Hannah and Priscilla: The Education of Slave Girls and Planters' Daughters in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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HANNAH AND PRISCILLA

THE EDUCATION OF SLAVE GIRLS AND PLANTERS’ DAUGHTERS IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Amber Esplin
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Amber Esplin

Approved, July 2001

James Axtell

James Whittenburg

Dale Hoak
To Scot Birrell, who made me want to teach history.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to consider the education of two groups of eighteenth-century Virginia girls—slaves and planters' daughters—and to examine and compare the ideas and debates that shaped their educational experiences.

Educational trends of the period led toward increasing opportunities for wealthy white girls, but opportunities for their black counterparts diminished as whites came to mistrust slaves who could read. Slave girls and planters' daughters faced very different futures; nevertheless, the attitudes expressed in debates over the question of black and female education revealed similarities in the way society perceived their roles. Both groups of girls occupied a subordinate position in society, and their intellect was in question.

The individuals named in the title of this thesis, Hannah and Priscilla, represent a general trend of their respective groups. Hannah, a slave girl, had a brief formal education intended to make her a pious member of the Anglican Church. Though she learned to read and write, her status as a slave was unchanged and her education provided no apparent advantage. Hannah's formal schooling sets her apart from the majority of Virginia slave girls, but her experience as a sometime scholar and perpetual slave symbolizes slaves' decreasing educational opportunities and the inability of learning to make a significant change in their status.

Priscilla, a planter's daughter, represents an upward trend in education; as a wider variety of subjects came to be deemed suitable for young ladies, the curriculum for female education expanded. Still, Priscilla's father emphasized the social graces, such as music and dancing, over academic achievements. Like other wealthy girls of her time, Priscilla was preparing primarily for her future role as wife and mother.

In their educational experiences, as in their lives, slave girls and planters' daughters were always close and always worlds apart.
HANNAH AND PRISCILLA

THE EDUCATION OF SLAVE GIRLS AND PLANTERS’ DAUGHTERS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA
INTRODUCTION

In an 1815 letter to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams reflected, "We may say that the Eighteenth Century, notwithstanding all its Errors and Vices has been, of all that are past, the most honourable to human Nature. Knowledge and Virtues were increased and diffused, Arts, Sciences useful to Men, ameliorating their condition, were improved, more than in any former equal Period." Indeed, the eighteenth century had proven a remarkable era, encompassing two revolutions and the birth of a new nation. Shaped by words and powered by ideas, the period that became known as part of the Age of Enlightenment produced philosophies that changed the world. As writers and thinkers challenged traditional concepts of government, human nature, deity, and the universe, attitudes emerged that altered the way people understood themselves and those around them.

Among the ideas whose influence proved far-reaching were new theories of education, mental development, and childhood. John Locke’s seventeenth-century treatise *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* examined methods of acquiring knowledge and sparked discussions on the capacities of the mind and the senses. In the next century, works such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile* suggested novel approaches to teaching and depicted childhood as a distinct and special phase. Meanwhile, in eighteenth-century
Virginia, parent-child relationships evolved as parents abandoned some goals and beliefs of an earlier era. Fathers and mothers increasingly welcomed their offspring as joyous, not just practical, additions to the family; instead of determining to crush children's devilish wills, as their seventeenth-century counterparts might have done, eighteenth-century Virginia parents permitted and even encouraged a little autonomy. Outside the home, the world was being remade, and inside, families were changing, becoming more intimate and more openly affectionate.²

It was a remarkable era, one that emphasized reason and progress and imagined a bright future for mankind. But it was also myopic and divisive. Most philosophers ignored—deliberately or unconsciously—huge portions of humanity, writing as if they lived in a universe entirely populated by propertied white men. For the people excluded from mainstream Enlightenment thought, the “progress” of the eighteenth century could be ambiguous and complicated. Marginalized groups such as women and African Americans sometimes felt the influence of philosophers and political leaders; ignored or not, they were inhabitants of the same world. Still, as non-citizens barred from participation in public life, their experiences of the major trends and events of the eighteenth century contrasted with those of white men. The new ideas about education, the talk of natural rights, the American Revolution had different implications for different groups of people.

The groups that are the focus of this thesis, Virginia slave girls and wealthy planters' daughters, had little in common beyond their submissive relationships to the white men in their lives. They lived side by side, but in conditions that represented opposite extremes; even their gender failed to unite them. Nevertheless, their status as outsiders in a male-dominated society created similarities in otherwise contrasting lives. Virginia society, which valued wealth and public opinion, confined both slaves and women to passive roles. Men could actively seek riches and honor, and when they did so, society applauded their aggressive and independent spirit. Women and blacks had another role: they did not acquire, they were acquired. They might add to a man's status by representing his wealth or providing him with advantageous family connections, but by society's standards they had little or no value of their own.

Because of the roles society assigned to slave girls and planters' daughters, their education was a low priority. They would not manage estates or fill government positions as their brothers and masters would. Was there any purpose in teaching them? Some argued that there was, and the debates over the purpose and proper extent of education for these groups of young women demonstrated the similarity of their positions. Clergymen, slaveholders, and philosophers confronted questions of blacks' intellectual capacity: were slaves inherently inferior, or did their degraded circumstances prevent them from manifesting their true potential? Would education improve them, make them better slaves, or would it provoke rebellion? Was it too great a risk? Writers and educators tangled with parallel issues when considering education for white young women. Did girls lack the mental abilities of boys, or did they only lack opportunities for learning?
Could education make them better wives and mothers, or would it drive them from their domestic duties? Was it too great a risk?

The Enlightenment and the American Revolution influenced the responses to these questions, but the answers led the two groups in different directions. Colonists’ focus on natural rights encouraged many to denounce slavery, and abolitionists viewed education as a way to prepare blacks for citizenship in a republic. As abolitionists embraced the prospect of education for African Americans, slaveholders became increasingly wary of slave education, finally banning blacks from learning to read. At least for a while, the question of education for Virginia slave girls was closed. For white girls, however, educational opportunities were expanding. The new republic demanded an educated populace, and women—as mothers—held the key. The issues of female education seemed temporarily resolved: learning did not have to compromise a woman’s femininity or her attention to family responsibilities.

As education became more acceptable for one group and explicitly forbidden for the other, the lives of planters’ daughters and slave girls grew ever more divergent. They had always been divided by an unbridgeable gap in social status; society ranked them far apart and promised them different futures. They had little in common, after all . . . except that their powers of intellect, their proper roles, and their very humanity were in question.
CHAPTER I

SOMETIMES SCHOLAR, ALWAYS SLAVE: THE EDUCATION OF HANNAH AND OTHER SLAVE GIRLS OF VIRGINIA

Mr. Nicholas’s little Hannah was born a slave. In eighteenth-century Virginia, where Hannah came into the world, some slaves still recalled another shore: perhaps someone in Hannah’s household remembered the West Indies or even far-off Africa and could tell the girl stories of another life. A few slaves held on to a past before bondage, to African names that echoed dignity and heritage.¹ For a people stripped of freedom, these names testified of an identity beyond servitude. But Hannah herself knew only Virginia. She must have grown up aware of the separateness that divided her household; though she lived alongside wealth and affluence, she was only a possession, expected to have no plans and hardly any thoughts of her own. As an infant she was probably baptized in the local Anglican church, where the hierarchical social order, where order itself, was praised and carefully preserved.²

¹ Philip D. Morgan gives an example of the survival of African names: “Among the eighty-nine Virginia slaves that Lewis Burwell owned between 1692 and 1710, the vast majority became known at least to their master by English names. Nevertheless, one in nine Burwell slaves achieved something more distinctive: at least five men retained African names, two couples chose an African name for one of their children, and another three parents seem to have combined an English name with a West African naming principle—that is, the father’s first name became the son’s second name. In this way, African memories were not lost altogether.” Morgan, Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1998), 21.

² Slave baptismal records are missing for 1755-58, which include the likely years of Hannah’s birth. However, between 1753 and 1764, at least eight slaves belonging to Robert Carter Nicholas, Hannah’s owner, were baptized in Bruton Parish. W. A. R. Goodwin, Historical Sketch of Bruton Church (1903; reprint, Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1998), 152, 156. William Hunter, a trustee of Williamsburg’s Negro school, wrote that “it is a pretty general Practice all over Virginia for Negro Parents to have their
Hannah emerged from babyhood in the home of "a prominent Williamsburg lawyer," Robert Carter Nicholas, who had received his education at the College of William and Mary and would serve as a burgess for both York and James City counties and as treasurer of Virginia Colony. Nicholas's career placed him among the eminent men of his era, but it included one unusual chapter. More than lawyer and statesman, Nicholas spent over a decade, from 1762 to 1774, in the philanthropic pursuit of educating slaves. He served as trustee—for many years the sole trustee—of Williamsburg's Negro school. Because Hannah was the ideal age, five or six when the school opened, and because she lived in Williamsburg in this particular time in the home of this particular man, she faced an opportunity that not all white girls could count on and few black children experienced: she was to be sent to a formal school. Her experience at the school and her subsequent return to slave labor present a parallel with the educational pattern of that age. In the eighteenth century, influential men encouraged slave literacy, usually in connection with religious instruction; nevertheless, for many black girls, slavery would limit their education to training for skilled labor.

Hannah grew up in an era when philosophers, churchmen, abolitionists, and slaveholders debated the capabilities and the role of Negroes. Were they mentally inferior, or did their degraded circumstances make them only appear so? Did they have souls? Were they human? Clergymen such as Thomas Bacon pleaded with slave owners to instruct their slaves in the true gospel and to bring them into the church. The Protestant

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3 *Associates of Dr. Bray*, 344.

