BOOK REVIEW

Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984. Pp. xx + 249 + essay on sources, notes, and index. $24.95

Reviewed by Norma Basch

Every so often a work of history appears that is so innovative in its conception and so cogent in its analysis as to constitute a new model for future research. Suzanne Lebsock's *The Free Women of Petersburg* is such a work. Lebsock has two goals in this community study: to chart changes in the status of women between the first years of the republic and the onset of the Civil War, and to explore the existence of a separate female culture embodying attitudes and values that differ significantly from those of the male culture. By examining virtually every extant public document on the free women of Petersburg, Virginia between 1784 and 1860, Lebsock invests these familiar but elusive goals with a new precision and specificity.

Lebsock is a social historian, and legal history, narrowly defined, is not her primary concern. Nonetheless, there is a great deal here for legal historians since law is closely bound up with Lebsock's focus on status. The bulk of her sources is legal, and she develops these sources with respect for their legal context and with awareness of their limits as social documents. Her work attests to the patience and care with which she combed unindexed deed books and court minute books, and to the rewards to be gained from doing so. For example, her survey of all the marriage contracts and the provisions for separate estates scattered throughout the town's deeds and wills contributes significantly to our knowledge of the married woman's equitable estate. It is noteworthy that most separate estates were created in the trust deeds and testamentary provisions of husbands, relatives, and friends, and not by antenuptial agreements. For Lebsock, the number and terms of these conveyances, bequests, and devises comprise an important index to change in the status of women. She finds that the use of separate estates mushroomed in the antebellum period, and although there was little corresponding growth in the power allocated to the wife, she points out that any separate estate was better than none at all. In translating the legal abstractions of jurists and chancellors into tangible options for flesh and blood women, Lebsock illuminates the social dimensions of the married woman's equitable estate. Her work exemplifies the power of social history to enrich our understanding of legal history.

There are lessons here also for social historians. No longer will they be able to use source limitations as an excuse for ignoring women, for in fashioning an in-depth community study in which women occupy center stage, Lebsock demonstrates that painstakingly surveyed public documents can tell us a great deal about women. Delineating in meticulous detail which women owned what and whom (slaves figure prominently in property transactions), Lebsock outlines changing patterns in the ownership and transmission of property and speculates intelligently on the implications of these changes for women. She refines the terms of the debate over gains and losses for women.

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in nineteenth-century America and provides persuasive, if not conclusive, evidence of women's increasing economic independence in the antebellum period.

While her thesis of improvement in the status of antebellum women draws on and affirms the conclusions of much of the recent scholarship on women and the family, it also lays siege to a great many assumptions. Lebsock grapples with some prevalent notions in Afro-American historiography as well. In a superb chapter on the free black women of Petersburg, in some ways the most enterprising and economically disadvantaged segment of the free population, she debunks the preconceptions in two alternative depictions of the black family: the 'matriarchal' household and the more 'normal' male-headed household. Nor does she find, as historians such as Carl Degler and Daniel Scott Smith have, a greater autonomy for white women in the shift toward a more companionate ideal in marriage. Where, she asks, would the power come from?

Lebsock views economic independence as the critical prerequisite for autonomy. Her emphasis on moderate improvement in women's economic status along with their decreasing dependence on individual men informs her entire thesis. With impeccable documentation she shows that more married women acquired separate estates, more women worked for wages, and fewer women married. She finds some autonomy for women in the expanding percentage of female property owners and their growing willingness and ability to exert control over their property. She points to a new female assertiveness in the conscious decision of the wealthiest and most eligible widows of Petersburg to avoid remarriage. To her credit, Lebsock measures gains in precise, relative terms and always within an historical context. If only twenty-five women between the 1830s and 1860 bargained with their dower right by refusing to agree to the sale of a husband's realty—a change that may seem inconsequential to modern eyes—it was twenty-five more than in the previous fifty years.

