ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE HOUSEHOLD:
WOMEN, SPACE, AND MOBILITY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

by Molly Sullivan

Though several historians have alluded to the mobility of colonial women in America, none have undertaken a focused analysis of the spaces women occupied in that period. The majority of women’s responsibilities did center on the home, but evidence shows that the obligations, expectations, and necessities of colonial life carried them away from their households rather often. Studying the lives of women in seventeenth-century New England reveals that they frequented most spaces – fields, streets, shops – within their communities with relative ease and regularity, sharing this common ground with their male counterparts. Women also encountered gendered spaces occasionally when they ventured into taverns, courts, and onto highways. They faced more restrictions in these areas which were dominated by men. Thus, gender influenced the spatial experience of colonial women in ways we had not previously realized. Although they confronted some restrictions in a few spaces, they encountered few boundaries overall to their movement.
BEYOND THE HOUSEHOLD:
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CHAPTER 1: WOMEN AND SPACE

Throughout American history, discussions of women are often tied to the domestic. Whether looking at female colonists, antebellum ladies, or middle class wives struggling with the Feminine Mystique in the twentieth century, women’s experiences cannot be fully understood without exploring their roles within the home. Alternatively, one must also examine the entire scope of their lives. Though domesticity has been an important aspect of the conversation, the lives of women cannot be limited to such a small space. Historians surveying nineteenth- and twentieth-century women have been able to draw important conclusions about their spatial experiences. Unfortunately, limited primary source material has hindered attempts fully to map out the lives of colonial women, especially those in the seventeenth century. Although several historians have hinted at the relatively unconstrained movement colonial women likely enjoyed, none have endeavored to make this the focus of their research. A study of the spatial scope of seventeenth-century women’s lives would allow us to better appreciate their place within society.

Fortunately, the New England colonies left behind enough extant records to support an investigation of the geographic lives of the women in this region. Because the necessities of colonial life required women to be deft household managers and active members of their communities, their lives could not have been strictly confined to their households. Though their homes served as the center of their lives, they often took to the streets, fields, and businesses of their communities to ensure the welfare of their families and neighbors. In carrying out their roles as mothers, wives, household managers, friends, and neighbors, they stepped out into the fields, mills, shops, homes of neighbors, and meetinghouses. They frequented these spaces with relative ease and regularity, sharing this common ground with their male counterparts. At times, women also ventured into taverns, courts, and onto highways. These areas stand out as gendered spaces, however, because even though members of both sexes entered these places, men dominated them. While men and women largely shared the other spaces within a community, women faced restrictions in these three specific locations.

This distinction most likely arose because while women’s responsibilities stemmed from within the household, men dealt with affairs external to it as well. A goodwife’s duties as producer and preserver of her family’s food, clothing, and other necessities carried her out into the fields to help harvest crops or to the mill to have corn ground or to a neighboring home to work on textiles with other women. Her trips to taverns, courts, and out onto the byways,
however, had little connection to her domestic responsibilities. Though giving testimony in court, operating a tavern, and riding out with her husband to accompany him in his commercial pursuits in another town were all important activities, they did not aid her in fulfilling the responsibilities expected of her gender. Moreover, these locations were spaces in which men often required limited – if any – aid from the women of their communities. Taverns benefitted from the preparation of food and drink usually undertaken by women, but otherwise both the tavern and highway travel functioned without much assistance from women; and, even though women gave testimony and faced punishment in the courts, male magistrates oversaw the administration of legal matters. Thus, gender largely influenced the spatial experience of colonial women. Although they confronted some restrictions in a few spaces, they encountered few boundaries overall to their movement.

**Feminist Theory: Space and Status**

Feminist theorists have taken an interest in the relationship between space and the position of women in society. In mapping out women’s experiences, these theorists have found connections between gendered divisions of space and women’s restricted status in society. Boundaries in society and within homes that limit women’s access to empowering institutions, such as education, lead to gender inequality. The contributions of these theorists underscore the significance of understanding the geography of women’s lives.

Daphne Spain, in her *Gendered Spaces*, looks at both industrialized and non-industrialized societies to examine the relationship between space and status. She focuses on how gendered spaces have created gender inequalities and proposes that spatial integration would increase women’s status in society. Spain states that “throughout history and across cultures, architectural and geographic spatial arrangements have reinforced status differences between women and men.”

When women are geographically isolated, this often leads to limited access to knowledge and education that could allow them to better themselves and improve their standing in society. Using the women of industrial America, Spain demonstrates how spatial constraints strengthened gender inequalities. While men left home to work in male-dominated areas to bring home wages, women remained insulated within their domestic domain. Her work highlights the importance of space in gender studies.

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2 Spain, *Gendered Spaces*, xiv, 3-4, 6-7, 107.
Historians who have applied feminist theory to nineteenth-century women emphasize the spatial limitations and strict divisions between domestic and public domains. Dolores Hayden, in *The Domestic Revolution*, supports the contention that American women gradually became more isolated from larger society in the decades preceding the Civil War and carried over into the early twentieth century. Hayden calls attention to early feminists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Livermore, Ellen Swallow Richards, and Ethel Puffer Howes, who recognized the inequalities created by the gendered division of labor and gendered spaces. These activists thought to resolve them by reflecting gender equality in redesigned private and public domains. Key to Hayden’s case is women’s greater physical separation from their families and social networks. During America’s industrial era, “the housewife, encased in the woman’s sphere, slowly became more isolated from her husband, who now worked away from home; her children, who attended school all day; and the rural social networks of kin and neighbors which were disrupted by migration in growing urban centers.”

She contrasts this housewife with the seventeenth-century goodwife who also carried the weight of domestic responsibilities, but was not so secluded within the home. The circumstances of living in a pre-industrial society meant that women often worked the fields beside men and they produced goods – textiles, foodstuffs, candles – that allowed them to contribute economically to the household. Much more of a family’s foods and other necessary supplies were produced by women at home; though the work was time-consuming and laborious, their lives were not as isolated as they would be two centuries later. Unfortunately, Hayden fails to clarify exactly why colonial women led less spatially constricted lives – why they ventured into areas that most industrial-era women did not.

Historians and theorists of nineteenth-century American women allude to a less spatially restricted life for women during the colonial period, but provide little detail. Scholars assume that colonial women enjoyed a comparatively high level of mobility, contrasting their freedoms with those of their descendants. The lives of their colonial counterparts serve as a foil against nineteenth-century women’s geographic restrictions, and scholars rarely explore their claims about colonial women. Historians fail to elucidate the full extent of colonial women’s geographic life. If we knew where colonial women went, we could determine whether cultural

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expectations attached to certain spaces presented a barrier to their movement. Did they lead more integrated lives within their communities because they encountered more integrated spaces? In what spaces did they live out their daily lives? How did their identity as women – mothers, daughters, wives, servants – influence their movement? To what extent did the geography of their lives influence them? And were there any restrictions or limitations on the spaces they inhabited? These questions have yet to be explored; no one has mapped out the lives of colonial women as they have for women in later centuries. Scholars have thought about women’s physical place in society, but not in early colonial America.

Research on Migration and Movement During the Seventeenth Century

Other historians – April Lee Hatfield, Virginia DeJohn Anderson, Alison Games, Susan Hardman Moore – have presented research on migration and movement during seventeenth century. In recent decades, especially with the advent of Atlantic history, historians have begun to examine transatlantic and intercolonial migration during the early modern period, but much of their analysis disregards gender. Ideas, goods, and the people that carried them crisscrossed the Atlantic world, keeping the New World colonies very much connected with one another as well as with the Old World. Most studies have adopted a wider perspective to try to grasp why people migrated to, from, and amongst the colonies and to understand the implications of this movement. Alison Games’s *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* and Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s *New England’s Generation* support the contention that since migration and mobility were commonplace in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became just as much a part of the Atlantic world, especially within the colonies. Upon arriving in colonial America, colonists moved about for a number of reasons, reshuffling according to circumstance.⁵ If mobility was rather common for colonists, what did this mean for the female population? Perhaps women experienced greater freedom of movement and ventured into what would later become gendered spaces as members of this interconnected Atlantic community. Here again, though the historiography does not pay close attention to women, it does underscore the significance of studying how individuals traversed space in colonial America.

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April Lee Hatfield uses seventeenth-century Virginia to examine the numerous and varied intercolonial and intracolonial connections that kept the newborn English Atlantic empire together in *Atlantic Virginia*. She argues that colonies shared strong connections with one another as well as with England, and that travelers played an important role in maintaining these connections. This colonial interconnectedness allowed for greater geographic mobility. Accordingly, early Virginians moved regularly and rather easily across political and geographic boundaries, demonstrating their ability to navigate the lands and waters of the New World.⁶

As Hatfield outlines examples of frequent travel between colonies, she presents one case that encourages further interest in the geography of women’s lives. Anna Vartlett and her husband engaged in trade, but Anna played a more active role in their business affairs than her spouse. Therefore, she traveled, seemingly alone, from her home in Virginia to New Amsterdam on several occasions over the course of a decade on business and family affairs. As a merchant, Anna not only navigated the world of commerce, but also the colonial courts when business disputes arose.⁷ Hatfield draws attention to a handful of other colonial women who actively engaged in seventeenth-century Atlantic trade who had similar experiences. Though these women were more affluent and influential members of colonial Virginia, and therefore might have traveled in ways that were not representative of all colonial women, they demonstrate that a woman’s world could extend far beyond the boundaries of the household. What remains unknown is how common it was for women to venture into these spaces, such as courts, docks, and places of business, that were used predominately by men, and how usual it was for women to travel longer distances from home.

Historians such as Hatfield, Games, and Hardman have demonstrated that those who lived in the seventeenth century did not lead isolated lives; their communities and colonies and their personal lives were most often interconnected to the larger Atlantic World. In their studies, some of these historians paid special attention to certain specific groups of people, such as puritan families or indentured servants, but women rarely captured their interest. Historians have made a strong case that movement within and between colonies was commonplace, but because their focus lies elsewhere, they fail to address what this new understanding of colonial communities and interactions meant for women.

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Historians and the Extent of Women’s Geographic Lives

In recent decades, other historians also have drawn attention to the numerous and significant roles that women played in seventeenth-century America; in doing so, they often have also considered women’s physical place in colonial society. Just as new research and fresh interpretations of source material has suggested that residents of colonial America led lives that were much less isolated than previously thought, studies examining various aspects of colonial women’s lives suggest that they were very much spatially integrated members of their communities. Though each historian’s work focuses on themes that often have little to do with women’s movement, their arguments and the evidence used to support them strongly suggest that women ventured into many spaces within their communities with relative ease. Whether discussing religion, law, or women’s roles in general, numerous studies indicate that the lives of colonial women extended far beyond the boundaries of domestic spaces.

Some research highlights the movement of colonial women within their communities, suggesting that, though their lives centered on their households, they were certainly not restricted to this space. Indeed, their busy lives often demanded that they venture throughout town into its many establishments. The life of one woman in particular draws attention to the extensive geography of women’s lives. Martha Ballard, a midwife and mother in post-revolutionary America, kept a diary in which she recorded her experiences. In A Midwife’s Tale, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich pieces together Ballard’s succinct entries to create a narrative that describes how the midwife trekked to reach patients in need, despite the obstacles nature threw in her path. Ballard was very mobile, traveling on foot, on horseback, or by canoe, sometimes alone and sometimes in the dark of night. When she headed out, she faced stormy weather at times as well.

On a rainy day in October, Ballard was called away at four o’clock in the morning to the bedside of a woman facing a difficult labor. She walked to the river, crossed it, and then finished the two-hour journey on horseback. After spending that evening and the next morning tending to her patient, receiving only an hour of sleep, the midwife delivered a healthy baby girl. At least she was able to make the trek home during a clear afternoon.8 The brief passages Ballard recorded in her diary demonstrate the frequency and regularity of Ballard’s mobility. Though she had familial and household obligations in addition midwifery, her domain was not defined by the domestic.