4 *Associates of Dr. Bray*, 188.
emphasis on literacy led to suggestions that slaves learn to read, and schools like Hannah's undertook the task of teaching young black children their letters and their catechism. Advocates of religious education did not usually challenge the institution of slavery; instead they exhorted masters to recognize and fulfill their duties to their dependents. Owners must not allow heathens to live in Christian homes and learn nothing. Slaveholders often responded with indifference to such preaching, but other ideas developing at the time appeared more menacing. The Enlightenment inspired contemplation of the rights of man, and some argued that education was a right, that it was wrong to deny it even to Negroes. Abolitionists anticipated slaves' joining society as citizens and urged that they be educated in preparation for assuming their new responsibilities.5

Despite the beginnings of abolitionism, Virginians became increasingly dependent on slavery during the eighteenth century. Formal schooling for slaves was rare; nevertheless, some slaves did learn to read. Reverend Samuel Davies encountered a surprising number of slaves who could decipher basic words when he visited Virginia in mid-century.6 As the century proceeded and plantations grew more prosperous, slaves also faced increasing opportunities for skilled labor. More and more female slaves left the fields to train for midwifery, cooking, sewing, or other occupations of housewifery.7 Shielding their masters and mistresses from the hard work of survival, slaves offered

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6 Woodson, Education of the Negro, 81.
7 Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 244, 246.
whites more time to pursue their own learning, to study the philosophies of the Enlightenment. But in Virginia these philosophies failed to open the door to widespread education for blacks; as literacy was increasingly linked to revolt, even the combination of reading and religious instruction proposed by pro-slavery clergymen began to seem threatening. Slaves who could read had an advantage if they tried to escape their bondage: a *Virginia Gazette* advertisement for a runaway slave explained that the man could “read and write; and, as he is a very artful fellow, will probably forge a pass.” In the final years of Virginia slavery, a law prohibited teaching slaves to read.\(^8\) The work Robert Carter Nicholas performed on behalf of the Negro school was philanthropic in one century, criminal in the next.

Virginians might have had more than the obvious reasons to fear slave revolt. As long as slaves occupied the most degraded level of the social hierarchy, they promised status to their white neighbors, for the “slave became the very model of what white Americans could never be.”\(^9\) Accordingly, slave children faced difficulties unknown to white children: the challenge of obeying both master and parent, the precarious quality of family life vulnerable to disruption by sale. Some slave families of Landon Carter and

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\(^8\) *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), Williamsburg, April 16, 1767; a law passed in the 1830-31 session of the Virginia General Assembly stated: “Every assemblage of negroes for the purpose of instruction in reading or writing . . . shall be an unlawful assembly. . . . If a white person assemble with negroes for the purpose of instructing them to read or write, or if he associate with them in an unlawful assembly, he shall be confined in jail not exceeding six months and fined not exceeding one hundred dollars.” *The Code of Virginia, Second Edition: Including Legislation to the Year 1860* (Richmond: Ritchie, Dunnivant & Co., 1860), 810-11.

others inhabited their own cabins, thus enjoying some sense of unity and autonomy. But the children often suffered from neglect while their parents labored in the field or in the master’s house. Thomas Jefferson built most of his slave cabins in a close group so that a few women could watch all the children. Carter grew angry when his “suckling wenches” wanted to nurse their babies five times a day, insisting that three was plenty. Young children found themselves in the care of other children, for slaves under ten did not usually labor in the fields but were assigned babysitting duties. “Children till 10. years old to serve as nurses,” ordered Jefferson. Robert Nicholas complained that masters kept children home from the Negro school to tend younger children.

Gender roles did not divide slave children as distinctly as they did white children. Both boys and girls worked in the fields when deemed old enough to join a plantation’s labor force, usually around the age of nine or ten. While white girls spent their day in the home surrounded primarily by females, slave girls associated with adults of both sexes. Still, some masters specified different tasks for boys and girls. Thomas Jefferson, for example, decreed that “from 10. to 16. the boys make nails, the girls spin. at 16. go into the ground or learn trades.” Slave boys were more likely to participate in apprenticeships, and more men than women performed skilled labor, leaving women to outnumber men in the fields. Nevertheless, women dominated a few important skilled positions, such as midwifery. “The clearest case of blacks’ ministering to whites was

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11 Edwin Morris Betts, ed., “Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings,” *Thomas Jefferson’s Farm Book: With Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings* ([Charlottesville]: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 5, 7 (hereafter cited as Jefferson’s Farm Book); Landon Carter diary, 496; *Associates of Dr. Bray*, 186, 240.
during or immediately after childbirth. Black midwives, or ‘grannies,’ delivered everybody from humble slave mothers to the wives of the most eminent patriarchs.”

As slaves played major roles in their masters’ lives, they sometimes earned their masters’ affection and inspired compassion. The Reverends John Waring and Thomas Bacon maintained that masters owed similar obligations to their slaves and to their own children. Thomas Jefferson urged potential buyers to keep families intact when forced to sell slaves to pay off debts. The slaves of Landon Carter often engaged his thoughts and became a continual presence in his journal. Carter administered to his slaves in times of illness; he worried over them and made notes of their progress. “Many of my people have been ill this week,” he recorded one day. The following day he reported that “Windsor, Sukey, Margaret’s son Tom all pretty well.” When a young slave girl named Charlotte died, Carter mused, “It was a slave and as such or indeed as a human creature must be happier than it could be to have lived, for in innocence to die is to be sure to die happy.” In this sentiment Carter momentarily acknowledged the harshness of slavery, though he quickly likened it to all mortal life, and affirmed the innocence of the little soul that had passed from his care. He imagined her deserving of a happiness that her life in his household would not have provided.

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12 Jefferson’s Farm Book, 7.
13 Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 214, 196, 324.
15 See, for example, a letter to Randolph Jefferson dated 1792: “Finding it necessary to sell a few more slaves to accomplish the debt of mr Wayles to Farrell & Jones, I have thought of disposing of Dinah & her family, as her husband lives with you I should chuse to sell her in your neighborhood so as to unite her with him, if you can find any body therefore within a convenient distance of you, who would be a good master, & who wishes to make such a purchase, I will let her & her children go . . .” Jefferson’s Farm Book, 14; see also pages 12, 13.
Masters’ compassion for their slaves frequently mingled with their belief in the slaves’ inferiority. Owners may have viewed their human property with a fatherly eye, but in doing so they reduced grown men and women to the status of perpetual children. In a sermon preached to a black congregation, Thomas Bacon compared masters and mistresses to fathers and mothers entrusted by God with the care of their slaves.17 While he tried to encourage and uplift his congregation, he belittled their intelligence and competence: why would they need others to care for them if they could manage for themselves? Landon Carter manifested a similarly paternalistic attitude. When he reflected on his duties to his slaves, he remarked that he bought eggs from them because he “enjoy[ed] the humanity of refreshing such poor creatures.” His tone resembles that of an indulgent parent encouraging a young child’s useless endeavor. Jefferson also adopted a fatherly tone when listing his duties to his slaves. He would “feed and clothe them, protect them from all ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen.”18 Unlike his own children, Jefferson’s slave “children” would never grow up.

Carter’s “fatherly” patience sometimes wore thin. He frequently complained of his slaves’ laziness, which he believed set them apart from their superiors. In his journal he reminded himself of the danger of lightening their workload: “Nothing so certain as spoiling your slaves by allowing them but little to do; so sure are they from thence to learn to do nothing at all.” They were different from most human beings, he asserted; when offered kindness and gifts in return for good labor, they only took advantage. They

16 Landon Carter diary, 204, 205, 636.
17 Bacon, Four Sermons, 13.
could not be “spurred on to diligence” as other people could.\textsuperscript{19} Carter was not alone in his conviction of blacks’ natural inferiority. Others expressed the differences that separated them from whites in harsher terms. An essay written in 1773 in defense of slavery praised the institution as a “generous disinterested exertion of benevolence and philanthropy” because without it “poor stupid Negroes would be turned adrift, and forever after deprived of their care and protection.”\textsuperscript{20}

The author of \textit{Personal Slavery Established} went on to claim that blacks shared so few characteristics with whites that they did not even belong to the same genus. “I would subdivide the Africans into five \textit{classes},” he explained, “arranging them in the order as they approach nearest to reason, as 1\textsuperscript{st}, Negroes, 2d, Ourang Outangs, 3d, Apes, 4\textsuperscript{th}, Baboons, and 5\textsuperscript{th}, Monkeys.”\textsuperscript{21} Although his essay is illogical and filled with self-contradictions, it expresses a common idea of the time: that blacks might appear in human shape, but they were not true humans at all. When the Reverend William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas aired their frustrations regarding the Negro school in 1762, they cited slaveholders’ attitudes as an obstacle to black children’s education. “We fear that [slaves] are treated by too many of their Owners as so many Beasts of Burthen, so little do they consider them as entitled to any of the Privileges of human Nature.”\textsuperscript{22} One abolitionist writer declared that owners placed slaves on a level \textit{below} their beasts, for “a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Landon Carter diary, 1095; \textit{Jefferson’s Farm Book}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Landon Carter diary, 834, 429.
\item \textsuperscript{20} \textit{Personal Slavery Established, By the Suffrages of Custom and Right Reason . . .} (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1773), 3, 14. This essay was dedicated to the committeemen of the Royal African Company, who supplied the colonies with slaves.
\item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Personal Slavery Established}, 18-19.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{Associates of Dr. Bray}, 185.
\end{itemize}
merciful Man would certainly use his Beast with more Mercy than is usually shewn to the poor Negroes.”

