

ROBBINS, ANGELA P. Ph.D. *Bridging the Old South and the New: Women in the Economic Transformation of the North Carolina Piedmont, 1865-1920* (2010)  
Directed by Dr. Lisa Levenstein. 248 pp.

In the post-Civil War North Carolina Piedmont, hardship visited all Southerners, and cast unprecedented numbers of women from every socioeconomic level, not merely the lowest ranks, into roles as providers. Increasing numbers of women sustained alternatives to the traditional patriarchal household and challenged conventional notions regarding a woman's nature and place by serving as breadwinners and courtroom advocates for themselves and their families.

During Reconstruction, women gained legal recourse for protecting their assets as well as their individual freedoms, and the courtroom became an important site of their economic agency. Despite the public discourse that built up an ideal of economic and legal dependency for women, North Carolina's married women's property legislation and other safeguards available to women, including divorce, were avenues through which women sought control of their assets and income.

The imperative among white Southerners to distinguish white women from black women influenced an almost thoroughly racially divided female labor force in Piedmont cities. Increasing numbers of white urban women entered the labor force as small businesswomen, operating boarding houses and working as dressmakers and milliners, while black women worked most often as servants for white families. The race and gender hierarchy that kept black women in a degraded position simultaneously ignored the economic contributions of most white women, who were traditionally portrayed as non-laborers in opposition to the laboring identity assigned to black women, and even

when their economic contributions to their families were quite significant. Their concentration in white and “female” occupations ensured that white women’s labor reinscribed race and gender hierarchies even as they simultaneously gained greater economic independence and challenged conventional notions of their roles.

White women did not generally seek to overturn the ideal of white womanhood that ignored their roles as providers for fear that they might slip from the pedestal constructed for them. Nonetheless, their daily lives were marked by demands on their labor and they engaged in a wide range of economic activities that frequently played crucial roles in supporting their families. Although all women were constrained by the race and gender hierarchy, the economic agency of white women reveals how they also benefited from and contributed to that system in the late-nineteenth century Piedmont.

BRIDGING THE OLD SOUTH AND THE NEW: WOMEN IN THE ECONOMIC  
TRANSFORMATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA PIEDMONT,  
1865-1920

by  
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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2010

Approved by

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several individuals and groups have been instrumental in seeing me through the dissertation research and writing. I extend particular gratitude to Dr. Lisa Levenstein, the director of my dissertation, for her guidance and her dedication to this project and to my committee members, Dr. Charles Bolton, Dr. Peter Carmichael, and Dr. Watson Jennison, for their insight and suggestions. For her graciousness and her helpful comments as a reader on this dissertation, I extend warm thanks to Dr. Michele Gillespie. The Department of History and The Graduate School of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro have provided various means of funding over the years for which I am most grateful. I acknowledge especially Dr. Allen Trelease, professor emeritus of the Department of History at UNCG, who has established a graduate fellowship for Ph.D. candidates, and I am deeply grateful for his financial contribution to my graduate studies and research. For their generous financial support of research trips, I offer special thanks to the Women's and Gender Studies Program at UNCG for the Sally and Alan Cone Special Projects in Women's and Gender Studies Grant and also the North Caroliniana Society at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for the Archie K. Davis Fellowship.

To Marie and Cliff, Andrea and Steve, and Catherine and Emily, thank you is simply not enough for embracing me as part of your family. And to Neil, your unconditional love and support have made all the difference.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1870s, Alice Morgan Person became the breadwinner for her family when her husband Joseph, injured during the Civil War and victim of a stroke shortly after his discharge from the Confederate Army, was no longer able to farm their plantation or find alternative work. The couple had lost the slave labor they had counted on before the war, and their children were too young to be of much help on the farm. Alice lamented, “We were left, as were so many Southerners, with only a tract of land, which my husband was powerless to look after, and a family of little children depending upon us.” In her late thirties, she began manufacturing and peddling her patent medicine to cure people’s aches and pains, which she named “Mrs. Joe Person’s Remedy.”<sup>1</sup> By the early 1880s, Person routinely traveled through rural areas and cities in North Carolina, peddling the tonic to residents in the area neighboring her Franklin County home and to

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Person was worth \$5825 in real estate and \$16,800 in personal property in 1860, including 12 male and 4 female slaves ranging in age from 8 months to 80 years. Two of the female slaves were of childbearing age, and 7 of the slaves were under the age of 18. They lived in 5 slave houses on the Person property. Joseph Person was 46 years old at the time of the 1860 census, his wife Alice was 19, and their first child, a daughter also named Alice, had been born that year. Twenty years later, the Persons had 9 children. Of the three eldest, two daughters were 20 and 19, and eldest son Wiley was 17 and working as a farmer, presumably on the family farm. The other 6 children were all under the age of 15. Joseph Person was still listed as a farmer, but his wife’s manuscript makes it clear that he was unable to labor on the farm due to his health. With her earnings, Alice Person related in her manuscript, she not only supported her family, but also was able to provide music lessons to her daughters and send son Wiley to college, where he studied law. Alice Morgan Person, “The Chivalry of Man, as Exemplified in the Life of Mrs. Joe Person,” TD, 1890(?), Foreword, 1-9, 21. Alice Morgan Person Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1860 U.S. Manuscript Census, Fort Creek District, Granville County, 81. 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Franklinton Township, Franklin County, 50.

druggists as far away as Charlotte. While tending to her business, she left her eldest daughter in charge of the household, including the care of her invalid husband and younger children.

Displaying great ambition, a decidedly “unwomanly” trait in the South of her time, Person expressed a desire for profitability and a comfortable living. She told her husband that she expected to earn a million dollars and informed a reporter for the *Durham Globe* that her business would make her a fortune. In 1884 – a few months after her husband died – she capitalized on the large crowds drawn to the North Carolina State Exposition in Raleigh by setting up an exhibit of her wares there. She took on business partners to help her expand her business, and then when they failed her, she took them to court to protect her livelihood. Person maintained her business until her death in 1913, and although she never earned anything close to a million dollars, her earnings provided financial security and a middle-class lifestyle to her family.<sup>2</sup>

In the three decades after the Civil War, North Carolina’s women increasingly became economic agents both in the courtroom and in the workforce. As hardship visited all Southerners, it cast unprecedented numbers of women from every socioeconomic level, not merely the lowest ranks, into roles as providers for their families. By the turn of the twentieth century, nearly a quarter of the state’s women were employed. Most employed women worked in agriculture since North Carolina remained predominantly rural well into the twentieth century. But other white and black women lived and worked

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. “A Woman’s Enterprise. An Important and Promising Industry yet in its Infancy. How a Persevering Woman Overcame Obstacles and Achieved Success in Spite of Unfavorable Circumstances,” newspaper clipping, n.d., scrapbook, Alice Morgan Person Papers, SHC.

in the expanding towns and cities of the Piedmont, which first became hubs for the distribution of tobacco and cotton and then centers of manufacturing. The importance of women's labor to the textile and tobacco factories of the Piedmont beginning in the late nineteenth century has been well documented, but even before this important change, the employment of women in cities had increased considerably and women's earnings had become vital to their families and the Piedmont economy.

White and black urban women held highly segregated jobs, although at times, some transgressed the color line. Prior to the industrial boom of the mid-1880s, most white women who worked in Piedmont cities functioned independently of men, manufacturing clothing, running boarding houses, or working as employees of other women in those trades. Among the large group of predominantly African American women employed as servants, either as cooks or domestics in private homes, were those who found a modicum of independence as washerwomen. By 1900, race and gender hierarchies hardened with the rise of Jim Crow, and that combined with changes in white women's employment effected increasingly rigid segregation in the state's female work force. With the changing economy, white women lost some work opportunities in cities, primarily in the needle trades, but gained new kinds of work in sales, clerical, and factory positions. Black urban women's jobs and earnings potential were severely limited because many of the new jobs were reserved for white women. Small gains made by black women through employment in tobacco factories, teaching, and operating their own businesses were offset by an increase in the number of black women who were confined

to work as domestic servants and laundresses, jobs that even the poorest white women refused with greater frequency.

As women increasingly won the right to control property and earnings, the courtroom became an important site of their economic agency. Prior to the Civil War, married women had been subject to the laws of *coverture*, and relinquished all assets to husbands upon marriage. In 1868, North Carolina's married women's property legislation opened the door for women to gain greater independence and control over assets. Both black and white women had legal recourse to protect their property, but it was white women who benefited most from these laws because they were more likely to have access to property to begin with. Laws also worked to protect married women who were abandoned, allowing them to get divorced and secure property so that they might support themselves and their children. Protections built into the law allowed women to sue for financial support when fathers did not provide for their children, a recourse pursued primarily by poor women, both black and white. Women from a variety of backgrounds assertively used the laws in the interest of their rights and also their economic independence.

When white women exercised economic agency in the labor force and the courtroom both men and women often interpreted their actions as fulfilling their duties to families instead of acknowledging how their actions challenged white gender prescriptions that cast them as social and legal dependents. White women also secured their womanhood by holding highly gendered and racialized jobs that were completely different from those most commonly held by white men and black women. As more

women joined the workforce, they found their options increasingly restricted to select occupations based on gender and race. Therefore, while the persistence of white women in the labor force challenged dominant prescriptions mandating that they not engage in paid labor, it did not fundamentally overturn the race and gender hierarchies that ruled their lives.

This dissertation explores women's roles in the economic transformation of the Piedmont of North Carolina between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, and focuses on urban women who worked as small business owners and used the courts to acquire financial resources. The study is situated in cities of the Piedmont, whose post-war social and economic circumstances in many ways were characteristic of growth patterns across the Upper South in the late nineteenth century. Located between the coastal plain on North Carolina's eastern shore and the Appalachian Mountains at its western border, the region retained a distinctive identity prior to the Civil War grounded in its natural resources, including fertile soil suitable to the cultivation of tobacco and staple crops, timber, and minerals. Before the development of the railroad in the 1850s, limited transportation routes were characteristic of the Piedmont and assured that its farms rarely grew large and never competed with coastal plantations. Few of the area's white residents owned more than two or three slaves to labor alongside them on their subsistence farms, assist with their trades or crafts, and work as personal servants in their homes. Although the Piedmont, like the rest of the South, remained primarily rural and agricultural into the early twentieth century, beginning right after the Civil War it also witnessed steady growth in its towns and cities due to the burgeoning tobacco and textile

industries. Railroad construction in the South outpaced the nation as a whole after the war, and Piedmont cities built on this expansion with production facilities, warehouses, and markets for the tobacco and cotton brought in from its farms.<sup>3</sup> Several cities lay within 200 miles of the North Carolina Railroad in the “Piedmont crescent,” from Charlotte on the western end, northeast into Greensboro, and on to the capital city of Raleigh in the east, the area’s three largest cities by 1900.

In this early stage of the Piedmont’s transformation into an industrial economy and more urban population, the region’s three largest cities – Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh – grew substantially. Between 1870 and 1900, Charlotte’s population ballooned from just over 4000 to nearly 20,000 residents, Raleigh saw its population nearly triple from 7700 to 20,000 people, and Greensboro witnessed a doubling of its population from 4400 to 9000 residents.<sup>4</sup> Municipal governments expanded, providing jobs and services to city residents. Small merchants, such as milliners and operators of dry goods stores, attracted new customers and a growing number of professionals, particularly doctors and lawyers, set up shop in Piedmont cities.<sup>5</sup> Much of this growth occurred immediately after the war, when freed slaves seeking new opportunities in their efforts to control their own bodies and labor relocated, and again in the 1880s, when financial exigencies pushed

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<sup>3</sup> On the impact of the railroad on postwar improvement and industrial development in the state, see Allen W. Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1871, and the Modernization of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *The North Carolina Business Directory 1877 and 1878. Edited by Rev. L. Branson, A. M.* (Raleigh, N.C.: L. Branson, Publisher and Bookseller, 1878), 136, 191, 291; *Branson’s North Carolina Business Directory, 1896* (Raleigh, N.C.: Levi Branson, Office Publisher, 1896), 307, 410, 606.

<sup>5</sup> *Branson’s*, 1877, 1896, passim; *Branson’s North Carolina Business Directory for 1884* (Raleigh, N. C.: Levi Branson, Office Publisher, 1884), passim.

many residents off unproductive farms amid sinking cotton prices and the cities offered new jobs. The ratio of white residents to black residents averaged approximately fifty-five to forty-five percent in these cities, and more black women than black men moved to Piedmont cities for employment in the late nineteenth century. A ward-by-ward breakdown of Charlotte's population statistics for 1880 reveals that in wards one and four whites were nearly double the number of blacks, that in ward two blacks were nearly double the number of whites, and only in ward three were the number of black and white residents nearly equal. Although this suggests that black and white sections of town were already in the process of becoming delineated, it was still common for whites and blacks of varying socioeconomic conditions to live and work on the same block. Beginning in the 1890s, segregated neighborhoods marked the Piedmont and the South.<sup>6</sup>

The economy of the entire nation suffered downturns and severe depressions in the late nineteenth century, most notably the Panic of 1873, which lasted throughout the rest of the decade. The years immediately after the Civil War had been boom years economically and politically, offering the hope of modernization, expansion, and democracy in a restored Union. The boom turned to bust in 1873, however, and railroads and banks failed, businesses closed their doors, and those employers that stayed afloat

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<sup>6</sup> Raleigh's overall population in 1883 was 54% white and 46% black. White women made up 28% and white men 26% of the city's population in that year, while black women formed 26% and black men just under 20% of the total. Charlotte's population figures for 1879 reveal a nearly identical story, at 53% white and 47% black. White women and white men each made up approximately 27% of the city's population, black women formed 25% of the total, and black men only 20%. *Raleigh City Directory. 1883* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Steam Printers and Binders, 1883), 16; *Chas. Emerson & Co's Charlotte, N.C. Directory, 1879-80...* (Charlotte, N.C.: Observer Steam Job Print, 1879), K. On the prevalence of "salt-and-pepper" neighborhoods in Piedmont cities in the 1870s and 1880s, see Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 4-5, 37-43, 60-62, 88, 116, 120-44, 224, 258-60.

were forced to eliminate jobs and reduce wages. The damages cut across social classes, and ordinary workingmen and women, artisans, and those hoping that a healthy national economy would carry them upward on the social ladder watched their prospects fade. In the years known as the “Gilded Age,” when capitalists built unprecedented wealth and developed and expanded new industrial sectors, more modest fortunes were earned and lost many times over and the numbers of working poor and unemployed swelled. Struggles between labor and capital marked much of the period, distracted Northerners from the work of Reconstruction, and gave rise to a reform movement to assuage suffering. The 1880s were once again boom years, full of hope and promise, only to be followed by another paralyzing depression that began in 1893, with similar causes and character to that of the 1870s.

In the South, recovery from war and factors including a lack of capital, problems with infrastructure, a dependency on cotton, and the rebuilding of political, social, and economic institutions distinguished the region as particularly poor and influenced its characterization as backward even as boosters promoted the image of a New South. The very industry that formed the backbone of Southern expansion, the railroad, also brought the economy down through rampant speculation, and over half of the nation’s railroads were in default by 1876. Cotton prices plummeted, as did prices for the other cash crops on which the Southern economy depended. Perhaps the most significant of ramifications of the economic crisis for the South was that, as historian Nell Irvin Painter has put it, “the nationalist, reforming temper of the 1860s lapsed into the reaction of the economically depressed 1870s, with demands of government retrenchment and less

government spending.”<sup>7</sup> Northern support for Reconstruction waned not only because the labor problems arising in the new industrial economy had gained priority over those of the South, but also because contemporary observers had begun to label Reconstruction a failure amid various political scandals and criticisms. Republicans were also losing power to Democrats because of the tendency to assign blame for the poor economy on the party in power. This left prostrate President Ulysses S. Grant, who retreated from Reconstruction in his second term. The inroads that had been made in transforming Southern politics and social relations were abandoned to the restoration of political dynasties and violent campaigns to rip political rights and power from Southern African Americans.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the men who became the nation’s wealthiest, among them Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, one of the most powerful public figures that came out of the nation’s transformation to industrial capitalism was the tramp. The fortunes a select few built depended on cheap, unskilled, and interchangeable labor, and amid wage cuts, factory closings, strikes and labor disputes, any of these unskilled laborers could easily turn to itinerancy, the “laborer’s response to an economic system dominated by frequent bouts of unemployment and idleness, harsh working and living conditions, a cut-

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<sup>7</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 1-35, quotation 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 512-34.

and-run mentality, and an uneven distribution of power.”<sup>9</sup> A symbol of the slide experienced by ordinary working people – from a degree of self-sufficiency and ability to rely on community networks to a stifling dependence on wages – the tramp was demonized as a man who could not or would not support his family rather than a casualty of the volatile economy and the low wage structure in which he became ensnared. This stereotype had become so common that by the time the skilled workers and veterans who made up Coxe’s Army organized their march to Washington in 1894 to draw attention to their plight and the need for unemployment benefits for the working poor they were vilified in the press as willfully unemployed troublemakers.<sup>10</sup>

The victims, the same voices proclaimed, were the women abandoned by or separated from these men. Reformers and social commentators who castigated men as failing the women who depended on them often proved unwilling to recognize the fiction of the living wage, and either reinforced it or intensified it, by portraying jobless men as drunks as well.<sup>11</sup> Even though men’s wages in the new industrial economy were not sufficient to supporting a family, and working class and poor women continued to earn

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<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Palmateer discusses the particular seasonal and temporary labor needs of timber and mining industries which would entice laborers to, and then abandon them in, another expanding postwar economy, the Pacific Northwest in, “Charity and the ‘Tramp’: Itinerancy, Unemployment, and Municipal Government from Coxe to the Unemployed League,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107 (summer 2006), 228-53, quotation, 229.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. On the image of the tramp as a criminal and social deviant and contemporary efforts to rehabilitate and punish tramps, see Frank Leonard, “‘Helping’ the Unemployed in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of the American Tramp,” *The Social Service Review* 40 (December 1966), 429-34. On the proliferation of tramps in contemporary literature and their later romanticization, see Christine Photinos, “The Figure of the Tramp in Gilded Age Success Narratives,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40 (December 2007), 994-1018.

<sup>11</sup> Palmateer, 230; Leonard, 431; Photinos, 1010-13.

wages to supplement the meager earnings of men, the theoretical economic dependence of women also kept their wages, as well as their opportunities, minimal.<sup>12</sup> The economic strain on families manifested itself differently in the especially hard-hit South, where agriculture remained dominant. Agricultural laborers struggled to maintain independent landholdings or to find work on others' land, and were increasingly crippled by bad crop yields and debt. These conditions "created an abundant supply of cheap labor that helped make possible the rapid expansion of the cotton textile industry in the 1880s."<sup>13</sup> White women and children were the first and largest group of workers to move into Southern textile factories, and their status as social, legal, and economic dependents, combined with the insistence of men to lay claims to patriarchal status despite their inability to make a living as farmers or farm hands, determined a low wage structure.

In the realm of business, lack of capital only intensified the already depressed economy in Southern states. David Carlton and Peter Coclanis have argued that, during the late nineteenth century, "relative poverty... would not have been too great a handicap in and of itself, if regional or national markets had channeled capital to enterprises in the South as efficiently as they did elsewhere." In short, Northern capital did not generally want to do business in the South or with Southerners. As late as 1900, the typical Southern firm started with a capital investment of \$11,000, while those of other regions were capitalized at an average of \$21,000. The amounts were even lower in the

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<sup>12</sup> As Jeanne Boydston explains, men's wages were kept low in part because industrialists recognized that women provided "invisible" support for their families, in *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 137-39.

<sup>13</sup> Foner, 535-36.

Carolinas than in the rest of the South, leading textile and furniture industries to turn to the pooling of small investments from multiple investors, whose receipt of regular dividends reduced the firm's ability to put money back into the business for improvements or expansion. These normally "fragmented, localized, ad hoc capital markets" limited the region's ability to expand on the large scale seen in other regions. Northern capital did flow in to some areas, such as Birmingham, but the North Carolina Piedmont was especially lacking in outside capital investment until the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

Immediately after the depression of the 1870s ended, the publisher of Raleigh's city directory painted a particularly rosy picture by summing it up as less than a blow to the local economy and the improvements that had begun during Reconstruction. "The panic of 1873 came," read the report, "but did not blight the growth of the city, whose prosperity then became assured. No business houses suffered during those dark days, and the people did not lose heart through the period of depression which followed."<sup>15</sup>

Although growth in the Piedmont was seemingly limited compared to other regions, such

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<sup>14</sup> The tobacco industry was an exception, primarily because it was a new industry and demand was so high, and Piedmont tobacco giants Julian Carr and James Duke overcame these obstacles. David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, "Capital Mobilization and Southern Industry, 1880-1905: The Case of the Carolina Piedmont," *The Journal of Economic History* 49 (March 1989), 73-94. See also James C. Cobb, who notes that even when Northerners did invest capital in Southern industry, policies geared toward "extractive, process-oriented operations" rather than heavy industry stunted growth in comparison to other regions, as in the example of Birmingham, in *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984* (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 16-22. C. Vann Woodward initiated the historiography of the "colonial" economy of the South in *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). See also Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986).

<sup>15</sup> *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Raleigh City Directory* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Printers and Binders, 1880), 30-31.

growth was substantial compared to its own pre-war circumstances. It was this growth that came to define the region and secure its New South identity.

With the depression over, the 1880s would prove a time of booming prosperity for the nation and the South during which those with even limited capital, like the numerous women who started small businesses, could take advantage. Women capitalized on this economic boom and its resultant population growth, offering their services to new residents and transients in the cities providing housing, food, clothing, and domestic services. Their entrance into the labor force reflected the way that this period of growth was also marked by economic uncertainty, including the challenges of postwar recovery, the South's continuing dependence on cotton, and the depressions that marked the 1870s and 1890s. These economic downturns propelled even many married women to earn money and seek financial recourse through the courts. It also added to the usual challenges faced by small business owners, making occupations such as dressmaking and boarding house operation risky ventures. Nonetheless, the demand for the services provided by women was high amid an increasing population associated with new opportunities in cities, and the numbers of women establishing these businesses grew significantly.

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Recognizing women's economic roles in cities changes our understanding of the burgeoning New South economy. Historians have illuminated the growing political and economic power of cities in the postwar South, and the role of a new "middle class" made up of merchants, craftsmen, and professionals who provided the leadership and

money to build industry.<sup>16</sup> Studies of North Carolina reveal that many of the old elite retained their property and regained their political power postwar, but they also shared political and economic power with merchants, professionals, and new industrialists.

Historian Dwight Billings, Jr. concluded that in North Carolina planters took the reins of industrial development and transferred their paternalistic ethos to mill villages. Building

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<sup>16</sup> The change vs. continuity debate shaped much of the historiography on postbellum economic conditions in the South, its genesis with C. Vann Woodward's classic text, *Origins of the New South*. Woodward's central thesis was that the New South represented a break with the Old South as new men with an alternative vision for Southern society, rather than the planter elite, seized power. Historians whose research builds upon Woodward's thesis of change often seek to illuminate how the destruction of the system of slavery and development of a new system of labor, accompanied by dynamic race relations, altered Southern society. Many scholarly works on African-American life following emancipation fall into this category, and emphasize political power gained during Reconstruction, the social and economic benefits of education, the transition from slavery to freedom, and efforts to define freedom and labor conditions. See for example, Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). For a general study of political Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). On labor in the postwar South, also see Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); and Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On class structure in the postwar period, see also Harold Woodman, *King Cotton & His Retainers: Financing & Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). In direct rebuttal to Woodward, some historians have maintained that not only did planters retain hegemony but they also resisted change and often fought measures to industrialize, choosing instead to preserve the South's dependence on cash crops. See James Tice Moore, "Redeemers Reconsidered: Change and Continuity in the Democratic South, 1870-1900," *The Journal of Southern History* 44 (Aug., 1978), 357-378; Jonathan Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); and Jay Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978). More recently, historians acknowledge that neither change nor continuity effectively represents the Southern experience and that the two conditions often existed in tandem, especially when considering both tangibles, such as improvements in manufacturing and transportation, and intangibles, such as attitudes and beliefs. See for example Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Howard N. Rabinowitz, *The First New South, 1865-1920* (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 1992).

on this research, historian Paul Escott argues that while many members of prominent families underwrote industrial development in the state, they received support from businessmen in growing cities. Describing class structure in antebellum North Carolina, Escott has noted that the planter class was a diverse group, and “the distinction between it and the so-called middle class was one of degree, not kind.” The middle class, Escott continues, “lacked sufficient wealth, polish, or political success to be accepted as part of the gentry. They were propertied, however, and . . . regarded themselves as thoroughly respectable members of the community and were recognized as such by the elite.” In Greensboro in the 1880s, those holding political offices continued to be “a diverse group, and their personal fortunes, professional standing, and the size of their business enterprises varied tremendously.” However, this power shifted, and as historian Samuel Kipp discovered, manufacturers and large merchants began replacing smaller merchants and artisans as office-holders in the city by 1890.<sup>17</sup>

This white merchant class that joined ranks with planters to form the middle class after the war included small businesswomen and craftswomen in traditional jobs such as

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<sup>17</sup> Dwight B. Billings, Jr., *Planters and the Making of a "New South": Class, Politics, and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 77; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 5-7, 216-219, quotation p. 7; Samuel Kipp, “Old Notables and Newcomers: The Economic and Political Elite of Greensboro, North Carolina, 1880-1920,” *The Journal of Southern History* 43 (August 1977), 373-94, quotation p. 377. Gail O’Brien also noted the undemocratic nature of local politics in her study of the rising power of lawyers in Guilford County. See *The Legal Fraternity and the Making of a New South Community, 1848-1882* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986). Jonathan Wells offers an analysis of the Southern middle class of the antebellum period which does not include many small merchants and particularly skilled craftsmen, noting their competition from slave labor, in *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 181-91. On ideological class status among former slave-holding families in North Carolina in spite of disparate economic circumstances, see Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

needlework and boarding house operation who contributed to and were affected by the changes occurring in the economic and political structure. Reflecting the diverse roots of the emerging white “middle class,” small businesswomen in the Piedmont hailed from both former slave-holding families and those whose livelihood depended on a trade, and some of these small businesswomen had connections to the nascent antebellum middle class either through their own work or the work or property-holding status of family members.<sup>18</sup> The wide range of material circumstances in this group is expected of a class in flux, but it also suggests that the white women who chose this work did so partly as a function of their interest in distinguishing themselves as a class above poor white women and their status as separate from black women. Even when they had no property or other resources, this group of women avoided domestic service and laundry work altogether, jobs associated with poor white women and, especially, black women. Their race and class determined the work most suitable for them, and in doing these jobs they did not upset existing hierarchies. Their earnings played a crucial role in helping many families attain the trappings of gentility, namely servants and an education for their children. However, if white women’s earnings helped many families to enter the emerging middle class, their hardships exemplified the precariousness of that status. The rise and fall of small business ownership among white women was intimately connected to the rise and

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<sup>18</sup> On the antebellum middle class, see Jonathan Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class*; L. Diane Barnes, *Artisan Workers in the Upper South: Petersburg, Virginia, 1820-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Frank J. Byrne, *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

fall of the merchant class more generally in the Piedmont between the Civil War and the 1890s.<sup>19</sup>

Studies of Southern white women have acknowledged changed conditions after the war but often focus on elite women's struggles to adapt to their new circumstances. The classic interpretation of elite women before and after the Civil War remains Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, published in 1970. Scott concluded that the Civil War helped to emancipate women who had challenged gender conventions when they took on new roles during the war. Her argument contributed a gender perspective to the longstanding change versus continuity debate in Southern historical scholarship, and she established many of the topics taken on since by historians of Southern elite and middle-class women in particular. Drew Gilpin Faust challenged Scott's conclusions, arguing that elite women had too much invested in white supremacy to challenge the patriarchal norm despite their life-altering experiences during the war. Other historians of Southern women have modified Scott's liberal interpretation. Jane Turner Censer argues that the war and reconstruction had variable effects depending on the woman's stage of life. In her study of elite and middle-class white women who worked primarily as writers and teachers, she concludes that older women generally fit the mode of continuity while younger women more readily embraced change. In an examination of the nursing work of slave, poor white, and free black women as well as elite and middle-class women during the war, Jane E. Schultz

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<sup>19</sup> Kipp, "Old Notables," 381. See also Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*; Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City*, 45, 48-51, 55, 90-95, 210-12.

concludes that most elite women rejected nursing as a career after the war because of the numerous unseemly responsibilities involved. Nonetheless, when they entered other occupations after the war, it was with confidence that their war work had influenced the public to be accepting of them as laborers and earners.<sup>20</sup>

Scholarship on elite women in the postwar period also examines the predominant discourse that assumed that women's economic agency was temporary or unwanted. Historian George Rable illuminated the prevailing belief among Southerners that white women took jobs only as a temporary measure and "that peace would return women to the domestic circle."<sup>21</sup> Among the few elites who supported woman suffrage in the postwar years were some women and men who believed that the circumstances for women had indeed changed forever. Yet as historian Marjorie Spruill notes, they still generally "insisted that change had been *forced* upon women," and thereby "invoked a certain protection before a public eager to accuse women activists of 'unwomanly' ambition, and of abandoning woman's domestic and subordinate role." Although her work focuses on the suffrage movement particularly, Spruill also found similar ideas among elite women regarding women's employment.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 112.

<sup>22</sup> Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, "Divided Legacy: The Civil War, Tradition, and 'the Woman Question,' 1870-1920," in *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*,

The enduring patriarchal household casts a long shadow on studies of Southern white women's paid labor. Historian Michele Gillespie has argued that the paid labor of white women in mills in the antebellum period intensified the need of even the poorest white men to maintain the image of the strong patriarch, and influenced them to claim the status of farmer when landless and without work. Historian Jane Turner Censer concludes that younger elite white women who gained a degree of independence and a new identity through their paid labor, primarily as teachers, in the lean years following the Civil War ultimately dedicated their support to the resurgent racial patriarchy of the 1890s through their middle-class domesticity.<sup>23</sup> Southern white women's unpaid labor in reform efforts, memorialization projects, and club activities have also been examined in terms of their relationship with the patriarchal social order.<sup>24</sup> These studies suggest that

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Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. and Kym S. Rice, ed. (Richmond: The Museum of the Confederacy and Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), quotation p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Michele Gillespie, "To Harden a Lady's Hand: Gender Politics, Racial Realities, and Women Millworkers in Antebellum Georgia," in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, ed. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 261-284; Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood*.

<sup>24</sup> Historians have examined how both men and women used the ideal of southern white womanhood to further social and political goals in the postwar South. For example, Caroline Janney argues that Ladies' Memorial Associations formed in Virginia immediately after the war could effectively characterize their work as domestic and avoid criticism for stepping out of appropriate roles because the presumed nature of women was apolitical, and therefore, "If women were not political, then, by extension, their actions could not be either." Despite this representation of their efforts, Janney argues that they were clearly effective political agents, not only paving the way for and helping legitimize later Confederate organizations, but also influencing the terms of national reconciliation and shaping Confederate memory, in *Burying the Dead but not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations & the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1-8. Marjorie Spruill observes that activists for woman suffrage maintained a conservative rather than radical stance in regard to their political activity by "invoking tradition in support of change," and provides evidence of elite women employing the argument that the devastation the war brought to Southern economic, political, and social systems provided inducement for women's roles to change. Spruill also notes that the "southern strategy" for woman suffrage remained conservative and essentially hinged on educated, white women restoring white supremacy through their voting power rather than a universal concern for equal rights. See "Divided Legacy," 176-183. See also

women's paid and unpaid labor created disharmony within the patriarchal household and potentially challenged the image of the dependent white woman in white society, leaving women to make adjustments to reconcile those differences. By exploring the actions, and where possible the viewpoints, of a range of white women who acted as economic agents, I argue that that many viewed their paid labor as essential to the functioning of their families, yet they also tended to observe the existing race and gender hierarchy rather than issue challenges to it.

While the ideal white woman was generally cast as a non-laborer and economic dependent in this environment, the labor of black women was presumed. In her study of the antebellum period, historian Suzanne Lebsack found that free black women in Petersburg, Virginia were more likely to own property and engage in business than either white women or black men. While white women most often continued to turn to marriage for economic security, free black women often chose not to marry and enjoyed personal and economic freedom. Similarly, in her examination of the transition from slavery to freedom in Atlanta, historian Tera Hunter shows that the work of African-American women was central to their struggle to shape an autonomous life in which they controlled their own bodies, a primary concern for former slaves, in both their work and leisure time. Historian Leslie Schwalm reveals women negotiating labor contracts within the system of sharecropping, the occupation of the majority of African-American women in the primarily agricultural postwar South. She emphasizes that former slave women did

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Spruill's full-length examination of the Southern suffrage movement, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

not retreat into domesticity or place the welfare of their families in the hands of men but rather played central and public roles in defining freedom and shaping labor conditions in South Carolina, defying both the supposed hegemony of white land-owning elites and the patriarchal social structure. These studies effectively demonstrate that wage earning was central to identity and the quest for self-determination among African American women.<sup>25</sup>

My exploration of women's wage labor from the 1870s to the 1890s focuses on the jobs occupying the majority of urban white women and offering them the best remuneration – dressmaking, millinery, and boarding. These women worked independently of an employer and were part of the business community, as evidenced by their listings in the commercial sections of directories. This focus excludes the large group of white and black wage workers who labored as seamstresses, who were less skilled than dressmakers and milliners and were more likely to work as employees of others producing piece work on a seasonal or temporary basis.<sup>26</sup> My research underscores how white women's employment changed over time and argues that new opportunities for white women further limited the occupational choices of black women.

While scholars have explored the roles of black women as economic providers, they have neglected the economic contributions of many white women to focus instead

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<sup>25</sup> Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*; Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*.

<sup>26</sup> On the status of seamstresses as both less skilled and lower paid than other needle workers, see Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 76-83.

on their legal and social subordination. Historians who have examined gender roles in the postwar South have done much to make Southern white women multi-dimensional. Yet they have focused on resistance to, and reconstruction of, the patriarchal social structure following the war rather than women's economic activities. Many of these scholars have made excellent use of legal records to show how some women challenged the patriarchal family structure in the years after the war, but could not successfully resist efforts by the state and men in their lives to shore up the traditional gender hierarchy. Peter Bardaglio argues that the state took over the governance of women's relationships with the men in their lives and with their children when the existing social structure broke down after the war, and that the gender hierarchy, in contrast with more egalitarian notions in the North, remained the primary construct in Southern law. Victoria Bynum's focus on gender roles considers particularly those women who did not follow society's rules, and who, in the act of exerting control in their own lives, struggled against local authorities who maintained sexual and social control over women through a legal system that reinforced the male-headed household and women's primary role as dependents. As Laura Edwards demonstrates, even as the household transformed with the end of slavery, the legal and social status of women continued to be that of dependents in male-headed households, and dedication to the gender hierarchy on the part of both men and women formed the basis of elite white power in the post-war South.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South, 1840-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). See also LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*.

My work offers a new perspective on Southern women's legal activities by focusing on their efforts to achieve economic security. While I concur that the legal system sought to reinforce the race and gender hierarchy, I illuminate a completely new facet of white and black women's efforts to use the law to their own ends. In the 1870s and 1880s, white women frequently initiated proceedings to protect their property and secured legal independence through divorce, which restored their control over property and earnings. Black women pursued these rights with less frequency, mainly because they had fewer opportunities to acquire property to begin with, but despite the justice system's bias, they, too, sought to protect their economic rights through court.

Although the number of white women across the South who worked independently as boarding house operators, milliners, and dressmakers increased substantially in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there are no major studies of Southern women who entered these occupations. Yet much can be learned from scholars who have examined women in these occupations in other regions. Placing women at the center of business history, these scholars have developed new definitions of entrepreneurship and business and new ways of thinking about the relationships between home and work, the public and private. Several historians have redefined business, moving away from the familiar image of the independent industrial-capitalist that usually characterizes late-nineteenth-century expansion, and including gendered businesses such as boarding houses, in which a woman may have worked alone or with only a few

employees.<sup>28</sup> Other work explains the distinctive place of women in commerce, as they filled particular economic niches rather than competing directly with men. These studies generally highlight how women capitalized on their specialized domestic skills and developed unique strategies for not only balancing domestic and work duties but also making a success of their ventures. In her study of Midwestern business women, Lucy Eldersveld Murphy concludes that they developed a distinctive female culture in which the great majority of their clients were female, and the key to a woman's success was her ability to balance the expectations of women associated with the private sphere with traits necessary to public entrepreneurial activity. Wendy Gamber has argued that millinery, a top occupational choice for women because it ranked highest in both prestige and income, formed the core of a distinctive female economy in which women were the principal players. She stresses the independence women achieved with their fashion-based businesses in Boston and concludes that their independence was limited over time by factors beyond their control, as modern systems of mass production, run by men in

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Angel Kwolek-Folland presents a "value neutral" definition of business as "engaging in economic activity in a market to seek profit and assuming the financial responsibility for that activity," in *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 5. Susan Ingalls Lewis uses the term "microentrepreneurship" to classify the small businesses of both men and women, rejecting "those supposedly 'universal' paradigms of success, enterprise, and entrepreneurship" which are essentially "male" models, and which "may not even have applied to most businessmen." See *Unexceptional Women: Female Proprietors in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Albany, New York, 1830-1885* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 1-13. See also works by Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy* and "A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History," *The Business History Review* 72 (summer 1998), 188-217. On the business of boarding house operation, see Sandra L. Wheeler, "To Get an Honest Livin': Professional Boardinghouse Keepers in Hartford, 1890," *Connecticut History* 36 (March 1995), 48-65; Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). For a similar discussion regarding African American businesses, see John Ingham, "African American Business Leaders in the South, 1810-1945: Business Success, Community Leadership and Racial Protest," *Business and Economic History* 22 (fall 1993): 262-72.

factories, replaced craftswomen in the needle trades.<sup>29</sup> My work is the first to bring the insight of women's business history to Southern history, and to illuminate the changing economic roles of white women in the New South economy. I show how urban white women moved from primarily small business operation to wage work in a single generation.

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While this dissertation relies on many traditional sources for studying Southern women's history in the late nineteenth century – the manuscript census, legal records, and published books, for example – it also introduces new sources frequently used in women's business history scholarship that very few works on Southern women have explored: city directories, ledgers of the R. G. Dun credit agency, and *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory*. Levi Branson of Raleigh published his directory regularly between 1866 and 1896, acquiring information from local correspondents in each county. *Branson's* identified some, but not all, of the small businesswomen in each county and city of the state, and make it possible to trace to some extent the persistence of women in small business operation in the state over the thirty years it was in publication.

City directories provide even more detailed information, denoting the address, marital status, and occupation of the majority of employed woman residing in the city. The business sections of directories routinely listed boarding house operators,

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<sup>29</sup> Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, "Business Ladies: Midwestern Women and Enterprise, 1850-1880," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (spring 1991), 65-89. While Gamber acknowledges this to be a "precarious independence," it was independence nonetheless. See Gamber, "A Precarious Independence: Milliners and Dressmakers in Boston, 1860-1890," *Journal of Women's History* 4 (spring 1992), 60-88 and *The Female Economy*, 21, 205.

dressmakers, and milliners who worked in cities; additional women operating small enterprises are found in the residential sections of directories. Although these occupations do not represent every independent business opportunity available to or performed by women in a city, they do represent the most common business choices and most recognized occupations among white women. Directory publication began in 1875 for the cities of Charlotte and Raleigh, and in 1879 for Greensboro, Winston, and Salem. Although not published annually in the early years, directories appeared frequently enough to support analysis of change over time in women's businesses, particularly regarding their growth in the earlier years of this study and decline in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Residential sections of directories help round out statistical information regarding individual businesswomen and their families, including race, members of the household, occupations of other members of the family, and the length of time a woman operated her business.

The credit ledgers of the R.G. Dun & Company agency figure prominently in chapter two. Dun records started in the antebellum period and ended around 1880 for Piedmont cities. Especially critical to this study, since extant records on these women are limited, the Dun ledgers provide important contemporary reflections on the work practices and personal characteristics of a select group of white businesswomen and their families. The Dun agents examined women who were the most visible members of the female economy, particularly those in millinery and sometimes those in dressmaking, and not all women in the business community. The vagaries of the postwar economy and small business operation meant that some women's businesses survived only briefly, and

many cannot be located in more than one source for a single year. Others were healthy and long lasting, and appeared in numerous sources over several years.

African American women figure less prominently in my analysis of women's work than do white women most of the time. Combined sources – directories, advertisements, court records, and records of the credit-reporting agency R. G. Dun & Company, in addition to the census – while still only providing a sketchy profile in most cases, do allow for recovery of white businesswomen's history beyond mere statistics. Black businesswomen are rarely located in these sources. "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," however, and the enterprises of black women may have just been even more invisible than those of white women. A principal factor in the problem of locating black businesswomen is that white men compiled this information. African American women's small businesses in the late nineteenth century consisted primarily of laundry service, boarding houses, and eating establishments that often were not recognized in commercial sections of (white) directories. These businesses were dismissed by Dun agents, who only infrequently evaluated white women's businesses, but never evaluated the business of a single black woman in the cities of Charlotte, Greensboro, or Raleigh. Few white women advertised their businesses in (white) directories and newspapers, and even fewer black women did. Newspapers owned by African Americans also rarely printed advertisements for women's businesses. I include discussion of African American businesswomen who worked as dressmakers, boarding house or restaurant operators, and laundresses in my analysis of women's independent

economic activities, and examine their work as carefully as possible given the extant sources.

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The legal status of Southern women was an important factor in their ability to achieve economic independence through either their legal activities or work for an income. In chapter one, I consider the extent to which women used North Carolina's married women's property laws and existing protections for single, divorced, and widowed women to engage the legal system and advance their own economic interests. Women had legal recourse for protecting their assets as well as their individual freedoms and they appeared in court to argue their cases. Although the law clearly acknowledged that women could not always rely on men and did not fulfill purely domestic roles, tradition did not allow women to escape suspicion and ridicule for any perceived violation of gender conventions. While elite and middling white women made some gains in the legal system, especially if they fulfilled gender and race expectations, poor white and black women were subject to decisions by judges who exercised their own brand of patriarchy and worked to keep the race and gender hierarchy in place.

In chapter two, I look closely at the dual effects of the poor economy and end of the system of slavery on white women working in small businesses, primarily as boarding house operators, dressmakers, and milliners. They represented a wide range of material circumstances – as many appear to have fallen or failed, simply survived, or made a comfortable living – and they experienced the usual ups-and-downs associated with small business ownership while suffering through the depression of the 1870s. Increasing

numbers of women sustained alternatives to the traditional patriarchal household and challenged conventional notions regarding a woman's nature and place because they served as breadwinners for their families. Yet their concentration in white "female" occupations, distinct from black women's and white men's jobs, meant that white women's labor reinscribed race and gender hierarchies even as they gained greater economic independence and challenged conventional notions of their place.

Chapter three is an exploration of how the North Carolina State Exposition of 1884 served as a medium to transmit messages about women's labor, from conventional notions about women's domestic roles to novel ideas about women using their education and skills toward a career and self-support. This event provides a microcosm of women's economic roles in the state. Women from all classes sought to capitalize on opportunities offered by the Exposition. Elite and middle-class white women gained particular attention and praise for both their domestic abilities and burgeoning professional opportunities, and they took advantage of the event as an opportunity to showcase their education and skills. Middle-class black women performed much the same function, but they and their efforts were segregated into an African American fair that ran simultaneously. Women of the working class and petty businesswomen labored to support the Exposition's construction and operation, serving visitors and event workers and organizers, yet their labor went almost completely unrecognized by organizers and the general public.