Although her role as healer prompted most of her movement, taking her “along the length of the town and beyond,” Ballard had other obligations to her community that brought her outside of her home. In addition to caring for the ailing, Ballard’s position required her to appear in court on occasion to testify in cases of rape or abuse, providing verbal evidence of what she encountered while treating those under scrutiny. Like her female peers, Ballard’s many economic and social responsibilities meant that she visited the homes of other townspeople, with and without her husband, to pay social calls and share in communal work – in her case often involving textiles – with other women. Her September 1788 diary entries reveal that “there were only two days in the entire [month’s] passage when she neither visited nor received visitors.” And the other women of her town of Hallowell, Maine, likely had similar experiences; “they fed travelers, bargained with their neighbors, and moved about their towns at will, on horseback, in canoes or afoot.” Though as a midwife, Ballard was frequently called away from home, her mobility was unexceptional. Ballard’s presence was accepted in various places all around town.

Altogether, evidence indicates that Martha Ballard felt comfortable moving beyond her household and did so regularly. Furthermore, her diary entries show her almost constant awareness of her own whereabouts, mentioning each day, almost without fail, her location at home or elsewhere. And though this movement was routine for the midwife, it took up much of her time and often shaped how she spent her days. Although Martha Ballard recorded her experiences after the colonial period, her diary raises questions about the geography of the lives of women who came before her. Did her mobility stem from the relative freedom of movement colonial women enjoyed, or did earlier women face more spatial restrictions?

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich produced an earlier study that suggests that colonial women were fairly active outside of their households and ventured into most spaces within their communities with ease and acceptance. In Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750, Ulrich looks at the many factors that shaped women’s roles as wife, mother, household manager, deputy husband, neighbor, and Christian in early New England society. While Ulrich does demonstrate that the lives of women focused on

9 Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale, 165.
10 Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale, 77, 79, 91-94.
11 Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale, 91.
12 Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale, 98.
13 Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale, 90-91.
their households, she also makes clear that they had other roles to play. Circumstances often compelled women to travel about their communities. Ulrich communicates the delicate balance that existed between their domestic life and the larger social community through which they navigated. In managing their households, wives and widows secured the stable production and maintenance of foodstuffs and other necessities for their families, which sometimes led them to labor in the fields, trade with neighbors, and help oversee their husband’s business affairs. The social lives of colonial goodwives also ensured that they made their way across town to call on neighbors, gather at the meetinghouse, or seek the aid of others.14

Ulrich points out that though “housewives commanded a limited domain,” they were not confined to the domestic space they managed.15 She contends that no distinct boundaries existed to separate the lives of men and women. Both sexes permeated the many spaces of their communities with few exceptions.16 Rather than analyzing these assertions, Ulrich goes on to use them to support her discussion of the many roles of colonial goodwives. Though it is not the purpose of her research, Ulrich explicitly draws attention to the importance of the spatial scope of colonial women’s experience.

Other research focuses on colonial women’s experiences in specific spaces outside the home. Cornelia Hughes Dayton’s Women before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789 and Terri L. Snyder’s Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia demonstrate women’s presence at meetings of the courts and their relationship with the law. Dayton argues that though women played a significant role in legal proceedings in seventeenth-century Connecticut because of their place in the community as overseers of moral conduct and social behavior, this role diminished in the eighteenth century as the courts’ legal decisions shifted in support of men’s commercial interests. In supporting her contention, Dayton also draws attention to women’s physical presence in colonial courtrooms, which she claims was not uncommon.17 Evidence shows that “in the early part of the colonial period, spectators on court days would have found it routine that one-third of those waiting to

15 Ulrich, Good Wives, 14.
plead or to give testimony were women.” Dayton further suggests that changes in the spatial framework of the lives of men and women affected the court system. The shift in judicial decisions “reveals a new set of divergences in men’s and women’s spheres taking hold gradually throughout the [eighteenth] century.” Thus, women’s presence in the courtroom influenced the judiciary, just as alterations in the judiciary came to influence women’s appearance in the courts.

Terri L. Snyder’s study of women’s voices in early Virginia also highlights women’s presence in court. She contends that the voices of wives, widows, and female servants and slaves held power colonial society, politics, and law. Sometimes their voices heard in and out of court served as a means of empowering these women, while at others it served as a source of trouble. Snyder presents many cases in which women successfully used the legal system to their advantage, though she also discusses many others in which they did not. Studying colonial court records not only reveals women within the judicial hearings but also draws attention to how women behaved in everyday circumstances. Snyder’s evidence of “brabbling women” demonstrates that they conversed, gossiped and argued all around town – in their homes, in the fields, in taverns, in places of business, and in the streets. How women behaved in these spaces could have serious consequences in the courts, for themselves and others. The work of both Snyder and Cornelia Hughes Dayton establish that although men were more visible in colonial law, women also had a key place in the seventeenth-century courtroom. It was not a space that erected barriers between men and women.

Sharon V. Salinger’s study of taverns in colonial America, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, though not specifically focused on women, demonstrates that inns and ordinaries were a public space that were not always welcoming to women, but did not bar their entrance. Taverns served as sites of communal drinking and shelter for travelers, but also as places to gather, socialize, and handle business dealings. Despite married women’s status as legal dependents, colonial law did not bar them from public houses. Women sometimes joined men in the more disreputable taverns, but “respectable women in the colonial period entered public

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houses rarely and in restricted contexts."\textsuperscript{23} A few women operated taverns, and others sometimes utilized them to purchase numerous goods the establishments might have for sale or trade. Women might visit the tavern to purchase butter, linen, beef, small quantities of wine, or other commodities, but did not stay to partake of the drink and conversation within the tavern. Even when present, women were not participants in the drinking culture. Salinger claims that taverns were in fact gendered spaces, one much more welcoming to men.\textsuperscript{24} The findings of these historians suggest that though colonial women face few spatial restrictions as they lived out their everyday lives, they sometimes faced barriers like that of the tavern. Although women were allowed to enter taverns, they were rarely fully accepted in what was a male-dominated domain. If the tavern played a much smaller role in their geographic experience, perhaps other spaces also did not openly welcome their presence.

Though most women did not venture into their local public house, on occasion female travelers had to make use of their facilities. Salinger points out that “although women occasionally stopped overnight in taverns, they stayed in them only reluctantly, after they had exhausted the possibility of other lodging.”\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the tavern as a gendered space extended to female travelers. Salinger’s claim also highlights another important aspect of women’s spatial experience: women’s mobility occasionally extended beyond their localities. In mapping their lives, it should be understood that women not only ventured away from their households, but also outside their towns. Research such as that of Sharon V. Salinger demonstrates that colonial women occasionally journeyed over longer distances. Though her discussion of public houses does not go so far as to address why women would be traveling beyond the safety of their communities, other research suggests that they left home for a variety of reasons.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s \textit{Good Wives} presents further evidence of women traveling away from home in the eighteenth centuries. In examining the writings of three men, Ulrich discovered patterns in the movement undertaken by their wives during and after pregnancy. The women traveled, often on horseback, into their second trimester. One of these women, Elizabeth Patten made a particularly brave journey “during the fifth month of her tenth pregnancy when she went by horseback alone the more than eighty miles to Boston to sell cloth and thread.”\textsuperscript{26} On

\textsuperscript{23} Salinger, \textit{Taverns and Drinking in Early America}, 50, 222-223.
\textsuperscript{24} Salinger, \textit{Taverns and Drinking in Early America}, 50, 222-224.
\textsuperscript{25} Salinger, \textit{Taverns and Drinking in Early America}, 224-225.
\textsuperscript{26} Ulrich, \textit{Good Wives}, 139-140.
this occasion, Elizabeth left to carry out business, but these three women more frequently trekked to visit family. Though their movement was much more limited during the last trimester and during lactation, all three wives traveled again (and almost invariably) around the time when they would be weaning their infants. Ulrich suggests a possible connection between the two activities, with mothers departing to leave weaning toddlers in the care of others.\textsuperscript{27} Each woman had numerous reasons for taking long-distance trips, but the evidence is clear. To reach distant destinations, colonial women ventured out onto the roads, on horseback and in canoes, even when pregnant. Such spaces covered by travelers, though perhaps dominated by men, were also utilized by women.

Rebecca Larson’s study of female Quaker preachers in \textit{Daughters of Light} supports the notion that colonial women were not restricted to their own localities, but argues that this mobility was exemplified only by traveling Quaker ministers. Larson contends that many Quaker women, especially ministers, moved between villages and colonies much more frequently than their sheltered contemporaries. Husbands, fathers, and other males could venture out into the world when necessary, leaving their wives and daughters safe within the family home. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women, however, “were infrequent travelers (except for occasional visits to relatives or for health cures).”\textsuperscript{28} Because of women’s primary role as household managers, their lives were largely confined to the privacy of the domestic setting. Female Quakers who possessed the spiritual gift of preaching regularly journeyed around to other towns and colonies, venturing into meeting houses, courthouses, town halls and other public spaces to share the Spirit of God. They left their families behind and traveled in the company of other Quakers – most often other ministers – for weeks and months at a time because of the strong desire to serve God.\textsuperscript{29}

Thus, according to Larson’s findings, female Quaker preachers’ behavior differed greatly from that of other colonial women, who mostly remained within the confines of their domestic environs. Other research, such as that of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Sharon V. Salinger, however, suggests that these female Quakers were simply more visible examples of colonial women living out aspects of their lives beyond the familiarity of their own homes and

\textsuperscript{27} Ulrich, \textit{Good Wives}, 140-142.
\textsuperscript{28} Rebecca Larson, \textit{Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775} (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 10, 94.
\textsuperscript{29} Larson, \textit{Daughters of Light}, 10-11, 17, 94, 96-97, 117-119.
communities. While spiritual motivations may have spurred certain Quaker women to travel somewhat more frequently than other women, this should not lead to the conclusion that the majority of colonial women rarely set foot beyond their kitchen gardens. Instead of following this assumption, further research could allow historians to map more precisely the geography of women’s lives.
CHAPTER 2: WOMEN ABOUT TOWN

Because a colonial woman’s daily activities largely centered on domestic tasks, the family home was a place in which she spent much of her time. And though the home was largely a woman’s domain, she shared this space with all other members of the household. The average New England family slept, ate, and performed numerous tasks under one roof, usually in rather cramped quarters. By the second half of the seventeenth century, they resided in clapboard story-and-a-half homes with thatched roofs – housing that would likely be considered quite humble by their counterparts in England at the time.\textsuperscript{30} It was this space that served as the epicenter of women’s lives.

As a goodwife entered her home, a view of the hall, the main room that contained most of the house’s activity, greeted her. Across from the door stood the large hearth that spanned several feet across and held the many wrought-iron tools she used when cooking meals here. If she were fortunate, she might have additional kitchen space in a lean-to built against the rear of the house. After seeing to meal preparations, the goodwife came together with her family in this same room to dine. If the family owned a simple table of planks, it would gather around it on benches. Despite the crude furniture and limited eating utensils, the goodwife could at least dress the table with some sort of linen. Once the family finished the meal, they would likely stow the table and benches against the wall to make more room in the limited space. The walls of the hall might also be lined with an organized clutter of tools she and other members of her family used within and outside of the home, such as butter churns or shovels.\textsuperscript{31}

After the meal, the goodwife might venture out into the yard to check the state of her kitchen garden or the livestock and take down wash drying on the line. Back inside the hall, she would deposit the linens in a chest and perhaps light more candles in addition to those already burning to keep out the deepening darkness. The home’s two small windows let in little enough light on sunny days. As the day came to a close, the members of the household made their ways to their respective sleeping quarters. The goodwife and her husband usually retreated to their own separate room called the “inner room” or “parlor” which offered them a degree of privacy that colonists in smaller homes did not have. As they rested in their bedstead, their children


\textsuperscript{31} Demos, \textit{A Little Commonwealth}, 30, 33, 39-43; Donnelly, \textit{Architecture in Colonial America}, 35, 37.
climbed the small staircase to a loft called the “chamber” where their own beds lay amidst a handful of other possessions stored here. In the morning, the goodwife would return to the hall and continue her daily routine of overseeing the management of the household – the space in which her every day experience was grounded. The household housed many of women’s daily activities and served as the most essential space in their lives.