Thomas Jefferson showed a continual interest in the question of blacks’ mental abilities. He observed his own slaves and conversed with other owners and philosophers on the question. “No body wishes more than I do to see such proofs . . . that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colours of man,” he professed in response to Benjamin Banneker’s assertion that blacks possessed natural intellect. He recorded a case of a black man succeeding as a mathematician and noted his desire to hear of more examples of blacks’ achievements. Not all apparent accomplishments impressed Jefferson, however. In 1773 a young Negro woman, imported from Africa at age ten and taught to read from the Bible, published a book of poems written in a popular style of the era. The book went through five editions before the end of the century, and antislavery advocates offered it as a compelling example of the Negro’s powers of intellect. But Jefferson remained unconvinced. His evaluation of blacks’ mental capacities, penned in 1781-82, expresses little hope of discovering abilities equal to whites: “Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior . . . and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.”

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24 *Jefferson’s Farm Book*, 11.

subsequent letters Jefferson declared himself open to a change of opinion, but evidently nothing persuaded him to reject his verdict of mental inferiority.\textsuperscript{26}

Arguments maintaining blacks' mental deficiency frequently rested on the state of their native societies. The author of \textit{Personal Slavery Established} pointed to the scarcity of large African kingdoms to strengthen his argument for inferiority. "Africa . . . chiefly consists of petty monarchies. . . . That they are \textit{all} perpetually at war with each other, we are well assured."\textsuperscript{27} His attack on Africa echoes the statements of David Hume, who linked civilization to pale complexions: "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation."\textsuperscript{28} Clergymen advocating religious instruction for blacks often labeled African societies barbaric. In the midst of widespread disdain toward Africa, however, a few defenders rose to challenge traditional ideas of the place. Abolitionist Anthony Benezet quoted numerous travelers who had visited Guinea and reported favorable impressions of the people there. William Bosman, for example, had lived in Africa for sixteen years and averred that "some Negroes, who have had an agreeable Education, have manifested a Brightness of Understanding equal to any of us." William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester, framed his defense of Africa in irony: "Did your slaves ever complain to you of their unhappiness amidst their native woods and deserts?" The Reverend Griffith Hughes of Barbados concurred with prevailing notions of African

\textsuperscript{26} In letters written in the 1790s Jefferson claimed he was willing to be convinced of black mental equality, but in a letter of 1814 he spoke of blacks as inferiors needing white assistance: "My opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from all ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, & be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them." \textit{Jefferson's Farm Book}, 5, 11.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Personal Slavery Established}, 19.
barbarity, but instead of using it to argue against blacks' intellectual equality, he suggested that slavery offered few opportunities to demonstrate mental ability. "That Slavery not only depresses, but almost brutalizes human Nature, is evident from the low and abject state of the present Grecians, when compared with their learned and glorious Ancestors." 

Like Hughes, numerous clergymen in the colonies supported slavery but disparaged the most demeaning portrayals of blacks. In 1706 Cotton Mather wrote *The Negro Christianized*, in which he affirmed blacks' natural "barbarity" but prescribed Christianity as "the best cure." He urged masters to take advantage of their opportunity to bring souls to the true gospel: God would hold them accountable for their treatment of slaves, Mather promised, for He was the ultimate Master. In setting up the master-slave relationship as an analogy for the state of humankind, Mather endorsed slavery, endowed it with religious significance, and at the same time called for humility among slave owners. If they were masters of some, they were also servants to One greater than they. Mather lacked faith in blacks’ mental capacities and offered simplified versions of religious texts, such as the Lord’s Prayer, that he felt would prove easier for them to grasp. "Indeed their Stupidity is a Discouragement," he warned. But in spite of his

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30 Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 1, 4-5, 24.
31 Ibid., 34, 25.
doubts concerning their intellect, he testified of their humanity. "Who can tell but that this Poor Creature may belong to the Election of God!" he exclaimed.\textsuperscript{32}

As other clergymen reiterated Mather's teachings, they emphasized the equality of blacks and whites before God. The Reverend Samuel Davies petitioned slave owners to consider the immortality of all souls and the insignificance of mortal life in the face of eternity. Slaves may occupy a low rank in earthly society; nevertheless, they were "candidates for the same eternal State . . . for the same Heaven or Hell." Whatever differences separated blacks and whites, the plan of God would not distinguish the two when it carried them to their final destination. Blacks had as much hope of heaven as whites, Davies promised, and "it is this that give importance to a being." Davies sanctioned the institution of slavery because "Providence . . . require[d] that there should be civil distinctions among mankind; that some should rule, and some be subject . . . but these distinctions are confined to this world."\textsuperscript{33}

Some whites questioned whether blacks had souls at all, and the Reverend Thomas Bacon addressed this subject in a sermon preached in Maryland in mid-century. He chastised those who had considered the question and proclaimed that "such Persons scarcely deserve a serious Answer." Still, he went on to explain the facts that demonstrated blacks' humanity. Dismissing the idea that their human form masked a beast's intellect, he declared, "God hath bestowed the Reason, Voice, and Language of Man [upon Negroes] . . . in equal Perfection with us." After all, most of those imported from Africa learned to communicate in a new language: was not this proof of some

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 3.
natural ability? Bacon blamed neglectful owners for giving slaves the appearance of ignorance; if given a chance, they showed themselves "disposed to receive Instruction" and paid "extraordinary Attention" to any teaching they chanced to receive. Bacon's arguments generally praise blacks' dispositions and attribute to them Christian qualities; he rarely mentions intellectual ability, except to counsel potential instructors to preach sermons "suited to their capacities." Like Davies and Mather, Bacon upheld slavery on earth and presented an ambivalent argument for black equality. But these clergymen believed that blacks were human, even possible member of God's elect. Their assertion of the value of black souls did have an effect. Some slave owners listened seriously to their teachings and viewed their human property with new eyes, as creatures "capable of mental, moral, and spiritual development." The trustees of the Negro school in Williamsburg would rely heavily on Bacon to soften slaveholders' hearts and open doors for black children to receive religious instruction.

The argument that the clergymen advanced—that slaves had immortal souls, were subjects of the same God, and therefore needed religion as much as the white man—was the same idea that led to the establishment of Williamsburg's Negro school in the first place. The roots of the experiment in Negro education, in which Robert Nicholas's Hannah would participate, extended back into the previous century. In the 1670s young Thomas Bray of Shropshire, England, studied theology at Oxford and later entered holy orders. Bray dreamed of bringing truth to the heathen, and America seemed especially full

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33 Davies, The Duty of Masters to Their Servants: In a Sermon (Lynchburg, Penn.: William Gray, 1809), 5, 17.
34 Bacon, Four Sermons, xi, v, vi, viii.
35 Ibid., vi, ix.
of heathens: not just Indians, the standard target of New World missionaries, but blacks as well. Bray was not a wealthy man; he lacked the resources necessary for carrying out his plans. But he had cultivated wealthy friends. His vision of enlightening the minds and saving the souls of American blacks impressed Abel Tassin, Sieur D’Allone. D’Allone willed part of his estate “to the Revd. Dr. Thomas Bray & his Associates that a Capital fund or Stock may be made thereof together with that little he has bestowed & employed in the Erecting a School or Schools for the thorough Instructing in the Christian Religion the Young Children of Negro Slaves & such of their Parents as shew themselves inclinable & desirous to be so instructed.”

In accordance with the will’s wording, Bray selected a group of “associates,” thus beginning a formal organization dedicated to teaching the gospel to blacks. The number of associates increased in the next several years; following Bray’s death in 1730, they continued the work he had set in motion. They sent books that missionaries could use to instruct slaves and encouraged colonial clergymen to reach out to their black brethren. But it was not enough, and the Associates of Dr. Bray began to expand their vision. They considered establishing formal schools for Negro students; in the late fall of 1758 they tested their idea by opening a school in Philadelphia with thirty black pupils. Two years later the influence of the Associates was felt in Williamsburg. Benjamin Franklin, who believed Negroes were “not deficient in natural Understanding,” had chosen Williamsburg as a proper site for the endeavor and had also counseled the Associates

36 Woodson, Education of the Negro, 33.
about the curriculum and the instructor. Before the establishment of the Philadelphia school he had advised the Associates’ secretary, the Reverend John Waring, that “a Mistress might be best to begin with, who could teach both Boys & Girls to read, & the Girls to knit, sew & mark.” He anticipated slave owners’ more willing participation if their female slaves could acquire useful skills.41

In 1760 the Reverend Thomas Dawson and William Hunter received letters requesting them to act as trustees for a Negro school like the one in Philadelphia. Dawson died soon afterwards, but Hunter lived long enough to recommend Robert Carter Nicholas as another trustee. “I will not pay You so ill a Compliment as to doubt of Your ready Compliance,” wrote the Associates’ secretary in a hopeful letter to Nicholas. “You judged very rightly of my Sentiments,” Nicholas replied.42 Nicholas discovered in his own household a potential student: Hannah was of the right age, about six. So the little girl went to school to Mrs. Wager, an old woman of uncertain health who had apparently been widowed long before any of her new pupils were ever born. Mrs. Wager was entrusted with twenty-four would-be scholars, “as many . . . as one Woman can well manage.” The number soon increased to thirty, about half of whom were girls, and their ages ranged from about three to ten years.43

Hannah’s school day began in darkness or the half-light of dawn: at seven in winter and six in summer. Mrs. Wager led the students in morning prayer, and if it was a Monday, she might require each pupil to recite from scripture. Nicholas had requested, in

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40 Associates of Dr. Bray, 135-36.
41 Franklin, quoted in Jordan, White over Black, 282; Associates of Dr. Bray, 144, 125-26.
42 Associates of Dr. Bray, 144-46, 152-53, 159, 164.
43 Ibid., 148, 153, 188.
the formal list of regulations he composed for the Associates’ secretary in London, that
the children be taught to spend the Sabbath engaged in pious activities; he therefore
instructed the mistress to “give her Scholars some Task out of the most useful Parts of
Scripture, to be learnt on each Lord’s Day.” If there was a service at the church, Mrs.
Wager led her flock there and endeavored to keep them quiet and orderly, “kneeling or
standing as the Rubrick directs.” A display of good church manners was thought to
represent the beginnings of true Christianity, for as the scholars learned proper behavior
they would shun the sin of idleness and avoid “the Beginnings of Vice.”

