children who become part of the “Strolling poor,” some by luck or misfortune had avoided being sold by an appointed “overseer,” while others who were “craft apprentices” and could no longer endure their master’s abuse had chosen to run away willing to abandon the possibility of a future payment of their Freedom Dues “Freedom dues that could represent a substantial bonus to a young person” (44), with amounts being paid to some individuals who have gained husbandry skills that were sufficient to allow them to buy up to ten acres of unimproved land,” land that was typically located at the edge of civilization, often referred to as the Frontier (Murray and Herndon 362).

All had a common beginning, one that was rooted in poverty. All were seeking to take advantage of any method or route that would provide a survival advantage. With poverty came the desperation that allowed women and men to take this forlorn chance. A willingness to start



anew, naively prepared to endure the additional hardship that they would incur at the edges of their civilization. Hardship that would include not only their current state of poverty but would also reflect the additional burdens levied on them by the indigenous residents of the frontier, along with other individuals or regulators who might impact their daily quest for survival. These challenges and privations were all dues that were part of a fee that came from seeking freedom. A choice that would ensure that they were no longer accountable to a master, nor would they be dependent on the church, benevolent societies, almshouses, relatives, or any one person or organization to provide for their well being.

## **B. Methodologies utilized by scholars to research this topic and problem**

With a few minor exceptions the sources I reviewed for this proposal can be considered journals of historical research. All appear to be dependent upon encompassing the presentation of changes that have occurred temporally while maintaining awareness for social change.

Otterstrom and Carville Earle offer an example of the influence of time and social change when they noted that “research opens the prospects for renewed study of the frontier in a manner that more fully considers the impacts of the sizable variations, both regionally and temporally, in the absolute and relative growth of settled area in the United States” (84).

Typically scholars utilized an interpretive lens to observe and report how individuals could construct meaning while attempting to eke out a life on frontier. The data that I have reviewed in developing my hypothesis for the most part can be viewed as qualitative with emphasis being placed on a phenomenological approach. Turner in his essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” and Billington in his text “Westward expansion: A history of the American frontier” provide perspectives as to the methods of expansion observed at the

western frontier. Turner presents a utilitarian approach by suggesting that the frontier progressed often as a result of exploration and land utilization. While Billington with descriptive prose, such as “each morning they left their houses to labor in the fields, using wooden hoe’s and mattocks fashioned by their own hands,” paints a verbal picture of events on the frontier that can be viewed as depicting more of a quantitative approach to documenting his research (83). Other writers, such as Smith, D., Rockoff, Otterstrom and Carville Earle use both numerical and non-numerical data to support their positivist approach of explanatory research. The scholars that I have chosen are essentially suggesting why these events and reactions occurred. It also becomes important to point out that although surveys and interviews could not take place in real time, that the information collected and analyzed in effect was a survey, a survey of historical documents and not individuals.

My process for wringing meaning from my articles has, in part, involved the results of an effort to recognize when the authors were using primary and secondary sources. The reality that a secondary source “reflects the bias of the individual speaking” demonstrates for me that the majority of authors that I have selected have exhibited a positive bias towards their topic. While Turner, who I found referenced in at least seven of my articles, may be referenced as a secondary source it is a primary recognition of his work.

The method that I feel that works best for my proposal is a historical-comparative approach, while at the same time recognizing that my process will incorporate other research methods. Many of my articles reference poverty as an event that was studied for a period of time. For example, Withey discusses the “colonel period” (37). While in “Markets for Children,” Murray and Herndon demonstrate via a chart that the number of children bound over to

orphanages fluctuated significantly over an 80 year period (361). This, to me, has elements of a case study which would make it more of a quantitative method.

The application and utilization of the research methodologies that have been discussed do not appear to be limited to one approach or method. The method that I would use for collecting historical records, such as taking notes, copying primary sources, utilizing data bases are all primary tools that I have used in my qualitative approach, should in no way be taken as a limit to any one method. A quantitative approach would as easily incorporate these information gathering techniques.

When I looked at Krawczynski's analysis of "William Drayton's Journal" or "A Retarded Frontier" by George Vincent I can see elements of an Ethnographic or a Phenomenological study. The isolated groups that Vincent encountered in his "Desire to see the Old Frontier," while not the perfect definition of prolonged field work, appeared to touch upon several of the key points of an ethnographic study, while at the same time suggested the cause of events that occurred at the frontier. I would consider Williams Drayton's Journal as critiqued by Krawczynski as demonstrating certain aspects of the descriptive method of quantitative research.

Drayton constructs, via his diary, an image or observation of how people lived or "spent their time". Including, for example, what he found as:

Amazing [,] was the high level of household independence maintained by backcountry settlers. Not only did they cultivate a diversity of crops, such as corn, wheat, tobacco, and indigo, and raise assorted livestock, but they also made their own clothing from wool, cotton, and flax. Equally astonishing was the region's great abundance of game, livestock, produce, and even labor, all of which could be obtained at considerably lower prices than in Charleston (183).