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“She is for plenty as well as peace in her household...She is...a bee for her diligence and industry in her hive.” As Cotton Mather wrote in Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, the ideal Christian wife worked assiduously to maintain a stable and organized household. Since much of a woman’s daily work, whether as wife, daughter, or servant, revolved around the domestic, the family household served largely as a woman’s domain. Few homes in the seventeenth century could be self-sufficient because most communities had, at best, limited access to manufactured goods. Thus, women worked as producers and custodians of necessary household goods.

Married women took charge of the many duties associated with housewifery, but daughters and servants worked alongside them to learn and sharpen these essential skills. In a 1656 advertisement for servants, John Hammond listed the responsibilities associated with housewifery as “dressing victuals, righting up the house, milking, employed about dayries, washing, sowing, etc.” To secure the family’s food supply, women cooked and baked over the hearth, churned butter, milked cows, preserved fruits and meats, and tended the garden. To outfit their families, they spun fibers to make cloth, sewed new clothes and mended the old, scrubbed dirty garments and linen, and hung them out to dry in the yard. And their work encompassed any other household tasks required to meet the daily needs of their families. With so many domestic responsibilities, woman spent plenty of time indoors at the hearth and spinning wheel or outside

32 Demos, A Little Commonwealth, 28-29, 31, 44-45; Donnelly, Architecture in Colonial America, 35.
33 Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1978), 93.
in the yard tending to the wash or weeding the garden.\textsuperscript{35} Though written in the late eighteenth century, a poem composed by Ruth Belknap illustrates the realities of housewifery:

\begin{quote}
Up in the morning I must rise
Before I’ve time to rub my eyes.
With half-pin’d gown, unbuckled shoe,
I haste to milk my lowing cow.
But, Oh! It makes my heart to ache,
I have no bread til I can bake.
And then, alas! It makes me sputter,
For I must churn or have no butter.
The hogs with swill too I must serve,
For hogs must eat or men will starve.
...
All summer long I toil & sweat,
Blister my hands, and scold & fret.
And when summer’s work is o’er,
New toils arise from Autumn’s store.
Corn must be husk’d, and pork be kill’d,
The house with all confusion fill’d.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

A woman’s responsibilities as a helpmeet to her husband, a dutiful daughter, a nurturing mother – a manager, preserver, and producer – oftentimes had to be fulfilled within the household.

The necessities of colonial life, however, also meant that women could not be restricted within their homes and yards; their familial responsibilities often could not be accomplished within such a limited area. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has said, “colonial women were by definition basically domestic” but also that “they were neither isolated nor self-sufficient.”\textsuperscript{37} Because the colonial household could not support itself, women had to venture out into the fields and into their communities to carry out household tasks.

Though some might imagine an invisible perimeter dividing the woman’s domain within the home from the man’s domain extending outward, Ulrich insists that “in reality no such barrier existed. Male and female space intersected and overlapped.”\textsuperscript{38} Colonial men and women shared many other spaces outside the family household. To provide milk and meat to feed the family, daughters sometimes had to keep watch on the family’s cattle in the common fields. To

put much needed money in the family coffers, wives might have to complete business transactions for their husbands. Even though women’s lives focused mainly on the home, other obligations – often those concerned with maintaining a prosperous and peaceful household – carried them into the fields and the streets of town. Their commitments as kin, friends, neighbors, Christians, and responsible colonists also meant that women commonly visited many other spaces within their communities and, at times, even traveled across colonies. Though society may have perceived members of their sex in need of protection from external threats or from themselves, women’s responsibilities necessitated their mobility.

As women managed the household, men took charge of husbandry. “Under ideal circumstances women did not work in the fields.”39 The realities of colonial life, however, meant that the situation was rarely ideal. Sometimes a woman’s duty to prepare meals and preserve provisions for the future required her to labor in the fields, not just her domestic domain. Women helped to plant and harvest crops, as well as supervise livestock in the fields. At times, women carried out these tasks unaccompanied, while at others they might be joined by kin, neighbors, or servants of either sex.

Evidence suggests that women walked to the family fields as well as the common fields. In many New England settlements, colonists replicated the open-field agricultural system that had been used in England when they left. Instead of owning enclosed parcels of land for farming, “men possessed individual, noncontiguous strips of land in large fields under common regulation.”40 Those with greater status in a community usually received larger fields to farm and were often allowed to graze more livestock on the common lands as well. Since men possessed dispersed holdings, they usually had to trek to their fields to plow or graze their animals. Thus, women who resided in the many communities that utilized this system might have had quite a walk to reach the fields. Because settlers often carried over traditions from the communities they left behind in England, many transplanted them in their new settlements in New England. While many communities like Rowley and Newbury, Massachusetts, implemented the common-field system, others implemented other agricultural systems based on the practices they brought with them.41

39 Berkin, Women’s Voices, Women’s Lives, 95.
Regardless of their residence in communities that had either open- or closed-field organization, women still had to leave the intangible borders of their households to venture into the fields. When Mary Hadley’s uncle sent her to a field of corn to check if there were any cows in it, she covered the half mile on foot. Although it is unclear whether Hadley’s uncle sent her to look after the cattle or protect the crops, watching over livestock in the fields was a job often left to women. They watched to ensure that their oxen, cattle, and hogs did not amble onto another’s property or off into the wilderness. Richard Beckley’s wife made sure to drive her pigs into the family’s yard to keep them from wandering overnight, possibly an evening routine. At times, their need to protect their families’ property led to confrontations. Elizabeth Woodbury “watched two oxen feeding in her husband’s field…fearing that they should go into Peter Woolfe’s ground.”\(^{42}\) When Mrs. Wolfe caught Goody Woodbury on her husband’s land, the two women came to blows. Despite the occasional dispute, it would seem that colonial society accepted that women were capable of tending to livestock. Andrew Heddan informed Goody Mary Brown that since his stint of watching over the cattle in the common field had come to an end, “she must look after it herself.”\(^{43}\) William Cantlebury confronted Goodwife Rowden when he found her pigs in his peas, expecting her to look after the animals.\(^{44}\) Evidently, New Englanders accepted that women could and should oversee the fields when necessary; such occurrences were not extraordinary.

In addition to tending animals, women often aided men in planting and harvesting crops. Though women usually looked after livestock independently, they nearly always had company when engaged in agricultural labor. Twenty-three-year-old Mary Powell recounted several instances of working alongside Isaiah Wood to gather and husk corn. On one occasion, her mother even sent her to help Wood shuck corn “on a moonlight evening.”\(^{45}\) In court, an elderly woman testified that she and her husband had planted the lot of Mr. Lattamore in decades past, perhaps because they were his tenants. Joseph Dalaber’s wife worked beside her spouse in his lot planting corn. On one occasion, seventeen-year-old Mary Walton had some business with Goodwife Dalaber so the young woman first went to the Dalaber’s home in hopes of finding her


\(^{43}\) Dow, *ECM*, vol. III, 22.

\(^{44}\) Dow, *ECM*, vol. II, 100-101.

there. When she found Dalaber absent, the girl went to the planting lot and found her at work with her husband. Mary Walton was not shocked or dismayed to locate Goody Dalaber outside her household working in the lot. Although men oversaw cultivation, it was not uncommon for women to engage in this labor as well, especially during the crucial periods of planting and harvesting. A goodwife’s responsibility to act as helpmeet to her husband and any woman’s responsibility to prepare meals and collect provisions extended their domain outward from their households and into the fields.46

Though women had enough responsibilities in their households to keep them thoroughly occupied, they also had obligations to their friends, neighbors, and extended family that could not be ignored. Sometimes they ventured forth in search of aid for themselves – seeking help in a time of crisis or just setting out to borrow a bit of milk. At other times, they hastened to assist others. Frequently, women paid social visits, sharing meals with friendly families or working with other women to complete household tasks while sharing company. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has pointed out that this was quite common behavior: “neighborliness was a cultural norm in all the New England colonies.”47 The distance they covered to reach their destinations depended on the location of their own household. Some women only had to walk across the street to find company, some had to trek across fields, but all had sufficient reason for covering the distance. Unless the women lived in households more isolated from village or city centers, they most often reached their destinations on foot. Venturing out into the streets and into the homes of others was a fairly regular occurrence for most women.

Medical emergencies were certainly enough to pull women away from their usual chores to aid others in need, especially fellow women. When women went into labor, a midwife would often guide the birth of the child. Other women with healing or childbearing experience would also attend, whether or not a midwife could be present.48 Midwife Cromwell along with four other married women attended the birth of a child. Dorothy Cromwell and Abigail Lord were present for the birth of Goodwife Bly’s child. Bly most likely needed more than their helping hands; she required their emotional support because her child was stillborn. Childbearing women were not the only individuals in need of aid. Grace Dutch reported that “she was called in the night to a woman who was not well” and remained with the ailing woman for several

47 Ulrich, Good Wives, 51-52.
hours. Even when no relief could be offered, women lent their support. Joana Smith, Elizabeth Perkins, and Jane Jordon gathered at the bedside of ailing widow Alice Ward to provide comfort so that the woman did not perish alone. No matter the time of day or the circumstances, women, especially married women who likely had more experience in handling such situations, came to aid of the ailing.

Women also took to the streets in more mundane, yet necessary pursuits. Servants, young women, and married women all had errands to run. Husbands, mothers, masters, and numerous others might send women to carry out various tasks, or women would often take care of the matter themselves. Since even the most diligent goodwife could rarely run a self-supporting household, women often called on one another for much needed supplies. Mary Powell, who had often been sent by her mother to aid with the harvest, also had to go in search of bread on one occasion. Goodwife Elizabeth Pinion visited the Turner home to borrow “lees of beer, cider.” Unfortunately, not all were inclined to be so generous with their stores. When Elizabeth Goodman came to the home of Allen Ball to borrow some buttermilk, his wife refused to oblige the visitor saying that “she cared not for her company.” Personal disputes aside, most women seemed happy to assist those in need because they would likely need to ask a few favors of their own in the near future.

While women often needed to run errands to meet their household needs, women shared their work to ease the burden and, undoubtedly, to enjoy a bit of social stimulation. They routinely shared in the labor of producing their household goods. When Elizabeth Whittier went to do some washing with Goodwife Herrick, “she rode with said Herrick,” suggesting that the two women may have lived some distance apart since Whittier did not travel on foot. Hence even when women did not live in close quarters, they saw the value of working together and might trek miles to do so. One incident highlights how valuable such an occupation could be to some women. On several occasions, Goodwife Quilter visited her daughter’s home to plead that her daughter and another woman “to goe over to the sayd Quilters and sit and worke with hir to bare hir company.” Whether women weaved, spun, washed, or husked corn, this shared work,

52 Dexter, New Haven Town Records, 1649-1662, 252.
54 Dow, ECM, vol. III, 140-141.
though completed within one household, encouraged women to move beyond their own domestic spaces while still completing essential tasks.

Amidst the daily toil, men and women were often able to find time to enjoy the company of their friends and family. More often than not, women were accompanied by others when they visited homes of others to share conversation and meals. Anise Redding and Ellen Dane stopped in at the Powell home to discuss the licentious behavior of a local man. After visiting one man’s home, Mary Woods walked to Ephraim Herrick’s home in the company of four or five others to pay another social call. Whether the meetings were planned, as when Goodwife Wolfe shared meals at the Emery home, or whether they were more spontaneous, as when Rebecca Shatswell suddenly decided to speak with Goodwife Quilter, such gatherings were commonplace occurrences. Colonial communities were very much interconnected socially and economically so such meetings happened quite regularly. At the same time, evidence indicates that society strongly deterred women, especially those unmarried, from sharing the company of unmarried men without some chaperone. Such private meetings were discouraged because they were seen as possibly encouraging wicked behavior.\textsuperscript{55} As Protestant New England communities worked to create a godly society, such sinful actions could not be tolerated.