Once the morning duties were complete, the task of learning to read occupied the
children’s time. Hannah and her classmates worked out of the primers “The Child’s First
Book” and “The English Instructor.” As her schooling progressed, Hannah saw shapes
take on meaning and become letters, letters crowd together and become words. Still Mrs.
Wager required more. If her pupils could decipher words, it was not enough: they must
also “pronounce & read distinctly,” and, perhaps most difficult in an age when many
believed spelling was flexible, they must know “the true Spelling of Words.” Mrs.
Wager might have rewarded newly competent readers with their own Common Prayer
book; the Reverend Waring had sent twenty copies of it from London, “to be given to the
Children when qualified to use them at Church.”

If the instructions of Franklin and Nicholas were followed, Hannah spent part of
her day practicing sewing. While the boys continued to read or learn their catechism, the

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44 Ibid., 190-91.
45 Associates of Dr. Bray, 146.
46 Ibid., 190.
47 Ibid., 158.
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girls gathered around the mistress and bent over their needlework. Hannah’s little fingers might have produced simple items at first, perhaps a handkerchief or a knitted scarf, but some of the girls might eventually be expected to turn out elaborately constructed dresses. More female slaves would be employed as seamstresses in future decades. Mrs. Wager, supervising their early efforts, might have given her students the same counsel that appeared in a “Workwoman’s Guide” in 1838: that is, to keep in mind the importance of “neatness of appearance” and to learn through the principles of sewing the principles of “good housewifery.” Cutting out a dress could teach “a sort of unassuming household mathematics,” and sewing in general inspired “ideas of order and management.” Nicholas hoped that the girls’ new skills would make them more “useful to their Owners.”

Hannah’s education in reading, spelling, and sewing was mingled with religious instruction. The children learned to read so that they might study the Bible; the school’s true purpose was to banish the old pagan myths from the children’s minds and fill them instead with a knowledge of the Christian gospel. The sermons of Thomas Bacon, which the Associates often invoked, emphasized the importance of teaching slaves of Christianity. He lamented the fact that so many slaves dwelled in Christian homes yet continued “in as profound Ignorance of what Christianity really is . . . as if they had remained in the midst of the barbarous Heathen Countries from whence they or their

48 Associates of Dr. Bray, 126, 191. Between 1757 and 1775, 1 percent of Virginia’s female slaves were employed as seamstresses; between 1784 and 1809, 12 percent were. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 245-246.


50 Associates of Dr. Bray, 191.
Parents had been first imported.” He proclaimed that slave owners had an “indispensable Duty” to school their slaves in the true gospel.\(^{51}\) To the slaves themselves, Bacon promised future equality. If they would obey the Master of all, God would “make no Difference between [them], and the richest freeman.”\(^{52}\) In the world to come, the slave’s reward would not be less than the master’s. Those who lived so closely and yet so separately on earth would share the same heaven.

But that was for the hereafter. The Negro school did not mean to do with away with slavery or to change the social order; Dr. Bray, like Griffith Hughes, Cotton Mather, Samuel Davies, and Thomas Bacon, had not objected to the institution of slavery, only to owners’ neglect of their Christian duty to bring up their slaves in the gospel. Thus at home Hannah learned that she occupied a different social rank, that she was different, less, and at school she learned the same lesson again. From Bacon it came out sounding benevolent: God was the true Master, but since he was not on earth, he sent masters and mistresses in his place. They would care for their slaves, teach them, and protect them as loving fathers and mothers.\(^{53}\) Just as the slaves of Landon Carter and Thomas Jefferson, Hannah was doomed to remain a child forever.

The Associates of Dr. Bray seemed to recognize no dichotomy in their teachings or their goals. They waited expectantly for signs of the children’s spiritual growth. “The Associates . . . desire to be informed . . . whether Any are baptized in Consequence of their Instruction in the School,” wrote the Reverend Waring to one of the Williamsburg trustees, William Hunter. Hunter explained that most of the children had already been

\(^{51}\) Bacon, *Four Sermons*, iv, x.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 11.
baptized as infants. Other signs might have testified of the school's influence, however. Mrs. Wager taught the children to pray in their homes, "before & after their Victuals" and at other times as well, "devoutly on their knees." She encouraged them to dress neatly and to behave themselves at all times.

As Nicholas's contribution to the class, Hannah might have sensed an increased burden to prove the school's potential value. She attended the school for "upwards of three Years," the recommended term of enrollment, and apparently received all it had to offer. She learned to read, and she learned the principles of the Anglican religion—Nicholas was pleased with her progress. But by the end of 1765, probably less than two years after Hannah left the school, Nicholas expressed disappointment over her. The bad influence of the other slaves, who had not had the benefit of Christian schooling, overcame her. "She turns out a sad Jade," he grieved.54 Perhaps Hannah had lost herself between the separate worlds in her household. She could read, she knew Anglican doctrine, she was different from the others: she no longer fit neatly with the other slaves. But neither could she fit into Nicholas's world; maybe she could speak like white masters, read like them, worship with them, maybe Nicholas compared her to his own children, but she would never be one of them. When the Reverend Hughes of Barbados contemplated black intellectual abilities, he pointed out that slavery offered no incentives for the educated: "An higher Degree of improved Knowledge in any Occupation would not much alter their Condition for the better."55 All the school's promises pertained to the

53 Ibid., 13.
54 Associates of Dr. Bray, 240-41.
55 Hughes, Natural History of Barbados, 16.
after-life; there would be no advancement on earth. If Hannah wanted to fit somewhere, it had to be with her own people. Her school career over, Hannah was just another slave.

Nicholas continued as trustee over the school until it closed in 1774, when Mrs. Wager died. He pursued the project with frustrated devotion, encountering numerous obstacles: high rents made it difficult to find a permanent home for the school; Mrs. Wager’s health was always in danger of failing; and most of all there were the slave owners, some of whom were indifferent to the school and some of whom opposed it. Nicholas flung copies of Bacon’s sermons in their direction but few seemed convinced of the importance of teaching Negroes. Some owners treated the school as a day-care center, sending “their Children more to keep them out of Mischief.” Some allowed their slaves to attend just long enough to learn to read, or just until they grew up enough to perform a useful chore at home. The official regulations composed in 1762 stipulated that pupils must remain at the school for at least three years, but Nicholas found the rule difficult to enforce. With potential scholars dropping in and out, the school that proposed to teach manners and morals might have been overwhelmed by chaos.

Worse than the indifferent owners were those who denounced the school as a menace: “An Opinion prevails amongst many of them, that it might be dangerous & impolitick to enlarge the Understandings of the Negroes, as they would probably by this Means become more impatient of their Slavery & at some future Day be more likely to

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56 *Associates of Dr. Bray*, 324.
57 Ibid., 236, 185-86, 240-41.
58 Ibid., 185-87, 240.
59 Ibid., 189-90, 240.
rebel." Mather had foreseen a similar protest when he wrote *The Negro Christianized*. He worried that owners would equate religious equality with an end to slavery. Could a baptized Negro, a brother or sister in the church, remain in bondage? Mather reassured owners that they need not lose their property: "What *Law* is it, that sets the *Baptized Slave* at *Liberty*? Not the *Law of Christianity*: that allows of *Slavery*." When Hugh Jones reflected on Negro education in his 1724 treatise *The Present State of Virginia*, he warned against coupling religious instruction with literacy: "Such [Negros] . . . be not taught to read and write; which as yet has been found to be dangerous upon several political accounts, especially self-preservation." He suggested, however, that "a Christian education" limited to learning prayers and the catechism would improve slaves, teaching them to "go to church, and not accustom themselves to lie, swear, and steal." Like Mather, he accepted the coexistence of Christianity and slavery. But as the century proceeded, more voices joined in protest of slavery, condemning it as contrary to the spirit of Christianity and the ideals of the Enlightenment. William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester, spewed antislavery sentiment at an anniversary meeting of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an organization founded by Dr. Bray of the Negro school. "Gracious God!" Warburton exclaimed, "to talk (as in terms of Cattle) of Property in rational Creatures! Creatures endowed with all our Faculties, possessing all our qualities but that of colour; our BRETHREN both by Nature and Grace."

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60 *Associates of Dr. Bray*, 186.
Championing Enlightenment philosophy, Warburton denied that one human being could own another. All people were born with liberty: "Nature created Man, free."\(^{62}\) Cotton Mather had made slavery into a religious symbol, and several defenders appealed to the Bible to uphold slavery: if the institution existed in biblical times, they argued, it could not be wrong. But Christian imagery could reject as well as support slavery. In Anthony Benezet's antislavery tract of 1767, he declared that "God gave to Man Dominion over the Fish of the Sea, and over the Fowl\(s\) of the Air, and over the Cattle, &c. but imposed no involuntary subjection of one Man to another."\(^{63}\) Benezet marveled at the apparent contradiction slavery presented in a land enflamed with the cause of liberty. "At a Time when the general Rights and Liberties of Mankind . . . are become so much the Subjects of universal Consideration," he wrote, "can it be an Enquiry indifferent to any, how many of those who distinguish themselves as the Advocates of Liberty, remain insensible and inattentive to the Treatment of Thousands and Tens of Thousands of our Fellow-Men?"\(^{64}\) In the years to come, the abolitionist movement gained momentum in the North, and southerners increasingly feared slave insurrections. Thomas Jefferson had predicted they would come, and they did: the 1831 rebellion of Nat Turner, who had taught himself to read, seemed to link literacy to revolt.\(^{65}\) Perhaps the proponents of black mental equality had been right all along, and if that was so, slaves must be kept in ignorance. Therefore, slave literacy became a crime.

