

Weekly Feedback

America's founding fathers, men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were part of a white, aristocratic, and male dominated society in Virginia. But how did white, aristocratic men get to dominate Virginian society over white women, Indians, and blacks of both genders? Through divine claims to power over white women and through legislation, Kathleen M. Brown explains in her fascinating social history, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* how white men came to dominate not only white women, but also the blacks and Indians they encountered upon reaching colonial Virginia.

Author Kathleen Brown explains that the males in English society professed to have a divine right to control women. Without this profound claim, there was no other basis for men to assert their superiority over women. This attitude was then transplanted to the "New World" at a time when European nations were also searching for a new national identity in the context of this New World that was "discovered." "When English explorers eventually reached the shores of the North American continent, their concepts of political authority, their representation of native inhabitants and their depictions of themselves as civilized conquerors reflected a history of imperial activity in which the language and performance of gender differences had played a prominent part (15)." Over time, the assertion that white male superiority was divine was written into colonial laws and became the reason for their dominance over Indians, blacks, and white women.

Comparatively speaking, white women fared better than black women simply because they were white. The inclusion of race as a criterion for judging superiority improved the status of many white women from "wenches" to "good wives," with black women taking over the characteristics of the former. However, white women, especially upper class women, still had to adhere to social customs that white men established for them in order to put them in their place and keep them there, such as where they could go and who they could speak to. This harsh treatment was the norm from white males and it permeated throughout all of the white social classes, where white men exerted authority over their wives, even over simple cosmetic applications. Upper class white women were generally only allowed to speak to other white women of the same social class. They were also forbidden by an act of legislation in 1691 from having sexual relations with black men. This law helped to solidify racial boundaries in the colony of Virginia by ensuring that white women did not have mixed babies that would then become free blacks as a result of their free lineage from their white mother. As evidenced by several cases, when this happened, it helped to blur the line of authority that white males had over blacks.

With the passage of the Virginia Inspection Act of 1730, Virginia's white planter elite increased their strength in the colony even further. This act allowed for the elite to empower inspectors to inspect the quality of tobacco that was grown on small and large farms. This had a damaging effect on smaller property owners whose tobacco did not meet the required standard. That is, if the standard was even attainable? With an increased control over tobacco growth, large plantation owners increased their political and social power. This power was kept within a small, elite group through intermarriages with members of the same social class. These white, aristocrats were able to consolidate power through legal, manipulative and dirty tricks. This allowed white, slaveholding elite men, such as Washington, Jefferson, and Madison to enjoy "longer lives, more stable families, larger estates, and greater security" than their ancestors before them (364).