To maintain strong Protestant communities, churches provided moral guidance and spiritual sustenance. For all members of a community, attending services at the meetinghouse was an important weekly experience. All were expected to attend regular services, unless some extreme circumstance kept them from appearing at the meetinghouse. Joining the congregation on Sabbath day aided in spiritual growth and provided an opportunity for all residents to come together as a collective – a spiritual and social event. Meetings also provided an opportunity to seek counsel from ministers.\textsuperscript{56}

Everyone attended church meetings on the Sabbath. Indeed, absence from services had legal consequences in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Several court proceedings concern those who failed to attend regular church meetings. One entry in the Essex Quarterly Court records listed the names and punishments of those who deviated from acceptable churchgoing behavior: “Fined for frequent absence from the public ordinances: Joseph Buffum and his wife, 30s; Samuell Gaskin, 20s; wife of George Gardner, 10s; wife of Josiah Sothwick, 10s; wife of Mr. Thomas

Gardner, 10s; John Smith, 20s; John Small, 20s; John Burton, 20s.” In this case, authorities used the law to punish those who had embraced Quakerism and refused to attend meetings on those grounds. Those who worked in some capacity on Sabbath received even greater censure. Goodwife Brabrook had to appear in court “for breach of the Sabbath by carrying a half bushel of corn or pease with her in the morning when she was going to public meeting.” Countless such cases were recorded in court documents. Anyone who failed to attend worship services could be censured and fined.

Women were therefore expected to get to church services, a weekly event that could involve travel. The distance from one’s home to the church meetinghouse most likely determined whether women walked or rode to the assembly. Mothers had to manage the additional burden of conveying their children to church, which could be quite a feat if the family resided miles from the meetinghouse. Inclement weather also posed a potential problem. As a result of these burdens, women living in outlying areas voiced their concerns over the placement of the meetinghouse. Some even petitioned for constructing new meetinghouses in more convenient locations for those who lived farther from the nucleus of the community. Of course, building additional meetinghouses meant generating public funds through taxation, so such petitions often led to disagreements among residents. Though the realities of colonial life made regular attendance seem like an unwanted obligation, most women desired the opportunity to join the congregation and geographic separation from the meetinghouse could hinder their spiritual needs that were so crucial to their experience.

As men and women attended weekly services at the meeting house, it functioned as a shared space between men and women. Likewise, households, fields, and streets were integrated spaces that women routinely occupied, much the same as their male counterparts. Places of business were slightly more restricted. Though women did venture into shops and taverns and their company was welcomed, men held a more significant presence in these spaces. Because men engaged in all kinds of trade much more frequently than women, they had more reason to visit businesses and carry out various transactions.

57 Dow, ECM, vol. III, 381.
The legal status of colonial women influenced their limited opportunities in commercial pursuits. “English law restricted the participation of women, especially married women, in the labor market, in trade and in the crafts and professions.”\(^{61}\) Married women could not buy or sell property or sign contracts, which often hindered what economic skills they might possess. Despite the law, women often engaged in trade. Because of the sharp realities of colonial life, the courts sometimes approved of or simply overlooked goodwives’ active participation in trade, especially when the proceedings benefitted all involved. Instead of providing aid for those whose husbands were absent or deceased, colonial governments allowed women to support themselves through commerce in ways previously barred from them. If husbands could not carry on with their business due to absence or illness, their wives were often capable and willing to take charge as necessary. One evening in 1676, Rebecca Hewett visited the Stillson home and “inquired for [Grace Stillson’s] husband because she wished to get a pair of shoes.”\(^{62}\) Grace Stillson dealt with the visitor, informing her that her husband did not carry anything that would fit. Hewett then described precisely what shoes she wanted, and Grace’s husband measured her for them when he returned home.\(^{63}\) Grace Stillson and her customer had little trouble entering into a business transaction on their own, though Grace’s husband completed it. Other women visited shops for various purposes. Goodwives Rust, Elizabeth Gibbs, and Sarah Boynton of Essex County, Massachusetts, would stop in to purchase or repair shoes, much like Rebecca Hewett.\(^{64}\)

One incident in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1654 reveals that the mill, though operated by men, was certainly within the domain of local women. Testimony in a case concerning debt shows it was not uncommon for women to frequent the mill to have their corn ground. Martha Beale, Sara Bradstreet, Mary Rowland, Joan Pitford, and Elizabeth Leg had all been to the mill around the time of the proceedings under scrutiny. One man even deposed that Mary Rowland had gotten into an argument with the miller’s wife about being shortchanged on her cornmeal. In this case and in others, helping provide and collect resources for the household


\(^{63}\) Dow, *ECM*, vol. VI, 149-150.

\(^{64}\) Dow, *ECM*, vol. V, 315; Dow, *ECM*, vol. VI, 151; Dow, *ECM*, vol. VIII, 279.
extended the range of women’s movement into an establishment some might imagine to have been reserved for men.\(^{65}\)

While trade discussions could be had at local taverns, these public spaces allowed for socializing and political discussions. With society’s concern for the morality of women, it might seem plausible for New England colonies to bar women from frequenting public houses, but no such laws existed. Sharon V. Salinger argues that, despite the lack of legal restrictions, respectable colonial women rarely patronized taverns. When they did so, women often came not to drink, but to gather supplies. “They purchased a huge variety of goods – salt, gloves, nails, beef, sugar, rope, linen, buttons, butter, and more.”\(^{66}\) So it would seem that even when visiting the tavern, women did so more often to meet her household obligations. Therefore, though women entered taverns, they encountered a different experience than that of men. These hubs of drink and conversation were gendered spaces dominated by men. Whereas women were mostly welcomed into shops, though they engaged in commerce less often than men, women faced greater restrictions on their interactions within taverns.

In addition to running ordinary errands, women occasionally had to appear at court gatherings to give testimony or face punishment. Court meetings were another necessary function in colonial society in which women shared the space with men, but at a lesser capacity. Men held positions of power within the courts and appeared in greater numbers. Still, despite women’s limited legal status, they still made significant contributions before the bar, especially in providing crucial testimony.\(^{67}\) They also provided essential documentation to the courts, brought forth complaints, and answered charges laid against them. Some women even put forth suits of their own.

Women’s presence in the fields, streets, neighboring homes, shops, and mills allowed them to see and hear much of what occurred in their communities. Hence, their testimony in court often proved very important in determining the outcomes of countless cases. Edith Pitts, along with Samuel Jackson, appeared in court and provided their testimony of the abuse Edith received from John Emerson. In a case concerning slander, fifteen-year-old Mary Dutch provided testimony alleging that Mary Davis had indeed spent a night alone in the company of

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John Meager – testimony that helped reverse the original verdict. Midwives, as well as other women who attended births, sometimes had to provide testimony, especially in paternity cases. In Anne Orthwood’s Bastard, John Ruston Pagan discusses how county magistrates employed midwives to ascertain who fathered illegitimate children. If a pregnant woman refused to disclose the information herself, then the midwife sometimes tried to force it from her during the pain of childbirth. Then, the midwife’s testimony could later be used to determine who would provide for the child. When a woman accused Joshua Codner of fathering her child, midwife Cromwell appeared in court in Salem, Massachusetts, to testify that her findings supported the claims of Mr. Codner.68

In addition to testimony, women also brought important documentation before the bar. Most frequently, this involved widows who were asked to bring the wills or inventories of their late husbands to be reviewed and administered by the court, or to settle disputes about wills. Widows Margaret Rix and Freeborn Sollas brought inventories of their husbands’ estates.69 Though it was more common for men to present lawsuits, some widows did come to court to do so when they felt it necessary. Elizabeth Chase and Elizabeth Blessdale both sued men to retrieve debts owed to them; Blessdale won her case. Judith Stillman sued a man “for detaining her thirds of land sold to [the] defendant by her deceased husband.”70

Women also came to court to answer to accusations, and if found guilty, to receive their punishment. Charges of adultery, fornication, abuse, slander, theft, and other crimes brought women to court meetings. In New Haven, Connecticut, Ralph Line’s wife “was called befor[e] the Court, and charged that she hath gon[e] on in a tract of stealing and lying for a great while together.”71 Line confessed to committing many of the crimes and the court sentenced her to the stocks because she was with child; harsher punishment would be meted out after she had given birth. Elizabeth Goodman appeared in court due to “the suspition of her lewd miscarraiges” for which she spent time in jail.72 And Mary Bidgood had to appear in court for living apart from her husband who had gone to England, which violated English law. The courts insisted that she

72 Dexter, New Haven Town Records, 1649-1662, 246-247; 256-257.
join him, and eventually arranged for her to sail to England to return to her proper place at her in her husband’s household.\textsuperscript{73}

Because county courts met in larger towns, many of those who had to appear before the bar had to travel quite a distance. Though court records do not offer details of how men and women reached court, those who traveled any distance from their homes to the meetinghouse could not have done so on foot. If a woman had to travel from her home in Salem, Massachusetts, to the quarterly court in Ipswich, she likely would have had to travel on horseback in the company of her husband or some other male kin. Their party would probably have had to ford or ferry across rivers and perhaps face inclement weather as they covered the fifteen or so miles to reach their destination. Other women who attended court faced a similar prospect, but their duty as faithful Christians, helpful neighbors, and responsible community members obligated women to journey farther from home than they usually would in their daily routine. But unless a woman was ailing or heavy with child, the authorities expected women called to court to play their part. Requiring them to travel miles from home was not considered an extreme imposition.

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As the spring of 1663 approached, John Rolfe left his home in Newbury, Massachusetts, to travel south to Nantucket. Since his wife Mary would be alone in their home during his absence, John tried to ensure that she would be provided for before setting off. He paid a visit to neighbors John and Mary Emery, asking if they would allow their daughter Betty Webster to stay at the Rolfe home and serve as a companion to his wife while he was away. The Emerys consented and, furthermore, “John Emerie promist to be as a father to me [Mary Rolfe] and a fr[i]end.”\textsuperscript{74} John Rolfe left home with the comforting knowledge that his wife would be well looked after. Unfortunately, soon after Rolfe set off, Mr. Henry Greenland, a physician and a stranger to the people of Newbury, arrived in town bringing plenty of mischief with him.\textsuperscript{75}

Since John Emery had promised to watch over Mary Rolfe, she often went with his daughter to the Emery’s home to share meals and company. It appears that Emery also entertained travelers on a rather regular basis, and accordingly provided lodgings for Mr. Greenland. In the time spent in one another’s company at the Emery home, Goodwife Rolfe

\textsuperscript{73} Dow, \textit{ECM}, vol. I, 199, 266.
\textsuperscript{74} Dow, \textit{ECM}, vol. III, 48, 53-54, 88-89.
\textsuperscript{75} Dow, \textit{ECM}, vol. III, 48, 68, 88.
claimed that Mr. Greenland made unwanted sexual advances toward her. When Emery, in response to Rolfe’s accusations, “made no answer but Laught” and refused to aid her, the goodwife dealt with the situation as best she could, turning to a handful of women for support. Mary Rolfe’s mother eventually convinced her daughter to submit a petition to the court, accusing Mr. Greenland of soliciting her to adultery.\textsuperscript{76}

The quarterly court records of Essex County, Massachusetts, offer a detailed account of these incidents, largely because of the contributions of many deponents and witnesses. Other historians might look at this case and value it for what it reveals about women’s roles in court proceedings because it involves numerous female deponents. One might use it to study how colonial society perceived and reacted to accusations of adultery and other immoral behavior, or one could examine what it proffers about the various relationships between colonists. What most would overlook is what this evidence reveals about the geographic movement of colonial women and the spaces into which they ventured. The trial proceedings that followed Mary Rolfe’s accusations highlight how women, as goodwives, daughters, friends, and neighbors, moved frequently, with purpose, and with relative ease about their towns and villages.