When Lebsock compares the position of antebellum women with that of their mothers and grandmothers, she finds improvement. But when she compares antebellum women with antebellum men, she modifies her improvement thesis with 'a trail of qualifiers'. The antebellum family remained asymmetrical with respect to the relative powers of wives and husbands. Autonomy for women, she cautions, was always small in comparison with autonomy for men, and there were some losses as well as gains over time. Professionalism drove women from midwifery and the upper levels of teaching, and the rise of the corporation excluded women from positions of power and profit in the new economic order. Furthermore, women paid for their growing autonomy in the private sphere with losses in the public sphere by the late 1850s, when men co-opted the voluntary organizations of Petersburg's women. She suggests that the particularly southern quality of her portrait may be inherent in the willingness of southern men to allow women substantial power so long as it remained informal in character.

Lebsock's authoritative analysis of economic improvement and its implications is open to some debate, but it is likely to prove far less controversial than her treatment of women's culture. It is here that she is most innovative and provocative. Lebsock brings a new yardstick to the question of how gender was reflected in the most deeply held values of women and men, and finds some documentable components with which to measure attitudes toward death, wealth, family, and slavery. She reasons that if economic gains yielded women a small range of choices, then it becomes possible to compare and contrast their choices with those made by men. Relying extensively on provisions in wills, Lebsock brings concrete evidence to the proposition that women had an identifiable culture of their own. She documents the tendency of female property holders to confront the prospect of death and to make wills far more readily than males. Ever alert to the special case rather than dependent on formula, women personalized their bequests, picking and choosing according to their own standards of merit. They worried more about other women and slaves, and were more likely to set their slaves free or to
include clauses preventing or restricting their sale. In wills and other property transactions, they displayed a penchant for economic security and a reluctance to take risks.

Lebsock reads these trends as the marks of a more humane counter-culture. Her contrast of the charity and ‘personalism’ of women with the egotism and formality of men comes close—too perilously close for my taste—to an argument for the innate moral superiority of women. For Lebsock, women were (and perhaps are) not only different from but better than men. On the other hand, when Lebsock assaults the overwhelmingly androcentric bent of most historical thinking and retains her sense of historicity, as she does throughout most of the book, she demonstrates the possibilities of rethinking history along non-androcentric lines. It is, in fact, her rejection of androcentric assumptions about law and history that frees her to develop traditional sources in strikingly original ways. She exhibits extraordinary ingenuity in using such sources to sketch images of the way the world looked from the perspective of some southern women.

This vivid portrayal of the objective and subjective world of the free women of Petersburg is that rare example of sophisticated scholarship that has the clarity to be accessible to the non-scholar. Lebsock’s voice is wry and witty; her vision, fresh and bold. In recasting the major issues in nineteenth-century women’s history, she has set the terms for future debate. Her book now stands as a challenge for more work of this kind. Future community studies on women may yield different results, but it is likely to be a long time before we see a study of comparable quality.

Bradley Chapin, *Criminal Justice in Colonial America, 1606-1660*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983. Pp. 203. $18.00.

Reviewed by Paul Finkelman

*Criminal Justice in Colonial America* is a short, concise, and generally readable discussion of crime and law enforcement in the first seven English settlements of what eventually became the United States. Chapin has carefully examined the published court records of Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Haven. Throughout the book Chapin makes insightful comparisons and contrasts between the Chesapeake, Puritan, Rhode Island, and Plymouth colonies.

Chapin’s most important contributions are his lucid discussions of 17th century procedure in both England and America and his numerous tables, which provide some quantitative analysis of criminal laws, crimes, and punishments in early America. Most of his discussion of procedure and court systems in England and the colonies will not be new to specialists. However, for scholars unfamiliar with this subject, Chapin has provided an excellent short introduction to this area of legal history. It will be particularly valuable for students who want a quick and relatively painless introduction to jurisdiction and procedural issues of the early colonial period.

This book also provides some excellent information about the specifics of some trials in this early period. These trials, and the facts Chapin presents, will be of use to social historians as well as to legal scholars. Tied to some of Chapin’s tables, these cases help provide images and hues for the tapestry of colonial history that some of us attempt to create in the classroom.

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