Chapter four is a study of changes in employment opportunities for women as the nineteenth century came to a close and the state focused ever more intently on

industrialization. Many of the independent business opportunities white women had counted on shrank, although not all at once or uniformly. Increasingly, women found that the services and skills they had been traditionally counted on to provide were no longer in demand or as lucrative, compelling them to pursue other options for earning a living. As a younger generation of white women entered new arenas of work, from factory employment to clerical jobs and professional careers, their African American counterparts faced ever more severe restrictions on their paid labor.

The Piedmont of North Carolina underwent a dramatic transformation between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, as did the roles of women in the developing New South economy. In the immediate postwar years, increasing numbers of white urban women exercised their independence in the labor force, often as small businesswomen, and in the courtroom, pursuing their newly established property rights and divorce with frequency. Yet their assertiveness received little public attention as public discourses built up an ideal of white women's economic and legal dependence. The race and gender hierarchy that kept white women from being viewed as providers simultaneously kept black women in a subordinate and degraded position, most often as servants to white women and their families. Social distinctions between black and white women limited other work opportunities for black women, a situation that intensified with Jim Crow. White women did not generally seek to overturn ideals of womanhood that ignored their economic contributions for fear that they might slip from the pedestal constructed for them. Nonetheless, in the courtroom and the labor force, both white and

black women made their mark on the New South by engaging in economic activities that played a crucial role in supporting their families and undergirding the Piedmont's development.

## CHAPTER II

### WHAT THE LAW ALLOWED: THE LEGAL EDIFICE OF WOMEN'S INCREASING AUTONOMY

All eyes were on North Carolina's state capital of Raleigh when the 1868 Constitutional Convention convened to create a new Constitution that would satisfy the requirements to readmit the state to the Union. In keeping with hyperbole surrounding Republican controlled state governments across the South, white conservatives in North Carolina railed against the "mongrel" convention, based on an assessment that there had been "no body ever assembled on the Continent of America so wholly unfitted, by education and training, to form a Constitution." At the State Capitol, in the gallery reserved for "ladies and their attendants," a reporter remarked that the space was "crowded with 'ladies of sable hue' and their dusky lords." He warned white women to stay away or risk their respectability.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Raleigh Correspondence of Wilmington Journal. Raleigh, N. C., Feb. 12, 1868," *Daily Sentinel*, 18 February 1868. In one of a series of articles on Reconstruction in the state, North Carolina essayist Mary Bayard Clarke had her fictional character Betsey Bittersweet disguise herself as a black woman to attend the Constitutional Convention. Seemingly driven by curiosity rather than a desire to participate in the political process, the Bittersweet character represented the usual position of white Southerners with her criticism of Republican delegates and objections to an expanded public role for white women. In later essays, however, Clarke promoted the economic independence of women, greater work opportunities, and better pay. Her use of a character to remind women of their proper place and her own voice to encourage their autonomy reveal one woman's struggle with the altered circumstances of the postwar period. See Anne Sarah Rubin, "Politics and Petticoats in the Same Pod: Florence Fay, Betsey Bittersweet, and the Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood, 1865-1868," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, ed., *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 168-88; Mary Bayard Clarke, *Live Your Own Life: The Family Papers of Mary Bayard Clarke, 1854-1886*, ed. Terrell Armistead Crow and Mary Moulton Barden (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

Regardless of white men's reproaches to black delegates and visitors at the Constitutional Convention and warnings to white women to stay away, both black and white women inserted themselves into the proceedings, chiefly through the presentation of divorce petitions to the delegates. Convention delegates had temporarily set aside customary limitations on legislative authority to grant divorces, leading men and women from across the state to petition. The relatively speedy and inexpensive divorces couples could obtain from the Convention enabled them to avoid waiting for months to appear on court dockets and also meant that they could avoid paying the usual costs. So many citizens submitted petitions for divorce that delegates made the decision to only consider cases of extreme hardship. More than half of the petitioners were women, taking advantage of the opportunity made available to them through the Convention to attain independence from men. In addition to their complaints about philandering, abusive, or absent husbands, most had an economic imperative to divorce. They needed to support themselves and protect their assets and earnings when husbands proved undependable.

The assertiveness of women at the Constitutional Convention was indicative of their assertiveness in seeking economic security through postwar Piedmont civil courts in general. Their efforts were at once supported by increasingly liberal ideas regarding women's rights to assets represented by the passage of the married women's property act at the Convention and thwarted by judges' conservative tendencies in interpreting the law. Black and white Piedmont women from a range of economic circumstances appeared most often in civil court to obtain a divorce, to pay or recover a financial settlement, or to claim alimony or child support. In other legal battles, women sought

control of land and property normally held by husbands or other men, challenging the longstanding property rights of men with their own newfound property rights. Although the Convention did not inspire or advocate a movement for woman's rights generally, it marked an important transformation in the legal status of women and their relationship to the law, encouraging individual women to pursue whatever legal recourse the law allowed toward their personal economic security.

Historians have generally examined the relationship of Southern white women to the law in terms of their status as members of the patriarchal household, because their legal, social, and political position was determined first and foremost by their presumed dependency within the traditional social order. Scholars have shown that the Civil War and emancipation disrupted, but did not destroy, the social order, and people in positions of power continued to subject both black and white women to the patriarchal ideal in the postwar period. The usually conservative interpretations of the law offered by Supreme Court justices have led many historians to conclude that legal authorities acted as surrogate patriarchs for black and white women, allowing certain protections and benefits based on their presumed dependency – such as divorce from adulterous and abusive husbands and alimony and child support – so that they would not become dependent upon the state to provide for them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between members of the Southern household and the law, see Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995). On the role of the judiciary, see especially Michael Grossberg, who coined the term “judicial patriarchy” in *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill:

However powerful the patriarchal ideal remained after the war, women's interactions with the courts cannot be understood solely in terms of what the legal proceedings conveyed about their status as members of households or as dependents. Such a focus obscures the fact that many women used local courts for economic reasons, seeking to bolster their efforts to support themselves and their families. Although historians have primarily looked at the impact of important legislation such as the married women's property act on elite women because they were the most likely to have separate estates to protect, many women of limited means also used this law to gain economic security.<sup>3</sup> Black and white women with few personal or marital assets pursued divorce for the independence it offered, many having earned their own money and acquired personal and real property both during and after their marriages. The poorest women – the daughters of white and African American laborers who had only meager earnings – turned to the law most often for assistance when the fathers of their children

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University of North Carolina Press, 1985). Victoria Bynum discusses the patriarchal stance taken by judges on women's cases in the antebellum period in *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South, 1840-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Nancy Bercaw, who deemed the married women's property acts "class legislation," protecting landholdings and other forms of property for the elite but not the wages of working-class women, so that "(n)onelite families did not have a safety net – a loophole – to legally escape creditors' control," in *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 182-84. Amy Dru Stanley concurs, arguing that women's property and earnings legislation "governed very different forms of wealth acquired by women of different classes," in *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 199. On the use of equity laws to protect women's property in the antebellum period, see Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984), 55, 67, 71-2. On the non-revolutionary effects of the married women's property act on privileged white women because of equity laws, see Jane Turner Censer, "'What Will Be My Own': Women and Property Ownership," chapter 3, in *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

did not provide support. While the law demonstrated some tolerance for white middle-class women's property rights, poor white and black women found themselves struggling against a system that theoretically protected them because of their supposed dependency, yet offered them little in the way of economic support.

### **The Legal Status of Women in Postwar North Carolina**

North Carolina was pushed into joining the seven other states that had already seceded from the Union after the firing upon Fort Sumter in 1861. Subsequently committing more men and provisions to the war than any other Confederate state, North Carolina also held the dubious distinction of having sacrificed a greater number of men to the war than any other – by some estimates an astounding  $\frac{1}{4}$  of all Confederate dead. Upon defeat, Southern states entered the tense period of Presidential Reconstruction, in which the planter elite could be hopeful that President Andrew Johnson's lenient policies and pardoning of Confederates would deliver them back into the Union with little duress or loss of political power. This was followed by the stark realization under Radical Republican control that Southern states would indeed be forced to change their political structure.

North Carolina's legislators set to work to ratify the amendments to the U.S. Constitution ending slavery and granting citizenship to former slaves as was required to rejoin the Union. This was accomplished through a constitutional convention in 1868, approved by popular vote and led by a Republican majority, because many former Confederates were restricted from holding political office. The work completed, the state

joined four others – South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida – in being readmitted to the Union that year. Within two years, a campaign of violence and intimidation brought North Carolina back under Democratic control at the state level, although local governments continued to elect Republicans to office, both black and white, particularly in areas with large black populations. The determination of African Americans to pursue their right to vote plus the threat of Fusion politics resulted in the violent Democratic campaign in Wilmington in 1898 to eradicate black political gains, followed in 1900 by a state constitutional amendment disfranchising most black voters and many poor whites, as well. In the intervening years, North Carolina's constitution as it was ratified at the 1868 convention was regarded as a very democratic document. Its provisions included the abolishing of property qualifications to vote or hold office; election, rather than appointment, of judges and representatives at the state and local level; creation of public schools, a state prison, and institutions for the care and treatment of the disabled; and the enlargement of rights for African Americans and women. Inspired by the promises made in the revised constitution, the majority of voters defeated an attempt by the new Democratic majority in 1870 to repeal the constitution, a move that would have reversed many of the gains made by North Carolina's citizens. Instead, political leaders and ordinary people alike would test the limits and possibilities of the rights offered in the 1868 constitution with legislative measures and in courtrooms.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 526-36; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 136-70; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 115, 183, 193, 194, 317, 318, 444; Jeffery J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*

Conservatives, both in ideology and in the name adopted by the party that would become Democrats, made divorce a political issue amid the controversy surrounding the 1868 North Carolina Constitutional Convention. Included among the many fears about, and complaints lodged against, Republicans was an exaggeration of their propensity toward favoring divorce. On the same page in which it admonished its readers to “Arouse, white men of North Carolina, before the black fetters are irrecoverably fixed upon you!” the editors of the *Daily Sentinel* of Raleigh condemned Convention delegates, stating that while divorce laws had been stringent enough to dissuade husbands and wives from pursuing divorce in the past, “(s)ince the present so called Convention has been in session, there have been a great many petitions for divorce.” Stoking the anxieties of many whites in the post-slavery landscape, conservatives expressed an imperative to preserve the sanctity of marriage from the Republican majority, about whom they raised alarm as “[a] set of men, who have so little respect for the marital relation as to license marriage between negroes and whites” and anticipated that they would “not hesitate to disrupt the tie upon whatever pretext.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the fears of some observers, Convention

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(Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2002), 70-94, 108-17. On the struggle of Democrats to achieve and then maintain political control in the Piedmont county of Granville, see Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 218-54.

<sup>5</sup> “More Humiliation of White Men” and “Divorces” in *The Daily Sentinel*, 19 February 1868. Victoria Bynum posits that divorce laws in North Carolina were actually quite liberal, but as a testament to its conservatism, “throughout the antebellum period North Carolina’s high court for the most part refused either to affirm divorces decreed or overturn those denied by the state’s superior courts,” in *Unruly Women*, 68-69. There were 120 delegates elected to the Convention, 107 Republicans and 13 Democrats (Conservatives), and 15 of the Republicans were African American men representing majority black counties. *The Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of North-Carolina, at Its Session 1868* (Raleigh: Joseph W. Holden, Convention Printer, 1868), 4-6, Electronic Edition, *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

delegates did not sanction interracial marriage, and in fact, adopted a resolution “that inter-marriages and illegal intercourse between the races should be discountenanced.”<sup>6</sup> Neither did they run roughshod over marital vows, filtering through the petitions to only consider the most extreme cases, and approving only fifteen of the twenty-seven that remained. Regardless, the impression of many interested citizens, including the petitioners, was that delegates looked more favorably upon divorce than the courts.

Allied with other authority figures who routinely expressed concerns regarding the harmful effects of divorce on individuals and society, a core group of delegates at the Convention, both white Republicans and Conservatives, consistently protested the passage of divorce ordinances. Their concerns were based not only on personal convictions but also on established law and practice in the state. The Chairman of the Judicial Committee at the Convention, William B. Rodman, later Associate Justice of the state Supreme Court, acknowledged the irregularity of a legislative body granting divorces in the state when he reported on behalf of the committee “that if the Convention determines to legislate on private matters” their recommendation was to approve the divorce petition of Dewitt and Nancy Wilson. Delegates who remained reluctant to sanction divorce entered a motion to reconsider each time a divorce was approved by the special committee formed to consider the petitions. The body voted in the February 13 session that the General Assembly would have the “power to pass general laws regulating divorce and alimony, but shall not have power to grant a divorce or secure alimony in any

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<sup>6</sup> *Journal of the Constitutional Convention*, 473.

individual case,” as had been the practice since the 1835 Constitution. Because divorce petitions became a surprising drain on their time, the delegates agreed that in order to speed up the process they would approve without a vote any petitions receiving a favorable review from the committee on divorce, and that the committee would only consider cases of extreme hardship and those that were unlikely to obtain a divorce in court.<sup>7</sup>

Although the divorce petitions that passed did so by a majority vote, there were disagreements among Republicans regarding divorce at the Convention. On March 13, white Republicans J. Q. A. Bryan, who had opposed every divorce petition recommended for approval by the committee on divorce, and Calvin J. Cowles, Convention chairman, submitted an official protest which read, “Being of the opinion that all cases of divorce properly belongs [sic] to the Courts, we dissent from granting the same otherwise.” While Republicans generally tended toward more liberal views on divorce than Conservatives and most judges, white Republicans like Bryan and Cowles often balked at granting divorces at the Convention but black Republicans were more liberal on the topic.<sup>8</sup> That convention delegates debated divorce cases at all reflected the growing

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<sup>7</sup> *Journal of the Constitutional Convention*, 119, 193, 197; Henry G. Connor and Joseph B. Cheshire, Jr., *The Constitution of the State of North Carolina Annotated* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1911), xlvi, lxxvii, 116. In the early proceedings, once the special committee appointed to consider the divorce petitions approved one, it passed to the whole body for a vote.

<sup>8</sup> *Journal of the Constitutional Convention*, 445-46. As examples of delegates’ voting patterns on the first few divorce petitions, the vote count for the petition of John Roberts was 51 yeas and 21 nays, and that for Rosa Quinlivan’s petition was 61 yeas and 23 nays, *Journal of the Constitutional Convention*, 344-45. Karin Zipf, “No Longer under Cover(ture): Marriage, Divorce, and Gender in the 1868 Constitutional Convention” in Paul D. Escott, ed., *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 207-10.

importance of legislation regarding women's property rights and earnings in postwar North Carolina.

In response to the economic crisis facing the state after the Civil War, the revised North Carolina Constitution of 1868 included legislation to protect wives' separate estates from debt collection and families from complete ruin. Married women's property acts across the South, with stipulations like that in North Carolina that a wife's property "shall not be liable for any debts, obligations or engagements of her husband," were part of more encompassing acts governing homestead exemptions that focused on protecting citizens from losing their property to debt.<sup>9</sup> Yet this reversal of certain aspects of the laws of *coverture*, which had turned possession and control of a woman's property over to her husband upon marriage, also represented a dramatic shift in the legal status of wives.<sup>10</sup> The act provided the state's women with greater access to property than ever before in a period when patriarchal authority still presumably ruled the household. Changes in dower, the one-third of a husband's property that passed to a wife upon his death, granted wives an interest in property owned by husbands throughout their marriages rather than only the property held when men died. This meant that husbands

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<sup>9</sup> Article X of North Carolina's Constitution of 1868 governed homesteads and exemptions. Section 1 covered the personal property exemption of \$500, Section 2 the real estate exemption of \$1000, and Section 6 was the married women's property act. Connor, *Constitution Annotated*, 359-428. On North Carolina's Reconstruction-era Constitutional changes, see John V. Orth, *The North Carolina State Constitution with History and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 212-16. For a brief discussion of Reconstruction-era changes in homestead exemptions and married women's property laws in the South generally, see Joseph A. Ranney, *In the Wake of Slavery: Civil War, Civil Rights, and the Reconstruction of Southern Law* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 86-88.

<sup>10</sup> Carole Shammas discusses the history of married women's property laws in the United States, explains how these laws varied by state and region, and provides an historiographical overview in "Re-Assessing the Married Women's Property Acts," *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Spring 1994), 9-30.

could no longer sell property without the permission of their wives. Of greatest consequence, historian Karin Zipf has argued, was the institution of privy examinations that granted wives the right to consent or object to the sale of marital property through a private consultation with the judge. This requirement offered legislative confirmation that women were rational and capable of making decisions independently of their husbands and in their own best interests, and, as a result, “significantly undermined husbands’ legal authority.”<sup>11</sup>

Although women had gained certain legal advantages and could test the boundaries of the married women’s property act, they usually exercised little real control over assets and their own affairs as long as they were married. Scholars have argued that because the married women’s property acts were aimed toward the shoring up of men and business in an unstable economy, and never intended to advance the cause of woman’s rights, they accomplished little for most women.<sup>12</sup> Authorities saw no reason to separate a woman’s relationship to the law from her subordinate position within the household. A widow, abandoned wife, or divorced woman could normally expect only a “life interest” in marital property, that is, use of the property throughout her life with severe restrictions on her ability to sell, convey, or alter the property, as it would revert to the heirs of the woman’s husband after her death. This carried with it a court-appointed male trustee to oversee any legal issues relating to the property. Neither did the law allow wives to convey their separate estates without the written permission of their spouses.

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<sup>11</sup> Zipf, 210-15.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Suzanne Lebsock, “Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women,” *Journal of Southern History* 43 (May 1977), 195-216.

The married women's property act did not address the inability of married women to enter into contracts, which continued to severely restrict their control over financial matters. Throughout the postwar period, married women were still unable to sign contracts independently of their husbands unless officially registered for *feme sole* status. A legal designation based in the English common law of *coverture*, which recognized either *femes covert* – women who were married and under the protection of their husbands – or *femes sole* – single, divorced, or widowed women who were self-governed – a married woman's *feme sole* status was usually acquired because she engaged in business and had a practical need for the independence to sign contracts and perform other legal matters related to her business. It required spousal consent, and even then limited wives to the rights specifically granted by their husbands. When Fannie Fishblate of Greensboro, a registered *feme sole* with permission to operate her own clothing store, tried to purchase land on her own, she and the seller were admonished by both the judge and her husband for overreaching her privileges, the contract was voided, and both parties were ordered to pay half the court costs.<sup>13</sup>

Even after married women gained some property rights, husbands retained rights to the labor, both household and otherwise, and income of their wives, meaning that a wife essentially worked for her husband even when employed by someone else or self-employed unless registered as a *feme sole*. This was an especially difficult situation for

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<sup>13</sup> Fishblate's husband testified that his wife "was registered as a free-trader, to do a mercantile business, and no other, and especially not authorized to engage in land speculations," in *E. P. Wharton and Allie H. Worth, Admx. vs. Fannie Fishblate and E. R. Fishblate*, Guilford County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, 1894, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

scores of ordinary women who earned income yet could exercise little or no control over their only real assets. Women's earnings laws passed in 1873 enabled those who earned their own money to control it, but the law did not reverse the right of husbands to the labor of their wives in the home and on the farm, where the majority of North Carolina's women worked.<sup>14</sup> In addition, scholars have noted the tendency of judges to interpret the laws very conservatively and rule against women who challenged male authority.<sup>15</sup> In sum, women's rights to their property and earnings, while legally protected, were never guaranteed. Even a right as routine and traditionally protected by law and custom as dower was something for which women often had to fight in court. Further complicating these issues, white middling and elite women in the South generally supported conservative social and political policies that restricted their own rights because of their commitment to white supremacy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Constitution Annotated*, 406. Nancy Bercaw notes the efforts of black women to protect their wages in light of provisions governing a woman's right to the fruits of her labor under the umbrella of the married women's property act in Mississippi, in *Gendered Freedoms* 150-53, 181-83. As historian Amy Dru Stanley has argued, the marriage contract rather than the wage contract continued to be the guiding principle for judges interpreting earnings laws, in *From Bondage to Contract*, 175-217.

<sup>15</sup> North Carolina State Supreme Court Justice Walter Clark stated that the legislature had to continually pass statutes to protect women's property rights from outdated interpretations of judges, in "Address by Chief Justice Walter Clark Before the Federation of Women's Clubs, New Bern, N. C., 8 May, 1913: The Legal Status of Women in North Carolina: Past, Present, and Prospective," Electronic Edition, *Documenting the American South*, UNC. See also Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth* and Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household*.

<sup>16</sup> See Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, "Divided Legacy: The Civil War, Tradition, and 'the Woman Question,' 1870-1920," in Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. and Kym S. Rice, ed., *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy* (Richmond: The Museum of the Confederacy and Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) and Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

## **Economic Independence through Divorce**

Piedmont women used civil courts most often to acquire a divorce. In Guilford County, for example, divorce had risen steadily to account for more than fifty percent of all civil cases involving women by 1890. As was the case with petitions presented at the 1868 Constitutional Convention, women and men were equally as likely to seek divorce in postwar courts.<sup>17</sup> Most women wanted to divorce to achieve independence from ruinous men even though divorce had its own potentially ruinous effects on their social status. Despite the social stigma it carried, divorce offered the independence that allowed women who could not count on economic support from their husbands to protect their assets, namely their earnings, by reestablishing their legal status as *femes sole*. If there were any assets to be had, women could also sue former husbands for alimony and, with the new property laws in place, marital property. Most Piedmont women did not pursue alimony either because they knew that their former spouses could not provide it or they could not afford the legal fees involved in pursuing their cases. Rather, the majority of women who divorced in the years immediately after the Civil War were of moderate to limited means, and for them the most important benefit of divorce rested in protecting their personal earnings and property.

North Carolina's women could be granted either absolute divorce, which was a complete dissolution of the marriage vows, or divorce from bed and board, which

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<sup>17</sup> In the period from 1870 to 1889 in Guilford County, women were named in 96 civil cases. Divorce accounted for nearly 50% of all civil cases involving women in the 1870s, and over 60% of those in the 1880s. Guilford County Superior Court Records, Minute Dockets, 1875-1885 and 1886-1889, NCSA. Victoria Bynum found that the majority of plaintiffs in antebellum Piedmont divorce cases were women, in *Unruly Women*, 74-75.

amounted to a legal separation. The former was much harder to obtain and therefore much less common. If a woman's husband had established a new home with another woman then she could sue for an absolute divorce, which restored her property rights and allowed her, but not her husband, to remarry. Adultery, abandonment, and cruelty, even to the point of repeated physical abuse, were grounds for bed-and-board divorce only, the rationale of legislators being that preserving the sanctity of the marriage vows was a matter with far-reaching implications that took precedence over an individual's distress or physical safety. Divorce from bed and board left the door open for couples to work out their differences and reconcile. This type of divorce also restored a woman's *feme sole* status and her control over her own property and earnings, but differed in that neither party could legally remarry. While their dependent status would suggest that women were hurt economically by divorce, divorced women gained outright control over their own earnings and property, freeing them from supposed dependence on men who had proved unreliable.

Why did women decide to pursue divorce? For the majority of men and women seeking divorce in court, it was the humiliation of a spouse's adultery that provided the spark. Yet often underlying their efforts was the belief that they would be better off financially if they divorced. Most of the petitioners to the Convention also stated that they could not afford the costs associated with pursuing divorce in court. Getting a divorce was no simple, straightforward matter. A wife had to prove abandonment as well as adultery to obtain dissolution of her marriage, and cruelty, including repeated physical abuse, was not sufficient grounds for divorce. Martha Brown of Raleigh petitioned the

Convention delegates for a divorce from her husband of fifteen years, and father to her seven children. She had to expose intimate details of her relationship with her husband in order to make her claims legitimate, revealing that as a consequence of her husband's adultery "he contracted more than once a disgusting and loathsome disease which he communicated to your petitioner." Further, since the law required that spouses seeking divorce substantiate their claims of abandonment or adultery, Brown and other women felt compelled to name their husbands' mistresses and provide witnesses, drawing neighbors and other community members into their dispute. In her petition, Brown named three women with whom she believed her husband had had sex, including one who had a reputation "of evil fame" in town. Finally, she argued that separation from her husband placed an additional economic burden on her. Brown had left her husband in 1866, he had since refused support for the three of their children who lived with her, whose "support and maintenance has fallen altogether upon her alone," and she claimed she did not have the money to pursue her case in court.<sup>18</sup>

As with Martha Brown, petitioners typically revealed their disappointment in their mates and some idea of the contractual obligations they believed marriage carried. A spouse's infidelity constituted a clear violation of a basic assumption of the marriage vows, as did the failure of men to provide for their families and the failure of women to perform household labor and engage in sexual relations with husbands. Henry G. Wood appealed to the sensibilities of male delegates who would understand his frustration with

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<sup>18</sup> *Petition of Martha Brown*, "Ordinances, etc." in the Records of the Constitutional Convention, 1868, box 295, Secretary of State Documents, NCSA.

a wife who “dos not wash for me nor Dos not bed with me.” Elizabeth Wood did not explain her reasons but she assented to the divorce by signing the document and petitioning the delegates along with him. James and Nancy Brady of Moore County vaguely referenced “difficulties” that led to their total estrangement, a version of the modern-day “irreconcilable differences,” which sought not to blame one or the other but clearly affirmed that the couple expected a level of mutual respect and affection that was absent. The couple also stated that they appealed to convention delegates because they could not afford the normal costs associated with divorce.<sup>19</sup> However mutual a couple’s interest in obtaining a divorce, it appears to have had little sway over the delegates, as both these petitions were denied.

Women seeking divorce weighed dissatisfaction with their marriages against the desire and ability to support themselves. The case of the Shroyers illuminates the financial burden of divorce on women in particular. In his petition, Edward Shroyer complained that his wife refused to live with him, moving to live with her sister where, in Edward’s opinion, she took better care of her brother-in-law than she had him. Mary’s voice was absent, so it is not known why she refused to perform the domestic duties expected of her and what drove her from her husband’s house, but she was evidently dissatisfied with the marriage as well. The delegates granted the divorce. At age forty-eight, Mary’s option to remarry, even if she wanted to do so, had already shrunk considerably; she offered no property or other material goods to a new husband. While

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<sup>19</sup> *Petition of Henry G. Wood and Elizabeth Wood and Application to divorce James Brady and Nancy Brady*, Convention Records, NCSA.

Mary remained single, living with her sister's family and working to support herself as a seamstress, Edward married the widow Alice Saintsing, who brought property and three children to their marriage. Edward was widowed within ten years and married to his third wife Ann, who worked as a seamstress, while his three stepchildren continued to live with him and contribute to a family income.<sup>20</sup>

Like Mary Shroyer, a divorced woman was usually an employed woman, regardless of her socioeconomic background. Divorced women in North Carolina worked for a living more than any other group of women in the late nineteenth century, and by 1890 sixty-one percent of divorced women in the state were gainfully employed.<sup>21</sup> For example, despite her marriage to a slaveholder before the Civil War, Adelia Slater started teaching music, relocating from Salisbury to Raleigh after the Convention delegates approved her divorce and granted her custody of her children. Slater set up a new household consisting of her four children and two black domestic servants, one of whom was a teenaged girl named Mary Slater, who had possibly been a slave for the Slater family prior to emancipation, and the other a young boy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "The General Tables of Occupations." Ninth Census. The Statistics of the Population of the United States (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1872); "The Tables of Occupation." Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1883); 1870 and 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Six Pound, Warren County.

<sup>21</sup> This compared to nearly 43% of widows, 27% of single women, and only 7% of married women, although employed married women, particularly, were likely undercounted because keeping house was recorded as their primary occupation. *Special Census Report on the Occupations of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1896), cxxviii.

<sup>22</sup> In 1860, Adelaide Slater lived in Salisbury, Rowan County with her husband James, and their children, 6-year-old Adelaide, and 3-year-old Henry, in 1860. Her husband was a clerk with \$1500 in real estate and \$4468 in personal property, which included one slave. Slater and her son Henry, aged 18, also working as a music instructor, and most likely for his mother, were listed as residents in the Raleigh boarding house operated by Mrs. Howell in 1875, see *Chataigne's Raleigh City Directory* (J. H. Chataigne,

The law allowed wives, whether the plaintiff or defendant in a divorce case, to sue for support and division of marital property.<sup>23</sup> Yet suits to distribute marital property rarely accompanied Piedmont divorce cases, likely because most involved struggling couples with little or no property to split. Petitions to the convention reflect this outcome in that only one of the fifteen divorces granted by the delegates referenced the expectation of the husband to provide financial support to his ex-wife. John Roberts of Chowan County was granted a divorce on the stipulation that his former wife Camilla be allowed to pursue alimony.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, of the thirty-seven divorce cases filed in Guilford County between 1880 and 1889, only five women received alimony or distribution of marital assets. One of those was Martha Morrison, whose case demonstrates the need for concern among women who faced, without divorce, the return of husbands who could make legal claims to their assets. When Henry Morrison sued the following court session to take possession of what he defined as marital property, Martha testified that she had purchased the land with her own money after he left her, and that he returned and “caused and procured the deed ... to be made to himself.” The court granted Martha “sole and exclusive possession” of the land she had purchased as well as an estate for life in the

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1875), 110-11. Slater disappears from Raleigh sources after that, however. 1860 U.S. Manuscript Census, Slave Schedules and Schedule of Free Inhabitants, Salisbury, Rowan; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh West Ward, Wake.

<sup>23</sup> A woman qualified for alimony once a divorce case was initiated, whether she was the plaintiff or defendant, and even if she was accused of adultery by her husband, as determined by the North Carolina State Supreme Court in the case of *Jacob Webber v. Rosa Webber*, June 1878. See *North Carolina Reports. Vol. LXXIX. Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of North Carolina, June Term, 1878* (Raleigh: The Raleigh News, State Printer and Binder, 1878), 572-77.

<sup>24</sup> *Journal of the Constitutional Convention*, 344.

house the couple had shared despite her having been found guilty of adultery in the couple's divorce.<sup>25</sup>

The four other women who received a financial settlement through the Guilford County court had been the ones to sue their husbands for divorce. Mollie Boon obtained a life interest in marital property after she divorced her husband, but she had to sue her former stepson in order to secure it. On Christmas Eve, 1885, Ellen Jarrell was awarded two houses and lots in High Point, all the personal property in her possession and in the houses, and custody of her children when she divorced her husband M. H. Jarrell on charges that he was a drunkard and abused her. Ida Hudson successfully sued her husband Richard for divorce, support, and custody of their child on the grounds of abandonment. Richard was ordered to pay Ida \$50 annually, and the court oversaw the installments each February and August. Mary McKinney's husband had abandoned her and moved to Caswell County when she was granted her divorce, custody of her children, and a \$1000 settlement collected by the sheriff in Caswell. Although significant, the acquisition of resources by these women following divorce was not typical. The law primarily protected those women who might lose assets because of their divorces – mostly white and middling women. Eighty-five percent of women who divorced their husbands in Guilford County in this decade did not pursue monetary compensation afterward, presumably because there were few marital assets to claim.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, Guilford County, August 1885; Guilford County Superior Court Records, Minute Docket, 1875-1885 and 1886-1889, NCSA.

<sup>26</sup> Guilford County Superior Court Records, Minute Docket, 1875-1885 and 1886-1889, NCSA. The only Piedmont divorce cases in which women were not awarded custody of their children were those in

Even though divorce brought little in the way of monetary settlements for most women, it did offer the protection of certain assets through the accompanying *feme sole* status. Ann Underdue of Raleigh, who before the Civil War had been a free black woman working as a seamstress, had acquired \$200 worth of real estate and \$50 in personal property by 1860. At age 35 she lived alone, separated from her husband for several years before obtaining her divorce from the Convention in 1868. She lived next door to the family of Sarah Underdue, a washerwoman with four dependents – possibly her daughter and three grandchildren – who claimed \$150 in real estate and \$50 in personal property. In the same neighborhood, washerwomen Letitia and Polly Roe lived next door to one another and operated separate households with dependents, each claiming \$300 in real estate. Letitia further claimed \$25 in personal property, and Polly, \$40.<sup>27</sup> A woman who could make her own earnings was often better off without a husband and, although her petition does not survive, it appears that Underdue divorced in part to protect her earnings and property from a husband who could return and lay claim to her assets.<sup>28</sup>

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which the wives had abandoned their husbands and, presumably, their children, as well, whereas fathers, who had a higher earning potential than women and therefore were assumed to be better equipped to provide financially for their children, had more frequently been awarded custody of children when parents divorced in the antebellum period, Peter Bardaglio notes an increase in the extent to which mothers were awarded custody of children in the post-Civil War period, based primarily on a belief that women were morally superior to men and especially suited to providing the love and care that young children, in particular, needed, in *Reconstructing the Household*, 137-46.

<sup>27</sup> 1860 U.S. Manuscript Census, City of Raleigh, Wake.

<sup>28</sup> Ann Underdue was granted permission to resume her maiden name, Ann Smith, following her divorce, *Journal*, 467. She was likely the Annie Smith who, ten years later, at age 45 with \$600 in realty and \$100 in personal property, was still neighbor to Polly and Letitia Roe, who, at ages 73 and 66 respectively, no longer worked. The head-of-household residing with a carpenter named Alvin Smith, a washerwoman named Jane Roe, and Charlotte and Betsy Flowers – no occupations listed – and their

The *feme sole* status gained by divorced women protected other assets available to them, as well. Widowed when her first husband died fighting for the Union in the Civil War, Matilda Lunsford had three small children and a pension of \$96 annually. Once Matilda was, as she claimed, “inveigled and persuaded into a marriage” by Green Anderson, she lost the pension. She cited Anderson’s abandonment of her within two months to live with “a lewd woman,” as well as his “reckless, desperate, and dissipated” behavior, and petitioned to reclaim the aid paid to widows of soldiers. For the purposes of determining need, the government recognized either *femes covert*, married women with someone to provide for them, or *femes sole*, unmarried women, and a divorce would return Matilda to the required *feme sole* status and reinstate her payments. In keeping with their stated guidelines, the convention delegates denied Matilda’s petition on the basis that, if her claims were true, she could find recourse in court.<sup>29</sup>

Women who labored for wages, owned property, and had dependants to support often divorced to escape economic burdens brought by the irresponsible actions of troublesome husbands. By re-establishing their *feme sole* status, divorced women regained control over earnings and assets that they had turned over to husbands upon marrying. Divorce proved a serious financial setback for women who were truly dependent on husbands to support them, but laws were in place that allowed them to seek

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children, Ann appears to have opened her home to extended family or turned her property into a boarding house. See 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh Township, Wake. None of these women appeared in the earliest Raleigh directory, *Chataigne’s Raleigh City Directory*, 1875.

<sup>29</sup> *Petition for divorce from Matilda Anderson of the County of Madison*, Convention Records, NCSA.

continuing support from their ex-husbands. The fact that few divorced women pursued this recourse suggests that most expected to – and did – provide for themselves as well as, or perhaps better than, their husbands had.

### **Race, Class, and Women’s Property (Pur)suits**

A wide range of women counted on laws such as the married women’s property act to protect their access to, and ability to maintain, personal property. In civil action cases concerning land in Wake, Mecklenburg, and Guilford Counties, women appeared most often as members of families. They were not principals in most cases but rather were named along with their husbands because of postwar changes to married women’s property laws that expanded protections of marital property, including the shielding of wives’ separate estates from debt and expansion of dower claims.<sup>30</sup> Yet a number of women engaged in property disputes on their own, including widows and divorced women of limited means who sought to retain life estates or homestead exemptions. Many fought to protect real estate they had purchased rather than inherited. Black and white wives with separate property went up against debt collectors. Black and white women of limited means pursued cases against white property owners who looked to

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<sup>30</sup> Although several women testified at having been defrauded, or at least deceived, by husbands or other male relatives over property, the only clear case I have found of a woman suing her husband in a property dispute was that of Jemima Atwell, who testified that her husband finally settled on a house and lot in Charlotte after turning over several tracts of land with the proceeds from the sale of property originally left to her. In the end, she had neither the deed to the property nor the \$500 difference that, she claimed, “he used for his own purposes,” a point he conceded in court. Jemima Atwell won her judgment, and her husband was ordered to convey the land to her by the next court term. *Jemima Atwell against Wm. B. Atwell, Fall Term 1878*, Mecklenburg County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Papers Concerning Land, box 4, 1878-1880, NCSA.

maintain or expand their control over property in their communities. The details of such cases reveal that women property owners hailed from much more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds than scholars have acknowledged, and winning or losing their cases often meant the difference between economic security and ruin. Although their court cases presented certain challenges to longstanding gender and race hierarchies, rulings consistently reinforced those hierarchies, often by favoring white men over women, and middle-class men and women over members of the lower class.

The change in status represented by the married women's property act provided wives with options as to how they presented themselves and their cases to the court. When Isabella Rowland was in danger of losing her property, a holding of nearly 1300 acres, because of her husband's debt, she and her husband argued that the case should be thrown out because only he was served with papers, and that she should have been served separately. In Mrs. Rowland's case, she was an "interested party" because her separate estate was at stake, but any wife could make this claim in court to protect her dower right in marital assets. The Rowlands lost in the lower court, the judge basing his decision on Mrs. Rowland's *feme covert* status, and determining that "service on the defendant S[amuel] Rowland was legal service as to both him [and] his wife." However, after 1868 Mrs. Rowland's rights were not governed solely by her status as a wife, but also as a property owner. The Rowlands appealed to the State Supreme Court, where the judge ruled that the wife must be served, and overturned the case.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Robert S. Perry vs. James Stephens and S. Rowland and wife*, Wake County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, 1869-1871, NCSA.

Other property-owning women opted instead to play up their dependent status in an effort to win their cases. Rosa B. Smith ultimately prevailed in a lawsuit against her for a debt of \$28 because her substantial separate estate was all in real estate rather than liquid assets. As a *feme covert*, she argued, she was required to attain written consent from her husband and a privy examination before binding over any of her property. She lost in the lower court because the plaintiff presented evidence that her husband did sign the paperwork, but she won on appeal because there had been no privy examination as required by law. Similarly, Margaret Cochran and Emeline Chavis both defended themselves against demands for payment from creditors with the argument that their *feme covert* status disabled them from making contracts, but both women lost their cases and were ordered to pay.<sup>32</sup>

Longstanding notions regarding the dependency of women influenced some property cases, and women could employ that argument to their favor, particularly in local courts. This appears to have been a factor in the property dispute of Anna Gifford of Charlotte, a widowed white woman with six dependent children. Her opponent, A. B. Davidson, had acquired the deed to her property as a result of her brother's debt. Davidson ignored the rules of polite society in the interest of winning his case, painting a negative picture of Gifford in the courtroom and hoping to convince the court that Gifford did not have the means to properly manage the property. First, he testified that

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<sup>32</sup> *A. Lester Heger vs. R. B. Smith and S. P. Smith and Johnston vs. Cochrane*, Mecklenburg County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, 1889-1890 and 1878-1881; *Thomas Love vs. Emeline Chavis and D. R. Chavis*, Wake County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, 1878-1880, all at NCSA.

he, not Gifford, had paid the taxes on the property since he had secured the deed from Gifford's brother. Second, he emphasized that the property was in desperate need of repairs. Finally, he declared his belief that Gifford was insolvent, stating that he doubted he would be able to recover money for either repairs or rent, which he sought in addition to having Gifford removed from the property. Gifford disputed his claim regarding the disrepair of the property and brought forward a contractor to testify on her behalf.<sup>33</sup>

The evidence presented in Gifford's defense suggested that her personal circumstances were those of a woman who needed protection through the legal system. Her brother, who the court determined had defrauded her but also testified on her behalf, certainly did all that he could to persuade the court that his sister was a sympathetic victim. J. E. Stenhouse stated that his sister had been ill for years and was too sick to appear in court. He also testified that he accepted his sister's conveyance of her deed to help him out with his business loans but admitted that he never acquired her permission to convey the deed for a debt. His sister, Stenhouse told the court, had no business knowledge and relied upon him for his "advice and counsel" since her husband died ten years earlier, suggesting that she was ignorant of the law. He added that his sister lived "in reduced circumstances" while she raised six young children.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gifford appeared as "Annie" or "Anna" in the census and the city directory, and as "Ann" only in the court documents. *A. B. Davidson vs. J. E. Stenhouse and Ann Gifford*, Mecklenburg County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Papers Concerning Land, box 5, 1881-1883 and *A. B. Davidson vs. Ann Gifford, Sally Thomas, and Eliza Darby*, box 7, 1889-1890, NCSA.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

With the portrait painted by her brother of her as the typically dependent and vulnerable white woman who would be unable to support her family if she did not retain her property, Gifford won the case. Davidson appealed, and the appellate judge ordered a new trial on the basis that the lower court ignored evidence and showed favor toward Gifford over Davidson. Rather than pursuing the case further – which had already consumed eleven years – and perhaps aware that the new evidence would work against her, Gifford entered into an agreement with Davidson to sell the property. In the end, she agreed to pay Davidson \$800 out of the proceeds of the sale, which turned out to be \$1500. Although Gifford's circumstances may have been better if she had retained the property, the loss of her property did not spell complete economic disaster. Like many other widows of her status, she hired servants and depended on her adult children for support.<sup>35</sup>

For some women, protecting their financial stability and real property was contingent upon protecting their intellectual property, which also had ties to changes in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Specifically, State Supreme Court Justice J. Merrimon wrote in his decision that the lower court ignored evidence that Gifford ratified the mortgage deed for her brother.