This case demonstrates that Mary Rolfe not only moved quite regularly between her home and that of the Emery’s, but that many of the other women of Newbury had occasion to make their way about town on a regular basis. Mary Rolfe continued to visit the Emery’s, even as the abuse continued. She and her friend Betty Webster, “having Received severall abuses…did agree to be still together and to help [one] another,” often braving the Emery home together. Even her infant that still needed nursing did not confine Rolfe to her home. Sixteen-year-old Sara Knight deposed that she ventured over to the Emery’s not for a social call, but “to grind some corn to make some samp” when she overheard him calling Rolfe a liar. In a piece of testimony concerning the charges against Mr. Greenland, Goodwife Emery, Hester Bond, and Elizabeth Webster claimed that they were at John Emery’s house with Mary Rolfe when the women made a wager concerning the wine they were enjoying. When Elizabeth lost the wager, Rolfe declared that they all would drink liquor in her home the next night, which they did.\textsuperscript{77} The female witnesses involved had several opportunities to get out of their own households for necessary errands and social calls.

\textsuperscript{76} Dow, \textit{ECM}, vol. III, 48-49, 52, 67-68.
\textsuperscript{77} Dow, \textit{ECM}, vol. III, 49-51.
Once the women in Mary Rolfe’s family heard about what she had suffered, it seems that very little would have kept them from aiding their loved one. Mary’s sister Sarah first noticed something was amiss when she saw Mary at church and noticed that she looked very upset. When Sarah inquired, Mary explained how Greenland had been mistreating her. Concerned that the rogue would make further advances towards Mary that night, Sarah pleaded that her mother allow her to go to Mary. Rebecca Bishop, the girls’ mother, decided to go herself the following day. She remained with Mary, trying to fend off Greenland and get to the truth. Bishop went home that night after hearing Mary’s account of what had occurred between herself and the physician.

Still worried that Greenland would take advantage of her lonesome daughter, she sent Sarah with another – presumably more trustworthy – young man to Mary’s home. When Sarah returned the next morning, Bishop set out to visit Mary again, but came upon John Emery along the way. She accompanied him to his home as he assured Mary’s mother that “there should bee no more harm done.” Then she set out yet again with Goodwife Emery to speak to their daughters, Mary Rolfe and Betty Webtser. Finally, both women decided that they could no longer keep quiet about the accusations against Greenland. Both Mary’s mother and sister felt obligated to do all in their power to protect their kinswoman, and their noble aim carried them on foot into the streets, the homes of others, the church, and the county court, in the end.

This trial, like many others in the surviving court records, demonstrates that colonial women took to the streets and paths around town as necessary. Whether they went abroad to make social calls, complete essential tasks, or protect family, women moved about their own communities quite regularly. Their obligations as kin, neighbors, and general caretakers extended their duties beyond the confines of their households, and their traffic underscores the wide range of spaces they lived in every day.

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CHAPTER 3: TRAVELING WOMEN

Women moved about their own localities with relative ease and regularity, but some traveled even farther abroad. Their movement was often necessitated by many of the same factors that defined their movement within their own communities. The women required to appear in court usually had to journey beyond their usual, everyday domain. They took to the roads to visit family and oversee business affairs. Some traveled within their counties and some even crossed colonial borders. As opposed to their movement around their own neighborhoods and towns, women never traveled far alone. Most often, male kin or trusted male acquaintances accompanied women on long-distant journeys. Although women traveled abroad in fewer numbers and with greater infrequency than they traversed the more familiar streets and homes of their own villages, it would seem that women who made longer journeys were not deemed extraordinary. Indeed, it would seem that, for the most part, their peers accepted that women could and sometimes needed to journey far from home. Even though most of a woman’s responsibilities focused on her household and her community, her social and economic networks sometimes necessitated that she temporarily leave home and set out on the road.

Little evidence of women traveling across New England in the seventeenth century exists. The eighteenth century, however, offers a handful of well documented women, such as Elizabeth Marsh and Elizabeth Ashbridge, who stand out as examples of women who enjoyed great freedom of movement, traveling across land and sea. Though she spent much of her youth in England, Elizabeth Marsh became a transcontinental traveler, visiting Menorca, Morocco, Gibraltar, and India during the second half of the eighteenth century. She often resided in each location for at least a few months, if not a few years. Though she had connections to the Royal Navy and overseas commerce through her family, she was not a particularly well-educated woman; nor did she come from great wealth. Despite her financial dependency and her two young children, Marsh even managed to explore India on an 18-month overland journey, accompanied not by her husband, but by a group of soldiers, guides, and a chosen male companion.79 Marsh was an enthusiastic traveler. Though her gender certainly influenced her traveling experiences, it did not hinder her from crossing oceans to visit exotic lands. Her story

survives as a great example of a female traveler, but it took place late in the eighteenth century and does not encompass the American colonies.

Elizabeth Ashbridge, on the other hand, did travel around North America. Having been widowed and shunned by her family in England, she traveled to America in 1732 and served three years as an indentured servant. Once freed, she married a schoolmaster who often moved throughout the colonies in search of work. Ashbridge acquired a keen interest in the Quaker faith and, defying her husband’s wishes, she regularly walked to meetings held miles from her residence. Her curiosity about Quakerism turned serious after she left her husband in Rhode Island and traveled alone to visit her kin in Pennsylvania. The account she left behind is a rich source on how one woman moved about the British Isles and the American colonies, but her experiences come too late to aid a study of seventeenth-century women. Still, her mobility, and that of Elizabeth Marsh, suggests that women in the eighteenth century could travel great distances with a degree of independence.

Although earlier sources are not as rich, enough evidence has survived to show that women could and did venture beyond their own communities. What evidence of female travelers in seventeenth-century New England remains often lacks detail about how far they traveled, how they reached their destinations, and what they encountered along the way. Piecing the scant evidence together helps to fill in the gaps and reveal commonalities.

The court records that prove essential in mapping the geography of women’s lives within their own communities also offer occasional evidence of long-distance travel. In the summer of 1660, John Ward and Thomas Mekings deposed that “they met with the wife of John Kitching, riding upon the highway,” sharing the horse with another man. This incident led to accusations of licentiousness against Goodwife Kitching. Unfortunately, the records do not reveal why the woman was on the road with a man who was not her husband. Perhaps her husband knew that the man escorted her, or perhaps the accusations were correct. Either way, it reveals that Kitching was on the highway and she was not alone. Women journeying farther from home also often had to use ferries to cross waterways that interrupted pathways. Mrs. Cromwell waited at

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Richard Stackhouse’s home for the ferry to take her across. Jane Lord also made use of a ferry while in the company of daughter and son-in-law.\textsuperscript{82}

Other recorded incidents demonstrate more clearly that women traveled over greater distances. Lydia Brown reported that her parents traveled together to Boston. Although the records do not reveal which town her mother and father set out from, they journeyed from somewhere within Essex County south into Suffolk County to reach Boston. Edmund Bridges asked his sister if she would accompany him to Salem, but she decided to stay behind in his home while Edmund set out with his wife. Since the record suggests that the siblings were from Topsfield, Massachusetts, the Bridges would have covered at least ten miles to reach Salem. Bridges certainly saw no trouble in traveling with one or two women to neighboring towns. Jonathan Hudson and his wife reported that, one night in 1667 a Mr. Pinshin accompanied by “a daughter of Dexter of Maulden” arrived at their home.\textsuperscript{83} The stranger claimed that they had been pursued by some men on the road as they traveled on horseback, so he asked for shelter for the night. The Hudson’s acquiesced. Mr. Pinshin was no doubt grateful for the protection for him and his female travel companion; as he explained it “he had brought her from her father’s [and] he was resolved to carry her home again.”\textsuperscript{84} All of these women reached their destinations most likely on horseback and in the company of a man, most often but not always a relative.

On a summer night in 1679, a fire broke out in Boston that damaged part of the city. In the confusion that followed, some took advantage of the chaos, stealing undamaged goods to be resold for their own profit. Prior to the tragedy, Lucretia Darby arranged for John and Samuel Dutch “to bring her goods in their boat from Boston to Ipswich.”\textsuperscript{85} The various goods waited in a warehouse until John Dutch could load them on his sloop and carry out Lucretia’s instructions. About a week after the fire, Lucretia and her husband Roger journeyed to Boston to find out if the fire had damaged their possessions. After doing some investigating of their own, questioning the Dutchs and several others, and searching sloops and warehouses, Lucretia found sufficient evidence to accuse Samuel and John Dutch of stealing most of her goods during the fire. Though

\textsuperscript{82} Dow, ECM, vol. II, 218, 219; Dow, ECM, vol. IX, 275.
\textsuperscript{83} Dow, ECM, vol. III, 138, 398, 444.
\textsuperscript{84} Dow, ECM, vol. III, 444.
the materials survived the fire, the Dutchs seized much of the cloth, ribbon, bridles, buttons, and other goods, which they sold to others in Boston. 86

Lucretia and her husband brought the case to court after losing a long list of wares to the Dutchs. Evidence suggests that the wares requiring careful handling might have been merchandise for a shop she owned in Ipswich. She refers to the property as “my goods,” and during the trial, one deponent mentioned “dame Darby’s shop.” 87 And although her husband accompanied her to Boston following the fire, Lucretia appears to have been in charge of the entire business transaction and took an active role in determining the truth about the fate of her wares and seeking justice in the courts. 88 Although Lucretia was among the minority of women engaged in business, she was not alone; in just this case mention was made of a few other women who owned their own shops in Boston. 89 Her economic interests meant that Lucretia likely traveled to and from Boston on several other occasions to oversee shipping, trade, and other business transactions. Hence, women not only traveled to visit family and friends, but at times, also to aid in their husband’s or to conduct their own business affairs.

While the previous examples arose from court records, one man recorded not only his own travel experiences, but also those of his spouse. Captain Lawrence Hammond of Massachusetts kept a diary in the late seventeenth century in which he recorded various events he thought noteworthy – the weather, the comings and goings of ships, lists of the sick and the dead, local events. Over the many years he wrote in the diary, he recorded several journeys that he took with his wife Anne at his side. Anne accompanied him on the road many times, often when they visited family and friends. If Lawrence kept diligent records of every venture that took him away from home, then he only traveled without his wife on two occasions when he had business to settle in Boston. On May 11, 1688, Hammond and his wife traveled by horse to Wenham, where they stayed five days, then went to Salem for a day before returning home. About a month later they rode to Concord to visit Madame Bulkley for three days. In March of the following year, they journeyed to Boston to visit a Mr. Clutterbuck. Days later, Lawrence went with his wife, daughter Abigail (who could have been about two months pregnant at the time), and Abigail’s husband, Luke, to Winnisimet (today Chelsea, Massachusetts). A few

months later, Lawrence and Anne rode back to Wenham to visit her Hammond’s brother, once again stopping in Salem – this time dining with another relative of his wife’s – before heading home.  

In March 1692, the Hammonds, their daughter Abigail, and her second husband James left for Barnstable on horseback. Unfortunately, “at Roxbury [we] were informed the waters were so high and wayes so bad we could not pass.” After returning to Boston, the family took a sloop as far as Cohasset and traveled on land for six days before reaching their destination. After staying in Barnstable for nearly a fortnight, they made their way home, stopping in Sandwich, Plymouth, and Braintree along the way. A year later, Lawrence escorted his wife to Wenham, possibly to visit her family there. Over a week later, Lawrence records that his “wife returned from Wenham.” His phrasing suggests that though he escorted her to her destination, Lawrence left her in good company and returned home. And although he does not mention if she had a traveling companion, it is unlikely that she would cover the distance alone. Besides his wife and daughter, Lawrence only makes note of one other woman who traveled abroad, though he provides little detail. He wrote that “Mrs. Jose went [toward] Pascataq this day, her son Richard Lee sent to our Hou[se], there to stay till her return.” Lawrence does not explain why the woman had to leave, but Mrs. Jose was absent for almost a month.