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\(^{64}\) Benezet, *A Caution and Warning*, 1.

\(^{65}\) For Jefferson's predictions, see *Jefferson's Farm Book*, 20; Turner's rebellion occurred in Southampton County, Virginia.
Before the law prohibiting slaves from learning to read, even those who missed Hannah’s opportunity to attend school might attain some level of literacy. Philip Vickers Fithian came as a private tutor for the white children of the Robert Carter household, but he taught a young black pupil as well: Dennis, whose father had requested that the boy learn to read.66 Some of Thomas Jefferson’s slaves could read and write; letters penned by John Hemings and Hanah of Poplar Forest show their literacy. And when the Reverend Samuel Davies visited Virginia, he found slaves who could read the Bible.67 Nevertheless, the ensuing years would close doors to education rather than open them: blacks’ chances for academic learning dissolved in Virginia in the years before the Civil War. At the same time, slaves increasingly faced another kind of education: training for skilled labor.

The need for skilled labor plucked more men than women from the fields, but women also felt the increasing demand for a more diverse labor force. As plantations grew in size and prosperity, owners employed more women as domestics.68 In 1769 William Byrd III of Westover enjoyed the service of twelve housemaids, four washerwomen, three dairymaids, two cooks, and two poultry women and bakers. These women amounted to two thirds of Byrd’s female slaves. Between 1757 and 1775, 89 percent of Virginia’s female slaves filled agricultural positions; between 1784 and 1809, only 76 percent of female slaves worked in agriculture.69 Slave owners occasionally selected and primed small children for household positions. Masters usually exempted

67 Jefferson’s Farm Book, 7; Woodson, Education of the Negro, 81.
68 Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 196, 244-46.
young slaves from field labor until the children reached age ten, but they might start training slaves as house servants at age five or six. Other domestics labored as field slaves into their late twenties or older before being chosen for positions of housewifery.\textsuperscript{70}

Domestic servants took over the work of white women, for “eighteenth-century household work was primarily women’s work.” Household pursuits included cleaning, caring for children, sewing, and cooking, among other things.\textsuperscript{71} Slaves mastering the “art of cookery” had to know the proper way of handling a wide variety of meats: eels, for example, should be “roll[ed] up hard in little Cloths” after being de-boned and having their heads and tails chopped off. The cook did not immediately discard these parts but boiled them with the eel bodies to add to the flavor. Calves’ heads must be scalded to remove the hair, then boiled slightly so that the meat came loose from the bone. Once this was accomplished, the head should remain basically intact.\textsuperscript{72} Meat pies were popular and could be filled with lamb, chicken, veal, or any number of other possibilities, but the spices and vegetables must suit the chosen meat. Lettuce, egg yolks, and parsley accompanied the beef in lumber pie, and lamb pie required potatoes, raisins, grapes, and lemon chips.\textsuperscript{73} An eighteenth-century cookbook, the first one published in the American colonies, recommended such dishes as “Haunch of Doe with Udder a-la-force,” “Sliced Tongues with Pickles,” and “Dish of Sucking Rabbits” and included instructions on how

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 244-45.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 197, 212.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 246.
\textsuperscript{72} [Hannah Glasse], \textit{The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy} (London, 1747); E. Smith, \textit{The Compleat Housewife, or, Accomplish’d Gentlewoman’s Companion: Being a Collection of several Hundred of the most approved receipts} (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1742), 7, 12.
\textsuperscript{73} Smith, \textit{Compleat Housewife}, 6.
“to pot a Swan.” It also offered an array of dessert recipes, such as almond cheesecakes, orange and lemon tarts, and baked bread pudding.\textsuperscript{74} Developing into a renowned cook probably required a few years of practice, and some other occupations of female slaves called for even more complex knowledge and experience. A number of slaves distinguished themselves in the field of medicine, which might have acknowledged a connection to cookery: one eighteenth-century cookbook followed a recipe for goose pie with one for a \textit{“Cure for the Bite of a Mad Dog.”}\textsuperscript{75} In the Carolinas a few slave women earned reputations as doctors; in Virginia this was less common: some male slaves, such as Landon Carter’s Nassau, acted as general physicians, but slave women were generally confined to midwifery. “Many a white child came into the world in the arms of a black nurse.”\textsuperscript{76} Midwives had to be prepared for all sorts of complications; they watched over the health of two patients at one time, and childbirth frequently proved fatal for one patient or the other. A midwife’s good sense of timing could save a life. Some dangerous situations required waiting: “Never . . . precipitate the delivery at this time,” counseled a medical treatise of the era, “but wait, and allow the parts to dilate in a slow manner, as from the violence of the Labour-pains the sudden delivery of the head . . . might endanger the laceration of the parts.” Other situations demanded action. It took careful maneuvering on the part of the midwife to save a breech-born baby.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} See Smith, “A Bill of Fare for . . . ,” \textit{Compleat Housewife}, [vii-x], 25, 45, 56, 67.
\textsuperscript{75} Glasse, \textit{Art of Cookery}, [17].
\textsuperscript{76} Morgan, \textit{Slave Counterpoint}, 626-29, 377.
\textsuperscript{77} W. Smellie, \textit{An Abridgement of the Practice of Midwifery: And a Set of Anatomical Tables with Explanations}, new ed. (Boston: J. Norman, 1786), 25, 42.
Slave midwives sometimes combined Euro-American medical knowledge with magic, favoring their own herbal concoctions and the evidence of their own experience. Their reputations spread throughout regions, and their practice extended beyond the limits of their own plantation. Robert Carter hired out his midwives for ten shillings (white midwives earned about four pounds). Landon Carter took the lead in the care of the women of his own family or relied on white doctors and midwives, but he kept black midwives to help with his slaves. Slave women continued to play a role in babies’ lives after their births, often nursing them and providing most of their care. The tutor Philip Vickers Fithian marveled at the practice of black women nursing white babies and wondered that it had no effect on the babies’ complexion. Apparently, few slave owners worried over this and the practice was widespread. Mrs. Carter of Nomini Hall, where Fithian was teaching, affirmed that several of her children had been suckled by black women.

When the trend toward more skilled labor first began, many skilled slaves learned their occupations from whites, but succeeding generations of slave children sometimes had the opportunity to learn from their own parents. Those who occupied skilled positions enjoyed a status slightly above that of the field slaves: “Acquiring a skill, or assuming a specialized position, set apart a minority of slaves from their fellows.” It might also have increased whites’ dependence on slaves as the slaves were incorporated into more

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79 Carter apparently played an active role in the treatment of ill members of his household, both slave and free. Much of his diary is dedicated to reports of health or sickness. For an account of his daughter-in-law’s birthing experiences, see Landon Carter diary, 315-17, 859; for slave women giving birth, see 514, 1036.
81 Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 212.
aspects of whites' daily life. Slave cooks, with the help of slave dairymaids and poultry women, fed their white masters and mistresses; slave seamstresses and spinners clothed them; slave midwives watched over their mistresses in a time of intense need, and slave nurses raised young white children.

What occupation Hannah was destined for when she left the Negro school is uncertain; perhaps she found her labor split between the field and the house, as a number of domestic servants did. It is impossible to know how much she was aware of the forces shaping the lives of slave women: philosophy, religion, ignorance, the reality of life that demanded labor, whether white or black. What did her experience at the school mean to her? Was it just three years of empty promises, a lesson on the hereafter with no application to the here-and-now? Was it of more value to know how to make marrow pudding than to know how to read? Mr. Nicholas evidently felt that she made no use of her learning. Still, amid the pro-slavery doctrine, the chaos created by irregularly attending scholars, and the tedium of the schoolwork, she might have sifted out something of worth. “While you are doing what is right and good,” Thomas Bacon had preached to a congregation of Negroes, “you are . . . working for a just Master in Heaven, who will pay you good Wages for it, and will make no Difference between you, and the richest freeman, upon the face of the Earth.”82 Just as the African names some slaves used

82 Bacon, *Four Sermons*, 11.
privately, her schooling could serve as a reminder that, whatever the slave owners or others might think, she was more than a slave. She was a human being.
Priscilla Carter was born the great-granddaughter of a Virginia legend. Robert "King" Carter, son of the first Carter in Virginia, had propelled his family to the pinnacle of elite society. An active participant in colony politics, "King" Carter served as a Burgess and as President of the Council, and by the time of his death in 1732 he ruled an empire of 333,000 acres. Two generations later, his grandson Robert Carter III governed 70,000 acres (his share of the ancestral lands) and commanded a slave labor force of over five hundred; his marriage allied him to another powerful family and helped him win an appointment to the governor's Council. Like his grandfather and father, Carter was a learned man. Educated at the College of William and Mary and in England, he amassed a substantial library of ancient classics and modern scholarship. His sons and daughters grew up in "a large Elegant House" in Westmoreland County, and in 1773 Carter engaged Princeton theological student Philip Vickers Fithian to tutor the next Carter generation.¹