Gifford's husband, Thomas, had worked as an agent for the railroad and earned a comfortable living, claiming \$2000 in real estate and \$400 in personal property just before his death. By 1880, two years after the suit was filed against her, Gifford's sons John, 19, and William, 17, were store clerks. She employed an African American woman as her cook and a young African American boy as a servant in her home. In Davidson's suit against her, two other black women, Sally Thomas and Eliza Darby, were named as co-defendants, but Gifford's brother testified that they were merely her tenants and not really involved in the property dispute, so they, too, may have been servants. In 1900, eleven years after her settlement, four of Gifford's five surviving children, including one widowed daughter and a grandson, still resided with her in a rental house and contributed to a family income. At that time, one of Gifford's daughters worked as a saleslady and one of her sons was a cotton broker. *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Charlotte, N.C. Directory, 1879-'80...* (Charlotte: Observer Steam Job Print, 1879), 59; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Second Ward City of Charlotte, Mecklenburg; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte, Mecklenburg; 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte Township, Mecklenburg.

women's property laws.<sup>36</sup> Once Alice Person became the primary breadwinner for her family, she found it necessary to engage the law to help protect her livelihood and the trademark she held for her patent medicine. Having entered a contract to sell her business to Pittsburgh native George Davidson, who had relocated to the Charlotte area to take advantage of mining opportunities, Person filed a lawsuit against him when he reneged on his agreement to pay her \$20,000 plus royalties for several years to become the new owner of the company. Person turned immediately to her lawyer, whose response that "a Yankee cannot come down here and treat a woman of our state in this way" supported her own indignation. She had hoped to use the settlement from Davidson to pay off the mortgage on her family's plantation and, presumably, retire. Instead, she had to sell her home to pay off debts and move to a smaller house in town. The case was stayed for many years, and although it was much less than she had hoped for, the court eventually awarded Person \$1250 in damages, an amount that many would have viewed a veritable fortune. This fraud suit was the first of a handful of legal proceedings she had to pursue in order to maintain her business. Shortly after her first lawsuit, she relocated to Charlotte, where she took on a business partner, and sold him half interest in her business. Her partner quickly accrued debts, and in order to protect her trademark so that she could carry on her business, Person brought a suit to dissolve the partnership before

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<sup>36</sup> In her examination of patent applications among women in the nineteenth century in the United States, economist B. Zorina Khan found a positive correlation between more liberal women's property rights and the frequency of patent applications. In the South, fewer women applied for and received patents than in other regions, presumably because women recognized the limits of their property rights in Southern states. See B. Zorina Khan, "Married Women's Property Laws and Female Commercial Activity: Evidence from United States Patent Records, 1790-1895," *The Journal of Economic History* 56, Papers Presented at the Fifty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Economic History Association (July 1996), 356-88.

her partner could sell the trademark to pay off the debt. Armed with this experience, in a second partnership she insisted upon a legal agreement so that her trademark would not be at risk. Dissolving this partnership, as well, Person returned to her residence in Kittrell, Vance County in 1886, eschewing partnerships and manufacturing her remedy on her own.<sup>37</sup>

Elite women like Alice Person were better equipped through their status and education than many women for dealing with legal matters, but, as Person's repeated legal issues demonstrate, their status did not necessarily protect them from bad business deals and the vagaries of an uncertain economy. Abby Bodfish of Charlotte got caught up in both in the mid-1870s. The mother of two, Bodfish resided with the Reverend B. S. Bronson, most likely her brother, a property owner worth \$5000 in real estate in 1870. Bodfish made a loan of \$9000 to wealthy cotton buyer and plantation owner John Y. Bryce that same year. Perhaps due to a bad crop or the depression that hit in 1873, Bryce reneged on his loan and left Bodfish the owner of two city lots and three farms of a few hundred acres each. Bodfish had to file suit against the Charlotte bank that held the mortgage, but she secured those properties in 1874. Bodfish then went into business, which brought her financial complications. She opened a millinery in Charlotte in 1875 in which she reportedly invested as much as \$5000. Although her credit reports were

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<sup>37</sup> Alice Morgan Person, "The Chivalry of Man, as Exemplified in the Life of Mrs. Joe Person," TD, 1890(?), Alice Morgan Person Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 13-20, 21-22, 27-29, 38-41, 44-45. The state business directory lists Mrs. Joe Person, patent medicine manufacturer, in Franklinton, Franklin County, likely because it was the post office serving Kittrell. Her son Wiley (W. M.) was also practicing law in Louisburg, Franklin County, at the time, *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory 1890* (Raleigh, N.C.: Levi Branson, Office Publisher, 1889), 295.

good, Bodfish was out of business within a year because the manager she hired ran off with her money. With liabilities in excess of \$15,000 and assets, mostly in the stock in her business, of less than \$10,000, Bodfish was compelled to file for bankruptcy.<sup>38</sup>

Bodfish's case provides another example of how the legal system offered protections to those who already had assets to protect, as voluntary bankruptcy was an option exercised primarily by middling and elite business owners who sought shelter from creditors, not men and women of the lower classes.

Similarly, women who needed to secure property to protect their livelihood sought to use the courts to that end. Mollie Boon Sutton appeared in the Guilford County Superior Court for the first time in 1882 for the same reason that many women wound up there: she sought a divorce from her husband James on the grounds that he had committed adultery with a "lewd woman." Seven years after her divorce, 49-year-old Mollie Boon appeared in court again, this time seeking redress on the charge that her former stepson had defrauded her when he accepted the deed to her property on the promise that he would "secure her a life estate in the same and live with and help her run a boarding house and grocery store," and then failed to do so. Daniel Sutton instead mortgaged and leased the property to his friend, Daniel Patton. In court Sutton denied

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<sup>38</sup> Mecklenburg County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, box 4, 1878-1880; North Carolina, vol. 16, p. 90T, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School. Bodfish's brother held \$5000 in real estate in 1870, making him a fairly wealthy man, but she was listed without property that year. A search for Bodfish in the 1880 census turned up no matches, and she did not have an entry in either the residential or the commercial section of the Charlotte directory that year. Bryce had listed \$65,000 in real estate and his wife an additional \$10,000. Bryce was listed in the directory as a cotton buyer and his primary residence was in town, *Beasley & Emerson's Charlotte Directory for 1875-'76* (Beasley & Emerson, Publishers: Observer Job Office Print, 1875), 32, 97. 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte, Mecklenburg; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte Ward 4, Mecklenburg.

that he had defrauded Boon, using her voluntary transfer of the deed to him as evidence to support his claim. Sutton acknowledged that he offered to help Boon, but testified that he could not have assisted her with the day-to-day operation because he had a business of his own to attend. The court ruled in her favor, voiding the deed she had made with her stepson and ordering Patton to serve as trustee for Boon and convey his rights in the property to her. Boons' lawsuit was not just about her rights to property, it was also about work. Like many women, her home was also her place of business.<sup>39</sup>

African American women only infrequently had the opportunity to become property owners since their wages were limited. When they did bring disputes to court they rarely received favorable settlements. One exception was the case of Alice and Tom Ferguson, who sued John Y. Bryce, the wealthy landowner who made a business deal with Abby Bodfish a few years earlier. The Fergusons' class and race set them apart from the wealthier Bryce, who had been a slave owner before the war, served as a captain in the Confederate Army, and owned several properties. Alice Ferguson was a dressmaker, and her husband Tom worked as a sharecropper on one of Bryce's properties. With her earnings, Mrs. Ferguson was able to acquire a small property. In 1878, the Fergusons sued Bryce, who owned a plantation adjoining their property, to

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<sup>39</sup> *Mollie Boon formerly Mollie Sutton vs. Daniel Sutton and Daniel Patton*, Guilford County Superior Court Records, Civil Action Papers Concerning Land, May 1889, NCSA. The state directory lists J. M. (James) Sutton as a grocer, *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory for 1884* (Raleigh, N. C.: Levi Branson, Office Publisher, 1884), 349; James was a deputy sheriff with \$1000 worth of real estate and \$2000 in personal property while Mollie (Millie) was keeping house, and Daniel was aged 9, in 1870. James was a merchant, Mollie (Melinda) was keeping house, and 19-year-old Daniel resided with them and worked as a clerk, perhaps in his father's store. In 1880, James and Mollie housed three single men who were identified as boarders, including a 19-year-old named A. C. Boon who was a clerk and possibly related to Mollie, as well as the family of carpenter N. M. Cook. 1870 and 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Rock Creek Township, Guilford. Mollie Boon apparently tried various means to earn a living, as she was listed as a farmer in *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory* 1890, 333.

secure their deed. Mrs. Ferguson made two payments totaling \$125 for the property, borrowing \$60 from Bryce to make her second payment and giving him the deed to hold until her payment was made. She testified that she had paid off her debt to Bryce by giving the money to her husband to pay him, but she also claimed that she never had a contract with Bryce and admitted that she had lost all the other paperwork that could support her claim to the land. Further complicating issues were her husband's financial entanglements with Bryce. Bryce claimed that Tom Ferguson owed him money, and that the reason the deed had been signed over to him was to make good on that debt. Mr. Ferguson testified that he paid Bryce the \$60 his wife entrusted to him, making it clear to Bryce that it was for Mrs. Ferguson's payment and had nothing to do with the business between the two men. At the same time, however, Bryce tore up his original contract with Tom Ferguson, wrote a new one, and insisted that he sign it. Mr. Ferguson testified he could not read or write, suggesting that Bryce was taking advantage of him and attempting to finagle the land away from the couple. Bryce emphasized in court that he had no idea that Mrs. Ferguson had any interest in the deed to the property. Yet her interest was substantial. When asked how she obtained the money to purchase the land and pay for the nearly \$700 in improvements she and her husband had made over four years, Mrs. Ferguson testified, "I made it sewing and dressmaking... I am a milliner by trade." The court named Bryce "trustee for and in behalf of said Alice," and ordered him to sign the deed over to her.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Thomas Ferguson and Alice Ferguson, his wife, against J. Y. Bryce*, Mecklenburg Superior Court records, Civil Action Cases Concerning Land, 1878. As Loren Schweningen explains, African Americans in the Upper South provided much-needed services in growing towns and cities of the postwar

Like Alice Ferguson, black women who engaged in property disputes demonstrated a degree of faith in the judicial system, despite their legal and social marginalization. As historians have shown, black men and women in North Carolina pursued equality under the law even as hopes inspired by Radical Reconstruction dimmed with white Democratic control at both the local and state level.<sup>41</sup> These conditions often worked against African Americans in legal disputes, and Ferguson appears to have been an anomaly in winning her case against a white man, particularly one of wealth and property. Two other black women who were involved in property disputes in the Piedmont went to court based on what they believed to be binding oral contracts, but with no written contracts their claims on the property in question were not protected. One of those women, Nancy Keen, first encountered judicial authority at the age of eighteen, when fornication and adultery charges were brought against her. Named in court documents along with the same man, Rufus Gibson, in 1869, 1873, and 1874, Keen

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period, and their earnings allowed them to take advantage of declining land prices, in "Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880," *The American Historical Review* 95 (February 1990), 49-54. Yet blacks in rural areas often remained landless or were able to purchase only the least agriculturally valuable land. See C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 205-07; John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1988) 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 251-53; and Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15-16, 196, 208-10.

<sup>41</sup> On the efforts of blacks to secure their political and civil rights and challenge white political and economic dominance, see Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 179-88. Historian Laura Edwards has discussed the tradition of black women, whether slave or free, pursuing legal cases to protect themselves and their property in the antebellum period, as well as the impetus provided to African Americans by emancipation and the Reconstruction amendments to engage the law to protect their individual rights, in "Reconstruction and North Carolina Women's Tangled History with Law and Governance," in Paul D. Escott ed., *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 155-191. See also Edwards, *Gendered Strife*, on the difficulties facing blacks in acquiring property, 90-91, 147-48, 168-69, and on the efforts of black women to pursue their rights in court, particularly in rape and abuse cases, 15-16, 21, 178-82, 184-85, 195-97, 198-200, 210, 211-13.

carried on an extended relationship with Gibson, a single white man who worked as a clerk and rented a room at a Greensboro hotel. Due to miscegenation laws, Keen was left without the option of legally marrying her lover, whether by choice, or force, or sheer humiliation as some other “wayward” young women may have done.<sup>42</sup>

Twenty years later Keen was back in a Greensboro courtroom fighting against her removal from property to which both she and two white men claimed title. The primary defendant in her 1889 case was R. A. Jenkins, from whom she leased land and to whom, she testified, she had paid \$5 each month toward a purchase price of \$100 for the lot. She accused Jenkins of fraud, and named three other men – Logan McCulloch, a bookkeeper, A. T. Vernon, a baggage agent for the Raleigh and Danville Railroad, and Jonathan Merritt – in the suit. All four men were white. One witness testified that Keen purchased goods from him on Jenkins’s account with permission from Jenkins, offering an alternative to Keen’s testimony of how the money she paid to Jenkins was used. The court determined that the land was not purchased with Keen’s money and named Vernon and Merritt the legal owners. Since Keen’s lease had expired the sheriff was ordered to see that Keen left the property.<sup>43</sup> Keen’s case shows how limited knowledge about

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<sup>42</sup> Rufus Gibson was 26 in 1870. In 1880, Nancy Keen was 29 and listed as *mulatto* in the census, and as *colored* in city directories. Keen continued to reside in Guilford County for years, but Gibson does not appear in later city directories or the 1880 census. 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Morehead Township, Guilford; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Greensboro, Guilford.

<sup>43</sup> She signed her name “Nannie” rather than “Nancy” on court documents, and her last name appeared variously as “Keen” and “Keene” in public records. Although Keen was a boarding house operator in Greensboro in 1884, there is no indication in the suit as to how she used the land, which she began leasing in 1886, or what kind of structure was on it, so there is no clear connection between her business and this lawsuit. *Nancy Keen vs. R. A. Jenkins, Logan McCulloch, A. T. Vernon, and Jonathan Merritt*, Guilford County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1890-1892, NCSA; Guilford County Civil Action Papers Concerning Land, 1890, NCSA; *Branson’s 1890*, 328. *City Directory of Greensboro, Salem and*

property law and contracts might hinder the aspirations of all women – but especially those who were poor or African American – and who hoped to attain the security offered by property ownership.

The outcome of Harriet Whitice’s case further demonstrated the power of whites to maintain strict control over land and property, and the inability of many blacks to protect themselves in light of longstanding legal safeguards for white property owners. The recently widowed Whitice had been told she had to move off the land where she and her husband had lived, but she refused on the grounds that they had purchased the land from the plaintiff’s father. If Whitice and her attorney had been able to establish her legal claim, the Homestead Act may have at least prevented her from losing her house. W. D. McAdoo presented a mortgage deed signed by his father, Calvin McAdoo, and Edmund Whitice which related to a debt owed by the couple and stipulated that if the debt was not paid by the end of December 1885 the land would be transferred and sold to the highest bidder. Whitice disputed McAdoo’s claims, telling the court that she and her husband, who “had to be waited on as a child” because he was gravely ill at the time he signed the deed, would never have signed anything other than an agreement that secured the property to them. She informed the court that they had been told that the deed would do just that, an indication that she and her husband may not have been able to read the document for themselves. She further testified that her husband had paid his debt to McAdoo’s father in full, but she apparently had no receipts or contracts to support her

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*Winston and Gazetteer of Forsyth and Guilford Counties* (Atlanta, GA: Interstate Directory Company, 1884), Greensboro listings, 119.

claim. McAdoo prevailed in the case, and Whitice and her then 14-year-old son James were put out. Whitice was ordered to pay costs in the amount of \$16, but the sheriff's deputy who went to carry out the court's order in September 1888 reported that she had already left the property and that "there was nothing found in her possession to pay the costs." Twelve years later, Whitice and her son still resided together in Greensboro, where they rented a house and James worked as a farm laborer on someone else's land, their hope of becoming landowners apparently gone.<sup>44</sup>

Although the cases of Alice Ferguson, Harriet Whitice, and Nancy Keen suggest that African American women refused to accept their status as second-class citizens, their marginalization in Southern society put them at a clear disadvantage in legal disputes. While Ferguson prevailed, suing a white man was a risky venture. Accepting the word of white men, who were socially, legally, and economically more powerful than they, instead of acquiring binding contracts that clearly spelled out their property rights, proved a costly mistake for both Whitice and Keen. Making a difference in Ferguson's case was that she had some documentation supporting her claims to her property, and the law generally remained on the side of property owners.

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<sup>44</sup> *W. D. McAdoo vs. Harriet Whitice*, Guilford County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1886-1889, NCSA; Guilford County Civil Action Papers Concerning Land, 1888, NCSA. The 1884 city directory listed an Edward Whitis with no occupation, and living in Warnersville, a predominantly black suburb of Greensboro, which corresponds to the location provided in the lawsuit. As was common in many directories of the time, his wife and children were not listed. *City Directory of Greensboro* 1884, 127. The census shows that Harriet Whitis was 45, husband Edmund (or Edward), a brick mason, was 56, and their son James was 6 in 1880. 1880 and 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Morehead Township, Guilford.

## **Mothers and the Limits of Court-Ordered Support for Their Dependents**

Impoverished, single women who had children outside of marriage appeared in court to press charges of bastardy to obtain financial support from the fathers of their children. The primary impetus behind the bastardy laws in place in North Carolina since the colonial period was to lay the burden of support on the father rather than the state. In the antebellum period, bastardy had been a criminal charge lodged against both men and women, who were compelled to name the fathers of their children in court and held in contempt if they failed to do so. The 1868 Constitution changed bastardy to a civil charge, and such cases were thereafter prosecuted as “the state” and the woman versus the man.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, authorities were loath to appear to support or reward women who challenged notions of female purity and patriarchal authority by having sex outside of marriage, so benefits to unmarried women and their children remained limited. The law allowed punishment by imprisonment for up to thirty days if a father failed to pay, but time spent in jail hindered his ability to earn the money to pay the penalties, and so was of little help to the mother and child.<sup>46</sup> Still, for a woman with very few resources, even a meager court order could mean the difference between feeding her family and going hungry. Since the courts required men found to be the fathers of women’s children to pay only nominal amounts of support and required those payments for only three years, only the poorest women saw much benefit in taking this type of legal action.

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<sup>45</sup> North Carolina Constitution, Article I, Section 12, II; Article I, Section 17, X, *Constitution Annotated*, 36, 82. On bastardy proceedings in the antebellum period, see Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 103-09.

<sup>46</sup> North Carolina Constitution, Article IV, Section 27, IV, *Constitution Annotated*, 237.

The rulings in bastardy cases in Wake County for 1870 confirm that child support payments were uncertain at best and that a woman who chose to pursue it could spend months in and out of court and still find no relief. In the twenty-two separate cases heard that year, only two resulted in the accused being ordered to pay. One of the men ordered to pay was a seventy-year-old whose forty-year-old wife had given birth that May; he had apparently suspected that someone else was the child's father and refused support, although the couple continued to reside together with all five of their children. In two other cases the man was found guilty, and an order to pay was likely forthcoming. The charges were either dropped or left pending in the majority of the remaining cases. In six cases, bond was set at \$200 and the man was ordered to appear the next term. Four of those cases had already been held over from previous terms, leaving the women and children awaiting a ruling and support payments for up to one year. One of those was among the few guilty verdicts mentioned above. In another, the man was found not guilty, and in a third, the judge declared that the woman "fail[ed] to state that the child was born within three years previous to the date," and so her witnesses were not questioned and the case was dismissed. The fourth was put off for yet another term. Two men did not appear in court and were fined *nisi*, so that if they did not show to defend themselves they would be found guilty, presumably in the next term. In an additional three cases, the ruling was not guilty. Another was marked *nolle prosequi*, meaning the case against the defendant was dropped but he could be indicted on the charges again. One man was discharged upon payment of costs, with no other notation. The child had died in one case, but the man was still ordered to post a \$50 bond,

suggesting some other impending charges relating to the case. One couple married before their case came before the judge, and the charges were dismissed on payment of costs.<sup>47</sup>

The women who initiated these efforts were generally poor and from families with little or no property. Thirteen of these women can be positively identified in the census. For eight of these thirteen, at least one child under the age of three lived with the woman and can be presumed to be her child. Eight of the thirteen women had an occupation identified in the census – one was a housekeeper, two were servants, two were cooks, and three were farm laborers. Six of the twenty-two women were most likely white, while the other sixteen appear to have been black or mixed race.<sup>48</sup> In all but one case, the men named did not own real estate, and had little or no personal property. Neither were any of the women property owners. Ten of the thirteen women lived with their parents or other family members, two lived with their employers, and one lived with another single mother. Few of the women or men involved in these cases can be traced

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<sup>47</sup> Wake County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1867-1871, NCSA; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake.

<sup>48</sup> Although a greater number of bastardy cases were heard in Wake County in other terms (in 1869, for example, 46 cases were heard), I selected 1870 as a sample year to correspond with the census. To determine the race of each woman in the bastardy cases, I searched her name and, in the event of multiple possible matches, filtered through the results favoring single adult women of childbearing age over young girls, older women who were less likely to get pregnant, and married women. In 13 cases, these criteria yielded a single good match. In one case, *State and Mary Davis vs. Isham Hunter*, there were two possible matches for the woman, one white and one black, but only one good match for the man. He lived in the same township as the white woman, so I chose the white woman as the best match. There were 9 cases for which no good match could be made for the woman, but good matches were made for each of the men. In cases of multiple possible matches, I favored single over married men and younger over older men, although in some cases it appeared that married and/or older men were the best matches. Wake County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1867-1871, NCSA; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake.

through consecutive censuses, suggesting some mobility in the group, as they most likely moved from place to place seeking employment.<sup>49</sup>

Women who sought relief in the courts through bastardy cases often turned as well to their families or other community members for a place to live, child care while they worked, and other forms of support. Although he does not explore child support directly, historian Dylan Penningroth argues that “domestic difficulties” among African Americans in the Reconstruction period were often brought to families, churches, and informal “committees” of community members and elders for mediation before legal action was taken. Sometimes these disputes were resolved to the satisfaction of both parties and court was avoided altogether. It is possible that the families of women who appeared in court to collect child support used such informal measures; that it was overwhelmingly African American women who pursued these cases suggests that their approach to bastardy cases may have differed somewhat from other legal matters or that communal strategies simply may have not worked all the time. Some of the men in these cases were transient laborers without family in the immediate area to whom the women’s relatives might appeal for assistance. The comparative absence of white women from the courts indicates that they may have relied on informal networks to call on the men to settle out of court more so than black women. As higher earners generally, the families of white women did not always feel the economic pinch of an additional mouth to feed to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

the extent that the families of black women did, and as a result could more readily exercise the option of not going to court.<sup>50</sup>

With about half the population of Wake County, Guilford County had a much smaller number of bastardy cases in the same period, but the court records support a conclusion that poor women combined the strategies of engaging the law and turning to family in close-knit communities. In 1870, Louisa Carmack, a twenty-two-year-old white woman, lived with and worked as a housekeeper for George Hendrix and his wife Mary, both white and in their sixties, and owners of property worth \$600 in the community of Fentress. In the fall of 1872, Carmack charged her employer with bastardy. The much older and, comparatively speaking, wealthier Hendrix may have coerced Carmack into a sexual relationship or even raped her. He was found guilty, fined, and ordered to pay support to Carmack. Although she came from a family of propertyless laborers, Carmack found support in her community and she and her daughter continued to live in Fentress with her uncle's family for at least another ten years. Likewise, Sarah Bishop remained in her family's small community and continued to reside with her mother and a sister after giving birth to her child and filing charges against James Piles for bastardy. Bishop received a favorable ruling against Piles in the spring of 1874. The judge may have doubted Piles's ability or inclination to obey the

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<sup>50</sup> Dylan C. Penningroth explores both legal and extralegal strategies among African American families and community members to resolve conflicts in their marriages, with other families, and especially regarding property, in *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 114-20, passim. Victoria Bynum has argued that the poverty of most women in bastardy cases only reinforced the assumption that they lacked respectability, while the respectability of better-off white women was assumed and the illegitimate children of these women were believed not to present the same burden on society, in *Unruly Women*, 104-06.

court order, because he also specifically stipulated that if Piles did not pay, he would go to jail for up to twelve months.<sup>51</sup> This warning may have induced Piles to pay, but if not, his time served in jail would be of no benefit to Bishop or her child.

Guilford County bastardy cases confirm the insufficiency of award amounts and the failure of the system to provide for dependents. The court awarded Louisa Carmack \$100 from her child's father, George Hendrix. He was to pay \$50 right away, followed by a \$25 payment each of the next two fall terms. Sarah Bishop was awarded \$80, also payable in three installments of \$40 up front and \$20 annually for two years. All indications are that these installments over three years were all the support legally required of the father. Incredibly, the courts stood to benefit as much from bastardy cases as the women and children. The legislature had allowed fines up to \$100 before reducing them in 1872 to \$60. The defendant also paid court fees, when he appeared to answer the charges and then again when he appeared to make his payments, of up to \$20 for the first two appearances and \$10 for the third. If the maximum amount was charged in each of these Guilford County cases, then George Hendrix paid the court \$10 more than he paid toward the support of his child, and James Piles gave \$30 more to the system than he did to his child. Perhaps as a holdover from the antebellum period, when bastardy was

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<sup>51</sup> Not only were there fewer bastardy cases in Guilford County, but also the court records named the women pressing charges in only three cases in the years 1870 to 1874. They were the Carmack and Bishop cases, discussed here, and a third in which the man was found not to be the father. Guilford County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1870-1874, NCSA; Mary L. Carmack, age 29 and with a 9-year-old daughter, appears in the 1880 census living in the same community with her uncle's family. Sarah, the eldest of widow Nelly Bishop's eight children, still resided with her mother in 1880 at age 30, and 2-year-old John was identified as Nelly's grandson. He was possibly Sarah's son, although her sister Bettie also resided in the household, but he could not have been the child for whom Sarah had been awarded support six years earlier. James Piles does not appear in either census. 1870 and 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Fentress, Guilford; 1870 and 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Greene Township, Guilford.

handled as a crime rather than a civil matter, the emphasis remained upon doling out punishment more so than offering anything resembling true support.<sup>52</sup> That women continued to pursue these cases, despite being faced with the likelihood of receiving little or no support, reveals their determination to use the legal system to secure financial support and its failure to provide for the most impoverished and vulnerable female citizens.

For many of North Carolina's women in the post-Civil War years, their economic strategies and legal activities were intimately connected, and reveal much about how women approached the problem of supporting themselves and their families. Although the legal and social status of women meant that they were not as likely as men to be property owners in their own right, the tide of changes brought by the Civil War established a landscape in which property rights for women became an important legal issue. Those who already owned property stood to benefit most from these laws, and generally saw their property protected in court decisions. Those who were least likely to own property – poor white and black women – found that race and gender hierarchies often undermined their efforts to use courts for economic security. Nonetheless, women from the most marginalized to the most privileged went to court to claim and protect what they could call their own. Some divorced because their husbands proved to be economic burdens rather than the providers society had deemed them to be. Others used the courts to hold on to property they had either inherited or purchased, or to assure that

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<sup>52</sup> Guilford County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1872-1874, NCSA.

fathers would provide some share of the support for their children. Although court cases reveal that income-earning and property-owning women sustained some Piedmont households, the patriarchal ideal remained very powerful. So powerful that, as discussed in chapter two, women often maintained the fiction of their economic dependency even as their own earnings supported their families.

CHAPTER III  
PIEDMONT BUSINESSWOMEN: GENDER, RACE, AND WORK  
IN A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

Between 1865 and 1900, the employment of women in North Carolina increased dramatically. Nearly twenty-five percent of the state's women were gainfully employed by the end of the nineteenth century, expanding from 58,860 in 1870 to 160,161 in 1900. Slightly less than half of those women were white.<sup>1</sup> Many of these white women were new workers who capitalized on opportunities providing vital services that undergirded

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<sup>1</sup> Noting that the “revolutionary increase in the participation of women in the labor force mainly involved whites” in the period from 1890 to 1970, Claudia Goldin traces this change to the 1870s and 1880s, in “Female Labor Force Participation: The Origin of Black and White Differences, 1870 and 1880,” *Journal of Economic History* XXXVII (March 1977), 87-108. The percentage of employed women in North Carolina steadily increased in the postwar period: 14.56% in 1870, 17.58% in 1880, 19.6% in 1890, and 23.38% in 1900. North Carolina ranked thirteenth overall in 1890 among U.S. states and the District of Columbia with the largest percentage of employed women. North Carolina's percentage of gainfully employed females aged 10 and over was higher than the national average at each census in the study period, as was the case for several Southern states, particularly those in which the percentage of employed women working in agriculture reached 50% or more. Numbering 87,847 out of the total 160,161 gainfully employed women in the state in 1900, African American women as those classified as “colored,” or “persons of negro descent, Chinese, Japanese, and Indians,” accounted for a slight majority at 54.8 % of all female workers in the state. Whites accounted for 67% and women 50.4% of the state's population. *U.S. Census Reports: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census: The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1872), “Females Engaged in Each Occupation. Table XXVII (B.) – The United States”, 686-95; “Selected Occupations, with Age and Sex, and Nativity. Table XXX. – State of North Carolina”, 751. *U.S. Census Reports: Compendium of the Tenth Census, June 1, 1880* (revised edition), (Washington: GPO, 1885); *Special Census Report on the Occupations of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington: GPO, 1896); *Special Reports – Occupations at the Twelfth Census, 1900* (Washington: GPO, 1904), “Statistics of Occupations. Table 33.-Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Each of 303 Specified Occupations: 1900”, 134-43; “Statistics of Occupations. Table 41.-Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Selected Groups of Occupations, Classified by General Nativity, Color, Conjugal Condition, Months Unemployed, Age Periods, and Parentage: 1900. North Carolina”, 356; “Statistics of Population. Table 9.-Population by Sex, General Nativity, and Color, by States and Territories: 1900.”, 482-483.

the commercial activities and burgeoning industrial expansion in cities across the Piedmont with their own small businesses as dressmakers, milliners, merchants, and boarding house operators. Joining the workforce was for most of these women a product of the significant economic and social dislocations characteristic of the postwar South. Many became breadwinners for their families because they were single, widowed, or divorced, or because they could not depend on the men in their lives to provide for them. However, this was not merely a temporary episode. White women remained a permanent part of the economic landscape and families grew increasingly dependent on their earnings to not only provide sustenance but to also protect their class status.

In the postwar period, the prevailing attitude concerning the economic agency of urban Southern white women was that it was a mere aberration for which the war was to blame. Women had been asked to take on unexpected roles during the war, and poor economic conditions in its wake continued to serve as justification for women's employment. Most white Southern men and women argued that white women did not desire to work but that the devastation of the war compelled it, and they assumed the employment of women to be a temporary situation that would find correction in an improved economy and re-entrenchment of the patriarchal household.<sup>2</sup> This argument dovetailed effectively with the pervasive assumption that white women's work was

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<sup>2</sup> See George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 112. Although her analysis deals specifically with the early suffrage movement, Marjorie Spruill Wheeler notes that elite women suffragists sometimes also argued that laboring white women represented a permanent change in the southern economy. See "The Civil War, Tradition, and 'the Woman Question,' 1870-1920" in *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. and Kym S. Rice, ed. (Richmond: The Museum of the Confederacy, and Charlottesville, The University Press of Virginia, 1996), 176-183. On the problem of transforming gender roles following the Civil War, see especially Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

always temporary, performed only by women who were unmarried or to supplement the earnings of husbands in difficult times.

White women's own actions helped to uphold this fiction. Although a large proportion of the Piedmont's small businesswomen were married, a seemingly open challenge to the belief that white women depended on their husbands for economic support, they generally did not assert their independence. Even when women's earnings supported their husbands, acknowledgement of the economic interdependence of business-operating wives and their husbands was eschewed in favor of upholding husbands as patriarchs and primary breadwinners. No matter their work for a living, married businesswomen carried out their domestic and child-rearing duties, and were as likely to appear in public records as "keeping house" as they were to be associated with their businesses. The contemporary interpretation of income-earning white women as an unfortunate outcome of the war, along with the apparent support of patriarchy demonstrated by most white women, worked to mask women's economic roles even as their workforce participation dramatically increased.<sup>3</sup>

Historians have written little about women as business owners in the South, even though more white women worked as dressmakers, milliners, and boarding house operators throughout the late nineteenth century than were employed as teachers, an

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<sup>3</sup> In this same period, Southern white women characterized their political activities as within the female sphere and in many ways upheld traditional gender roles even as they expanded traditional female roles. See Caroline Janney, *Burying the Dead but not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations & the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Elna C. Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

occupation which has received greater attention from scholars in part because elite and educated women left records about their work experiences while less well-off women did not.<sup>4</sup> This chapter focuses on the jobs occupying the majority of white women in Piedmont cities in the late nineteenth century, and identifies them as businesswomen in keeping with recent scholarship on women in these trades for other regions. Most did the work themselves, sometimes alongside other female members of their families or other women as their employees, and, as historian Susan Ingalls Lewis has discussed in her study of needle workers in mid-nineteenth century Albany, New York, “the roles of owner and laborer overlapped” for most small businesswomen.<sup>5</sup> The literature that exists on businesswomen in other regions of the country generally concludes that women operated within what historian Wendy Gamber has named a *female economy*, in which women plied their trades catering to mostly female clients just outside the realm of corporate America. This reflected the separate spheres ideology that shaped many,

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<sup>4</sup> Although he is among the few Southern historians to acknowledge the increasing presence of needle workers, specifically, in Southern cities by the 1880s, Edward Ayers does not imagine them as contributing to the local economy or consider dressmakers and milliners as operators of their own small enterprises. His analysis hinges on the image of women engaged in this work as hapless victims and leads directly to a discussion of the lack of public aid, the role of women’s clubs, and the benevolent work of women, in *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 77, 88. On the teaching profession in the postwar period, see Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 211-13 and Jane Turner Censer, “Women in Public: Schoolteachers and Benevolent Women,” chapter 5 in *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 153-206.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Ingalls Lewis, “Business or Labor? Blurred Boundaries in the Careers of Self-Employed Needlewomen in Mid-Nineteenth Century Albany,” in *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* ed. Beth Harris (New York: Ashgate, 2005), 141-155, quotation 149.

though not all, white women's experiences, and also provided a useful analytical framework for scholarship on women's business history.<sup>6</sup>

Engaged in primarily gendered enterprises run out of their homes most of the time, which lessened attention to their economic roles in both their families and communities, the Piedmont's businesswomen resembled their Northern and Western counterparts in many ways. They rarely advertised, but they appeared often in the business listings of city directories. Their start-up costs were usually minimal, and their businesses and profits infrequently grew beyond what is considered a petty enterprise. Some engaged in business for brief periods of time, while others carried on their enterprises for decades. Yet while most scholars of women's business history focus on the gendered dimensions of their work, this study emphasizes how women's work in Piedmont cities was, with few exceptions, not only gendered but also racially specific. The legacy of slavery ensured the status of black women as laborers almost exclusively in service to whites as household servants, cooks, and laundresses. By contrast, white women offered their services in cities most often in the needle trades and boarding,

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). Likewise, Lucy Eldersveld Murphy writes of a *female culture*, in "Business Ladies: Midwestern Women and Enterprise, 1850-1880," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (spring 1991). While she does not challenge the notion of a female economy, Edith Sparks adds to this discussion the *intentionality* behind women's businesses, and their "clear deliberation about what actions were most prudent and profitable" given the limitations and expectations of a gendered society, in *Capital Intentions: Female Proprietors in San Francisco, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 8-10. Béatrice Craig similarly argues that "family strateg(ies) little concerned with the 'male bread winner ideology'" drove married women into small retailing businesses in nineteenth-century Lille and Tourcoing, France. Most were married to craftsmen, skilled workers, and foremen with wages sufficient to supporting their families, such that Craig concludes that the wives' businesses provide evidence of economic ambition, in "Where have All the Businesswomen Gone?: Images and Reality in the Life of Nineteenth-century Middle-Class Women in Northern France," chapter 4 in *Women, Business and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Rethinking Separate Spheres* ed. Robert Beachy, Béatrice Craig and Alistair Owens (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006), 52-66.

options mostly denied to black women. Indeed, one of the reasons white women's business endeavors did not produce significant controversy was that they worked in a racially segregated labor force. As a result, the increasing presence of white women in the Piedmont workforce after the Civil War contributed to a hardening of racial categories.

As increasing numbers of white women capitalized on opportunities in expanding cities by engaging in self-employment throughout the late-nineteenth century, many helped to support struggling families and shore up the middle class status of their families. While some of these small businesswomen moved in and out of their trades or worked as a temporary measure, many others became fixtures in the local economy from the 1870s through the 1890s. By the early twentieth century, white women had gained opportunities in the professions and positions in factories as well as clerical and sales jobs that ultimately replaced customary work in the needle trades and boarding. However, the three decades prior to 1900 serve as a distinctive period in which white women increasingly took economic responsibility for their families, and those working in cities were as likely to be proprietors of their own independent business enterprises as employees. That they did so without upsetting longstanding hierarchies illuminates the resilience of the Southern race and gender system, the benefits white women gained from, and the contributions they made to, that system, even as it limited their autonomy.

## **At Work in the Piedmont**

Opportunities for women in business increased in tandem with the growth of Piedmont cities during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as women offered vital services to the cities' expanding populations. The establishment of tobacco and cotton markets in Charlotte, Durham, Greensboro, Raleigh, Winston, and other points along the railroad began in the early 1870s. In addition to families who had resided in these towns prior to the war, repeated economic downturns and crop failures pushed North Carolinians off their small farms and into the cities, which beckoned with promises of New South expansion and opportunities for work. Describing conditions that could have applied to numerous towns along the Piedmont crescent from the southwestern point of Charlotte northeast into Greensboro and then eastward to Raleigh, *Emerson's 1879 directory for Winston, Salem, and Greensboro* proclaimed,

Upon the establishment of the tobacco market and the completion of the railroad from Greensboro in 1873, Winston began to thrive and enlarge its boundaries. The resident contractors and builders and those who flocked to the growing town, have been busy since that time erecting stores, factories, and residences. New streets have been opened, and where six years ago were fields and forests, are now populous and busy streets.<sup>7</sup>

Women capitalized on this growth by offering their services. They clothed, fed, and boarded the relocated and transient as they arrived to Piedmont cities. No work was more important for white women in postwar Piedmont cities than the needle trades, and the number of women engaged in small businesses as dressmakers and milliners

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<sup>7</sup> *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Winston, Salem & Greensboro, North Carolina, Directory, 1879-'80* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1879), xxi.

increased significantly between 1870 and 1890. Needlework employed more Piedmont women than the mills until the 1890s, and also employed far more white women than teaching until the twentieth century. Boarding house operation increased significantly in the postwar years as well, and proved a reliable and profitable choice for Piedmont women well into the twentieth century as new arrivals crowded into cities seeking opportunities. Hundreds of African American women also found work in Piedmont cities as domestic servants and laundresses.

In the capital city of Raleigh the population expanded from just under 8000 in 1870 to around 20,000 by the mid-1890s. In 1875, only five women who made a living operating boarding houses in Raleigh appeared in *Chataigne's Raleigh City Directory*, but by 1896, twenty-one appeared in *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory*, one of whom had persisted for those twenty-one years. The number of milliners did not expand as significantly, doubling from two in 1875 to four in 1896, but this was partly because custom-made hats were fashionable luxuries that few could afford.<sup>8</sup> Although they catered to customers across a broader socioeconomic range, dressmakers were not among the businesses listed in the commercial section of the Raleigh's directory in 1875, but numbered forty-two in the city directory for 1896. Dozens of other dressmakers could be found in the residential listings as well. Restaurant operation, a business

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<sup>8</sup> Many Southerners, both black and white, simply could not afford the services of milliners. According to the 1900 Federal Census report "Women at Work," the limited growth in the number of milliners across the South as compared to other regions was a function of both race and class, specifically "(t)he influence of the large proportion of negroes in the Southern states and their generally poor economic condition." See "Statistics of Women at Work, based on unpublished information derived from the schedules of the Twelfth census: 1900." U.S. Census Bureau (Washington: GPO, 1907), 75.

dominated by African Americans in this period, expanded from five to ten establishments and was the occupation of choice for one black woman in 1875 (called an eating house) and four in the mid-1890s. In addition to these more typical occupations, white and black women ran eight general or grocery stores, three liverys, a dry goods store, and a dray business in the city, some of whom likely took on the businesses of their deceased husbands.<sup>9</sup>

Smaller cities in the Piedmont witnessed similar growth among women's businesses in this period. Greensboro, the third largest of the Piedmont's postwar cities, experienced steady growth of its population within a mixed economy of mercantile and small manufacturing until its textile industry took off in the mid-1890s. Its population was about one-half that of Raleigh, and had reached over 10,000 by 1900. The directory listed only one female boarding house proprietor in Greensboro in 1875; ten operated in the city by 1896. Greensboro had two milliners in 1875 and four in 1896. Greensboro's city directory for 1892 listed these businesswomen along with nine dressmakers, one merchant, and one taxidermist. A thriving tobacco industry influenced similar growth in Greensboro's neighboring city of Winston, which would merge with the Moravian settlement of Salem in the early twentieth century. It expanded from 3000 residents in

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<sup>9</sup> *The North Carolina Business Directory 1877 and 1878*. Edited by Rev. L. Branson, A.M. (Raleigh: L. Branson, Publisher and Bookseller, 1878), 291; *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory, 1896* (Raleigh: Levi Branson, Office Publisher, 1896), 606, 614-17. North Carolina State Library, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh. *Chataigne's Raleigh City Directory* (J. H. Chataigne, 1875), 132-33, 137, 144-45; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, N.C., 1896-'97* (The Raleigh Stationery Co., 1896), 328-29, 338-39, 356-57.

the 1870s to over 10,000 twenty years later. Of the five hotels and boarding houses in Winston in 1877, women operated three, and that more than doubled to seven by 1896.<sup>10</sup>

Within the Piedmont, job opportunities for white women varied depending on the local economy. Charlotte, the Piedmont's fastest-growing city in the late-nineteenth century, ballooned from just over 4000 residents in 1870 to a population of over 19,000 before the end of the century, yet women in Charlotte experienced occupational opportunities dissimilar to those in Raleigh, a city of comparable size. Charlotte claimed four women boarding house operators in 1875, as well as four dress- and cloak-makers, three merchants, a purveyor of hair work, and two milliners. By 1896, at least twelve women operated boarding houses in Charlotte but the city's businesswomen did not make similar gains in other areas. Of Charlotte's sixteen hotels and boarding houses in 1877, only four had women proprietors and nine other women operated other kinds of businesses in the city. By 1896, the proportion of women operating boarding houses was nearly fifty percent, but only three other women – a milliner, a general store merchant, and a stenographer-typist – appeared in Charlotte's city directory. By comparison, women boarding house operators in Raleigh expanded to thirteen of nineteen in the same period of time, an additional eighteen women business owners appeared in the state directory for the capital city by 1896, and a total of eighty-five women received listings in the business section of Raleigh's city directory that year. Charlotte's intense manufacturing focus likely influenced the business environment there in such a way that

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<sup>10</sup> *Chataigne's*, 182, 187; *North Carolina Business Directory 1877*, 114; *Branson's 1896*, 307, 310, 312-313; *Greensboro City Directory for 1892-'93* (Greensboro, N.C.: Stone and Kendall Publishers, 1892).

it was not as inviting to women as other Piedmont cities. The possibility also remains that women business owners were present in Charlotte but simply overlooked by those responsible for gathering information for directories in favor of giving a boost to the city's manufacturing profile. *Branson's* 1896 directory listed another four women boarding house operators outside the Charlotte city limits, which may offer another clue as to why fewer women appeared in the Charlotte business directory in the period of study than for Raleigh, despite their equivalent population figures. Rapid industrial expansion put land at a premium, so some of Charlotte's businesswomen may have worked and resided outside the city limits while still serving the city's residents and visitors.<sup>11</sup>

As important as Greensboro, Charlotte, and Winston would prove in shaping the Piedmont's manufacturing identity, and Raleigh would continue to be as the state capital and center of government, Durham also had a distinctive identity grounded not only in its intensive manufacturing focus but also because it would become "the capital of the black middle class" in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The city of Durham had a population of

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<sup>11</sup> Charlotte witnessed steady population growth throughout the period, and the 1896 city directory boasted about especially rapid population growth in the few years between 1890 and 1896, from 11,557 to 19,651, in *A Directory for the City of Charlotte, N.C. for 1896 and 1897 (The Charlotte Directory Company, 1896)*, 8. City directories routinely published census population figures and directory publishers also canvassed for updated figures between censuses. *North Carolina Business Directory 1877*, 191-92, 194-96; *Branson's 1896*, 410, 413, 416-17, 606, 610, 614-17; *Beasley & Emerson's Charlotte Directory for 1875-76...* (Beasley & Emerson, 1875), 93, 98, 99, 101, 103, 109; *A Directory for the City of Charlotte, N.C., for 1896 and 1897* (Charlotte: Observer Printing and Publishing House, 1896). 271-72; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, N.C., 1896-'97*, 323-361.