From Captain Hammond’s brief entries, it would seem that he encouraged his wife to travel at his side and that they did so in large part to sustain family ties. Even as he recorded violent clashes with Indians in the surrounding areas, Hammond did not seek to restrict his wife’s movements. None of his children from previous marriages lived except for two daughters who were of marriageable age when Lawrence began the diary, so he and Anne probably did not have to fret about their well-being when they needed to spend a few days out of town. The diary also reveals the author’s strong interest in shipping and military affairs. Serving as captain of a foot company in Charlestown, deputy to the General Court from Charlestown, and the Recorder of Middlesex County for many years, Lawrence Hammond would have been a fairly prominent

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individual of some influence in his community. Perhaps his position afforded him and his wife more opportunities to travel about Massachusetts than other colonials. The diary does show that with each of these jaunts about the colony Lawrence’s wife and daughter never traveled alone. It also reveals that they always traveled with purpose, even if the business conducted mostly concerned the men involved. Their gender required that they not venture forth on their own, but it did not keep them absolutely confined to the familiarity of their everyday spaces within town.

These bits of fragmentary evidence offer some insight into where women traveled, with whom, and why, but they do not offer much detail about those who ventured away from home. Although no extensive records of seventeenth-century female travelers exist, one woman, Sarah Kemble Knight, did keep a thorough journal of her journey from Boston to New York in 1704. While she set out in the early eighteenth century, her experiences can help extrapolate information from less detailed sources of the previous century and provide some understanding of women’s movement over longer distances. Moreover, her story touches on many of the issues raised in the fragmentary evidence presented above – travel on horseback, use of ferries, need for male escorts, visits to family and friends, seeing to business dealings – but in greater detail. Perhaps most important of all, her journal reveals how those she encounters react to her as a female traveler. Though her gender did help shape her venture, it did not keep her from braving the colonial wilderness and it did not prevent others from welcoming her as a common traveler.

“*Wee made Good speed along*”: The Journey of Sarah Kemble Knight

As the sun fell silently towards the horizon of Narragansett country in Massachusetts, the thoughts of Sarah Kemble Knight no doubt drifted toward where she would rest her weary body that night. She had only been one day out on her journey from her comfortable home in Boston to New York, but the miles of travel on horseback and the stresses of making one’s way through the wilds and towns of colonial New England had already begun to tax her. Unfortunately, any hopes of finding decent lodging before nightfall were dashed when her guide informed her that they would not reach any such places for another fourteen miles or so. Moreover, he explained, they would have to ford a fast-flowing river before they reached their destination. She would have to cross another dangerous river – the second that day – and with only the light of the moon to guide her if the trees overhead did not shut out its light. The prospect did not sit well with her.

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But if she wanted to find sleep in a warm inn that night, she must ride on and confront what possible hazards lay ahead. And that is precisely what Sarah did.\textsuperscript{95}

That Tuesday evening, October 3, 1704, Sarah Kemble Knight had only just begun her five-month trip that would carry her from Boston to New York and back again. By the time she returned home, Sarah had traveled roughly 400 miles through largely unfamiliar territory. She used several different guides to escort her through wooded, uneven terrain crisscrossed with waterways and dotted with towns and isolated dwellings. As Sarah made her way, she took note of her experiences, both pleasant and not. In her journal, she recorded the amusements, dangers, and discomforts of long-distance travel. She wrote of the people she encountered, the fare she ate, the lodgings she used, the towns she rode through.\textsuperscript{96} Despite Sarah’s dry humor that often seeped into her accounts, she deemed her journey and the observations she made throughout its duration important enough to record and share with others.

Since then, historians have also recognized the importance of her journal. Ever since its first publication in 1825, many have read it as a rich source on the people, places, and customs of colonial Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York. Historians such as Cornelia Hughes Dayton, Christopher L. Tomlins, and Bruce H. Mann have cited Sarah’s observations in their studies of law and society in colonial New England. Literature enthusiasts have enjoyed her account for its personality and wit.\textsuperscript{97} Sarah’s account also holds significance because it survives as perhaps the only detailed travel log that recounts one woman’s extensive movement through early colonial America. Since it is probably the most fruitful source relating to women’s travel, it merits a closer look.

An in-depth study of Sarah’s personal account of her long-distance journey reveals much about women who were on the move at the time. By analyzing her journal, one can determine how she made her way across colonies, how she organized her journey, whom she traveled with, whom she encountered along the way, how such people reacted to a female traveler, and what Knight thought about her situation. This analysis will not only enhance our understanding of the mechanics of travel; it will also indicate how one woman approached long-distance treks and her

\textsuperscript{95} Sarah Kemble Knight, \textit{The Journal of Madam Knight} (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1972), 4-9.
\textsuperscript{96} Knight, \textit{The Journal of Madam Knight}, 1.
more general thoughts on traveling women. Perhaps most importantly, this study can provide insight into the attitudes of Sarah’s contemporaries. Were they shocked or upset to encounter a woman traveling relatively alone? Did they balk at her audacity? Did they regard her differently from other travelers because she was of “the weaker sex”? Or did they accept her as they would any other traveler? Anyone who reads Sarah’s account would find that nearly everyone she met sees her position as unremarkable. Though colonial roads and pathways saw more men, the byways were places women could venture as well.

A study of this travel log also allows one to draw further conclusions from less detailed sources, such as the diary of Captain Lawrence Hammond. It can also suggest how to interpret more fragmentary pieces of evidence to better illustrate the extent and restraints of women’s mobility in early colonial America. It would be foolish to take one woman’s observations as representative of all female travelers and their encounters, but Knight’s account can be used as a guide to help extrapolate information from brief, scattered references to women’s movement.

Before turning to the contents of the journal of Sarah Kemble Knight, it is helpful first to become acquainted with the author. On April 19, 1666, merchant Thomas Kemble and his wife Elizabeth welcomed their first daughter into their lives. One of ultimately five or six children, Sarah grew up in Boston and at age twenty-three married Richard Knight. Most researchers have concluded that her husband was most likely a shipmaster. In the spring of 1689, Sarah gave birth to Elizabeth, their only child. She kept a shop and took up odd jobs to supplement their income. After seventeen years of marriage, Richard passed away. Sarah never remarried. The widow continued to run the household she shared with her mother and daughter and her shop in Moon Street. Elizabeth married in 1713, and Sarah followed her to New London, Connecticut, a few months later. She kept some of her property in Boston, but settled into her new surroundings, running another shop and an inn and also engaging in trade with Indians. Records indicate that she owned more than one farm and bought up land in the surrounding area throughout the remainder of her life. When she died in September 1727, her estate was valued at more than £1800.98

Sarah had an eye for business, was capable of managing her own life, and possessed not an ounce of timidity. As her travel diary reveals, she confidently made her way through the

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world, a deft negotiator and manager. Though not fearless, she faced down her terrors then moved forward in a very levelheaded manner. She expressed herself freely and demonstrated an undeniable wit. Though Madame Knight was a somewhat prominent member of her community, she was not pretentious.\textsuperscript{99} She had a feisty personality that proved handy as she rode across the colonies, navigating through a “man’s world”.

When Sarah set out from Boston on October 2, 1704 for New York, she knew that she faced a 200-mile trek to reach her ultimate destination. Though she encountered many obstacles along the way that delayed her journey, she was not on the move for the duration of the five months she records. She spent two months in New Haven, Connecticut, visiting family and perhaps carrying out some business. Once she reached New York, she spent about a fortnight handling whatever affairs had drawn her there. When Sarah was on the road, she traveled day after day, only pausing to take meals, bait horses, and sleep in the evenings. She and her traveling companions rose early to spend as much time as possible on the road during the daylight hours. It took seven days on the road to ride from Boston to New Haven, and about two days more to reach New York – at least on the outgoing journey.

She did not explain her reasons for traveling to New Haven and New York; she simply stated that she had “business lying unfinished” there.\textsuperscript{100} It seems that whatever business called for her attention concerned her family because she hinted that her kinsman Mr. Thomas Trowbridge needed to travel with her to New York to put the matter to rest. Sarah later mentioned that her return home was delayed in New Haven because she had to wait for “the distribution of the Estate,” which could indicate that she was helping to sort out a relative’s will.\textsuperscript{101} Whatever motivated Sarah to venture away from home was likely quite important because it took her away from her fifteen-year-old daughter and drew her out during some of the coldest months of the year. She was on the road from October to December, then again from the end of December to March.

The journal that Sarah left behind is a rich source because she served as such an observant reporter. She acted as narrator to her journey, but she did not simply make notes of the mechanics of her travel (such as how far they traveled, how, or when). She took in her surroundings with avid interest. While sojourning with family in New Haven, she recorded an


\textsuperscript{100} Knight, \textit{The Journal of Madam Knight}, 25.

\textsuperscript{101} Knight, \textit{The Journal of Madam Knight}, 25, 37.
extensive personal study and evaluation of the laws and customs of Connecticut and compared her observations to her own experience of living on Massachusetts. Although she did not seem to take as strong an interest in New York during her visit, she also explained some of the customs that colonists enjoyed there during the winter months. Her narrative of her outgoing journey is slightly different than that of her trek homeward. As she and her guides made their way toward New York, Sarah seemed mostly consumed with reflections on the expedition itself. Her focus remained on how she accomplished each leg of the journey and all that she experienced in doing so. While traveling back to Boston Sarah did not necessarily neglect to make some similar observations, but she broadened her focus. She could look beyond the pathway ahead or the lodging that sheltered her to scrutinize the scenery – especially the towns through which they passed.\textsuperscript{102} It would seem that after facing the many obstacles that arose along the road on her way to New York, Sarah became a slightly more relaxed traveler, able to look about her and take in more.

**Organizing the Journey**

Before Sarah Kemble Knight even stepped out her door, mounted her horse, and trotted beyond the outskirts of Boston, she had to consider how to manage her household in her absence and how she would get to New York. In 1704, her daughter was fifteen and not yet married, and her husband was still alive. Sarah leaves no notes on how the situation at home was handled during her journey, but perhaps Sarah’s mother looked after Elizabeth when her father was taken away by his occupation. Sarah’s absence might have also served as a chance for her daughter to try her hand at household management, one of the primary responsibilities she would have when she married. Whatever was decided, no doubt the household continued to function in its mistress’s absence.

As for the journey itself, Knight, for the most part, seems to have planned as much of the mechanics of her trip as possible before setting out. First, she made the decision to travel by horseback; means of available transportation were limited, so this is not surprising. As a shopkeeper, Sarah likely made shorter trips to conduct business, though no extant records can prove this to be true. Still, for a thirty-nine-year-old woman who had lived all of her life in Boston, such a trek may have seemed daunting. During her travels, Sarah also had to resign herself to using canoes and ferries to cross rivers that could not be forded on horseback.

Second, she had to arrange travel companions who would escort and lead her through the various stages of the trip. Since she was a woman, it would have been considered unwise and possibly dangerous for her to set out without a male guide. Though her husband apparently still lived at the time, he most likely could not accompany Sarah because he was either away on business or could not leave his work for such a long span of time. Still, she preferred to rely on her kinsman to fill this position, and she enlisted their help wherever possible. On the first day, she set out with her kinsman Captain Robert Luist and traveled with him as far as Dedham, which was roughly ten to fifteen miles away, where she was to meet up with the western post rider. Relation Thomas Trowbridge conducted her from New Haven to New York and back. Even if she had never met these kinsmen before, she considered them reliable, trustworthy fellows who would safeguard her welfare.

Though her relatives willingly guided her through territory known to them, she did need to utilize unfamiliar male guides where her family members could not lead the way. From the outset, it would seem that she intended to accompany the post whenever she had no family to serve as her escort. The postal system established in the colonies largely imitated the structure used in England, consisting of offices along the coast that connected the port towns. Postriders carried the post in satchels secured behind them on their horse’s back, using the roads and ferries to deliver their burdens. Postriders covered great distances of throughout the colonies, and travelers in need of a guide could turn to postriders because of their familiarity with the terrain. Bumps along the way occasionally upset these initial plans, forcing her to seek out other relative strangers to keep her safe and on course. On October 2, Sarah planned to meet with the post rider near Dedham. “But he not coming, I resolved to go to Billingses where he [the post man] used to lodg[e]” to spend the night and wait for him to arrive. Since she did not know how to reach the Billings’s home, Sarah had to hire someone to guide her. In the tavern, a man named John offered to take up the task depending on how she could compensate him. After quickly settling the terms, they set out for the twelve-mile ride. Though he was a stranger to her, John seemed a rather pleasant guide who entertained her with stories, did not overtax her with a swift pace, and delivered her safely to the Billings’s home.