The Carter children, including two sons, five daughters, and one nephew, met their tutor each morning at the schoolhouse on the family plantation. Priscilla at fifteen was the eldest daughter; according to Fithian, she showed promise as a student and acquired knowledge easily. "[She] makes good progress in what She undertakes," he
confided in his journal early in 1774. “If I could with propriety continue in the Family, I should require no stronger Inducement than the Satisfaction I should receive by seeing this young Lady become perfectly acquainted with any thing I propose so soon as I communicate it to her.”² But Priscilla’s course of study was limited. Not for her to struggle with Latin and Greek—she was, after all, not a son. She moved in the highest spheres of society, the heiress of wealth and privilege; the social gap between her and the slaves on her father’s plantation could hardly stretch wider. But in some respects she was not so different from those slaves. In the eighteenth century, people sometimes talked about women and blacks in similar ways: as creatures of questionable mental capacity for whom education might be a waste or a risk, creatures put on earth to serve white men, even as creatures without souls. For white women, educational opportunities were improving by the end of the eighteenth century; the accepted curriculum was expanding. Still, society placed the greatest value on skills that made women useful. Ornamental accomplishments improved their chances for marriage, a mastery of domestic arts prepared them for wifehood, and proper intellectual pursuits could make them better mothers. Marriage and motherhood were “the two ultimate life goals.”³

Despite the subservience both owed white men, slave girls and planters’ daughters did not see themselves as sufferers sharing a common plight. They may have played together as children, but their experiences shaped them for different worlds. While slave

girls worked in the fields, interacting with and learning from adults of both sexes, elite young ladies inhabited a gender-segregated society. Surrounded by women who demonstrated by example what a female should be, white girls trained for their future roles as wives and mothers. "Differentiating the masculine from the feminine world became an abiding concern for parents:" young men needed education, physical strength, and an aggressive nature to build up their family’s wealth as successful planters; girls were celebrated for their charm and delicacy, which would bring softness and harmony to a home.4 In the Robert Carter household, brothers and sisters attended school together, but their living arrangements kept them separate at other times. The boys slept over the schoolroom; the girls boarded in the great house. A conversation recorded by their tutor, Fithian, reveals the different futures their parents had in mind for them: “At Breakfast Mrs Carter asked me who is foremost in Arithmetic; whether Bob, or Prissy? At which Mr Carter observed, that him of his Sons whom he finds most capable of doing Business . . . Shall have the management of the whole [estate].” It mattered little whether Priscilla did well at ciphering—the important competition was between her brothers.5

The need for a female role model who would ensure the development of proper attributes sometimes divided young girls from their parents. After Thomas Jefferson’s wife died, he left two young daughters, Polly and Lucy, in the care of their maternal aunt.

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4 Catherine M. Kerrison writes, “Ties of sisterhood that bound northern women in deeply emotional relationships that led to a collective female consciousness were non-existent in the South, where race divided white women from black more surely than their common subordination to male authority united them.” “By the Book: Advice and Female Behavior in the Eighteenth-Century South” (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 1999), 16-17; see also Gail S. Terry, “Sustaining the Bonds of Kinship in a Trans-Appalachian Migration: The Cabell-Breckinridge Slaves Move West,” Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 103 (1994), 471-74. Smith, Inside the Great House, 57-61.
His oldest daughter, Patsy, accompanied him to France, but Jefferson quickly installed her in a convent school, where he visited her on Sundays. William Byrd II took his daughter Evelyn to London with him but saw her only for an hour or so every few days. Fathers often participated in their daughters’ upbringing by plotting the course of their formal education, but women were indispensable as teachers of the principles of femininity. Relatives and girls’ schools provided an important source of female instructors, and some families chose to employ private female tutors. Fithian noted that the Turbervilles, neighbors of the Carters, had imported a young Englishwoman as a governess for their daughters.

The teaching role of mothers, in particular, received special emphasis near the end of the eighteenth century, when the American colonies joined in a united republic. The founders of the new nation worried over the responsibilities they would pass to their posterity: since the country’s survival depended on the virtue and knowledge of its people, future generations must be educated to prepare for their duties as citizens. Washington addressed the importance of a knowledgeable public in his first message to Congress in January 1790: “Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness,” he declared. “In one in which the measure of government receives their impressions so immediately from the sense of the community as in ours, it is proportionally essential.” Washington’s farewell address reiterated the same theme.

7 Smith, Inside the Great House, 60-63; Farish, ed., Fithian Journal, 120.
"Promote then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge," he advised. "In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened." Jefferson prescribed similar protections for the new republic when he penned a bill setting up a public school system. In the introduction to his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," he explained that "the most effectual means of preventing [tyranny] would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large." Jefferson hoped that students would learn from the examples of antiquity and from British and American history "to know ambition under all its shapes" and be ready "to defeat its purposes."  

But even before children went to school, they had teachers—their mothers. As links between the present and future generations, women could act as key figures in determining the success or failure of the republic: "motherhood was discussed almost as if it were a fourth branch of government." Female education improved in the late eighteenth century as young women were schooled to instruct their children in the principles of republican virtue. When asked for his advice on a proper course of study for young women, Jefferson explained his motives in educating his daughters. "I thought it essential to give them a solid education, which might enable them, when become mothers, to educate their own daughters, and even to direct the course for sons, should their fathers be lost, or incapable, or inattentive." Whether or not they found themselves

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filling in for a missing father, mothers cared for and taught their sons during their earliest childhood years. Popular conduct books of the eighteenth century dwelt on the influence women would exert over their children—and thus over society. In a series of lectures originally delivered to a girls’ school in England, John Burton tried to impress on young students the gravity of their position: “It is in the power of the female Sex to inspire young Men with maxims of Honour, Virtue, and even Patriotism . . . . Political Government may be said to derive its strength from the nursery.” The widely read James Fordyce asserted that women “were manifestly intended to be the mothers and formers of a rational and immortal offspring.” The new respect for “republican mothers” seemed to offer women the chance to prove what a 1780 broadside had proclaimed, that “if opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal, and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good.”

The new value placed on female education sparked debate over the mental capacities and natural character of women. What should a girl’s education include, what was its primary purpose, and how much were girls capable of learning? Just as proponents of Negro education encountered doubts about black intellect, writers on girls’ education argued over the abilities of the female mind. The question of female intellect was an old one: medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas had asserted women’s innate inferiority, even encouraging children to direct their love toward their more worthy

14, 1818, quoted in Saul K. Padover, comp., The Complete Jefferson: Containing His Major Writings, Published and Unpublished, Except His Letters (New York: Tudor, 1943), 1085.

10 Most conduct books read by the Virginia gentry were originally published in England. According to Catherine Kerrison, “Virginia gentlemen consciously sought to emulate the lifestyle of English country gentlemen. . . . A genteel literary culture developed in Virginia that depended on the cultural authority of the London metropolis.” By the Book, 44-45; J[ohn] Burton, Lectures on Female Education and Manners,
fathers. Several centuries later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau dismissed women as emotional, not rational, creatures. Scottish dissenting minister James Fordyce, whose *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) found a large readership on both sides of the Atlantic, announced without apology that women were not the mental equals of men. Fordyce equated physical strength with mental vigor and judged females inferior on both counts. "You yourselves, I think," he appealed to his readers, "will allow that war, commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy, and all the abstruser sciences, are most properly the province of men." He conceded that women might possess certain abilities not anchored in reason, especially something he called "an uncommon penetration in what relates to characters, an uncommon dexterity in hitting them off through their several specific distinctions." He encouraged girls to pursue "solid" educations, to rise above frivolity by proving themselves "capable of better things than the placing of a ribbon" and displaying minds "devoted to wisdom, and ennobled by knowledge." But for him there was no denying the "real defect" in women's powers of reason.¹¹

Similar opinions were offered by other sources, sometimes with harsher wording. A *Virginia Gazette* article from 1773 lauded husbands for the guidance and wisdom they offered their wives: "[Men save] female minds, overwhelmed by Trifles, [from] languishing in Ignorance." In 1748 British aristocrat Lord Chesterfield advised his son that "women . . . are only children of a larger growth. . . . A man of sense . . . neither

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consults them about, nor trusts them with serious matters.” Chesterfield thus shut an entire sex out of adult life and into the nursery. Some Americans apparently went further, not just questioning women’s intellect but the essence of their humanity. During dinner at the Robert Carter home one evening, Mrs. Carter remarked on a peculiar idea she had encountered: women had no souls. Her daughter Priscilla immediately discounted the theory; it seemed to negate all her efforts. Her tutor Fithian noted her comment: “If I thought [women had no souls] I would not have spent all this morning in Reading.” As to where the idea came from or how widely she had heard it discussed, Mrs. Carter offered no information. But even as an unusual statement the theory has significance. In a society in which white men were believed to have souls, the idea that women did not have them placed a distinction between white men and all other creatures. Besides God, white men were the only permanent entities in the universe; they were moral and immortal. Women, on the other hand, were temporary flashes across the world stage, less real because they were less constant. White men were more like God, then, and women more like animals. This distinction calls to mind the racist pamphlets that debased blacks to the level of monkeys. Their humanity, too, was under attack.\(^{12}\)

Women found defenders as well as detractors, sometimes among their own sex. Like those who argued for black mental equality, writers refuting women’s intellectual inferiority often blamed apparent differences on inequality of opportunity. Of course girls seemed frivolous, shallow, and less than reasonable—they were taught to be that way. Could they exhibit a mind equal to a man’s without having the benefit of a man’s education? And even if they could, was it in their best interest? John Gregory, author of

\(^{12}\) Kerrison, “By the Book,” 96; Farish, *Fithian Journal*, 111.
the popular conduct book *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), cautioned young ladies not to reveal their good sense. “If you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.” The best men, he told them, would not disdain an intelligent woman, “but such [men] will seldom fall in your way.” Philadelphian Gertrude Meredith derided the young men of her city, who were won over by superficiality rather than merit. “Do you imagine . . . that ladies are valued according to their mental acquirements?” she asked indignantly. “I can assure you that they are not.” With so much of their future depending on marriage, and with learning more a handicap than an asset in the marriage market, young women had little motivation or opportunity to demonstrate their true intellectual potential. “We educate women . . . in such a way as to debilitate both their corporeal and their mental powers,” complained Thomas Cooper in 1798. “All the accomplishments we teach them are directed . . . to the amusement of the male sex; and having for a series of years . . . incapacitated them for any serious occupation, we say they are not fit to govern themselves.”