<sup>12</sup> Franklin E. Frazier, "Durham: The Capital of the Black Middle Class," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925. Reprint, New York: Atheneum/Macmillan, 1999), 331-41. See also Booker T. Washington, "Durham, North Carolina, a City of Negro Enterprise," *Independent* 70 (23 March 1911), 644-48; W.E.B. DuBois, *The Upbuilding of Black Durham: The success of the Negroes and their value to a tolerant and helpful southern city*. *World's Work*

around 2000 before the tobacco industry hit full stride, and experienced substantial growth beginning in the 1880s. While only two businesswomen, both milliners, plied a trade there in 1875, by 1896, when its population had reached nearly 9000 residents, *Branson's* state directory identified several small businesswomen in Durham – at least eight operating hotels and boarding houses, five in millinery, one dry goods and one general store merchant. Durham's businesspeople took advantage of industrial expansion and population growth by offering an ever-expanding range of goods and services. The city's directory for 1887 recognized an even larger number of businesswomen, including as many as twenty-four women proprietors of hotels and boarding houses, thirty dressmakers, twelve milliners, a tailor, as well as other women who worked independently in varied occupations including bag contractor, florist, truck farmer, poultry raiser, gardener, and boot and shoe maker. Of those businesswomen, five were African American: one boarding house operator, three dressmakers, and a florist. In addition, the Durham directory varied from other Piedmont city directories in that it listed in its business section cooks, the great majority of whom were black women, and seamstresses, of whom about ten percent were black. With a sharp focus on rapidly expanding industry in the city, the directory's business listings included tobacco operatives, specifically feeders and cutters along with tobacco rollers, who were almost

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23 (Jan. 1912) [S. l.: s. n., 1912]. Electronic resource (Chapel Hill: University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002); Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 3-5.

exclusively black men, and cotton mill operatives, specifically weavers, about half of whom were white men and the other half, white women.<sup>13</sup>

By 1903, the Durham city directory already reflected a growing black middle class of professionals, including physicians and teachers, as well as businessmen, fostered in part by Jim Crow segregation.<sup>14</sup> One prominent example was former slave John Merrick, who continued his over twenty-year career as a barber in Durham in addition to founding the North Carolina Mutual and Provident Association and serving as president of Lincoln Hospital, providing health care to Durham's black community. Of the sixty-five black businesses appearing in the commercial listings that year – including Merrick's company, an attorney, two doctors, a real estate firm, ten barbers, fourteen grocers, ten eating houses, six shoemakers, and numerous other merchants, craftsmen, and professionals – not a single one was operated by a black woman. As was characteristic of the Piedmont's other larger cities, the city's dressmakers, milliners, and boarding house operators were all white women at the turn of the twentieth century, but by 1915 black women would figure more prominently in Durham's directory as proprietors of these and other small businesses.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Directory of the Business and Citizens of Durham City for 1887* (Raleigh: Levi Branson, 1887), 139-99.

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between the growth of African American business and segregated communities, see Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf: distributed by Random House, 1979); Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Weare, 21-23, 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Durham, N.C. Directory, 1903-1904* (Richmond, VA: Hill Directory Company, 1903), 21, 154, 170, 180, 259-60, 262-62, 267-68, 283, *passim*.

Housing and other aspects of the economy did not become completely segregated in most Southern towns before the late-1890s. Evidence supports historian Thomas Hanchett's conclusion about the "salt-and-pepper" make-up of Charlotte's neighborhoods in this period, and a mix of people from varying economic classes and occupations could be found along a single street and within a block in Piedmont cities.<sup>16</sup> Yet women's work options were thoroughly segregated in Piedmont cities throughout the postwar period, and almost all women who engaged in paid work did so in jobs that the white public viewed as appropriate to their race. Nearly fifty percent of the women residing in Piedmont cities were black, and they were more likely than black men to move to cities seeking independence and job opportunities not available to them in rural areas.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, many existing and new employment sectors were almost completely denied to black women.

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<sup>16</sup> Some African American residents lived in mostly African American neighborhoods and suburbs by this time, such as Oberlin in Raleigh, one mile from the city, which had 750 residents by 1880, compared to 5,000 black residents who lived within the city limits that year. Unskilled laborers as well as skilled craftsmen, small business owners, and educators resided in Oberlin and worked in the city, and the black graded school was located there. It is unclear whether a thriving black business community had also developed separately in Oberlin by that time. *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Raleigh Directory, 1880-'81* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Printer and Binders, 1879), 34, passim; *Raleigh City Directory 1883* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Steam Printers and Binders, 1883), passim; *Raleigh City Directory, Published by the Turner, M'Lean & Losee Directory Company, for the Year 1886* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Power Printers and Binders, 1886), 144, 148, 149; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, North Carolina, 1887* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Power Printers and Binders, 1887), passim. On salt-and-pepper neighborhoods in Charlotte in the 1870s and 1880s and the transition to Jim Crow racial segregation there beginning in the late-1890s, see Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 4-5, 37-43, 60-62, 88, 116, 120-144; 224, 258-260.

<sup>17</sup> *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 16; *Chas. Emerson & Co's Charlotte, N.C. Directory, 1879-80* (Charlotte, N.C.: Observer Steam Job Print, 1879), K.

The leading occupations for the state's women outside of agriculture clearly illuminate the racial segregation of their work experiences.<sup>18</sup> Ninety percent of dressmakers and ninety-nine percent of milliners, the most highly skilled and customer-oriented of needle workers, were white. Likewise, of the women who ran their own boarding houses and hotels, ninety-one percent were white. After a surge in the 1890s, when Piedmont industrialists started committing resources to developing cotton mills and tobacco factories in the area, cotton mill operatives grew to about eight percent of all employed women by 1900, and ninety-nine percent of those workers were white.<sup>19</sup>

While women were limited by race to particular jobs, poor women of either race had flexibility to cross over into the least-skilled and lowest-paying jobs in the state with some regularity. The majority of the approximately one percent of all employed women who worked as operatives in the burgeoning tobacco industry were black; yet white women made up twenty-eight percent of female tobacco operatives. Domestic workers formed the largest proportion of employed women after agriculture, at sixteen percent, and while it was an occupation generally associated with black women, one quarter of those workers were white. Similarly, twenty percent of seamstresses, the least-skilled needle workers and those most likely employed by someone else rather than working independently, were black. At the opposite end of the economic scale, because the black

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<sup>18</sup> As in most other Southern states, North Carolina remained primarily rural into the twentieth century, and the majority of both black and white women enumerated in the census worked in agriculture. Although the total percentage of female agricultural workers decreased slightly in the period from 1870 to 1900, it remained close to 50 percent of all employed women throughout. See *Special Reports – Occupations at the Twelfth Census, 1900*, “Statistics of Occupations. Table 41;” “States and Territories. Explanatory Notes,” 90-91.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

middle class was expanding and obtained greater educational opportunities in the late nineteenth century, black women gained ground in teaching, the most common professional occupation among women. Yet because black women were confined to teaching in racially segregated schools, white women still made up a significant majority of North Carolina's teachers in 1900, at seventy-six percent.<sup>20</sup> Other than the occasional exceptions, racial segregation continued to dominate women's work in North Carolina's cities well into the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the period, race remained a powerful force in shaping the employment opportunities available to women in Piedmont cities.

### **“Womanly” Businesses**

White women's inclusion in business listings of directories legitimated and drew attention to their businesses to some degree, but simultaneously reinforced to a great extent the perception of their work for an income as temporary and domestic in nature. Home and work were often the same place for white women, as was the case for thirty-six of the thirty-seven dressmakers listed in the Raleigh city directory in 1883. Working from home distinguished and segregated the work women performed and the services they provided and often effectively hid their work from public view; it certainly reinforced the perception of the work of white women as domestic rather than

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Marion W. Roydhouse, “‘Big Enough to Tell Weeds from the Beans’: The Impact of Industry on Women in the Twentieth-Century South,” chapter 5 in *The South is Another Land: Essays on the Twentieth-Century South* ed. Bruce Clayton and John A. Salmond (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 87-88.

commercial, and also contributed to an undercounting of income-earning women. More than forty percent of Raleigh's dressmakers did not appear in directory business listings in 1883 and 1888, and these workers were even less visible by 1896, when sixty-six percent of dressmakers were unlisted.<sup>22</sup>

A contributing factor in the perception of women's businesses as something other than commercial and profit-driven was that very few Piedmont businesswomen advertised. The occasional businesswomen who did advertise in directories or newspapers were also among the most successful and long-term, with the resources to pay for advertising. Caroline Gorrell of Greensboro, in announcing her new spring merchandise, expressed gratitude to her customers for their "liberal patronage in the past" and her hope that they would bring her more business. Dressmakers Lyon and Hines touted Mrs. Lyon's many years of experience, and Mrs. Lucetta Ray, wife of Knights of Labor organizer John Ray, remarked upon her sixteen years in the field, claiming that she was "better than ever prepared to please my old customers" in Raleigh. Of the fifty-eight businesswomen who attained listings in the commercial section of the 1883 Raleigh directory – including thirty-seven dressmakers and twelve boarding house proprietors – only one, dressmaker Lucetta Ray, took out an advertisement in the directory. Ray was

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<sup>22</sup> It had become much less common, but some men also continued to work from home, particularly those operating grocery stores, bars, and restaurants. This was the case for at least 25 men in Raleigh in 1883. *Raleigh City Directory. 1883*, 155-56, passim; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1888*, 132-33, passim; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, N.C., 1896-'97*, 338-39, passim. For discussion of how women's businesses and their history have been obscured by the impression that women's businesses were essentially an extension of their domestic duties see Wendy Gamber, "A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History," *The Business History Review* 72 (summer 1998), 188-217 and Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998).

also the only one of the larger group of seventy-three individual businesswomen – including forty dressmakers and nineteen boarding house operators – to take out an advertisement in the 1888 directory.<sup>23</sup>

The few businesswomen who could afford to advertise usually did so in a way that reinforced white feminine norms. The Stovall sisters of Greensboro likened business transactions with customers in their dressmaking business to social visits, advertising that both former customers and new ones “may favor them with a call at their residence.”<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Oettinger of Raleigh used the neighborly approach when advertising her millinery, stating simply, “you all know where she lives.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, dressmakers’ and milliners’ advertisements emphasized the fashion at the heart of their businesses and their relationships with, and service to, their customers. Custom clothiers and hat makers provided a highly valued service to middle-class and elite women who sought the fit and style that gave them confidence in their appearance and distinguished them from women who could not afford such services.<sup>26</sup> Routinely, milliners and dressmakers appealed to refined and selective customers by describing their work as fashionable and drawing attention to the quality of their workmanship and the materials they used, as when Mrs. Maurice and Mrs. Adams of Greensboro announced that they had “just returned from a

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<sup>23</sup> *Greensboro Patriot*, 31 January 1884; *The Exposition News*, 1884, Henry E. Fries Collection, scrapbook, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History. *Raleigh City Directory. 1883*, 147-168, front matter; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1888*, 121-148, advertisement insert in “General Information,” between pages x and xi; *Raleigh City Directory 1886*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> *Greensboro Patriot*, 14 April 1875.

<sup>25</sup> *Daily Sentinel*, 4 January 1868.

<sup>26</sup> Gamber, *Female Economy*, 97-101.

visit to the Northern cities, and have brought the Finest, Richest and most Fashionable stock of Millinery and Ladies' Furnishing Goods, comprising the Latest Novelties."<sup>27</sup>

While operating any small postwar business was fraught with challenges, the low earnings potential and restrictions on credit faced by women presented them with even greater obstacles than their male counterparts experienced. As industrial capitalism expanded in the late nineteenth century, the R. G. Dun & Co. Agency increasingly favored larger firms with greater capital, while small businesses, like the majority of those owned by women, grew less likely to receive favorable credit ratings. After the Civil War, R. G. Dun provided instructions to his agents to "shift their emphasis to measures of capital worth, cash flows, debts outstanding, and other quantifiable data," in order to enhance the reliability of their ratings and systematize and nationalize the process of credit reporting. Remarks on personal characteristics and business habits, as well as the opinions of local agents familiar with businesspeople in the community, were to give way to criteria set by the New York office. Based on the agency's new standards, smaller firms with less capital were generally awarded lower credit ratings, while larger firms with greater capital received higher ratings.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Greensboro Patriot*, 21 October 1865.

<sup>28</sup> James D. Norris, *R. G. Dun & Co., 1841-1900: The Development of Credit-Reporting in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1978), xvii. Norris argues that while Dun's emphasis on establishing standards proved beneficial to larger firms and may have contributed to their dominance in the period, "However much he might occasionally remind subscribers that it was good business to extend credit to smaller firms that received ratings of 'good' or even 'fair,' keeping in mind the capital worth as an indication of the capacity of the business, Dun's insistence upon tying the two ratings together undoubtedly militated against the smaller concerns," 92-94. See also Gamber, *Female Economy*, 170-76.

Narrow, gendered notions about what constituted a business worked to obscure women's business endeavors. Boarding house operators effectively represent this point because despite the fact that boarding house proprietors ranked among the most visible businesswomen in their communities – catering to the general public and appearing frequently in the commercial sections of directories – they were passed over by credit agents. This was in part because they were considered unlikely to borrow on credit to the extent that milliners, fashionable dressmakers, and merchants did, but it also reveals the credit agents' bias against recognizing them as businesswomen. They certainly did not meet the new standards established by R. G. Dun. Among small businesswomen, milliners appeared most often in credit reports because they usually maintained large stocks and were likely to need at least small amounts of credit to both establish the business and to keep the most fashionable supplies at hand to satisfy customers. On the other hand, boarding house operators continued to be thought of as housewives who rented rooms out of necessity or primarily to friends and family rather than businesswomen who capitalized on their available resources to make a living. As historian Sandra Wheeler points out, this categorization does not account for the varying goals and strategies of different boarding house keepers. Wheeler identified a clearly professional group in late-nineteenth-century Hartford, Connecticut who advertised and “thought of themselves in commercial rather than domestic terms.” These proprietors had to purchase numerous articles to furnish the rooms, provide comfortable

accommodations, feed their boarders, and sometimes rent buildings specifically for the purpose of boarding.<sup>29</sup>

Such a professional group of boarding house operators existed in the postwar Piedmont. For example, Miss Carrie Boner announced to readers of the *Greensboro Patriot* that she had leased a newly constructed house at the intersection of West Sycamore and Salisbury streets and was “prepared to accommodate boarders with rooms and meals or with meals alone.” In a similar manner, Mrs. N. A. Brown demonstrated her desire to capitalize on new business and transient workers coming into the city, advertising, “having leased the new Brick Building in the grove near the Depot, I am now prepared to take boarders (with or without rooms,) on very reasonable terms. Railroad men will find it very convenient.” Railroad men, and others, continued to rent from Brown for over twenty-five years, a testament to her professional status.<sup>30</sup> In Piedmont directories, where boarding houses received regular listings, locals seemed to distinguish the casual boarding house operator from the profit-seeking one by listing only a selection of the active boarding house operators in business sections. However, the choice of

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<sup>29</sup> Sandra L. Wheeler, “‘To Get an Honest Livin’’: Professional Boardinghouse Keepers in Hartford, 1890.” *Connecticut History* 36 (March 1995), 48-65, quotation on p. 50. Much of the scholarship on boarding houses examines tensions between women’s work and notions about public and private spheres. Glenn Perkins, in his master’s thesis on boarding houses in Wilmington, North Carolina, provides evidence that the primary concern of boarding house operators shifted from demonstrating their respectability to potential boarders in the 1850s to providing evidence of professionalism for a discerning clientele by the 1880s. See “Accommodating Strangers: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Wilmington, N.C., Boardinghouses” (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2004), 44-52. In her work on boarding houses, Wendy Gamber argues that late-nineteenth century boarding house operators and their clients often created families and homes that revealed shifting boundaries between the private and the public, in *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> *Greensboro Patriot*, 24 February 1875 and 10 March 1875.

directory publishers to list some women's boarding houses alongside other businesses likely had more to do with making sure business travelers could secure lodging than recognizing women boarding house proprietors as part of the business community.

In addition to their providing a necessary service in growing Piedmont cities, the select group of white boarding house operators who appeared in business sections of the earliest directories may have been there because they shared many characteristics that would have distinguished theirs as the best accommodations the city had to offer. Carrie Boner's widowed mother had owned \$900 worth of property in 1870. Although Boner was unlikely to have inherited a portion of her mother's estate, having possibly preceded her mother in death as she was suffering from stomach cancer in 1880, she benefited from her family's property-owning status nonetheless. A boarding house operator since 1875, Boner's standing in Greensboro was confirmed in the heat of the summer of 1879 in a newspaper announcement that, "(o)n account of the inclemency of the weather last night, the ladies of the Baptist church will have ice cream and cake on sale again to-night, at Miss Carrie Boner's." In the property she leased, widowed Mrs. N. A. (Ann) Brown rented to skilled workers, city employees, and small businessmen – specifically, four railroad engineers, two prison guards, a telegraph dispatcher, and a grocer's family in 1880 – and from whom she was able to charge more than she would if her boarders had been unskilled laborers. By 1900, Brown owned her own property, and there she rented

to a similar clientele – a railroad dispatcher and clerk as well as a publisher and telegraph operator.<sup>31</sup>

The status of many of the Piedmont's earliest boarding house operators proved advantageous to their ability to maintain their businesses. Of the five women whose boarding houses attained listings in the commercial section of Raleigh's 1875 directory, at least three were property owners. The widow Mrs. L. B. Evans held \$5000 worth of real estate. She rented rooms to a lawyer and clerk in addition to providing housing to several young, single women without occupations, possibly relatives who contributed to the running of the boarding house given that Evans had no servants living in her household. Also widowed, Mrs. E. C. Beckwith had moved her young family to Raleigh from the town of Smithfield in neighboring Johnston County, where she held \$1250 worth of real estate. In her Raleigh establishment, Beckwith boarded a lawyer and his family and also a clerk, bookkeeper, grocer, horse dealer, tailor, printer, and cashier. Although directories always listed her business as a boarding house, the census taker named Beckwith's profession as "keeping hotel." Maggie Fentress held \$7000 worth of real estate in her name in 1870, and was married to Thomas, a tailor. Fentress boarded three printers in 1880, and was still running her boarding house, adjacent to her husband's business, as late as 1888. Another of the boarding houses operators receiving a listing in the commercial section, B. N. Howell, had retired from farming and joined his wife in her business, and their real estate was valued at \$3000. The Howells' boarders

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<sup>31</sup> *Greensboro Patriot*, 30 July 1879. Carrie Boner's younger sister Louisa took over the business in 1880. 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Winston Township, Forsyth County; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Greensboro, Guilford; 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Gilmer Township, Greensboro, Guilford.

included several clerks, a printer, a saddler, a baker, and a female music teacher and her children. Although she was missing from the commercial section of the 1875 directory, Mrs. Levi Branson's boarding house appeared in both city and state directories in preceding and subsequent years. She opened her business in Raleigh as early as 1869, when her husband held \$5000 in real estate. Branson's establishment was recognized as a hotel rather than a boarding house in several sources over the years. Mrs. J. D. Pullen, who also did not appear in the business section but was listed in the residential section as a boarding house operator, was married to a clerk. Although the couple had no real estate holdings in 1870, at "Mrs. Pullen's Boarding House" they rented to a solidly middle-class clientele – the families of a commission merchant, lawyer, and dry goods merchant, and a single doctor – that year.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not they owned property, by attracting a certain class of boarders these businesswomen aided their own claims to respectability. Being a "lady" did not preclude these women from earning a living, and neither did working for a living take that status from them, so long as they maintained a genteel household at the same time.<sup>33</sup>

Those women who were "seen" in the earliest city directories were most frequently white women with property and status in the community, and perhaps best

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<sup>32</sup> *Chataigne's*, 34, 46, 70, 74, 77, 78, 94, 98, 103, 104, 110, 132-33; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh Township, Wake and Smithfield Township, Johnston; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, South East Raleigh and Raleigh Township, Wake.

<sup>33</sup> They also catered to a similar clientele as those served by the city's hotels. The Grange Hotel's boarders included clerks, two deputy sheriffs, a cotton weigher, a contractor, and a tax collector, and residents of the Yarborough Hotel included clerks and a collector for the internal revenue, insurance agents, merchants, a banker, a doctor, and the president of Oak City Mills, *Chataigne's*, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 56, 59, 63, 75, 85, 90, 107, 116, 124, 125, 129.

represented the professional set of boarding house operators, but they did not represent either the full range of women or the typical woman in this occupation. By the mid-1880s, with Piedmont cities growing rapidly, the number of boarding house listings had doubled. Between 1875 and 1888, a total of forty-four white women received listings as boarding house operators in the commercial section of Raleigh's directories. As many as nineteen of these women continued in the business of boarding for two years or more, and at least five of these boarding house operators persisted for an exceptionally long time, including the aforementioned property owners Beckwith and Fentress, who worked for twelve or more years, and Branson and Evans, who worked at least twenty years.<sup>34</sup>

In Raleigh's earliest directory, published in 1875, there was a mix of men and women operating boarding houses, and women ran fewer than half of the boarding houses listed. By the mid-1880s, it had become an almost completely female occupation, and eighty percent of boarding house operators listed in 1888 were women. However, the occasional woman operated a boarding house with, or under the name of, her husband, and these joint ventures usually obscured the woman's role in the business. Included in this small group were two African American women, each of whom appeared only a single time as a boarding house operator. Mrs. Mary Wyche's residential listing identified her as the proprietress of the St. Lawrence Hotel in 1887; otherwise, and in all the commercial listings throughout the decade, her husband Robert was listed as a boarding house operator or hotel proprietor, with no other mention of Mrs. Wyche.

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<sup>34</sup> *Chataigne's* 132-33; *Chas. Emerson's & Co., Raleigh Directory 1880*, 162; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 150; *Raleigh City Directory 1886*, 113, 161; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1887*, 180; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1888*, 124-25; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1896*, 328-29.

Similarly, Mrs. Polly Hare was named a boarding house operator in 1886, but her husband David was identified in the other directories, and all the commercial listings, as the proprietor of their boarding house. Neither of these women was listed with another occupation throughout the decade, which supports a conclusion that they were among the city's professional boarding house operators.<sup>35</sup>

More than half of the female boarding house operators throughout the 1880s, however, worked in this occupation on a temporary rather than long-term basis. Overall, this group appears to have been of more moderate means and propertyless. Of the twenty-five women who attained listings in only a single directory, it appears that most selected boarding house operation out of a need for temporary work to supplement the earnings of their husbands or other members of their households. Among those was Etta Fowler, the wife of blacksmith Willis Fowler. Although Mr. Fowler's stepfather had held \$500 in real estate in 1870, this property does not appear to have passed to Fowler, who, in 1880 at age twenty-four (prior to his marriage to Etta) lived with his widowed mother, a dressmaker, and by 1900, after his wife Etta had died, moved in with his brother-in-law. Another short-term boarding house operator, Mrs. J. C. Hester, was married to a postmaster and may have had only a single boarder, the principal clerk to the Secretary of State, in the one year she was acknowledged in the business pages of the directory. Mrs. Lillie Ferguson's husband was a tailor, and she, too, appears to have taken in boarders for only one year. Similar stories likely played out for several of the other short-term

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

boarding house operators, with husbands or other relatives in occupations such as furniture dealer, salesman, clerk, carpenter, and brick deliverer, whose incomes they supplemented by taking in boarders seasonally or briefly.<sup>36</sup>

While these married and sometimes widowed women took in boarders to supplement other household income, at least six of these temporary proprietors appear to have truly been women on their own. Single or widowed, and with no other relatives living with them, they attempted boarding house operation as a means of supporting themselves when they had no one else on whom to depend. They had, perhaps, moved to the city on their own specifically seeking employment. Three of these women were the only residents with their surnames in the city. One, Kate Dougherty, had been listed as a “boarding house prostitute” in the 1880 census, and although prostitution was among the possible occupations in cities for self-supporting women, it cannot be assumed that the other women in this group were not operating legitimate businesses because they had no roots in the community. These short-term boarding house operators were just as likely to have failed or abandoned the occupation because of the normal challenges facing small business owners. On the whole, the numbers reveal that boarding house operation was a viable option for women seeking to make a living in the cities who may have had only their domestic skills to work with, whether or not they owned property. Boarding house operators came from the elite and middling ranks of property owners as well as poorer women who rented out rooms in buildings they had leased for that purpose. The

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh Township, Wake; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, South East Raleigh, Wake; 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh Ward 3, Wake.

professional, long-term boarding house operators were among those who had the most resources available to them, but the variance in status among the women who entered this work reveals that a lack of material wealth did not prevent other women from capitalizing on the growing need for housing in Piedmont cities.<sup>37</sup>

While some female proprietors found their businesses elevated by virtue of their status and ties in the community, the status of their boarders, and their apparent professional standing, and others gained notice as a function of their providing a much-needed service in the city, many working women were obscured by various circumstances and never, or only infrequently, appeared in the city's directories. Marriage concealed both white and black women, as early directories often listed heads-of-households but not dependents, and some married women who operated boarding houses or other businesses with their husbands found their status of businesswoman concealed by their status as wife. Property ownership was a factor in whether or not women appeared in directories, and white widowed women who owned property frequently appeared in the directories of the three largest cities, but propertyless unmarried and widowed black and white women often resided in someone else's household. Some of them lived with relatives, but many black women who worked as domestic servants were hidden because they resided with an employer.

While all women might be absent from directories for a variety reasons, the work of black women was often ignored despite its value to the family and the community at

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Kate Dougherty's surname was variously spelled Doherty. 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, South East Raleigh, Wake.

large. Black women were particularly absent from many of the earliest city directories, even though they consistently formed a large proportion of city residents in the Piedmont. Domestic service was second only to agriculture in employment among women in the state, and while hundreds of black women filled these jobs in Piedmont cities, only a handful can be found in the earlier directories. For example, while boasting a population of just over 10,000, the 1875 Raleigh directory identified only four black women in the residential listings. Even though 656 black women resided in Winston in 1879, only fifteen appeared in the residential listings that year. In Charlotte, where black women formed twenty-five percent of the population in 1879, only 59, or three percent of all black women residing there, appeared in the residential listings at all that year. By the mid-1880s, the large number of black and white women working for a living became more visible because, as one directory publisher stated, the goal had become to not only record the name of every person in business in the city, but also “those receiving wages for any kind of service.”<sup>38</sup>

The work of white women, even though it was consistently portrayed as domestic duty performed on a temporary basis and as supplementary rather than supporting, consistently gained more attention than that of black women, and even when their work shared some important characteristics. In her examination of the lives and work of African American women in postwar Atlanta, historian Tera Hunter points out that the

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<sup>38</sup> African American residents were usually distinguished in Piedmont directories by an asterisk or the notation (*c*), although some directories provided separate white and black listings, as in Raleigh’s 1886 directory. *Chataigne’s*. 38, passim; *Emerson’s Winston, Salem & Greensboro, North Carolina, Directory, 1879-’80*, xxiv, passim; *Beasley & Emerson’s Charlotte Directory for 1875-76*, K. *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1887*, 7.

autonomy laundresses experienced distinguished their work from that of other domestic servants who lived with their employers and were constantly at their beck-and-call. As they worked from home and had a degree of flexibility that allowed them to tend to their own households and the needs of their families, laundresses had much in common with skilled white needle workers. The U.S. Census Bureau report “Women at Work,” based on the 1900 census, recognized these similarities, as well. The report described laundry work as “an industry of the home,” and acknowledged its importance in “enabling a large class of women to maintain the family to which they belong, or to materially assist in its support, without the necessity of special technical training or experience and without seriously interfering with their household duties.” Dressmaking received the same distinction, as an occupation appealing most to white women in the thirty-five to forty-four age group and one that could “be pursued at home by women whose household duties do not permit them to participate in shop or factory work” and was “in many cases the resource of married women who are compelled to rely upon their own efforts for the support of their families.” The report went on to describe laundresses as most likely to be married and living with other breadwinners, including their children. In comparison to seamstresses, dressmakers, and milliners – the majority of whom were white women – laundresses nationwide were two to three times more likely to be the primary breadwinners in their households.<sup>39</sup> Of the various factors working to obscure the

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<sup>39</sup> Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 26. The Census Bureau report put the percentage of laundresses as the primary breadwinners in their families at 21.9, compared to 12.6 percent of dressmakers, 10.5 percent of seamstresses, and 7.1 percent of milliners nationwide. See “Statistics of

identification of women in city directories, women's occupations had a significant influence. The large group of white and black women who worked as seamstresses and the occupations held most often by black women – domestic servants, cooks, and laundresses – did not garner attention. Yet “womanly” businesses – those of dressmakers, milliners, and boarding house operators – routinely formed categories within the business listings, and even those women who took in boarders on a temporary basis might be recognized in directories.

### **Seeking Stability and Status**

In the postwar years, families confronted frequent economic downturns and persistent instability in the wake of the Civil War, and a substantial number of Piedmont families relied on women's earnings to help lessen financial insecurity. Responding to financial strain, women from all socioeconomic levels entered the workforce to support their families. Most of the white women who entered business in the Piedmont would be classified as middle class by virtue of the fact that they were merchants and craftspeople, yet their economic circumstances varied considerably. The married businesswomen identified in Raleigh's 1888 directory, for example, had husbands who worked as laborers, shoemakers, carpenters, compositors, salesmen, clerks, and lawyers, as well as numerous other occupations. Although working for a living was far removed from the ideal of Southern white womanhood embraced by the elite, women from the former

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Women at Work, based on unpublished information derived from the schedules of the Twelfth census: 1900 United States.” Bureau of the Census (Washington: GPO, 1907), 56-62, 70-75, 81.

slave-holding class often found their financial status equally precarious, and practical concerns prevailed when family assets had disappeared and male breadwinners had been lost. Many small businesswomen teetered on the brink of financial ruin, became insolvent and lost their businesses, endured similar losses by fathers and husbands, and started over time and again. Others more reliably provided basic necessities for their families both in the short term and long term. Women's earnings not only helped limit their families' instability but also allowed many to assert middle-class status in the new social order.

Although women's small businesses rarely required much in the way of initial investment, small business ownership has been historically associated with middle-class status. A small business could offer a woman enough profit to shore up that status by providing to her family the markers of middle-class identity. Yet at the same time, middle-class status was both in its formative stages and rather precarious in the postwar South, and business ownership signified neither solvency nor security. Male and female petty business owners faced tremendous adversity, as evidenced by consistent newspaper reports of business closings related by R. G. Dun & Co., the nation's leading commercial credit reporting agency.<sup>40</sup>

Agents with R. G. Dun & Co. visited towns across the Piedmont and collected information on the local community of business operators from the antebellum period through 1880. The vast majority of the businesswomen who received credit ratings were

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<sup>40</sup> For example, the *Raleigh Register* reported the following on 8 October 1884: "R. G. Dun & Co. report 194 failures last week. The failures are more numerous than usual in the Southern States and light in New York city, as compared with previous weeks."

milliners, and some dressmakers and merchants also warranted attention. Agents reported on a businesswoman's acumen and solvency for the purpose of alerting creditors. Their primary task was to determine creditworthiness, based on whether or not a businesswoman paid accounts on time, owned property, or maintained a customer base. Agents confirmed marital status and provided financial assessments. Their notes allow for a general accounting of a woman's business over time, detailing how long she operated the business and whether she worked on her own, with family members, or with a female partner. The agents' notes also provide insight into a businesswoman's relationship with her husband, if married. If she or her husband had declared bankruptcy or had some other financial difficulties, it was likely to be recorded in the ledger. If she was registered as a *sole trader*, maintaining control over her business and assets independently of her husband, the agent made note of that. While the directories and census provide a collection of names and statistics, the Dun ledgers help develop a picture of the lived experiences of the women who operated these businesses.

The seemingly objective approach taken by Dun agents to evaluate a woman's business was tainted with subjectivity, such as depictions of her as "worthy" or of "good character," as well as similar comments on the reputation of her husband or other relatives. An oft-repeated description of Piedmont businesswomen was "poor but hon[est] [and] indus[trious]," an indication that women who started out with few assets rarely achieved upward mobility, and many simply failed outright. Over half of the businesswomen appearing in the Dun ledgers for the Piedmont counties of Forsyth, Guilford, Mecklenburg, and Wake between 1865 and 1880 – when the last entries in

these ledgers were recorded – were without property and had no other evident means of support. Dun agents did not impugn the reputation of a single Piedmont businesswoman, regardless of her poverty. Rather, descriptions such as *honorable*, *honest*, *upright*, and *industrious* were meant to preserve not only the credit but also the respectability of businesswomen.<sup>41</sup>

Struggling through the economic depression of the 1870s, unstable and transient best describe many of the Piedmont women’s businesses evaluated by Dun agents. The notation “out of bus[iness]” appears alongside many businesswomen’s names in the Dun ledgers, and many simply disappear from extant records. For example, Mrs. Sarah Thompson’s millinery in Raleigh survived at least three years, and in that brief time she went from “doubtful” to “consid[ered] good some little property” to insolvent and out of business. In May 1871, Mrs. Anne Faison was a milliner of “g[oo]d char[acter] but worth [nothing],” and within two years the agent noted, “know no such person.” The following year the agent confirmed that Faison was out of business. Miss C. C. Hills operated her millinery for fewer than two years, and Miss Anna Monroe managed fewer than nine months. In Greensboro, Mrs. M. E. Ballinger was remarked upon as a “worthy lady” and “poor but hon[est] and indus[trious]” from March 1876 to February 1877, but

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<sup>41</sup> Wendy Gamber described most of the milliners in her study of Boston and its environs as working class, and found that Dun agents most frequently used the term *respectable* to describe them, which she concludes, “granted them honorary middle-class status” and provided men a means of understanding the place of women in the commercial world. Accordingly, “wholesaler paternalism” governed local credit practices and sometimes meant that women lacking in capital could obtain limited credit based on assessments of their good character. See *The Female Economy*, 161-65. *Respectable* is never actually used to describe the businesswomen in Dun ledgers for Forsyth, Guilford, Mecklenburg, and Wake counties after the Civil War. However, many of the adjectives that were used to describe Piedmont businesswomen were certainly intended to convey the same idea. North Carolina, v. 11, p. 534y, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

then “Out of Bus[iness] [and] gone” a year later. Similarly, Mrs. E. C. Newcombe was also rated as “poor, but hon[est]” in November 1876, insolvent the following year, and, although she apparently tried to make a go of it for another two years, was out of business by February 1879. Milliner Mrs. Jennie Brinkley of Lewisville, just outside of Winston, was in business for around four years, but she barely made ends meet the entire time. With no property, her small business was “doubtful” and she was “not d[oin]g much bus[iness]” prior to failing in 1875. Mrs. Lena Gordon and Mrs. Sue Crutchfield established a partnership in a general store in Winston, with accounts worth around \$500 each month in May 1878. The agent rated them with “g[oo]d bus[iness] hab[it]s, cred[it] fair.” A year later Gordon was on her own, with “cap[ital] limited to stock in trade,” which the agent estimated at \$1500, and although he found her to be good for small bills, he advised against “large credit” and noted again that she had no property other than her stock. By December 1879, the agent observed that Gordon’s business had failed, and that with liabilities of \$1200 and assets of only \$600, she would “prob[ably] pay 50%.”<sup>42</sup>

In light of their often limited resources and earnings potential, partnerships with other women offered viable alternatives for craftswomen of small means. In Winston, milliners Mrs. Davis, “a widow lady without family,” and Miss Welfare, “an old maid” who provided for her widowed mother, not only teamed up for their mutual interests but they also took on more than one job at a time. Davis had been in business with another woman, Virginia Gilmer, from December 1873 until Gilmer retired in July 1874. This

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<sup>42</sup> North Carolina, v. 24, pp. 18, 41, 74, 84, 160<sup>40</sup>; North Carolina, v. 11, pp. 534<sup>6</sup>, 534<sup>D</sup>; North Carolina, v. 10, pp. 495, 534, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; *Chataigne’s*, 84.

relationship and the timing of their partnership suggest that Davis learned the trade from Gilmer and likely picked up her client base. Davis and Welfare consistently earned praise as honest, reliable, and good for small amounts of credit. In January 1878 the notation “out of business” appeared, yet this was either a mistake or a temporary situation, because throughout 1878 and 1879, when the ledger for Winston ended, the record on their business continued. Both women began teaching full time, but they continued to operate their millinery where they had “a competent lady in charge of their store,” who may have been Mrs. Tatum, an employee in 1879. By then, Davis was boarding in town and Welfare resided in Salem. Although the schools over which they presided – Salem Private School for Miss Welfare and Winston Private School for Mrs. Davis – appeared defunct, they continued to operate their millinery and notions shop on Main Street in Winston as well as a second location in Salem. Propertyless when they established their partnership in 1874, by December 1876 they had both become property owners.<sup>43</sup> Through their labor and acquisition of property, Davis and Welfare pulled themselves out of the ranks of the poor. Their business partnership had not released them from fluctuations in the market or any number of things that might go wrong, but their combined resources aided their stability and their status as property owners helped protect them in the absence of men.

Single and widowed businesswomen often employed the strategy of pooling resources with, and relying on various types of support from, their female relatives,

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<sup>43</sup> Welfare’s name was variously recorded as Wilfour in the Dun ledgers. North Carolina, v. 10, p. 500, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School. *Emerson’s Winston, Salem & Greensboro, North Carolina, Directory, 1879-’80*, 11, 37, 41, 74, 136-37.

including training them to work in the business. This strategy allowed women whose resources were limited by the absence of a male breadwinner to contribute to a family income. Unmarried Maggie Reese of Raleigh lived with her family and employed three of her four younger sisters in her millinery, operated variously out of her home and in a separate location, throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Her father had been a barkeeper with no property in Hillsboro, Orange County when Reese was fresh out of school at age 16, and then relocated his family to Raleigh, where he claimed the occupation of farmer by the time Reese was 25. However, within three years their elderly father was without an occupation, and their older brothers had already established households of their own, leaving the Reese sisters responsible for their family's welfare. Maggie Reese had established her business by 1883 at age 28, where she employed her sister Josephine as a saleswoman. Reese trained her sisters in the craft, and by 1888 she employed both Josephine and Sallie as milliners. Sisters Josephine and Janie worked in sales for Reese in 1896, while Sallie continued her work as a milliner at Reese's shop.<sup>44</sup>

Though her enterprise was small, a successful businesswoman like Maggie Reese frequently provided employment to other workers in the community, including other women with the requisite skills or interest in learning. In addition to providing work to her sisters, Reese had numerous employees over the years. Two single white women, Mary Parham and Blanche Walker, worked as milliners for Reese as early as 1883. Reese also hired black porters Robert Powell and William Palmer and a white

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<sup>44</sup> 1870 and 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Hillsborough, Orange; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 109, 163; *Raleigh City Directory 1886*, 86, 118, 124; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1887*, 132, 193; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1888*, 86, 142; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 243, 350.

saleswoman named Julia Partin.<sup>45</sup> Dressmaker Carrie Firth hired at least three other dressmakers and seven seamstresses to work at her home-based business.<sup>46</sup> Bettie Besson employed her daughters as milliners and also black porter John Sills to carry out the tasks of heavy lifting and making deliveries for her business.<sup>47</sup> Dressmaker Lucetta Ray, wife of Knights of Labor organizer John Ray, advertised not only her many years' experience and her use of the "latest improved systems, patterns, and machinery," but also the quality of the seamstresses she employed.<sup>48</sup> In 1880, Mrs. Burt of Raleigh apprenticed a young woman in the dressmaking trade. Although the particular terminology seems to have fallen mostly out of use, many skilled women followed the tradition of training others in their trade while at the same time providing them a residence. For example, seamstress Ellen J. Allen resided with and worked for dressmaker Mrs. Debnam in Raleigh, and Caroline Gorrell of Greensboro boarded her niece, Nanny Weatherly, and another woman who worked as milliners in her shop.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time that they provided jobs to other members of the community, craftswomen who trained their children in their trade could count on additional contributions to a family income in the short term and knowledge that their children would be able to support themselves and their own families in the future. Louise Benson

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<sup>45</sup> *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 100, 132; *Raleigh City Directory 1886*, 101; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1887*, 122, 128, 158; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 224, 226.

<sup>46</sup> *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 33, 52, 53, 57, 60, 67, 68, 88, 109, 114, 156.

<sup>47</sup> *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 259.

<sup>48</sup> *The Exposition News*, 1884.

<sup>49</sup> 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, South East Raleigh, Wake and Greensboro, Guilford; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 18.

trained her daughter Lilly and possibly her younger sister and co-worker, A. M. Edney, in the millinery trade. Another of Benson's co-workers in 1875 at Wittkowsky & Rintels department store in Charlotte, dressmaker Mary Reed, also taught her daughter Mollie; Reed went on to run an independent dressmaking business in the next few years. A widowed head of household and immigrant from Germany, Raleigh's Madame Besson had four daughters who lived and also worked with her in her millinery shop. Numerous dressmakers counted on their daughters and younger sisters to work for them as either seamstresses or dressmakers, like the widowed Mrs. Weddon of Raleigh, who employed both her daughters as seamstresses in her dressmaking business. Dressmaker Mary Graham's adult daughter worked as a dressmaker with her out of their home, while her fourteen-year-old son attended school. Providing an education to younger siblings, children, and grandchildren was another way in which small businesswomen provided for the next generation. Milliner Pauline Query, although married, was the primary breadwinner in her family and paid for the education of daughter Clara, who entered teaching. Boarding house operator Lucy Evans supported two generations of female relatives, and sent her granddaughter to school to become a teacher.<sup>50</sup>

Black dressmaker Henrietta Eaton was an exception, since few Piedmont dressmakers were black, but the work of her children distinguished her class status from that of her fellow white dressmakers. A married woman whose husband worked as a

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<sup>50</sup> Mrs. L. E. Benson was 36 and A. M. Edney was 31 in 1880. 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte First Ward, Mecklenburg. *Beasley & Emerson's*, 29, 41, 72, 109; *Chas. Emerson & Co's 1879*, 85, 110. *Raleigh City Directory 1886*, 32; *Raleigh City Directory 1888*, 9, 142; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 67; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 135; 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh Township, Wake.

gardener, Mrs. Eaton had at least ten children by 1900. The couple's two eldest daughters, Mary and Kate, lived and worked from home with their mother, while three of their teenaged daughters worked as domestic servants and twelve-year-old James worked as an errand boy. Only the youngest of the couple's children attended school. White dressmakers' and milliners' children commonly attended school until at least their teens, but black children often started working as servants as young as age ten in the postwar period. Although she worked in an occupation denied to most black women, the fact that Mrs. Eaton's children also had to work instead of going to school is an indication that her earnings were lower than those of many white dressmakers and that she could not claim middle-class status.<sup>51</sup>

Although the general assumption would be that only the most financially-strapped white families would include employed women, the money women earned did not merely contribute to familial subsistence, as important as that was, but often helped their families afford the services of black women as laundresses, servants, and cooks – all of which distinguished them from poor whites. All but the poorest white women hired laundresses to perform what was considered a most loathsome and unmistakably racialized chore. In her suit to divorce her husband, Mary Franklin cited among his many abuses his demand that she “have her washing done herself and work out and pay for it.” Although Mrs. Franklin may have been right that her husband was trying to shame her by suggesting she

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<sup>51</sup> On the centrality of education to the quest among black Southerners for self-determination, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 115. 1880 and 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake.

get a job to pay for her domestic servants, he did not go so far as to suggest that she do her own laundry.<sup>52</sup> White women who could afford to do so were accustomed to hiring other black servants to work for them as well, and while laundresses usually worked out of their own homes, many domestic servants lived with their employers. Milliner Louise Benson ran a household comprised of her husband, who was a machinist for the railroad, three young children, and a black cook named Kate Smith.<sup>53</sup> Bettie Besson's earnings as a milliner were sufficient to allow her to hire the services of two black cooks, Cherry Jones and Lizzie Harris, over the years. Middle-aged sisters Bede and Matilda Smith worked as dressmakers out of their home in Raleigh, employing and boarding a young, white seamstress to assist with their business and a 12-year-old black servant in their home. Both of Ann Yeargin's daughters worked alongside her as dressmakers, and the family hired a 16-year-old black chambermaid. Lucy Haley, a seamstress, and her daughters, who were dressmakers, supplemented the earnings of husband and father Thomas, a wheelwright, and also employed a 30-year-old black woman to cook for their family.<sup>54</sup>

Boarding house operators who had the resources often hired the services of black domestic workers to assist them with highly demanding chores tending to the needs of their boarders. Mrs. S. H. Montgomery of Raleigh hired as many as five servants to help

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<sup>52</sup> Guilford County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1890-1892, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

<sup>53</sup> 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte First Ward, Mecklenburg.