In the end, the gap that I will fill will be accomplished by not only replicating the data of others', but more importantly by extracting overlooked data. My umbrella will be that of ascertaining the historical interpretation or intent of the articles that I have selected for

establishing my hypothesis, while at the same time remaining aware of the possible advantages of other methods.

### **III Proposed research methodology**

#### **A. Data or evidence to be collected**

Evidence that is required for my proposal will be collected via an historical-comparative approach. The essential purpose of this data will be to start a conversation that provides historical insight to the effect that poverty specifically had on the development of the colonial frontier. There appears to be justification for both a “cause and effect” view of the situations that confronted the mothers and their children and that of non-positivist interpretive approach, while the majority of the other authors cited, will describe poverty by discussing social interactions among civil and clerical organizations. Others tend to be positivist as is reflected in the statistical data that is provided by (Daniel Smith 84).

My proposal encompasses a period of historical time that would initially appear to lend itself to a longitudinal analysis. The majority of the data is revealed via a time line that reaches back some three hundred and fifty years, of which my interest focuses on approximately ninety years. While not a classical longitudinal analysis, this proposal becomes a hybrid that takes into account observational aspects of both longitudinal, in that the data collected can be considered

temporal, or as occurring at “multiple points in time” and cross-sectional because of the implication of particular dates, i.e. 1740 the date of the “Great Fire” that destroyed colonial Charleston forcing many women into unexpected poverty (Mulcahy 135).

For the most part the data that is available for my proposal will be extracted from the intricate narratives of the authors cited within proposal. Many of these historical narratives are built around a substantial amount of primary resources, typically numerical and statistical data.

The evidence that I collect, will be, as stated by Leedy and Ormrod “a rational explanation for a string of seemingly random events [ultimately] draw[ing] inferences [and meaning] about the effects of events on individuals and the society in which they lived” (5378). Throughout the narrative of the articles that I have suggested as resources for my proposal are a myriad of graphical data, references and analysis. Sources and narratives that are “firsthand accounts; newspaper clippings, legal documents, diary entries, [and] eyewitness” accounts, with the majority of these serving as primary data (5407). All of which are reviewed for pertinent points that can be used to support my hypothesis.

## **B . Techniques for collecting data**

In my utilization of an Historical Research methodology, I will look at a large amount of raw and statistical data gather by the authors that I have selected to support my hypothesis. Lockely has combed through an impressive number of Church registries and county records, while Nash and others have reviewed and reported on the impact and application of tax roll data in his discussion of female heads of households and poverty.

In my efforts to address validity as it concerns my research questions and hypothesis, I am relying on the credentials and the supporting data supplied by the scholar's that I have cited to document reliably what has been investigate. My efforts via an explanatory conversation will be to integrate unevaluated and evaluated observation to demonstrate what I feel are the unexplored considerations of the effects of poverty, especially upon female heads of households and their children.

More importantly for me will be my efforts at demonstrating that A. the transience of poor children removed from female heads of household, was caused by the failure of a bonded contract, and at the same time B. provided an opportunity for self betterment. While both A and B can become reliable indicators of the viability of the variables of my hypothesis. The Prima facie evidence that that the expansion of the western frontier was dependent upon poverty experienced by poor individuals will be documented by comparing the narrative of the various authors, and extracting missed or underdeveloped data offered by these narratives.

The assumptions that are made will rely on both external and internal evidence in determining whether the data is genuine (Leedy and Ormond 5585). The possibility of using a graphic demonstration to illustrate the flow of individuals away from poverty, along with the changing boundaries of the frontier could be considered, although for the focus of my proposal this may not serve my intent. A chronological consideration will offer limited support for the data considered, while an overall review of the historiography will be integral to my proposal.

Where the data for the proposal was rooted, forms another important aspect of my hypothesis. The fact the poverty was indeed pervasive would only become important for this

proposal when considerations are given to the relative location of those impoverished, and the ever changing location of a frontier for opportunity.

#### **A. Methods of analysis**

Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod suggest that the first step of an analysis in determining if the hypothesis that has been suggested is “realistic and practical,” would be to create a check list for evaluating key areas of my proposal. It is further suggested that a “pilot study” could be conducted to ensure feasibility of my proposal (3910).

### **IV. Outline of the Final Report**

The final report that I will present will be structured as follows:

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- II. Review of the Related Literature
- III. Research Methodology
- IV. The Results

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## **V. Expected Outcomes**

The end product of this proposal should provide an opening for beginning a conversation, a dialogue that focuses on the overlapping significance of the poverty which was investigated. While at the same time considering the potential for the data observed to serve as a tutorial for the present. This proposal is not intended to serve as a summary, but more as a framework for an evaluation of potential relevance, relevance with regards to poverty in general. I would hope that those who would seek to gain insight and understanding of the dynamics of the poverty experienced by female heads of households of the time period discussed will find applicable data for similar situations that are endured presently. The frontier that poverty has helped to expand, or push back is not limited to the wildernesses discussed. The wilderness can be confronted any time a mother must step into the unknown in order to provide for her loved ones. The action of taking that step is the results of many tangential occurrences in her life. My expectations are that,



by examining the steps she has taken, useful data and insight for planners and researchers of the present can be found.

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