Cooper was not alone in his assertion that education, not nature, created differences in men’s and women’s abilities. John Burton’s *Lectures on Female Education* (1793) addressed the issue of female intellect by going back to the nursery. Burton asked his readers to compare young boys and girls who had not yet begun their education: if they were unequal at that age, he concluded, it was girls who proved superior. Girls “display a greater share of vivacity, and a readier talent for Conversation.” Education led

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girls and boys in different directions and developed different abilities in each sex; nevertheless, "however the soil may be neglected," women’s minds were as fertile as men’s. Burton disagreed with James Fordyce that girls should not study the sciences: they "are not too abstruse for female Genius." To give credence to his claims of female mental equality, Burton listed the accomplishments of several famous women. Queen Elizabeth I had spoken Latin; Lady Jane Grey read Plato in Greek. Women had written histories, translated Greek and Hebrew works into their own language, and composed poetry and other literature. The accomplishments of a French female writer, Stéphanie Félicité Genlis, inspired at least one Virginia woman to long for more educational opportunities. In 1791, French traveler Ferdinand-Marie Bayard recorded a visit with the Virginia lady, who confided her admiration for Genlis. Bayard remembered, "She assured me that if the education of women were less neglected, they would rival their husbands in fame as they do in love and goodness."14

In the 1790s Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft took up the pen to “vindicate” the rights of women. Her eloquent defense railed against the mediocre education that left a woman with “an empty mind” where “indolence and vanity—the love of pleasure and the love of sway . . . will reign paramount.” Wollstonecraft depicted education as fundamental to human moral improvement; smarter women could overcome the faults that men scorned and grow worthy of respect—from men and from themselves. Rejecting standard practices, Wollstonecraft advocated a plan for education that united the sexes. Following separate paths led them away from their best selves: “men and women were

14 Burton, Lectures on Female Education, 1:164, 168, 165-67; Bayard quoted in Tori Eberlein, “To Be Amiable and Accomplished: Fitting Young Women for Upper-Class Virginia Society, 1760-1810” (M.A.
made for each other,” she professed. Schooling them together would not only give them equal educational opportunities but also make them better human beings. Together boys and girls would learn “graceful decencies,” each sex improving under the influence of the other. Boys would not “be ruined by the early debaucheries, which now make men so selfish, or girls rendered weak and vain, by indolence.” And when it came time for marriage, a husband and wife could unite as friends and companions rather than as master and slave. They would recognize each other as inhabitants of a single world. How different from the custom of upper-class English and Virginians, who grew up separate from the opposite sex and then found themselves married to strangers from a foreign culture.

Wollstonecraft’s pronouncement that girls and boys should study all the same subjects demanded a radical departure from the practice of the times, but her avowal that men and women improved each other tapped into a commonly-held notion. Many defenders of female intellect believed, along with their opponents, that women possessed a distinct nature complementary to men’s. In the ideal Virginia family, the mother’s gentleness and grace would temper her husband’s harsher disposition. Together man and wife would create a balance of wisdom and mercy, logic and sentiment, blending their separate natures in a harmonious whole; neither sex without the other could enjoy complete happiness. In Burton’s lectures to young ladies, he urged his audience to picture marriage as the unity of two complements: men confronted the challenges of life, and women soothed their fears. As a unit, they conquered the world. Like Wollstonecraft,

Burton disapproved of a wholly unequal relationship and viewed education as the key to elevating women. He encouraged girls to improve their minds so that they might enjoy a fuller companionship with their husbands: “The two Sexes are designed for mutual happiness,” he told them, “and for enjoying a reciprocation of sentiments and affections; which can never be the case, if the one be so much degraded, as to act not like the friend, but the slave of the other.” Burton affirmed over and over that girls possessed equal intelligence with boys, that they could excel in any study they undertook. But, like many writers and educators of the time, he worried that too much study (or study of the wrong subjects) would destroy the unique attributes that made women women.16

Wollstonecraft, while promoting educational and political opportunities for women, carefully emphasized that learning did not endanger domesticity. Education would refine women’s taste, Wollstonecraft claimed, because taste required understanding. Neither vanity nor pettiness would rule a mind filled with meaningful knowledge, and if given worthy subjects to contemplate, women would not look to frivolous pleasures for entertainment. The well-educated woman demonstrated good sense and devotion to her family—the more she knew, the better she could serve as wife and mother. “An active mind embraces the whole circle of its duties,” wrote Wollstonecraft, “and finds time enough for all.”17 Nevertheless, striking a balance between domesticity and education could prove difficult. Thomas Jefferson educated his eldest daughter, Patsy, almost as he would a son, challenging her to conquer Latin

17 Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Women, 384-85, 391.
classics. But in his letters he reminded her of her most important duties. He encouraged her to learn needlework and other domestic arts so that she might be qualified as the “mistress of a family [to] direct the works of her servants.” Shortly after her marriage, Patsy mentioned to her father that she could no longer find time to read. The demands of married life crowded out the activity that had once monopolized so much of her time. As a student in Paris, she had struggled to live up to her father’s expectations; now that season of her life had passed and Jefferson’s expectations had changed. “Nothing is so engaging as the little domestic cares into which you appear to be entering,” he wrote to her. “And as to reading it is useful for only filling up the chinks of more useful and healthy occupations.” Most Virginians believed that the purpose of education was to prepare for marriage and motherhood, and Patsy’s education served her well when it came time to educate her own children.\(^1\) It seemed true that, as Wollstonecraft argued, learning could improve women’s domestic talents. But where did the benefits of education end and the dangers begin?

Many conduct books and articles on education drew the line at Latin and Greek. Latin “was an exclusively male puberty rite,” and women who engaged in such serious study put their femininity at risk. In her popular conduct book, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773), Hester Chapone offered cautious praise to the women who mastered classical languages but advised young ladies against following their example. Latin and Greek were simply not necessary, and studying them required young women to exchange “the graces of imagination for the severity and preciseness of a

19 Burton agreed that girls should not study the “learned Languages” and warned them that “when Ladies . . . devote their lives to study, they throw off the female character.” Fordyce scorned “those masculine women” who attempted to invade “the province of men.” An excess of study would lead them to quit “their just sphere, for one much less amiable, and much less beneficial.” In 1793 a cautionary tale appeared in the Philadelphia _Lady’s Magazine_. After the fictional Amelia, only daughter of a clergyman, mastered Latin and Greek, her “pride and pedantry” made her a social outcast. The author concluded with a moral: women who studied “the dead languages” would make “rapid advances towards *manhood*.” If the trend were not checked, women might engage in other masculine behavior. The author foresaw female prizefighters.20

Robert Carter put his daughters in no such danger. Following typical English and Virginia practices, he ordered his tutor Fithian to instruct only his eldest son in Latin and Greek. The son, Ben, did not appreciate the workload: “He swore, & wished for Homer that he might kick Him, as he had been told Homer invented Greek.” In the Custis household, however, Homer would have met with a better reception. Elizabeth Parke Custis, granddaughter of Martha Washington, resented her tutor’s refusal to teach her the classical languages. She recalled hearing her stepfather tell the instructor “‘that [I] was an extraordinary child and would if a *Boy* make a Brilliant figure’—I told them to teach me what they pleased and observed to them I thought it hard they would not teach me Greek and Latin because I was a girl—they laughed and said women ought not to know those

20 Burton, _Lectures on Female Education_, 1:168; Fordyce, _Sermons to Young Women_, 1:272, 284; Kerber, _Women of the Republic_, 199.
things."²¹ Patsy Jefferson's father encouraged her to read Latin classics, but he never pushed his younger daughter, Polly, to do so. On some level, Jefferson might have accepted prevalent ideas about the link between classical languages and masculinity. Polly seemed to display a more feminine nature than Patsy; she was delicate and small while Patsy was tall and robust, she was shy while Patsy was outgoing. A rigorous education suited Patsy but not her "womanly" sister.²²

Learning Greek and Latin was not an option for most girls; still, the accepted curriculum expanded toward the end of the eighteenth century, from a course of study centered on reading, letter-writing, basic arithmetic, and ornamental accomplishments to one that often encompassed French, history, geography, poetry, and some sciences. Hester Chapone recommended French because of the many acclaimed literary works in that language.²³ Jefferson called French "an indispensable part of education for both sexes" and believed that women and children were especially adept at acquiring language skills. He also recommended Spanish for Americans because of the United States' growing relationship with Spain and because "the antient part of American history is written chiefly in Spanish." As an exercise in the language he gave his daughter Polly Don Quixote to read. Polly waded through it with the help of a dictionary. At one point she wrote to her father, "I have not been able to read in Don Quixote every day, as I have been travelling ever since I saw you last, and the dictionary is too large to go in the pocket.