<sup>54</sup> *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1887*, 93; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 139, 259; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, South East Raleigh, Raleigh SW Division, and NW Division City of Raleigh, Wake.

her run her household of five children and her business with fourteen boarders. Also in the capital city, widowed fifty-nine-year-old Lucy Evans worked under very similar circumstances, boarding thirteen, employing five live-in servants, and providing for a household of five other women – her single sister, two single nieces, a widowed daughter, and young granddaughter. Twenty years later, Evans still ran her boarding house and employed two servants who lived with her and her daughter, granddaughter, and two boarders. Annie West of Raleigh likewise hired one woman to cook and another to do the washing and ironing for her family and boarders.<sup>55</sup> The Cole and Taylor sisters of Chapel Hill, who inherited property from their parents and rented out rooms and a small guesthouse behind their house on West Franklin Street for years, routinely had two or three live-in servants in their employ.<sup>56</sup> Although they made what was an unconventional choice for the Southern white woman, the earnings of these small businesswomen helped preserve their class status and maintain the respectability of their families, and their employment of both white and black workers in their businesses and households shored up their claims to middle-class identity.

The women who succeeded in business for an extended period of time and persisted in spite of economic downturns were in many instances better off to begin with. They often had other resources, including property, which provided them not only a base

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<sup>55</sup> 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake.

<sup>56</sup> Youngest sister Harriet inherited the real estate, and her older sisters Mary Catherine, who never married, and Sarah Cole Taylor, who was widowed, inherited personal property. Mary Catherine Cole kept the books for their business, in which she referenced Harriet's housekeeping duties. When Harriet was away, Mary hired additional help. Account book of Mary Catherine Cole, folder 82, Cole and Taylor Family Papers, SHC; 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Chapel Hill, Orange.

for their businesses but also an important safeguard against financial ruin. Milliner Caroline Gorrell of Greensboro had been married to a slave-holding merchant before the war, but was widowed and without property when she received guarded praise as “in every respect reliable and trustworthy but her capital is small” in May 1874, and the customary remark of “poor but hon[est] and indust[rious]” in February 1877. However, likely through inheritance, by August 1877 Gorrell had attained a “small estate” and owned her house. Gorrell then earned the praise “worthy and industrious” and “making a living” in June 1878. By May 1879 the agent described Gorrell’s business as “very good” and by December 1879 remarked, “I think bus[iness] is on the increase yearly.” Gorrell paid “pretty well,” the agent surmised, and he assessed her as creditworthy despite her stock on hand, which he valued at between \$1000 and \$1500. Although he did not know the value of her real estate, it carried considerable weight when evaluating her standing as a woman of business. It was her real estate that had pulled her up from the ranks of the poor. She was, the agent reported among the final entries for Guilford County, dated February 1880, “economical and consid[ered] safe.”<sup>57</sup> Safe, it seemed, from the vagaries experienced by the landless poor. A successful millinery career could not in itself provide that security, but neither could her small inheritance; the reputation she had established combined with her real estate made Gorrell a good credit risk and released her from the precariousness experienced by many Piedmont businesswomen.

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<sup>57</sup> North Carolina, v. 11, pp. 518b, 572, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

Indeed, Gorrell went on to successfully run her business, support her family, and train other milliners, into the early twentieth century.

Many formerly elite women like Caroline Gorrell were compelled by financial distress to join the expanding female workforce following the war, but their work did not normally upset the race and gender hierarchy any more than that of less well-off women in business. Rather, they were able to fall back on a common perception that their work was another form of duty to family, and, as historian Laura Edwards has argued, “not for their own fulfillment or to control economic resources in their own right,” thereby diluting potential challenges to the appropriate roles of Southern white women.<sup>58</sup> North Carolina patent medicine entrepreneur Alice Morgan Person, for example, consistently justified her work in relation to the notion of duty so central to her identity as an elite white woman: “It was a move of love and duty for my household idols, not of choice and preference. Somebody had to work and the place was mine.”<sup>59</sup>

Elite women who joined the labor force further reinforced existing hierarchies with their ability to follow the expectations of polite society. Historian Jane Turner Censer has argued that the younger generation of elite women worked following the Civil War to provide not only the basic necessities for the families but also markers of status, such as an education for their children and siblings. The value postwar Southern society

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<sup>58</sup> See Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 142-143.

<sup>59</sup> Alice Morgan Person, “The Chivalry of Man, as Exemplified in the Life of Mrs. Joe Person,” TD, 1890(?), Alice Morgan Person Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Foreword, 1-2, 21.

conferred upon women's education and intellectual pursuits, Censer contends, allowed elite women "to regain an honored place in the world."<sup>60</sup> Education and choice of occupation alone did not allow them to retain that position of honor, however, as elite women were expected to further distinguish themselves through their decorum. In her examination of the "new belle" of the postwar years, Sarah Case has argued that the proper education provided elite women both marketable skills that would lead to employment, primarily as teachers, and equipped them with the ability to "prove their elite status through dress, language, and behavior," thereby distinguishing them from both the antebellum Southern belle and their contemporaries of the working class.<sup>61</sup>

The seemingly smooth transition of elite women into the workforce was punctuated by concerns that work jeopardized their status and respectability. As both an advocate for expanded job opportunities for Southern white women and a member of a prominent former slaveholding family, North Carolina essayist and columnist Mary Bayard Clarke confronted the prevailing attitude among Southern elites that the white woman who entered an occupation was "regarded by others as having socially lowered

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<sup>60</sup> The younger generation was defined by Censer as having been born after 1820, in Jane Turner Censer, "Women in Public: Schoolteachers and Benevolent Women," chapter 5 in *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 153-206, quotation pp. 205-6. As suggested by the chapter title, Censer also discusses the efforts of elite women who did not earn a living but performed civic duties and carried out memorialization projects as part of an expanded public role.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Case, "Mildred Lewis Rutherford (1851-1928): The Redefinition of New South Womanhood," in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times, Volume I*, ed. Ann Short Chirhart and Betty Wood (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 272-296.

herself.”<sup>62</sup> Clarke had been reproached by her sister, Francis Miller, for challenging existing gender norms through her writing career and application for a government position, and this disagreement between the two sisters reveals tensions more generally regarding the acceptability of income-earning women. North Carolina scholars have argued that, despite Miller’s own “unconventional step” in taking on the occupation of boarding house proprietor after her husband’s death, she “never directly challenged or rejected southern society’s expectations for elite southern women” as she perceived her sister had done.<sup>63</sup> Miller’s decision not to claim her business in directories, the census, or through advertisements may have partly reflected these personal convictions. Additional factors, including her late husband’s prominence in the community as a lawyer and politician and her status as Governor Holden’s neighbor, limited her need to advertise and allowed her to count on a social network to sustain her business. Regardless of her resistance to claiming her work, her elite status carried with it certain advantages for her

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<sup>62</sup> In her article, titled “Woman North and South,” Clarke also equated progress to Northern states and industrialization, and expressed her hope that the South would bend “to outside pressure to move” in that direction, in *Live Your Own Life: The Family Papers of Mary Bayard Clarke, 1854-1886*, ed. Terrell Armistead Crow and Mary Moulton Barden (University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 372-375. On the political aspects of Clarke’s publications, see Anne Sarah Rubin, “Politics and Petticoats in the Same Pod: Florence Fay, Betsey Bittersweet, and the Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood, 1865-1868,” in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Jane Turner Censer, “Mary Bayard Clarke’s Plain-Folk Humor: Writing Women into the Literature and Politics of Reconstruction” *The Journal of Southern History* LXXVI (May 2010), 241-274.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke, *Live Your Own Life*, xxvi-xxvii. The 1870 census shows that Miller held \$5000 in real estate and \$2000 in personal property. She housed two married couples that were likely boarders, as well as three others who were either boarders or relatives – a 19-year-old woman, a 62-year-old woman, and a 25-year-old man with the surname Miller – but her occupation was “keeping house,” the terminology used to describe housewives without an occupation, rather than boarding house operator, 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake.

business, including ownership of her property and valuable social connections that brought customers to her.

It was both unusual and generally unacceptable for women of elite status to strike out on their own and move beyond the protection afforded by their homes, their communities, and the women's organizations that had become commonplace by the late nineteenth century. However, the exigencies of poverty in the aftermath of the Civil War and the determination to provide for their families drove numerous elite women to take on roles as independent businesswomen. While working from home effectively shielded most small businesswomen, some were more exposed and subject to scrutiny because they moved outside the female economy. Historian Michele Gillespie has profiled *Lost Cause* novelist and poet Mary Gay, a single woman who took responsibility for her younger sister, sister-in-law, and nephew after her brother died in the Civil War. Gay wrote *Lost Cause* literature which she personally published and distributed, traveling alone for extended periods of time to sell her books and raise funds for Confederate memorials, and sending money home to her female relatives who maintained the household in her absence. Although she took on, as Gillespie argues, "the identity of the traditional male," Gay also satisfactorily fulfilled the ideal of white womanhood with her promotion of the dual causes of Christianity and building up Confederate memory while she earned her living.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Michele Gillespie, "Mary Gay (1829-1918): Sin, Self, and Survival in the Post-Civil War South," in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times, Volume I*, ed. Ann Short Chirhart and Betty Wood (University of Georgia Press, 2009), 199-223, quotation 202. See also LeeAnn Whites, "'Stand by Your Man': The Ladies Memorial Association and the Reconstruction of Southern White Womanhood," in

Similarly, Alice Person became her family's sole provider, traveling alone extensively to sell her patent medicine after her husband became incapacitated and unable to support their family shortly after the war. By the time she was widowed in 1884, "Mrs. Joe Person's Remedy" provided her and her children a comfortable living, including a college education for one of her sons.<sup>65</sup> Yet Person's story reveals some ambiguity over the social acceptance of elite women in business. While both Mary Gay and Alice Person were self-supporting, Person's business was more obviously for profit, and although she marketed herself as a maternal caretaker, medical professionals generally frowned upon the patent medicine business as quackery and preying upon the sick. The daughter and wife of former slaveholders, Person also received criticism from her peers. Elite women in the city of Tarboro left her with the indelible memory of "the contemptuous swish of their skirts as they passed, lest they should come into contact with a working woman!" Person further observed that another guest at the same hotel, a "yankee," was not only welcomed, but "visited, dined, flowered, and ice creamed," because "she wore diamonds and I – a working apron."<sup>66</sup> Person's reflections on the opinions of others shaped an awareness that, because of her work, she floated along the border of respectability, instead of resting squarely within it. Despite this episode of

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*Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 133-149.

<sup>65</sup> Person's son Rufus took over the business in the early twentieth century, and her son Wiley became a lawyer. Her handwritten will, in which she left her patent and the business to Rufus, is included among her papers. Alice Morgan Person, "The Chivalry of Man, as Exemplified in the Life of Mrs. Joe Person," TD, 1890(?) and scrapbook, Alice Morgan Person Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>66</sup> Person, 42-43.

rejection, Person felt redeemed by statewide celebrity and financial success and she established a local reputation as an exceptional businesswoman.<sup>67</sup>

### **Husbands as Assets and Liabilities**

Perhaps no relationship was more important to the small businesswoman than that with her husband. Although they had been defined as economic dependents, and the earnings of women were often dismissed as temporary or merely supplemental to those of men, many white women in business either took on the role of primary providers for their families or their earnings proved equally important as those of men to the support of families. Married women were especially prominent among businesswomen in Piedmont cities, working to supplement the often meager incomes of their spouses or serving as primary breadwinners when husbands could not. While only seven percent of married women statewide were classified as gainfully employed in 1890, fully thirty percent of

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<sup>67</sup> Little had been written about Alice Morgan Person aside from contemporary newspaper accounts documenting her business, her travels, and social events at her house until the recent publication of her manuscript. See David Hursh and Chris Goertzen, *Good Medicine and Good Music: A Biography of Mrs. Joe Person, Patent Remedy Entrepreneur and Musician, Including the Complete Text of Her 1903 Autobiography* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland & Co. Inc., Publishers, 2009). Goertzen has also published a scholarly examination of Alice Person's music. See "Mrs. Joe Person's *Popular Airs*: Early Blackface Minstrel Tunes in Oral Tradition," *Ethnomusicology* 35 (Winter 1991), 31-53. Louise Stephenson, Person's great-granddaughter and the family member responsible for donating her papers to the Southern Historical Collection and East Carolina University, described Person as "a resourceful, dedicated, enormously talented woman who could have been the original Women's Lib advocate," in "Letter from Louise Stephenson," *Alice Person: Good Medicine and Good Music*, Digital Exhibit (no longer active), Joyner Digital Library, East Carolina University, accessed October 2004, <http://www.lib.ecu.edu/digital/music/person>. As contributor to *The State*, forerunner of *Our State* magazine, T. H. Pearce seemed to agree with Stephenson's assessment, praising Person's business acumen and calling her "a lady ahead of her time," in "The Persistence of Mrs. Joe Person," *The State* 54 (October 1986), 22-24. A clipping from the *Charlotte Observer* dated 16 March 1913 found in the Person family scrapbook consistently praised Person and attributed her success to her "manly" characteristics. Alice Morgan Person Papers, SHC.

the dressmakers and fifty percent of the boarding house operators listed in Raleigh's city directories between 1883 and 1896 were married women.<sup>68</sup> Many of these wives completely supported their husbands.

Census takers and directory compilers had trouble seeing businesswomen because Piedmont husbands often claimed their wives' businesses as their own, which could either erase women from sources completely or provide only a limited accounting of their work history. Moreover, very few married Piedmont businesswomen exercised their right to register as a *feme sole* or *free trader*, which would have conferred upon them the ability to handle their business affairs independently of their husbands. Without that distinction, married businesswomen had no claim to their own income or wages. Wives could not obtain this legal status without express contractual permission from their husbands, which explains in large part why so few women took this step to protect themselves. Instead, most married businesswomen appeared to observe traditional gender roles even as they carried on economically interdependent relationships with their husbands.

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<sup>68</sup> By 1890, 61% of divorced women in North Carolina were gainfully employed, as were nearly 43% of widows, 27% of single women, and only 7% of married women, although employed married women, particularly, were likely undercounted because keeping house would have been recorded as their primary occupation most of the time. *Special Census Report on the Occupations of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1896) cxxviii. I searched both the business and residential sections of the Raleigh city directories for women with an occupation. To distinguish married women from widows, both of whom received the title "Mrs.," I compared their addresses to those of men with the same last name. Some women used their husbands' initials in their own names, and some directories list married women as "wife of..." Widows usually received the distinction "wid" in the listings, and sometimes "wid of...", and single women usually received the title "Miss," with the exception of African American women, who received no such titles of respect regardless of marital status. *Raleigh City Directory. 1883*. (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co. Steam Printers and Binders, 1883); *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1888* (Raleigh: Observer Printing Company, Printers and Publishers, 1888); *Directory of the City of Raleigh, N.C., 1896-'97* (Raleigh: The Raleigh Stationery Company, 1896).

Marriage often masked a woman's business or her entire identity, and working with her husband almost certainly made her work invisible at times. It was quite common for the husband to serve as the public face of the business while the wife carried out many of the day-to-day activities or worked in partnership with her husband with little or no notice paid to her role. Mrs. William S. Moore and her millinery operation experienced such a situation, as in just a few short months in 1865 her business in Greensboro shifted from being advertised in the local newspaper as an enterprise separate from her husband's and operated out of her home, to a brief period when it was advertised as part of his business, to finally no mention of her role in the business at all. Mrs. Moore told customers they could find her "(o)ne door east of Efland's Hotel" in June, and in July she advertised her millinery as "for the present, at her residence east street Greensboro." Fully one-third of Mr. Moore's August 1865 advertisement for sundry items at his store alerted customers, "Also, By Mrs. Moore, Millinery" at the location next door to the hotel. The strategic banner-type text of the word *millinery*, set in larger type than any other part of the advertisement, suggests the millinery's importance to the business, which now appeared to be a joint venture. By September, Mr. Moore advertised items "just received at the millinery" without mention of his wife. While the October advertisement repeated the large type from August, there was again no mention of Mrs. Moore, although her work is suggested by the use of the pronouns *us*, *our*, and *we* in describing the millinery.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Greensboro Patriot*, 24 June 1865; 3 July 1865; 19 August 1865; 9 September 1865; 21 October 1865.

Directory listings reflected Mrs. Moore's husband's new prominence in what had been her independent business, and provided only a sketchy accounting of her work. Mr. Moore appeared in the residential and business listings in Greensboro's earliest city directory in 1879 as a merchant of general merchandise, millinery, and fancy goods and again in the 1892 directory as a dealer in dry goods, fancy goods and notions, including millinery trimmings, and musical instruments. Yet Mrs. Moore received no separate commercial or residential listing in either of those directories. It is possible to establish some sense of her continuing career only because she received credit as a businesswoman in her own right with listings in the city directory for 1884 as well as both the 1884 and 1890 editions of *Branson's* directory.<sup>70</sup> Like most married businesswomen, Mrs. Moore's status as a wife often took precedence over her status as a businesswoman, with the result that she virtually disappeared from public records from time to time. Women may not have challenged the emphasis on their husbands' roles in their businesses because it allowed each spouse to carry out publicly the gender roles expected of them and lessened any undue attention on the wife's work and earnings.

Some spouses engaged in formal and recognized business partnerships. The business partnership of the Oettingers of Raleigh provides a good example of how a woman's role as a wife could obscure even the most successful businesswoman's work

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<sup>70</sup> *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Winston, Salem & Greensboro North Carolina Directory, 1879-'80*, 102, 120, 123; *City Directory of Greensboro, Salem and Winston and Gazetteer of Forsyth and Guilford Counties* (Atlanta, GA: Interstate Directory Company, 1884), 178; *Greensboro City Directory for 1892-'93*; *Branson's 1884* listed Caroline Moore as a milliner and her husband as a general store merchant, 348, as did *Branson's 1890*, 328; *Branson's 1896* listed Mr. Moore as a dealer in musical instruments and millinery, 312. Likewise, Mrs. Moore was listed as a milliner in the 1870 census, but as keeping house and without an occupation in later census. 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Manuscript Census, Greensboro, Guilford.

identity. Although their businesses were separate in the years immediately after the Civil War, both were fashion-based and operated out of their residence at 48 Fayetteville Street, in the heart of Raleigh's business district. The Oettingers devoted the first half of an early advertisement to his business in ready-made clothing, fancy goods, shoes, dress silks, and trimmings, and the second half to Mrs. Oettinger's millinery business. She let her customers know that she had just returned from the North with a large stock of millinery "to suit all classes." The Oettingers advertised again in 1880, this time in the city directory, and still at the same address. A much shorter advertisement, as was typical in directories, this one suggests her subordinate role in his mercantile business as overseer of the millinery department. Isaac Oettinger's name appears in bold letters at the top, with a brief description of his millinery business, followed by a single line, in much smaller type, reading, "Mrs. Oettinger attends to the millinery branch."<sup>71</sup>

Although Mr. Oettinger's prominence in the advertisement suggested otherwise, the Oettingers established their partnership upon her millinery business. The Oettingers operated separate businesses until June 1873, when the Dun agent recorded for him, "out of Bus[iness] as such but associated with his wife," and for her, "Mr. Oettinger associated with her." In April 1874, the agent further remarked that Mr. Oettinger "advertises the Millinery bus[iness] heretofore kept by his wife as now in his own name." Whether or not Mrs. Oettinger invited her husband's interference with her business remains unknown, but the millinery business continued going strong for several years and proved

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<sup>71</sup> *Daily Sentinel*, 4 January 1868; *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Raleigh City Directory, 1880-'81*, front matter.

profitable. The agent proclaimed Mrs. Oettinger “the leading Milliner of the city” numerous times after she officially established her partnership with her husband. This change in their working relationship helps explain why Mrs. Oettinger’s role in the business was sometimes diminished in publications that only recognized her husband’s dry goods store. Mrs. Oettinger received a separate listing as a milliner in the 1872 *Branson’s* directory, but she was essentially invisible in *Branson’s* 1877 directory, as it listed only Mr. Oettinger as a millinery and fancy dry goods merchant. Mr. Oettinger, rather than his wife, obtained a listing in the business section of *Chataigne’s* 1875 Raleigh directory as a milliner. The Oettingers were both German immigrants and Jewish, which may have made them especially sensitive to preserving traditional gender roles so that they did not draw unwanted or unfavorable attention. Isaac Oettinger and other Jewish businessmen were no doubt aware of Dun agents’ biases and comments, which often drew upon and reinforced negative stereotypes. Oettinger himself was described in March 1869 as “a Jew but is responsible and reliable,” as if the two were usually exclusive.<sup>72</sup> Despite the fact that the couple’s business was heavily dependent on her skills and reputation as a milliner and her contributions to her family’s economic security, the Oettingers found it necessary to keep her business identity subordinate to her status as wife.

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<sup>72</sup> *Branson’s 1872*, 224; *Branson’s 1877*, 297; *Chataigne’s*, 98; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake. North Carolina v. 24, p. 86, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School. On the pervasive ethnic and religious prejudice of credit agents and its negative effects on minority-owned businesses, see David Gerber, “Cutting out Shylock: Elite Anti-Semitism and the Quest for Moral Order in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Marketplace,” *Journal of American History* 69 (December 1983), 615-37.

The distinction between a wife's business and that of her husband was often blurred, as husbands and wives employed strategies that helped sustain the image that married men were the primary breadwinners for their families and obscured the reality of the wife's financial contribution to the security of her family. Mrs. Anna Frankenthal of Charlotte had a mercantile business with stock valued at between \$8000 and \$10,000 in January 1873, but as the Dun agent found her husband to be her agent and manager, it is unclear whether she financed the business. Henry Frankenthal and his brother-in-law had been in business together in New York, but failed in 1868 and left owing debts. Running Mrs. Frankenthal's business, or what may have been their own business in her name, offered some protection from those debts since North Carolina's 1868 Constitution included legislation protecting married women's property. Their poor management or bad luck followed them to North Carolina, where in March 1873 Mrs. Frankenthal's business failed and in April her goods were seized for debt. By December 1873, she was out of business. She and her husband recovered well enough for him to open a grocery by 1877 and expand to grocery and commission merchant by 1879. The couple also operated Frankenthal House, a boarding house catering to Jewish merchants, clerks, and craftsmen, which remained in operation until at least 1884. Four servants and fifteen boarders resided at Frankenthal House in addition to the nine members of the Frankenthals' immediate family. The size of this business leaves little doubt that, despite the fact that Mr. Frankenthal was recognized as the proprietor of the boarding house, this was either Mrs. Frankenthal's new line of work or a partnership between the two since he was also running a store at the time. The couple had adapted to their improved economic

circumstances by transferring everything out of Mrs. Frankenthal's name and into her husband's name.<sup>73</sup>

Because of the risks involved in small business proprietorship, a husband of even limited means generally helped secure a businesswoman's financial status and lend her credibility. Mrs. W. S. Lindsay's mantuamaking business gained the Dun agent's attention between November 1874 and January 1876. She earned praise as "a lady of excellent char[acter]" and, given that half the ledger space describing her business actually referenced her husband and his work in tobacco manufacturing, it would appear that her rating was due in large part to Mr. Lindsay's reputation as that of "a gentleman of integrity." Her husband's standing in Greensboro as "a successful trader and out of debt" clearly helped determine the agent's conclusion that Mrs. Lindsay was "doubtless responsible for all her contracts, though her capital is small." The couple's lack of real estate proved to be the only real negative, contributing to repeated descriptions of Mrs. Lindsay's capital as limited, and her overall evaluation as "poor, but honest and indust[rious]."<sup>74</sup> Mrs. Lindsay capitalized on her husband's status and reputation to

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<sup>73</sup> North Carolina, v. 16, p. 102z9, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; 1870 and 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Charlotte, Mecklenburg, in which Anna is listed as Fannie; *Branson's 1877-78*, 194; *Branson's 1884*, 447; *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Charlotte, N.C. Directory 1879-80* (Charlotte: Observer Steam Job Print, 1879), 57, 105. *Third Annual Charlotte City Directory for the Years 1889 and 1890* (Charlotte: E.F. Turner & Co. Publisher, R. E. Blakely Printing House, 1889), 170.

<sup>74</sup> North Carolina, v. 11, p. 547, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School. Lindsay and other Piedmont craftswomen continued to use the outmoded term *mantuamaker* although *dressmaker* had become the more conventional terminology and an indicator of significant changes in women's fashion. See Marla R. Miller, "The Last Mantuamaker: Craft Tradition and Commercial Change in Boston, 1760-1840," *Special Forum: Women's Economies in North America before 1820*, *Early American Studies* 4 (fall 2006) 372-74, 421-24.

establish her own creditworthiness while contributing to their financial stability through her own work.

Despite the advantages that marriage could offer a businesswoman, husbands also had the ability to disadvantage their wives' businesses in numerous ways. The cases of former business partners Mrs. S. Adams and Mrs. N. Maurice illuminate both circumstances, as Adams benefitted from marriage while Maurice was harmed by her husbands' actions. Sarah Adams had operated an independent millinery as early as 1855 in Greensboro, where her husband owned property and slaves. Adams and Maurice established their partnership by 1865 and dissolved it within two years. In July 1866, Sarah Adams's husband Peter had made money from his real estate, which, along with her advanced age – Sarah Adams was in her sixties – may have been a factor in Mrs. Adams ending her partnership with Mrs. Maurice. Peter Adams's success reflected upon his wife's business in a very positive manner, and the Dun agent kept his subsequent remarks brief. In July 1867, her standing was simply, "good;" in January 1868, "very good;" and in July 1868, the agent remarked that Mrs. Adams did "a fair bus[iness]" and referenced her husband, which accounted at least partially for the notation that she was "good for her engagements." The influence of Mrs. Adams's husband's success on her own creditworthiness became quite clear with the final entry on her from April 1869, which read, "out of bus[iness] good for all her engagements."<sup>75</sup> The conventional gender expectations of wives and husbands suited the Adamses' marriage, the agent implied,

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<sup>75</sup> North Carolina, v. 11, p. 534j, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; 1870 U.S. Manuscript Census, Greensboro, Guilford.

regardless of whether or not Sarah operated her business – he, the breadwinner and responsible for any debts she might incur, and she, the dependent.

Adams had already retired from business, presumably comfortable in her husband's success, when in February 1871 her former partner Mrs. Maurice was widowed and her husband "left her indigent." As partners, Adams and Maurice had the reputation as "very good people very industrious" in July 1866. In March 1867, the agent noted that Maurice carried on the business alone and that her status was "g[oo]d." She continued to receive positive remarks for many years, as honest, industrious, reliable, creditworthy, and even making money. When her husband died, an examination of Mrs. Maurice's accounts led the Dun agent to conclude that she was worth little. When the agent returned in May 1871 he noted that Mr. Maurice had "died insolvent but his bus[iness] was distinct from hers. She continues the business of Mantua m[a]k[in]g & as M is no longer having to spend it for [him] she is m[a]k[in]g money."<sup>76</sup> Regardless of her personal industriousness and capabilities, Mrs. Maurice could not rely on her husband, as could Mrs. Adams, who gave up her business when her husband was able to provide for their family without her assistance. Mrs. Maurice's husband appeared to be the opposite of the dependable provider, and rather a financial burden.

Although custom dictated that men provide financially for women, as Sarah Adams's husband eventually did, Mrs. Maurice and other businesswomen appear to have been disproportionately responsible for support of their husbands. The husband of Mrs.

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<sup>76</sup> North Carolina, v. 11, p. 534e, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

N. J. Howell, a boarding house operator in Raleigh, was one such man who relied heavily on his wife's business for support. As early as 1871, Mrs. Howell operated a "private boarding house," with "extra charges for meals when sent to rooms," and at which she catered to married couples both long-term and short-term as well as men who came to Raleigh on business. By 1872, Mr. B. N. Howell was bankrupt, a status that appears to have driven him to get involved in his wife's business. Subsequent to his bankruptcy, Mr. Howell laid claim to proprietorship of the boarding house in the 1875 Raleigh city directory and the couple's son, R. P. Howell, worked as the business manager. No mention was made of Mrs. Howell's role in the business at that time. In the 1880 census the elder Howell, at that time in his sixties, claimed the occupation of farmer yet was also described as disabled due to heart disease. Mrs. Howell regained her status as boarding house operator in the census that year, but in the 1883 city directory she was instead listed as the housekeeper, her husband as the proprietor of the boarding house, and her son as a truck gardener and huckster. Howell House appeared in directories variously as a hotel and boarding house between 1880 and 1884 with either father or son as the proprietor. The business appears to have remained in the same location on Blount Street despite its varying characterizations.<sup>77</sup> Although Mrs. Howell's labor was obscured in various sources, the business she established appears to have been the only consistent

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<sup>77</sup> Mrs. Howell's account book was used for the boarding house in the years 1871-1872, but then skips to the year 1887 when it was used to record payments to laborers, mostly cotton pickers, on a farm. It is not clear who was running the farm at that time, but the farm had likely become the Howells' primary source of income as Howell House was nonexistent following a lawsuit in 1885 in which Mr. and Mrs. Howell were ordered to pay over \$2000 to William Poole. Loose receipts in the account book confirm that the couple's son, R. P. Howell, had become a farmer, fruit grower, and market gardener by 1893. Account Book, Mrs. N. J. Howell, North Carolina State Archives; North Carolina, v. 24, p. 11, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; *Chataigne's*, 78, 79; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 70, 160; *Branson's 1884*, 641.

source of income for her family for many years. She only intermittently received public recognition for her financial contributions to her family while the men in her life served as the public face of her business.

For some couples, disguising the wife's role in providing for her family simultaneously covered up some personal folly or failing on the part of the husband. While some husbands claimed their wives' businesses and may have contributed in meaningful ways to their success, others threatened to tear down their wives' achievements through bad behavior or a poor financial sense. A profligate or indebted husband received attention from Dun agents, who sometimes expressed sympathy for, and also expressed reservations about, women whose husbands provided yet another obstacle to security. In Cornelia Thompson's case, prior to the Civil War the Dun agent worried about how her husband might bring her down, stating he would "sooner credit her than her husband because we think she w[oul]d be more prompt. No female law in this state. She is liable for his debts [and] he for hers." Following the war, Thompson was no longer on firm footing, the agent's comments proving prescient. Despite the passage of women's property laws, the failure of her husband's cabinet making business in 1866 appears to have placed additional strain on Thompson, as her credit rating dropped to "not to be trusted," and "not considered good." Thompson was out of business by 1869. Similarly, Mrs. M. E. Dodson of Greensboro received notice of the Dun agent in 1872, who remarked, "though she is regarded as a very worthy lady her husband is insolvent." A year later, she was also described as insolvent, but apparently tried to continue her business as in 1874 the agent noted that she paid her bills "slowly &

scarcely at all.” Dodson struggled on until July 1879, at which time she was no longer in business and again reported as insolvent. Mrs. L. L. Kuester (also Keuster) suffered from the apparent alcoholism of her husband who, despite fifteen to twenty years successfully operating a gunsmith shop in Raleigh, later warranted comments such as “drinks hard [and] is losing p[ro]p[erty],” “considerably in debt,” and “attends very little to business...insolvent...in bad health and drinks.” By December 1873, Charles Kuester was incapable of running the business and Mrs. Kuester and her son took over the operation of the shop. Within a year the business had failed, and Mrs. Kuester, listed as a widow in the 1875 Raleigh city directory with no occupation, still resided with her son who was also “given to dissipation.”<sup>78</sup> Not only could these businesswomen not depend on the men in their lives for security, but in turning social expectations on their heads these dependent men intensified their wives’ financial burdens and compounded the normally challenging odds facing any woman in business.

Some husbands’ problems led them to become wholly dependent on their wives’ earnings. Milliner Pauline Query’s husband was insolvent in March 1871, and later that year was described as “v[er]y worthless,” while she continued to pay promptly. Her husband’s instability continued for many years, with reports of him as “dissipated” and “unreliable,” yet Mrs. Query managed to successfully carry on her Charlotte business.

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<sup>78</sup> On the negative effects of the postwar economy on the marital relationships and credit of needle workers and their husbands, see Pamela Nickless, “Scarlett’s Sisters: Spinners, Widows, Wives, and Free-Traders in Nineteenth-Century North Carolina,” chapter 9 in *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Beth Harris (Hampshire, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 157-169. North Carolina, v. 24, pp. 11, 78; North Carolina, v. 11, p. 534<sup>4</sup>, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

The agent appeared to lay blame on her husband for any problems she may have been having, because even when she paid slowly, her industriousness and the general health of her business balanced out the negatives, as in December 1874 when the agent noted, “Is sometimes rather behind. Is atten[tive] [and] does a large bus[iness]. Husband CM Query is not steady.”<sup>79</sup> There is no evidence in the Dun ledgers that Mrs. Query’s business ever improved a great deal – in May 1877 creditors were advised to use caution and in March 1878 she still had no personal property beyond her stock – but other sources suggest that she enjoyed as much success as any Piedmont milliner. Mrs. Query hired at least one clerk, Walter Alexander, as early as 1875. She continued in millinery, advertising as “Mrs. P. Query & Co.” and operating out of her home on Trade Street, as late as 1889. Her daughters Clara, a teacher, and Pauline also resided in the home. Her husband Calvin served as manager of her business, either an indication that he became a bit more reliable with time or that she continued to struggle against his problems, and certainly confirmation that her business was their sole source of income.<sup>80</sup>

As Query’s story demonstrates, for the occasional working wife, an undependable husband did not bring her down with him. Mrs. M. A. Hardie “went into bus[iness] after failure of her husband,” P. C. Hardie, “an easy indolent man” who worked as a salesman in the 1880s, but her business remained quite healthy. Having invested money given to

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<sup>79</sup> North Carolina, v. 16, pp. 102w, 102z2, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

<sup>80</sup> North Carolina, v. 16, pp. 102z4, 102z50, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; *Beasley & Emerson’s Charlotte directory for 1875-76*, 26; *Branson’s 1884*, 450; *Hirst’s Directory of Charlotte North Carolina* (Charlotte: Hirst Printing and Publishing House, 1889), 55, 122-23.

her by her mother in her millinery business, Mrs. Hardie was one of a very few married businesswomen in the Piedmont who registered as a *feme sole* trader. This legal status protected her separate property and earnings and gave her the ability to make contracts in the interest of her business. She earned consistently good remarks from Dun agents and also advertised her business frequently, another sign of her solvency. Despite her husband's early struggles, he managed to turn himself around and by 1896 worked as the jailer for the police department. Mrs. Hardie no longer served as the primary breadwinner for her family and had given up millinery, although she did take in at least one boarder to supplement her husband's earnings.<sup>81</sup>

Mrs. R. McNelis also worked temporarily until her husband was able to serve as the primary breadwinner for their family. McNelis ran a millinery in Charlotte "assisted by her husb[and]," and the couple's separate listings in Charlotte's directory in 1879 confirm that Cornelius McNelis had no other occupation. Mrs. McNelis's favorable reports in the Dun ledger included one in January 1880 which read, "Is d[oin]g a small active bus[iness] pays her bills promptly [and] has local cr[edit] to mod[erate] am[oun]t." Owing to the stability afforded by Mrs. McNelis's business, her husband was able to establish himself, and he attained a job as a policeman in the ensuing years and she gave up millinery.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> North Carolina, v. 24, p. 133, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 60; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1888*, 142, 204; *Directory of the City of Raleigh 1896-'97*, 138.

<sup>82</sup> North Carolina v. 16, p. 145, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; *Emerson's Charlotte Directory 1879*, 74; *Charlotte City Directory 1889 and 1890*, 78.

In addition to supporting husbands temporarily until the husbands could effectively provide for their families, married women worked to support their families when their husbands' incomes simply proved insufficient. Mrs. Edith Branson, whose husband Reverend Levi Branson ran a publishing company and produced *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory*, operated a boarding house in Raleigh for several years while her husband rebuilt his reputation and regained his financial footing following bankruptcy. She also assisted her husband as copyist and co-editor of the directory, and their daughter Daisy worked on the publication, as well. Mrs. R. R. Moore's husband was also a reverend, and her boarding house in Greensboro was variously listed under both his name and hers for many years. Mrs. T. J. James ran a secondhand clothing store in Charlotte, where her husband, who had been a pastor and then took up the trade of tinner, had little or no capital. Mrs. James also tried her hand at dressmaking for a time. Retired merchant James Rogers relied not only on his wife Mary's income from her dressmaking business and their son's income as a factory employee, but also the additional income from the Lamb family, including dressmakers Emma and her daughter, who boarded in his house.<sup>83</sup> While conventional wisdom argued that wives assumed a provider role only because of the harsh economic conditions of the postwar period, and that they were unlikely to remain part of the workforce out of commitment to the male breadwinner ideology, the continued employment of these

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<sup>83</sup> North Carolina v. 24, p. 17; North Carolina v. 16, p. 153, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School; *Branson's 1896*, front matter; *Branson's 1877*, 293; *Branson's 1884*, 641; *Chas. Emerson & Co's Charlotte, N.C. Directory, 1879-80*, 67; 1880 U.S. Manuscript Census, Raleigh, Wake, and Charlotte, Mecklenburg.

married women demonstrates that some couples engaged in the moderating of traditional gender roles to meet the practical, everyday needs of their families.

Southern conventions that cast white women as economic dependents obscured the importance of their labor for an income to both the survival and status of their families. They formed an ever-increasing proportion of North Carolina's workforce after the Civil War, undergirding commercial expansion in the Piedmont. White women labored in primarily gendered and racially specific jobs and they usually worked out of their homes, enabling their economic contributions to be dismissed and their work to be characterized as non-commercial. Many had been pushed into the workforce most certainly by severe economic necessity, as their contemporaries surmised, but they often stayed in their jobs to preserve their families' class status and to maintain a desired standard of living. In the tumultuous decades after the war, even as white women's business endeavors challenged idealized portraits of women devoting themselves solely to the home and family, their economic activities simultaneously served to shore up gender, race, and class hierarchies. Consequently, they rarely elicited significant public attention or criticism.

When North Carolina staged its State Exposition in 1884 to showcase the state's resources and potential as a prominent player in the New South economy, the prevailing discourse that had attempted to explain away white women's labor as a temporary effect of the Civil War remained, as did the camouflaging of the importance of women's labor. Yet, as we will see in chapter three, state leaders began to acknowledge at the Exposition

that women had become a permanent fixture on the economic landscape, and they opened up a discussion there about the most suitable jobs for white women in the New South.

## CHAPTER IV

### “EMPLOYMENT FOR LADIES?”: NORTH CAROLINA’S 1884 EXPOSITION AND THE ECONOMIC ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE NEW SOUTH

Occurring during the golden age of fairs and expositions, and like most large fairs of its time, the North Carolina State Exposition of 1884 was designed specifically to showcase the state’s resources and encourage investment in manufacturing and industry. For Southern states, particularly, expositions offered an opportunity to demonstrate a move away from an agricultural economy and toward industrialization and participation in a national economy.<sup>1</sup> While this focus would appear on its surface to either exclude women or keep them at the margins of the event, women’s contributions to the Exposition and the labor performed there by women made evident their diverse roles in the transforming economy of the state. The Exposition provided a public space for black

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on Southern expositions generally focuses on the association between the events and New South aspirations. Evaluating the “industrial evolution” evidenced by the most prominent Southern expositions held in Atlanta, Louisville, New Orleans, and Nashville in the late nineteenth century, C. Vann Woodward provided this image: “The huge exposition structures of plaster and iron were temples erected to the alien gods of Mass and Speed. In their halls Southerners joined with millions of Yankee guests to invoke the spirit of Progress and worship the machine. Here they performed rituals of ‘reconciliation’ and nationalism, and held reunions of Blue and Gray – without which none of these affairs were complete. More prosaically, the expositions were modern engines of propaganda, advertising, and salesmanship geared primarily toward the aims of attracting capital and immigration and selling the goods,” in *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 124-25. More recently, Robert W. Rydell has examined assertions of progress and patriotism at Southern fairs within the context of race relations and shows that African Americans hoping to claim their part in the New South vision both protested their exclusion from, or biased representation at, these fairs and took an accommodationist stance, in “The New Orleans, Atlanta, and Nashville Expositions: New Markets, ‘New Negroes,’ and a New South,” chapter 3 in *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 72-104. K. Stephen Prince finds that the crafting of a successful economic relationship between North and South consumed the leadership of Atlanta’s 1881 exposition in “A Rebel Yell for Yankee Doodle: Selling the New South at the 1881 Atlanta International Cotton Exposition,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 92 (fall 2008): 340-71.

and white women of the better classes to demonstrate respectability, a market place for women's domestic production, and an opportunity for laboring women to earn additional income. It also served as a forum through which the event's organizers and the press discussed and, for the first time, publicly approved the role of white women as laborers taking on new jobs in the state's more diversified and industrial economy. Rather than expressing concern over the inherent challenges to gender conventions that white wage-earning women presented, men at the Exposition broadened their conception of true womanhood and offered the employed white woman, providing for herself and her family, as a new ideal. Although they remained essentially conservative, and refrained from encouraging careers over marriage and motherhood, the support these men offered to the state's continuously expanding number of working women represented an ideological shift in Southern gender and race conventions that bound white women to domestic and dependent roles.