105 Knight, The Journal of Madam Knight, 1-3.
At times, others joined Sarah and her guide. Setting out for Kingston from Mr. Haven’s house in Narragansett country, she and the post man were joined by a French doctor. A New Haven man who Sarah “engaged to wait on” her also accompanied Sarah and her kinsman to New York and back. Traveling forward alone never seemed to have been an option for Sarah because, as she comments on a few occasions, she did not know the way.106 Yet even if she knew the way, would she felt comfortable riding through New England alone? Although this question cannot sufficiently be addressed solely based on her journal, the answer would most likely be no. Though a confident, forthright woman, Sarah appreciated a friendly companion who ensured her safety while crossing dangerous rivers or plodding over steep trails.

A Place to Lay Her Head

While making travel arrangements, there was little Sarah could do to organize her lodgings in advance. As with her choice of guides, she took advantage of any hospitable family that resided along her route. Since she had relatives in New Haven and New York, she had established accommodations during her extended stays in these two towns. She usually had to improvise on the road. Although she did not know precisely where she would rest every evening, she would have understood that her options were limited to the taverns or inns that accommodated travelers. Since Sarah chose her guides for their familiarity with the terrain, they could inform her of the suitable places to stop for the night.

The law required that each jurisdiction had some sort of inn or public house that could offer food and shelter to travelers and their horses. This policy meant that Sarah would likely have a place to shelter each night, but it did not mean that these establishments were numerous and easy to come by. Miles and miles often separated the “ordinaries,” or taverns, alongside the road so that the travelers sometimes had to ride quite a distance before they could rest themselves and their mounts. On October 3, though darkness was quickly descending, Sarah’s guide informed her that they had to carry on for at least another fourteen miles before they would come to any places to spend the night. The following afternoon, they continued to find roadside accommodations sparse. They had to ride at least twenty-two miles before they came across a place to rest and feed their horses and take an afternoon meal. The postman recommended they

break at Mr. Devil’s, but Sarah drolly “questioned whether we ought to go to the Devil to be helped out of affliction.”

Ironically, Sarah’s aside about Mr. Devil turned out to be true; the ordinary’s owner proved to be a rude, disobliging fellow who did not aid them. This man, who apparently “look’t as old as the Divel himselfe, and quite as Ugly,” spoke very little “and no, or none, was the reply’s hee made us to our demands.” This occasion was only one of many instances in which the travelers confronted poor service and accommodations. Since they were mostly at the mercy of their keepers and what they had to offer, Sarah encountered a wide range of pleasant and unpleasant fare and sleeping arrangements. At Mr. Haven’s establishment, a kind woman welcomed Sarah and took care to make the new guest comfortable, which pleased Sarah. She was happy to find the house clean and the food palatable. Even the “Apartment” allocated to her for the evening met with her approval, though it was little more than a small room “parted from the Kitchen by a single bo[a]rd partition.”

Despite the cozy accommodations, Sarah got very little sleep that night. A group of boisterous men in the next room carried on a lengthy and spirited debate over the origins of the name of Narragansett country, which very much irritated Sarah until she “wish’t ‘um tongue tyed.” After long hours of travel on horseback, she could hope for a comfortable bed and helpful hosts, but she must have learned quickly not to expect it.

As necessary, Sarah’s party stopped at taverns or other eating houses to rest their horses and fill their stomachs; she did not bring her own provisions. As with sleeping arrangements, one never knew what to expect. At an inn near Saybrook, Sarah and her guide waited as the landlady boiled mutton for them, “but it being pickled, and my Guide said it smelt strong of head sause, we left it, and [paid] sixpence a piece for our Dinners, [which] was only smell.”

They found the fare so foul that they left without a meal, but others offered surprisingly tasty dishes. The company they encountered at these establishments could be just as unpredictable. Though some hosts proved very enjoyable company, the behavior of a hostess at one ordinary irked Sarah. The indelicate woman “entertain’d our fellow traveller…with Inumirable complaints of her bodily infirmities; and whisper[e]d to him so lou’d, that all the House had as

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full a hearing as hee.”¹¹² To tune out the woman’s grumbles, Sarah took the opportunity to record her thoughts in her journal. Considering that she usually gave less detailed descriptions about individuals she found pleasant, she probably took delight in describing the tactless woman in her writings.¹¹³

While Sarah was mostly welcomed into the taverns and ordinaries along the road, her situation in taverns was different than that of her male companions, demonstrating the validity of Sharon V. Salinger’s contention that these establishments were gendered spaces. Although she was present, she was not included in the conversations of the men around her when sharing meals or company. She likely ignored the banter of the aforementioned woman who tried to entertain the company of men, but on other occasions, Knight described conversations she overheard, but did not partake in. Since ordinaries served as public spaces for men to share drink and conversation, male travelers likely enjoyed the tavern culture in addition to utilizing it as lodging. Judging by Sarah’s experience, female travelers likely isolated themselves to a degree, perhaps to avoid being perceived as immoral women. Although the owners accommodated female travelers, they often had different experiences than those of their male counterparts. Sleeping arrangements for men were more communal, while landlords often tried to keep women segregated in separate quarters. This arrangement served to maintain propriety. It also indicated the obvious fact that Sarah was usually the sole female lodger on a given night. Sarah never recorded any instances in which she had to share her bed with other women; since she made a habit of commenting on individuals she shared close quarters with, she likely would have taken note of such circumstances if faced with them. Women traveled less often than men; otherwise Sarah too might have encountered bedmates. In the few entries in which Sarah describes her sleeping accommodations, she tells of spaces isolated from other male travelers.¹¹⁴ These circumstances likely contributed to Sarah’s preference for sheltering with family in a private home when possible. Long-distance travelers often faced such unpredictable circumstances on the road.

**Unexpected Complications**

Though a traveler might not know what kind of service she would receive at roadside taverns, she could at least be assured of food and lodging. On the road, however, no such

¹¹² Knight, *The Journal of Madam Knight*, 12, 16.
guarantees existed and Sarah faced many unexpected, unavoidable obstacles. Mother Nature often stood as the most tenacious hindrance to Sarah’s journey. Swamps, steep hills, overgrown foliage, and fast-flowing rivers slowed her progress, but could not be avoided. Heavy darkness called for caution and careful treading, slowing travelers’ progress and threatening their safety in more precarious passages. Upon setting out, Sarah’s guide John warned her against traveling too quickly at night. She seemed to consider dangerous rivers the most disturbing hurdle thrown across her path. When a river could not be forded on horseback, a tense canoe ride could resolve the issue. On one occasion, however, Sarah decided that the high, fast-flowing waters of the Paukataug River were too much to handle. Though she was very reluctant to part with her guide, she decided that it would be better to wait until the waters subsided before trying to cross them. This drastic decision then left Sarah without a guide until she could make her way to her family in New Haven, which was at least sixty miles away.115 While she was certainly not at ease with her decision, she must have believed herself capable of managing the situation on her own. Unsurprisingly, she was able to do just that.

After the postman and the French doctor traveling with him left Sarah behind at the river’s edge, she located a shabby cottage nearby that housed a married couple and two of their children. The man predicted that it would not be long before the waters receded, so he extended an invitation to Sarah to wait it out in their cottage and offered to lead her across when conditions allowed for it. It was not long before the man’s ragged son-in-law paid the family a visit. Despite his unkempt appearance, Sarah asked if he would escort her to the next town – Stonington – once the old man helped her cross the river. When the time came, the men in turn led her to her desired destination. Upon arriving in Stonington, Sarah had more resources available to her, but she still had to find a guide to escort her to New Haven.116

While enjoying fine accommodations in an ordinary in town, Sarah heard word of a man and his daughter traveling in the same direction. She waited for them, and then that afternoon set out with the man, named Polly, and his eighteen-year-old daughter, Jemima. Polly said “he had been to fetch [Jemima] out of the Narragansetts, and said they had Rode thirty miles that day, on a sor[r]y lean [mare], with only a Bagg under her for a pillion.”117 Sarah expressed sympathy for the young woman whose father forced her to ride at a fast pace on a mount without any sort of

saddle or cushion. Polly simply ignored his daughter’s sobs of pain, and there was little else Sarah could do. Jemima not only provided Sarah with some company; she also shows that Mrs. Knight was not the only woman moving about far from home and with a male escort.

After crossing the ferry to New London, Connecticut, the travelers parted company and the Reverend Gurdon Saltonstall invited Sarah to spend the night at his home. She was glad of the pleasant companionship, but she once again had to locate a proper guide to New Haven. She was “in Great parplexity at thoughts of proceeding alone.” The good reverend understood her misgivings and found her a trustworthy man, Mr. Joshua Wheeler, who saw her to her destination. They traveled through Saybrook (today, Old Saybrook, Connecticut), spent the night in Killingsworth, and arrived in New Haven the following afternoon. There Sarah would spend the next fortnight amongst family. Even though Sarah proved capable of finding guides to accompany her, she was very much on her own. She had to rely on herself to manage this stage of the journey, and she demonstrated her ability to do so efficiently. Her experiences on this stretch of the journey also demonstrate many strangers’ willingness to aid a traveling woman in need. They did not eschew Sarah for her audacity – for leaving her family and home behind to venture out alone – but welcomed her into their homes and company.

Sometimes the weather forced Sarah to make the best of the most inconvenient circumstances. After setting out from New York with Mr. Trowbridge, bad weather ruined the travelers’ hopes of bedding down in New Rochelle that night. That December evening, they got lost in a great snowstorm. Being lost in such violent and dangerous weather no doubt tried their nerves. They soon crossed paths with a man who lived nearby, but he unfortunately only had one bed in his cottage which was occupied by a sick wife. Instead, he directed them to another dwelling nearby; alas, its elderly inhabitant proved to be even less helpful, refusing to let the travelers into her home. Fortunately the woman’s son lived close by and he invited Sarah and Mr. Trowbridge to lodge at his home. The man made Sarah very comfortable, but the exposure to the cold had already taken its toll on her constitution. Sarah fell ill that night, though she recovered well enough to continue onward the following morning. When such unexpected obstacles appeared, Sarah had to find courage and confront the situation. In the face of such uncertainty, though often frightened, she showed herself to be capable of managing whatever the

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wilds of New England thrust in her path. And the colonists she encountered largely proved themselves to be fairly accommodating of a female traveler.

**People Encountered Along the Way**

As can be seen in these cases, Sarah encountered many different people on her journey. She not only spent time in the company of her guides, but also met men and women at the ordinaries where she took her meals or at the lodgings where she slept. While making her way back to Boston, she even received an invitation to dine with Governor Fitz-John Winthrop of Connecticut.121 As one would expect, she found some people’s company very pleasant, some very disagreeable, and some tolerable but not worth mentioning. While Sarah often expressed what she thought of other individuals she met, it is a bit more difficult to read how people reacted to her presence.

Only on one occasion does Sarah record an encounter with an individual who responded negatively to her circumstances as a lone traveler. On her first night on the road, she and her guide John rode into the dark to reach the Billings’s home where she intended to rest for the night. Unfortunately, she did not receive a warm welcome.