²² Gina Dandy argues that Jefferson's contrasting treatment of his daughters reflects the traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics he perceived in Patsy and Polly, respectively. See Dandy, "Deputy Son."
of the chariot.” A few days later she was still neglecting *Don Quixote*, apparently welcoming the respite.24

In addition to languages, young ladies commonly studied history, a subject that parents and tutors hoped would divert them from the novel-reading that too many girls enjoyed. Novel-reading trained the mind to expect constant amusement, but history offered all the drama of a novel while presenting valuable examples of how—and how not—to act. It could “entertain and improve at the same time.”25 Hester Chapone counseled young ladies to acquaint themselves with the chronology of major events: “A woman makes a poor figure who affects, as I have heard some ladies do, to disclaim all knowledge of times and dates. . . . The highest mark of folly is to be proud of such ignorance.” Since many Virginians accepted religion as part of education, a course in history might begin with the Bible, move on to a study of classical Greece and Rome, and finish with the background of the new American republic. A knowledge of geography made history more comprehensible; to develop this knowledge in his daughter Patsy, Jefferson sent her a lengthy list of cities he had recently visited and ordered her to trace them on a map. Patrick Henry also directed his daughter to study history and geography, along with poetry, sermons, “and other well-written religious productions.” Poetry and literature seemed especially suited to young ladies, since these modes of expression celebrated sentiment and imagination. Chapone commended Shakespeare’s works for

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25 Jefferson believed that novels obstructed learning because “reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. Nothing can engage attention unless dressed in all the figments of fancy.” Jefferson to N. Burwell, March 14, 1818, in Padover, comp., *Complete Jefferson*, 1085; Chapone, *On the Improvement of the Mind*,
their lessons in morality and human nature and recognized Homer and Virgil, in English translation, as staples: "Every body reads [them] that reads at all." 26

A love of poetry was thought to come naturally to girls, but even a limited familiarity with science was not unwomanly. Fordyce, who was so outspoken on the subject of female intellect, granted that young ladies might study "the principal facts, or great outlines of Astronomy." Burton likewise encouraged girls to take an interest in the natural world; books on astronomy and natural history would reveal "the oeconomy of divine Providence." To astronomy, Chapone added biology and botany, and John Gregory, in *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, proclaimed, "There is no impropriety in your . . . cultivating any art or science to which genius or accident leads you." 27 A little science would increase spirituality and nurture a proper respect for divine creation. As with other knowledge that extended beyond domestic duties, it was meant to elevate young women to a nobler plane of wifehood and motherhood. Study of proper subjects would distract girls from gossip, instill self-discipline and patience, and form them into moral women. "It is not sufficient that you are taught the domestic arts," explained Burton. "If you would wish to have a true sense of virtue and decorum, to be fit companions for Persons of sense, and to act with ease and dignity . . . let it be your desire, that your minds should have it's [sic] due share of instruction." Writers such as Judith Sargent Murray would contend that the true purpose of education, for boys and girls,

2:192. Burton praised the study of history because through it one "may learn Wisdom from the example of others." Burton, *Lectures on Female Education*, 1:193.


should be to prepare them for a vocation and thus for independence. But in eighteenth-century Virginia, motherhood was the vocation, and an independent woman had no role or place in society.\(^\text{28}\)

Perhaps because of the continuing focus on marriage and motherhood, emphasis on the ornamental accomplishments was strong. Dancing was an important social activity; it provided opportunities for young people to meet and court. Philip Fithian remarked on the necessity of cultivating the skill if one wanted to participate in Virginia society: “In this province [dancing] is a necessary qualification for a person to appear even decent in Company!”\(^\text{29}\) Music could also be a social skill: accomplished young ladies might be called upon to entertain guests with a demonstration of musical talent. Both Patsy Jefferson and Priscilla Carter devoted significant time to music and dancing. The two girls followed very different daily schedules and ultimately attained a different level of education, but they shared a solid background in the ornamental arts. When Patsy was eleven and staying with friends in Philadelphia, her father wrote to her with these instructions: “With respect to the distribution of your time the following is what I should approve. from 8. to 10 o’clock practise music. from 10. to 1. dance one day and draw another. from 1. to 2. draw on the day you dance, and write a letter the next day. from 3. to 4. read French. from 4. to 5. exercise yourself in music. from 5. till bedtime read English, write etc.” Jefferson’s letters included frequent inquiries about Patsy’s progress in music. “Let me know what books you have read since I left you, and what tunes you can play,” Jefferson wrote on one occasion. Another time he instructed her to “learn all


\(^{29}\) Farish, ed., *Fithian Journal*, 43.
your old tunes over again perfectly, that I may hear them on your harpsichord on its arrival.’

Priscilla Carter devoted three days a week and every evening to learning to play the piano; her sister Nancy spent the same amount of time practicing the guitar. The girls’ musical skills earned them their father’s approbation in a way that academic pursuits could not. Robert Carter loved music and played well himself; some evenings found him enjoying duets with his daughters. It was one thing he shared with them at a time when all his other plans and hopes seemed directed to their brothers.

Although Priscilla was pressed to work hard at music, her school routine left her much more leisure time than Patsy Jefferson had. On days not devoted to music or dancing, Priscilla accompanied her sisters to the schoolhouse on her parent’s property, where they met their brothers and their tutor at a little after seven in the morning. The young scholars studied with Fithian an hour before going in to breakfast. After the meal the children returned to their studies until noon, then enjoyed a few hours of freedom before finishing the school day with a final session that generally ran from three-thirty until five. Priscilla spent her school time “Reading the Spectator; Writing; & beginning to Cypher.” Her younger sister Nancy was using The Compleat Letter-Writer to develop her writing skills, and the other girls practiced spelling and elementary reading. The ability to write well and spell correctly offered proof of a proper education. “There is nothing

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which exposes a Person's want of literature or education, more than mistakes in speaking or writing," observed John Burton.33

In the intervals between study, Priscilla might have filled her time with domestic pursuits. A plantation mistress had numerous responsibilities, and a young lady well trained in housewifery would be of value to a husband. William Byrd II wrote proudly of his daughters that "they are every day up to their elbows in housewifery, which will qualify them effectually for useful wives, and if they live long enough, for notable women." Many Virginia men probably agreed with James Fordyce that a woman's "business chiefly is to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful."34

There was no getting away from the demands of domesticity. Even so, as the eighteenth century drew to a close, women found new value placed on their traditional roles and new subjects available for them to study. Some writers countered the trend by degrading women as they degraded slaves, insisting on women's inferiority and dependence on white men. Nevertheless, for white women educational opportunities would continue to open up. And meanwhile, it was possible to find a balance between the pursuit of knowledge and the reality of daily life. Philip Fithian described a woman who

33 Burton, Lectures on Female Education, 1:170. Tori Eberlein emphasizes the importance of writing skills for young ladies, but Linda Kerber argues that "there was . . . likely to be severe disparity in the verbal fluency of husband and wife, brother and sister . . . . Even in bookish families the literacy gap was marked." See Eberlein, "To Be Amiable and Accomplished," and Kerber, Women of the Republic, 191-92. Kenneth Lockridge explains, "It is doubtful that in eighteenth-century America women's literacy advanced much if at all, but over the long run women's literacy everywhere in Anglo-America seems to have moved from a rate below 20% early in the seventeenth century toward a rate around 50% in the mid-nineteenth century. . . . Nowhere was women's literacy raised enough to erase an ancient legacy of discrimination." Literacy was closely linked to social status, but even among women of the Virginia gentry it may not have been universal. Lockridge, Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 97.

34 William Byrd to John Boyle, 2 February 1727, in Marion Tinling, ed., The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684-1776, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: Published for the Virginia
harmonized learning with modesty and traditional femininity: “Mrs. Brown appears to be a woman of uncommon understanding. . . . Her Ideas are extensive & distinct. . . . Nor is She unacquainted with Books & Science—But of these She makes no Boast; & only uses them as Helps in every other Part of her Discourse.”35

One of Jefferson’s letters to his daughter Patsy expressed hopes that must have been common among eighteenth-century Virginia fathers, hopes that merged social grace, moral character, and intelligence in the image of an ideal woman:

I need not tell you what pleasure it gives me to see you improve in every thing agreeable and useful. The more you learn the more I love you, and I rest the happiness of my life on seeing you beloved by all the world, which you will be sure to be if to a good heart you join those accomplishments so peculiarly pleasing in your sex. . . . Lose no moment in improving your head, nor any opportunity of exercising your heart in benevolence.36

To be good enough (but never too good) to win universal approval, to edge through the narrow space between accomplished mother and unnatural woman—such was the task of an elite Virginia lady. Eighteenth-century girls had a lot to live up to.

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CONCLUSION

The fathers, mothers, tutors, and teachers who schooled the young women of the eighteenth century had high expectations. They taught more than reading and writing: they also inculcated the values of society, and they hoped not so much for scholars as for model human beings. Academic learning had only a limited role to play; for the wealthiest and the poorest young women of Virginia, the eighteenth century was an era of stratification. The fortunes of birth, far more than good spelling or an understanding of astronomy, determined a girl’s future. Education would not break Hannah’s bondage or make Priscilla Carter the manager of her father’s estates. These girls’ paths had been mostly set at the moment they came into the world, the one a slave, the other a planter’s daughter. The girls’ schooling was meant not to challenge the roles for which their births had destined them, but to instill in them an appreciation for the standing order of society. The students at Hannah’s school were taught to be better slaves, and Priscilla and other wealthy young women learned the importance of domesticity. If girls, slave and free, could learn to accept their stations and to play their parts well, they would become society’s greatest symbols of success. Who could question slavery or the traditional role of women if slaves and wives were obedient, dutiful, and happy?

But even as educators strove to reinforce social mores, they opened the door for change. Slave girls who could read were still slaves, planters’ daughters who excelled at
their studies were still excluded from public life—nevertheless, opportunities for education were opportunities to chip away at the myth of female and black inferiority. The more girls learned, the more they manifested their potential. Throughout the century, men argued that women and blacks lacked reason, that the present social order suited their lesser abilities. Still, when Virginians outlawed slave literacy and channeled women’s learning into an acceptable model of motherhood, they did so not because they doubted women’s and slaves’ intellect but because they feared it. Society’s passive members might be intelligent after all, and such an acknowledgment would have far-reaching implications. In a century of political upheaval, the debates over female and black education began a true revolution, one that would extend beyond the Age of Enlightenment and into the ages to come.
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