Historians evaluating the roles of women in nineteenth-century fairs have generally concluded that men either excluded women entirely or relegated them to separate spaces, effectively dismissing women from the goals and accomplishments of the events. In one familiar example, white middle-class women responded to organizers' plans to exclude them from the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 by petitioning Congress to force the inclusion of women on organizing committees, but to no avail. Historian Gail Bederman has shown how women responded, forming a Board of Lady Managers that developed and promoted one of the most popular exhibits, the Woman's Building. Another important challenge at the Columbian Exposition came

from African American women, who had to press to be included on the Board of Lady Managers and to see that blacks would be represented fairly, if at all, at the event. Their activism in Chicago was the genesis of the formation of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. Despite its success, “(t)he lesson most people took from the Woman’s Building was that there was a ‘domestic demarcation’ between men’s contributions to civilization – machines, technology, commerce – and women’s – needlework, beauty, domesticity.” The Columbian Exposition, Bederman concludes, provides examples of how Americans “deployed discourses of civilization to construct gender” and “assert white male hegemony.”<sup>2</sup>

Although North Carolina’s Exposition clearly featured “domestic demarcation” and the authority of white men, in contrast with the Columbian Exposition the spirit of North Carolina’s Exposition was one of the inclusion of women and discussion about their changing roles, at least those who were white and of the better class. State leaders

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<sup>2</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31-44. Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) is among the historians who echo Bederman’s assessment of this creation of American identity in the late nineteenth century, noting that “the discourse of civilization underscored the superiority of white manhood and suggested that white men, not women, would lead the way toward human perfection,” p. 8. Kline notes a shift in attitudes by 1915 that not only included women but also centered upon them and their reproduction. Jim L. Sumner’s assessment of women’s contributions to the North Carolina Exposition is in keeping with these scholars in “‘Let us Have a Big Fair’: The North Carolina Exposition of 1884,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 69 (January 1992), 57-81. Sumner discussion of the contributions of women to the Exposition centers on their domestic production, which he classifies, along with agricultural displays, as “mundane” in comparison to the industrial exhibits. Sumner limits his discussion of the official Ladies’ Exhibit to the observation that it had been “relegated” to the second floor of the main hall, suggesting that the exhibit’s physical location represented its disconnection from those deemed more important and more closely related to the goals of the Exposition, namely industrial exhibits.

On African American women’s participation at the 1893 World’s Fair, see “How Did African-American Women Define Their Citizenship at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893?” on *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, database available online and Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, especially chapter 2, “‘The White Man’s Civilization on Trial’: Ida B. Wells, Representations of Lynching, and Northern Middle-Class Manhood.”

and fair organizers repeatedly stressed the importance of women to the success of the Exposition, and praised their contributions to the Exposition and to North Carolina's economic goals in three primary areas. First, the Exposition communicated to the public that white women of the better class actively supported the New South agenda, principally through their roles as wives and daughters of the state's leading men. While the state's leading white men handled most of the business of the Exposition, and the political and economic business of the state more generally, the women in their lives aided them in appreciable ways. Participation in the fair allowed these women to build upon their image as the ideal wife, mother, and citizen. The Exposition provided a medium for expression of middle-class respectability, where white women put to work and honed their organizing skills, raised their profiles, and established networks that helped them expand their accepted social roles.

Second, white women performed and displayed traditional "women's work" throughout the Exposition. This certainly affirmed the view that a domestic role remained the most appropriate for women in the South but it also simultaneously confirmed the importance of women's household production for financial gain and to the economic security of their families. Women competed against one another for cash prizes and other awards for their household production, and also worked tirelessly to showcase the best their counties and institutions had to offer.

Women also gained attention at the Exposition because they represented a new ideal that emerged in the unstable post-war economy – the educated and employed white woman, supporting herself and her family, and imagined as a noble contributor to the

state's economic transformation. During and after the Civil War, to compensate for their loss of men's earnings, many white women in North Carolina took on income-producing activities to help support themselves and their families. The Exposition marked the first public acknowledgement of the permanence of white women in the labor force. In an important move away from Southern gender and race conventions that cast white women in purely domestic roles in order to shore up white manhood, the men in charge of the event gave their blessing to white women who capitalized on education and took on new job opportunities offering a degree of self-support.

Even as state leaders came to see and approve the labor of white women in particular occupations at the Exposition and in the New South, they continued to ignore the labor of most women, who remain largely absent from the official documents and contemporary observations. White Southerners' focus on true womanhood meant that the contributions of many women went unnoticed due to their status as working class or African American. Black women participated in the Exposition through a segregated African American fair, advertised and promoted yet overshadowed by the Exposition. The time, effort, and products they contributed demonstrated the diversity of black women's roles in the state. While Exposition organizers exalted the work of white women, the leading black men did the same for black women at the segregated African American fair. Black women of the better class, like their white counterparts, used the fair as an opportunity to demonstrate middle-class respectability and exhibit their domestic skills. The majority of black women, like the majority of white women, contributed products from their kitchens or gardens and handmade items.

Another group missing from the accounts are those black and white women who operated petty enterprises, such as boarding houses, eating establishments, and dressmaking shops, and for whom the Exposition and annual state fairs produced revenue. Laundresses, chambermaids and domestics, and women who rented furnished rooms and provided meals to workers and fairgoers performed labor crucial to the fair's operation, yet also remained virtually invisible. The stories of all of these women reveal how the state's most enterprising women participated in North Carolina's premier event of 1884 by capitalizing on the income and opportunities it generated. The work performed by various women, and illuminated by the Exposition, exposes the diversity of women's economic roles in the New South and flexibility in the ideal of white Southern womanhood.

### **“The biggest thing ever seen or dreamed of in North Carolina”**

Organizers and supporters billed the North Carolina State Exposition in 1884 as a monumental event of potentially enormous economic implications. Riding the wave of success of the North Carolina exhibit at the Boston Exposition in 1883, organizers planned the event in October to coordinate with and encompass both the annual state fair and the annual fair of the North Carolina Industrial Association.<sup>3</sup> State newspapers felt it

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<sup>3</sup> According to one source, “Governor Jarvis won much acclaim for the state during the Boston Exposition of September 1883. North Carolina had the largest exhibit of resources, and Jarvis's ‘New South’ speech focused even more attention on the state's progress in agriculture and industry. The exhibit was so popular that it was also shown in Chicago and New Orleans.” See “Thomas Jordan Jarvis,” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, volume 3, William S. Powell, ed., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979-1996), 273.

their duty to boast of the success of the retooled state fair that October. Months in advance, the *State Chronicle* remarked that newspapers had set to work “stirring up the people” and publishing regular notices about the preparations and expectations.<sup>4</sup> In addition, “Northern papers are full of items about the Old North State,” declared one article, “some of whose readers may take enough interest in the matter to be in attendance.”<sup>5</sup> On opening day, another newspaper summed up the Exposition’s projected potential: “No enterprise” in the state had “ever reaped a hundredth part of the advantages this promises... (t)he benefits to be derived are simply incalculable.”<sup>6</sup> Declared another, “(t)he exposition is the biggest thing ever seen or dreamed of in North Carolina.”<sup>7</sup> *State Chronicle* editor Walter Hines Page practically gushed:

...I have never seen any fair that was comparable in its significance and instruction to the North Carolina State Exposition ... many more have had much greater displays of machinery; but not one of them ... has ever been so accurate an index to the people that made them; nor has any one of them had so much instruction to impart to the thoughtful or such instigation to the industrious. It is not only the greatest industrial event in the history of North Carolina – the greatest event of any kind, indeed, except, perhaps, the events that led to our two great wars – but it is the greatest industrial event in the history of any State in the Union ... The era of the present tense is come!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Exposition Notes,” *North Carolina State Chronicle*, July 12, 1884. Scrapbook. Henry E. Fries Collection, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh. Jim L. Sumner notes that Walter Hines Page reported in the March 1, 1884 edition of the *State Chronicle* finding forty-seven newspaper columns across the state devoted to the Exposition during the last week of February alone, in “The North Carolina Exposition,” 64-65, n.26.

<sup>5</sup> “North Carolina to the Front,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>6</sup> “October the First,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>7</sup> “The Exposition – The Visitors Viewing the Grand Exhibit,” unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 4 October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>8</sup> “Our Industries – The Lessons of the Exhibits at the State Exposition,” *State Chronicle*, 7 (?) October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

Page, who had visited and reported on numerous other fairs and expositions in his role as newspaper editor and journalist, actively encouraged modernization of his native state. Along with other New South boosters in the state, Page's hopes were focused on the transition to a new era for North Carolina. Praising the selection of William S. Primrose as Exposition President and Henry Fries as Secretary, Page declared, "Neither of them is a politician, neither a Colonel, neither a man who has sought promotion . . . we have for once, at least, run out of the old grooves entirely."<sup>9</sup> Page insisted that Primrose, who was in banking and insurance and served on the Board of Directors of Peace Institute in Raleigh, and Fries, of the prominent Salem family who owned a cotton mill, woolen mill, flour and grist mill, and the Salem gas and water works, represented a "new force" promising to change North Carolinians "from 'lordly' farmers to progressive men of business."<sup>10</sup>

State newspapers were not the only ones to notice North Carolina's commitment to industrial expansion and tout the state's progress. In July, the national publication *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* promoted the upcoming Exposition, where visitors could expect "the most excellent object lesson of a State's condition, resources and opportunities ever made," and echoed Page's assessment of Primrose and Fries as

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Sumner, "The North Carolina Exposition," 64.

<sup>10</sup> Frustrated by the failure of his newspaper and the state's lack of progressivism, Walter Hines Page abandoned North Carolina and relocated to New York City in 1887. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 163. *Raleigh City Directory. 1883*. (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co. Steam Printers and Binders, 1883), 98, 106, 179, 182; *City Directory of Greensboro, Salem and Winston and Gazetteer of Forsyth and Guilford Counties* (Atlanta, GA: Interstate Directory Company, 1884), 90-91; "Officers of the Exposition," *State Chronicle*, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

members of a “new generation of Southern men” for a “new era in Southern history.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Times-Democrat* of New Orleans, site in 1884 of the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, also recognized North Carolina as “one of the chief and most progressive States of the new South.”<sup>12</sup>

Promotional newspaper articles such as these inspired competition among potential exhibitors and also encouraged a healthy rivalry between larger cities intent upon relating their dynamic growth to the state’s New South aspirations. Raleigh’s *News & Observer* demonstrated the spirit of competition between two of the state’s fast-growing cities by refuting an article from the *Charlotte Observer* that purported growth in Charlotte as having surpassed that of Raleigh. The capital city was not “behind in the race” at all, the Raleigh newspaper rebutted, but rather the 1880 census had incorrectly reported its population, and “evidences of improvement, industrial enterprise and growth of population” were “strikingly apparent” everywhere in Raleigh.<sup>13</sup> The preparation of exhibits had, according to the *News & Observer*, stirred up a “rivalry between the counties,” which was taken as necessary to a successful event.<sup>14</sup> Years later, H. A.

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<sup>11</sup> “The North Carolina State Exposition,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 5 July 1884, 316-17.

<sup>12</sup> “A Visitor’s View – And Notions of the Exposition. Let the People Come!” *State Chronicle*, 8 October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>13</sup> *Raleigh News & Observer*, 19 May 1884.

<sup>14</sup> “Exposition Notes – How the Good Work Progresses – The Buildings Well Toward Completion,” *News & Observer*, 6 August 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

London of Pittsboro credited “emulation or rivalry of the counties in competing for the most creditable exhibits” as key to the Exposition’s success.<sup>15</sup>

Not the least among newspapers in its enthusiasm for the Exposition was the *Raleigh Register*. In the months leading up to the Exposition the *Register* ran a series of articles highlighting the prosperity of various towns and counties in the state and significant contributions of individuals and institutions as a taste of what the Exposition would offer. These articles paid particular attention to growth in the Piedmont, naming Charlotte “the New York of North Carolina” and asserting that the population and industrial expansion found in Winston, the “city of carpetbaggers,” rivaled that of Roanoke and Birmingham.<sup>16</sup> Once the Exposition started the *Register* deemed it, “The Grandest Display Ever Made by One State.” Two weeks into the festivities, it reported that “gentlemen from the North” planned to invest in mining “on a large scale” in the state as a direct result of what they had seen exhibited in Raleigh, exactly the outcome for which fair organizers had hoped.<sup>17</sup> The *Register* reprinted and confirmed a New Orleans *Times-Democrat* report that the state experienced a post-Exposition boom, citing as evidence that in the first quarter of 1885, “\$750,000 were added to the industrial capital

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<sup>15</sup> Letter from H.A. London to Henry Fries, 3 December 1912, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>16</sup> “Charlotte – Prosperous and Proud of It,” *Register*, 27 February 1884; “The Magic City – A North Carolina Rival to Birmingham and Roanoke – Seven thousand People now where only a few Families lived in 1870 – Diversified Manufacturing the Cause,” *Register*, 5 March 1884. Also see profiles of Raleigh, February 27; Wilmington, Statesville, Fayetteville, Waughtown, Washington, Kernersville, Liberty, and Staley, March 5; St. Mary’s School, Montgomery County, and Edgecombe County, March 12; Durham, New Hanover County, Asheville, Worthville, Fayetteville, and Smithfield, April 16.

<sup>17</sup> “The Grandest Display Ever Made by One State,” *Register*, 15 October 1884.

of North Carolina.”<sup>18</sup> Along with the abundant promotion and enthusiasm, the *Register* cautioned its readers to not allow exaggeration to take hold, warning that telegrams sent from North Carolina to points North were “very ill-advised” when they crowed that the Exposition was bringing in upwards of \$10,000,000 in new investments.<sup>19</sup>

Frequent discussion of the expected economic benefits contributed to the overall message that the Exposition had a serious and unique purpose, a fact that would not be lost on fairgoers. The annual state fair, folded into the Exposition in 1884, had become a social gathering, which accounted in large part for its overall appeal, but changes afoot, with the purpose of establishing order and respectability, established a new tone. The board determined that there would be no horse racing and neither would they permit gambling or anything “of an immoral or objectionable character” at the Exposition, as the focus needed to remain earnestly on education and advertisement of the state’s resources.<sup>20</sup> While fair visitors would not have to sacrifice their beer drinking, no liquor was served on the grounds, and “the old shanty saloons and restaurants” were torn down to make way for “neat buildings,” including a new saloon “with its broad verandahs” near

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<sup>18</sup> “Effects of the Exposition,” *Register*, 15 October 1884.

<sup>19</sup> No title, *Register*, 15 October 1884.

<sup>20</sup> On the annual state fair as “the social event of the year” in this period, see Melton A. McLaurin, “The Nineteenth-Century North Carolina State Fair as a Social Institution,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 59 (July 1982) 213-229. McLaurin stresses the popularity of horse racing and other sporting events at the fair in *The North Carolina State Fair, 1853-1899* (Master’s Thesis, East Carolina College, 1963), 53-54 and concludes that “the fair probably could not have survived had it not been for its social development, 71-72; “The State Exposition. Meeting of the Board of Directors Yesterday – Progress Gratifying,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA; *North Carolina State Exposition Plans of Buildings, Rules and Regulations Governing Exhibitors at the North Carolina State Exposition: Raleigh, N.C., October 1st to October 28th, 1884: Also Premium Lists of the North Carolina Agricultural Society and the North Carolina Industrial Association* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Steam Printers and Binders, 1884), 4-5.

the main building.<sup>21</sup> In the publication laying out the rules and regulations for exhibitions, Exposition organizers promised “an efficient police force will be on duty night and day for the protection of property and maintainance [*sic*] of order.”<sup>22</sup> Given the state fair’s reputation for rowdy attendees, one newspaper was compelled to report that no arrests had been made on the fairgrounds during the first week of the Exposition, touting “neatness and good order” among the event’s pleasing features.<sup>23</sup> Efforts to crack down on unruliness were apparently effective, as a report later in the month credited the majority of visitors with a “general deportment” being “worthy of high commendation,” and regarded the behavior of most men as “courteous and gentlemanly” as well as sober. Not all visitors could be so readily controlled, however, and some young men continued to disrupt the fair with their drunkenness, interpreted as a lack of respect for other visitors and the general tenor of the auspicious event. Comparing the younger generation to Robert Burns’s “Scotch laddies,” the *Register* criticized these young men for lacking the expected serious commitment to improvement of self and state.<sup>24</sup>

Decisions to suspend some of the state fair’s social aspects in order to emphasize the Exposition’s educational and instructional focus speaks not only to the investment in, and hopes pinned on, this particular event, but the extent to which middle-class

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<sup>21</sup> “Exposition Notes – How the Work Progresses on the Grounds,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>22</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> “The Exposition – The Attendance Yesterday Quite Large,” *News & Observer* (?), 8 October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>24</sup> “The Exposition – And the Men and Women There,” *Raleigh Register*, 22 October 1884.

respectability governed fair behavior. Fun and games drew the attention of fairgoers away from instructional exhibits, and the problems posed by drinking and gambling increased as crowds grew. Since the expectations hinged on the participation of, and endorsement by, the state's leading industrialists, and organizers hoped to court investors from outside the state, crowd control was central to the need to attract middle-class families, and especially women. Both white and black middle-class women had taken upon themselves the work of educating and providing a proper example for the lower classes, including membership in, and political activity through, reform organizations. Long a staple among middle-class women, the temperance and Prohibition movements had gained momentum among middle-class reformers in North Carolina following the Civil War, with several cities in the state passing prohibition or licensing referendums.<sup>25</sup> No respectable woman would attend or endorse the event if organizers could not promise control of alcohol and the disruptive behavior associated with it.

### **Women's Organization and Leadership**

The most apparent public role of white women at the Exposition, and in Southern society more generally, remained that of supporter for the agenda proposed and executed

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<sup>25</sup> The *Register* reported that in the city of Monroe, "fifty ladies attended the polls and worked all day for prohibition." Prohibition initiatives appeared and reappeared on the ballot across North Carolina in this period. For example, the *Raleigh Register* noted in June 1877 that Asheville and Greensboro approved prohibition and that in the cities of Wilson, Franklinton, and Raleigh, and the county of Cabarrus, residents approved licensing of liquor. "Prohibition – License," and "Prohibition Election," both in *Raleigh Register*, 12 June 1877. Janette Thomas Greenwood argues that through the prohibition movement of the 1880s, a coalition of black and white members of the better classes in Charlotte "briefly shaped a new kind of politics outside of traditional party channels," in *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White "Better Classes" in Charlotte, 1850-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 77-113.

by the state's leading men. Lauded for their "modesty and purity" and praised for their refinement, white women attending the Exposition were challenged with a lofty proposition: "In these women lies our strength for good society and to them we must look for the foundations upon which to build the future glory and honor of our noble old State." As testament to their respectability, reporters frequently noted, one only needed look at their handiwork on display at the Exposition. Of the Salem Female Academy exhibit, a reporter remarked, "(e)verything is tasteful and beautiful, and reflects much credit on the Salem 'girls.'" Reporting on the display constructed by Warren County's women, the observer related that their work maintained "their long established reputation for refinement, taste and energy."<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, these comments referenced a particular group of women – white, elite and middle-class, generally educated women from the most powerful and wealthy "better" families in the state. Such women performed highly visible organizing work inside the Exposition, like the wife of Secretary Henry Fries of Salem. Mrs. Fries first gained the attention of a newspaper reporter when she assisted her husband with Forsyth County's exhibit at the 1882 state fair. The writer reflected upon the outstanding quality of the exhibit and the prestige it brought the county, extending gratitude to Mr. Fries and his "estimable lady."<sup>27</sup> Often mentioned in articles about her husband and his preparations for the Exposition, Mrs. Fries herself became the focus of many newspaper

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<sup>26</sup> "The Exposition – And the Men and Women There," and "Exposition Notes," *Register*, 22 October 1884; "Exposition Notes – Warren County's Exhibit," *Register*, 15 October 1884.

<sup>27</sup> "The State Fair," unidentified newspaper clipping, the date 1882 written in pencil, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

notices. Her untiring work and commitment to the event impressed the many reporters and editors who met her.<sup>28</sup> “Mrs. Secretary,” as one writer called her, took her role as wife to one of the state’s leading men very seriously, was by his side on numerous trips across the state in anticipation of county exhibits, and also resided in Raleigh throughout the month-long event. In an enthusiastic response to a question about how often she would accompany Secretary Fries on his official business on behalf of the Exposition, Mrs. Fries replied, “(j)ust as often as I can, you may be sure.” Women like Fries often ranked alongside the officers of the Exposition in the receiving of accolades at public events, and she was representative of the state’s “fair daughters” to whom Primrose extended special thanks for their hard work in his speech at the official opening day ceremony.<sup>29</sup> At a meeting of exhibitors, Colonel L. L. Polk also extended “special compliments to Forsyth County, Mr. Primrose, Mr. Fries and the ladies.”<sup>30</sup>

Other newspaper articles attest that this was not empty praise or mere courtesy, rather that the men in charge had received valuable assistance from their wives, daughters, and other female citizens. Allen Warren of Pitt County was “aided in

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<sup>28</sup> One reporter remarked that Fries, “with his coat off and sleeves rolled up, assisted by his wife, who was also an untiring worker, has thus made...his native county a credit to the state,” then went on to ask, “Can you find another man and wife in North Carolina worth their \$200,000 that would have given this *work* to the cause.” “Forsyth County,” newspaper clipping with “New Bern Journal 1882” written in pencil, Fries scrapbook, NCSA. A *News & Observer* article reprinted in the *Salem Press* also gave credit to both Mr. and Mrs. Fries for the Forsyth exhibit at the 1882 State Fair, commenting further upon the many friends they had both made during their stay in Raleigh, newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>29</sup> No title, *State Chronicle*, 9 February 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA; another unidentified and undated article remarked that Mrs. Fries would be in Raleigh “until after the close of the exposition;” B. Von Herff photographic essay of the Exposition, NCSA.

<sup>30</sup> “Souvenir, North Carolina State Exposition,” October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

arranging the display by his charming daughter, Miss Acha.”<sup>31</sup> The official guidebook listed Mrs. Sarah Elliott as the superintendant of Granville’s ladies’ department, yet the impression of at least one newspaper reporter was that she took charge of the county’s entire exhibit. Elliott also received signal attention for her efforts to raise money for the orphan asylum in the county seat of Oxford, a duty typically taken on by middle-class women in the late nineteenth-century South. The bulk of the article on Chatham County focused on the goods produced by its women; and while Major R. James Powell received credit as the person responsible for the management of the Chatham exhibit, one other man and seven women, including Powell’s wife, comprised the county’s committee.<sup>32</sup> An article in April confirmed that the women of that county set to work organizing early, and that Chatham was the only county at that point to have had “a central executive exposition committee of ladies,” as well as subcommittees of women for each of the county’s townships.<sup>33</sup> In an article profiling “Men of the Exposition,” the writer praised Powell’s knowledge of and usefulness to Chatham County, but also made the remarkable

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<sup>31</sup> “Pitt and Davidson – East and West Combine to Make the Exposition Great,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>32</sup> “The Great Exposition – The Attendance Yesterday the Greatest Since Opening Day,” unidentified newspaper clipping, 15 (?) October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA; *Authorized Visitors’ Guide to the North Carolina State Exposition and Raleigh*, p. 86. The same article reported that Mrs. Elliott had collected \$25 for the orphanage. By suggestion of Exposition organizers in the official publication of rules and regulations, Forsyth County donated its \$100 prize for the best county exhibit to the orphanage. *Plans of Buildings*, p. 19; *Exposition Souvenir*, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>33</sup> “Concerning the Exposition,” *News & Observer*, 9 April 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

point that “the ladies did ten times as much work” and described that work as “tenfold more painstaking” as that of the men of the county.<sup>34</sup>

Although black women of the better class carried similar responsibilities, they were less visible, at least to mainstream sources. Black women, like black men, had a primarily segregated presence at the Exposition, a reflection of the state of race relations in the period.<sup>35</sup> The North Carolina Industrial Association, repeatedly referenced in white-owned newspapers as the Colored Industrial Association, had operated a segregated state fair at Camp Russell, one mile away from the Capitol and on the city’s eastern limits, since 1879. It was the first such fair in the South and was initiated by successful black businessmen in the state who had organized county fairs in previous years, such as the industrial fair in New Hanover County in 1876. The primary goal of the NCIA fair had been to showcase the accomplishments of the state’s black citizens since emancipation and, as with the state fair, to advance improvements in agriculture and industry. It also furthered the cause of racial uplift, a task traditionally taken on by the better class and, particularly, educated black women.

Their segregated presence at the Exposition also provides a lens for examining economic diversity among the state’s African Americans. Governor Thomas Jarvis

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<sup>34</sup> “Men of the Exposition – Mr. Powell of Chatham,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>35</sup> In the 1880s in North Carolina, historian John Haley relates, determination among whites to keep blacks socially and politically impotent grew. This encouraged segregation in daily life as well as organizations like the North Carolina Industrial Association and special events like the Exposition, yet at the same time political rhetoric was particularly hostile toward African Americans in 1884, and “Democrats exaggerated the themes of social equality, black domination, and white supremacy” in campaigns. See John H. Haley, *Charles N. Hunter and Race Relations in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 65-66.

summed up the goals of the fair most effectively when he remarked in his speech at the 1881 fair that the onus was on black citizens to demonstrate that they were “industrious, enterprising and intelligent.”<sup>36</sup> Black women, particularly those who were educated, were central to this effort as, in language reminiscent of the expectations raised for white women at the Exposition, observers tended to emphasize the presumed connection between a black woman’s household production and her abilities as a wife, mother, and community worker. Edwin G. Reade, former congressman, Confederate Senator, and North Carolina Supreme Court justice, in his speech at the opening ceremonies of the 1880 NCIA fair, “especially complimented the ladies on their beautiful handiwork, and urged upon them the cultivation of a love for the beautiful, that they render their houses attractive, and make home the altar at which the hearts of husbands, sons and daughters will ever worship.”<sup>37</sup> The editors of the *Journal of Industry*, the official newspaper of the NCIA, addressed their calls for hard work to the “young ladies” and imposed upon them equal responsibility with men “to labor for the establishment of race character, or the work can never be accomplished.” As was common for white women of the better class at the Exposition, the *Journal* also heaped praise upon “noble hearted women of the race” for taking interest in the NCIA fair, crediting their participation alone as “sufficient to warrant the highest expectation.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “The Colored Fair at Raleigh,” *The Christian Recorder*, 12 January 1882.

<sup>37</sup> “The Fair – The Second Annual Exhibition of the North Carolina Industrial Association,” *Journal of Industry*, 8 October 1881.

<sup>38</sup> “Our Young Men and the Industrial Fair,” and “Encouraging Words,” *Journal of Industry*, April 1879.

At the NCIA fair, African American colleges, business owners, and agricultural producers all exhibited in a manner comparable to their white counterparts at the annual state fair, with a strong undercurrent emphasizing racial uplift. In its inaugural issue, the *Journal of Industry* extolled the virtues of hard work and education toward solution of the “great Negro problem,” echoing the mainstream sentiments familiar in the words of national black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, keynote speaker at the 1880 NCIA fair, and local dignitaries, such as Bishop James Walker Hood, who also spoke at the 1880 event. Both emphasized the themes of temperance, hard work, and education, and discouraged emigration from the state. These same themes prevailed at the 1886 fair, in the speech focused on temperance and education given by Senator Henry W. Blair, Republican from New Hampshire, and in the praise offered by the editor of *The Star of Zion* to fair organizers for having prohibited gambling and horse racing.<sup>39</sup> For the opening ceremony of their fair in 1884, North Carolina’s black citizens organized a parade of troops followed by a slate of guest speakers, including African American Reverend Joseph Price, who delivered the annual address, and white notables, including Governor Jarvis and Exposition President Primrose. The parade featured a light infantry

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<sup>39</sup> The first issue of the *Journal of Industry* promoted these themes throughout, but see especially, “Our Young Men and the Industrial Fair” and “The Colored People’s Fair – The Movement Endorsed – Premiums Offered” (letter written by E. R. Dudley to O. Hunter, Jr., Secretary of the North Carolina Industrial Association) April, 1879. Portions of the speeches of Douglass and Hood are printed in the October 8, 1880 edition of the paper, to be continued in the next edition. Unfortunately, as with most editions of the *Journal*, the second issue cannot be located. “Senator Blair at the Colored Fair” and “The Colored Industrial Fair,” *The Star of Zion*, 19 November 1886. *The Star of Zion* focused primarily on church news, but also reported local and state news with some regularity. Upon relocating its offices from Petersburg, VA to Salisbury, NC in 1886, the newspaper lent its support to the NCIA fair, and also reported having attended every NCIA fair since 1879. It remains an organ of the A. M. E. Zion Church, currently located in Charlotte, NC.

company, a brass band, and firemen, and represented black craftsmen and professionals from across the state.<sup>40</sup>

Comparatively limited coverage of the segregated black fair in white-owned newspapers in 1884 lends the impression that although African Americans may not have been excluded from the Exposition or from the annual state fair, they may have chosen to restrict their attendance to NCIA fair days. If this was this case, it was likely in the interest of promoting their own fair but also a result of the apprehension that accompanied and severely limited interracial activities in the period. According to one newspaper, the attendance of African Americans was expected to be quite large during the separate fair. Although it had been incorporated into the Exposition and officially ran throughout the Exposition, the “exhibit of the colored people” was housed in the grand stand rather than the main exhibition hall, a physical separation that worked to further remove black and white fairgoers.<sup>41</sup> Although support among white business leaders was crucial to funding the NCIA fair, in sharp contrast to the bountiful reports on exhibits in the Exposition, limited references to the contents of the exhibits at the African-American fair suggest that mainstream newspaper editors did not feel obliged to support the black fair or were simply distracted by the grandness of the Exposition. Aside from a note about a bubble level made by one black craftsman, and a table crafted by William Burgess, which received praise for the variety of local woods used rather than for his

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<sup>40</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, p. 6; “The Colored People’s Day,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>41</sup> “The Colored People’s Day,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

craftsmanship, it would have been a challenge for interested readers to locate discussion about African American displays.<sup>42</sup>

### **Exhibiting Women's Domestic Production**

While black women and their efforts remained essentially hidden, mainstream newspapers took note of the strong presence of white women among the exhibitors at the Exposition, with numerous articles focused strictly on women's wares. Most women exhibitors demonstrated their own competitive spirit by contributing both their domestic production and their time to county displays. Franklin County's display seemed focused particularly on "a great variety and quantity of everything in the line of ladies' handiwork."<sup>43</sup> The women of Chatham similarly presented "splendid specimens of ladies' handiwork" including jewelry, children's clothing, needlework, a quilt, paper flowers, wreaths, paintings, and drawings. The county's "crowning glory" was the map of Chatham made of native mosses wrought by Mrs. J. J. Jackson, daughter of Governor Jonathan Worth.<sup>44</sup> Many articles listed meticulously each woman's name and contribution to her respective county exhibit.

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<sup>42</sup> In *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) Robert Kenzer states that, prior to 1887, when the organization began receiving funds from the state legislature, "the fair was supported entirely by private contributions to the Industrial Association, largely from leading white bankers, businessmen, and industrialists," 75; unidentified newspaper clippings, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>43</sup> "Franklin County," unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>44</sup> "Chatham County – Was the First County to Propose an Exhibit," *State Chronicle*, 2 October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

Photographs of the Exposition exhibits taken by B. von Herff confirm that white women and their handiwork occupied important and central spaces in the exhibits. Von Herff published his photographs in 1884 to provide a visual essay of the Exposition, and it appears that his intention was to provide an accurate, or perhaps even ideal, photographic journal of the event. Rather than focusing strictly on the industrial exhibits and machinery, von Herff seems to have been most interested in capturing a cross-section of the exhibits as well as the social aspects of the Exposition. His photograph of the Durham County exhibit reveals that fully one-third of the exhibit space was devoted to women's products. Other photographs show women's handiwork centrally located in the exhibits of Davie, Catawba, and Forsyth counties. Significantly, while most county exhibit photographs taken by von Herff have no people in them at all, women appear in the two that do. Perhaps as testament of their hard work and commitment, women posed with their exhibits in the official photographs taken of Davie and Catawba counties. Whether this was the choice of the exhibitors or the photographer, it is an indication that the women took ownership of the exhibits.<sup>45</sup>

The photographs provide visual confirmation that most white women and their contributions to the Exposition were not segregated or pushed to the margins of the event. While the "Ladies' Exhibit" was located on the second floor of the Central Exhibit Hall when the event opened, the official Exposition guidebook also noted "Ladies' Fancy

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<sup>45</sup> *The North Carolina State Exposition, Raleigh, North Carolina, October 1884, A Sketch of its Officers, Its Objects and Its Successes. Photographic Illustrations of the Buildings, and the State, County and Private Exhibits*, North Carolina Office of Archives and History Photographic Collection. One newspaper item described von Herff as an "amateur photographer of much skill" and the photographs as "interesting souvenirs" of the event, unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.



B. von Herff's photograph of the Durham County exhibit showing Ladies' Exhibit in foreground. Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

Work,” needlework, paintings, preserves, and so on featured in various county exhibits throughout the main hall rather than segregated into a gendered space. The “Ladies’ Saloon,” clearly a space reserved for women, was also located on the ground floor between Davidson and Johnston Counties’ exhibits. Rather than situating the saloon on the second floor convenient to the designated Ladies’ Exhibit, organizers apparently expected women to have interest in all the exhibits and spend a substantial amount of their time downstairs browsing among the bulk of exhibits. One newspaper article also reported the relocation of the ladies’ exhibit downstairs in mid-October, halfway through

the fair. Although no official explanation for this move accompanies the mention in the article, it helps dispel any notion that the women's exhibit, and the work of women, had been deemed less important than others and undeserving of a central location.<sup>46</sup>

Von Herff's photographs also offer an idea of the extent of the attendance and participation of women at the Exposition and the efforts of exhibitors to appeal to female visitors. In addition to the photographs of women with their county exhibits, women are prominent among the visitors snapped by von Herff's camera seated outside a restaurant on the fairgrounds and in attendance at events at the grandstand. Utilizing the promotional advantages of the Exposition, Salem Academy in Winston-Salem and Peace Institute in Raleigh, both schools for women, exhibited independently and primarily displayed painting and embroidery. Von Herff's photograph reveals that Salem used the Exposition exhibit as an opportunity to attract new students and recount its proud history by including student work dating to the school's inception in 1804. The Household Sewing Machine Company and Hurst, Purnell & Company, which displayed fabric, notions, and patterns, were among those exhibitors whose products were typically marketed to and purchased by and for women for their personal use, domestic chores, and small businesses. Taylor's Cologne and Cherokee Remedy reportedly appealed to

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<sup>46</sup> "The Great Exposition – The Attendance Yesterday the Largest Since Opening Day," unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA; *Visitors' Guide*, 82-91. On a similar note, one newspaper reported, "(t)he toilet rooms for the ladies are being neatly fitted up. Careful servants will be in attendance. The ladies will be pleased that provisions have been made for their comfort," "Exposition Notes," unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA. There had been some discussion about constructing a separate building to house both women's and educational exhibits, but the necessary funds were not raised. While Jim L. Sumner concludes that a second-floor location marked the Ladies' Exhibit as less important, there had been constructed only the main exhibition hall and a few smaller buildings, meant for "lesser displays" according to Melton McLaurin, which indicates that at the opening of the Exposition the ladies' exhibit was visible and centrally located, even if it was not on the ground floor. Sumner, "The North Carolina Exposition," 72-74; McLaurin, *The North Carolina State Fair*, 42.



Restaurant on Exposition grounds showing women customers seated out front, perhaps drawn in by the sign offering “Ice Cream Today.” Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

women because its “gentlemanly manager takes their handkerchiefs and passes them through the fountain of cologne that bubbles up at his stand.” Likewise, the Whitin Company offered female visitors samples of cotton carded by their machine, in which they were said to be “wonderfully interested.”<sup>47</sup>

White women who had products to sell hoped to capitalize on the opportunity to reach a large audience by setting up their own displays at the Exposition, like Mrs.

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<sup>47</sup> *State Exposition*; unidentified newspaper clippings, n.d., Fries scrapbook, NCSA.



Some exhibitors marketed specifically to women, such as Taylor's Cologne and Cherokee Remedy. Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

Hyams, with her cut mica ornaments, and Mrs. Joe Person, who sold her patent medicine; both women displayed in the east wing on the ground floor of the main exhibition Building. Mrs. Hyams remains a mystery, but Mrs. Person had been operating her business since 1878, and in 1882 began the effort to expand her business. 1884 was an extraordinary year for Person; not only did she exhibit at the Exposition, but her husband died and she established her first business partnership that year. Person combined her patent medicine business with performances of her own musical arrangements at fairs

across the South, a one-woman medicine show similar to other road show musical acts popular at the time. A shrewd businesswoman who relished what became a very successful enterprise that allowed her to support her family, setting up at the Exposition was not likely something she would have done unless she expected it to be profitable.<sup>48</sup>

Even though individual black women did not receive the same kind of attention lavished upon their white counterparts in white-owned newspapers, recognition of black women's contributions to segregated fairs in primarily African American newspapers supports that they held a similarly prominent role in their own fair, assisting with and organizing exhibits and fulfilling their prescribed duties to home, family, and community. The NCIA fair received little notice in 1884, as it was overshadowed by the Exposition, but reports on fairs in previous years give an idea of the expectations and contributions of black women. The New Hanover County (Wilmington) Industrial Association fair of 1876, a predecessor to the NCIA, received tremendous praise from *The Christian Recorder* as representative of the "progress of the colored people of the South." Items crafted by women received particular notice from the writer: "A silk quilt worked in leaves and flowers by Mrs. Jane Coleman ... landscapes in oil and zephyr flowers by the

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<sup>48</sup> *Authorized Visitor's Guide to the North Carolina State Exposition and Raleigh. 1884. The Only Guidebook Sold on the Exposition Grounds.* (Raleigh: Exposition Guide Publishing Company and Edwards, Broughton & Co., Printers and Binders, 1884), 93, *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Alice Morgan Person, "The Chivalry of Man, as Exemplified in the Life of Mrs. Joe Person," TD, 1890(?), Alice Morgan Person Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Vance County historian Samuel Thomas Peace wrote, "For many years she (Alice Person) attended each state fair at Raleigh where she had a booth in the Exhibition Building and where each day she played and sold music of her own composition; advertised and sold medicines of her own making," in "*Zeb's Black Baby*": *Vance County, North Carolina, a Short History* (Henderson, N.C.: s.n., 1955), 115. For a scholarly treatment of Person's music and performances, see Chris Goertzen, "Mrs. Joe Person's *Popular Airs*: Early Blackface Minstrel Tunes in Oral Tradition," *Ethnomusicology* 35 (winter 1991), 31-53.

Misses Brodie of Raleigh and a fine water color by Miss Maria E. Guion of Charlotte.”

In praising the 1882 NCIA fair, the *Recorder* remarked upon “many articles of household use, clothing, cake, bread, preserves, etc.” as admirable.<sup>49</sup>

An article and accompanying illustrations about the NCIA’s first annual fair in 1879 in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* provide an extensive look at black women’s contributions. *Leslie’s* reporter touted Floral Hall, the site of women’s exhibits, as “the very centre of attraction,” and proclaimed, “the exhibit of our colored sisters ... would hold its own in any Northern fair.” The article commented upon baked goods submitted by women, and of particular delight, a cake, “representing when cut the exact sectional appearance of a watermelon, especially in color ... a triumph of confectionary.” The illustrations depicted the reality that the majority of African Americans were agricultural workers, bringing to the fair their best livestock and poultry. Women appear in the drawings in numerous roles: as exhibitors of what appear to be products of their gardens and kitchens, as assistants responsible for registering entrants, and as the crafters of a collection of sunbonnets, the headdress of choice for most of the women in the illustrations and another indication that they worked the fields, on display either for sale or in competition.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to providing valuable evidence of the contributions of black women to the NCIA fair, the *Leslie’s* article also effectively presented the inherent contradictions

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<sup>49</sup> “Industrial Fair Association,” *The Christian Recorder*, 20 January 1876; “The Colored Fair at Raleigh,” *The Christian Recorder*, 12 January 1882.

<sup>50</sup> *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 6 December 1879, 243.

found in the stereotypes of African Americans in the period. Alongside the racist comments of white dignitaries at the fair, among them that the state's black citizens had no ambition, the paper printed the comments of a single black man, NCIA secretary O. Hunter, Jr., who clearly defied the negative remarks made by the white men he called "ever so kind and good to us" in their support of the fair and its goals of racial uplift. The paper distinguished Hunter, who founded the NCIA along with his brother Charles, as an exceptional black man by providing his comments sans the dialect it used to relate the interviews of ordinary, working-class fair exhibitors and visitors (for example, one woman was quoted as saying, "I see dem slippers 'fo my eyes dis minnit, an' dey're gone like a drink.") In another example, praise for the hall in which women displayed their handiwork as "tastefully decorated" contrasts sharply with a disdainful description of the clothing of the men as ill-fitting and "of patterns only to be seen in stage farces." Despite its decidedly disrespectful and paternalistic tone, the paper heralded the fair as a great success and an example for other Southern states. Seemingly inadvertently, the paper provided glimpses of the obstacles African Americans hoped to overcome through the fair in its depiction of racial stereotypes that plagued even the most successful individuals and events.<sup>51</sup>

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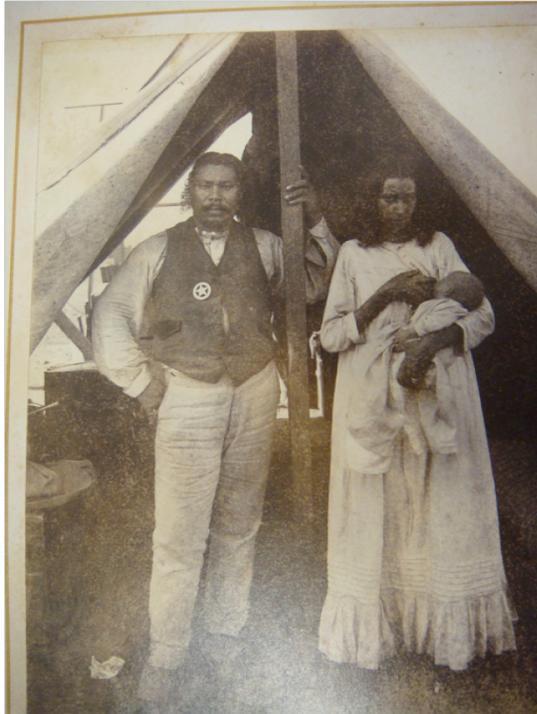
<sup>51</sup> Governor Jarvis characterized himself as an expert on the habits and abilities of the state's black citizens, and as "entitled to an opinion" on the same as a result of working in the legislature with black men. It was he who commented that African Americans generally had no ambition, and that while black children exhibited a propensity toward learning and performed well in school, blacks were "not a race of scholars." He formed this opinion based on his observation that blacks exhibited "tardiness in the higher branches," yet he praised the black principal of the African American normal school in Fayetteville as "an unusually good scholar and well-behaved gentleman." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 6 December 1879, 243.

At least one woman of color was in herself an exhibit, and her location outside the Exposition site helped emphasize her supposed differences from the “fair daughters” who received attention and praise. Von Herff’s photograph shows a Cherokee woman breastfeeding her baby, dressed in a cotton nightgown, standing in the opening of a tent alongside a Cherokee police officer, reported by one newspaper item to be her husband. The couple could be viewed away from the fairgrounds, at a site “just south of the grounds” given the name *Expositionville*; the exhibits there were characterized as “curiosities,” and the photograph serves as evidence that it was likely similar to the infamous Midway exhibits at the Columbian Exposition, where nonwhite people were depicted as savage and uncivilized. No literature accompanies the photograph to explain its educational value, but as with other fairs of the period, it was likely meant as a comparison of the “evolution” of the Anglo-Saxon race to those deemed less civilized. Telling, perhaps, is an article’s description of the man as a medicine man rather than by his occupation and the fact that the woman stood bare-breasted in a period when Victorian sensibility would have made women who claimed civility and respectability, such as Mrs. Fries, blush at the thought.<sup>52</sup> Certainly, the classification of the Native American couple as a “curiosity,” outside both the mainstream (white) fair and the

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<sup>52</sup> *State Exposition; Visitor’s Guide*, p. 85; unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA. In *Manliness and Civilization*, Bederman links the supposed savagery of American Indians, Africans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese on display at the Columbian Exposition to their willingness to expose women, who were often scantily clad in these exhibits, to “sexual danger and indecent exploitation.” Aside from affirming for white men their racial superiority, these displays reinforced the gender differences espoused in the Victorian concept of separate spheres, 35-36.