But [Sarah] had not gone many steps into the Room, ere I was Interogated by a young Lady I understood afterwards was the Eldest daughter of the family, with these, or words to this purpose, (viz.) Law for mee—what in the world brings Yo[u] here at this time a night?—I never see a woman on the Rode so Dreadfull late, in all the days of my versall life. Who are You? Where are You going?122

Such a reception shocked Sarah. She was further surprised when the woman of house, the young woman’s mother, began interrogating John, wondering where and why he would be traveling with a strange woman. The hostess then turned her attention to Sarah, pestering her with more questions and, to Sarah’s mind, treating her very rudely. Sarah expressed her displeasure and told the woman that she “did not think it my duty to answer her unmannerly Questions.”123 Though her female hosts were appalled at her situation, Sarah certainly had not anticipated such a reception. She expected to be treated kindly and fairly no matter whom she encountered, no matter the circumstances. And these two women were the only people to treat her thus. If she had another similar confrontation on her journey, she would almost certainly have made note of

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it. Sarah was inclined to record any accommodations or individuals that did not meet her standards, perhaps to help other travelers avoid such abysmal experiences.

For the most part, however, people welcomed the traveling woman and accepted her presence as they would that of any other traveler. They did not greet her with surprise or condemnation simply because she was a woman traveling alone. Perhaps at the inns and taverns they treated her well enough because she was a paying customer, but this fact was not enough to warrant respect at the Billings’s house. The tavern and inn owners welcomed her and cared for her as they did their other guests, though they did seem to make an effort to offer her private sleeping arrangements because she was a woman. Though a few individuals were very unpleasant, most seemed more than willing to help her find a guide or anything else she required. Many people along the way – people Sarah had never met before – invited her into their homes to enjoy her company and offer her a more comfortable place to stay. After arriving in Milford on her return journey, Sarah received an invitation from a gentlewoman to stay in her home so that they could entertain one another. When it came time for her to depart, the woman tried to persuade her to stay. Whether out of loneliness or hospitality, the woman did not hesitate to welcome an unfamiliar woman traveler into her household. So it would seem that most people did not find anything remarkable about Sarah traveling alone.

As for Sarah, she faced the dangers and complications of travel with practicality and courage. At times, she was frightened by her situation, but she usually confronted her fears, put them behind her, and move forward on her way. While riding through the dark one night, “the least of which was enough to startle a more Masculine courage,” Sarah realized that she must either forge ahead or be lost to the wild woods. So, with the mettle of any man, she spirited onward. She also made note of the positive experiences she had along the way. That same night, she found beauty in the night sky and used this to boost her nerve. She reacted to her surroundings with wit and aplomb. She eagerly recorded all that she could about her travels and her encounters with new people, places, and customs. Sarah Kemble Knight was no meek and feeble gentlewoman tied to the safety of her home. She was an active woman who plunged into and took pleasure in the world around her.

Finally, after months of intermittent travel and many long days on the road, Sarah arrived at her home in Boston on March 6 to be warmly greeted by her elderly mother and adolescent daughter. After such a lengthy absence, her friends and family welcomed her home, eager to hear of travels. Though she had a number of pleasant encounters along the way, Sarah expressed her “Joy and Satisfaction” at finally returning home.\(^{127}\)

Though Sarah is not representative of all women at the time, her account demonstrates that most people accepted a confident female traveler without any misgivings. At least by the beginning of the eighteenth century, colonists in New England and New York did not appear to have deemed lone women travelers as especially remarkable. As William L. Andrews states, her narrative reveals that a settled and static domestic life was by no means a foregone conclusion for early American women. External circumstances and internal motivation propelled these women into new environments that challenged their traditional sense of social roles and demanded that they find new ways to define themselves as individuals and as women.\(^{128}\)

Though her travels took place in the eighteenth century, they show that women enjoyed relative freedom of movement in early colonial New England. The journal Sarah left behind demonstrates her own appreciation for her surroundings; she clearly saw the importance of recording the details of her whereabouts and the process of traveling across colonies.

Sarah’s journal also demonstrates that in addition to taverns, the roads and byways of colonial New England were also gendered spaces. Though a journey like Sarah’s was not uncommon for other colonial women, those who did head out on the highways shared the space with men, but traveled under different circumstances than their male counterparts. Women were expected to travel with a male companion – preferably a relative – to guide and protect them. Even though men faced the same troubles and dangers of traversing colonial highways, they could set out without concerning themselves too much with finding reliable guides or respectable ordinaries to patronize along the way, as with Sarah.

The case of Sarah Kemble Knight allows one to compare her experiences to the fragmentary evidence of seventeenth-century female travelers, for she was not alone on the


colonial byways. Although evidence is somewhat sparse, records of other women traveling not only about their own communities, but also long distances from home demonstrate that the geography of women’s lives could not be delineated by the boundaries of their own communities. When women ventured abroad, they often traveled on horseback with some male escort, most often a close male relative. Since much of the colonies remained untamed wilderness and the threat of Indians continued in many areas, society expected women to travel with a trustworthy companion to keep them safe and guide the way forward. On journeys long or short, women sought out the company of kin or friends first and foremost, only relying on public houses when absolutely necessary. Obstacles arose, but these women travelers could often deal with them. And whatever took women far from their households had to be important to them, be it family or business matters. While men did travel more frequently than women, traveling women were common in colonial New England. Plenty of women may never have ventured beyond their town borders, but some did take to the rivers and roads. Although their gender clearly influenced the mechanics of their travel and, at times, their treatment along the way, their actions were quite ordinary and acceptable.
CONCLUSION

The journal left by Sarah Kemble Knight, though written in the early eighteenth century, demonstrates the great scope of women’s movements in colonial America. Her recordings encourage further research into mapping the lives of women who preceded her. Though several historians such as Ulrich and Salinger have touched on the mobility of seventeenth-century women in America, none have undertaken a focused analysis of women and space. The majority of women’s responsibilities did center on the home, but substantial evidence shows that the obligations, expectations, and necessities of colonial life carried them away from their households rather frequently. Women worked the fields, visited relatives, aided neighbors, attended church, carried out business in mills and shops, and, on occasion, participated in court. Some, like Sarah, even traveled long distances to oversee business affairs and visit faraway kin. Married, single, or widowed, accompanied or not, most women moved about the fields, streets, and businesses of their communities regularly and quite easily.

At this time, most spaces in communities – homes, fields, streets, churches, and several businesses – were gender integrated, although some more than others. Unlike nineteenth-century America, spaces cannot be designated as public versus private, and few can be described “gendered.” Men and women usually shared most spaces, though, generally, the further women journeyed from the household, the less integrated spaces became. While many wives and daughters spent time working in their fields, very few ventured into the wilderness to fish, hunt, or meet with local Indians. Though many visited shops and other businesses to carry out specific errands, men more often conducted a family’s business dealings in and out of town, especially in trade, deliveries, and exchanges. And taverns, though available for female locals and travelers, were spaces usually dominated by men. As for journeying over longer distances, men had more opportunities to travel, though many women also trekked across the colonies for various purposes.

In the field, streets, neighboring homes, meetinghouses, and businesses, women shared common ground with men. It is not extremely surprising that women ventured into these spaces because they were tied to women’s domestic responsibilities. They visited these places to fulfill their roles as household managers, food producers, good neighbors, and faithful Christians – all essential in maintaining a stable home. Helping in the fields with agricultural labor and overseeing livestock secured food stocks. They called on neighboring homes to fetch necessary
supplies or complete domestic tasks in the company of other women. Regular visits to meetinghouses ensured spiritual fulfillment essential to sustaining a devout household. Running errands at mills and other shops helped to feed and clothe their families.

Taverns, courts, and highways, however, were gendered spaces dominated by men. Although women did visit these places on occasion, they faced intangible but undeniable restrictions to their presence. Men visited these spaces more frequently, in greater numbers, and often in a different capacity than women. While women’s actions in the other places about town nearly always related to their household obligations, taverns, courts, and highways had tenuous ties to the domestic – if any at all. Though wives managed households with the aid of other women, husbands handled affairs beyond the home. Therefore, even though women had a presence in such spaces, it was often restricted because men had greater reason to visit these spaces that were largely separated from the domestic.

Taverns served mainly as places for drink, conversation, and talk of trade. Men, who dealt more frequently with economic matters than women, could conduct business dealings in local public houses. Respectable women who did venture into taverns rarely participated in the drinking culture; they usually only stopped in search of household supplies these establishments could provide at a cost. When a woman appeared on court days, she did not do so to carry out her female duties to her household, even though her testimony or the accusations against her may have connections to her everyday domestic tasks – such as tending livestock. When women took to colonial highways, they did so most likely to visit distant kin or to oversee business affairs – neither related to domestic tasks. Men had more reason to be on the roads because they oversaw external economic affairs for themselves and their families. Consequently, men were also more likely to know the way, to be able to guide themselves – unlike women such as Sarah Kemble Knight.

Moreover, these locations were spaces in which men often required limited – if any – aid from the women of their communities. Although women may have provided some of the services for taverns, such as food and drink preparation, their presence was not necessary to the men who patronized such establishments. Men only required women to attend court when they could offer valuable testimony or when they faced punishment meant to deter other unacceptable

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behavior. And though women’s contributions to colonial courts should not be discounted, they did not have full legal status and could not hold positions of power. Although husbands sometimes invited their wives to join them on journeys to other towns or colonies, men had little reason to compel women to be out on the byways. Any long-distance affairs that family’s faced could nearly always be handled by the men. Indeed, many likely preferred men to deal with them because of the many dangers that travelers of either sex faced on colonial highways. Despite the reasons that led these specific spaces to be gendered, women still ventured into them, and many others, according to their everyday obligations.

Gender largely shaped the mobility of women in seventeenth-century New England. Their duties as good wives, mothers, daughters, deputy husbands, friends, and neighbors, their responsibilities as women in their communities, helped to determine where they went. A wife might have to help her husband in the fields to harvest the corn needed to put food on the table. A young woman in need for cornmeal to prepare daily meals might have to trek to the local mill to have corn ground. Maintaining a well-organized household meant that women had to move beyond its borders to complete everyday tasks, and supporting a strong community obligated women to help uphold and strengthen social networks. Women rarely wandered about aimlessly; they always had a purpose for being out and about in their communities. The responsibilities they carried as women in their villages, towns, and cities helped to shape their movement and meetinghouses. As seen with Sarah Kemble Knight’s excursion, their gender also influenced how they arranged for travel over longer distances – ensuring they had a male companion to guide and safeguard them until they reached their final destination.

Accordingly, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s descriptions of midwife Martha Ballard in *A Midwife’s Tale* are not as extraordinary as they may seem. Ballard’s very mobile life, carrying her miles away from home in almost any weather conditions nearly day after day, may lead one to believe her the exception to the rule – that her experience was not that of other women. One might conclude that her great mobility stemmed from her role as a midwife, her location on the frontier of Maine, or her place in time, for she kept her diary in the in the decades immediately following the founding of the United States of America. Evidence of the lives of seventeenth-century women, however, suggests that the scope of Ballard’s movements reflects a continuation of the experiences of her colonial counterparts. After mapping the lives of early colonial women in New England, evidence indicates that Ballard’s spatial experience was rather unremarkable.
Thus, as other historian’s research has suggested, seventeenth-century women were not confined to their domestic domain. Sufficient evidence demonstrates the mobility these goodwives and daughters enjoyed within their villages and even on colonial byways. Indeed, without the ability to move freely within their own communities, women would have had great difficulty fulfilling their domestic duties. Their spatial experience was fairly unrestricted. In attempting to map their everyday lives, we have seen that the geographic scope of their experience included much more than their homes. They regularly ventured out into the streets, fields, neighboring homes, mills, shops, and meetinghouses. Only in taverns, courts, and on the highway did women confront any limitations to their presence. But for the most part, the necessities of early colonial life meant that the community welcomed women into nearly every space in their communities. Searching for any distinct boundaries to their spatial lives would prove fruitless. Nearly all spaces within colonial communities were permeated by both men and women. I do not attempt to argue that colonial women led fiercely independent lives. My aim is not to thrust upon them greater agency than they had in actuality, but to understand their reality. By addressing this issue I have shown that women enjoyed a fairly vast spatial sphere within their communities and across colonial borders.
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Secondary Sources