African American fair, revealed one of the challenges of an increasingly bifurcated view of race.



Von Herff's caption for this photograph was simply "Cherokee Indian and Squaw." Courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

### **Fair Competition and Earnings**

If one looks primarily at the exhibits and reads their descriptions in newspaper articles, it may appear that the role of women was strictly traditional and domestic at the Exposition. Yet, the act of removing their domestic production from the home and pitting it against the work of other women in a competitive arena had the effect of changing the value and meaning of women's work and products. As Lu Ann Jones has demonstrated for the early twentieth century, rural Southern women who raised poultry and eggs, cultivated vegetables, and canned and preserved produce from their gardens for

local and regional markets took great pride in both their production and their contributions to household income. They guarded their earnings and made decisions as to how that money would be spent, thus reducing their economic dependence upon the men in their lives.<sup>53</sup> When women produced for the fair – a specialized, albeit temporary, market – they likely controlled the income they generated and yielded the same sense of satisfaction and independence.

Because of the personal and financial gain they stood to make, many women were fierce competitors for the prizes awarded to winning entries. The time and energy they poured into county exhibits is but one indicator of the level of competition among women at these fairs. In anticipation of the enthusiastic response of women to a call for their applications to the state fair in 1880, the *News & Observer* encouraged women to send in their lists early to avoid “crowding and hurry,” and further announced one company’s tentative plan to pay a special premium “to every lady who gains the regular premium.” According to newspaper reports, women’s entries included an array of preserved foods and baked goods in addition to their handiwork; however, a full accounting of the categories open to women at the Exposition is not clear in the available official sources. In addition to the usual monetary rewards, “the largest and best display of any kind by any one lady” earned a gold medal in 1884. As two other gold medals were awarded in

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<sup>53</sup> Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 50-52, 70, 72-74. One judge at the 1919 North Carolina State Fair noted lively discussions among the men over the quality of their entries, and also remarked, “I was too busy with my work in judging the livestock to note what the women were doing, but it is safe to assume that they were equally proud of the products they had entered,” in S. G. Rubinow, *Some Results of Fair Work in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, June 1919).

the categories of agricultural products and manufactured goods – competitions entered overwhelming, if not solely, by men – fair organizers confirmed the value of contributions from women as well as their desire to compete and be recognized for their work.<sup>54</sup>

As potentially beneficial as fair participation could be for some women, the competitive categories in official publications suggest some of the limitations for women who wished to use the Exposition or the annual state fair for profit during the 1880s. Women traditionally held responsibility for poultry and eggs on their family farms, such as the Elizabeth City woman who “realized a net profit of \$150 on eggs and chickens” in two years, and “this,” reported a newspaper, “besides supplying her family table, including six farm hands.” Since North Carolina’s flourishing egg market shipped “lots of this perishable commodity to Northern markets” annually, women had much to gain from raising poultry.<sup>55</sup> While this work proved lucrative to many of North Carolina’s rural women, the premium list does not include poultry among its categories for competition at the state fair and Exposition in 1884.<sup>56</sup> Cattle, horses, mules, sheep, and

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<sup>54</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, 19; “The State Fair,” *News & Observer*, 17 September 1880. Unfortunately, premiums for women’s entries are not listed with those for livestock and agricultural products in the *Plans of Buildings*. Although it is a later period, if the premiums paid in 1919 are any indication of tradition, items with a higher market value, namely food, also earned women higher premiums at the state fair. In that year, the state allotted 20% to home economics products (“canned products, labor-saving devices, pantry supplies, etc.”), 30% to agricultural products, 20% to livestock, and lesser amounts or no premiums at all to products in other categories, such as fine arts and textiles, which included many items crafted by women. See S. G. Rubinow, *How Cooperative Fair Work is Carried On In North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Agriculture, February 1919), 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Reprint of articles from various state newspapers, *Raleigh Register*, 12 March 1884; “Observations,” *The News and Observer*, 17 September 1880.

<sup>56</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, 15-19.

swine all garnered awards for their owners, and all were livestock traditionally tended to by men. Governor Jarvis admonished fairgoers in 1881 to bring their best to the fair for exhibit, that “(n)o lady dare say she has better poultry at home than she finds here, without convicting herself of a failure of duty” to self and state. He further advised, “the woman who raises one additional chicken adds something to the aggregate wealth of the state.” The governor’s remarks make it clear that women performed this work, earned an income from it, and displayed their poultry in some capacity at the state fair, even if the organizers had not formally sanctioned it. With no competitive category at the fair for their chicken-and-egg businesses, women were left to their own devices to promote and sell such goods at the fair. It is no surprise that a business dominated by women in the 1880s did not gain recognition at the Exposition, and also no coincidence that by the early twentieth century, when the North Carolina State Board of Agriculture had been encouraging expansion and commercialization of the poultry industry, it had become an official category at the annual state fair.<sup>57</sup>

Significantly, the official publication of the rules and regulations of the Exposition provides a better look at the competitive categories open to black women at the NCIA fair than of those of white women at the mainstream fair. The Exposition premium list provides no indication of competition among white women in the state fair other than mention of a gold medal for the best overall presentation by a woman, while the premium list for the NCIA fair provides no fewer than nine competitive categories in

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<sup>57</sup> “The State Fair. The Formal Opening – Remarks of Governor Jarvis – Some Notes of the Display.” *The News and Observer*, 13 October 1881. For an examination of the transition of the poultry business from “women’s work” to an agribusiness poultry industry in the early twentieth century, see Jones, *Mama Learned us to Work*, 81-105.

which women either most likely entered or the category is clearly labeled for women. While there is no accounting for all the categories in which black women submitted products, there is little doubt about the most suitable categories for women's entries. Certainly, they entered the competitions for plain needlework and fancy needlework "from any lady," each paying \$10. Women were also the most likely winners of the prizes for plain and fancy cakes, the best loaf of light bread, and since it was a standard course offering at women's colleges, the various categories of painting and drawing, each of which paid \$5. In these categories alone the award money added up to \$50, or sixteen percent of the premiums listed by the NCIA fair that year. Items with a higher market value, namely food, also earned women higher premiums at the fair. The highest monetary prize in the NCIA fair most likely awarded to a woman was that in the category of canned fruits and vegetables, which earned the same \$20 prize as the two other largest prizes, those for best field crops and farming implements. This increased to twenty-three percent the proportion of total prize money paid to women at the NCIA fair.<sup>58</sup>

Since the primary role for both white and black women remained domestic, white women likely competed in similar categories, although this was not evident in the official publications. However, white women probably earned higher premiums than black women, as the premiums paid at the Exposition and state fair were much higher, generally, than those of the NCIA fair; \$3000 was allotted for premiums at the 1884 Exposition compared to only \$300 at the NCIA fair that year. While the expectation was

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<sup>58</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, 20-21.

likely that black women would enter their goods only in the NCIA fair, there is no clear evidence that black women were shut out of competition in the mainstream fair; in fact, a black woman named Lizzie Otey displayed a quilt in the Ladies' Department of the 1881 state fair, although no other black women received such mention during the Exposition or other fairs in the 1880s.<sup>59</sup>

Poultry constituted a large proportion of the awards list for the NCIA fair, even as it was left out of the competitive categories at the mainstream fair, yet it is not clear whether black women, black men, or both entered these competitions. The NCIA awarded prizes to twenty varieties of chickens, as well as turkeys, geese, ducks, guineas, peafowl, and pigeons; the prizes awarded in these categories represented one-third of the total prizes at the NCIA fair, yet none of these animals appear in the prize list for the Exposition and state fair. This suggests either that the economic contributions of black women to the family income were more highly regarded than those of white women, or that the proportion of black men raising poultry was higher than that of white men, or both.<sup>60</sup> African American men had trouble finding work as white men attempted to maintain their racial dominance by crushing economic and political opportunities for black men in the wake of civil rights legislation, culminating with the Wilmington Race

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<sup>59</sup> \$302.50 is the total prize money listed for the 1884 NCIA fair in the *Plans of Buildings*, 20-21, and the premium totals were given in "The State Exposition. Meeting of the Board of Directors Yesterday – The Progress Gratifying," unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA. Jim L. Sumner notes that the NCIA fair distributed \$500 in premiums in 1884, citing the *News & Observer*, 17 and 18 October 1884 and *State Chronicle*, 18 October 1884. Additional categories or increased awards may have been added after publication of the *Plans of Buildings*. "The State Fair. Some General Notes About the Exhibitions – The Ladies' Department – The Stock, Star Premiums, Etc." *The News and Observer*, 15 October 1881.

<sup>60</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, 20-21.

Riot in 1898.<sup>61</sup> With the earnings potential of African American men stifled, the earnings of black women were not only more crucial to the survival and thriving of black families, but what was considered “woman’s work” among white rural residents may have been regarded as acceptable work for men, or a joint venture between men and women, among rural African Americans.

That a form of labor traditionally viewed as “woman’s work” remained excluded from the competitive categories for white women in the state fair throughout the nineteenth century speaks to the ideals of white womanhood and longstanding conventions regarding white women’s labor in the South. White southerners had historically presented white women as non-laborers and emphasized their dependency in order to shore up the image of the male patriarch. Defining white women in opposition to black women – who had labored as slaves and continued to work most often in jobs that closely resembled their work as slaves – enhanced this image, while emphasizing that both black and white women raised poultry to earn money could have diminished their supposed differences. The objective to protect the image of the white Southern woman as a non-laborer, to portray any work that she performed as a duty to her family rather than true labor, and to deem any work she performed as less important than that of men, can be seen in the omission of official competitive categories for white women, even those of a domestic nature, but especially the raising of poultry, from the premium

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<sup>61</sup> White power rested on gender relationships, and ultimately the fear that, as historian Anastasia Sims has concluded, “if gender roles were redefined, racial barriers might also be overturned,” in *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 156. See also Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

list. By ignoring this economic role and focusing instead on white women's domestic production, organizers of the fair reinforced the traditional belief that an economic role was not associated with the ideal white woman.

### **“Employment for ladies?”**

Despite emphasis at the Exposition on the traditional domestic role of white women, state leaders also recognized and supported an economic role for white women in the New South, establishing careers and supporting themselves through new opportunities available in the state. Connecting advances made by women in education to progress in the state generally, organizers chose to showcase at the Exposition how North Carolina's women used their skills and education to find a career and earn an income and hoped to inspire others to do the same. Although the number of employed women in the state had increased significantly in the twenty years since the end of the Civil War, this was the first time that influential men publicly recognized and encouraged white women's economic activities rather than portraying women who earned a living as hapless victims of circumstance. Between 1870 and 1900, North Carolina's number of gainfully employed women nearly tripled, and by 1900, twenty-three percent of the state's women worked for wages. Women dominated only a few occupational categories throughout this period, all of them characteristically urban-centered: boarding house operators, domestic servants, laundresses, and craftswomen in the needle trades. After agricultural work, the second highest percentage of employed women in the state worked in domestic service or as laundresses, and the vast majority of women so employed were

African American. Few black women found prospects beyond domestic service and laundry work, but those who did managed their own businesses catering primarily to an African American clientele. By contrast, most white women in cities worked as seamstresses, dressmakers, milliners, and boarding house or hotel proprietors. The needle trades provided work to thousands of women across the state, increasing six fold between 1870 and 1890. Boarding house and hotel operation also increased at a remarkable pace among North Carolina's women, from a mere 24 in 1870 to nearly 800 at the end of the century.<sup>62</sup>

Exposition President William S. Primrose acknowledged the economic roles of white women as a guest contributor to the *Raleigh Register*. Primrose focused upon the income-producing work of women across the state, declaring that, "The Exposition should in [the Women's] department endeavor to suggest every method of work that may furnish a suitable avocation and fair living for such of the young ladies of the State that have to depend mainly upon their own exertion for support." He explained that these "instances are not rare, since the destruction of property by the war, where noble young

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<sup>62</sup> The number of employed women in the state increased from 58,860 in 1870 to 160,161 in 1900. Educated women also had the option of teaching, which accounted for 2.6 percent of North Carolina's employed women by 1900. Around the time of the Exposition industrial jobs for women were on the increase. Mills and factories accounted for 2 percent of the state's employed women in 1870, 6.3 percent in 1890, and 10.7 percent in 1900, including a large number of children. Clerical and sales positions were also on the rise, but accounted for less than 1 percent of the state's employed women in 1900. *U.S. Census Reports: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census: The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1872); *Ninth Census*, "Females Engaged in Each Occupation. Table XXVII (B.) – The United States," p. 686-95; *Ninth Census*, "Selected Occupations, with Age and Sex, and Nativity. Table XXX. – State of North Carolina," 751; *U.S. Census Reports: Compendium of the Tenth Census, June 1, 1880* (revised edition). (Washington: GPO, 1885); *U.S. Census Reports: Report on the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census, 1890* (Washington: GPO, 1895); *Twelfth Census*, "Statistics of Occupations. Table 33.-Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Each of 303 Specified Occupations: 1900," 134-43.

women, unused to work, have supported not only themselves, but their parents and families.” Primrose encouraged white women to look beyond the needle trades and teaching for work, and went on to name drawing and painting, raising of silk worms, typewriting and other rather unusual jobs such as canning shrimps, taxidermy, and botany among the occupational choices already made by women in the state. He declared that every woman with a skill should show her handiwork at the Expo, “to encourage others in similar pursuits, for pleasure or for profit.”<sup>63</sup>

Men and women across the state had been witnesses to this changing economic role over the twenty years since the end of the Civil War, and at the Exposition acknowledged the possibility of turning education into a career as a new measure of respectability for white educated women. The goal behind educating Southern women had never been a career, but echoing Primrose’s observations, an article profiling St. Mary’s School expressed that the expectations for educated young women had changed with the demise of the slave economy. Whereas the state’s “fair daughters” had previously obtained their education and then married, they now more frequently moved from the classroom to employment. While generations of elite Southern women had attended St. Mary’s and “imbibed the principles and graces” which readied them for missionary work and other forms of public service suitable to their status, the “old methods of training women ... were obsolescent.” In agreement with President Primrose’s assessment, the *Register* reporter found that young women “compelled by the fortunes of war to earn their own living” had determined that they needed a more

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<sup>63</sup> “The State Exposition – Women’s Department – Women’s Work,” *Register*, 16 April 1884.

rigorous course of study and examinations in order to secure a career. The school recognized “the absolute necessity of supply to meet demand” and made changes which would equip students interested in seeking a career with the requisite skills and credentials to compete in a new world.<sup>64</sup>

Women’s entrance into the work force had become a matter of some significance, worthy of public attention and consideration. Newspapers joined Primrose in acknowledging white women’s labor force participation. The *State Chronicle* proposed, “Employment for ladies? This begins to look as if the problem to find employment for ladies had already been solved. The Exposition is full of specimens of ladies’ work, hardly dreamed of here hitherto.” The article profiled Mary Clarke Morgan, a taxidermist in business with her brother, and a widowed mother of two young children. Morgan told the reporter that her work was her profession rather than a hobby, earning her an income as well as personal satisfaction. “I do it for money,” she stated, “I go to my workshop early and I stay late; and taxidermy is my profession.” The article credited Morgan with producing the majority of the pieces her business put on display at the Exposition, including the company’s most profitable items, fans made from feathers and duck skins worked into dress trimmings.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “St. Mary’s School – Without a Rival In The Age That Has Passed Away – Doing its Work Well in the New World of To-Day,” *Register*, 12 March 1884.

<sup>65</sup> “Fish, Fowl, Reptile. All Beautifully Mounted in North Carolina. That, too, by a North Carolina Lady – The Attractive Taxidermic Exhibit of Craven County,” *State Chronicle*, 10 (?) October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA. The visitor’s guide simply lists Morgan and her brother as “Clark & Morgan, Managing Directors,” which raises questions about the number of women who may have exhibited at the Exposition but whose identity was masked by how the business was presented. See *Visitor’s Guide*, 82.

Despite the sensation she seemed to cause at the Exposition, and the success the article suggested she was enjoying, Morgan's income was, perhaps, not sufficient to self-support. The only daughter of Mary Bayard Clarke, essayist and newspaper editor, Morgan lived with her parents from the time she was widowed in 1880 until she remarried in 1886. While the concern of both mother and daughter may have been a matter of propriety as much as income, the editors of a volume of Clarke's works argue that she believed her daughter, like so many other young women of her station, ill-equipped, her education having left her wanting the appropriate skills, to support herself and her children. Apparently anxious to see her daughter remarried for the sake of security, and concerned about her own failing health, Clarke investigated her daughter's suitor, George Moulton of New Hampshire, after a brief courtship and then orchestrated a wedding at her bedside just two weeks before she died.<sup>66</sup> Despite her own personal success and monetary contributions to the support of her family, Clarke had also benefited from being married to a lawyer and judge; realistically, she seems to have concluded that her daughter's best chance for security and comfort remained in her roles as wife and mother.

Although talk at the Exposition of employment for women indicated that Southerners had begun to modify the gender expectations that had bound women to the household in the slave economy, the discussion simultaneously reinforced traditional gender roles. Men generally portrayed women's labor at the Exposition, from taking

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<sup>66</sup> Mary Bayard Clarke, *Live Your Own Life: The Family Papers of Mary Bayard Clarke, 1854-1886*, Terrell Armistead Crow and Mary Moulton Barden, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), lii-liiii.

charge of exhibits to displaying their household products, as corresponding to the duties of wife, mother, and citizen rather than labor in the true sense. Further, Primrose assumed that women sought employment out of necessity only – when “normal” circumstances, namely marriage, did not apply or when the economy was so poor that women felt themselves forced into jobs. While Primrose and other writers did not express support for careers for women that would have been out of the norm at the time, such as medicine or law, they also did not appear to severely limit women to only certain choices. Given their general encouragement at the Exposition, state leaders and newspaper editors appear to have supported a multitude of business opportunities for women. Although Primrose suggested that a variety of occupations were open to white women, the reality was that they normally engaged in independent enterprises that allowed them a degree of flexibility so they could continue to meet the demands of raising children and performing their usual domestic tasks. In North Carolina’s cities, those jobs were most often in the needle trades and boarding house operation.<sup>67</sup>

### **Capitalizing on the Exposition**

Since discussion of women’s contributions to the Exposition focused almost exclusively on the white women of the better class, the labor of other women in places such as Raleigh’s boarding houses and eating establishments, outside the event itself but crucial to its success, was rendered even more invisible. A nod to the contributions of

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<sup>67</sup> “The State Exposition – Women’s Department – Women’s Work,” *Register*, 16 April 1884.

women who operated petty enterprises can be found in the *Visitor's Guide*, where six female boarding house operators, eighteen dressmakers, and one milliner gained entry in a business section along with male boarding house operators, barbers, boot and shoe makers, blacksmiths, and a painter, on the assumption that their services would be required by Exposition exhibitors and visitors.<sup>68</sup>

Providing accommodations for the influx of visitors to Raleigh during the Expo became a central focus of the organizers and offers evidence of the capital opportunities the event made available to women. It was clear that Raleigh's twenty hotels and boarding houses were not enough to lodge the high numbers of Exposition visitors expected on some nights. Fair organizers and Raleigh residents accepted this reality and sought solutions well before opening day. President Primrose urged private citizens who owned houses that they "must entertain guests, in other words take boarders." The city established a bureau of information to maintain a register of "the hundreds of people who will take boarders" and there was even talk of establishing temporary hotels.<sup>69</sup> Response was encouraging, as "most of our citizens are preparing to open their doors to receive

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<sup>68</sup> *Visitor's Guide*, 67-68.

<sup>69</sup> *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory 1884* (Raleigh, N. C.: Levi Branson, Office Publisher, 1884), 641-42; unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d., Fries scrapbook, NCSA; "Exposition Notes – How the Work Progresses at the Grounds," unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d., Fries scrapbook, NCSA; "Board of Alderman," unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d., Fries scrapbook, NCSA. K. Stephen Prince found similar articles in the *Atlanta Constitution* in the months leading up to the Atlanta International Cotton Exposition in 1881, but his interpretation is that women were called upon to provide hospitality and entertainment more generally, primarily in the form of dinner or cocktail parties, rather than the lodging of guests, in "A Rebel Yell for Yankee Doodle," 340-71. Primrose specifically defined "entertaining" as providing accommodations to visitors, and that along with the numerous other discussions in newspapers forms the basis for my interpretation.

boarders...and a large number are preparing to open regular boarding houses.”<sup>70</sup> The *Chronicle* projected that “Raleigh will accommodate with comfort ten times as many persons comfortably as are usually entertained here without great comfort.”<sup>71</sup>

Confidently, the *News & Observer* reported the success of the campaign, declaring, “the accommodations in Raleigh for visitors promise to be ample.”<sup>72</sup> Even after the Exposition opened, accommodations remained foremost in many minds. Attendance was so high on Raleigh Day, one of the many specially designated days throughout the event designed to encourage large crowds through various affiliations, the city “could barely contain its visitors,” and as many as “5,500 strangers slept in Raleigh” that evening.<sup>73</sup> The issue inspired one writer to joke, “The town was full last night. One man went to his boarding house and found six ladies in his room.”<sup>74</sup>

City leaders did not publicly acknowledge that the need to house visitors would provide an opportunity for women to earn income. Women made up the majority of Raleigh’s boarding house operators and were the ones most likely to open their houses to visitors. With his use of the term *entertain* to describe boarding, Primrose associated boarding with domesticity, as did most of his contemporaries, and this worked to

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<sup>70</sup> “Exposition Accommodations,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>71</sup> “Exposition Notes,” *State Chronicle*, 12 July 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>72</sup> “Exposition Notes – Meeting of the Board of Directors Yesterday – The Progress Gratifying,” *News & Observer*, n.d., Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>73</sup> “The Great Exposition – A Grand Day – Yesterday’s Crowd Estimated at 17,000 – Good Order – Sights and Scenes at the Grounds,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>74</sup> “Exposition Notes,” unidentified newspaper clipping, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

diminish the labor involved and obscure the profit motive of professional boarding house proprietors.<sup>75</sup> Some women challenged this characterization of their businesses by seizing the opportunity afforded them by the Exposition to advertise their boarding houses. Boarding house rates ranged from \$1 to \$2 per day, while hotel rates were slightly higher, ranging from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per day. Four white women appeared in the boarding house listings of the Exposition *Visitor's Guide*; among those, Mrs. J.R. Barkley advertised "good accommodations," while Mrs. L.B. Evans courted boarders with a description of her boarding house as "first class." Ten African American-operated boarding houses also appeared in the *Visitor's Guide*, and eight of those listed men as the proprietors. Most focused not on providing lodging, but on serving meals to visitors during the Exposition, with prices ranging from twenty-five to fifty cents. This indicates that some black-owned boarding houses may have actually been restaurants temporarily expanded to profit from the Exposition. The businesses operated by Mrs. Henrietta Taylor and Mrs. J.N. Vass were classified as boarding houses in the *Visitor's Guide* but listed as restaurants in both the city directory and *Branson's North Carolina Business Directory*. Another possible explanation for the discrepancy is offered by a black

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<sup>75</sup> For discussion of how women's businesses and their history have been obscured by the impression that women's businesses were primarily an extension of their domestic duties see Wendy Gamber, "A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History," *The Business History Review* 72 (summer 1998) and *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, "Business Ladies: Midwestern Women and Enterprise, 1850-1880," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (spring 1991); and Angel Kwolek-Folland in *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998). On the business of boarding in particular, see Sandra L. Wheeler, "'To Get an Honest Livin': Professional Boardinghouse Keepers in Hartford, 1890." *Connecticut History* 36 (March 1995), 48-65, and Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

proprietress who explained that she called her Raleigh establishment a boarding house because she could not afford the license required to operate a restaurant.<sup>76</sup>

Milliners and dressmakers also advertised in the *Visitor's Guide* and the *Exposition News*, a newspaper published especially for the event, with the expectation of earning additional income from Exposition visitors. In the tradition of typical advertisements of the day, of the fifteen white dressmakers in the *Visitor's Guide*, five guaranteed a perfect fit, and two of those remarked upon their good work and the customer's satisfaction. Of the three black dressmakers listed, one described her work as fashionable, and another indicated that she was a seamstress and also produced men's clothing. The milliner and dressmaker, both white, who submitted much more elaborate and detailed advertisements to the *Exposition News*, did not appear in the *Visitor's Guide*, but the objective of all these advertisements was the same: to draw attention to the services they provided in the hope of drawing in new business during the Exposition.<sup>77</sup>

Businesswomen certainly anticipated increased profits from the additional foot traffic associated with the Exposition, but unforeseen benefits were to be had as well. Unpredictable October weather often adversely affected attendance, as newspapers noted

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<sup>76</sup> *Plans of Buildings*, 6; *Visitor's Guide*, 67; *Branson's 1884*, 642; *Raleigh City Directory*. 1883, 150, 166. Twelve of the sixteen boarding house operators in the commercial section of the 1883 city directory were women, eleven of whom were white. Fewer African American boarding houses appeared in the *Raleigh City Directory* than in the *Visitor's Guide*, another indication that black businesspeople were capitalizing on opportunities afforded by the Exposition. Men were the proprietors of two of the three black boarding houses appearing in the 1883 directory, which suggests that black men ran boarding houses more often than, or perhaps in partnership with, their wives in Raleigh, whereas more white women than white men ran boarding houses there. Interview with Della McCullers in the *Federal Writers' Project Papers*, #583, Robert O. King, "Aunt" Della McCullers' Boarding House (Della McCullers, Raleigh, 1874, black, boarding house operator, Raleigh, n.d.), SHC.

<sup>77</sup> *Visitor's Guide*, 67-68; *Exposition News*, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

frequently.<sup>78</sup> Dust, heat, rain, and cold consistently plagued fairgoers, and the weather changed – sometimes dramatically – from one day to the next. While this would appear unfavorable for local businesses, it had a surprisingly positive impact on sales in Raleigh’s clothing stores. As one reporter observed:

Wednesday, the people all wore dusters. Overcoats were not dreamed of. The rain and consequent cool weather changed matters. Thursday the people all wore wraps. To get them they had to buy them. The result was that the sales of overcoats, ladies’ cloaks, etc., were far the heaviest ever known here. At Tucker’s store, for instance, the clerks had no time to eat or do anything save wait on customers.<sup>79</sup>

Tucker’s dry goods store was a neighbor to many of the dressmakers and milliners occupying spaces in the heart of the business district like M.A. Hardie, who advertised her location as “opposite Tucker’s.” Maggie Reese, whose millinery sat one block down from Tucker’s, was one of the local businesswomen who chose to advertise in the *Exposition News*. The three other milliners on the same block as Tucker’s likely benefited from these conditions even though they did not advertise.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For example, one headline read “Blistering Heat Reduces the Crowd,” unidentified newspaper, 5 October 1884, and the *Chronicle* reported that attendance was not what it should have been due to the severe heat and drought in “A Visitor’s View. And Notions of the Exposition. Let the People Come!” 8 October 1884, Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>79</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d., Fries scrapbook, NCSA.

<sup>80</sup> Tucker’s was listed as a dry goods store in the 1886 Raleigh city directory, operated by W. H. and R.S. Tucker and located at 123 and 125 Fayetteville Street, in the center of the business district and about 1 ½ miles from the fairgrounds. They also had a display in the main building at the Exposition. Mrs. Hardie took out an advertisement in the 1880 Raleigh city directory giving Tucker’s as a landmark for finding her millinery across the street, and her residential and business address was listed as 128 Fayetteville Street in the 1886 Raleigh city directory. In addition to Hardie, three other women milliners conducted business in the 100 block of Fayetteville Street in 1883 and 1886. *Visitor’s Guide*, 92; *Chas. Emerson & Co.’s Raleigh Directory 1880-’81* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Steam Printers and Binders, 1879), front matter and *Raleigh City Directory. 1883*, 163; *Raleigh City Directory, Published by*

The most invisible of all the laboring women responsible for the success of the Exposition were those of the lower classes who worked for daily wages. The demands on women who labored as domestics, laundresses, chambermaids, restaurateurs, and providers of room and board increased during the Exposition, yet their efforts, in sharp contrast to their counterparts of the white and black better classes, received no acknowledgement from the event's organizers and earned no praise in newspapers. Historian Tera Hunter has shown how the anticipation of a huge event bringing an influx of visitors to a city could initiate negotiations for better wages or working conditions and alter the power relationship between employer and employee.<sup>81</sup> While there is no evidence of a strike like that of Atlanta's washerwomen, it is reasonable to assume that Raleigh's wage laborers responded in some meaningful way to the anticipation of the Exposition in 1884. At the very least, they were able to earn additional income as their hours and responsibilities increased.

The North Carolina State Exposition in 1884 established as its primary goal to introduce North Carolina as a progressive member of the New South, worthy of Northern capital investments and ready for the challenge of transforming its economy. It was also, like both the annual state fair and the NCIA fair incorporated under its banner in 1884, a

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*the Turner, McLean and Losee Directory Company, For the Year 1886* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Steam Printers and Binders, 1886), 53, 99, 118, 124.

<sup>81</sup> Tera Hunter, "Domination and Resistance: The Politics of Wage Household Labor in New South Atlanta." *Labor History* 34 no. 2-3 (spring/summer 1993), 205-20, and "'Washing Amazons' and Organized Protests," chapter 4 in *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

social event that attracted North Carolina residents from across the state and, although perhaps not to the extent organizers had anticipated, visitors and potential investors from outside the state. While historians have focused on the industrial-minded men who contributed considerable time, energy, and income to the event with the hope that it would provide a much-needed push toward North Carolina's forward progress, many women received credit from the state's most prominent men for their own cultural and economic contributions to the Exposition. The most visible of all were white, educated women from prominent families who were critical to the organization and success of the Exposition. White and black women of the better classes, primarily through displays of handiwork under the banners of their schools and as assistants to their male relatives who managed the event, employed the fair to demonstrate middle-class respectability, assert their social standing, and take on leadership roles.

For some of these women and numerous others, the Exposition presented additional opportunities, primarily of an economic nature. Significantly, some women found encouragement from state leaders to pursue careers and economic self-reliance in the changing economy, a reflection of the acceptance of new roles for white Southern women. Numerous women from across the state displayed, and won recognition and monetary awards for, their production of household goods and foodstuffs that provided a regular income for many of them. Businesswomen like Mary Clarke Morgan and Mrs. Joe Person demonstrated faith in the Exposition's earning potential by exhibiting their products to an expanded range of customers. Some women earned additional income boarding, feeding, and clothing fair visitors for a month, either through their established

businesses or on a temporary basis. Finally, wage-earning women whose labor supported the construction and operation of the fair, but whose efforts evaded public notice, also increased their earnings potential during the Exposition, even if only by picking up additional shifts or a heavier work load. While some of the women participating in the Exposition were credited as central to the event and discussed extensively, and others remained virtually invisible, examining all of their contributions to this event sheds light on the wide-ranging economic roles of women in the New South.

CHAPTER V  
BUSINESSWOMEN TO WAGE EARNERS: THE NEW SOUTH  
GENERATION OF EMPLOYED WOMEN

By 1897, Maggie Reese had run a successful millinery in Raleigh for fourteen years. In that year, at age forty-two, she married Vitruvius Royster, chief deputy clerk of the Superior Court. She continued to operate her business in her maiden name for a few years while employing three other milliners, two saleswomen, and a porter. She also employed her single younger sisters, one as a milliner and two others as saleswomen. After having a child, Maggie Reese closed her business. Her sisters then found jobs as members of a large sales force in the Sherwood Higgs & Company dry goods store while they continued to reside together with their widowed mother.<sup>1</sup> By the 1920s, the three younger Reese sisters, one of whom had since married, had returned to the tradition of custom hat making. They opened their own millinery, calling themselves “Misses Reese & Company,” and located their shop on Fayetteville Street, next door to an icon of the new modern conveniences available to Raleigh shoppers, the Piggly Wiggly grocery

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<sup>1</sup> *Raleigh City Directory, 1883* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Steam Printers and Binders, 1883) 100, 109, 132, 163; *Raleigh City Directory, 1886* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Power Printers and Binder, 1886), 86, 118, 124; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, North Carolina, 1887* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., Power Printers and Binders, 1887), 122, 128, 132, 158, 193; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1888* (Raleigh: Raleigh Printing Company, Printers and Publishers, 1888), 28, 86, 142; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, N.C., 1896-'97* (Raleigh: Raleigh Stationery Company, 1896), 71, 224, 226, 243, 350; *Maloney's 1899-1900 Raleigh, N. C. City Directory* (Atlanta, GA: Maloney Directory Company, 1899), 88, 96, 152, 190, 249, 257, 285, 317, 390.

store. As their sister Maggie had done for years, the Reeses offered employment to a small staff, including saleswomen and milliners.<sup>2</sup>

Employed white women were an integral part of the North Carolina Piedmont's transition to an industrial economy built upon textiles and tobacco, which began in earnest in the 1880s. As railroads increasingly crisscrossed the New South, they facilitated the growth of markets for cash crops to supply factories to make products. Small independent farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers who raised those crops found themselves subject to the vagaries of the market and frequently mired in poverty. To help farm families make ends meet, women and children often labored in the growing number of textile factories in the region, resulting in a significant rise in the proportion of married women recognized as gainfully employed in the state.<sup>3</sup> By the early 1900s, many small

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<sup>2</sup> Maloney's 1901 Raleigh City Directory (Atlanta: Maloney Directory Company, 1901), 231, 237; Hill Directory Co.'s Raleigh, N.C. City Directory, 1921-22 (Richmond, VA: Hill Directory Company, Inc., 1921), 104, 399, 417, 531; Hill Directory Co.'s Raleigh, N.C. City Directory, 1922-23 (Richmond, VA: Hill Directory Company, Inc., 1922), 100, 573.

<sup>3</sup> For analysis of the employment of white women in antebellum factories, see Bess Beatty, "I Can't Get My Bored on Them Old Looms: Female Textile Workers in the Antebellum South"; Michele Gillespie, "To Harden a Ladies Hand: Gender Politics, Racial Realities, and Women Millworkers in Antebellum Georgia"; and Susanna Delfino, "Invisible Women: Female Labor in the Upper South's Iron and Mining Industries," all in *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, ed. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Married women increased from 16% of the state's female work force in 1890 to 23% in 1900. The percentage of employed women who were married continued to increase, rising to 30% by 1920. "Table 116. Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Selected Occupations, Classified by General Nativity, Color, Age Periods, Conjugal Condition, Illiteracy, Inability to Speak English, Months Unemployed, and Country of Birth, by States and Territories: 1890. North Carolina." *Report on the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1895), 592-93. "Table 41. Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Selected Groups of Occupations, Classified by General Nativity, Color, Conjugal Condition, Months Unemployed, Age Periods, and Parentage, 1900. North Carolina." *Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1904), 356. "Table 16. Number and Proportion of Females in Each Age Period Engaged in Gainful Occupations, by Divisions and States: 1920." *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920 - Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1921), 442-43. "Table 22. Women 15 Years of Age and Over

farmers had to abandon farming. Men increasingly became mill workers, and entire families moved into mill villages like the ones established by brothers Ceasar and Moses Cone at their facilities in Greensboro.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of women's labor to factories in North Carolina, the Southern state with the largest number of women employed in manufacturing, should not be underestimated. Yet historians' focus on this move from farm to factory has fed a misapprehension that white women were only then beginning to contribute to the New South economy.<sup>5</sup> In fact, employed white women had already made their mark in the towns and cities of the Piedmont, undergirding economic expansion throughout the late nineteenth century in steadily increasing numbers primarily as needle workers, boarding house operators, and merchants catering to the expanding population. Still, observed

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Engaged in Each Selected Occupation, Classified by Marital Condition, with a Distribution of the Married by Age Periods, for States: 1920. North Carolina." *Fourteenth Census: Population*, 781-82.

<sup>4</sup> On industrial capitalism in the Piedmont and life in mill villages, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). On the importance of railroad development to industrialization in the Piedmont of North Carolina specifically, see Allen Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1871, and the Modernization of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). On the correlation between railroads and industrial development in the South generally, see Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9-20.

<sup>5</sup> C. Vann Woodward first acknowledged the centrality of women's labor to industrialization in the South, but he also downplayed the impact of the transformation from field to factory owing to the nearly homogenous demographic of the new factory workers and what he interpreted as limited changes in everyday life, in *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 222-23, 226. Recently, historians have emphasized change and the social repercussions of industrialism. For example, see Hall et al., *Like a Family*; David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); and Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). On the effects on women in particular, see Delores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985) and Marion W. Roydhouse, "'Big Enough to Tell Weeds from the Beans': The Impact of Industry on Women in the Twentieth-Century South," in *The South is Another Land: Essays on the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Bruce Clayton and John A. Salmond (Greenwood Press, 1987), 85-106.

historians Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Anne Firor Scott, “the wage work of the female mill hand attracted attention in a way that customary labor on the land and in the home had not.”<sup>6</sup> Employed white women in the years since the Civil War largely escaped extended discussion or debate because they were seen as temporary workers and their labor could more easily be connected to women’s domestic duties. Even small business enterprises, which had provided income to thousands of white women, were cast as traditional and often domestic, especially since so many businesswomen worked out of their homes.

The transition of the Reese sisters to employees for a bigger, male-owned company was typical in many respects of larger changes in women’s economic activities in place by the early twentieth century. Whereas in the period between the 1870s and 1890s white women often worked as small businesswomen in expanding Piedmont cities, by the early 1900s most were more likely to work as employees for others than independently in their own enterprises. The Reese sisters and others continued to make custom clothing and hats for customers in the early twentieth century, but the market had clearly shrunk. Traditional jobs for white women in the female economy – namely the needle trades – faded in importance as customers turned to new shopping experiences in department and specialty stores for the latest trends in women’s clothing and accessories. By the 1910s, women’s clothing became more streamlined and fashion became more relaxed, a reflection of the acceptance of mass-produced clothing, rather than custom-

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<sup>6</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Anne Firor Scott, “Women in the South,” in *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*, ed. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen (Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 479-87.

made, as the more fashionable.<sup>7</sup> As younger women entered new employment, they also lost, and sometimes rejected, traditional jobs that had sustained the previous generation and afforded them some measure of control over their working conditions. However, many older, skilled women continued to ply their trades, and jobs such as boarding house operation, which filled a demand created by the industrializing economy, continued to thrive. While the Reese sisters' move into clerical work for a large employer exemplified the shift in the nature of white women's employment at the turn of the century, their eventual return to small business ownership also illuminates the unevenness of this transition.

Even as the type of work performed by white women transformed considerably in a single generation, racialized conceptions of appropriate work for women did not fundamentally change. As white women embraced new kinds of work, black women negotiated a different and much less remunerative set of opportunities. With segregation encoded into law, black women either mainly performed work that white women refused to do or engaged in activities that reflected the growing racial divide, catering mostly to other African Americans. The New South generation of women – adult women, both black and white, who transitioned along with the economy – found their work increasingly marked by rigid racial and class boundaries.

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<sup>7</sup> On changes in women's fashion related to women's leisure and work in the late nineteenth century, see Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (The Kent State University Press, 2003).

## **White Women's Employment – New Jobs in the New South**

By 1900, Charlotte and Greensboro had become major textile manufacturing centers of the southeast, and Raleigh, the state capital, continued to grow as a center of education and government. Boosters typically focused on growth and the modern conveniences available in Piedmont cities, as in Raleigh, which its 1888 directory declared, “extend(ed) the hand of welcome to the home-seeker, capitalist and manufacturer to this healthy and progressive town.”<sup>8</sup> Part and parcel of the transition to an industrialized economy was white leaders’ commitment to the separation of the races, conditions that they suggested promoted racial harmony. Beginning with the earliest directories, publishers demarcated black residents in the Piedmont’s major cities with an asterisk or the description “colored,” and often divided black and white residents into altogether separate listings. In 1888, amid the Piedmont’s population and manufacturing boom, Raleigh’s barbers advertised along the rigid boundaries of “for colored people” or “for white people only.” Neighborhoods became increasingly segregated, and this system of *de facto* segregation was gradually encoded into law, affecting schools, transportation, and nearly every facet of Southern life. Finally, the state passed a constitutional amendment in 1900 to disfranchise African Americans, and many poor whites, with the implementation of poll taxes and literacy tests.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1888*, ii-v, 123.

<sup>9</sup> For a summary and analysis of political disfranchisement in North Carolina, see Michael Perman, “Defeating Fusion II: North Carolina, 1898-1900,” chapter 8 in *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001) and Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 247-262. For an analysis of the response of black women in the

The economic growth of North Carolina affected job opportunities for white women dramatically and rapidly in the fifty years following the Civil War. In addition to the significant increase in the numbers of employed women overall, the type of work available to white women transformed. (see chart 1) The needle trades provided work to most of the white women working in cities until the early twentieth century, but by that time the number of women employed as milliners, dressmakers, and seamstresses began to fall off. Meanwhile, beginning in the mid-1880s, the number of women employed as mill and factory operatives in the state increased rapidly. By 1900, the number of women employed in the state's factories had grown to over 17,000, or nearly eleven percent of all employed women in the state. (see chart 2) At the turn of the twentieth century, white women made up close to 100 percent of all female operatives with the exception of tobacco factories, where black women made up over seventy percent of workers. Only a generation earlier, a nearly equal number of white women worked in the needle trades as worked as factory operatives. After increasing in the 1870s and 1880s, the percentage of women employed in the needle trades peaked at 5.2 percent in 1890 then dropped to 3.7 percent by 1900.<sup>10</sup>

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state to disfranchisement, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> "Table 41. Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Selected Groups of Occupations, Classified by General Nativity, Color, Conjugal Condition, Months Unemployed, Age Periods, and Parentage: 1900. North Carolina." *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900), 356.

**Chart 1: Numbers and Percentage of Employed Women in North Carolina**

Census Year+	# employed women in NC	% women employed
1870	58860	14.56
1880	86976	17.58
1890	115192	19.6
1900	160161	23
1910	272990*	34*
1920	202697	22

Sources: *Ninth Census: Population* (1870); *Tenth Census: Population* (1880); *Eleventh Census: Population* (1890); *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900); *Thirteenth Census: Population* (1910); *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920). U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

+ the 1860 census did not provide statistics on working women other than the numbers of needle workers, as shown in chart 5

\*marked increase the result of “overenumeration,” of female agricultural workers in 1910

New jobs in factories signaled an important change in employment opportunities for white working-class women in North Carolina’s cities, as did expanded opportunities in teaching for educated women. In 1880, teaching, a growing occupational category for

**Chart 2: Gainfully Employed Females Age 10 and Over, Factory Operatives**

Census Year	Operatives <sup>1</sup>	% of total
1870	1192	2
1880	2815	3.2
1890	7216	6.3
1900	17196	10.7
1910	27738	10
1920	29065	14

Sources: *Eighth Census: Population* (1860), *Ninth Census: Population* (1870); *Tenth Census: Population* (1880); *Eleventh Census: Population* (1890); *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900); *Thirteenth Census: Population* (1910); *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920) U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

<sup>1</sup> category includes operatives in cotton, oil and refinery, paper, silk, and woolen mills, tobacco factories, and mill and factory operatives (not specified)

women throughout the late nineteenth century, still attracted a nearly equal number of men as women. By 1900, the number of women employed as teachers was double that of men. An increasingly gendered occupation available to the state's single, educated women, the number of teaching positions held by women quadrupled between 1870 and

1900, but saw its most rapid rate of growth among the next generation of women teaching in the twentieth century. (see chart 3) By 1900, black women comprised nearly twenty-five percent of those teachers, working in racially segregated, all-black schools. The percentage of black women teaching in North Carolina's schools had dropped to just twenty-one percent by 1920, an immediate effect of the implementation of Jim Crow. However, the number of black women employed as teachers rebounded and reached twenty-five percent again in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

As traditional urban occupations for women such as dressmaking and millinery diminished in importance, expanding cities continued to offer some women self-employment opportunities in more diverse lines of work. Groceries were among the most numerous businesses in the commercial sections of directories and although they never formed a significant number of grocers, at least seven white women and two black women operated their own groceries in Raleigh. Black women operated seven eating houses and two restaurants in Raleigh, and a handful of white women offered services as artists and music teachers.<sup>12</sup>

African American women also found a niche market in the new economy, offering hairdressing to a black female clientele. Twelve of the fifteen hairdressers who appeared in the business directory for Raleigh in 1922 were African American. All but

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<sup>11</sup> "Table 41. Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Selected Groups of Occupations, Classified by General Nativity, Color, Conjugal Condition, Months Unemployed, Age Periods, and Parentage: 1900. North Carolina." *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900), 356. *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920). *Fifteenth Census: Population* (1930); *Sixteenth Census: Population* (1940). U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Maloney's 1899-1900 Raleigh*, 387-388, 390-391, 396-398, 401, 410.

**Chart 3: Gainfully Employed Females Age 10 and Over, Teachers**

Census Year	Teachers	% of total
1860	1936 (both men and women)	
1870	966	1.6
1880	1407	1.6
1890	2884	2.5
1900	4095	2.6
1910	7542	2.7
1920	12451	6

Sources: *Eighth Census: Population* (1860), *Ninth Census: Population* (1870); *Tenth Census: Population* (1880); *Eleventh Census: Population* (1890); *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900); *Thirteenth Census: Population* (1910); *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920). U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

one of these hairdressers operated out of her home, and they all lived in predominantly segregated neighborhoods alongside other African Americans on their block. The

locations of these businesses suggest that they primarily or exclusively served other black women, as white women were unlikely to travel into African American neighborhoods for such services.<sup>13</sup>

### **Boarding House Proprietors: Accommodating Change in the New South**

In the first decades of the twentieth century, boarding house operation did not die out the way some other traditional work options for women had, but it did undergo considerable change. The influx of new and transient workers to Piedmont cities created a growing and constant demand for affordable, temporary housing, and the number of women in the state working as boarding house operators increased substantially each decade between the Civil War and the early twentieth century. (see chart 4) Women were able to maintain the viability of their boarding houses amid competition from other forms of housing by responding to changing needs as the urban landscape took shape.

Boarding house operators suited their businesses to the New South environment and an urban work force in important ways. For example, as historian Louis Kyriakoudes has shown in Nashville, Tennessee, the increasing presence in early-twentieth-century North Carolina of “pink collar” workers in clerical and sales positions stimulated the growth of boarding houses catering to single wage-earning women. Such boarding houses

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<sup>13</sup> *Hill's Raleigh 1922-23*, 86, 201, 216, 238-9, 280, 319, 327, 466, 558, 559, 581, 593, 604, 616.

**Chart 4: Gainfully Employed Females Age 10 and Over, Boarding and Hotels**

Census Year	Boarding	Hotel Keepers	total
1870	15	9	24
1880	73	31	104
1890	258	74	332
1900	698	128	826
1910	1566	186	1752
1920	1401	336	1737
1930	2443	224	2667

Sources: *Ninth Census: Population* (1870); *Tenth Census: Population* (1880); *Eleventh Census: Population* (1890); *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900); *Thirteenth Census: Population* (1910); *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920); *Fifteenth Census: Population* (1930). U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

promised safe and affordable housing to women who had moved away from their families to the cities, seeking opportunity and independence.<sup>14</sup>

By the 1920s, in addition to boarding houses and apartment buildings, Piedmont directories had also begun listing “furnished rooms,” which catered to low-income earners and transients.<sup>15</sup> Among the women offering this new form of cheap, temporary housing was Nancy Gill at 418 South Person Street in Raleigh. Gill had started her business in the early 1900s, and had been operating for nearly thirty years when she granted an interview to the Federal Writers’ Project in 1938. At age 84, Gill was still doing all the laundry, cooking, and cleaning for her customers herself. Having grown up in a family of “hardworking po’ white folks,” Gill’s story was a familiar one: She had moved to Raleigh as a young wife and mother in 1880, seeking new opportunities because her family had struggled to make ends meet on a farm. Her husband died in the early twentieth century, at which time she sought an occupation that might allow her to support herself and her children. “I have always been independent and I don’t want to be dependent on anybody for my living,” she recalled. “So, I went into my room, locked the door, and thought for a while. Finally, I decided that I would operate a cheap rooming house in Raleigh, and I have been earning my living in that way ever since.” Gill maintained her business by accommodating to change over time. As she observed,

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<sup>14</sup> Louis Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 141-42.

<sup>15</sup> The 1921 Raleigh city directory, for example, listed 4 apartment buildings and 14 establishments offering furnished rooms in addition to 28 boarding houses. Women operated 71% of the furnished rooms and 79% of the boarding houses that year. *Hill’s Raleigh 1921-22*, 58, 67, 84.

“Raleigh used to be a big tobacco market and farmers would come here from miles away ... most of them rented cheap rooms. Things are different now ... (t)hey come to town in their automobiles, transact their business, and they go back home. I depend on floaters now, men going from one town to another.” The interviewer described Gill’s renters as not only floaters but also “habitual drunkards, and street bums,” but Gill said she had little trouble with them. She paid \$15 each month for the house and earned about \$40 each month in rent.<sup>16</sup>

After 1900, African American women were among those who benefited from the demand for housing among new workers. One result of the transition from exclusion to segregation with Jim Crow was that black women held an eighteen percent share of the boarding house market in the state by 1920. Although their numbers had increased statewide, black boarding house operators remained essentially invisible to mainstream directory publishers. Only one of the twenty-two boarding houses listed under individual names in the 1921 directory for Raleigh was that of an African American woman. In Charlotte, the numbers were slightly more favorable, with two African American women out of the fifteen listed as boarding house operators in 1920.<sup>17</sup>

Boarding house operators like Nancy Gill assessed the needs of residents and visitors and adapted their services so that they could continue to earn a living in the

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<sup>16</sup> Robert O. King, *Mrs. Nancy Gill's Lodging House* (Nancy Gill, ca. 1854, Wake Co., white, boarding house operator, Raleigh, 20-24 November 1938) Federal Writers' Project Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina.

<sup>17</sup> *Hill's Raleigh 1921-22*, 67. *Charlotte, North Carolina City Directory* (Asheville, N.C.: Commercial Service Co., 1920), 679-80, 700. “Occupations. Table 1. Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Each Selected Occupation, Classified by Color or Race, Nativity, and Parentage, and Age Periods, by States: 1920.” *Fourteenth Census: Population*, 989.

industrializing urban economy. Their stories illuminate the unevenness of the transition from needle trades and boarding in the late nineteenth century to clerical and factory work in the early twentieth, particularly for the older generation of white women, to whom this work had proved a viable source of income in previous years.

### **Race and the Needle Trades**

In the early twentieth century, while boarding house operators increased in numbers, traditional jobs for white women in the needle trades faded in importance and became a thing of the past, as customers turned to department and specialty stores for the latest trends in women's clothing and accessories. The number of women employed in the needle trades had doubled between 1870 and 1880, and then doubled again the following decade. In 1890, more white women were employed in the state as dressmakers, seamstresses, and milliners than worked as operatives in cotton mills. Yet in the 1890s the percentage of employed women engaged in these occupations began to decrease. Change did not happen all at once or uniformly. Like the Reese sisters, some women retained self-employment opportunities in needlework. Indeed, the actual number of white women engaged in dressmaking increased between 1900 and 1910. However, it decreased substantially in the following decade, and by 1920, the needle trades had dropped to their lowest proportion of employed women in the state since 1870. (see chart 5)

White women's engagement with dressmaking in Raleigh exemplified trends in urban areas throughout the state. The number of dressmakers listed in the commercial

**Chart 5: NC – Gainfully Employed Females Age 10 and Over, Needle Workers**

Census Year	# working in NC	Milliners	Dressmakers	Seamstresses	Tailoresses	Total Needle Trades	% of total
1860	+	66	106	5019	228	5419	
1870	58860	174	<sup>1</sup>	964	<sup>1</sup>	1138	1.9
1880	86976	2355	<sup>2</sup>	<sup>2</sup>	113	2468	3.7
1890	115192	603	1052	4227	144	6026	5.2
1900	160161	512	2735	2386	325	5958	3.7
1910	272990*	979	6241	<sup>2</sup>	<sup>2</sup>	7220	2.6
1920	202697	586	2728	<sup>2</sup>	73	3387	1.8

Sources: *Eighth Census: Population* (1860), *Ninth Census: Population* (1870); *Tenth Census: Population* (1880); *Eleventh Census: Population* (1890); *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900); *Thirteenth Census: Population* (1910); *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920). U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

+ the 1860 census did not provide statistics on working women other than the numbers of needle workers shown on this chart

\*marked increase the result of “overenumeration,” of female agricultural workers in 1910.

<sup>1</sup> in 1870, milliners, mantuamakers, and dressmakers formed one category, while tailoresses and seamstresses formed another

<sup>2</sup> in 1880, milliners, dressmakers, and seamstresses (not factory) were grouped together, while tailoresses were another category; in 1910 and 1920, dressmakers and seamstresses (not factory) formed a single category

section of the Raleigh city directories for both 1888 and 1896 remained steady (at forty-one and forty-two respectively), but residential listings reveal that the number of women actually performing this work expanded considerably, increasing from seventy-two in 1888 to 123 in 1896. Only one of the dressmakers listed in either of these years was African American. By the turn of the twentieth century, dressmaking was a vanishing profession, underscored by its virtual disappearance from city directories. While they listed thirty dressmakers in the commercial section of their publication for 1899-1900, Maloney's directory opted not to list dressmakers in the commercial section at all in 1901. At least thirty-three women in the city still claimed the occupation that year, but this was a significant decrease from the 123 only five years earlier. By 1922, when a different company published Raleigh's directory, only twenty-two dressmakers appeared in the business section of the directory, with an additional three in the residential section, a drop of eighty percent in one generation. Similarly, the Charlotte city directory for 1920 listed only twenty-nine "dressmakers and fitters," and just three additional dressmakers were found in the residential section.<sup>18</sup>

Although in the late nineteenth century the majority of craftswomen in the needle trades worked independently out of their own homes, growth in cities throughout the period promoted the expansion of retail stores where white women increasingly found employment. Men appealed to the ever more important female customer by incorporating women's fashion into their larger firms, often with the addition of millinery

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<sup>18</sup> *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1888*, 132-133; *Directory of the City of Raleigh, 1896-'97*, 338-339; *Maloney's Raleigh, 1899-1900*, 396-397; *Maloney's 1901 Raleigh City Directory* (Atlanta: The Maloney Directory Co., 1901), 285; *Hill's Raleigh 1922-23*, 74-75. *Charlotte Directory* (1920), 694.

and dressmaking departments in general or dry goods stores. Experienced white women usually supervised millinery departments in men's stores, like Miss E. E. Burnside, the "foreman" of the millinery department in W. S. Moore's Greensboro store.<sup>19</sup> Although subject to the authority of their employers, working in these stores also offered certain advantages over self-employment, such as limited to no investment in materials, rent, and advertisement as well as a reliable customer base, depending on the reputation of the store owner. These jobs offered women greater economic security than they could often expect working on their own, and as these opportunities expanded women may have preferred them over riskier – and increasingly less viable – independent business ownership. In her study on businesswomen in San Francisco, historian Edith Sparks argues that women who had capitalized on available opportunities in small business proprietorship in the nineteenth century began to reject proprietorship over time both because of the risks involved and because opportunities availed themselves in new fields.<sup>20</sup> In North Carolina, some skilled white women found work in large establishments such as the Wittkowsky & Rintels store in Charlotte, which offered dry goods, groceries, shoes, and clothing. By 1876 the store employed thirty-six workers,

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<sup>19</sup> *Chas. Emerson & Co.'s Winston, Salem & Greensboro North Carolina Directory, 1879-'80* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1879), 83. Although she was listed as Mr. Moore's employee in this earlier source, five years later Miss E. E. Burnside was listed as a saleslady in Mr. Moore's wife's millinery in the *Directory of Greensboro, Salem, and Winston and Gazetteer of Forsyth and Guilford Counties* (Atlanta, GA: Interstate Directory Company, 1884), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Edith Sparks, *Capital Intentions: Female Proprietors in San Francisco, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1-21.

including five women.<sup>21</sup> As in women-owned businesses, family ties frequently shaped women's work for larger employers. Mrs. L. E. Benson and her younger sister, Miss A. M. Edny, worked as milliners for Wittkowsky and Rintels. Also working as dressmakers for the firm were Miss Lizzie Alexander and Mrs. Mary Reed and her daughter, Mollie.<sup>22</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, only a few department stores selling ready-to-wear women's fashions existed in the Piedmont, but by the early twentieth century they had become a staple of city life and a reliable employment option for white women. White women who might have turned to dressmaking in the past, and whose mothers and other older female relatives had worked in the needle trades, were now more likely to clerk in stores selling factory-produced clothing. For example, by the end of the century, when milliner Bettie Besson retired, her daughters all went to work for the same male-operated dry goods store in Raleigh, two as clerks and one as a milliner. Similarly, Lily Benson's mother had worked at Wittkowsky & Rintels and independently as a milliner, but Benson, trained in millinery by her mother, had taken on the new occupation of saleslady for a Charlotte department store by the early twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

With the diminishing numbers of dressmakers overall came an increasing number of African American women employed in the occupation. In the early 1920s, half of all

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hanchett points out that large firms had not yet replaced smaller firms in North Carolina's cities in the mid-1870s, but he argues that Wittkowsky & Rintels, with its numerous employees and imposing building on Trade Street, represented "the start of large-scale economic enterprises in Charlotte," in *Sorting out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 35-37.

<sup>22</sup> *Beasley & Emerson's*, 26, 29, 41, 72, 109. Mrs. L. E. (Louisa) Benson was 36 and A. M. Edny was 31 in 1880. 1880 Federal Manuscript Census, Mecklenburg County, Charlotte First Ward, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Maloney's Raleigh, 1899-1900*, 149.

the dressmakers in both Raleigh (thirteen out of twenty-two) and Charlotte (fourteen out of twenty-nine) were African American.<sup>24</sup> In his study on black entrepreneurs in North Carolina, historian Robert Kenzer concludes that self-employment opportunities for blacks in the state increased in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>25</sup> However, Kenzer's analysis does not consider how some of these jobs may have opened up to black women in part because younger white women in cities rejected dressmaking in favor of jobs as operatives in factories and mills, stenographers and typists, and saleswomen. Indeed, census information reveals that white dressmakers were older by 1900 than those women finding other kinds of work in cities. While most of these new occupations were closed to black women, dressmaking was one that opened up to them. By 1920, African American women accounted for twenty-nine percent of dressmakers in the state. This growth in dressmaking among black women also reflected the larger number of black women in cities who could afford these services. However, since by this time the crafting of custom clothing and hats provided an occupation to less than two percent of all employed women, limited numbers of black women stood to benefit.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Hill's Raleigh 1922*, 74-75; *Charlotte 1920*, 694.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Kenzer, "The Black Business Community," chapter 2 in *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> "Table 41." *Twelfth Census: Population*, 356. "Occupations. Table 1. Total Males and Females 10 Years of Age and Over Engaged in Each Selected Occupation, Classified by Color or Race, Nativity, and Parentage, and Age Periods, by States: 1920." *Fourteenth Census: Population*, 989.

## **Black Women's Employment – The Transformation of Laundering**

As the younger generation of white women pursued new lines of work, the younger generation of black women generally continued to work in the same jobs as their older family members – primarily as laundresses and domestic servants. These occupations became increasingly racially segregated in the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1930, black women rose from seventy-five percent to ninety percent of domestic servants, and the proportion of black women employed as laundresses remained steady at ninety-five percent. These circumstances were not static, however, and continued to be affected by changes in the economy. As a result of the Great Depression, the number of white women turning to work in domestic service rose and black women accounted for only eighty-six percent of domestic servants and seventy-two percent of laundresses in 1940. Not only did white women take on this work traditionally performed by black women, they also grew from seventy-two percent of dressmakers and seamstresses in 1930 to eighty-three percent in 1940, so they negatively affected the gains made by black women in the needle trades. The limited job opportunities in the state for black women, and evidence of the ability of white women in times of hardship to move into jobs traditionally reserved for black women, are an example of the strangulating effects of segregation and white economic power in North Carolina after 1900.<sup>27</sup> (see chart 6)

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. "Occupation Statistics. Table 11. Males and Females 10 Years Old and Over in Selected Occupations, by Color, Nativity, and Age, for the State: 1930." *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930 – Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1933), 1213. "North Carolina. Table 13. Race and Age of Employed Persons (Except on Public Emergency Work), and of Experienced Workers Seeking Work, by

**Chart 6: Gainfully Employed Females Age 10 and Over, Domestic Servants and Laundresses**

Census Year	Domestic Servants	% AA	Laundresses	% AA
1870	23866	+	834	+
1880	28683	+	3542	+
1890	27055	71	8129	94
1900	25278	75*	12696	94
1910	28226	82	23192	95
1920	20763	86	15185	95
1930	44121	90	16414	95

Sources: *Ninth Census: Population* (1870); *Tenth Census: Population* (1880); *Eleventh Census: Population* (1890); *Twelfth Census: Population* (1900); *Thirteenth Census: Population* (1910); *Fourteenth Census: Population* (1920). U.S. Census Bureau, online at <http://www.census.gov/>.

+ statistics on race not available for these years

\* category included domestic servants and waitresses in 1900

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Occupation and Sex, for the State, and for Cities of 100,000 or More: 1940." *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 – Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1943), 547.

Laundry work remained the domain of African American women, and was one of few work options consistently available to them. In retaining this foothold they continued to exercise a degree of control in the conditions of their labor. Yet beginning in the late nineteenth century, modern steam laundries as well as Chinese-owned laundries offered independent laundresses competition. By the early twentieth century, commercial laundry service was booming, and several modern laundries in Piedmont cities competed with independent laundresses.<sup>28</sup> As the twentieth century progressed, laundresses also faced modernizing households with washing machines.

The virulent racism of the Jim Crow South added to the challenges facing laundresses. Despite traditional reliance on black women's services, historian Tera Hunter reveals "dominant racial notions linking disease to black servants," particularly laundresses, in Atlanta at the end of the nineteenth century. A tuberculosis scare there prompted accusations that washerwomen worked and lived in unsanitary conditions and was followed by proposals to regulate washerwomen through fees and physical inspections. These unfounded fears also fed competition from commercial laundries. In his study of Nashville historian Louis Kyriakouides has shown how, as technology advanced, commercial laundries there attempted to reduce competition from black laundresses in the period from 1900 to 1930 "through a racist advertising campaign that

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<sup>28</sup> Raleigh advertised a Chinese laundry as early as 1888, and steam laundries by 1896. *Directory of Raleigh 1888*, 64; *Directory of Raleigh, 1896-'97*, 347. Greensboro had a Chinese laundry as early as 1892. *Greensboro City Directory for 1892-'93* (Greensboro: Stone and Kendall Publishers, 1892), commercial listing. Charlotte had three steam laundries and one Chinese laundry by 1910. *Walsh's Charlotte, North Carolina City Directory for 1910* (Charleston, SC: The Walsh Directory Company, 1910), 473. These numbers continued to expand, with as many as nine commercial laundries in Charlotte and six in Raleigh by the early 1920s. *Charlotte Directory* (1920), 717-18; *Hill's Raleigh 1922*, 96-7.

associated black women with dirt and disease.” He links the consistent use by white launderers of the term “sanitary” to these efforts. Both Raleigh and Charlotte had white-owned laundries that used “sanitary” in their business names, but no overtly racist messages like the ones Kyriakoudes found or suggestions that black laundresses were not clean appear in directory advertisements for either city. This cannot be interpreted as a more “progressive” stance on race relations in the state, but rather, the practical demand for laborers may have curbed some of this rhetoric as the Sanitary Laundry in Charlotte, for example, employed both African American and white women.<sup>29</sup> Further, the term “sanitary” had become common as a result of Progressive reform measures and was used by a variety of businesses listed in city directories. These businesses included a black-owned barber shop in Charlotte in 1915, although the Sanitary Barber Shop in that city was a white-owned business in 1920.<sup>30</sup>

In the increasingly competitive field of laundry service, white and African American men created new business opportunities for themselves. Some opened businesses offering a variety of cleaning methods as well as ironing to busy professionals. While African American women continued to serve customers as laundresses across the Piedmont, they rarely became the owners or operators of the new commercial laundries and cleaners. African American men operated twelve of the twenty-one cleaning

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<sup>29</sup> Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 187-218. Kyriakoudes, 139-40. *Charlotte Directory* (1920), 107, 120, 135, 173, 221, 223, 225, 329, 330, 445, 467, passim.

<sup>30</sup> For examples of the use of the term “sanitary” among Piedmont businesses, see *Raleigh (N.C.) Directory 1919-1920* (Richmond, VA: Hill Directory Co., 1919), 37, 104, 135, 190, 206, 226, 349, 382, 401, 403, 411; *Charlotte, North Carolina City Directory 1915* (Asheville, N.C.: Piedmont Directory Company, 1915), Kirkwood's Dairy advertisement, insert between pages 300 and 301, 413, 503, 533, 635; *Charlotte Directory* (1920), 21, 139, 238, 540-541.

businesses listed in Raleigh's 1922 directory, and only one of those men lived with a laundress. Lewis Goode, proprietor of Chelsea Tailors, which offered cleaning, pressing, and tailoring services to customers, was married to Estella, a laundress, who may have assisted in her husband's business. The wives of the other married men operating these businesses worked as domestics and cooks, and owing to the demand that they work in their employers' homes were unlikely to have played any significant role in their husband's businesses.<sup>31</sup>

The rise of middle-class professionals in need of specialty laundry services in Piedmont cities also brought about the development of "pressing clubs," offering the service of "keeping a handsome suit in excellent condition, sponged, pressed, and with unbroken stitches" for an annual fee. In 1915, Fink's Pressing Club in Charlotte advertised "fine custom tailoring," "sanitary steam pressing," and "expert dry cleaning." Charlotte's Acme and City Pressing Clubs both advertised membership rates at \$1.00 each month.<sup>32</sup> Although *Good Housekeeping* magazine reported that pressing clubs grew out of a woman's "ingenuity when prodded by poverty" as well as her skills in cleaning clothes and her ability "to use a hot iron on a cloth suit as ably as any tailor," it was neither skilled needle workers nor laundresses who opened these businesses in Piedmont

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<sup>31</sup> *Hill's Raleigh 1922-23*, 67, 195-197, 275, 291, 380, 443.

<sup>32</sup> Eighteen cleaning and pressing businesses were listed in the 1915 Charlotte directory, 6 of which were operated by African American men, and 3 of which were white-owned pressing clubs. Three such clubs operated in Raleigh by 1922, all run by white men. *Charlotte Directory 1915*, 4, 15, 508, 613; *Hill's Raleigh 1922-23*, 67.

cities. Pressing clubs were owned and operated by white men who hired women as their employees.<sup>33</sup>

Although black women did not lose their small business opportunities in laundry service to the degree and with the rapidity that white women lost theirs in needle work, the formerly feminized occupation of laundry service underwent masculinization as it commercialized across the South, pushing laundresses out of this traditional occupation over time. The New South created work opportunities for white women to replace those they had lost to modernization, whereas the majority of black women remained mired in the few, racially distinct jobs available to them, several of which were declining.

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When women moved to Piedmont cities in the early twentieth century, they faced a changed environment from that of the immediate postwar years and with very different opportunities for making a living. Teaching had become a common choice among single and widowed educated women. Although it had employed far fewer women throughout the late nineteenth century than the needle trades, by 1900 four thousand women worked as teachers, and that number tripled within twenty years. Traditionally a choice for the elite and educated – men and women, black and white – the expansion of public education generally to teach a broader range of North Carolina’s citizens and, especially, the establishment of college programs in existing institutions and normal schools to train

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<sup>33</sup> Isabel Gordon Curtis, “New Sources of Income,” *Good Housekeeping* 31 (November, 1900), 264-65.

teachers in the late nineteenth century, provided the foundation upon which this job became a primarily female profession in the twentieth century. Teaching became, in fact, the almost singular focus of elite white women's education, preparing them for either a respectable (if not highly remunerative) career or, as historian Jane Turner Censer has argued was the case for most white teachers, "as a bridge from girlhood to marriage or at times when family needs were pressing."<sup>34</sup>

While white women found their educational options limited to the field of education, African American women struggled against a segregated public school system that provided especially meager funding to black schools and a system of higher education that emphasized industrial training. Public education made lasting and important gains during Reconstruction, but retrenchment became the watchword for Democrats who seized power in the state in 1870. Accusing the ousted Republican leadership of excesses and confronting an economic depression, new leadership across the South followed a policy that "generally discouraged the expansion of public school opportunities."<sup>35</sup> The white political and economic elite often viewed the education of blacks as a waste of funds, preferring to limit their reach to what they assessed to be the "proper" education for blacks, one that would ensure an entrenched, manual labor force. Historian James Anderson has argued that Northern white philanthropists, those traditionally credited for taking a progressive stance while funding and building black

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<sup>34</sup> Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood*, 156-58, 170-80; Ayers, 211-13.

<sup>35</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 20-23; Ayers, 44-45.

schools in the South, supported an industrial education modeled after Tuskegee or Hampton for the purpose of readying the next generation of youth for “Negro jobs.”<sup>36</sup> White taxpayers bemoaned that they were “taxed to death to educate negroes,” when in fact, white schools benefited from public funding at the expense of black schools. Black taxpayers faced the burden of not only contributing toward an unequal school system but also making up for the discrepancies by pulling from their own personal accounts and seeking other sources of funding for black schools.<sup>37</sup> Despite the obvious problems, African Americans in the Piedmont continued to invest their money and their faith in schools because they saw education as essential to freedom and equality.

Cities offered the best schools and work conditions for teachers, as well as leadership positions for educated men and women in both schools and communities more generally. African American teachers provided political leadership and, “(a)long with ministers, they enjoyed prestige and wielded influence.”<sup>38</sup> While their activities and goals often took different trajectories, black and white women who had achieved higher education were those most likely to become clubwomen and use their positions toward leadership roles in their communities as a result. Black and white clubwomen were

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<sup>36</sup> Anderson, 35-37, 40, 42-44, 52, 67-68, 197-98, 206-37; John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, sixth edition, 1988), 239-44, 246-50.

<sup>37</sup> Ayers, 419-25; Adam Fairclough, “‘Being in the Field of Education and Also Being a Negro... Seems... Tragic’: Black Teachers in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 87 (June 2000), 77-79.

<sup>38</sup> Fairclough, *passim*, quotation p. 66; Censer, 172-73, 174-80; Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 179-87.

married to businessmen, professionals, and educators. Black clubwomen, who were more likely to work for wages than their white counterparts, were most likely to seek employment as teachers. In keeping with the conservative stance toward black education across the South, white clubwomen generally promoted industrial education for African American students as a means of social control. Black clubwomen also promoted industrial education out of their dedication to “race uplift,” and saw it as a means to not only prepare young African Americans for the job market but also to eventually improve the prospects of lower-class blacks by instilling those traits deemed “respectable” and easing negative stereotypes.<sup>39</sup> Despite their own access to and education in the arts and literature, science, and classical studies, most educated, middle-class blacks did not openly challenge industrial education when whites provided most of the funding. Yet, as historian Adam Fairclough notes, private black schools continued the tradition of educating students in the liberal arts and for professions, and even in public schools, the

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<sup>39</sup> Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Ladies, New Women: Race, Region, and Clubwomen in South Carolina, 1890-1930* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 1-23, 66-67, 190-92. See also Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). On race uplift as a goal among North Carolina’s black elite and middle class generally, see Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, revised edition, 2002), 99-105. On the women’s club movement, see also Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) and *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Anastasia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997). On African American clubwomen in particular, see Dorothy Salem, *To Better our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890- 1920* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1990); Anne Firor Scott, “Most Invisible of All: Black Women’s Voluntary Associations,” *Journal of Southern History* 56 (February 1990), 3-22; and Stephanie Shaw, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 3 (summer 1991), 10-25.

quiet persistence of black teachers improved course offerings and raised classroom standards over time.<sup>40</sup>

Teachers and ministers, along with businesspeople and skilled craftsmen, formed the expanding black middle class in Piedmont cities. Black urban population increased significantly across the Upper South in the late nineteenth century and black business ownership ballooned, increasing 1000 percent between 1870 and 1910. Much of this increase occurred in the 1880s, with an expansion of black-owned businesses catering more and more to a black clientele. By the 1890s, concludes historian Loren Schweninger, “in most towns and cities, small Negro business districts emerged, typically including a grocery store, saloon, restaurant, dry goods establishment, rooming house, small hotel, barbershop, undertaker, and livery stable.”<sup>41</sup> This improvement in black business in the Upper South in the late nineteenth century was evident in Piedmont cities, but it was highly gendered, as very few black women operated businesses in Piedmont cities, and it was marked by both gains and losses. In the case of groceries in Raleigh in the 1880s, for example, blacks made a significant improvement from thirteen percent of all grocers in 1880 to twenty-eight percent by 1887. However, a decline was evident in 1888, when blacks made up only twenty-four percent of grocers, and by 1896, the proportion of black grocers had dropped to its 1880 level. Meanwhile, in the city of Durham, black men never made up more than seventeen percent of grocers between 1887

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<sup>40</sup> Fairclough, 70-74, 81-83.

<sup>41</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 176-182; Crow et. al., 106-07.

and 1911, and the directory publisher left them out of the commercial section of the 1902 directory completely, opting to list only white grocers that year.<sup>42</sup>

Although the tale of Durham's black grocers suggests that black businessmen there were not raking in their share of African American dollars spent in the late nineteenth century, the growth of black business was one of the most significant changes in Piedmont business in the early twentieth century. Durham garnered much-deserved attention early in the twentieth century as the "capital of the black middle class," the "city of Negro enterprise," and "Black Wall Street." In an era when the quintessential success story was that of the "self-made man," accounts of Durham often centered around John Merrick, a former slave who entered the barber's trade, eventually operated six barber shops in Durham, and established with his partners the nation's largest black-owned insurance company, North Carolina Mutual, in 1898.<sup>43</sup> Black Durham witnessed substantial growth, particularly among professionals. African American doctors consistently formed twenty percent of all physicians listed in Durham's directory in the

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<sup>42</sup> *Raleigh City Directory 1880*, 167-69; *Raleigh City Directory 1883*, 158-59; *Raleigh City Directory 1886*, 161-63; *Raleigh City Directory 1887*, 24, 37, 40, 53, 141, 188-90; *Raleigh City Directory 1888*, ix, 88, 136-38; *Raleigh City Directory 1896*, 343-44. *Directory of the Business and Citizens of Durham City for 1887* (Raleigh: Levi Branson, Publisher, 1887), 168-69; *Directory of Greater Durham North Carolina* (Durham: Samuel L. Adams, 1902), 287-90; *Seeman's Durham (North Carolina) Directory 1911-1912* (Durham: Press of the Seeman Printery, 1911), 129-44, 237-38.

<sup>43</sup> Franklin E. Frazier, "Durham: The Capital of the Black Middle Class," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925. Reprint, New York: Antheneum/Macmillan, 1999), 331-41; Booker T. Washington, "Durham, North Carolina, a City of Negro Enterprise," *Independent* 70 (23 March 1911), 644-48; W.E.B. DuBois, *The Upbuilding of Black Durham: The success of the Negroes and their value to a tolerant and helpful southern city*. *World's Work* 23 (Jan. 1912) [S. l.: s. n., 1912]. Electronic resource, *Documenting the American South* (Chapel Hill: University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002); Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 3-5; Crow et. al., 127-29.

first two decades of the twentieth century, black men continued to make up a large proportion of the ministers, barbers, shoemakers, and draymen there, and they made gains as real estate agents, druggists, dentists, and tailors. Showing a willingness to take chances in enterprises selling products to city residents with disposable income, black men (and a few black women) made up a significant majority of the distributors of soft drinks and they opened several candy stores. Population growth in the city also spurred black men to take their share of new construction as building contractors, forming fifteen percent of that field by 1923.<sup>44</sup> Scholars have drawn a direct connection between the founding of North Carolina Mutual and other black businesses in this period and the political upheaval associated with the Wilmington Race Riot in 1898. Forced to abandon political aspirations due to the forces of institutionalized segregation and racial violence, many of the most talented African Americans in the state turned to other areas, particularly education and business, as means of “upbuilding” the black community and improving their personal circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

Black businesswomen never formed a substantial proportion of black businesses in Durham or other Piedmont cities, but they did have an increasing presence beginning in the early twentieth century. In Durham, black women had made significant gains in dressmaking and hair dressing, particularly, which was a direct result of an expanded middle class of black women who desired and could afford these services. The high

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<sup>44</sup> *Hill Directory Co. 's Durham (Incorporated), N.C. City Directory 1923* (Richmond, Va.: Hill Directory Co. Inc., 1923), 49-98.

<sup>45</sup> Sydney Nathans, *The Quest for Progress: The Way We Lived in North Carolina, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 79-81; Weare, 21-23, 30.

profiles of two of these women, dressmaker Kate Whitley and beauty salon proprietor Eugenia Simmons, reveal their import to and status within Durham's black business community. The eponymous Eugenia Beauty Parlor was located at 210 Guthrie Avenue, in the building anchored by attorney William Cannady and four of Durham's black doctors. Simmons was either single or widowed, and resided with another of Durham's small businesswomen, Kate Whitley. The Home Dressmaking Shop, Whitley's business with partner Ethel Clay, was located in the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company annex. Whitley and Clay's business neighbors included John Merrick's company and the offices of two doctors, a lawyer, a minister, and the *Standard Advertiser*, a newspaper edited by Reverend Richard Spiller.<sup>46</sup> The clientele of these evidently highly respectable businesswomen likely included the wives of the professionals with whom they shared space as well as others who shopped and attended to their own business, both personal and commercial, downtown.

While a growing and prosperous black middle class helped characterize Durham in many ways, so did its increasing numbers of white female textile workers and, especially, black female tobacco workers. As historian Leslie Brown has acutely observed, "Durham was home to some of the wealthiest black men in the United States but also some of the poorest African American women in the state." In cities across the Piedmont, black women continued to labor most often in poorly paid realms, namely domestic work, and they also made up the largest numbers of tobacco workers, also

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<sup>46</sup> *Hill's Durham 1923*, 54, 64-65, 73, 239, 304, 466, 531, 583.

poorly paid, in places like Durham and Winston. The increasing numbers of white women in the work force limited opportunities for black women throughout the late nineteenth century, and the employment of white women in textile factories beginning in the 1880s further limited jobs available to both black women and black men. In the interest of “protecting” even the most underprivileged white women in these new sectors of employment, factory owners shut black women out of textile mills altogether and restricted them to performing the hardest and dirtiest work in tobacco factories, and offered black men only those jobs away from the factory floor to prevent them from coming into direct contact with the white women who worked there.<sup>47</sup>

The mass movement of white families from the farm to the factory beginning in the 1880s was a phenomenon that continues to serve as an historical marker for the North Carolina Piedmont. The rise of Piedmont factories had a huge impact on the economy of the state, drove it with force into the New South, and created a complicated, dynamic historical narrative that has emphasized both paternalism and poverty. Recent scholarship has focused on the tensions between labor and capital that were unique to the South’s particular relationships among gender, race, and class. The total number of women working in factories grew ten times between 1880 and 1920. This substantial number understandably shaped contemporary discussions and historical scholarship on

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<sup>47</sup> Brown, 44-45, quotation 16. On race and class in Piedmont tobacco factories, see Delores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* and Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

women at work and its impact on the family.<sup>48</sup> This focus overshadows the earlier years when it was not as clear what the economic thrust of the Piedmont could or would become, and has made it challenging to remember or recognize the working women who came before this transformation.

By the early twentieth century North Carolina's small businesswomen were made up largely of an older generation of white women, some of whom were able to leave assets to the New South generation. These businesswomen assumed greater access to and control over assets into the early twentieth century, especially when unmarried or widowed, and they actively protected their property and earnings through wills.<sup>49</sup> In 1913, Alice Person willed her patent medicine business to her son Rufus, but much like dressmaking, hers had become a dying profession by the next generation. Having worked with his mother for twenty-five years, Rufus Person appealed to his mother's former customers after her death, stating that he would "live up to the policies and principles of my mother." Rufus brought the next generation of Person women into the business as well. Alongside him in the company, his wife Jessie served as president and his daughter – aptly named Alice after her grandmother – as vice-president. However, patent medicines were by then past their heyday. Person had viewed her remedy as a true

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<sup>48</sup> On the culture of Piedmont mill towns, see Hall et. al., *Like a Family* and Roydhouse, "Big Enough to Tell Weeds from the Beans."

<sup>49</sup> Married women were burdened by common-law restrictions on their ability to enter into contracts independently of their husbands until 1911 in North Carolina. However, Suzanne Lebsack cites an early-twentieth-century judge who noted a glaring discrepancy between law and practice, leading her to propose that married women in North Carolina frequently ignored the state's very restrictive laws, conducting business and using or conveying their property in ways that violated the law in their interest of being self-supporting, in "Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women," *The Journal of Southern History* 43 (May 1977), 209-10.

medical discovery rather than simply another patent medicine; regardless of her conviction, patent medicine manufacturers were met with disdain from the medical profession. Increasingly, people in this business were referred to as cheats and “hucksters” who were taking advantage of the infirm, ignorant, and desperate. Rufus eventually closed the books for good on the business his mother had established in order to support her children, and he returned to farming.<sup>50</sup>

Even more commonly, Piedmont businesswomen entrusted female relatives with their legacy. For example, Caroline Gorrell operated her millinery in Greensboro for a full twenty-five years, beginning in the 1870s. She took in nieces and nephews, training at least two of her nieces, Nanny Weatherly and Katie Cobb, in the millinery business. When Gorrell died in 1905, she willed most of her real estate and personal property to her grandchildren and nieces. Gorrell’s will included a provision to lease her storefront to Weatherly for five years, offering her niece a measure of security as she carried on her millinery in Greensboro’s business community. For her part, Weatherly also left property to her two daughters in her will, including a storefront on Market Street. Mrs. E. C.

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<sup>50</sup> 1920 Federal Manuscript Census, Mallard Creek, Mecklenburg; *Charlotte, North Carolina City Directory 1916* (Asheville and Charlotte, N.C.: Commercial Service Company Incorporated, 1916), 363; *Charlotte, North Carolina City Directory 1920* (Asheville and Charlotte, N.C.: Commercial Service Company Incorporated, 1920), 490. Although one newspaper article published after her death reported that Person had sold her business sometime around 1910, Person’s own account book reveals that she traveled and corresponded on behalf of the company as late as 1912, a year before her death. Her handwritten will, in which she left the bulk of her estate to daughter Josie and son Rufus, and her patent and the business to Rufus, is included among her papers. “Mrs. Joe Person Dies Suddenly While on Her Way to California. Well Known Charlotte Woman is Victim of Apoplexy,” *Charlotte Observer*, 16 March 1913, and reprinted in “Mrs. Person, Medicine Maker, Recalled Here,” *The Record-Advertiser* (Halifax, Virginia), 30 March 1972. Alice Morgan Person Papers, SHC. “Mrs. Joe Person’s Remedy. Purely vegetable. A good blood medicine. This is the verdict of those who have tried it.” (Charlotte, N.C.: Person Remedy Company, 1917), Advertisement, NCC, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Watlington, who operated the Guilford House and invested in apartments on North Elm Street as well as the General Greene Hotel in Greensboro, also left property to a daughter.<sup>51</sup> Each of these women, having worked their entire adult lives in their own small businesses, was able to leave behind both financial security and a legacy to the other women in their lives. Along with this came the realization that opportunities and expectations for women had changed and their younger female relatives were unlikely to work in the same businesses that had sustained them.

The earnings of many nineteenth-century businesswomen helped provide the stability that enabled the next generation to get an education, go into professions, and become clubwomen, but rarely to enter the same occupations. Their daughters and granddaughters often entered teaching, and also entered new occupations as clerks, stenographers, and saleswomen. Their legacies included other cultural contributions for which white and black middle-class women have long been acknowledged. In addition to the property she willed to her female relatives, Caroline Gorrell left an annual gift to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Judith Mendenhall, a divorced businesswoman who operated a boarding house in Greensboro for many years, left her estate to her sister in 1896, and her sister in turn willed all of her property to two female relatives in 1900. One of them established a scholarship in Judith Mendenhall's name at Woman's College, later the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.<sup>52</sup> Many of the important cultural

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<sup>51</sup> Guilford County Wills, Book G p. 492.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

contributions made by women from all socioeconomic levels – and particularly the support they offered their children and other female relatives – were possible because of the earnings of women. Even they often called it “duty” instead of “work,” as Alice Person’s words remind us, but their material contributions sustained their families through a period of economic instability and transformation.

In the postwar Piedmont, increasing numbers of women had sustained alternatives to the traditional patriarchal household and challenged conventional notions regarding a woman’s nature and place by serving as breadwinners and courtroom advocates for themselves and their families. White women did not generally seek to overturn the ideal of white womanhood that ignored their roles as providers for fear that they might slip from the pedestal constructed for them. Nonetheless, their daily lives were marked by demands on their labor and they engaged in a wide range of economic activities that frequently played crucial roles in supporting their families. Although all women were constrained by the race and gender hierarchy, the economic agency of white women in the transitional economy of the late nineteenth century also reminds us of the ways in which they were able to benefit from and contribute to that system.

The number of employed women in North Carolina grew substantially between the Civil War and the early twentieth century. Taking opportunities where they existed and adapting to changed circumstances, black and white women earned a living when economic conditions demanded it, and even though social expectations frowned upon it for white women. They not only sustained their families but also capitalized upon and contributed to the expansion of the Piedmont. Although at the North Carolina State

Exposition of 1884 white men had suggested that white women would be able to take advantage of a variety of opportunities in the New South, the reality was that many jobs women had traditionally relied upon also increasingly closed to them.

To the extent that women's work did diversify, options were even more severely limited by class and race. By the turn of the century, white educated women in the Piedmont primarily engaged in teaching and nursing, young women from the middling ranks could find work in clerical and sales positions, and a true working class emerged through the textile industry. Boarding house operation remained an important small business open to white women of all classes and more available to black women because of the influx of new workers and residents into the cities. Within this transformed landscape, some older, skilled white women maintained independent businesses providing accommodations and custom-made clothing and hats, but younger white women generally performed different work. Simultaneously, black women's opportunities were so restricted by race that even though some carved out a portion of Piedmont business for themselves, successive generations of black women often labored in the same, limited jobs. With this measure of both persistence and flexibility, women who labored in North Carolina from the 1870s to the turn of the twentieth century bridged the old South and the new.

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